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# **An OER Collection of Composer Biographies**

**Edited by Giacomo Fiore and Kumiko Uyeda  
Performing Arts and Social Justice  
University of San Francisco**

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## Table of Contents

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)	4
Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300–1377)	5
Josquin des Prez (ca. 1450–1521)	6
John Dowland (1563–1626)	7
Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643)	8
Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1667–1729)	9
Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741)	10
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)	11
(Franz) Joseph Haydn (1732–1802)	12
Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745–1799)	13
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)	14
Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770–1827)	15
Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868)	16
Franz Schubert (1797–1828)	17
Harry Burleigh (1866–1949)	19
Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)	20
Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)	21
Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953)	22
John Cage (1912–1992)	23
Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)	24
Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016)	25
Steve Reich (b. 1936)	26
Meredith Monk (b. 1942)	27
Kaija Saariaho (b. 1952)	28
Caroline Shaw (b. 1982)	29

## Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

Hildegard was born from a free-noble family (i.e. not bound to servitude), in what is now modern-day Germany, in 1098 CE. As the tenth child in her family, she was tithed to the Church at age eight, and entered the nearby Benedictine monastery at fourteen. She took her vows as a nun when she turned eighteen and spent the rest of her life in monastic cloister—a common life path for girls at the time. Hildegard however was a remarkable child. She had experienced mystical visions since an early age, and eventually gained permission from the local bishop to record her visions and use them as the basis for her preaching and worship. Hildegard wrote poems, plays, and music inspired from these visions, as well as scientific and theological works. In addition, Hildegard developed a remarkable political career, eventually founding her own monastery near Bingen around 1150. There



she led over fifty nuns in worship and contemplation, including the performance of her own sacred works. She was sought-out as a visionary and counsel laypeople and politicians of her time, and secured the protection of emperor Federico Barbarossa, who bestowed upon her the title of “abbess.” After her death she was considered for canonization, but the proceedings were never finalized.

The music of Hildegard of Bingen is entirely **monophonic**. It is remarkable, however, in its originality: it shares very little features with contemporary **plainchant**, and shows almost no signs of derivation from existing melodies. Reflecting the exuberant, often apocalyptic tone of her visions, her melodies are often highly **melismatic**, and feature other unusual traits such as consecutive **leaps** and **wide ranges**. Melodic figurations are generally connected to the poetic texts that they accompany. The music’s purpose serves the monastic practice of *ruminatio* (“ruminatio” or “chewing over”), the repeating consideration of a theological or devotional point. Whether due to Hildegard’s relative isolation from the outside world from an early age, her transcendent attitude, or most likely a combination of both, her music remains uniquely individual and effectively “out of time” nearly a thousand years after her life.

## Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300–1377)

Guillaume de Machaut is without known equals in his importance as a poet and composer in the fourteenth century; the breadth and depth of his work—which he labored to preserve for future generations—is unrivaled, affording us a close and detailed look at his style and how it relates to that of his contemporaries.

Machaut spent a significant portion of his life in courtly service to Jean of Luxembourg, combining clerical and artistic duties as was typical of learned people of the time. He followed his lord as he moved between the various courts of the reign (from modern day Luxembourg to as far east as Bohemia); eventually he served other patrons, including Charles II, the Duke of Berry, the Duke of Burgundy, and Pierre de Lusignan. Machaut also held offices as a canon (a paid officer of a Catholic cathedral), thus guaranteeing himself a dependable income through the combination of service and patronage.

Especially significant is the (embellished) autobiographical work *Livre du voir dit*, a poetical and musical anthology that chronicles Machaut's life in the early 1360s, and offers direct testimony to his own sense of authorship and self importance—all rather unusual traits for creative types in medieval times. He even commented directly on the perceived quality of some of his own compositions.

Machaut was one of the leading stylists in the *Ars Nova* movement, characterized by an increase in **rhythmic** and **polyphonic complexity**, as well as greater **expressivity**. Nevertheless, Machaut was well-connected to the monophonic tradition of the Church, and often combined the “old” and the “new” with great skill in his own compositions. His *Notre Dame Mass* is the earliest known polyphonic setting of the Ordinary of the Catholic Mass; it incorporates existing plainchant with intricate **isorhythmic** realizations for four voices.

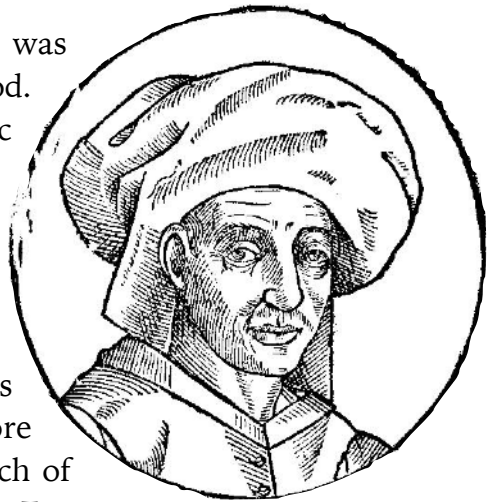
Also noteworthy is the **secular rondeau** “Ma fin est mon commencement,” an intriguing puzzle-like composition which features **retrograde melodies** to generate the musical equivalent of an **ouroboros**—the Medieval icon for infinity.



## Josquin des Prez (ca. 1450–1521)

Josquin des Prez, generally known simply as Josquin, was a Flemish composer of the High Renaissance period.

