

MISTER DARWIN (BOTANICAL VERSION)

COMPOSER'S NOTES

THE SONG IN A SENTENCE

The song recounts the story of Darwin's voyage on the Beagle and his delay in publishing *Origin of Species* until almost pipped to the post by Alfred Russel Wallace. It encourages the listener and singer to follow in Darwin's footsteps and join in Kew's Great Plant Hunt.

HISTORY & MAIN POINTS OF THE SONG

I wrote the original version of *Mister Darwin* (then called *Mister Darwin, Mister Wallace, Mister Matthew*) for the *Teign Lifetime Project* in 2004. I wanted to pack as much information as I could into a short, catchy song so that people learning or hearing it would pick up the key points of Darwin's story, but would also remember his co-discoverers of the mechanism by which evolution occurs, namely natural selection.

At a meeting at the Centre for Life in Newcastle in September 2008, I heard about Kew's Great Plant Hunt project and sent off my song to them to see if they were interested in using it. Much to my delight, they were charmed by the song so my Singtastic co-director, Sue Blake, and I toddled off to the wonderful Wellcome Trust building in London for a meeting with Khairoun Abji and Megan Gimber from Kew.

Over tea and cakes, the four of us re-wrote some of the lyrics, moulding the song more to the purposes of the Great Plant Hunt. The only thing nobody spotted is that I'd got the pronunciation of St Helena wrong. It should be pronounced with the accent on the second 'e' of 'Helena' – unlike the common British pronunciation of the girl's name. This actually required a slight re-jigging of the musical notation, so you may find you have an incorrect copy if you were an early downloader. You'll also notice it pronounced incorrectly on some early recordings of both versions of the song. Never mind – just try and get it right when you sing it!

STYLISTIC POINTS

Mr Darwin has a folk song quality. It's probably best sung simply, energetically and straightforwardly with a great emphasis on making the words as clear as possible so that the story comes across well.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- With its simple melody and clear rhythms, Mr Darwin makes a great song to dance to - perhaps in a country-dancing style.
- So many creatures, plants and countries are mentioned that the song offers numerous opportunities for illustration and artwork generally. It might be a good project to make a book of the lyrics with illustrations flowing around and between the text.
- In an educational setting the song could form the starting-point for a play or dance-piece about Darwin's life and work, with the action being punctuated by the five verses and the coda at appropriate moments.
- You may like to write extra verses for the song about other aspects of Darwin's life, perhaps describing in more detail the controversy his work provoked, or outlining his in-depth study of worms over many years, or the sad fate of the Beagle's captain. You could have a verse or two in the key of D minor instead of D major if the subject matter were sad or serious – or perform them in 4/4 time instead of 9/8 and at a slower tempo. I do something similar in the equally bouncy Pirate's Song from my children's opera about the Spanish Armada, *Armadadrama*.