

ALFRED BRENDEL

Pianist

The Boston Globe

Levine, Brendel bring their best

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | March 4, 2005

James Levine conducted his first chamber-orchestra program with the Boston Symphony Orchestra last night, a responsibility his predecessor Seiji Ozawa preferred to shift to others. Programs of Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert do not show off conductors the way programs of Tchaikovsky, Mahler, or Richard Strauss do; instead they swiftly expose limitations of technique, style, and musicianship.

Last night's concert proved a great success for Levine, who was thoroughly trained in the elements of classical style by his mentor George Szell and others, including himself. And it renewed a favorite partnership. Levine and pianist Alfred Brendel have been working together, off and on, for a quarter-century or more; their mutual esteem and the pleasure they take in each other's musical company is visible and audible.

Brendel, now 74, was fighting muscular problems the last time he appeared with the orchestra back in 2001, and had to cancel part of a Beethoven concerto cycle. In Mozart's D-Minor Concerto, K. 466 last night, however, he was in very good shape, playing with zest and high musical intelligence. He cannot create the illusion of spontaneity, but he's witty and playful, which is nearly as good. He offered his own cadenzas, which were musically interesting, knowledgeable in matters of counterpoint, and effective in keyboard layout. There was a deft reminiscence of the first movement undertow in the cadenza to the third.

Brendel's tonal palette may be limited and even rather bleak, but his mastery of timing and rhythm, and his projection of shifting and contrasting moods, overcomes this limitation. And of course his lanky, awkward stage personality is an endearing one. Levine, no mean Mozart pianist himself, worked hand-in-glove with his soloist, and so did the orchestra. A standing ovation resulted in a rare encore: a Rondo from a Haydn Sonata that ranged so freely across the spectrum of tonalities that it sounded almost contemporary. Levine beamed from a chair near the stage door; Brendel returned the favor by sitting in the audience for the second half of the concert.

Haydn's "Oxford" Symphony (No. 92) and Schubert's "Tragic" (No. 4) were full of interesting parallels and contrasts and made a striking frame for the Mozart concerto. The Schubert was conducted and played with bristling intensity that gave way in the finale to some smiles. Levine was attentive to the inner workings of the music, to balance and internal contrast, the crisscross of harmony and dissonance. In the Haydn, he savored every ingenuity of the composer's inexhaustible invention, and Levine is not one to miss a punch line.

In a style in which the BSO has not invariably excelled in the past, the playing was first-rate; when these musicians are asked to do the right thing, they deliver it.

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

Tel: 212.757.0782 • Fax: 212.541.5179

E: nycolbert@colbertartists.com

Web: <http://www.colbertartists.com>