



## Beethoven: The Universal Composer

*Edmund Morris*

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## Beethoven: The Universal Composer Edmund Morris

“Brilliant....This book is a perfect marriage—or should one say, duet—of subject and author, every word as masterly as the notes of the artist it illuminates.” — Christopher Buckley, *Forbes*

“This is not just criticism but poetry in itself, with the additional—and inestimable—merit of being true.” — *Washington Post Book World*

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Edmund Morris (*The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, *Theodore Rex*, *Dutch*) is one of America’s most distinguished biographers, known for his rich, compulsively readable prose style. His biography of Beethoven, one of the most admired composers in the history of music, is above all a study of genius in action, of one of the few giants of Western culture. *Beethoven* is another engaging entry in the HarperCollins’ “Eminent Lives” series of biographies by distinguished authors on canonical figures.

## Beethoven: The Universal Composer Details

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## Jacob Lines says

I picked this up because I've read some of Morris's other stuff. He is a great historian, and I like Beethoven's music, so it seemed worth a read. It was. This book is short enough – 229 little pages – to not blog down, and long enough to give a good feel for his life. As you would expect from an eminent historian, Morris does a really good job of explaining Beethoven's life and the culture and politics that surrounded him. He also does a wonderful job of explaining the music – what came before, how Beethoven mastered the past and pushed music forward. As a layperson that enjoys music, I found it understandable and enriching. He also shows the personality behind it all. He was kind of a jerk, but at least this book helps to explain why. Now I need to look for comparable biographies of Handel and Bach.

Marco says

Best life ever. Except for Jesus, and the like...

Alaa says

## **Scott Taylor says**

Beethoven has always been a favorite of mine. I play piano, own a piano, and have many of his works. All I knew of the man going into this was that he was...temperamental, for lack of a better word. This book definitely confirms that, and adds a lot of color. Though it's not the most coherent biography I've ever read, by a long shot.

The historical setting and cast of characters are well established. Various wars, mostly having to do with Napolean, are mentioned when they affected Beethoven or his work. There are fun little anecdotes about Haydn, like the part where Beethoven essentially was cheating him out of a sizeable chunk of money. The author includes a lengthy discussion about the 'Immortal Beloved,' presumably Antonie Brentano. There is considerable exposition on their correspondence, various meetings and insights into Beethoven's forbidden love for her. I wish more of these sorts of details had been present throughout the book.

Likewise, the author covers the various musical compositions well. You get a good sense of the chronology

and development of his musical style. One part I found intriguing was the description of his struggle with creating an opera. Sorry, Beethoven old man, you were just not meant for opera. This information is juxtaposed with discussions about his constant health problems and his reputation.

There is worth in reading this book, if you can make it through the somewhat tedious and uneven narrative. But I have to think there is a better biography out there somewhere.

Thanks for reading.

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### **Tony says**

Edmund Morris' three-volume work on Theodore Roosevelt is, in my view, one of the very great works of biography ever written. So I was happy to stumble across this biography of Beethoven in a used book store. I opened it as I was reading Alejo Carpentier's 'The Chase' which deals with the *Eroica* symphony. And I couldn't put it down.

Now, this is a life story I already knew fairly well; and there's nothing new in this rendering, although Morris writes with authority on such controversies as exist. What I did not know is that Morris is a "private scholar of music" and a trained classical pianist. So I read this mainly for Morris' insights into the *music*. Real musicians might find fault with his interpretation, but it read like a sublime gibberish to my untrained ear.

For example:

*A dominant seventh's desire to resolve onto the tonic is the most powerful force in Western music: to prevent it from doing so amounts to coitus interruptus.*

Yes, I forgot to mention that Morris can be smugly glib, and more so here than in his larger works. I mean, he dismisses Mahler with one word: *masturbatory*. But, really, I offer in Mahler's defense, aren't we all?

I like to listen to the music when reading a book about music. What I found though, if this helps understand the hurried lightness of the book, is that I would put on a piece, say the Second *Razumovsky* String Quartet, and before the first movement was half-way through, Morris would be talking about *Moonlight* Sonata and I'd have to get up and change the CD.

But now that I've finished the book I can go at my own unhurried pace, enjoying the string trios as I write this.

Timeless music, but not a timeless book.

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### **Alexander says**

An interesting and good short biography of one of my favorite composers. A very fast and lively read, as I've come to expect from Edmund Morris. Helpful to have some recordings on hand as you read in case you want

to listen to a piece as you're reading about it. Recommended.

**Wade says**

This is a very interesting account of the life of Beethoven. It's really a pretty short biography (about 225 pages, and the pages are pretty small). You do need to have some musical understanding to enjoy this book. There is a very helpful glossary in the back of musical terms. But he talks about the absurdity of Beethoven switching from C major to C minor to the key of E back to C major. So, if that doesn't mean anything at all to you, you won't enjoy this book. Having said all of that: Beethoven is ridiculous and I gained a huge appreciation of him through this book. Edmund Morris is obviously a great author and this book is very enjoyable.

