

36 NOTEWORTHY MUSICIANS

*Black Composers, Female Composers,
Latin American Musicians, AAPI Musicians*

Black Composers

Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges	4
Scott Joplin.....	6
Samuel Coleridge-Taylor	8
Florence Beatrice Price	10
Margaret Bonds	12
William Grant Still.....	14
Duke Ellington.....	16
Wynton Marsalis	18
Rhiannon Giddens.....	20

Female Composers

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel.....	22
Clara Wieck Schumann.....	24
Cécile Chaminade	26
Amy Beach.....	28
María Grever.....	30
Undine Smith Moore	32
Julia Perry.....	34
Chen Yi.....	36
Jennifer Higdon	38

Latin American Musicians

Heitor Villa-Lobos	40
Astor Piazzolla	42
Tito Puente	44
Antônio Carlos Jobim.....	46
Rita Moreno	48
Tania León	50
Germaine Franco.....	52
Lin-Manuel Miranda	54
Gustavo Dudamel	56

AAPI Musicians

Queen Lili'uokalani.....	58
Shinichi Suzuki.....	60
Ravi Shankar	62
Yo-Yo Ma.....	64
Tan Dun.....	66
Xian Zhang.....	68
Siddhartha Khosla	70
Bruno Mars.....	72
H.E.R.....	74

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Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges

December 25, 1745 – June 12, 1799

French Composer, Violinist, and Conductor
Classical



- Joseph was from the French colony of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean. He was born out of wedlock to a teenage enslaved Senegalese person named Anna and a married white plantation owner who was her enslaver.
- Bologne's father took him to France to be educated when he was young. His father wanted him to have all the advantages of his own social class because social factors such as racism and classism would have prevented that for a person born of a non-consensual union with an enslaved teenager.
- By age 13, Joseph was enrolled in an elite boarding school for fencing and horsemanship. He became the best fencer in the school and even traveled to compete in fencing competitions.
- When he graduated at age 19, Bologne was made an officer of the king's bodyguard and a chevalier (knight). Although he was not eligible to inherit his father's title because he was born out of an unmarried union, King Louis XIV granted him the title of "Chevalier de Saint-Georges."
- The first mention of Bologne as a musician was in 1764. His musical training is unknown, but because of his impressive technique as an adult, it is assumed that he studied music as a child.
- In 1769, Bologne became a violinist in an orchestra, Le Concert des Amateurs. Joseph became the conductor of the orchestra a few years later.
- His first compositions were a set of six string quartets. A leader in this genre, his were among the first string quartets written in France.
- When the Paris Opéra needed a new director in 1776, Bologne was a top candidate. However, he withdrew from consideration when three of the opera's prima donnas stated they would not work for someone of mixed race.
- The queen of France, Marie Antoinette, began to invite Bologne to perform at private musical gatherings of close friends. The Queen played the pianoforte while Joseph performed on the violin.
- In 1785, Bologne was the director and concertmaster of an orchestra that commissioned Franz Joseph Haydn to compose six symphonies, which Bologne conducted at their premiere.
- Joseph made trips to England, where he learned about the country's anti-slavery movement. He helped establish a group in France called the Société des amis des noirs (Society of the Friends of Black People).
- France's "Code Noir" or "Black Code" was a set of laws that restricted the freedom of Black people in religion, marriage, and business. Because of these laws and the racist and classist beliefs of that time, Joseph could not marry at the same level of society that he enjoyed.
- Saint-Georges lived mainly among the aristocracy and owed much of his success to the King and Queen. However, when the French Revolution began, he joined the revolutionaries fighting for equality. He heroically led a group of Black soldiers that came to be known as the "Légion Saint-Georges."
- Unfortunately, he was not hailed as a hero for long. The aftermath of the French Revolution was chaotic, and Joseph was accused of treason and imprisoned for nearly a year.
- After his release from prison in the late 1790s he died poor and alone at the age of 53.
- Saint-Georges' music was rarely heard for almost 200 years after he died but is now gaining well-deserved recognition. He composed string quartets, sonatas, concertos, symphonies, operas, songs, and more.

"The most accomplished man in Europe in riding, shooting, fencing, dancing, and music."

