SOFTWARE & TECH

The Snowman Walking In The Air

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Introduction: The Enduring Magic of a Winter Classic

Every generation has its own soundtrack for winter. For millions of listeners around the world, the hauntingly beautiful melody and poignant lyrics of **The Snowman Walking In The Air** have become an inseparable part of the holiday season. Originally written by the late British composer Howard Blake for the 1982 animated television film *The Snowman*, this piece carries a weight far beyond its deceptively simple structure. It is a song of flight, friendship, and the bittersweet nature of ephemeral joy. When the film first aired on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom on Christmas Eve, no one could have predicted that this wordless animation, paired with a single vocal song, would become a recurring cultural phenomenon. Decades later, the piece remains a staple of Christmas concerts, school choirs, and nostalgic playlists. But what is it about this particular work that continues to captivate audiences of all ages? To understand its lasting appeal, we must explore the song's origins, its musical architecture, its lyrical depth, and the profound emotional resonance that has made **The Snowman Walking In The Air** a true winter masterwork.

The Birth of a Masterpiece: Howard Blake and Raymond Briggs

A Partnership of Contrasts

The journey of **The Snowman Walking In The Air** began not in a recording studio, but in the pages of a children's picture book. In 1978, British author and illustrator Raymond Briggs published *The Snowman*, a wordless story told entirely through delicate pencil crayon drawings. The tale follows a young boy who builds a snowman that comes to life at midnight; the two share a magical adventure, culminating in a flight across the snowy landscape. The book was a quiet success, but its true potential was unleashed when producer John Coates decided to adapt it into an animated television special. He brought in composer Howard Blake to create a score. Blake understood that the film, like the book, had no dialogue, so the music would have to carry the entire emotional narrative. He composed an orchestral score, but felt that one moment demanded something more: the flight scene. He wrote the song **The Snowman Walking In The Air** to accompany that sequence.

The Vocal Choice: A Child's Voice for a Child's Dream

Blake made a crucial artistic decision. He chose to have the song sung by a boy treble rather than a professional adult vocalist. The chosen singer was Peter Auty, a chorister from St Paul's Cathedral. Auty's pure, unforced voice perfectly captured the innocence and wonder of the boy's adventure. His delivery is simultaneously fragile and confident, a delicate balance that makes the listener feel as though they are hearing the internal song of the child himself. This authentic vocal quality elevates **The Snowman Walking In The Air** from a mere soundtrack piece to an authentic emotional memoir of childhood joy. Interestingly, a later recording by Welsh soprano Aled Jones, made when he too was a boy treble, became even more commercially famous, but Auty's original remains the definitive version for purists. The song's power lies in this youthful sincerity, a quality that adults often find deeply moving because it reminds them of a time when magic felt real.

Musical Analysis: The Architecture of Emotion

Key, Melody, and Harmonic Journey

The musical structure of **The Snowman Walking In The Air** is deceptively simple, yet it contains sophisticated elements that contribute to its hypnotic quality. The song is written in the key of E-flat major, a key often associated with warmth, nobility, and tenderness. The melody begins with a rising interval that immediately evokes the sensation of lifting off the ground. Blake uses a wide tessitura, allowing the melody to soar from low, reflective phrases to high, exultant notes that mirror the physical ascent of the snowman and the boy. The harmonic progression moves from the tonic to the subdominant and dominant with subtle chromatic inflections, creating a sense of motion and gentle tension. There is no jarring dissonance; the music remains in a safe, comforting tonal world, much like the child's trusting relationship with his snowman companion. The orchestration is equally masterful: the piano provides a delicate, arpeggiated foundation reminiscent of falling snow, while strings and woodwinds add layers of shimmering warmth. The final climax of the song releases into a high note that feels like a moment of pure transcendence, exactly as the pair flies above the clouds.

Rhythm and Phrasing: The Pulse of Flight

The compound time signature (often felt as 6/8 or 12/8) gives the piece a gentle lilt, a rocking motion that feels both like a lullaby and the steady beat of wings. This rhythmic ambivalence is part of its genius. It lulls the listener into a dream state while simultaneously propelling the narrative forward. The phrase lengths are irregular, reflecting the natural pauses of a child's breath or the unexpected dips and turns of an airborne journey. Howard Blake has stated that he wanted "the music to feel like it was floating," and he achieved this by avoiding strong downbeats in the accompaniment, allowing the melody to drift across the bar lines. This sense of weightlessness is central to the theme of **The Snowman Walking In The Air**. It is not a march or a dance; it is a glide. This musical choice reinforces the central metaphor of the story: that the most profound joys in life are often transient, fleeting, and impossible to hold onto, but we can still experience the ecstasy of flying, if only for a few minutes.

