



# Ralph VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

## *The Lark Ascending*

**Ralph Vaughan Williams** (12 October 1872 – 26 August 1958) was an English composer whose works include operas, ballets, chamber music, secular and religious vocal pieces and orchestral compositions including nine symphonies, written over sixty years. Strongly influenced by Tudor music and English folk-song, his output marked a decisive break in British music from its German-dominated style of the 19th century.

Vaughan Williams was born to a well-to-do family with strong moral views and a progressive social outlook. Throughout his life he sought to be of service to his fellow citizens, and believed in making music as available as possible to everybody. He wrote many works for amateur and student performance. He was musically a late developer, not finding his true voice until his late thirties; his studies in 1907–1908 with the French composer Maurice Ravel helped him clarify the textures of his music and free it from Teutonic influences.

Two episodes made notably deep impressions in Vaughan Williams's personal life. The First World War, in which he served in the army, had a lasting emotional effect. Twenty years later, though in his sixties and devotedly married, he was reinvigorated by a love affair with a much younger woman, who later became his second wife. He went on composing through his seventies and eighties, producing his last symphony months before his death at the age of eighty-five. His works have continued to be a staple of the British concert repertoire, and all his major compositions and many of the minor ones have been recorded.

***The Lark Ascending*** is a poem by the English poet George Meredith about the song of the skylark. It first appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* for May 1881, and was later included in his volume *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth*. The poem is a pastoral, devotional in feeling. It describes how "the press of hurried notes" run repeating, changing, trilling and ringing, and bring to our inner being a song of mirth and light like a fountain piercing the "shining tops of day." The joyfulness, purity and unrestrained delight of the "starry voice ascending" awakens "the best in us to him akin." The lark's song is the wine which lifts us with him in the golden cup, the valley of this world: the lark is the woods and brooks, the creatures and the human line, the dance and the marriage of life within it. The hearts of men shall feel them better, shall feel them celestially, "as long as you crave nothing but the song".

The poem inspired Ralph Vaughan Williams to write a musical work of the same name, which is now more widely known than the poem. He originally composed it in 1914 for violin and piano. Vaughan Williams worked on his "pastoral romance for orchestra" *The Lark Ascending* before the outbreak of the Great War, and inscribed selected lines (not a consecutive passage) from Meredith's poem on the flyleaf of the published work. They are the opening and closing lines (so the entire poem is invoked), and between them the six lines in which the lark is made to embody the wine. In choosing these lines Vaughan Williams may have been drawing out a eucharistic resonance in Meredith's image.

*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.*

The work premiered in 1920 in Shirehampton, Bristol, the same year the composer re-scored it for solo violin and orchestra. This version, now the more often performed of the two, premiered in 1921. The piece is one of the most popular in the Classical repertoire among British listeners.