

The Lark Above the Trenches

for Soprano solo, SATB choir divisi,
High and Low Drums, and Hand Chimes

Music by:
John Muehleisen

Text:
The Lark Above the Trenches
by Muriel Elsie Graham
The Lark in the Morning (Traditional Devon Folksong)

*Commissioned by Illinois Wesleyan University Collegiate Choir
J. Scott Ferguson, Conductor*

*Made possible by the Sylvia Monti Anderson Commissioned Choral Work Fund
honoring Delta Omicron at Illinois Wesleyan University*

The Lark Above the Trenches

“A French soldier writing to *Le Matin* says that the other day a lark sang above the trenches its spring song, which was to them a song of joy and hope.” – February 1915

All day the guns had worked their hellish will,
And all night long
With sobbing breath men gasped their lives away,
Or shivered restless on the ice-cold clay,
Till morn broke pale and chill
With sudden song.

Above the sterile furrows war had ploughed
With deep-trenched seams,
Wherein this year such bitter seed is sown,
Wherein this year no fruitful grain is strewn,
A lark poured from the cloud
Its throbbing dreams.

It sang - and pain and death were passing shows -
So glad and strong;
Life soared triumphant, though a myriad men
Were swept like leaves beyond the living's ken,
That wounded hope arose
To greet that song.

–from *Vibrations, a collection of poems from 1913–1916* by Muriel Elsie Graham (1868–1928)

The lark in the morning awakes from her nest
She mounts in the air with the dew on her breast,
Oh the lark and the ploughboy together can sing,
And return to her nest in the evening,
Return to her nest in the evening.

–from *The Lark in the Morning, a traditional Devon folksong*

Program Note

I first met Scott Ferguson, the conductor of the Illinois Wesleyan University Collegiate Choir, at the National Collegiate Choral Organization conference in Charleston, SC in 2013. One of our mutual conductor friends, Nancy Menk, introduced us and immediately suggested that Scott commission a work from me, as she had several years before. Scott and I exchanged contact info, and in 2016 Scott and I started discussing the commission in more detail. At that time, I was deep in the middle of the largest work I have composed to date, a concert-length oratorio commemorating the centenary of World War I. Because I had already been immersed in the history and poetry of WWI for several years, that body of amazingly rich poetry was front and center in my mind when it came to looking for a text for the commission. In addition, Scott indicated that the theme for IWU's 2016-2017 Academic Year was Women's Power, Women's Justice, so we decided to combine the two themes, which allowed me to focus on WWI poetry written exclusively by women, of which there is a significant amount. Some of the most well-known poems from that period are by Vera Brittain, whose powerful memoir, *Testament of Youth*, was made into a movie several years ago.

I finally chose the stunningly vivid poem, *The Lark Above the Trenches*, by Muriel Elsie Graham (1868–1928), a poet about whom I could find very little biographical information. Here is the sum total of what I found:

"Born in Calcutta. Her justice of the peace father was an East India Company employee and her mother a vicar's daughter. By 1871 the family were living in Stirling, Scotland, where she appears to have remained throughout her life."

- from *Tumult & Tears: An Anthology of Women's First World War Poetry* by Vivien Newman

I was initially intrigued simply by the title of the poem, which invokes such a powerful image: a beautiful songbird juxtaposed with the most brutal icons of physical wartime environments: the infamous trenches of the Western Front. As I read the introduction to the poem—which is included between the title and the first stanza—the source of that imagery became clearer:

"A French soldier writing to *Le Matin* says that the other day a lark sang above the trenches its spring song, which was to them a song of joy and hope."
– February 1915

Here we have a poem about joy and hope in the midst of almost insurmountable odds and despair, both a literal event and a powerful metaphor that can be extended to our own personal circumstances in life. As I read the poem, I found the juxtaposed images and message of the poem very compelling: the brutality of trench warfare overcome, even transcended, by the "sudden song" of the lark, with the joy and hope it represented to the soldiers who heard it. The lark itself (a metaphor of both joy and hope) makes brief appearances at the end of the first two stanzas, finally coming to dominate the third and final stanza, in which its song overcomes "pain and death" which Graham describes as "passing shows." Her masterful juxtaposition of the images of war with the sudden beauty of the lark's song and the poet's pacing of the appearances of the lark are powerful, and I wanted to base the musical material of the composition on this stark contrast between the oppression and despair of war and the lark's song of joy and hope. The war music came easily, but how to represent the lark? I did some research online and stumbled on a wonderful folksong titled *The Lark in the Morning*. The version I encountered, and which I use in the work, is a relatively obscure Devon version of the more well-known Irish folksong. The inclusion of this folksong in *The Lark Above the Trenches* is intended to represent the soldiers' memories of home, which the song of the lark represents to them; that is, the pastoral countryside of England. This memory and strong connection to England is realized most powerfully when the folksong emerges more and more prominently toward the end of the work. In the context of World War I, the final line of the folksong, in which the lark "return[s] to her nest in the evening," represents the hope of the soldiers to return safely home to England.

