



COMPOSERS, Part 1

Of course you should strive to learn as much as you can about any topic that you study be it for quizbowl or anything else. That being said, learning about a subject as broad as classical composers can be a daunting task - especially if you are just getting started. Therefore, I find it helpful to break up a topic like composers into the two most important categories for quizbowl - chronology and geography.

No matter the format, you will almost always find references in questions to when and/or where someone is doing their most important work. Pay attention to context clues. If a question mentions a composer's collaboration with Bjorn Bjornson that should make you think Scandinavia and quickly lead you to Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg (who had a long and fruitful collaboration with Bjornson) before *Peer Gynt* is ever mentioned.

ARMENIA

There is only one composer of Armenian decent that I have ever heard come up in any quizbowl question, and that is the 20th century composer **Aram Khachaturian**. His best known works are the ballets *Spartacus* and *Gayane* (which contains the famous *Sabre Dance*)

AUSTRIA

There are many important Austrian composers, so keeping them straight is a difficult task. Chronology is a great place to start. Start learning when each of these men is living and working, and you will quickly be able to narrow down possible answer choices from the first clues in the question.

- **Joseph Haydn** (1732-1809) – “Father of the Symphony” who wrote more than 109 symphonies. If a question mentions a symphony # higher than 41 (Mozart’s last), it’s a good bet that it’s a Haydn work. He spent most of his adult life working for the Esterhazy family.
- **Wolfgang Mozart** (1756-1791) – Perhaps the most asked about composer in quizbowl, his important works are too numerous to be mentioned here completely. *Paris*, *Prague*, and *Jupiter* Symphonies (Numbers 31, 38, & 41) along with operas *Abduction from the Seraglio*, *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute* are most common in questions.
- **Franz Schubert** (1797-1828) – Schubert is best known for his writing more than 600 art songs (known as *lieder*) as well as his Symphony # 8 (*The Unfinished*), Symphony # 9 (*The Great*) and mysterious and controversial Symphony # 10 (*The Last*).
- **Johann Strauss, the Younger** (1825-1899) – Known as the “waltz king”, he is best known for his *Blue Danube Waltz*. He is also known for his operetta *Die Fledermaus* (*The Bat*).
- **Gustav Mahler** (1860-1911) – Wrote *lieder* and song cycles (like *The Song of the Earth*) but is best known for his symphonies like the *Resurrection*, the *Tragic*, and the *Symphony of a Thousand*. He was also notoriously scared of “The Curse of the Ninth”, believing that he would die soon after completing his 9th symphony. Therefore, he did not number the symphony that he wrote after his 8th symphony.
- **Arnold Schoenberg** (1874-1951) – Creator of the “twelve tone system”. Works include *Transfigured Night*, *Moses and Aaron* and *A Survivor from Warsaw*.
- **Alban Berg** (1885-1935) – Best known for the atonal operas *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*



BELGIUM

Though he spent a good bit of his adult life in Paris, **Cesar Franck** is usually credited as being a Belgian composer (and the only one I have ever heard mentioned in quizbowl questions). Franck was a master organist, and most music historians put him in the same league as J.S. Bach for being the best organ virtuosos of all time.

BRAZIL

It is rare that it would ever come up, but there is a Brazilian composer to be aware of, **Heitor Villa-Lobos**. He is the only South American composer of any nationality that I have ever heard in a quizbowl question, so any composer question with references to Brazil or South America, in all probability, refer to Villa-Lobos (and if it's not him, what are the chances of someone else knowing it?).

CZECH (BOHEMIAN)

In situations where there is more than one important composer of a given nationality, chronological references in the question should help you considerably to narrow down the answer. Unfortunately when it comes to the Czech composers, however, this strategy is not terribly useful, as the three that will come up lived more or less at the same time (late 19th century). Adding to the confusion is the fact that other composers (Vivaldi and Mozart specifically) lived and worked in the city of Prague (but in the 18th century).

