

# *The top 10 greatest classical composers*

Recently, Anthony Tommasini, classical music critic of The New York Times, published his list of the top 10 greatest classical composers. Tommasini is the first to admit that the exercise is crazy, futile, pointless and doomed to failure but, having said that – it is good fun, so we will go along with the idea for a while. Unsurprisingly his list caused considerable discussion and not a little consternation amongst the devotees of certain composers who didn't make it onto his list. If you did not see his list, you might like to jot down your own one now before reading any further.

On hearing about this exercise, I immediately tried to define some criteria by which one could measure the 'greatness' of a composer – something which Tommasini conspicuously failed to do. My initial thoughts came up with four conditions which must be satisfied by any composer with claims to be in the 'top ten'

- A1: He (or, of course, she) must have produced at least five works which are universally acclaimed to be masterpieces of the highest order including at least one of transcendent quality.** (We might define a 'masterpiece' as a work (or collection of shorter works) of at least 30 minutes duration which gets regular new recordings every decade and concert performances every year, and which is universally acclaimed to be a work of exceptional quality)
- A2: He must have written several works which no other composer could conceivably have written before him.**
- A3: He must show complete mastery in several different media.**
- A4: His collected works must exceed the equivalent of 10 CD's** (We shall define a 'work' as a piece of music (or collection of shorter pieces) of at least 30 minutes duration, which has at least 5 different recordings in the CD catalogues at any one time and which is thought by many people to be a 'masterpiece')

By relaxing our criteria just a little, we can come up with a list which should serve to distinguish the merely 'great' composers – namely.

- B1: He must have produced at least one work which is universally acclaimed to be a masterpiece.**
- B2: He must have a distinct and recognisable musical style.**
- B3: He must show complete mastery in at least one medium.**
- B4: His collected works currently in the concert repertoire must exceed the equivalent of 5 CD's**

Well, let us see where these criteria lead us. The starting list of 43 names supplied by Tommasini was (in alphabetical order)

**Bach; Barber; Bartok; Beethoven; Berg; Berlioz; Bernstein; Brahms; Britten; Bruckner; Chopin; Copland; Debussy; Dvorak; Faure; Gershwin; Handel; Haydn; Ives; Ligeti; Listz; Mahler; Mendelssohn; Messiaen; Mozart; Poulenc; Prokofiev; Puccini; Rachmaninov; Ravel; Rossini; Scarlatti; Schoenberg; Schubert; Schumann; Shostakovitch; Sibelius; R. Strauss; Stravinsky; Tchaikovsky; Verdi; Vivaldi; Wagner.**

The first question to ask ourselves is – has Tommasini missed out any 'great' composers? Arguably yes.

**Purcell** wrote at least one masterpiece – *Dido and Aeneas* – and his musical style is unique and recognizable. He shows complete mastery of all the choral and orchestral techniques available to him at the time and his writing for the human voice is unexcelled. His influence on subsequent composers is undoubted and his corpus of works comfortably exceeds 5 CD's.

Another early composer who qualifies to belong in any list of potentially 'great' composers is surely **Monteverdi** whose *Vespers of 1610* is a clear masterpiece. On the other hand, his collected works, as I have defined them, probably do not amount to 5 CD's worth. Monteverdi wrote a lot of fine music and it is hardly his fault that the medium in which he worked is no longer popular, nevertheless, we must be consistent and regretfully reject him.

Another quite surprising omission from the initial list is **Grieg** whose *piano concerto* is obviously a masterpiece. No work which could survive so many performances could be anything but. On the other hand, I do not think he is sufficiently innovative to satisfy criterion B2. If you had never heard his piano concerto before (unlikely thought!) could you not be forgiven for thinking that it was written by, say, Rachmaninov?

There are also arguments for the inclusion of **Smetana, Borodin, Saint-Saens, Mussorgsky** and **Rimsky-Korsakov** who all wrote masterpieces but who fail to qualify on criterion B2 as well. Of these five, only Borodin produced a sufficiently large musical output to satisfy criterion B4.

