

# Letting the Lark Ascend: Vaughan Williams's 'Most Popular Work' and the Limits of Revisionism

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*Ralph Vaughan Williams's The Lark Ascending is a perennial favourite in the British classical music radio station Classic FM's 'Hall of Fame' poll. In spite of its apparent popularity, however, the work sits uncomfortably with the way revisionist critics and scholars have wanted to portray the composer. As an escapist piece of English musical pastoralism, The Lark undermines their preferred view of Vaughan Williams as a progressive or even 'modernist' participant in his artistic milieu. To combat this image, some critics and musicologists have argued for complex, harder-edged interpretations of the work that have little to no basis in the music's primary source materials or the composer's stated priorities in his own writings. Such emphases reflect a problem in recent revisionist literature, wherein traditionalist, nationalist, or Romantic aspects of Vaughan Williams's music are excessively downplayed (or re-situated) in favour of arguments that better support elite sensibilities. As a work consisting of accessible, melody-centric music, and following from a poem excerpt suggesting an idyllic scene, The Lark serves as a bulwark against revisionist overreach and a check against over-emphasis on trendy priorities.*

## Introduction

Hot off yet another year of placing highly in Classic FM's 'Hall of Fame' music taste poll, and outright winning multiple annual contests prior to that, Ralph Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* (subtitled a 'Romance' for violin and orchestra) has nonetheless fostered divided opinions.<sup>1</sup> For some, including an ostensibly large number of listeners and performers, *The Lark's* popularity is not difficult to explain: its beauty, directness of expression, and evocative qualities naturally invite affection.<sup>2</sup> For other listeners, *The Lark* has outstayed its welcome. They argue that more deserving compositions (including others by Vaughan Williams) merit increased attention instead.<sup>3</sup> According to another perspective (which may

<sup>1</sup> See Classic FM's article announcing the piece as their poll winner in 2022 see [www.classicfm.com/radio/hall-of-fame/lark-ascending-vaughan-williams-150th-year/](http://www.classicfm.com/radio/hall-of-fame/lark-ascending-vaughan-williams-150th-year/). The work took second place in the 2023 poll: <https://halloffame.classicfm.com/2023/>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, see Stephen Moss, 'A Wing and a Prayer: The Enduring Beauty of The Lark Ascending', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2020, [www.theguardian.com/music/2020/dec/08/the-lark-ascending-ralph-vaughan-williams-classical-chart-topper-jennifer-pike](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/dec/08/the-lark-ascending-ralph-vaughan-williams-classical-chart-topper-jennifer-pike).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Stephen Moss, 'I'm Flipping the Bird at The Lark Ascending', *The Guardian* music blog, 25 March 2008, [www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2008/mar/25/letsgivethebirdtothelark](http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2008/mar/25/letsgivethebirdtothelark). As seen above, Moss eventually reversed his attitude on

nonetheless share ground with some others rehearsed here), the fact of *The Lark's* popularity is less of a problem than *why* it has been popular. As merely pleasant and diverting music, and especially as an escapist piece of English musical pastoralism, *The Lark* sits uneasily with the image of Vaughan Williams that revision-minded critics and academics have cultivated in recent decades. Keen to present the composer as a progressive-minded figure, as opposed to the narrowly parochial one promulgated by both hostile critics and well-intentioned early supporters, some have associated the work with the same milieu as the World War I-inspired *Pastoral Symphony*, and/or they have presented it as a more complex composition than they perceive others to have understood. The gist of these efforts seems clear: in the apparent words of former controller of BBC Radio 3 and the Proms, Roger Wright, 'it is important the piece doesn't just become a pastoral wallpaper, a pretty reflection on a rural scene. There is loss there too and the sense of a difficult time in a country's history. It should not simply be a piece to relax to'.<sup>4</sup>

Wright's fear that *The Lark* is widely seen as a 'pretty piece to relax to' is justified by earlier Vaughan Williams literature (more on this later) and probably by the recent Classic FM polls, even if this reason for the work's present popularity would be difficult to demonstrate comprehensively. However, the trouble with his admonishment, and with like-minded arguments, is that they lack direct supporting evidence. Unlike the case of the *Pastoral Symphony* (which was completed after the war and premiered in 1922), and which Vaughan Williams himself (but only in private communication) linked to his war service, there is no certain indication in the primary sources that *The Lark* relates to the war whatsoever, neither in terms of being inspired by nor immediately coinciding with it.<sup>5</sup> There is not even obvious indication that the work has much to do with the kind of 'loss', historically prompted or otherwise, which would make it an obvious fit for a 'hard' (or non-Arcadian) pastoral label.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Vaughan Williams's poetic inspiration for

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the work. Simon Heffer also recently offered this remark: "But in Vaughan Williams's sesquicentenary year, it is time to strip away all the prejudices, and indeed the somewhat superficial reasons for his growing popularity – such as Classic FM's championship of *The Lark Ascending*, which in truth is not among his most profound works – and to examine why he is not merely a great composer, but one of Britain's greatest cultural figures, to rank with Shakespeare, or Milton, or Dickens, or Turner, or Constable, or Wren'. See Heffer, 'Hinterland: Vaughan Williams Wrote the Theme Music for his Turbulent Times. It's Time We Recognised This Titan', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 2022, [www.pressreader.com/uk/the-daily-telegraph-review/20220101/281676848248077](http://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-daily-telegraph-review/20220101/281676848248077). See also Jessica Duchen, "Vaughan Williams at 150: It's Time to Admit He's the Greatest English Composer of the 20th Century", <https://inews.co.uk/culture/ralph-vaughan-williams-150-bbc-philharmonic-its-time-to-admit-hes-the-greatest-english-composer-of-the-20th-century-1518856>. Here is her brief remark on *The Lark Ascending*: "The trouble is that a few of his pieces are almost too popular for his own good, while others – possibly even better – enjoy airings once in the proverbial blue moon. *The Lark Ascending* often tops the Classical FM Hall of Fame and the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* regularly graces concerts in cathedrals'.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Vanessa Thorpe, 'How the First World War Inspired Britain's Favourite Piece of Classical Music', *The Observer*, 26 April 2014; [www.theguardian.com/music/2014/apr/27/first-world-war-inspired-the-lark-ascending-favourite-classical-music](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/apr/27/first-world-war-inspired-the-lark-ascending-favourite-classical-music).

<sup>5</sup> For Vaughan Williams's disclosure of this information about his *Pastoral Symphony*, see his letter to Ursula Wood, 4 October 1938, VWL1378; The Vaughan Williams Charitable Trust, *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams* Online Database, [www.vaughanwilliams.uk](http://www.vaughanwilliams.uk).

<sup>6</sup> For more on this terminology and how it relates to Vaughan Williams (and to music generally), see Eric Saylor, "'It's Not Lambkins Frisking at All": English

*The Lark* (his choice of lines from George Meredith's eponymous poem), suggests a work that naturally encourages, if not demands, the benign pleasantness which some commentators seem reluctant to associate with the composer's music at all.

This article is both a defence of *The Lark Ascending* as a 'beautiful piece to relax to' and a counter-perspective to the kind of Vaughan Williams revisionism in which such characterizations get downplayed. The first part examines and challenges specific arguments in the non-scholarly press for *The Lark* being inspired by actual history, and principally World War I, showing them to lack basis. I then consider and respond to two brief scholarly commentaries that respectively cast the work in terms of complexity and loss, according to musical content. While they in turn suggest that *The Lark's* musical sophistication and trajectory supersede a simple or 'soft' interpretation, I propose otherwise. The music's melodic cohesiveness, together with a plain comparison of poem and composition, strongly correlate with a work that luxuriates in beauty and emotions associated with an explicit scene, which are all issues that Vaughan Williams separately discussed in print prior to World War I. The latter portion of this article shows the revisionist context for the interpretations argued against here. Quick to point out perceived 'modernist' or 'progressive' aspects of Vaughan Williams and his music, the more aggressive revisionism regarding this composer continues to short-shrift concordant Romantic strains of his complex personality, not to mention his self-described 'bourgeois' musical values, which appeal less to its practitioners' sense of prestige. While I have divided this writing into approximate portions concentrating upon non-scholarly and scholarly literature, I thought it important to include perspectives from both groups, since the former body of literature is more likely to be widely read by audiences (and therefore has scope to be more influential), and writers in both categories share the impulse to modify *The Lark's* image in opposition to how it is defended here. Each treats issues that the other does not. But the revisionist impulse adopted by both risks eclipsing legitimate aspects of Vaughan Williams and his music, the latter of which are reflected in this popular composition and the cultural importance it has assumed.

### *The Lark Ascending: Confused Origins and Contexts*

The current disagreement over how to frame and interpret *The Lark* begins with its unclear chronology and creative process. Conclusive primary evidence indicating the precise date of its initial completion is missing, but a number of strong indicators point to 1914 and, specifically, before the start of World War I. The earliest available manuscript is a holograph score of the work for violin and piano scoring, the 'special arrangement' in which Michael Kennedy claims the music was first performed for a concert of the Avonmouth and Shirehampton Choral Society in 1920. (Kennedy writes that the composition's original manuscript 'must be presumed lost'.)<sup>7</sup> This score of *The Lark*, showing multiple revisions, is held at The

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Pastoral Music and the Great War', *The Musical Quarterly* 91/1–2 (2008): 29–59, especially at 41–5.

