

11. GREAT CONTEMPORARY PIANISTS IN INTERPRETATIVE DIALOGUE: ALFRED BRENDEL AND MURRAY PERAHIA

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Abstract: *The choice of valuable interpretative versions is highly important for both pianists on their way to performance and teachers in their complex activity of piano training. These become real models of esthetical thinking and artistic inspiration in the approach of a musical work. We shall use Sonata in D minor D 958 by Franz Schubert as an interpretative analysis model in the view of the pianists Alfred Brendel and Murray Perahia.*

Key words: *Alfred Brendel, Murray Perahia, comparative interpretations, piano*

1. Introduction

Both the lovers of classical music and specialists have access today to reference interpretations with great contemporary pianists through the large number of CDs, DVDs and Internet websites that have appeared over the past years. The choice of valuable interpretative versions is highly important for both pianists on their way to performance and teachers in their complex activity of piano training. These become real models of esthetical thinking and artistic inspiration in the approach of a musical work. We shall use Sonata in *D minor D 958* by Franz Schubert as an interpretative analysis model in the view of the pianists Alfred Brendel and Murray Perahia.

2. Alfred Brendel - short biography

Alfred Brendel is one of the most important pianists of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, famous for the interpretation of the works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms and Liszt. A. Brendel was born on the 5th of January 1931 in Wiesenberg, Czech Republic and studied piano, composition and conducting at Zagreb (Croatia) and Graz (Austria) with Edwin Fischer, Paul Baumgartner and Edward Steuermann (a student of Busoni and Schoenberg). His international career started in 1949 after ranking the fourth at Busoni Competition of Italy and lasted until 2008 when he withdrew from the musical stage. Besides recitals in Europe and USA, the pianist also had a prodigious concert career under the baton of some famous conductors such as Claudio Abbado, Sir Simon Rattle, Daniel Barenboim, Bernard Haitink, Sir Charles Mackerras, Mariss Jansons etc. Alfred Brendel has one of the broadest discographies, some of the most important records including the complete collection of the piano concertos by Mozart, all the solo piano works by Beethoven (he is the first pianist to have achieved it), the piano concertos by Brahms etc. One of the most notable achievements of Alfred Brendel is the attempt to draw the attention on the importance played by the piano sonatas by

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Franz Schubert, by musicological writings, as well as by the recordings at the record companies Philips and Decca: the sonatas *D 537, D 575, D 664, D 784, D 840, D 845, D 850, D 894, D 958, D 959, D 960*.

Alfred Brendel won many awards for his records: *The Great Award of the Liszt Society, The Gramophone Award, The Great Award of the French Disc Academy, The British Music Association Award, The Léonie Sonning Award, The Siemens Award* etc. The pianist received a large number of honor diplomas from Oxford, Yale, Sussex universities etc. and was conferred upon title of *Knight of the British Empire* in 1989 for „The remarkable services brought to the Music of the Great Britain”²⁶, where he established his residence in 1972. Alfred Brendel is also a famous musicologist, his essays being extremely valuable and useful to pianists, as well as to any musician: *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts* (1976), *Music Sounded Out* (1990), *Alfred Brendel on Music: His Collected Essays* (2001) (contains the reviewed versions of the first two books and other essays). In the book entitled *Le Voile de l'Ordre. Entretiens avec Martin Meyer*²⁷ (2002), the pianist speaks about his life and career, about an interpreter's freedoms and obligations, about the musicians that had an influence on him: Alfred Cortot, Edwin Fischer, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Wilhelm Kempff etc.

3. Murray Perahia - short biography

The American pianist Murray Perahia is considered to be one of the most lyrical pianists of our times, being often called „musician's musician”²⁸. He was born on the 19th of April 1947 in New York and started taking piano lessons when was four. Latter on he went to Mannes College, where he graduated from conducting and composition. In 1972 he ranked first at the fourth edition of *Leeds International Piano Competition*, being the first North-American to have achieved such a performance. The musicians that marked his artistic evolution include the composer Benjamin Britten, the tenor Peter Pears and the pianists Rudolf Serkin and Vladimir Horowitz, the latter one exerting a defining influence on his piano technique. Besides a rich solo career, Murray Perahia is also an interpreter of chamber music together with the Guarneri and Budapest quartets. He is also main conductor guest of the Academy of St. Martin orchestra in the Fields, that went on tours in USA, Europe and Asia. The popularity that Murray Perahia has is also supported by the large number of recordings for which he received numerous Grammy and Gramophone awards. The pianist holds honorary doctorate degrees conferred upon by the Universities of Leeds and Duke, and in 2004 Queen Elisabeth II conferred upon him the title of Knight Commander of the British Empire for the remarkable services brought to music.

