

BOSTON GLOBE

MUSIC REVIEW

Pianist provides drama, surprise, and feeling

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff, 4/27/2004

Alfred Brendel's audience has learned to expect the unexpected. For many, the pianist is the true successor to Rudolf Serkin as today's leading senior-statesman interpreter of the great Viennese composers, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. At 73, his smile has become as benevolently beatific as Serkin's, but with an air of mischief that is all his own.

Brendel has always been unpredictable: His mind never stops working and leading him in new directions. But for a decade or more, he has suffered from various muscular problems. How much of his expanding vision his fingers can communicate has become a variable. For this reason Brendel has given up playing some works that used to be at the core of his repertoire; like all great artists, he is careful never to let you hear anything he can't do.

Mozart was Brendel's choice for the first half of Sunday afternoon's program. He opened with the lesser known of the composer's two Fantasias in C-Minor, which may be a written-out improvisation. Brendel played it well, perhaps too well, because it sounded meticulously prepared in every detail -- he is not a pianist to leave a clash of harmony unitalicized. But this meant that the piece never sounded improvisational, or even spontaneous.

Two sonatas followed, in B-flat (K. 281) and in E-flat (K. 282). These were observant and elegant, and profited from the pianist's sense of humor.

He was never prissy or small scale, but one felt that the blueprints meant more to him than ornamental detail. There wasn't much flesh and blood, and one thought of those Mexican folk-art depictions of dancing at village festivities in which, dressed in wedding clothes, the bride and groom are skeletons.

Schubert's Three Piano Pieces (D. 946) brought out the best of Brendel -- the drama, the undertow, the delight in surprise, and even a lilting, singing line. To these qualities, the pianist added profound feeling when he came to the theme and variations in the finale of Beethoven's Opus 109. Here (as in the opening movement) he drew glistening, liquid sounds from the instrument, anticipating the sound world of Debussy and Ravel, which Brendel has rarely explored in public.

The audience responded with a standing ovation, and there was a single encore, Schubert's Impromptu in G-flat, which floated out of the piano and bore us aloft into a realm of bliss made more meaningful, more perfect, by the memory of sorrow.

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