<sup>7</sup> Surviving early-stage manuscripts for Vaughan Williams's compositions are, with notable exceptions, often missing. See Vaughan Williams's comment about usually destroying his 'rough copies' in a letter to Alan Frank, 15 February 1958; VWL3375, *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams Online Database*, [www.vaughanwilliams.uk](http://www.vaughanwilliams.uk); and Byron Adams, 'The Stages of Revision of Vaughan Williams's Sixth Symphony', in *Vaughan Williams*

British Library in London (Add. MS 52385), portions of which are as of this writing available to view online. While no date appears on any of its folios, the library's descriptive captions claim that the work was originally composed for violin and piano (which Kennedy seems to contradict), and place its initial completion in 1914.<sup>8</sup> Both Kennedy's *Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* and *Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* also offer a 1914 completion date (apparently for an original, pre-revised, and now-lost scoring for violin and orchestra) with no explanation of how it was arrived at.<sup>9</sup> Kennedy treats the composition in his catalogue as a 'post-war' work only because the composer revised the final orchestral version in 1920 and again before publication in 1926 (with a copyright date of 1925). He also points out that the musical revisions (as opposed to the extra Meredith poem lines in the manuscript that do not appear in the published score – more on this later) shown in Add. MS 52385 are mainly for 'tautening' the music, implying that they do not alter it beyond immediate recognition.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the original scoring, three circumstantial bits of evidence are worth considering for *The Lark's* initial completion date. First, Hubert Foss offers the year of 1914 in his monograph on Vaughan Williams.<sup>11</sup> This is noteworthy because the composer sent Foss a list of corrections of mistakes he found in the book's text, some of which involve composition completion and premiere dates. He provides each date as a year with no more specific information. Vaughan Williams did not correct the 1914 date Foss had already supplied, and therefore ostensibly accepted it.<sup>12</sup> Second, according to Andrew Green, this generic 1914 date is confirmed by a programme note that Vaughan Williams himself wrote for a 1926 performance.<sup>13</sup> Third, and even more significantly, Green points out that A.H. Fox-Strangways's April 1920 *Music & Letters* article surveying Vaughan Williams's musical output affirms 1914 and adds the specific time of 'just before the war'.<sup>14</sup> Green is probably correct that, since Vaughan Williams contributed an article to this same issue of the journal ('The Letter and the Spirit'), and given that Fox-Strangways undoubtedly had close access to the composer, his information is very likely accurate.<sup>15</sup>

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*Essays*, ed. Byron Adams and Robin Wells (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 1–16, at 1–2. For information about the work's first performance in its violin and piano scoring, as well as his statement on the original manuscript, see Michael Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 81–2.

<sup>8</sup> See The British Library, Collection items: Ralph Vaughan Williams, *The Lark Ascending*, Add MS 52385. Link: [www.bl.uk/collection-items/vaughan-williams-the-lark-ascending](http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/vaughan-williams-the-lark-ascending).

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 412; and *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 81–2.

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 82.

<sup>11</sup> See Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974; reprint of the original 1950 edition published by George C. Harrop), 115, 205.

<sup>12</sup> Vaughan Williams, Letter to Hubert Foss, 7 February 1951; VWL2188, *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams* Online Database, [www.vaughanwilliams.uk](http://www.vaughanwilliams.uk). I thank David Manning for suggesting this point to me.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Green, 'Liberating the Lark', *BBC Music Magazine*, December, 2020, 26–34, at 29. I have not seen this programme note, nor do I know where a copy could be accessed.

<sup>14</sup> See A.H. Fox-Strangways, 'Ralph Vaughan Williams', *Music & Letters* 1/2 (1920): 78, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Green, 'Liberating the Lark', 33–4.

Others, however, have claimed (without apparent basis) that *The Lark's* composition overlapped with the war. Some do this by means of loose chronology, as when Michael Jameson writes that 'the score had been sketched as early as 1914, but the ensuing European conflict set back both its completion and revision'.<sup>16</sup> There is also Richard King's claim that it was begun 'at the outbreak of the Great War and completed in 1920'.<sup>17</sup> Others more explicitly (and imaginatively) link *The Lark* directly with the war. Betsy Schwarm's *Encyclopedia Britannica* article states that 'Vaughan Williams composed *The Lark Ascending* in 1914, in the early days of World War I, when a pastoral scene of a singing bird on the wing seemed far removed from reality'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the BBC's 'Teach' web page devoted to the work includes the following:

Vaughan Williams was working on *The Lark Ascending* in 1914, just as World War I broke out. He was on holiday in Margate when a young boy spotted him making notes and thought he was writing a secret code, so he informed a police officer and the composer was temporarily arrested in case he was a German spy! Although not necessarily directly influenced by the war, this piece became something of a symbol of the English spirit during a time when the country was struggling with its national identity.<sup>19</sup>

The story cited here regarding the Margate holiday incident repeats a persistent myth tying *The Lark* directly (and colourfully) to World War I. Vanessa Thorpe, after providing the Roger Wright quote cited above, gives this account:

Although Vaughan Williams was once thought to have been watching troops embark for France while he composed the piece, this story came from an account written much later by Ursula. What is known, however, is that Vaughan Williams was holidaying on the coast in Margate in Kent on the day Britain entered the first world war. The resort was not an embarkation point, but ships were engaging in fleet exercises. The composer later told the story that the tune came into his head as he walked the cliff, at which point he jotted down the notes. A young scout then made a citizen's arrest, assuming he was scribbling details of the coastline for the enemy.<sup>20</sup>

Or consider this excerpt from an online Classic FM composer guide ironically aimed at '[breaking] down some of the popular myths' about Vaughan Williams:

Another example is *The Lark Ascending*, the 2007 and 2008 Classic FM Hall of Fame No.1. Contrary to popular belief, it is not the ultimate sound-picture of the English countryside. In late August 1914, Vaughan Williams was staying with friends in Margate. He wrote *The Lark* on a hill overlooking the harbour, as a lament for the troops departing like cattle to be slaughtered in France.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Michael Jameson, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: An Essential Guide to His Life and Works*, Classic FM Lifelines Series (London: Pavilion Books, 1997), 55.

<sup>17</sup> Richard King, *The Lark Ascending: The Music of the British Landscape* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), iii.

<sup>18</sup> Betsy Schwarm, 'The Lark Ascending'. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 7 December 2015; [www.britannica.com/topic/The-Lark-Ascending](http://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Lark-Ascending).

<sup>19</sup> Unsigned article, "Vaughan Williams – The Lark Ascending", [www.bbc.co.uk/teach/ten-pieces/classical-music-vaughan-williams-lark-ascending/znwdbdm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/ten-pieces/classical-music-vaughan-williams-lark-ascending/znwdbdm).

<sup>20</sup> Thorpe, 'How the First World War Inspired Britain's Favourite Piece of Classical Music'.

<sup>21</sup> Unsigned Classic FM article, 'Vaughan-Williams Re-Assessed', [www.classicfm.com/composers/vaughan-williams/guides/vaughan-williams-re-assessed](http://www.classicfm.com/composers/vaughan-williams/guides/vaughan-williams-re-assessed).

The source of this 'Margate Myth' appears to be a short passage from Ursula Vaughan Williams's 1964 biography of her late husband. She briefly mentions Ralph's and his then-wife Adeline's trip there to stay with his mother just as the First World War was starting and young men began enlisting for service. She also describes the writing episode at the cliffs, including the 'citizen's arrest' by the boy scout, but nowhere is *The Lark Ascending* named as the work he was composing. Here is the main part of the account:

Ralph, walking on the cliffs overlooking the Channel, where the B.E.F. [British Expeditionary Force] were already crossing towards the battlefields, sat down to write a tune he had thought of and grew absorbed in his music notebook. He was recalled to time and place by a small Boy Scout who gazed at him fiercely and told him he was under arrest. "Why?" asked Ralph, puzzled. "Maps", said the scout. "Information for the enemy". Feeling rather like Hugh the Drover accused of spying for Boney, Ralph allowed himself to be escorted to the police station, showed his suspicious MS paper and was let off with a caution.

Ursula adds an important footnote: 'This was Ralph's own version of the story. [George] Butterworth, in a letter written after a visit to Cheyne Walk, says that he was writing a lecture on Purcell'.<sup>22</sup> This detail is noteworthy not only because it suggests that Vaughan Williams may not even have been composing music at this scene at all, but also because it shows that his memory of this event, as with other events he recalled many years later (for instance his account of the circumstances surrounding his collection of the folk song 'Bushes and Briars' in 1903) may have been uncertain so long after the fact.<sup>23</sup> (Direct and indirect recollections of the 1914 completion date for *The Lark* collectively do not quite have this problem because of their number and agreement across a wide chronological span.) In any case, the multiple mis-renderings of this episode are unfortunate examples of seizing upon a story uncarefully in service of a desired correlation.

