

QUEEN BEE

COMPOSER'S NOTES

THE SONG IN A SENTENCE

The song is sung by a queen bumblebee emerging from hibernation and looking forward to the process of building a new colony from scratch.

HISTORY & MAIN POINTS OF THE SONG

This is one of my very earliest children's songs, written in 1984 for a Spring Concert in Plymouth involving children from seven mainstream and special schools and organised by Jane Tarr. It is a classic example of a song inspired by science rather than one conveying a lot of information. I firmly believe we should be using song to celebrate science. We don't think twice about singing to celebrate religion, great events, patriotism, love, birthdays, Christmas, New Year and other anniversaries. Yet, somehow, the glories of science – the excitement, astonishment, mystery of science – are rarely celebrated in song. Part of my mission is to fill that gap and provide people with enjoyable songs to express their positive feelings about the incredible world around us which science seeks to explore.

STYLISTIC POINTS

I rarely consciously adopt a particular musical style when songwriting, but I sometimes recognise a particularly strong influence having written a song. Queen Bee cries out to be performed like a pop song of the late 50's or early 60's – I can imagine it being sung by Shirley Bassey backed by a chorus of gents in top hats and tails! So, I'd recommend "camping it up" as much as you dare. Try to make the verses as melodramatic as you can, but perform the refrains with every ounce of over-the-top sunny optimism you can muster. Standing still with arms stiffly by your sides is not really an option for this song...

Take particular care with making the blue notes really blue. Singers not used to singing jazz can find this quite difficult so it's worth spending time on. The blue notes in Queen Bee are the A flats in the refrain (B flats in the final refrain) – in other words, the minor third where you might expect the major third to be. Without them, the song loses a lot of its character.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- You could use Queen Bee as the starting point for a research project about bees, social insects in general, or an even broader study of all types of social animals (including humans!).
- Queen Bee is a song that really has to be moved to. Try devising a choreography for the song, even if it's only hand and arm movements. Costumes are virtually obligatory for this song!
- Try using the difference between ordinary and 'blue' notes to get singers listening really carefully to what they and others sing. See if they can learn to alternate between the jazzy and non-jazzy version of the melody and talk about the difference those notes make to the feel of the song.
- Extend the music theory exploration of Queen Bee by challenging students to sing it 'straight', ie in common time rather than in compound time. I've never heard it performed like this, but I suspect it could work rather well with a Latin feel. Discuss the difference in mood this creates and explore why.
- Queen Bee is a song that works for all ages, from pre-schoolers to old-timers. The refrain is very easily and quickly learnt. It's an ideal song for audience involvement at a school concert for example.