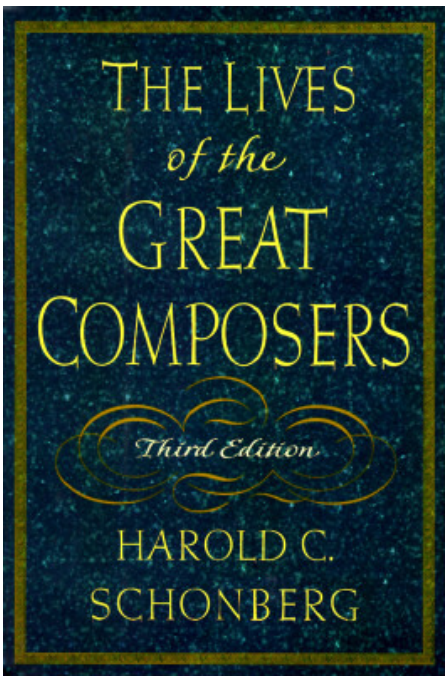

The Lives of the Great Composers

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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.

The Lives of the Great Composers Details

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From Reader Review The Lives of the Great Composers for online ebook

Greg Fanoe says

I learned a lot, but this was far too dry to merit more than 3 stars. Still, glad I read it just from the standpoint of my own cultural edification.

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jonathan says

5/13 read: chapter 8, "poet of music, franz schubert". there's this whole bit about how beethoven was in vogue during much of schubert's life, and, despite a ridiculously huge and enormously beautiful catalog of music, was totally underappreciated during his life. he died in 1828. it follows that "it was robert schumann who unearthed [schubert's] ninth symphony, the 'great' c major. schumann had known of its existence and on new year's day of 1839 he visited schubert's brother ferdinand, who showed him piles of manuscripts. ferdinand allowed schumann to depart with the scor of the c-major symphony, and on march 29, 1839, mendelssohn [!] conducted the world premiere in leipzig. there is some evidence that the work was tried out in vienna in 1828, under schubert's supervision, and was shelved as being too difficult. in a letter to clara wieck, schumann raved about the score: 'it is not possible to describe it to you. all the instruments are human voices. it is gifted beyond measure, and this instrumentation, beethoven notwithstanding---and it's length, this heavenly length like a novel in four volumes, longer than the beethoven ninth symphony.' [actually, not true.] then schumann reviewed the liepzig premiere with his typical understanding and big-heartedness: 'the symphony produced such an effect among us as none had produced since beethoven... years must pass, perhaps, before the work will be thoroughly understood in germany, but there is no danger that it will ever be overlooked or forgotten. it bears within it the core of everlasting youth.' schumann, as so often, was right. the c-major symphony, in its breadth and passion, had a claim to stand near the beethoven ninth. schubert, in his last year, expanded tremendously. his music is packed with ideas, is enormous in scale, is starting to head in a new direction. on his deathbed he is said to have cried that new ideas were running through his head. what would he not have done had he lived!"

i should add here that he died at age 31. to me, that story is extraordinarily moving.

Randall Wallace says

“A superior harmonic sense is the mark of nearly all the great composers. Where most composers of his day would confine themselves to the rules, Bach made the rules.” Sounding more like a Romantic than a Baroque composer, Bach told an aspiring organist to not only play the notes but express the “affect”, the emotional significance of the piece. None of Corelli’s pieces go higher than third position on violin. “A feeling for modulation, is the infallible mark of the important composer. It is the mediocrity who sits so close to home, who does not have the imagination or the daring to go from key to key.” “It is safe to say no great music is without the element of the unexpected.” “Melodies had to be harmonized, and in his harmonic ideas Schubert was supreme.” Music totally changes between 1830 and 1840. It moves from classical harmony to romantic which means allowing seventh, ninth, eleventh, and even altered chords. Romantic is more legato and rich. Rubato: “Every sensitive musician uses it; the device is equivalent to variation of line in a drawing

by a master”. Chopin was known for using it a lot although he made his pupils stick to a metronome for Bach and Mozart. Chopin loved singers, so you must bring out his singing lines. Donizetti composed L’Elisir d’Amore in eight days including one of my favorite arias of all time, Una Furtiva Lagrima. Wagner and Berlioz sucked at playing any instrument yet look at what they wrote. Wagner actually went through a radical period where he fell under the influence of the super cool anarchist Mikhail Bakunin; sadly, he quickly went back to being a racist jerk. Cesar Frank got uneasy when any student composer did not modulate enough. I loved Mahler’s critique of orchestral musicians: “They cannot read the score markings, and thus sin against the holy law of dynamics and the inner hidden rhythms of a work. When they see a crescendo they immediately play forte and speed up; at a diminuendo they become piano and retard the tempo. One looks in vain for gradations.” When Saint Saens went back for his recital encore at age ten, he offered the audience “to play any of Beethoven’s thirty-two sonatas from memory.” Debussy’s ear was his only rule; chords did not have to resolve. Ravel was only five feet tall.