One of my goals with the piece was not only to explore the juxtapositions of war and hope, but to create a parallel musical structure to that of the poem, especially the way in which the image of the lark and hope increasingly figure more prominently in the poem. In order to reinforce the contrast between war and hope, I used contrasting percussion instruments. For the theme of war I used drums, with their dark, booming percussive tones reminiscent of "the guns" that open Graham's poem and for the lark I used a set of hand chimes, with their bright, melodious, celebratory sound, reminiscent of the bells of the churches that represented a haven from battle for so many during the war.

I used the folk tune for *The Lark in the Morning* to create a musical parallel to the growing sense of joy and hope throughout Graham's poem and to represent the lark itself throughout my musical setting of the poem. The first appearance of the folk tune is in the choral sopranos, who, with the altos, sing a textless contrapuntal accompaniment to the men singing the final two lines of the first stanza: "Till morn broke pale and chill / With sudden song." The soprano line of that accompaniment uses nearly the entire first phrase of the folk tune and represents the initial, nascent emergence of the lark and its clear association with dawn, both powerful images of a rising sense of hope. The first full appearance of the tune follows immediately upon this passage at the end of the first stanza. It is initially comprised of the first three phrases of the folk tune in a highly ornamented form performed either as a vocalise for solo soprano or by a whistler. In this guise the tune is intended to

mimic ornate birdsong rather than the literal folksong. The three brief “birdsong” statements of the folk tune are punctuated by the hand chimes representing the welling up of joy and hope in the hearts of the soldiers. The final two phrases of the folk tune appear again in the birdsong guise at the end of the second stanza of the poem. The first appearance of the folk tune in a recognizable and complete form follows soon after the birdsong of the second stanza as a chorale set to the words of the third stanza of Graham’s poem. This reflects the fact that the third stanza is dominated by the song of the lark and its impact on the soldiers’ spirits, with Graham using phrases such as “Life soared triumphant” and “That wounded hope arose / To greet that song.” From this point through the end of the work, the folk tune dominates more and more as the sense of joy and hope rises higher and higher and the tempo of the music increases, along with the ever-growing celebratory peals of the hand chimes and finally the addition of the drums, this time transformed into drums of dance rather than of war. Eventually, the text of the original folksong replaces the text of the third stanza of Graham’s poem for the final two iterations of the folksong, completing the transformation of “pain and death” into joy and hope. In the final iteration, the lark’s wordless birdsong is heard for a final time sung triumphantly above the voices of the choir, who sing the folksong as a round or canon, while the drums and hand chimes create a celebratory atmosphere of dancelike joy and hope.

- *John Muehleisen (Feb. 20, 2017)*

The Lark Above the Trenches

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J. Scott Ferguson, Conductor

Made possible by the Sylvia Monti Anderson Commissioned Choral Work Fund

honoring Delta Omicron at Illinois Wesleyan University

Dur.: 8:00

The Lark Above the Trenches: Muriel Elsie Graham (1868–1928)
and excerpt from *The Lark in the Morning*: Anonymous

Original Music by: John Muehleisen (2016)
The Lark in the Morning: Devon Folksong, arr. Muehleisen

Feroce ♩ = 98 2 4

The score is for a 4/4 piece in B-flat major. It features a Solo Soprano part, Hand Chimes, High/Low Drums, and a four-part chorus (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass). The tempo is marked 'Feroce' with a quarter note equal to 98 beats. The music is divided into two sections of 2 measures each, followed by a 4-measure section. The lyrics 'All day the guns had worked their hell-ish' are shared by the Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts. The drum part is marked 'aggressivo' and 'ff'. The vocal parts are marked 'molto marcato', 'ff', 'sfzp', and 'ff'. The Solo Soprano part has a whole rest in the first two measures and a whole note in the third measure. The Hand Chimes part has whole rests in all four measures. The High/Low Drums part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The vocal parts enter in the third measure with the lyrics.

