



Alfred Brendel On Music: Collected Essays

Alfred Brendel

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“Piano playing, be it ever so faultless, must not be considered sufficient.” Addressed to the Mozart performer, this is Brendel’s piece of advice in his first essay. Given that, one could say the famous pianist proceeds in the subsequent forty-one essays to not talk about playing the piano at all. Instead, he writes about “latent musical possibilities” and “sources of bliss.” These essays are not technical references for the pianist, nor are they style guides for particular pieces. They are philosophical adventures that attempt to charter the profound subtleties of playing music.

On Schubert, for example: “Is there any other composer who so often tests the limits of intensity? Schubert’s music disintegrates into silence as well as violence. Feverish nightmares lead to the brink of madness.” On Beethoven’s piano sonata opus 111: “What [semplice e cantabile] imply is not ingenuousness or simple-minded sweetness, but simplicity as a result of complexity—distilled experience.”

Brendel writes of music as a matter of life and death, and that is a wonderful world to be able to step into. He is careful in his articulation and appreciates how difficult it is to write about music—a form of expression that started when written or spoken words no longer sufficed. There are years of thought and study behind these essays. They cover topics of which he obviously feels passionately and his language does not waiver or equivocate.

Brendel writes about Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert extensively. He devotes ten essays to Liszt and four to Busoni. Other topics include advice on setting a recital program and thoughts on humor in classical music. He also makes a case for live recordings in one essay and in another commiserates about the frustrating temperament of pianos. At the end of the book are transcriptions of three interviews with Brendel.

This book is definitely intended for the initiated pianist, though other instrumentalists will benefit from thoughts on musicality. While most of these essays have been previously published, Brendel has revised, rewritten or corrected many of them for this collection.

Nava Hall