

Eight composer lives

One page each: what happened to them, what they changed, three pieces to hear, and one thing worth stealing. These are the eight faces on the covers of the packs in this library — worth knowing as people who worked, not portraits on a wall.

Every one of them was a working musician with deadlines, patrons or pupils, and every one of them wrote a great deal of music that nobody now plays. That is the normal shape of a composing life.

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Four things they had in common

All eight were practical working musicians — playing, conducting, teaching or all three. All eight learnt their craft by studying other composers' scores closely. All eight wrote for specific players and rooms rather than for posterity. And all eight were, at some point, in trouble — with money, with employers, with their health, or with the critics.

Reading these with the history pack

Bach is late Baroque; Haydn and Mozart are the Classical style itself; Beethoven crosses from one to the next; Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann and Brahms are four very different answers to the question of what to do after him. A short history of Western music gives the surrounding ground.

Johann Sebastian Bach

1685–1750



A church organist and choirmaster who spent his life meeting weekly deadlines, and in doing so wrote the music every later composer studies. He was known in his lifetime chiefly as a spectacular organist; his manuscripts sat largely unplayed for eighty years after his death.

THE LIFE IN EIGHT LINES

1685	Born in Eisenach into a family that had supplied Germany with musicians for generations.
1695	Orphaned at ten; raised by an elder brother, and copies out scores by moonlight to learn them.
1703–05	First posts as organist; walks some 400 km to hear Buxtehude play, and overstays his leave by months.
1717	Kapellmeister at Köthen. Writes chiefly instrumental music — the Brandenburgs, the cello suites.
1723	Cantor of St Thomas's, Leipzig: a new cantata most Sundays, plus a school to run.
1729	Takes over the Collegium Musicum, a student ensemble playing in a coffee house.
1747	Begins <i>The Art of Fugue</i> , an exhaustive study of one subject. Left unfinished.
1750	Dies in Leipzig after failed eye surgery. Twenty children; ten survive him.

Steal this

Write a bass line first, and make it a tune in its own right. Bach's lowest part is never filler — it walks, it argues, it has direction. If your bass is interesting, your harmony will be too, and the whole texture comes alive without any extra notes.

WHAT HE CHANGED

Counterpoint, completed. Nobody before or since has made several independent lines behave so well while still sounding inevitable.

Every key made usable. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* — two sets of 24 preludes and fugues, one in every key — argued the case in practice.

The keyboard as a complete instrument. Music that needs no accompaniment and no ensemble to sound finished.

Teaching by writing. Much of his output exists because a pupil, a son or a choir needed material next week.

LISTEN TO THREE

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, first movement — the drive of the Baroque in five minutes.

Cello Suite No. 1, Prelude — one line implying a whole harmony.

St Matthew Passion, opening chorus — two choirs, two orchestras, and grief on an enormous scale.

One thing worth knowing

He was rediscovered largely because Mendelssohn revived the *St Matthew Passion* in 1829, eighty years after Bach's death. A reputation is not a fixed thing, and the judgment of one's own decade is not final.

Joseph Haydn

1732–1809



A wheelwright's son who spent thirty years as a nobleman's employee and, in that unglamorous position, invented much of what we mean by the symphony and the string quartet. Cheerful, practical, funny in his music, and generous to younger composers — Mozart was a friend, Beethoven a pupil.

THE LIFE IN EIGHT LINES

1732	Born in Rohrau, Austria, to a wheelwright and a cook. No family tradition of music at all.
1740	Chorister at St Stephen's, Vienna. Dismissed at seventeen when his voice breaks.
1749	Nine hard freelance years — teaching, playing dances, accompanying, learning by doing.
1761	Enters the service of the Esterházy princes. Stays, in effect, for the rest of his working life.
1772	The <i>Farewell</i> Symphony: players stop and leave one by one, a hint to the prince about leave.
1784	Friendship with Mozart. The two learn from each other; Haydn calls him the finest composer alive.
1791	Two triumphant visits to London. Writes twelve symphonies and becomes internationally famous at sixty.
1809	Dies in Vienna as Napoleon's army occupies the city.

Steal this

Use silence. Haydn stops the music dead, then comes back somewhere unexpected. A rest is the loudest thing you can write, and nothing else so cheaply buys a listener's attention back — a bar of nothing costs you no notes at all.

WHAT HE CHANGED

The string quartet. Four equal voices in genuine conversation — he wrote nearly seventy and defined the medium.

