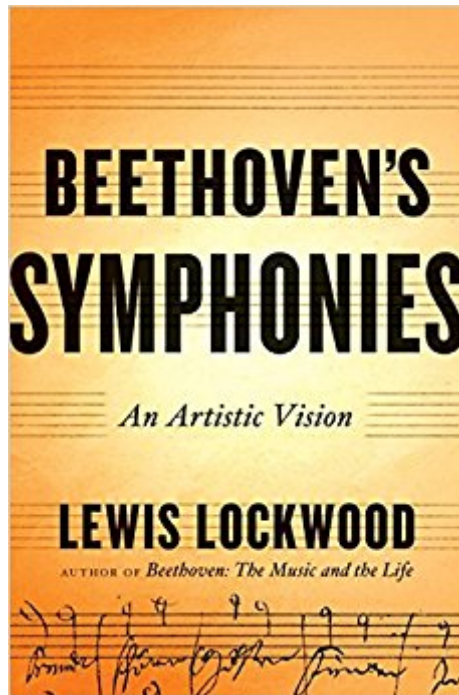


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Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision



Synopsis

An exploration of the unswerving artistic vision underlying Beethoven's symphonies, from one of the world's leading scholars of the composer's works. More than any other composer, Beethoven left to posterity a vast body of material that documents the early stages of almost everything he wrote. From this trove of sketchbooks, Lewis Lockwood draws us into the composer's mind, unveiling a creative process of astonishing scope and originality. For musicians and nonmusicians alike, Beethoven's symphonies stand at the summit of artistic achievement, loved today as they were two hundred years ago for their emotional cogency, variety, and unprecedented individuality. Beethoven labored to complete nine of them over his lifetime—a quarter of Mozart's output and a tenth of Haydn's—yet no musical works are more iconic, more indelibly stamped on the memory of anyone who has heard them. They are the products of an imagination that drove the composer to build out of the highest musical traditions of the past something startlingly new. Lockwood brings to bear a long career of studying the surviving sources that yield insight into Beethoven's creative work, including concept sketches for symphonies that were never finished. From these, Lockwood offers fascinating revelations into the historical and biographical circumstances in which the symphonies were composed. In this compelling story of Beethoven's singular ambition, Lockwood introduces readers to the symphonies as individual artworks, broadly tracing their genesis against the backdrop of political upheavals, concert life, and their relationship to his major works in other genres. From the first symphonies, written during his emerging deafness, to the monumental Ninth, Lockwood brings to life Beethoven's lifelong passion to compose works of unsurpassed beauty. 10 illustrations; 10 music examples

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Customer Reviews

I have loved Beethoven's music since childhood with what I hope is increased understanding and inspiration. An early book that I have returned to over the years in listening to Beethoven's symphonies is George Grove's 1896, "Beethoven and his Nine Symphonies" which remains in print and which has taught me a great deal. As a late Victorian, Grove adored Beethoven. He wrote in the concluding paragraph of his book. "These great works he did as no one ever did, and probably no one ever will.... Music will advance in richness, scope, and difficulty; but such music as Beethoven's great instrumental works, in which thought, emotion, melody, and romance combine with extraordinary judgment and common sense, and a truly wonderful industry, to make a perfect whole, can hardly any more be written. The time for such an event, such a concurrence of the man and the circumstances, will not again arrive. There can never be a second Beethoven or a second Shakespeare. However much orchestras may improve and execution increase, Beethoven's Symphonies will always remain at the head of music as Shakespeare's plays are at the head of the literature of the modern world." In 2003, I read Lewis Lockwood's biography of Beethoven: "Beethoven: The Music and the Life" which also taught me a great deal. Lockwood, Professor of Music Emeritus at Harvard, has written a new book focusing, as did Grove's book more than a century earlier on Beethoven's symphonies: "Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision." Lockwood shares Grove's understanding and love for the Beethoven symphonies, and writes from the perspective of the early 21st Century rather than of Victorian England.

Somewhat disappointing, this book seems oddly old-fashioned and disjointed. As the reviewer in the NYRB stated, Lockwood sometimes schematically analyses the music and sometimes uses historical and biographical information to elucidate the "meaning" behind each work. He often fails to make a really intense connection between how the music is written and why it was written, and how it might have been influenced by extra-musical issues of a cultural, political and artistic nature, when describing each work. Yet his introduction-the best part of the book-does this amazingly well. Only in his analysis of the Eroica, which is less interesting and less fully developed than in his previous book, does he attempt to make this clear, and he completely misreads the meaning of the Finale, which is much less an emotional resolution of the symphony (as it is in the 5th). Instead it represents a historically grounded didactic pageant of how a hero's ideas and actions are viewed by

posterity, finally resulting in their ultimate triumph. Lockwood seems to dismiss this idea in favor of the greater emotional, but much less interesting outpouring (and repetitiveness) of the finale to the fifth. Beethoven, who knew the Eroica was his masterpiece (not the fifth) before he wrote the ninth, would definitely NOT have approved. Of course, when it comes to Beethoven's symphonies, or any great music, unless one listens again and again, what point is there to read about it unless it furthers ones' understanding and appreciation.

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