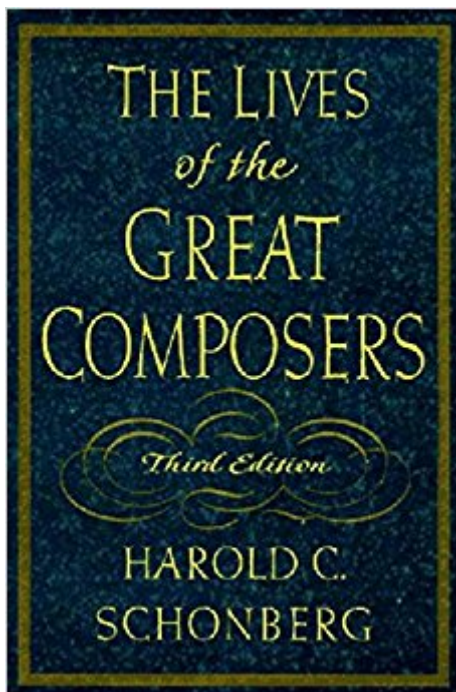


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# The Lives Of The Great Composers



## Synopsis

An updated and expanded edition of this perennial favorite, tracing the line of composers from Monteverdi to the tonalists of the 1990s. In this new edition, Harold Schonberg offers music lovers a series of fascinating biographical chapters. Music, the author contends, is a continually evolving art, and all geniuses, unique as they are, were influenced by their predecessors. Schonberg discusses the lives and works of the foremost figures in classical music, among them Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, the Schumanns, Copland, and Stravinsky, weaving a fabric rich in detail and anecdote. He also includes the creators of light music, such as Gilbert and Sullivan and the Strausses. Schonberg has extended the volume's coverage to provide informative and clearly written descriptions of the later serialists such as Stockhausen and Carter, the iconoclastic John Cage, the individualistic Messiaen, minimalist composers, the new tonalists, and women composers of all eras, including Mendelssohn Hensel, Chaminade, Smyth, Beach, and Zwilich. Scattered throughout are many changes and additions reflecting musicological findings of the past fifteen years.

Photographs

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This third edition of a work that has become a standard resource since its publication in 1981 includes brief but significant changes. A new chapter brings the work up to date, covering later serialists such as Stockhausen and Carter, minimalists Philip Glass and John Adams, and Alfred Schnittke and Peter Maxwell Davies. Schonberg discusses the recent phenomenal success of recordings of Gregorian chant and the search for styles of composition that combine originality and

complexity with audience appeal. Women composers Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Amy Beach, Cecile Chaminade, Ethel Smyth, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich are now included. Though each has been given only one paragraph, it is valuable to see them placed in the context of their contemporaries and their predecessors. Schonberg writes for the lay reader. His intention is to humanize the composers and the writing, always highly readable, emphasizes biographical information rather than musical analysis. Recommended for all public and academic libraries. ?Kate McCaffrey, Onondaga Cty. P.L., Syracuse, N.Y. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A smooth, closely woven sequence of brief biographies . . . set in a surrounding continuum of depth and breadth which reflects the author's solid musical culture, his erudition, his command of socio-historic background, and his long experience in every kind and degree of performance. -- The New York Times

Harold C. Schonberg *The Lives of the Great Composers* W. W. Norton, Hardback, 1997. 8vo. 653 pp. Third Edition. Preface to the Third Edition by the author [pp. 13-17]. General Bibliography [pp. 621-636]. First published, 1970. Second Revised Edition, 1981. Third Revised Edition, 1997. Contents Preface 1. Pioneer of Opera: Claudio Monteverdi 2. Transfiguration of the Baroque: Johann Sebastian Bach 3. Composer and Impresario: George Frederic Handel 4. Reformer of Opera: Christoph Wilibald Gluck 5. Classicism par excellence: Joseph Haydn 6. Prodigy from Salzburg: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 7. Revolutionary from Bonn: Ludwig van Beethoven 8. Poet of Music: Franz Schubert 9. Freedom and a New Language: Weber and the Early Romantics 10. Romantic Exuberance and Classic Restraint: Hector Berlioz 11. Florestan and Eusebius: Robert Schumann 12. Apotheosis of the Piano: Frederic Chopin 13. Virtuoso, Charlatan - and Prophet: Franz Liszt 14. Bourgeois Genius: Felix Mendelssohn 15. Voice, Voice, and more Voice: Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini 16. Spectacle, Spectacle, and More Spectacle: Meyerbeer, Cherubini, Auber 17. Colossus of Italy: Giuseppe Verdi 18. Colossus of Germany: Richard Wagner 19. Keeper of the Flame: Johannes Brahms 20. Master of the Lied: Hugo Wolf 21. Waltz, Can-Can, and Satire: Strauss, Offenbach, Sullivan 22. Faust and French Opera: From Gounod to Saint-Saens 23. Russian Nationalism and the Mighty Five: From Glinka to Rimsky-Korsakov 24. Surcharged Emotionalism: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky 25. From Bohemia to Spain: European Nationalists 26. Chromaticism and Sensibility: From Franck to Faure 27. Only for the Theater: Giacomo Puccini 28. Romanticism's Long Coda: Richard Strauss 29. Religion, Mysticism, and Retrospection: Bruckner, Mahler, Reger 30. Symbolism and Impressionism: Claude Debussy 31. Gallic Elegance and the New Breed: Maurice Ravel and

