

ALFRED BRENDEL

PIANO

THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Alfred Brendel dominates Orchestra Hall at final Chicago concert

Concert was final in Chicago as his career nears end

By John von Rhein | Tribune critic

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Over his horn-rimmed glasses, Alfred Brendel cast a somewhat amused glance at a packed Orchestra Hall on Sunday, as if to say, "OK, we all know why we're here. Let's get on with it." With that, the celebrated Austrian pianist sat down at the Steinway to play his final Chicago concert. At the end of the year, he will retire from the concert stage, closing the book on a distinguished 60-year career.

And what a concert it was. I've attended many of the nearly three dozen recitals the pianist has given in the city since his downtown debut in 1966 and can honestly say I've never heard him play better. His program -- a lexicon of signature Brendeliana -- traced a fascinating evolution from the Viennese classical masters Haydn and Mozart to Beethoven and finally to Schubert's transcendent Sonata in B-flat. Everything bore the wisdom and mellow insights of a lifetime of study and re-examination, but also something more: the magisterial calm of a great musician, still lively of mind and body at 77, who knows he no longer has to prove anything to anybody. You had less the sense of an old pro revisiting old haunts than a questing intelligence letting the composers tell him in which directions to take their music.

Name a major pianist who brings greater stylistic discernment to his chosen repertory. You can't. Haydn's Variations in F Minor was given a gravely beautiful reading, alive to all that is boldly original in the piece. Mozart's K.533 Sonata had one marveling at the breadth of Brendel's touch and articulations, the limpid quality of his voicings and his scrupulous attention to detail. His Beethoven Sonata No. 13 in E-flat (Opus 27, No. 1) was about dynamic and textural contrasts writ large. The pianist hung onto the serene chords of the opening section as if he were leading a congregation in prayer, before tearing into the ensuing figuration. He capped off his immensely characterful performance with a neatly executed flourish that brought him the first of several standing ovations.

Brendel ended, appropriately enough, with Schubert's valedictory work for the keyboard. The B-flat Major Sonata is a masterpiece he has visited numerous times over the years but perhaps never with the broadly flowing eloquence, the unforced grandeur, the inwardness and concentration one heard Sunday.

This is how one wants to remember Brendel, bidding a gentle adieu to an adoring public while still at the peak of his game. The sold-out audience refused to allow him to leave the stage until he had favored them with encores. He offered two: The slow movement of Bach's "Italian Concerto" and Liszt's "Au Lac de Wallenstadt," from Book 1 of "Annees de Pelerinage." Now, could this ageless pianist be persuaded to undertake an entire series of "post-farewell" tours?

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111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019
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