— U.S. President John Adams, describing Saint-Georges

William Grant Still

May 11, 1895 – December 3, 1978

American Composer, Conductor, and Arranger

20th Century



- William was born in Mississippi to parents who were both respected educators at Alabama A&M College. His father died when William was an infant, and his mother moved the family to Arkansas.
- As a child, William's grandmother sang traditional spirituals to him. His stepfather nurtured his interest in music by taking him to musical performances and buying him records.
- At age 14, he began violin lessons and taught himself to play other instruments, including the cello and oboe.
- Still entered Wilberforce University at just 16 years old, with plans to study medicine. He continued to pursue music by learning to play several instruments and conducting the university band.
- He enrolled at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and worked as a janitor to pay for school. One of his professors created a scholarship for him when he learned that William couldn't afford composition lessons.
- After his time at Oberlin, Still began to work for influential blues composer W. C. Handy in Memphis. Still created arrangements of Handy's works, was artistic manager for the Handy Band, and worked at Handy's music publishing company (the most prominent Black Tin Pan Alley music publishing business).
- Still served in the Navy during World War I. He then moved to Harlem, where he was part of the Harlem Renaissance movement. He was an arranger and pit player for *Shuffle Along*, a Broadway musical written, produced, and performed entirely by Black musicians.
- Through the 1920s and 30s, William worked as a composer, arranger, and musician. He arranged music for two NBC radio shows. His work mainly began in commercial music, but by the 1930s, he turned his attention to classical music.
- In 1931, Still's first major work for orchestra, *Symphony No. 1, "Afro-American,"* was performed by the Rochester Philharmonic. This marked the first time a major U. S. orchestra performed a complete work composed by an African American.
- In 1934, Still was awarded his first of three Guggenheim Fellowships and moved to Los Angeles. He conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra in performing two of his works and became the first African American to lead a major American orchestra.
- For a time, William intentionally avoided arranging spirituals to break stereotypes and ensure his work was judged on his creativity and compositional ability.
- Still also arranged music for films, including *Pennies from Heaven* and *Lost Horizon*.
- Still's style utilized the harmonic and rhythmic languages of jazz, blues, and spirituals.
- William wrote "Song of a City" for the 1939 World's Fair in New York City but wasn't allowed to attend the fair without police protection unless he came on "Negro Day."
- He wrote nine operas. One of these, *Troubled Island*, was the first opera by an African American to be performed by a major opera company (New York City Opera, 1949).
- In 1981, his opera *A Bayou Legend* became the first by an African American composer to be televised.
- Still was known as the "Dean of African American composers." He was inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame in 1999.

"For me, there is no White music or Black music—there is only music by individual men that is important if it attempts to dignify all men, not just a particular race."

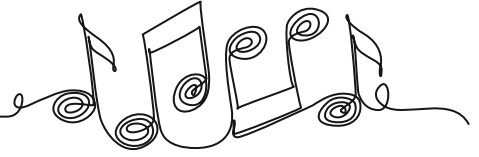
— William Grant Still

Amy Cheney Beach

September 5, 1867 – December 27, 1944

American Composer and Pianist

Romantic



- Amy Cheney was a child prodigy—by age two she could sing 40 melodies, harmonize with her mother, and had perfect pitch. At four, she wrote her first music by composing waltzes in her head and then playing them on the piano.
- Amy had *synesthesia*, an involuntary ability to experience color while hearing sounds. Because of this, she associated different musical keys with specific colors. As a child, she would request “pink” or “blue” music from her mother, who eventually figured out that she was asking for music in E-flat or A-flat.
- After studying piano with her mother until age eight, Amy’s family moved to Boston, where she took lessons from leading pianists. Her teachers believed she should study in Europe, but her parents would not allow it.
- Beach’s only formal education in theory and composition was one year of study in her teens. She taught herself orchestration by studying and memorizing works by Bach and other European composers.
- Her first published work was the song “The Rainy Day” when she was 15.
- Amy debuted professionally as a pianist in 1883 at Boston’s Music Hall. She gave several noteworthy performances over the next few years, including with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.
- In 1885, she married Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach. He supported Amy’s composing but limited her performances to a few charity events each year. She could not teach piano lessons, and her music had to be published under the name “Mrs. H. H. A. Beach.” Dr. Beach insisted that she focus more on composition than performance but would not allow her to study with a teacher. These restrictions were common for upper-class women at this time.
- Despite the limitations imposed on her, Amy continued to compose. The Handel and Haydn Society orchestra performed her *Mass in E-flat Major* in 1892.
- Amy was the first American woman to compose and publish a symphony: *Gaelic Symphony*, in 1896. It became one of her best-known compositions. The common belief at the time was that only men could write large works like symphonies, so the popularity of this piece was notable.
- These successes led to her inclusion as a member of a group of Boston musicians known as the “Second New England School” or the “Boston Six.” The other members of the group were all men.
- Beach was sometimes criticized for writing large works or music that sounded powerful, which was seen as “unladylike.” Women were expected to write small pieces (songs, piano solos) that were delicate and melodic.
- After the death of her husband, Beach took a break from music. She went to Europe and eventually began performing and composing again. She was a soloist on her own works with orchestras in Berlin, Leipzig, and Hamburg.
- She returned to the U.S. in 1914 and maintained a busy touring schedule.
- In 1921, Amy helped establish the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, an artists’ retreat community.
- Amy co-founded the Society of American Women Composers, mentored young composers, and served as President of the Board of the New England Conservatory of Music. She wrote many articles on preparing, practicing, and composing music.
- Beach died in 1944. Although Amy enjoyed great success as a composer, her music was neglected after her death. She has been “rediscovered” recently and appreciated for her writing and the ground she broke as a woman.

“Remember that technic is valuable only as a means to an end. You must first have something to say—something which demands expression from the depths of your soul. If you feel deeply and know how to express what you feel, you make others feel.”

— Amy Beach