

Classical Music Quiz

Absolute Classics

If you only knew 10 Absolute Classics ... well, you probably wouldn't be doing this Quiz! But since you probably are...

Our following questions are based on the current Classic FM Top Ten, as in their 2014 Hall of Fame. One may well query the definitions and parameters, but it is a good popular 'barometer of taste' and should ensure we stick to very mainstream repertoire ~ mostly!



1. Beethoven famously wrote nine Symphonies, each of them ground-breaking and interesting listening, though (as it happens) the odd numbered ones are, on the whole, possibly the more remarkable. Which of them has furnished the European Anthem?

No.3

No.5

No.7

No.9

2. Working in reverse order, no.9 in the Hall of Fame is a choral work associated with Ash Wednesday in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel: Allegri's sublime Miserere mei Deus. Which of the following is NOT regarded as being true of this piece?

It is scored for nine voices, the highest of which (the treble solo) is required several times to sound and sustain a high C (two octaves above Middle C)

The score was a closely-guarded Vatican secret, until the young Mozart was able to hear, memorise and recreate a written score for it from memory; in due course he was summoned back by the Pope and (instead of being excommunicated) was congratulated on his talents and initiative

Its text is from the 51st Psalm, a particularly penitential text appropriate to the occasion; the setting is the work of two composers, Allegri (probably around 1638) with revisions and discreet ornamentations by Tommaso Bai, 300 years ago in 1714

ALL of the above are true

3. We are back with Beethoven again: one of only two composers each having more than one entry in the Top Ten (we will meet his companion a little later). This is another of his Symphonies, this time No.6 in F major, his op.68. By what programmatic subtitle is it more widely known?

The Pathetic

The Pastoral

The Drum-Roll

The Jupiter

4. Your author has to confess at this point that the next entry in the Hall of Fame, despite it having been there for three years, would otherwise have completely passed him by, belonging to so modern a genre that it would not have sprung to his mind as a potential classic in any traditional sense. However...

This is a track from 'the Beethoven of video games' (we are pinching ourselves here...) by the name of... ?

Shinobu Ishihara

Nobuo Uematsu

Michiyo Machida

Yo Yo Ma

5. We have arrived comfortably back at Elgar and his Enigma Variations (of which there are 14: a possible cultural nod to the 14 Stations of the Cross, what with his Catholic upbringing?); specifically the serene Nimrod. This seems a strange name, doesn't it, even within the context of a somewhat crypticised set of musical portraits of the composer's friends?

What is the significance of 'Nimrod', as a name or title?

There is a fighter jet used by the RAF by this name

Nimrod, unfamiliar though it may look, is one of the earliest names in Genesis, the frontmost Book within the Holy Bible. The original Nimrod was a hunter, and Elgar's friend had this surname

The surname of Elgar's friend was indeed 'hunter', but in its German form Jaeger (like the clothing company, though no actual relation)

'Nimrod' is a partial anagram of the name 'Mr Robin D[raper]', as this man usually liked to be known in real life

6. You were perhaps beginning to wonder where Mozart had got to in such generally illustrious and familiar company. No.5 in the rankings is his concerto in A major, K.622 for an instrument which, in this more-or-less modern form, had existed only for a couple of generations or so by the time he wrote the piece: he regarded it as being more able than any other to express human thoughts without actual words. Which instrument is this?

The clarinet

The piano

The violin

The flute

7. Well, we didn't give this away earlier ... but here's Beethoven back yet again, for a 3rd entry in the Top Ten. Anyone suspecting that 'classical music' as such tends to be dominated by 'dead white male Germans' is probably right ~ though let's not discriminate on demographic grounds, but rather, applaud their work on its undoubted and enduring merit.

And it's another concerto, this time for the Piano: his Opus 73 in Eb major, The Emperor (not his own original title for it, apparently; though one could quite have understood had he coined it himself).

How many other piano concertos had he written before producing this one?

1

2

3

4

8. Two of the top three spots are reserved for that colossus of 20th-century British music, Ralph Vaughan Williams. We may approach this next work of his through a parallel with Benjamin Britten, a generation or so later: Britten shared a birthday (on the feast-day of Saint Cecilia, patroness of music ~ which could hardly be more indicative or auspicious) with the earlier composer Henry Purcell, and he (Britten) drew his own influences and inspirations both from such early British music and also from traditional folksongs that were still being sung in his own lifetime. 'RVW' had in many salient ways done the same.

In 1910 VW produced one of his major works which, from its presence in this list, has obviously found a popular resonance over the intervening century, even with all that period's other musical innovation and historical ups-&- downs. It openly drew its inspiration from an earlier composer, as its title acknowledges:

Fantasia on a Theme by ... (?)