The symphony. A hundred-odd of them, working out the four-movement shape everyone after him inherited.

Development as argument. Taking a small motif and making a whole movement out of examining it.

Wit as a musical device. Silences, false endings and sudden loud chords, used deliberately to catch the listener out.

LISTEN TO THREE

Symphony No. 94 "Surprise", second movement — the joke arrives in bar sixteen.

String Quartet Op. 76 No. 3 "Emperor", second movement — a hymn tune, then four variations on it.

The Creation, "The Heavens are Telling" — the sound of a composer thoroughly enjoying himself.

One thing worth knowing

He wrote to order, in uniform, for a man who could dismiss him — and produced music of enormous invention anyway. Constraints and a weekly deadline are not the enemy of good work; for most composers in history they were the condition of it.

Wolfgang Amadé Mozart 1756–1791

Exhibited across Europe as a child, and thereafter spent his short adult life trying to make a freelance living from a profession still organised around patronage. Wrote with famous fluency in every genre going, and had a particular genius for opera – for music that tells you what a character is really thinking.



THE LIFE IN EIGHT LINES

1756	Born in Salzburg. His father Leopold, a violinist and teacher, recognises the gift almost at once.
1762	The touring years begin: a decade of courts, carriages and illness across Europe.
1770	In Rome, reportedly writes out a jealously guarded choral work after hearing it twice.
1781	Breaks with the Archbishop of Salzburg and moves to Vienna to work for himself.
1782	Marries Constanze Weber. Concerts, pupils, publishing – good years, and good money.
1786	<i>The Marriage of Figaro</i> , with the librettist Da Ponte. Two more masterpieces follow with him.
1791	<i>The Magic Flute</i> succeeds; the Requiem is commissioned and left incomplete.
1791	Dies in Vienna at thirty-five, in debt, of an illness still not securely identified.

Steal this

Give the accompaniment a life of its own. Mozart's left hand and inner parts are full of small answering figures rather than plain chords. Write your tune, then ask what the other parts have to say about it – and let one of them reply.

WHAT HE CHANGED

Opera as character. The music tells you who someone is and when they are lying – several people at once, each with their own line.

The piano concerto. Twenty-seven of them; he made the soloist and orchestra genuine partners rather than rivals.

Melody that seems inevitable. Tunes so natural that the effort behind them is invisible – the hardest thing on this page to imitate.

Chromatic feeling inside Classical form. Elegant surfaces with real darkness underneath, especially in the minor keys.

LISTEN TO THREE

Symphony No. 40 in G minor, first movement – sonata form, and utterly unconsoling.

Piano Concerto No. 21, second movement – the most famous slow movement he wrote.

The Marriage of Figaro, Act II finale – seven characters, one continuous twenty-minute build.

One thing worth knowing

The story that he wrote everything perfectly at first attempt is largely myth: the surviving sketches show cuts, rewrites and abandoned starts. He composed extremely fast, in his head as well as on paper – but he did revise, and so may you.

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827



Arrived in Vienna as a brilliant young pianist, went deaf in his late twenties, and kept composing for another quarter of a century — writing his most radical music when he could no longer hear it performed. He changed what a composer was: not a servant supplying music, but an artist with something to say.

THE LIFE IN EIGHT LINES

1770	Born in Bonn. Pushed hard by a court-musician father who wanted another Mozart.
1792	Moves to Vienna, studies with Haydn, and makes his name as a pianist and improviser.
1798	Notices his hearing failing. Tells almost no one for years.
1802	Writes the Heiligenstadt Testament, a letter to his brothers about despair. Does not send it.
1804	The <i>Eroica</i> Symphony — twice the length of anything before it, and a different kind of piece.
1808	Premieres the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies in one freezing four-hour concert.
1824	The Ninth Symphony, with chorus. He is by now effectively deaf and has to be turned to see the applause.
1827	Dies in Vienna. Reportedly some ten thousand people attend the funeral.

Steal this

Build from something tiny. Take a three- or four-note figure and refuse to abandon it: invert it, stretch it, hide it in the bass, give it to another instrument. A short motif thoroughly worked will always sound more unified than four good tunes in a row.

WHAT HE CHANGED

Scale. Symphonies grew from twenty-five minutes to over an hour, and demanded to be listened to as arguments.

Motif as material. Four notes are enough to build a symphony from, if you examine them thoroughly enough.

The composer's status. He worked for publishers and subscribers rather than a household, and behaved as an equal to princes.

Late style. The last quartets and sonatas go somewhere so strange that players took decades to catch up.

