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ALEXANDRE KANTOROW

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JOURNEYS of exploration

As Alexandre Kantorow releases a second volume of Saint-Saëns piano concertos, Tim Parry meets a virtuoso on a compelling path of discovery

When Alexandre Kantorow walks on stage he exudes a curious combination of shy bewilderment and casual self-assurance, as if he can't quite believe that he's in front of all these people yet knows that everything is going to be OK. When he plays the piano, the music seems to flow through his body; he never looks under pressure or physical strain, even when performing the most demanding repertoire. His movements are free and loose yet precise, like

a well-coordinated rag doll. He is one of the most relaxed pianists you could imagine.

Casual self-assurance can easily tip over into knowing arrogance. But with Kantorow it never does, and speaking with him only enhances this impression. We meet first at his UK debut recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London's Southbank Centre at the end of January. The concert is sold out, the reception enthusiastic bordering on ecstatic. Audiences have been deprived of live music-making for

long enough to have a renewed gratitude for the experience, and this concert triumphantly reinforces a reputation already built on recordings for BIS and his Grand Prix success at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 2019.

A week later, the French pianist was back in London to play Saint-Saëns's Second Piano Concerto at the Royal Festival Hall with the Philharmonia and its young Finnish conductor Santtu-Matias Rouvali in the popular 3pm Sunday afternoon slot. Another warm reception. After the concert he was straight

on the Eurostar back to his home in Paris, and we agreed to talk further as soon as time allowed. Inevitably, so it seems nowadays, the next time we speak we are on Zoom, Kantorow looking as relaxed in front of a screen as he does at the piano.

Kantorow has just turned 25, although he seems older. He was born into an eminent musical family: his father is the violinist and conductor Jean-Jacques Kantorow, with whom Alexandre has made his concerto recordings for BIS, and his English mother is also a violinist. Such an upbringing has obvious advantages, but does it also come with expectations? 'My parents were a bit afraid of my being a son of musicians,' Kantorow says. 'They were afraid of applying parental pressure. You're right, there are a lot of advantages, but there can also be a backlash, so they waited a bit. It was my mum who took me to lessons and helped to sort my musical education, but my parents were really focused on my results in school. Of course, music was there all the time when I was young – I heard my dad practising and went to concerts – but it was never the main focus. We had a piano at home and I just wanted to have fun on it. I tried the violin, but it wasn't my thing, whereas the piano felt like a bit more of a brain game – I was into logic and maths, and with the piano you had to get the notes into your brain and know exactly where they were on the keyboard. My growing into music went gradually from the age of five to 16. When I was 12 I had an amazing teacher called Igor Lazko. He was the first one to establish important aspects of technique into my hands, and also the first to interrogate whether I wanted to be really serious about music. He made it clear to me that if I wanted to be professional then I had to work harder.'

'I had a good ear, and a good facility and coordination, and my parents noticed this early on. I was very floppy. I was never tense at the piano, always really relaxed'

This isn't the usual tale of a hot-housed prodigy rattling their way around the keyboard with tiny hands. But young Alexandre clearly had ability and inherited a highly developed ear. 'Yes, I had a good ear,' he says, 'and a good facility and coordination, and my parents of course noticed this early on. I was very floppy. I was never tense at the piano, always really relaxed.' I mention that this doesn't seem to have changed, and he laughs. 'It's true that I'm very comfortable on stage and mostly the body is very relaxed, but what matters is what happens inside and that can vary from concert to concert.'

Kantorow talks fluidly, jumping from one thought to another as a result of an abundance of things to say rather than through any struggle to articulate in a second language. As well as responding to questions and relating his own experiences, he is keen to engage in a genuine exchange. He not only tolerates but reciprocates my attempts at humour. He's a very easy conversationalist.

