

THE CONCERTO: A LISTENER'S GUIDE BY MICHAEL STEINBERG



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Amazon.com Review

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A former music critic for the *Boston Globe*, Steinberg (*The Symphony: A Reader's Guide*) here gathers some 122 essays, some of which began as notes to programs given by the New York Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra, among others. Now based in Edina, Minn., Steinberg generally focuses on the most-often played concertos by Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and other popular composers. Although this is not the book to open if you're looking for data on a rare item by the likes of Nikolai Miaskovsky or Vagn Holmboe, it is nevertheless a worthwhile introduction for readers shy of technical matters. Steinberg intersperses his essays with plenty of commentary about various concertos from musicians, who generally have more pertinent things to say than a good many musicologists. Although there are musical examples, they need not scare off readers who have never studied music. Inevitably, in a collection of articles such as this, there will be some painful omissions: thus, although Witold Lutoslawski's great Cello Concerto merits an article, none is devoted to his equally great Piano Concerto. Modern composers such as Henri Dutilleux, Bohuslav Martinu and Darius Milhaud are not discussed here, nor are there any entries about popular classical works such as Haydn's Cello Concertos. While this book not an all-inclusive or encyclopedic guide, this collection of articles has a relaxed, easy charm that will most likely win

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Michael Steinberg's 1996 volume *The Symphony: A Reader's Guide* received glowing reviews across America. It was hailed as "wonderfully clear...recommended warmly to music lovers on all levels" (Washington Post), "informed and thoughtful" (Chicago Tribune), and "composed by a master stylist" (San Francisco Chronicle). Seiji Ozawa wrote that "his beautiful and effortless prose speaks from the heart." Michael Tilson Thomas called *The Symphony* "an essential book for any concertgoer."

Now comes the companion volume--*The Concerto: A Listener's Guide*. In this marvelous book, Steinberg discusses over 120 works, ranging from Johann Sebastian Bach in the 1720s to John Adams in 1994. Readers will find here the heart of the standard repertory, among them Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, eighteen of Mozart's piano concertos, all the concertos of Beethoven and Brahms, and major works by Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Bruch, Dvorak, Tchaikovsky, Grieg, Elgar, Sibelius, Strauss, and Rachmaninoff. The book also provides luminous introductions to the achievement of twentieth-century masters such as Arnold Schoenberg, Be'la Bartok, Igor Stravinsky, Alban Berg, Paul Hindemith, Sergei Prokofiev, Aaron Copland, and Elliott Carter. Steinberg examines the work of these musical giants with unflagging enthusiasm and bright style. He is a master of capturing the expressive, dramatic, and emotional values of the music and of conveying the historical and personal context in which these wondrous works were composed. His writing blends impeccable scholarship, deeply felt love of music, and entertaining whimsy.

Here then is a superb journey through one of music's richest and most diverse forms, with Michael Steinberg along as host, guide, and the best of companions.

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Indispensable

By David A. Kemp

A wonderful book. Michael Steinberg is probably the premier writer of program notes for symphony orchestra concerts in the English-speaking world, and his two books, *The Symphony: A Listener's Guide* (Oxford University Press, 1995, 678 pages), and its companion volume *The Concerto: A Listener's Guide* (Oxford UP, 1998, 506 pages), are probably the two best collections of program notes on the symphony and the concerto that have ever been published in English. Steinberg formerly wrote the program notes for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and currently writes them for the New York Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. He was music critic of the Boston Globe for twelve years. These two books come with glowing recommendations from such distinguished musical figures as Seiji Ozawa, Michael Tilson Thomas, Andre Previn, Herbert Blomstedt, Roger Norrington, and John Adams. Speaking as one who has attended countless symphony orchestra concerts on the East Coast, West Coast, and in Dallas for more than forty years, and has always read the program notes, I can say that I've never read any as good as these. They are readable, learned, witty, accessible, and delightful, full of important biographical and historical

information, and of course musical description, evaluation, and analysis that is genuinely illuminating and enlightening, without being so technical you need to be a musicologist or seated at a piano to understand it. (Inevitably, there are some musical examples, but these are relatively few, usually fairly simple, and you don't have to understand them to grasp the meaning of the text.) I would recommend these two books strongly to any lover of classical music, anyone who attends symphony orchestra concerts.

Having said this, I can't help noting a few unfortunate omissions. No Haydn trumpet concerto, no Rodrigo *Concierto de Aranjuez* (indeed, no trumpet or guitar concerti at all). No Handel *Concerti Grossi*, Opus 6, and, a truly surprising omission, no Vivaldi *Four Seasons*. Vivaldi and Telemann, the two most prolific composers of concerti, are not to be found in Steinberg's book; indeed, the entire Baroque period, during which the concerto form flowered and proliferated, is ignored with the sole exception of J. S. Bach. Otherwise, I'd say that all the concertos you would reasonably expect to find in such a book are included here.