Related to questions of *The Lark's* precise chronology and direct involvement with World War I is the notion that it recalls (and maybe even mourns) a lost pre-war or even pre-industrial England. A common thread here is troubled historical events being deployed to be as consequential for the work as possible, even occasionally seeming to explain away its uncomfortably 'escapist' associations. Richard King, for example, states: 'We might remind ourselves that however forcefully the music stirs in us nostalgia or wistfulness of our own, Vaughan Williams was, with good reason, himself nostalgic for a prelapsarian landscape, an idea of pastoral idyll of Albion which the Great War had nullified permanently'. A few pages later he writes: '*The Lark Ascending* is imbued with nostalgia, it is nostalgia that recognizes the depth of this rupture [World War I], and the landscape it evokes is one of a more innocent age'.<sup>24</sup> Despite his skilled marshalling of evidence showing *The Lark* to predate the Great War and having little (if anything) to do with it, Andrew Green still wants the music to be an elegy in response to real-world events. He hypothesizes that the British agricultural depression starting in the middle

<sup>22</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 115.

<sup>23</sup> I discuss Vaughan Williams's memory of the 1903 event in "'There, in the fastness of Rural England": Vaughan Williams, folk song and George Borrow's *Lavengro*', *The Musical Times* 156, No. 1933 (2015): 43–56, at 45–6.

<sup>24</sup> King, *The Lark Ascending*, 12, 16.

1870s, the effects of which were ongoing while Meredith wrote his poem ('Meredith wrote his *Lark Ascending* as the depression bit deep', he writes) and for long after, may also have contributed to the sense of loss he and others perceive in Vaughan Williams's own *Lark*.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, David Gutman wishes to separate *The Lark* from associations he and other critics do not like. After writing that 'Vaughan Williams was no escapist', and speaking of his mature idiom's 'determination to articulate shared feelings, particular in time of war', he asks: 'is this straightforward nostalgia or did the composer hard-wire something else into the piece from the start?' As with others we have seen here, Gutman cannot abide *The Lark* as just a 'nice piece to listen to': 'but in creating that potent sense of loss Vaughan Williams must be doing something more than contrasting whimsical bird music with a folksier ground-level middle section'.<sup>26</sup>

### Two Scholarly Interpretations and a Response

Two brief treatments of *The Lark* in the scholarly literature, both published in roughly the last decade within volumes of broader focus, make deeper, music-driven arguments for understanding the work as something beyond the idyllic. Neither writing connects the music with outside events, and both are more effective than the thus-far-sampled, slender speculations in their shared aims. But both also neglect to consider significant mitigating factors (as we shall see). The first appears in Christopher Mark's survey of chamber music and works for soloist with orchestra in *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*.<sup>27</sup> Mark duly notes that the work's designation as a 'Romance' signals lyricism, but he cannot keep from deriding the Meredith poem from which Vaughan Williams's epigraph is extracted, calling it 'sentimental (and, at best, third-rate)'. He wants to distance the work from this association, however, also noting that *The Lark* seems to have been one of the factors which prompted the 'cowpat music' jibes. Hence, he resists the characterization of it in *Grove Music Online* as 'wholly idyllic and therefore different in feeling from the post-war pastoral works', asking if it is even possible to have a wholly idyllic work.<sup>28</sup>

Mark essentially casts *The Lark* in terms of a process of undermining an idyllic scene depicted at the outset and recalled later. The music opens quietly with an unstable ninth chord (E-G-B-D-F#) in the strings, horns, and clarinets, from which the soloist launches into a pentatonic cadenza containing the music's initial melodic gestures. Mark sees this in terms of a 'representational' world of time suspended. The orchestra takes on what he calls a 'commentating' role as accompaniment directly preceding Rehearsal A, with the soloist likewise moving from representation into commentary when it joins the orchestra in the first climax shortly after Rehearsal D. According to Mark, the return to the initial material

<sup>25</sup> Green, 'Liberating the Lark', 34.

<sup>26</sup> David Gutman, 'Vaughan Williams's *Lark Ascending*: A Complete Guide to the Best Recordings', *The Gramophone*, 25 May 2021; [www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/vaughan-williams-s-the-lark-ascending-a-complete-guide-to-the-best-recordings](http://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/vaughan-williams-s-the-lark-ascending-a-complete-guide-to-the-best-recordings).

<sup>27</sup> See Mark, 'Chamber Music and Works for Soloist With Orchestra', in *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, ed. Alain Frogley and Aidan J. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 179–98, at 185–7.

<sup>28</sup> For the *Grove* quotation, see Hugh Ottaway, revised by Alain Frogley. 'Vaughan Williams, Ralph'. *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, [www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com).

(the cadenza) at four bars after Rehearsal F sounds more like reminiscence than a convincing recapturing of that opening state, with its truncation supporting this impression. Like Gutman and others, Mark views the middle section, beginning from two bars before Rehearsal G, with its new, 'folk-like' melody stated by the flute, in terms of moving 'from the sky to ground-level and human activity', and 'community'. He correctly notes in this section the loss of the D–B motive heard throughout much of the prior music, and he characterizes the violin's role as 'decorative' once this has happened. Mark identifies a sense of nostalgia with, among other elements, the violin resumption of the middle section's initial flute melody at Rehearsal R. He sees the final, modally ambivalent restatement of the opening cadenza as embodying the work's greatest feeling of loss and melancholy.

In his book on twentieth-century English pastoral music, Eric Saylor also devotes some paragraphs to advocating for a non-idyllic *Lark*. Like Mark, he notes the work's 'Romance' designation. While he actually reprints the stanzas of the poem that form its epigraph (something that Mark does not do), he also largely ignores questions of how it might specifically relate to the music, only suggesting that the solo violin's trills may reference the bird's song. Saylor's primary interest is the music's modal complexity. He notes that 'throughout the piece, Vaughan Williams masks the identity of the specific scale or mode that he has chosen to employ, often by pitting two collections of similar scalar content against each other in ways that suggest conflicting central pitches'. As a major example of this, he points to how the work opens with a focus on the pitches of E-B-D-F#, drawn from the E Dorian collection, but that the return of the opening material in the cadenza finds itself favouring slightly different pitches from this collection: E-G-B-D, with the violin seeming to favour D as a central pitch instead of E. Saylor then points out instances where 'Vaughan Williams deliberately obscures the central pitch of a given theme', identifying passages that sound 'conventionally "folkish"' from the middle portions of the work: starting at two measures before Rehearsal G (the flute theme), and the passage where the oboe enters over the solo violin's repeated figures and trills at Rehearsal M. For Saylor, these elements suggest that 'instability is the order of the day in this work: it abounds with long passages of unbarred violin solos, simultaneous scalar collections of competing quality, and unresolved seventh and ninth chords'. In his view, 'this sort of technical sophistication deviates from the popular portrayal of *The Lark Ascending* as a dreamy, tranquil little work, particularly since it also eschews conventional displays of virtuosity'. In the following sentences, Saylor downplays the extent to which *The Lark* directly invokes nature:

And much like Classical-era music, the overall design and sound suggest naturalness without necessarily invoking nature itself. The violin's cadenzas, for instance, convey the same kinds of rhythmically free figuration and trills as one might hear in a lark's song, but nowhere in the piece does Vaughan Williams quote an actual birdcall. This directly contrasts with Delius's approach in *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, bolstering the argument that the two works represent entirely different spheres of expression and inspiration – one Romantic and representational, the other metaphysical and pastoral.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Eric Saylor, *English Pastoral Music: From Arcadia to Utopia, 1900–1955* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 114–17. Saylor also writes that the work could arguably be grouped with the postwar compositions because of its debut after the war (p. 5).