Having an established musician for a father brought huge advantages in accelerating the next stage of Kantorow's development. He made his first recording when he was 16, an album of French violin sonatas with his father on the NoMadMusic label, issued in 2014. 'At the time my dad wanted to stop playing the violin and I was playing the piano,' he explains, 'and we thought this would make a nice memory together and we wouldn't have the chance again.' The first recording for BIS followed a year later, with Liszt's two piano concertos and the youthful *Malédiction* for piano and string



Kantorow's first recording at 16 was of violin sonatas with his father, Jean-Jacques

orchestra, his father conducting the Tapiola Sinfonietta. 'That's the good thing when you're 17,' he says with a wry smile. 'You don't realise how big a mountain some pieces are. At this time I was playing quite a lot of Liszt, including not so well-known pieces like *Malédiction*. Then we had this idea for the project, and my dad put it together, and Robert von Bahr at BIS listened to it, and wanted to take it and to carry on working with me.'

This was the real breakthrough. BIS is an excellent home for a talented young musician, allowing space to grow and develop, with a vision and expectations geared towards sustained excellence rather than short-term goals. It helped that Jean-Jacques Kantorow already had a relationship with the label, having made many recordings including the three violin concertos and other works for violin and orchestra by Camille Saint-Saëns. This leads us very neatly to the companion project – the complete works for piano and orchestra including the five piano concertos and four smaller works, on two very well-filled discs – where Kantorow is again partnered by the Tapiola Sinfonietta with his father conducting. The first volume, containing the Third, Fourth and Fifth Concertos, was an Editor's Choice in June 2019 (as it happens, the month that Kantorow won the Tchaikovsky Competition). There is a danger that this release was slightly overshadowed by Bertrand Chamayou's recording of the Second and Fifth Concertos on Erato, which was issued a few months earlier and won *Gramophone's* Recording of the Year in 2019, but its qualities still hold firm. The follow-up album – containing Concertos Nos 1 and 2 and the four smaller works with orchestra – has just been issued, making this a desirable complete survey quite different from Chamayou's recording. The most obvious comparison is Stephen Hough's much-lauded set on Hyperion, which is now more than 20 years old.

Listening to the new recording, the first thing to strike you is how spaciouly Kantorow takes the famous opening of the Second Concerto. This was a feature of his performance at the Royal Festival Hall in early February – where the opening solo was measured, inflected, sonorous and deeply expressive – but it's even more marked on the recording. I wonder what the thinking is behind this approach. Kantorow's response is characteristically humble: 'Actually, today I would probably play it faster than I used to. At the time I was preoccupied with the



With Rena Shereshevskaya, who prepared him for the Tchaikovsky Competition

idea of characterising the different styles in this music, so in the first movement the change between the opening organ prelude and the more Schumannesque or Chopin-like music that follows.' I mention Saint-Saëns's own recording, a truncated solo version of the first movement set down acoustically in 1904, which includes this opening cadenza taken at a surprisingly rapid tempo and with inimitable freedom. Kantorow knows the recording of course. 'When I played it in London it was different,' he says, 'and today it would be different again, perhaps closer to the recording of Saint-Saëns. This music is so fresh and at the time I really wanted to characterise this opening prelude in quite an extreme manner. I wanted to amplify the contrasts in the music because even with all the fun and the lightness and bravura, there is a darkness in this work that somehow resonated with me at the time.'

This suggests that Kantorow's interpretative responses are malleable and something he sees as part of an ongoing journey. He clearly knows the composer's own recordings, but when learning a piece like this how much is he aware of other interpretations? 'Generally,' he begins, 'when playing something, you have usually heard recordings so you already have sounds in your ears that aren't created in your own imagination but are created by hearing someone else. There is a bit of a balance involved in reading what is written in the score and setting that in the context of your own experience – you will probably come up with things that are not written down, where you deduce that certain things are meant to be played in

a certain way. I spend enormous amounts of time at the piano going from one extreme to the other, feeling convinced one day that something should be played a certain way, allowing the harmonies and rhythms to reveal themselves, and then the next day feeling that a piece needs more help to make it special. I go back and forth. I don't know whether it is a good thing, but when I practise I play works in quite different ways. Sometimes I don't have my mind fully settled until I play something on stage. It helps to perform with an audience – then you really get to feel what at the time is right for you.'

