



The Bonsai Tree

Music by: Julie Giroux (1961)

Published: 2010 by Musica Propria, Inc

Instrumentation/Voicing: Concert Band

Broad Description & Type/Genre: Japanese-influenced, symphonic tone poem

[Full Score](#)

[Recording](#)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Composer **Julie Ann Giroux** was born 1961 in Fairhaven, Mass. and raised in Phoenix, Arizona and Monroe, Louisiana. She received her formal education from Louisiana State University and Boston University. She studied composition with John Williams, Bill Conti and Jerry Goldsmith, to name a few. Julie is an accomplished performer on piano and horn, but her first love is composition. In 1985, she began composing, orchestrating and conducting music for television and films. Within three hours after arriving in Los Angeles, she was at work on the music for the Emmy Award winning mini-series *North and South*, followed soon by work on the television series *Dynasty* and *The Colbys*, as well as the films *Karate Kid II*, *White Men Can't Jump*, and *Broadcast News*.

The Composition ***Sandai-Shogun no Matsu***, a five needle pine bonsai is considered one of Japan's national treasures. The tree is at least 500 years old and is considered to be one of the oldest known living bonsai trees. It is documented as having been cared for by Tokugawa Iemitsu (August 12, 1604 - June 8, 1651) who was the third shogun of the Tokugawa dynasty. *Sandai-Shogun no Matsu* is housed in the Tokyo Imperial Palace.

'Although the center of this famous tree's trunk is now totally hollow, it has been carefully nurtured for generations and gazing at it's gnarled form today, a sense of awe is felt at the forceful destiny that has allowed such a small piece of life to survive for so many centuries'.

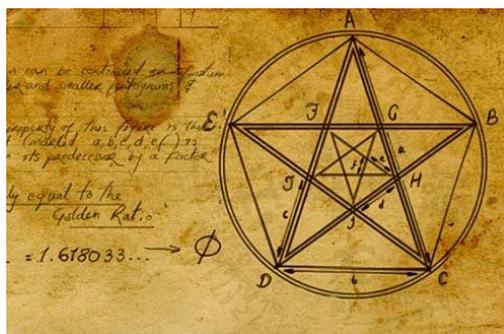
- From *About the Composer and Program Notes*



ELEMENTS OF MUSIC:

Form *The Bonsai Tree* follows a modified Rondo structure of ABABCBA, with an additional B section on either side of the C section. As the A & B sections are always paired, the entire work can be grouped into five total sections, AB AB C BA BA. The form is a palindrome, acting like a mirror, allowing the listener to relax their mind, and reflect inwardly but always return to something contemplative and simple. Throughout the work, there are instances of overlapping phrases, without ending in a full cadence. This gives the listener the impression that the original thought was not complete and the mind is wandering.

A	m.1-5	
B	m.5-10	Five measure section
A	m.10-16	
B'	m.16-22	Six measure section, utilizing an extension during the last measure (false climax point approximately 19-20 - Golden Ratio).
C	m.22-30	Developmental section with fragments of the B melody woven in
B''	m.30-37	Drastic change of timbre and setting, extension twice. Climax point
A	m.37-42	
B'	m.42-48	
A	m.48-52	



The climax of the work is reached in measure 30, emphasized by two extensions of the melody, delivering a full cadence in the harmony. Based on Phi (Golden Ratio) of 1.618, the climax occurs near measure 30 (approximately 61.8% of the way through the piece). Taking the same ratio and applying it from the beginning to the climax, something important should happen at approximately measure 20, where a false climax happens. This ratio happens throughout music, art

and architecture around the world. It is also the ratio of the root to the fifth, which will be explored in both Melody and Harmony.

Melody

The melodies of *The Bonsai Tree* are primarily pentatonic which can be found in cultures around the world. Because of the nature of the pentatonic scale, a melody can start anywhere on the scale and be able to resolve.