Of more modern composers, one glaring omission is inexcusable – that of **Elgar**. His *Dream of Gerontius* is a masterpiece, as is his *Enigma variations*, his *violin concerto*, and his *cello concerto*. His symphonies explored completely new realms of harmony and his range of output varies from massive choral works to intimate chamber pieces. I cannot understand why he is so consistently overlooked as my reckoning he could almost be included amongst the greatest of classical composers. The only reason he does not make the top ten is because his greatest work – the *Dream* – is not universally acclaimed to be of 'transcendent' quality (and for a definition of what I mean by transcendent, see below).

Another name which really should have made it into the list of nominees and, indeed, into the list of 'great' composers is **Janacek**. His *Sinfonietta* is a masterpiece and his operas, chamber music and piano works enable him to sail through my other criteria with ease.

Other names which should really have made it into the initial list include **Delius, Vaughan Williams, Holst, Walton** and **Tippett**. I wonder what Tommasini has against British (and for that matter, Russian) composers? All the above have written acclaimed masterpieces: Delius: his *orchestral suites*; Vaughan Williams: his song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* or his *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis*; Holst: his *Planets suite*; Walton: *Belshazzar*; and Tippett: *Child of our time*.

Like the Russian composers mentioned earlier, all of these composers easily satisfy B1 and B3 but Holst and Tippett have an insufficient corpus of works in the current catalogues to satisfy B4: The main question which hangs against their names of Delius, Vaughan Williams and Walton is the question of the extent to which they forged new ideas which are uniquely theirs. Obviously the question 'If Delius had not lived, could someone else have written *Walk to the Paradise Garden*?' is as ridiculous as it is unanswerable. On the other hand, my gut feeling is that these three really do qualify as being genuinely 'great' composers.

To summarise so far, the following composers are, in my opinion 'great' composers: **Purcell, Elgar, Delius, Janacek, Vaughan Williams** and **Walton**. In addition the following names should have been included in the list of nominees: **Borodin, Grieg, Holst, Monteverdi, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Saint-Saens, Smetana** and **Tippett**.

Now let us turn our attention to the task of elimination some composers from Tommasini's initial list.

Firstly – did they all produce at least one universally acclaimed masterpiece? This is my extended list of 58 nominees. Here's where the sparks will fly!