We are so used to artists talking about the certainties of their convictions and the truths behind their interpretative choices that this openness is refreshing. Kantorow continues: 'It's as if there is a triangle, with each side representing deepness, structure and braveness, and generally it's hard to get more than two of these right. You never have it complete. Maybe in the opening of the Second Concerto I forgot the structure part of it.'

Such an exploratory approach must help to enable a sense of spontaneity in performance. 'Absolutely,' he agrees. 'It's an amazing thing – although it's a tiring and restless thing. I think it's good to be able to listen to your own playing from three months earlier and think, "I don't have a lot in common with this person anymore". I feel this is something important in music and in life in general.' Perhaps this is a youthful perspective. I can see that striving for such musical and personal growth is healthy, but it presents a challenge when it comes to making records. Kantorow nods. 'Definitely. It also makes you realise how subjective we are. You can listen to a recording and think it's good, and a few months later you think, "Who is this?", and it turns out it's you. It's so bizarre the way we hear ourselves.'

*'The First Concerto is charming ...
As it's Saint-Saëns it's orchestrated
in a clever way and makes you smile'*

Given the importance Kantorow places on playing things with an audience as an essential part of shaping his own relationship with a work, I'm curious whether he managed to perform all six pieces on his new album in concert before recording them. Saint-Saëns's Second Concerto is of course hugely popular, but one rarely hears the First in the concert hall, and the smaller works are difficult to programme, although *Wedding Cake* makes a pleasing encore. Kantorow acknowledges the advantages of having a father with longstanding associations with various European orchestras, which certainly helped when it came to running in some of these works. Sure enough, he has played them all in public at least once, as indeed he had with the three Saint-Saëns concertos on the earlier recording.

I have never heard the First and Third Concertos in concert, although I've always had a soft spot for the Third, sometimes rather unfairly cited as the weakest of the five. Kantorow tells me that he toured this concerto with the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra and everyone loved the piece. He'd love to play it more. What about the First Concerto, written when the composer was in his early twenties? 'I've played No 1 twice in concert,' Kantorow says. 'It's extremely charming and it has unique moments; the second movement especially is really elegant, a bit Baroque. The first and third movements are showpieces from a young composer, but as it's Saint-Saëns it's always orchestrated in a clever way, and it always makes you

PHOTOGRAPHY: VINCENT BOURRE, RENA

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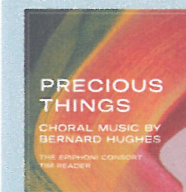
Phrases
Héloïse Werner and friends

Luminous and daring, this celebration of Héloïse Werner's multifaceted gifts is nourished by rich dualities. *Phrases* reveals Werner as both singer and composer, as an artist shaped by both her native France and her adopted UK, and as a soloist of captivating individuality who is also an intrepid collaborator.

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our ears, hearts and minds'**

- The Times

DCD34289
Released 27 May

Precious Things: Choral Music by Bernard Hughes
The Epiphoni Consort
Tim Reader director

Devoted to Bernard Hughes's choral music and programmed in close collaboration between the composer and The Epiphoni Consort, this portrait recording reveals a composer for whom musical style grows naturally out of the provenance of his commissions and their chosen texts.

Himself a wordsmith, text setting and delivery are at the forefront of Hughes's creative thinking, and Epiphoni, making a name for themselves in recordings of music by living British composers, are ideally suited to the delivery of Hughes's diverse language, in performances that showcase their trademark luxuriant sound.

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For Kantorow, audiences are essential in shaping his relationship to a particular work: 'Sometimes I don't have my mind fully settled until I play something on stage'

smile. It's a tough piece to programme in concert, but it feels like a gift to pianists – because it's not so often played you don't have too much of a performing tradition already in your head, and you can imagine that a friend has composed it just for you. You feel you have leeway to make it your own and you can just have fun with it.'

