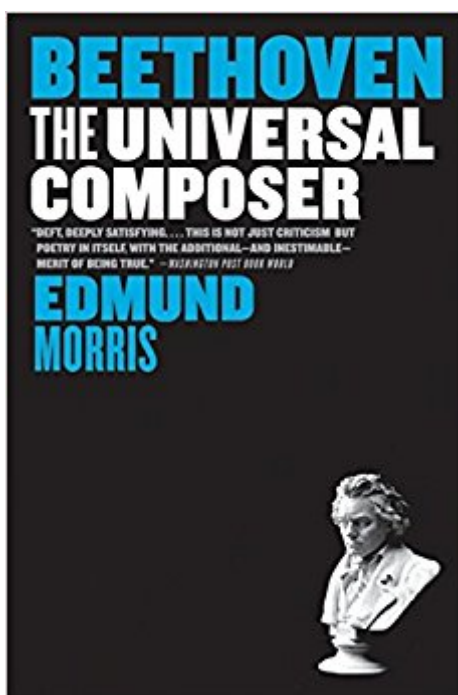


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Beethoven: The Universal Composer (Eminent Lives)



Synopsis

“Brilliant....This book is a perfect marriage—or should one say, duet—of subject and author, every word as masterly as the notes of the artist it illuminates.” —*Christopher Buckley, Forbes*

“This is not just criticism but poetry in itself, with the additional—and inestimable—merit of being true.” —*Washington Post*

Book World Pulitzer Prize-winning author Edmund Morris (*The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt, Theodore Rex, Dutch*) is one of America’s most distinguished biographers, known for his rich, compulsively readable prose style. His biography of Beethoven, one of the most admired composers in the history of music, is above all a study of genius in action, of one of the few giants of Western culture. Beethoven is another engaging entry in the HarperCollins *Eminent Lives* series of biographies by distinguished authors on canonical figures.

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Customer Reviews

This addition to the Eminent Lives Series by Pulitzer-winning biographer Morris (*Theodore Rex; Dutch*) does not disappoint. The author provides a close analysis of only one cantata, the early (written at 19) and relatively obscure Joseph II, but leaves no doubt he could easily do the same for the more radical and magisterial works, which are "bothersome to orthodox opinion" about Beethoven's time, were the ground not so well trodden. Outsize in talent, Beethoven was a difficult, ugly little man, uncomfortable with women (Immortal Beloved and a certain amount of "groupie" attention notwithstanding, he seems never to have had a successful romantic relationship),

snobbish and a raving egotist. His seven-year legal battle with his sister-in-law over custody of her son assumed "manic proportions" and set him "drifting toward paranoia." Yet not only did his prodigious productivity never falter, his psychosis, alcoholism, chronic rages, famous deafness and increasing illness ("dropsy

Adult/High School

—This concise, well-organized biography by an eminent music scholar is just the right length and depth for teen readers. Most readers already know that Beethoven was deaf by the time his famous Ninth Symphony was performed, but Morris fills in the fascinating details of how the composer, who began to lose his hearing in his late 20s, developed strategies to continue writing music and to keep his ever-increasing audience from learning his secret. Students who are compelled to practice their music lessons will sympathize with Beethoven's unhappy life as a child prodigy, when he was allowed to raise his exhausted fingers from the clavier keyboard only when it was time for him to take up the violin. Having lived a childhood of straitened circumstances, he became extravagant and frequently fell into debt as an adult. To keep a supply of ready money, he frequently sold almost completed pieces that he had not even started to multiple wealthy patrons. He attracted eager young ladies, but his shyness prevented him from forming any attachments except for emotional bonds with married women. Morris has interwoven Beethoven's life story with lyrical passages about the sounds and structures of his major works. These descriptions help show how he used the techniques developed by past masters, while introducing the innovations that would be further developed by composers over the next hundred years.

—Kathy Tewell,
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This brief but excellent biography of Beethoven has an important shortcoming: it lacks an index of the compositions that Edmund Morris discusses as he leads his readers through Beethoven's life and huge accomplishment. This is a shortcoming because Morris is able to convey tremendous excitement about the many Beethoven masterpieces he reviews and to develop, at least in this reader, a determination to become more familiar with The Master's oeuvre. Not to worry, though; this resourceful reader began to keep his own list of masterpieces that Morris discusses, that are largely unknown to him, and that he is now determined to hear and enjoy. Thanks to Morris, the list reaches 24 and includes the Cello Sonata, Op. 69; the violin sonata in G major, Op. 96; the Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli, Op. 120; and the single movement trio in B-flat (WoO 39), which