The A melody (above) utilizes a D minor pentatonic scale (D, F, G, A, C). It begins on D and proceeds up the minor third, followed by a whole step, giving a lifting shape as if one is trying to capture large amounts of sand in their hands, then watching it sift gently out. This melody moves in pentatonic stepwise motion until the final measure, with the leap of a perfect fifth, propelling the musical line forward into the more intervallic B melody.



Rhythm *The Bonsai Tree* is written in common time, with measures of 2/4 time and 3/4 time that extend the B sections and provide relaxation of the end of the musical phrase. *The Bonsai Tree* has a subdued accompaniment rhythm in the introduction, from the alternating half notes in the vibraphone and marimba. The  rhythms provide a forward motion to the overall flow of the melody and accompaniment, gently moving the listener into the next section of music. With the interplay between pulse and dotted rhythms, the quarter notes leading into measure 16 have a very satisfying quality because of their simplicity and divergent melodic lines. 16th notes are used almost exclusively in an ornamental fashion.

At the climax of the piece (measure 30), the accompaniment settles onto beats two and four, against the  presented in the melody. The marcato-staccato articulation at measure 31 provides the low reeds and brass with weight on each of the eighth notes stretching the rhythmic feel into the resolution of the melody in measure 32. The melody is extended twice, with an additional beat added in measure 34, and through augmentation at measure 36, giving the listener and performer a feeling of finally arriving at the destination. This is a perfect example of a climax utilizing the Golden ratio (see references).

Harmony The Key Signature of *The Bonsai Tree* is Bb major/G minor throughout the entire piece and is primarily diatonic. The harmonic structure utilizes Perfect Fifths, as presented in the opening percussion harmonic structure. These stacked fifths come back in the approach to the climax of the piece and play a very important role in the harmonic sound (F, C, Ab, Bb, Eb). The interval of the 5th is also the eighth note of thirteen notes in an octave, giving us a ratio and notes in the Fibonacci Sequence.

<https://www.goldennumber.net/music/>

As Giroux extends the melody in measure 18 to the false climax, there is some exploration and foreshadowing of the harmonic progression in the C section. The notes outside the key signature, provide the foundation for a ii V, ii IV V, bVII V giving the listener a sense of tonicization of F, but never getting the satisfaction of the resolution to F. With a rest in the accompaniment on beat one of measure 18, the block G minor chord resolves to a C major chord in second inversion, giving the impression that the phrase is not quite complete. In measure 19, Giroux begins again with the same G minor chord this time on beat one, passing through Bb Major in first inversion before resolving to the C major in root position. As the melody descends in measures 20 and 21, there is a resolution from an Eb major chord to the C Major; however the suspended fourth in the melody resolves into the third, before the phrase settles back into the G minor key center as the C section begins. This gives the music an incomplete, unrequited feeling, as if the listener is looking for deeper understanding.

The C section (measure 22) continues to develop this ii V harmonic idea, with suspended fourths resolving downwards to the C major triad in measures 23 and 25. This builds towards the climax of the piece at measure 30 with stacked fifths using the notes of the Eb major pentatonic scale:

Eb and Bb. These stacked 5ths are echoed by the lower reeds and brass on beat two. The open 5ths of F and C are echoed by the lower reeds and brass. This incomplete chord returns to the voicing of fifths (Eb and Bb) at measure 31, where the low brass and woodwinds present a counter melody moving in parallel fourths that FINALLY delivers a bVII-I cadence to F major in measure 32, at the Golden moment, giving the listener a feeling of enlightenment and the satisfaction of arrival. This tonicization is reaffirmed again in measures 35 and 36. The solo flute on Concert D is used as a transition note at measure 37 back to the G minor of the A section from the very first harmony presented again in the percussion.

