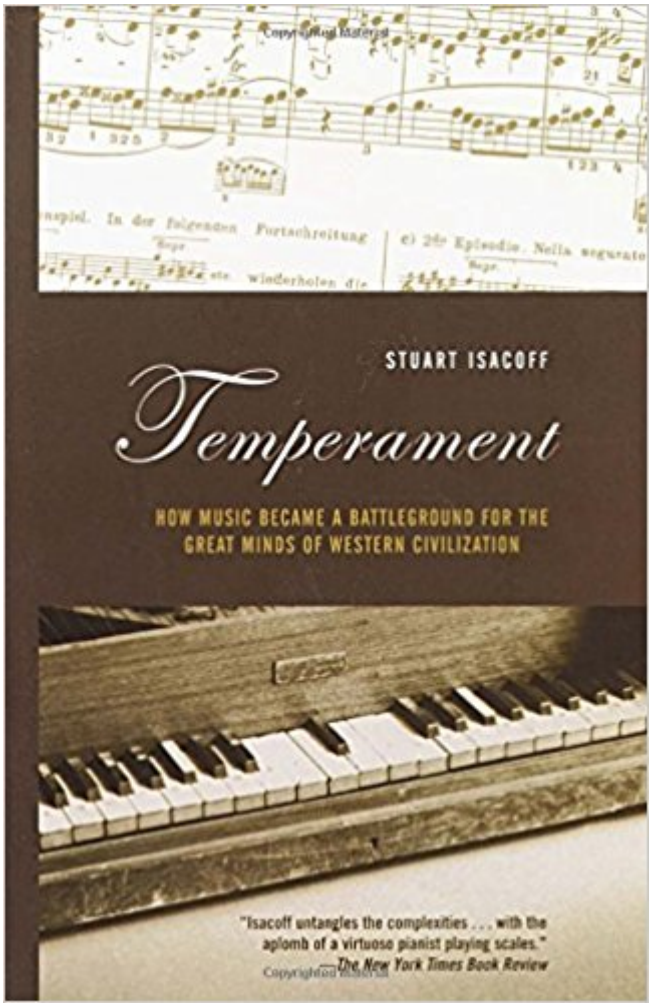
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Temperament: How Music Became A Battleground For The Great Minds Of Western Civilization



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Synopsis

Few music lovers realize that the arrangement of notes on todayÃ¢â ¬â„¢s pianos was once regarded as a crime against God and nature, or that such legendary thinkers as Pythagoras, Plato, da Vinci, Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, Newton and Rousseau played a role in the controversy. Indeed, from the time of the Ancient Greeks through the eras of Renaissance scientists and Enlightenment philosophers, the relationship between the notes of the musical scale was seen as a key to the very nature of the universe.In this engaging and accessible account, Stuart Isacoff leads us through the battles over that scale, placing them in the context of quarrels in the worlds of art, philosophy, religion, politics and science. The contentious adoption of the modern tuning system known as equal temperament called into question beliefs that had lasted nearly two milleniaÃ¢â ¬â œand also made possible the music of Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Debussy, and all who followed. Filled with original insights, fascinating anecdotes, and portraits of some of the greatest geniuses of all time, Temperament is that rare book that will delight the novice and expert alike.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Involving mathematics, philosophy, aesthetics, religion, politics, and physics, Stuart Isacoff ’s Temperament invokes the tone of a James Burke documentary. However, the focus is not on a modern invention, but rather a modern convention: that of tuning keyboards so that every key is equally in tune--and equally out of tune. With the existing literature tending to bog down in

mathematical theory or historical tuning methods, Isacoff bravely attempts to make this seemingly arcane topic interesting to the general reader. He distills the mathematics and music theory into their simplest essences, and draws apt analogies from the everyday. He also generously peppers the text with the quirks and escapades of its more flamboyant central characters; the relevance of the information is often tenuous at best, but Isacoff has obviously done his homework, and he can be forgiven some frivolity. Less forgivable is his neglect of "well-temperament." Namesake of Bach's masterful collection of 24 pieces (one each in all the major and minor keys), the well-tempered keyboard liberated composers from the howl of badly tuned keys in the way equal temperament did, while preserving the distinct quality of each key. It was a pragmatic and aesthetically rich solution that captivated composers and theorists for decades. Yet Isacoff reserves less than two pages for its description. (Perhaps he deliberately overlooked the topic since it doesn't fit well with his casting of equal temperament's opponents as rigid, dogmatic, and impractical.) Despite its flaws, Temperament is an accessible guide to a fascinating topic seldom discussed outside musical circles. Though the book may not invigorate hard-core theorists, the amateur musician, armchair scientist, history buff, or plain old curious can glean plenty from it. The advent of digital keyboards--some of which can be tuned to historical temperaments at the flip of a switch--makes this an ideal time for the topic to be rejuvenated. --Todd Gehman --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Isacoff, editor-in-chief of Piano Today magazine, tells the worthy tale of how musical temperament the familiar, seemingly fixed relationships between notes on an instrumental scale came to be taken for granted. After centuries of an accepted belief in the mathematical and divine governance of music, the 17th century saw the growth of a fierce debate over experimental new tuning methods. In the 18th century, the modern keyboard allowed for a new kind of tuning, known as equal temperament, whereby each pitch is equally distanced. New musical possibilities opened up, changing composition forever. Isacoff traces music theory contributions by da Vinci, Newton, Descartes, Kepler and Rameau. Unfortunately, he sometimes clumsily attempts to keep his audience's attention with irrelevant, if salacious, gossip e.g., philosopher Robert Hooke "recorded his orgasms in a diary," and King Louis XIV refused to eat with a fork. Meanwhile, he gives relatively short shrift to Kepler and Galileo. His ambitious historical canvas uses extensive secondary sources, but there are research gaps, such as his outdated portrait of Isaac Newton as a total "ascetic." Nevertheless, this harmonics drama will excite music geeks and music historians. (Nov. 24)Forecast: Knopf's prestige guarantees sales to major music collections, and Isacoff's national