## Ahmed Eid says

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fQG4CcoRuM>

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### **M. Fenn says**

Interesting and disappointing. Interesting, because Beethoven's life was pretty interesting. Disappointing, in that it's a pretty shallow look into his life. No new scholarship; it doesn't even bring up the new thoughts about what killed Ludwig (lead poisoning). Disappointing, too, in that I remembered who Edmund Morris is. He's the guy who wrote *Dutch*, the bio on Reagan that's part fiction. Makes me wonder what he added to Beethoven's life, although he got the skeleton right, from what I know about the composer.

And this opening exchange really set me on edge:

The British playwright Enid Bagnold once asked a feminist what advice she would give to a twenty-three-year-old housewife who, having lost four children, found herself pregnant again by an abusive, alcoholic husband.

"I would urge her to terminate the pregnancy," the feminist replied.

"Then," said Ms. Bagnold, [wait for it] you would have aborted Beethoven."

ARGH!!! So, a rightwing sycophant had to inject his politics into a biography in which they didn't belong. Fortunately, that's the last he brings anything like that up, but it was still annoying.

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### **???? says**

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### **Erik says**

Morris is a superb writer who, when given the opportunity to write out of the box, is as good as it gets. The epilogue to this great little biography of Beethoven is perfect.

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**Greg says**

Edmund Morris appears to state the facts about Beethoven, as opposed to Marcia Davenport's lush, deeply personal "Mozart" in which she does state that her story is not a text-book. Morris does give us more of a "text-book" than Davenport, but I was deeply drawn in to the last days of Beethoven. I knew of his deafness, but not about the other, and very serious, savages to his body and mind. And the fight for custody over a child, also new to me, is the product of the very sick mind of Beethoven. I enjoyed this book, but I actually liked Davenport's "Mozart" better even though she romanticizes (in the traditional sense) his life while Morris leans toward brutal truths. On the other hand, Morris "proves", to me at least, Beethoven's musical achievements far outweigh Mozart's. While Mozart's music is in general light/happy, Beethoven reaches so much further and creates massive depths and heights. I'm not a big fan of violin music on it's own, but a late Beethoven violin symphony is one of the most beautiful pieces of music I've ever heard, and "Moonlight" has been my "comfort" music for going on forty or so years now. And even in Beethoven's first symphony, there are odd moments when the counterpoint is nowhere in sync with the theme, sort of like some of Beyoncé's vocals are off the "beat". (I am not a musician but did play the first movement of "Moonlight" once in a recital and I was a church pianist for years.) I don't recall Mozart experimenting as such. But I digress. This book is a good, well-researched, and solid recount of Beethoven's life and music. Is he truly one of the three geniuses of music along with Bach and Haydn? I'd like to hear other's thoughts.

**Don says**

moved 80 times, deaf in 30's, 1778 Cologne first performance, Dec 16 1770, alcoholic dad when teenager, after 4 children lost, main squeeze descriptor of leaders, German power center in Vienna (Austria-Hungary), flog and lock in cellar, piano and violin lessons devoid of creativity regiment by father, genius creativity frightening in proximity to madness, unteachable gift of perfect pitch—12 tone scale, daily mass, Bonn at 16, short latin temper scowl eccentric deep thought orchestra exposure nervous colic absentmindedness augmentative and reductive at home in his head, enjoyed loud blasts of pipe organ, 900 miles to Vienna with Mozart for 2 weeks interrupted by Mother's death of consumption, 93 France dominance made for strange alliances, 40 minute cantatas, new pieces sold 6-7 times over as trademark for one year, girl of 16 when 30, composed different each decade of life, bark implants for deafness, pay 4 rents at once, Napoleon dead in 21, 32 piano sonatas 135 opus 9 symphonies, alternate rage of hate love with Carl and suicide 7 year custody battle for nephew Carl, March 1827 applaud friends the comedy is over, perhaps typhus caused hearing loss, Shubert buried close by year later.

## Sayaf says

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### **Betty Confetti says**

This biography is fairly short, and Edmund Morris is a Beethoven fan. It is through that lens that one sees Beethoven and his work. Morris provides intellectual assessments of a wide variety of compositions of the genius artist with incredibly flowery language. But he is not really a music critic, and so understanding this, I give the biography 3 stars. If you want a detailed read that gives a lot of wonderful information, this is a book for you. The biography is sequential rather than one focusing on themes of the composer/performer's life. I would like now to read a biography written by a music critic who can help me digest really what Beethoven means in the span of history--not simply the time period in which he lived and relative to the greats of his time. Morris doesn't do this, and I doubt that he has the expertise. The glasses of the enthusiast, however, don't keep the author from offering Beethoven's failings. But just as the people of Beethoven's time gave him the benefit of the doubt due to his genius, so Morris also fails to hold really anyone accountable for enabling the eccentricities "for art's sake," all the while the composer lived in isolation, mentally ill, and destroying the lives' of family members. Was it all worth it? For us now, Morris seems to be saying Yes! The music is so profoundly fantastical. But I am left to wonder whether the people who called him brother, father, and son would agree.

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