

The Lark Ascending by Ralph Vaughan Williams

PRIMARY CLASSROOM LESSON PLAN

For:

- Key Stage 2 in England and Wales
- Second Level, P5-P7 in Scotland
- Key Stage 1/Key Stage 2 in Northern Ireland

Written by Rachel Leach

Background

The composer: Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872 - 1958)

- English composer
- Born into a wealthy, well-connected family and had the best education money could buy
- Was a collector of folk songs

The music: The Lark Ascending

- Written in 1914, inspired by a poem of the same name
- Describes a lark flying, gliding and soaring through the air, looking down at the fields below
- Is often voted the nation's favourite classical piece by radio audiences

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- listen and reflect on a piece of orchestral music
- invent their own musical motifs and structure them into a piece
- perform as an ensemble
- learn musical language appropriate to the task

Curriculum checklist

- play and perform in ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments
- improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
- listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory

Glossary of music terms used

Coda	another word for ending
Pitched percussion	percussion instruments that can play different pitches – xylophones, glockenspiels, chime bars etc
Tune	another word for a melody. A linear line of notes that makes a satisfying musical shape
Unpitched percussion	percussion instruments that can only make a limited number of sounds – drums, shakers woodblocks, tambourine etc

Resources required

- Paper and writing materials
- Classroom percussion instruments and any other instruments that your children might be learning
- **Optional** – full, unedited recording of Lark Ascending by Vaughan Williams

This scheme of work is plotted out over six lessons. Feel free to adapt it to suit your children and the resources you have available.

The six lessons at a glance

Lesson 1:

Activities: Listen and describe a piece of music
Watch the orchestral performance and discuss
Create a poem inspired by the music

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Appreciate and understand a wide range of high-quality live and recorded music drawn from different traditions and from great composers and musicians

Lesson 2:

Activities: Create a shimmer and tune using Vaughan Williams' notes

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 3:

Activities: Learn to sing and play a tune
Add lyrics to the tune
Use technical terminology where appropriate

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 4:

Activities: Learn about birdsong
Create a short birdsong piece
Follow a conductor

Curriculum link: Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music

Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Develop an understanding of the history of music

Lesson 5:

Activities: Structure musical ideas to tell a narrative
Use technical terminology

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 6:

Activities: Create a coda
Perform in front of an audience

Curriculum link: Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music

LESSON 1

Watching and listening

1. Prepare your class

Explain to your class that you are going to begin a 6-week music project focusing on a fantastic piece of music by a composer called Ralph (pronounced Raif) Vaughan Williams. Watch the introductory film with Molly Rainford.

2. Watch the full orchestral performance.

This is a gorgeous, gentle piece so you might like to dim the lights of your room or ask your children to close their eyes and relax as they listen. If you have space, ask them to lie on the floor!

3. Discuss what you have just watched and perhaps ask the following questions –

- a) Did you like the music?
- b) How did it make you feel?
- c) If you could float off anywhere, where would you go?
- d) What would you see down below?

4. Listening task

Explain to your class that this piece is about a lark flying up into the air and looking down at the world below. Explain that you are going to create a poem written from the viewpoint of the lark. Make sure everyone has something to write on and with, and as you listen again ask your children to make a list of-

- 1 colour (what colour does the music make them think of?)
- 1 emotion (how does the music make them feel?)
- 1 adjective (describe the music or the lark)
- 1 movement word (to describe how the lark travels)
- 1 place (where is the lark flying over?)
- 1 thing/ noun (what can the lark see from the sky?)

Feel free to adapt this list to compliment what you are studying in literacy or other subject areas

5. Listen for a third time and ask your class to join together their words using conjunctions (or connectives) to make a poem. They may also add 'the lark' or imagine they are the lark. Explain further that their poem doesn't have to rhyme or even make sense but it must be finished by the time the music has finished.

6. Finally, read out some of the poems to the class (or encourage the poets to read their own work). You could do this with the music playing softly in the background

- 7. If you have more time,** encourage your children to write out their poems in an imaginative way so that the words 'fly' across the page. They could add small drawings of the lark and the things it sees around and within the text. Keep these poems safe, you'll need them later on in the project.

