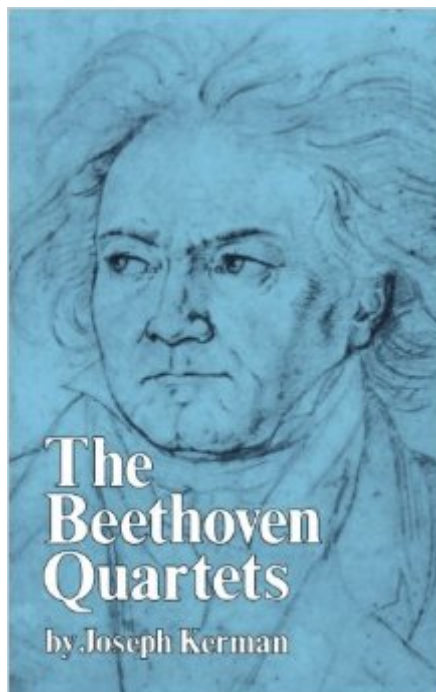


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The Beethoven Quartets



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

Joseph Kerman was a leading musicologist, music critic, and music educator from the 1950s to the 2000s. He reshaped our understanding and appreciation of Western classical music with his first book, *Opera as Drama* (1956), to his last, *Opera and the Morbidity of Music* (2008), including his studies on Bach, Beethoven, William Byrd, concertos, and more. He was a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, where he served two terms as chair of the Music Department. He wrote *Listen* together with his wife, Vivian Kerman.

The author goes into minute detail about some of the technical aspects of each quartet. But somehow, I found that he lost the "big picture" about how the piece was structured. I never got a sense of the overall structure of each movement of a given quartet. His presentation of the minutia (key changes, chordal sequences, etc) was mildly interesting, but needed a better sense of the more global aspects of the piece.

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.

I have now read about three of Beethoven's quartets in Mr. Kerman's book. How refreshing (and astonishing) to see statements like "... how many serious writers on music... often seem to proceed on the unspoken premise that everything in the composition makes aesthetic sense... not everything a composer does works, a lesson that must be extrapolated even to Beethoven." He causes me to think about what I'm listening to with renewed insight, vigour, and enjoyment. Whether or not you agree with him (on positive or negative points!), there is depth and intelligence here. I would agree with some of the previous reviews that a very good background in music is essential. On a final note, this collection of essays is very literate - pleurably so!

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 H&rtel 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.

Don't be scared away from this book, which is actually very interesting and well written. I don't have a degree in music but have read a little bit about music history, harmony, fugue and some music forms, which seems enough to comprehend this book. I do prefer the music analysis in detail rather than a few sentences of descriptions or generalization of a piece of music, especially from the great composer like Beethoven. I just got this book and have read only a few pages, but it already attracts me. It has very detailed historical background of each Beethoven's string quartet and the analysis of it. I am really pleased to have this book!

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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