

ALFRED BRENDEL

PIANO

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A Pianist Bids Farewell With Schubertian Grace

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The audience at [Carnegie Hall](#) on Wednesday night, which spilled over into stage seats, would have been happy to let the ovations for [Alfred Brendel](#) go on and on. But after a substantive program devoted to the Classical masters he has championed and three encores, Mr. Brendel crossed his arms over his chest in gratitude and signaled that that was it. The time had come. With one more bow, he left the stage and ended the New York chapter of his towering 60-year career.

This acclaimed Austrian pianist, who has lived in London since the early 1970s, will retire from the concert stage at the end of the year. Wednesday's recital and a performance last Sunday of [Mozart's](#) Concerto No. 24 with the Met Orchestra and [James Levine](#), also at Carnegie Hall, were his last New York appearances.

At 77, Mr. Brendel looks spry and energetic. He certainly played through demanding pieces by Haydn, Mozart, [Beethoven](#) and Schubert with what seemed undiminished focus, utter integrity and a penchant for surprise. His account of Schubert's mystical late Sonata in B flat was particularly transfixing: spacious, searching and calmly eloquent. Even in its scherzo, for all the humor, delicacy and grace of his playing, Mr. Brendel conveyed the somber undertow, with sudden turns in the middle section to ominous harmonies and jumpy bass lines.

But Mr. Brendel has been grappling with a mild form of arthritis and finds the concert circuit tiring. He is a man of wide-ranging interests, including painting and writing (both essays and humorous German prose poems). And he is a devoted teacher.

Because Mr. Brendel has concentrated on the Classical masters, he has been viewed as a self-appointed guardian of that heritage. Yet he never made this claim for himself. Instead he has been immersed in a personal and lifelong examination of music he finds continually rewarding and elusive. During his day he played an enormous amount of repertory, including unlikely virtuosic touchstones like Prokofiev's Fifth Piano Concerto and Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." But his landmark early recordings of the complete works of Beethoven on the Vox label brought him to attention and identified him for the public.

Even in his chosen repertory, his playing over the years has sometimes come across as dutiful and dry. In his effort to serve these great scores he can seem pedantic to some. At his best, he disappears into the music. He was at his best here: relaxed, sensitive and spontaneous.

He began with an eerily calm performance of Haydn's Variations in F minor, pensive music that slips into rhapsodic bursts of chromatic harmony and spiraling passagework. Then he offered a fascinating, rather cagey account of Mozart's Sonata in F, from 1788, a work at once deceptively simple and strangely elaborate. In Beethoven's Sonata No. 13 in E flat — which, like its Opus 27 companion, the "Moonlight," is labeled "quasi una fantasia" — Mr. Brendel captured the music's fantastical elements in his vibrant yet lucidly structured performance. If some contrapuntal runs got a little tangled up during the bumptious finale, it mattered little, for all the brio and rustic character of the playing.

After his first encore, a ruminative performance of the slow movement from Bach's "Italian Concerto," Mr. Brendel gave a breezy account of Liszt's "Au Lac de Wallenstadt," music lightly tinged with Spanish rhythms. Mr. Brendel was once a major exponent of Liszt. Why has he not played more such pieces in recent years? With his final encore, a lyrically supple and unsentimental performance of Schubert's familiar Impromptu in G flat, came the answer. "This is what I do," the message seemed to be. "This is who I am."

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