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The Classical Music Experience: Hear and Discover the Sounds and Stories of Forty-two Great Composers

Julius H. Jacobson II
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"It has been said that more has been written about Wagner than any man who ever lived, except for Jesus and Napoleon," writes the author. Richard Wagner was a high note in nineteenth-century music, combining personal magnetism, lofty ambition, unconventional tendencies, and genius. Wagner and forty-one other composers are featured in this book-and-CD set, which spans 500 years of composers and their works.

Blending an affinity for classical music and an intimate knowledge of medicine, the author broadens the horizon of musical appreciation for the seasoned listener, even though he insists that this book is intended for those with little or no previous experience regarding classical music.

It is this marriage of passion and knowledge, liberally entwined with rich historic facts, that provides the reader with a better understanding of the era in which each composer lived. Informative sidebars highlight each miniature biography, giving insight into the common threads that ran through many of their lives, like untimely deaths, privileged upbringings, and extreme behaviors, to name a few. One can certainly understand the early demises, with the lack of modern medical care and the prevalence of disease in colonial times. However, to learn of some personal traits and social leanings, one may wonder where the melodious and even joyful sounds that result from these same minds come from.

Beethoven was a slob who could not even keep a servant, yet his most famous symphony, the fifth, is absolutely regimented in its composition. Wagner, an outspoken anti-Semite and "egomaniac of the first order," gave the world the famous bridal march.

The two eighty-minute CDs provide samples of the music that dovetail perfectly with the text. They are arranged in chronological order to heighten the understanding of the impact that previous composers had on later ones. These partial recordings, narrated by Academy Award-winning actor Kevin Kline, are designed to whet the appetite so that the listener may decide which composers are most to his or her liking.

Jacobson may discredit himself by saying that his only qualification to write this book is that he has been an avid listener of classical music since his teens. One gathers that his sheer experience with this genre overrides many who have studied it as a matter of course. The enthusiasm with which the information is presented truly adds to the readers' enjoyment. To ensure this appreciation, helpful advice is meted out concerning listening technique, and the organization and cataloging of a musical collection. After all, what good would it do one to crave the soothing sounds of Tchaikovsky if one could not find him? Recommendations for further reading and listening complete this collection of familiar, and not so familiar, selections of great composers.