LESSON 2

The lark ascends

- 1. Warm up.** Begin with your class sitting in a large circle. Your children need to be in a calm, thoughtful mood for this lesson so after passing a clap around the circle, pass focused, quiet gestures and sounds such as –
 - A 'box' of silence
 - A baby lark
 - The gentle flap of wings
 - A 'shh'
 - A soft 'whoosh'...and end with a gentle rumble on the knees
- 2. Remind** your children of the work they did during the last lesson and perhaps play the beginning of Lark again or read one of their poems. Explain that you are going to begin making your own version of Vaughan Williams' music and, like the real piece, you need just two ingredients – a **shimmer** and a **tune**
- 3. Begin with the shimmer.** Vaughan Williams uses just four pitches to create his shimmer which is then present under most of the beginning of his piece. His pitches are E, B, D, F# -



Place a xylophone in the middle of your circle with these notes on it (you can take off the other pitches if you like). Ask one or two children to come forward and try to play a continuous, soft shimmer using these notes.

Its important to keep the E as the lowest note but if you don't have an F#, just leave it out or substitute with an A

- 4. Encourage other children** to select unpitched instruments to add to this shimmer. They need to be able to make a soft, continuous sound so shakers and jingle bells are good for this. Woodblocks and drums are less good. Challenge your players to keep the sound as continuous as possible - you are aiming for a shimmer not a pulse. (Shakers/ jingle bells may need to be stirred rather than shook for example)

5. **The second ingredient is the solo tune.** Place another xylophone in the middle of the circle with just these notes on it (below) -



These are good notes for beginner players on orchestral instruments but again please feel free to adapt them to suit your children and resources

- Ask one member of the class** to come forward and play a short solo using these notes as other children play the shimmer. There are no rules for this but the solo must be heard over the sound of the shimmer. Children who don't yet have a role can 'police' this.
6. **Split into groups** and ask each group to make a short piece using a shimmer and solo tune. Before they get to work on this, remind them that the solo represents the lark in flight, the shimmer is perhaps the sound of the land below.
7. **Finally, bring the class back together** and hear each group. Can they turn their group pieces into one big piece that only ever has one solo at any one time? To do this they need to come up with an order and then try to make the tune sound continuous as it moves from group to group. The shimmer should also never stop. Which order will make the best story for your lark's flight?

LESSON 3

The lark's tune

For this lesson it would be useful to have a full recording of Lark Ascending. It is widely available online and lasts about 15 minutes. If you don't have access to one, don't worry you can still complete the lesson without

- 1. Warm up.** Begin in a circle again and recap your gentle sounds warm-up. Talk through the piece you made at the end of the last lesson
- 2. Explain** that Vaughan Williams' Lark Ascending is actually about three times longer than the version they heard last week. The middle features a traditional folk tune that Vaughan Williams had picked up on his travels. Play this tune to your class by starting the full recording at about 6'10. It is first heard played by the flute.
- 3. Teach this tune to your class and encourage them to sing along using a 'la' sound.** There is a slightly simplified version of it below which can be played on classroom xylophones or by beginner orchestral players.

E G G A G E D E G G A B C B A G A D D C D

C E C B G D D

- 4. Encourage your class** to add new words to this tune. Perhaps they can borrow phrases from the poems they made in lesson 1
- 5. When this is achieved** and your class can sing along loud and proud, it is time to make a class version of the music so you don't have to rely on the recording. Here are some tips -
 - Play the melody on xylos/ orchestral instruments
 - Play the bassline on bass xylos or bass bars if you have them. The bass notes can also be highlighted by chime bars/ glocks
 - Add a strong drumbeat on the first note of each bar
 - Add your unpitched shimmer
 - Think about how many times to repeat the tune, how to start and stop and what to do in between repeats.

