Composers GK

# Bach

## Bio

Johann Sebastian Bach is known as one of the greatest composers of all time, being a pioneer in counterpoint and harmony, the basis of all modern music. Bach was a German composer and organist from the late Baroque period. He was born into a family of musicians in Eisenach (northern Germany) in 1685. Bach received early training in the violin and organ from his father and his older brother, Johann Christoph. At the age of fifteen he became a paid chorister at St Michael’s church in Lüneburg, followed by various other positions, as violinist and organist.

Bach was an unrivalled master of counterpoint, and a lot of his music is highly complex. Throughout his life, he was appreciated more for his brilliant organ playing and improvisatory skill than for his compositions.

Bach was a devout Lutheran, and his faith profoundly influenced his music.

### Weimar Period (1703-1708)

* **Positions**: Bach began as a court organist to the Duke of Weimar and later became the concertmaster of the court orchestra.
* **Style and Works**: This period was characterised by his mastery of the organ and the development of his contrapuntal style. He composed intricate organ works, cantatas, and instrumental music. His works from this time, such as the *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor,* show his skill of counterpoint and harmony. His exposure to Italian music especially Vivaldi influenced his style.

### Köthen Period (1717-1723)

* **Positions**: As Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Köthen, Bach had the freedom to focus on secular and instrumental music.
* **Style and Works**: This period saw the creation of some of his most celebrated instrumental works, including the *Brandenburg Concertos* and the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I.* The absence of church duties allowed him to explore more secular themes and experiment with form and structure.

### Leipzig Period (1723-1750)

* **Positions**: Bach served as Cantor and Director of Music at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, a role that involved teaching, composing, and overseeing church music.
* **Style and Works**: This period was dominated by his sacred music, including the *Mass in B Minor,* *St. Matthew Passion,* and numerous cantatas. His works from this time are deeply spiritual, blending theological depth with musical innovation.

### Legacy

Bach’s music, though underappreciated during his lifetime, laid the foundation for modern Western music. His pioneering work in counterpoint, harmony, and musical form continues to inspire musicians and composers to this day.

## Compositions

Bach’s compositions Bach’s compositions for keyboard instruments include:

* six Partitas, six ‘French’ Suites and six ‘English’ Suites.
* seven Toccatas.
* fifteen Inventions and fifteen Sinfonias.
* Goldberg Variations.
* Italian Concerto.
* The Well-tempered Clavier (48 preludes and fugues in books).
* shorter works such as preludes and dances.
* more than 250 works for organ, including chorale preludes, trio sonatas, solo concertos, and toccatas (e.g. Toccata and Fugue in D minor).

His choral music includes:

* St. Matthew Passion and St. John Passion.
* Mass in B minor.
* Magnificat.
* Christmas Oratorio.
* over two hundred church cantatas, including *Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele*, Ein *feste Burg ist unser Gott* and *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme.*
* over twenty secular cantatas, including the *Wedding*, *Peasant,* and *Coffee* Cantatas.

His instrumental and orchestral music includes:

* six *Brandenburg* concertos.
* concertos for one, two, three or four harpsichords. Violin concertos.
* a concerto for two violins.
* four orchestral suites.
* six suites for cello.
* six sonatas and partitas for violin (i.e. three of each).
* six sonatas for violin and harpsichord.
* three sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord
* The Musical Offering.

An Index to Bach’s works (Bach Werke-Verzeichnis) was made by the German musicologist Wolfgang Schmieder in 1950.

The BWV number identifies the piece.

## Contemporaries

* Dietrich Buxtehude (Danish, c. 1637-1707).
* Johann Krieger (German, 1651-1735).
* Johann Pachelbel (German, 1653-1706).
* Johann Kuhnau (German, 1660-1722).
* Frangois Couperin (French, 1668-1733).
* Tomaso Albinoni (Italian, 1671-1751).
* Antonio Vivaldi (Italian, 1678-1741).
* Johann Mattheson (German, 1681-1764).
* Georg Philipp Telemann (German, 1681-1767).
* Jean-Philippe Rameau (French, 1683-1764).
* George Frideric Handel (German, 1685-1759).
* Benedetto Marcello (Italian, 1686-1739).