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Bibliography  
 Index=====After "Horowitz: His Life and Music" and "The Great Pianists: From Mozart to Present", "The Lives of the Great Composers" has been my third encounter with a book by the former senior music critic of New York Times Harold C. Schonberg (1915-2003). And for third time I am enchanted. I have rarely found in non-fiction writing such admirable combination of colossal amount of fascinating information and amusing, entertaining, hugely readable style as in Mr Schonberg's; his books are some of those treasures that you can always use as a reference source for classical music and its composers, pianists, conductors, superstars - or just open on any page and happily immerse yourself into a fabulous kaleidoscope of characters and events. "The Lives of the Great Composers" seems to be Mr Schonberg's greatest achievement in the field - if the number of revisions is to be taken as something of a measure for that. To the best of my belief, "The Great Conductors" (1967) and "The Glorious Ones" (1985) were never revised, and "The Great Pianists" (1963) was revised only once (1987), while in 1997 was published, revised and expanded as usual, the Third edition of "The Lives of the Great Composers" (after the First in 1970 and the Second in 1981). I think the best way to review this book would be a long quote from its fascinating Preface. As usual with Harold Schonberg it is a perfect piece of writing that makes you want to devour the whole book at once: "The emphasis in this book up to now has been on "great". The great composers always, one way or another, altered the course of musical history and have entered into, if not the consciousness of all humanity, certainly the consciousness of Western people. (Never believe politicians who prate about music being an "international language". It isn't.)" [...] "I have tried to humanize the great composers, to give an idea of what they felt and thought. This approach was considered unfashionable at the time of the first edition, and is still considered unfashionable today. Many music scholars insist that the work rather than the person is the thing; that a piece of music can best be explained as music; the only valid "explanation" can be made through structural and harmonic analysis. Anything else is sentimental program-note writing that has no real application to the music. I disagree. I firmly believe that music can be explained by the man; indeed, must be explained by the man. For a man's music is a reflection of his mind and his reaction to the world in

which he lives. [...] Just as we see the world and other beings through the eyes of Rembrandt, Cezanne, or Picasso when we look at their paintings, so we experience the world through the ears and mind of a Beethoven, Brahms, or Stravinsky when we hear their music. We are in contact with a powerful mind when we hear their music, and we must attempt an identification with that mind. The closer the identification, the closer it is possible to come to understanding the creator's work." [...] "It is easy to make a mystique out of form and analysis; but are not these topics best left to the professionals, to be read by other professionals? I have always been amused by books supposedly for the lay reader that are full of complicated music examples. Some of those examples - score reductions and the like - Vladimir Horowitz himself would have found difficult to play." Indeed, there is hardly anything I could add. Still, let me try.

