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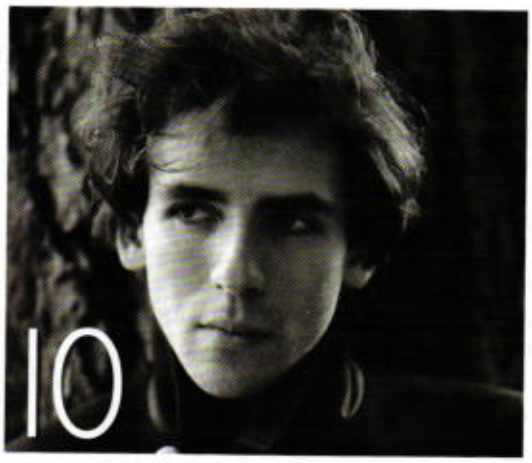

Time on our hands

Winter is always a time for taking stock, but never more so than this year, in my experience. This morning I pulled a dog-eared volume of Chopin off the shelf, prompted by the story of Josephine Proctor on BBC Radio 4's Today programme. At the age of 84, isolated in quarantine, she has set aside a 'golden moment' in each day to teach herself one of the nocturnes. 'I turn my piano light on, and put my glasses on, and I just have a go.'

Her quiet resolve, her homely upright, the care and the honesty in her playing as it came over, reminded me so powerfully of you, our readers, who write in and tell me what the piano – and *Pianist* – means to them at a time like this. Someone else dear to me also sprang to mind: Dame Fanny Waterman, whose death in December could hardly go unremarked in these pages.

Laying aside practice, and the other demands of life, many of us have curled up in front of a movie. I asked Warwick Thompson to look at pianists in film. He has produced a great list, from Marx Brothers magic in *The Big Store* to the nail-biting *The Beast with Five Fingers*. He forgot one of my favourite postwar weepies, *The Dream of Olwen*, but he said I hadn't given him enough space for everything!

We can also spend more time *listening*. The dizzying heights of Rubinstein in Chopin inspire Josephine Proctor to work on her trills: listening is learning. Matthew Ash has produced a helpful article on the subject at a new blog, musicalmatt.com. Our cover artist Alexandre Kantorow speaks to Peter Quantrill about listening to Pletnev – and then learning even more from playing on his made-to-measure piano. Hear Kantorow for yourself on this issue's covermount album, where he performs an electrifying *Islamey*.

As Steven Osborne points out to me (p68), pianists are solitary creatures. Stephen Hough said much the same thing when I bumped into him at the local greengrocer. He's never felt so rested in years, not having to jump on a plane from one engagement to the next, now with time for uninterrupted practice. Until life returns to a more normal state, let's keep watching, listening and learning.

Erica

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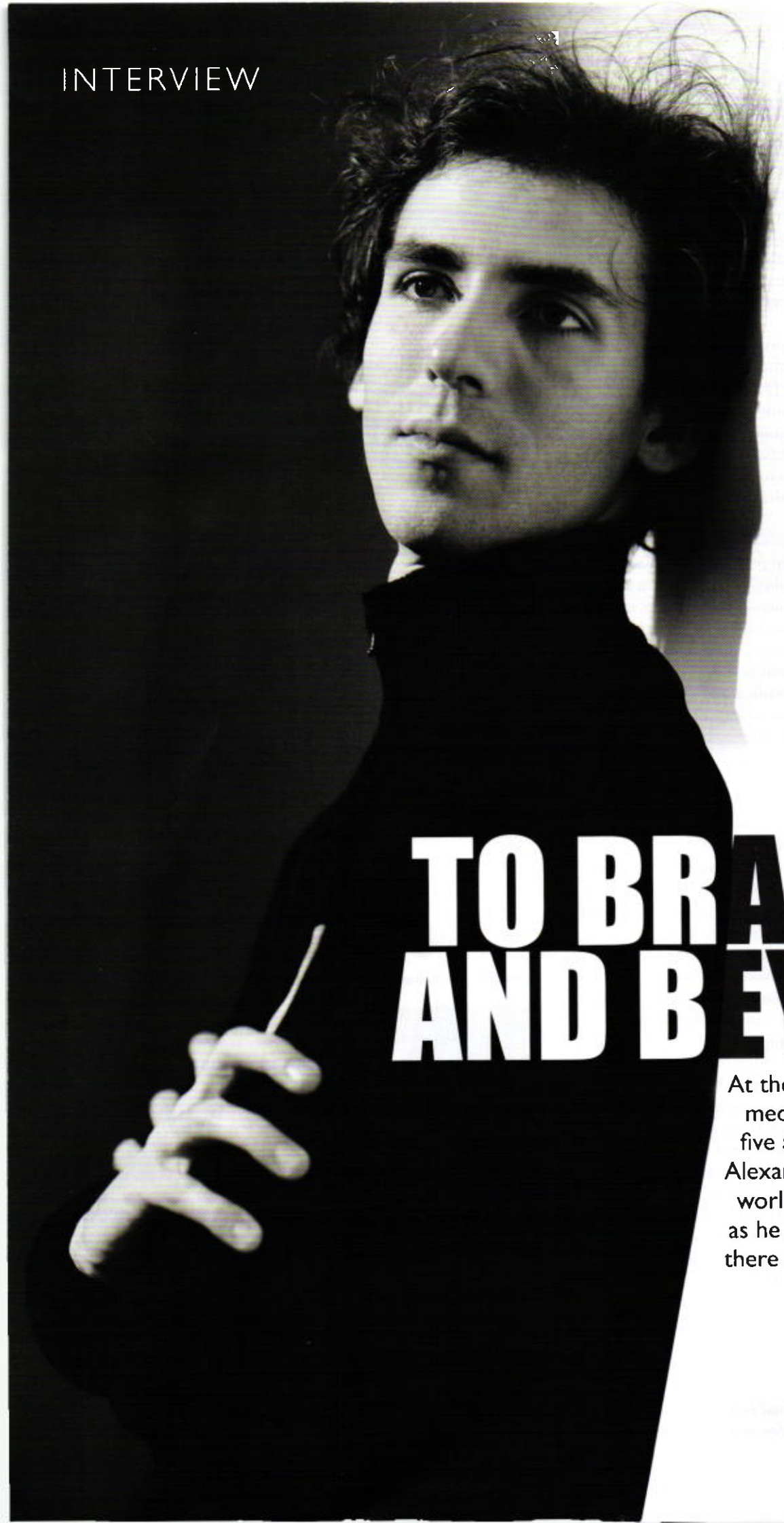