He either studied with or modeled some of his music on the style of Johannes Ockeghem, one of the most representative composers of the previous generation. Eventually his music took him across Europe, holding posts in Paris, Milan (serving the Sforza family) and in Rome at the papal court. He held his most prestigious service in Ferrara as choirmaster for the Este family in 1503, before assuming a long-lasting post as provost of the Church of Notre Dame in Condé-sur-l'Escaut (northern France,



presumably near his birthplace), where he stayed until his death. Josquin's reputation only grew after his passing: his music was widely printed and circulated for years after his death, and he was regarded as a past master by ensuing generations. We have records of his works being performed as late as 1616—a remarkable occurrence at a time when contemporary music reigned supreme.

Due in part to his wide travels, Josquin absorbed a variety of musical styles into his own. His **polyphony** is intricate yet accessible, often employing a device known as **voice pairing** to achieve textural simplification. As the name implies, voice pairing consists of two voices performing at the same time, usually in alternation with the remaining voices (for example, alto and soprano would sing together, then tenor and bass would respond, as pairs). The music also features a great degree of expressivity, often underscoring the text with tasteful examples of **word painting**.



## John Dowland (1563–1626)

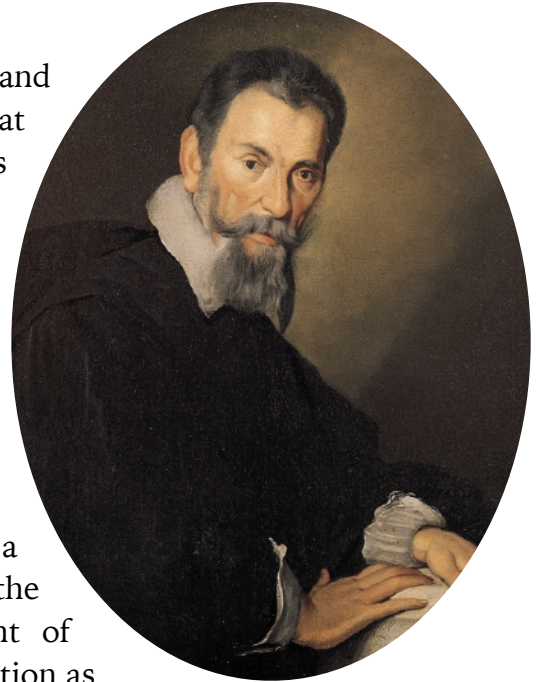
John Dowland was an English lutenist and composer, among the most popular of Elizabethan times. He served many courts in England and Europe (most importantly Christian King of Denmark), but, perhaps due to his Catholic faith, never acquired a high post at the court of Queen Elizabeth herself—a failure that haunted him throughout his life, as he acknowledged in letters and the prefaces of his printed books. Nevertheless, he enjoyed outstanding reputation and success in Europe, and his collections of lute songs were widely distributed throughout England and the Continent. His son Robert was also a lutenist and composer, and may have contributed to cementing his father’s legacy after his death. Although musical taste in England changed rapidly after Dowland (effectively surpassing his style), he is regarded as one of the most important English composers of his time, and among the greatest composers of songs in the English language ever.



Like Josquin's before him, Dowland’s musical style is syncretic, combining existing element of English music (like the form of **broadside ballads** and the rhythms of popular dances like the **pavane** and **galliard**) with more adventurous harmonic and polyphonic devices, some of them borrowed from Italian **madrigals**. He was a skilled lute player and wrote extensively for it—both as accompaniment for the voice, and as a solo instrument. Dowland’s work for the lute display his technical facility and inventive polyphonic writing, with some works featuring up to four simultaneous voices. Many of Dowland’s songs deal with the subject of **melancholy**, a rather fashionable topic in Elizabethan times, and feature deliciously “emo” titles as “Flow, My Tears,” “Can She Excuse My Wrongs,” “Melancholy Galliard,” and “In Darkness Let Me Dwell.” His lute piece *Lachrimae Pavan* was reprinted for decades and adapted into different versions after his death.

## Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643)

Monteverdi was born in Cremona (Northern Italy), and began his musical studies with the Chapel Master at the local cathedral. He displayed precocious talents as a composer, and published his first books of vocal music while still in his teens. Later he served at the court of the Duke of Mantua, where he encountered the music of some of the leading musicians of its time. Monteverdi's most remarkable feat came in the early 1600s, when he contributed to the development of a completely new musical style despite having already reached maturity as a composer. He built upon the work of a group of intellectuals and composers known as the **Florentine Camerata**, advancing the development of modern **opera**. In 1613 he took on a prestigious position as the music director at St. Mark's cathedral in Venice, and he continued to compose adventurous vocal and dramatic music until his death.



Monteverdi wrote numerous pieces of polyphonic vocal music, some of which was attacked by contemporary critics for being excessively experimental. He defended his music in the preface to his fifth book of madrigals, articulating how his use of **dissonance** and irregular rhythms was done so that the music could fully express the text; he also claimed that his music related to the tradition his predecessors (such as Josquin), who had been experimenters themselves.

His contributions to the then-infant genre of opera similarly display an emphasis on textual expressivity and dramatic clarity, and feature some of the first examples of the use of specific **instrumental colors** for effect.

## Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1667–1729)

Harpsichordist and composer, she was born in the Jacquet musical family and at the age of ten was already being mentioned in Parisian magazines like the *Mercure Galant* for her abilities at the keyboard and as a singer. She became noticed at the court of Louis the XIV, who favored her and placed her in musical tutelage at Versailles. Eventually she married the court organist Marin de la Guerre; upon his death she moved back to Paris and supported herself composing and giving performances of her music at her home. Many of her early works are lost; however there are records of at least one publication dedicated to Louis XIV before the turn of the 18th century, several and instrumental, vocal, and staged works.