On the negative side, I did not like the fact that Harold was not a fan of Saint Saens Piano Concerto #2, and that he dissed the amazing first movement of Dvorak’s Seventh Symphony. Then Harold dares to say, “It is true that no one can make the case for Grieg as one of the immortals.” Really? Jan Garbarek, would beg to differ. Jan sells more records than any classical artist today and his favorite composer is Grieg (Jan is also Norwegian). Grieg loving Jan’s record Officium with the Hillard Ensemble sold 1.5 million copies. Let’s see one of Harold’s classical musical friends pull that off. Another snotty PMS comment by Harold is “How could the composer of Valse Triste (Sibelius) be taken seriously?” A good book for the most part but occasionally you wonder how elitist-douchebag Harold (who looks like John Gielgud pistol-whipped by a midget) got this book deal.

Mk Miller says

A good introduction to classical composers, but this guy gets unnecessarily catty at times, and if you're new to classical music and impressionable you may want to be wary of letting Schoenberg sway you against certain composers. Another thing to consider - pare this book with a premium Spotify subscription and you can build playlists to match what you're reading, without having to drop huge wads of money (operas can get expensive). Also, as you approach the late 19th century, consider augmenting this with Alex Ross's The Rest is Noise: Listening to the 20th Century.

Thomas J. Hubschman says

I rarely read biography, especially biographies of writers and other artists. I assume anything worth knowing about them is in their art, that the source of their creativity is a different self from the person the artists' friends and family and public know. Also, artists are notoriously mistaken about themselves. You could even say they know themselves less well than does the average person who would no more think of writing a poem or a symphony than s/he would sign up to take a trip to the moon. Notorious bigots, if they happen to be good writers, create sympathetic characters whom by right they should be portraying in the worst light. Think Anthony Trollope's MP in The Way We Live Now. And walking saints can produce pap and cant. But not always. Chekhov was saintly in some ways, and no one has matched him as a short story writer.

And then there's the question of biography being just another form of fiction, or at least being as much about

the author of the biography as about the subject.

Even so, I overcame my aversion, made an exception, as it were, for Harold C. Schonberg's The Lives of the Great Composers and then for his The Lives of the Great Pianists. The reason is my schoolboy-like adoration of classical musicians. I know what neurotic jerks writers usually are (I'm one myself...a writer, I mean). But I put great composers and their interpreters high up on pedestals--or did until I read Mr. Schonberg's books.

This "lives of" genre, of course, started with the medieval Lives of the Saints, and continued in the Renaissance with Vasari's Lives of the Artists, which tells you something about how Western culture has progressed or a least changed its focus over the last thousand years. By the 19th century artists pretty much had a clear field to themselves, and they played it for all it was worth.

Not that the Bachs, Chopins and Prokofievs or Liszts, Hofmanns and Horowitzes come off badly in these books. If anything, Schonberg is an even bigger groupie than I am, though much better qualified to see his subjects' moral and social warts. It's not a matter of any one of the greats being brought down a peg or two by what he puts in these volumes but of a cumulative impression one is left with and the standards of value by which a modern musicologist like Schonberg (not to be confused, by the way, with the 20th century composer Arnold Schoenberg) evaluates them and their work.

I don't know why I was so naïf as to think musicians were not, like fiction writers, subject to the academic bent for seeing art as a progressive historical process classifiable into schools and periods: Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Post-Romantic, Modern, Post-Classical and God knows what else. Scholar’s minds work that way. But it never occurred to me that great musicians could fall for that kind of silliness. They create because they are moved to do so, and what comes out of them is the only thing possible. Or, so I had thought.

But they were in fact frequently all too conscious of the imperative to be innovative, if not always original. Truly great artists break the molds, create new forms, because the content of their art, what they must express, demands new forms. Beethoven didn't have to think about in what ways he could show up Haydn and out-Mozart Mozart. He spent a few years under the influence of those two, but then found his own voice, matching it to the powerful creation inside him. He didn't innovate for the sake of innovation. The content of his art dictated the form and the expression.

But others were more self-conscious. Brahms was looked down on as old-fashioned by the school that saw Wagner as the future of music, and then of course Wagner suffered the same fate, until by the time we reach the twentieth century composers would rather die than be thought anything less than avant garde. In consequence we got a dogged academic adherence to innovation for its own sake (and, perhaps, more tellingly, combined with mediocrity) that has driven otherwise sympathetic listeners in our own time to rock and jazz (which have their own issues with innovation for innovation's sake).