media appearances (NPR, etc.) may mean good general sales.Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A great book, but understand what it is before you buy it. It addresses the HISTORY of temperament and tuning, not temperament itself. Specifically, it focuses on how an understanding of tuning and temperament followed the growth of intellectual development in western civilization. The author does not explain the details of historic temperaments and tuning. If your interest is about historic temperaments themselves, you will be disappointed.The authors writing style is good. He writes in a story telling fashion, has a sense of plot and a number of points of climax, which really helps to keep the readers interest. There is no prerequisite knowledge needed, so the general reader should be able to follow this book. However, there are a lot of characters and I got them confused sometimes. It helps to jot a few notes about each character as they are introduced.

It’s been about four years since I read this book, but I remember that it was an excellent read. I was extremely interested in the material, being ignorant of almost all of it before beginning the book, and I thought it was well-written to boot. Isacoff presented the information well-- providing diagrams and pictures where necessary for understanding certain things, such as the mathematical basis for fifths and octaves. He also included a great deal of history surrounding the main argument (the main point of which was whether to retain the perfect fifth or sacrifice it for the perfect octave) and so he therefore included aspects of religion, politics, and science which were contemporary at the time. The book is also replete with amusing historical anecdotes, making it quite an entertaining read, rather being dry material.For one specific example, Isacoff discusses how music was taught in earlier medieval times with no written music at all-- thus there was a strong need for a verbal scale to teach new choir members how to sing in harmony. To this purpose, a specific verse in Latin became a main teaching standard, with the next note in the scale at the beginning of each verse. Eventually they sung just the words as a shortened version, and then abbreviated those words. Those abbreviations are now "Do, Re, Mi..." --the first two letters of the original full verses in Latin (except for "Do", which I believe was "Ut", originally.)This kind of historical information, for me, was what made this book so fascinating to read, and opened my eyes to why things "are they way they are" in music today.Highly recommended.

Stuart Isacoff’sÃ Â Temperament: How Music Became a Battleground for the Great Minds of Western CivilizationÃ Â is a good general introduction to the vexing question of how to tune a piano

and other keyboard instruments. He does a good job of describing the mathematics behind the problem in a non-technical manner.However perhaps the best parts of the book are where he describes how the questions of musical tunings become part of the history of western civilization. People really cared about this and what it said about the relationship of man to god and how the universe worked. Euclid, Newton, Alchemy, Copernicus, Galileo and other heavyweights of intellectual history all participated in the struggle to devise the perfect tuning system.Entertaining and accessible. If you've wondered about the differences between just tuning, equal tuning, and well tuning, this book is for you.

Loved the history and felt as though the men through history were contemporaries, although they spanned the centuries with their questions on developing temperament. The book was a gold mine of interesting information on the links between science, music, art, and math (and the "string theory" of modern scientific thought). If I was still teaching school, it would be a core book for the development of my lessons in any of the subjects above, to bring alive my classes. I was excited to talk about it to my friends today.When I listen to music, I appreciate music that tells a story and paints a picture as when listening to "The Warsaw Concerto"[ASIN:B0000060DC Warsaw Concerto]] I also love music that is really special, as is the arrangement of La Mer, which accompanied the end of the movie in "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier,Spy".[ASIN:B0059XTTW8 Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy]] I am a lay person who sympathizes with the thoughts that Mr Isacoff expresses in,The Afterword, of this book. It is impossible to satisfy everyone. Is it really possible to reach what we think of as perfection, or is perfection different to each of us? Just as I suspect perception might be different to each of us.Madlyn Fafardauthor

This is a problematic book. It seems to me that any book entitled "Temperament" would be targeted to people who had some clue about what temperament is - or want to. Instead, the book just wanders aimlessly about, never really getting at the meat of the debate, and never really addressing the core issues. There are a few places where the author begins to explain what it really going on, briefly, but then launches off into another historical anecdote. That is what this book is, a series of historical anecdotes, loosely related to musical temperament. It is a shame, really. There are so few books on this subject - and it really is an important topic. It would probably be a three star book (it's okay) if I had no expectations, but it is a big disappointment.I am confused about who would love a book like this and give it five stars, since it is pretty dry for people with no interest in the nitty gritty musical details.

This book was very interesting, and it put the ideas of music, art, philosophy, history and science all together. I can’t believe all of this isn’t covered in required history classes! Super important to understand how music became what it is today.

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