

Classical Music

Many cultures have their “classical music,” meaning music held in the highest esteem with the longest history. The term often means western or European classical music, almost always written music, rather than music such as folk music that is passed down via the oral tradition, or music such as jazz that is improvised by the performer. Much music in western classical music is in forms such as symphonies, choral works, concertos, chamber music and operas.

Classical Music in Missouri

Classical music lovers in Missouri enjoy a strong array of orchestras, choruses, opera companies, choruses, chamber music ensembles, soloists and educational institutions. Some of the earliest classical music heard in Missouri was performed by musicians playing for family gatherings, community events, and for the enjoyment of the participants. Singing societies, including German societies in St. Louis, became popular in the 1800s and provided opportunities for many to sing in choruses. The St. Louis Symphony was formed out of the St. Louis Choral Society which began in 1880, making the Symphony the second oldest continuous symphonic organization in the United States. In 1869 and several other subsequent years, St. Louis audiences had heard the Theodore Thomas Orchestra, led by the German-born conductor who led orchestras in New York and Chicago. In Kansas City, after several attempts in the 1890s, the Kansas City Philharmonic took hold in 1933.

Famous solo artists, such as violinist Ole Bull from Norway in 1844, soprano Jenny Lind, “The Swedish Nightingale,” in 1851, and piano virtuoso and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk, “The Chopin of the Creoles,” in 1862, came and performed in St. Louis. The Metropolitan Opera Company staged a week of Wagnerian operas in St. Louis in 1889, helping to lay the seeds for the creation of the Lyric Opera of Kansas City in 1957 and the creation of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 1976. Missouri has produced its share of opera singers, including Helen Traubel, Grace Bumbry, Vinson Cole and Julia Bullock. Baritone Robert McFerrin Sr., father of vocalist Bobby McFerrin, attended Sumner High School in St. Louis and was the first Black man to sing at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City in 1955. Composer and classical music writer Virgil Thomson, a native of Kansas City, wrote the ground-breaking opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* in 1934, as well as *Mother of Us All* in 1947.

Excellent music education programs abound in Missouri schools, including choral, band, jazz and orchestra programs in many high schools and colleges, composition programs of the Mizzou New Music Initiative supported by the Sinquefeld Charitable Foundation at the University of Missouri-Columbia

Classical Bios

Scott Joplin

Scott Joplin (1868-1917) was an African American composer and pianist. Although he was most famous for his ragtime compositions, he strove throughout his career both to elevate ragtime as a musical form, and to expand his compositions into longer, classical forms, including a ragtime ballet, and two operas.

Born in Texas, Joplin grew up in Texarkana, Arkansas to parents who worked as laborers, but shared their love of music with their children, teaching Scott to play piano. Joplin’s talent was noticed by a local German-born music teacher, Julius Weiss, who instructed him further by placing special emphasis on European art forms, including opera. Weiss’ influence may be one foundation of Joplin’s lifelong desire for recognition as a classical composer.

Joplin lived from 1884 to 1901 in Sedalia, Missouri, earning a living as a piano teacher and performer, as well as from the royalties he received from the sale of his ragtime compositions. He moved to St. Louis in 1901 where he formed an opera company of 30 people and created his first opera, *A Guest of Honor*, for a Midwestern tour in 1903. The production was shut down due to the theft of the box-office receipts, forcing Joplin to deal with the financial losses. Sadly, the score was lost.

Joplin then wrote a second opera, *Treemonisha*. Based on European models, *Treemonisha* has three full acts and an overture, with the words set to music. It features arias, choruses, ensembles, and dance. In 1907, Joplin moved to New York City to find a producer and the financial resources for this opera to be performed. Unfortunately, due to lack of money and interest from possible producers, Joplin was unable to present a complete stage production of the opera, and it faded into obscurity. Despite deteriorating health, he was able to copy out the score and publish it in 1911.

Joplin's goal in composing opera was to expand and enlarge his musical compositions beyond ragtime. *Treemonisha* is not truly a ragtime opera but is drawn from both classical music and the rural African American music of his time. *Treemonisha* was finally presented in a full production, with great success, in 1972. Since then, it has been widely produced around the world and recorded. Joplin was posthumously awarded a special Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1976. Joplin helped to revolutionize American music and culture by introducing African American music with intense syncopation and rhythms and by helping to pave the way for the next generation of African American artists.

