

ALFRED BRENDEL

PIANIST

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Brendel at home in Vienna

By Michael Cameron *Published March 6, 2007*

Alfred Brendel's repertoire has never been overly broad, with odd forays into pre-classical and post-Romantic music coming in fits and starts, and now trimmed nearly entirely from his touring schedule.

Vienna is his rock, and while a crop of young pianists has provided equally distinguished accounts of Haydn and Schubert, Brendel remains a benchmark in this core of keyboard music. Last year's appearance by the 75-year-old pianist was a fine affair, but there were random fissures in his technique that caused one to speculate on an impending twilight to this incomparable career.

Sunday's Orchestra Hall recital found him spry and engaged, giving admirers hope that his incandescent recitals will continue as an annual Chicago tradition into the near future.

The bookends of the program were two C minor Sonatas of Haydn (H. XVI: 20) and Mozart (K. 457). For many these works from the two Viennese masters represent a foretaste of Beethoven's looming salvos. The pianist didn't stint with his sonority during sterner moments nor in his vivid tracing of opposing themes, but he was more occupied with the kinship of ideas than their surface antipathy.

In both sonatas, he extruded the essence of the music's core without presumptuous historical projection. For Mozart, it was the human voice (especially in the sublime second movement) that kept Brendel grounded.

Haydn's impishness leavened the pianist's concoction before Sturm und Drang could drag it through the mud.

Beethoven's Sonata in A-flat Major, Opus 110 provided the most impressive balancing act of the evening. The entire work was suffused with grandeur, even as he kept the first movement's filigree from smothering delicate tunes, and as he whispered the poetic utterances of the third with porcelain delicacy.

The finale (the sonata's heart) unfolded with an unerring sense of pace and formal cohesion. Many pianists use the occasion to justify a ferocious final climax, but Brendel built his fugal edifice with exacting care, leading organically to final cadences that retained the work's allegiance to Austria's noble countryside.

There are other ways to serve up this timeless music. For two delightful hours Sunday, Brendel's seemed the only way.

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