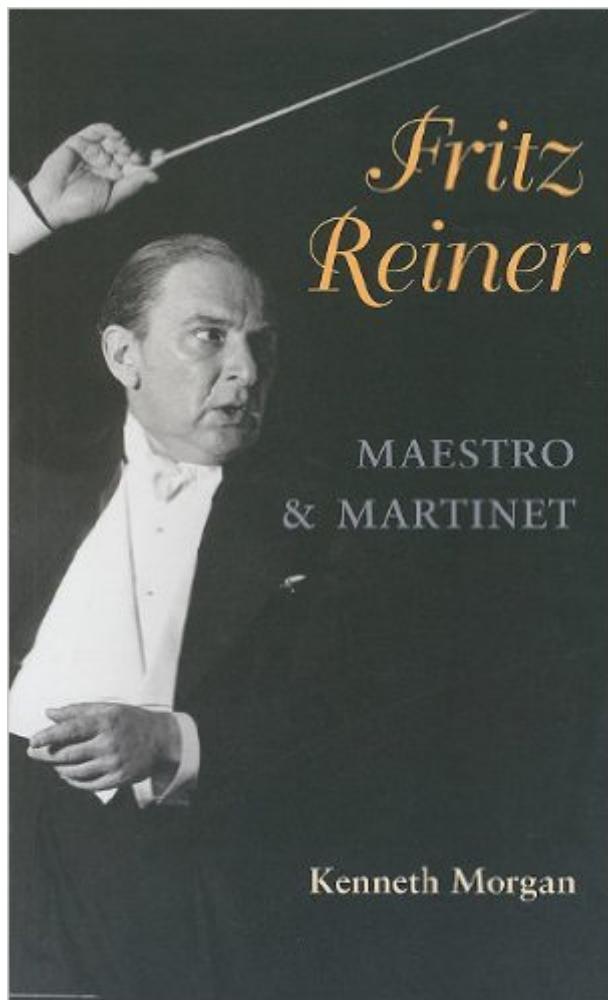


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Fritz Reiner, Maestro And Martinet (Music In American Life)



Synopsis

This award-winning book, now available in paperback, is the first solid appraisal of the legendary career of the eminent Hungarian-born conductor Fritz Reiner (1888-1963). Personally enigmatic and often described as difficult to work with, he was nevertheless renowned for the dynamic galvanization of the orchestras he led, a nearly unrivaled technical ability, and high professional standards. Reiner's influence in the United States began in the early 1920s and lasted until his death. Reiner was also deeply committed to serious music in American life, especially through the promotion of new scores. In *Fritz Reiner, Maestro and Martinet*, Kenneth Morgan paints a very real portrait of a man who was both his own worst enemy and one of the true titans of his profession.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Kenneth Morgan's book seems to be only the second full-length work devoted to the eminent conductor Fritz Reiner (1888-1963). It is thoroughly researched and Morgan has had the benefit of access to extensive archival material including Reiner's own papers. As an academic study it fills an important gap. However as a biography of Fritz Reiner it does not tell the whole story. Morgan, not a musician but a history professor, is really only interested in Reiner's career, achievements and legacy as a conductor, teacher and recording artist. Thus the usual biographical details are summarised in the first (20-page) chapter, which reads like a separate article, leaving Morgan free to spend the rest of the book on charting Reiner's career. Reiner was married three times but we learn little about his wives or his three children. Certainly readers are interested in Reiner's

friendships with major figures like Bartók and Richard Strauss, but they are also interested in what Reiner was like away from the concert hall and the opera house. Reiner was a private man but surely it is the job of a biographer to provide insights into his subject's personal life, or at least appropriate parts of it. I also found some features of Morgan's writing style unhelpful, particularly his penchant for setting out streams of information rather than listing it (or, better, moving it to an appendix). A half-page paragraph running through the repertoire which Reiner conducted in a season or a location quickly becomes indigestible. The writing style is occasionally maladroit, as with this example from page 157: "He did not find a place for all leading American composers on his programs, notably Charles Ives, Elliott Carter, and Roger Sessions". There are also some factual lapses, such as including Flotow's opera *Martha* among French repertoire (p.34) and stating that the original version of Mozart's G minor symphony (K.550) has oboes rather than clarinets (p.214 - there are oboe parts in the 'clarinet version' too). Two uses of the non-word 'minuscule' should have been picked up in proof reading. But for all my criticisms, this is an important and valuable book. Reiner was a significant figure in 20th century music, but he was not a charismatic man and he remains much less well known than he deserves. It is unlikely we will get another biography of similar quality in the foreseeable future so I certainly recommend buying and reading this one. Print and paper quality are good and there is a very interesting selection of photographs.

As Dr. Reiner conducted the first Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert I ever heard, I have held a fond place in my heart towards him. Therefore it is a treat to have this more analytical biography of the musical life of this great Hungarian-American conductor to accompany Philip Hart's 1994 "Fritz Reiner: A Biography", which was rather anecdotal in its approach. Morgan has also blessed us with his detailed information on the Reiner recordings, which for the standard repertoire, as well as for most of the orchestral works of Richard Strauss, and also some surprise offerings, my favorite being Alan Hovhaness' "Mysterious Mountain" Symphony No.2, has created one of the most important American archives of classical musical interpretation, ranking finally, I believe, in importance even above that of the recorded musical legacy of Leonard Bernstein. Hopefully still more of the older commercial recordings and the taped live performances of Reiner with various orchestras over the decades will be recovered, engineered, and released on CD (or whatever format the future holds for us) - Kenneth Morgan has gone the full measure to document those issued to date.

This book represents a missed opportunity. Mr. Morgan's very thorough research pays off handsomely in his account of Reiner's earlier career, which is undoubtedly the high point of the

book. Unfortunately, much of Morgan's treatment of Reiner's later years, from about his time in Pittsburgh to the end of his life, seems oddly dry, with numerous details that never coalesce into a convincing whole. The latter portion of the book discusses Reiner's musicianship but amounts to little more than an extended yet curiously superficial review of the conductor's discography. It's clear from the way Morgan writes that he has little to no experience either as a trained musician or as a music world insider, which Reiner's prior biographer Philip Hart was. This leads to a rather clunky, one might even say "out of tune," overall effect. The book as a whole also needs more attentive editing in order to make it better-written and -organized on its own terms. Many times a single topic will be discussed or touched on in multiple places, sentences and paragraphs cry out for repaired word-order or simple coherence, and--worst of all--Morgan often comes across as being more interested in pointing out flaws or mistakes in Philip Hart's biography than he is in simply doing a better job. This pettiness does nobody any favors. While Hart's account has its limitations, Morgan's is not any better, just different. The two taken as a whole provide the portrait that each separately tries to but cannot. All told, a mis-fire.

It is a pleasure to read Kenneth Morgan's excellent biography of Fritz Reiner, giving music lovers a wonderful account of his extraordinary life, far surpassing the pathetic, earlier work by Philip Hart. Although one could still hope for a biography even richer and more complete than this, Morgan at least gives us a well-balanced account of the great conductor's career, and writes with a style infinitely superior to that possessed by Hart. This book is a real pleasure to read, and I recommend it to everyone interested in Dr. Reiner's career.

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