The Third Edition of "The Lives of the Great Composers" by Harold C. Schonberg is a formidable book of more than 600 closely printed pages (and in a font a trifle smaller than it should have been) grouped in 41 chapters. The scope is simply staggering - from Claudio Monteverdi in the beginning of the XVII century until the avant-garde composers (if they may be called by that name) that dominate the second half of XX century. The style is typical for Harold Schonberg - gripping, chatty, witty, naughty and absolutely compelling. But just below the diverting surface, there lurk powerful intelligence, remarkable personality and tremendous knowledge of music history. The title implies that biographical information is the main topic and certainly that is so, but the book might well have been called *The Minds of the Great Composers* or *The Music of the Great Composers* for there is a great deal of fascinating reflections both about the characters of these great men and about the eternal music they created. Mr Schonberg does not mince words and his frankness is exhilarating: Mozart was a really bad boy, Beethoven - a misanthrope, Chopin - a snob, Liszt - a poser, Schumann - a complete nut, Mussorgsky - a drunkard, Tchaikovsky - a homosexual and a total depressive, Wagner - a fierce anti-Semite and a colossal egoist, and so on and so forth. The beautiful thing about Harold Schonberg is that he never harps on these personal matters; he does mention them all right but the creative side of the great composers and its expression in music always comes first. Considering the very limited space he has on his disposal, Mr Schonberg has done a fabulous job to summarize the human being and the great composer. I can't even imagine how one could write something about a Beethoven, or a Mozart, or a Wagner that has any semblance of completeness in just 20 pages or so, yet the eminent music critic has certainly succeeded in doing so. No matter what or who he writes about, he always remains wonderfully readable, and a great fun to read indeed. Most importantly, together with basic biographical data, he always offers some startling insights and thought-provoking reflections about the man and his music, about traditions and revolutions, about

art and future, about human nature. Take Mozart for example. There are lots of books written about the Salzburg genius but I very much doubt you can find in any 20 pages of them so much to reflect upon than in the chapter from Harold Schonberg's *The Lives of the Great Composers* dedicated to this really great composer. It is nothing short of remarkable achievement - it is indeed unbelievable - in so limited a space to give a compelling idea of Mozart's music and character, his life and his age, and even the performance practice and how it did change since then. But there it is: [Of Mozart's music.] "Mozart's music is at once easy and hard to listen to; easy because of its grace, its never-ending melody, its clean and perfect organization; hard, because of its depth, its subtlety, its passion. It is strange to say of a composer who started writing at six, and lived only thirty-six years, that he developed late, but that is the truth. Few of Mozart's early works, elegant as they are, have the personality, concentration, and richness that entered his music after 1781 (the year of his final break from Salzburg, significantly)." [Of Mozart's character.] "He grew up a complicated man with a complicated personality and an unprecedented knack for making enemies. He was tactless, spoke out impulsively, said exactly what he thought about other musicians (rarely did he have a good word to say), tended to be arrogant and supercilious, and made very few real friends in the musical community. He had the reputation of being giddy and light-headed, temperamental, obstinate. We can look back to all this and sympathise. He was Mozart; he was better than any musician of his time; he did unerringly spot the mediocrity around him (and also the great figures: he had nothing but respect for Haydn), and in his musical judgments he was never wrong. But that did not make things any easier for him while he was alive." [Of Mozart's age.] "We in the late twentieth century, with recordings and radio and concerts in which Mozart is a staple of repertory, are apt to forget that in the 1780s even a professional musician could not be sure that the first time he was hearing a work might not also be the last. There were not that many concerts. A new piece of music had to be grasped immediately. It probably would not even be printed. Not until Beethoven and the Romantics could a composer be reasonably sure that all of his major works would be published." [Of Mozart's performance practice.] "Period instruments, thanks to the world popularity of the early-instrument movement, are now in constant use. Thus today we have, perhaps, a better idea of how the music might have sounded in Mozart's day. But how Mozart himself would have played or conducted it - that is another matter. What has happened is that modern musicians, with the best intentions of "authenticity", tend to perform classic music with late-twentieth-century ideas of fidelity to the printed note and regularity of rhythm. And, one suspects, at slower tempos than Mozart himself would have taken. In addition, musicians today seem to ignore Mozart's own strictures, spelled out in his many letters, that describe his kind of performance. Mozart, for instance, in a long letter, specifically

