

# Alfred Brendel, world-famous classical pianist, is dead at 94

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Alfred Brendel, the internationally renowned pianist whose name is associated with profound interpretations of the works of Beethoven, Schubert and other classical masters, died in London on June 17 at the age of 94.

Brendel recorded all 32 Beethoven piano sonatas on three separate occasions. He excelled especially in Beethoven's last three piano sonatas, composed between 1820 and 1822, as well as the last three by Schubert, produced in the months before the younger composer's death in 1828, in that decade of musical masterpieces. He was also well-regarded for his interpretations of Beethoven's five piano concertos.

Brendel was considered an outstanding representative of what is often called the "Vienna school" of piano playing, closely associated with the composer and pedagogue Carl Czerny (1791-1857), a younger contemporary of Beethoven. Czerny, whose name is known to millions of young piano students through his books of piano exercises, had many well-known pupils, among them the Hungarian composer and pianist Franz Liszt.

The Vienna school is more classical, faithful to the intentions of the composer, and traces its roots to the classical and early Romantic periods. It is sometimes contrasted with the "Russian school," considered more emotional and freer in its technique, and commonly connected to the heart of 19th century Romanticism, and to such famous names as Vladimir Horowitz, Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter.

Brendel himself claimed he had no school. As one obituary quoted him, "I do not believe in schools of piano playing, and I have no technical regimen. Only the particular piece you happen to be playing can tell you about its technical problems." He objected to a frequent description, including from some critics of his style, that he was too "cerebral." He saw the

intellectual and emotional interpretations as inseparable sides of his playing. "It bothers me when people call me an intellectual as a musician," he said. "For me, music begins and ends with feeling, but the mind has an important function as a filter."

A student of his described him, in an appreciation published in the German press, as "a passionate musician with a volcanic intensity...he knew his musical temperament very well and sought to cultivate and tame it," producing "piano playing that was finely and precisely structured on the one hand, but at the same time lively and spontaneous."

Though most well-known for his interpretations of Beethoven and Schubert, Brendel also performed and recorded the sonatas of Haydn and Mozart. He was especially concerned with reviving interest in Liszt as a serious composer, and was also devoted to the work of Ferruccio Busoni, the Italian pianist and composer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who was considered the musical heir of Liszt. Brendel was keenly aware of the work of more contemporary composers, but chose not to perform much 20th century work, with the exception of Arnold Schoenberg's Piano Concerto.

Brendel had thousands of admirers both in Europe and the US. In the piano concerto repertory, he worked closely with both the Vienna Philharmonic and the Berlin Philharmonic, under such conductors as Claudio Abbado, Simon Rattle and Daniel Barenboim. In the United States, he appeared 81 times at New York City's Carnegie Hall, and worked with American conductors such as Leonard Bernstein and James Levine.

The pianist's collaborators included famous musicians like Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Their recording of Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*

[*Winter Journey*, 1828] is a noteworthy example.

A late bloomer as a musician, Brendel was largely self-taught. He was not a child prodigy. “I had loving parents,” he once explained, “but I had to find things out for myself.” Some master classes he attended at the age of 16 were essentially his last lessons, but he studied continuously for his entire career, listening to his own recordings as well as the recordings of other pianists to deepen his understanding and find new meaning in the classics of the past.

Brendel was born in northern Moravia, in what is now the Czech Republic. He studied some years in Zagreb, in the former Yugoslavia, and spent most of his youth and young adulthood in Graz, the capital of the Styrian province of Austria. It was in Graz that he made his performing debut, at the age of 17. Brendel was nearly 30 when he first attracted international attention, and 40 when he put down roots in London. His career blossomed especially in the 1970s and ‘80s.

His early experiences are probably reflected in the broad and international outlook for which Brendel was known. In the words of Daniel Barenboim, he had a towering intellect and was a “wonderful humanist.” Brendel loved the rich musical life of London. While he was especially enthusiastic about the BBC Proms, the eight-week season of classical concerts held at the city’s Royal Albert Hall, he also remarked that he did not attend the “Last Night at the Proms,” pointing to what he called its chauvinistic tone.

Brendel was particularly known for his wide intellectual interests. In his youth he had been a painter, with some of his work being exhibited in Graz. He also worked at poetry, and was known especially for seven or eight volumes of essays on music. The pianist’s wit, which came across in some of the lectures he gave on his musical life as well as such topics as Beethoven’s late style, contrasted with Brendel’s serious demeanor in performance.

Brendel had quite a few pupils who went on to illustrious careers. Imogen Cooper and Paul Lewis are two of the better known. Brendel, who was married twice, had four children, including Doris Brendel, a British rock and pop singer, and Adrian Brendel, a highly regarded cellist.

Even though he did not begin performing in public until 1948, and announced his retirement from public performance in 2008, when he was 77 years old,

Brendel’s performing career still spanned 60 years. Moreover, the 2008 retirement did not put an end to his musical career. He continued to write and lecture for the rest of his life.



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