TO BRAHMS AND BEYOND

At the age of 23, with a gold medal from Moscow and five albums under his belt, Alexandre Kantorow has the world at his feet. However, as he tells **Peter Quantrill**, there is so much left to learn

A young man rises from the keyboard. Sallow, open-necked and hollow-eyed, he nods from exhaustion as he turns to acknowledge the storm of applause breaking over the last chord of the music, his arms hanging limp by his sides. No wonder. Alexandre Kantorow has just played the second concertos of Tchaikovsky and then Brahms, one straight after the other, in the final of the 2019 Moscow International Tchaikovsky Competition.

It's a performance that won him not only the gold medal in the piano division, but also the coveted *grand prix* of the whole competition, also covering its violin, cello and vocal sections, awarded on a discretionary basis to artists of quite exceptional gifts (Daniil Trifonov won it in 2011). Still available to view on the online Medici TV platform, the occasion is remarkable not only for Kantorow's stamina – an hour and a half playing the most physically demanding concertos in the repertoire – but also the surge, the shape and passion infusing all those double-octaves and lyrical lines. You can see him listening to himself, to the orchestra as well: he is in the zone.

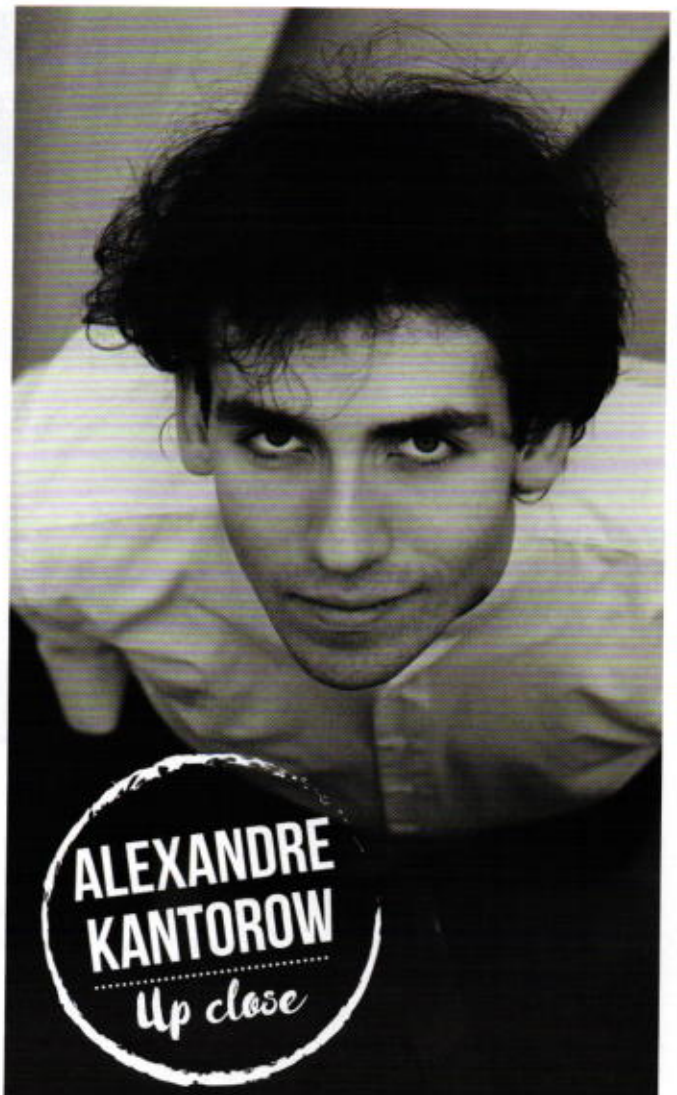
On a Zoom call from his home in Paris, Kantorow relives the experience with me. All the Moscow finalists must play a pair of concertos, one of them by Tchaikovsky: what made him choose the Cinderella Second? 'I started off with the First, because it felt like the normal choice. But I began to get this weird sensation of not managing to find my own path in it. I felt uncomfortable with so many versions in my ear. I was a bit depressed one afternoon, and since my dad has all these orchestral scores at home, I picked out the Second and it felt like a breath of fresh air. It also felt very natural under the fingers – there was an immediate response even sight-reading it.'

