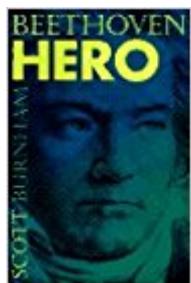


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# Beethoven Hero



## **Synopsis**

Bringing together reception history, music analysis and criticism, the history of music theory, and the philosophy of music, Beethoven Hero explores the nature and persistence of Beethoven's heroic style. What have we come to value in this music, asks Scott Burnham, and why do generations of critics and analysts hear it in much the same way? Specifically, what is it that fosters the intensity of listener engagement with the heroic style, the often overwhelming sense of identification with its musical process? Starting with the story of heroic quest heard time and again in the first movement of the Eroica Symphony, Burnham suggests that Beethoven's music matters profoundly to its listeners because it projects an empowering sense of self, destiny, and freedom, while modeling ironic self-consciousness. In addition to thus identifying Beethoven's music as an overarching expression of values central to the age of Goethe and Hegel, the author describes and then critiques the process by which the musical values of the heroic style quickly became the controlling model of compositional logic in Western music criticism and analysis. Apart from its importance for students of Beethoven, this book will appeal to those interested in canon formation in the arts and in music as a cultural, ethical, and emotional force--and to anyone concerned with what we want from music and what music does for us.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Winner of the 1996 Wallace Berry Distinguished Book Award, Society for Music Theory "Strategic economy is a very striking feature of this book, as striking as its breathtaking ambition.... Those with

intestinal fortitude will find much to ponder, admire, and digest in Beethoven Hero."--New York Review of Books "Scott Burnham's Beethoven Hero is in every respect an exciting new book.... Burnham's arguments are well marshaled, his answers ... trenchantly expressed; the previewers quoted on the dust-jacket have every reason to extol the book as both 'courageous' and 'convincing'."--William Drabkin, The Times Literary Supplement "How the composer was able to make his personal quest our quest is ... explored in Beethoven Hero, which is one of those rare Beethoven books written with a verve and passion to approximate its subject."--Charles Michner, The New York Observer

"The most important contribution of the past two decades to the history of the philosophy of music and of music theory."--Charles Rosen, University of Chicago

What can one say, but Beethoven!

Wonderfully written book about a composer that Scott Burnham understands as well as anyone alive today. This book fills in the details in an immensely readable fashion. If you want to understand Beethoven, you must read this book!

In "Beethoven Hero" (1995), Scott Burnham, Professor of Music at Princeton University and a leading Beethoven scholar, offers two complementary approaches to the music of Beethoven's heroic period. As Professor Burnham reminds us, this music consists of a relatively small body of work from Beethoven's middle period, primarily the third and fifth symphonies, the "Emperor" concerto, the "Waldstein" and "Appassionata" piano sonatas, and several overtures. Yet, for many listeners, these works have come to be regarded as the greatest achievement of Western music and, more importantly, as the paradigms by which other music is heard and judged. Much of Professor Burnham's study is devoted to explaining the nature of Beethoven's heroic music and the reasons for its power and appeal. He finds that this music has been found by virtually all listeners to speak of the human condition in terms of suffering and struggle and the overcoming of suffering through will, persistence, and self-actualization. Thus, Professor Burnham offers an analysis of the first movement of the Eroica symphony which shows that listeners who hear this music in terms of a programmatic, extra-musical interpretation (the struggles and ultimate victory of a hero) describe the work in ways essentially similar to those listeners who use more formalistic, strictly musical descriptions. (in terms, for example, of the long, ambiguous exposition, the new thematic material in

the development, the horn call that begins the recapitulation, the expansive coda). Professor Burnham then follows this discussion with his own analysis of the first movement of the fifth symphony which tries to show in musical terms how this work retains its hold over the imagination of many people. Professor Burnham then discusses how Beethoven's heroic style became paradigmatic for all music. There is a difficult but fascinating discussion of the work of four 19th and 20th century musical theorists, A.B. Marx, Hugo Riemann, Heinrich Schenker, and Rudolph Reti, and their use of Beethoven. Broadly speaking, these theorists took Beethoven as their model, tried to determine in their various ways the structural, thematic, and harmonic patterns they found in Beethoven's music, and then made these patterns normative for considering all music. Their work, for Burnham, shows both the enormous influence of Beethoven and how his work became paradigmatic through what is essentially circular reasoning. Following this musical analysis, Professor Burnham changes his focus and finds that Beethoven's music captures the worldview of his time in Germany which he finds rooted in Goethe, with its focus on the self and on concepts of change and becoming, and Hegel, with its focus on consciousness and transcendence. Hegelian idealism has, for the most part, lost its philosophical appeal; but its goals and values remain moving in Beethoven's music in a way that bare philosophy could never realize. This discussion and the discussion of musical theory are the pivotal sections of Burnham's book. This leads to the second main theme of Burnham's analysis. While he does not for a moment deny the power or appeal of Beethoven's music, he argues that listeners and critics have been too ready to accept it as the sole paradigm and as the model of what music should be. Thus, he argues, the heroic style incorporates a set of musical and ethical values but, grand as they are, there is no reason for them to be exclusive. He points out that other music that does not conform to the heroic paradigm is sometimes given short shrift simply because it is "not Beethoven". Professor Burnham's prime example is the music of Schubert (p. 155, p. 167). Every reader will recognize the tendency Burnham describes and think of other cases. The goal of this book, I think, is to encourage the appreciation of Beethoven (The book seems to me to overstate the regard in which his heroic music is held in a definitely skeptical, anti-heroic age such as our own.) but to recognize that there are other ways of hearing music and of appealing to the heart. This is an excellent goal both for specialists in music and for the non-specialist music lover. Professor Burnham writes (pp 167-68)"[I]t is time to dissolve the terms of this our happy thralldom, to forsake the comforts of our insular domain, place our sails in the way of new winds, and face the dangerous promise of an open sea. We must look away from the Work as a world and toward the World in the work. Only then may we acknowledge that we interact with music in ways that speak of so much more than the singular experience of the heroic

style ... And that is how we may best continue to honor Beethoven Hero, by staying in touch with the hero within ourselves and others, the hero whose presence is music."The details and analyses in this book are difficult in places but its goals are clear. This book is for serious lovers of music. It will deepen the reader's appreciation for Beethoven's heroic music while weakening the stranglehold that his works have sometimes exerted on the musical imagination.Robin Friedman

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