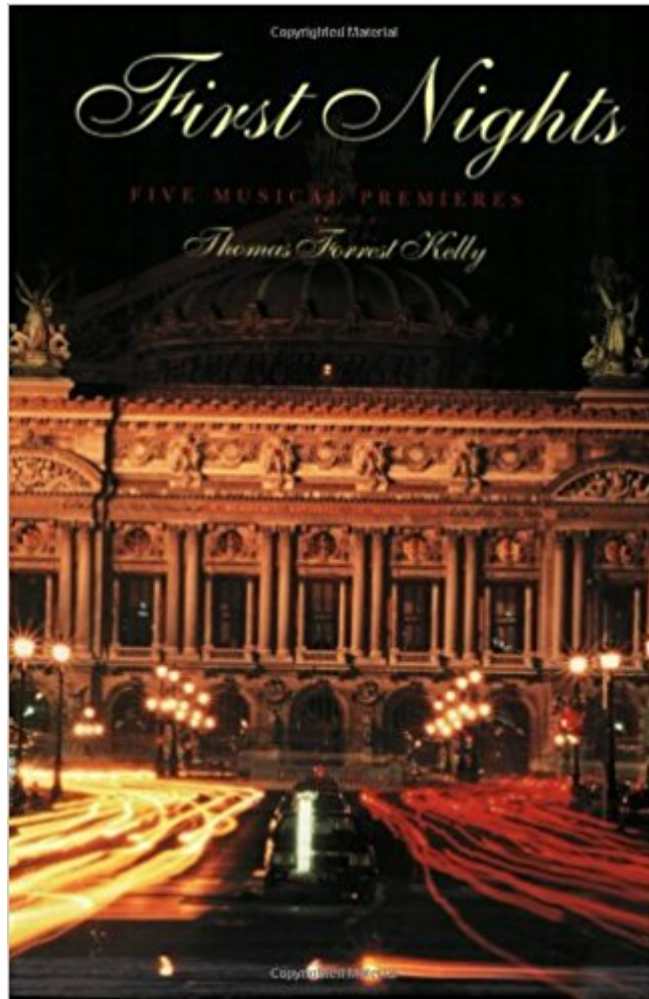




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First Nights: Five Musical Premieres



Synopsis

This lively book takes us back to the first performances of five famous musical compositions: Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in 1607, Handel's *Messiah* in 1742, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in 1824, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* in 1830, and Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* in 1913. Thomas Forrest Kelly sets the scene for each of these premieres, describing the cities in which they took place, the concert halls, audiences, conductors, and musicians, the sound of the music when it was first performed (often with instruments now extinct), and the popular and critical responses. He explores how performance styles and conditions have changed over the centuries and what music can reveal about the societies that produce it. Kelly tells us, for example, that Handel recruited musicians he didn't know to perform *Messiah* in a newly built hall in Dublin; that Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* was performed with a mixture of professional and amateur musicians after only three rehearsals; and that Berlioz was still buying strings for the violas and mutes for the violins on the day his symphony was first played. Kelly's narrative, which is enhanced by extracts from contemporary letters, press reports, account books, and other sources, as well as by a rich selection of illustrations, gives us a fresh appreciation of these five masterworks, encouraging us to sort out our own late twentieth-century expectations from what is inherent in the music.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"First Nights is a brilliant essay in synthesis, continuously alert to those extramusical pressures,

exerted by everything from snobbery and bureaucracy to sex and ambition, that added their burdens of stress to the birth of these musical masterpieces. . . . With its abundant portfolios of documents and sensitively chosen illustrations, this is the kind of book that has us crying, 'Oh, that we were there!'

—Jonathan Keates, *The New York Times Book Review* "First Nights presents a mass of technical information in an unusually accessible way. The book is always enjoyable."

—Judith Weir, *Times Literary Supplement* "Kelly . . . is something of a rarity—an academic who can tell a good story. . . . Kelly's inclusion of relevant documents—letters, newspaper clippings, long-ago interviews, ticket counts—and the list of recommended recordings help make *First Nights* a book that should prove engrossing to general reader and specialist alike."

—Tim Page, *Washington Post Book World* "A unique and extremely attractive account of the premieres of five musical masterpieces spanning from 1607 to 1913. . . . Kelly paints a vivid and fascinating picture of each premiere by combining information taken from a number of sources, including letters, archival documents, and observations of the music itself. This should appeal to all music lovers."