Family values

Dad is Jean-Jacques Kantorow, the violinist and now conductor who has partnered his son and the Tapiola Sinfonietta on a fast-multiplying pile of recordings for the Swedish label BIS. For the first of them, way back in 2014, Kantorow played the Liszt concertos – young man's music, but already touched with remarkable maturity by the 17-year-old. 'The great thing about Alexandre,' remarked the Sinfonietta's principal clarinet, Harri Mäki, 'is that he always listens and absorbs ideas while he retains his own clear and logical inner voice. I have the feeling that I am witnessing the beginning of something very remarkable.'

There is a lightness of being about Kantorow, now 23, that offsets his natural affinity with music known for its density and complexity, Brahms above all. His parents encouraged him to keep up his academic studies, which tended by inclination towards the sciences. Even so, by the age of 14 his talent at the piano could not be ignored, and he became a student of Igor Laszko at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. 'He told me it could become a professional choice for me – I could make a career from it – but I would have to work. My parents said go for it, but they weren't 100 per cent sure, and neither was I. But I knew I needed more time for music.'

By the time he entered the Conservatoire National, studying with Frank Braley and Haruko Ueda, Kantorow had already made his concerto debut, with the Sinfonia Varsovia at a music festival in Nantes. 'I gobbled up all the music I could,' he remembers. 'Those were nice times. It was like a bubble of music. That was when I decided to devote myself to music.' The hard yards of theory had not always come to Kantorow as naturally as messing around on the piano, learning to play one piece as fast and loud as possible and then looking for another. 'When I was little I was so bad at ▶



ALEXANDRE KANTOROW
Up close

If you could play only one piece from now on, what would it be?
It's the only piece I have in my head right now, so... Brahms's Second Concerto! But that would probably be the truth.

If you could play only one composer?
In a weird way, probably Beethoven, even though I haven't played much of his music yet.

One pianist you would travel a long way to hear?
Dead, probably Sofronitsky. Alive, Pletnev.

One concert hall you'd love to play in?
I love the Concertgebouw – I was lucky enough to play there during lockdown, and I found how the acoustic changes extraordinary. And it feels cosy – comfortable – it doesn't feel like a big hall. As for a hall I haven't played in yet: Wigmore Hall.

One piece of advice to amateur pianists?
Listen to yourself.

If you weren't a pianist, what would you be?
Something in science – maybe astrophysics.

analysis! I didn't grasp the connection between what I heard and what I was doing. But for the conservatoire I had to take a crash course over the summer beforehand, and afterwards I was amazed at how easy and logical they felt, these ideas of tension and resolution. And then these ideas connected organically with my playing. Now it's one of the joys I have, to take the score of a symphony and read through it.'

The path to Moscow

In 2015 he first met the teacher of virtuosos, and virtuoso teacher, Rena Shereshevskaya. The story goes that she asked him, 'What do you want from me?' His reply: 'The Tchaikovsky!' That year Shereshevskaya had coached and guided Lucas Debargue to a fourth prize at the competition, and the stirrings of a career which would soon outstrip his higher-placed rivals.

