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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: 4.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (4 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

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!

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.

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!!!

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