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Rutter For The Beauty Of The Earth

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Introduction

Few pieces of choral music capture the spirit of gratitude and joy as perfectly as John Rutter’s beloved setting of the hymn *For the Beauty of the Earth*. With its soaring melody, warm harmonies, and deeply reverent yet accessible character, this work has become a staple in church services, concert halls, and school performances around the world. But what is it about **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth** that makes it so enduring? The answer lies not only in Rutter’s masterful composition but also in the timeless words of the original hymn and the universal human longing to give thanks for the world around us. In this article, we will explore the origins of the hymn, the musical genius of John Rutter’s arrangement, the lyrical themes of praise and creation, and the lasting impact of this cherished choral piece. Whether you are a choral singer, a music lover, or someone simply seeking a deeper appreciation of this work, you will find a wealth of insight into why **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth** continues to inspire audiences of all ages.

The Origins of For the Beauty of the Earth

To understand the significance of Rutter’s setting, we must first look at the hymn text upon which it is based. The words were written in 1864 by Folliott S. Pierpoint, an English Anglican poet and hymn writer. Pierpoint originally composed the poem as a communion hymn titled “For the Beauty of the Earth” for a service at his local church in Bath, England. The hymn was intended to express gratitude for the beauty of creation and the blessings of life, culminating in a “sacrifice of praise” offered to God. Over the decades, the text has been set to several different tunes, most notably the German melody “Dix” and later by many composers. However, it was John Rutter’s 1973 arrangement that would elevate the hymn to new heights of popularity and artistic excellence.

John Rutter, a British composer and conductor known for his prolific output of choral music, was commissioned to write a setting of *For the Beauty of the Earth* for the choir of Clare College, Cambridge, where he was then a fellow. Rutter took Pierpoint’s seven-stanza poem and selected four stanzas that focus on the themes of creation, beauty, love, and divine providence. The result was a piece that immediately resonated with performers and listeners alike, becoming one of the most frequently performed anthems in the English-language choral repertoire. Today, **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth**is synonymous with heartfelt thanksgiving.

The Lyrics and Their Meaning

Pierpoint’s original poem is a hymn of praise that celebrates the seen and unseen gifts of the world. Each stanza begins with the phrase “For the beauty of the earth” followed by a specific aspect of thanksgiving: for the beauty of the earth itself, for the beauty of the skies, for the joy of human love, for the gift of divine love, and so on. The refrain, which appears after each stanza, is a simple yet profound couplet:

“Lord of all, to Thee we raise / This our hymn of grateful praise.” This repetition grounds the hymn in a posture of worship, making it suitable for both liturgical and secular settings.

Rutter selected four stanzas for his setting: the first (“For the beauty of the earth”), the second (“For the beauty of the skies”), the fourth (“For the joy of human love”), and the fifth (“For Thy Church which evermore”). By choosing these, he creates a narrative arc that moves from the natural world to human relationships and finally to the spiritual community. This carefully curated selection allows the music to flow from awe at creation to intimacy and then to a broader sense of belonging. The absence of the more specifically Eucharistic verses makes the piece accessible to a wide variety of audiences while retaining its core message of gratitude. In **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth**, the lyrics are not simply sung; they are elevated to a prayerful meditation that invites the listener to pause and reflect on the goodness of life.

Rutter’s Musical Interpretation

What sets Rutter’s setting apart from other arrangements is its melodic grace and harmonic warmth. Where the traditional tune “Dix” is bright and march-like, Rutter’s melody is gentle, lyrical, and unfolds in a flowing 3/4 time signature. The piece begins with a simple, almost folk-like melody sung by the sopranos, supported by soft chords in the organ or piano accompaniment. As the verses progress, Rutter gradually adds layers of harmony and counterpoint, enriching the texture without overwhelming the listener. The refrain, with its rising phrase “Lord of all, to Thee we raise,” creates a sense of joyful ascent, while the final cadence leaves a feeling of peaceful resolution.

Rutter for the Beauty of the Earthis written for SATB choir (soprano, alto, tenor, bass), though it is often performed by unison or two-part choirs with an adapted accompaniment. The voice leading is clear and idiomatic, making it accessible to amateur and professional choirs alike. Rutter’s characteristic use of suspension and diatonic dissonance adds emotional depth without sounding dissonant or jarring. The accompaniment, whether on organ or piano, provides a lush foundation that supports the vocal line while adding its own coloristic touches, such as arpeggiated figures that evoke the natural imagery of the text.

Structure of the Piece

The piece is structured in a strophic form with variations. Each verse presents the same melodic contour, but Rutter changes the harmonic underpinning and choral texture from verse to verse. Verse One is gentle and homophonic, with the choir singing in block chords. Verse Two introduces a countermelody in the alto and tenor lines, creating a subtle polyphonic interest. Verse Three, setting the stanza about human love, is more intimate, with a reduced texture and a slightly slower tempo. Verse Four builds to a climax, with the full choir singing in unison on the phrase “This our hymn of grateful praise” before a quiet, prayerful closing. This structural progression mirrors the emotional journey from wonder to gratitude to commitment, making **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth** a deeply satisfying musical experience.

Performance and Popularity

Since its publication in 1973, Rutter’s setting has become one of the most frequently performed anthems in the English-speaking world. It is a favorite for Thanksgiving services, wedding ceremonies, graduation celebrations, and concerts where a message of thankfulness is desired. Its simplicity and beauty make it a repertoire staple for school choirs, church choirs, and community ensembles. The piece has been recorded by numerous professional choirs, including the Cambridge Singers (founded by Rutter himself), as well as by cathedral choirs and collegiate ensembles. Its presence on streaming platforms and hymnal supplements continues to introduce new generations to the joy of **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth**.

One reason for its widespread popularity is its emotional resonance. The music does not preach or demand; it simply invites the listener to share in a moment of gratitude. In a world that often focuses on problems and deficits, this piece offers a counterbalance of abundance and beauty. Choral directors appreciate its teachability, while audiences respond to its melodic directness. The piece also works well in both sacred and secular contexts, as the phrase “Lord of all” can be interpreted broadly to encompass the Earth's beauty regardless of the setting. This versatility has made **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth** a true crossover hit.

The Legacy of John Rutter

John Rutter (b. 1945) is one of the most influential living composers of choral music. His career spans more than five decades, during which he has written over 200 works, including anthems, carols, masses, and larger choral works like the *Requiem* and *Gloria*. Rutter’s style is often described as neo-romantic, blending traditional tonality with fresh melodic invention. He has a gift for writing music that is both accessible and artistically substantial, a rare combination that has endeared him to choirs and audiences worldwide. **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth**is a prime example of his ability to take a familiar text and transform it into something that feels both timeless and new.

Beyond this particular piece, Rutter’s contributions to choral music include his editorial work, his founding of the Cambridge Singers, and his prolific recording career. He has also arranged many folk songs and carols, and his compositions are performed in cathedrals, schools, and concert halls on every continent. The enduring popularity of **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth**is a testament to his skill as a craftsman and his deep understanding of the human spirit’s need for beauty and gratitude.

How to Learn and Perform “For the Beauty of the Earth”

If you are a choir director, singer, or music educator interested in performing **Rutter for the Beauty of the Earth**, there are several resources and considerations to keep in mind. The piece is published by Oxford University Press as a separate octavo, with versions for SATB and for unison voices. The vocal ranges are moderate: the soprano part goes

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