

philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
(1872 – 1958)

The Lark Ascending

Today the prose and poetry of George Meredith (1828-1909) are a 'minority interest'. The author of the novels *The Egoist* and *Diana of the Crossways* and of the wonderful sequence of sonnets *Modern Love*, is sadly out of fashion. Before the First World War he was a major literary figure, living near Dorking, Surrey, where Vaughan Williams also spent a large part of his life. Both Vaughan Williams and Holst were admirers of Meredith. His poem *The Lark Ascending* inspired Vaughan Williams to compose a Romance for violin and orchestra in which the violin's climbing trills and twists of melody represent the lark's song:

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

Two bars introduce the violin's first unaccompanied cadenza of ascending fifths from which, over muted orchestral strings, it drifts into the main theme. Oboe, clarinets and horns add variants of the principal subject while the soloist rhapsodises with it in time to close this first section with a shorter cadenza. Flute and clarinet begin an *allegretto tranquillo* episode, reminiscent of folk-song, in which the chimes from the triangle and the woodwind's trills and chirrupings are subsidiary to the violin's rapturous song, which becomes more animated and decorative. The orchestral contribution ends with exquisite thirds derived from the first subject, leaving the soloist alone 'winging up' until 'lost in light'. Simple as the work may seem, it is of considerable originality and it captures the idyllic mood of a pre-1914 England, perhaps a pastoral Arcadia which never existed except in the imaginations of composer-poets.

Vaughan Williams completed the work for violin and piano in 1914 but left it until after the war, when he orchestrated and revised it, simplifying the violin part. He dedicated it to Marie Hall, a pupil of Elgar. She played the violin and piano version at Shirehampton on 15 December 1920 and was soloist in the first performance of the orchestral version in London on 14 June 1921, with Adrian Boult conducting.

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