describes his rubato. How many "Mozart specialists" playing the Mozart keyboard music use his kind of rubato? Or any rubato at all? None comes to mind. Like all performing musicians of the day, Mozart not only constantly improvised cadenzas but also embellished the melodic line as he went along. It is a mistake to approach Mozart's music with the attitude that the printed note is the final word. Often it is, or should be, just the beginning. If recent research into eighteenth-century performance practice has demonstrated one thing, it is that our forefathers used much more freedom in interpreting the music than most twentieth-century musicians are prepared to admit." Of course compressing three and half centuries of music history into 600 pages compels vast omissions and a great many musical masterpieces must be mentioned with no more than a few words. There are no detailed musical analyses here, and for my part this is simply wonderful; music should be listened to, lived through, experienced, felt, suffered, everything you'd like - but certainly not analysed. Harold Schonberg has an ability for general description of the music of a given composer that is nothing short of astonishing; it is not just accurate and perceptive, but it shows a genuine passion for music - and that's something you don't often find in music critics. Many of his musical impressions border on poetry and make for unforgettable reading. Absolutely the same may well be said about his character sketches of complicated personalities who have almost only thing of common - genius. Indeed, as far as I am concerned Mr Schonberg is impeccable at all fronts. Even about my favourite composers (Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff) he can always surprise me with something profound and stirring I have never before thought about; at the same time his chapters on composers who I find extremely tedious (Bach, Handel, Haydn) or openly despise (Stravinsky, New Viennese School, not to mention more modern ones) are equally absorbing and fascinating. That's saying a great deal indeed. As for his chapters on groups of composers, they are superbly organized and cover an amazing variety of material; Chapter 25, for example, manages to get under the skins of such diverse composers like Smetana and Dvorak on the one hand, and Sibelius and Grieg on the other - together with a hint of Granados, Albeniz and Debussy; Chapter 23 is certainly the finest synthesis, in so short a space, of Glinka, Borodin, Balakirev, Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky that is possible to exist. Though I would have enjoyed, for example, something more about Gustav Holst and *The Planets* or Carl Orff and *Carmina Burana*, to complain about those omissions when such a wealth of musical history is present seems like the purest form of idiocy there is. It is worth noting some of the criticisms I have read about *The Lives of the Great Composers* for they show that some people obviously have a really remarkable ability for missing the point. Some of them complain that the book started with Claudio Monteverdi and all earlier great composers are totally neglected. True. But, firstly, this is no

History of Music and, secondly, Harold Schonberg explains this in his wonderful preface as well as in his very first paragraph of the first chapter. He wrote a book about great composers and to be read by an intelligent layman, not a musicological study in which every composer there ever was under the sun should be included and which can be read - if at all - only by musicologists. Harold Schonberg had to draw the line somewhere, he had to choose a criteria of greatness; a very tall order that he managed brilliantly. He decided - very sensibly to my mind - that the universal public acceptance and the presence of certain music regularly in the concert hall today is the best criteria to consider a composer "great" and therefore worth including in the volume. That's why he chose Monteverdi to start with, because his music is the earliest one that is still very much played in public. Mr Schonberg tells us that there are many great composers before Monteverdi and they are occasionally heard today and even have fanatic admirers, but they simply don't fit his criteria. Nor does he make any bones about the modern composers - the accent here is on "composers", not on "great". This leads me directly to another ridiculous criticism about the book, namely that it isn't a reference for modern composers. Of course it isn't - it is such by design. Perhaps the modern "composers" issue requires a more detailed discussion. Considering the astonishing degree of perversity they have achieved in their "compositions", it is very much to Harold Schonberg's credit that not only does he deal with them at all and even dedicates whole chapters to them, but he always remains with his tongue in cheek and he is never angry - which is quite an achievement in this case. But he is often very serious too, as when dealing with the so called Serialists, their "music" and their impact on the audiences: "A chasm developed between composer and public. The world of the international avant-garde in the 1960s had developed a variety of styles, but the music of virtually every serial-dominated composer had certain traits in common - the absence of melody, an emphasis on the linear (polyphonic) rather than the vertical (harmonic) aspects of music, total dissonance, objectivity, abstraction. The public would have none of it. This was something new in the history of music. Even the wildest experiments in the previous centuries had a hard core of public admirers, and after a generation or so their music, if it had anything to say, entered the repertory. Serial composers talked about the cultural lag. They said they were writing for a future age. But, it was asked, how long was a cultural lag supposed to operate? [...] Could it be that perhaps - just perhaps - the fault lay not with the public but with the composer?" Very sensible question! Indeed, how can one take these gentlemen seriously? Consider the notorious John Cage, the father of the so called indeterminacy in music, who made a real revolution and really did reach the peak of deliberate perversity: "This led to a kind of music that, for the first time in history, was completely disorganized. All music used to be organized sound. Now, in his Imaginary Landscape



