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John Rutter For The Beauty Of The Earth

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Introduction: A Hymn Reimagined

Few choral works evoke a sense of radiant gratitude quite like John Rutter's arrangement of **"For the Beauty of the Earth"**. This beloved hymn, with its joyful refrain of "Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise," has been a staple of congregational singing for over a century. Yet, it was the singular vision of the British composer John Rutter that transformed this Victorian hymn into a lush, modern choral masterpiece that resonates with choirs and audiences worldwide. In this article, we explore the life of John Rutter, the history of the hymn, the distinct musical features of his most famous setting, and why **John Rutter For The Beauty Of The Earth** has become essential repertoire for choirs of all abilities.

The Composer: John Rutter – Master of Modern Choral Music

To truly appreciate the arrangement, one must first understand the composer. John Rutter (born 1945) is one of the most performed choral composers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His style is characterized by accessible melodies, rich harmonies often reminiscent of French impressionism, and a deep sensitivity to text setting. Rutter studied music at Clare College, Cambridge, where he later served as Director of Music. His catalogue includes large-scale works like the Requiem and Magnificat, as well as countless anthems, carols, and hymn arrangements.

Rutter's approach to hymnody is unique: he respects the traditional tune but reimagines it with fresh accompaniments and vocal textures. His setting of **For the Beauty of the Earth**is a prime example. Where the original hymn by Folliott S. Pierpoint (1864) was set to the German tune "Dix" (often associated with "As with Gladness Men of Old"), Rutter composed an entirely new melody for the verses, retaining only the traditional refrain "Lord of all, to thee we raise." This daring move paid off: his version became instantly recognizable and is now performed far more often than the original tune.

The Origins of the Hymn Text

The words of "For the Beauty of the Earth" were written by Folliott S. Pierpoint (1835–1917), an English hymn writer and poet. He originally penned the text for use during a Eucharistic service at his church in Bath, England. The hymn celebrates the beauty of creation—the earth, the skies, the changing seasons, the love of family and friends, and the gift of divine grace. Each stanza offers a different reason for praise, culminating in the repeated chorus.

The text is inherently inclusive and broad, making it suitable for a wide range of worship contexts. Pierpoint's original eight-stanza hymn is often shortened in modern hymnals, but Rutter's setting typically uses four to five stanzas, which allows for a satisfying musical arc without becoming overlong.

Musical Analysis of Rutter's Setting

Melody and Harmony

John Rutter's melody for the verses is lyrical and soaring, with a gentle arch that mirrors the emotion of the text. The key is typically G major (though it is sometimes transposed for congregational use), and the time signature is 3/4, giving the piece a lilting, waltz-like feel. This triple meter is unusual for hymns, which often use duple time, and it adds a graceful, dance-like quality that immediately sets Rutter's arrangement apart.

Harmonically, Rutter employs his signature technique of lush, warmly dissonant chords that resolve satisfyingly. The accompaniment—whether for organ, piano, or chamber orchestra—includes flowing arpeggios, suspended harmonies, and occasional chromatic shifts that heighten the emotional impact. For example, at the phrase "for the joy of ear and eye," the harmony gently swells before settling, as if painting the beauty it describes.

Texture and Structure

Rutter typically writes for SATB choir, but his arrangement is remarkably flexible. Many performances use a four-part choir, but the piece works just as well with a unison congregation supported by the organ. The texture alternates between homophonic (all voices moving together) and polyphonic (imitative, overlapping lines). The refrain is always robust and homophonic, allowing the congregation or choir to unite in the act of praise.

Each verse is treated slightly differently. The first verse might be in unison, the second in four parts, the third with a soprano descant, and the fourth with a dramatic build to a climactic final refrain. This variety keeps the listener engaged and allows the choir to display dynamic control. The final "Amen" (often included) is a gentle, lingering cadence that leaves a feeling of peaceful gratitude.