—Library Journal (starred review) "In his discussions of the premieres of five of the most significant musical works of the past four centuries, Kelly considers the composer, the cultural milieu, the production, and the reviews of each. . . . Aided by a wealth of pictures and documents, Kelly limns these five epoch-making debuts in engrossing detail."

—Booklist "Reading about prominent longtime visitors such as Verdi and Wagner and the places they lived, can stir fresh interest in musical figures so historic they often seem frozen in familiar patterns and prejudices. The actions of past and present concert halls, opera houses, theaters, conservatories, churches, libraries, museums, and cemeteries having to do with music and music-makers through the centuries. Armchair travelers will most definitely find something interesting here."

—Allen Hughes, *Chamber Music* "A splendid complement to beginning courses and a delightful read for general audiences. An essential purchase."

—Choice "[This is] a book that invites us to clear our ears and try to imagine five important pieces of music in the birth pangs of first performance."

—Nina C. Ayoub, *Chronicle of Higher Education* "There's much more to *First Nights* than the title might lead you to believe. Thomas Forrest Kelly's impressive new book is an account of the premieres of five important musical compositions. But its scope is greater: It includes not only a chronicle of the preparation, performance and aftermath of each premiere, but sets each one in its social and musical milieu. At the end the reader has some sense of what it was like to be alive at the time and a member of the audience."

—Olin Chism, *Dallas Morning News* "An engrossing book. . . . A thoroughly researched account of the first performances of five famous pieces. . . . The author puts

each of these masterworks into a comprehensive perspective, historical, sociological, and artistic, and then presents all known documents, including related correspondence and reviews. When the reader is done, he has an elevated sense of how a specific work represents its composer, how the piece came to be written, how that creative artist was affected by his society, and how that society and ultimately the whole world was affected by the composer." — Almos T. Werner, Music Associates of America "[A] smart and lively book. . . . The result is a delightful, even playful book. . . . In the process of clearing our ears, Kelly makes some sharp and important points about the relationship of a work of art to the society around it, about the historically contingent nature of how we listen, and about the fatuousness at the heart of any notion of authentic performance." — Jeremy Eichler, New Republic "All are works that had a profound effect on first hearing that largely continues to the present day. Kelly illuminates these small slices of history by describing details on the preparation for the performances, the actual event, and the critical aftermath." — The Beethoven Journal "This will be a very nice book to present to the young music or opera buff in one's life, though there is much for the mature reader too, as Mr. Kelley portrays the changing world of music-making on a large scale — and the evolving social roles and status of the composers from dependency on patrons to being independent producers of their concerts and beyond. . . . [An] enjoyable book." — Colin Walters, Washington Times "Kelly's engaging, fast-paced narrative makes music, an ineffable art, come alive for the general reader. This is a book that anyone with an interest in the arts can read and enjoy." — Craig Wright

Thomas Forrest Kelly is professor of music at Harvard University. He has served as president of Early Music America, as a regular commentator for National Public Radio, and as a columnist for the magazine Early Music America.

Excellent book giving details of composers, singer and orchestral musicians, the first-night concerts and venues/theater where 5 landmark first-nights performances took place. These are Monteverdi's Orfeo, Handel's Messiah, Beethoven's 9th Symphony premier which is most informative, Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique and Stravinsky's Rites of Spring. The book is well-researched and presented, a great book.

Good book for my music appreciation class!

Awesome course at Harvard, and this book is really readable.

Relive the premiere performances of Monteverdi's Orfeo, Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, Berlioz' Symphonie Fantastique - Documented and vivid!

Son is music major and needed this piece to rehearse. It was exactly what he wanted.

This book chronicles several "first nights" of different composers, including Stravinsky's disastrous "Rite of Spring," which audiences clearly weren't ready for at the time. Very enjoyable musical history.

Am 3rd year college student who performs operas and wanted to be able to read about the premieres of 5 famous operas and see what went on behind the scenes.

I took Professor Thomas Kelly's "First Nights: Five Performance Premieres" class at Harvard, and it was an amazing experience. His lectures were loosely based off of this book, and always garnered curious visitors in the lecture hall. While I didn't read the book during the course, because the material was repetitive with his lectures, I read all of it in anticipation for the final, and it was as if Professor Kelly was giving a personal lecture to me, all without leaving the comfort of my room. It is well written, well researched, anecdotal without being too convoluted, and entertaining, most importantly! I highly highly recommend this book! I am looking forward to reading his First Nights at the Opera book soon. If you ever have a chance to visit Harvard, do come by to listen to one of his lectures (Fall semester, Tu/Th at 10 AM in Sanders Theater)

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