



A Dust in Time by Huang Ruo

This composing activity is inspired by *A Dust in Time* by **Huang Ruo**, a Chinese composer based in New York. *A Dust in Time* was composed for **strings** and is a response to the 2020 **Covid 19 Lockdown**. It was given its online world premiere as part of the **Beijing Music Festival** in autumn 2020.



Huang Ruo said this about his piece:

'This special piece is created for the people affected by the pandemic, giving them a piece of music to reflect, to express, to heal, to find internal peace, strength, and hope.'

The piece is inspired by **Tibetan sand mandalas**. These are **circular patterns**, sometimes enclosed in a **square**, made with **coloured sand**, created by **Tibetan Buddhist monks** to aid meditation. The piece is **60 minutes long**, symbolising the **circle** and **cycle** of the **hour**. Mandala means circle in Sanskrit. **Watch** this video to learn about sand mandalas, what their **meaning** is and how they are **created** then ritually **destroyed**. <https://youtu.be/IYVcjFhpsHc>

Listen to an excerpt from *A Dust in Time*: https://youtu.be/mGUSrm5Px_Y

A Dust in Time is like a sand mandala in that the music **expands (grows)** from a **central point outward** and then **contracts (shrinks)** and **returns** back to the centre. This symbolises the life cycle and the journey from nothing (emptiness) to something (fullness) and then back to nothing.

A Dust in Time is also a **passacaglia**, a **musical form** in **3/4 time** (3 beats in a bar) where a simple melody is continuously varied (changed) by small degrees as the piece progresses. In *A Dust in Time* this is achieved by gradually adding new notes into the melodic lines over a **repeating bass line (a basso continuo)** which loops around and around like the circle of the mandala.



Creating your own mandala:







You could create your own mandala out of **leaves, berries** and **nuts** or just look on the internet for mandala patterns to colour.

Your Turn!

In this activity you are going to **compose, notate** (write down) and **perform** your own mandala inspired music over the **passacaglia chord sequence** from *A Dust in Time* and think about what for you, would symbolise **hope** and **light** in music. We will keep our music to **60 seconds** instead of 60 minutes!

Preparation activity - rhythm:

A Dust in Time is a passacaglia which is in **3/4 time** i.e. there are **3 beats in a bar**. Below are some 3/4 rhythms. The words underneath are there to help you with the rhythm. Practice playing them on one note. Can you make up any different 3/4 rhythms that are not here?

 1 2 3 man- da- la	 1 2 3 bu- dhist	 1 e 2 3 me- di- ta- tion
 1 2 3 time.....	 1 e 2 3 co- lour- ful	 1 2 e 3 sand pat- tern shape

In *A Dust in Time*, Huang Ruo uses the **D minor scale**:



Start by learning this scale on your instrument. If you don't know all of the notes of the scale, you could choose **4 or 5 notes** of the scale that you do know. That's all you need for this activity. Play the rhythms above using the different notes of the scale.

A Dust in Time uses a **chord sequence** which circles round and round. We have turned this into a **60 second(ish) backing track** for this activity:

Improvising a melody:

Choose the **first note** of your melody from the **D minor scale** - maybe D, F or A. This will also be your **final note**. **Starting** and **finishing** on the same note creates and completes the musical circle. Using the backing track below, **improvise 3/4 rhythms** on your **1st note**. Then, do the same again but, this time after a while, **add a 2nd note**

into your 3/4 patterns. Repeat, and, always starting with your 1st sound, gradually add your **3rd**, **4th** and **5th** note.

Composing a notated melody:

The **first pitch/note** of your melody is the **centre** of your **mandala**. As you **add** notes, as in the activity above, you are **expanding away** from the **centre** and when you **take away notes**, you are **returning** to the centre. This is like the monks creating the mandala by starting at the centre then moving outwards before sweeping the sand back into the centre.

It is also a kind of **musical palindrome** like *A Dust in Time*. A palindrome is something which is the **same when read forwards and backwards** e.g. **kayak** is a palindromic **word** and **02/11/20** is a palindromic **date**.

You are now going to **create** and **notate** a **20 bar melody in 3/4** by adding and taking away pitches as in the improvisation activity above. You can use the downloadable sheets to notate your melody on. When you have finished your melody, you can play it along with the backing track if you would like to. Here is a 60 second (20 bars of 3 beats) example melody. Notice how notes are added and then taken away:

♩ = 60

As you **compose** and **notate** your melody, think about how you could convey **hope** and **light** in your music. Maybe think about **dynamics** and **articulations**. Try to find ways of making **small changes** to the ideas you have chosen to give the sense of growing out from the centre point and back again instead of inventing new ideas as you add new sounds.

Extension:

Another thing that Huang Ruo does in *A Dust in Time* is make **intervals** (the distance between two notes) **bigger** in the **middle** of the piece. He also **starts** with **simple rhythms** that gradually get more complicated and then return to being simple again. You could try this too.