



These Particular Circumstances – Sean Shepherd

In this resource the young people will take each of the seven episodes of *These Particular Circumstances* by Sean Shepherd and create their own music responses to each one (Circling, Spinning, Floating, Grinding, Sinking, Teetering, Soaring)

Page 1 – Programme Note

These Particular Circumstances is a twenty-one minute piece by Sean Shepherd composed in 2009 for the New York Philharmonic. He describes it thus:

'The piece, in seven episodes, is a collection of contrasts: different characters and kinds of music are stitched together in time, without pause. Although each of the individual parts may well stand on their own, they surely don't; my specific intention sways toward putting each episode to use in service of the whole work, not unlike ingredients in a sauce. It's a chicken-and-egg scenario for me to remember which came first: did the name Grinding—the title of the fourth episode—describe the music I had written, or did I decide to write music that must grind? While I worked hard to form each episode around its own musical concerns and personality quirks, I bent and warped each as I saw fit toward my main objective: telling one twenty-minute tale, not seven short anecdotes. I viewed the large shape of the work as simply as I could: a waveform; or: up-down-up.'

Sean Shepherd

Page 2 – Introduction

In this resource, the children will take each of the seven episodes in *These Particular Circumstances* by Sean Shepherd and create their own musical responses to each movement. Some composing activities will be for the whole group, some for small groups and others for individuals. The activities will create the building blocks for a complete seven movement piece. Don't worry if your group's piece ends up having less movements.

Learning objectives

- To create a piece of music inspired the seven episodes in *These Particular Circumstances* by Sean Shepherd
- To develop a greater understanding of *These Particular Circumstances* and to support the children's listening
- To use movement as a starting point for composing and improvisation



- To understand how musical elements of pitch, texture, timbre, and speed can be used to describe movement.

Please listen to *These Particular Circumstances* and read the Music Maze Guidance before you begin.

Resources needed

- Spinning tops
- Feathers
- Paper plane
- Musical instruments
- Mix of tuned and un-tuned percussion.

Page 3 – Activity One: Circling

Stand with the children in a big circle. Send a clap around the circle – each child claps one at a time. Send it the other direction. Make sure everyone is communicating with the person next to them.

Try the same idea this time with the children using musical instruments instead of clapping. Try to get the children to match the length and articulation of the note/sound. Vary this. Ask the children to think of different contrasting ideas to send around. This might be anything from three short fast notes to one note that crescendos.

You could have two circles, one inside the other or three. Nominate different children in each group to start the sending of the short musical ideas around the circle. The groups could also send the musical ideas round in different directions. Ask the children to listen to the effect of the sounds circling. Experiment with different versions with different ideas until you find a version you all like. This is your circling music.

Page 4 - Activity Two: Spinning

Set off a spinning top. Ask the children to watch it's movement and think of a musical idea that might match the spinning movement of the top.

Some questions you might ask:

- Is it moving fast or slowly?
- Does the movement repeat or do different things?
- What happens as the top runs out of energy?



Give each child or pair of children, a spinning top and ask them to create a simple improvisation to match the spinning of the top from start to finish. Their piece must last as long as the top spins. Give them time to practice this. Listen to some of them.

Listen to some examples of the BCMG musicians improvising spinning music.

Create a big texture of spinning ideas by setting off the children's tops to trigger their improvisations. You can set each child/pair's spinning top off more than once. This is will be the children's spinning music. Listen to the BCMG musicians play their example.

Page 5 – Activity Three: Floating

Divide the group in two with a 'floating' group and a 'grinding' group. Ask the children to decide, with your support and through listening, who should in the 'grinding' group (e.g. low and louder instruments) and who in the 'floating' group (e.g those who can play high and quietly). This is approximate and rough - some instruments will fit into both groups.

Floating group: e.g. violin, cello, bells, cabasa, xylophone

Ask the children to watch a feather float down to the ground. Encourage them to experiment and find floating sounds on their instruments. Encourage non-traditional ways of playing their instruments – harmonics, breathing down the instrument, flautando, using just the headpiece of the flute. See if the children can match each other's sounds even if playing a very different instrument. Select some of the sounds and with the children, create a texture of them.

Listen to the example of the BCMG musicians improvise floating music.

Page 6 – Activity Four: Grinding

Grinding group: e.g. cello, trombone, bass drum, cabasa, agogo bell

Ask the children to create a repeating grinding rhythm on their instrument. Encourage low dark sounds and ask them to think about the movement of big machinery in factory. After some experimenting time ask them to try learning each other's rhythms. Tell them not to worry about exact pitches – the 'crunchier' the harmony the better.

Listen to the BCMG musicians play their grinding rhythm.

Now ask them to create a piece using their rhythms. This could be done by:

- Creating a sequence of the individual rhythms with everyone playing all the rhythms (remember you can include a rhythm more than once)



- Layering some or all of the rhythms on top of each other (if the harmonies crunch, all the better)
- Dividing into smaller groups, each group taking a different rhythm and then experimenting with the above
- Doing a mix of the above

Listen to the BCMG musicians layering two grinding rhythms on top of each other.

Page 7 – Activity Five: Sinking

Ask the children to order themselves from the ‘highest’ instruments to the ‘lowest’ instruments. This again is not very exact as instruments like the cello or piano can play very high or very low. Work with the children to create a rough order, trying out different versions. Who can play the highest note, who can play the lowest note?

Divide the line into three or more groups: high, middle and low. Ask each group to invent a short musical idea that goes from the highest sounds in the group to the lowest one. Join all the groups together to create one continuous piece. Don’t worry if the pitch goes up and down a bit. The important thing is the overall downwards direction.

Listen to the BCMG musicians improvise their sinking music.

Activity Six: Teetering

Organise the children in pairs and ask one of them to improvise a teetering movement whilst the other improvises music to match. Listen to all of these as a group and ask them to choose the one they think is the most effective and that can be replicated by the whole group. Create the teetering improvisation as a group.

Listen to these examples of one and two musicians improvising teetering music.

Page 8 – Activity Seven: Soaring

Launch a paper plane and ask the children to watch its movement. Ask them to describe the movement, ie it has a take-off, then soars. This could be seen as a short sound quickly followed by a long one.

For this activity the children will use some chords from *These Particular Circumstances*.

Chord 1: D G B F# A E (short note: take off)

Chord 2: C# F A Eb Bb C (long note: soaring)

Ask the children to pick a note from Chord 1 for the short note and from Chord 2 for the long note.



- Could you add dynamics?
- How can the group ensure it plays together?
- How can the group make the musical idea soar even more?

Listen to the BCMG musicians' version of soaring.

Page 9: Putting it all together

Now you will have the following bits of musical material.

1. Circling – whole group circling patterns
2. Spinning – spinning top individual improvisations making group texture
3. Floating – feather textural piece with half the group
4. Grinding – low crunching rhythms with half the group
5. Sinking – whole group pattern moving from high to low pitch
6. Teetering – whole group piece based on improvisation
7. Soaring – paper plane chord piece with whole group

This is in the order that composer Sean Shepherd uses but there is no need to follow the same order. With the group, listen to all the material and decide on an order in which to perform the music. Also consider the theatrical and movement aspects of the performance.

Listen to the version created by children at our Music Maze workshop.