

## CONCERT BAND

## Ten band composers you should know — besides Sousa



Percy Grainger helped create a worldwide interest in British folk music through his band music. [File photo](#)

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## LISTEN — Concert Band stream



The concert band is a familiar part of many Americans' educational experience. Whether you played in the band, had friends who played, or simply knew of all the kids who headed to the far corner of the school at 10th period, you have probably heard of band and maybe some of its instruments.

But while you might know famous composers' names from throughout classical music history, you might be less familiar with band composers. Here are just a few of the important names in band history.

John Philip Sousa is, for many, the primary encounter with concert bands in the wild. He has been called the March King because he contributed more than 100 marches to the band literature. His *The Stars and Stripes Forever* is an American classic, and he was a powerful force in creating a concert band culture in the United States through the Marine Band and his touring band. As his music would suggest, Sousa was a fun-loving, patriotic guy. His band also played as a volunteer baseball team, challenging all of the local teams on their tours.

It should be noted that depending on when you participated in band, certain composers' names will stand out as favorites. This list aims to include voices who have impacted or are impacting the tradition of composition for band, and is not to be read as a list of the "top 10" composers. Art is subjective, after all! There are countless composers not mentioned here whose works are educational and longtime favorites for bands worldwide, including popular names in the field such as John Barnes Chance, Alfred Reed, Ron Nelson and Robert W. Smith.

What this list also highlights is an incredible need for diversity in published composers.

## Percy Grainger (1882–1961)

This man was truly devoted to the wind band. An Australian by birth, Grainger was instrumental in revitalizing a worldwide interest in British folk music. He's famous for having hiked around Great Britain with an early recording device strapped to his back. He would walk into pubs, buy the locals a round of drinks and ask them to sing a song. He recorded these informal performances and then transcribed them directly onto sheet music, with all of the rhythmic bumps or off-key harmonies that were captured. The resulting collection of folk tunes became the band standard *Lincolnshire Posy*. His other notable works include *Children's March: Over the Hills and Far Away* and *Colonial Song* (aka *Australian Up-Country Tune*).

## Alex Shapiro (1962–)

Alex Shapiro is a seriously accomplished composer whose band works often include electronic audio tracks as a layer of sound otherwise unachievable for an acoustic ensemble. She was trained at Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music under Ursula Mamlok and John Corigliano, but left the East Coast to score a documentary in California. There, while composing for other films, her passion for activism took off, and she served on the board and as vice president of the Southern California ACLU and as president of the board of directors of the American Composers Forum. She composes for a variety of instrumentations and ensembles, and is passionate about achieving greater composer diversity in the band world.



Composer Alex Shapiro attends an ASCAP event in Los Angeles in 2016. [Tommaso Boddi/Getty Images for ASCAP](#)

## Karel Husa (1921–2016)

Husa's breadth of work covers everything from ballet to chamber music to vocal and orchestral works, and he won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for his String Quartet No. 3. But his most famous work was for concert band. *Music for Prague 1968* was written after the Czech-born composer listened to a BBC Radio broadcast as the Soviet Union crushed the Prague Spring movement. Husa had since emigrated to the United States, but as he listened to the report of the event, he was deeply moved. Much of his work was influenced by other modern Czech composers, and *Prague* was only his second work for band, so he decided he would write it the same way he would compose for an orchestra. That decision was revolutionary, and the composer's embrace of the band as an ensemble that could achieve great professional musicality was as important in the 1960s as it is today.

## Joseph Schwantner (1943–)

Between Husa and Schwantner, concert band writing became a serious artistic force in the late 20th century. Schwantner's ... *and the mountains rising nowhere* revitalized the possibilities of band tonality and texture. He applied progressive motivic development, aleatoric writing effects and massive use of the percussion section (46 different instruments!) to create a standard for advanced ensembles. His other works for concert band are also highly regarded and include *From a Dark Millennium, In evening's stillness ...* and *Luminosity*.

