

Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra

EXPANDED PROGRAM NOTES

MARCH 16, 2024

The Lark Ascending

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in The Vicarage, in Down Ampney in Gloucestershire, on 12 October 1872 but moved to Leith Hill Place in Surrey when he was just two, upon his father's death. His father, Arthur, was a vicar from a prominent family. His mother, Margaret, hailed from the famous Wedgwood (as in fine china) family which multiple times in the proceeding decades had married members of the Darwin family. Thus, young Ralph (pronounced "rayf") was the great nephew of Charles Darwin. His maternal aunt gave him his first piano lessons at a young age, and he wrote his first little piece at age six. Vaughan (pronounced vawn) Williams was by no means a prodigy in musical performance or composition. And even though he was a skilled violist, his family preferred him to take up the organ—which he did with some success.

Vaughan Williams obtained a degree in music from the Royal College of Music in 1894 including studies with the composer Hubert Parry. His style was much influenced by his discovery and avid collecting of English folk songs beginning in 1903. A further influence developed when his work as an organist led to his being asked to edit the English Hymnal over the period 1904—1906. This brought him in contact with the work of earlier English composers dating from the Tudor and Elizabethan periods, like Thomas Tallis. Even as an agnostic, he wrote several hymns himself and initially had them listed as "anonymous." His famous hymn "Come down, O Love Divine" is often called the "Down Ampney Hymn" in his honor. His other hymns include "O taste and see" and "The Old Hundredth."

He studied briefly with the German Max Bruch and much later in 1908 with French Impressionist composer and orchestration wizard Maurice Ravel who happened to be several years his junior. This French instruction helped free Vaughn Williams's sound from the Wagnerian, Teutonic influences of which he and many of his fellow British composers had been inculcated. Yet, while Vaughan Williams picked up some of Ravel's orchestral mastery and lightness of texture, he avoided imitating the Impressionist style. Indeed, Ravel stated that Vaughan Williams was his only student "who did not write music like Ravel."

Despite completing nine symphonies, as well as several operas as one of the great English composers of the 20th century, Vaughan Williams's reputation outside of England is mostly carried by his pastoral, occasion pieces such as his *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (performed by the IPO in that famous concert at the Harris Theater), and the piece we will hear today, *The Lark Ascending*. This pastoral approach did not frequently garner the favor of the progressive classical enclave. Aaron Copland is supposed to have said that listening to Vaughan Williams's *Symphony No. 5* was like "staring at a cow for 45 minutes." Yet

several of Vaughan Williams's pieces have much more of an edge to them, including his WWII-prefiguring *Symphony No. 4*. Vaughan Williams died in 1958 at the age of 85--the same year that he completed his *Ninth Symphony*.

The story is told that when Vaughan Williams visited Indiana University in 1954, there was a reception held in his honor by the faculty of the famous School of Music there. At one point the composer made an unexpected request. "Please, I should like to try a cola." While this beverage was not on the menu, it didn't take too long to find one and, with due ceremony, serve it on ice to the guest. As the company watched, the eminent British octogenarian sampled this exotic concoction and pronounced, "I'm not sure that I understand the point of this." As passed down the years, the tale carried the implication that the sweet soft drink didn't deliver the same effect as a stiff gin and tonic.

That said, *The Lark Ascending*, a romance for solo violin and orchestra, not only holds the sweetness that comes immediately from consuming a soft drink, it generates a feeling similar to the pleasant aftereffect of downing a tall gin and tonic while enjoying an outdoor scene in the country. It was inspired by a poem by George Meredith and written in 1914 just before the start of WWI. However, the piano/violin score wasn't orchestrated until 1920. The premiere took place in 1921 with the dedicatee, Marie Hall, as soloist under the baton of the young Adrian Boult, who became one of the composer's greatest advocates.

The music begins with several cadenzas by the violin soloist which flutter up and down an evocative pentatonic scale in the manner of traditional English folk tunes. (It is interesting to hear Vaughan Williams speaking about the "tunes" that he discovered and placed in the Hymnal – "tune" wasn't a four-letter word for him.) Yet there are no actual folk tunes in *The Lark Ascending*. At that point in his career, RVW had assimilated the folk style so completely that he was able to write original music in that manner. The melodic contours change with new material by the solo flute which subsequently is taken up by the violin soloist whose music then gathers a new trilling, fluttering energy before settling down for a quiet ending.

- IPO Board Member Charles Amenta M.D.

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