



Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph

By Jan Swafford

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Jan Swafford's biographies 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.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review There is such an abundance of personal documentation of Beethoven—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

Review

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From the Inside Flap

The essential book on the life and music of Ludwig van Beethoven, written by an esteemed composer and historian

Ludwig van Beethoven confronted professional and personal obstacles almost unmatched by any other artist. And yet, by the time of his death in 1827, this brilliant man had defied crippling ill health, his listeners incomprehension, romantic rejection, and fate's hammer, his encroaching deafness, to become the most famous composer of his time, creator of some of the most iconic music ever written. He was lionized by princes, misunderstood by critics, and celebrated so widely that more than ten thousand people attended his funeral. By that point Beethoven's works had been embraced as the anthems of the Romantic era, and the man had become a myth.

Peeling away layers of legend that have built up around Beethoven's life, Jan Swafford's magnificent new biography shows how a child prodigy from an obscure corner of what is now Germany came to write music that defines the modern age. Swafford mines sources never before used in English-language biographies to reanimate the revolutionary ferment of Bonn, the city where Beethoven grew up and imbibed the Enlightenment ideals that would shape all his future work.

In his early twenties, Beethoven left for Vienna, capital of European music, a city whose madness for art and gossip papered over the rigors of a repressive police state. There, Beethoven studied with the great Franz Joseph Haydn, a father figure whose shadow, like Mozart's, would loom large in the young composer's tormented psyche. Beethoven went on to write towering symphonies, intricate, mysterious string quartets, and piano sonatas and concertos that would push the boundaries of this new instrument. He drove his career to ever-greater heights, all while staving off financial ruin, overcoming the pains of unrequited love, and, toward the end of his life, fighting a vicious custody battle for the nephew he loved. His story is one of titanic passions and struggles.

To those who knew him, Beethoven could seem irascible and haughty, even at times misanthropic. His violent temper occasionally drove away longtime friends and supporters. Yet he was also a man of sparkling

humor and astonishing warmth, capable of deep devotion. While *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph* is rich in atmosphere and epic in scope, it is also surprisingly intimate, offering a portrait of the composer in all his human complexity. And as a composer himself, Swafford provides insightful readings of Beethoven's key works, allowing us to hear this beloved music as if for the first time.

More than a decade in the making, this biography will be the defining statement on Beethoven for years to come and a necessary addition to any music lover's library.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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