RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

BORN: 12 Oct 1872 (Down Ampney, Gloucestershire)
DIED: 26 August 1958 (London)
NATIONALITY: British

*Ralph Vaughan Williams was an English 20th Century composer who wrote symphonies, chamber music, opera, choral pieces, and film scores. He’s been described as ‘the most important English composer of his generation’.*

About the composer

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in a small village in Gloucestershire in the late 19th Century. Sadly, his father died when Ralph was just 3 years old, so his family moved to Surrey to live closer to his mother’s relatives. He soon began to have his first piano lessons with an aunt and he took to it straight away. By the time he went to school at the age of 8, Vaughan Williams was able to play the organ and the violin and he joined the school orchestra.

After school, music seemed the obvious career path for him to follow, so Vaughan Williams spent two years at the Royal College of Music in London and another three years at Trinity College, Cambridge. It was during his time at Cambridge that Vaughan Williams became sure that he wanted to be a composer. However, progress was slow and a lot of people doubted the young man’s abilities – his own cousin even described him as a ‘foolish boy’ who pursued music even though he was ‘hopelessly bad at it’. Charming!

Luckily, a few negative comments didn’t put Vaughan Williams off. In fact he focused on his composing with even more determination, he even took lessons from two already famous composers: Max Bruch in Berlin and Maurice Ravel in Paris. Part of Vaughan Williams’ struggle with developing his own music was his unhappiness with the English musical scene at the time, which for him lacked a national identity. While he was abroad, it dawned on him that he didn’t want to imitate foreign models in his work, but instead he wanted to draw inspiration from familiar surroundings, sights and sounds – like the English countryside and folksongs.

Vaughan Williams was particularly interested in the history of folk songs and the tales they told of the working lives of ordinary people. He often travelled to remote parts of the country to listen to them being sung in local pubs or on farms and fishing boats, and he wrote down the tunes so that he could weave the melodies into his own music.

During World War I, Vaughan Williams enlisted to fight (even though he was technically too old) and he spent a difficult two years as a stretcher-bearer on the front line before being appointed as a second lieutenant in the Royal Garrison Artillery. He saw many of his comrades killed or wounded, and the horrors he experienced during the war would go on to influence his music a great deal. His 4th Symphony, for instance, sounds particularly full of anger and sadness.

About the music

*The Lark Ascending* was inspired by a poem of the same name written by George Meredith, which tells the tale of a skylark singing an impossibly beautiful, almost heavenly, song. In Vaughan Williams’ piece this skylark can be heard in the romantic, soaring violin solo. 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. In 1920, Vaughan Williams revised the piece to the version we now know and it has gone on to become one of the country’s favourite classical pieces.