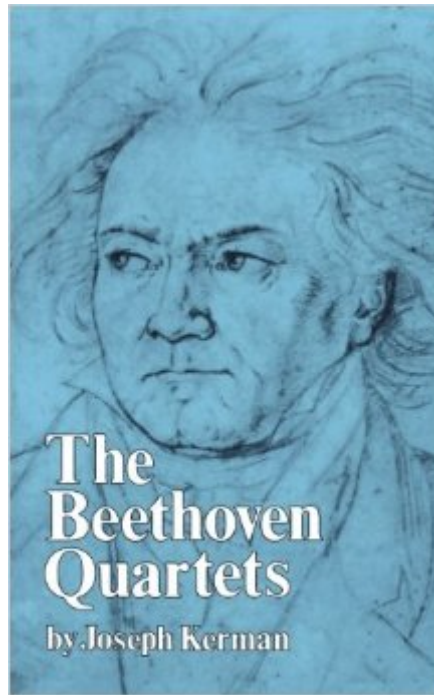


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The Beethoven Quartets



Synopsis

A critical study of the structure, style, and significance of the sixteen string quartets. Beethoven's quartets show a technical mastery, depth of thought, and intensity of musical inspiration unsurpassed by any other composer. This brilliant survey, by one of America's leading musical scholars, has already achieved classic status.

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Customer Reviews

To get anything out of this book, you need to have scores and recordings of the quartets. What's more, you need to have scores with measure numbers: the Dover reprint of the Breitkopf und Härtel edition of the scores is a great bargain, but lacks measure numbers, which you have to write in -- a slightly tedious, but indispensable task. (Use pencil, because it's easy to make mistakes.) Once you've done this, though, you're in for a transformative experience. Mapping Kerman's analysis onto the scores is occasionally like a treasure hunt, but what treasure there is! If you're like me, and have known and loved these pieces as a listener for a long time, the insights and aesthetic wonderment to be gleaned from close study of this book can take your enjoyment and appreciation to an entirely new level.

I am unqualified to write a review of this highly acclaimed book, because I am neither a musicologist nor a student of music. If you have training in music, please ignore this review. I give it 5 stars merely because it is highly acclaimed. I'm writing this mostly because it is not mentioned here on , or elsewhere, what the book consists of, and whether "casual listeners" can read it. The answer is

"no". I purchased this book because I love the late quartets intensely, and I was looking for something that would be a pleasure to read, and something that might deepen my understanding of the quartets (especially the late quartets). I found that I could not comprehend more than a few sentences in the entire book. Almost nothing is said about the non-musicological aspects of the quartets; nothing that evokes wonder or interest - for the casual listener, of course. Although I would not use the word "casual" to describe myself as a listener - I've been listening to the quartets for more than a decade now, and find something new every time - it remains that without formal training, this book is entirely incomprehensible. It is a series of technical analyses, and might as well have been written in Japanese as far as I am concerned. If you're like me - someone who loves the quartets but does not have a formal grounding in music - this book is not for you. Read Sullivan's "Beethoven" if you haven't read it already.

This is an excellent book for people who want to more fully understand and appreciate Beethoven's string quartets. It is fairly technical, but if you can read music at all passably you should be able to follow the many examples. Mr. Kerman obviously knows his subject VERY well and he places the works into historical and musical perspective as he explores the formidable technique that went into them. Two caveats: First, he really doesn't like some of LvB's music very much! For example, re the fugue ending the third Razumovsky Quartet (an all-time favorite of mine), he speaks of the main theme's "rare flatulence" and says, "Few movements in Beethoven...stretch their material so unscrupulously." The final measures are "...the accents of a hero turned demagogue..." where the music "...makes loud cadences and repeats itself endlessly, a garish but nonetheless formidable display of might." C'mon Joe, tell us how you really feel... Second, he sometimes gets ahead of himself and writes about an interior movement of a quartet before starting the main discussion, so that the text is hard to follow--especially if you're reading along while listening to the music. This is irritating of course. Those comments aside, there's a wealth of knowledge and insight in this book that should help anybody interested in Beethoven--and that's everybody, right?--increase their enjoyment of his ever-astonishing quartets.

This is my favorite book about the Beethoven quartets. Yes, it presumes some musical training, a score and a recording, but these things are not rare. I find Kerman's aesthetic and value judgments to be uniquely insightful, even if I don't agree with all of them. He can step back and talk about the relationship of one quartet to another, as well as the phrase-by-phrase development of each movement.

This book is really only for serious music students or musicologists - I would bet that most normal musicians or instrumentalists would have a difficult time even understanding it. As far as deep analysis and technical/structural interpretation goes, this book is probably one of the best available for the subject matter it covers. It is not for the "casual listener" or for those of you who are interested in the quartets and want to just read amusing anecdotes about their composition. This is a serious, scholarly study of the music itself, not a biography or history - although those subjects do play a part, of course, in relating the music to Beethoven's personal psychology. As such, I think it is vital for most Beethoven scholars or advanced music students to have - for reference if not for pleasure. Those of you who just want to read about Beethoven, his times, the genesis of his music, and to lightly touch on some technical matters might want to try a standard like Burk's "The Life and Works of Beethoven" or some of the more recent volumes.

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