



## Lesson: Kevin Puts - Award-Winning Composer

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### OVERVIEW

Since the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Music awarded to Puts was announced while he was writing *Charm* and working with middle school students, take this opportunity to provide students with some background on the Pulitzer Prize. This short lesson makes receiving an award relevant to your students by placing awards and recognition in a familiar context from their own life experiences. Parts of the lesson could be used as a homework assignment.

### LEARNING GOAL

After reading an article about Kevin Puts and the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Music, students will answer a series of question about the award. Most questions probe for simple knowledge, but questions #5, #7 and #9 ask students to speculate and do some thinking.

### RESOURCES & MATERIALS

Student copies of:

- [“What is the Pulitzer Prize”](#) article
- [Article Worksheet](#)

### PROCESS

1. Launch a short discussion about winning awards or special recognition using the familiar context of school. Ask students to talk about awards or recognition won by:
  - The school (for example district recognition for academic improvement, service projects, etc.)
  - individual students (for example the Scholastic Art Awards, All State Music Awards, academic achievement awards such as Student of the Month, Science Fair recognition, sport awards, etc.)
  - A teacher (Music Educator of the Year, etc.)

Ask students what they know about famous national awards with which they might be familiar such as the Oscars, Grammys, and Emmys. For example, what are the categories and who were some past winners.
2. In pairs or small groups, direct students to talk about someone they know (a relative, family friend, neighbor, etc.), who has been recognized in some way. For example, a military award such purple heart, workplace awards such as employee of the month, a special scholarship, membership in an audition only

Youth Orchestra, recognition for special achievement in the Boy or Girl Scouts, etc. You may also want to ask students to talk about any awards or recognition that they may have received.

3. Make a transition to Kevin Puts, the composer of *Charm*, and the world famous award he received while writing *Charm*. Read the article “The Pulitzer Prize,” out loud or in small groups. Answer the questions in class, or make the reading and questions a homework assignment.
4. Listen to some of the music from the opera, *Silent Night*, or watch video clips. Students who are interested in learning more could research the opera and learn more about Kevin Puts and his music. Here are some places to find out more and listen to *Silent Night*.
  - A video of the chorus singing the lullaby “Sleep” is one YouTube at:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orCzFg49Lh4>
  - For history about Joseph Pulitzer, to the Pulitzer site at <http://www.pulitzer.org/historyofprizes>
  - For an article about *Silent Night*, go to Opera News,  
[http://www.operanews.com/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2011/11/Features/A\\_Leap\\_of\\_Faith.html](http://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2011/11/Features/A_Leap_of_Faith.html)
  - Hear a full recording of the opera, *Silent Night*, by Minnesota Opera at  
<http://www.npr.org/event/music/151211677/hear-the-opera-that-won-the-pulitzer>

# What is a Pulitzer Prize?



In spring 2012, while he was writing *Charm* for the Scarsdale Middle School band, Kevin Puts received some wonderful news. He learned that he was the winner of the 2012 **Pulitzer**

**Prize** for Music composition. He recalled that "It was an amazing day...it changed my life. It was the wildest day of my life...The next morning was the first time the kids played *Charm*. I didn't sleep the night before."<sup>1</sup>



## WHAT IS THE PULITZER PRIZE?

They were created by Joseph Pulitzer (1847-1911), who came to America as a 17 year old Hungarian immigrant. He became a successful journalist, newspaper owner, and politician. His will included a gift to Columbia University (New York) to open a School of Journalism and establish the Pulitzer Prize. Pulitzer's wishes were quite specific. He wanted four awards in journalism, four awards in letters (literature) and drama, one in education, and four special scholarships. The first Pulitzer Prizes were awarded in 1917.

Joseph Pulitzer did not name music as an award category, but music was an area that would receive one of four yearly scholarships. In 1943 the scholarship was converted into a prize "For a distinguished musical composition of significant dimension by an American that has had its first performance in the United States during the year."

Today, Pulitzer Prizes recognize achievement in the fields of newspaper and online journalism, literature, and music composition. Twenty-one awards are given each year. In twenty, each winner receives a cash



<sup>1</sup> "American Composers Forum interview with Kevin Puts. See video at Composer Kevin Puts on winning the Pulitzer Prize while in residence at Scarsdale Middle School" interview at American Composers Forum, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcZ1I8zQKcM&feature=youtu.be>

award of \$10,000.00. A winner in the public service category receives a gold medal.

## WHAT WAS THE WINNING COMPOSITION?

The opera, *Silent Night*, composed by Puts with librettist Mark Campbell, won the Pulitzer. It is based on a true story told in the 2005 film, *Joyeux Noël*. Commissioned by Minnesota Opera and co-producer, Opera Company of Philadelphia, the premiere (first performance) was on November 12, 2011 at the Ordway Theater, St. Paul, Minnesota. The critics and audiences both loved it and the rest of the performances played to standing-room-only audiences for the rest of the run.



Image from *Silent Night* courtesy of the Minnesota Opera

The story of *Silent Night* takes place during World War I in the trenches of a battlefield in Belgium. On Christmas Eve, 1914, as soldiers huddle in their bunkers, the sound of music drifts from the French and Scottish bunkers as soldiers celebrate the holiday. A German soldier/opera singer answers back with a Christmas song. Soon the soldiers wave white truce flags and a temporary truce is negotiated in recognition of the Christmas spirit. Soldiers leave their bunkers and mingle on the battlefield. Eventually, the officers admonish them for their peaceful gathering. Soldiers return to their bunkers as the snow begins to fall.

## Learn more at:

- Pulitzer web site <http://www.pulitzer.org/historyofprizes>
- *Silent Night* at Opera News, [http://www.operanews.com/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2011/11/Features/A\\_Leap\\_of\\_Faith.html](http://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2011/11/Features/A_Leap_of_Faith.html)
- Hear all of *Silent Night* at <http://www.npr.org/event/music/151211677/hear-the-opera-that-won-the-pulitzer>



Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

After reading about the Pulitzer Prize, answer these questions:

1. In addition to the recognition and publicity, what does a Pulitzer Prize winner receive?
2. For what musical work did Puts receive this award?
3. How many awards are given each year?
4. Who created the Pulitzer Prizes?
5. Why do you think this person created such a prize? (This question is not answered in the article. It requires you to respond based on logical thinking.)
6. How many composers receive this award each year?
7. Why is the Pulitzer Prize a “big deal?”
8. What new piece was Kevin Puts composing when he heard about his win?
9. How do you think Kevin Puts felt when he first heard the news? (Be very creative and imaginative with your answer to this question.)