

Total performance time: approximately 110 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

# The Lark Ascending: Music for Violin & Piano

[Hyeyoon Park](#) violin

[Benjamin Grosvenor](#) piano

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–1791)

Violin sonata No.24 in F, K.376 (1781)

*i. Allegro*

*ii. Andante*

*iii. Rondeau: allegretto grazioso*

**Tōru Takemitsu** (1930–1996)

Distance de fée (1951)

**Claude Debussy** (1862–1918)

Sonata for violin and piano in G minor (1917) 13'

*i. Allegro vivo*

*ii. Intermède: fantasque et léger*

*iii. Finale: très animé*

**Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872–1958)

The Lark Ascending (1914) 15'

**César Franck** (1822–1890)

Sonata for violin and piano in A (1886) 28'

*i. Allegretto ben moderato*

*ii. Allegro*

*iii. Recitativo –*

*Fantasia: ben moderato –*

*Molto lento*

*iv. Allegretto poco mosso*

INTERVAL

While the titles in this programme feature the word 'violin' prominently, the piano is very much an equal partner rather than 'accompaniment'. Intriguingly, the violin was often viewed as an 'accompaniment' instrument in the 18th century; the published copy of **Mozart's** own K.376 sonata had as its title page 'Six Sonatas pour le Clavecin, ou Pianoforte, avec l'accompagnement d'un Violon' (Six sonatas for piano, with violin accompaniment). However, skilled as he was at playing both piano and violin, Mozart could not but write beautifully and idiomatically for both instruments, creating a true partnership in his Sonata No.24. He composed it in 1781, shortly after moving to Vienna, and it has an atmosphere of tremendous calm in its sunny F major key. Such serenity requires great precision, however, despite looking deceptively simple on the page. Melodies and accompaniment figures are passed, democratically, back and forth between the players, notably so in the tranquil second movement, which is effectively a theme and set of delicate variations. The final movement has an irresistible lightness of touch, exemplified by the final bar in which the music simply evaporates away.

By fascinating contrast is a piece written by a Japanese composer heavily influenced by French composers, who had themselves been influenced by East Asian music. **Takemitsu's** oeuvre embraces a huge range of styles, including electronics as well as music from his home country, and later on film scores. However, his *Distance de fée* (1951) strongly channels the rich, parallel chords characteristic of Messiaen (a composer he later had an extended lesson from), and the quality of stillness frequently found in Debussy's work. In the opening and concluding sections both instruments return time and again to a haunting theme, while a more freewheeling middle passage weaves variations around it, including a mini-cadenza for the violin. The music does not stray far, however, from the sumptuous piano chords and wistful melodic line above.

**Debussy** himself is next with his rightly celebrated Sonata in G minor, composed in 1917 and one of his last completed works. Debussy was known for his dismantling of standard musical forms, turning instead to contemporary poetry and visual art for creative stimulus (he sometimes went so far as to declare he did not really listen to music, nor find much inspiration in it.) A Sonata, then, is something of a surprise so late in his career. It is in some ways a 'Classical' sonata, with its presentation – in the first movement at least – of a series of themes, which are explored, developed and reprised. But within this format, there are stranger, more fantastical elements that take flight from convention. This is most apparent in the middle movement, which begins with an improvisatory-style cadenza for violin, followed by a swift succession of contrasting musical elements (from sensuous to playful to eerie), not so much developed as thrown down next to each other. This more anarchic spirit invades the sprightly finale.

**Vaughan Williams** appears to take a leaf out of Debussy's book in turning to poetry as an organising principle rather than standard musical form. *The Lark Ascending*, taking its title and spirit from a poem by George Meredith, can seem weighed down by its reputation, derided as much as praised for being so often dubbed 'the nation's favourite' classical piece. But it is worth listening to with a fresh perspective, especially in the version for violin and piano – the form in which it premiered in 1920. (Audiences at the time were certainly startled by its originality; the *Times* critic noted that the piece 'showed a serene disregard for the fashions of today or yesterday'.) The violin part, frequently heard alone and stratospherically high, has a tranquil yet also vulnerable quality, which is more apparent in this version. The piano has a 'grounding' function, with its characteristically modal, folk-like harmonies, and overall the mood is peaceful and meditative. Violinist Richard Tognetti, who had originally dismissed *The Lark* as piece of fluff, later suggested it was 'transcendental to the point where you are astral travelling'.

**Franck's** violin sonata may well be his most celebrated composition. He wrote it in 1886 as a wedding present for the violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, a fellow Liégeois. Ysaÿe not only sight-read it on his wedding day, but gave a spirited performance from memory in almost total darkness at the public premiere after the light had faded. He went on to champion the work into the 20th century. It is a beautiful gift of a piece, generously endowed with melodies, several of which appear across all four movements.

The first movement is an elegant introduction, in a gentle dance-like form. It was apparently intended by Franck to be considerably slower, but – after cantering through it in the dwindling light – Ysaÿe persuaded the composer it should be played more quickly. It opens contemplatively, as if halfway through a thought, with an opening rising 3rd in the violin – a motif that appears across the whole piece. The flamboyant second movement could have been a more conventional opener, with its dramatic, rolling semiquavers and surging melodies. The third movement is improvisatory in style, bringing back a dreamy version of the melody from the first movement, as well as ushering in two gorgeous tunes of its own. These return in the fourth movement, after Franck has worked through a charming canon: perhaps intending to represent courtship, both violin and piano chase each other around the score, culminating in a playful hint of 'wedding bells' in the joyful final section of this celebratory piece.

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