Orlando Gibbons

Thomas Tallis

Thomas Weelkes

William Byrd

9. You might be surprised that the Top Ten appears somehow to have bypassed All Those Russians (actually, they have a fairly plentiful representation not too much further down the ranks): 'wot no Tchaikovsky?', you may have wondered. Perhaps Tchaikovsky's star is temporarily on the wane for some reason. Anyhow, 'No.2 is No.2' (for reasons you will shortly see) and it is resolutely in the minor mode, in this case of the key of C. One might also have expected the uppermost works all to be in the sunnier, major mode ... but definitely not this one. Rachmaninov's seething Piano Concerto No.2 has an almost visceral and perhaps cathartic appeal for anyone who has found themselves in turmoil, privately and/or perhaps in troubled times (such as wartime). Apparently this piece was 'absolute tops' in the previous year's listings.

It was written in 1900 but enjoyed enormous, if somewhat improbable, popularity forty-odd years later when used as the soundtrack for a film about a romance-that-hardly-ever-was ~ between two professional people (each married to someone else) whose paths crossed on a provincial railway station 'somewhere in England' in the shadow of the Second World War.

What was the title of the film?

Ill Met by Moonlight

Brief Encounter

Kiss and Tell

Strange Illusion

10. Right, folks, tea-break over (or not ...) : it's time for No.1, appropriately a centennial track as this Quiz is drafted in 2014. This piece is another of RVW's, a genuine classic evocation of the English landscape, and, as such, a bittersweet reminder of that innocence which was ~ all too imminently ~ to be shattered on the otherwise similar fields of Flanders and elsewhere. It features a solo violin and orchestra. What is the title of the piece?

A Norfolk Rhapsody

Bushes and Briars

The Lark Ascending

Sussex Folk Song Suite

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The Choral Symphony was Beethoven's ninth and final venture in this genre (how could he possibly have topped or bettered it?)

2. Working in reverse order, no.9 in the Hall of Fame is a choral work associated with Ash Wednesday in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel: Allegri's sublime Miserere mei Deus. Which of the following is NOT regarded as being true of this piece?

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Yes, they are all true. Mozart's memory feat is perhaps not quite so astonishing as all that ~ even for a 14-year-old, given that he was Mozart and already a well-established composer and recitalist by that age ~ since the piece moves very slowly and has a repeating structure. Any reasonably trained musician who happened never to have heard nor performed it before (e.g. during their own formative years as a cathedral chorister) might well be capable of a serviceable shot at such a transcription on the basis of one single alert hearing

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These are all genuine symphony titles, but mostly not by Beethoven. His 6th contains country dances and a splendidly memorable and effective evocation of a passing thunderstorm.

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The popular track is from the Final Fantasy game, apparently ~ a classic of now and tomorrow, one has to assume. Answer 1 was the name of the inventor of the classic colour-blindness test (look it up online if interested) and the other two are both genuine Japanese musicians, one rather better-known than the other

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The surname of Elgar's friend was indeed 'hunter', but in its German form Jaeger (like the clothing company, though no actual relation)

'Nimrod' is a partial anagram of the name 'Mr Robin D[raper]', as this man usually liked to be known in real life

Jaeger was indeed the surname, though you will not hear any traditional musical 'hunting' motifs in this piece of music ('tally-ho' horn-calls, nor whatever). The jet aircraft is obviously from a later date than this musical work; flight had barely been invented when Elgar wrote them in the closing months of the 19th century!

6. You were perhaps beginning to wonder where Mozart had got to in such generally illustrious and familiar company. No.5 in the rankings is his concerto in A major, K.622 for an instrument which, in this more-or-less modern form, had existed only for a couple of generations or so by the time he wrote the piece: he regarded it as being more able than any other to express human thoughts without actual words. Which instrument is this?

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This is the Clarinet Concerto, best-known probably for its 'classically' mellifluous slow movement. One wonders what Mozart might subsequently have made of the saxophone, had he lived to hear it!

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Yes, the Emperor was his no.5 (along with the Fifth Symphony ~ 'da-da-da - DAAH' etc. ~ which, perhaps surprisingly, was not any one of the three Beethoven top-10 works). The young Mozart had produced many more than this, and very lovely many of them are too (the Bó , K.450 is a truly under-recognised classic: try it!); but Beethoven was getting into a completely higher musical gear, striding almost audibly across from the Galant into the fullblown Romantic style

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Thomas Tallis

Thomas Weelkes

William Byrd

These are each redoubtable and genuine Tudor polyphonists, but Tallis was in this case 'the one

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What was the title of the film?

Ill Met by Moonlight

Brief Encounter

Kiss and Tell

Strange Illusion

You can still visit the station tea-room at Carnforth, where much of this film was shot on location; the music will probably begin to swirl in your mind as you sit there with your rock-bun, or whatever. Author's note: Don't expect them to serve you tea there after 4 o'clock in the afternoon! We once arrived there on just such a 'nostalgia trip' and were told that teas had finished at four, despite there still being a large and fairly well-stewn pot on the famous counter at about 4.07pm ...

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Bushes and Briars

The Lark Ascending

Sussex Folk Song Suite

Not for nothing is this work acclaimed as 'soaring' and 'sublime'. Even RVW could not have known that within months, he would be signed up as a medical orderly with the British forces, despite his age (then already in his early 40s) and flat feet. Close exposure to gunfire cannot have helped his hearing, which deteriorated later into his long life so that he had to use aids to be able to follow music and conversations