## Julius Fucik (1872–1916)

Known as the "Bohemian Sousa," Fucik wrote extensively for concert band, which at the time meant a lot of military marches. He was a Czech composer and studied under Antonin Dvorak before becoming the conductor of several regimental bands and later his personal ensemble. In addition to hundreds of marches, he wrote polkas and waltzes. He combined styles, too, as heard in his famous *Florentiner March*. His other well-known piece is the *Entry of the Gladiators*, which became synonymous with circus clowns.

## David Maslanka (1943–2017)

Maslanka was one of the biggest names in American composition — especially for band. His love of Bach contributed to a sound that is distinctly his own, with massive brass power chords and wild woodwind flurries, as well as simply mournful, poignant solo lines showing up in nearly all of his work. He wrote 10 symphonies, eight of which were for concert band, and more than 40 other pieces for concert band, as well as chamber, orchestral and solo works. Some of his most notable pieces include *Mother Earth, Give Us This Day, Symphony No. 4* and countless others. His piece *Angel of Mercy* earned him an honorary doctorate from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn.

## Vincent Persichetti (1915–1987)

The works of Persichetti, who has 14 classics in the band repertoire to his name, are often a band student's first introduction to contemporary classical music. As a composition professor at Juilliard, he taught Philip Glass, Toshi Ichihyanagi, Einojuhani Rautavaara and other contemporary composers. He first explored the styles of Bela Bartok, Igor Stravinsky and Aaron Copland before developing his own voice. His *Divertimento, Symphony No. 6* and *A Lincoln Address* are among his most notable works.

## Julie Giroux (1961–)

Giroux is an incredibly well-rounded powerhouse composer. Her first work was published when she was only 9, and she hasn't stopped since. An established band composer even in college, she moved to Los Angeles and within three hours was hired by Bill Conti to orchestrate his score for the TV miniseries *North and South*. When she won her first of three Emmys, she was the first woman and youngest person to win the award. She has more than 100 film, video game and TV credits. But for the concert hall, she has composed more works for band than any other instrumentation. She is a highly sought-after guest clinician and advocate for school bands.

## Gustav Holst (1874–1934)

Holst's First and Second Suites are staples in the band repertoire. His British background is an audible influence in his work, and he was a part of England's folk-song revival, which influenced a great deal of band music. A trombonist, pianist, music educator and composer, he was a believer in music for the people. Additionally, his is some of the best writing for the euphonium, a typically band-only instrument that he also employed in his most famous orchestral work, *The Planets*. His daughter, Imogen Holst (1907–1984), became a strong conductor, educator and composer, too, and advocated for her father's work.

## Frank Ticheli (1958–)

It is hard to find a band student within the past 20 years who made it through the experience without playing something by Ticheli. His works are influential to young musicians because he treats the young band like a serious musical force. His music pushes students to work on blend, intonation and phrasing in a way that many composers disregard as impossible. His arrangements of American folk songs in concert settings are especially popular in schools. His notable works include *Shenandoah, Blue Shades, Cajun Folk Songs, Vesuvius* and *Angels in the Architecture*.

## Bonus: Frederick Fennell (1914–2004)

We would be remiss not to mention the Eastman Wind Ensemble's founder and inventor of the modern wind ensemble. Fennell decided to decrease the concert band's size for a clearer and more controlled sound, reducing each instrument's numbers to its orchestral size (one performer per part) while retaining the full band scoring. To promote the new group, he sent out a call for scores, to which Vincent Persichetti, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Percy Grainger quickly responded. Like his Tanglewood classmate Leonard Bernstein, Fennell is responsible for producing many recordings that have been used as the standard for decades, including a now-legendary series for Mercury Living Presence. He was a sought-after guest conductor for the world's finest bands, including the Dallas Winds, and was the founding director of the Tokyo Kosei Wind Orchestra, which is generally regarded to be the best band in the world.

## Honorable Mention: Paul Hindemith (1895–1963)

Finally, an honorable mention goes to Paul Hindemith. He composed two cornerstone pieces of the band repertoire were composed by Hindemith: his *Symphony in B-flat* and his *Symphonic Metamorphosis*, which was an arrangement of his orchestral work based on the music of Carl Maria von Weber.

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