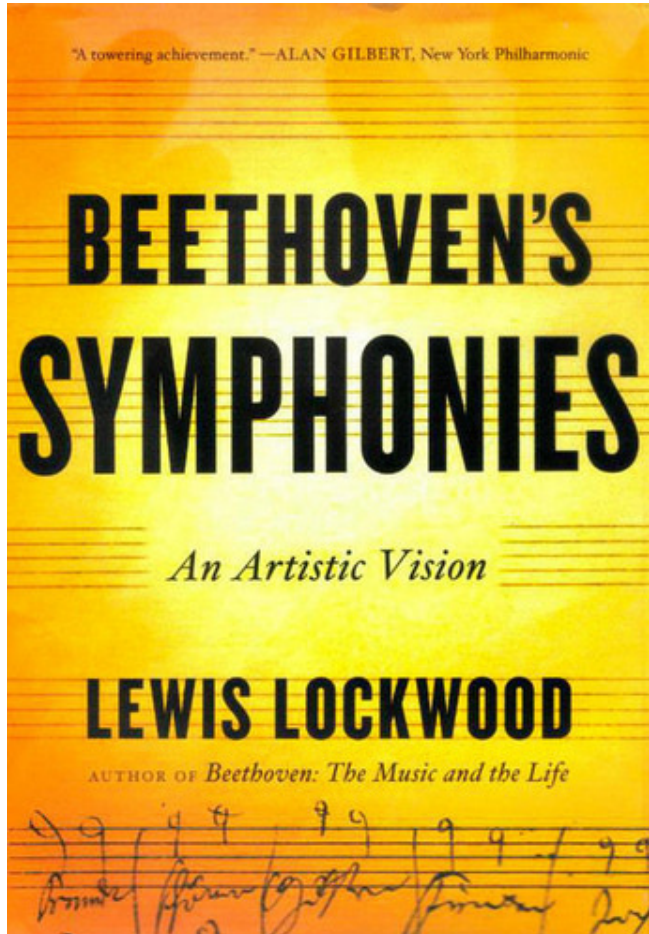


'Symphonies' hits the right notes

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"Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision" by Lewis Lockwood. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2015. 304 pages, \$29.95.



“Beethoven’s lifetime restriction of his completed symphonies to nine – less than a 10th as many as Hayden, less than a fourth as many as Mozart – was due in part to his living in changing times,” Lewis Lockwood explains in “The Triumph of This Art,” the introduction to “Beethoven’s Symphonies: An Artistic Vision,” his new treatise on the life and accomplishments of the great composer Ludwig van Beethoven.”

“In earlier decades, the writing of symphonies had often been a matter of steady output by composers who were typically supported by a private patron in a local court establishment with regular concerts put on for the enjoyment and pleasure of the patron and his friends,” Lockwood continues. “With the rise of bourgeois audiences seeking entertainment in opera houses and, occasionally, in orchestral concerts but with regular public concert seasons only beginning to emerge, occasions for the performance of new symphonies had to be manufactured.”

The law of supply and demand seems to be a constant throughout the long evolution of

human history and culture. Moreover, for those who think artistic and creative preferences are a fairly recent phenomenon, Lockwood’s primer on Beethoven’s seminal accomplishments will be a reality check of some magnitude.

In much the same way the popularity of different forms of entertainment compete for our collective attention today, the rivalry between symphonic and operatic music characterized the cultural landscape through much of the composer’s era. Where relatively few patrons chose to put their somewhat limited discretionary resources influenced how society moved forward – just as it does in contemporary times.

“Beethoven’s Symphonies” is extensively researched with 28 pages of source notes and a 10-page bibliography at the conclusion of the nine chapters sandwiched between an introduction and an epilogue that comprise the main text.

A chapter is devoted to each of the nine symphonies Beethoven produced, so the progression of the book is not that difficult to decipher. The narrative is infused with a number of illustrations, primarily from the 19th century, that serve to facilitate the acquisition of a more detailed understanding of the musical concepts Lockwood articulates in such an eloquent manner. Of course, it helps if the reader has at least a rudimentary background in the basic terminology germane to the

subject matter being addressed, although I found that my two years of band experience back in junior high were sufficient to enhance my overall appreciation of most of the author's principal thesis.

I enjoyed this book immensely, although (to reiterate) it was difficult to decode in some places. As a result, in more than one instance, I found myself searching the Web for tangible examples of what Lockwood was describing. And although classical music is apparently not the preferred genre of those who spend most of their existence in the virtual world, I was nonetheless still able to find what I was looking – or should I say “listening” – for in almost every case.

To more acutely appreciate what I am referencing here, consider the following passage from “The Seventh Symphony”: “One of the many beauties of the scherzo is the ingenuity with which Beethoven maintains the obsessive repetition of a two-note figure moving down one step (a half-note tied to a quarter-note) for long stretches in pianissimo. His way of deploying it is to state it in three four-bar phrases in succession on different pitches – first in the winds, then in the high strings, then in the bassoons and bases, and then to break the spell with a fortissimo explosion.”

I am confident there are individuals who, after reading this excerpt, can hear in their minds exactly what Lockwood is recounting. For most of us, however, it only becomes clear when we actually hear the movement in its musical form.

Lockwood has been a faculty member at both Princeton as well as Harvard, where he is the Fanny Peabody Professor of Music Emeritus. He is also a distinguished senior scholar at Boston University. A past editor of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* as well as a past president of the American Musicological Society, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1984 and to the American Philosophical Society in 2013.

His previous books include “Music in Renaissance Ferrara, 1400-1505, The Counter-Reformation and the Masses of Vincenzo Ruffo,” “Beethoven: Studies in the Creative Process” and “Beethoven: The Music and the Life,” which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2003. The Lewis Lockwood Award of the American Musicological Society is named in his honor.

In the final analysis, it was not the meticulous dissection of each of the nine symphonies that most captured my imagination, although there were times when I was mesmerized by the level of detail Lockwood employed in order to appropriately illuminate the deeper significance of the composer's vision. Rather, it was the unmistakable philosophical and existential overtones embedded in these masterpieces I found most fascinating. This universal meaning behind Beethoven's work, as brought to life by Lockwood's succinct yet surprisingly comprehensive prose, is what I found most appealing about “Beethoven's Symphonies.”

“It is worth remembering that the idea that Beethoven's music could possess ‘revelatory dimensions’ had its roots in the composer's own belief that his greatest works, certainly the symphonies, were not merely products of high craftsmanship, but were the expressions of a moral vision, a deeply rooted belief that great music can move the world,” Lockwood observes in the epilogue.

“Beethoven's best works display something like these same properties, intertwining what is intensely human with the feeling that the listener is being carried to a higher plane. They stand as examples of what great music can still mean in our fragmented and pessimistic age.”

After reading Lockwood's superb analysis of the contributions of one of the world's most influential composers, I could not agree more. I recommend “Beethoven's Symphonies” highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.