Timbre Giroux utilizes a number of different timbres to create a contemplative setting throughout *The Bonsai Tree*. In general, the woodwinds are scored together and the brass are scored together with the saxophones linking the two choirs (typical of pieces written at this level), however from time to time she separates parts based on the tessitura of the instruments rather than the tone color. The percussion play a melodic role, as opposed to a driving rhythmic role, and add color with various idiophones that would be used in the modern Japanese wind ensembles (gongs, triangles, cymbals, marimba, vibraphone, bells). As the work opens with the alternating perfect 5ths in the vibraphone and marimba, the percussion section creates a reflective color, accented by the brighter tone of the orchestra bells, finger cymbals, and suspended cymbals. As there is no snare drum, the bass drum and timpani give the impression of the Taiko drum during the two climactic rises (measures 18-21, measures 30-32).

The woodwind choir creates a hollow, dark, woody timbre with the clear tone of the flute to carry the melody at measure 5. At measure 10, the full brass section enlightens the ensemble, as if the sun has just emerged from the horizon, and is used primarily in a harmonic setting with the low saxes, bassoon and bass clarinet. The melody is shared between the clarinets and trumpets, but is passed gracefully to the flutes, oboes and alto saxophones, as if the statement is an affirmation of a peaceful, meditative thought.

Beginning at measure 22, the melody shifts from the dark and woody tone of the marimba, vibraphone and low brass, with a similar quality to large wind chimes. This melody is passed seamlessly to the trumpets playing in the lower register and alto saxophones. The timbre shifts in measure 23, to the clear, resonant sounds of the orchestra bells, flute, oboe and clarinets, rich with the harmonic overtones. In measure 25, the timbre shifts to the brass, before an extended woodwind development accentuated by fragments of the B melody in the clarinets, bells and vibraphone. This build leads to the full ensemble climax at measures 30-32, which is highlighted by the only use of the crash cymbals in the entire piece.

Texture *The Bonsai Tree* relies primarily on Melody-driven Homophony for compositional texture. The melodies at measure 10 have an air of polyphony about them. The textures alternate and vary from very thin (beginning, measures 37-42 and ending) to thickly scored at measure 10, measure 30 and measure 42.

Dynamics The entire dynamic spectrum is explored throughout *The Bonsai Tree*. The piece comes full circle, starting and finishing with the percussion at a softer dynamic. As the work builds, there are moments of tension and release, especially at the false climax and climax points, which are highlighted with the cymbals, gong, timpani and bass drum. At various points, Giroux utilizes sudden crescendos from piano to mezzo forte as the chord changes (measures 18-21), giving the impression of an enlightening sunrise. At measure 44, the crescendo from piano to mezzo forte motif is presented once and then reversed to a diminuendo into the final statement of the A melody in the percussion, giving the performer and listener a sense of contentment.

Musical Selection *The Bonsai Tree* is a beautiful example of a well crafted piece, demonstrating a masterful composer's ability to balance the use of all the elements in an expressive and contemplative setting. Melodies and countermelodies are distributed throughout the entire ensemble. Rhythms are interesting and independent, but not overly complex for this grade level. The harmonies are fairly simple and easy to hear, but provide interest as Giroux uses them in the context of varying musical timbres. The textures are varied and provide interest, as they add to the overall dynamic contrast. Giroux expertly utilizes Phi (the Golden Ratio) at least twice, with the climax at measure 32 and a false climax at measure 19.

Additional Considerations All percussion parts are essential to the successful performance of this piece, as they add a timbral effect that gives this piece an authentic sound.

THE HEART STATEMENT **The heart of *The Bonsai Tree* is the use of the pentatonic mode, which creates a tranquil and reflective space that naturally envelops the performer and the listener.**

Introducing The Piece **Reflection on the Bonsai Tree**
(Affective Outcome)

Image of the *Sandai-Shogun no Matsu* is presented to students. What do you notice about the tree? How big is it? (32 inches high) Can you tell how old it is? (over 500 years) Are the branches straight? How about the shape? What about the trunk? Can you see the roots? Lead towards intertwined, gnarly, etc.

The piece that we are going to be studying is representative of this Bonsai Tree, allowing us to reflect on the idea of balance and harmony in our lives.



