

PLANETS

COMPOSER'S NOTES

THE SONG IN A SENTENCE

The first half of the song (the Preamble) outlines the overall structure of the Solar System, while the second half (the Round) is a mnemonic for the planets in their correct order outward from the Sun.

HISTORY & MAIN POINTS OF THE SONG

The song was originally part of my children's musical *Granny Galactica* written for Yealmpton Youthspring Youth Music Theatre in 1989. The characters in the musical are taken on a wild-goose chase across the galaxy by an alien robot with ulterior motives, and they sing this song while travelling at great speed away from the Sun, when the Solar System as a whole heaves into view.

As with several of my songs, the second half is the original version and I have added the more information-packed first half much more recently (2008 in this case). *Granny Galactica*, or songs from it, has been performed many times and this song is usually staged with children playing each of the planets plus another as the Sun. They each hold aloft a large, colourful cardboard disc representing the planet and 'orbit' around the Sun as they sing. With very young children this tends to turn into a hilarious race reminiscent of *Ben Hur*, with planets colliding, overtaking each other or simply drifting off into outer space. Once seen, never forgotten!

STYLISTIC POINTS

It's fun to perform the first half of the preamble rather drily and precisely as though delivering a lecture: then burst into Handelian grandeur at the "Poor old Pluto" line as though your emotional reaction to Pluto's banishment could be contained no longer.

If you're including *Planets* as part of a public performance, I strongly recommend making the Round section an opportunity for audience participation. Print the lyrics in the programme and take five minutes to teach your audience the Round line-by-line or simply by getting your choir to sing it through a couple of times. But be sure to make it clear to the audience which section of the choir they're to sing with when it comes to singing in canon, and your conductor needs to use a big, strong, clear beat, or the whole thing can collapse in a heap! On the audio recordings included in the portfolio, you can hear a couple of dangerous moments, but everything pulls together again just in time...

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- Create cardboard planets and act out the song as described above.
- Research the Greek mythological characters from which the planet's names are derived and discover why they were granted those particular monikers. The story of the naming of Pluto (even though no longer a planet as such) is especially interesting. Try finding out what names other cultures gave to the naked-eye planets. Find out who names newly-discovered heavenly bodies and how the names are chosen.
- Try debunking Astrology by distributing untitled descriptions of the characteristics supposedly displayed by people with different star-signs. Allow each person to select the description they feel most suits them, then match up the actual star-signs of your group members with the signs they selected. If you achieve results of any statistical significance, let me know and I'll eat a small hat!
- Research the link between the names of the Solar System's bodies and the days of the week.
- Research the relative distances of the planets from the Sun, devise a scale to work to and get your group to stand out on a field at the correct distances from each other to represent the Solar System.
- Listen to Holst's wonderful *Planet Suite*!