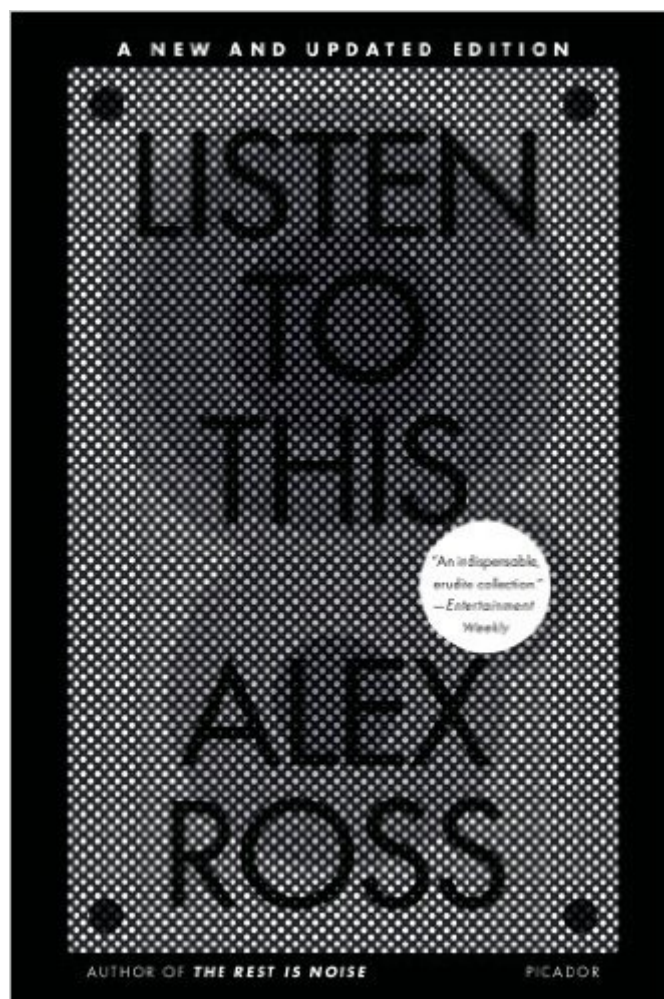


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# Listen To This



## Synopsis

One of The Telegraph's Best Music Books 2011 Alex Ross's award-winning international bestseller, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, has become a contemporary classic, establishing Ross as one of our most popular and acclaimed cultural historians. *Listen to This*, which takes its title from a beloved 2004 essay in which Ross describes his late-blooming discovery of pop music, showcases the best of his writing from more than a decade at *The New Yorker*. These pieces, dedicated to classical and popular artists alike, are at once erudite and lively. In a previously unpublished essay, Ross brilliantly retells hundreds of years of music history—from Renaissance dances to Led Zeppelin—through a few iconic bass lines of celebration and lament. He vibrantly sketches canonical composers such as Schubert, Verdi, and Brahms; gives us in-depth interviews with modern pop masters such as Björk and Radiohead; and introduces us to music students at a Newark high school and indie-rock hipsters in Beijing. Whether his subject is Mozart or Bob Dylan, Ross shows how music expresses the full complexity of the human condition. Witty, passionate, and brimming with insight, *Listen to This* teaches us how to listen more closely.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

From the first chapter of his second book, *LISTEN TO THIS*, in which he recounts how Beethoven's "Eroica" symphony inspired a lifelong love of music in him - to the last in which he details the pathos lingering throughout the work of Johannes Brahms - Alex Ross cements his reputation as perhaps the most dynamic writer on music today. His first outing, *THE REST IS NOISE*, has become an

international bestseller and established itself as THE premiere survey on twentieth century classical music - an obtuse subject effortlessly broken down and made accessible by Ross's seamless prose and clear narrative structure. LISTEN TO THIS proves to be far more episodic than THE REST IS NOISE. In contrast to that book's linear chronology, LISTEN TO THIS is simply a collection of essays on various musical subjects, most of which have already been published in Ross's primary meal ticket, THE NEW YORKER magazine. But LISTEN TO THIS is no less riveting, as Ross's engaging writing is by turns emotional (the sentimental chapter on Lorraine Hunt Lieberson), intelligent (he chronicles the entire musical history of a particular walking bass line in chapter two) and funny (the many on-campus scenes he depicts involving Marlboro College in "The Music Mountain"). Also, since it includes chapters on a wide variety of musicians, from Mozart to Dylan to Bjork to contemporary Chinese classical composers, LISTEN TO THIS truly does have "something for everyone," and reading through all of the essays is a great way to expose yourself to new music in which you may not have had any prior interest. Personally, I was less than enthused about reading the chapters on Schubert and Brahms, for example, but after making my way through them - which I ultimately considered more of a joy than a chore - I found myself researching more historical facts and seeking out samples of their music. It is a testament to Ross's skills as a writer that he has long been inspiring this effect in many of his readers. Don't be surprised if you pick up a Marian Anderson record or develop a sudden peculiar liking for obscure Chinese composer Qigang Chen after reading this book! Ross even makes it easy on us by providing a "suggested listening" section on each chapter, in which he recommends a slew of recordings. Ross isn't without his flaws, however: he is far more comfortable when covering classical subjects than pop or rock, as evinced by the rather bland chapter on Radiohead (though he fares better with Bjork, weaving comparisons of her music to the Icelandic classical tradition throughout that chapter). Also, the chapter "Edges of Pop" is without any real thesis - only offering brief glimpses at a small smorgasbord of oddball musical artists. Regardless, anyone with even a remote interest in classical or rock music would be hard pressed not to find inspiration and insight in LISTEN TO THIS. Alex Ross's devout love of music bleeds off of every page, without fail, directly into the heart of the reader.