On the same day in June 1904 that Saint-Saëns recorded parts of the Second Concerto, he also set down an improvisation

on themes from *Africa*, a fantasy for piano and orchestra elaborating on North African melodies, finalised in Cairo in 1891.

Less than three minutes long, this recording is a testament to Saint-Saëns's prodigious

pianism, a snapshot from another age. 'It's incredible,' agrees Kantorow. 'Especially the timing that he has. He has a unique way of keeping the rhythm, keeping the structure, and playing with the timing without it feeling like he's consciously doing so. This is also what I love about his playing of the opening of the Second Concerto. Even though it's very fast, the way he slightly plays with the timing is really special. In the end, the tempo we choose isn't the most important thing. What matters is what we do with the sonorities and the timing within this overall tempo.'

This takes me back to Kantorow's recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. The importance to him of colour, sonority and musical space were evident throughout. Whether in the descending tritones that open Liszt's *Dante Sonata* or the ever-intensifying tremolos of Scriabin's *Vers la flamme*, Kantorow allowed time to create the most ravishing sounds from the gorgeously regulated Steinway. In the Scriabin, increasing the volume and ferocity of the tremolos without your wrists stiffening is a huge physical challenge, and I was reminded of his performance at the Tchaikovsky Competition of Liszt's 'Chasse neige', another work built on sustained tremolos, where he again conveyed power and potency

without obvious exertion. After the concert, our conversation turned to this Liszt Study – Kantorow's choice of it in Moscow over more popular competition pieces such as 'Mazepa' or 'Feux follets', his intense work on recalcitrant tremolos that behave differently on each piano, and our shared belief that it is a mark of Liszt's genius that he concluded the *Études d'exécution transcendante* with a piece of such bleak desolation.

Later, with more time to talk and as a kind of epilogue to our Zoom call, we pick up the threads of this conversation. I ask him why he entered the Tchaikovsky Competition in

the first place. He was already an established name, with high-profile, well-received recordings for BIS alongside a growing concert career. Was there a risk that entering the competition could backfire?

'I think the first time I really thought about the Tchaikovsky was listening to the previous competition [in 2015],' Kantorow begins. 'I watched Lucas Debargue playing, and I remember this incredible story of his not playing the piano for so long, and the way he made everyone notice him. There was this frenzy in his playing. I was very curious about who his teacher was. I found out that it was Rena Shereshevskaya, who studied in Moscow alongside Mikhail Pletnev' – Pletnev is another pianist Kantorow singles out for his mastery of sonority and timing. 'I asked her to come to a concert of mine, and afterwards the first thing she said to me was, "You've had a Russian teacher", which is true. "I know," she said. "No French pianist knows how to play with this Russian technique."'

I am immediately curious. From what I've experienced of Kantorow's live playing, with my amateur eyes and ears, his style is not obviously Russian. Was this something in his sound or in his technique? 'I think it must have been a mixture,' Kantorow says, although he seems as mystified as I am. 'She would have heard something, maybe an attention to notes that sustain, or a certain way of getting into the keyboard with weight. I don't know how she figured this.' With widespread international travel and the sharing of influences, not to mention the all-pervasiveness of the internet, national characteristics in playing styles are not so marked, or indeed so relevant, as they used to be. But Kantorow points out that it remains the case that in Russian culture the teacher is more important than the student. Those family trees of teacher-student relationships stretching over decades are a peculiarly Russian phenomenon, so that even Emil Gilels was routinely described as a student of Heinrich Neuhaus as a way of reinforcing his credentials.