If will greatly help future lessons if your children stick to the same instrument they used in lesson 2

- 6. Finish** this lesson with a performance of your class version of the tune and remember to carefully keep a record of what you have done

LESSON 4

The lark's song

Again, you could use the full recording of 'Lark' in this lesson, or do without

- 1. Warm up.** Begin this lesson by singing through your version of the lark's tune that you made last week. Do this either without accompaniment, by singing along to the recording or with just a few carefully chosen players. It might also be useful to remind your children of the solo and shimmer piece you made back in lesson 2
- 2. If you have a full recording of 'Lark'**, play the section from about 7'30 to about 8'15 and ask your class to describe what they hear. Hopefully they will say that it sounds like lots of different birds singing together. There is also a single triangle chiming amongst all the birdsong

If you don't have a recording, simply tell the class that Vaughan Williams makes a section of music out of just birdsong and a triangle

- 3. Ask your children to get out the same instrument they have been using so far in this task.** The new challenge is to make a short burst of birdsong on their instrument. This can be achieved on any instrument if the following rules are applied. Birdsong must be –
 - short and loud
 - the same every time
 - played neatly

For example, it can be a short flourish of notes up and down on a glock, a few taps on a woodblock, a quick shake of a tambourine or a short rhythm played once on a drum etc.
- 4. Appoint a conductor and a triangle player** and ask the conductor to layer up the birdsong carefully. Perhaps just one bird at a time with gaps then others gradually joining in one by one until the texture is full. The triangle player must play whenever signalled too.
- 5. Practise this several times** with several different conductors and triangle players. Keep asking the children how it could be made better and keep going until you have the perfect little section of birdsong.
- 6. Finally,** finish this session by recapping, either on instruments or just by making a list on the board, all of the sections you have made so far. You should have –
 - Shimmer and solo piece (the lark ascending)
 - Vaughan Williams' tune (the lark's tune)
 - Birdsong (the lark's song)

LESSON 5

The lark's journey

1. **Warm up.** Sitting in a circle again, remind your children of everything they have worked on so far and make a list on the board. It should look like this –
 - Shimmer and solo piece - the lark ascending (lesson 2)
 - Vaughan Williams' tune - the lark's tune (lesson 3)
 - Birdsong - the lark's song (lesson 4)

You also have your poems from lesson 1

2. **Get the instruments out** and slowly work through all of these sections. Work slowly and carefully making sure everyone understands what they are doing in each piece.
3. **Structure.** Ask your class to come up with an order for these sections which tells the story of the lark but also works musically and logistically (i.e. no tricky transitions between rhythms or moments when children have to swap instruments quickly). You could add in some poetry readings to help with these potential issues.
4. **Try out a few suggestions** until you have a structure that everyone is happy with and can play. Practice this structure until it is neat and end the session with a performance of your almost finished piece!

LESSON 6

The lark's descent and performance time!

- 1. Warm up.** Begin the lesson with a quick focusing warm-up like pass the clap and then talk through the piece you made last lesson.
- 2. Get the instruments out** and put your piece back together. Work slowly and carefully and make sure that everyone understands what they are doing in each section.
- 3. Have a discussion about the ending (or coda).** Begin by reminding your children that you are describing the story of the lark flying up into the air, looking down at the world below and then what? You might like to play the very ending of Vaughan Williams' piece (either in full or the BBC Ten Pieces version) to your children to inspire them.
- 4. Encourage them to use the story** they are telling and create the perfect musical ending for it. Should the lark
 - fly away?
 - descend back to earth?
 - or something else?
- 5. Create a new ending** for your piece. To make this as easy as possible steer your children towards repeating something they have already made rather than creating something new. Again, you might want to use their poetry from lesson 1 to help you.

Maybe they have already got the perfect ending! If so, practice your piece until it is perfectly executed

- 6. Finally,** invite another class in to be your audience and perform your piece to them.

TAKING IT FURTHER

Cross-curricular activities

- **LISTENING:** Birdsong features in many famous pieces. Listen to Beethoven's 6th Symphony, Movement 2 (ending), The Birds by Respighi or French composer Olivier Messiaen's Oiseaux Exotiques and draw the birds that you hear.
- **ARTWORK:** Vaughan Williams' lark looks down on the world from up high. What would the world around your school look like to the lark? Encourage your children to draw the school and its surroundings from the sky
- **LITERACY:** Turn your poems into stories or even songs

© Copyright Rachel Leach London 2018