## Compositional Style

Music from the late Baroque period (c. 1600-c 1750) is often elaborate and complex. Characteristics of Bach’s compositions include:

* counterpoint (two or more equally important voices heard simultaneously).
* ornamentation and embellishment (e.g. trills), particularly at cadence points.
* imitation between the voices.
* many sequences, sometimes based on the *circle of 5ths* harmonic progressions.
* modulations to closely related keys (typically up or down a 5th).
* monothematic form (one main theme per movement).
* long phrases.
* steady rhythmic pulse.
* hemiola rhythm before some important cadence points.
* tierce de Picardie endings for works in minor keys.

# Mozart

## Bio

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was an Austrian pianist and composer from the Classical period. Together with Haydn and Beethoven (the “First Viennese School”), he represented the culmination of the Classical era. Mozart excelled in all the main genres of instrumental and vocal music of his day, including operas, symphonies, concertos, quartets, and sonatas.

Mozart was born in 1756 in Salzburg, where his father, Leopold, was a composer and deputy *Kapellmeister* (director of music) to the prince-Archbishop. Mozart showed extreme talent on the piano and violin. He watched his sister play the piano and undertook piano and composition lessons with his father, Leopold. Mozart began to compose at the age of five, and the following year he was taken by his father on the first of many concert tours. The “Grand Tour” of 1763-1766 embraced most of the important European musical centres, with extended stays in Paris and in London, where Mozart became friends with Johann Christian Bach, the son of Johann Sebastian Bach. This tour, and his later travels enabled Mozart to encounter a broader range of music and musicians outside Salzburg.

Mozart entered the archbishop's service in 1769 but was treated poorly, with disagreements. He continued to travel, including several visits to Italy, Germany, and France. He finally left the archbishop in 1781, settling in Vienna, where he hoped to find a new job.

Vienna was one of the main musical centres of Europe, and Mozart met many prominent composers there, including Haydn, Clementi. He married Constanze Weber in 1782, and they had six children, but only two survived infancy. Mozart earned a modest income from teaching and performing. In 1785, work began on operas such as *Le nozze di Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro)* with the Italian poet Lorenzo da Ponte. In 1784-6, he composed nine of the greatest piano concertos in literature. In 1787, he was appointed to the job of *Kammermusicus* (chamber musician) by Emperor Joseph II. Despite this support and the success of his operas, he was poor in both his health and finances, and he died in Vienna in 1791, at the age of thirty-five.

## Contemporaries

Mozart’s contemporaries

* Joseph Haydn (Austrian, 1732-1809).
* Johann Christian Bach (German, 1735-1782).
* Domenico Cimarosa (Italian, 1749-1801).
* Muzio Clementi (Italian, 1752-1832).
* Ludwig van Beethoven (German, 1770-1827).

## Compositions

Mozart’s compositions for piano include:

* Twenty-seven concertos.
* Eighteen sonatas.
* Sixteen sets of variations, including Ah vous dirai-je, maman.
* three fantasies.
* four rondos. His other works include:
* Sixteen operas (e.g. The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni, and The Magic Flute).
* church music (e.g. masses, the Latin motets Exultate jubilate and Ave, verum corpus, and an unfinished Requiem).
* Forty-one symphonies (e.g. “Paris,” “Linz”, and “Jupiter”).
* concertos (e.g. five for violin, four for horn, two for flute, one for clarinet, and one for flute and harp).
* chamber music (e.g. twenty-five string quartets, six string quintets, thirty-five violin sonatas and a clarinet quintet)

## Compositional Style

Mozart was one of the leading representatives of the Classical style (c. 1750-c 1810), which is usually light and elegant, characterised by:

* short, balanced phrases (antecedent and consequent, or question and answer).
* homophony (one melodic line, with simple chordal or broken chord accompaniments).
* diatonic harmonies, often based on the primary triads (I, IV, V7).
* modulations to closely related keys, typically up or down a fifth.
* steady (though not rigid) pulse.
* articulated sound, with many detached notes and short slurs.
* ornamentation, particularly at cadence points.
* thematic development and highly organised formal structure
* syncopation

# Mendelssohn

## Bio

Mendelssohn is one of the most celebrated and well-known composers of the Romantic era. Felix Mendelssohn was a German composer from the Romantic period. He was born in Hamburg in 1809, into a wealthy and well-educated family (his grandfather was the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn). Although originally Jewish, the family converted to Christianity and later adopted the name Bartholdy. Mendelssohn received an extensive liberal education encompassing art, literature, and music. He displayed prodigious talent in performance and composition from an early age; his *String Octet* and the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* were both written before he was eighteen. In 1829, at the age of twenty, Mendelssohn conducted the first performance of the *St Matthew Passion* since Bach’s death. Mendelssohn was one of the key contributors to Bach’s fame today.

