

Alfred Brendel is the preeminent thinking pianist, a loner to whom fame came through the power of imaginative integrity, an artist who has achieved -- at his best -- a divinatory rapport with piano literature from Bach to Schoenberg. Yet by his account, "I did not come from a musical or intellectual family....I have not been a child prodigy. I do not have a photographic memory; neither do I play faster than other people. I am not a good sight-reader." Born in Wiesenberg, Moravia -- in the latter-day Czech Republic -- in 1931, he received piano lessons from ages 6 to 16, as the family moved from Zagreb to Graz, and studied composition privately while supporting himself in a variety of odd jobs. Brendel was among the first generation to learn from recordings, the legacies of Cortot, Kempff, Schnabel, Furtwängler, and Toscanini proving especially valuable. Master classes with Eduard Steuermann -- a pupil of Busoni and Schoenberg -- and Edwin Fischer crowned his scarce tuition. A 1948 debut recital in Graz marked the beginning of his career, launched by taking a prize at the Busoni Competition in Bolzano in 1949. Busoni's example, his mysticism and Faustian striving, fascinated the young Brendel -- he recorded Busoni's Fantasia Contrappuntistica in the early 1950s -- but proved a detour while prompting an extraordinary insight into the music of Liszt. The ensnaring and gradual liberation from Busoni's influence may be traced in the several essays Brendel wrote about him in Musical Thoughts & After-Thoughts. Fischer came to mean more. "With Fischer," Brendel wrote in 1960, "one was in more immediate contact with the music: there was no curtain before the soul when he communicated with the audience. One other musician, Furtwängler, conveyed to the same degree this sensation of music not being played, but rather happening by itself." Armed with such ideals, Brendel embarked upon an international recital and recording career which, in the decade of the 1960s, saw his reputation grow throughout Europe and North America as he became a frequent guest with the world's greatest orchestras. He performed the entire cycle of Beethoven sonatas in London's Wigmore Hall in 1962, and recorded them for Vox. In the 1970s he became an exclusive Philips artist, touring and recording prolifically, not only the Classical masters -- Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann -- but Liszt, Mussorgsky, Stravinsky, Bartók, and Schoenberg, and garnering numerous awards. He has published books of comedic poetry and musical criticism. In 2004 he appeared in concert with his son, cellist Adrian Brendel. Brendel announced his retirement in 2007 and undertook one last, worldwide concert and recital tour, ending in Vienna in December 2008, performing, appropriately enough, Mozart's "Jeunehomme" Piano Concerto.

## Alfred Brendel plays Beethoven



**Rondo in G major, Op. 51, No. 2 • Allegretto, WoO 53**  
**6 Ecosseise in E flat major, Woo 83 • Fur Elise WoO 59**  
**Polonaise in C Major op 89 • 32 Variations in C minor, WoO 80**

Sketches for the Rondo in G major were made in 1798. It seems Beethoven gave the piece to Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, a student of Beethoven and the dedicatee of the "Moonlight" Sonata, Op. 27, No. 2, written in 1801. Her romance with Beethoven fizzled (she probably never took it seriously) and she became engaged to Count Wenzel Gallenberg, a young composer of ballet music with whom Guicciardi had been involved at least as long as she had known Beethoven. She married Gallenberg in 1803. Sometime in 1802, Beethoven asked Guicciardi to return the Rondo so he could dedicate it to Countess Lichnowsky.

The Allegretto in C minor, Hess 66, gives us the real Beethoven-sound. Full of drama and demanding a fair amount of virtuosity, it is an excellent piece for any piano lion. It is in fact another version of WoO 53, and dates from between 1796 and 98. The main differences with WoO 53 are in the second phrase of the trio and in the coda.

In bar 26 a natural indicates a deliberate clash between E flat and D natural; the equivalent bar after the trio (bar 116) does have a D flat. Since E-flat against D doesn't make much sense harmonically, we can assume that the natural is just another reading error by Hess.

