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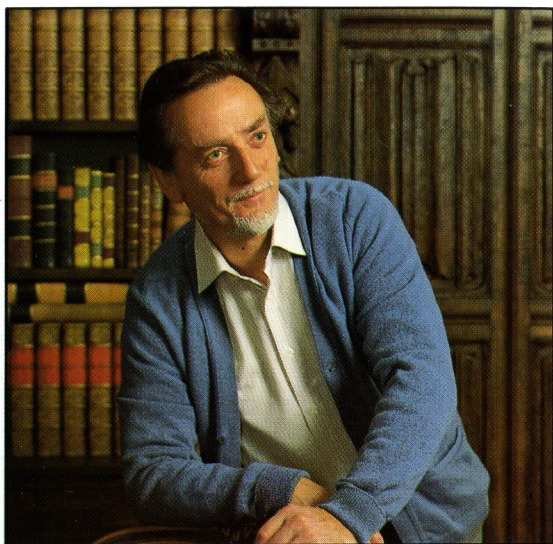


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**BRYDEN THOMSON**

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# Vaughan Williams

## Symphony No. 5 in D

- [1] I Preludio: Moderato (11:58)
- [2] II Scherzo: Presto misterioso (4:43)
- [3] III Romanza: Lento (11:42)
- [4] IV Passacaglia: Moderato (10:16)
- [5] The Lark Ascending (15:30)

[DDD]

TT = 54:28

**BRYDEN THOMSON**

*conducts*

**THE LONDON  
SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**

**Michael Davis** *violin solo*

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Vaughan Williams wrote *The Lark Ascending* in 1914 but revised it in 1920, then again before publication of the full score in 1926. Hence it should be considered part of his post-World War I output. Described as a Romance for Violin and Orchestra, the instrumentation is: solo violin, two flutes, oboe, two each of clarinets, bassoons and french horns, triangle, strings. There also are reductions for chamber orchestra and for violin and piano, and it was in this last form that the piece first was heard in public, from Marie Hall, the dedicatee, and George Mendham at Shirehampton Public Hall on December 15th 1920. The première of the orchestral version was given in the Queen's Hall, London, on June 14th 1921, by Marie Hall with the British Symphony Orchestra under Adrian Boult.

This was a concert of the second Congress of British Music, and *The Times* remarked that *The Lark Ascending* was the only work in a long programme 'which showed serene disregard of the fashions of today or yesterday. It dreams its way along.' Certainly the opening is magical. The orchestra sustains a soft ninth chord as the soloist essays phrases that are indeed like birdsong and grow into the main theme. This melody seems capable of infinite extension, there being no apparent limit to the variants on its basic four-note idea. An agitated central section and a folklike tune for full orchestra follow, then the violinist gathers everything together in what becomes a final rapturous flight.

The score is prefaced by some lines from 'The Lark Ascending' by George Meredith (1828-1909), and although the music was inspired by the poetry, the poetry could just as easily have been a response to the music:

He rises and begins to sound,  
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,

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'Tis love of earth that he instills,  
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.

In its birdlike quality, and even coolness, the solo part really does suggest the detachment of an observer high above the land, and the violin writing is unique in Vaughan Williams's output. The sustained, rapt meditation has no parallel, either, among other works for violin and orchestra. The mood of the piece as a whole finds an echo in *Merciless Beauty*, settings of words attributed to Chaucer, also first heard in 1921, and *The Lark Ascending* points clearly to the three major works that soon followed, the Pastoral Symphony, *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* and the Mass in G minor.

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Symphony No. 5 might seem to belong in that series, and in one sense it does epitomise the contemplative side of Vaughan Williams's music. Written in 1938-43, it was first heard at the Albert Hall, in a Promenade Concert on June 24th 1943, from the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by the composer. By then he was just past 70, and Symphony No. 5 appeared to be a final resolution and synthesis of all that he had done. The finale seemed to have a particularly valedictory air, and it was inconceivable that he should write another *four* symphonies, and much else besides. Yet what lies between No. 5 and works such as the Pastoral Symphony is the violent eruption of Symphony No. 4 (1931-4). This made Symphony No. 6 (1944-7) an understandable and necessary successor to No. 5, the former being the work that destroyed our comfortably rounded view of Vaughan Williams's

symphonic output once and for all.

Dedicated 'To Jean Sibelius, without permission,' Symphony No. 5's instrumentation is: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), oboe, cor anglais, two each of clarinets, bassoons, french horns and trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings. Published in 1946, it was revised for the first LP recording of 1954, these corrections being incorporated when the score was reprinted in 1961. Early piano scores describe the work as being 'in G,' this apparently confirming the composer's claim that he was uncertain as to what key the symphony was really in! Its sources are various, parts of it first being heard as music from a pageant about the preservation of the countryside. There are closer and far more significant links with Vaughan Williams's opera, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, although the material common to both works is treated quite differently in the symphony from in the opera.

First comes a Preludio, opening with a D major horn call. There are two further ideas, one on cellos and basses, one aspiring on violins, and these three form the basic substance. All are expanded, and the opening's uncertainty disappears. There is a brief development section that makes much of a three-note figure which passes from one instrument to another before rising to a climax. The horn motive returns and there is a strong affirmation of the second subject. Part rhapsody, part rondo, the Scherzo follows. It is the quickest of Vaughan Williams's scherzos, and its orchestration and some of its themes have a certain hardness. Note the assertive rhythm of the one for oboe and cor anglais; but another theme is like a sublimated yet still lilting folkdance. Mainly this movement is quiet, though with loud outbursts, switches of rhythm, and a sudden ending.

Most of the *Pilgrim's Progress* material is in the Romanza, which can be read as a richly polyphonic commentary on these ideas from elsewhere. It is also in an entirely personal version of sonata form. The finale is a passacaglia, though hardly a strict one. Its main theme, broad and spacious, has a counter-melody which proves to be more important. There are elements of

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free variation and, again, sonata form, and a climactic return of the opening horn call. This leads to an epilogue, a serene polyphonic treatment of the counter-melody during which every tension is resolved.

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**Bryden Thomson** is held in high esteem for his major contribution to raising the stature of British orchestras. He has held posts as Principal Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, BBC Welsh and Ulster Orchestras, Associate Conductor of the Scottish National and Assistant Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. He is currently Principal Conductor of the RTE Symphony Orchestra and Conductor Laureate of the Ulster Orchestra.

The increasing interest in 20th century British music owes much to Bryden Thomson, who has given premières of many important works by British and Irish composers and has done much to promote British music at home and abroad. He has championed composers such as Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Bax, Harty, Ireland and many others; his recordings of their music have won much world-wide acclaim and played a significant part in enhancing the reputation of both Chandos and the Ulster Orchestra, with which he began the complete cycle of Symphonies of Arnold Bax. This recording is one of a complete cycle of the Symphonies of Vaughan Williams.

He maintains his interest in Scandinavian composers, including Sallinen, Holmboe, Nielsen and Sibelius, and he has been very active in the field of opera: as Conductor at the Norwegian Opera in Oslo, Royal Opera in Stockholm and at Scottish Opera. Television audiences will know him for his genial but straightforward manner in handling the young competitors in the BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition.

In 1984 the New University of Ulster conferred on him an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of his services to music in Ulster, and he recently received an award from the Scottish Composers Society.

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VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Symphony No. 5 - Thomson

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