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Beethoven In America



Synopsis

Beethoven permeates American culture. His image appears on countless busts and coffee mugs; his music is heard in movie scores, TV soundtracks, commercials, and pop songs; he is Schroeder's god in Peanuts and Chuck Berry's freaked-out parent in "Roll over Beethoven." In this book, Michael Broyles seeks to understand the composer as he exists in the American imagination and explores how Beethoven became a cultural icon. Broyles examines Beethoven's appearance in a variety of contexts: American commercialism, the Afrocentrist and black power movements, and the modernist critique of Romanticism. He considers portrayals of Beethoven in American film and theater and the uses of his music in film scores, as well as references to Beethoven and his music in disco, country, rock, and rap. In the end, he shows that to examine Beethoven on American soil is to examine America itself.

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Customer Reviews

"...[M]akes the case that not only was Beethoven the all-around musical stud of musical studs, he might be the greatest of all musical ingratulators, turning up in our American corner of the universe, again and again, and more than most of us realize." —Washington Post Book World
Broyles pens an engaging and fascinating text, relying on copious amounts of research supplemented with myths and mysteries to rebuild and develop the image of Beethoven.... The language of [the] text is accessible and avoids unnecessary scholarly jargon or extensive musicological terms."

—popmatters.com
"Beethoven in America remains an engaging and valuable work of cultural

history. The breadth of Broyles's knowledge about Beethoven's public presence is astounding, and this is the rare academic book that has thoughtful discussions of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Adrienne Rich, Amiri Baraka, and Yngwie Malmsteen. That people from such diverse circles felt connections to Beethoven is brilliantly demonstrated, and this is ultimately a fascinating analysis of the strange career of Beethoven as a multipurpose icon." [Journal of American History](#)"[T]his book is as much cultural history as musicology, and this makes it useful across disciplines. Like Beethoven's person and music, it is varied and interesting and suggests many possibilities for future research." [Music Reference Services Quarterly](#)" ["This book fills a great gap in our understanding both of Beethoven and of American culture. The panorama of this narrative encompasses antebellum rice plantations in South Carolina and the film studios of Hollywood, music critic John Dwight and rock star Chuck Berry, Theosophy and Black Power, Beethoven's sketches, and YouTube videos."](#) [Christopher Reynolds, University of California, Davis](#)"[Broyles] serves as an intellectual, hyper-informed but genial tour guide to a potentially sprawling subject. Though the book is dense in research, it is never pompous; it could serve as a model for how serious musicological study can be generously shared with interested parties who don't happen to be in the same profession." [Santa Fe New Mexican](#)"[T]hanks to Broyles' book, we're a little bit closer to understanding Beethoven's lasting impression on American culture." [stereosubversion.com](#)"[Beethoven in America] is packed with Beethoven facts and also takes a unique approach." [CHOICE](#)

Michael Broyles is Professor of Music at Florida State University and former Distinguished Professor of Music and Professor of American History at Pennsylvania State University. His most recent book, *Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices* (IUP, 2007), written with Denise Von Glahn, won the Irving Lowens Prize in 2007.

Extraordinarily researched. Well written to boot. You don't have to necessarily be in love with Beethoven's music to fully appreciate this story of American in her youth.

This is a very well written and interesting account of the many ways and many places Beethoven shows up in our country, from cartoons, plays, TV advertisements, toys (rag dolls, moveable action figures), music boxes, movies, pop music, politics, all these besides classical radios stations who regularly include Beethoven's music. A very enjoyable read for anyone.

