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Proms: a farewell to celebrate

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David Fanning reviews Alfred Brendel and the Philharmonia at the Albert Hall

If Alfred Brendel's decision not to make any more live broadcasts for the BBC spares him some frayed nerve-endings and preserves him for many more non-broadcast performances, it will be cause for more delight than sorrow.

Certainly his last appearance at the Proms – with that most uplifting of concertos, Beethoven's Emperor – felt more like a celebration than a wake.

In many ways, it was an anti-imperial interpretation. From his down-to-earth opening flourishes, through his plain-speaking delivery of the slow movement and lively appreciation of the finale's joviality, Brendel refused to prink and preen, or to grandstand in any way. But, because he always knows precisely where he is in a structure – and why – the impression was of a serene nobility, a higher simplicity.

On yet another sultry evening, the orchestra's tuning was soon at odds with the piano's, but otherwise the Philharmonia accompanied attentively. A standing ovation was the only proper response to Brendel's extraordinary Proms career, spanning 36 years.

There may be those who would like to see him use any freed-up hours to develop his gift for poetry of the verbal kind. Sir Harrison Birtwistle is not the first composer to latch on to Brendel's characteristically quirky eloquence. His Three Brendel Settings, splendidly sung by William Dazeley, are two parts angst to one part whimsy. Frankly onomatopoeic at times (not just in the central poem, addressed to the poet by a sheep), the music complements the words effectively enough, without betraying their essential naivety.

Presiding over events was Christoph von Dohnányi, another musician who knows the mainstream repertoire from the inside. His account of Brahms's Third Symphony was nicely balanced between affection and flow, with little to offer sensation-hungry ears, but much to reward the connoisseur.

Taking the first movement with a minimum of fuss, keeping the second to a serenade-like scale and phrasing the third with immense subtlety paid off in the long term when darker issues loomed in the finale. So, too, did the decision to double the woodwind in order to clinch the climactic moments.