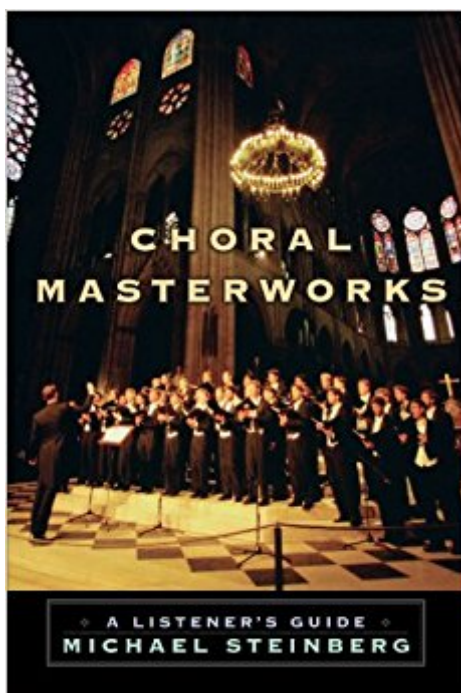


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Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide



Synopsis

Michael Steinberg's highly successful listener's guides--The Symphony and The Concerto--have been universally praised for their blend of captivating biography, crystal clear musical analysis, and delightful humor. Now Steinberg follows these two greatly admired volumes with Choral Masterworks, the only such guide available to this most popular of musical forms. Here are more than fifty illuminating essays on the classic choral masterworks, ranging from Handel's Messiah, Bach's Mass in B Minor, and Beethoven's Missa solemnis, to works by Haydn, Brahms, Mendelssohn, and many others. Steinberg spans the entire history of classical music, from such giants of the Romantic era as Verdi and Berlioz, to leading modern composers such as Elgar, Rachmaninoff, Vaughan Williams, and Stravinsky, to contemporary masters such as John Adams and Charles Wuorinen. For each piece, Steinberg includes a fascinating biographical account of the work's genesis, often spiced with wonderful asides. The author includes an astute musical analysis of each piece, one that casual music lovers can easily appreciate and that more serious fans will find invaluable. The book also provides basic information such as the various movements of the work, the organization of the chorus and orchestra, and brief historical notes on early performances. More than twenty million Americans perform regularly in choirs or choruses. Choral Masterworks will appeal not only to concert goers and CD collectors, but also to this vast multitude of choral performers, an especially engaged and active community. "What sets Steinberg's writing apart is its appealing mixture of impregnable authority (he knows this music) and purely personal asides (by the end of the book, we know this man). Choral Masterworks can be read by anybody, from a professional musician to any young listener newly braced by the stoic pessimism of the Brahms 'German Requiem.'" --Washington Post Book World

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Customer Reviews

Steinberg, program annotator for the San Francisco, Boston, and New York Philharmonic orchestras, describes some 50 works for accompanied chorus. For each, he begins with the composer's statistics, continues to the voices and instruments in the piece, sketches its genesis and first performances and how it fits into its creator's compositional history, and leads the reader through its sections, noting what to listen for. The big boys--Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn, and Stravinsky--are represented by their major works, but the less-well-known likes of John Adams' *Harmonium*, based on poems by Donne and Dickinson; Luigi Dallapiccola's *Canti di prigionia*, settings of writings from prison by Mary Queen of Scots, Boethius, and Savonarola; and Arthur Honegger's *Le Roi David*, the story of David and Saul, also appear. Steinberg's most personal essay is on Sir Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, whose genesis lies in the infamous *Kristallnacht* of 1938, and whose structure is based on Handel's *Messiah*. Well-written, concise introductions that record collectors, concertgoers, and chorus members alike should enjoy. Alan Hirsch

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"What sets Steinberg's writing apart is its appealing mixture of impregnable authority (he knows this music) and purely personal asides (by the end of the book, we know this man). *Choral Masterworks* can be read by anybody, from a professional musician to any young listener newly braced by the stoic pessimism of the Brahms 'German Requiem.'" --Washington Post Book World

Someone has said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture. When Robert Schumann was asked what a piece he had just played meant, he played it again, and he was one of the most literary of composers. Stravinsky, who looms large in this book, insisted that music has no meaning beyond its sound. Most of the time, these reservations are accurate enough, and most books about music range from dumbed down to cast in poetic terms meant to compete with the composer rather than explicating the work at hand. This book is the exception. It is in fact a model of a book about music which can be understood and enjoyed by amateurs and professionals alike. There are only a few musical examples, so the ability to read music is not a requirement. But those

