

# Alexandre TANSMAN

## PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

QUATRE DANSES MINIATURES

MAZURKAS, BOOK I

SONATA RUSTICA

ÉTUDE-SCHERZO

5 IMPROMPTUS

SONATINA NO.1

7 PRELUDES

Danny Zelibor

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

# ALEXANDRE TANSMAN: PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

by Danny Zelibor

With the music of any brilliant composer, even a minimally trained ear can detect a specific personality. You recognise the ‘Waldstein’ or ‘Appassionata’ Sonatas from only a few notes, but even in the least familiar Beethoven works, it is possible to guess the composer. The same holds true for Alexandre<sup>1</sup> Tansman. You repeatedly encounter signature motifs and variations on his favourite pianistic treatments, which thread through and unify his entire canon of piano compositions. Yet perhaps the most powerful element in Tansman’s output is that, although always staying true to his personal language, he translates it to adopt, absorb and incorporate the various influences that shaped his lengthy career. In combination with his fecundity and long life, this cosmopolitan approach has left posterity with a cornucopia of music to enjoy.

Born in Łódź in 1897, Alexandre Tansman could not have asked for a more auspicious start in life.<sup>2</sup> The son of well-to-do parents in the Jewish upper-middle class, he entered a world in which his various talents could easily flourish. He began his studies at the conservatoire in Łódź, eventually continuing to Warsaw, where he was put on the map by winning first, second and third prizes in a Polish national composition contest with a violin piece and two works for solo piano. This boost of encouragement – along with a not-so-enthusiastic response from Polish music-critics, rooted in anti-Semitic sentiment and their distaste for his exploration of chromaticism – prompted him to try his luck in Paris.

This move in 1919 almost immediately proved a successful one for the young composer. With the help of Maurice Ravel, he quickly found himself moving in elite musical circles, meeting publishers (Max Eschig would publish the lion’s share of his output), conductors (Vladimir Golschmann and Serge Koussevitzky would become major champions of his orchestral music), and fellow composers and musicians, among them Charlie Chaplin, George Gershwin, Bohuslav Martinů, Darius Milhaud and, perhaps most importantly, Igor Stravinsky, whose biography he wrote in 1948.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tansman was first known as Aleksander but adopted the form Alexandre soon after his arrival in France in 1919 and retained it thereafter.

<sup>2</sup> Tansman’s autobiography, left unfinished in 1958, was published only in 2013, as *Regards en arrière: Itinéraire d’un musicien cosmopolite*, ed. Cédric Segond-Genovesi, Éditions Aedam Musicae, Château-Gontier.

<sup>3</sup> *Igor Stravinsky*, Amiot-Dumont, Paris, 1948 (new edition Les Éditions du point d’exclamation, Paris, 2009).

When the threat of the Second World War began to loom over Europe, it became clear that Jewish musicians had to flee Paris to escape the Nazis. Tansman and his wife, Colette Cras,<sup>4</sup> herself an accomplished pianist, and their two daughters, Mireille and Marianne, first escaped to Nice. They remained there until 1941, after which a committee including Charlie Chaplin, Eugene Ormandy and Arturo Toscanini helped transfer the family to the United States. For the next five years, they resided in Hollywood, a sort of ‘modern Weimar’, as Tansman would call it.<sup>5</sup> Apart from this brief exile, he spent his entire career in Paris (it was there that he died, on 15 November 1986) – and yet the cultures that shaped his music were hardly so singular. Besides obvious French and Polish inflections, his palette included jazz and blues (much like Milhaud) and a host of eastern influences from a world tour he made in 1932–33 – not the mark of a composer with no voice of his own but of one who believed that to ignore influence was to do disservice to the process of composition. He further incorporated chromaticism into his language but never wholly abandoned tonality, remaining more or less a Neoclassicist. His catalogue is vast – it includes concerti, ballets, operas, a wide array of chamber music, oratorios, symphonic works and film music – but like many composers, he used the piano as one of his primary vehicles of expression.<sup>6</sup>

The first work on this album, the *Sonata Rustica* (1925), was one of his most successful works; appositely, it was dedicated to Ravel, whose support had been instrumental in advancing his early career. Indeed, the work itself owes much to Ravel, who helped Tansman ‘develop a sense of economy of means, cultivate an intimate relationship between line and means of expression, and resist empty musical prattle.’<sup>7</sup> This sonata exemplifies that influence, its three movements always sticking to the point, never meandering into meaningless padding. The first movement [1], a sort of rustic scene, skillfully parades the theme through various guises. The second, a Cantilena marked *Largo* [2], is the crown of the work, beautifully demonstrating that ‘relationship between line and means of expression’, relying on an aching pathos that Tansman often employs (other examples include the Mazurka No. 2 found in this recording [9] and the Sarabande from his *Suite dans le style ancien* of 1929). The third movement [3] rounds out the work in an excited display of dance material.

