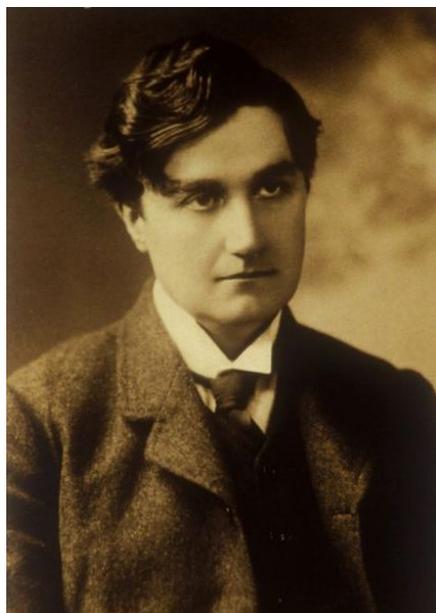


# A Celebration of a Masterpiece

By Andrew Glover-Whitley



Vaughan Williams at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

August the 4<sup>th</sup> 1914 saw the outbreak of one of the worst wars ever known to mankind. It destroyed nations and toppled four monarchies in Europe having killed millions in a needless slaughter to massage one man's ego in Germany. A man who lost his Imperial crown in 1918 when he was deposed in favour of a democratic federal *republican* state. It broke the strong and buried the weak. No-one was immune from its ever increasing reach of its fingers.

A hundred years later we are coming up to the centenary celebrations of that awful conflict. There is also another centenary that we in the world of music should also be celebrating, and in some corners the celebrations are underway with countless performances of the work. The piece in question is now loved and revered as a British masterpiece but when it was first premiered in a private performance just after the outbreak of the war it was ignored as something from a recent bygone age. The rot was setting immediately and reactions were immediate. The piece was "*The Lark Ascending*"

by Ralph Vaughan Williams. It is a classic of its time and a work that is so beloved of we Brits. Not only us, it is loved and treasured around many countries for various reasons.

To us it speaks of an England now long gone. A land of horse and cart and hand field labour, peace and quiet. Folk songs and quiet contemplation, a world of Hardy and Lawrence. A land of tranquility and thatched cottages and simple living. In a nutshell a land that never truly was, unless you were affluent and comfortable. Having said that the piece is so rooted in the English land, idea and psyche that it feels as if it has never been any other way but there. The use of pentatonic scale patterns frees the violin from a pull towards a tonal centre point, this in turn allows for expressive impressionistic elements to become important basically folk orientated twists. This liberty also extends to the pulse of the work. The cadenzas for solo violin are written without bar lines which in turn lends them a sense of meditational release that was rare and new at the time, and yet so English.

The first incarnation of this wonderful work was as a Violin and Piano piece and works surprisingly effectively. It has unfortunately never been recorded, that I can find. It was in this version for four years before Vaughan Williams orchestrated it and in 1921 was premiered in the version that everyone knows today. To my mind and ear though the original with piano is more effective as a work and as a piece of genuine Englishness than the orchestral version that bears slight French influences in its timbral colours.

Vaughan Williams had studied briefly with Maurice Ravel and in this piece Ravel's influence on him came to the fore. Not in a French manner but in an English Impressionism that only he could ever really master. This was really the beginning of the English Pastoral movement in music that developed further with other composers of the next generation such as Moeran and Alwyn etc.



Vaughan Williams in 1919. Already haunted by the trenches.

It is one of those pieces of music that is hard to actually describe or put your finger on as to what it is about the piece that speaks so directly to us as humans, and as Brits. Vaughan Williams uses a quote from George Meredith's wonderful poem of the same name to preface the work and set the pastoral scene that he then describes musically. The ever rising lark from a field of barley, watched and mused on by the viewer. Rich impressionistic romance at its best.

*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.*

There were more copies of A.E Houseman's book of poems "*A Shropshire Lad*" found on dead soldiers than copies of the bible during that war and in that set of poems he speaks of an England that was of the people and for the ordinary man. This spoke to the ordinary soldier who knew that world. In Vaughan Williams's case he too saw himself as

just one of these men who had seen the trenches and the horrors. It is possibly one of the many reasons why his music conveys the simplicity of folksong (*The middle section contains a setting of the folksong "Lovely Joan"*). His own music he wanted to be known by peoples of all classes and walks of life and so this piece became to all who have heard it something they carry around inside them for the rest of their lives. This is possibly why it has survived so well amongst all peoples of these Islands.

If such a thing as an iPod had been around in 1914 I am sure that they would have found this piece on as many dead British soldiers iPod's as the Houseman poems were on their bodies when they were buried.

It is so quintessentially English and yet so of another world.

[http://youtu.be/a\\_JCvL1jVeM](http://youtu.be/a_JCvL1jVeM)

Lark Ascending - Hugh Bean Violin and the LSO under Adrian Boult