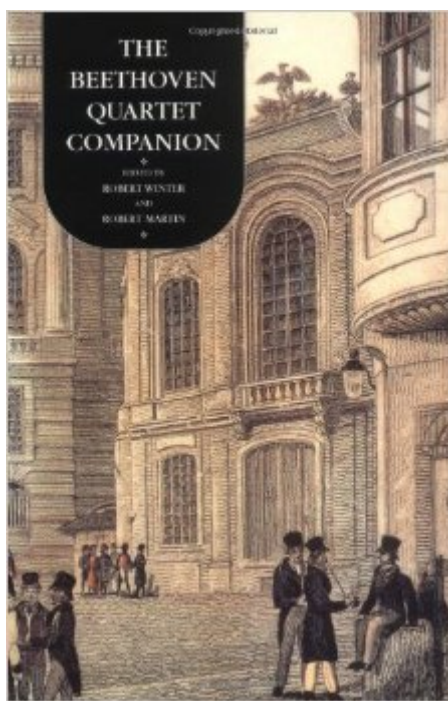


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The Beethoven Quartet Companion



Synopsis

While the Beethoven string quartets are to chamber music what the plays of Shakespeare are to drama, even seasoned concertgoers will welcome guidance with these personal and sometimes enigmatic works. This collection offers Beethoven lovers both detailed notes on the listening experience of each quartet and a stimulating range of more general perspectives: Who has the quartets' audience been? How were the quartets performed before the era of sound recordings? What is the relationship between "classical" and "romantic" in the quartets? How was their reception affected by social and economic history? What sorts of interpretive decisions are made by performers today? The Companion brings together a matchless group of Beethoven experts. Joseph Kerman is perhaps the world's most renowned Beethoven scholar. Robert Winter, an authority on sketches for the late quartets, has created interactive programs regarded as milestones in multimedia publishing. Maynard Solomon has written an acclaimed biography of Beethoven. Leon Botstein is the conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra as well as a distinguished social historian and college president. Robert Martin writes from his experience as cellist of the Sequoia Quartet. And the book is anchored by the program notes of Michael Steinberg, who has served as Artistic Advisor of the San Francisco Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra.

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Customer Reviews

This book should have been called simply "The Beethoven Companion." While it focuses on the string quartets, it deals with many facets of the composer's life, and with life in Vienna at the time.

Detailed but never dull, thorough but never technical, the book describes performance practice, takes you into the minds of interpreters, and deals with such fascinating philosophical considerations as Romanticism vs. Classicism, the meaning of the so-called "last period," and audience expectations in Beethoven's time. Essays by Beethoven scholars are thought-provoking. I know a fair amount about Ludwig, but time and again I found myself learning new things, or reconsidering old wisdom. I have many books on the Quartets, and on Beethoven in general. This one ranks among the very top of the heap.

This book consists of a collection of essays about topics relevant to Beethoven's work on his sixteen string quartets, as well as a quartet-by-quartet analysis, much like you would see in program notes (only more thorough). The essay writers approach the quartets from several different angles: some write as musical performers while others as professional musicologists, but all are of excellent quality and give you insight into a particular aspect of Beethoven and his music. Another great characteristic of this book is its accessibility. Even though it would help to know how to read music, that is more or less the extent of the technical knowledge you need to enjoy this book. Because Beethoven's string quartets form a central part of his musical output, understanding these pieces is crucial to understanding his musical career (similarly for his piano sonatas and symphonies), and this book provides an excellent starting point for learning about the string quartets in-depth. After reading the enclosed essays, you'll want to listen to his quartets again (or anew!), with this book as your guide.

It is nowhere preconized that the core of this fine book (half its pages, in fact) is extensive notes on the pieces themselves by the late gold-standard musicologist and annotator Michael Steinberg. While there is much fascinating historical and contextual material by the editors and others, anyone who has enjoyed and learned from Steinberg's famous series the Symphony, the Concerto, and Choral Masterworks should know that this is effectively a fourth volume of his superb notes.

The initial motivation was to get Michael Steinberg's Notes On The Quartets. First thing I looked at was his Glossary, which is very useful for non musicians. I loved his circle of fifths diagram, but wish he'd added one for key signatures. -- Kerman's opening essay provides an interesting way of looking at the three stages of Beethoven's quartet output. (Early to late) The most interesting essay is Solomon's take on the old "Was Beethoven a classical or a romantic composer?" I've always thought the distinction made no difference and that Beethoven was a sui generis. Not to be put in

any box. And that those who do so have some agenda. Solomon makes a similar argument but with a much more substantive scholarship and perspective. Very nice! The other articles offer interesting perspectives on the life and times in which the quartets first saw light and Martin's run-through of what a quartet's members do to prepare for the performance. All interesting. -- I've listened to these quartet's since my first mono vinyl of the Amadeus Quartet back in the 60's. And have managed to get along without any such background reading. But now I have the leisure it is nice to broaden the context and experience. Steinberg's analysis is very useful, though, in the end I found myself going on line and printing scores for movements I wanted to look at more closely and then dig out Tovey and other sources for more detail. But that's not to slight Steinberg's discussions, which are very useful. - Certainly recommended for detail and context which can only enhance your listening experience.

I really can't figure out how many stars to give this book, because I think it depends on your musical expertise. For strong amateurs and professionals, it's apparently a 5-star book. It was way too advanced for me: I tried to read a few pages and just gave up. This book is a lot tougher than the usual liner notes which come with classical music.

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