

Pastoral Poetry: Early 20th-Century British Violin Repertoire

Program notes written by ©Sarah Kiel, Spring 2024.

British violin music from the early 20th century has always been deeply moving and personal to me. It is an unusual mix of reserved introspection, pastoral beauty, and deep emotion under a seemingly tranquil surface. It reflects my personality: I am a quiet, reserved person but also emotional and sensitive. I am also a confirmed Anglophile—a lover of all things British! I love England's literature, fine art, beautiful landscape, and fabulous television dramas.

When doing more research on the pieces I selected for this program, I was amazed to learn how well they connect and relate to each other. In addition to all being pieces I love, they were also all written in the same WWI decade, before the war and at its very beginning and end. There is also an interesting connection to famous female violinists of the time. The Violin Concerto by Coleridge-Taylor was commissioned by American violinist Maud Powell, and The Lark Ascending was premiered by British violinist Marie Hall (also a student of Elgar).

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) composed his **Violin Sonata** in 1918 while staying in the English countryside. While writing the sonata, he had heard news of the approaching end of WWI. Of the 3 movements, the 2nd movement has a special place in my heart. It is unusual for the slow movement of a sonata to be a Romance, especially one with such an emotional middle section. Elgar described his sonata in these words: “The first movement is bold and vigorous, then a fantastic, curious movement with a very expressive middle section; a melody for the violin ... they say it is as good or better than anything I have done in the expressive way ... the last movement is very broad and soothing, like the last movement of the second symphony.”

Ralph Vaughan Williams’ (1872-1958) beloved **The Lark Ascending** was the first piece I selected for this program. I believe it is one of the most sublimely beautiful pieces ever written, one that to me symbolizes my own ascent to where I am now during my time at Longy. It is based on a 122-line poem of the same name by English Romantic poet George Meredith, and Vaughan Williams wrote out 12 lines of the poem at the beginning of the score. Although originally written for violin and piano in 1914, the more famous version is the one the composer revised for violin and orchestra in 1920. Vaughan Williams’ second wife, Ursula, herself a poet, wrote that in this piece the composer 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, being, rather than illustrating the poem from which the title was taken.” I especially love the *sensa misura* (“without measure”) cadenzas that give the violinist complete rhythmic freedom.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s (1875-1912) **Violin Concerto** was his last major work, and sadly, due to illness, he was unable to attend the premiere. Coleridge-Taylor was the son of an English mother and a Sierra Leonean medical student and was raised in England by his mother after his father abandoned their family to return to Sierra Leone. The concerto was commissioned by famous American violinist Maud Powell, who felt a connection with Coleridge-Taylor because of their shared experiences of prejudice (he as a Black composer and she as a female violinist). She joked that this concerto was “Taylor-made” for her. This concerto is a unique mix of rhythmic intensity and beautiful, memorable melodies. Both Powell and Coleridge-Taylor

were also staunch advocates of racial equality and helped to introduce African music and musicians to the American classical music scene.

12-line excerpt from George Meredith's poem *The Lark Ascending* that Vaughan Williams included in his score:

He rises and begins to round,
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,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
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.