

BOSTON HERALD

Brendel's esoteric selections please all

By Keith Powers

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It seemed like a nostalgic return to a bygone era yesterday afternoon, when the Celebrity Series brought pianist Alfred Brendel back to Symphony Hall.

What a classic combination: A sun-splashed spring day, our great hall sold to capacity, and the master himself onstage to perform standard repertory from Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven.

Even though Brendel stayed with traditional composers, he began with esoterica: the Mozart C minor fantasy, unfinished in his life and completed later by Maximilian Stadler, who worked out many of Mozart's sketches after his death. Full of drama and bravura passages, Stadler's work seems more Mozart than Mozart himself - that is, too much passion, not enough style. In Brendel's hands the work seemed to seek out the missing composer, attempting to shape a reasonable interpretation that would have pleased Mozart.

Two sonatas followed, full of structural invention and quintessentially mature Mozartean charm. Brendel's playing hasn't flagged a bit. He may not venture the Hammerklavier anymore, but when he puts his fingers on the keys, pure music follows.

After intermission, he offered the "Drei Klavierstücke" ("Three Piano Exercises") of Schubert. These pieces were never published, and the last exists only in a partial sketch. Scholars assume that Schubert meant to finish these off as a larger set of impromptus. As it is, they offer only a glimpse of what might have been, but a fascinating one at that.

And that is the essence of Schubert - like the Romantic poets of his generation who also died young, the best of what we get only teases us about what we've missed.

The first two exercises, fully wrought, send quasi-Beethoven signals at every turn, mixing forms and abruptly shifting tempos and melodies. The third, a powerful message cut short after four short minutes, leaves listeners ready for more, which will not come.

The Beethoven opus 109 sonata, which closed the program, fits no mold. All the late Beethoven works are large scale, genre-defying. The opus 109 is brief, cataclysmic, terse. The Schubert and Beethoven beautifully mirrored each other, both suggestive representations of great genius in Schubert's case, only partially realized, in Beethoven's case, yet to be fully understood. More Schubert as an encore finished this generously conceived recital.

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