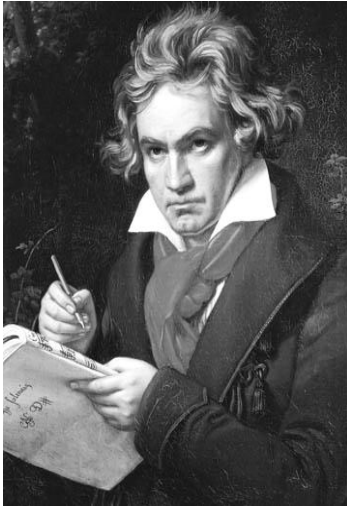


Meet the Composers



Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany in 1770. His father began giving him piano lessons when he was three years old, and Ludwig was so small he had to stand on the piano bench in order to reach the keys. Little Ludwig's father wanted him to be world-famous, and Papa Beethoven often forced Ludwig to get up in the middle of the night to practice the piano, rapping his knuckles whenever he made a mistake! By the time he was 12, Ludwig worked as professional pianist, organist and composer and earned a salary to support his family, and soon Mozart said of him, "Keep your eyes on him; some day he will give the world something to talk about." In 1792, Beethoven moved to Vienna and began studying composition with the composer Haydn (Mozart's old friend). Beethoven lived in Vienna for the rest of his life, even though he never stopped complaining about the Viennese and their lack of appreciation for his music! In Vienna, he made became famous as a gifted pianist and composer, and he played many concerts for the wealthy aristocracy. He also became famous as a vain and moody grump. He once told a prince who paid his salary, "There are and will be thousands of princes. There is only one Beethoven." By the time he was thirty, Beethoven realized he was going deaf, and he had a huge ear trumpet made for him by his friend Maelzel (who also invented the metronome, a device that helps musicians keep time in music). In 1802, while vacationing in a village called Heiligenstadt, he wrote a tragic note to his brothers, telling them how he suffered from his deafness. His hearing became even worse, and for the last nine years of his life, Beethoven could hardly hear anything. Despite his deafness, he still composed music and conducted concerts, only hearing the music in his head. For the last ten years of his life, Beethoven worked furiously on composing, writing some of the greatest music ever written, including his last three piano sonatas, his ninth symphony and a series of string quartets that sum up his lifetime of joy and suffering. Beethoven died at age fifty-seven during a huge thunderstorm, and according to legend, he climbed out of bed and furiously shook his fist at the sky before exhaling his last breath.



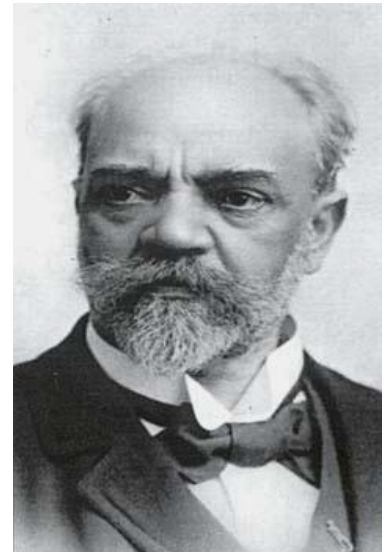
Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884)

Bedrich Smetana, whose last name means "cream" in Czech, was born in Bohemia (now within the Czech Republic). His father was a wealthy beer-brewer but loved playing the violin, and decided to teach his son the violin when Bedrich turned four. Bedrich also studied piano as a child. Smetana was not a great student, but he loved writing string quartets for his friends and attending concerts. In his early twenties,

Smetana tried unsuccessfully to earn money by teaching piano, starting a music school, and by touring Bohemia playing piano concerts. He married a woman named Katerina Kolarova, who he met in school, and they had four daughters, but sadly three of their daughters died in childhood, and Katerina died only three years later. After moving to Sweden for a few years only to struggle to find success, Smetana returned home to Prague and wrote the first great Czech opera, *The Bartered Bride*. He was then hired as a conductor of Prague's Provisional Theater Orchestra (where the composer and fellow Czech Antonin Dvořák worked as a violist), and during this time, Smetana composed more than forty other operas, often using his beloved Czech folk tunes and dances for inspiration. He also wrote a famous orchestral piece, *Ma Vlast*, a beautiful ode to his home country, which made him very famous and earned him the nickname "The Father of Czech Music." Smetana's life ended in tragedy; he suddenly went deaf and had to give up his job as a conductor. Soon afterward, Smetana suffered a mental breakdown, and he died in 1884 in a mental asylum.

