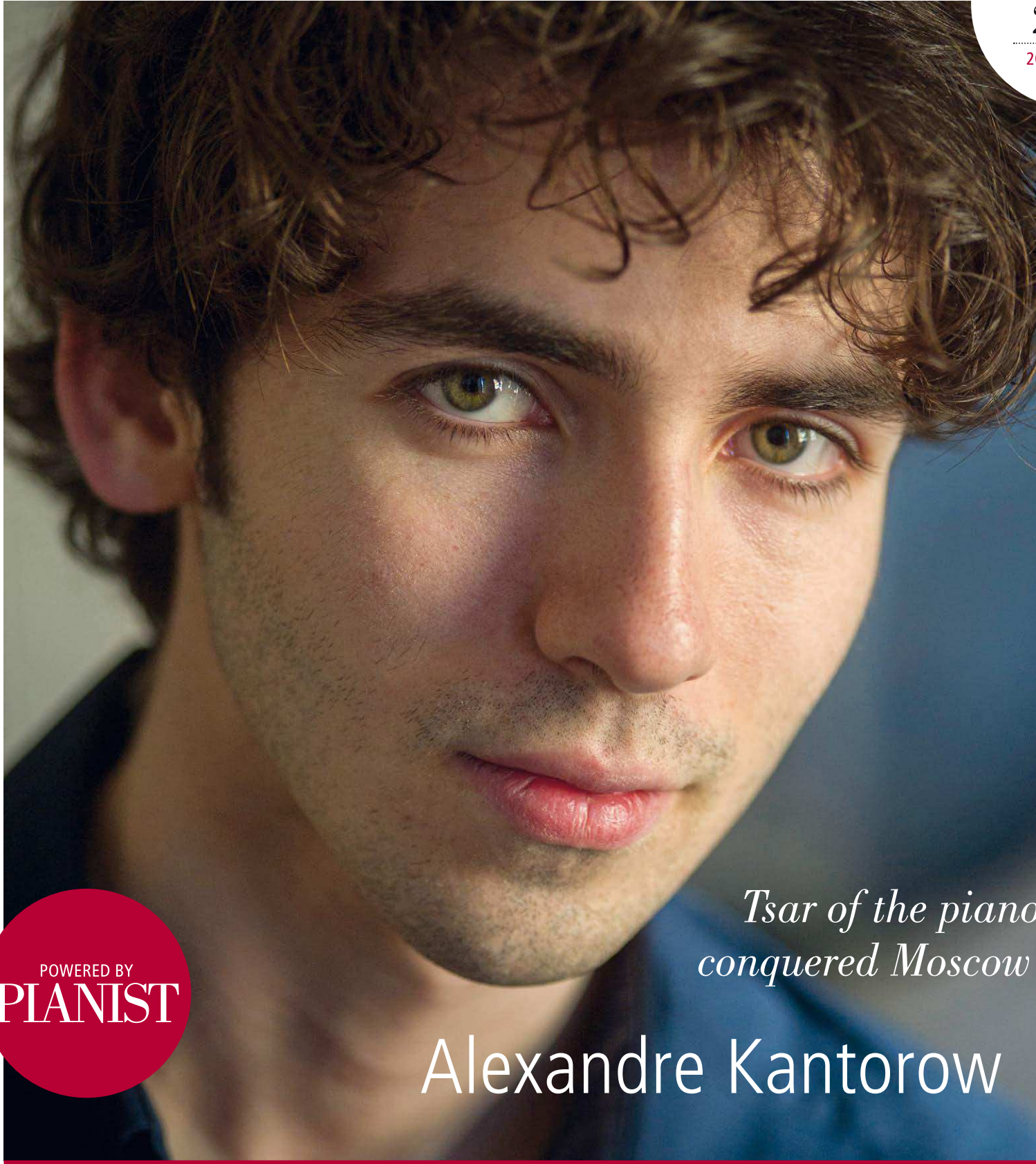


THE WORLD OF PIANO COMPETITIONS



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conquered Moscow*

Alexandre Kantorow

Tchaikovsky International Music Competition

The Tchaikovsky International Music Competition has been full of surprises and controversies throughout its history. From its first edition when the American Van Cliburn won, the competition has never ceased to surprise and shock people. The XVI edition that concluded in a chilly, rainy Moscow was no exception.

