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How Music Works

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HOW
MUSIC
WORKS



DAVID
BYRNE

Narrated by Andrew Geman



Synopsis

Best known as a founding member and principal songwriter of the iconic band Talking Heads, David Byrne has received Grammy, Oscar, and Golden Globe awards and has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In the insightful *How Music Works*, Byrne offers his unique perspective on music - including how music is shaped by time, how recording technologies transform the listening experience, the evolution of the industry, and much more.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Byrne begins his wide-ranging historical, technological, psychological and sociological examination of music with a novel insight: architecture of musical venues shape composition and instrumental arrangements. Regarding huge gothic cathedrals, intimate nightclubs, and jungle camp sites, room reverberation, volume of space, and audience vocal ambience dictate modal versus scale works, instrument development, and performance dynamics. The great revolutionary divide was recording technology, and musicians discovered that what works live does not necessarily achieve the same result on vinyl, tape, CD, or .mp3, and vice versa. Expectations often lead to disappointment and the performance and performer suffers. With such an interesting introduction, the book offers much promise. It almost fulfills expectations with both personal and general tidbits and theses that reward the reader, though for myself his personal examples are somewhat weaker. The second chapter is an musical autobiographical section describing the evolution of his music and stage attire over the succeeding eras of rock. In his world travels, his encounter with Japanese and Balinese traditional music and theatre art had a profound influence on the development of his stage craft. One of his

suits clearly had classic Japanese origins. Chapters 3 and 4 return to musicology with an expansion of the role of technology, recording and playback. The historical account is amusing when considering the delusions of reality instilled by each new device on the unconditioned and uneducated ear.

This is David Byrne week for me. On Sunday, I caught the sensational David Byrne and St. Vincent show at the Orpheum Theater in Boston. The last time I saw Byrne live was when I caught the Talking Heads on August 19, 1983 at the old Forrest Hills Tennis Stadium in New York City. So, clearly I was already a Byrne fan. How Music Works The other part of David Byrne week is his fabulous new book *How Music Works*. The book is Byrne's take on the industry he's succeeded in. He offers keen observations about the music industry, the art of making music, telling stories in the book using a combination of history, anthropology, and music theory. I love this book! In particular, Byrne has a fascinating take on the development of music, which is quite different from what other music historians say. In a chapter titled "Creation in Reverse" he argues that music evolves to fill the space where it is performed. For example, the Talking Heads evolved in the 1970s at New York punk club CBGB requiring volume to overcome the din. The sparse music that came out of the CBGB scene such as the Ramones and Television worked perfectly for that room. Music that evolved in gothic cathedrals (lots of reverberation) has long notes with no key changes. Carnegie Hall and other similar rooms require texture. With discos, people made music to exploit the fantastic sound systems and people's need to dance. Rock music played in hockey arenas (the worst acoustics on the planet) must be straightforward with medium tempos. You get the idea. The music that is successful works perfectly for each venue. With personal sound systems (starting with the Walkman in the 1970s then evolving into MP3 players such as the iPod), all of a sudden you can hear every single detail.

I enjoyed this book. It has transparency and thoughtfulness I haven't seen in other books about music. Mr Byrne gets to the guts of what's going on in music today. I claim, however, that in Chapter 9 he's faking it. For those who have not read this chapter, one premise is loosely that classical music is over-venerated, over-funded and that pop music is the true underdog: underfunded and never getting enough respect from critics especially for works emerging from amateur musicians. David writes: "I never got Bach, Mozart or Beethoven - and don't feel any worse for it". I suggest the exact opposite of his premise is the case: look at the budgets for pop music albums. In fact look at the budget Byrne himself tables in the book for a recent album - \$218,000. The documentary 'Sound

City' talks of budgets reaching \$400,000 to \$600,000 in the 1970s for pop albums - one can only imagine what they are today. Do you think classical music has anything like these budgets? Try raising kickstarter money for a woodwind quintet, or better yet - approach a record label for funding. Those I know trying to get new works off the ground in the classical tradition are lucky to raise a few thousand dollars to do this work. Today the tradition emerging from classical times is the underdog. Cumulatively pop music spends over 13 billion dollars a year on recording, arranging and performance fees for its songs. And yet they still collectively haven't made a piece as good as Beethoven's 9th symphony. So who is the underdog in this battle? They have multi-core workstations, high-speed data links to each others studios, world-wide access to musical talent in an international studio system, an international payment system...what else?

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