



## Mini-Lesson:

# Meet Composer Thomas C. Duffy

---

### OVERVIEW

Students will read, discuss, and share background stories and information about composer Tom Duffy.

### LEARNING GOALS

Students will learn about composer Thomas C. Duffy's life in music through reading, writing and discussion.

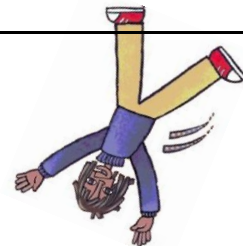
### RESOURCES & MATERIALS

Student copies of:

- [Meet the Composer](#) reading
- [Read & Write a Composer Profile](#) worksheet

### PROCESS

1. Divide students into small groups and direct them to read "Meet Composer Thomas C. Duffy." They can read silently or out loud, sharing the reader's role within their group.
2. Direct them to discuss what they've read and write responses to the questions on the Q & A worksheet. All students can complete a worksheet or one student can act as the scribe for the group.
3. Their last task is to discuss and agree upon the most interesting fact or idea they learned about Duffy.
4. Reconvene as a large group. Each small group will share the most interesting fact or idea about the composer.
5. (OPTIONAL) If it would be received well by your students, administration and parents, consider sharing the story, "Spitting Contest in South Africa" with your class. The story can be found on page 8 in the Teacher's Guide in this Curriculum.



## MEET THE COMPOSER OF

*A+: A "Precise" Prelude and An  
"Excellent" March*



Composer Dr. Thomas C. Duffy was born on June 17, 1955. Today, he is Professor of Music in the School of Music and Director of Bands at Yale University. His

compositions have been performed and recorded by bands, orchestras and wind ensembles worldwide. He has also conducted ensembles throughout the United States, Japan, England, France, Ireland, Finland, Russia, South Africa, Swaziland, the Czech Republic, Bermuda, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, Austria and Italy. In 1996, Dr. Duffy received the Outstanding Music Educator of the Year award by the Connecticut Music Educators Association. He writes music for players of all skill levels because he believes that all musicians should have access to great new music, not just professionals.

### EARLY YEARS

Dr. Tom Duffy grew up in Palo Alto, California and was the oldest of 10 children in his family. In 1962, when he was in second grade, he discovered his first instrument. While watching the Ed Sullivan Show with his parents, he saw a cute Italian mouse puppet called Topo Gigio that played the accordion. When Tom's mom saw the accordion, she said, "That is the greatest instrument ever!" Seven-year-old Tom decided he wanted to

play the accordion. He pestered his parents to get him lessons and they agreed.

Tom's first accordion weighted 25 pounds and was so big that it pinched his chest when he squeezed it closed. It was so heavy he couldn't lift it when it was in its case!

In 1963, Tom's family moved to Storrs, Connecticut. Their new house had an old, beat-up piano in the basement that he loved to play. He would escape to the basement, away from his nine siblings, and play the piano. He already knew how to read sheet music from his accordion lessons and also understood how melody and harmony fit together because accordionists play melodies with one hand and harmonies with the other. Armed with this knowledge and some sheet music he found in the piano bench, Tom taught himself to play the piano.

### BEGINNING TO COMPOSE

Dr. Duffy started to make up accordion tunes when he first began to play music at the age of seven. When he was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, he began to write songs for voice and guitar. Tom's high school music teacher, George Masso, encouraged him to write original music and also asked Tom to arrange music for the pep band and school musicals. Tom wrote his first non-pop composition in his high school music theory class. Called *Stravinsky Sketches*, the piece was written for and performed by his high school band and orchestra, piano, clarinet, violin, tenor saxophone and flute.

## COLLEGE AND BEYOND

Dr. Thomas C. Duffy attended the University of Connecticut where he earned a Bachelor of Science in Music Education and a Master of Musical Arts in Composition. Because of the years he spent playing in his parents' basement, he passed into advance piano courses and helped pay his way through college by playing gigs on the keyboard.

After finishing at the University of Connecticut, Dr. Duffy attended Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where he earned a Doctor of Musical Arts in Composition. He went on to teach music at the University of Connecticut, the Hartford Conservatory, and Yale University, where he teaches today.



## CREATING A+

A+ was written as a musical joke. Dr. Duffy wrote the piece based on the idea that even though playing a wrong note can ruin a performance, getting one note wrong is still very good mathematically (it still would be an "A" performance). In the piece, players are told to intentionally get notes wrong! The piece was commissioned by the American Composers Forum for its BandQuest® series and was premiered by the Tiverton Middle School band in Rhode Island.



### DR. DUFFY'S ADVICE TO YOUNG COMPOSERS

"Learn to play or sing well. Your instrument is the way that you can have a personal contact with making music. At first you are making the music that others have written. Eventually, you will have your own ideas and the skills to realize them. Listen to all kinds of music and try to write down things that you hear and like. At first you will become skilled at writing down what you hear; eventually you will become skilled at writing down things that you hear in your head."

-Dr. Thomas C. Duffy

Resources for this article:

- In-person interviews
- Duffy's website at <http://www.duffymusic.com>



Name \_\_\_\_\_

## READ & WRITE A COMPOSER PROFILE

Read about composer Christopher Theofanidis (C.T.), then complete this Composer Profile with what you've learned. It's okay to re-read to find the answers.

1. Dr. Duffy was born on \_\_\_\_\_
2. Name 4 countries where Dr. Duffy has conducted: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What was Duffy's first instrument? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Who taught him to play the piano? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How old was Dr. Duffy when he wrote his first pieces? \_\_\_\_\_
6. *Stravinsky Sketches* was the title of a piece he wrote for \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Who else did Duffy write/arrange for in high school?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What school premiered *A+: A "Precise" Prelude and An "Excellent" March*?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Name one interesting thing you learned about Dr. Duffy.  
\_\_\_\_\_