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First Nights: Five Musical Premieres



Synopsis

This lively book takes us back to the first performances of five famous musical compositions: Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in 1607, Handel's *Messiah* in 1742, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in 1824, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* in 1830, and Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* in 1913. Thomas Forrest Kelly sets the scene for each of these premieres, describing the cities in which they took place, the concert halls, audiences, conductors, and musicians, the sound of the music when it was first performed (often with instruments now extinct), and the popular and critical responses. He explores how performance styles and conditions have changed over the centuries and what music can reveal about the societies that produce it. Kelly tells us, for example, that Handel recruited musicians he didn't know to perform *Messiah* in a newly built hall in Dublin; that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was performed with a mixture of professional and amateur musicians after only three rehearsals; and that Berlioz was still buying strings for the violas and mutes for the violins on the day his symphony was first played. Kelly's narrative, which is enhanced by extracts from contemporary letters, press reports, account books, and other sources, as well as by a rich selection of illustrations, gives us a fresh appreciation of these five masterworks, encouraging us to sort out our own late twentieth-century expectations from what is inherent in the music.

Book Information

Hardcover: 384 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press (May 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0300077742

ISBN-13: 978-0300077742

Product Dimensions: 10.4 x 7.3 x 1.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.9 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #899,255 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #11 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Berlioz](#) #23 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Stravinsky](#) #38 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Handel](#)

Customer Reviews

A successful expansion of his lecture series at Harvard, Thomas Kelly's *First Nights* chronicles the events leading to the first performances of five enduring masterpieces. He places Monteverdi's

opera L'Orfeo, Handel's venerable Messiah, symphonies by Beethoven and Berlioz, and the Stravinsky ballet The Rite of Spring in the respective contexts of the cities, musical cultures, and performance venues in which they were first heard. Kelly builds his chapters through an accumulation of minute but not trivial detail. The first Euridice in L'Orfeo was a castrato priest; the oppression of Catholics in Handel's Dublin was shocking; the legendary catcalls at The Rite of Spring's premiere began before the curtain went up. As Kelly gathers these pieces of the puzzle together, we become desperate to find out what will happen, completely forgetting that we already know how the music ultimately triumphed over time. Along the way, there is hilarious information about the audiences (Handel's would not have been out of place at a rodeo, though Monteverdi's was unusually well informed) and reactions from the performers (conductor Pierre Monteux apparently always hated the Rite). There are also many factoids about how the music must have sounded. (Did you know that the first performance of Beethoven's Ninth included a piano?) Kelly has provocative ideas about performance practice, suggesting that it is really a matter of how adaptable musicians need to be; he feels that musical works themselves, not just our perceptions of them, change over time. A great deal of First Nights is devoted to documents about the works, and the discography is helpfully annotated by Jen-Yen Chen. The book is unusually well designed, and no knowledge of score reading is necessary. --William R. Braun

This is a unique and extremely attractive account of the premieres of five musical masterpieces spanning from 1607 to 1913: Monteverdi's opera Orfeo, Handel's oratorio Messiah, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique, and Stravinsky's ballet Le Sacre du printemps. The focus of each essay is the actual premiere, but Kelly, who teaches a course called "First Nights" at Harvard, first places each event in its broader historical and cultural setting and then proceeds to fill in the scene with numerous interesting details and asides. One of North America's most prominent musicologists, Kelly paints a vivid and fascinating picture of each premiere by combining information taken from a number of sources, including letters, archival documents, and observations of the music itself. This should appeal to all music lovers. Recommended for public and academic libraries.-Timothy J. McGee, Univ. of Toronto Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

We had to use this as one of the textbooks for my Musicology course, and it was by far the most liked by all of my fellow students and myself. It utilizes a wealth of primary sources for each premiere to accentuate each performance's importance. The subject matter is fascinating in-and-of itself, so even if you aren't using it for a class, it will still provide a great source of education for the

casual reader.

Thank you for your book.

This book brings together an extraordinary amount of interesting information about 5 of the greatest works of Western music, in the context of trying to recreate their first performances. Kelly writes with the interest of an enthusiast, but the scholarly background is immense, as befits a university press book. Plenty of interesting illustrations and diagrams, and interesting pull-quotes in boxes, break up the text, enhancing readability. I had not previously been aware that the version heard at the first concert of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* was subjected to significant rewriting before being published in the form performed today -- this is typical of the interesting insights the book adds to common knowledge. Also, that Berlioz changed the selection of wind instruments, but that one can hear many of the originals on some recent recordings. My only disappointment was that Kelly stopped at 5 works - I would love a similar work-up of first performances of the Wagner Ring Cycle, Mozart's *Figaro*, and a major work of Mahler - perhaps the first performance of the 8th Symphony. I guess that just means that Kelly might profitably prepare a sequel!

Good.

Fun and informative book. If you like classical music you will enjoy this book.

Hardcover book is in great condition! Even the delicate paper jacket came in pretty good shape. Shipping took almost all of the allotted time (around 9-10 days). But the condition of the book and price TOTALLY made up for the shipping length which wasn't really that bad. Thanks so much!!!

It's easy as a listener to get caught up in the impact of great music on us today and to ignore the people who brought it about in the first place. Kelly has done a wonderful job of enlightening and enlivening my experience of these five works, four of which I've spent a lot of time with over the years. He brings together stories on the composition, the cultural setting, and the nuts and bolts of putting on the first performances in a way that both academics and popular readers will appreciate.

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