Comparison with Traditional Tunes

The original hymn tune "Dix" (by Conrad Kocher, 1838) is strong and straightforward, with a repetitive structure. Rutter's melody is more decorative and rhythmically varied. While "Dix" marches forward in 4/4, Rutter's version floats in 3/4. The emotional effect is different: "Dix" feels solid and earnest; Rutter's feels joyful and effervescent. Many choir directors prefer Rutter's version for special occasions where a more expressive, celebratory atmosphere is desired.

Performance Considerations

- Voicing: Typically SATB, but also available in SAB or SA arrangements for less experienced choirs. The piece is considered approachable for intermediate choirs.
- Accompaniment: Originally for organ or piano. An orchestral arrangement (strings, woodwinds, brass) is also popular for festival services.
- Difficulty: Moderate. The vocal lines are mostly stepwise with some leaps, and the harmonies are consonant enough to be learned relatively quickly.
- Occasion: Most commonly performed at Thanksgiving, harvest festivals, weddings, Easter Sunday, and general worship services focusing on creation or gratitude.
- Duration: Approximately 3–4 minutes for 4 verses and refrain, making it ideal for use within a liturgy.

One of the reasons **John Rutter For The Beauty Of The Earth** is so widely performed is its adaptability. A small parish choir can present it beautifully with piano, while a large cathedral choir can add organ and brass for a thrilling festival sound.

Reception and Legacy

Since its publication in the 1970s (as part of Rutter's collection of hymn arrangements), this setting has become a favorite in the choral repertoire. It has been recorded by countless ensembles, including the Cambridge Singers (Rutter's own choir), the King's College Choir, and many others. The recording by the Cambridge Singers is often considered the definitive version, offering a pristine blend of voices and a sensitive organ

accompaniment.

Beyond live performances, the piece has found a home in popular culture. It has been used in wedding ceremonies, television soundtracks, and even as background music in films seeking an uplifting, sacred atmosphere. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to be both deeply traditional and refreshingly modern. Rutter respected the hymn's heritage while giving it new life—a balance that is notoriously difficult to achieve.

Why This Setting Matters for Choral Directors

For music ministers and choral directors, **John Rutter For The Beauty Of The Earth** is a versatile tool. It can serve as a teaching piece for developing tone and blend, as the long legato phrases encourage good breath control. It also provides an opportunity to teach dynamic contrast: the piece moves from *piano* to *forte*with natural arcs. Furthermore, it is one of those rare hymns that can be sung by the congregation during a service and then later performed by the choir as an anthem—the familiarity deepens the spiritual impact.

Incorporating the Piece into Worship or Concert

1. Thanksgiving Services: The text explicitly thanks God for the earth and its blessings, making it perfect for Thanksgiving. Use it as a processional hymn or an offertory anthem.
2. Weddings: Many couples choose this piece during the signing of the register or as a congregational hymn. The joyful yet reverent mood suits the occasion.
3. Earth Day or Environmental Themes: With its focus on creation, the hymn can be adapted for services that emphasize stewardship of the environment.
4. Choral Concerts: As a standalone piece or part of a set of Rutter works, it provides a moment of serene brilliance among more dramatic selections.

When preparing the piece, directors should pay careful attention to the accompaniment's flowing nature; the organist or pianist must keep the triple meter buoyant without rushing. The choir should aim for a unified vowel sound, especially on the word "raise," which appears repeatedly at the end of the refrain. The final "Amen" should be sung with a gentle release, not a hard cutoff.

Conclusion: A Timeless Gift of Gratitude

John Rutter's setting of **For the Beauty of the Earth** is more than just a piece of music; it is a vessel for gratitude. Through his masterful craftsmanship, Rutter took a familiar hymn and elevated it into a soaring prayer of thanks. The melody lingers in the ear long after the last chord fades, reminding us of the beauty that surrounds us daily. Whether sung by a professional ensemble in a concert hall or by a small congregation in a country church, this arrangement continues to inspire worship and wonder. For anyone seeking to express heartfelt praise through choral music, **John Rutter For The Beauty Of The Earth** remains an enduring and essential choice.

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