

# A quick survey of South African classical composers

---

Having finally just managed to get my internet connection working properly, I thought I should make my first post back in the old country a themed post on some of the more important South African composers.

Of course no such survey could start without Arnold van Wyk (1916 – 1983), who is most famous for his contributions to the art-song genre:

<http://youtu.be/Q7epzKeIUYE>

but he is equally recognized for instrumental compositions as well, especially the Five Elegies for String Quartet:

<http://youtu.be/9za5tH1-MmY>

Writing elegies for strings is almost something of a South African thing, as can be seen here in the work of another giant, who is still composing at over 90 years of age: Stefans Grové.

<http://youtu.be/2WjfVTQJz7k>

He was the first South African of the older generation of composers to seriously incorporate African themes and ideas into his music. Grové is most well known for his instrumental compositions. This one is one of my personal favourites:

<http://youtu.be/YC9DesZ6flw>

Most South African composers now incorporate African themes as a staple in their compositions, but few do so as seamlessly and effectively as is found in the minimalism of Michael Blake:

<http://youtu.be/w2s9l-l-72Y>

Here is me and my wife performing one of his pieces at the 2nd Singapore flute festival:

<http://youtu.be/1YaPUeupH8w>

A different take on incorporating African themes more directly is taken by Peter Louis van Dijk in works such as "Horizons":

[http://youtu.be/h4\\_XPhCOTRo](http://youtu.be/h4_XPhCOTRo)

It is quite common for South African composers to leave home soil, but John Joubert has settled permanently in Britain, but can still be counted as a South African born, raised and (largely) educated composer. His music is distinctly British though:

<http://youtu.be/9YR2r1HbQ9E>

Other key figures include Hendrik Hofmeyr, who has a penchant for highly virtuosic writing:

[http://youtu.be/WNO\\_n9Y5b1g](http://youtu.be/WNO_n9Y5b1g)

Hofmeyr can also write a touching melody in the style of van Wyk though:

<http://youtu.be/FssK2-BoXWk>

Klatzow has an exquisite melodic sense, as seen here:

<http://youtu.be/ZYOBxIqxngY>

One of the foremost Black composers is Bongani Ndodana-Breen, his music reflects the fact that REAL black South Africans are far more likely to engage in either operatic styles of singing than any of the "traditional" styles which composers often like to emulate:

[http://youtu.be/VOVpNJq\\_L0g](http://youtu.be/VOVpNJq_L0g)

He is most famous for his opera on the life of Winnie Madela (an anti-apartheid stalwart):

<http://youtu.be/Tex7NXCqkx0>

Another South African composer who has principally settled abroad is Kevin Volans, but he has more than retained the national flavour, also, like Michael Blake, in a minimalist mode but with a very different take. This piece is for scordatura (intentionally cross- or miss-tuned) harpsichord:

[http://youtu.be/oeN-wJ1\\_YI4](http://youtu.be/oeN-wJ1_YI4)

Like many South African composers, Volans is not afraid to bring out the technical fireworks:

<http://youtu.be/k4AQ3GEeTVc>

Last but not least is Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph, certainly one of the greatest female South African classical composers, and also one of the greatest besides:

<http://youtu.be/fsmMAPn4eiM>

She also compiled the composite South African national anthem still in use today.

Of course, this list is far from complete, but should hopefully provide a rough overview of some of the major lights in South African composition.