Both Mark and Saylor make valuable observations regarding *The Lark*, especially relating to its modal fabric. But the implications that they draw from them are limited both by their near-avoidance of examining the poem's relationship with the music (and in Mark's case his explicit disdain for this text), as well as their need to avoid unwelcome associations. While neither Mark nor Saylor make the same mistake as non-scholarly press commentators in baselessly connecting *The Lark* to actual historical events, there are nonetheless reasons for conceiving the composition quite differently from how they do. To begin, it happens that Vaughan Williams himself expressed thoughts about attaching poetry to instrumental works, and also about the term 'romance' as it has to do with music, across multiple writings which with *The Lark* predate the First World War. Admittedly, the matter is complicated by the fact that Vaughan Williams wrote an article very early on that he appeared to contradict to some extent in subsequent publications. In 'The Romantic Movement and Its Results', he declares the Romantic epoch at an end (with Wagner having been the culminating figure), casts aspersions on the symphonic poem as a viable genre, and he suggests that truly progressive composers will re-establish Classical tendencies in a break with the period just ended.<sup>30</sup> But in subsequent articles for *The Vocalist* and *The Music Student*, we find Vaughan Williams treating the subject of romanticism with much more nuance and positivity, applying the term to a cherished model, Johann Sebastian Bach. In 'Bach and Schumann', Vaughan Williams identifies romanticism, and explicitly 'romance', with a concern for expressing emotion and with uniformity of mood in music at the expense of predetermined, Classically oriented forms. He points to the examples of Bach's fugues and Schumann's Op. 17 Fantasy as music preserving 'the unity of mood by means of a poetical idea which recurs again and again in varied surroundings'. Speaking of Bach's harmonies, he makes this statement: 'His amazing harmonic progressions, which sound new and strange even now, are not the result of any conscious constructive aim, but are the direct outcome of the emotional intensity of the moment'. Later in the same article, he distinguishes between types of Romanticism, expounding upon the kind he had just applied to Bach and Schumann:

There are, of course, other composers than Schumann who are called 'romantic'. These, it is true, have little in common with Bach ... Indeed, Bach had little to do with the material, and often superficial romanticism of storms and wild huntsmen, and processions to the scaffold. But there is a truer and deeper romance, that of the heart, which deals not with external events, but with the minds and souls of human beings. This is the romance which Bach shares with his great apostle Schumann – the romance which, by making the ideal art subservient to the intimacies of human emotions, finally raises human emotions to the level of ideal art.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, in a 1910 article entitled 'The Romantic in Music: Some Thoughts on Brahms', Vaughan Williams favourably revisits the subject of the symphonic poem genre, suggesting that Brahms may have found it more congenial to his Romantically inspired materials than the Classical models he preferred. In

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<sup>30</sup> Vaughan Williams, 'The Romantic Movement and Its Results', *The Musician* 1/23 (1897): 430–31; quoted in David Manning, ed., *Vaughan Williams on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13–16.

<sup>31</sup> Vaughan Williams, "Bach and Schumann", *The Vocalist* 1/3 (1902): 72; quoted in Manning, ed., *Vaughan Williams on Music*, 129–32.

describing the advantages of this genre and other programmatic music, Vaughan Williams makes several remarks which would seem to have direct bearing upon a work such as *The Lark Ascending*. He proceeds from the principle that 'the business of the composer is to make his visions intelligible to others ... in such a way that they will be able to correlate them with what they already know'. In music along 'Classical' lines, he argues, this is done primarily through form, with structures adhering to expected benchmarks of symmetry and unity to aid general recognition. But a composer has other means of helping listeners relate to his compositions, he continues, 'by ranging his ideas so that they are analogous to the events of some story, some poem, some historical or ideal person or some natural phenomenon'. Vaughan Williams further writes that 'the true symphonic poem does not try to take the place of words or sights. The extraneous idea, the 'programme', is simply a common ground where the composer can meet the hearer before they start together on the voyage to unknown regions whither he is taking them'. Almost at the end of the article, he makes a statement consistent with his stated feelings in later writings: 'they should remember that form is a means and not an end'.<sup>32</sup>

Mark notes that *The Lark Ascending* was far from the last Vaughan Williams work to use the 'Romance' designation, as the latter's 1951 *Romance* for harmonica and orchestra notably indicates. The slow movements in several multi-sectioned compositions, and perhaps most notably the overtly romantic third movement of the Fifth Symphony (1943), are titled likewise (or similarly, with 'Romanza' being the designation for this particular section). He seems to have reserved the appellation for stretches or entire works of special emotional import. Accordingly, one further writing briefly reaffirms his convictions stated above. This is a brief letter penned to his former pupil Grace Williams in 1930 or 1931. Revealingly, Vaughan Williams shows concern in it over the direction her music is taking under the guidance of her current teacher, Egon Wellesz:

I'm ... wondering whether your work's not getting too 'cerebral – I believe in romance & emotion & think you cannot get on well without them (in your life as you realize – why not in your art) – don't get too much under the influence of Wellesz but keep your head and your own judgment – I wonder if you ought to leave him? I expect that will settle itself – but I shan't mind from that point of view.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, if we choose to privilege the few surviving occasions where Vaughan Williams expounded upon the 'romance' idea in his writings, we would be left with the following impression: in his music it refers to emotional intensity and/or consistency, and would seem to fly in the face of the cerebralism as an end in itself. Furthermore, for Vaughan Williams, the deep feeling suggested by 'Romance' (or 'Romanza') would not preclude the sadder emotions (witness the epigraph atop the *Pilgrim's Progress*-derived third movement of the Fifth Symphony in that work's manuscript), but this question would depend upon context for each work.

<sup>32</sup> Vaughan Williams, 'The Romantic in Music: Some Thoughts on Brahms', *The Music Student* 2/8 (1910): 116–20; quoted in Manning, ed., *Vaughan Williams on Music*, 165–70.

<sup>33</sup> Vaughan Williams, undated letter to Grace Williams, VWL3848, *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams* Online Database, [www.vaughanwilliams.uk](http://www.vaughanwilliams.uk). Emphases are Vaughan Williams's own.

Given the reasonable proposition that the principles stated above have some bearing upon *The Lark Ascending*, an evidenced-based interpretation of the work should assign due weight to Vaughan Williams's apparent notion of 'romance', to the poetry he chose to head the score, and to structural principles relevant to both. If we begin from the premise that *The Lark Ascending* is not related to external events, according to his conception of the term 'romance' cited above, we are left with another of the composer's strong indications: that the work closely relates to the poem excerpt, which serves to aid the listener in grasping the music's form and emotional makeup. This means that, however much the analyst may dislike this poetry, it is nonetheless important for any source-rooted reading of the music. With these factors in mind, it is worth briefly revisiting the lines Vaughan Williams chose to head his score:

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.

As Michael Kennedy points out, British Library Add. MS 52385 shows additional but crossed-out lines:

He is the dance of children, thanks  
Of sowers, shout of primrose banks  
And eyes of violets while they breathe;  
All these the circling song will wreath ... <sup>34</sup>

Before discussing what these lines might mean for the music, we might briefly address Vaughan Williams's text-deployment practices. As Byron Adams has explained on multiple occasions, he often patched together and even modified parts of his source materials, sometimes in ways that depart from the specific context of the originals.<sup>35</sup> In this instance, however, George Meredith's poem has mainly been understood in a decidedly 'soft' pastoral vein, indeed as a 'joyous' nature poem according to one author writing perhaps not far from the time Vaughan Williams may have come to know it.<sup>36</sup> The entire poem concerns rapt

<sup>34</sup> See Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 81–2.

<sup>35</sup> See Byron Adams, "Biblical Texts in the Works of Vaughan Williams", in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, ed. Alain Frogley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99–117; Byron Adams, "'No Armpits, Please, We're British': Whitman and English Music, 1884–1936", in *Walt Whitman and Modern Music: War, Desire, and the Trials of Nationhood*, ed. Lawrence Kramer (New York: Garland, 2000), 25–42; and Byron Adams, "'Music in the Air": Vaughan Williams, Shakespeare, and the Construction of an Elizabethan England', in *Let Beauty Awake: Elgar, Vaughan Williams, and Literature*, ed. Julian Rushton (London: Elgar Editions, 2010), 96–107.

<sup>36</sup> See Walter Jerrold, *George Meredith: An Essay towards Appreciation* (London: Greening, 1902), 61–4. Indeed, some opinions of the poem deem its descriptions of natural beauty to be

outdoor celebration, whether or not one wishes to give credence to the composer's crossed-out lines (indeed, they only underline this impression). There is no evidence currently available that Vaughan Williams saw the text otherwise, or employed it at all subversively in his composition. Any possible effort to cite his inconsistent fidelity to literary sources in order to cast the composition in 'hard' pastoral terms would therefore be forced at best. A plain reading of Vaughan Williams's chosen lines (both those included and those crossed out) suggests the lark's song and flight as parts of a beautiful natural scene, with human onlookers transfixed by them. Ursula Vaughan Williams offers the following about her husband's thinking regarding this work: 'He had taken a literary idea on which to build his musical thought in *The Lark Ascending* 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'.<sup>37</sup> The kind of 'paradise lost' that Mark and others associate with the work's series of musical events may be their personal response to the music, to which they are certainly entitled, but nothing in the chosen lines (including the word 'lost', which rather more ostensibly refers to the conclusion of the depicted vision) betrays an angst devastating enough to undercut the words' explicit message. There is no imperative in the poem excerpt, and correspondingly in the music, that an idyllic vision is ever lost for the duration of both.

Considering such an interpretation of the poem as something aiding the experience of *The Lark* has consequences for how we might approach its form and other musical elements. This is all the more true if we apply not only Vaughan Williams's thoughts about the roles of 'amazing' harmonic progressions and form quoted above, but also his melody-centric conception of the listening experience. In multiple writings, he expressed his belief in the primary importance of melody. For example, he echoed Wagner's remark that 'the business of a conductor is to find out where the melody lies'.<sup>38</sup> In one letter, he wrote that 'all musical invention ultimately comes from melody'.<sup>39</sup> At other times he was harsh with composers he perceived to have been unable to create convincing tunes.<sup>40</sup> This emphasis on melody has profound implications for Vaughan Williams's approach to form and texture. As early as 1954, Elsie Payne remarked on how folksong influenced not only the character of Vaughan Williams's melodies, but also the essentially melody-centric fabric of his compositions. She writes that 'melody is the epitome of Vaughan Williams's whole expression', and that 'his most characteristic and

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overdone. For example, see James V. Baker, "The Lark in English Poetry", *Prairie Schooner* 24/1 (1950): 70–79, at 76.