<b>Bach</b>	<i>B minor mass; St Matthew Passion; Brandenburg concertos; Violin concertos; The art of fugue</i> etc. etc. The list is endless
Barber	[His <i>adagio for strings</i> is a pretty but it is not a masterpiece]
<b>Bartok</b>	<i>Music for strings, percussion and celesta; Concerto for orchestra; the string quartets; three piano concertos; violin concerto</i>
<b>Beethoven</b>	<i>the symphonies; the late string quartets; the piano sonatas; violin concerto</i>
Berg	<i>Concerto for violin and orchestra</i>
<b>Berlioz</b>	<i>Symphony fantastique; Romeo et Juliette; Te deum</i>
Bernstein	His inclusion in the list is inexplicable.
Borodin	<i>Prince Igor</i>
<b>Brahms</b>	<i>The symphonies; the piano concertos; the violin concerto; the German Requiem; the clarinet quintet;</i>
<b>Britten</b>	<i>War requiem; Peter Grimes; violin concerto, cello symphony; a Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
<b>Bruckner</b>	<i>Symphonies 4 and 7</i>
<b>Chopin</b>	<i>his piano music; piano concertos</i>
Copland	[ <i>Appalation spring</i> , his best-known work, is not a masterpiece]
<b>Delius</b>	<i>Orchestral suites</i>
<b>Debussy</b>	<i>La Mer; Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faune; the Etudes; string quartet; violin sonata</i>
<b>Dvorak</b>	<i>Symphonies 7 and 9; string quartet No 12; cello concerto</i>
<b>Elgar</b>	<i>The Dream of gerontius; cello concerto, violin concerto</i>
Faure	<i>Requiem</i>
Gershwin	<i>Rhapsody in Blue</i>
Grieg	<i>Piano concerto</i>
<b>Handel</b>	<i>Messiah; concerti grossi Op12; music for the royal fireworks; water music;</i>
<b>Haydn</b>	<i>Symphonies; string quartets; masses; The Creation</i>
Holst	<i>The Planets</i>
Ives	[His symphonies are by no means universally acclaimed as of exceptional quality]
<b>Janacek</b>	<i>Sinfonietta</i>
Ligeti	[His best known work is <i>Atmospheres</i> but only because Kubrick used it in 2001]
<b>Listz</b>	<i>Piano concerto; piano sonata in Bb; piano music</i>
<b>Mahler</b>	<i>One very long symphony</i>
<b>Mendelssohn</b>	<i>Midsummer Night's Dream; symphony No 4; violin concerto; octet; piano music</i>
Messiaen	<i>Turangalila symphony</i>
Monteverdi	<i>Vespers</i>
<b>Mozart</b>	<i>Symphonies; piano concertos; chamber music; operas; Requiem</i>
Mussorgsky	<i>Pictures at an exhibition</i>
<b>Poulenc</b>	<i>Concerto for two pianos; flute sonata; Gloria</i>
<b>Prokofiev</b>	<i>Romeo and Juliet; classical symphony; symphony No 5;</i>
<b>Puccini</b>	<i>Tosca; Madame Butterfly</i>
<b>Purcell</b>	<i>Dido and Aeneas</i>
<b>Rachmaninov</b>	<i>Preludes; piano concerto No 2; symphony No 2</i>
<b>Ravel</b>	<i>Piano concertos; piano works; string quartet; Daphnis et Chloe</i>
Rimsky-Korsakov	<i>Sheherezade</i>
Rossini	[He almost admitted, in the dedication to his Petite Messe that he had never written a masterpiece!]
Saint-Saens	<i>Symphony No 3</i>
Scarlatti	<i>Sonatas</i>

Schoenberg	<i>Verklarte Nacht; Gurrelieder</i>
<b>Schubert</b>	<i>Symphonies 5 &amp; 9; Winterreise; string quartets 13 &amp; 14; C major quintet;</i>
<b>Schumann</b>	<i>Piano music; Dichterliebe; cello concerto</i>
<b>Shostakovitch</b>	<i>Symphony No 5</i>
<b>Sibelius</b>	<i>Tone poems; violin concerto; symphonies</i>
Smetana	<i>Ma Vlast</i>
<b>R. Strauss</b>	<i>Tone poems; four last songs;</i>
<b>Stravinsky</b>	<i>The firebird; Petrushka; the rite of spring;</i>
Tippett	<i>A child of our time</i>
<b>Tchaikovsky</b>	<i>Romeo and Juliet; string quartet No 1; piano concerto No 1; violin concerto; symphonies 4, 5 and 6; ballet scores; Eugene Onegin</i>
<b>Vaughan Williams</b>	<i>On Wenlock Edge, Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis</i>
<b>Verdi</b>	<i>Several operas; requiem</i>
Vivaldi	[ <i>The four seasons</i> is not a masterpiece even though it gets recorded every week!]
<b>Wagner</b>	<i>Operas; overtures</i>
<b>Walton</b>	<i>Belshazzar</i>

We can happily eliminate Barber, Bernstein, Copland, Ives, Ligeti and Vivaldi on the grounds that they did not produce a single masterpiece.

We can eliminate Berg, Faure, Gershwin, Messiaen, Scarlatti and Schoenberg on the grounds that it would be difficult if not impossible to put together 5 CD's of varied, high quality and current repertoire music of theirs.

And we must regretfully eliminate Faure on the grounds that his music, while undoubtedly pretty, is well within the comfort zone of his age.

So here, then is my list of the 36 truly 'great' composers (listed above in bold type):

**Bach; Bartok; Beethoven; Berlioz; Brahms; Britten; Bruckner; Chopin; Delius; Debussy; Dvorak; Elgar; Handel; Haydn; Janacek; Listz; Mahler; Mendelssohn; Mozart; Poulenc; Prokofiev; Puccini; Purcell; Rachmaninov; Ravel; Schubert; Schumann; Shostakovitch; Sibelius; R. Strauss; Stravinsky; Tchaikovsky; Vaughan Williams; Verdi; Wagner; Walton.**

Now let's tighten the screw. Which of them number among the 'greatest'?

