

ALFRED BRENDEL

Pianist

Alfred Brendel's Transcendental Sonatas

By Tim Page

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Alfred Brendel's Tuesday night piano recital at the Kennedy Center was one of the great events of the season.

Brendel, now 75, has always been an artist of the highest seriousness -- it is hard to imagine him playing a thoughtless or unreflected phrase -- but rarely have I found him so purely charming as he was in the concluding piece on the program, Haydn's Piano Sonata in C (Hob. XVI:50).

The pianist Artur Schnabel generally refused to play Haydn's music because he didn't think it "metaphysical" enough. I've never believed that was true -- the first wrenching minutes of "The Creation" ought to shut down that argument pretty quickly -- but it is true that Haydn, like Rossini and very few other great composers, was endowed with a sturdy, witty worldliness that he valued at least as much as he did storming the heavens.

Brendel not only played the sonata, he played *with* it -- from the teasing pointillist melody that starts it off, to the quiet, unexpected closing chords, which are so remarkably modest (after such a major work) they inspired a wash of delighted laughter from the capacity audience.

Still, I suspect it is Brendel's performance of Schubert's Sonata in G (D. 894) that will linger longest in the memory. Nobody will ever doubt the metaphysics of this music; it

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seems a serene and elevated meditation on otherworldly matters from a master, blissfully above the battle, who knows much more than we do. Brendel spun out the sonata calmly, as though he had all night, with a tone that took on an eerie luster in softer passages. It is a long piece, lasting the better part of an hour (Brendel took all the repeats), and yet when it is over, if you can surrender to it, very little time seems to have elapsed -- one looks back at the previous 45 minutes as though they had been a dream. In the 19th century, only Wagner at his best was able to manage this sort of suspended animation.

The program also contained two late works by Mozart -- the Fantasia in C Minor (K. 475), played with just the right mixture of proclamation and rambling fancy, and the achingly sad Rondo in A Minor (K. 511), as acute and unsentimental a musical depiction of physical frailty as the repertory affords.

Haydn's Sonata in D (Hob. XVI:42) began the evening -- the opening variation movement, especially, was wonderfully nuanced and all but encyclopedic in its examination of a single melody from multiple vantage points.

The concert was presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society, which has been bringing Brendel to town since 1973. If it had done nothing else in the past four decades (and this is its 40th-anniversary season), the society would deserve our gratitude for that.

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