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FINDING LEWIS-LIKE JOY IN THE MUSIC OF SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

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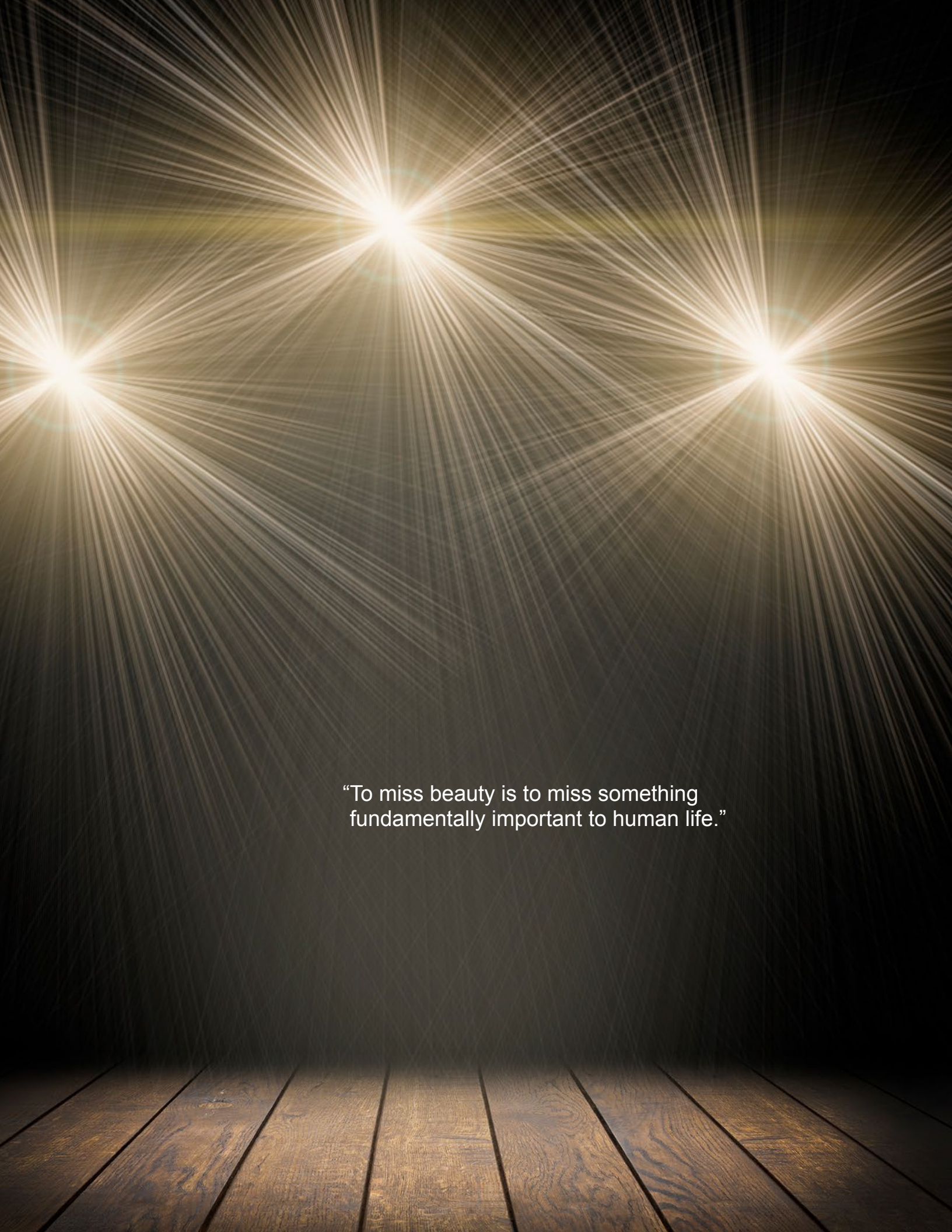
Lewis wrote a lot about joy. But he meant something different than the word's usual connotations. Rather than a feeling of happiness or elation, he meant that bittersweet experience of longing for

something just beyond our reach. He identified it as the central story of his life. In one of his most content-packed sentences, he defined joy as “an unsatisfied desire, which is itself more desirable than any satisfaction.”¹

You might want to read that sentence again. It's dense. But for me, it resonates as one of the most helpful statements I've ever heard.

