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## Biography of George Frideric Handel

By Beth Beutler

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"Handel is the greatest composer who ever lived. I would bare my head and kneel at his grave." This quote is attributed to Ludwig van Beethoven, a composer very famous in his own right. It indicates the great respect Handel earned for his contribution to music.

George Frideric Handel was an accomplished musician who is perhaps best known for producing *Messiah* in 1742. This piece is often performed at Christmas time by choirs around the world. Interestingly, this famous piece was styled differently from much of his other work. Most of his work is known to be dramatic. *Messiah* is considered to be more contemplative. Since this piece is perhaps his most famous, he is often mistaken for having been primarily a church musician. Rather, he wrote many other works that include concertos, oratorios, and cantatas. His pieces were part of the Baroque period, a time when musical notes expanded and new instruments were introduced. Musical tones were used together both independently and in harmony.



Handel was born in 1685. (Another famous composer, Johann Sebastian Bach was also born that year.) Handel showed interest and skill in music as a child. His father, who was in his sixties when Handel was born, preferred his son pursue other interests, but his mother encouraged his musical bent.

He studied law for a while to honor his father. However, after his father passed away, he returned to focusing on music. He played a variety of instruments, including the organ, harpsichord, and violin. He wrote operas and sacred music. He spent time in Germany, Italy, and finally, England, where he resided until his death in April 1759. He never married but had good relationships and friendships with others, including musicians. He was known to be smart and humorous, and over the years, his love of food became evident by his weight.

While in England, he received a yearly salary from the queen. He also produced operas again for some time but lost a lot of money in the endeavor and eventually gave up on it. He wrote music for coronation ceremonies and directed a music academy.

Later in life, Handel suffered some physical setbacks. He had a tendency to be anxious and sometimes suffered from depression. He was not always praised - in fact, *Messiah* became the subject of controversy in London. He had a stroke at 52. This made his right arm unable to function for a time, which kept him from performing. About 13 years later, he suffered serious injuries in a carriage accident. A year later, he began to lose his sight, and this progressively worsened until he died 8 years later. (He did attempt some operations to improve his sight, performed by an eye specialist who also worked on Johann Sebastian Bach. Unfortunately, he was unable to help either composer regain his sight.) Handel last performed publicly just 8 days before he passed away. He is buried in Westminster Abbey and is highly honored for his contribution to music.

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## Biography of George Frideric Handel

### Questions

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\_\_\_\_\_ 1. Who said that "Handel is the greatest composer that ever lived"?

- A. Beethoven
- B. Haydn
- C. Mendelssohn
- D. Bach

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. True or false? Much of Handel's work was contemplative, but *Messiah* was dramatic.

- A. true
- B. false

3. What other famous composer was born the same year as Handel?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 4. Which instrument is NOT one that Handel played?

- A. organ
- B. flute
- C. harpsichord
- D. violin

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. Did Handel ever marry?

- A. no
- B. yes

6. Handel sometimes suffered from anxiety and \_\_\_\_\_.

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7. What type of ceremony did Handel write music for?

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8. How long before his death did Handel stop performing?

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## Connecticut Composer Charles Ives

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A source of pride for the citizens of Connecticut is the music of composer Charles Ives. His father, George Ives, was a U.S. Army bandleader throughout the American Civil War. Charles was born in Danbury, Connecticut, in 1874. Charles Ives grew up listening to the sounds of his father's marching band playing on one side of the Danbury town square while another band played simultaneously on the other. Charles took music lessons from his father. He was taught traditional music theory along with experimental music. His father also introduced him to the music of Stephen Foster, whose songs included "Camptown Races" and "Oh! Susanna."



At age fourteen, Charles became the organist for his church. As part of this job, he wrote various songs and hymns for the church services. One of these pieces, written in 1891, was called *Variations on "America"*. This piece included several different variations on the song "America," also referred to as "My Country 'Tis of Thee," written by Reverend Samuel F. Smith.

After graduating high school in New Haven, Ives enrolled at Yale University. He studied music there under American composer Horatio Parker. During his time at Yale, Ives wrote a campaign song for William McKinley in 1896. He composed his first symphony while there, too.

After graduation from college, Ives earned his living as an insurance salesman. He opened his own insurance company in 1907 and ran it until he retired. In his spare time he composed music. He also continued as church organist.

In 1907, Ives suffered the first of several "heart attacks." This is what he and his family called them, but they may have been psychological rather than physical conditions. After his recovery, he became more creative. He began composing prolifically. He married in 1908 and moved his wife and business to New York. He continued his success in the insurance business as well as composing music until his second heart attack in 1918. After this, he composed very little.

In 1922, he published his *114 Songs*, which included songs he wrote as a teenager. One day in 1927, he came to his wife with tears in his eyes to say he could no longer compose music. He said, "Nothing sounds right." No one really knows what happened to make him believe this, but it was clear to Charles Ives. His last composition was written in 1926. He continued to revise his old ones and supervised the performance of his music.

Ives' worsening health caused him to retire from the insurance business in 1930. He died of a stroke in 1954 in New York City. His works went unperformed for many years. Later in life, he was called a true music revolutionary. Today, Ives is regarded as one of the first American composers of international importance. Some

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have even called him America's greatest composer. Perhaps if you listen to one of his symphonies, you can decide for yourself.

Connecticut Composer Charles Ives

## Questions

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1. In what state was Charles Ives born?

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2. Who was Charles Ives' first music teacher?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 3. What was Charles doing at age 14?

- A. playing the church organ
- B. working in the insurance business
- C. marching in a band
- D. singing in the choir

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. When did Charles Ives write *Variations on "America"*?

