

ALFRED BRENDEL

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Alfred Brendel Speaks

by Charles T. Downey | Wednesday, November 18, 2009

This article is an Ionarts exclusive.

Austrian pianist Alfred Brendel may have retired from performing last year, but he continues to share his thoughts about music. Already known during his performing years as an intelligent commentator on music, Brendel has been touring the United States this month, presenting a lecture version of his essay *On Character in Music*, focusing mostly on the sonatas of Beethoven, with the support of Washington Performing Arts Society. After a brief delay to allow the capacity crowd to filter through the security check at the door, Brendel appeared on the dais of the Austrian Embassy on Monday night, turning periodically from his text, read with the aid of the embassy's not always reliable amplification system, to the Bösendorfer to play some brilliantly chosen musical examples. The excerpts were from a wide range of Beethoven's sonatas, bookended by selections from the work of a composer much closer to Beethoven than some listeners might think, Arnold Schoenberg.

Several complete cycles of the Beethoven piano sonatas are being performed in Washington at the moment, from Till Fellner and François-Frédéric Guy (a marathon nine-day performance, concluding this Sunday), as well as local versions by Yuliya Gorenman (ongoing at American University) and Anne Koscielny (ongoing at Howard Community College), leading Anne Midgette to ask the question, [What do the Beethoven sonatas mean?](#) in the *Washington Post*. So, it was a helpful way to organize one's thoughts about the Beethoven sonatas to hear Brendel, who has performed the complete cycle himself, quite famously, speak about how he views the contrasts of the sonatas. He spoke of various attempts -- by historians, aesthetic philosophers, and musicians -- to analyze how Beethoven used the different aspects of music (more than just tempo) to tell a story, some more plausible than others. How can one reliably understand what Beethoven's various gestures might mean, especially in so many cases when the composer left no indication of his intentions?

As Brendel sees it, the clues are mostly right there in the [scores](#) themselves. He referred to some sources, mostly writings by or attributed to Beethoven, but he also went so far as to dismiss some extra-musical information often treated as reliable, most famously Anton Schindler's recollection that sonata no. 17 (op. 31, no. 2) was best understood in reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Tovey and many other historians and later writers led the way in this dismissal of Schindler's interpretations). Brendel spoke of many of the characters he identified in his own interpretation of the sonatas: dancing, singing, speaking, as well as four that he identified with the four elements of fire, water, air, and earth.

If there were any musician whose intuition about Beethoven I would probably trust, it would be Alfred Brendel, and it is a shame that the event conflicted with François-Frédéric Guy's ongoing performance of the Beethoven sonata cycle at La Maison Française, because Brendel's lecture was an excellent sort of road map to the monumental journey Guy is on at the moment. Ultimately though, as with all abstract instrumental music, the search for this kind of meaning in the absence of words or more concrete information is highly subjective and speculative. One is not obliged to hear the sonatas in the same way as Alfred Brendel, but one could certainly do a lot worse.

Colbert Artists Management

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019
www.colbertartists.com ~ 212-757-0782