Virgil Thomson

Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) was an American composer who was important in developing the "American Sound" in classical music. He based his compositions on many types of music found only in America: songs from Civil War soldiers, cowboy music, Baptist hymns, the blues, folk and popular songs, and music rooted in the American Midwest.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, Thomson's first musical experience was playing the organ in a church. He studied music at Harvard University, and after graduation studied and lived in France from 1925 till 1940. He was influenced by several contemporary French composers. His most important colleague during this period was the American writer Gertrude Stein who also lived in France. Thomson asked her to write a libretto for an opera he wished to compose. The result of their collaboration was the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* which premiered in 1934. It was revolutionary in its form, content, extraordinary visual production, and its portrayal of European saints by an all-Black cast. In spite of rejecting many of the traditional forms of opera, the opera received popular acclaim and is one of Thomson's most successful works. *Four Saints: an Olio for Chamber Orchestra* was arranged by St. Louis composer Paul Reuter and performed in Hartford, Connecticut, on the 50th anniversary of the premiere. In 1947, Thomson and Stein again collaborated successfully on the opera *The Mother of Us All* which portrays the life of the social reformer Susan B. Anthony, one of the major figures in the fight for the women's vote in the United States. The opera has characters, both real and fictional, from American history. Both Stein and Thomson appear as narrators in the opera.

Thomson was a prolific composer, writing symphonies, ballets, orchestral works, and piano compositions. He was also well known for his music composed for movies. He wrote the music for two documentary films about the role of the United States government in developing programs to alleviate the problems of the Great Depression of the 1930s. In 1949, he received

the Pulitzer Prize for his musical score for the film *Louisiana Story*. This award was the first Pulitzer Prize given for a musical composition written exclusively for film. He then adapted the film scores into orchestral suites to be performed by symphony orchestras.

Thomson also was an important music critic for a New York newspaper and served as a mentor of a new generation of American composers, including Leonard Bernstein. He was honored with the Kennedy Center Honors award and the National Medal of Arts.

Kevin Puts

Kevin Puts (born 1972) was born in St. Louis and grew up in Michigan. He studied musical composition and piano at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where he earned his degree of Doctor of Musical Arts. He has served as a composer-in-residence for several musical organizations. Since 2006 Puts has taught as a member of the Composition Faculty at the Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Puts is recognized as one of the most important composers of his generation. He has been awarded many commissions to compose music of varied genres, including three operas, four symphonies, and many orchestral concerti. These works have been performed and recorded by leading orchestras, ensembles, and soloists throughout the world. In 2004, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra commissioned him to compose a piece in celebration of the Symphony's 125th anniversary. This tone poem is titled *River's Rush*, and it seems appropriate that in fulfilling a commission from St. Louis, a city that sits near the confluence of our nation's two great rivers, Puts drew inspiration from the sounds of the movement of water. One of Put's most significant compositions was his first opera *Silent Night*. This opera relates the story of the spontaneous Christmas truce in the fighting between the British and German armies during World War I in 1914. The opera was first presented by the Minnesota Opera in 2011 and Puts won the Pulitzer Prize for music for this opera the following year. *Silent Night* has been performed worldwide by over 20 opera companies, and a video production has been recorded as well.

Robert McFerrin Sr.

Robert McFerrin Sr. (1921-2006) was a baritone whose career included singing in opera houses as well as teaching young students. He was born in Arkansas but lived in St. Louis most of his life. McFerrin showed vocal talent as a young boy and was sent to live with his aunt and uncle in St. Louis where he attended the prestigious Charles H. Sumner High School, the first Black high school west of the Mississippi. The director of the choir there was so impressed that he taught McFerrin privately and encouraged his career. After serving in the military during World War II, he graduated from the Chicago Musical College when he was 27. He then moved to New York City where his career prospered. He sang on both Broadway and at the New York City Opera. In 1953, he won the Metropolitan Opera's "Auditions of the Air," the first African American singer to do so. In 1955, he made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera, the premiere opera company in the United States. He was the first Black man to sing at this house, the same month that Marian Anderson also sang there. He sang several roles at the Metropolitan, but uncertain as to his future, resigned his position there to move to Hollywood, California. His major breakthrough at this time was singing the role of Porgy in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. In this movie version of the opera, Sidney Poitier acted the role of Porgy onscreen and lip-synched the musical numbers which were sung by McFerrin. When released in 1959, this movie was well received and McFerrin's singing was highly praised. McFerrin then became a voice teacher.

