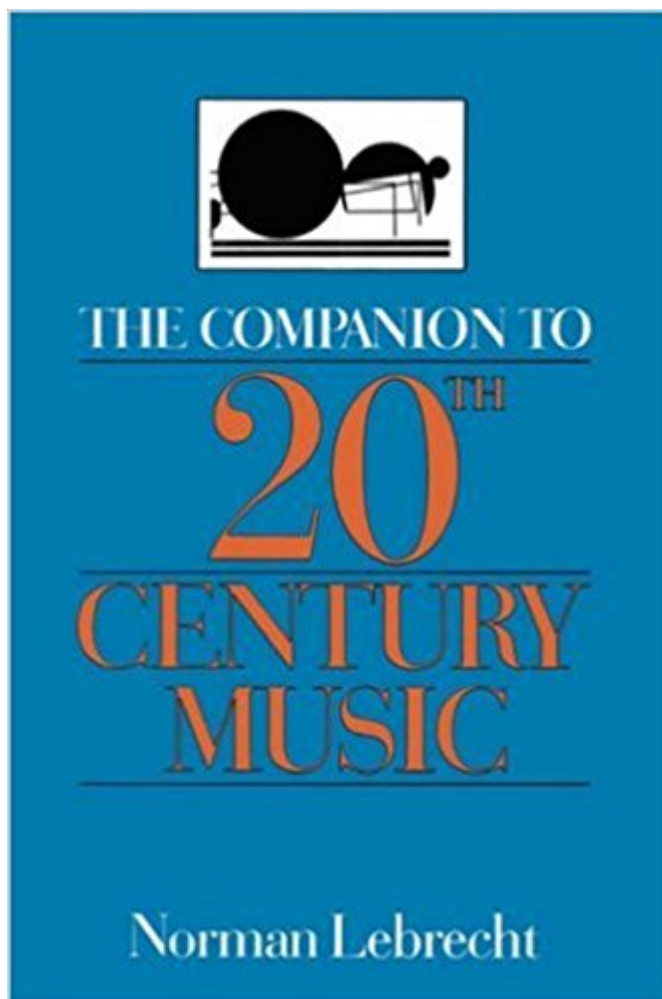


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The Companion To 20th-century Music



Synopsis

Twentieth century music has been remarkable for its pluralism. The various styles—atonality, neo-classicism, nationalism, serialism, jazz, computer music, minimalism, electronics, folklorism, and happenings—sheer chance—have been far from monolithic, and experimentation has been, perhaps, the century's only defining feature. With over 2500 entries, *The Companion to 20th-Century Music* is the first book to comprehensively define and applaud this diversity. Norman Lebrecht celebrates variety and innovation, assessing composers and musicians according to artistic merit rather than ideological or institutional eminence. He states that his purpose is "to demythologize, to enlighten, and to entertain" so he writes in a readable, narrative style, free of jargon and abbreviations. The end result is the perfect companion to the music of our time.

Book Information

Paperback: 440 pages

Publisher: Da Capo Press (August 22, 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0306807343

ISBN-13: 978-0306807343

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,117,401 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #92 in [Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Publishing & Books > Bibliographies & Indexes > History](#) #120 in [Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Publishing & Books > Bibliographies & Indexes > Music](#) #1181 in [Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > History](#)

Customer Reviews

British music critic Lebrecht is well known to music lovers for his entertaining, gossipy book *Discord* (LJ 5/1/83). The same droll, opinionated, and eminently quotable author makes a triumphant return with this encyclopedia on the personalities and ideas of this century's music. As with Nicolas Slonimsky's *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (LJ 1/92, 8th ed.), the stamp of an idiosyncratic, unabashedly partial mind can be found in every entry. Lebrecht professes a pluralistic, nonideological approach: He holds no allegiances, save to his own instincts and good judgment.

The results are mixed; for the most part, readers will be greatly impressed by the insightfulness of his comments and the sheer scope of the project. Certain entries, though, are irritatingly flippant and lacking in useful information. One can also criticize Lebrecht for ignoring current technological developments (there is no entry for "MIDI" and a woefully inadequate one for "computers") and for being slightly behind the curve in listing contemporary American composers. These caveats aside, the book is terrific reading and should be included in most music reference collections.- Larry Lipkis, Moravian Coll., Bethlehem, Pa. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

20th century music has been remarkable for its pluralism. The various styles - atonality, neo-classicism, nationalism, serialism, jazz, computer music, minimalism, electronics, folklorism, "happenings", sheer chance - have been far from monolithic, and experimentation has been, perhaps, the century's only defining feature. With over 2500 entries, *The Companion to 20th-Century Music* is the first book to comprehensively define and applaud this diversity. Norman Lebrecht celebrates variety and innovation, assessing composers and musicians according to artistic merit rather than ideological or institutional eminence. He states that his purpose is "to demythologize, to enlighten, and to entertain", so he writes in a readable, narrative style, free of jargon and abbreviations. The end result is the perfect companion to the music of our time.

Okay. I should qualify that. This book is not intended to cover popular music. Not even jazz. We are only talking about "art" or "serious" music here. And then only some of that. But since you are here, you probably know that already. ...Mr. Lebrecht is a fairly opinionated Englishman. If you agree with him, fine. If you don't, tough. (Example, from the entry on Australasia: "A late developer in musical terms, the antipodes contributed sopranos - ... - and little else". Ouch! Mr. Lebrecht doesn't care much for electronic/computer music. Ouch again.) I guess I am lucky in that I agree with many Mr. Lebrecht's opinions - most of the time. So I actually find the "Companion" a handy reference to some of my favourite music. I haven't found a similar book that covers as much as what this one does. And I often appreciate the critical viewpoints. Negative points: The "Companion" tries to cover a lot. This means that every heading provides only a limited amount of information. Yet most topics packs a punch. Other books cover fewer topics, but more information per topic. At the same time the "Companion" does not cover everything. I found that many obscure artists (including composers) are missing from the book. And there is little overall historical analysis of the entire period. The book is presented in the dictionary style - which is what I wanted. Yet it is still nice to browse through.

Entries are cross-referenced, as one would expect. After 429 pages, the appendix has a historical timeline covering world events, the arts, and music. I would have liked a visual diagram of how, say, American composers relate to each other. There are 13 photos, and a handful of line drawings. For other periods of classical music, you'll need the Oxford Dictionary of Music edited by Michael Kennedy. If you are interested in jazz (as well), look elsewhere. I recommend The New Grove's Dictionary of Jazz edited by Barry Kernfeld. As for the "Companion", get the second edition. It covers the whole of the last century.

If you are looking for a comprehensive and objective guide to this musical period, The Grove would be a better choice. If you enjoy Lebrecht's columns on "La Scena Musicale," however, this book is highly entertaining. Lebrecht is opinionated, highly informed, and does not hesitate to criticize if he feels it is warranted. Those who are annoyed by his obvious bias would be advised to avoid this book. Although many obscure composers and movements are treated, there are a few significant omissions: Ezra Pound, despite authoring 3 operas as well as other works, is mentioned only in the entry for his orchestrator, George Antheil. Arvo Part's seminal work Tabula Rasa is barely mentioned in his entry; it probably merits an entry of its own. And how can any guide to 20th Century classical music include Frank Zappa, but omit Prof. Peter Schickele and P.D.Q. Bach? Entries referenced elsewhere in the text are marked with an asterisk, however, some may have been lost in editing. I searched in vain for the entry on "self-mutilation," referenced in the entry on "aesthetics." This is basically an encyclopedia, and the highest praise for it may be that there are few books in that format on any subject that merit reading from cover to cover -- this is one of them.

First off, I must tell you that, though you won't find a ready indication on the cover (well, not of my hardcover copy anyway), this is primarily and in fact 99% about classical music, musicians and composers. Yes, there are little write-ups about the Beatles and Elvis and slightly more substantial paragraphs on major jazz artists, but for the most part this is devoted to the significant, the major, the obscure and the really unheard-of classical composers who worked from 1900 to the 1980s. Lebrecht is pithy and curmudgeonly to a fault, though it livens up the essentially dull nature of an encyclopedic work; my biggest personal peeve is that he feels compelled to dredge up information about sex lives as often as possible, whether or not it seems to have significant impact on the personages in question. Sure, he agrees with the majority of critics that Benjamin Britten was likely the greatest English composer since Purcell; do we need to have more than a word or two in

the short space he has to spend on his sexuality, however much it may have been in the gossip pages 50 years ago? And his sneering disdain for pop music is unwarranted also, I think. Clearly people reading this book are interested in classical music - brief remarks on those pop/rock stars who have influenced the musical world at large might be necessary, but he needn't alienate those of us who are under 70 and/or also appreciate non-"serious" music at times. Still, this is a useful little tome, with almost any composer you can think of mentioned, and plenty you haven't heard of; musicians and orchestras are also given some space, but most of the pages belong to Britten and Messiaen, Strauss and Puccini, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern and the rest of the last century's great polyglot mix of traditionalism, romanticism, folksong, serialism, avant-garde and just outright weirdness.

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