In his many Ecossaises for piano, Ludwig van Beethoven proves that he could write vivacious dance music. The "ecossaise", originally a Scottish country dance, was very popular in a more developed form in early 19th century salons. As a stylised dance it principally appeared in the piano repertoire of Franz Schubert and Frédéric Chopin as well as Beethoven.

Among enthusiasts of Beethoveniana, the identity of the "Elise" in the title of the composer's most famous piano miniature, Für Elise, is almost as much of an enigma as that of the "Immortal Beloved." (One of the most popular theories is that "Elise" is actually "Therese" -- that is, Therese Malfatti, the longtime object of the composer's affections.) Given the modest technical demands of this work -- it has long been a favorite of keyboard novices -- it is reasonable to conclude in any case that "Elise" was a beginning piano student.

Though usually designated a bagatelle, Für Elise has the form of a compact rondo (ABACA). In spite of its brevity, the work bears the distinctive stamp of its creator. There is a slight hint of brooding in the Slavic-tinged A minor refrain; the B episode, in F major, possesses the yearning, songlike character of so many of Beethoven's slow movements. In the C episode, a very effective modulation from D minor to B flat major is achieved via a simple but very characteristic half-step shift in the bass. Like a tiny cut gem, Für Elise is flawless; even in an effort of such petite proportions, one is reminded of Leonard Bernstein's observation of the

"sense of rightness" which pervades all of Beethoven's works.

This piece was dedicated to Empress Alexiewna of Russia, to whom it was presented. Afterward, Beethoven was given fifty ducats, a substantial sum at the time for a single piano composition of modest length. But the gift to the Empress seems also have accounted for the payment made by her husband, Tsar Alexander I, of one-hundred-fifty ducats, more or less owed to Beethoven for 12 years for the three violin sonatas of Op. 30 (Nos. 6, 7 and 8), which were dedicated to the Russian ruler.

This work begins with a cadenza-like passage, a not-too-distant cousin of the one that opens the "Emperor Concerto" (Piano Concerto No. 5). Could the allusion to that 1809 work be deliberate? It is especially intriguing to conjecture so, since the polonaise was dedicated to an "Empress," and the concerto had probably gotten its famous nickname before 1814. In any event, when the polonaise proper begins, Beethoven proves his deft skills in the realm of this famous Polish dance form. The theme might have fit well in an early Chopin polonaise, but Beethoven's treatment is a bit more energetic and driven than what Chopin would generally produce. The middle section here features some brisk rhythms, and just before the close, a brief snippet from the opening cadenza appears -- here the allusion to the "Emperor Concerto" sounds even more pronounced. The mood of the piece is joyous and elegant throughout, though not as elegant as Chopin's works in the genre. If this piece is not one of the composer's great masterworks, it is nonetheless a rousing effort. The work was first published in Vienna in 1815. A typical performance of it lasts about five to six minutes.∂

This powerful work dates from 1806, the year of the more lyrical Violin Concerto and Fourth Symphony. In form it resembles the famous Chaconne from Bach's D minor Partita for violin, with a short thematic fragment given equally terse variations. Beethoven's theme, however, is even shorter, a series of chords with a couple of runs thrown in, and there is a smaller range of emotion. The music is moody, or stormy, or melancholy; there is little light even in the brief major-key section (Variations 12-16). The work requires considerable virtuosity, with each variation presenting a different technical challenge so that it almost seems like a set of etudes. However, it is the sometimes violent emotional content that dominates. In the extended final variation the music at last finds its way into song, but it is a somber song which fades away with two quiet chords at the end.

# **Alfred Brendel** **plays** **Beethoven**

Alfred Brendel plays piano works by Beethoven

- 1. Rondo in G major, Op. 51, No. 2 9:52**
  - 2. Allegretto, WoO 53 3:56**
  - 3. 6 Ecossaise in E flat major, Woo 83 2:02**
  - 4. Fur Elise WoO 59 2:56**
  - 5. Polonaise in C Major op 89 5:39**
  - 6. 32 Variations in C minor, WoO 80 11:10**
- Total Time: 35:35**

**Recorded by Vox Turnabout July 1964**

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