

# ALFRED BRENDEL

pianist

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Music Review | Alfred Brendel

### Unearthing Spontaneity in Viennese Sonatas

By **ALLAN KOZINN**

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At 75, and with a devoted following, the pianist Alfred Brendel can do as he likes. These days, what he appears to like is focusing narrowly on Viennese music from the decades around 1800, which is to say, works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. Having played Beethoven a great deal hereabout, Mr. Brendel devoted his Carnegie Hall recital on Monday evening to the other three.

As a listener who has always admired Mr. Brendel's interpretations of these composers, but also of others — Liszt, for one — I have mixed feelings about this constriction of repertory. Still, Mr. Brendel offers compensations. As often as he has been heard playing Haydn, Mozart and Schubert, his ideas about them continue to evolve.

This time, his Haydn — the Sonatas in D (Hob. XVI:42) and C (Hob. XVI:50) — sounded to be drawn in more finely calibrated hues and dynamics than in the past. In the opening Andante con espressione of the D major Sonata, there was even an expansive rubato, the kind that creates the impression that the music is being imagined on the spot. The first two movements of the C major shared that quality, with the Adagio sounding unusually impassioned. Passion carried the finale as well, but didn't overwhelm it: Mr. Brendel's movement (and work) endings are matter-of-fact rather than grandly stated.

In Schubert's D major Sonata (D. 894), intellectual probing and visceral power battled to the finish, however inconclusively. Along with Mr. Brendel's alternately ruminative and fiery Haydn, it was a reminder that this music is improvisation at heart, refined and written down but not meant to be frozen.

His performances made other points, too. In past visits, Mr. Brendel has illuminated the degree to which early Beethoven embraced Haydn's sensibilities, even as he struggled to give his rebellious streak free rein. But this time the rhythmically supple phrasing and finely graded dynamics in Mr. Brendel's Haydn suggested that this was where the revolution was really kindled, and that Haydn's influence persisted well beyond Beethoven's early works. Parts of the D major Sonata, which Haydn wrote in 1784, when Beethoven was going on 14, had the restlessness and fire that became hallmarks of Beethoven's music a quarter century later.

Mr. Brendel offered other surprising connections as well. His account of Mozart's Rondo in A minor (K. 511), with its melancholy, chromatic melody line etched over an undulating accompaniment, sounded oddly like Chopin. There may be something to the argument that Chopin was a Classicist at heart — or that Mozart was a proto-Romantic.

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