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The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth And The Human Imagination



Synopsis

A TIME Magazine Top 10 Nonfiction Book of 2012A New Yorker Best Book of the YearLos Angeles Magazine's #1 Music Book of the YearA unique and revelatory book of music history that examines in great depth what is perhaps the best-known and most-popular symphony ever written and its four-note opening, which has fascinated musicians, historians, and philosophers for the last two hundred years. Music critic Matthew Guerrieri reaches back before Beethoven's time to examine what might have influenced him in writing his Fifth Symphony, and forward into our own time to describe the ways in which the Fifth has, in turn, asserted its influence. He uncovers possible sources for the famous opening notes in the rhythms of ancient Greek poetry and certain French Revolutionary songs and symphonies. Guerrieri confirms that, contrary to popular belief, Beethoven was not deaf when he wrote the Fifth. He traces the Fifth's influence in China, Russia, and the United States (Emerson and Thoreau were passionate fans) and shows how the masterpiece was used by both the Allies and the Nazis in World War II. Altogether, a fascinating piece of musical detective work—a treat for music lovers of every stripe.

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Customer Reviews

The title of Matthew Guerrieri's *The First Four Notes* has a rather *In The Beginning* feel. Undeniably those notes mark a new era, be it the early years of the Romantic period, or of instrumental music, even the beginning of symphonies composed with a metronome. The subject matter - the four-second melody which opens Beethoven's *Symphony # 5* in C Minor - seems too long for a blog post, too short for a book, too specialized for a general audience and too well-trodden for the specialists. Fortunately Guerrieri errs to the side of hardcover in spite of that, briefly exploring every divergence available, from Georg W.F. Hegel to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Ives. But while some readers may bask in the measure's aesthetic and philosophical family tree, others may resort to pruning. Ludwig van Beethoven wrote the Fifth during - and indeed, was largely responsible for - a transitional period in music history. Given, the metronome had not been invented yet, but neither had the conductor's baton or, not insignificantly, the electric motor. Critics reviewed symphonies from sheet music and audiences rarely attended concerts by permanent orchestras; instead, the Fifth was normally "interpreted by either amateur or essentially freelance groups." Rumors must have flourished in this environment, and two survive even today: first, that Beethoven composed the Fifth and all of his subsequent work stone-deaf, and second, that the opening measure - and its refrain throughout the seven-minute allegro - represents the knock of fate, or the knock of death, our one shared fate.

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