The Lark (Solo Soprano)

Hand Chimes

High/Low Drums

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

All day the guns had worked their hell-ish

All day the guns had worked their hell-ish

All day the guns had worked their hell-ish

All day the guns had worked their hell-ish

The Lark Above the Trenches

Drums

p \curvearrowright *ff*

S
will, All day the guns had worked their hell-ish

A
will, All day the guns had worked their hell-ish

T
will, All day the guns had worked their hell-ish

B
will, All day the guns had worked their hell-ish

Drums

mf \curvearrowright *ff*

S
will, All day All day All day the guns had

A
will, All day All day the guns had worked

T
will, All day All day the guns had worked

B
will, All day the guns had

6 8 10 12

REPUSSAL COPY DO NOT

Drums

14 *mp*

S *sfz* *p* *ff* *f* *ff*

worked their hell-ish will, the guns had worked their hell-ish will, —

A *sfz* *p* *ff* *f* *ff*

— their hell-ish will, the guns had worked their hell-ish will, —

T *sfz* *p* *ff* *f* *ff*

— their hell-ish will, the guns had worked their hell-ish will, —

B *sfz* *p* *ff* *f* *ff*

worked their hell-ish will, the guns had worked their hell-ish will, —

Drums

18 *ff* *p* *p* *legato* *f*

20 *f*

22 *f*

S *p* *legato* *f*

And all night long —

A *p* *legato* *f*

And all night long — men gasped their lives a - way,

T *p* *legato* *f*

men gasped their lives a - way,

B *legato e molto espressivo* *p* *mp* *p* *pp* *f*

With sob-bing breath — Ah —

The Lark Above the Trenches

Drums

ff *mp* *pulse-like* 24 26

S *mp* *f*
And all night long

A *mp* *f*
And all night long men gasped their lives a-way,

T *mp* *f*
men gasped their lives a-way,

B *p* *mp* *p* *pp* *f*
legato e molto espressivo
With sob-bing breath Ah

Drums

ff 28 30 32

S *mf* *mp*
And all night long

A *mf* *mp*
With sob-bing breath

T *mf* *mp*
men gasped their lives a-way,

B *mf*
men gasped their lives a-way,

Or shiv-ered

rit. -----

34 36 *f*

S *f*

A *f*

T *mf* rest - less on the ice - cold clay, *f*

B rest - less on the ice - cold clay, *f*

rit. -----

Adagio pietoso ♩ = 74

p as if wailing in woe 38 40 *f*

S Ah *f*

A *p* as if wailing in woe *f*

T *mp nobile* And all night long men gasped their lives a - way, *f*

B *mp nobile* And all night long men gasped their lives a - way, *f*

The Lark Above the Trenches

Maestoso luminoso con speranza ♩ = 76

accel.

fp

S
Ah

A
Ah

T
Till morn broke pale and chill With sud-den song.

B
Till morn broke pale and chill With sud-den song.

Faster ♩ = 90

Senza misura ♩ = c. 45
quasi bird song

The Lark
Ah Ah Ah

Hnd. Ch.

S
Ah
stagger breathing

A
Ah
stagger breathing

T
Ah
stagger breathing

B
Ah
stagger breathing

$\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ a Tempo $\text{♩} = 90$

50

The Lark

Hnd. Ch.

S

A

T

B

mf

Ah

mp

f

ff

f

p

1.v.

$\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ Senza misura $\text{♩} = \text{c. } 45$

$\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ a Tempo $\text{♩} = 90$

52

The Lark

Hnd. Ch.