- **Bedrich Smetana** (1824-1884) - Best known for *The Bartered Bride*, *The Moldau*, *Ma Vlast*, and *From My Life*. He lived for a decade in Sweden and suffered from tinnitus which caused him to hear a continuous high note which plagued him his whole life.
- **Antonin Dvorak** (1841-1904) - Best known for *From the New World* which he wrote after a trip to visit family in Spillville, IA in 1893. He played viola in a symphony conducted by Smetana. Other works include *Slavonic Dances*, *Moravian Duets*, *Stabat Mater* and *Rusalka* (an opera).
- **Leos Janacek** (1854-1928) - By far the least common of the three, Janacek is best known for *Sinfonietta*.

ENGLAND

There are several English composers that you need to know, but chronology should help you a little bit to distinguish among them. Handel (early to mid 1700s) also could be mentioned here, as he left Germany to live in England and compose for the Hanovers.

- **Henry Purcell** (1659-1695) - Only English Baroque composer of note. He was organist for Westminster Abbey for most of his life, so most of his work is sacred music and hymns. He, however, is also known for operas and "semi-operas" like *Dido and Aeneas*, *The Fairy Queen*, and *Abdelazar*.
- **Edward Elgar** (1857-1934) – Best known for *Pomp and Circumstance* (written for the coronation of Edward VII, but later used as a graduation standard), *Engima Variations*, *The Land of Hope and Glory* (a song based on *Pomp and Circumstance*). Early in his career, he worked composing songs for a lunatic asylum.
- **Frederick Delius** (1862-1934) – Fairly obscure, but does come up occasionally. He is best known for *Brigg Fair*, *On Hearing the First Cuckoo of Spring*, and *A Village Romeo and Juliet*.
- **Ralph Vaughn Williams** (1872-1958) – Every year, I hear more and more questions about Vaughn Williams, so you definitely want to know about him. He was related to both Charles Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood. Major works include *Sinfonia Antarctica*, *The Sea Symphony*, *The Lark Ascending*, and *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*.
- **Gustav Holst** (1874-1934) – Notice how three of these men all died in 1934. Holst is best known for his *The Planets*, a work that you should learn more about if you don't know much about it. He was also heavily influenced by Hindu literature, as evidenced in his *Songs from the Rig Veda* and *Savitri*. *At the Boar's Head* is another work that comes up a lot.



- **Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976) – Collaborated with poet W.H. Auden on numerous works including the opera *Paul Bunyan*. Other works include *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (based on Purcell's *Abdelazar*) and the operas *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, and *Turn of the Screw*

FINLAND

There is only one Finnish composer that you will ever need to know, **Jean Sibelius**. *Finlandia* is by far his best known work. He also wrote *Valse Triste*, *The Swan of Tuonela*, and various works based on the *Sagas*, the *Eddas* and the *Kalevala*.

FRANCE

France is another country that has produced a large number of prominent composers. Again though, if you pay attention to chronology, you should have a much better chance of narrowing it down.

- **Hector Berlioz** (1803-1869) – It was Berlioz's obsession with the actress Harriet Smithson that inspired his *Symphonie Fantastique*. This work, with subsections like "March to the Scaffold" and "Dream of a Witches Sabbath" is a common topic of quizbowl questions. Other Berlioz works include *Harold in Italy* and *The Damnation of Faust*
- **Charles Gounod** (1818-1893) – The story goes that one critic thought that Gounod's opera *Faust* was so much better than anything else the composer had ever written that it must not be Gounod's. Offended, Gounod challenged him to a duel.
- **Jacques Offenbach** (1819-1880) – He was born in Germany to Jewish parents, but moved to France as a young man. He usually is credited as a French composer. The works that you need to know are *The Tales of Hoffmann* (based on the writings of German E.T.A. Hoffmann) *Orpheus in the Underworld*, and *Robinson Crusoe*.
- **Camille Saint-Saens** (1835-1921) – He fought in the Franco-Prussian War, and had a very public feud with Claude Debussy. His major works include *Carnival of the Animals*, *Danse Macabre*, *Organ Symphony*, and the opera *Samson and Delilah*.
- **Georges Bizet** (1838-1875) – He is known mostly for his operas like *The Fair Maid of Perth* and *The Pearl Fishers*. His best known opera is *Carmen*, which is based on a play by Merimee. He also wrote the minor opera *L'Arlesienne*.
- **Claude Debussy** (1862-1918) – His music is often described as the musical equivalent of "Impressionism" though it is sometimes referred to as "Symbolism" due to his close association with the Symbolist poets.

