

## **The Lark Ascending by Ralph Vaughan Williams**

### SECONDARY CLASSROOM LESSON PLAN MULTI-LAYERED CLASS COMPOSITION

For:

- Key Stage 3 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- Third and Fourth Level, S1-S3 in Scotland

*Written by Keith Ayling*

#### *Learning outcomes*

During this lesson pupils will develop their:

- understanding of the inspiration behind Vaughan Williams' The Lark Ascending
- understanding of the processes of song-writing and formation of lyrics
- skills by practically completing lyric phrase formation and melody

#### *Curriculum checklist*

The following aspects of the KS3 and 3<sup>rd</sup> Level music curriculum (for England, Scotland, Wales and N. Ireland) are encountered in this project:

- Listen and evaluate/appraise
- Performing/playing/rehearsing and reviewing
- Composing/improvising
- Singing
- Technology
- How music is created (i.e. pitch, tempo, timbre etc.)
- Notation (staff or other relevant notations)
- Identifying musical devices and concepts
- Aural skills (imitating, understanding pitch)

#### *Required kit/space*

- CD player or iPod with The Lark Ascending
- Optional piano or guitar
- Simple recording device such as a phone, tablet or computer

### *Time needed*

This project can be developed over a few lessons, although elements of it can be separated and completed within one lesson.

## 1. Introduction

As a starting point, students should listen to and/or watch the available Ten Pieces clips and recordings:

- The Lark Ascending extract .mp3 (download the .mp3 for working offline)
- Molly Rainford's introduction to the piece from the Ten Pieces II film

## 2. Listen and discuss

The piece could be playing as pupils enter the room, but allow students to listen to the full c. 5 minute extract.

Ask students:

- to describe which elements of the music make them think of a bird?
- what is happening in the music that reflects birdsong?
- what is happening that reflects a bird's flight?

The Lark Ascending was written in 1914 by Vaughan Williams just before the beginning of the Great War. It was inspired by a poem of the same name by George Meredith written in 1881 (you can find the full poem on the Ten Pieces website). The poem is a highly regarded piece of romantic verse written in rhyming tetrameter couplets in three long continuous sections. However, its popularity was eclipsed by the nation's love for the piece of music it inspired.

## 3. Task #1

How was the music inspired by the poem? Ask students to read a section of Meredith's poem (suggestion: the first 20 lines) and ask them to consider one or more of these questions:

- In the poem how does Meredith connect the Skylark to a particular time of day?
- How do the instrumental melodies of music link to or reflect the lyrics of a song?
- Which words does Meredith use to describe speed, both faster and slower?
- Which lines create a sense of musicality that you can see inspired Vaughan William's piece?
- What is happening on the ground, below the flight of the lark? (Does the poem reference the war?)

## 4. Task #2

To begin the song-writing process, ask students to write four lines or phrases to form a verse of a song.

**Alternate 1:** (in groups, threes or twos)

Ask students to use these key words from the poem to write their own lines of a verse.

Key words: Tide, Ripple, Fountain, Delight, Mountain, Sweetness, Glittering

**Alternate 2:** Suggest the following themes to inspire four lines:

- The flight of a bird

- The Great War (World War 1)
- The pupil's own morning time

**Alternate 3:** (in groups, threes or twos)

Allow students to choose one of these lines from the poem as a starter and ask them to write the next three lines to make a verse.

*He drops the silver chain of sound - On mountain heights in morning's prime,  
For all to hear and all to know - He is, the hills, the human line,  
Without a break, without a fall, - Our wisdom speaks from failing blood,*

## 5. Task #3

Combine and create a melody

Each group should now have a verse of four lines. These can be combined in to a song - (folk songs are typically AAA without a chorus) - or the pupils can identify a recurring theme or line that can become a chorus (ABA). Encourage students to swap verses and lines in order to collaborate. The swapping of lines can make a stronger composition and teach songwriters not to be too precious about their own work if it creates something greater.

To create a melody, students with singing ability can try to sing the lines and see what melodies can be created. If a piano or guitar is available encourage pupils to use two or four simple chords such as C - G or C - Am - F - G to begin creating a melody, singing the lyrics over the top.

By the end of the lesson, students should have written out their lyrics and recorded their melodies (either on paper or technology if available). If technology is available, students could record their melodies. This will enable students to develop their songs further in a subsequent lesson.

## 6. Plenary activity

- One or two groups may be able to read their lyrics aloud to the class or perform their melody and lyric
- Ask pupils to discuss in their groups, what went well and what was more challenging about the tasks
- Recap the key words and their meanings in a Q&A

## 7. Homework activity

Develop the four lines completed in class and write a further four lines on your own, or if inspired continue to write a chorus and complete the song. If possible, encourage students to continue to collaborate with their group in breaks and lunch periods.

## 8. Applying the song-writing approach to other pieces

Encourage students to borrow a melody from a famous piece of classical music (perhaps from another of the Ten Pieces), play the melody in to a looping app and create some new lyrics over the top. Students could choose a specific theme such as World War 1 or a theme inspired by a different romantic poet. The lyrics could be sung, spoken or in the form of rap.

## 9. Explore related themes further:

### World War 1

Explore other poets of the era. Students could use lines in a similar way to create new songs based on other poems.

Find out more about [Poetry in World War I](#)

### Romantic Poetry

When reference is made to Romantic verse, the poets who generally spring to mind are William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), George Gordon, 6th Lord Byron (1788- 1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and John Keats (1795-1821).

Find out more on this archived BBC website: [The Romantics](#)