She remains the most prolific and influential woman composer of her time; particularly noteworthy are her contributions to the development of the dance suite, and her experiments in the tradition of the **unmeasured prelude**—an improvisatory performance in the same key as the ensuing dance movements, which often would be written down as a set of rough contours without too much rhythmic information in terms of meter and rhythm (hence the name “unmeasured”).



## Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741)

Antonio Vivaldi was a violinist and composer, principally active in his native Venice, northern Italy, and Rome. An ordained priest, he held a long post teaching music at an orphanage for girls in Venice; the concerts they presented there attracted audience from all over Europe. Later he achieved notoriety throughout Europe, especially due to his instrumental writing; he also composed several operas and much sacred vocal music. Towards the end of his life he suffered from a decline in popularity in Venice due to changing musical taste; he attempted to revitalize his career by moving to Vienna, but died only one month after his arrival there.

Vivaldi was an extremely skilled violinist, and wrote music for the instrument meant to showcase both expressivity and technical virtuosity. He helped standardize the structure of the **baroque concerto** (a work for orchestra accompanying one or more soloists), in particular the **Fast-Slow-Fast** movement alternation, **Ritornello** form, and the implementation of colorful instrumental effects both in the solo and accompaniment parts. Some of his 500 and more concertos were published in print and circulated widely in Europe; J.S. Bach transcribed at least five of them for keyboard, thus contributing to spreading Vivaldi's innovations into the future.



## Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Johann Sebastian Bach was an organist, violist, and composer; his works represent the culmination of the Baroque compositional style, and anticipate some of the features of the ensuing Classical period (1750~1810). Bach was born in Eisenach (Germany) of a distinctively musical family; he was orphaned by age nine and taken in by his older brother Johann Christoph Bach, himself a musician and a student of Johann Pachelbel. After young Johann Sebastian completed a well-rounded Lutheran education, including extensive studies in Classics, Rhetoric, and Theology, he took on several musical posts as organist and kapellmeister (music director) in a rather circumscribed area of northern-eastern Germany (Arnstadt, Mulhausen, Weimar, Cothen). His last and longest



employment was as music director of St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig, a position of considerable prestige and tradition. Overall Bach enjoyed a degree of renown during his lifetime, especially among other musicians; however he did not acquire the same level of fame and prestige as others (such as Buxtehude and Handel), and definitely did not acquire the level of respect and admiration that his music would eventually secure after his death.

Bach married twice and had twenty children, although most did not survive him; Johann Christian and Carl Philip Emmanuel were also successful composers in their own times.

Much of Bach's music was composed for Lutheran church services—he would often need to provide new music for the weekly worship, as well as copy it out and prepare it for performance. Sometimes his music was criticized for being too difficult and ambitious for worship purposes; reportedly he was a demanding director, and would expect much from his pupils and musicians. He also wrote instrumental music, including enduringly popular **suites** for various solo instruments; concertos and other works for large ensembles and occasional music for patrons and political figures. His works are marked by a high degree of polyphonic sophistication—his melodies intertwine to generate complex and sometimes surprising harmonic progressions; this is especially evident in his composition of **fugues**, which would set the contrapuntal standard for generations to come.

## (Franz) Joseph Haydn (1732–1802)

Joseph Haydn was an Austrian composer of German descent, and among the most influential composers of the classical period. He was taken in by a family relative at the age of five to develop his musical inclinations; by the age of six he had begun studying the violin and harpsichord in addition to singing as a choirboy.

His career flourished in the 1760s, when he began service as music director at the Esterhazy court (an immensely wealthy aristocratic family ruling over a region in modern-day Hungary). He served under three Esterhazy princes before moving to London in 1790, having benefitted from a stable source of income, remarkable prestige, and access to resident ensembles for thirty years. The London years were also fruitful, and cemented Haydn's reputation as the leading European composer of his time.

Haydn returned to Austria in 1795, residing in Vienna and taking up part-time employment with the Esterhazy again, and enjoying his stature and reputation.

Haydn wrote in nearly every genre of classical music, including several operas (mainly earlier in his career) and a wide range of sacred works. He is mainly remembered for his contributions to instrumental music, including his influence on the then-developing genres of the **symphony** and its chamber counterpart, the **string quartet**. His compositions feature memorable melodies, clear musical forms, and often elements of musical humor (he was renowned as a prankster in his lifetime). In addition to his influence and reputation, Haydn served as a mentor to both Mozart (in the 1780s) and Beethoven (who studied with him in the 1790s); the three of them are regarded today as the finest exponents of Viennese classicism.



## Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-1799)

Joseph Bologne was born in Guadeloupe, West Indies, of mixed descent. His father, Georges de Bologne Saint-Georges, was a French planter and his mother, Nanon, was a slave of Senegalese origin. Joseph Bologne was educated in France, where he excelled in fencing and horsemanship. Since he was of mixed race, he encountered much racism and racist laws in pre-Revolutionary France, and even though he was given the title “chevalier” due to his riding prowess, he was ineligible to inherit his father’s title as an illegitimate son. When Saint-Georges was 19, the violinist Antonio Lolli composed two concertos for him and two years later, the composer Francois Joseph Gossec dedicated a set of six string trios, Opus 9 to him. Saint-George became the concertmaster/conductor of Gossec’s orchestra in 1773, when Saint-George was 28. He became a sensation in Paris as a violinist and composer, where his early music, three sets of six string quartets, were inspired by Haydn’s early quartets. Saint-George continued to perform, compose, fence, and was a colonel in the French army during a period of revolutions in Europe (he also excelled in dance). His published works include: 14 violin concertos, two symphonies, six *symphonies concertantes*, various chamber music, vocal music, and six *operas comiques*.



## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

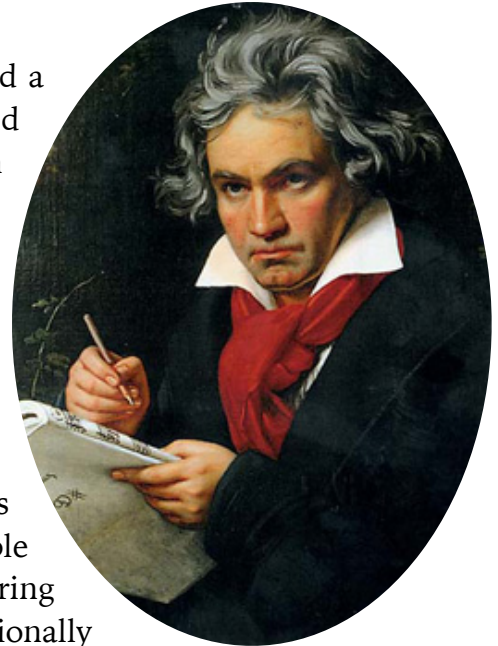
Johannes Chrisostomus Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (how's that for a name?!) was born in Salzburg, Austria, from a musical family. His father Leopold was a violinist and pedagogue of some renown; his sister Nannerl had also been taught as a singer and pianist. Young Amadeus showed precocious talents, and spent much of his childhood touring with his father and sister across European courts, impressing aristocratic and royal patrons with his performance, improvisation, and compositional skills. In addition to fame and a modicum of financial success, his travels granted Mozart with exposure to much music that was not widely available in his hometown. Eventually Mozart settled in Vienna, and produced a number of successful and popular works (such as several operas in Italian as well as German, and much chamber and orchestral music). His fortunes, however, were alternating, possibly due to a combination of expensive lifestyle, generosity to friends, and ill-advised financial management. He died before finishing his Requiem Mass (Mass for the Dead)—a facet that gave rise to mythology and intrigue surrounding his death. He remains one of the most beloved and often performed composers of all time. Mozart was first and foremost a master of melody—he could compose memorable tunes effortlessly, and tended to emphasize the “singable” quality of music in most of his pieces. His symphonies, sonatas, and concertos alike feature this melodic facility in spades. His operas are similarly beloved for their tunes, as well as their generally light and accessible content. From an instrumental standpoint he was an early champion of the recently-developed clarinet, and wrote much virtuosic music for the piano (his primary instrument), including several popular concertos.





## Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770–1827)

The most influential composer of the 19th Century, and a key transitional figure between the Classical and Romantic compositional styles, Beethoven was born in Bonn (Germany) but achieved notoriety after his move to Vienna in 1792, when he began studying regularly with Haydn and Salieri, among others. He began to lose his hearing around 1801, as he acknowledged to his brothers in a letter which became known as the “Heiligenstadt Testament.” A sense of defiance against fate permeates his works from this period, dubbed the “Heroic” one (as shown most noticeably in his Symphony No. 3). Widely supported by various noble patrons, Beethoven continued to compose as his hearing deteriorated; his late works, written when he was functionally deaf, present ambitious and unprecedented dissonance and harmonic complexity, and found a difficult reception with the Viennese public. By the time of his death, Beethoven had become to embody the ideal of the “genius” Romantic artist, standing alone against destiny and fiercely focused on artistic transcendence. “Classical” music would never be the same after him, and many composers modeled their aesthetic, style, and work ethic on his (sometimes mythologized) example for generations to come.



Beethoven’s musical production is generally divided into three distinct periods: an early classical style, showing the influence of Mozart and Haydn; the “heroic” period of 1803–1815, characterized by larger and more heavily developed form, often forceful and epic in aesthetic; and the late style, abstract and experimental in style, but more focused on personal, intimate expression (many of the late works are for string quartet). Beethoven’s music is rhythmically active, and even his thematic material is perhaps better defined by its rhythmic features than by sheer melodic shapes (think for example of the infamous “short-short-short-long” motive from the 5th Symphony, which permeates and informs the entire work. These musical features (rhythmic vs. melodic emphasis; longer, more developed forms; more adventurous harmonies) contributed to the definition of the burgeoning Romantic style in opposition to the strict “Classical” style of the late 18th Century.

## Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868)

The most successful and influential Italian composer of the early 19th century, Rossini was born in Pesaro in a family of musicians (his father was a city trumpeter; his mother a professional opera singer). Once his family settled in Bologna, he underwent musical training at the local Liceo Musicale, and began working as an accompanist and harpsichordist in local theaters. In 1810 Rossini was commissioned his first opera, and the young composer began redefining the Italian operatic style: he modernized the harmonic language, drawing from the example of Mozart; placed additional emphasis on melodic beauty (leading to the definition of the so-called “Bel Canto” style); and refined the dramatic complexity of the lighter, comedic plays. His early productivity was impressive—he composed seven operas in just sixteen months—and he often resorted to recycling numbers or melodies from one work to the next. In 1813 he completed *Tancredi*, his first international success; his best known work, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, established him as a continent-wide phenom in 1816.



Later in his career Rossini held posts in Naples, Vienna, Paris, his work culminating in a series of operas that included his other masterpiece, *William Tell*, in 1829. The Rossini retired, enjoying financial stability but suffering from health and personal troubles. He finished few works in the intervening forty years, the most important being a choral setting of the religious text *Stabat Mater*. Operatic trends were changing, as was the political situation in Italy, leading to revolutions and wars of independence starting in 1848; Rossini was not as enthusiastic about these changes as the general population, and had to relocate from Bologna to Florence, fearing for his safety. His last years were reportedly dark, presumably suffering from depression and isolation, though his reputation and popularity as a composer remained in the highest esteem.