'I am really attracted to the Brahms who defies how we often think of him… so fiery and ambitious and even avant-garde'

Kantorow began to work with her, dreaming of Moscow. 'I had no idea what preparing for it would involve,' he says. 'Competitions aren't a big cultural thing for us in France. A year beforehand I started to prepare with her, having several lessons a week and going into a level of detail on each piece that I never imagined before. I am lucky never to have to do another competition again!'

How does Shereshevskaya work her magic? According to Kantorow: 'Her special quality is to make a lot of abstract observations but to put them in concrete terms.' There is an absorbing documentary (*To Music*, on Naxos) showing her at work with Debargue in just this fashion. For Kantorow, too, the experience – of both the coaching and the competition – was transformative. 'It was like being in a dark room when the light goes on. You blink, then suddenly you understand more. I learnt a lot of new stuff, especially about timing, and length of sound. What I did before is quite lacking in those terms: I was unaware of things that are now painfully audible to me.'

Such as? In reply, Kantorow uses both brass tacks and big ideas: it's a French thing. 'When you hit a note on the piano, it dies. You cannot give it new life. So much of what we do is to let it die in a certain way so that we feel a line, and a singing voice. A big part of that comes simply from awareness. It's very striking that if you listen to the sound to the end, you will hear it and most of your listeners will too. If this awareness is combined with a nice amount of timing between the notes, it can really feel like you are singing at the piano. My teacher is also obsessed with the idea of playing with your hands not exactly together, making each note clear, so that the melodic line is also clear to the listener, it isn't just vertical chords.'

From early on in his preparation, Kantorow had determined to submit himself to scrutiny in Moscow with the Second Concerto by Brahms, a marathon in itself. 'It's still the concerto that I feel keeps the piano at the perfect spot,' he says. 'You have to assume the leading voice, but also be the accompaniment, to make chamber music and a symphony. We realised it was a pretty long programme; that endurance would be an issue. But it was easier than I expected. Having played previous rounds in the hall I felt a lot more comfortable,

and the orchestra gives you so much energy and electricity. After the Tchaikovsky Concerto, I felt exhausted. On the other hand, there was no way to be tense in the arms. Something that stresses me out about the Brahms is that if you don't have a relaxed arm from the first entry, it's so audible. So in one way it was a lot easier to perform after the Tchaikovsky!'

Moscow changed everything, including his latest BIS album, of more Brahms (the Second Sonata), coupled with Bartók and Liszt, which he had recorded before the competition. 'After one year, listening to it again felt terrible. So I did it again, in Paris, and then re-did half of it again in Finland. Maybe it was just a stupid ego thing, not accepting what you've done and letting it go. This was the first time I have been a pain for my record company!'

Defying expectations

Now embarking on an international career, Kantorow retains a certain diffidence – an air of sanity, perhaps – about where the next few years will take him, although Brahms will certainly keep him company. BIS will record the First and Third Sonatas with similarly original couplings; scheduled concerts include a trip back to Russia in March, to the Siberian wilds of Perm for a festival curated by Denis Matsuev. 'I am really attracted to the Brahms who defies how we often think of him,' he says, 'so fiery and ambitious and even avant-garde; he could be compared to Liszt. I am pretty sure that Liszt would have been amazed by these youthful sonatas. They are so bold, harmonically intense and structurally original.'

One unanticipated benefit of being in demand is the opportunity to play on different instruments. 'You often unlock a lot of problems by playing a piece on a different piano,' he says. 'Then, when you play at home, you sound different to how you did before. This often happens when I go back home after playing concerts, and it lasts for a few days before I settle back into the sound of the instruments I'm used to.'

Kantorow recalls seeing Mikhail Pletnev in recital in Paris a while ago. 'He takes his own Kawai piano with him. I had the chance to play it after the concert, and it's one of the weirdest pianos I've ever put my fingers on! He's a fanatic for pianos that have length: he hates percussion on a piano, and will go to great lengths to have the most singing tone possible. So, for example, the bass is very muted compared to the upper voices. Everything feels like butter. After hearing it and playing on it for a couple of days there were things about his style that I grasped, a mimetic instinct kicked in – I even found myself wanting to imitate the way he puts his hands on the piano. Maybe it's a sign that I am not fully formed yet, but for now it feels as though watching someone else play can change the whole balance of how I play.' Not unlike Brahms, Kantorow has an old head on young shoulders. ■

Alexandre Kantorow plays Brahms, Bartók and Liszt on BIS 2380. Scheduled concerts include the Fifth Piano Concerto of Saint-Saëns at the Royal Festival Hall on 7 April. For updates, see intermusica.co.uk/artist/Alexandre-Kantorow.
Alexandre Kantorow plays Balakirev's Islamey *on this issue's covermount. Full details on back of album.*

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