

ALFRED BRENDEL

LECTURES and READINGS

OC REGISTER

What makes music beautiful? Alfred Brendel knows

October 27th, 2009

posted by Timothy Mangan, music critic

Pianist Alfred Brendel, now officially retired, returned to the stage last night to give a lecture/demonstration on “Musical Character(s) in Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas.” *The Orange County Register*, Oct. 27, 2009.

The celebrated pianist Alfred Brendel was in town Monday night, at the Irvine Barclay Theatre to be exact, playing Beethoven piano sonatas. Or parts of them. Brendel, who retired from the concert stage in December 2008, after 60 years as a performer, was actually giving the opening lecture for the fifth season of the Philharmonic Society of Orange County’s “What Makes Music Beautiful?” lecture series, using the keyboard to illustrate his points.

Photo: Miguel Vasconcellos, OC Register

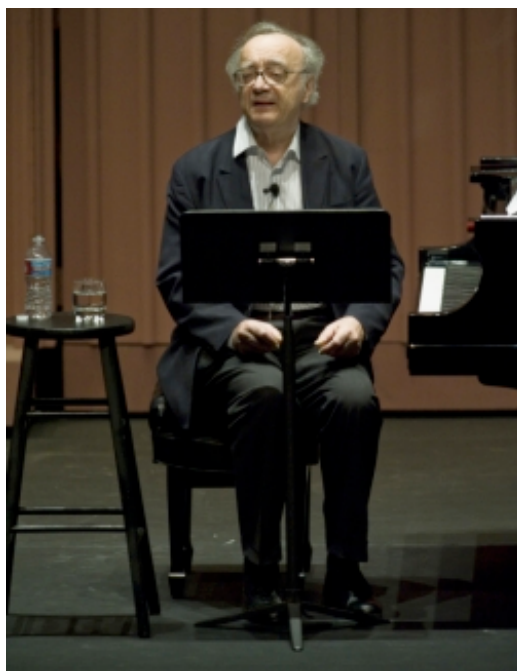
His talk was entitled “On Character in Music.”

Specifically, it was a reading of his essay “Musical Character(s) in Beethoven Piano Sonatas” filled out with live musical examples. The bespectacled, frizzy-haired Austrian pianist, 78, wearing a dark suit and no tie, sat at a piano bench facing a music stand, from which he read his learned and quirky article, published in 2000, in a lilting Germanic accent.

Brendel has long been a gifted musical essayist. Largely a self-taught musician, he is also an original and independent thinker. His topic this evening was controversial – more so than most of those in attendance, listening to his reasoned and reasonable delivery, probably realized. But talking about music is a difficult business.

The claim that “each Beethoven sonata” – he wrote 32 for piano – “has its own character,” as Brendel asserted at the start, is fraught with danger. The idea that we can assign concrete meanings, or at least assign such concepts as “character” and “atmosphere,” seems, perhaps, rather amateurish – at least until you listen to Brendel’s take. Beethoven’s reported statement that the first four notes of his Fifth Symphony were “Fate knocking at the door,” it turns out, may be worth taking seriously.

Brendel drew on 18th and 19th century writings on aesthetics, as well as those of



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Arnold Schoenberg, to make his case. The extramusical meaning that Beethoven and other composers often assigned to their pieces, Brendel said, should be expressed, even personified, in the interpreter's performance. His first example came from Schoenberg's Piano Concerto. The first section was marked by the composer with the descriptive phrase "Life was so easy," and for Brendel that suggests a way of playing it, which he did, in a less convoluted, less dreamy manner. It flowed.

With Beethoven, the character of a sonata is always found in the first few measures, after which everything else is based upon it, a drama acted out. The composer Anton Reicha, a contemporary of Beethoven, called the sections of a sonata, "exposition," "intrigue" and "denouement," or as Brendel translated it, "exposition," "the plot thickens," and "resolution."

If Brendel's analysis sounds complicated, his intentions are otherwise, even if profound. By assigning Beethoven's sonatas characters, descriptive phrases, moods and other labels, he turns analysis, often so mathematical and structural, into a kind of poetry, available to the everyman. And though based on solid scholarship, he has fun with it, uses his imagination.

"The external movements of the 'Waldstein' Sonata seem to me like landscapes that unfold before the musical eye," he said. "Perceiving this, I would like to let my fantasy run free and imagine for myself how, in the first movement, the horizon lies low with a great deal of sky above it, whereas in the rondo, we find ourselves high in the mountains, listening to a mountaineer's song, clouded in a beautiful mist." He then played part of that rondo, capturing a kind of sparkling fog, high in the hills, and taking us there.

In other words, an objective dispatch of the notes on the page, a "just the facts, Ma'am" approach to music making, so widespread these days, is a fundamental mistake, according to Brendel. "Interpreters should never assume that understanding the structure of a work might automatically give them insight into the work's character, atmosphere and spiritual state." Sometimes it can be as simple as taking a Beethoven "con fuoco" (with fire) marking literally, and bringing out the pictorial flame in a sonata melody. At other times it is more complicated, looking into biography as well as structural analysis, rhythm and harmony.

But the results are the same. The Beethoven sonatas are tales and plays in musical guise, their meanings and philosophies beyond mere science. Hearing Brendel talk about and play them again, even if in small slices, was a reminder of why he was such a great, and beloved, musician for so many years. He made them vivid for us.

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