OUTCOMES:

Skill Outcome

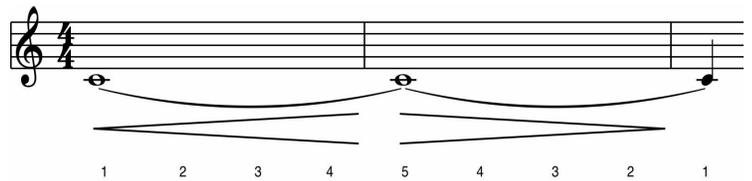
Students will apply crescendo and diminuendo to the rise and fall of musical phrases, building tension and release.

Strategies

1. **Shape The Band** - Students will take turns in front of the ensemble leading crescendo/diminuendo through different parts of the phrases in Circle of 4ths/5ths, warm-ups, scales, melodies and chorales (Kinesthetic, Aural, Visual). - Using Höberman Sphere.



2. **Tabuteau System** - Apply the Tabuteau (Sound in Motion) number system to crescendos and diminuendos during warm-up scales and around the Circle of 4ths.



Apply this system of crescendos and diminuendos to the musical phrases and building tension points in the piece (ex. m19-22, m27-30).



3. **Highest, Longest, Last** - Students will perform each phrase of the melody with various phrase shapes based on three options. Is the goal note the highest, is it the longest note or is it the last note? Students will receive [melody worksheets](#) with each complete melody written out. Play the entire musical line. Score marking assignment. Find the phrases in the piece and apply the Highest, Longest, Last Rule.
4. **Rules of Repetitions (from *Sound in Motion*)**
 - a. Simply, when an idea or phrase repeats, it is played stronger, like a parent telling a child to clean my room over and over. This will be applied to the repetition in the B Melody.
 - b. Anti-Repetition - When you are expecting for the phrase to get stronger, and it does the opposite, sometimes very dramatically. When you are expecting a loud argument, and the person gets really soft. This can be very effective too.
5. **Pass the Baton** (Visual/Kinesthetic)
 - a. Students will learn how (and how not) to pass a baton as a handoff in a Track and Field Relay. Concepts to include: timing, getting in stride, and the proper handoff.
 - b. [How to Pass a Baton in a Relay](#)
 - c. Applying 'Passing the Baton' to handing off the melody. Timing, getting in stride, and a handoff - From playing and understanding the entire musical line, to understand passing the melody. Incorporate this concept into the rehearsal of the piece, from measures 22-30 by applying the Tabuteau system.

Assessments

1. **Score marking** - Highest, Longest, Last - Individual Melodies Markings (Formative)
2. **Individual Performance Assessment** - Students will record the melody demonstrating their understanding of phrase shaping (Summative)

Knowledge Outcome

Students will explore the construction and modes of the pentatonic scale.

Strategies:

1. **Pentatonic Modes** (Relative Modes)
 - a. F Major to F Major Pentatonic - Leave out Fa and Ti (Solfege - Curwin)
Sing and Play the Concert F Major scale, using solfege. Leave out Fa (4) and Ti (7). This is our F Major Pentatonic Scale. Just like our relative Major and minor, Pentatonic scales have relative Major and minor. By starting on La (6th step), we can create our Minor Pentatonic scale. Write out your F Major Pentatonic and d minor Pentatonic Scale on the Pentatonic Scale Worksheet.
 - b. Understanding Pentatonics with Ethan Hein (Videos)
[The One to Rule Them All | Soundfly](#) [The Ancient Scale | Soundfly](#)
 - c. Map out the Major Pentatonic Based on our Piano Keyboard
 - d. Explore the ratio of 3 half steps and 2 half steps and apply this to Bb Major to Bb Major Pentatonic to g minor Pentatonic
2. **Overlapping 5ths** - Building Pentatonic Scales Based on Perfect 5ths
 - a. Circle of 5ths - Warm-up around the Circle of 5ths, then start from Concert Bb and go counter-clockwise 4 steps. These five notes become the Major Pentatonic.
 - b. <https://www.goldenumber.net/music/>
3. **Hidden Pentatonics** - Discover the Pentatonic hidden in the harmony through score analysis in the piano reduction.
 - a. Percussion Intro
 - b. Climax Point
4. **Exploring and Composing Pentatonic Melodies** - Using a GarageBand Playalong, students will improvise as a group over the Bb Major/g minor pentatonic and the F Major/d minor pentatonic. From this improvisation, students will write down ideas and create a simple pentatonic melody. Transpose from G Minor Pentatonic to D Minor Pentatonic (Create).
5. **Choice Project** - Demonstrate understanding and mastery of pentatonic in a creative way. Students can complete this in groups or alone. Some ideas: Teach a younger student about pentatonic melodies in a video lesson. Create visual art based on the idea of the symmetry of the pentatonic. Improvise or create a composition with your classmates based solely on pentatonic melodies and harmonies. Write program notes about how Ms. Giroux creates melodies or harmonies. Record video program notes explaining how the pentatonic melodies are used. Other ideas? Be sure to document your project either with a video recording, audio recording, print out, or artwork.