Shereshevskaya agreed to work with Kantorow, although he tells me that she got mad that they didn't get enough time together as he was always off playing concerts. He continues: 'I didn't know if I wanted to enter the Tchaikovsky Competition. It's true that I was already established, and there was a lot of talk about whether the competition was necessary or could backfire if I didn't get through the first round. Two years before the competition was when we really started to work. It took more than a year to choose the programme. We tried a lot of different pieces, and she got to understand where my strengths lie. I'd never worked so much on individual pieces before. She showed me that preparing for a competition is different from preparing for a recital, even though in the moment each performance should feel like a concert. It was tough, but so exciting.'

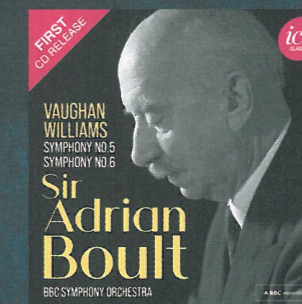
Kantorow looks back on the intensity of this preparation with fondness and satisfaction. He learned a lot, regardless of the outcome of the competition. As with all such prestigious events, winning brought a slew of concert engagements and wider recognition, not least in Russia. Never again will he get to perform Brahms's Second Piano Concerto in such a heightened state, having just played Tchaikovsky's Second Concerto – an extraordinary feat of stamina and musicianship displayed in the concerto final. I wonder if Kantorow can recall how he felt as he sat down to play the Brahms in such unique circumstances. His reply is simple: 'A mixture of extreme tiredness and extreme relaxation.' **G**

► Alexandre Kantorow's BIS recording of Saint-Saëns's First and Second Piano Concertos and four smaller works is reviewed on page 42

PHOTOGRAPHY: SASHA GUSOV

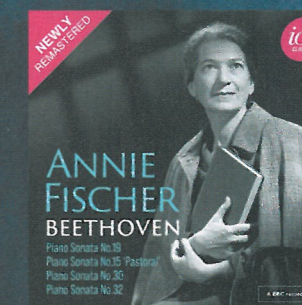
NEW RELEASES
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Sir Adrian Boult
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Released to mark Vaughan Williams' 150th anniversary, Boult conducts authoritative interpretations of two of the composer's greatest symphonies, Nos 5 & 6 caught live from the 1972 and 1975 Royal Albert Hall 'Proms'. The musicologist Anthony Payne described the performance of Symphony No. 5 as 'one of the most taut and concentrated interpretations I have ever heard of the work'. Both recordings are enhanced by superb new stereo remastering.



Annie Fischer
ICAC 5165

Bryce Morrison, the renowned authority on piano music, said of Annie Fischer, "she was among the greatest and most richly comprehensive of all pianists". Universally acclaimed as an interpreter of Mozart and Beethoven amongst others, Annie Fischer was always critical of her own studio recordings preferring the spontaneity of live performances. These live stereo BBC recordings from 1971 to 1987 of Beethoven sonatas were recorded in single takes.



Clara Haskil
Herbert
von Karajan
ICAC 5166

Herbert von Karajan and the revered Romanian pianist Clara Haskil had an extraordinary rapport. These performances recorded live emanate from a concert tour that took place in January 1956 in Salzburg to mark Mozart's bicentenary. Apart from their rarity and outstanding artistry, these recordings are notable for their excellent sound which has benefitted from state-of-the-art remastering.

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flair or inspiration'), whose shadowy atmosphere feels a tad more special. Recommended. **David Gutman**

Rautavaara

Fantasia^a. In the Beginning. Lost Landscapes^a.
Deux Sérénades (compl Aho)^a
^aSimone Lamsma *vn*

Malmö Symphony Orchestra / Robert Trevino
Ondine © ODE1405-2 (58' • DDD)



Here we have 'late-period Rautavaara' – music written after the composer's aortic

dissection of 2004 and the extensive convalescence that followed. It is marked out, according to Kimmo Korhonen's generous booklet note, by a sense of serenity and distillation from a composer who had glimpsed death and had nothing left to prove. Taken together, the works here form a 'grand farewell'.