S

A

T

B

Ah Ah Ah Ah

mp

f

f

f

f

f

54

The Lark Above the Trenches

Senza misura ♩ = c. 45

mf Ah

56

ff *p*

p *p* *p* *p*

l.v.

a Tempo ♩ = 90 *accel.* 58 *Feroce* ♩ = 98 60 62

The Lark

Hand Chorus

Drums

p *ff* *ff* *sfzp* *ff*

ff *ff* *sfzp* *ff*

ff *ff* *sfzp* *ff*

ff *ff* *sfzp* *ff*

ff *ff* *sfzp* *ff*

A - bove the ster - ile fur - rows war - had -

A - bove the ster - ile fur - rows war - had -

A - bove the ster - ile fur - rows war - had -

A - bove the ster - ile fur - rows war - had -

A - bove the ster - ile fur - rows war - had -

Drums *pulse-like* *p* *legato* *f*

S ploughed With deep-trenched seams, _____ *f*

A ploughed With deep-trenched seams, _____ such bit - ter seed is sown, *f*

T ploughed _____ such bit - ter seed is sown, *f*

B ploughed Where-in this year Ah _____ *legato e molto espressivo* *p* *mp* *p* *pp* *f*

Hnd. Ch. 70 72 74 *f*

Drums *ff* *mp* *ff* *pulse-like*

S With deep-trenched seams, _____ A _____ *f* *con speranza*

A With deep-trenched seams, _____ no fruit-ful grain is strewn, A _____ *f* *con speranza*

T _____ no fruit-ful grain is strewn, A _____ *f* *con speranza*

B _____ Where-in this year Ah _____ *legato e molto espressivo* *p* *mp* *p* *pp* *f* *con speranza* A

76 78 *mf*

The Lark

Hnd. Ch.

S
lark — poured from the cloud Its throb - bing dreams. Ah

A
lark — poured from the cloud Its throb - bing dreams. Ah

T
lark — poured from the cloud Its throb - bing dreams. Ah

B
lark — poured from the cloud Its throb - bing dreams. Ah

Senza misura ♩ = c. 45 *a Tempo* ♩ = 90

quasi bird song

80 82 *mf*

The Lark

Hnd. Ch.

S
p stagger breathing

A
p stagger breathing

T
p stagger breathing

B
p stagger breathing

The Lark Above the Trenches

Senza misura ♩ = c. 45 **a Tempo** ♩ = 90

The Lark

Hnd. Ch.

S

A

T

B

84 Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah

86 l.v.

mp f

88 90

f ff

sang It sang

It sang

It sang

sang It sang

ff

rit. -----

l.v. 92 94

Hnd. Ch. *ff* *f*

S *f* It sang

A *f* It sang

T *f* It sang

B *f* It sang

Chorale

Maestoso con speranza ♩ = 44

l.v. 96 98 100

Hnd. Ch.

S *f* *molto legato e sonoramente*
It sang — It sang — So glad — and strong; and —

A *f* *molto legato e sonoramente*
It sang — It sang — So glad — and strong; — and —

T *f* *molto legato e sonoramente*
It sang — It sang — So glad — and strong; and —

B *f* *molto legato e sonoramente*
It sang — It sang — So glad — and strong; and —

102 104

S pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life soared tri -

A pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life soared tri -

T pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life soared tri -

B pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life soared tri -

106 108 110

S um - phant, though a myr-i-ad men Were swept like leaves be - yond the liv-ing's

A um - phant, Ah Ah

T um - phant, Ah Ah

B um - phant, Ah Ah

The Lark Above the Trenches

S
ken, That wound-ed hope a - rose To greet that song. —
"ken" = knowledge or awareness

A
liv - ing's ken, That wound-ed hope a - rose To greet that song. —

T
That wound-ed hope a - rose To greet that song. —

B
That wound-ed hope a - rose To greet that song. —

p *f* *p* *f* *p* *f* *p* *f*

112 114 116

Hnd. Ch. *mf* *mf* *mf* *mf*

S
It sang So glad and strong; and

A
It sang So glad and strong; and

T
It sang — It sang — So glad — and — strong; and —

B
It sang — It sang — So glad — and — strong; and —

mf *mf* *mf* *mf*

Risoluto ♩ = 72

118 120

accel. -----

Hnd. Ch. 122 124

S
 pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life soared tri - um - phant,

A
 pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life soared tri - um - phant, Were

T
 pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life soared tri - um - phant, though a myr - i - ad men Were

B
 pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life soared tri - um - phant, though a myr - i - ad men Were

Hnd. Ch. 126 128

S
 though a myr - i - ad men Were swept like leaves That wound - ed hope a - rose To greet that song. *f*

A
 swept like leaves Were swept like leaves That wound - ed hope a - rose To greet that song. *f*

T
 swept like leaves be - yond the liv - ing's ken, That wound - ed hope a - rose To greet that song. *f*

B
 swept like leaves be - yond the liv - ing's ken, That wound - ed hope a - rose To greet that song. *f*

Andante con speranza ♩ = 84

130 132

Hnd. Ch. *mf*

Drums *mf*

S *mf*
It sang — It sang — So glad — and — strong; and —

A *mf*
It sang — It sang — So glad — and — strong; and —

T *mf*
It sang It sang So glad and strong;

B *mf*
It sang It sang So glad and strong;

134 136

Hnd. Ch.