LISTEN TO THREE

Symphony No. 5, first movement — the most economical piece of construction in the repertoire.

Piano Sonata Op. 27 No. 2 "Moonlight", first movement — and then the finale, which nobody expects.

String Quartet Op. 132, third movement — a long slow hymn of thanksgiving after an illness.

One thing worth knowing

His sketchbooks survive, and they are a mess: dozens of attempts at phrases we now think of as inevitable. The famous opening of the Fifth was reworked repeatedly. Genius here looks a great deal like persistence with a pencil.

Hector Berlioz

1803–1869



A medical student who defied his father to become a composer, played no instrument to a professional standard, and consequently imagined the orchestra with an originality nobody schooled at the keyboard could match. Also a formidable critic and conductor, who wrote the first great textbook on orchestration.

THE LIFE IN EIGHT LINES

1803	Born near Grenoble, the son of a doctor. Learns flute and guitar — never the piano.
1821	Sent to Paris to study medicine. Abandons it for the Conservatoire, against his family's wishes.
1827	Sees Harriet Smithson act Shakespeare and becomes obsessed with her.
1830	<i>Symphonie fantastique</i> — five movements narrating an opium dream about that obsession.
1833	Marries Smithson. The marriage is not a success.
1844	Publishes his <i>Treatise on Instrumentation</i> , studied by every later orchestrator.
1858	Completes <i>Les Troyens</i> , a vast opera he never sees staged whole.
1869	Dies in Paris, better known in Germany and Russia than in his own country.

Steal this

Transform a theme instead of repeating it. Bring your tune back in a new metre, a new key, a new instrument, or twisted into something grotesque. The listener recognises it and hears what has happened to it — which is how music tells a story without words.

WHAT HE CHANGED

Orchestration as invention. Instruments chosen for their colour and combined in ways no one had tried — muted, divided, placed offstage.

Programme music. A symphony with a printed story, its movements following a narrative rather than a form.

The recurring theme. His *idée fixe* returns transformed across five movements — the ancestor of the film score's character theme.

Conducting as a discipline. He toured as a conductor and wrote about how to rehearse an orchestra properly.

LISTEN TO THREE

Symphonie fantastique, fourth and fifth movements — a march to the scaffold, then a witches' sabbath.

Harold en Italie, first movement — a symphony with a solo viola wandering through it.

Les nuits d'été, "Le spectre de la rose" — the same imagination turned to a single voice.

One thing worth knowing

Not being a pianist was arguably his advantage: he composed by imagining orchestral sound directly rather than working out ideas under ten fingers. If your instrument is not the piano, that is a different set of ears, not a deficiency.

Felix Mendelssohn

1809–1847



A prodigy who, unusually, fulfilled the promise: at sixteen he wrote an octet that has never left the repertoire. Also a conductor, pianist, organist, watercolourist and tireless organiser — he founded a conservatory, revived Bach's choral music, and worked himself into an early grave at thirty-eight.

THE LIFE IN EIGHT LINES

1809	Born in Hamburg into a prosperous, intellectual family; taught alongside his gifted sister Fanny.
1825	Writes the Octet at sixteen — arguably the finest piece by any teenage composer.
1826	The <i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i> overture at seventeen: Shakespeare in sound.
1829	Conducts Bach's <i>St Matthew Passion</i> , unheard for eighty years, and begins the Bach revival.
1829	Travels Britain; Scotland and Staffa give him the <i>Scottish Symphony</i> and <i>Hebrides</i> overture.
1835	Takes over the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra and raises it to the front rank of Europe.
1843	Founds the Leipzig Conservatory, still one of the leading music schools.
1847	Dies at thirty-eight, months after his sister Fanny, from a series of strokes.

Steal this

Write light and fast. Mendelssohn's scherzos move in quick, quiet, precisely articulated notes — the orchestra playing at a whisper at speed. Thin textures and short note values create excitement far more reliably than volume does.

WHAT HE CHANGED

The concert overture. A single self-contained orchestral piece evoking a place or a play — the model for the symphonic poem.

Reviving the past. Before him, concerts were mostly new music. He made the performance of older repertoire normal.

The violin concerto rewritten. His E minor concerto dispenses with the long orchestral opening and starts with the soloist, almost at once.

Institutions. An orchestra raised, a conservatory founded, standards of rehearsal set. Not all of a composer's work is composing.

LISTEN TO THREE

Octet in E flat, first movement — eight strings, written at sixteen, and effortless.