## **Franz Schubert (1797–1828)**

Born in Vienna of a middle-class family, young Franz began musical activities after auditioning for Antonio Salieri, a composer a bit past his prime but still serving as court musician for the Emperor; later on he was admitted to the Royal College, showing great precociousness as a pianist and composer. Despite being encouraged to look at Italian operatic models by Salieri, Schubert was more interested in the Austro-Germanic styles of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, and in the poetry of early Romantic authors like Schiller and Goethe. Schubert's own musical style represents a transition between the balance and melodic preponderance of the classical period, and the expansiveness of early Romanticism.

He entertained a beginning career as a schoolteacher, but never relinquished pursuing his own compositional development, gradually increasing his productivity as well as the quality of the works he completed.

1814 and 1815 are what historians call Schubert's "Miracle Years"—he would compose hundreds of Lieder (songs) for voice and piano (or guitar), usually dedicating himself to setting the music of one single poet at a time, developing particular affinity to their rhythms, imagery, and atmospheres. By the 1820s he had achieved the status of professional composer, and his music figured frequently in private evening entertainment among the well-to-do Viennese. His compositional output remained prodigious, but his health suffered from his work drive and lifestyle. In 1823 Schubert contracted syphilis, he ultimately succumbed to the disease in 1828. He remains one of the most prolific and beloved composers of songs, having written over 600; he attempted ten symphonies, of which seven were completed in his lifetime, and composed dozens of chamber works for various instrumental forces.



### Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

Born in Leipzig of a middle-class family, Richard Wagner eventually rose to prominence as the most influential composer of operas in the 19th century (and perhaps, of all time). His innovations were many: he rejected the dominant Italian and French models for serious and comic operas alike, turning instead to Norse and German mythology for inspiration; he composed his own libretti; he developed a complex system of interconnected themes, each representing a character or idea, called **leitmotifs**; and eventually claimed all aspects of artistic creation under the influence of the composer (what he termed **Gesamtkunstwerk**, or “total art-work”). His most impressive achievement was the completion of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, a cycle of four operas (totaling nearly twenty hours in length) that tells the epic tale of the hero Siegfried and the valkyrie Brunhilde, and the eventual destruction of Valhalla.

Though not always successful during his early career, Wagner enjoyed widespread acclaim during his lifetime, and was able to oversee the construction of an opera house of his own design in Bayreuth; before he died, he stipulated that his operas could only be performed there.

Wagner’s influence in matter so harmony, dramatic organization, and scope reached far into the twentieth century, and in some ways he precipitated the crisis of the tonal system by stretching it to its utter limits. However his legacy remains complicated due to his antisemitic views (born out of professional frustrations, and eventually published in a vitriolic invective called “Judaism in Music”). Hitler was especially fond of Wagner’s epic operas, and his music was sometimes used in official Nazi functions. For these reasons, Wagner’s music was not performed in the state of Israel until the early 2000s, and any programming of it there remains controversial to date.



## Harry Burleigh (1866–1949)

African-American singer, composer, arranger, and editor. Burleigh was born in Pennsylvania in a family descending of freed slave Hamilton Waters. He gained admission to the National Conservatory in New York City on a scholarship at the age of 26; there he studied voice, theory, and bass viol while also working as a handyman to sustain his studies. The story goes that visiting Czech composer Antonin Dvorak heard Burleigh singing Negro Spirituals while he was sweeping the halls of the school; the two become close, and Dvorak would go on to incorporate a theme of African-American inspiration in his famous “New World” Symphony No. 9. Upon graduating Burleigh became the first African-American soloist in the all-white choirs of St. George’s Episcopal Church and Temple Emanu-El in NYC; he collaborated with Black British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and traveled to London to sing for king Edward VII.

As a composer, he published hundreds of successful songs and arrangements of traditional spiritual melodies for piano and voice. He received the Spingarn medal from the NAACP in 1917, and went on to mentor extremely popular recitalists such as Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson. The popularity of his spiritual arrangements eventually outshone that of his original art songs, many of which have fallen out of print. In 1914 Burleigh was among the founders of ASCAP—the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers; he served on its board from 1941 until 1946.



## Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)

Austrian composer, theorist, and painter, Arnold Schoenberg was one of the most influential and divisive figures in early 20th-century music. His uncompromising **atonal** works of the 1910s led to the development of a compositional system, known as **12-tone** or **dodecaphonic** music, which turned into the dominant academic musical language of the mid-century.

Schoenberg was not extensively trained, but studied music with the fervor of a passionate amateur. His early compositions show the influence of the chromaticism of Wagner and motivic consistency of Brahms; however a time of personal crisis in the early 1910s led to a change in aesthetics, advocating what he called the “emancipation of dissonance” for the purpose of maximum expressive potential. Pieces from this time period continue to puzzle lay audiences to this day:

they are eerie, unsettling, avoiding conventional harmonies and the reliance on tonal centers; yet they

can evoke strong images and emotions from attentive listeners. Not coincidentally Schoenberg was associated with an artistic movement known as **Expressionism** (alongside art greats such as Kandinsky and Klee, among others): expressionist artists advocated for art that reflected the artists’ interior reality, distorting and exaggerating conventional and “realistic” features, harnessing the power of visions and dreams, and not shying away from socially unpalatable emotions and subjects. Pieces like *Erwartung*, the second string quartet, and his melodrama *Pierrot Lunaire* perfectly encapsulate his contributions to the style.

