

Brendel's technique and spirit lift Schubert, Mozart, Beethoven

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It may have been a grand piano on stage at Symphony Center that was coaxed, coddled and caressed by that grand poet Alfred Brendel, but his recital of works by three masters was in fact a celebration of the human voice.

A prolific writer on musical issues, he can expound on Mozartean opera with the authority of a musicologist or dedicated opera buff, and this knowledge paid off Sunday in two early Mozart sonatas and the Fantasy in C Minor, K. 396.

The Fantasy is not top-drawer Mozart--much of it was not in fact composed by him. This didn't undermine Brendel's seriousness of purpose, and his exquisite digital and temporal control breathed life into the problematic work.

The pianist chose two early sonatas of Mozart, K. 281, and K. 282, works that abound with melodic riches. The pianist brought his lithe, sensitive touch to these bright works, with a range of dynamics and rubato subtle enough to suggest shapeliness without exaggeration.

Brendel's tonal palette expanded considerably in the second half, gaining an almost orchestral heft with Schubert's late "Three Piano Pieces," D. 946. The pianist's control of balance shifts between hands was uncanny, and his mastery of pulse was sure but never stiff. Cheer and darkness alternate throughout these pieces, and the pianist was particularly moving when mining a vein of wistful Viennese nostalgia.

It could not have been a coincidence that Brendel chose one of Beethoven's more lyrical sonatas to keep company with arguably the two greatest masters of cantabile.

This late sonata, Op.110 in E Major, came off as amiably radical. Lyrical melody was lovingly sculpted one moment, and in the next the listener was drawn to the formal eccentricities, harmonic instability and unsettling asymmetries.

The piano seemed to disappear from the stage at the outset of the Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo. From a delicate blossom of a tender melody emerged a kaleidoscopic barrage of variations. Every strand of Beethoven's thunderous fugal variation emerged with clarity.

The recital was not without a few tense moments. Coughing fits, applause between movements of the Schubert works, and an inexplicable whistling sound elicited stares of exasperation from Brendel. Yet his concentration never flagged. Indeed, it seems nothing can disturb the delicate balance of discovery and inevitability that Brendel brings to the keyboard.

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