



MEET THE COMPOSER:

Johann Sebastian Bach

Age Range: Elementary, Middle School, High School

Introduction: Composers write music, just like authors write books. In the Class Notes “Meet the Composer” series, we will learn a little bit about the achievements, backstory, and influences of a variety of composers. Get ready to learn about these influential composers and listen to some of their music.

Total Video Time: 15:12

Total Lesson Time: Approximately 25-30 minutes

BACKGROUND on Johann Sebastian Bach

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685 in Germany. He was born into a family of musicians, and several of his own children became musicians too. He is often referred to as “J.S” Bach, since there are other composers with the last name Bach.

J.S. Bach began musical studies with family members at a young age. He got a job as a music director for several churches, so many of his compositions were originally performed in church. He also received commissions from nobility, so many of his compositions were originally performed in palace chambers.

J.S. Bach played violin and was an accomplished organist and harpsichord player, so he composed a lot of keyboard music. Today, many of his pieces are performed on the piano, though the modern piano had not been invented during his lifetime.

J.S. Bach’s work was well-respected by friends and colleagues during his lifetime, but he was not very famous or well-known beyond his home country of Germany. During the 1800’s and after, his work became much more famous, in part because the composer Felix Mendelssohn became a champion and advocate for J.S. Bach’s work. J.S. Bach died in 1750 in Germany.

MUSIC of Johann Sebastian Bach

1. J.S. Bach wrote a set of six instrumental pieces known as “the Brandenburg Concertos”. He dedicated the work to a nobleman called the Margrave of Brandenburg. J.S. Bach hoped that by dedicating these pieces to him, the Margrave would offer him a job, but that didn’t happen.

After Bach’s lifetime, the musical form of the concerto usually meant that one featured soloist played along with an orchestra. But in these concertos, there are small groups of different combinations of instruments that all take turns playing solos and playing together. Here is a part of the third Brandenburg Concerto, composed for strings and harpsichord.

[Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major, 1. Allegro](#). Composed 1718. Video approx. 5.5 minutes.

2. Johann Sebastian made his living as a music director for several churches, and he was also the church organist. Here is one of his most famous pieces for organ, Toccata in d minor.

[Toccata in d minor](#). Composed around 1708. Video approx. 3 minutes.



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3. The next piece was composed for J.S. Bach's work in the church. The words are based on words from the Bible, and the piece would have been performed for special celebrations like Christmas. As you listen and watch, notice that many of the instruments look similar to modern instruments, but there are differences too. Bach wrote music a long time ago, and some of the instruments (like the flute and trumpet) have changed over time.

[Magnificat anima mea from Magnificat BWV 243](#). Composed 1723-1733. Video approx. 3 minutes.

4. J.S. Bach also wrote a lot of music for solo instruments—almost like practice pieces. Here is the prelude from his Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major. J.S. Bach wrote music so long ago, but his music still seems to connect with audiences today.

[Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, Prélude](#). Composed around 1720. Video approx. 3.5 minutes.

CREATE, CONNECT, & RESPOND to Bach's music

1. One of J.S. Bach's most famous pieces is the Toccata in d minor, listed above. Learn more about toccatas in the Class Notes lesson [What is a TOCCATA?](#)
2. As a church musician, playing the pipe organ was a big part of J.S. Bach's life. Learn more about the pipe organ and how it works in the Class Notes lesson [Instrument Exploration: How the Pipe Organ Works](#).

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FAST FACTS

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