

FOUR BILLION YEARS

Performed at Dawlish Leisure Centre, Devon, UK by children from 10 local schools and by Teignmouth Community Choir, July 2004. The signer is Steve Almy and the soloist is Leigh Toney.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRDBqQ0-b4k>

FOUR BILLION YEARS

COMPOSER'S NOTES

THE SONG IN A SENTENCE

Life has been around on Earth for about four billion years, but we're the first species to single-handedly cause a mass extinction of epic proportions - but also to have the consciousness and technological ability to do something about it: what a pity it'll be if we just stand by and let it happen.

HISTORY AND MAIN POINTS OF THE SONG

Four Billion Years was written in 1988 as part of my space musical *Granny Galactica*. This show tells the story of an elderly astronomer who gets taken on a journey around the galaxy by an alien robot scout, Franklin, in the company of her grandchildren and a lonely geostationary satellite, Cynthia. They end up on the planet of the Fnrks, a charming but slobbish alien race who inhabit beautiful planets one after the other, always inadvertently wrecking them with their self-indulgent pastimes.

When the Earthlings realise that the Fnrks are considering Earth as a candidate for their next home, they are terrified. But when the Fnrks then decide that humans have already wrecked Earth beyond repair, the visitors sing *Four Billion Years* as a lament for their poor, abused home planet. They return home determined to spread the story of the Fnrks as a warning to *Homo sapiens*.

STYLISTIC POINTS

Four Billion Years is nothing if not a sad song. It can be sung simply, softly and slowly or more energetically – with more “oomph” – when it seems to imply that, sad as the message is, the singers are going to get up and do something about it right after finishing the song.

I've frequently used it as the end of a Darwin Songs performance as though to say “you've heard some fun songs and some elegiac songs about life on Earth, but now go away thinking about what we could all do to try and preserve those fragile life forms.” It makes a moving finale to a concert, though you can always lift the mood afterwards with an encore of something like *Queen Bee* or *Mutate*.

On the website you can hear several interpretations of the song – as jazz ballad, a *capella* lament, uplifting Gospel-style number, choral anthem. You may find yet another way to interpret *Four Billion Years*.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- *Four Billion Years* would make a great soundtrack for a short ballet.
- It might make a moving score for a film of countryside and wildlife.
- In an educational setting, the ethical issues raised in the song could be explored as part of environmental studies. Part of the project could be the creation of further lyrics expressing the personal feelings of participants.
- You could try to gain a concept of how long four billion years really is by illustrating that length of time somehow – perhaps representing each thousand years as one millimetre and working out how far you'd have to travel to reach four billion.

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<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=1HiFrcLeaA4>

Performed at the Kresge Auditorium, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA by North Cambridge Family Opera Festival Chorus and members of Teignmouth Community Choir (UK), April 2007. The soloist is Tim Traversy.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_AtsexH50c