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## If Brendel Were a Bagel, He Would Be an Everything

By JAMES BARRON

**T**he question was, What kind of bagel would the author of "Cursing Bagels," a new book of poems that casts Beethoven as a baker throwing a fresh batch of guess what into the oven, like? Cinnamon raisin? Sun-dried tomato? Pumpernickel? Plain?

None, it turned out. The author, the pianist Alfred Brendel, cursed them all.

"I've never eaten bagels myself," he said. "It's not my regular fare."

So it went, when a reporter took a dozen bagels to an interview with Mr. Brendel, 73, who is more famous for his off-putting intensity in concert halls and recording studios than his laugh-out-loud-funny poems. The bagels went untouched by Mr. Brendel's bandaged fingers. (He said the bandages protect fingernails that tend to break.)

Alfred Brendel? Poetry? It sounds almost as unusual as Alfred Brendel appearing with his son, Adrian, 28, a cellist. But Alfred Brendel is doing that these days, too. The elder Mr. Brendel, who is famous for his single-mindedness, is doing a kind of public multitasking. He is nearing the end of a nationwide tour that has sandwiched poetry readings between concert dates, like his recital at Carnegie Hall tonight at 8. And his concert dates have been sandwiched between appearances with his son. They will perform together twice next week, first at the 92nd Street Y on Tuesday, then at the Irving S. Gilmore International Keyboard Festival in Kalamazoo, Mich.

So a conversation with Alfred Brendel during a stopover in New York (and a later telephone interview with Adrian Brendel, in Los Angeles on the way to a recital with his father) veered from the silliness of poetry to the seriousness of their father-son pairings.

Alfred Brendel is also famous for his eccentricity: walking out of a restaurant because he could not stand the background music or, as he did before a concert with the baritone Matthias Goerne in Los Angeles last month, insisting that the air-conditioning be shut off because he could not stand being chilly.

Or not eating the bagels.

But like any good multitasker, he compartmentalizes. He channels his pranksterish side — he once tied a yo-yo onto a statue of Mozart — into the poems, not the piano playing.

"You read some of my poems, you'd think I'm just fooling around," he said. "I like fooling around, but not when I play." Which is what his fans have come to understand. Mr. Brendel is known for carefully focused, carefully thought out displays of struggle and stamina, like his Beethoven sonata cycle at Carnegie Hall in the 1980's. By contrast, he makes the other two elements of his multitasking — the poetry readings and the performances with his son — sound almost accidental.

"I was not out to breed musicians at all," Mr. Brendel said. The way he described a recital when Adrian was 10 and playing a movement of a Beethoven cello sonata sounded distant and doubtful that there could be another musician in the family, or at least one who was any good: "I went to listen and said, 'Well, this is definitely a musician, there is no doubt.'"

But they did not begin playing together in public until Adrian was in his 20's. "He very much wished that this would happen," Alfred Brendel said, referring to his son, "and my wife wished that it would happen." So they mapped out a two-year concert schedule, sandwiching joint appearances among their other dates.

"After the end of this year I shall leave him on his own," Alfred Brendel said. "I'm not that young, and I have to look after myself, and he's an adult and should be able to look after himself."

On to the son, who has performed and recorded chamber music in Europe and also founded a summer festival in England, for the obvious question: What is it like, being Alfred Brendel's son? "I've been asked it so many times, and I have no idea of the answer," he said. "It can be a struggle because people jump to conclusions very quickly. When people see my name on the same playbill as my father, they assume, 'He's only there because he's bad and he's his son.' I can't really do anything about that. It used to bother me. It doesn't so much any more."

"This is the only thing we'll ever do as a duo," Adrian Brendel said. "It's something I've dreamed of doing since I was very young. He can't set aside years and years to play chamber music. I'll probably look back on this in 10 years' time and realize fully what an experience it's been. But it has its pros and cons."

More pros than cons, Adrian Brendel said. "My father gives me quite a lot of free rein," he said. "The ironic factor of this is, given how much Beethoven he's played in his life, this is his first encounter playing these pieces. I've been playing them for quite a few years with various different people. Also, I've been playing an awful lot of chamber music for the last 10 years, in contrast to my father, who's very much a soloist, very much in that mentality, a loner as it were."

Back to the father. There are those of course who say that making a name for oneself as an intellectual may not be the smartest course for a performer. Mr. Brendel, like the pianist Charles Rosen, has written a number of books of essays on music. But poetry? He stumbled into that by accident, he said, during a long and sleepless flight to Japan.

His first poem was about a pianist who developed an extra index finger: not for coping with tricky passages, but for jabbing in the air when the other two were busy. Finally a pianist could give a coughing concertgoer a hard time during a concert.

One bit of whimsy led to another. Soon Mr. Brendel, who writes in his native German, had enough poems for his first volume, "One Finger Too Many" (Random House, 1999). "Cursing Bagels," published by Faber & Faber, is made up of translations (by Mr. Brendel with the musicologist Richard Stokes) of poems first published in Germany last year.

"Poetry has in a way changed my life," he said. "There may have been an inner need that I did not recognize, which is doing something which is completely my own. When I play pieces of music, I play works that other people have composed. I try to do justice to their compositions. And when I write essays, I want to relate something on a certain subject or a certain theme. I know what I want to write about."

Poetry turned out to be different. "The poems tell me what to write," he said, "and I take it down, go on working on them. Sometimes they are finished quickly, sometimes it takes 15 versions, sometimes I throw them away." And sometimes, coming from someone who had a cult following as a pianist in his 20's but did not become a star until later, they sound autobiographical:

Once upon a time

I was no wunderkind

Due to my obstinacy

Though

I became one later

Other poems in "Cursing Bagels" describe pianos hanging in a fireplace like blackened hams: "smoked pianos sound nobler." And then there is the title poem itself, with its image of Beethoven as a baker in the afterlife, where, Mr. Brendel writes, "we can make up for all we missed in life." So there is Beethoven, hurling dough into the oven, as Mr. Brendel compares Beethoven's sonata movements to pretzels and alludes to the musicologists Donald Francis Tovey and Heinrich Schenker.

In German, that poem was titled "Schimpfende Kipferl" — cursing kipferl, a crescent-shaped German cake. Was something lost in translation?

"You don't have kipferl here," Mr. Brendel said, "so I had to use something else."