No. 4 the instruments are twelve radios sounding different stations simultaneously, with two players at each radio manipulating the knobs to change stations and volume. Of course every performance had to be different. [...] In his most notorious work, 4'33", the pianist (or any other performer/s) sits at the keyboard without touching the keys for four minutes and thirty-three seconds or any other period of time, ad libitum. The piece is in three movements, indicated by the pianist's lowering and raising the lid. The idea behind 4'33" is that the audience sounds, ambient noise, noises coming from the street or whatever, or whenever, are the content of the piece. Nobody disputed the claim that Cage had a fertile - if wacky - imagination."I am totally speechless!At any rate, there is still a lot of time to pass before any modern composer can be regarded as 'great', that is before (if ever!) his music achieves the universal public acceptance and enters the standard repertory. At the same time Mr Schonberg dedicates a lot of space to Modernism: Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Bartok, New Viennese School; they all are covered in different chapters and by no means less extensively than the masters from previous ages. In none of them is Mr Schonberg in any way dismissive or contemptuous. Quite on the contrary indeed - his admiration for Modernism (at least until Stravinsky) is as genuine, if a bit qualified sometimes, as that for Romanticism or Classicism. But what if it wasn't?The most serious accusation against Mr Schonberg usually is that he is biased and far from being objective. True. And a great advantage indeed. This is another thing I love in Harold Schonberg's writing - and another thing you rarely if ever find in music critics - openly confessed subjectivity and a real understanding that this is something inevitable. As Mr Schonberg said himself:"I write for myself - not necessarily for readers, not for musicians. I'd be dead if I tried to please a particular audience. Criticism is only informed opinion. I write a piece that is a personal reaction based, hopefully, on a lot of years of study, background, scholarship and whatever intuition I have. It's not a critic's job to be right or wrong; it's his job to express an opinion in readable English."(Interview with Editor and Publisher, 1967)"Some critics profess to work according to a set of immutable esthetic and technical laws. They are only fooling themselves. There are no immutable laws. There is only the critic himself: his background, his taste and intuition, his ideals, his literary ability. If style is the man, so is criticism, and his criticism always ends up a reflection of what he is."(Times, July 6, 1980)It must be stressed that Harold Schonberg was not only a Senior music critic of Times for 20 years, a prolific writer and a man of great knowledge about music and history, but he too was a trained musician, accomplished pianist and a fine score reader (that is, he could hear the music in his head while reading the score). He was a man who knew both his mind and his subject pretty well. But musicians and musicologists should remember that "The Lives of the Great Composers" was not written for them, but for the layman; and if the latter is dissatisfied with its

contents, there is in the end a simply staggering General Bibliography in which, chapter by chapter, a huge number of biographies, studies, diaries, volumes with letters and such like are listed for those who want to learn more. The most angry about Mr Schonberg's subjectivity usually are the ardent admirers of Gustav Mahler who obviously is a composer the author holds in low esteem. For my part this is perfectly fine since I still can't persuade myself that Mahler is a composer that should be taken seriously, much less as a great one or a genius. At any rate, even in this most critical case Harold Schonberg is by no means entirely dismissive. He mentions some fine moments in certain of Mahler's works but ultimately he simply can't understand what all the fuss was about. Neither can I. Speaking of myself, I don't always agree with Harold Schonberg. Far from it. Sometimes he can be exasperating, like his harping on Liszt's "charlatanism" and Don Juan status; both certainly were part of this complicated and fascinating personality, but probably to a much smaller degree than is usually thought, as Alan Walker made clear in his magisterial biography Franz Liszt. Harold Schonberg has all three volumes of this remarkable work in his spectacular General Bibliography, but he either never read them seriously, or he doesn't think much of Alan Walker as researcher; both statements beggar belief. Be that as it may, Mr Schonberg is quick to recognise Franz Liszt as one of the seminal and most prophetic forces among the myriad of great composers in the XIX century. But he puts in the in the group of "minor masters" composers like Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius, another opinion of his I find a bit hard to agree with. He is especially harsh about Grieg's most popular works; surely the great Norwegian has a lot more to offer than the Peer Gynt suites and the Piano concerto but this doesn't at all mean that these works are not masterpieces - indeed, there are among the most wonderful music I've ever heard. As for the Finnish genius Jean Sibelius, I have my own problems with him, with his late works especially, but Karelia, Finlandia, En Saga and the first two symphonies (when played well!) are works of immense power and originality. The same can well be said about Richard Strauss' symphonic poems and I cannot for the life of me agree with Mr Schonberg that the effect dominates the substance. These orchestral masterpieces might well have been quite modern in the end of XIX and the beginning of XX century, and they surely were the talk of Europe at that time, but their musical value has nothing to do with such matters; yes, some moments of Eine Alpensinfonie definitely are bombastic and parts of Don Quixote are positively ludicrous, but both works are masterpieces nonetheless. I assume the admirers of Vivaldi (and some other Baroque masters) would be somewhat exasperated to find his compositions described as "wallpaper music". (Well, his concerti grossi may well be, but The Four Seasons, despite its popularity, is surely a great work.) And sometimes, though seldom indeed, Harold Schonberg can write a downright nonsense, like a sentence in Chapter 34 which tells us a