The backbiting that went on in this fight to be at the head of the pack is worthy of a high school locker room. It's embarrassing to read some of the things composers said about each other, and no doubt still do. I suppose they did so partly to keep their stock up in their own estimations. Unless they were fools they knew what Bach or Beethoven meant to music no matter how they tried to trash them with glib asides (they probably stayed up nights thinking up those nasty one-liners). What's more disconcerting is the way they worried about their place at the cutting edge of their art. God forbid they should write something that was behind the times. Ever onward. The past, if not prologue, is something to be spurned. Who can write as if there had been no Wagner? Or no Stravinsky? Well, Brahms could, for one. And Rachmaninoff for another.

We've seen the same thing in literature. Who could expect to be taken seriously as a serious writer unless s/he wrote in a post-Joycean style? Not Saul Bellow. Not John Updike. And then who could expect to get the lit-crit establishment's seal of approval if they ignored the tenets of Post-Modernism? How many first-rate talents have succumbed to this orthodoxy and diminished their talents rather than end up as, God forbid, "popular" writers?

Walter Kaufmann, best known as the translator of Frederic Nietzsche, pointed out that all the great philosophers were what today would be considered amateurs. Maybe something similar could be said about great writers and composers. The best educated in their craft are self-educated, i.e. they learn by experiencing others' art. Frequently they are mentored by another great talent. But with the ascendance of the academy and its minions we have just the opposite situation: a cadre of mediocrities mass-produced and as conformist in their thinking and creations as any mainline clergyman.

It's in the nature of the academy to foster conformity and uniformity, even when it professes to want the opposite. The firestorm of petty invective and personal insult that met B. R. Myers's A Reader's Manifesto a few years back showed just how sensitive and insecure the establishment is to any questioning of its authority. The Inquisition was liberal-minded by comparison.

Schonberg seems surprisingly deaf to the diktats of the establishment of which he is of course a part. But I still say "surprisingly," because the man is nothing if not a passionate lover of music--all music, it seems, though he is lukewarm about some composers I would think he would be enthusiastic about--Prokofiev, for example, who managed to write fabulous music despite the towering presence of Stravinsky. And how dare he! (I mean Schonberg) leave out George Gershwin in a book like this, while including, not to mention--not to mention--infinitely less talented contemporary composers.

Even so, The Lives of the Composers is a valuable book, as is The Lives of the Great Pianists, if only as an introduction to the subject, or subjects. A decent bibliography of related readings is included; musicians then as now are a garrulous and scribbling lot.

Yijia Chen says

A comprehensible encyclopedia of all music labeled "classical" and its progression since the Baroque period. Schonberg did a good job including all major composers and exploring their lives, expertise, and innovation. I personally spent the most time on the giants of the Classical and Romantic periods and threw my mind into their lives and contemporaries, though not as much for those from the 20th century.

The book is substantial in content, and it took me a little more than two month to walk through this long history of music. Although I enjoyed this book as a music amateur, I would really recommend reading it if you have professional knowledge in music theory or the major pieces.

Genni says

“We are in contact with a mind, and we must attempt an identification with that mind.” This is Schonberg's stance on understanding music. Music cannot be divorced from the mind that created it. It is not simply structural or harmonic analysis. So Schonberg attempts to relate to each composer and the world and culture that produced him as well as the make and personality that lent itself to the creation of classical music. Therefore, it is largely biographical, in contrast with *The Great Pianists*, which focuses more on the specific contributions of each pianist.

I often wondered at some of the “great” composers he included. Some he terms “minor” composers. Perhaps they did not contribute anything earth-shattering, but did produce works that continue to be popular (i.e. Greig). I can understand their inclusion. But what of the chapter devoted to Meyerbeer, Cherubini, and Auber? Not only did they not contribute anything significant to the repertoire, but they also are never played. But I suppose this is nitpicking.

Overall, Schonberg is a great writer, though I did feel he exhausted musical prose here more than in *The Great Pianists*. I lost count of how many composers found themselves to be an “anachronism in his own time”, for example. Still, those who have not studied the composers before will find a fine exposition. For those who have studied them before, a fitting recapitulation.

Ioana says

I couldn't enjoy the book. Although it was written in a slightly charming style, I found the author rather subjective and judgmental. I don't know if this is the proper way to get people into the history of music, with journalistic idiosyncrasies.

Profound Alchemy says

Read and re read and re re read. It really is very nicely done.
I have the 599 page hardback edition.

Mark Dickson says

Highly recommended!

This is one of my favorite books. I used to own the 1st edition when I was a 20-something, but it was lost along the way. I found this 3rd edition just recently and have loved revisiting these chapters.

