

## **Mu Ara**

To me, just about the most exciting thing that is happening in the world today is the almost weekly discovery of planets around other suns in our galaxy. In just a few years we have discovered over a hundred of these “exoplanets”. I am just embarking on a project to write a set of orchestral pieces for various orchestras which picture in sound some of these new planets - it is an interesting thought that we know probably just about as much about these new planets as Gustav Holst did about Mars, Jupiter and the rest at the beginning of the last century. Mind you, with some scientists predicting that there could be as many as 100,000,000,000,000 planets in our galaxy, I don't think I am going to keep up!

Mu Ara depicts the huge planet which circles the star of that name in the constellation of the Net. We hear the planet approaching, we glimpse its alien surface, and we hear it continuing on its journey – a palindromic process, and sometimes the music too is reversed in the second half of the piece. The piece uses a compositional technique used by all sorts of composers ever since the Elizabethan madrigalists – that of using keyboard black notes to suggest darkness and keyboard white notes to suggest light. This is not just a visual trick – it has the effect of contrasting one harmonic area with its opposite, the rapid alternation of the two helping maybe to create an aural picture of this massive, swiftly rotating planet.

Melodies are derived from the name itself: using a mixture of French and English note names, *Mi, Ut, A, Ré, A*, produce the five-note theme (*E, C, A, D, A*) which is used in all sorts of ways, and which conveniently outlines a white note pentatonic sound to contrast with black note pentatonic sounds. The five-noteness also fixed the 5/4 rhythm of the piece right from the first sketches – an asymmetry which seems to fit with the lurchingly wobbly orbit that this planet has around its sun.

I played around with these musical ideas for some months, but maybe it was the ghost of Holst looking over my shoulder which prevented me from really getting beyond sketches! In the end it took a series of possibly increasingly anxious phone calls from David Kendall for me to pluck up courage, and the score was written in just a couple of weeks..