Fans of his work know that Alex Ross writes mainly about classical music, and Listen To This highlights some of his best writing on the genre in the last decade, including fantastic essays on Mozart, Schubert, and late-period Brahms. But he also has something for contemporary music fans, with almost equally enlightening essays on Bob Dylan, Radiohead and Bjork. His knowledge of music is deep--he grew up listening to classical instead of popular music, and took music lessons as

a teenager-- and he applies the same critical musical eye to Kid A and Medulla as he does the Eroica. Indeed, Ross shows us that some of our best pop composers pay just as much attention to textures, rhythm, harmony, and melody as a composer of orchestral music would, and I saw these artists from a new angle. In fact, this conjunction of music, crossing the border from classical to pop as he calls it, is precisely the book's strength, and possibly its greatest potential benefit. Though these essays are primarily about classical music, he writes with such a contagious zeal, with such an obvious love of music, that he shades the restrictive boundaries we've created to categorize music. He does this well in the above-mentioned pieces. But nowhere is this idea better put than in his essay, "Chacona, Lamento, Walking Blues", where he ties the basso lamento of the middle ages through the centuries all the way to Led Zeppelin's "Dazed and Confused". Ross gets it. He gets that music is music and any genre of it has the ability to touch anyone. Still, his first love is classical, and nothing seems to concern him as much as the forms lack of popularity, especially the greatly underappreciated works of the twentieth century. This concern informs many of the essays. In "Listen to This", Ross outlines the history of classical music's popular decline. He blames it partially on what he calls the "sacralization" of music, a process over time that turned the proceedings of a classical music concert into an almost religious experience. The most glaring example of this snobbery, the prohibition on applauding mid-piece, even between movements, is explained. But perhaps worse than ridiculous rules of etiquette was what Ross calls the "fetishizing" of the past, the etching of the great classical composers onto a musical equivalent of Mt Rushmore, where there's no room for new faces. He argues that this prompted modern composers to write for one another, pushing the music into territory far removed from the classical repertoire and foreign to the ears of most listeners who were untrained to catch the musical 'advancements' these artists were making. I found the error of the modern composer's way neatly summarized in Ross's essay on Mozart, which is called, "The Storm of Style: Mozart's Golden Mean". Mozart's 'Golden Mean' is early advice the composer's father, Leopold, gave him. Leopold told the young Wolfgang that he had to write music that would be appreciated by both connoisseurs of music as well as the general public. As enjoyably and thought-provokingly as Ross writes, I would've liked to have seen him tie the problem of modern music to this simple rule. Because as a fan of classical music who hates just about every modern orchestral piece he's ever heard, I see this as the core problem. I often read rave reviews about contemporary composers, like John Adams, Jennifer Higdon, and Osvaldo Golijov. But they're almost always written by the intelligentsia of classical music: conductors, other composers, or the classical press, people like Ross. Modern composers must make music smart AND entertaining for regular listeners. Otherwise the music will remain as distant from most of us as the

lives of the great composers are. Most people can enjoy Beethoven's 5th symphony, even if they don't understand how he spends the entire symphony harmonically taking apart the famous eight-note beginning. But will the average listener appreciate Stravinsky's Rite of Spring if they don't know about or understand the rhythmic intricacies of the piece? I doubt so, in most cases. It's all about the golden mean. Of course, many people could appreciate classical music more if they gave it the time and attention it deserves. But given the average attention span these days, perhaps the future lies in Ross's essays on pop music. Maybe Radiohead and Bjork are our modern masters. Both are inspired by the composer Olivier Messiaen, but have used his influence in a form more readily accessible in the current world culture. In the essay, "Symphony of Millions", Ross goes to China and finds music conservatories there teaching not just classical theory, but also pop-music arranging. As we may find China driving world culture in the twenty-first century, is this a sign that blended genres and shorter works will render modern orchestral compositions permanently irrelevant? (Indeed, I think some of the more successful contemporary orchestral works already do blend genres. See Golijov, for example.) Wherever you come down on the issue, Ross's thought-provoking work is a great guide to have in the thinking process. He hits his own golden mean with his engaging and intelligent writing, which will appeal to a broad category of music-lover, not just classical fans. It's for anyone who wants to know how music works its magic, and the artists who create that magic.

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