Violin Concerto in E minor, first movement — the soloist enters in bar two.

The Hebrides overture — the swell of the sea in the opening figure.

One thing worth knowing

His sister Fanny Hensel was a composer of comparable gifts, discouraged from a public career by their family and the conventions of the time. Some of her music was published under Felix's name. Worth seeking out on its own terms.

Clara Schumann

1819–1896



One of the great pianists of the nineteenth century, touring for six decades, and a composer whose small output is consistently fine. She raised seven children, managed her husband Robert's career and then his illness, and largely invented the modern recital — playing from memory, and other composers' music rather than her own.

THE LIFE IN EIGHT LINES

1819	Born in Leipzig. Her father Friedrich Wieck, a piano teacher, trains her rigorously from five.
1830	Concert debut at eleven; tours Europe as a celebrated child virtuoso.
1836	Completes her Piano Concerto in A minor, begun at fourteen and toured by her for years.
1840	Marries Robert Schumann after a court case against her father's refusal.
1853	Meets the twenty-year-old Brahms. A lifelong friendship and correspondence begins.
1856	Robert dies in an asylum. She supports seven children by touring, and never remarries.
1878	Appointed principal piano teacher at the Frankfurt Conservatory, where she teaches for fourteen years.
1896	Dies in Frankfurt, having given some 1,300 concerts.

Steal this

Write for the instrument you actually play. Her piano writing fits the hand because she was the finest pianist in the room — it sounds harder than it is. Know one instrument from the inside and everything you write for it will be idiomatic.

WHAT SHE CHANGED

The recital as we know it. Playing from memory, programming serious repertoire, and putting other composers before herself.

The performer as curator. She kept Robert's and Brahms's music in the repertoire by playing it for decades.

Editing and teaching. Her edition of Robert's works and her Frankfurt pupils shaped how the next generation played.

A composing life against the odds. She doubted publicly whether a woman could compose, and composed anyway.

LISTEN TO THREE

Piano Concerto in A minor, second movement — a duet for piano and solo cello.

Three Romances for violin and piano, Op. 22 — concentrated, singing, beautifully judged.

Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 17, first movement — her most ambitious piece, and her best.

One thing worth knowing

She wrote in her diary that she had once believed she possessed creative talent, but had given up the idea — a woman must not wish to compose. She was wrong about herself, and the fact that she believed it tells you what the century cost.

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897



Played piano in Hamburg dance halls as a boy, was proclaimed a genius at twenty, and then took twenty-one years to finish his first symphony — because Beethoven's nine were standing behind him. Romantic in feeling, Classical in discipline, and ferociously self-critical: he destroyed far more music than he published.

THE LIFE IN EIGHT LINES

1833	Born in Hamburg to a double-bass player. Earns money young by playing the piano in taverns.
1853	Meets Robert and Clara Schumann. Robert declares him the future of German music in print.
1856	Robert dies. Brahms's devotion to Clara lasts, in one form or another, the rest of his life.
1868	<i>A German Requiem</i> makes his name across Europe — a requiem for the living, not the dead.
1876	The First Symphony at last, after twenty-one years of work and doubt.
1878	The Violin Concerto, for his friend Joachim. Settled in Vienna, he now composes in country summers.
1890	Announces his retirement, then meets a clarinetist and writes four more masterpieces.
1897	Dies in Vienna, eleven months after Clara Schumann.

Steal this

Vary rather than repeat. When your theme comes back, change its rhythm, its harmony or its length — never simply copy the bars out again. It is more work and it is the difference between a piece that develops and one that merely recurs.

WHAT HE CHANGED

Developing variation. Themes are constantly reshaped rather than restated — every bar grows out of the one before it.

Rhythmic ambiguity. Cross-rhythms and displaced accents that make you unsure where the beat is, on purpose.

Old forms, new feeling. Passacaglia, chorale and canon used in Romantic music without sounding like a pastiche.

Chamber music's second golden age. Quintets, sextets and sonatas that treat the medium as seriously as the symphony.

LISTEN TO THREE

Symphony No. 4, finale — thirty variations on an eight-bar bass, and utterly gripping.

Clarinet Quintet, first movement — autumnal, and the reason he came out of retirement.

Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 2 — four minutes; possibly the tenderest piano piece of the century.

One thing worth knowing

He burned an enormous quantity of his own work, including early quartets and songs, keeping only what met his standard. Being ruthless with your own drafts is not self-doubt — it is editing, and it is most of what makes a good composer.