



## Mini-Lesson:

# Meet Composer Christopher Theofanidis

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### LEARNING GOAL

Students will read, discuss, and share background stories and information to learn the details about the music in order to support their performance of *Sweet like that*.

### RESOURCES & MATERIALS

Student copies of:

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

### PROCESS

1. Teach students how to pronounce Christopher Theofanidis' name. (Remember rhymes with 'eat your Wheaties')
2. Divide students into small groups and direct them to read "Meet Composer Christopher Theofanidis." They can read silently or out loud, sharing the reader's role within their group.
3. 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.
4. Their last task is to discuss and agree upon the most interesting fact or idea they learned about Theofanidis.
5. Reconvene as a large group. Each small group will share the most interesting fact or idea about the composer.

### EXTENSIONS

Summarize what you know about *Sweet like that*:

- Ask a small group (or the whole band) to create a *Sweet like that* bulletin board or display using the information in the readings, other resources in the materials, and information and images they search for on their own.
- If students work in small groups, consider alternative format for collecting and displaying what they learn such as a PowerPoint presentation, display boards, and i-Movies. When performing *Sweet like that*, display students work behind the band, show PowerPoint presentations or iMovies at the concert.

## MEET THE COMPOSER OF *SWEET LIKE THAT*



Christopher Theofanidis (rhymes with “eat your Wheaties”) was born in Dallas, Texas in 1967. Today, his music is heard all over the world. Orchestras, opera companies, and other ensembles regularly perform his pieces in places like London, Philadelphia, Moscow, St. Louis, San Francisco, Baltimore, and Korea.



photography by Alexandra Gardner/NewMusicBox.org

### EARLY YEARS

Theofanidis grew up in a musical family. Christopher, his sister, Lydia, and his brother, Paris learned to play instruments (piano and guitar), and Paris still writes songs. Christopher’s very first composition was a piano solo that started as an **improvisation**. He wrote it down and dedicated it to his grandfather.

He was a member of the Alief Elsik H.S. band in Houston, Texas. During senior year, his director asked him to write a piece for the band. Theofanidis used his daily study hall to create the piece with some help from the assistant band director. He admits that the title embarrasses him a little today. It was called “Revenge of the Taco” in honor of a percussionist friend who thought you should never take yourself too seriously! The other band members really liked it, especially the wailing high notes he wrote for the band’s first trumpet player, Bart O’Connor.

### COLLEGE AND A BIG DECISION

Theofanidis almost didn’t become a professional composer. As a kid in suburban Houston, he didn’t know much about composers and how they made a living. He studied music at the University of Houston, but in his last year, thought he would switch to business. He applied to several graduate business programs, and just one graduate composition program at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. When Eastman accepted him, he jumped at the chance to go.

At Eastman, Theofanidis discovered that “music is absolutely essential – a great way to bridge gaps among people and bring a lot of joy to the world.” He earned graduate degrees from Eastman and Yale University.

### WHO INSPIRES HIM?

Theofanidis is inspired by Tchaikovsky’s sense of melody and lyric grace, Ravel’s **orchestrations** and sense of intimacy, and by Beethoven for



his belief in humanity. The composer to which he feels the closest, however, is Franz Schubert because he feels that he understands Schubert’s music the best. Among more



recent composers, Theofanidis admires Gyorgy Ligeti (Hungarian), Lou Harrison and John Adams (two Americans). Film music and **jazz** also hold his attention and spark his ideas.

## HOW DOES HE BEGIN A NEW PIECE?

Ideas start to flow when a poem, image, or visual scene triggers a mood or emotion of some kind. This stimulates his thinking and creates the atmosphere for launching into a new piece. The poetry doesn't become a part of the work, but rather a point of reference or a way to reflect his ideas and thoughts. He can then create melodies that have a memorable shape or contour that he likes. It is searching for these melodies that takes the longest time. Once he is happy with the core melodies, Theofanidis thinks about, develops ideas and plans for how they can come together to make a piece.



Theofanidis with band students at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School

## CREATING *SWEET LIKE THAT*

*Sweet like that* was written for the band at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School, a middle school in New Haven, Connecticut. He visited the band several times to get acquainted with the students and their playing. He also asked them what music they liked to play and what they could do with their instruments. These ideas stimulated his thinking. The piece was commissioned by the American Composers Forum for its *BandQuest*® series.

## HONORS & AWARDS

Over the years, Theofanidis' work has been recognized with several awards. They include an International Masterprize (a competition hosted at the Barbican Centre in London), the Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, six ASCAP Gould Prizes, a Fulbright Fellowship to

France, a Tanglewood Fellowship, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters' Charles Ives Fellowship.

His most famous piece to date is *Rainbow Body*. In the past ten years it has been performed by over 100 orchestras all over the world. (Listen to this piece at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4lxoOD6p7U>)

His composition for chorus and orchestra based on the poetry of Rumi, *The Here and Now*, was nominated for a Grammy in 2007 for best composition. He also wrote a concerto for Sarah Chang, a famous violinist.

His opera, *Heart of a Soldier*, was premiered by the San Francisco Opera in September, 2011. This new work is based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning book of the same title by James B. Stewart. It is the stunning true story of Rick Rescorla, a man who gave up his own life saving thousands in the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001.

## WHAT'S THE BEST THING ABOUT COMPOSING?

"Being able to hear the "sound-worlds" that you imagine come to life is the best! It is also about taking a kind of journey – and sometimes telling a story through the music. I wouldn't trade it for anything."  
-Christopher Theofanidis

Resources for this article:

- In-person interviews
- Gramophone Magazine, <http://www.gramophone.net/Issue/Page/January%202004/10/834627/ON+E+TO+WATCH+Christopher+Theofanidis+composer+Has+winning+Masterprize+had+an+effect+already>
- Christopher Theofanidis' website at <http://www.theofanidismusic.com/>.
- The Pittsburgh Post Gazette online Concert Preview at <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/07046/762185-42.stm#ixzz1Q2LLpwUC>





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. Theofanidis was born in \_\_\_\_\_

2. For what instrument was his very first composition written? \_\_\_\_\_

To whom was it dedicated? \_\_\_\_\_

3. *Revenge of the Taco* was the title of a piece he wrote for \_\_\_\_\_

4. Name one or more composers whom C.T. admires and who inspire him.

5. When C.T. composes, what musical element is most important to him and to his music? It's also the aspect of the music that takes the longest time for him to create.

6. What well known composition by C.T. has been played all over the world?

7. For what school did C.T. write *Sweet like that*? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Name one interesting thing you learned about C.T. or his music?