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**SACD Review by** [**Huntley Dent**](http://dev.fanfarearchive.com/indices/itop/reviewers/h1_060.html)

BRAHMS Piano Sonata No. 3. Ballades, op. 10. BACH-BRAHMS Chaconne in d (arr. for left hand) • Alexandre Kantorow (pn) • BIS 2600 (SACD: 84:18)

Although it was an undeniable triumph for Alexandre Kantorow to win the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 2019, and a source of national pride for France, the timing was unfortunate. Soon the pandemic brought live performances to a halt, and without a victory tour Kantorow might have risked becoming one of the overlooked gold medalists from the Tchaikovsky, which has had more than its fair share. He is stupendously talented and almost universally praised, however, so realistically speaking, at 24 Kantorow faces an illustrious career.

Here in his third solo recital disc. The central work is Brahms’s Piano Sonata No. 3, which has emerged on disc as the most popular of the three massive sonatas he composed starting when he was 19. They acknowledge Beethoven’s late piano sonatas, but the idiom strikes me as already Brahmsian, with a strong dose of Schumann. On a previous solo disc Kantorow programmed Piano Sonata No. 2, and in my review (Fanfare 44:3) I ventured a blanket judgment: “Kantorow plays Sonata No. 2 with such theatrical flair that perhaps only Richter makes for a fair comparison.”

Richter has never been recorded playing the Third Sonata, although there are nine live accounts of Sonata No. 1 and 13, no less, of Sonata No. 2. (This accords with his idiosyncratic choice of when and what he would play. Of the four Brahms Ballades, op. 10, which also appear on this new Kantorow recital, Richer played only the first two.) Few pianists obey Brahms’s dynamic markings for the opening of the sonata, which call for forte, a crescendo to fortissimo, and then a sudden drop to pianissimo. Typically performers drop to mezzo-piano, as Kantorow does. But what stands out is how boldly he handles the crescendo, building to a fierce volume level and phrasing with marked rubato. This sets the stage for a heroic Romantic reading, which is precisely what we get.

Kantorow makes the music as personal as any virtuoso from the Golden Age, which I find thrilling. He phrases flexibly and is willing to insert expressive hesitations, even though they break the flow of the moving line. He finds a monumentality in the first movement that is missing from even my favorite account, an early Nelson Freire recording on Sony. The effect is mesmerizing, assuming you aren’t immediately put off by such theatricality—this is like Shura Cherkassky redux. To keep the biggest gestures from throwing everything out of balance, there is relaxed lyrical playing in the movement’s quiet passages.

The moods of the three inner movements are beautifully expressed. Kantorow has a singing tone in the Andante espessivo but uses very little pedal and doesn’t linger. The Scherzo is played with a combination of exuberance and mercurial rhythmic pulse that keeps the music almost jazzily off-kilter. The Intermezzo is played with the kind of wistful inwardness that prefigures the late Intermezzos that ended Brahms’s writing for solo piano. He was a composer in love with cross-rhythms and syncopated accents, which Kantorow captures adroitly in the finale, yet in this difficult movement to bring off, what impressed me most was hearing a young pianist interpret with so much imagination and sympathy for the idiom. Kantorow ends on a triumphant note of Schumannesque abandon. I would easily call this my new favorite performance of Piano Sonata No. 3—every aspect of youthful genius is thrown into high relief.

The album begins with the Four Ballades, which make a suitable discmate for the sonata, since they are dated 1854, the year he turned 21. Except for the title, these pieces do not spring from Chopin’s Ballades but display Brahms’s literary leanings. Ballade No. 1 is based on “Edward,” the same Scottish poem that Carl Loewe memorably set as a Lied. Brahms seems to acknowledge the bardic nature of the verse by using simple open intervals and triads. He was in the habit of not revealing the poems that inspired some of his piano music, which seems to be the case in the other three Ballades. I tend to think of the Ballades as character pieces with undisclosed subjects, but in any event all are memorable and beautiful. Kantorow’s readings combine maturity, depth, and close personal sympathy for the music.

The program ends with Brahms’s arrangement for the left hand of Bach’s iconic Chaconne in D Minor, which is also on a new release from Daniil Trifonov, reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Both performances are satisfying, but I prefer Kantorow’s unabashed Romantic style. I should mention that BIS’s recorded sound, as heard in conventional two-channel stereo, has remarkable fidelity—the most forceful fortissimos are clean and clear. Overall, this release adds further luster to the reputation of a very gifted pianist and is easily one of the best recital discs of the year. A must-listen for devoted pianophiles. Huntley Dent