That's one way of reading it. Another is that post-2004 Rautavaara simply isn't as good as much of the music that came before. *In the Beginning* (2015), the composer's last completed piece, is an overture-like work that is no match for *Isle of Bliss*. Like *In the Beginning*, the Fantasia for violin and orchestra written in 2015 for Anne Akiko Meyers can't quite work out how to end itself and so simply shrugs its shoulders and stops. This is Rautavaara in soft, neo-Romantic vein, his unmistakable harmonies glimpsed fleetingly. It noodles on its chosen modes like a bored organist waiting for a late bride.

There is a little more to the *Two Serenades*, written for Hilary Hahn (and completed by Kalevi Aho, as it lay unfinished when Rautavaara died) and recorded by her recently (DG, 3/21). The weave of the violin line clearly endears the piece to violinists. There are some codified references hidden underneath the nostalgia and even an attractive sense of patience and stasis in places, a relief after the uniform movement heard thus far. There is more soul in these works, and soloist Simone Lamsma responds in kind.

Lost Landscapes is an orchestration from 2015 of Rautavaara's 2005 work of the same name for violin and piano. It charts places of significance for the composer, from Vienna to New York, but the music hardly differs in expression or construction; Rautavaara's vision of New York sounds rather like his own picture of Vienna, just faster. There is some beauty here, but plenty to lull listeners into slumber. And there's far more to Rautavaara's oeuvre than that. **Andrew Mellor**

Rihm

'#39'
Male über Male 2^a. Sphäre nach Studie^b.
Stabat mater^c

^cChristian Gerhaher *bar*^a Jörg Widmann *cl*

^cTabea Zimmermann *va*^b Tamara Stefanovich *pf*

^{ab}members of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra / Stanley Dodds

BR-Klassik © 900639 (58' • DDD • T)

Recorded live at the Prinzregententheater,

Munich, December 8, 2020

Rihm

'#40'
Jagden und Formen

Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra / Franck Ollu

BR-Klassik © 900640 (62' • DDD)



In our polystylistic age, has any major composer been more polystylistic than Wolfgang Rihm? On the turn of a dime, he writes music that's neo-expressionistic (*Jakob Lenz*), post-serial (the *Chiffres*) or neo-Romantic (the *Nähe fern* Symphony, composed after Brahms). Alongside the volume of his output – north of 500 works and counting – it can leave you either exhausted, impressed or confused. These two recordings, featuring impeccable performances by musicians associated with Munich's *musica viva* series, alternately show us the mainstream and the avant-garde Rihm.

First the mainstream. *Sphäre nach Studie* (1994/2002) for chamber ensemble is a piano-driven slow-burner. Half an hour long, it's written in a pointillistic style: brief staccato stabs on piano and harp are surrounded initially by silence, then, as the work goes on, by quasi-resonant washes in the other instruments, from the decay of gongs to low sustained string notes. It's like a mash-up of Bartók's night music and Lachenmann, but ultimately the form is uninvolved and the material doesn't warrant the length. More lyrical is Rihm's *Stabat mater* (2019) for baritone and viola. Recently set by James MacMillan, the 'Stabat mater' text in Rihm's setting is secular; he sees the text as 'a work of poetry, a subjectively poetic moment of contemplation'. Baritone Christian Gerhaher's tone starts out as lamenting, the opening line's syllabic phrasing taking a full minute to unravel. By the 'Eia mater' a hint of sensuality has begun to inch in, and the work's neo-atonal style comes across like a Renaissance song as reimagined by

Berg. *Male über Male 2* (2000/2008) for clarinet and nine instruments is similarly lyrical, making full use of the clarinet's range with sudden leaps from the highest to the lowest register. Jörg Widmann (Rihm's former student) performs the solo part deftly, but as before, with little development, the basic material feels too stretched over four movements.

