

# ALFRED BRENDEL

## PIANO

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## Pianist Brendel offers complex, subtle reading of Beethoven in final tour

By Rob Hubbard

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Brendel knows Beethoven.

One would be hard pressed to name a pianist with a deeper and more lasting relationship with the works of Ludwig van Beethoven than Alfred Brendel. But, soon, audiences will no longer have the pleasure and privilege of experiencing Brendel's mastery on the concert stage: He's retiring from performing at the end of this year.

Lest you think this 77-year-old Austrian mentor to many is limping off into retirement, his skills diminished by age, this week's Minnesota Orchestra concerts should dispel any such notion. On Thursday night, Brendel was brilliant in his intrepid interpretation of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, a spirited reading that brimmed with insight.

It helped to have as collaborators Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra. They recently recorded a symphony that premiered at the same Vienna concert as this concerto in 1803, and their subtle shadings and wide-ranging dynamics were an ideal fit for Brendel's approach.

Concertgoers arrived with a strong sense of the occasion, offering extended applause that prompted an extra bow before Brendel played a note. The anticipation proved warranted as the pianist established an intriguing tone early on. The gravitas of the opening fell away to expose a composer of conflicting moods. There were times in the first movement when Brendel's right hand seemed to represent Beethoven looking backward toward Mozart while his left thundered like the troubled titan he became.

Every quiet section of the Largo seemed like a little slice of a sonata. And the concluding Rondo was playful but appropriately anxious, building to a memorable climax. At the concerto's end, Brendel got a long and loud standing ovation, the audience calling him back for five bows.

The orchestra would receive high marks for this concert had it stopped there. But it enhanced its reputation for passion and versatility by closing with a reading of Shostakovich's Sixth Symphony that ran the gamut of moods. It raised adrenaline levels to their highest point since ... well, since Brendel left the stage.

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