<sup>37</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 156.

<sup>38</sup> Vaughan Williams, 'Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony', in *National Music and Other Essays*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 1987), 103.

<sup>39</sup> Vaughan Williams, letter to Elsie Fry, 16 December [early 1940s], VWL5219, *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams* Online Database, [www.vaughanwilliams.uk/letter/vwl3848](http://www.vaughanwilliams.uk/letter/vwl3848).

<sup>40</sup> For example, see his denigration of Berlioz as a melodist when compared with Dvořák in an undated letter to Grace Williams, VWL3894, *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams* Online Database, [www.vaughanwilliams.uk/letter/vwl3848](http://www.vaughanwilliams.uk/letter/vwl3848). There is also his remark after hearing a student composer at Cornell University play a movement from a dissonant string quartet on the piano: 'If a tune *should* occur to you, my boy, don't hesitate to write it down'. Archibald T. Davison claims that this remark was relayed to him by a Cornell Professor who was present at the event. See *The R.C.M. Magazine* 55/1 (1959): 29. This incident has since been quoted elsewhere. For example, see James Day, *Vaughan Williams*, third edition, Master Musicians Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 96; and Simon Heffer, *Vaughan Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 134.

contemplative expression is a fundamentally melodic one. The separate constituents of his style are all dependent upon melodic ideas'. Earlier, she speaks of 'the melody maintaining its integrity against the total effect' in his music.<sup>41</sup> In a related vein, Edward Macan writes about 'block juxtapositions' of different modal collections within single works by Vaughan Williams and Holst. Significantly, he identifies melody, or thematic transformation, as a unifying component across these different areas.<sup>42</sup>

Such observations carry much relevance for *The Lark* if we view the work as melody-driven, and accept that a listener unskilled in, or unconcerned with, music analysis (say, an untrained Classic FM poll voter) may not hear the music primarily according to its modal intricacies. (Such intricacies would be impossible for all but the most rarefied listeners to hear and navigate without a score in any case!) Also, while the principal melodies can be difficult to demarcate with precision, given both occasional linking elements and the significant elaboration (or variation) to which they are sometimes subjected, there are essentially three main, aurally recognizable thematic groups across four areas. These include the opening theme group that dominates the first section (including both the 'bird-song', ornament-like figures with which the violin opens in the cadenza, seen in Exx. 1a and 1b, and the theme that 'materializes' from them just prior to Rehearsal A, seen in Ex. 2b); the 'folk-like' theme certain commentators have associated with 'ground-level' human activity occupying the second, 'Allegretto tranquillo' section from just before Rehearsal G to one measure before Rehearsal L; the short, repetitive ideas comprising a brief interlude section following this and lasting up until Rehearsal R (seen in Ex. 1c); and the resumption of the initial material in reverse order (albeit with new interpolations) to close. With the exception of the interlude section, each of these areas shifts its modal pitch support as its melodic content is stated, elaborated, and restated. These changing modal areas can best be apprehended using David Manning's fine chart (also reproduced by Christopher Mark in his analysis) of the work's form.<sup>43</sup>

An important consideration, however, is that multiple melodic gestures persist across different theme groups, so that there are nevertheless points of aural connection even across contrasting areas with considerable harmonic complexity accompanying them. The most prominent example of this is the D–B motive (mentioned by Mark, as we will recall) that melodically saturates the composition and unites different themes and areas. As we see in Example 1a, this motive establishes itself almost immediately. It represents a point of pitch invariance across every full and discernible modal collection presented in the work: E Dorian, D Pentatonic, D Dorian, E Aeolian, B (minor) Pentatonic, and E (minor) Pentatonic. The way in which Vaughan Williams insistently repeats it suggests such an intent: a motivic anchor given to the listener to forestall possible tonal and variational discombobulation. Beyond the figure in Example 1a, some other prominent examples are illustrated in Example 2, along with the pitch collections accompanying them.

Almost the only place in the composition where this motive is not heard is in the D Dorian area of the second part of the B section. However, this area still includes

<sup>41</sup> Elsie Payne, 'Vaughan Williams and Folk-Song', *The Music Review* 15 (1954): 103, 125.

<sup>42</sup> Edward Macan, 'Block Juxtapositions: A Structural Principle in the Music of Holst and Vaughan Williams', *British Music* 15 (1993): 83–104, at 84.

<sup>43</sup> Table 1 is a reproduction of Manning's chart, found on page 79 of the second volume of his doctoral thesis, "Harmony, Tonality and Structure in Vaughan Williams's Music" (PhD diss., University of Cardiff, 2003). I thank him for his permission to use it here.



Ex. 1a Beginning of Bar 3 cadenza, solo violin (First theme group)



Ex. 1b Later in Bar 3 cadenza, undulating figure in the solo violin (First theme group)



Ex. 1c 6–11 bars after Rehearsal L, solo violin part (Third theme group)

the D and B pitches, and they are fleetingly present in some of the violin figures directly leading up to Rehearsal L. Furthermore, the motive of the descending minor third is heard in other pitches almost as soon as the section starts, recalling the D–B motive indelibly despite a temporarily shifting modal ground (see Ex. 3). Indeed, the importance of this gesture, which quite transcends precise pitch, is driven home in the work's final bars, as Vaughan Williams thrice gives us a

Table 1 *The Lark Ascending* – Formal Plan (created by David Manning)

Bar	Section	Theme	Pitch Centres
1	Introduction 1	(.see Ex 2.9),	E Dorian
3	Cadenza 1	Cad. 1	D Pentatonic (D, E, F#, A, B)
4		A1	(G, A, B, D) then D Pentatonic
5	A section	A1, A2, A3	E Dorian
C.10		A4	modulating
D.10		A2, A1	E Aeolian
F.4	Introduction 2	(see Ex. 2.9)	E Dorian
F.7	Cadenza 2	Cad. 1	D Pentatonic
F.8	B section	B1	E Aeolian
L.6		B2	D Dorian
R.1		B1	E Aeolian
T.10	A' section	A1, A2, A3	modulating, E Aeolian
V.9		A4	modulating
W.4		A2, A1	E Aeolian
V.1	Introduction 3	(see Ex. 2.9)	E Aeolian
Y.6	Cadenza 3	Cad. 1	E Pentatonic, B Pentatonic, E Pentatonic



Ex. 2a Bar 3, approximately midway through the opening solo violin cadenza (D Pentatonic)



Ex. 2b Bar 5, beginning of the first A section theme, solo violin (E Dorian)



Ex. 2c 10 bars after Rehearsal D through one bar after Rehearsal E, beginning of the second A section, flute melody (E Aeolian):



Ex. 2d 3-6 bars after S, transition to the return of the A section, solo violin (E Aeolian)

A multi-staff musical score. The top staff is labeled 'Solo Violin' and contains the same melodic line as Ex. 2a. Below it are four staves for 'Violin I', 'Violin II', 'Viola', and 'Violoncello'. Each of these four staves has a dynamic marking *ppp* and contains a simple accompaniment pattern of quarter notes. The Solo Violin staff has a *ppp* marking at the beginning.

Ex. 2e Closing cadenza, as string accompaniment fades, solo violin and strings (E Pentatonic)



Ex. 2f Closing cadenza, final notes in the solo violin (E Pentatonic)

descending minor third on G–E in the solo violin before lingering one last time on the unifying D–B to conclude (see Ex. 2f). It hardly matters that a tonic pitch here is ambiguous, as Saylor points out, because both this intervallic gesture and the importance of its chief, pitch-specific D–B iteration have by now so ingrained themselves as focal points in the musical consciousness of even the passive listener.

Another noteworthy melodic constant are the undulating figures in the solo violin part that highly recall one another even when they do not share exact pitches. Although they are often similar in their contours of pitch sequences, it is perhaps their rhythmic profiles that register the closest kinship. The clearest point of comparison is between the figures presented in Examples 1b and 1c. In different parts of the work (prominently the bars proceeding from Rehearsal M), similar undulating figures appear, and while their groupings may comprise 8, 9, 10, or another number of notes, and despite the fact that these figures can appear in semiquaver-, demisemiquaver-, or hemidemisemiquaver-note rhythms, they are closely enough related in gesture and profile to recall each other from different areas of the work. And as with the recurring D–B motive, the changing and sometimes elusive modal dressings of these figures may give them divergent contexts, but they are recognizably linked despite this.

