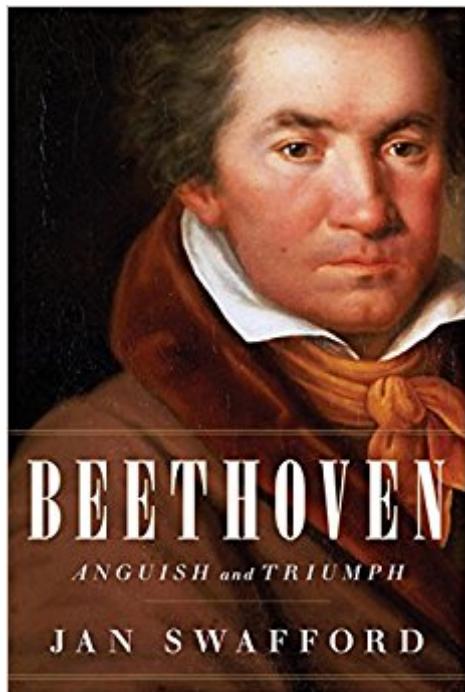


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Beethoven: Anguish And Triumph



Synopsis

Jan Swafford's biographies of Charles Ives and Johannes Brahms have established him as a revered music historian, capable of bringing his subjects vibrantly to life. His magnificent new biography of Ludwig van Beethoven peels away layers of legend to get to the living, breathing human being who composed some of the world's most iconic music. Swafford mines sources never before used in English-language biographies to reanimate the revolutionary ferment of Enlightenment-era Bonn, where Beethoven grew up and imbibed the ideas that would shape all of his future work. Swafford then tracks his subject to Vienna, capital of European music, where Beethoven built his career in the face of critical incomprehension, crippling ill health, romantic rejection, and "fate's hammer, his ever-encroaching deafness. Throughout, Swafford offers insightful readings of Beethoven's key works. More than a decade in the making, this will be the standard Beethoven biography for years to come.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review There is such an abundance of personal documentation of Beethoven's letters, other papers, press notices and reviews, acquaintances' memoirs that, while eschewing musical analysis, John Suchet was able to write an excellent 400-page biography without too much speculation. There is such an abundance that Swafford, incorporating lengthy but not highly technical discussions of the most important compositions, produces a 1,000-plus-page life without exhausting—indeed, further piquing—interest in the most consequential musician who ever lived. For readers of

both Suchet and Swafford will find many nonmusical details in the latter's account that Suchet didn't mention. Also, the two biographies differ in emphases; for instance, Suchet stresses that Beethoven's own bad habits contributed to his physical and mental anguish, whereas Swafford fingers coincidental factors, such as lead poisoning and injurious medicines, for the composer's virtually lifelong indigestion, nausea, diarrhea, and other internal complaints. But Swafford, whose Charles Ives (1996) and Johannes Brahms (1997) rule the roost on their respective subjects, so deftly intertwines biography and musical explication that anyone capable of matching a motif in musical annotation and a cording of it will revel in his Beethoven. Indeed, such readers will want to refer to the book often when they listen to Beethoven. A marvelous achievement. --Ray Olson

A New York Times Book Review Editor's ChoiceA Christian Science Monitor Top 10 Book of the Month "Swafford's craftsmanship shines...The book is two books: a biography and a series of journeys through the music, a travelogue with an excitable professor. Readers will want to have a recording playing so they can match metaphors to sounds. I found myself engaged by his imagery, sometimes delighted and surprised." *—Jeremy Denk, New York Times Book Review* "Impassioned and informed...Swafford's exuberance is infectious, prompting the reader to revisit works both famous and obscure." *—The New Yorker* "[T]he stately rhythm, carefully etched detailing and oceanic sweep of this ambitious book mirror the complexity and richness of Beethoven's revolutionary Romanticism...surrender to it and it's easy to be swept away...Swafford comes marvelously equipped to take on the enormousness of Beethoven's life and work — his heights of inspiration, depths of suffering, the roots and range of his masterworks...Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph doesn't drown in its musicology so much as achieve a buoyant balance of technical and human detail." *—Matt Damsker, USA TODAY* "Compelling...Despite the wealth of historical detail, this is no dry academic tome, but a biography full of colorful descriptions of the composer and his milieu...Comprehensive, detailed, and highly readable, this is an entertaining biography that should find favor with music lovers and history buffs." *—Seattle Times* "Swafford creates the perfect blend of a historical person and musical genius...Monumental...A truly remarkable biography." *—Christian Science Monitor* "Swafford's writing on Beethoven's music is perceptive and illuminating. But just as impressive is his sympathetic portrait of Beethoven the man. Swafford's book, which should be placed alongside the excellent biographies by Lewis Lockwood and Maynard Solomon, does not diminish any of the composer's flaws. Instead,

