

# Classical Masterpieces for Parents & Kids

A top ten list of classical masterpieces for parents and their kids

Source: [artsedge.kennedy-center.org](http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org)



## 10, 9, 8, 7, 6...5, 4, 3, 2, 1! The Runners-Up

Looking to bolster your child's knowledge of classical music or simply trying to broaden their knowledge of music in general? Whatever your reason, here's a different kind of musical hit list— our choices for the top 10 works in Western classical music for kids and their parents.

**10** Identify the instruments of the orchestra with our [Instrument Spotter's Guide](#).

### *Peter and the Wolf*

by Sergei Prokofiev

If you're thinking of easing your child into a lifelong appreciation of classical music, this musical fairytale—complete with spoken narration—is a good place to start. Instruments assume the roles of Peter (a plucky little boy), the Wolf (his nasty nemesis), and a host of woodland characters.

**Where you may have heard it:** In Disney's animated *Peter and the Wolf*, or on an episode of *Angelina Ballerina* entitled "Angelina's Musical Day." The Wolf's music is also used as the "bully" theme in the movie *A Christmas Story*.

**If it's a hit, you can also try:** Camille Saint-Saëns's *Le Carnaval des Animaux* (*The Carnival of the Animals*)

### **9** *L'apprenti sorcier (The Sorcerer's Apprentice)*

by Paul Dukas

This famous late 19th-century bassoon showcase is a sparkling bit of "program music" (music that is based on something other than itself, like a book, a poem, or a play) and a brilliant way to introduce kids to some unusual orchestral sounds like the piccolo (a sort of "mini-flute").

**Where you may have heard it:** In the famous segment of Disney's *Fantasia*—think broomsticks! The theme also plays a recurring role in the credits of the 2010 film, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

**If it's a hit, you can also try:** Gustav Holst's *The Planets*, VI. Uranus, the Magician or Mozart's *Concerto for Bassoon in B flat*

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Learn how Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* drove the crowd wild at [Sounds Historic](#).

### *The Firebird Suite*

by Igor Stravinsky

With music based on Michel Fokine and Stravinsky's 1909 ballet of the same name, this suite features probably the most elaborate version of a musical "round" you're apt to find. "Row, row, row your boat" has nothing on this piece; during the finale, various instruments layer the same tune on top of one another until the entire orchestra joins together for one explosive ending.

**Where you may have heard it:** As the final segment in Disney's *Fantasia 2000*.

**If it's a hit, you can also try:** Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (with orchestrations by Maurice Ravel)

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### *The Planets*

by Gustav Holst

Composer Gustav Holst, a sort of amateur horoscope fan, decided to name the movements of this massive work after the planets in our solar system (minus Earth and Pluto), claiming each "suggested" or inspired its own unique musical section based on its astrological profile. The rhythmically-infectious music calls for several rarely seen instruments like the glockenspiel, the xylophone, the gong, and the organ. Plus, the work is positively cinematic in its ability to depict images of conflict, solitude, mystery, and joy.

**Where you may have heard it:** "Jupiter" (movement IV) appears in a recent Reese's Pieces commercial.

**If it's a hit, you can also try:** Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) and *The Firebird Suite*

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### *Overture to Guillaume Tell (William Tell Overture)*

by Gioachino Rossini

The overture to Italian master Gioachino Rossini's final opera is so catchy and "action-packed," it's earned a place on the concert stage all its own. Though things start small with only a few instruments, the music soon builds to a startling conclusion filled with cymbal crashes and a famous horn melody. Listen for some stirring musical sound effects, such as the quick, sharp notes from the low strings that are meant to resemble galloping horses.

