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# The Concerto: A Listener's Guide



## Synopsis

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, Dvora'k, 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 Barto'k, 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Veteran music critic and program-notes writer Michael Steinberg offers up a sequel to his well-received collection of articles, *The Symphony: a Reader's Guide*. Over the years, Steinberg has written program notes for the likes of the San Francisco Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra, so this new book might be subtitled, "Pieces of Music Orchestras Paid Me to Write About." Even though the selection of pieces is far from all-inclusive, the approach to the reader is friendly and non-snobby, and very little of the book is off-putting for those who have no musical training. Beethoven, Brahms, and Mozart are plentifully described and with a certain feeling for how to mix biographical incidents with musical matters to heighten a reader's interest. However, a lot of rarer composers are absent, as are some works by familiar composers, so readers might want to complement this book with another Oxford Press title, *A Guide to the Concerto* edited by Robert Layton, which, instead of focusing on individual works, contains essay-length overviews by such expert critics as David Brown and Michael Kennedy--whetting the appetite for hearing rarities as well as informing the reader about familiar works. Reading Steinberg, one would never agree with Glenn Gould (among other musicians), who dismissed the concerto form as artistically unsatisfying. Instead, one feels a sense of gratitude for so many good works written in the medium. --Benjamin Ivry

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 over readers unfamiliar with the subject. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

As with Steinberg's "The Symphony," this work on "The Concerto" is a fine piece of writing passionately about the subject matter: in this case, the blessed concerto. As a child of the Baroque, their slighting (no Telemann, Vivaldi and limited Bach --- what about his woodwind Concertos?) doesn't detract from this fine rendering of String and Keyboard Concertos. His notes on the play between soloist and orchestra through each piece is aptly traced through their development. Steinberg is a gifted "wordsmith" of painting the emotions and expression thereof through pace and rhythm and instrumental layering. Whether using for one's concert attendance or listening to broadcast or own library performance accompaniment, this is a thorough and historical accurate guide and companion.

Mostly a great reference. There are always a few details that people in the biz should know, but often don't. For example, the spelling of Rachmaninoff's name (correct here and in the book, ie. as the composer always spelled it and how it appears on his tombstone. Another example is the Sinfonie Concertante, a form that emerged in Paris in the early 1770s, and as such should never be spelled "Sinfonia", as it unfortunately is in this book. These are quibbles, of course, but someone should start getting it right rather than repeating the error. My main complaint is the curious ordering of the pieces within each composer. Of the two dozen Mozart pieces, the first one listed is the Clarinet Concerto. I appears the author listed items alphabetically (clarinet, horn, piano, violin, etc), except things like "Double Concerto" and "Concertstuck" are tacked on last as though he couldn't decide if these were official names. The last Mozart pieces discussed are his violin concertos, written well before anything else listed. This isn't the first author to do this, but I think it would make more sense to list compositions in the order written so that proper context and creative development can be appreciated.

excellent reference book, well written and researched. It has brief bios of composers as well as a guide for listening to the music.

It is in fine condition. Thank you.

Bizarre omissions -- too many masters of the concerto ignored. Overblown writing -- does not hit the "sweet spot" between the technical and the dramatic. In all, I found it useless. Easier to just "Google" something I am interested in. In sum, I deleted it.

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 to the works that have intrigued you.

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