

BlueWater Chamber Orchestra:
James Thompson reflects on Vaughan Williams’
The Lark Ascending

by Mike Telin



Two personal interests of composer Ralph Vaughan Williams were poetry and the violin, both of which are magically entwined in his work for violin and orchestra, *The Lark Ascending*, inspired by George Meredith’s [poem](#) of the same name. The composer’s wife Ursula wrote that in the work Vaughan Williams 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...”

On Saturday, November 23 at 7:30 pm at the Church of the Covenant, violinist James Thompson will join the BlueWater Chamber Orchestra in Vaughan Williams’ ethereal, single-movement work. Under the direction of Daniel Meyer, the English-themed program — Interlaced Brilliance and Love — also includes Gerald Finzi’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and Franz Joseph Haydn’s *Symphony No. 104* (“London”). The program will also be presented on Friday the November 22 at Rocky River Presbyterian Church. (Pay-what-you-wish format).

During a recent telephone conversation, Thompson, who is BlueWater’s guest concertmaster this season, said that he understood that the work was under consideration when he was asked to join the ensemble. “I know Daniel is excited to include it on the program, so in a lot of ways, mathematically and logistically, it fits the bill. And it’s actually going to be a first performance for both of us. I’ve not had the opportunity to play the piece either, so we’ll be discovering it together this week.”

Thompson said that although *The Lark Ascending* is well-known, it’s not a piece violinists would prepare for a competition. “It’s slow, reflective, and a little noodly, so

you have to make sure you know what you're doing in order to keep the music moving along. Because of that I think it falls through the cracks for a lot of people until a situation like this presents itself."

The violinist noted the importance of recognizing that the work was not written by Beethoven or Brahms. "Most of the time it's almost improvisatory in nature and so colorful and textural that it definitely presents a new set of challenges."

What are those challenges? "For me it was finding the trajectory of the piece, because unlike a Beethoven sonata, it doesn't have that harmonic tug that kind of pulls you all the way through the structure. It's more like a slow, babbling brook — you stop to smell the roses along the way. You also need to find ways to bring out all of these wonderful colors that are in the score."

The piece also uses the entire range of the violin — the lark flies out of the valley and sings until it reaches the highest register of the instrument. "Because it's so poetic, it's important to find some sense of purpose in the music — which is awfully meditative, but that's part of what makes it so beautiful."

Thompson said that he has enjoyed discovering an English set of musical values. "Vaughan Williams was one of the first composers to purge his music of outside influences. I read that maybe five or six years before he wrote this piece he spent time studying with Ravel, who really encouraged him to break away from those influences. Of course Ravel is another composer whose music is unique in the course of history."

A native Clevelander and graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music, Thompson is also a member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. "When I got the call in 2020 asking me to be part of CMS' Bowers Program it was a dream come true for sure. So this is actually my first season as a full-fledged CMS member. But the only difference in how they treat the Bowers artists and the regular artists is that you get an asterisk by your name in the program. And other than that, you're treated exactly the same, so it's been a wonderful experience."

The violinist said he is thrilled to be part of BlueWater. "It's always a great time for me because it really is coming home. I have known so many people in that orchestra for so many years. In fact, several of them taught me at various points at CIM when I was a kid — Liesel Hook was my group class teacher and Laura Schuster taught me viola for a couple of years."

Thompson was also involved with BlueWater from year one. "It's hard for me to believe this is the fifteenth anniversary. I remember they rehearsed at the Breen Center at St.

Ignatius when I was in school there. And as part of their first season, they invited me to play Mozart’s “Turkish” concerto — I was a little terrified. So yeah, fifteen years. And I think the orchestra sounds wonderful and I cannot tell you how much I love working with Daniel. He’s a fantastic conductor, musician, and such a great advocate for music. And, the musicians enjoy working with him — not every conductor has the full, enthusiastic approval of their players.”

Photo by Carlin Ma

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