

# ALFRED BRENDEL

## PIANIST

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### **Alfred Brendel recital seriously sublime**

At 76, the pianist makes standard repertory anything but.

By **Mark Swed, Times Staff Writer**, March 15, 2007

ALFRED BRENDEL inspires reverence the same way Albert Einstein did in his late years. The pianist is well known as a charming raconteur and has even made a bit of a name for himself of late as a whimsical poet of surrealistic light verse. His intellectual street cred comes from publishing articles on music in the New York Review of Books. He does not hesitate to take political stands or weigh in on cultural issues. He is, among other things, a film buff.

He is an intellectual and an intellectual's pianist. But he is not an intellectual pianist. And the difference is significant.

**When Brendel sits down at the Steinway, as he did Tuesday night when he gave a recital in Walt Disney Concert Hall, all the world drops away.** Einstein said he practiced physics with his whole body. To understand what connects matter in the universe was for him to *feel* the connections, to *be* the connections. Brendel plays Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert and Mozart with his fingers. And what he does with his fingers is tie bows — celestial bows, perhaps, but bows nonetheless. He makes connecting the dots seem a higher, priestly calling.

Though Brendel is playful with words, there is little sense of play in the music he performs. The mood in Disney was thus a tad uptight Tuesday. You don't mess with Brendel. He casts a delicate spell, and a cellphone ring or careless throat clearing can break it. He's been known to walk offstage when the audience isn't quietly attentive.

But this was a hall filled with devotees. Although Brendel, who turned 76 in January, does not appear to be a pianist diminished by age, he has implied that retirement may be in the offing and makes no guarantees that he will be back our way again. Anyone who coughed midMozart risked a thousand stares.

I wouldn't take Brendel's threat of retirement too seriously. His performance was, if anything, one of wondrous obstinacy. The repertory was as standard as could be. Classical period sonatas in C minor by Haydn and Mozart were its bookends. In between came Beethoven's otherworldly penultimate sonata, Opus 110, and two agreeable Schubert impromptus.

Brendel is touring North America with this same program all month, broken up only by performances of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 17 in Boston and Chicago. Keeping such repertory fresh — and these are pieces the pianist has played his whole life — is a challenge. But if the kinds of flowers are, every day, the same, Brendel does appear to at least pluck fresh ones each morning.

And I'm not sure it really matters what Brendel plays, since he plays it all the same anyway. Essentially, he makes everything sound like Schubert at his most divinely lyrical.

Brendel's tone is his calling card, and in the Disney acoustic, he got the piano to sound more beautiful than ever. He gives to each note the texture of an aural soft rubber ball. You almost feel as though you could give these puffs of air a nice, satisfying squeeze. But the balls are also elastic, each tied to the next. They float. After a while, you stop caring where they came from and are just glad they exist.

The Schubert impromptus (Nos. 1 and 3; No. 2 was the sole encore) were the slightest music but the most magical-sounding. Brendel's Beethoven had a luxuriant sense of flow. He has never been a technical wizard, and the fugue at the end, like the scherzo-like second movement, was earthbound. But the first movement and the slow movement were not.

Brendel can love Mozart to death, and he puts away his sense of humor when he plays Haydn. But there were, in these major Haydn and Mozart sonatas, many exquisite moments, especially in the slow movements, which were transporting.

A slightly cultish attitude among Brendel's admirers worries skeptics. I'm not convinced that his performances are entirely authentic. I'd put him at 80% real deal and 20% playing the part of an out-of-this-world egghead (some said the same about Einstein). But when those transporting, Schubertian moments come in Brendel's performances — and they always do, no matter what he plays — they feel just great. For the moment, nothing else matters.

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