In the mid-1920s Schoenberg developed a new compositional method meant to guarantee the avoidance of tonality in composition. Though he never published the details of this system himself, his students contributed to popularizing it across Europe, especially after World War II. Being Jewish, Schoenberg left Vienna for the United States at the eve of the War; he settled in Los Angeles and taught at USC and UCLA (notable students included John Cage and Lou Harrison—though both composers developed significantly different styles).

Schoenberg was wildly superstitious and suffered from triskaidekaphobia (the irrational fear of the number 13); he died on Friday July 13, 1951, at the age of 76 (7+6...), after having spent the entire day in bed, attempting to escape a fateful date on a fateful year.



self portrait by A. Schoenberg

## Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Born in a minor aristocratic family in Northwestern Russia, Stravinsky began studying music by perusing his father's collection of scores, and with some tutelage from his mother, who could sing and play the piano. He took private piano and theory lessons and eventually apprenticed under Rimsky-Korsakov, one of the leading Russian composers of the 19th century, though Stravinsky never abandoned his law studies at the University.

In the 1910s, having risen to a certain prominence as a promising young composer in Russia, he was commissioned to compose a ballet drawing from Russian folklore by Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, a company based in Paris that capitalized on the city's taste for the exotic by offering technically excellent productions often drawing from fantastical or far-away themes. *The Firebird* was, we could say, Stravinsky's first "hit." It was followed rapidly by two other Russian ballets, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*. The latter piece, premiered in 1913, was so perplexing due to its primitivist choreography that it caused a riot at its premiere. By then, Stravinsky's fame as a modernist iconoclast had been cemented. During World War I he sojourned in Switzerland; after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, as his family's lands became confiscated by the newly-instituted communist state, Stravinsky made Paris his new home.

Like other Twentieth-century composers, Stravinsky's style radically changed over time; in the 1920s and 30s he participated in the return to more consonant, almost tonal, and generally simpler compositions, inspired by a kind of cool mannerism and looking back to the music of the 17th and 18th century; this Neoclassical style proved incredibly influential across Europe and the Americas. As the political tensions that would lead to World War Two escalated, Stravinsky himself emigrated to the United States in 1939. Adjusting to American life was not entirely easy for Stravinsky—once a Russian aristocrat, then an adopted Parisian intellectual—but he continued to compose actively and eventually came to enjoy his time in Los Angeles and, later, New York City. After the death of Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg—perhaps his only rival in reputation as a modern composer—Stravinsky adopted Schoenberg's method of twelve-tone composition, writing several successful works in this idiom in his late years. He remains a towering figure in twentieth-century music, both for his stylistic versatility and the uncompromising and recognizable quality of his compositional voice.



## Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953)

Ruth Crawford Seeger was born in Iowa and began showing musical aptitudes at an early age. She studied composition at the American Conservatory in Chicago, and became first woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition. She traveled to Berlin, Paris, Vienna, and Budapest to witness the leading modernist musical trends first-hand; however, she purposefully avoided taking lessons from more established composers, as she wanted to maintain a degree of independence for her own U.S. perspective. Upon returning from Europe she composed her *String Quartet 1931*, which became one of her best-known works. This piece is especially significant as one of the earliest (if not the earliest) example of systematic serial organization of parameters other than pitch—a development that predates similar developments in the European avant-garde by about fifteen years.



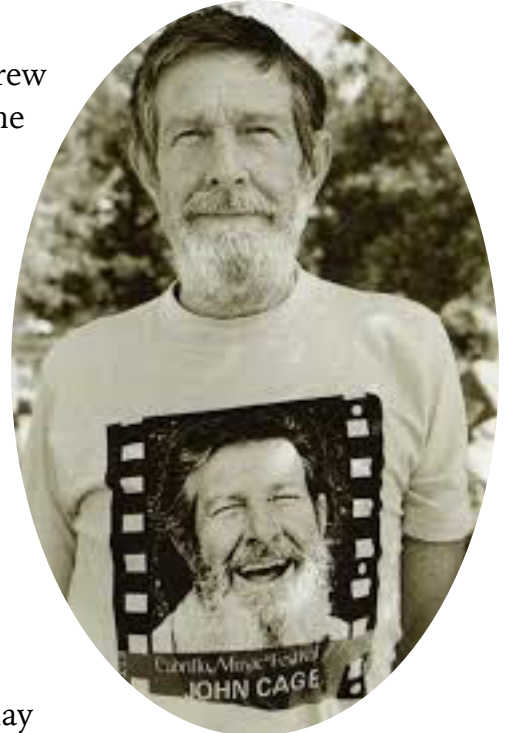
In 1932 she married Charles Seeger, an established composer, theorist, and musicologist. As was unfortunately customary at the time, her own career ambitions became secondary to his various engagements, which included Federal administrative positions at WPA's Federal Music Project. Ruth dedicated herself to raising their children; her stepchild Pete, as well as children Peggy and Mike, all became successful folksingers. Folk song collection and arrangement, in fact, represented one of the musical outlets that Ruth preserved alongside her domestic obligations, working for the FMP and the Library of Congress. In the early 1950s, as she returned to composition in earnest, her life was unfortunately cut short by cancer.

For her application of contemporary hyper-modernist U.S. techniques (such as **diaphonicism** and **dissonant counterpoint**), her own individual developments (e.g. the serialization of dynamics and attacks in the third movement of the *String Quartet*; and the derivation of formal structures from series material in the fourth movement of the same work), and her publication of inventive didactic arrangement of numerous folk songs, she remains an unparalleled figure in the landscape of twentieth-century American music—and one that has been getting increasing and well-deserved critical and repertorial attention.



