

No other music reaches the heights of *The Lark Ascending*

Violinist *Tasmin Little* explains why the piece will be the cornerstone of her final two concerts

As 2020 draws towards its close and I finish my career as a concert violinist after more than 30 years on the concert platform, I've been reflecting on some of the very great works I've been lucky enough to perform in my life. Alongside the epic concerti for violin and orchestra, such as Beethoven, Elgar, and Tchaikovsky, there is one work, far shorter, which stands out in my mind. *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughan Williams may last a mere 15 minutes or so, but the impact of this piece on audiences and players alike is momentous. It's a work that consistently tops the classical charts. Audiences confess that it promotes a sense of peace and tranquillity, that they use it as a means of meditation, and they find it an almost religious experience.

Originally conceived for violin and piano and completed in 1914, *The Lark Ascending* was not premiered until 100 years ago, on December 15 1920. After the First World War, the composer reworked it for solo violin and orchestra and it is this version that is most often heard in concert performances today.

So why does this short, mainly quiet piece, depicting a small, vulnerable bird flying high in the sky, engender such a profound reaction in people? And what is the experience of the player in performing this work?

The music, inspired by George Meredith's 1881 poem, begins with a rief introduction of slow and arched chords in the accompaniment. When the violin enters, the listener is instantly drawn into an intimate and contemplative world, as the soloist weaves a



Last flight: Tasmin Little will perform *The Lark Ascending*, by Ralph Vaughan Williams, left, as she retires from the concert podium

filigree line of unbroken, nuanced melody. Time stands still as the long, held chord in the orchestra represents solid earth and the violin soars effortlessly above, rising high in the sky before swooping and ascending once again. The modal nature of the harmonies reminds us of folk music, adding to the pastoral feel of the piece, and the slow lilt of the gently rocking rhythm of the main theme creates a mesmeric sense of calm.

I recently received an email from someone whose father has dementia but still talks coherently about *The Lark Ascending* and his request to have it played at his funeral, a wish I have heard expressed by numerous people over many years. Could it be that the ending of the piece, with the violin, alone, flying and singing like the little bird soaring high above, represents for some people our spirit leaving the earthly world behind and ascending to heaven? Or perhaps the appeal of this work is that it feels nostalgic for an era when the pace of life was slower, our needs were more simple and there was time to pause for reflection.

Although the work inspires tranquillity for the listener, this feeling is generally the last thing the soloist experiences during performance – the athletic and rapid swoops and dives must sound natural and effortless despite their technical difficulty, and the simplicity of the slow, quiet violin melody belies the rock-solid bow control required of the soloist,

especially in the highest reaches of the instrument. The stratospheric two final notes of the piece are notorious in violin circles. Iona Brown, the famous violinist who appeared with regularity at the BBC Proms, said "There is simply no escape from those last two notes".

In 1991, I made my first recording of the piece, with conductor Andrew Davis and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, with the composer's widow, Ursula, in attendance at the sessions. I was very inexperienced in the studio at that time, having made only two previous recordings, and I felt a huge amount of pressure as I had only played the piece a few times in concert. My initial mistake was failing to remember that there is a vast difference between giving a concert performance and making a recording: in a large hall one must project the sound to the back of the venue, and in a recording the microphone is barely inches from the instrument. When I

heard the result of our recorded "first take" of the piece, I was shocked to hear myself projecting as though I needed to fill a large hall. Ursula looked unimpressed and I rapidly realised I needed an entirely different approach to make it work under the microphone. This was the moment that I first experimented with "floating" my sound, using barely any pressure on the bow, to create a feeling of space and air. Thankfully, it worked perfectly and Ursula remarked that it was "much better". By the end of the sessions she was happy and said what a pleasure it had been to hear me play. In 2013 I made a second recording of the work, as I felt my interpretation had developed a great deal over the intervening years. Nowadays I prefer a more unhurried and restful pace for the main theme, which in addition allows for a greater arch-like development of pulse within the piece. Of the 60 times I have performed *The*

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Lark Ascending, from London to Mexico City, it is my 1995 performance at the Last Night of the Proms that stands out in my memory. In a venue as vast as the Royal Albert Hall, I had to find a way to project my sound to fill the acoustic for the audience while remembering to keep enough air in the sonority so that the microphones would pick up more subtle and intimate nuances for the television and radio public. The audience was simply extraordinary. Bearing in mind there were around 6,500 people in the hall, I wondered how the ending of the piece would go and whether someone in the party mood of that special event would break the atmosphere too soon. I needn't have worried. The silence lasted a full 16 seconds and it felt as though the musicians and audience were held by the atmosphere and no one wished to break the spell.

It means a lot to me to have the chance to perform *The Lark Ascending* later this month, a century almost to the day after its premiere. After these final performances, I will certainly miss playing it but I'm also looking forward to sharing my knowledge of this piece, and learning yet more about it, with future students. Every player has their unique perspective and this is what keeps it evergreen. In remembering the many performances that I've been lucky to give to audiences both in the UK and abroad, one thing remains constant: as my final note has come to a close with the sound of my violin still lingering in the air, I have been left with a feeling of extraordinary unity with my colleagues and audience. It is a feeling that is impossible to describe and it is one of the most powerful experiences one can have in music.

Tasmin Little gives her final performances of *The Lark Ascending* on Dec 16 and 17 at St Luke's Church, Grayshott. Details: londonmozartplayers.com