²⁶ <http://www.colbertartists.com/ArtistBio.asp?ID=alfred-brendel>

²⁷ *The Veil of Order. Conversations with Martin Meyer*

²⁸ „musician's musician” - http://www.mymusicbase.ru/PPB/ppb18/Bio_1848.htm

4. Compared analysis of the Sonata in *D minor* D 958 by Franz Schubert

Alfred Brendel recorded the sonata in *D minor* D 958 by Franz Schubert in 1987 at the record company Philips, and Murray Perahia recorded it in 2003 at the record company Sony.

First part, *Allegro giusto* (Alfred Brendel – 10'26", Murray Perahia – 10'47")

Exposition

The interpretative version of the pianist Alfred Brendel is extremely suggestive, the tension of the musical discourse giving to the beginning of the sonata a dramatic atmosphere, an atmosphere of panic where „The leading character in this tragedy is being chased and cornered and looks in vain for a way of escape.” (Brendel, 2007, p. 140). The vision of the pianist Murray Perahia impresses us by the special attention to details, by the sustained tempo, rhythmic highlighting, his full approach full of drama emphasizing the similarity between the beginning of the sonata and the theme of the *32 variations* by Beethoven. The interpretation offered by the pianist Alfred Brendel highlights the complex construction of the secondary theme (theme with variations) by the clear demarcation of the three component sections by means of the *ritenuto* at the end of the theme and first variation. The interpretative version of Murray Perahia of the secondary theme is interesting as well: in this case the agogic liberties are minimal, the pianist highlighting only the quavers of the anacrusis of the first variation by distributing a small *ritenuto*. Both pianists highlight the lyrical and cantabile character of the secondary theme by small shades of *piano* and *pianissimo*, achieved through an expressive legato at the bottom of the key. The tension created at the end of the secondary theme is conveyed by the two interpreters by a dynamical sonority, the variational nature of the last section being underlined through the highlight of the melodic line included in the series of sixteenths at the right hand. Both Alfred Brendel and Murray Perahia take into account the repetition sign of the exposition end, in the section resume the two pianists being loyal to their own interpretative conceptions approached in the first exhibit of the thematic material.

Development

Murray Perahia gives to this section an energetic character and underlines the harmonic mobility specific to the first development stage through strong dynamical contrasts and small agogic fluctuations. The pianist achieves the dynamical contrast *ffz-piano* of the development beginning by taking into account the quaver pause and the slight delay of the *piano* shade, therefore succeeding in creating a special sound effect. The version offered by the pianist Alfred Brendel has a little too agitated character due to the more moved tempo in the development beginning, that is almost double compared to the calm and quiet tempo in which the interpreter ended the exposition. The two interpretative versions of the development end captivate us through the rhythmical accuracy and dynamic tension from *pianississimo* to *forte*, Alfred Brendel and Murray Perahia preparing this way the return full of drama of the main theme within the reprise.

Reprise

Within the reprise both pianists follow their own interpretative conceptions used in the exposition, with a view to emphasising the thematic contrast created by Schubert. Coda benefits from a much more suggestive interpretation according to the pianist Alfred Brendel, this one highlighting the climax of the emotional tension of beat 263 through dramatised musical discourse.