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Antonin Dvořák was born in 1841 in a tiny village in Bohemia (now within the Czech Republic). He was the oldest of nine children, and although his father ran an inn and a butcher shop, the family was poor. Dvořák's father played the zither (a stringed folk instrument) to entertain guests at the inn for extra money to support his large family, and young Antonin loved listening to traveling musicians who stayed at the inn. When Antonin was six, he began studying violin at school, and by age twelve he had already begun composing music. In 1857 he moved to Prague, and after finishing school, he joined the Provisional Theater Orchestra as a violist. A few years after Dvořák joined the orchestra, Bedrich Smetana was appointed the principal conductor. Although the orchestra played some exciting concerts, including some with Dvořák's hero, the German composer Richard Wagner, the job did not pay well. Dvořák left the orchestra to give himself more time to compose, and he tried to earn a living by teaching,



a bold decision considering that he'd never had any music performed or printed! As Dvořák turned thirty, he was often silent and gloomy; he even used manuscripts of some of his unnoticed music as tinder for fires; he later joked that because of his early failures, "I always had paper on me to light a fire!" His fortunes change in 1874, when he won a competition; the famous composer Johannes Brahms was one of the judges. Brahms recognized Dvořák's amazing talent and recommended Dvořák's music to a publisher. Soon his *Slavonic Dances* were published and they made Dvořák's folk-inspired music famous worldwide. His new symphonies were played by famous orchestras throughout Europe, and he became the most famous Czech in the world. Dvořák loved reading good reviews of his own works, chuckling happily if he saw himself praised. In 1892 his family moved to New York City, where Dvořák was hired as the director of the National Conservatory of Music. In the United States, Dvořák was inspired by trains and ships, birdsong, and the music of black and American-Indian communities. During his time in

the U.S., he wrote some of his most famous music, including his *American* string quartet and his ninth symphony. In 1895, Dvořák and his family returned to Prague. He spent the last few years of his life writing operas, and he died peacefully in 1904, his wife Anna at his side.



Johann Strauss Jr. (1825-1899)

Johann Strauss Jr. was born in Vienna, Austria in 1825. His father, already a famous composer and conductor, tried to convince Johann Jr. to be a banker, but little Johann had already started composing when he was only six years old. Mama Strauss encouraged him, and before he was twenty, Johann started his own professional orchestra, playing violin and conducting the orchestra, sometimes at the same time! Emperor Franz Joseph hired him as his court's Royal Director of Music, and Strauss' waltzes, polkas and marches made him beloved by Vienna's aristocracy. In a few short years, Strauss became even more well-known than his famous father, playing for kings, queens, and wealthy audiences throughout Europe, Russia and even the United States, earning him the name "The Waltz King." He also became a close friend of the composer Johannes Brahms (Dvorak's mentor). Strauss' wife, an actress and singer, encouraged him to try writing for the theater; Strauss wrote his most popular operetta *The Fledermaus* in 1874. Strauss wrote more than 150 waltzes, including the most famous waltz of all time, *The Blue Danube*. He died in Vienna in 1899, wealthy, celebrated and adored.



Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Gustav Holst was born in 1874 to a musical family in Cheltenham, England. Gustav's father was an organist and choirmaster at the Cheltenham Cathedral, and Gustav began writing music as soon as he was big enough to hold a pen! Gustav studied piano as a child, and later learned trombone while attending at the Royal College of Music in London. After he finished school, Holst worked as a professional trombonist; he thought it would give him a steady job and would help him become a better composer and conductor. In 1903, he also began working at several schools, eventually teaching and conducting at the Royal College of Music, the University of Michigan and lecturing at Harvard University. Holst met the famous fellow British composer Ralph Vaughn Williams, who was known for using English folk tunes in his music, and the two composers became life-long

friends. Holst was a vegetarian for most of his life, he loved riding his bicycle and he had a good sense of humor (which he must have needed, riding a bicycle with his trombone strapped on his back!) In 1923, after becoming too sick to teach, Holst left teaching and devoted himself to composition. Holst's most famous work is the orchestral suite *The Planets*, and much of his other work contains influences from traditional English folk songs and Sanskrit and Hindu texts. Holst died in 1834 and was buried in the Cheltenham Cathedral.

Sources consulted for "Meet The Composers":

1. Isserlis, Steven. Why Beethoven Threw the Stew. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.
2. Isserlis, Steven. Why Handel Wagged his Wig. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.
3. Krull, Kathleen. Lives of the Musicians: Good Times, Bad Times (and What the Neighbors Thought). San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovick, 1993.
4. Schaefer, Carole Lexa. Two Scarlet Songbirds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.