Despite these omissions, I recommend this book and its companion volume warmly and wouldn't be without them. Now I wish Mr. Steinberg and Oxford University Press would give us a third volume, covering the large body of orchestral music that is neither symphony nor concerto (such as tone poems and symphonic suites and dances, ballets and ballet suites, incidental music to plays and pageants, major overtures and preludes, et al.).

17 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

Worthy Companion to Steinberg's "The Symphony"

By Sol Guber

Michael Steinberg's "The Concerto" is a worthy companion to his book on the Symphony. The book is a compilation of program notes that were written for various orchestras.

Steinberg gives a quotation from Prokofiev about music that states "the melody must be simple and comprehensible without being repetitive or trivial...We must seek a new simplicity." If you substitute music criticism for melody, this quotation can be used for the basis of this book. Steinberg tries to make music and especially the concertos of major composers comprehensible. He combines history of the period with the place of the concerto in the composer's works as well as why the work was written. He gives a detailed discussion of the music in a manner that is comprehensible to a listener rather than a musicologist. There are a few musical examples and I believe that there should be more. The majority of the concertos discussed are ones that are frequently performed but there are a number of modern works that are described. About forty different composers are discussed, from Adams to Zimmermann, with the most important works of each composer detailed.

In a comparison of this book with "The Concerto" edited by Ralph Hill, the two books compliment each other. Steinberg has more information about the composer and the times that the works were written, while Hill has many, many more musical examples and is written at a level for more sophisticated musical listeners. If you have the Hill volume, you will still enjoy Steinberg's work and learn more about the works discussed. While the book is a good value, I still have one caveat, it will cause you to purchase a number of new CD's to listen the works that have intrigued you

17 of 19 people found the following review helpful.

Another splendid book for music lovers from M. Steinberg

By Daniele

Some time ago I re-read the review I wrote for the companion book "The symphony" and I think I somewhat overstated the faults and underlined the virtues. Now that I have more experience with music books I can say that quite nobody in the business writes with Steinberg's appealing mix of musical authority, wit and passion, all wrapped in highly-readable but nonetheless refined literary style. His are books that you can really read or consult over and over. Maybe sometimes he's too opinionated, and his books are ultimately limited by the concert-notes he wrote (thankfully American Orchestras' programming is FAR more adventurous than what get in Europe), but all of this is a price I pay gladly for such a wealth of instructive and entertaining info. I

mean, when Steinberg likes a piece (I'm thinking about the Schuman Violin Con., for example), you really would run out of the house to buy the cd ! Also, I believe this second book is slightly different in technique: while "The Symphony" was essentially centred on the discussion/description of the pieces, in "The Concerto" the various articles are sort of mini-essays on the composer, with more extensive biographical notes and brief descriptions of other significant works beyond those discussed. Of course a symphony is generally longer (and more elaborate in form) than a concerto, so maybe this was also an adjustment to a different subject. This approach works especially well in some cases. For example, the article about the Adams Violin concerto is, in addition, an essay that also speaks about this composer's career and key-works. Probably Adams could not be included in the first book because he hasn't written a symphony (yet) but, knowing that Steinberg was the SFS program annotator during Adams composer-in -residence years, it was really a loss, as the wealth of first-hand insights that I found in "The concerto" confirms. Also, I greatly appreciated the inclusion of Saint-Saens Piano Concertos n.2&4 . I harshly criticized the French composer's exclusion from the first book, and here Steinberg even talks briefly about the Organ Symphony. Thank you very much. In some mini-essays Steinberg does an outstanding job in re-assessing some unjustly underrated composers: in this respect the Walton and Barber sections are excellent. Then there are those "special" composers for whose music the author shows great affection besides his deepest musical understanding: good examples are the Brahms and Stravinsky sections, which are a joy to read (and re-read, and not only while you're listening to the music). Even a piece I personally dislike, the Lutoslawski cello con., makes for compelling reading! About the (unavoidable, I'm afraid) "omission game", this time I don't have a lot to point out: the Nielsen Violin Concerto is deliberately left out (agreeing or not with the reasons, I think it should be included anyway), and it's too bad that Steinberg doesn't include the Glass Violin Con. , which I think is the "other" major contemporary concerto with the Adams, but there's not much else to complain about (why nothing about Penderecki, though, in neither of the 2 books?) Now, what about a book about the great pieces written in other forms, like Ballets (the Rite of Spring or Romeo and Juliet), Serenades (Mozart, Brahms, Dvorak) and Symphonic Poems (Strauss, Respighi) ? I want more!

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