Second part, Adagio (Alfred Brendel - 8'13", Murray Perahia – 8'26")

Exposition

In the beginning of the second part, the pianist Alfred Brendel opts for a fuller sonority with a view to creating the dynamical difference indicated by Schubert in the score (*piano – pianissimo*) upon exhibiting the second period of the main theme. The pianist makes use of dynamical fluctuations within the musical phrases in order to highlight the modulating character of the theme. Murray Perahia does not comply with all the shades indicated by the composer in the score, using a dynamical range more reduced than the one used by Alfred Brendel when rendering the main theme. Nevertheless, he achieves an extraordinarily suggestive interpretation by which he underlines the solemn atmosphere provided by the beginning of the second part. The emotional deepness, the timbre subtleties and the pianist's attention focused on every detail of the musical discourse, turn this interpretative version into one full of refinement and mastery. With a view to rendering the progressive tension of the musical discourse within the secondary theme, Alfred Brendel chooses to combine the dynamical growth in the end of the first segment with an *accelerando* distributed over the last beats. In the interpretative view of the pianist Murray Perahia, the agogic fluctuations within the secondary theme are minimal. In order to highlight the rhythmical diversifications that turn the musical discourse of the secondary theme into a dynamical one and to avoid loading the reduced sonority of *pianissimo*, the pianist does not use the right pedal in beat 28 when the rhythm of the accompaniment goes from binary divisions to ternary divisions.

Reprise

In the reprise the musical discourse provides the two pianists with the possibility to exploit the entire timbre and colour richness of the instrument, which contributes to the achievement of a particularly suggestive image.

Third part, Menuetto.Allegro (Alfred Brendel - 3'14", Murray Perahia – 3'08")

Menuetto

In the third part the two pianists choose the same lively tempo that allows them to give fluency to the musical discourse and underline its dancing character. In the first period of the *Menuetto*, both interpreters opt for the same ample phrasing that contains the entire section. The differences between the two interpretations are from the dynamical point of view, both versions being equally interesting: Alfred Brendel chooses to comply with the *crescendo* indication marked in beat five, whereas as far as Murray Perahia is concerned

the dynamical growth starts from beat four, together with the ascending direction of the melody. In the view of the pianist Alfred Brendel, the arpeggio cells per quaver values (from the median period of the *Menuetto*) are interpreted *non legato* and without the right pedal, which leads to a rather dry sonority of these ones. At the same time, the dynamical contrasts are not as obvious as with Murray Perahia, who succeeds in this way in highlighting the more vigorous character of this section.

Trio

In the interpretation of *Trio*, the pianist Murray Perahia manages to masterly render the dancing atmosphere, by conferring upon the section balance and refinement. The subtle musicality of the pianist Alfred Brendel is very suggestive in *Trio*, his interpretative view impressing through the quality of the sound, perfect phrasing, and special colour effects obtained by means of the right pedal and soft pedal.

Fourth part, *Allegro* (Alfred Brendel - 9'15", Murray Perahia – 9'14")

Exposition

The two interpretative versions catch the obsessive character of the sonata end, the exhibit of the main theme being accompanied by an extended dynamical range (*pianissimo-fortissimo*) and precise rhythm. The tempo chosen by the two pianists helps them keep the clarity of the quaver pulse, therefore highlighting the energetic character of the theme. In contrast to Alfred Brendel, Murray Perahia uses too much pedal in bridge, an aspect that attenuates a certain degree of the clarity and suppleness of the quavers in *staccato*. In the interpretative view of Alfred Brendel, the secondary thematic group gets a rather agitated aspect, especially when it comes to rendering the chromatic path of the first segment (m. 131-132, 135-136, 139-140). The version of the pianist Murray Perahia is more inspired, this one opting for a more balanced interpretation of the secondary thematic group, in which he follows the fluency of the exhibit of the main motive in different registers.

Development

The pianist Alfred Brendel offers an important role to the episode theme of the development, his interpretation full of lyricism and sensitivity highlighting its bond with the melodism of vocal type. The contents full of tension in the second development stage is more obvious in the interpretation of Murray Perahia, the pianist preparing the climax of beat 410 through step by step dynamical gradations and through dramatised musical discourse.

Reprise

In the reprise both pianists mostly follow their own interpretative conceptions used in the exposition. The entire timbre-colour richness of the instrument is exploited in both interpretative views of the last part, the two pianists succeeding in creating suggestive images that highlight the richness of these Schubertian pages.

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