A Pianist With a Penchant for Poetry

The renowned Alfred Brendel visits campus to share an unexpected side of his talent.

By Diane Krieger

"When Christo had wrapped the Three Tenors on the balcony of La Scala, the civilized world fell unnaturally silent."

Such were the choice morsels of poetic mischief dropping from the lips of world-famous pianist Alfred Brendel on a recent visit to USC's Jeannette McDonald Hall. In town for a Disney Hall concert, Brendel gave a poetry reading — that's right, poetry — on March 12 as a guest of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's Brain and Creativity Institute and the USC Thornton School of Music.

It seems the Austrian-born, London-based concert artist leads a double life as a polyglot versifier; his stanzas have been published in German, English and French.

Asked to distinguish between his pianistic and his poetic muses, the 76-year-old Brendel said, in charmingly-accented English, "as a pianist, I try to sing. My poems don't sing. They speak." They also strive for — and achieve — dry blasts of hilarity.

His first poem One Finger Too Many — composed a dozen years ago in the midst of a sleepless flight to Tokyo — concerns the inexplicable growth of a peripatetic digit prone to popping up anywhere on its unfortunate owner's anatomy.

What's a pianist with a taste for the absurd to do? "It's hard to make the audience smile or laugh when something funny happens in a piece of music," Brendel said with characteristic deadpan humor. Poetry doesn't have this problem.