

# In concert

**Queen Elizabeth Hall, London**  
**Alexandre Kantorow** 29 January

Liszt's *Dante* Sonata made an audacious opening to Alexander Kantorow's London debut recital. It proved to be the start of a memorable evening that showed off this French pianist's extraordinary gifts to maximum effect. Whether in Liszt's tumultuous rhetoric or in the central *Francesca da Rimini* episode (in Kantorow's hands, a truly heart-felt and caressing *dolce con amore*) the performance carried all before it: a marvel of recreative vision and imagination.

Schumann is, perhaps to an even greater extent than Liszt, an ideal outlet for a pianist of Kantorow's rhapsodic and blazing intensity. The F-sharp minor Sonata is long, wild and unruly, dedicated to the beloved Clara 'From Florestan and Eusebius', Schumann's most dearly cherished schizophrenic alter-egos. Like Brahms' early Sonata in the same key, the F-sharp minor bristles with savagely unpianistic demands contrasting with Schumann's lyricism (from a composer who once exclaimed with tragic prophecy,

'Sometimes I think I could sing myself to death'). Baffling to early listeners who were inclined to ask, 'When is a sonata not a sonata?' it also infuriated a later critic who referred to it as 'a farrago of fatuities'. Yet from Kantorow, all possible reservations were swept aside: whether in the mockery of the Scherzo's central *alla burla ma pomposo*, in the beguiling scotch-snap of the finale's second subject, and most of all in the concluding alpine octave leap across the keyboard, Kantorow's mastery sustained and riveted attention.

This was followed by more adventures into manic and obsessive territory, by way of Scriabin's *Vers la flamme* (Towards the flame), forever associated with Horowitz yet clearly with a new and formidable champion here. Then, by way of relative breadth and repose, came Brahms' arrangement for left hand of the Bach Chaconne in D minor. Encores included Guido Agosti's arrangement of Stravinsky's *Firebird* and Liszt's *Petrarch Sonnet No 104* ('I fear and hope and burn and am full of ice') where Kantorow's empathy for Liszt's arrangement of his earlier song was absolute.

How the Russians must have loved Kantorow in his triumph at the 2019

Tchaikovsky Competition. He is very much a man after their own hearts, his warmth and engagement a far cry from other more abstract and even chillier alternatives (Pollini's celebrity in the West remains a mystery to the Russians).

Kantorow is a pianist with a burning mission, reminding you of William Blake's immortal aphorisms: 'exuberance is beauty'; and conversely, 'prudence is an ugly old maid courted by incapacity'. **IP**

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*Alexandre Kantorow can be heard performing the Bach-Brahms Chaconne on his latest album (BIS-2600 SACD)*