There is, then, a great deal of melodic cohesion in *The Lark*, the modal underpinnings of which are rightly characterized by both Mark and Saylor as complex and at times equivocal. But, with respect to Saylor's analysis in particular, it is a kind of cohesion that does not require sophisticated listening to apprehend. It aligns with Vaughan Williams's own words (from the 'Bach and Schumann' article cited above) regarding the use of imaginative harmonic progressions, which in this case alter the conditions under which melodies can be heard over the duration of a composition. Melodic cohesion also relates to why one might object to Mark's interpretation of the work. To associate the truncated return of the solo violin's opening material (cadenza 2) just prior to the start of the second section with reminiscence seems reasonable on face, but does this have to amount to a sense of loss (which this seems to imply) while looking back on an initial state? As we have already seen, there is enough melodic commonality (and particularly Example 1a material) during the intervening bars to ask whether the initial state was ever really missing up to that point. Furthermore, cadenza 2's placement and truncation would by another perspective simply be a formal buffer between two large areas of the work, an economic means of capping one section, preparing the next, and ensuring cohesion and continuity along the way. (These are goals that



Ex. 3 1–4 bars starting at M, solo oboe



may be ill served structurally by having either no restatement or a full restatement of the opening cadenza at this point.) Likewise, Mark's 'linchpin' of the work at Rehearsal R, where the solo violin takes up the main melody of Section B instead of the flute, (and where it later plays double-stopped, 'languorous' descending figurations), does indeed sound emotionally intense, perhaps even nostalgic as he claims (though the passage of time since the theme's first statement has by this point not been very great). But once again this whole passage corresponds with a need for thematic restatement and timbral variety, not to mention another imminent shift of sections (in this instance a return to A section material). Last, the final solo violin cadenza (cadenza 3) that Mark associates with the work's greatest sense of loss, coming as it does amidst a modally ambivalent conclusion, is comparable in length to cadenza 1, upon which it is based. If this is another loss-fuelled reminiscence, why is it not also truncated like cadenza 2? Moreover, if modal ambivalence here partially contributes to the sense of loss, what of the knotty modality presented with the work's opening sequence of events prior to Rehearsal A, before any such 'loss' can have occurred? Perhaps Vaughan Williams simply calculated that a second full cadenza (the third total), the very last solo violin pitches of D–B, and a new *variety* (though not necessarily severity) of modal ambiguity to conclude the work, together amount to the most concentrated, effective ways of rounding off a consistent vision. In short, the places where Mark identifies representation, commentary, and nostalgia all turn out to implicate practical issues of structure and compositional craft. A 'wholly idyllic' piece might indeed be impossible if it were in practice to avoid any significant contrasts, or if deeper meanings were too often read into thematic recurrences. And while an argument could be made that an idyllic vision might not necessarily exclude moments of nostalgia or melancholy, the moments of intense expression Mark identifies could as easily be attributed to fervent points of beauty and mystery in the total scene created by the violin and orchestra.<sup>44</sup>

If we are to use the poem as a guide to apprehend the aesthetic content of the composition, in the spirit of Vaughan Williams's written comments above, we should be looking for ways to relate musical elements to the text's coherent imagery of an ascendant lark, its onlookers, and the backdrop described for both. Indeed such elements are not difficult to find. A kaleidoscopic modal fabric throughout provides a suitably blurred undercurrent for a richly melodic narrative enacted by the solo violin and occasionally the *tutti* orchestra and other single instruments. Seen in this light, *The Lark Ascending* is not a 'difficult' work that must be defined by its complexities. Nor are there firm objective grounds to necessarily see it as some expression of loss beyond what Vaughan Williams's chosen poetic lines state, though of course one may freely do so on a personal level. The historical and contextual evidence shared here supports enjoyment of the work as a beautiful piece of music evoking a pleasant, and perhaps even 'escapist' natural scene without needing to be something more. Listeners may not be required to experience it as such, but they should certainly feel no shame in doing so. Nor should they be cowed by critical arguments that would downplay the reasons they enjoy it, but which ultimately lack obligatory interpretive basis. Until a primary source for such a basis is unmistakably discovered, we should cheerfully

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<sup>44</sup> For a useful commentary on the various connotations (both pleasurable and painful) borne by the term 'nostalgia', see Matthew Riley, *Edward Elgar and the Nostalgic Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5–16.

accept (and perhaps privilege) any listener preference for a peaceful, even idyllic *Lark*.<sup>45</sup>

### The Revisionist Context

The notion of *The Lark Ascending* as a primarily complex or angst-associated piece is a recent development in its reception history. Earlier commentators, untrammelled by contemporary revisionist priorities, did not connect the work with the war, nor indeed did they find much that is subversive about it. Simona Pakenham associates *The Lark* with 'morning freshness' and the 'friendly' manner of his earlier works.<sup>46</sup> Hubert Foss sees it much in terms of its pictorial qualities, and claims that 'the whole piece is as full of the sounds and scents of the English countryside as Keats's line "the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves"'.<sup>47</sup> James Day, Frank Howes, Percy Young, and even Michael Kennedy variously cast it in similar terms, or associate it with changing moods of the eponymous scene.<sup>48</sup> The desire to read *The Lark* otherwise did not manifest itself in earnest until decades after Vaughan Williams died. At the early end of this tendency is Wilfrid Mellers's treatment of the work in his fascinating yet controversial monograph on the composer's music.<sup>49</sup> Dubbing it 'very far from being an escapist piece', he argues for it representing both nature *and* human perception and activity. Furthermore, he sees symphonic qualities in it and finds significance in the fact that it was first performed after the war.<sup>50</sup> George Revill frames *The Lark* in terms of a 'modernist' pastoralism and the composer's radical politics.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> In her discussion and annotation of Vaughan Williams's essay, 'The Letter and the Spirit', Ceri Owen points out that, by his later years, Vaughan Williams had become more receptive to the role of the audience in creating a set of associations for a given piece of music. The composer even eventually omitted a paragraph in this essay (for reprinting in his 1953 Oxford University Press book *Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony with Writings on Other Musical Subjects*) about the importance of hearing a composition as it was intended by the composer. See Owen, 'Vaughan Williams's "The Letter and the Spirit" (1920)', in *Vaughan Williams and His World*, ed. Byron Adams and Daniel M. Grimley (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 57–73, at 58–61. The case could be made that the interpretations I am critiquing here are a valid part of this (re)creation. I do not deny this, nor would I wish to deprive Mark, Saylor, or others of their personal responses to the music. I am only arguing that the best evidence points to the composer's own conception of *The Lark Ascending* as lying closer to associations that they (and others cited here) make a point of resisting.

<sup>46</sup> Simona Pakenham, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Discovery of His Music* (London: Macmillan, 1957), 72, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Hubert Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974), 114–16.

<sup>48</sup> See James Day, *Vaughan Williams, The Master Musicians*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 225; Frank Howes, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 96–9; Percy Young, *Vaughan Williams* (London: Dennis Dobson Limited, 1953), 126–7; and Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 168.

<sup>49</sup> For a good explanation of why this book is controversial, see Alain Frogley's review of the first edition in *Music & Letters* 71/3 (1990): 435–8.

<sup>50</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion*, second edition (London: Travis & Emery, 1997), 69–79, at 79.

<sup>51</sup> George Revill, 'The Lark Ascending: Monument to a Radical Pastoral', *Landscape Research* 16/2 (1991): 25–30.

But *The Lark's* problematic status began in earnest when contemporary Vaughan Williams revisionism did, primarily in academic scholarship. The first stage of this coincided with Alain Frogley's edited essay collection, *Vaughan Williams Studies*, published in 1996 by Cambridge University Press. His opening chapter effectively summarizes multiple longstanding problems and misconceptions that had long plagued the composer's reception: his parochial image, his alleged technical clumsiness, and his oversimplified relationships with folksong and pastoralism, among other issues. While neither Frogley nor his contributors give sustained attention to *The Lark* in this volume's essays, he does mention it as a work that ostensibly fuelled the 'cowpat' and other epithets lending to Vaughan Williams's unflattering image, and especially his poor standing among critics, academics, and concert programmers. Frogley's essay also discusses (albeit briefly) the *Pastoral Symphony* in light of Ursula Vaughan Williams's revelation of her husband's private letter explaining that the work is connected with his World War I service in France rather than being 'lambkins frisking' as most people take for granted.<sup>52</sup> While Frogley was not the first to do so, this kind of reference to a work once considered a cornerstone of Vaughan Williams's parochial ruralism is significant as a part of a larger, seminal call to reassessment.<sup>53</sup> As we have begun to see already, this revelation would be a cornerstone of revisionist scholarship for years to come.