The second disc is a new recording of a classic – not only of Rihm's oeuvre but of the music of this century: the concerto for orchestra *Jagden und Formen* ('Hunts and Forms', 1995–2001, rev 2008). Reviewing the original *Jagden und Formen* release on DG (9/02), Fabrice Fitch noted that 'subsequent revisions are not out of the question', and so it has proved. Rihm's proclivity for revisions ties into the idea of the open work, popular in the 1960s avant-garde, and shows kinship with that other arch-reviser, Boulez. Boulez is also a reference for the music's proliferative style, as exemplified in the breakneck opening violin duo: their unison quickly becomes heterophony, before wider ensemble counterpoint begins flashing by, almost too fast to hear. The unbridled *élan vital* barely abates for the next hour, the titular chase leaping out from the pristine dry recording, all shrieking clarinets and tremolo vibraphone and thrumming electric bass guitar. By contrast, the ending is remarkably understated: a bongo solo, over which a brief flute duo affirms a plangent melody.

It is a virtuoso work, and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra here palpably relish it. The previous release, performed by Ensemble Modern, slightly mellowed the avant-garde edge; alongside this being the revised and definitive version, it makes the BR-Klassik disc the one to go for.

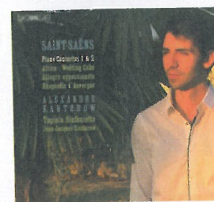
Liam Cagney

Saint-Saëns

Piano Concertos - No 1, Op 17; No 2, Op 22.
Africa, Op 89. Allegro appassionato, Op 70.
Rhapsodie d'Auvergne, Op 73. Valse-Caprice,
'Wedding Cake', Op 76

Alexandre Kantorow *pf*

Tapiola Sinfonietta / Jean-Jacques Kantorow
BIS © BIS2400 (85' • DDD/DSD)



The prospect of a recording of any of Saint-Saëns's works for piano and orchestra is always a delightful one. You know you are in for an hour or more of music that lifts the spirits with its *joie de vivre* and inexhaustible supply of memorable

ideas. The prospect is enhanced, on this occasion, by the same soloist, orchestra and conductor who gave us Concertos Nos 3, 4 and 5 back in the long-ago pre-pandemic days, a superb disc that won the accolade of an Editor's Choice (6/19).

This one should be heading the same way, despite some reservations about the first movement of Piano Concerto No 2. Of course, there is more than one way of interpreting such requests as *andante sostenuto* and *ad libitum* (for the solo passage that begins the work) and crotchet=54 (for the orchestra's entry), but the Kantorows, father and son, take both sections far too ponderously. Perhaps Alexandre had been playing too much Brahms (I note that the G minor Concerto was the only work here recorded in 2021; the remainder come from sessions in 2018 and 2020). Also, after the cadenza, at 8'06" the piano hits a low octave B natural followed by a semiquaver rest. In what might be an editing error the music simply stops; four bars later, there is a right-hand octave onslaught marked *agitatissimo*. It certainly is not that here. The end result is a first movement that lasts nearly two and a half minutes longer than benchmark accounts by Darré, Hough, Chamayou and young Benjamin Grosvenor. The popular Scherzo movement is superb, and the finale is taken at an exciting true *presto* (though there is an unscheduled *meno mosso* adjustment at 2'02", just after fig D).

None of these moments is significant enough to mar one's enjoyment of the music-making. Quite the opposite. There is a palpable exuberance and joy in the way these works come across, none more so in the four concertante works for piano and orchestra, the effervescent *Wedding Cake* caprice, *Rhapsodie d'Auvergne* (an early use of French folk song, years ahead of d'Indy and Canteloube), *Allegro appassionato* (not the better-known work for cello with the same title) and *Africa* (who else was using North African folk music at this time?).

The album also includes the woefully neglected Piano Concerto No 1, with its opening horn call reminding us of the end of Chopin's Second Piano Concerto. If the rousing finale doesn't hook you, then try the haunting slow movement with its prescient passages not only of its successor but of the kind of impressionistic writing that anticipates Ravel by half a century.