**Where you may have heard it:** This one is best known as the theme song to classic TV's *The Lone Ranger*.

**If it's a hit, you can also try:** Rossini's Overture to *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*)

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Crazy about Copland? Find out the story behind [Fanfare for the Common Man](#)

### "Hoedown" from *Rodeo: Four Dance Episodes*

by Aaron Copland

Ask a classical music lover to describe Aaron Copland's style in one word and the adjective you'll most likely hear is "American." There's something about Copland's works that instantly conjures up images of purple mountains majesty, and the last movement of *Rodeo* (originally conceived as a high-stepping "cowboy" ballet) with its pulsating fiddles and punchy xylophone melodies is no exception.

**Where you may have heard it:** As the theme song to the "Beef" commercial campaign of the 1990s.

**If it's a hit, you can also try:** Copland's *Appalachian Spring* and *Billy the Kid*

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Want to know more about the history of the *1812 Overture*? Head over to [Sounds Historic](#).

### *1812 Overture*

by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

You haven't heard "big, bold, and brassy" until you've heard this bit of history, written in 1880 in celebration of the Russian victory over Napoleon in 1812. (If you listen very carefully, you can hear traces of both the French national anthem and the Russian anthem from Tchaikovsky's day.) Though Tchaikovsky himself dismissed the piece as being "very loud and noisy," (there's even cannon fire!) its trademark fanfare melody has made it irresistible to generations of listeners.

**Where you may have heard it:** The work is often used as a "big finish" for a concert line up, especially on the Fourth of July.

**If it's a hit, you can also try:** Stravinsky's *The Firebird Suite* or Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite*

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There's even more Mozart over at [A World of Music](#).

### *Serenade No. 13 for Strings in G Major: Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (“A Little Night Music”)

by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

This effortlessly graceful work for strings was most likely created as a bit of 18th-century light entertainment—a musical interlude for an evening of upper class Enlightenment partying. British actor, director, author, and music-lover Stephen Fry praises its “fun, almost throwaway, feel,” but don’t be fooled by its cheeky facade. *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*’s striking use of musical contrasts (i.e., soft to loud, high to low) has much to teach kids about the dynamics of music.

**Where you may have heard it:** Often used in films during a fancy party or a scene in a high-end establishment.

**If it’s a hit, you can also try:** Mozart’s *Concerto for Clarinet in A* or Mozart’s *Piano Concerto No. 21 in C*

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### *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3*

by Johann Sebastian Bach

*New York Times* music writer Anthony Tommasini said of Johann Sebastian Bach that “Including [him] is a no-brainer,” when it comes to selecting the top 10 composers of all time. The Brandenburg concerti (a set of six completed in 1721) are shining examples of Bach’s ability to explore the rainbow of sounds an orchestra has to offer—from light to dark and everything in between. The 3rd is a fun and bouncy work written for strings, featuring an interesting “call and response” between various instrument groups.

**Where you may have heard it:** Like Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, the Brandenburg concerti are often trotted out in TV and movies when trying to create an elegant atmosphere. *No. 3* made a brief appearance on TV’s *The Gilmore Girls*.

**If it’s a hit, you can also try:** Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto No. 6*

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Can't get enough Beethoven? Check out [Beethoven Rocks!](#)

### *Symphonies No. 5 & 9*

by Ludwig van Beethoven

Okay, we’re cheating a little here by including two pieces in one slot, but we have good reason. These two works rank among the most famous in the canon, and you seldom hear the one mentioned without the other. Music writer Tim Smith says of Beethoven’s 5th that “the first four notes...are perhaps the best known in the world.” (Think: da-da-da-DUM.) Similarly, the “Ode to Joy” from the 9th’s final movement is one of the most hummable and instantly recognizable themes in all of Western music. These two symphonies (a taste of both are in the player below) are a must for every classical music novice.

**Where you may have heard them:** Everywhere! Pop culture abounds with references to these symphonies. Here’s just a sample: For the 5th: The 70s disco track “A Fifth of Beethoven”

For the 9th: The “Joyful, Joyful” finale from the film *Sister Act 2*, and the YouTube sensation “Ode to Joy” from the Muppets

**If it’s a hit, you can also try:** Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 3* “Eroica,” Beethoven’s *Piano Concerto No. 5*, “The Emperor”