

ALFRED BRENDEL

PIANO

THE PLAIN DEALER

Composer arrives amidst a goodbye

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Plain Dealer Music Critic

The Cleveland Orchestra isn't much into thematic programming. But if it were, this week's concerts at Severance Hall might be labeled "Introductions and Valedictions."

The orchestra meets and greets Austrian composer Johannes Maria Staud, bids adieu to renowned pianist Alfred Brendel and performs Brahms' last symphony, the Fourth, under music director Franz Welser-Möst.

Staud, the orchestra's fifth Daniel R. Lewis Young Composer Fellow, is in town to hear the ensemble play his "Apeiron," which is subtitled Music for Large Orchestra, in its U.S. premiere. The work's title translates "endless, unlimited mass," as expounded by the sixth-century B.C. thinker Anaximander.

In place of a specific narrative, Staud probes the infinite possibilities that can be gleaned from a crowd of instruments. The music goes to extremes, from wisps to chaotic barrages, with an army of percussion instruments (including ratchets) providing rainbows of color.

Staud deftly creates clamor from stillness and punctuates with fluttering harps, muted and eruptive brass and sliding strings. The piece doesn't sound markedly different from many other contemporary scores of its ilk. Perhaps Staud will provide something distinctive when his first commission for the orchestra arrives early next year.

Brendel, a distinguished visitor to Severance Hall since 1971, is wrapping up a 60-year career with farewell concerts throughout 2008. His swan song in Cleveland is Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3, whose composer is one of the Central European masters to whom the pianist long has devoted himself.

Brendel has never favored surface brilliance, and his performance Thursday summarized his probing nature. He was a bit tentative in the opening movement, but his way of exploring inner drama and detail made the performance a Beethovenian cliffhanger.

By the time he shaped the slow movement's sublime lines, Brendel was the essence of lyrical elegance, with keen attention to embroidered figures. In the finale, he applied lightness to dark phrases and buoyancy where Beethoven shifts from minor to major. Brendel deserves our gratitude for sharing his artistry with Cleveland for 37 years.

After three weeks of celestial concerts led by Pierre Boulez and Ton Koopman, the orchestra often sounded diffuse under Welser-Möst, whose reductive bent undermined the extraordinary melding of logic and emotion in Brahms' Fourth.

The performance was so propulsive at times that the mad rush caused notes to run together in a breathless muddle. Welser-Möst achieved suppleness in the slow movement - but elsewhere, he didn't allow the orchestra to exult in Brahms' warm or fierce character.

Grandeur, however, broke through the clouds in the finale's passacaglia, especially Joshua Smith's expressive flute solo and the trombones' majestic eloquence.

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