

ERAS

COMPOSER'S NOTES

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

Scientists divide the four-billion-year history of life on Earth into four huge slabs of time called 'eras': the Pre-Cambrian featured very primitive life, mainly algae and bacteria; the Palaeozoic, following the 'Cambrian Explosion' of life forms, saw the evolution of complex organisms such as invertebrates, trees, insects and reptiles; the Mesozoic ushered in the era of the dinosaurs and the first mammals as well as the earliest flowers; the current era, the Cenozoic, saw the destruction of the dinosaurs – probably from the effects of a huge meteorite strike on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula – and the rise of the mammals. And us!

HISTORY & MAIN POINTS OF THE SONG

"Eras" was written as part of the Teign Lifetime Project in 2004. I wrote the lyrics whilst on holiday in Switzerland, nursing my aching thumbs after the injuries they'd sustained during my inept attempts to ski. I'd always wanted to find some way of remembering the names, lengths and main features of the geological eras and suddenly realised that this was my chance to do it.

I also find it helps to know the origins of the names, which all derive from ancient Greek or Latin: "Pre" means "before"; "Cambrian" is a Latinised version of "Cymru", the Welsh word for Wales where rocks of that era were first identified; "Palaeo" derives from the Greek "palaios" meaning "old"; "zoic" is from the Greek "zoe" meaning "life"; "Meso" is the Greek for "middle"; "Ceno" is from the Greek "kainos" meaning "new".

I've never studied Greek and only scraped through my Latin 'O' level second time around because I happened to have done the translation before, but - for me at least - having some idea about the origins of words helps hugely in remembering their meanings.

I suppose the main point of the song - apart from being a mnemonic (from the Greek "mneme" meaning "memory") - is to convey some idea of the immense scale of the history of life on Earth; and the fact that mammals (including humans) are a relatively recent arrival.

STYLISTIC POINTS

I always thought "Eras" should be performed in a great rush of energy and excitement building to a sustained climax when the descant parts come in during the last verse (if you have someone to sing them!). But, since hearing jazz singer Sue Kibbey interpret the song in a relaxed shuffle rhythm, I find I enjoy it just as much in swing time and somewhat slower. Try it out in different ways and see which you like best.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- It would be fun and instructive to make a timeline of life's history – perhaps on a long roll of unwanted wallpaper for example. You could illustrate it with pictures of the life forms present during each of the eras.
- You could draw a "family tree" of evolution, beginning with great(x lots)-granddad bacterium, working through early invertebrates, fish, reptiles, early mammals, primates, apes, humans, your grandparents, parents and yourself.
- The song could be acted out as a pageant, with children dressed up as examples of the organisms evolving during each era. Only trouble is, *everyone* will want to be a dinosaur and *nobody* will volunteer to be an alga... Might be time to draw lots.
- Try making a list of words that you think derive from the same Greek and Latin roots as listed above. It's surprising how many there are. Check them in a good dictionary afterwards.