Lyrical Depth: More Than a Children's Song

Literal Imagery and Metaphorical Meaning

At first glance, the lyrics of **The Snowman Walking In The Air** describe the literal events of the film: a snowman and a child flying over mountains, rivers, and the sleeping village. But the words carry a deeper layer, one that speaks to the human condition. The line "We're walking in the air" is intriguing because snowmen don't walk in the air; they fly. Yet the verb "walking" suggests a casual, ordinary act, as if this miraculous flight is the most natural thing in the world. This is exactly how a child perceives magic: not as an exception, but as a possibility. The lyrics also contain a gentle melancholy. The snowman is a creature of winter; they "sail over the world" but are "never seen before." The song hints at the snowman's inevitable fate: when the sun rises, he will melt. The lyrics do not dwell on tragedy, but the knowledge of impermanence makes every soaring phrase more precious. The song teaches us to embrace beauty without trying to own it, a lesson that resonates deeply with adults who have experienced loss.

Universal Themes: Friendship, Wonder, and Transience

The enduring popularity of **The Snowman Walking In The Air** can be attributed to its articulation of universal themes. Friendship is at the core: the boy and the snowman share a bond that requires no words. Wonder is the fuel: the child's wide-eyed amazement at seeing the world from above reminds us to maintain a sense of awe. And transience: the knowledge that this magical night must end. The song does not shy away from the bittersweet. The final verse says, "We're holding very tight, we're flying through the air." The word "tight" implies a desperate grasp, a wish to hold onto the moment forever. This emotional honesty, wrapped in a beautiful melody, is what elevates **The Snowman Walking In The Air** from a seasonal novelty into a timeless piece of art. It speaks to the child in every

adult and acknowledges that the most beautiful things are often the most fleeting.

Cultural Impact and Legacy

A Christmas Staple Worldwide

In the United Kingdom, *The Snowman* is an annual Christmas tradition, and the song **The Snowman Walking In The Air**is its centrepiece. It is performed in school nativity plays, sung by choirs in cathedrals, and played on radio stations throughout December. The song has crossed borders and become a winter anthem in many other countries, often translated into local languages. Its use in commercials, charity singles, and even as a motif in popular films and television shows testifies to its cultural saturation. The Aled Jones version reached number 5 on the UK Singles Chart in 1985 and has sold over a million copies. The song's versatility is remarkable: it can be performed as a simple piano-vocal piece or as a grandiose orchestral arrangement. This adaptability has allowed it to remain fresh across generations.

Recordings and Interpretations

Beyond the original and Aled Jones covers, countless artists have recorded their own versions of **The Snowman Walking In The Air**. Jazz musicians have reimagined it as a delicate ballad, electronic artists have infused it with ambient textures, and classical ensembles have arranged it for chamber groups. Each interpretation adds a new layer to the song's legacy, but the core emotional impact remains unchanged. The song has even been used in therapeutic contexts, such as memory care for the elderly, because its familiar melody can trigger profound emotional and cognitive responses. This cross-generational and cross-cultural appeal is rare. It demonstrates that true artistic quality speaks a language beyond mere entertainment. **The Snowman Walking In The Air** is a piece of shared emotional heritage.

How to Perform the Song: Tips for Musicians

Vocal Considerations

For singers, especially young trebles, the key challenge of **The Snowman Walking In The Air** is maintaining a pure, unforced tone through the wide interval leaps. The high climax must sound effortless, not strained. Breath control is essential, as phrases are long and require smooth legato. The singer should avoid sliding between notes; instead, they should aim for clean intervals that reflect the clarity of a winter sky. The emotional interpretation is equally important. The singer must convey wonder without sentimentality, and joy without over-exuberance. A soft, intimate delivery at the beginning, building to a radiant middle, and returning to a hushed, reflective ending is often most effective. Accompanists should listen carefully to the vocalist and allow the melody to float above the piano line.

Arranging for Choir or Orchestra

When arranging **The Snowman Walking In The Air** for choir, directors often assign the melody to sopranos or a small ensemble, with altos and tenors providing warm harmonic support. The use of humming or "oo" sounds can create an atmospheric backdrop that mimics the sound of wind or distant bells. Orchestral arrangements should emphasize the strings for sustained warmth and the piano for the delicate snowflake-like arpeggios. The percussion section should remain restrained, using perhaps a glockenspiel or chimes to add a magical sparkle, but never overwhelming the melody. The tempo should feel natural, neither rushed nor dragging; a speed of around 80-86 beats per minute for the compound pulse is typical. The goal is to create a soundscape that invites the listener into a dream.

Conclusion: A Song That Flies Beyond Winter

The genius of **The Snowman Walking In The Air** lies in its perfect alignment of story, music, and emotion. Howard Blake created a composition that feels both eternal and fleeting, just like the snowman itself. From the first ascending notes, we are lifted into a world where the impossible becomes possible, where a child can fly alongside a figure made of snow, and where joy is not measured in hours but in moments of pure presence. The song has become a cultural touchstone not because it reminds us of Christmas, but because it reminds us of what it means to feel alive. It speaks to the part of us that still believes in magic, even when we know that morning will bring the thaw. As long as winter comes, as long as children build snowmen, as long as people seek beauty in the cold, the melody of **The Snowman Walking In The Air** will continue to echo through the night, inviting us to take flight one more time.

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