The most rigorous criterion is, of course, the first. Which of these have produced a masterpiece of what I have called 'transcendent' quality. It must be a work which is head and shoulders above its contemporary rivals; it must be a work which could not be improved by the addition or subtraction of a single note and most important of all, it must be a work which is capable of producing in the listener an emotional response which lies far beyond mere pleasure or excitement.

In the list of composers and works above, I have also highlighted in bold those works which I feel satisfy these conditions. Naturally there will be many works not listed which others will find emotionally equally powerful and it is possible – indeed – certain that some will not be as moved by the works I have chosen as I am but, for what it is worth, in my opinion there are 8 works which are of transcendent quality; they are:

<b>Bach</b>	<i>B minor mass; St Matthew passion,</i>
<b>Beethoven</b>	<i>The last string quartet: op 131</i>
<b>Brahms</b>	<i>German Requiem;</i>
<b>Britten</b>	<i>War Requiem</i>
<b>Handel</b>	<i>Messiah</i>
<b>Mozart</b>	<i>Requiem</i>
<b>Schubert</b>	<i>C major quintet</i>

After listening attentively to any of these works, it is almost impossible to believe that they were

written by a mortal human being – containing as they do extended passages of unmatched beauty and emotional depth. To see their transcendent quality, you only have to ask yourself – what is the nearest contender? Did Haydn write a string quartet which could be compared with Beethoven's Op 131? Can you compare Verdi's Requiem with Brahms'? Did anyone ever write anything as sublimely beautiful as the slow movement of Schubert's quintet? Has anyone, ever, written anything as harrowing as Britten's War Requiem? Just thinking about it makes me weep.

Works which, for me approach, but do not quite reach, this same level of intensity are:

**Brahms:** *Clarinet quintet*  
**Schubert:** *Winterreise*  
**Wagner:** *Tristan und Isolde*  
**Strauss:** *Four last songs*  
**Elgar:** *The Dream of Gerontius*

But of the three extra names which appear on this list, we must reject Wagner from the category of the 'greatest' composers because he essentially only wrote in one medium. Both Strauss and Elgar, however, have serious claims to be among the greatest composers.

Of the remaining composers in my list of 36 'greats', we must also eliminate Berlioz, Bruckner, Chopin, Listz, Mahler, Puccini and Verdi because their mastery is confined largely to one medium.

Borodin, Delius and Purcell must go on account of the limited volume of their output.

That leaves:

**Bartok; Debussy; Dvorak; Haydn; Janacek; Mendelssohn; Poulenc; Prokofiev; Rachmaninov; Ravel; Schumann; Shostakovitch; Sibelius; Stravinsky; Tchaikovsky; Vaughan Williams; Walton.**

all of whom wrote a substantial body of music which no other composer could have written and who therefore qualify (along with **Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Britten, Elgar, Handel, Mozart, Schubert** and **Strauss** already discussed) among the 26 'greatest' classical composers.

It is a bit pointless to single out just 10 composers (but then the whole of this exercise is arguably pointless) but if I have to add three from this list to the 7 transcendentalists **Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Britten, Handel, Mozart** and **Schubert**, then I would go for **Mendelssohn** (for his absolutely jaw-dropping Octet), **Haydn** (for the sheer staggering quality of his enormous output and the influence which he had on all subsequent classical music) and **Strauss** (for his four last songs and unique sound quality). Bartok, Elgar, Debussy, Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky would, however be treading on his heels!

So how does my (roughly ordered) list compare with Tommasini's?

<u>Tommasini</u>	<u>Linton</u>
Bach	Bach
Beethoven	Beethoven
Mozart	Mozart
Schubert	Schubert
Debussy	Brahms
Stravinsky	Britten
Brahms	Handel
Verdi	Mendelssohn
Wagner	Haydn
Bartok	Strauss

What does your list look like?