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The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth And The Human Imagination



Synopsis

A TIME Magazine Top 10 Nonfiction Book of 2012
A New Yorker Best Book of the Year
Los Angeles Magazine's #1 Music Book of the Year
A unique and revelatory book of music history that examines in great depth what is perhaps the best-known and most-popular symphony ever written and its four-note opening, which has fascinated musicians, historians, and philosophers for the last two hundred years. Music critic Matthew Guerrieri reaches back before Beethoven's time to examine what might have influenced him in writing his Fifth Symphony, and forward into our own time to describe the ways in which the Fifth has, in turn, asserted its influence. He uncovers possible sources for the famous opening notes in the rhythms of ancient Greek poetry and certain French Revolutionary songs and symphonies. Guerrieri confirms that, contrary to popular belief, Beethoven was not deaf when he wrote the Fifth. He traces the Fifth's influence in China, Russia, and the United States (Emerson and Thoreau were passionate fans) and shows how the masterpiece was used by both the Allies and the Nazis in World War II. Altogether, a fascinating piece of musical detective work—a treat for music lovers of every stripe.

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Customer Reviews

I bought this because I love Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. It's not only giving me an even greater appreciation of the music, but I am learning so much about history, philosophy and music theory. I am enjoying this book but I'll be the first to admit that it's over my head. It contains a lot of philosophy, and I don't have any background in philosophy. There is also a lot of music theory, of which I have a thimbleful of knowledge. So I am reading it on different levels - as an introduction to some philosophical principles (such as 'amor fati') which I struggle through, rereading multiple passages multiple times; as a trip back into music theory, with passages that I don't necessarily have to reread, but I definitely need to slow down; as a biography and historical account of events, customs and controversies before, during and after Beethoven composed the 5th, in which I become engrossed.

It is really difficult to say why I liked the book so much. I do enjoy Beethoven's music, and though the 5th Symphony is not my favorite of his works, I still admire it and feel its intensity deeply when I listen. I have read biographies of Beethoven's life and probably would have abandoned this book if it was about Beethoven. It is not. It is about his music and examines why this symphony, # 5, has fascinated and even enthralled people since its premiere in 1808 and extending into the present. Diverse cultures have responded strongly to the symphony. Philosophers have waxed romantic, dissected it and tried, with mixed results, to explain why the music is important. Guerrieri is well read, writes with style and shows deep understanding of his subject. He obviously is passionate about Beethoven and the enormous impact his music has had on the world. More than you think. Much more. I read the this book from cover to cover (well, not all the footnotes) and enjoyed it, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche notwithstanding. If you like Beethoven's music, this book might well be the best book you can read to expand your understanding of it.

I generally like to read books about specific works of art, like one about 'The Last Supper', and have read some good books like that which weave a biography of the artist in with a biography of the work of art. So when I saw this great titled book, I was excited to read it. This was quite an ambitious book and so well researched, but for me, and maybe this is more a comment on my own reading ability than about the author's writing ability, I found the book quite difficult to get through, especially the parts about German philosophy and also some of the different sections about some of the different music reviewers. Still, I did make it through those parts, barely, and found the last section of the book about Beethoven in recent culture and also about how the Fifth was first

performed very good. All in all, this is a tough read, but I'm glad I read it. I got a lot out of it, even though I probably only picked up about 40% of what the author wanted me to get out of it. Still, with that 40% I learned quite a lot. I'm glad I read it, but I'm also glad that I'm done. Again, it could just be that my reading level is somewhat below this book, I'll admit.

This is an EXCELLENT book, full of interesting bits of musical history but also tied up with all kinds of philosophical and political movements and history, from the time of Beethoven up to the present day. Guerrieri is a witty and intelligent writer. My one disappointment is that he never lets on how he himself views the Fifth and what, if anything, he feels it signifies extra-musically. He's so smart - I wanted to know.

Wide ranging review of the interpretation of Beethoven's work by diverse philosophical thinkers which come from a surprising range of the political spectrum and covers the whole range of years since the first performance of the work. Very thought stimulating - but some knowledge of philosophy does help.

This book is arguably the world's largest program note on Beethoven's Fifth. An exhaustive bounty of information about this iconic symphony, it makes little effort to get into the music, but does much to reveal its impact on its time and on the world in general.

This is a fantastic book, full of both tidbits of musical history (the invention of the metronome) as well as a fabulous and surprising interpretation of the history of listening... I loved it.

Not a book for everyone, but if it is a subject that is of interest, this is a great read.

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