Drums

S
pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life — soared — tri - um - phant, — though a myr - i - ad men Were

A
pain and death were pass - ing shows, Life — soared — tri - um - phant, — though a myr - i - ad men Were

T
pain and death were pass - ing shows, soared tri - um - phant, though a myr - i - ad men Were

B
pain and death were pass - ing shows, soared tri - um - phant, though a myr - i - ad men Were

accel. -----

Hnd. Ch. 138 140

Drums

S
swept — like leaves be - yond the liv - ing's ken, That wound-ed hope a - rose To greet that song. *f*

A
swept — like leaves be - yond the liv - ing's ken, That wound-ed hope a - rose To greet that song. *f*

T
swept like leaves be - yond the liv - ing's ken, wound-ed hope a - rose To greet that song. *f*

B
swept like leaves be - yond the liv - ing's ken, wound-ed hope a - rose To greet that song. *f*

Gioioso ♩ = 90

Hnd. Ch. 142 144

Drums *f*

S
f marcato
The lark in the morn - ing a - wakes — from her nest She —

A
f marcato
The lark in the morn - ing a - wakes from her nest She —

T
f marcato
The lark in the morn - ing a - wakes — from her nest She —

B
f marcato
The lark in the morn - ing a - wakes from her nest She —

The Lark Above the Trenches

Estatico ♩ = 96

154 *ff* Ah Ah Ah

156

f Hnd. Ch.

f Drums

ff *molto marcato* S
The lark in the morn - ing a - wakes from her nest She

ff *molto marcato* A
The lark in the morn - ing a - wakes from her nest She

ff *molto marcato* T
The lark in the morn - ing a -

ff *molto marcato* B
The lark in the morn - ing a -

158 160

The Lark
Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah

Hnd. Ch.

Drums

S
mounts in the air with the dew on her breast, Oh the lark and the plough - boy to - geth - er can sing, And re -

A
mounts in the air with the dew on her breast, Oh the lark and the plough - boy to - geth - er can sing, And re -

T
wakes from her nest She mounts in the air with the dew on her breast, Oh the lark and the plough - boy to -

B
wakes from her nest She mounts in the air with the dew on her breast, Oh the lark and the plough - boy to -

The Lark Above the Trenches

The Lark

Hnd. Ch.

Drums

S

A

T

B

turn to her nest in the e - ven - ing, Re - turn to her nest in the e - ven - ing, in the

geth - er can sing, And re - turn to her nest in the e - ven - ing, Re - turn to her nest in the

geth - er can sing, And re - turn to her nest in the e - ven - ing, Re - turn to her nest in the

The Lark

Hnd. Ch.

Drums

S

A

T

B

e - ven - ing. Re - turn to her nest in the e - ven - ing.

e - ven - ing. Re - turn to her nest in the e - ven - ing.

e - ven - ing. Re - turn to her nest in the e - ven - ing.

e - ven - ing. Re - turn to her nest in the e - ven - ing.

162

164

Ah

Ah Ah Ah Ah

166

168

ff

Ah

mf

ff

f

ff

mf

ff

f

ff

l.v.

The Lark

Hnd. Ch.

Drums

S

A

T

B

170 172 174

damp Hand Chimes on beat 1

mf *fff*

PERUSAL SCORE DO NOT COPY

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score for 'The Lark Above the Trenches', page 21. The score is arranged for a full orchestra and includes a vocal line for 'The Lark'. The vocal line (The Lark) consists of a single melodic line with a long note at measure 170, followed by rests at measures 172 and 174. The Hand Chimes (Hnd. Ch.) part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents, followed by a long note at measure 174. The Drums part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents, followed by a long note at measure 174. The strings (S, A, T, B) part consists of a single melodic line with a long note at measure 170, followed by rests at measures 172 and 174. The score includes dynamic markings of *mf* and *fff* for the drums, and a performance instruction 'damp Hand Chimes on beat 1' for the hand chimes. A large watermark 'PERUSAL SCORE DO NOT COPY' is overlaid on the score.