

THE BIRDS [Gli Uccelli] (1928)

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

The Italian composer Respighi was active in many fields: he was also a conductor, violinist, violist, and a teacher. His own teachers included the composer Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, a member of the famous group of Russian innovators known as “The Five”. Rimsky-Korsakov was admired for his imaginative instrumentation and Respighi, too, had a gift for highlighting the brilliant tone colors of the orchestra. Respighi also acquired a love of early music from another teacher, Torchi, and often incorporated older pieces into his works. One can hear these colors and early music in, for example, his three popular ANCIENT AIRES AND DANCES and also in the work you will hear tonight, THE BIRDS.

THE BIRDS is based on keyboard (often harpsichord) and lute works by several composers from the 17th and 18th centuries, a period referred to in music history as the Baroque era. Respighi recomposed these pieces into five new ones for the orchestra. Each piece represents a different bird and taken together, the collection forms a “suite”—a musical genre that was very popular during the Baroque period. Composing THE BIRDS was a challenge, since taking music originally written for a single instrument like a harpsichord and altering it to be played by the many instruments of the orchestra can be difficult. In the process, Respighi didn’t even try to imitate a harpsichord: instead he concentrated on showing off the various tone colors of the instruments and using them to paint sound pictures of the birds. Listen carefully to see if you can identify the bird calls in each piece.

The suite opens with a PRELUDIO (based on a composition by Pasquini): here Respighi introduces listeners to the work as a whole and gives a preview of the bird calls and melodies to come. The birds now begin to appear: LA COLOMBA (after a work by Gallot) is the dove, represented by the oboe. LA GALLINA (after Rameau) is the clucking hen and L’USIGNUOLO (inspired by an anonymous work, 17th century) is the quiet and gentle nightingale. IL CUCÙ (after Pasquini) is the European cuckoo—a call Americans may know from cuckoo clocks. The very end of the work resembles its beginning as fragments of the melodies return and the birds come together to sing one last time.

THE LARK ASCENDING, Romance for Violin and Orchestra (1914, rev. 1920)

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

THE LARK ASCENDING is almost 100 years old, but listeners’ polls report it has been one of the most popular pieces of music in the United Kingdom in recent years—and listeners in the United States love it too. The composer, Vaughan Williams, was one of several British composers from the early twentieth-century who were seeking a revival of English music. Up to that point perhaps the best-known English-born composer in classical music had been Henry Purcell, who had lived in the 17th century. (As far as popular music goes, Rock didn’t even exist yet, much less Great Britain’s most famous 20th century music group, The Beatles.)

As a young man, Vaughan Williams studied at the Royal College of Music and much later with Maurice Ravel in Paris. He was especially energized after working with Ravel, writing works still popular today—including an overture to the play THE WASPS, a FANTASIA ON A THEME BY THOMAS TALLIS, and A LONDON SYMPHONY. In 1914, on the eve of World War I, Vaughan Williams composed THE LARK ASCENDING for violin and orchestra, consulting with violinist Mary Hall on the solo part. Once the conflict began, however, the 42-year-old composer put aside his work to volunteer for the war effort, as did many others (including his teacher Ravel). He joined the British Field Ambulance Service and saw action in Greece and France over the course of four years. After the war the composer joined the staff

of the Royal College of Music and continued composing—among other things—symphonies and film scores. THE LARK ASCENDING was first performed in 1920, six years after it was composed, in an arrangement for violin and piano with Mary Hall on violin. The orchestral version you will hear tonight premiered in 1921.

THE LARK ASCENDING was inspired by George Meredith's poem of the same title, which describes the song of a lark as it flies upward: here, the solo violin takes the role of the lark. This is a calm, pastoral work, but the music also has great emotional depth, implying the composer is communicating more than a simple picture of a beautiful landscape. The solo part is demanding: to create the impression of a lark swooping effortlessly over the fields, the violinist often begins on lower pitches and must move quickly up into the high range of the instrument, with many notes and string crossings—for the performer, anything but effortless! The work itself is in three parts (ABA'); it opens with the strings and winds playing quiet chords as the violin enters, continuing its ascent alone. The orchestra returns later to help develop musical ideas further and the section closes with a violin solo. The second section begins with the orchestra playing a straightforward, folksong-like melody as the violin "hovers" above. In the final section melodies we heard previously return, and the work ends with the soloist climbing up the register of the instrument as the lark circles higher and higher, finally vanishing into the distance.

**"The Swan of Tuonela" (1895, rev. 1897, 1900) from
the LEMMINKÄINEN SUITE, op. 22 (1896)**

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

The KALEVALA is the great epic poem of Finland and features many myths and stories about creation, nature, gods and heroes. It was an important inspiration for the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, providing not only stories and subjects for works but ideas for musical sounds and techniques as well. Struggling to create a "Finnish national music" in the late 19th century, Sibelius studied the formulaic melodic patterns and rhythms of the epic and the practices of folk singers who were still performing the poems. For many people then and now, the unique personal style he developed came to embody the sound of the entire nation and culture.