To be sure, Frogley's volume was a measured, necessary corrective to decades of neglect and poor understanding concerning Vaughan Williams. However, with a second phase of academic revisionism, traceable to a group of *Musical Quarterly* articles published in the spring–summer 2008 issue, we begin to see revisionists 'go on the offense'. Introduced by Byron Adams, this slate of scholarship collectively calls for recognition of an additional variety of twentieth-century musical modernism.<sup>54</sup> It finds conventional applications of the term inadequate to account for British composers traditionally considered conservative, but who responded to their milieu in ways perhaps less hard-edged than Continental modernists while still modern by other measures.<sup>55</sup> Hence, the term 'British Modernism' that heads the issue. Three of the five writings centrally concern Vaughan Williams. In an article already cited above, Eric Saylor discusses the *Pastoral Symphony* as a war work in the context of historical-literary theory that recognizes a 'hard', unidealized category of the pastoral trope – one amenable to uniquely modernist concerns.<sup>56</sup> Anthony Barone examines manuscripts of the Fourth Symphony and finds

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<sup>52</sup> See Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, 121. (For the contents of the letter itself, see VWL1378 at *The Letters of RVW* Online Database: [www.vaughanwilliams.uk/letter/vwl1378](http://www.vaughanwilliams.uk/letter/vwl1378)) Michael Kennedy echoes the association and calls the symphony Vaughan Williams's 'war requiem'. See Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 155.

<sup>53</sup> See Frogley, 'Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the Reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams', in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, 1–22. For some earlier mentions of the *Pastoral Symphony's* wartime associations, see Michael Kennedy, 'Ralph Vaughan Williams in the First Centenary of His Birth', *Studi musicali* 2 (1973): 175–87, at 182–3; and Michael Vaillancourt, 'Modal and Thematic Coherence in Vaughan Williams's *Pastoral Symphony*', *The Music Review* 52 (1991): 203–17, at 203–4.

<sup>54</sup> See Adams, "Foreword", *The Musical Quarterly* 91/1–2 (2008): 1–7.

<sup>55</sup> Jenny Doctor expounds most upon these matters in this issue. See Doctor, 'The Parataxis of "British Musical Modernism"', *The Musical Quarterly* 91/1–2 (2008): 89–115, especially at 109–12.

<sup>56</sup> Saylor, "'It's Not Lambkins Frisking at All'", 39–59.

modernism in its juxtaposition of fragmentation and cohesion.<sup>57</sup> Finally, Daniel M. Grimley's reading of the *Sinfonia antartica* identifies modernism in the work's inversion of conventionally symphonic kinds of development and structure, as well as in its evocation of a post-war climate of fear.<sup>58</sup> In just one of these articles (Saylor's) is *The Lark Ascending* even mentioned, and then only in passing. But together they are significant both for their appropriation of a term for Vaughan Williams that had usually been understood to apply to other types of composers and music, and also as a part of a broader revisionist context for latter-day readings of *The Lark* critiqued here.<sup>59</sup>

By 2013 Alain Frogley had produced another multi-author volume of Vaughan Williams essays, this time in co-editorship with Aidan J. Thomson: *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*. This collection is yet another landmark in the ongoing academic Vaughan Williams revisionism, and one in which Christopher Mark's afore-mentioned chapter expressing discomf with *The Lark*'s 'idyllic' associations finds a natural home.<sup>60</sup> Admittedly, not all of the essays in this collection take the same revisionist bent, and even some that do are quite informative and even-handed. Julian Onderdonk's chapter, for instance, admits the conservative and even 'idealizing tendencies' in Vaughan Williams's nationalist vision, while strongly emphasizing the progressive socio-political aspects of his outlook. Onderdonk's conclusion is typical of his circumspection: 'we can recognize in Vaughan Williams's music an independent voice poised between modernism and conservatism, innovation and tradition, that has its roots in his personal

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<sup>57</sup> Anthony Barone, 'Modernist Rifts in a Pastoral Landscape: Observations on the Manuscripts of Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony', *The Musical Quarterly* 91/1–2 (2008): 60–88. J.P.E. Harper-Scott provides an alternative interpretation of the Fourth Symphony in his essay 'Vaughan Williams's Antic Symphony', in *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960*, ed. Matthew Riley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 175–96.

<sup>58</sup> Daniel M. Grimley, 'Music, Ice, and the "Geometry of Fear": The Landscapes of Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antartica*', *The Musical Quarterly* 91/1–2 (2008): 116–50. Shortly thereafter, Grimley also published an essay similarly finding modernist currents in the *Pastoral Symphony*'s structure and trope reinterpretations. See Grimley, 'Landscape and Distance: Vaughan Williams, Modernism and the Symphonic Pastoral', in *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960*, ed. Riley, 147–74.

<sup>59</sup> Here I am distinguishing between the terms 'modern' and 'modernism' (or "modernist"). While some (including early-twentieth-century British critics) have used these terms loosely, and recent decades have seen a blurring of their distinction in academic writing, twentieth-century historiographical parlance has traditionally reserved 'modernism' for composers and music demonstrating self-conscious attitudes relating to technical or aesthetic progress, subversion, autonomy, and/or perceived 'demands of history'. There is not space here to do this issue justice, but a good understanding of musical modernism's special status can be gained from Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, *The Oxford History of Western Music Volume 4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–5, and Mark Evan Bonds, *A History of Music in Western Culture*, 4th edn (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 495–8.

<sup>60</sup> The year 2023 saw the publication of a new volume of essays: Byron Adams and Daniel M. Grimley, eds., *Vaughan Williams and His World*, cited above. Beyond recognitions of *The Lark Ascending*'s popularity, the work rarely gets mentioned in it. But several of the book's contributions intensify the revisionist trends rehearsed here. For more on this, see my forthcoming review in *Notes: The Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association*.

history and his family's heritage of commitment to society and nation'.<sup>61</sup> Similar to Grimley's 2008 article cited above, however, Julian Horton's chapter searches for traditional symphonic credibility in Vaughan Williams's later symphonies while also identifying their 'modernist' or 'progressive' qualities.<sup>62</sup> To the extent that he cannot connect Symphonies Nos. 7–9 to the former, like he can with the (or his) modernism-associated Symphonies Nos. 4–6, he critiques them. To the extent that he associates these works with technical progressivism Horton makes eager comparisons: 'Even cursory engagement reveals a post-tonal vocabulary, which is no less progressive than that employed by Bartók, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, or Shostakovich'. Even more boldly: 'The collection-based textures of the *Sinfonia Antartica*'s nature music, for instance, prefigure heterophonic techniques exploited by the second generation of the post-war avant-garde, most obviously in the spatial works of Ligeti's first maturity (*Lontano*, for example)'.<sup>63</sup> Aidan J. Thomson repeatedly emphasizes what he considers to be Vaughan Williams's 'progressive' characteristics, even admitting that he considers a theme of the volume to be 'Vaughan Williams the Progressive'.<sup>64</sup> Thomson claims that Vaughan Williams 'began in the Parry tradition, and ended with works that perhaps anticipated the modernism of the generation that came to the fore in the late '50s: that's a huge transformation within a single lifetime'.<sup>65</sup> Both Horton and Thomson, then, seek to show links between Vaughan Williams and composers more conventionally categorized as 'modernist' or 'progressive' despite these composers' vastly different musical outlooks and aesthetic orientations. (For instance, Vaughan Williams ridiculed what he called 'The Wrong Note School'.)<sup>66</sup> It is thus hardly surprising to find Thomson expressing preference for 'hard' pastoralism in response to one of his interviewees, Piers Hellawell. Thomson offers this in a conversation where the Tallis Fantasia and *The Lark Ascending* are mentioned: 'whereas one might say that some of Vaughan Williams's work *doesn't* recover that [pastoralist] ideal, or

<sup>61</sup> Julian Onderdonk, 'The Composer and Society: Family, Politics, Nation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, ed. Frogley and Thomson, 9–24, especially at 15, 24.

<sup>62</sup> For a critique of this stance, see Ryan Ross, 'Is It Symphonic? Some Thoughts on the Critical Reception of Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antartica*', *The Ralph Vaughan Williams Society Journal* 69 (2017): 6–9.

<sup>63</sup> Julian Horton, 'The Later Symphonies', *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, 199–228, quotes at 226.

<sup>64</sup> Thomson, 'Becoming a National Composer: Critical Reception to c. 1925', and 'Vaughan Williams and His Successors; Composers' Forum', *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, 56–75 and 299–320, at 74, 300, and ff.

<sup>65</sup> Thomson, 'Vaughan Williams and his Successors', 317.

