

NINETY-THREE MILLION MILES AWAY

COMPOSER'S NOTES

THE SONG IN A SENTENCE (or two...)

The Sun may be ninety-three million miles away, but light travels so quickly that it doesn't take long to reach here from there. We depend on the light from the sun and most life on Earth would die if it suddenly vanished – but that's not likely to happen for an awfully long time yet.

HISTORY & MAIN POINTS OF THE SONG

I wrote *Ninety-Three Million Miles Away* in 1985 while I was living with my newly widowed sister and her two young children at Swallows Barn in the tiny hamlet of Brownston in the South Hams district of Devon. I remember taking this song and another one – *Neutron Star* – into my niece and nephew's primary school at Modbury to teach it to their class. Over twenty years later I found myself visiting the same school to teach the children there some of my Darwin Songs for a performance in 2007.

STYLISTIC POINTS

The song works best when taken at a cracking pace, but not at the expense of clarity. Try to think of the words spitting out like bullets from a machine gun. Treat the continuous sequences of fast quavers as though they were staccati – as detached and pointed as you can make them. Do take care though that singers don't speed up on the second line of each refrain – I've often heard singers tumble over themselves on this little bit.

It is fun to speed up during the Coda, but don't do it if your singers are finding it too difficult. Or at least only add the accelerando once everyone is really familiar with the song.

In 2008 a young friend of mine was undergoing a gruelling two-day interview process to study Physics at Oxford University. At one point the question of the distance from Earth to Sun came up, and Joe was the only interviewee who knew the correct answer, having known my song virtually since infancy. I'd like to think that his knowing that fact was the clincher that gained him a place at Oxford. But I'd probably be deceiving myself...

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- The song is probably too fast to dance to whilst singing without getting horribly out-of-breath, but it's ideal for doing synchronised hand gestures to, illustrating words and thoughts in quite a literal way and making a bit of a comedy routine from it. Definitely not a song to sing po-faced.
- You could use the song as a starting-point for a project about the Sun: its central role in sustaining nearly – but not quite - all life forms on Earth; its role in mythology and religion; what makes it different (if anything) from the countless zillions of other stars in the universe; how it works, what it's made of, and how scientists have discovered these facts over the centuries; the profound effects upon the evolution of life that the cycles of day and night and of the seasons have had and why these cycles occur.
- Research the astounding facts and figures about the Sun, such as the number of Earths that would fit inside the Sun, the weight of material that it throws off into space each second, the time it takes to complete one orbit of the Milky Way, and its minuteness compared to our home galaxy. Then try to find ways of conceptualising these figures: if the Earth were a marble, how big would the Sun be?; if the Sun's life were the same length as a human life, how old is it now and how long does it have left?; if the Sun were a grain of sand, what would be the width of the Milky Way?; what proportion of the Sun's energy landing on Earth's surface would we need to capture to replace all the power stations on the planet?
- See if you can find a song from 1959 called *Why Does The Sun Shine?* with the brilliant first line "The sun is a mass of incandescent gas". It is one of many fun tracks created by predecessors of mine who also wrote songs inspired by science.