Lewis put into words the feeling I had experienced at the end of every concert, after seeing a beautiful sunset, or while watching the credits at the end of great movie. In fact, Lewis confirmed I was not alone in my experience. In his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” he explained more about this sense of longing: “We usually notice it just as the moment of vision dies away, as the music ends, or as the landscape loses the celestial light.”²

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis recounted his earliest memory of this unsatisfied desire when seeing something beautiful. His brother, Warnie, had made a replica of their garden on top of a biscuit tin and brought it inside to show off. Lewis remembered, “That was the first beauty I ever knew. What the real garden had failed to do, the toy garden did.”³ In another place, he remembered an encounter of beauty mixed with deep longing after hearing a piece of music by Wagner.⁴

A dark, atmospheric scene featuring three bright spotlights positioned in a triangular arrangement at the top of the frame. The spotlights cast powerful beams of light that create a dense, starburst-like pattern of rays across the dark background. At the bottom of the frame, a wooden floor with visible planks is illuminated by the light from the spotlights, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall mood is dramatic and contemplative.

“To miss beauty is to miss something
fundamentally important to human life.”



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Do you identify with this? Can you remember catching a glimpse of beauty or hearing a moment of music or encountering a display of the ineffable that left you with an ache of longing? Despite the disappointment, do you still treasure that experience? And do you hope to relive it again and again?

I do every time I hear Sergei Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony or the first movement of his Symphonic Dances or pretty much every note of his Third Piano Concerto. Perhaps it's my Russian ancestry resonating with that flavor in his music. Or perhaps it's all the stories of his life that I recall as I allow his music to wash over me. Or maybe I'm inspired when I remember the difficulties in his life that didn't overtake him or make him bitter. Or maybe I just like his music and find a pleasure in it that points me toward the God who made music so delightful and gave me ears to hear.

I hope my musings in this article can help you find those experiences of joy that point you to the One who placed eternity in your heart. As I write, I pray that He would use the temporal to point you to the eternal.

I'll share three reflections from hours of listening to Rachmaninoff. I don't offer them with any sense of authority as I would if I were preaching a sermon or teaching a Bible study. I won't even say that God "gave" me these ideas as if that carried some kind of divine inspiration. I'm simply trying to think about something that falls into the category of "whatever is lovely" in that list of things we are told to think about in Philippians 4:8.

First, there is such a thing as beauty. And for that we say "thanks be to God!" Rachmaninoff's music could be described as interesting or complex or layered or finely crafted or requiring attentive listening or demanding of the utmost skill to perform. But more than anything, it's beautiful. I listen to his *Vocalise* and just want to sigh. I try to play his symphonies as background music, and they won't allow me to do anything except close my eyes



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and immerse myself in them. I once showed up to a doctoral-level class fifteen minutes late because, even though I arrived at the parking lot in plenty of time, I sat in my car, unable to turn off the radio station that had selected Vladimir Horowitz's performance of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto as its "morning drive-time selection."


Visit Youtube or Spotify or Pandora and search for Joshua Bell's performance of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* and see if I'm exaggerating.

But not everyone shares my love for Rachmaninoff. For some of his contemporary composers and performers, their disdain smells of jealousy. For some critics, the dismissal comes because he chose to adhere to old forms and structures in composition, unwilling to be avant-garde or shocking. The fifth edition of Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, published in 1954, boldly predicted, "The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninoff's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favor." But music critic and biographer Harold Schonberg sides with the majority, calling the Grove reference "one of the most outrageously snobbish and even stupid statements ever to be found in a work that is supposed to be an objective reference."⁵

Rachmaninoff's symphonies, concertos, and a variety of other pieces remain as staples in today's orchestral repertoire for one dominant reason. They're beautiful. And people can't get enough of beauty.

Philosopher Gregory Ganssle says, "To miss beauty is to miss something fundamentally important to human life." He believes this because

beauty startles us. It stops us in our tracks. It moves us to change directions. We do not glance at beautiful

A full-page background image of a night sky filled with stars and the Milky Way galaxy. In the lower-left foreground, the dark silhouette of a person stands with their back to the camera, looking up at the vast cosmic display. The horizon is a thin dark line, and the ground appears to be a reflective surface like water or ice, mirroring the stars above.