Beethoven accommodated to the technique of a little girl (the daughter of a friend) "without condescension to parlor sentimentality." And as I write, Op. 131, the string quartet in C-sharp minor, plays in the background. According to Morris, Beethoven rated this as his most perfect single work. Certainly, Morris, an award winning biographer, does not neglect the basics of his discipline in **BEETHOVEN: THE UNIVERSAL COMPOSER**. From this book, a reader will learn about the wealthy and aristocratic connoisseur society in Vienna, which recognized and sustained Beethoven from the start of his career. A reader will also learn about Beethoven's work habits, frustrated romantic life, and questionable business practices. And, a reader will learn about his erratic and obsessive obstreperousness. Late in his life, this dominated in the world, while The Master amazingly produced from his head such great works as the Leonore Overture, the Grosse Fugue for Piano Four Hands, the Missa Solemnis, and the Ninth Symphony. This enjoyable biography provides ample information about Beethoven's life but never loses sight of his many great works. Recommended.

Edmund Morris' biography of Ludwig van Beethoven, part of the "Eminent Lives" series, is delightful. Edmund Morris has written biographies of Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. He also plays piano, studies music, and has been examining Beethoven for decades and decades. The combination works very well here. The front dust jacket comments place this 200 page volume in perspective. "Edmund Morris, the author of three bestselling presidential biographies and a lifelong devotee of Beethoven, brings the great composer to life as a man of astonishing complexity and overpowering intelligence." This book is well worth looking at, if one wishes an accessible biography of Beethoven coupled with an insightful reading of his music (at least I think that it is insightful). Morris begins by noting that (Page 2): "Of all the great composers, Beethoven is the most enduring in his appeal to dilettantes and intellectuals alike." Agree or disagree, that is a common view of the composer. Morris points out that Beethoven's early compositions were pretty radical for the day--only to become even more so in his late works (e.g., the Grosse Fugue). This book covers the personal life of Beethoven, much of it rather tortured. His family life was not especially great. His father in essence exploited him as a "child prodigy," even lying about Ludwig's age to make him seem more incredible as a young artist. We see his pain as deafness sets in and his personal life remains unfulfilled, with his "Heiligenstadt Testament." Then, the "Immortal Beloved" letter of 1812 (Morris, by the way, provides an answer as to who this person was--different from whom I had concluded played this role when I took the question seriously 20 or so years ago). There is also the strained relationship with his brother and his nephew Karl. Was he an ogre with Karl? An inept

"father figure"? What? This is a most literate biography, covering his early years, his interactions with Mozart and Haydn, his development of relationships with nobles who would provide financial support for his work. But what makes it special for me is that Morris appears to know Beethoven's music well, and he folds his musical observations into the text in a way that I find enchanting. He notes how some early notes later became the Third Symphony and how some written comments later became the heart of the 9th Symphony. Those who have seen the movie "Eroica" can appreciate Morris' description of the first rehearsal. The chapter labeled "Valedictory" lays out Beethoven's last months. The final chapter, "Epilogue," attempts to give some closure to the book (how successful I leave to the individual reader). This is a relatively brief biography, but literate, properly critical, and appreciative of Beethoven's contributions to our heritage. I do believe that this would be a welcome volume for someone who wants entrance to Beethoven the person and Beethoven the artist.

Separating art from an artist's life often frustrates. Van Gogh's chaotic life compares to the disorderly life of Beethoven; each master's art triumphs, the merge of art and personality fascinates. It is left to the historian to sort it out and opine; a good writer who knows music can make for a fine book. Edmund Morris, the famed Teddy Roosevelt historian, leaps in this short well-written biography from American political history to chronicle the life and music of Beethoven at the turn of the nineteenth century. In crisp and insightful commentary, his writing skills as a historian and a musicologist are evident. With touches of irony and an examination of scores and pieces, this is a good first book for one's understanding of Beethoven and his life and his music, but regrettably it is not enough. Thin on music analysis, the book is without an index which would allow one to retrace important text, once read but forgotten. So while Morris' words sparkle, and the chronology of his life captivates, examining Beethoven's artistic maturation is frustrated by the author's web of words, his conclusory opinions and a scarcity of in depth music analysis. Some Beethoven historians, like Barry Cooper, have been criticized for too much analysis, it would have been helpful in this short book if there had been more. Harvey Sachs' book on the Ninth Symphony is wonderful history and his analysis of the Ninth section by section is a valued companion. The truth of the study of Beethoven is that it takes many hours of enjoyable listenings and the reading of many books to fathom the man and the beauty he has given humanity.

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