

Farr from dull and not always serious



> Warriors from Pluto, music by Gareth Farr; New Zealand Chamber Orchestra and soloists; Morrison Trust CD, MMT 2036.

By Bryan James

SO FAR as I can tell, *Warriors from Pluto* is the sixth compact disc featuring the world of the Wellington-based composer, Gareth Farr. He is certainly regarded by many people in the capital as being the most interesting of our contemporary composers.

In some respects, his works have also found appeal beyond the tiny minority who share a keen interest in

"modern" classical music, for he keeps producing aurally — sometimes visually — exciting sounds.

His newer work shows more of the characteristics of his versatility, yet we still await a work of symphonic length. Many of his shorter pieces seem like a pastiche of styles, but perhaps he sets out deliberately to borrow in order to attempt to create something quite new.

In *Naga Baba* (1997) for example, he makes a musical analogy of an extreme Hindu sect, skilfully using orchestral colour and ensemble to depict the loss of individuality in pursuit of a collective ideal and devotion to an Indian god. A solo violin (played by Donald Armstrong, the orchestra's leader) represents an initiate's submission to the collective will, portrayed effectively by other instrumental elements.

Then, too, in *Te Parenga* (2000), Farr strikingly employs a solo clarinet, with strings, a harp, and



percussion to play simple, melodic, effective programme music in a suite for Peter Vere-Jones' revival of Bruce Mason's *The End of the Golden Weather*.

And no greater contrast could be provided than in the title piece, *Warriors From Pluto* (2000), where Farr unleashes his considerable talent for jokey fantasy. Apparently conceived as an eighth movement to Holst's *The Planets*, in Farr's imagination it takes the form of "a Plutan's vision of planet Earth". Nervously trembling strings introduce the listener to the percussion ensemble, Strike, whose members drum up a planetary dialogue curiously South Pacific in

nature. Atmospheric orchestral effects set off Strike's gentle hammering of bells and gongs, before a vigorous blast of a finale (incorporating what sounds suspiciously like a telephone ringing) and exciting drumming.

Drums emerge as the dominant feature in *Nga Tai Hurihuri* (2001), written as a commission for a private, technology company, and featuring in one of the translated verses the line "It is a new sunrise — lo, a new era is born/ it is a new world of light and technology". If this is not banal enough, all of it has been translated into Maori for reasons I cannot fathom, but it is sung winningly by the fine operatic voice of Deborah Wai Kapohe, in a kind of counterpoint to the non-operatically trained voice of Aroha Priest.

The final work on the CD, called *Time and Tide* (2001), consists of a suite Farr compiled for another commercial commission, the incidental music to the television programme, *Duggan*.

Farr's music reminds me of a good Cutler desk: many drawers of all sizes and shapes; open one and something surprising pops out; open another, and there's a different surprise. He is never dull, and sometimes — thank goodness — not at all serious.