who can read music, as well as those who can't, will derive instruction and enjoyment and, the prime test of such a book, enhancement of their enjoyment of the works covered. The book begins with an insightful, rather moving essay on "Sacred Texts in a Secular World: A Word to Nonbelievers - and Believers." This is in fact a serious issue for many modern music lovers, for most choral music is Christian and many people today are not Christian - are nonbelievers, as the section title notes, or belong to other religions (Steinberg was Jewish, indeed a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany). Certainly if you wish to sing any of the great choral works, with very few exceptions you will have to join a Christian choir - I know I could not sing Handel's Messiah, or the Bach Passions or B-Minor Mass, or the Stravinsky Symphony of Psalms in synagogue (one of the unintended consequences of the legal restrictions on religious activities in public schools is the deprivation of Jewish students of the choral repertory of the Western world). To sing them, as I did, I joined church choirs, and the New York Choral Society under Richard Westenburg (essentially a church musician and founder of Musica Sacra), and the London Symphony Chorus (nominally secular, but in a country with an established church). In the end, I would not willingly be deprived of these great Christian works, though I do not share their theological foundations. It is Steinberg's position, and mine, that these works belong to all of us, however we understand and receive them. I note objections that some choral work is not included together with objections that another choral work is. Of course a book like this must choose among the riches of the choral repertoire and no two people are likely to agree with the choices. But this book covers 43 major choral works and a few minor ones, in my opinion a generous offering. Highly recommended.

This volume makes a perfect introduction to the major choral works you're likely to hear (along with some relatively obscure ones as well). While lacking any recommendations or discography, this book certainly fits the bill for checking before attending any performance or just listening to music being broadcast. The table of contents alone is a "must have" list for choral compositions, or for filling any holes in a cd collection!

UPDATE: Mr. Michael Steinberg recently passed away (as is noted by A Music Fan in the comments), and so unfortunately we will not have any more writing from him on this earth. Rest in Peace, Mr. Steinberg. And thank you for that you did write. I appreciate your books more and more with every passing year. I am giving Mr. Steinberg Four Stars for his good work. Mr. Steinberg says in his introduction that he regrets omissions, but does not intend to apologize for anything he DID include. Well, if I were him I would retract that; as I will show, he makes some inclusions that are

hardly earth-shattering. He omits Berlioz's *Te Deum* (one of the works he regrets leaving out), yet includes several of the smaller Brahms works! I'm not anti-Brahms, but why would you leave out a work like the Berlioz *Te Deum* in the first place? And however interesting it may be, why include the Mozart-Handel "Messiah"? If Mr. Steinberg had left that out, the smaller Mozart and Brahms, he would have had space to include Berlioz, Bruckner, Poulenc, Monteverdi, and at least one more Haydn mass, the "Nelson". There are several great settings of the "Gloria" by Antonio Vivaldi which are wonderful. I would have suggested Vivaldi's "Dixit Dominus". Poulenc's "Gloria" is also a work which deserved to be included, as did Dvorak's *Requiem*...whatever George Bernard Shaw's opinion of it may have been. One of the most unforgivable omissions was Monteverdi's "Vespro della Beata Vergine", but of course Mr. Steinberg doesn't apologize for its omission like he did for obscure Pfitzner, Gerhard and [less obscure] Delius. Monteverdi's *Vespers*, even though it is a collection of pieces, is accepted as one of the greatest choral works. As I see it, to choose the right works for a book like this, you choose ONE work by each major composer until you have all the big guys covered. Then you expand the amount of works by some of them. In Bach's case, the two *Passions* would be included in addition to the *Mass in B minor*. In Berlioz's case, you would expand to include the *Te Deum*....and so on. In this book, Steinberg includes "Genesis" by Wuorinen, "Lilacs in the Dooryard Bloom'd" by Roger Sessions, and what I think is an excessive amount of Stravinsky: the *Requiem Canticles*, *Symphony of Psalms*, *Mass*, *Sacred Canticle*, *Persephone*, and *The Wedding*. Obviously Stravinsky should be represented, but six works by him, and only one of Haydn's *Masses*? Is that legal? I understand that Steinberg was pressured by his publisher to keep the length of this volume small, some indiscretions can be forgiven. But this is a VERY unbalanced book in terms of the choices of works to explore. But enough criticism. Let's go over the real positives of this book. The actual exploring of the pieces is very good, though some pieces get more attention than others. It is very hard to write about music without being either too technical, too rhapsodic, or too reminiscing. Steinberg strikes the balance perfectly. He starts out most often by interesting you with anecdotes, some of them from his own life. When he goes into detail describing the actual music, he is careful to stick to 'regular people language', but even still those areas are a bit sticky for the lay listener. He uses notated musical examples often enough, which make this book more than just a regular read for those who know their music theory. When Mr. Steinberg gets to do an "update" for his book, I expect to see a far wiser inclusion of great works. Note (just in case Steinberg reads his reviews): I'm only criticizing you because I like your books!

good

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