## John Cage (1912–1992)

Born in Los Angeles, California, in 1912, John Cage grew up to become the most influential U.S. composer of the twentieth century. His radical ideas about the nature of music, sound, silence, and intention have informed countless other musicians and artists. Cage attended UCLA for composition in the early 1930s, studying with Arnold Schoenberg, who reportedly dismissed his efforts as having “no ear for harmony.” It is no surprise that Cage’s early success came as a composer in the nascent field of percussion music (including several collaborations with dancers); through his experiments with electronics, which may constitute the first example of their use in live performance; and in the development of the so-called prepared-piano in the mid-1940s—all works in which rhythm, sonority, texture, and form play structural roles in harmony’s stead.



By this stage in his career Cage had moved East to New York City, a location that will eventually yield the moniker of “New York School” to his work alongside composers Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff, and other artists like Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, and Mark Rothko.

Inspired by his encounters with the teaching of Zen Buddhist philosopher Daitaro Suzuki, Cage became increasingly interested in ideas concerning indeterminacy (his term), an aesthetic in which aspects of a composition would remain “open” and separate from the composer’s control. Early examples include pieces like *Music of Changes*, which was meticulously composed using chance operations, but resulted in an otherwise conventional, fixed score; and perhaps his most famous piece, *4’33”*, consisting only of the specified duration, harnessing environmental sounds as the content of the piece while the performer(s) sat in silence in front of the audience. Later in his career Cage continued to explore the boundaries between music, theater, and life, developing pieces in collaboration with his life partner, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham; outsized multimedia events involving sound, electronics, and audience interaction deemed “happenings;” and a piece for organ stretching to over six hundred years in duration (performance still in progress). Eventually he returned to simpler forms; his late output consists almost entirely of melodic pieces written for friends and collaborators.

His written works have proved similarly enduring; *Silence: Lectures and Writing* is a key conceptual text of U.S. experimental music, and contains beautiful “slice of life” anecdotes in the style of Zen Buddhist koans.

## Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)

Born in New York City in a Russian Jewish family, Bernstein attended Harvard University and the Curtis Institute, studying with composers Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, and Dimitri Mitropoulos. In 1943 Bernstein was named assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, making his debut in November of the same year on a last-minute replacement that was broadcast nationally and propelled him to fame. Bernstein was an energetic, effusive conductor, sometimes criticized for putting a very strong personal stamp on his interpretation, but generally beloved by audiences. He conducted the Phil until 1969, and was named a lifetime conductor emeritus there upon his retirement. In addition to expanding the audience of the Philharmonic and bolstering its international reputation, Bernstein engaged in



successful public-facing activities, including a popular series of televised lectures on music appreciation. He became blacklisted the McCarthy era due to his very liberal political views and his homosexuality (which was a kind of open secret)—two aspects that made him an easy target in the time of the Red Scare; however his career survived this dark time in American politics.

As a composer he is remembered primarily for his dramatic music, in particular the musicals *On the Town* and *West Side Story*, though he composed a large amount of choral, vocal, and orchestral music as well. His musical style drew from aspects of U.S. popular music, and represented a kind of moderate American modernism, eschewing both academic serialism and experimental trends. He was one of the first U.S. composers and conductors to gain widespread international renown, and his interpretations at the podium remain widely respected to date.

## Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016)

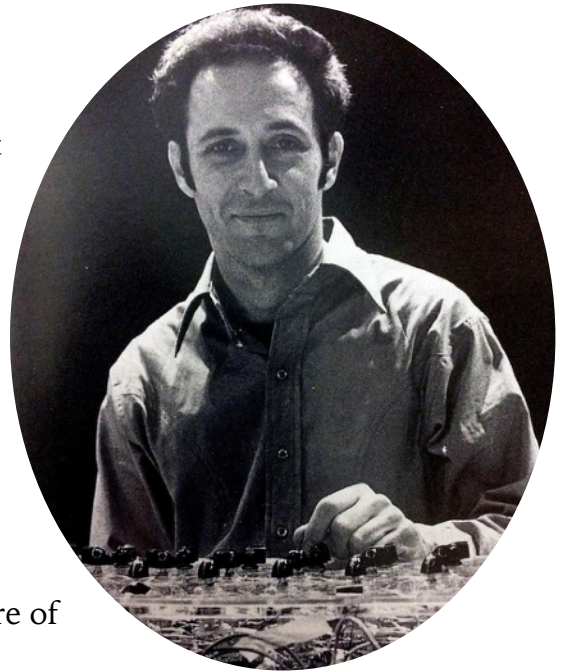
Born in Houston, Texas, Oliveros began playing the accordion encouraged by her mother, who was taken by the instrument's popularity in the 1940s; she also took on the tuba and French horn, before settling on composition. She studied at San Francisco State University, and became an early member of the San Francisco Tape Music Center (alongside Ramon Sender, Morton Subotnick, and Terry Riley), where she developed various tape looping and synthesis techniques. In the late 1960s she joined the faculty at UC San Diego, and worked on a set of improvisatory and listening techniques she called *Sonic Meditations*. Later in her career she further refined her approach to communal listening and ensemble communication through a concept called Deep Listening;



developed a practice of performing on accordions in alternative tuning systems; and created a complex electronic ecosystem known as the Expanded Instrument System, which reacts to the sonic input of multiple performers in the form of spatialized audio. From an aesthetic standpoint Oliveros was outspoken on issues of gender and sexual equality—her essay “And Don’t Call Them Lady Composers” denounced systemic biases against women in classical music, and outlined possible approaches to ameliorate the situation. Her stance was reflected in uncompromising yet humorous electronic compositions such as *Bye Bye Butterfly* and *Big Mother Is Watching You*. She was the recipient of numerous awards, including the John Cage Prize from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and Guggenheim, Fulbright, and NEA fellowships. Her role as a pioneer of electronic music extended to contemporary practice, as she developed and refined technology for telematic improvisation and “cyber-jamming” in virtual spaces.

