Program Notes

Edmonton Symphony Orchestra

WINSPEAR

The Lark Ascending
Ralph Vaughan Williams (b. Gloucestershire, 1872/d. London, 1958)

First performance: Bristol, 15 December 1920
Last ESO performance: May 2016

Seeking solace from a world on the brink of war in 1914, English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams turned to two of his greatest loves – the violin and poetry. The poem which inspired Vaughan Williams came from the imagination of the great English poet, George Meredith; *The Lark Ascending* is a 122-line poem detailing the song of a skylark.

The melody, which is perfectly suited to the violin's soaring lyricism, supposedly came all at once to Vaughan Williams while on a walk near the cliffs of Margate with the British Navy conducting fleet exercises in the North Sea down below. Wanting to make sure that he was able to remember the tune that had just come to him, Vaughan Williams began to jot down the melody. Unfortunately, a zealous scout saw him writing in his notebook and thought he was an enemy spy making notes of the coastline and consequently initiated a citizen's arrest.

Thankfully neither that misunderstanding nor the outbreak of World War One would prevent Vaughan Williams from writing what would become one of his most beloved pieces, although the music would be shelved for several years before receiving its premiere in 1920.

Ursula Vaughan Williams, the composer's second wife and a poet in her own right, noted that in *The Lark Ascending*, Ralph had "taken a literary idea on which to build his musical thought … and had made the violin become both the bird's song and its flight, being, rather than illustrating the poem from which the title was taken".

After the muted strings and woodwinds set the pastoral scene, the solo violin takes flight with a cadenza written "senza misura," that is without bar lines. This instruction sets the soloist free, both in expressing the trills of the lark song, and in the melody which both soars and dips, at times suddenly, mimicking a bird aloft.

What follows is music whose "very simplicity is deceptive." Structurally, the piece flows freely with a dancelike middle section and closing cadenza that is reminiscent of the opening before the music soars away. It is not overly complex in its harmonic approach nor in its orchestration, and yet the soaring, almost improvised nature of the solo part puts incredible technical demands on the soloist. The weaving together of the soaring violin line with the pastoral orchestral colours have led music critic Frank Howes to call this a piece "like nothing else in music."

On the opening page of the score, Vaughan Williams wrote out twelve lines from Meredith's poem:

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.

Il rè Pastore, K208: "L'amerò, sarò costante"
Wolfang Amadeus Mozart (b. Salzburg, 1756/d. Vienna, 1791)

First performance of the opera: Salzburg, 23 September 1775
Last ESO performance: September 2012

"I hate Salzburg," a young Mozart once wrote. "There isn't a penny's worth of stimulation in this town." Even with his distaste for his hometown of Salzburg and his disdain for his employer, the Archbishop Colloredo, Mozart still crafted many musical gems while living there, including the opera *Il rè pastore* (The Shepherd King) in 1775 when he was nineteen years old.

Based on a popular libretto by Pietro Metastasio, the underlying theme of the musical drama is the pull between the demands of love and the demands of kingship that the shepherd-king, Aminta, experiences. Although the narrative itself has been described as "insignificant," Mozart's musical quality still shines, especially in the aria *"L'amerò, sarò costante"* (I will love her and be faithful.) In this number, Aminta confesses his undying love for the shepherdess Elisa, and although the vocal writing is sublime, the music is elevated by the obligato violin part. Written around the same time as his five violin concertos, some scholars believe Mozart himself may have been the violin soloist himself at the premiere in Salzburg's Residenz-Theater.

"Exsultate, jubilate", K165/158a
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

First performance: Milan, 17 January 1773
Last ESO performance: January 2010

Mozart's hatred of his hometown of Salzburg meant that he welcomed every opportunity to escape, even if it was temporary. Between 1769 and 1773, he, along with his father Leopold, made three visits to Italy which were vital both in shaping the younger Mozart's education and perhaps more importantly, in spreading his fame. It was during his final visit to Italy in 1773 that the sixteen-year-old Mozart composed his motet *Exsultate, jubliate* (Rejoice, resound with joy.) Visiting Milan for the production of his opera *Lucio Silla*, Mozart was so taken with the vocal talents of the opera's castrato Venanzio Rauzzini that he decided to compose the sacred motet for him while the production was nearing the end of its run.

While still performing the opera at night, Rauzzini debuted the three-movement *Exsultate, jubilate* on January 17, 1773. Because it was written with an operatic star in mind, the music has more in common with Mozart's concert arias than with liturgical music. Musicologist Stanley Sadie, commenting on the jubilant "*Alleluia*," noted that this music is "a jewel of a piece with its high spirits and its wit ... like no other piece of Mozart's; its music speaks unmistakably of his relaxed high spirits at the time he wrote it and of the elation and confidence that his opera-house success had brought him."

Symphony No. 4 in G major
Gustav Mahler (b. Kalistě, 1860/d. Vienna, 1911)

First performance: Munich, 25 November 1901
Last ESO performance: November 2009

For a time in his creative life, Gustav Mahler was a victim of his own success. In October of 1897, he was appointed as music director of the Vienna Court Opera and under his visionary (and many would say dictatorial) leadership, Mahler helped the opera company reach new heights. However, the rigorous demands of this position also meant that he had little time for one of his first loves, composition.

