

ALFRED BRENDEL

Pianist

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Experienced Brendel reaches emotional center

BY ROB HUBBARD

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While classical audiences continue to be seduced by youth and flamboyance, it's reassuring that there's plenty of interest in what wisdom can be gleaned from a seasoned elder like Alfred Brendel. A 74-year-old pianist with a half-century performing career behind him, Brendel is regarded as one of the most visceral of pianists, always seeking the emotional center of every work he performs.

And how welcome it was to see Brendel selling out St. Paul's Ordway Center for the closing concert of the Schubert Club's International Artist Series Tuesday night. What the appreciative crowd received was a stirring solo recital in which Brendel acted as an experienced guide on a journey into works from the classical and romantic eras.

Offering his fifth Schubert Club recital — but first in 16 years — Brendel served as an ideal example of what insights can be found by those who dispense with the cerebral and tap directly into their hearts for inspiration.

While the pianist's emotional intelligence has clearly grown over the years, he's had a reputation for being arrestingly intuitive ever since he emerged as a largely self-taught soloist in 1950's Austria.

The first nugget of wisdom offered by Brendel was how different something can look when viewed from a variety of perspectives, his text for this lesson being a set of nine variations Mozart wrote upon a minuet by J.P. Duport.

Brendel took its simple theme and folded it into some surprising shapes, each colored by a different mood.

But for taking a piece to emotional extremes, the evening's highlight was Robert Schumann's "Kreisleriana," eight moody movements that range from manic to melancholy. It proved the ideal work for a tour de force by Brendel, who hypnotized with his sorrowful slow movements before erupting into frenzied furies.

Similarly engrossing was Schubert's "Moments musicaux," although it's a work of far more somber and reflective tone. But, as on the Schumann, Brendel proved a font of emotional insight.

Then the pianist tossed off these dark hues on an effervescent C-major Haydn sonata. Smiling joyfully as he played, Brendel seemed to welcome the catharsis, as if his soul was emerging from the difficult but rewarding dark night of Schumann and Schubert into the bright sunshine of Haydn.

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