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RESEARCH NOTE

When Did Classic Composers Make Their Best Work?

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This Research Note shows that classic composers created their best works when they were at a similar age when creators in other domains did their best work, namely when they were at an age that represented around 60% of their life span. This finding is very similar to earlier results for painters and authors.

Recent studies on peak creativity of 189 painters and 89 authors with a Nobel Prize in Franses (2013, 2014) inspired the investigation in this research note. The web site <http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/main.jsp> documents the most popular works (which are most often performed) by the 100 most popular classic composers. The data appear in the Appendix, which also provides information on the year of birth and of death, and additionally, the year in which the most popular work was created. When this work was created during various years, one can choose to use the beginning year, the middle year, or the end year for the subsequent computations. Only for one composer could I not find the year in which the best work was created.

Table 1 shows that the average age of peak creativity is around 39 years. At the same time, for the 97 of the 99 composers who have died, the fraction of their life span when they created their best work is in the range 0.60 to 0.62.

Interestingly, as can be seen from Table 2, which presents the relevant numbers for painters and authors, these new statistics for classical composers are about the same. In particular, for the average relative age there thus seems to be a common feature across creative individuals.

TABLE 1

Average age and average relative age of peak creativity, where age is year work created minus birth year, and relative age is age divided by (year of decease minus year of birth)

Choice of dates for peak work	Average age	Average relative age
Begin	38.3	0.603
Middle*	38.9	0.613
End	39.6	0.625

Note: * For example, for Johann Christian Bach the middle year of 1775–1780 is set at 1777.

TABLE 2

Average age and average relative age of peak creativity of painters (Franses, 2013) and authors (Franses, 2014)

	Average age	Average relative age
Painters	41.9	0.620
Authors	44.8	0.570

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Appendix

TABLE A1.
Data Appendix

	<i>Composer</i>	<i>Birth</i>	<i>Decease</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Year Created</i>
1	Isaac Albeniz	1860	1909	Asturias	1892
2	Tomaso Albinoni	1671	1751	Adagio for Organ and Strings in G minor	1708
3	Malcolm Arnold	1921	2006	Scottish Dances (4), Op. 59	1957
4	Johann Christian Bach	1735	1782	Sinfonia concertante for Violin and Cello in A major, C 34/Quintet for Flute, Oboe, Violin, Cello and Harpsichord in D major, Op. 22 no 1	1775/1780
5	Johann Sebastian Bach	1685	1750	Air on the G String	1720
6	Samuel Barber	1910	1981	Adagio for Strings, Op. 11	1936
7	Béla Bartók	1881	1945	Concerto for Orchestra, Sz 116	1943
8	Ludwig van Beethoven	1770	1827	Symphony no 5	1808
9	Vincenzo Bellini	1801	1835	Norma: Casta diva	1831
10	Hector Berlioz	1803	1869	Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14	1830
11	Leonard Bernstein	1918	1990	West Side Story: Somewhere	1956
12	Georges Bizet	1838	1875	Carmen: Flower Song	1875
13	Ernest Bloch	1880	1959	Baal shem: 2nd movement, Nigun "Improvisation"	1923
14	Luigi Boccherini	1743	1805	Quintet for Strings in E major, Op. 11 no 5/G 275: Minuet	1771
15	Alexander Borodin	1833	1887	Prince Igor: Polovtsian Dances	1869–1887
16	Johannes Brahms	1833	1897	Symphony no 1 in C minor, Op. 68	1855–1876
17	Benjamin Britten	1913	1976	Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, Op. 34	1946
18	Max Bruch	1838	1920	Concerto for Violin no 1 in G minor, Op. 26	1868
19	Anton Bruckner	1824	1896	Symphony no 7 in E major, WAB 107	1884
20	William Byrd	1543	1623	Mass for 4 Voices/Mass for 5 Voices	1592–1593/1594–1595
21	Frédéric Chopin	1810	1849	Nocturne for Piano in E flat major, Op. 9 no 2	1830–1832
22	Aaron Copland	1900	1990	Fanfare for the common man	1942
23	Arcangelo Corelli	1653	1713	Christmas Concerto, Op. 6 no 8	1690–1714
24	Claude Debussy	1862	1918	Clair de Lune	1890–1905
25	Léo Delibes	1836	1891	Lakmé: Flower Duet	1881–1882
26	Frederick Delius	1862	1934	On Hearing the First Cuckoo In Spring	1912
27	Geatano Donizetti	1797	1848	L'Elisir d'Amore: Una furtiva lagrima	1831
28	Antonín Dvořák	1841	1904	New World Symphony	1893
29	Sir Edward Elgar	1857	1934	Salut d'amour, Op. 12	1888
30	Manuel de Falla	1876	1946	El amor brujo: Ritual Fire Dance	1914–1915
31	Gabriel Fauré	1845	1924	Pavane, Op. 50	1886–1887
32	César Franck	1822	1890	Panis angelicus	1872
33	George Gershwin	1898	1937	Rhapsody in Blue	1924
34	Alexander Glazunov	1865	1936	Violin Concerto	1904
35	Christoph W. Gluck	1714	1787	Orfeo ed Euridice: Dance of the Blessed Spirits	1762
36	Charles Gounod	1818	1893	Ave Maria	1853
37	Enrique Granados	1867	1916	Danzas (12) españolas for Piano, Op. 37: no 5, Andaluza	1890
38	Edvard Grieg	1843	1907	Concerto for Piano in A minor, Op. 16	1868
39	George Frideric Handel	1685	1759	Largo	1738
40	Franz Joseph Haydn	1732	1809	Surprise Symphony	1791
41	Paul Hindemith	1895	1963	Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes of Carl Maria von Weber	1943
42	Gustav Holst	1874	1934	The Planets	1914–1916
43	Johann Nepomuk Hummel	1778	1837	Trumpet Concerto	1803
44	Charles Ives	1874	1954	Variations for Organ on "America"	1891
45	Leos Janáček	1854	1928	Sinfonietta	1926
46	Aram Khachaturian	1903	1978	Sabre Dance	1942
47	Erich Wolfgang Korngold	1897	1957	Die tote Stadt, Op. 12: Glück, das mir verblieb "Mariettalied"	1920
48	Fritz Kreisler	1875	1962	Liebesleid	1910
49	Franz Lehár	1870	1948	Das Land des Lächelns: Dein ist mein ganzes Herz	1929
50	Ruggero Leoncavallo	1857	1919	I Pagliacci: Recitar!...Vesti la giubba	1892
51	Franz Liszt	1811	1886	Liebesträume for Piano, S 541: no 3, O Lieb, so lang	1850
52	Jean-Baptiste Lully	1632	1687	Armide, LWV 71: Passacaglia	1685–1686
53	Gustav Mahler	1860	1911	Symphony no 1 in D major "Titan"	1887–1888
54	Marin Marais	1656	1728	Les folies d'Espagne	1701