Among Sibelius's works inspired by the KALEVALA is THE SWAN OF TUONELA. THE SWAN, in fact, is one of four pieces in a suite (collection) illustrating legends from the epic, specifically about the great hero, Lemminkäinen. These stories tell how Lemminkäinen hoped to win the hand of the Mistress of Pohjola in marriage. To do this he had to perform several impossible tasks, including killing the sacred Swan of Tuonela. Tuonela is the Kingdom of Death in Finnish mythology, and is guarded by the Swan that sings as it glides along the dangerous Tuoni river. Before Lemminkäinen can kill the Swan, however, he is himself killed; when his mother arrives, she finds his lifeless body and breaks into a lament (in a later story the hero does return to life). An interesting side note to the history of THE SWAN is that Disney studios originally planned to include it in FANTASIA (1940) and even developed a story board for it. However, like several other pieces considered for the film, it was dropped from the production before animated sequences were drawn.

In this work, the Swan is represented by the cor anglais—a.k.a., the English horn (an instrument related to the oboe but larger and deeper in pitch and tone), while the orchestra paints a dark picture of the underworld (compare this with Vaughan Williams' Lark/violin, flying above an orchestra that illustrates a serene countryside). Softly playing strings open the work and the Swan/English horn joins them. As the Swan's song continues it is sometimes "answered" by the cello or viola, gradually reaching a crisis point but coming to a quiet end. This is one of the great solos for English horn in orchestral literature, dark,

moody, and rich. Some writers also suggest that this piece may represent the lament of Lemminkäinen's mother at his death, but the majestic Swan remains at its heart.

**CANTUS ARCTICUS; CONCERTO FOR BIRDS AND ORCHESTRA
for orchestra and taped bird songs, Op. 61 (1972)**

Einojuhani Rautavaara (1928 -)

One of Finland's most notable composers today is Einojuhani Rautavaara, who is looking forward to his 85th birthday in 2013. As a student he studied at the Helsinki Academy and later came to the United States to study with Persichetti at the Juilliard School in New York and Sessions and Copland at Tanglewood. He has worked with a variety of musical styles, sources, and techniques over the years, including neo-classicism, folk music, serialism, tape, and "poly-stylism," that is to say, the juxtaposition of several styles (e.g., American jazz, other popular music, and classical) in a work. Like Sibelius, Rautavaara has also written works inspired by the Finnish epic KALEVALA, and he has often been attracted to metaphysical and religious subjects—several compositions, for example, have focused on angels.

In CANTUS ARCTICUS, Rautavaara invokes not angels but other winged beings, namely birds. This is a "concerto," by definition a work featuring two parties (such as a soloist and orchestra) performing with—and sometimes against—one another. In this case, the parties performing together are the live orchestra and recordings of real birds. The University of Oulu, Finland originally commissioned Rautavaara to compose this work and some of the bird songs were recorded near Oulu and in the Arctic Circle. Among them you will hear a recording of swans, the bird evoked in Sibelius' SWAN OF TUONELA.

CANTUS ARCTICUS has three movements and each features a different set of bird songs: I. THE MARSH. Two solo flutes open the work and other winds join in—their calls may remind you a little of cuckoos—as well as bog birds. A slow melody in the strings emerges and the movement ends quietly in the woodwinds. II. MELANCHOLY. The movement opens with a shore lark, lowered in the recording by several octaves; the strings join to play a quiet melody, which gradually becomes more intense; toward the end the shore lark returns. III. SWANS MIGRATING. The sound of a large group of swans opens the movement, with tremolos in the strings and imitations of birds in the woodwinds. Further in, the strings play a broad, slow chorale (reminiscent of the first movement) and the swan sounds become louder. At the crisis point a cymbal crashes, and the music and birds fade, with the harp and percussion remaining.

--Notes by Linda Schubert

Avian Suite (orchestral premiere)

Stacey Berk

In Avian Suite, the colorful timbres and techniques available in the instruments of the orchestra are utilized to capture characteristics of five contrasting birds. The open intervals and melodic embellishments of Eagle lend a Native American feel to the introduction. This carries the listener to the magnificent open plains where the music gradually swells into a soaring theme before returning to rest at the end. Chickadee is the most literal translation of birdsong in the suite, with "chick-a-dee-dee-dees" and "phoe-bes" used as motivic material. In addition, the movement attempts to capture the perky, inquisitive nature of the little bird. Owl is a shift into a dark forest, with creepy night noises in the strings, winds and percussion, and the bassoon and cello taking the lead with a spooky octatonic melody. Swan characterizes the beauty of the majestic bird as it sweeps through the water. Finally,

Hummingbird is a rondo that uses the ensemble to emulate a tiny bird that zooms in and out of sight as it hovers and zips around with its lightning-quick wings.

Avian Suite is composed and dedicated in memory of Rachael Streich, a UWSP clarinetist and music graduate whose life touched so many others with her grace and joy. Kimberly Helton and The Polaris Wind Quintet commissioned Avian Suite for woodwind quintet and premiered it in February 2011. The Central Wisconsin Symphony Orchestra commissioned the orchestration of the work for today's premiere performance.

--Notes by Stacey Berk