

ALFRED BRENDEL

PIANO

THE BOSTON GLOBE

Pianist Brendel bids a serenely Brendellian farewell

By Jeremy Eichler February 25, 2008

Alfred Brendel once wrote that "the range of what a great composer can express seems mysteriously incompatible with his limitations as a visible, and tangible, human being. I cannot imagine anything more thrilling than to explore that range."

That has essentially been his self-assigned mission for some six decades of piano performance, an astonishing career that is now winding down. Brendel is the kind of serious-minded artist who would find it crass or vulgar to trumpet a string of concerts as a "grand farewell tour" but the word is out that he is retiring from performance at the end of this year. And so a sense of moment infused the atmosphere of Symphony Hall on Friday night, when he performed a Celebrity Series recital that was his final Boston appearance.

Alfred Brendel (pictured last week at Carnegie Hall) chose to play music by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert at his final appearance in Boston. (Jennifer Taylor for the New York Times)

True to form, he chose a quintessentially Brendellian program, consisting of music by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, four composers whose expressive range he has obsessively mapped over the years with the rigor of a scientist and, at times, the sensitivity of a poet. When both aspects of his personality are fully realized, as they were on Friday night, his recitals can amount to a kind of cartographic tour de force, where lucid renderings of the music's topography are layered with urbane and often witty insights into a landscape's deeper properties, its hidden reservoirs, its affinities to other domains that lie within.

In this spirit, Friday's quartet of works seemed carefully pre-selected for their marriage of formal rigor with expressive flights of freedom. Brendel began with a poised and fluid account of Haydn's Variations in F Minor followed by an incisive reading of Mozart's mercurial Sonata in F Major (K. 533/K. 494). The satisfaction came from grasping both the structural relationships that Brendel renders transparent and also the marvelous details he conveys via sly asides, chords broken just so, or gestures stylishly enfolded into their surrounding context. His playing overall was not note-perfect, yet it still came across as edifying without being pedantic.

Indeed, on a good night, Brendel has always had a gift for exposing the false opposition between sensual pleasure and intellectual engagement. In his hands on Friday, the two came off as parties to a secret pact, aptly demonstrated in Beethoven's Sonata Op. 27, no. 1, with its illuminating title "Quasi una fantasia." Brendel laid out its distinct movements as a seamless journey full of formal links and allusions glancing forward and back.

The program culminated in Schubert's monumental B-flat Sonata (D. 960), the composer's own *de facto* farewell to the piano. Brendel devoted the entire second half to this luminous work, conferring on the opening movements a gentle swaying grace and subtlety of touch, with the *Andante Sostenuto* distinguished by its richly tolling bass and glowing accents. The final two movements were studies in virtuosity sublimated to other goals. A moving serenity lay beneath the flurry of notes.

The encores - among them the *Andante* from Bach's "Italian Concerto" and Liszt's "Au Lac de Wallenstadt" - also had a certain interstitial tenderness, making it clear that Brendel was in no particular hurry to leave the stage. Nor did this devoted audience want to let him go.



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