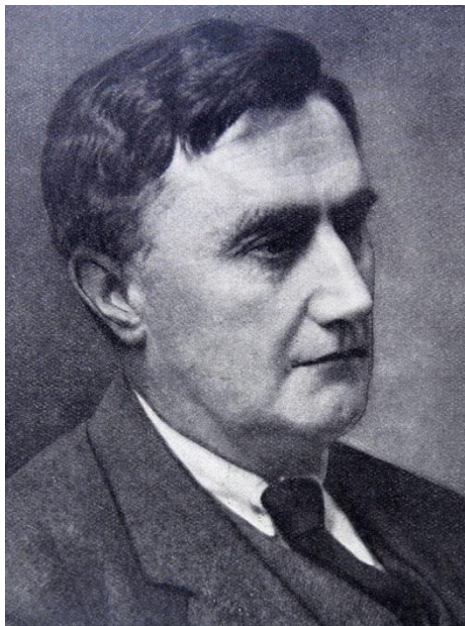




# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## **The Lark Ascending**

**Ralph Vaughan Williams**



**1872-1958**

With his friend Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan Williams was (and is) an important figure in the history of folk music. He also helped compile the English Hymnal, and used some of the folk tunes that he had collected as tunes for hymns (such as 'I heard the voice of Jesus say')

In the Classic FM Hall of Fame 2018 *The Lark Ascending* is no. 3.



### The piece

RVW quotes the poem 'The Lark Ascending' by George Meredith in the flyleaf of the score as follows:

*He rises and begins to round,  
He drops the silver chain of sound,  
Of many links without a break,  
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.*

*For singing till his heaven fills,  
'Tis love of earth that he instils,  
And ever winging up and up,  
Our valley is his golden cup  
And he the wine which overflows  
to lift us with him as he goes.*

*Till lost on his aerial rings  
In light, and then the fancy sings.*

RVW subtitled this piece 'A pastoral romance for orchestra' - that is, a piece that is meant to evoke the beauty of the countryside. After a brief, quiet, chordal start, the solo violin enters, and gradually rises higher and higher, like the lark in the poem that flies 'up and up'.

Who knew....?

RVW started composing this in 1914, and went to Margate on holiday in August that year. As he sat composing on a bench, looking out to sea at the naval ships that were practising their manoeuvres (remember, the First World War was about to begin) a little boy spotted him making what he thought were secret notes on his paper. Thinking he was a German spy the boy got the attention of a passing policeman, who arrested Vaughan Williams!

### Classroom Activities

1. Why not start by watching and listening to a lark? This video has both the Skylark and Woodlark- it's not clear which bird George Meredith was referring to!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guYUPjI9t6s>

2. Listen to a recording of the opening of *The Lark Ascending*. Discuss what you see in your imagination as you listen- Is it morning, midday, afternoon or dusk? Is it hot or cold? Are there any houses nearby? Discuss the emotions you feel when you hear the music. Do you feel calm or excited, unhappy or thoughtful, tired or energised? Now write



your own poem about the Lark, to go at the front of RVW's score, or draw a picture that could go on the cover of the music.

3. RVW makes great use of the pentatonic scale- a scale made of 5 notes- and of the dorian mode in order to create the special mood that the piece evokes. Using classroom instruments or music software, improvise or compose your own 'Lark tune' that the violin might play at the start of the piece. Use the notes E, G, A, B, and D- the notes that RVW uses.
4. RVW was an atheist, despite writing music for the Church. He was nonetheless deeply spiritual. **Discussion-** do you think that *The Lark Ascending* has a spiritual message for its listeners, or is it just a descriptive piece of music that is telling us about a bird in flight?

Richard Poyser  
d'Overbroeck's 2018