## Steve Reich (b. 1936)

One of the earliest exponents of musical minimalism, Reich was born in New York City but divided his time between there and California after his parents' divorce. He attended Cornell University (majoring in philosophy), then studied composition at the Juilliard School and Mills College in Oakland, California, where he studied with Luciano Berio and Darius Milhaud. In the mid 1960s Reich was involved in the experimental music scene in the Bay Area, working at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, where he developed his groundbreaking phasing piece *It's Gonna Rain*, and performed in the premiere of Terry Riley's *In C*.



In 1970 Reich traveled to Ghana to study traditional drumming techniques, but his stay was cut short by a bout of malaria. He integrated several the traditional practices of Ewe music in his 90-minute percussion tour de force *Drumming*, which represents the culmination of his early style.

After returning to NYC he formed his own ensemble, Steve Reich and Musicians, which allowed him to present his music after meticulous rehearsal, and to tour the country (and beyond) pretty much the same way a rock band would. Reich's 1970s album releases on ECM, especially *Music for 18 Musicians*, were commercially successful and helped him secure his position in the field of contemporary music; this combination of managing his own live performances and directly accessing the recorded music market (rather than relying only on commissions and external ensembles) created a new career model for younger composers. Later in his career he developed a more varied harmonic language than his austere minimalist beginnings, drawing from his own Jewish heritage and philosophical education for inspiration. He received the Pulitzer Prize in music for his piece *Double Sextet* in 2009, and the Golden Lion from the Venice Biennale in 2014, and he remains one of the most widely performed living composers year after year.

## Meredith Monk (b. 1942)

Composer, singer, dancer, choreographer, and interdisciplinary artist. Meredith Monk was born in New York city in a Russian-Jewish family of artistic inclinations; her mother was a professional singer and Monk remembers the stage as a critical component of her life from an early age. After graduating from Sarah Lawrence College she founded The House, an interdisciplinary arts organization that is still active today. Her early pieces involved electronics, self-accompanied vocalizations, and movement; eventually she developed a lexicon of vocal and body gestures, which she would teach to the permanent members of her ensemble. Most of her works from this time were not notated, but taught by rote and performed from memory; she would generally require to act as a coach for any ensemble desiring to stage them. In 2000 she signed a publishing deal with Boosey & Hawkes, allowing her music to be transcribed into score form and made available for performance by other groups.

She was a pioneer in the development of **extended vocal techniques**, exploring the range of the human voice outside the confines of traditional and classical training. A characteristic feature of her compositions is that they are usually wordless, resorting to simple phonemes or made-up syllables instead of a conventional text. According to Monk, the voice has a language of its own, and the presence of a text often detracts from it.

One of her most successful pieces was *Dolmen Music*, released on ECM records in 1981 to critical acclaim. She has composed song cycles and operas for her ensembles, as well as site-specific and multimedia works. She is the recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” Award, two Guggenheims, and the Presidential Medal of Arts, among other honors. She lives with her turtles in a Tribeca loft, and remains active as a composer and performer.



## Kaija Saariaho (b. 1952)

Born in Helsinki, Saariaho studied at the Helsinki School for Art and Design and the Sibelius Academy; composers Esa-Pekka Salonen and Magnus Lindberg were also in her class. She tells how, in order to escape the conservative aesthetic limits of their curriculum, the three of them would have weekly meetings to listen to contemporary music, study scores, and discuss musical trends and theories together. In the early 1980s she moved to Paris to study at IRCAM in the Centre Pompidou, one of the premiere locations for electro-acoustic research. Much of her music involves the usage of electronic processing, often modifying, augmenting, or reacting to the sound of acoustic instruments in real time. Her style combines elements of **spectralism**, a contemporary musical trend that departs from acoustic phenomena to derive compositional features and parameters, with a fluid, post-modern approach to genre and inspiration. She composed two pieces inspired by the legend of the medieval troubadour Jaufré, leading to her opera *L'amour de loin* (2001). In this multi-faceted piece, scored for only three singers, a messaging pilgrim acts as the only intermediary between Jaufré, who is in France, and his “love from afar,” the Countess of Tripoli. When the Metropolitan Opera in New York City staged this work in 2012, it was only the second time they had ever produced an opera composed by a woman.



## **Caroline Shaw (b. 1982)**

Caroline Shaw is a vocalist, violinist, and composer based in New York City. She holds degrees in performance and composition from Rice, Yale, and Princeton University. Her composition *Partita for Eight Voices* won the Pulitzer Prize in composition in 2013; it was originally written for the a cappella ensemble Roomful of Teeth, of which she is a member. In 2019, Ituk artist Tanya Tagaq pointed out that *Partita* appropriated traditional Inuit vocal techniques like *katajjaq* without the necessary acknowledgment or compensation; Shaw has since retracted the piece and is in the process of reworking the section, but questions about the limits of inspirations across cultural and colonial borders still remains.

Shaw's music draws from classical, experimental, and literary elements, often quoting or paraphrasing examples in a vibrant, light-hearted way. Recently Shaw made the news for collaborating with hip hop artists Kanye West and Nas, both as vocalist and in producing roles. She remains in demand as a composer, actively fulfilling commissions for a variety of ensemble and performers, while also teaching at NYU and the Juilliard School. According to her official press biography, she loves "the color yellow, otters, Beethoven opus 74, Mozart opera, Kinhaven, the smell of rosemary, and the sound of a janky mandolin."