In 1973, age 52, he returned to St. Louis where he remained for the remainder of his life. He was appointed an Artist-in-Residence at the St. Louis Institute of Music Conservatory, both

performing and teaching. In spite of physical illnesses, he continued singing with great success well into his 8th decade. He received two honorary degrees, one from the Stowe Teacher's College (now the Harris-Stowe State University, the only historically Black university in St. Louis) and the other from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. He is honored with a brass star and plaque in the St. Louis Walk of Fame on Delmar Boulevard. He died at age 85. His accomplishments as a Black man in the field of classical singing served as an inspiration to singers of color who followed him. Both of his children became professional singers. His daughter Brenda was a jazz singer and made her career as a Motown recording artist as well as a teacher. His son, Bobby, became a well-known non-classical singer, composer, conductor, and won a Grammy award. Bobby also conducted many symphony orchestras and was active both as a performer and educator.

Helen Traubel

Helen Traubel (1899-1972) was an American concert and opera singer who specialized in the soprano roles in operas written by Richard Wagner. She also performed and sung in nightclubs, cabaret, television, films, and musical theater. Born and raised in St. Louis, Traubel studied in St. Louis and New York. She made her debut as a concert singer with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in 1923 and her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1937. By 1941 she was the foremost soprano singer of Wagnerian operatic roles in the United States and was a major soloist at the Metropolitan Opera. However, her operatic career was restricted by the limited numbers of roles she would sing. She left the Metropolitan Opera in 1953 when her contract was cancelled due to disagreements over her appearance in other entertainment venues. She then expanded her career to more lucrative roles in night clubs, Broadway shows and movies.

Traubel was a committed baseball fan and was once a part owner of her hometown team, the St. Louis Browns. She also wrote two murder mysteries, one set at the Metropolitan Opera House. This novel, *The Metropolitan Opera Murders* (1951), featured a soprano heroine who is a thinly-disguised representation of Traubel herself. She has been inducted into both the Hollywood Walk of Fame for her contribution to the recording industry and the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Grace Bumbry

Grace Bumbry (born 1937) is an American opera singer and one of the leading mezzo-sopranos of her time. She followed the pioneering career of the singer Marian Anderson as an African American singer in the fields of opera and classical music. She was born in St. Louis where her father was a railroad porter and her mother a high school teacher. She attended Sumner High School and at age 17 she won a teen talent contest sponsored by radio station KMOX. One of the prizes was a scholarship to the St. Louis Institute of Music, but she was denied admittance because she was Black. The contest promoters arranged for her to sing an operatic aria on the nationally televised *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* program. Her success there allowed her to study at Boston University and then at Northwestern University. At age 21, she was a winner at the Metropolitan Opera National Auditions and two years later made her operatic debut in Paris. She became an international star in many European opera houses, including being the first Black singer to perform at the Richard Wagner Festival in Bayreuth, Germany at age 24. Much of her career was centered in Europe, although she also sang in America. Just as McFerrin sang the role of Porgy in the Gershwin opera, she performed the role of Bess at the Metropolitan Opera when that company first presented this opera in 1985. She was twice invited to sing at the White House, first by Jackie Kennedy and then for the Ronald Reagan inauguration. Unusual for a singer, she sang both mezzo-soprano and soprano roles.

In the 1990s, she founded and toured with the Grace Bumbry Black Musical Heritage Ensemble, a group devoted to preserving and performing traditional Negro spirituals. She has recorded many operatic roles. She has received many honors, including the Kennedy Center Honor Award and recognition on the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Vinson Cole

Vinson Cole (born 1950) is a native of Kansas City, Missouri. He is a tenor who began his training at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and then at several of the most prestigious music institutes in America. He began his career in singing in Europe and then at age 27 won the Metropolitan Opera Auditions. He went on to sing leading roles in many major opera houses in America and Europe, including several roles at Opera Theatre of St. Louis. He has recorded extensively with many famous conductors around the world. After retiring from performing, Cole taught at several music conservatories and is now a faculty member at the Conservatory of Music and Dance at the University of Missouri- Kansas City.