it suggests that these flaws were inconsequential compared with the severity of the composer's anguish and the achievement of his music." *Washington Post* "Swafford has a knack for bringing in the reader wholly unschooled in the technical vernacular of classical music. That skill is in evidence in this blend of biography and musical assessment. Even if you don't know the difference between a leitmotif and a lighthouse, don't sweat it, for this is, more than anything, a saga of a man at odds with so many things: convention, social mores, himself, women, his family ... If this isn't exactly the Beethoven that Schroeder of *Peanuts* fame worshiped, it's a more believable characterization, and, more than that, one gets a better sense of how this roiling personality produced works to roil the human soul." *Boston Globe* "An immersive, comprehensive view...The book has a biopic feel...Lively" *The New York Review of Books* "This combination of gripping biography and readable analysis of Beethoven's compositions is a book for all Beethoven enthusiasts, full of insights and memorable vignettes, old and new." *Washington Times* "A highly rewarding read, with a lightness of touch that makes history come to life." *The Economist* "Magisterial, warm, and engaging...A triumph of scholarship and musical affinity... Jan Swafford is to be saluted." *The Independent* "Swafford traces the life and art of Beethoven in eye-opening, rational detail and gives you a more human, more fascinating portrait of Beethoven the radical evolutionary than even the Beethoven the Romantic of legend...When Swafford writes about Beethoven's raptusâœthe trance-like state friends remarked upon when he was most lost in his musical worldâœyou feel as if you were there, listening to the improvisations flowing from the virtuoso's fingers...For those who cannot read music, Swafford's published excerpts can look daunting, but with a little work and a good CD collection, anyone can follow Swafford's journeys through Beethoven's journeys. The payoff is more than worth it." *Big Think* "Magnificent...Some of the most enjoyable segments of his book are the spirited and knowledgeable readings of Beethoven's various compositions. These passages are so passionate that they virtually propel the reader across the room to the CD collection, to play the pieces being so smartly described...A stunning tour de force, a Beethoven biography to shine for a lifetime." *Open Letters Monthly* "Monumental...Engaging and entertaining...Beethoven aficionados and lovers of classical music will want this book, as will readers interested in biography and the artistic milieu of late 18th- and early 19th-century Europe." *Library Journal*, starred review "A thorough, affectionate, and unblinking account of the life of the great composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)...Due to the author's unsurpassed research and comprehension, we stand in the presence of a genius and see all his

flawed magic." *Kirkus*, starred review "In this brilliant, exhaustive story, biographer and music historian Swafford (Johannes Brahms) brings new life to Beethoven." *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

A remarkable book written by an obviously brilliant author who understands biography and music. I spent 10 months savoring this story of the great Beethoven's life while listening to his pieces along the way (bought a 60 CD compilation of his works). Frankly, I'm in awe of the depth of Swafford's research and his ability to pull innumerable facts together and tell them in a compelling story. I've read several hundred biographies. This is one of the best.

I'm going to say straight up, without any reservations, that it must have sucked to be Beethoven. We all know about his deafness and anger issues, but I was not prepared for the emotional rollercoaster this book took me on. With the myriad problems he had, it's nothing short of astounding how productive he was in his composing, et al. Of course, like the biographies I've been reading recently, there is plenty of musical analysis in between the life narrative and excerpts from correspondence, etc. I thought it was all rather sound, supplemented by plenty of musical examples, and well-integrated into the book as a whole. For the first few chapters, there was a tendency to meander as the time period was set up, but things flowed better when Swafford got to the meat of the story. I'm sure there are other equally good biographies of Beethoven (I've got two more lined up already), but this one would probably be sufficient for someone who is just dabbling instead of doing serious research. Because of the musical discussion, I will say that this book will probably be more useful to the musically inclined. All around, it's a great book that practically had me in tears by the final chapter. Highly recommended.

This is a rich and nuanced biography of Ludwig van Beethoven--warts and all. The book does not romanticize him; it does not take a critical orientation. It is an evenhanded consideration of a complex, extraordinarily talented, difficult person. And it highlights his musical output--making the book very compelling. This is, on the one hand, a cradle to grave biography, beginning with his family's background and his early life (I had always thought it settled that his birth was on December 16, 1770--but not so certain according to the author). The book explores his childhood as a prodigy, pushed by his father to generate income. His father championed him as a new Mozart (indeed, the young Beethoven met Mozart once, to no great advantage). The book also traces his musical output, from childhood efforts to his mature works--the final string quartets, Symphony # 9, Missa Solemnis,

and the like. One of the stronger features of the book is the author's detailed discussion of selected works, in terms of their "musicality." Jan Swafford, the author, teaches music history, theory, and composition--so that he has the requisite background for making sense of Beethoven's music. I cannot read music, so that his inclusion of the music itself is beyond me--but his description of the music informs well enough. The book also considers the arc of Beethoven's life--his battles with others, his friends, his volatile temperament, his relationship as guardian of his nephew, his (ill-fated) loves, his challenging economic situation over time, his scheming to enhance his income (sometimes offering several publishing companies the same piece of music!), his progressive deafness (a tragedy for a composer and a pianist) and so on. All in all, an important work if one wishes to understand better Beethoven's life and art. But the value of this book is (a) a deeper understanding of Beethoven the person and (b) his music and how it came about.

It did meet expectations!... I "thought" I understood the meanings and various moves of a symphony...I learned so very much..So very much!...Liked how it integrated the evolving time in world history...Caution: a basic knowledge of music will help... There are more than a few times when explanations become very involved... Its a great book, worthy of a read..!

In addition to the usual biography about Beethoven's many personal "quirks, author Jan Swafford especially excels in (1) providing very informative descriptions of how Beethoven's music championed of the emerging "commoner" Enlightenment, and (2) in using his musicologist training to describe in simple language (even a layman like me could understand) the innovatively technical aspects of Beethoven's piano sonatas, concertos, the "Missa Solemnis" . . . and especially his 3rd, 5th, 7th and glorious 9th symphony!

I enjoyed this book immensely. Swafford tells of Beethoven's life, achievements and troubles with compassion and depth. His ability to place Beethoven's life into historical perspective, expressing how those worldly events factored into Beethoven's life, shaping his achievements, brings insights beyond what I could have expected when I first opened the cover. If you're interested in knowing about Beethoven as a person and Beethoven as the creator of among the greatest body of music ever composed, this book's worth reading.

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