

## A Genius?

With the recent passing of the genius Brian Wilson (The Beach Boys), the concept of “genius” got me thinking: what exactly is a genius, and is there a difference between a genius in pop music and one in classical music? Or are we thinking too much in musical boxes? Perhaps it’s a bit like comparing apples and oranges. But before I set the two genres side by side, let me first look into how a genius is defined.

According to Wikipedia, a genius is a person with a special talent that stands far above the average or normal. Generally, this talent is present in more than one area.

And according to the DBNL (Digital Library of Dutch Literature): In general usage, genius refers to an exceptional natural aptitude or talent and originality of mind. The term is mainly used to describe exceptional artistic or scientific creative power.

These seem like convincing definitions to me. Now let me take two of my musical heroes: Brian Wilson and Igor Stravinsky.

Brian Wilson is considered a genius, but so is Igor Stravinsky. Both are geniuses, but in completely different domains.

Stravinsky rewrote the rules of art music. Brian Wilson redefined what pop music could be. So if we see a “genius” as a visionary who reshapes their genre, then both qualify—each in their own way.

Which of the two is the greater genius—Igor Stravinsky or Brian Wilson—is a very different question and depends on how you define “genius” and in what context you place it. Two definitions have already been given. But let me try to weigh this fairly based on influence, innovation, technique, and cultural reach:

- Stravinsky worked with highly complex rhythms, harmonies, and forms that influenced entire movements within classical music. His work is studied at conservatories around the world.
- Wilson used ingenious studio recordings, multi-voice arrangements, and intuitive harmonies, often without formal training. *Pet Sounds* by Brian Wilson is complex, but in a different way than Stravinsky’s abstract, structural complexity.
- Stravinsky broke radically with classical tradition. *Le Sacre du Printemps* literally caused a riot at its 1913 premiere. He revolutionized rhythm, tonality, and compositional form.
- Wilson profoundly renewed pop music. He transformed studio work into an art form (think of the album *Pet Sounds*), influenced The Beatles, and made pop music more introspective, richer (and more emotional, some would say?).
- Stravinsky’s influence lies primarily within classical music, ballet, and film music. His impact is deep, but mostly within that world.

- Wilson influenced global pop culture, from The Beatles to contemporary artists, and his music moved and touched millions of listeners.

Both men heard music that others could not imagine: Stravinsky heard harmonies, rhythms, and structures that no one had thought of before. Wilson heard harmonies and arrangements that seemed illogical (but worked).

So can we now ask: which of the two is the greater genius?

If you look at musical complexity and technical innovation, Stravinsky is the greater genius.

If you look at emotional impact, cultural influence, and studio innovation, Brian Wilson is his equal—or even greater—within pop music.

Objectively speaking, Stravinsky is likely the greater genius, as his influence penetrates deeply into the foundations of music as an art form.

Subjectively speaking, especially within pop culture, Brian Wilson is a genius on his own level, and for many, more accessible and moving than Stravinsky will ever be.

Now that the terms “moving” and “emotional” (or is it passionate?) have come up, I’m entering a completely different realm. Perhaps more on that in another note. For now, I’d like to refer to Charles Rosen’s *Music and Sentiment* about this topic.