In the 1830s, he toured widely, being particularly well received in England, where he was a favourite of Queen Victoria. Mendelssohn later became conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and was a founder and director of the Conservatory there. He suffered from poor health and a gruelling work schedule in his final years; he died in Leipzig in 1847, and although only thirty-eight when he died, he was said to have already looked like an old man.

## Contemporaries

German: Robert Schumann, Richard Wagner

Other: Hector Berlioz, Frederic Chopin, Franz Liszt

## Compositions

For Piano: three *Sonatas*, five *Fantasies*, eight sets of *Songs without words*, seven *Preludes and Fugues*, *Rondo Capriccioso*, *Variations sériuses*.

Other works include five symphonies, including ‘Scottish,’ ‘Italian,’ and ‘Reformation,’ two piano concertos, a violin concerto, concert overtures, including The Hebrides and Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage, the oratorios St Paul and Elijah, and chamber music such as the string quartet.

## Compositional Style

Mendelssohn’s music is elegant and charming; in this respect, and his fondness for classical formal structures, he was more ‘classical’ than Schumann or Chopin, who were born one year later. The lyricism of his melodies and chromaticism (albeit restrained) of his harmonies are ‘romantic’ characteristics of his style. Foremost among the forms at which he excelled was the Scherzo, such as that from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Romantic characteristics of the piece include:

* highly expressive character with frequent changes of mood
* lyrical melodies
* rich harmonies using chromaticism.
* sparkling virtuosity

# Debussy

## Bio

Claude Debussy, born on August 22, 1862, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France, was one of the most influential composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He grew up in modest circumstances, and his musical talent was recognised early. At the age of ten, he entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied piano and composition. Despite his brilliance, Debussy often clashed with the Conservatoire’s conservative professors due to his unconventional ideas.

He won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1884 with his cantata , which allowed him to study in Rome. However, he found the experience stifling and returned to Paris. During this period, he was influenced by Russian composers like Mussorgsky and the exotic sounds of the Javanese gamelan.

He sought to create music that was more fluid and atmospheric, drawing inspiration from Symbolist poets and Impressionist painters. His works, such as *Clair de lune* (part of *Suite bergamasque*, 1890–1905), and *La Mer* (1905), are celebrated for their innovative use of harmony and orchestral colour.

In 1902, Debussy achieved international fame with his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which highlighted his unique approach to musical storytelling. Throughout his career, he composed a wide range of works, including piano pieces, orchestral compositions, and chamber music. His later years were marked by illness and the challenges of World War I. Despite these difficulties, he continued to compose, completing three of six planned sonatas for various instruments.

Debussy passed away on March 25, 1918, in Paris, after battling cancer. His legacy endures as a pioneer who reshaped the landscape of classical music, influencing generations of composers and musicians.

## Contemporaries

The other great ‘impressionist’ composer was Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), who, of course, was also French. Other contemporaries of Debussy composing in quite different styles include Puccini, Mahler, Bartók and Stravinsky.

## Compositions

Debussy’s output includes the opera *Palléas et Mélisande*, orchestral music (including *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* and *La mer*), many songs, chamber and choral music, and much piano music (including *Images*, *Estampes*, *Children’s Corner*, *Préludes* and *Etudes*, and *Fantasy* for piano and orchestra). In his music, he deliberately attempted to create a distinctively French style, proudly describing himself as ‘Musicien Français.’

## Compositional Style

Debussy’s musical style has an affinity with two other characteristically French genres - the *impressionist* painters (eg, Monet, Manet, and Degas) and the *symbolist* writers (eg, Verlaine and Mallarmé). The label ‘impressionist’ is the one most applied to Debussy’s music (although the composer himself objected to it).

* Frequent use of 7th and 9th chords
* Parallel movement of chords
* Use of parallel 5ths in the bass
* Pedal points
* Rhythmic fluidity