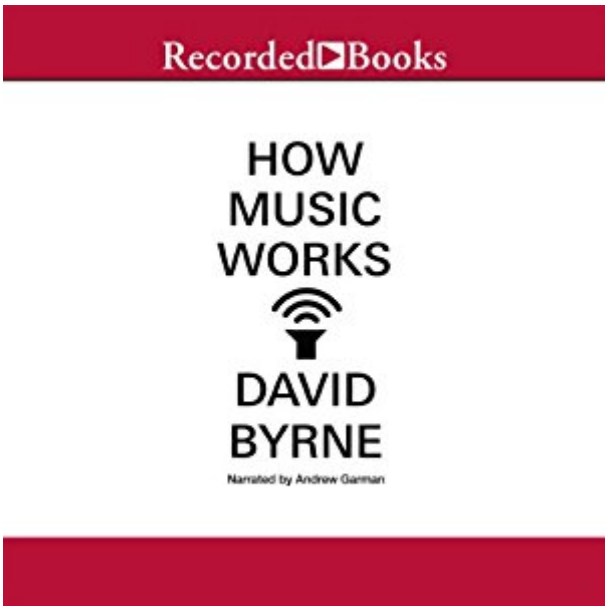
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How Music Works



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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

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 WorksThe 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. This allowed pop music to evolve from its early radio form.Byrne has a 2010 TED Talk on this idea: "How architecture helped music evolve."How Content WorksAs I devoured How Music Works I was constantly thinking how Byrne's ideas apply to other forms of content. I think the ideas are valid when thinking about the written word, video content, and the Web. I used the ideas in How Music Works to formulate ideas about content in general.David Byrne's How Music Works is amazing. Read it. And as you do if you're not in the music business, feel free to substitute "content" for "music" and see where the ideas lead you.

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 necesarily 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. The ideal of recordings was and remains an actual live performance, particularly among classical music fans; but the alternative worthy philosophy is the electronic creation of uniquely shaped sound itself, as with tape editing, synthesizers and digital programming, and electric instrument design. Oddly, computerized editing of recordings to achieve perfection in tempo,

pitch, and so forth proved imperfect to the ear and lacking in warmth and positive emotional value. Byrne does not elaborate in later chapters, but recordings (and its transmission over radio) changed society by uniting peoples, speeding musical development, and (for instance, in Brazil) of overturning governmental policy of approved musical forms. I do not share Bryne's lament about the calculus-like wave sectioning of digital CDs over analogue LPs because of psychoacoutics, an aging ear, and the fact that speakers are yet analogue in their cone movement and shaping. Of interest is Byrne's belief that we are now so awash in music, indeed private music on personal .mp3 players and smart phones, that live performances are becoming more important, as that increasingly rare commodity, silence. I enjoyed Bryne's relating, in brief James Burke fashion, the connection of the Chinese mouth organ, the shen, to digital computers.Chapter 5 is again more personal with Bryne's experiences in a recording studio and the art, engineering, and strategy of creating an album. Entire books have been written and documentary films have focused on this subject, but the use of computers on mixing boards is a new phenomenon.The following chapter discusses his collaborations. He had already mentioned his albums with Brian Eno, but now Byrne moves beyond Talking Heads by developing music with Caetano Veloso and choreographer Twyla Tharp and creating with Norman Cook [Fatboy Slim] a theatrical piece on the Philippine's Imelda Marcos.Chapter 7 is all about the business and financial side of the music industry. There are pie charts. He explains the very recent changes in industry, when musicians can edit and mix their music on their laptop computers and distribute it via digital download and cloud companies and promote themselves with YouTube videos and have kickstarter campaigns to get public underwriters. The giant brick & mortar record shops (Tower, Borders, Virgin Megastore) are no more and the power of music labels are severely diminished. This chapter should be read by anyone considering how to create and promote their own music; he describes various business models.The next chapter furthers practical advice on the choice of venues, song material, the courage to be different, responsibility to band members and fellow musicians, and so on. It is a peculiar chapter for such a book.Chapter 9 pulls back to a shotgun approach critical of musical elitism and lauding the amateur musician. In the days before mass-marketed recordings, there was a piano in the parlor. Even in the 1960s, every kid (yours truly included) had an acoustic guitar, singing folk songs. Until very recently, courses in music appreciation were dedicated only to classical music and rarely jazz. Governmental and corporate funding erected costly symphony halls and museums. Byrne seems to ignore the reality that these measures were to preserve and encourage endangered music styles and that the masses are doing fine in supporting pop and avant-garde culture, filling stadiums and arenas and small local music joints. Symphony halls are

not restricted to dead European composers; I have heard contemporary American, Japanese, Argentinian, Iranian, and other world composers. Still, the point is taken when middle and high schools do not offer music and art classes and other nations support amateur musicians, music clubs, and youth bands and orchestras. Music and art should not be passive art forms.The final chapter covers music as a human, biological, and indeed metaphysical essence. This historical and anthropological section sketches prehistorical, ancient, and early modern musical instruments, musical sciences, and philosophies. Everything vibrates, from atoms to planets. He does not include it, but string theory of matter involves vibrating strands of energy. Bryne briefly mentions the differing scales of music across the planet, the relationship of language and speech to music, neurological imprinting of music and its performance, music in religious rituals [Taliban and similar zealots aside], the natural ambient music appreciated by John Cage and the composed ambient music of Satie, Eno, and Feldman, and various other aspects of music. Bryne can only touch upon these large subjects as he closes the book. While it may lead to further reading, I find the section too scattered to be truly effective.This grand book, with its padded cover, offers a little of everything to everyone. Fans of Bryne, as leader of the Talking Heads or as musicologist, will surely find much to appreciate here. I do think, however, that he could have prepared two smaller books, one dedicated to the practice of musicmaking today and one to music's historical and anthropological aspects.

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