I have read two recent books which explore the impact of two important German figures on the cultural history of the United States. The first book by Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen discusses the American reception of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. *Ä* *Ä* American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas *Ä* *Ä* The second book, "Beethoven in America" which I am reviewing here, discusses the great composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 -- 1827) and his reception in the United States over the course of more than 200 years. The author, Michael Broyles, is Professor of Music at Florida State University and a former Distinguished Professor of Music and Professor of American History at Penn State University. Broyles has written extensively on music in the United States. An earlier book written with his wife Denise Von Glahn studies the relatively unknown American modernist composer Leo Ornstein, *Ä* *Ä* Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices *Ä* *Ä* who also receives some attention in this book's treatment of Beethoven. I have had a long interest in Nietzsche and a substantially longer interest in Beethoven. I have long loved to read about Beethoven and to hear his music, which I play on the piano. I read both Ratner-Rosenhagen's and Broyles' books to understand how Americans have viewed these figures. There are some parallels. Both the philosopher and the composer have been understood differently over time by Americans of varied persuasions and backgrounds. And both Nietzsche and Beethoven have attracted strong interest not only from educated individuals or those devoted to the arts but from Americans across a broad spectrum. Of the two, Beethoven's influence seems to me stronger and more varied. Beethoven lived earlier and has had a longer period of influence. His music has a broader, more universal appeal than the difficult thought of the solitary Nietzsche. And his musical language is abstract and will bear an even greater range of interpretation and response than the thought of a difficult philosopher writing in German. It was instructive to think about the American reception of Beethoven in that, great as Beethoven's influence has been, it has been based, as Broyles shows, on a relatively small group of his compositions that includes essentially the 3d, 5th, 7th, and 9th symphonies, the Moonlight and Pathétique piano sonatas, and the short piano piece Für Elise. Many Americans will know little more than these compositions. I have been practicing for some time a piano work that does not fit within this small group: a piece called simply the piano sonata in B-flat, opus 22. It is valuable to have a perspective on Beethoven derived in part from one of his many works that are not in popular awareness. Broyles' book shows broad-ranging scholarship about both Beethoven and American culture. The book examines the reception of Beethoven both among scholars and lovers of classical music and among a broader population. The relationship of these two groups itself becomes one of the major themes of the book: whether Beethoven should be seen as the representative figure of a high European-based culture or as a

more popular type of figure. Broyles concludes that Beethoven "is a protean icon in American culture, the man and his music deeply embedded in the American consciousness far beyond the concert hall." The book is in four parts, the first of which examines the early reception of Beethoven in the United States. Broyles' focus is on American Transcendentalism in the persons of Margaret Fuller and John Dwight who saw in Beethoven a transcendental genius whose music had a romantic, spiritual, ethical and universal compass. This view of Beethoven also developed in Europe. It persisted through the 19th Century and, with all the reactions against romanticism and universalism, remains important today. An interesting part of Broyles' discussion includes a treatment of various Theosophists who wrote studies of Beethoven. The second part of the book discusses the modernist reaction against romanticism. Here Ornstein and his fellow modernists from Broyles' earlier book assume a role. The focus in understanding Beethoven shifted from romanticism to classicism with an emphasis of the structure of Beethoven's musical thought. Broyles closely examines a group of four recent American biographies of Beethoven, including works by Solomon, Lockwood, Kinderman and Morris, that each have enjoyed substantial readership. He also examines feminist approaches to Beethoven, particularly in a poem by Adrienne Rich titled "The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven Understood at Last as a Sexual Message." In the third and fourth parts of the book, Broyles examines Beethoven in popular culture in which Broyles is surprisingly well versed. He offers close analyses of Beethoven as he has been portrayed in many American movies and stage works over the years. Some of these works accept, the iconic, romantic Beethoven while others rebel against it. In the final part of the book, titled "Beyond Classicism: Beethoven in American Society and Culture" Broyles examines the various ways Beethoven has been portrayed in American popular music from jazz to heavy metal. Most Americans will know the Chuck Berry song "Roll over Beethoven" which receives detailed analysis. Beethoven's influence, however, extends forward and backward, including the world of heavy metal which is far beyond me. In a fascinating chapter, Broyles gives an account of the efforts of many African American scholars in the 1960s (derived from the work of an earlier self-taught African American scholar named Joel Rogers) to suggest that Beethoven was black or had a degree of black ancestry. A final chapter examines sculpture and artistic representations of Beethoven and the use to which the man and his music have been put to sell products of every description. The study suggests that the perception of Beethoven in American culture has changed as American culture itself has changed. There is a welter of portrayals of movies, films, books, comic strips, artifacts, and more in this book that sometimes threatens to turn the book into more of a catalog than into an analysis of Beethoven and his reception. There is much to be learned in this study

about Beethoven and about why he inspires devotion as well as about popular culture. The book may help American readers better understand the culture in which we live. A better result would be to encourage readers to engage or reengage with the music of Beethoven. Robin Friedman

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