

BLACK HOLE

COMPOSER'S NOTES

THE SONG IN A SENTENCE

Through a series of comic analogies, the song conveys the essential facts about what a black hole is and how it is formed.

HISTORY & MAIN POINTS OF THE SONG

Written in 1989 for the first production of my space musical *Granny Galactica* by Yealmpton Youthspring, the song was at first considered too difficult for performance by children. Although *Youthspring* was essentially a group for children and teenagers, co-founder Hilary Hall and I decided that this song would have to be performed by an adult. Then one day we were sitting having elevenses in Hilary's kitchen when from out in the garden we heard the voices of her young daughter, Louise, and her friend. At the tops of their voices they were singing *Black Hole* with pretty much perfect pitching and accurate rhythm – unaccompanied – as they played on the grass.

This was one of many lessons that have taught me over the years not to underestimate what children can do when it comes to performance. And I mean ordinary children here, not those with special training or abilities. When writing my musical *The Terrorthon* while in residence at Ivybridge Community College, I wanted to compose a musical line to be sung unison by the whole cast that would give an impression of bewilderment and fear. I took the risk of writing a melody using serial technique in which all twelve notes of the chromatic scale are used before any note is repeated. To my amazement, the cast learnt the melody in the space of a few minutes and were able to sing it confidently, note-perfect, from then onwards.

I spent a year working in residence in four pre-schools a few years ago and I was constantly amazed at the ability of 3 and 4 year-olds to sing complex melodies and rhythms accurately, to come up with catchy tunes when we were doing collaborative songwriting, and to respond creatively and enthusiastically to all sorts of existing music from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* to a contemporary Greek folk song, from an Indian *raga* to a movement from Handel's *Water Music*.

When listening to music, it is always tempting to listen only to what is familiar. But if you are a parent, teacher or friend of young children, I would urge you to expose them to every sort of music you can get your hands on – even music you yourself don't like (or think you don't). Early exposure to music of all cultures and periods – including 'difficult' contemporary classical music – will open children's ears to a world of possibilities. They may even help you broaden your own horizons.

STYLISTIC POINTS

Black Hole is unashamedly jazzy in style and I'd suggest you make the most of this in whatever way seems best.

At the time of writing the song I didn't know much about jazz harmony at all – I wrote it very much 'by ear' rather than through any theoretical knowledge. This makes some of the harmony rather difficult to analyse in any meaningful way, so the harmonies I've used for *the Voice and Chord Symbols* sheet are something of a compromise. To have notated them exactly according to the existing piano part would have created some extremely odd-looking and difficult-to-interpret symbols.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- The best thing to do with this song is dance to it!
- Black holes are a gift to science fiction writers since we don't really know what happens 'inside' them (if there is any such thing as 'inside' a black hole!). Use this as an excuse to write a really outrageously unlikely story about your journey into a black hole. This could be done individually or as a group, throwing in ideas to be written down by a facilitator or teacher. This is a great way to arouse what I call a 'creative fervour' with a group – a state which can produce a huge outpouring of creative energy in a very short space of time.
- Research and try to 'get your head around' what is known about black holes. Remember that children are generally more open to extraordinary ideas and concepts than adults are. They may have less trouble than you with understanding an Event Horizon or Hawking Radiation – the process by which a black hole can actually evaporate!