good case can be made that Rachmaninoff's music is less sentimental than Mahler's or Tchaikovsky's. Now, I wonder what case that would be. How exactly do you measure such thing as "sentimentality"? No matter. Truly, it doesn't matter at all how much I disagree with Harold Schonberg occasionally. I can never be angry with him. There are two main reasons for that. Firstly, Mr Schonberg's knowledge and erudition are almost frightening and speak with a really commanding voice. I have no doubt that Harold Schonberg has listened to any of the thousands and thousands of works he mentions in passing through these 41 chapters; in the concert hall, on record or in his head while reading the score, the author seems to know everything about everybody's work. If there are any mistakes or inaccuracies in this matter, I am certainly not aware of them; quite as expected of course, since to question Mr Schonberg's conclusions one must indeed have an overwhelming knowledge and understanding of classical music and its rich history. Secondly, and far more importantly, Harold Schonberg has a writing style which, quite simply, is a pure delight and joy to read. He gives you tons of information but always remains wonderfully readable, no matter if he writes about Monteverdi or about Bartok. His digressions are always well calculated - the one about castrati in the Handel chapter is brilliant - and his historical background is perfectly placed. He is always amusing, quite often he is actually hilarious, but he is never flippant or tactless. His candour is refreshing, his reflections - stimulating. Had somebody told me just a few months ago that a music critic would soon become one of my favourite authors, I would certainly have sent the poor fellow into asylum. Yet, that's precisely what has happened. In short, reading "The Lives of the Great Composers" by Harold Schonberg offers a fascinating view of the greatest music ever written through the life and characters of the greatest musical geniuses ever lived - and its reading does cause addiction. In conclusion, if you are even remotely interested in classical music, you must read this book. Period.

OK this is a classic and really interesting to read. You just have to like Art and music, you DO NOT have to be an expert! The stories about the composers are so interesting. I loved reading this book during the cold winter months with the fire in the fireplace. Buy it and then decide if it would make a good gift because everyone is different.... I gave it to a friend and they loved it.

My friend told me about this book and I have thoroughly enjoyed reading it...

Schonberg's third edition of this perennial favourite includes a few subtle changes to the first edition (which I'd read numerous times), as well as new accounts of the serialists, tonalists, minimalists

(and other -ists) who have bored and bewildered audiences during the last 45 years or so. And while Schonberg doesn't say so explicitly, in many ways this book poses the ultimate riddle of our supposedly advanced culture and times - how on earth did we go from the heights of Mozart in the 18th century, and then Beethoven in the 19th, only to fall in the last century to a level of such mindless mediocrity? Reading the latter pages of this book, I was reminded of Thomas Beecham's immortal riposte to the question of whether he had ever conducted the music of Stockhausen. "No, but I've trodden in some," was his sardonic reply. Beecham would surely have applauded the author's straightforward style. Not for Schonberg is the stuffy, academic approach to the great composers so favoured by classical poseurs, but rather a witty series of vignettes designed to make the subjects come alive. Schonberg shows the composers warts and all, and our appreciation of their strengths and flaws (both musically and characterwise) is all the keener for his lack of pretentiousness. For some readers, he will undoubtedly have his blindspots when it comes to assessing certain composers' musical worth (his section on Elgar, for example, is not as glowing as the subject deserves), but he makes no apologies for possessing strong opinions - and nor should he. If you're looking for a politically correct account of the great composers, then look elsewhere. Meanwhile, the intelligent lay-person (rather than the musical expert) will find many rewarding hours in this witty feast of a book.

I know this book . Very important Excellent for students.

Wonderful information about composers. Easy to read. My son received this as a gift and now gives copies as gifts to friends who love music.

Just what my husband wanted

Interesting book

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