Christine Brewer

Christine Brewer (born 1955) is an internationally known opera singer who has been associated with St. Louis for all of her life. She was born in southern Illinois, where she still resides. She studied music education and was a music teacher for several years before becoming a professional singer. She began her career as a member of the St. Louis Symphony Chorus. The start of her opera career was in the chorus of Opera Theatre of St. Louis and her first major role with Opera Theater was in Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* in 1990. In 1989, she was a winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Auditions and first sang at the Metropolitan Opera House in 2003.

She is most famous for roles in operas by Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Britten and has performed these roles on many international stages. She has made over 25 recordings of these operas and other musical selections. She has sung major roles with both the Opera Theatre of St. Louis and the Union Avenue Opera Theater in St. Louis.

In 2007 the BBC Music Magazine named her one of the top 20 sopranos of all time. She has won a Grammy Award and was also honored with a star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame. Her dedication to musical education continues as she teaches 6th graders in Marissa, Illinois in a program called Opera-tunities. She also works with voice students at Webster University.

Julia Bullock

Julia Bullock (born 1987) began her musical career when she joined Opera Theatre of St. Louis's Artist-in-Training program while still in high school. Her graduate education included studies at the Eastman School of Music, Bard College, and Juilliard School.

Bullock has continued her association with Opera Theatre with her performance in the 2019 world premiere production of Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. She has sung the inaugural performance for several other world premiere productions. She has appeared in many preeminent opera houses, both in the United States and around the world, as well as maintaining a thriving solo career in many concert halls. She has served as the Artist-in-Residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where she curated innovative programs of contemporary music, emphasizing music composed by women of color. She has been featured on several distinguished recordings, two of which were nominated for Grammy Awards.

In addition to her musical career, Bullock has been active in political and community causes, stimulated by her own mixed heritage, and she is committed to integrating diversity, equity and inclusion in the arts. She encourages performers and other artists to engage in political engagement. She has participated in many benefit concerts for charities devoted to medical causes and war-affected children throughout the world, and strives to undertake outreach work in every city she visits.

Leonard Slatkin

Leonard Slatkin (born 1944) is an Internationally acclaimed conductor and currently Conductor Laureate of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, having been Music Director from 1979 to 1996. He held prior positions with the orchestra, beginning in 1968, of Assistant Conductor, Associate Conductor and Principal Guest Conductor, and he founded the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra in 1970. He championed new music, and led the orchestra in Grammy-winning recordings and on many tours. He is also Music Director Laureate of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), Directeur Musical Honoraire of the Orchestre National de Lyon (ONL). He maintains a rigorous schedule of guest conducting throughout the world and is active as a composer, author, and educator.

Slatkin has received six Grammy awards and 34 nominations. His latest recording is the world premiere of Alexander Kastalsky's *Requiem for Fallen Brothers* commemorating the 100th anniversary of the armistice ending World War I. Other recent Naxos releases include works by Saint-Saëns, Ravel, and Berlioz (with the ONL) and music by Copland, Rachmaninov, Borzova, McTee, and John Williams (with the DSO). In addition, he has recorded the complete Brahms, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky symphonies with the DSO (available online as digital downloads).

A recipient of the prestigious National Medal of Arts, Slatkin also holds the rank of Chevalier in the French Legion of Honor. He has received Austria's Decoration of Honor in Silver, the League of American Orchestras' Gold Baton Award, and the 2013 ASCAP Deems Taylor Special Recognition Award for his debut book, *Conducting Business*. His second book, *Leading Tones: Reflections on Music, Musicians, and the Music Industry*, was published by Amadeus Press in 2017. He is working on a third volume, *Musical Chairs: The Changing Landscape of Classical Music in the Twenty-first Century*.

Slatkin has conducted virtually all the leading orchestras in the world. As Music Director, in addition to St. Louis, he has held posts in New Orleans; Washington, DC; London (with the BBC Symphony Orchestra); Detroit; and Lyon, France. He has also served as Principal Guest Conductor in Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Cleveland. He makes his home in St. Louis with his wife, composer Cindy McTee, and has a star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame.