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## Book Reviews: Classical Music - "Unlocking the Masters" Series

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## Unlocking the Masters Series

(*Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press*) Thomas May. *Decoding Wagner: An Invitation to His World of Music Drama* (2004) David Hurwitz. *The Mahler Symphonies, An Owner's Manual* (2004). *Getting the Most Out of Mozart, the Instrumental Works.* (2005). *Getting the Most Out of Mozart, the Vocal Works.* (2005). *Exploring Haydn: A Listener's Guide to Music's Boldest Innovator.* (2005). M. Owen Lee. *The Great Instrumental Works.* (2005)

This series of informal guides proposes to introduce the educated listener to the historical context of some of the most famous and, in two cases, infamous works of the Western "classical" tradition. The prose style is generally casual, summarizing the life and works of each composer in broad strokes. The aim is to entertain and inform, presumably with the hope that readers will become admirers and seek further experience with this rewarding music. Each book includes one or two CDs of music to illustrate points made in the prose, and these contain full movements or numbers rather than short excerpts. The discs come from a variety of labels (e.g., BMG Classics, Naxos, and Hänssler) and include a wide range of performers and performance styles, more about which below.

Starting as it does with Wagner and Mahler, the series tackles major aesthetic issues and concerns surrounding composers whose works have polarized audiences since their first performances. Paradoxically enough, I find these two books to be the best and most striking of the series, perhaps in part because these composers demand an acolyte-like devotion and likely because these books are meant to convert skeptics and foster unity among the devoted. The authors do an admirable job of explicating in words the almost indescribable appeal of these late Romantic masters, and the books read well and engagingly because of their intense devotion to a cause. The subsequent works on Haydn and Mozart do not fare so well, in part, I imagine, because less benediction is needed for these best-known composers. The much larger and more comprehensive outputs of Mozart and Haydn also obstruct a deep and personal reading of the works discussed, as the authors seem to feel compelled to mention almost every work at some point in the guide. How can one discuss with any catching fervor all twenty-one operas of Mozart and still devote attention to the sacred works all in one two-hundred-page booklet? Progressing through the series, then, the reader encounters ever shorter and more superficial descriptions of the works addressed, which seems backwards and unsatisfying.

The most disappointing book of the series is the latest one, *The Great Instrumental Works* by M. Owen Lee. Unlike the true discussions of works provided in Hurwitz's *The Mahler Symphonies* or May's *Decoding Wagner*, Lee's book reads like a collection of short program notes, somewhat less informative in many cases than the notes provided with full-length recordings available on CD. Any music-loving concert attendee or CD collector is likely to know at least this much already, I think, and the casual reader-listener or, worse, young student would likely do better to go to a more reputable or scholarly source. Still, the series as a whole has its merits in the first two books.

Each of the Wagner and Mahler books begins with a brief introduction to the slightly mysterious allure of these composers in the concert hall. Their reputations in their own time and, especially for Wagner, the reputations accrued over the twentieth century are discussed in a succinct but thorough manner. Each author does his subject justice by exploring the complexity of reception and its relationship to historical standing. Then each one dives into the works to be discussed, both with very different techniques. May traces Wagner's life and works simultaneously, weaving an entertaining tapestry of influence from one to the other and constructing a reading of each opera in the context of Wagner's personal life and development as an artist. Naturally, this is easier to do with a composer who wrote so much and so well in his own lifetime regarding his works and their construction, rather than with, say, Brahms, who wrote so little about his works, or Mozart, whose output is so large. The BMG Classics compilation disc included with the book illustrates his points well, and the performances are, for my taste, quite well done. The mixture of performers gives the reader/listener opportunities to hear a variety of approaches, and I found it quite satisfying to hear so many unfamiliar voices. Serious opera fans may be disappointed not to find their favorite big-league sopranos and tenors; this book, though, is not designed for them, but for the initiate hoping to find a way into the corpus of Wagner's operas. I think it serves that purpose very well.

Hurwitz on Mahler is similarly a pleasure to read. He approaches his subject from a works-first perspective, leaving biographical inquiry for another day. Moving through the symphonies from the first to the tenth, Hurwitz describes the events of each movement, allowing each symphony to build on those that have come before. His use of recordings is good (Hurwitz, after all, is the proprietor of [Classicstoday.com](http://Classicstoday.com), perhaps the most visited Internet site for classical music information and reviews; if anyone is likely to choose high-quality, representative recordings, I'd expect it to be him.), but the inclusion of a single complete movement from each symphony seemed a bit silly to me. Because he discusses musical features in every movement of each symphony, at least one excerpt from each would have been welcome to this reviewer; either that, or a close reading of the selected movement and a briefer overview of the rest, perhaps, would have served his purposes better.

With this introduction to the series, I hoped to find in the two-book set on Mozart and the single volume on Haydn a collection of insightful discussions about the most significant or personally thrilling works carefully chosen by the author. Unfortunately, this was not to be. *Getting the Most Out of Mozart* neither delivers on its title's implied promise nor lives up to the standard set by the two previous books of the series. Like its predecessors, the recordings chosen for inclusion on the compilation disc are high-quality and representative, but the prose disappoints. Hurwitz falls victim to temptation: given a free hand to explore these works with the reader-listener and seemingly unable to judiciously choose one or two works from each genre, he provides a whirlwind tour through the life and works of perhaps the two greatest and most prolific composers of the Western tradition, leaving little of substance in his wake.

For whom might this series be useful? Because the earlier books present very good discussions of the works they address, they seem to me limited to the knowledgeable

amateur: that mythical, blue-haired opera-goer or symphony subscription regular. Alternatively, these might make good reading for the parents of a particularly bright music student, who may want his or her family to have some inroads to the works performed in the upcoming concert or recital. Even the lackluster Mozart and Haydn books of the series would be appropriate, perhaps welcome, for this purpose. For the music student I would recommend a well-written textbook (true, a rarity, but that's an issue for another review) or music dictionary entry over these.