GERMANY

Be careful that you do not confuse German and Austrian composers – a common mistake amongst quiz bowl players.

- **Johann Pachelbel** (1653-1706) – Baroque composer best known for is *Canon in D Major*. An excerpt from Pachelbel's *Canon* appears in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.
- **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) – The best known of a long line of Bach family musicians. He is noted for his use of the *contrapuntal* technique. His works worth knowing are too numerous to mention but include *St. Matthew's Passion*, *Brandenburg Concertos*, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and *Goldberg Variations*.
- **George Frideric Handel** (1685-1759) – Kapellmeister to George, Elector of Hanover (later George I of England). He moved to London when George I became king and lived out his life there (in a house next door to where Jimi Hendrix would later live). He wrote dozens of important works, including *Water Music*, *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, *The Messiah*, and the operas *Nero*, *Xerxes*, and *Almira*.
- **Cristoph Gluck** (1714-1787) – Music teacher of Marie Antoinette best known for the opera *Orpheus and Eurydice*
- **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827) – Student of Haydn. The deafness he developed later in life has been attributed variously to lead poisoning, typhus, and childhood beatings from his alcoholic father. Works include *The Kreutzer Sonata*, *Fur Elise*, *Fidelio*, and *The Creatures of Prometheus*.



- **Carl Maria von Weber** (1786-1826) – A cousin (by marriage) of Mozart, he is best known as the founder of German Romantic opera. His major works include *Oberon*, *Euryanthe*, and *Die Freischutzu*.
- **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1791-1864) – German Jewish operatic composer who was an early mentor to Richard Wagner. This relationship soured, however, when Wagner wrote “Jewry in Music” which blasted Meyerbeer. Subsequently, the two had a very public feud. Meyerbeer’s best known operas are *Les Huguenots* and *Le Prophete*.
- **Felix Mendelssohn** (1809-1847) – Also criticized by Wagner in “Jewry in Music”. Mendelssohn and his teacher Carl Zelter is credited with reintroducing the works of Bach to European audiences with a performance of *St. Matthew’s Passion*. His works include *Songs Without Words*, *Hebrides Overture (Fingal’s Cave)*, *Italian Symphony*, *Scottish Symphony*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.
- **Robert Schumann** (1810-1856) – Married Clara, the daughter of his music teacher Friedrich Wieck. He wrote *Papillons*, *Spring Symphony*, and *Rhenish Symphony*. He attempted suicide by throwing himself into the Rhine River, apparently brought about by madness resulting from a combination of syphilis and mercury poisoning.
- **Richard Wagner** (1813-1883) – Married the daughter of Franz Liszt. Best known for his operas like *Rienzi*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhauser*, *Lohengrin*, *Parcifal* and *The Ring of the Nibelung*.
- **Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897) – Close friend (and possible lover) of Clara Schumann. His works include *Academic Festival Overture*, *German Requiem*, *Lullaby* (AKA *Wiegenlied*) and *Hungarian Dances*.
- **Richard Strauss** (1864-1949) – He was leader of the State Music Bureau for Nazi Germany, but his views often conflicted with the Nazi Party, and he was removed from the position. He wrote tone poems like *Also sprach Zarathustra* and *Don Quixote*, but he is better known for operas like *Salome*, *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

