

# Two Honors for Brendel: A Premiere and a Farewell

By JOHN ROCKWELL

LONDON, Aug. 19 — Seek and ye shall find connections between any two randomly selected events, that is. The Tuesday and Wednesday evening Proms concerts at the Royal Albert Hall here offered two German conductors with ties to Hamburg: Christoph von Dohnanyi, whose brother was mayor of that city and who this fall takes over the NDR Symphony, the top-of-the-line radio orchestra there, and Ingo Metzmacher, music director of the Hamburg Opera and conductor of the opera orchestra's symphonic arm, the Hamburg Philharmonic (posts Mr. Dohnanyi once held).

Each concert featured a premiere by a well-known composer: the world premiere of Harrison Birtwistle's Three Brendel Settings and the British premiere of Hans Werner Henze's Symphony No. 10. And each concert had a piano soloist long noted for sober, deeply musical work in the German repertory, Alfred Brendel and Richard Goode.

The Tuesday concert was a beauty. Mr. Dohnanyi, who is also the principal conductor of London's Philharmonia Orchestra, has brought that band to a level of calm assurance in the core repertory that recalls its sound during the years of its founder, Walter Legge, the record producer and husband of the soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf.

The opening Brahms Symphony No. 3 glowed with warmth, with no loss of propulsive energy. And Mr. Dohnanyi's account of the orchestral part of Beethoven's "Emperor" Piano Concerto, with a reduced complement of players, was supportive and assured.

As one might gather from the title of Mr. Birtwistle's piece, Mr. Brendel played a dual role in this concert. In his later years he has emerged as a recognized poet. And, to be sure, he is still a most formidable pianist.

The Philharmonia had commissioned a number of composers, among them Thomas Adès and Luciano Berio, to contribute Brendel settings for his 70th birthday in 2001. Mr. Birtwistle's first Brendel song received its premiere then, and now he has made a three-song set, with two new commissions from the BBC.

Mr. Birtwistle's music can be forbiddingly tortured in its density and complexity, but not here. The cycle lasts only 10 minutes, and is nicely contrasted. The opening song, dark and brooding, is bookended by the last one. In between comes the witty "A Sheep Addressed Me as Follows," in which a sheep sings its perception of a human. As the program annotator Jonathan Cross wittily put it, Mr. Birtwistle is something of a specialist in articulate ruminants, having included a chorus of singing sheep in his opera "Yan Tan Tethera." The cycle is full of evocative orchestral effects and was well sung (in English; Mr. Brendel contributes to his translations) by William Dazeley, a baritone.

After the concert Mr. Brendel was honored for his Proms farewell. (He has said that he would no longer do performances that are broadcast live on the radio, and all Proms concerts fit that description.)

Good news: his account of the "Emperor" was sober yet full of personality, and still deftly played. As usual he recalled Rudolf Serkin as a magisterial exponent of the German style. That his "Emperor" also recalled Edwin Fischer, one of his teachers, is meant as high praise. If anything, his encore — the Schubert "Klavierstück" in E-flat minor, surging and songful — was even better.

Mr. Goode, in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, played well too, although his intimate style is not ideally suited for the cavernous Albert Hall. He was plausibly accompanied by Mr. Metzmacher and his orchestra, which was a relief after the worst Strauss "Don Juan" I have ever heard — unidiomatic, slack, sloppy. Nicholas Kenyon, the BBC Proms director, said that the Germans had arrived less than two hours before the concert, and hadn't had time to take the measure of the hall — a hall whose measurements definitely require some taking.

Mr. Metzmacher is a new-music specialist, so one has to assume his account of the Henze 10th was more authoritative; certainly the playing sounded surer. Mr. Metzmacher had led the British premiere of the Henze Ninth and the world premiere of the Henze 10th; Simon Rattle, scheduled to conduct here the next night, did the world premiere of the 10th, but in Lucerne, not Britain.

Like Mr. Birtwistle's music, Mr. Henze's can sound clotted, but here the 10th seemed light and open and almost airy. Mr. Rattle had asked for something crystalline and clear and English, and despite the huge, percussion-heavy orchestra, he got just that.

In his program notes Calum MacDonald suggested parallels to Shakespeare's "Tempest." The outer movements, "A Storm and a Dream," are grand and symphonic but deeply affecting, even if the tension flagged a bit toward the end. The middle movements have undeniable charm: a singing slow Hymn for strings alone, and a rollicking Dance for brass and percussion (plus piano and double basses).

Wednesday's concert was the only one of the five I will have seen this week that was not sold out. But there was still a respectable crowd in this huge hall, and Mr. Metzmacher, with Mr. Henze's help, managed to redeem himself after the intermission.