The value is the 10-15 page chapters devoted to each composer. None of the treatments are thorough, but a single volume thread of composers from Monteverdi to Copland is just right for me. Especially when I just want an hour or two diversion to whatever else I'm reading.

Mark Desrosiers says

This witty and fascinating march through history didn't cure me of my hate for "classical music" -- in fact it reinforced my belief that these highbrow genres were always made by and for European (or Europhile) religious, political, and economic elites. Yet it did grant me not only understanding and knowledge, but lots of gossip, dirt, rebellion, and insanity to chew on next time I deride classical as music for serial killers. An excellent book, recommended for everyone everywhere -- even haters -- and it's remarkable that this final revision was assembled when Schomberg was in his eighties.

Here he digresses about castratos (in the chapter on Handel): "These glamorous, ungainly figures were pursued by bored ladies out for a new kind of thrill. There were many such in the eighteenth century aristocracy. They also knew that, come what may, there would be no children." When I saw that "come what may" I laughed out loud, and sussed Schonberg as a nasty wit who has no interest in preserving composers in amber.

The chapter on Tchaikovsky reconfigures that neurotic man as something less than the AC/DC audacity of the 1812 Overture, and more of a crazier version of Morrissey: when conducting, "he got the idea that his head was going to fall from his shoulders, and he actually would put his left hand under his chin to keep it attached. It is not surprising that he was not exactly a conductor who could inspire his players."

Or dig his career summary of Giacomo Puccini: "He composed three of the most popular operas ever written, died worth an estimated four million dollars, had all the opportunity he desired to play poker and to decimate the duck population around his lodge at Torre del Lago, and indulge his passion for fast boats, fast motor cars, and fast women." Every chapter features gems of this sort -- these composers come to life as mostly nutzoid or (unintentionally) hilarious men. Only dull sobersides like Bach, Handel, or Mendelssohn take you away from the flesh and blood and deep into the music.

But there really is an autumnal tone, a sense that modernity has rendered new "classical" music comatose, or vegetative. The last words here: "Whatever the complex of reasons, the period after World War II and the following decades saw a hiatus in the mighty line of powerful, individualistic composers that had extended from Monteverdi through Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg." Imagine all the rock and pop music writers today having to contend with that, with the death of all they've ever enjoyed and engaged through a lifetime, and that's what Schonberg leaves off with. I look forward to reading Alex Ross's The Rest Is Noise for an alternative to Schonberg's verdict, which as far as I can tell remained unchanged at his death in 2003.

Maja Lisa says

I'm giving this 4 stars because it's a great resource, but I wish I could give it 1 star for the overarching

misogyny.

Zevi says

This is a fantastic book, thoroughly researched, lucidly written and highly entertaining. It contains details on the lives of all the great composers and many of the more obscure ones as well. The composer Charles Ives became one of my heroes after reading this. One of my friends is currently writing an instructional book on playing the guitar titled, **How to Become a Guitar Player from Hell**, and he told me this book really inspired him and also influenced some of the musical ideas he decided to include for illustration purposes.

Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says

This is a very well written, informative overview of some of the most important composers of the Western tradition, from Bach to Webern. Schonberg has the power to make the same bare facts of a particular composer's life that I've read before in CD liner notes or reference book entries take on real drama and significance, without distorting the facts. He writes well about music, succeeding in conveying the experience of the various pieces discussed without growing stale or sounding pretentious.

However, I do not always agree with him. He is downright wrong about Mahler, whose music he dismisses as the over-emphasised, over-scored product of a neurotic mind. He accepts that Sibelius was a composer with an individual style, and one whose reputation may well increase with time (these words were written at a time when Sibelius' initial popular appeal had faded and the current revival of interest in him had not begun), but he also pegs him as a minor composer, which is questionable at best. He is similarly cavalier with Bartok. He is also rather sketchy on Shostakovich. On the other hand, he very sympathetic to Liszt, and to the French 'impressionists', perhaps in excess in the latter case. By and large, Schonberg overemphasises the intellectual aspects of music while showing a certain distaste for the emotional aspect, which may serve as a corrective to a certain tendency to value maudlin displays of emotional excess but is hardly a balanced approach to any form of art, particularly music, which hardly needs to aspire to the condition of science.

Still, a superbly written book, an excellent guide for lay readers who are reasonably familiar with the composers being discussed and can draw their own conclusions.

Barbara says

I've been reading this book to bits for decades now (an earlier edition). The only reservation I have about Schonberg is that he didn't always write about the composers themselves with respect. But all his sins are forgiven him because of the short chapter he devoted to my beloved Hugo Wolf, of whose ultrasubtle, inspired settings of good poetry Schonberg said "No greater songs exist". Sometimes I agree with that.