<sup>66</sup> For Vaughan Williams's generally hostile attitude toward 'The Wrong Note' school, and for those he considered to be part of it, see *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams* Online Database: VWL932, VWL1457, VWL1785, VWL2476, VWL3361, VWL4308, and VWL4309. Elsewhere he was less than charitable toward the music of composers who aggressively embraced dissonance and other traditionally 'modernist' elements. For example, see his remarks on Stravinsky in VWL530; and his perfunctory remark on Schoenberg marking the latter's death in 'Arnold Schönberg 1874–1951', *Music & Letters* 32/4 (1951): 322 in Manning, ed., *Vaughan Williams on Music*, 173. Also worth recalling in this context is the beginning of the composer's 1955 tribute to Sibelius, where he compares the latter favourably (and rather caustically) against various avant-garde techniques. See 'Sibelius (18785–1957) (A Tribute Written on the Occasion of his Ninetieth Birthday)', in *National Music and Other Essays*, 261–4, at 261.

it does so only very fleetingly, before turning away again'. Another of Thomson's interviewees, Anthony Payne, refers to *The Lark* as 'really haunting'.<sup>67</sup>

Even in this modest sampling of literature we can begin to see wide application of terms such as 'modernist' and 'progressive' according to the needs and inclinations of their different users. Indeed, in his introduction to the *Musical Quarterly* articles cited above, Byron Adams himself calls attention to this regarding the issue's authors: 'Happily, none of them agree exactly on a definitive meaning of "British modernism." Surely, however, all would concur that British modernism can be best understood as one of a plethora of equally valid and exciting "modernisms" that coexisted during the last century.'<sup>68</sup> The trouble with this approach is that when terms can signify virtually whatever their users wish, whenever they wish it, they become unwieldy. And insofar as this specific one is deployed to combat the much more stable (if otherwise problematic) terms of Vaughan Williams's long-standing parochial image, revisionism can easily haemorrhage effectiveness. This problem is already starting to receive attention, notably in the growing literature about music and middlebrow taste. A paragraph about these tendencies in Kate Guthrie's recent book is worth quoting at length:

These new avenues [of 'attempting to extricate Britain's midcentury musical culture from its dubious reputation'] have proved expedient for British music studies, allowing scholars to contest the long-derided conservatism of their historical subjects. However, they have done so on grounds that limit both our understanding of modernism and ... of other cultural traditions, as well as the often fractious interactions between them. As far as modernism is concerned, our understanding of its role within twentieth-century culture more broadly risks losing its historical specificity, as 'modernism' becomes a catch-all for any cultural product that can persuasively be presented as somehow responding to modernity. At the same time, scholars have continued to accept modernism as an arbiter of value, invoking it as an honorific. This perspective has not only perpetuated old anxieties about Britain's relationship to a continental other that is consistently imagined as more innovative, more progressive, and timelier; it has also left scholars embroiled in wrangling over aesthetic worth, as they have struggled to accommodate ill-fitting repertory within a narrative that privileges radical responses to modernization above all else. By continuing to approach Britain's musical culture through the polarizing terms set by a coterie of midcentury continental composers and propagated by the postwar academic establishment, academics have displaced its midcentury cultural ideologies with a later set of scholarly priorities. In doing so, they have left little space for mapping in-between cultural spaces on their own, often contradictory terms.<sup>69</sup>

This gets to the heart of the matter. Resentful of a slanted postwar historiography, in which early twentieth-century British music at large (and Vaughan Williams in particular) have been considered much less essential to the Western Classical Tradition's development than Continental modernists such as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartók, revisionists understandably wish to advocate

<sup>67</sup> Thomson, 'Vaughan Williams and his Successors', 307, 317.

<sup>68</sup> Adams, 'Foreword', 6.

<sup>69</sup> Kate Guthrie, *Music and the Middlebrow Culture in Modern Britain: The Art of Appreciation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 8–9. Another noteworthy study involving "middlebrow" British music and reception is Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

vigorously for the importance of this repertoire and its creators.<sup>70</sup> But some are doing so in a way that implicitly validates the historiographical wrongs they seek to redress. Like those who short-shrifted Vaughan Williams and Company in the first place, they hold ‘modernism’ to be convenient nomenclature, well cognizant of the privilege it bestows amongst those for whom the slightest whiff of conservatism is anathema. And so we are witnessing its scattershot application to composers and works outside of any circumscribed set of styles, values, and motivations, hardly relieved by qualifiers like ‘British’, and done much in the interest of rescuing these creators and their music from political disfavour. (Taken to extreme, the label always fits because of the argument that *every* twentieth-century composer was inevitably touched by modernity in some way.)<sup>71</sup> In other words, whereas before there was an In-Crowd and everyone else, now there is just a poorly-defined In-Crowd. But to quote Richard Taruskin, writing about the appropriation of Rachmaninoff (another early twentieth-century composer treated unkindly by postwar music historiography) to the label, ‘efforts to find the modernist in Rachmaninoff can only reinforce invidious preconceptions. Me-tooism, which tacitly accepts the bias, is always futile.’<sup>72</sup> Why not strive to account for specific crowds and individuals, and argue for their importance, by bringing appropriate (and more delicate) tools to each task while avoiding politically opportunist catchwords and other reckless terminology? Such a resolution might acknowledge Vaughan Williams’s debts to Continental trends and techniques, while unashamedly maintaining that his contributions were rooted in national community; that his musical language is fresh, substantial, and (yes) innovative in some ways, but in the end much more approachable than those more of the uncompromising autonomist types who used to be (still are?) more recognizably understood as ‘modernist’; that his leftist political beliefs were real, but were checked by a strongly moderate sensibility; and that history and its subjects should be more than merely a sandbox for the preoccupations of historians, though these preoccupations will inevitably be present. In the words of Ian Pace, ‘Beyond attempts to nuance and enrich the concept of modernism, some fearless scholars might consider whether the concept itself is necessarily worth preserving in such a [broad] form or whether some modified terminology ... might prove more enlightening’.<sup>73</sup> While this is not the place to launch an extensive critique of the emergent Modernism Problem in twentieth-century music historiography, the issue looms ever larger in our evolving understanding of Vaughan Williams and his oeuvre, and tinges the discourse surrounding his ‘most popular work’.

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<sup>70</sup> For a useful discussion of this impulse and examples of what has prompted it, see Frogley, ‘Modernism and its Discontents: Reclaiming the Major Minor British Composer’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 143/1 (2018): 243–254, especially at 243–6.

<sup>71</sup> For example, see J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>72</sup> Richard Taruskin, ‘Not Modern and Loving It’, in Taruskin, *Russian Music at Home and Abroad: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 120–33, at 126.

<sup>73</sup> Ian Pace, ‘Modernist Fantasias: The Recuperation of a Concept’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 144/2 (2019): 473–93, at 493. Additionally, a very recent article by David Manning argues for firm boundaries in defining twentieth-century musical ‘modernism’, while citing others who have done similarly. See Manning, ‘Vaughan Williams, Modernism, and Neo-Romanticism: *Sancta Civitas* as a Vision “Among the Ruins”’, *The Musical Quarterly* 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gdad008>.

### Conclusion

What the eager revisionists in general, and the opponents of an unencumbered *Lark* in particular, risk is replacing one mythical Vaughan Williams with another. To argue for 'politically acceptable' versions of the composer and his music, to extents that ignore, or are difficult to reconcile with, available evidence, serves more to gratify trendy agendas than it does to increase our understanding. It also undermines the welcome gains of more temperate revisionism in combating simplistic images of him in the opposite direction. An honest assessment of Vaughan Williams and his music unflinchingly gives due to his strong Romantic and nationalist currents, and even to his aversion toward the kind of modernism with which (as we have seen) some revisionists have wished to reconcile him. It also acknowledges that while Vaughan Williams has been misunderstood according to the former terms, this misunderstanding is nonetheless often rooted in facts (prominently his own views encountered throughout his writings) that sit uncomfortably with certain contemporary priorities, not to mention the extent to which he himself was responsible for his 'pastoralist' image.<sup>74</sup> As one who believed that every composer should have a message for his own people, who respected popular taste, who explicitly stated that modernism and conservatism are irrelevant next to one's individuality, and who wrote that love of one's country and customs are healthy, Vaughan Williams composed music that abundantly and unironically reflects these concerns.<sup>75</sup> And as his most popular work, portrayed here to be one that substantially resists efforts to 'free' him from aspects annoying to the critical and scholarly elite, *The Lark* stands as a bulwark against revisionist overreach. In his most recent book, Eric Saylor interestingly provides this further remark on the composition, seeming somewhat to modify his earlier statements cited above:

It is a work that revels in the expansive and melancholic beauty of its own sound, without apology or embarrassment, soaring to picturesque heights that few in the postwar world still dared. Perhaps this is why *The Lark Ascending* has proven so resilient: in an increasingly noisy and exhausting world, it still provides a quiet space to dream.<sup>76</sup>

Melancholy aside (possibly), yes indeed. In this spirit, we should gratefully celebrate an Ascendant Lark as simply the 'pretty piece to relax to' that its popularity suggests.

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<sup>74</sup> Kirstie Asmussen has recently discussed how Vaughan Williams was directly complicit in the soft pastoralist, nationalist image projected in Hubert Foss's book *Vaughan Williams: A Study*, cited earlier in this article. See Asmussen, 'Biographical Revisionism: Hubert Foss's Conflicting Portrayals of Vaughan Williams', *Journal of Musicological Research* 38/3–4 (2019): 285–97, at 295–6.

<sup>75</sup> These views are presented and expounded upon in the following writings: 'National Music', 'Nationalism and Internationalism', and 'The Making of Music', all of which may be found in Kennedy, ed., *National Music and Other Essays*, 1–73, 154–9, and 205–42. For the quote about modernism and conservatism see Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 372.

<sup>76</sup> Eric Saylor, *Vaughan Williams* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 97–8.