Confined to composing during his summer vacations, Mahler struggled to write new music, and he began to fear that his days of composing major works were behind him. However, as his vacation neared its end in 1899, inspiration suddenly came to Mahler, and he sketched out what would become his *Fourth Symphony* in a mere ten days. It wasn't until the next summer though, while he was in the composing hut of his new summer villa in Maiernigg, that he completed the symphony.

For inspiration, Mahler looked to a familiar muse, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn), a collection of German folk poetry and songs that he had been fascinated with for years. In particular, he turned to a song he had set from the collection in 1892; *Das himmlische Leben* (The Heavenly Life) was a child's vision of what heaven was like which included angelic dances and sumptuous feasts (with side dishes of asparagus and string beans!) This song would become the foundation of the fourth movement.

The four-movement form of the symphony along with the sparser orchestration (trombones are notably absent from this work) was something of a departure for Mahler whose first three symphonies had taken on titanic proportions. Perhaps it was because he thought of this work as something of a "symphonic humoresque," music that was meant to look at life through a lens of innocence and simplicity. As the listener will note, however, themes of darkness and the macabre are still present in Mahler's vision.

The first movement begins with the lightness and humour of a humoresque, complete with sleigh bells before the first violins enter with a folk-like melody of playfulness and innocence. Mahler notes that the first three notes of this melody should be savoured "in the same way as we begin a 'Viennese waltz' in Vienna." As he spun one heavenly melody after another, he had in mind, "a dewdrop on a flower that suddenly illuminated by the sun, bursts into a thousand lights and colors."

But not everything is sunshine in this movement. As the development unfolds, Mahler noted,"sometimes the atmosphere darkens and grows strangely terrifying. Not that the sky itself clouds over: it goes on shining with its everlasting blue. But we suddenly become afraid of it, just as on a beautiful day in the sun-dappled forest one is often overcome by a panic terror."

As the development reaches its climax, a trumpet call rings, as if a commander were marshalling his troops and one which Mahler referred to as "the little summons." (Mahler aficionados will recognize this motive as the opening trumpet call from his *Fifth Symphony*.)

The second movement, still ringing with the character of gemütlichkeit (coziness, belonging) established in the first movement, introduces the spectre of death. Mahler originally supplied this subtitle for the movement, referencing the character of Freund Hein, an allegorical figure for death:

"Freund Hein strikes up the dance for us; he strokes the fiddle most strangely and plays us up to heaven."

This spectral dance is represented by the solo violin, which is tuned up by a whole tone, giving the instrument a more piercing quality. (Mahler was not the first composer to mistune a violin to create this ghostly sound: the "devilish" violin virtuoso Nicolo Paganini used it often while French composer Camille Saint-Saëns used it to great effect in his *Danse Macabre*.)

It is in the third movement where we see Mahler at his most emotionally vulnerable; he noted that the opening melody reminded him of his mother "smiling through her tears"- the face of her who was able to "solve and forgive all suffering by love." The movement is a double theme and variations woven together that eventually builds to a carnival-like frenzy before the horns call everyone back to calm. This calm soon unwinds into a near stillness, the heartbeat of the music sensed only in the pizzicato bass before the entire orchestra explodes into an ecstatic vision of the gates of heaven.

In the finale, all are ushered into the heavenly realms. Mahler noted, "When man, now full of wonder, asks what all this means, the child answers him with the fourth movement: '*This is Heavenly Life'*." If many of the musical motives sound familiar in this finale, it is because Mahler has been preparing listeners throughout the entire symphony, building many of the themes in the preceding movements from small melodic fragments of the fourth movement's song.

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HEAVENLY LIFE
(translation by Addie Funk)

In the pleasures of heaven we're joyous,
the earthly avoid that annoy us.
In heaven not a rustle
is heard of earth's bustle,
in deepest of peace all goes on.
In a way that's angelic we're living
it's due though to merriment e'er giving,
adancing and springing,
askipping and singing,
Saint Peter in heaven looks on.

All manner of herbs aromatic
they grow in our garden ecstatic.
Asparagus, salad,
delights to the palate
on great platters for us there abound.
Good apples, good pears and good peaches
to eat them the gardners beseech us.
Wouldst roebuck, wouldst pheasant,
in numbers they're present
and running around.

If for fast day food one wishes,
then with joy there come aswimming all fishes.
See yonder Saint Peter
Saint John and his lamb have been parted,
and Herod to catch it has started.
An innocent and weak little,
pretty and meek little
lambkin to slaughter is led.
Saint Luke is the oxen aslaying,
he does it without all delaying,
in heavenly cellar
the wine costs no Heller!
The angels they bake all the bread.

with nets running fleeter
than wind to the heavenly brook!
Saint Martha there must be the cook!

No music on earth e'er so stirring
with ours can stand the comparing.
Ten thousand young virgins
to dancing it urges!
With laughter Saint Ursula shakes.
Cecilia with all her relations
are excellent courtly musicians.
Of sweet angels' voices
a chorus rejoices!
To pleasure it all things awake