

The Lives and Times of the Great Composers, 2004, 984 pages, Michael Steen, 0195222180, 9780195222180, Oxford University Press, 2004

A grand and panoramic biographical history of the giants of classical music, *The Lives and Times of Great Composers* is a new, unique, and lovingly constructed modern reference--and a beguiling read which you will return to again and again. Interlinked yet self-contained, each chapter distills the life of one or more composers, set against the social, political, musical, and cultural background of the time. Read the story of Bach, the respectable burgher, much of whose vast output was composed amidst petty turf disputes in Lutheran Leipzig; or the ugly, argumentative Beethoven, obsessed by his laundry; or Mozart, the over-exploited infant prodigy whose untimely death was shrouded in rumor; or the ghastly death of Donizetti and Smetana. Read about Verdi, who composed against the background of the Italian Risorgimento, or about the family life of the Wagners; and Brahms, who rose from the slums of Hamburg to become a devotee of beer and coffee in fin-de-siecle Vienna, a cultural capital bent on destroying Mahler. Michael Steen paints a vivid portrait of the tumultuous times in which these brilliant, yet flawed, human beings labored--a tour of 350 years of European history. From Handel's London and the speculative financial frenzy of the "South Sea bubble"; to the courts of petty German princelings and the ornate and sleazy Dresden; to the astonishingly creative Vienna of Beethoven and Schubert; to the opera in 19th-century Paris and Bizet in the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune; to the Majorca of Chopin, to the Russia of Tchaikovsky and the Siege of Leningrad, just one of the many horrors which Shostakovich had to survive. We encounter, too, painters such as Renoir and Manet, literary figures like Zola, Proust, and Dostoyevsky, and religious leaders such as Pope Pius IX and Cardinal Newman. *Great Composers* paints in broad brushstrokes the culture of a continent far wider than music.

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