It's a terrific programme – unique for a single disc, so far as I know – clocking in at 85 minutes, and another feather in the cap of the gifted soloist and his partners. The recording offers an exemplary balance between piano and orchestra in a realistic acoustic, and comes with a good booklet –

but was the original version of the Second Concerto really for pedal piano?

Jeremy Nicholas

► See our interview with Alexandre Kantorow on page 16

Shostakovich · Weill

Shostakovich Symphony No 5, Op 47^a

Weill Symphony No 2, 'Symphonic Fantasy'

Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra / Lahav Shani

Warner Classics © 9029 54783-4 (77' • DDD)

^aRecorded live at De Doelen, Rotterdam, September 29 & 30, 2018



An eye- (and ear-) catching coupling. Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony is front and centre of the core repertoire these days – though not always in performances as good as this one – but we rarely hear Kurt Weill's two symphonies and the Second is a piece of real significance in the musical history of its time, bridging as it does Weill's two lives in Germany and America.

Indeed, the strident call to arms at the outset of this 'Symphonic Fantasy' together with its many pages of motoric urgency come upon us like a metaphor for Weill's flight from Germany, where the writing was very much on the wall. He wrote the symphony in Paris in 1933-34 but it is the stark realisation of what he was leaving behind that gives it its imperative, dare I say martial, character. In the lyric contrasts – such as the melody for solo trumpet in the first movement – we can almost hear the accompanying accordion of those celebrated Brechtian street songs, gritty and urban, and the funeral oration for trombone in the oppressive central *Largo* is unmistakably Weillian and strangely monochromatic like one of those wartime newsreels.

The Israeli conductor Lahav Shani (Principal Conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic) is new to me and I am mightily impressed by his lean and taut way with a piece he so clearly holds a special place for in his portfolio. The finale has real teeth, and besides its almost imperceptible transformation into a goose-stepping march one might see the flashes of piccolo as glinting menacingly off Mack the Knife's switchblade. I personally love the way Weill assimilated himself into American culture and have always felt that his best work in music theatre happened there. Perhaps critics of his concert work did him an unintentional favour. Good to hear this again, though, and better yet to hear it served so well.

But hot on its heels is an account of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony where the feeling is refreshingly one of rediscovery. From bar one there is an inescapable and unremitting tension. Shani has a wonderful nose for atmosphere and the chilled first subject seems to find its own space in a desolate place. The second subject brings a glimmer of hope and warmth but the theatre of war is soon upon us and Shani's darkly imposing Rotterdam brass bring home the development thrillingly. There's more than a touch of the Hebraic in the big unison release here, and the long celesta-flecked coda is mesmerising.

Shani reminds me just how achingly beautiful the slow movement of this piece is. The atmosphere is again distilled and super-spatial, with string-playing that leans wholeheartedly into the harmonic pull of the music – and honestly I don't think I have ever heard the transition into the hushed final pages sound quite as breathtaking (and that despite some extraneous rustling from the audience).

The much-contested (though not so these days) final pages of the finale are, of course, signalled from brutish march at the outset but Shani takes no prisoners when it comes to ramming home Shostakovich's hollow victory. The repeated *As* are possessed of an insanity that it is impossible to misconstrue however much the audience's cheers would have us think otherwise. A terrific disc. Edward Seckerson

Sibelius

Symphonies – No 2, Op 43; No 4, Op 63

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra /

Owain Arwel Hughes

Rubicon © RCD1072 (87' • DDD)



The second instalment of Owain Arwel Hughes's Sibelius cycle is a pairing of the Second and Fourth Symphonies with a running time of no less than 87 minutes. Having found Hughes's interpretations of the First and Third symphonies (11/20) unusually eloquent and persuasive, I was hoping for more of the same with these new additions to the series. However, although the performances have many virtues, I don't feel they approach the stature of the earlier recording. As before, Hughes directs straightforward and purposeful interpretations, and the orchestral playing is both refined and committed. The big-boned and slightly bass-rich recording is also very imposing. Nevertheless, both performances operate