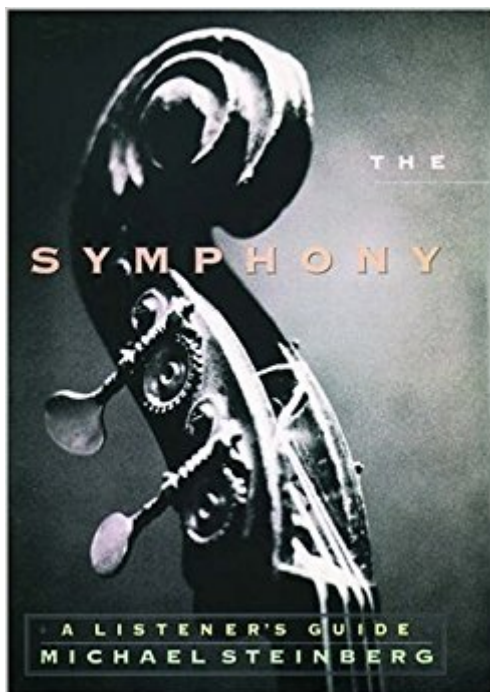


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# The Symphony: A Listener's Guide



## Synopsis

From the agile beauty of Mozart's "Jupiter" and the fierce power of Beethoven's Fifth to the celebration of heroism in Shostakovich's "Leningrad," the symphony has long held a prime place in the Western musical pantheon. Now, in *The Symphony*, renowned teacher and critic Michael Steinberg offers music lovers a monumental guide to this most celebrated of musical forms, with perceptive commentaries on some 118 works by 36 major composers. Enriched by biographical detail, historical background, musical examples, and many finely nuanced observations, this volume is a treasury of insight and information. Readers will find illuminating discussion of the complete symphonies of Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Elgar, Sibelius, and Mahler, as well as of the most loved symphonic works of Schubert, Bruckner, Dvorak, Tchaikovsky, Vaughan Williams, Prokofiev, and others. We learn, for example, how to listen more sharply for Haydn's humor, to Mozart's singular combination of pathos with grace, and to the evolution of Beethoven's musical ideas in his epoch-making nine symphonies. The range and variety of composers are remarkable--Schumann's musical poetry, Tchaikovsky's melodic genius, Mendelssohn's patrician elegance, Mahler's wild and beautiful innovations, Bruckner's mighty cathedrals in tone, the brooding mysteries of Sibelius, Stravinsky's fascinating engagements with the past, and Aaron Copland's ebullient American athleticism--and all are illuminated by Steinberg's deft, inviting, and intensely personal essays. The book boasts generous coverage of American composers, with sections on Howard Hanson, Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, Aaron Copland, William Schuman, and John Harbison. Steinberg gives us such a vivid portrait of each composer's personality that we get the most immediate sense of how the work is a direct expression of the person from whose soul and brain it has sprung. Tracing the ways in which composers have dealt with the extraordinary musical challenges that have engaged them throughout the centuries, Steinberg takes us through the revolutions of expression, sound, and form that have shaped the symphony's remarkable history. Whether beginners or veterans, music lovers will listen to the symphony with enlivened interest and deeper understanding with Steinberg's masterful guide in hand.

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## Customer Reviews

This is a serious, inclusive look at symphonic composers and their work. A well-constructed reference, it examines the development of the symphonic art from its beginnings to the present day, composer by composer, in chronological order. This would be a useful addition to any music bookshelf.

Critic, lecturer, and program annotator Steinberg describes 36 composers and, movement by movement, 118 symphonies, including all the standard repertory regularly programmed by North American orchestras as well as a few by less well known composers such as Gorecki, Harbison, Martinu, and Sessions. The writing varies from formal and factual to chatty, with candid asides and stories relevant to the composer, the composition, or an important performance. The information is on the level of good program notes (the origin of most of it), although reader familiarity with some basic musical technical terms is assumed. A well-written, informative introduction to the repertory for most music collections. Timothy J. McGee, Univ. of Toronto Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

When I first opened this book, it began with symphony number 1 of Beethoven. And "go to beginning of book" in the index menu brings me to the same point. No introduction, table of contents, or introduction to Beethoven. I didn't know how to go to another symphony without paging through the whole book (search did not work very well). However, as I eventually discovered, if you press "previous page" at the beginning, you get the prior missing parts of the book. And "Table of Contents" in the index takes you to the Table of Contents, which is selectable so you can go right to the symphony you want. Once I figured out how to use the book I was pleased with it.

One of the only books I've kept since graduation. Very interesting to read - and easy to "skim" if

necessary. Details are fascinating and references aren't too hard to understand for someone with less musical knowledge. I still remember some wonderful passages about Beethoven's 6th that I flagged to read again. Overall: A+

This is a classic book by one of the best music critics -- ever. If you're a symphony fan, or want to be, this is the one book you should have.

Good and easy to read review. I bought it as I try to update my understanding of Mahler, especially with the new or renewed interest. Some of the tomes appear to be overwhelming. Here although brief the discussions of the compositions are well thought out.

The other reviews have addressed the content in some detail. Readers are warned that the Kindle edition of the book is of poor quality. Text appears to have been scanned without proper conversion. Unlike other Kindle books legibility is poor and text scalability is limited. This is really unacceptable and should be an embarrassment to the publisher.

Michael Steinberg's *The Symphony* is a useful companion for both beginning and experienced listeners. It's basically a collection of program notes written for the Boston Symphony and San Francisco Symphony when he acted as the orchestras' publications director and artistic advisor. Its main focus is on the core symphonic repertoire, including discussions of the complete cycles of Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, Mahler and Sibelius. There is much other material besides including generous but partial surveys of the symphonies by Nielsen, Shostakovich, Bruckner and Tchaikovsky. Given the genesis of the book comprehensiveness was not an aim. Still it is a pity that works by composers such as, for instance, Franz Liszt, Leonard Bernstein and Witold Lutoslawski are totally absent. Also, the reference to *the symphony* needs to be taken quite literally. Introductions to tone poems such as Richard Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra* or Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade* are nowhere to be found. Typically Steinberg situates the work in the composer's career and personal life and provides a movement by movement description. Often, when it concerns contemporaneous composers (Sessions, Harbison, Piston, Hanson) he admixes personal reminiscences. There are few notated examples, lowering the bar for listeners without a musical background. The introductions are longer and more developed than a standard CD booklet text. For instance, the discussion of Sibelius Seventh Symphony references Wagner, Schoenberg and Palestrina, and includes an

extended quotation from Donald Tovey's Essays in Musical Analysis. In his discussion of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, Steinberg dwells for a full page on the work's very first bars to make us understand how the composer was able to trick us, almost, in believing that the music had been going on all along and that we just happened to come within earshot. The celebrated composer John Adams paid tribute to Steinberg's erudition and eloquence in his autobiography Hallelujah Junction: "Michael's ability to render, in beautiful and uncluttered English prose, complex and subtle musical issues set the gold standard for how one communicates about music in words." That should count as an endorsement. Oxford University Press published similar companion volumes dedicated to Steinberg's notes on key choral works and concertos.

The late Michael Steinberg wrote the best and most thorough notes ever written on the Symphony. Many of the great orchestras of the world often relied on his work to include as their program notes for concerts. He is perceptive, intelligent, knowledgeable, and conveys a sense of immediacy, which, even in the absence of the music, has the music come alive in the reader's mind. In short, what the Kobbé Book of the Opera is to opera, Michael Steinberg's book is the symphony.

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