(Continued)

TABLE A1.
(Continued)

	<i>Composer</i>	<i>Birth</i>	<i>Decease</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Year Created</i>
55	Pietro Mascagni	1863	1945	Cavalleria Rusticana: Intermezzo	1890
56	Jules Massenet	1842	1912	Werther: Pourquoi me réveiller?	1887
57	Felix Mendelssohn	1809	1847	Concerto for Violin in E minor, Op. 64	1838–1844
58	Claudio Monteverdi	1567	1643	Vespro della Beata Vergine	1610
59	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	1756	1791	Jupiter Symphony, K 551/Le nozze di Figaro, K 492: Overture	1788/1786
60	Modest Mussorgsky	1839	1881	Pictures at an Exhibition for Piano	1874
61	Carl Nielsen	1865	1931	Symphony no 4, Op. 29 “Inextinguishable”	1915–1916
62	Jacques Offenbach	1819	1880	Les contes d’Hoffmann: Barcarolle	1880
63	Johann Pachelbel	1653	1706	Canon in D major	around 1680
64	Niccolò Paganini	1782	1840	Caprice for Violin solo no 24 in A minor	1802
65	Manuel Ponce	1882	1948	Estrellita	1912
66	Francis Poulenc	1899	1963	Sonata for Flute and Piano	1956
67	Sergei Prokofiev	1891	1953	Classical Symphony, Op. 25	1916–1917
68	Giacomo Puccini	1858	1924	Tosca: E lucevan le stelle	1900
69	Henry Purcell	1659	1695	Dido and Aeneas: When I am laid in earth (Dido’s Lament)	1688
70	Arvo Pärt	1935	-	Fratres	1977
71	Sergei Rachmaninov	1873	1943	Vocalise	1912
72	Jean-Philippe Rameau	1683	1764	Gavotte Varee	?
73	Einojuhani Rautavaara	1928	-	Cantus Arcticus, Op. 61 “Concerto for Birds and Orchestra”	1972
74	Maurice Ravel	1875	1937	Pavane pour une infante défunte	1899
75	Ottorino Respighi	1879	1936	Pines of Rome	1924
76	Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov	1844	1908	Flight of the Bumblebee	1899–1900
77	Joaquin Rodrigo	1901	1999	Concierto de Aranjuez for Guitar	1939
78	Gioachino Rossini	1792	1868	Il barbiere di Siviglia: Largo al factotum	1816
79	Camille Saint-Saëns	1835	1921	The Swan	1886
80	Pablo de Sarasate	1844	1908	Zigeunerweisen, Op. 20	1878
81	Erik Satie	1866	1925	Gymnopédie no 1	1888
82	Domenico Scarlatti	1685	1757	Sonata for Harpsichord in E major, K 380/L 23	1754
83	Franz Schubert	1797	1828	Ave Maria	1825
84	Robert Schumann	1810	1856	Träumerei	1838
85	Alexander Scriabin	1872	1915	Etude for Piano in D sharp minor, Op. 8 no 12	1894
86	Dmitri Shostakovich	1906	1975	Symphony no 5 in D minor, Op. 47	1937
87	Jean Sibelius	1865	1957	Finlandia, Op. 26	1899
88	Bedrich Smetana	1824	1884	The Moldau	1874
89	Johann Strauss Jr.	1825	1899	The Blue Danube (An der schönen, blauen Donau)	1866
90	Richard Strauss	1864	1949	Don Juan, Op. 20	1888
91	Igor Stravinsky	1882	1971	The Rite of Spring (Le sacre du printemps)	1913
92	Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky	1840	1893	Concerto for Piano no 1 in B flat minor, Op. 23	1874
93	Georg Philipp Telemann	1681	1767	Concerto for Trumpet in D major, TV 51 no D 7	1710–1720
94	Ralph Vaughan Williams	1872	1958	Fantasia on Greensleeves	1924–1928
95	Giuseppe Verdi	1813	1901	Aida: Celeste Aida	1870–1871
96	Heitor Villa-Lobos	1887	1959	Bachianas brasileiras no 5 for Soprano and 8 Cellos: Aria “Cantilena”	1938–1945
97	Antonio Vivaldi	1678	1741	The Four Seasons	1725
98	Richard Wagner	1813	1883	Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg: Act 1 Prelude	1867
99	Sir William Walton	1902	1983	Coronation March “Crown Imperial”	1937
100	Carl Maria von Weber	1786	1826	Invitation to the Dance, in D flat major J 260/Op. 65	1819