Assessments

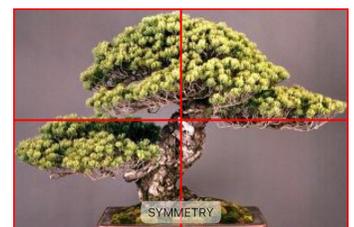
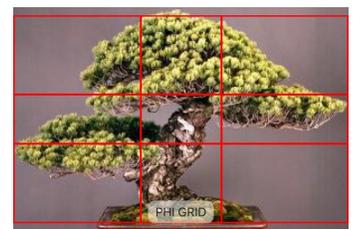
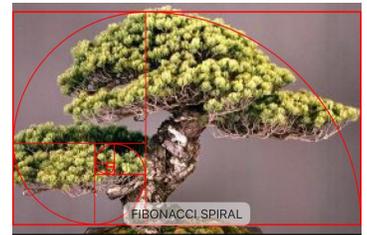
1. Exploring Pentatonic Melodies (Formative - Group)
2. Pentatonic Modes Worksheet (Formative)
3. Composing Pentatonic Melodies (Formative)
4. Choice Project (Summative)

Affective Outcome

Students will reflect on the role that balance and harmony play in music and in their lives.

Strategies:

1. **Find Your Chi** - Your Center (Kinesthetic)
 - a. *Get Comfortable.* To properly work on breathing, it needs to be the main focus, not on how uncomfortable your legs are, or how you want to hang a picture on the wall you're staring at. In a chair, sit with your back straight, your feet flat on the ground and knees shoulder width apart.
Breathe Deeply. Pay attention to breathing in and out. Make sure you are using your diaphragm, not just your chest. Breathing from your diaphragm (lower in your body, close to your stomach) allows you to get more air both in and out. Cycling a lot of air through your body is essential for developing your chi.
Keep your mind empty. It is difficult to keep your mind neutral and away from thinking about anything and everything. But for the 2-3 minutes you are practicing breathing, try to just focus on that. The in and the out are like the yin and yang - opposites, yet interconnected.
Breathing in a square. Breathe in. Hold for 5 seconds. Breathe out. Hold for 5 seconds.
2. **Reflection on the Bonsai Tree** (Intro Strategy)
Image of the *Sandai-Shogun no Matsu* is presented to students (Expert noticers). What do you notice about the tree? How big is it? Can you tell how old it is? Are the branches straight? What about the trunk? Can you see the roots? Lead towards intertwined, gnarly, etc.
3. **Balance & Harmony:** How are these two ideas defined outside of music? How are they related? Exit Ticket
4. **Balance in the Music** - How do we see the concept of balance and harmony displayed in the music? Balance in the form? ABABCABABA. Balance between elements? Melody and Harmony? Balance in the dynamics? Wood vs Metal Percussion sounds?
5. **Think Only Tree**



What is your tree? What is something that you use to find balance and harmony in your life? Why? How can we promote better balance?

Possible answers include sewing, crocheting, running, swimming, cooking/baking, gardening, mowing the lawn, etc. (Journal Assessment)

Assessments

1. Balance and Harmony - Exit Ticket (Formative)
2. Balance in the Music - Exit Ticket (Formative)
3. What Is Your Tree? - Journal Reflection (Formative)

10 Ways To Take Out The Piece

1. Has a melody based on a pentatonic scale
2. Constructed from the Golden Ratio
3. Utilizes many various timbres of the ensemble, especially the percussion
4. Is in Rondo Form
5. Embodies the significance of the number 5
6. Has both a false climax and a climax
7. Changes time signatures to extend sections of the form
8. Uses Stacked Fifths instead of traditional chords at the Climax of the Piece
9. Is a Japanese inspired tone poem
10. Is symmetrical in form and can be looked at as a mirror of itself

Additional Concepts & Ideas That Can Be Taught With This Piece

Dotted Rhythm Ideas: [https://timtopham.com/5-ways-to-help-your-students-master-rhythm/Karate Kid - Bonsai Tree](https://timtopham.com/5-ways-to-help-your-students-master-rhythm/Karate-Kid-Bonsai-Tree)
[What Is The Golden Ratio?](#)
[The Jazz of Physics](#) by Stephon Alexander
[Sound in Motion](#) by David McGill
 Effortless Mastery by Kenny Werner
[The Creative Director](#) by Ed Lisk
[SoundFly 'The Black Keys'](#)
[De Kai - The Universality of Music](#)

NTS (note to self) and other Resources



Inyo - Okinawan Flag - Where Karate was born - This symbol is the Japanese equivalent to Yin-Yang.

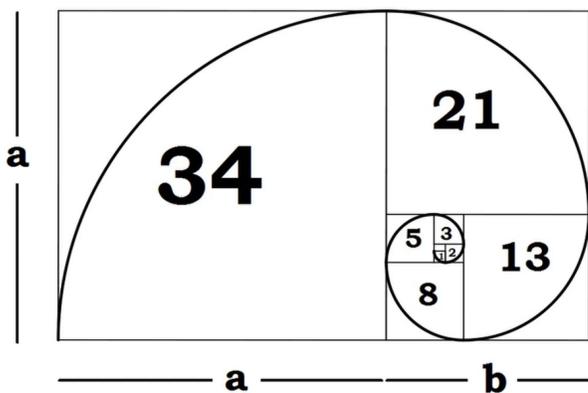
Bonsai have long been respected in the ancient art of Feng Shui for their ability to draw life energies into a room, sharing them gladly with all who pass through. As a focus of sight, conversation, and living forces, a Bonsai can quickly spread joy and contentment to all who see it.

Bonsai Concept: cultivation, long term persistence, gradual shaping into something beautiful to portion of elements, asymmetry, balance, harmony, nature