*We do not want merely to see beauty, though,
God knows, even that is bounty enough. We
want something else which can hardly be put
into words — to be united with the beauty we
see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves,
to bathe in it, to become part of it.*



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

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*things or skim beautiful verses. To glance or to skim is to hold an object or text at a distance. And to hold something at a distance is to fail to encounter it. When it comes to beauty, to glance is to fail to see.*⁶

C.S. Lewis agreed. Again, in “The Weight of Glory,” he noted,

*We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words — to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.*⁷

A second reflection while considering Rachmaninoff is that we can recover from life’s setbacks. Rachmaninoff did. His life as a performer, composer, and conductor began early. At age nine, he enrolled in the prestigious St. Petersburg Conservatory and quickly rose to the top of his class. He composed his first piano pieces at age fourteen and followed them with a steady flow that challenged even the best of pianists. He completed his First Piano Concerto by the age of eighteen and dazzled audiences with his performing prowess. Perhaps his unusually long fingers gave him an advantage.

Making the huge transposition to compose symphonies began in his twenty-second year, leading to the world premiere of his First Symphony two years later. But the evening was a disaster, which set Rachmaninoff back for many years. The orchestra failed to prepare for the performance of a piece that required far more than the usual demands of that time. And the conductor for the evening, Alexander Glazunov, showed up drunk! Rachmaninoff hid in the lobby of the concert hall, covering his ears, unable to listen to the damage being inflicted on his masterpiece. He plunged into a depression that took years and therapy to overcome.

For almost three years, he wrote nothing. Reflecting back on



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that dark period, he said, “I felt like a man who had suffered a stroke and had lost the use of his head and hands.”⁸ Eventually he resumed writing pieces for the piano, including his second concerto—a tour de force that remains one of his most frequently performed pieces.

Later he dared to tackle the task of composing another symphony. More than ten years after that horrific butchering of his First Symphony came the premiere of his second. In many people’s minds, the second outshines the first and continues to thrill audiences around the world.

I listen to his Second Symphony and marvel that he didn’t just shrug off the pain of rejection. Nor did he compose a work that expresses anger or bitterness. He overcame the hurt and emerged more creative and more expressive, producing a work that rhapsodically thrills its hearers.

Third, I wonder if some of us have a life-song we must sing or a life-message we must proclaim. All of Rachmaninoff’s compositions in some ways sing the same song. They fit together as a cohesive body of work. Harold Schonberg suggests, “Rachmaninoff wrote his C-minor Piano Concerto in 1901 and never deviated from the pattern, writing essentially the same kind of music throughout his life.”⁹ This strikes me as all the more remarkable when I consider the many pains in his life as compared to the numerous displays of beauty in his music.

By the age of forty, Rachmaninoff had achieved a level of fame and financial success that placed him among Russia’s bourgeoisie. But in 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution, that was the wrong status to have. His land, home, and possessions were confiscated, forcing him to escape with his family (on a sled!) to Finland. They moved several times to various countries but never returned to their homeland. Later in life, living in America, he

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reflected, “The whole world is open to me, and success awaits me everywhere. Only one place is closed to me, and that is my own country — Russia.”¹⁰

What strikes me as particularly sad, whenever I listen to his First Symphony, is that he left all the notes and music for that work behind in Russia. As you can imagine, a family of four could only fit so much on a sled. The scores for his First Symphony did not make the move. Rachmaninoff never heard that piece again in his entire life! His only experience of hearing it was that one distorted performance that never should have been played for anyone, especially its composer.

After Rachmaninoff’s death, his family reclaimed his home in Russia. It now serves as a museum of the composer’s great life and work. Among the treasures found there were the instrumental parts for his First Symphony, which were reconstructed and eventually performed — for only the second time — in 1945. Three years later, Eugene Ormandy, the conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, prepared the piece for its American premiere (after much diligent rehearsal because the piece required it!). That First Symphony now finds its way onto the docket for orchestras’ regular calendars all over the world.

