



Sleepless nights: Alexandre Kantorow recorded his latest album during overnight sessions in February 2023 (Sasha Gusov)

An afternoon in late January, midway through the Swiss Alpine *Sommets Musicaux de Gstaad* festival at Gstaad's Hotel Bernerhof, Alexandre Kantorow is being a complete trooper. Fresh off the moulinet recital ahead of him in nearby Rougemont Church, he should ideally be checking into his room for a few moments to catch his breath. But since the next 20 minutes are his only free window for an interview, he packs his suitcase, whipping off his snow-dusted coat and amenably diving fast into talk of the programme he will record the following week. In fact, if you were wondering why Kantorow, still only 27, is increasingly being hailed as a demand pianist – beyond that famous double win at the 2019 Tchaikovsky Competition and his obvious naturalness, this combination of good-natured cooperation, instant focus and sheer naturalness.

The programme we're discussing constitutes the final instalment of a three-album project Kantorow has been working on since 2020, presenting Brahms's three piano sonatas, one per album, alongside partner works offering various interpretations. The sonatas are early works, and Kantorow has saved the very earliest for last, pairing the C major Piano Sonata with Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*, to demonstrate their rhythmic similarities. Further cross-referencing comes in the form of transcriptions by Liszt that Kantorow has programmed between the Brahms and Schubert, referencing

Kantorow needs no encouragement to wax lyrical about early Brahms. 'He really feels like a young composer who really enthuses. 'Of course, he's taking elements of the past and expanding upon them, such as small Beethoven moments as wild as Liszt in the creativity of the structure.' I comment that Brahms's First Sonata gets relatively full marks for a lack of tunes!' Kantorow smiles. 'There's not a lot of relationship to melody. It just kind of goes in a big circle. You feel how he wants to treat the piano orchestrally. You really feel the horn at certain moments. The

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they've had a brief opportunity to switch from their own recently made instrument to an old Cremonese. 'This thing where you can feel a personality in the instrument ...', he muses. 'Something that feels mysterious to delve more into it, and afterwards leaves you with sounds in your mind that you can then try to recapture.'

To return to this mysterious, magical combination of piano and room for his final Brahms album, though, under decidedly non-ideal surrounding conditions. For a start, whereas Kantorow usually records as the culmination of a project, the Sommets Musicaux de Gstaad concert – his final chance to perform the programme before the third time he has ever performed it in public. Furthermore, the recording sessions will then happen over the next few days.

'Yeah, well it started in a very pragmatic way,' he laughs as my face suggests that these conditions are not ideal. 'I had a lot of time to build this programme, and I was set to do a big tour of it in March, by which time I wanted to be in the music. So, when I know that recording is one of the best ways to cement your way of playing, it's important to try something new and record it before. And then the hall wasn't available, so the only option was to ask whether it was free during the nights, and they said yes!' Yet on this snowy February afternoon, his look or sound grimly filled with trepidation, but simply curious as to how he'll find treating a recording session as a process. 'Practising at night is always a special feeling, too,' he points out. 'That sense of being the only person in town. I don't know how that will translate into recording, because in sessions you need inspiration, and you have to keep going. But in the days leading up to it I shall physically prepare myself by trying not to sleep at night for a few days.' In addition, he has built in a small safety net: a return to the Société de Musique to perform the recording opportunity to record that day's rehearsal, and indeed to hear whether his interpretation has changed over the intervening period's concerts.

Back in Gstaad, though, I ask how the pieces are currently feeling. 'Extremely exciting,' he responds. 'Very exciting, there's a lot that's left a bit to the mystery of the moment and adrenalin.' So is it changing quite dramatically between performance, I ask. 'Yes, absolutely.' And in each of his two previous performances of this programme, has he taken risks, or just going with how it feels in the moment? 'The latter,' he answers. 'For me with a new programme at a concert it's really instinct and adrenalin that are the drivers. Then, block by block, certain parts come up that are not yet developed, what's not yet convincing or doesn't hold the audience, and then you slowly adapt, and it's a very different – you're instead deciding what you're going to do in the moment in a very clear, conscious way.' I need to conclude our interview. With the evening's concert in his mind's eye, Kantorow apologises as he packs his suitcase away.

Fast forward to a snow-blanketed Rougemont Church that evening, and Kantorow is a human whirlwind. He is so swift that it's as if he's popped out of nowhere, then exploding into the Brahms at the second he sits on his stool – and onwards into a reading of electrifying passion and power, his intakes of breath audible from the piano becoming an orchestra as his successive layers of colours reverberate – and low-register rolls reverberate in the ancient church space. The applause almost lifts the roof. Then next, a *Wanderer* clearly accentuating the contrast between the two works, followed by lyrically voiced Schubert-Liszt song transcriptions.

Kantorow is no less squeezed for time when, some weeks later, we complete the interview. This time he is

decisions, and that's the joy. I'm doing the most enormous amount of concerts of this programme, and piano, gives something new, a different light.' As for whether this is a process he'd be up for repeating, know. It's a bit of a luxury to be able to do a recording before and after, but I will see how it turns out whether it's something interesting.' And now, after all this time, with the sounds and emotions of that concert *still* reverberating around my head, the resulting album stands triumphantly – for me, and one as a potently evocative souvenir of an especially intense period of thought and experimentation from still.

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