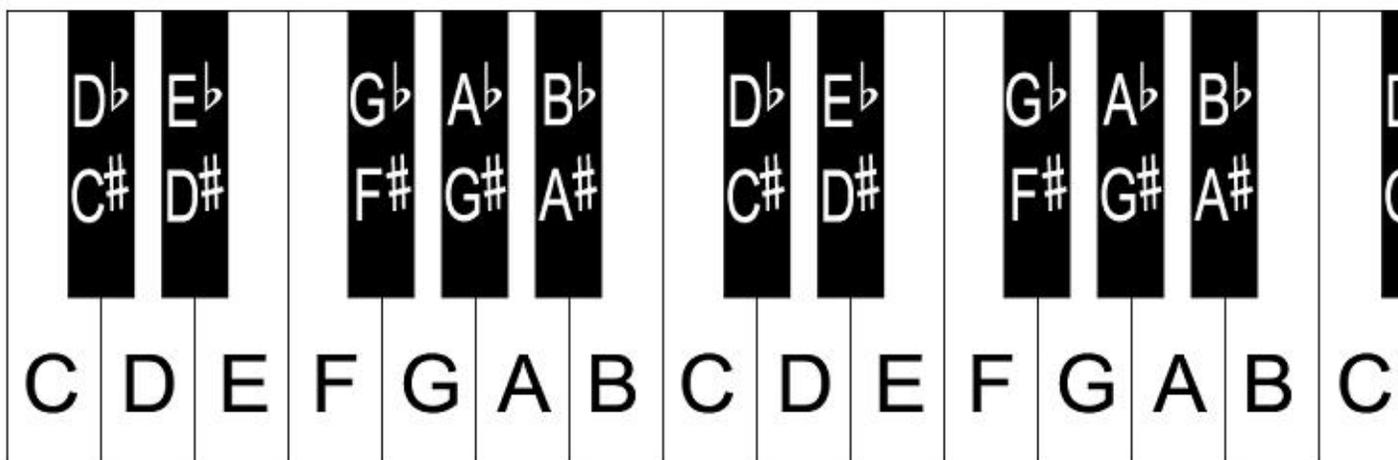
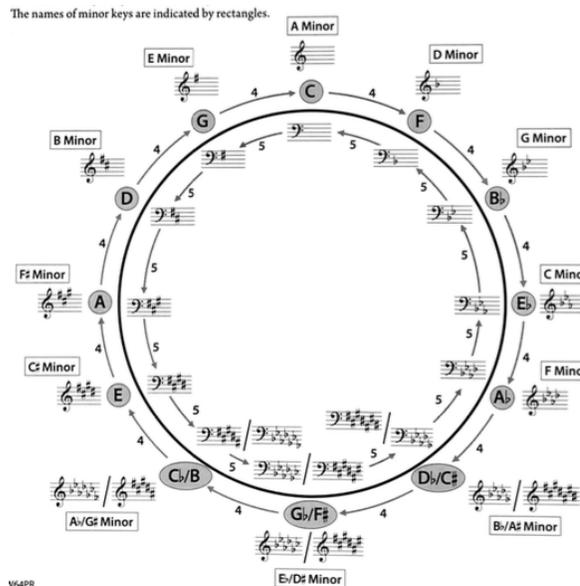
Zen - a state of calm attentiveness in which one's actions are guided by intuition rather than by conscious effort Perhaps that is the zen of gardening—you become one with the plants, lost in the rhythm of the tasks at hand

Checklist of Items Needed To Teach This Piece

- Printed scores/parts
- [Melody Worksheets](#)
- Circle of 4ths Handouts
- Google Forms & Questions Set Up in Advance
- Pentatonic Worksheets
- Journals, Pencils
- Notecards
- Rubrics
- Track Baton (or Paper towel roll)



The names of minor keys are indicated by rectangles.



Pentatonic Scales

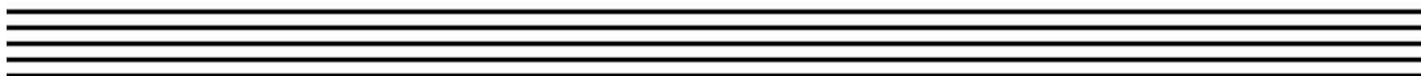
Concert F Major

Do (Root)	Re (M2)	Mi (M2)	Sol (m3)	La (M2)	Do (m3 - Root)

Concert d Minor

La (Root)	Do (m3)	Re (M2)	Mi (M2)	Sol (m3)	La (M2 - Root)

Use this staff to compose a d minor pentatonic melody. Be sure to add your Treble or Bass clef, your concert F Major /d minor key signature and a time signature. Use the full staff paper on the back if you want more space or to make edits.



Concert Bb Major

Do (Root)	Re (M2)	Mi (M2)	Sol (m3)	La (M2)	Do (m3 - Root)

Concert g Minor

La (Root)	Do (m3)	Re (M2)	Mi (M2)	Sol (m3)	La (M2 - Root)

Use this staff to transpose your D minor pentatonic melody to G minor. Be sure to add your Treble or Bass clef, your concert Bb Major/g minor key signature and a time signature. Use the full staff paper on the back if you want more space or to make edits.