More evident than in many symphonies, Rachmaninoff’s first has a single theme that weaves together its four movements. That theme is taken from a melody deeply embedded in Rachmaninoff’s soul, a part of the *Dies Irae* plainchant he heard hundreds of times while attending worship services. That theme also found its way into several other compositions but nowhere else as clearly stated as in the First Symphony.

Here’s the part of the story I love. Toward the end of his life, Rachmaninoff composed his last work, his Symphonic Dances. At the end of the first movement, he wove that *Dies Irae* theme in as a musical exclamation point. He believed his statement of



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the theme had been lost for all time, because his score for the First Symphony had been left behind in Russia. He assumed the government had destroyed it and that no one would ever hear the symphony again. But being unable to bear the loss of the theme that had captured his heart, he planted it at the end of the first movement of his last composition. While the statements of the theme in the First Symphony came out loudly and march-like, in his Symphonic Dances, he orchestrated it to flow slowly and luxuriously — almost as a way of wistfully saying good-bye to it. In his own hand, he penned the word *alleluia* at that point in the manuscript. It was his life's song, and he didn't want it silenced.

Am I stretching things too far to imagine that some of us have a life-song to sing or a life-message to proclaim? To be sure, all Christians are called to be a witness to the gospel, “to make the most of every opportunity” (Col. 4:5) to tell others about the Savior. But might there be specific subsets of that core message that have our individual names written on them? I believe some people have God's call upon their lives to return again and again to a particular message. I know scientists who can't help but talk about the Creator's design in the universe. I've met artists who attest to the physical beauty of that same creation. I've met Christians who regularly return to the topic of community as a reflection of the three-personal God who hard-wired us for connection.

C.S. Lewis couldn't stop talking about joy and how multiple disappointments no longer let him down. He realized they were only signposts, pointers “to something other and outer.” I love the sentence Lewis tacked on to the very end of his story of his conversion, *Surprised by Joy*. After saying we no longer need to stop and stare at those signposts that point us to God, he added, “Not that I don't often catch myself stopping to stare at roadside objects of even less importance.”¹¹

I catch myself “stopping to stare” at Rachmaninoff's music quite often. Have you found those roadside objects of even less

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importance that bring you joy — an unsatisfied desire, which is itself more desirable than any satisfaction? I hope you'll stop and stare. Or, perhaps, stop and listen. ■

NOTES

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (1955; repr., New York: Mariner, 2012), 18.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (1949; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2001), 39.

³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵ Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1997), 520.

⁶ Gregory E. Ganssle, *Our Deepest Desires: How the Christian Story Fulfills Human Aspirations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 76.

⁷ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 42.

⁸ Schonberg, *Lives*, 512.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 510.

¹⁰ Robert Walker, *Rachmaninoff: His Life and Times* (Neptune City, NJ: Paganini, 1981), 107.

¹¹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 238.



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I passed on from Wagner to everything else
I could get hold of about Norse mythology...
From these books again and again I received
the stab of Joy. I did not yet notice that it was,
very gradually, becoming rarer.

—*C.S. Lewis*



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1

Have you ever experienced something like the “Joy” that C. S. Lewis wrote about? Where or when? Can you put into words some of the emotions associated with that?

2

What can you learn from Rachmaninoff’s handling of disappointments, setbacks, or suffering?



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articles about evangelism and other ways our lives intertwine with God's creation. He and his wife Pam live in Annandale, VA and have three grown sons. Randy blogs at www.connectionpoints.us.

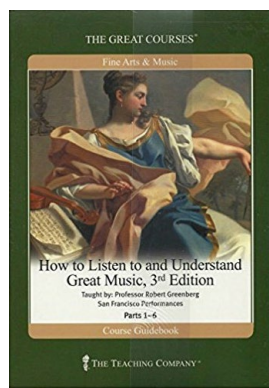


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How to Listen to and Understand Great Music, 3rd edition
(Robert Greenberg, The Great Courses – The Teaching Company, LLC.)

Professor Greenberg brings his brilliant insights about music along with his captivating style of lecturing, to help any listener, regardless of level of musical training, appreciate classical music in fun and engaging ways. Most

public libraries have these contributions to The Great Courses. Once you listen to this introductory series by Dr. Greenberg, you may want to listen to his other courses about specific composers or other aspects of great music.