- A. 1887
- B. 1899
- C. 1903
- D. 1891

5. In what year did Charles Ives quit composing?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 6. How is Charles Ives remembered by some today?

- A. a great insurance salesman
- B. America's greatest composer
- C. an American painter
- D. a great singer



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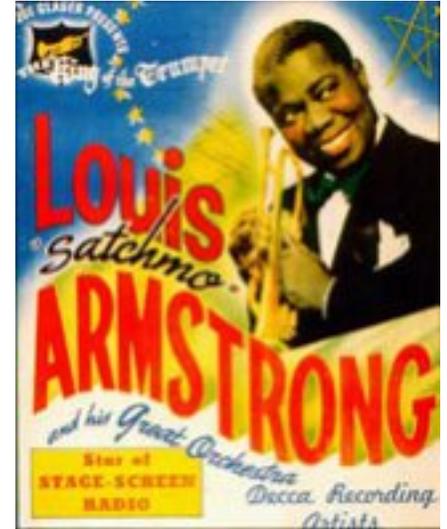
## American Musicians

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There are many famous American musicians. Some of them were great singers. Others were masters of one or more musical instruments. Some conducted orchestras, and others composed original music and lyrics.

These American musicians made all kinds of music. There was folk music, jazz music, classical music, rock music, religious music, movie music, and much more.

Here are just a few of the many great American musicians. All four of these musicians worked in the early part of the twentieth century. Each of them is an example of the creativity and talent that is represented by American music.



### Irving Berlin (1888 - 1989)

Irving Berlin was best known for composing some of America's most famous songs. His songs include "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and "God Bless America."

Irving Berlin was born a Russian Jew. He immigrated to the United States with his family when he was five years old. His family settled in a tenement house in New York. At that time, Irving Berlin's first name was Israel, but later he changed it to Irving.

Some of his most popular songs are in the scores of famous plays and movies. They have tunes and words that stick in your mind. All together, Irving Berlin wrote over 1,000 songs.

### Duke Ellington (1899 - 1974)

When you think of the big band sound, you think of Duke Ellington. He was also a songwriter, composer, and performer, but Duke Ellington is best known as the leader of a big band.

Duke Ellington was born in Washington, DC. He learned music first from his parents, beginning with piano lessons when he was seven or eight years old. Later, he continued to improve his piano playing by learning all that he could from mentors who were excellent musicians.

Eventually, he moved to New York City, the place to be if you were a performing artist. There he made his first recording. He performed in New York with his band, The Washingtonians. His band became famous. They played for Queen Elizabeth in England and President Nixon here in the United States.

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### **Aaron Copland (1900 - 1990)**

Aaron Copland's best-known work is "Appalachian Spring." To compose this piece, he combined his knowledge of classical music with new American ideas.

Aaron Copland grew up in Brooklyn, New York, with his family, who were also Jewish immigrants. His sister taught him to play piano, and he even tried to learn more by taking a correspondence course. Then he traveled to Europe, which was recognized as the place for serious students of classical music. Back in America, he tried different combinations of classical music and other types of music in his compositions.

Today, people remember him best for the pieces that combined classical music with simple tunes and clear melodies. "Billy the Kid" and "Rodeo" are two more of his famous works.

### **Louis Armstrong (1901 - 1971)**

Louis Armstrong was a jazz musician who is most famous for his trumpet playing. Pictures of Louis Armstrong almost always show him with his trumpet. He is often considered the greatest jazz musician.

Louis Armstrong was from New Orleans, the place where jazz began. He learned to play a cornet, a horn like a small trumpet, while he was in reform school for firing a gun on New Year's Eve. Later, he began playing in music clubs. Louis Armstrong and other jazz artists made the New Orleans style popular, and soon it was spreading from city to city.

People loved to hear Louis Armstrong play. They liked the improvisations that he added to the songs, making each one original. Musicians who practice jazz today hope to learn to improvise like Louis Armstrong and the other early jazz artists of New Orleans.

You can find music by all of these artists on recordings at a music store or a library. Once you listen to their music, you will understand more about each of them than you can from just reading about their lives. You will also hear the influence of their music whenever you listen to current hit songs because each of these musicians helped to inspire the popular music of today.

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American Musicians

## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. He was best known as the leader of a big band.
- A. Irving Berlin
  - B. Aaron Copland
  - C. Louis Armstrong
  - D. Duke Ellington
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. He was a great jazz trumpet player.
- A. Louis Armstrong
  - B. Irving Berlin
  - C. Aaron Copland
  - D. Duke Ellington
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. He wrote a musical composition called "Rodeo."
- A. Aaron Copland
  - B. Duke Ellington
  - C. Louis Armstrong
  - D. Irving Berlin
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. He wrote "God Bless America."
- A. Irving Berlin
  - B. Louis Armstrong
  - C. Duke Ellington
  - D. Aaron Copland
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. He grew up in the nation's capital.
- A. Louis Armstrong
  - B. Irving Berlin
  - C. Duke Ellington
  - D. Aaron Copland
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. He studied classical music in Europe.
- A. Aaron Copland
  - B. Irving Berlin
  - C. Louis Armstrong
  - D. Duke Ellington
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. He lived to the age of 101.
- A. Duke Ellington
  - B. Aaron Copland
  - C. Louis Armstrong
  - D. Irving Berlin
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. What do all four of these musicians have in common?
- A. They all studied classical music in Europe.
  - B. They were all great American musicians.
  - C. They all played piano and trumpet.
  - D. They all performed jazz music.

