

Brahms: Piano Sonata No. 3; Ballades, Op. 10 etc (Kantorow)

Alexandre Kantorow (piano) (BIS)

Our rating

★★★★★ 5.0

By **Michael Beek**

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Brahms

Ballades, Op. 10; Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor; Chaconne – from Partita No. 2 by JS Bach
Alexandre Kantorow (piano)

BIS BIS-2600 (CD/SACD) 85:16 mins

Tchaikovsky Competition winner Alexandre Kantorow has already demonstrated his profound empathy for Brahms in a previous release for BIS which features insightful performances of the B minor Rhapsody and Second Piano Sonata. Here he tackles the more technically and musically demanding Third Sonata, a work which has inspired several distinguished recordings from master pianists such as the late Nelson Freire on Decca and Murray Perahia on Sony. Yet Kantorow fully matches these formidable rivals, presenting an absorbing interpretation that revels in the quasi-symphonic dimensions of Brahms's piano writing and allows the musical argument to unfold with the maximum degree of spaciousness. Above all, there's a tremendous depth and beauty of tone to Kantorow's playing, amply supported by a wonderfully warm recording.

Kantorow's approach to the Sonata is romantic and impassioned, making the most of its stark contrasts in mood. This is already evident in the huge dynamic range that characterises his conception of the opening movement in which tortured and sometimes ferocious writing is frequently juxtaposed with passages that are wistful and resigned in character. Yet even in those passages where the sheer density of textures can so easily sound overloaded, such as the opening of the development section, there is never a feeling of strain in the playing.

The rest of the Sonata is no less impressive. Kantorow imbues the more reflective sections of the *Andante* with tender lyricism, the opening of the trio section of the *Scherzo* sounds radiantly beautiful, and the death-ridden angst and desolation of the *Intermezzo* is suitably chilling. At the opposite end of the dynamic spectrum, the *Scherzo* is volatile and explosive, and in the *Finale*, Kantorow sustains the tension superbly, which brings the Sonata to a suitably exciting and defiant conclusion.

A similarly epic quality is brought to bear on the *Four Ballades* which are delivered here with poetic sensibility and a captivating sense of atmosphere. In particular, Kantorow's propensity for emphasising the lowest registers of the keyboard brings a deeply unsettling resonance to these evocative miniatures. Nowhere is this more effectively drawn than in the *sotto voce* closing passage to the First Ballade where the left-hand staccato off-beat triplets sound particularly spooky. Such imaginative control of texture makes me long to hear how Kantorow might tackle Brahms's later more intimate and emotionally elusive piano output.

Yet perhaps the most compelling playing of all comes with Kantorow's perceptive account of the arrangement for left hand of the Bach Chaconne from the Second Violin Partita, a much more austere transcription than the flamboyant version for two hands by Busoni. Once again, the richness and fluidity of the playing compel admiration, and the way Kantorow paces the large-scale architecture of the music is mesmerising. A particularly special moment comes near to the end with the return to the darker mood of the opening. The way in which Kantorow negotiates this transition in tonality, from major to minor, is quite simply spellbinding.

Erik Levi



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Michael is the Reviews Editor of BBC Music Magazine. He was previously a freelance film music journalist and spent 15 years at St George's Bristol. Michael specialises in film and television music and was the Editor of MusicfromtheMovies.com. He has written for the BBC Proms, BBC Concert Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Albert Hall, Hollywood in Vienna and Silva Screen Records.