Perhaps the biggest surprise in the entire competition was for An Tianxu (20) in the finals. An had earlier made a request to change the program order to play Tchaikovsky first, which was then approved by the committee. The change, however, was not communicated to the orchestra. In addition, the announcer announced that he would play Tchaikovsky, then corrected himself in Russian only, creating further confusion. It took An a split second to realize what had happened, arriving at the first note a beat late. An sat bewildered during the orchestra introduction, but the jury chairman Denis Matsuev was seen speaking to other jury members at the same time. An was then offered a second performance to allow him to perform his pieces again; he declined but was later given a special award for courage.

The jury selected 7 finalists instead of 6. There was again an inevitable uproar, about who the 7th was and should have been. There was again a strong voice that at least one woman should have made the finals. However, the competition had to go on and choose the winner.

Lyrical lines

The first day of the finals began with a confident reading of the Prokofiev Third Concerto by Konstantin Yemelyanov, almost as a warm up for the Tchaikovsky No. 1. Yemelyanov was cunning and daring at times, pulling back the dynamics when playing solo,

as if to pull the audience's attention.

Dmitry Shishkin followed with the same repertoire, but in the reverse order. Shishkin showed off his characteristic attention to details, placing precisely calibrated emphasis on each note in phrases and chords. Lyrical lines soared in Tchaikovsky, though he at times emphasized dissonant notes for added colour. Prokofiev was filled with colourful punches, sarcasm and laughter. Shishkin also remained faithful to the distribution of notes in the score in the second movement, clearly bringing out the piercing accents in the second variation in particular.

The aforementioned performance by Tianxu An followed. Though bewildered by the shock, An recollected himself during the orchestra introduction in Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody, and remained cool, and almost at ease. An navigated through the first movement of Tchaikovsky No. 1 confidently, particularly delivering fast runs with a delicate touch. However, anxiety seemed to creep in, and the last movement was barely held together due to excessive rubato and very fast tempo.

Chamber music

On the following day, Alexey Melnikov's poetic reading of Tchaikovsky No. 1 was sincere and sentimental. Here there were few surprises. The dark, tragic reading of Rachmaninoff No. 3 illus-



Grand Prix winner Alexandre Kantorow in Moscow

trated the composer's struggles with depression, with the lyrical line gasping, though the sense of futility was pervasive. Yet, the climb to the climax in the last movement was carefully measured, with a strong sense of self-awareness and healing.

Alexandre Kantorow had been unique throughout the competition: he was the only competitor to play a Kawai in the earlier stages, and the only one to play Tchaikovsky No. 2 and a non-Russian concerto: Brahms No. 2. The highlight of his performance was the second movement of the Tchaikovsky, where Kantorow was no longer a soloist, but a chamber musician with violin and cello. Kantorow exhibited his sensitivity, remaining keenly attuned to the orchestra, to blend in and to stand out, as the music dictates. The furious second movement of Brahms was delivered with emotional stability and confidence.

Luxuriant sonority

Maō Fujita opened the last day of the competition, and the ardent fans couldn't get enough of him. Clear voicing in thundering chords in Tchaikovsky No. 1's opening provided a clear definition of its outline. Such clarity was carried throughout his performance, but Fujita showed off his keen sense of ensemble, particularly with a cellist in the second movement of Tchaikovsky. Fujita's characteristic sincerity and transparency was carried through the Rachma-

ninoff No. 3, where he often executed fast lines sans pedale, showing off the intricate structure within the dense score.

American Kenneth Broberg played the same program as Tianxu An. Broberg and conductor Petrenko verbally confirmed that they would begin with Rachmaninoff Rhapsody, as a nod to the earlier incident with An. Broberg delivered a polished and probing performance with more generous pedalling that contrasted with Fujita's drier, articulated approach. Resonant, with some extra notes added in the bass, Broberg projected an expansive, luxuriant sonority particularly in Tchaikovsky.

In the end, a winner had to be chosen, and the rest of the field had to be ranked. The jury awarded the first prize to Alexandre Kantorow. The second prize was shared between Shishkin and Fujita, with the third prize distributed to Broberg, Yemelyanov and Melnikov, and the fourth prize awarded to An, along with a special prize for "Self Confidence and Bravery." At the Saint-Petersburg gala concert that lasted until 1:30 am under the white night, Kantorow was declared the over-all Grand Prix winner. It was the first time that a non-Russian was awarded the first prize in piano since Ayako Uehara in 2002, and the audience exploded into a raucous applause.

KEN IISAKA

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