<sup>4</sup> Her father was the composer Jean Cras (1879–1932).

<sup>5</sup> In an interview with M. H. Pinel, quoted in ‘Alexandre Tansman: Diary of a 20th-Century Composer’, compiled and translated by Jill Timmons and Sylvain Frémaux, online at [http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish\\_music/PMJ/issue/1.1.98/tansman\\_part1.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/PMJ/issue/1.1.98/tansman_part1.html).

<sup>6</sup> This series of recordings will focus largely on the piano music Tansman intended for adult players. His substantial output of music for young pianists is being recorded by Elżbieta Tyszecka on a number of CDs (so far AP0205, AP0246, AP0255 and AP0270) from the Polish label Acte Préalable.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in ‘Alexandre Tansman: Diary of a 20th-Century Composer’, *loc. cit.*

In spite of his naturalisation as a French citizen in 1938, Tansman always considered himself ‘un compositeur polonais’, and this outlook informed much of his music-making. But like Grieg and Bartók, although he drew heavily from his national heritage, he was adamant that he would never include a folk melody in its original form; doing so, he believed, would diminish the integrity of the tune. Instead, he chose to write ‘in the style of’, incorporating a distillation of the harmonies, melodic nuances and rhythmic characteristics germane to Polish folk-music. The *Quatre Danses miniatures* (1923) offer exactly this sort of composition. The first two movements, a ‘Gavotte’ [4] and ‘Menuet’ [5], are snippets of traditional stylised dance music, both ending with the same sort of chromatic downward-stepping left-hand that Tansman so often exploits. The fourth is a ‘Petite marche’ [7], a single page of clashing harmonies and accented sarcasm, making it difficult to imagine that this is not some sort of musical satire. But it is the third dance [6] that so perfectly exemplifies Tansman’s usage of Polish folklore: a mazurka marked ‘à la Chopin’, it employs Polish gestures although quoting no specific material. And an even more striking example can be found in the set of pieces which follows.

The *Mazurkas: 1er recueil*, composed between 1918 and 1928, constitute the first of the four sets of mazurkas Tansman would eventually write, and they are cornerstones of his piano works. The first set is peppered with three obereks (Nos. I [8], III [10] and IX [16]), spirited dances that are propelled forward by an acrobatic right hand and droning left. The remaining works consist of slow-to-moderate pieces that display long melodic lines, seductive chromaticism and playful interaction between the various voices.

Written in 1922, the virtuosic *Étude-Scherzo* [18] is one of the earliest examples of polytonality in Tansman’s repertoire. The hands exist on different planes, interrupting each another with counter-material, and the closing *glissando*, which is punctuated by staccato left-hand quavers, dissipates the two pages into nothing. This brief work has points in common with the third-movement Toccata of the Sonatina No. 1, written a year later [28]. Both approach polytonality in much the same way, though the latter is more exploratory, explosive and technically taxing. One section is so Stravinskian in character that it immediately conjures up ‘Les Augures printaniers’ from *Le sacre du printemps*. The other two movements represent two of Tansman’s primary influences. The first [26], with its thin, fluid lines, is a product of the musical climate in Paris, and the second [27], marked ‘In modo polonico’, hints at a Polish style through suggestive rhythms and veiled folk-melodies.

Tansman is at his most daring in the *Sept Préludes* of 1921. These are intricate pieces of music, no two of which follow the same pattern. Their form is experimental, typically free or fantasy-like in nature, and the harmonies can be at one turn just shy of a Gershwin song or Scriabin prelude, and at the next become dense stacks of sound that climb up three staves. The first Prélude, for example, opens with a cacophony

of thick texture and mismatched harmonies [19] but then slowly melts away into moments of a single-line melody that leaves the listener wanting for nothing. The second [20] is perhaps the most simplistic of the set, strung together by one essentially seamless line that is punctuated by a mini-coda which recalls the opening melody. The remaining five preludes remind the listener that these pieces are exercises in contrast. Each one displays the quietest of pianissimos and the most thunderous of fortes, ebbing and flowing between the two. The most extreme case is found in the fifth [23], which is both atmospheric and declamatory, opening and ending with thin veils of texture that are punctured by a tremendous climax. And although the first, second and fifth preludes gently hint at something of a cadence, these pieces ultimately finish by stepping chromatically into silence, keeping them open-ended and beautifully mysterious.

The *Cinq Impromptus*, written in 1922–25, are dedicated to Serge Koussevitzky, who used his post at the Boston Symphony to kickstart Tansman's career in the United States. Each impromptu is a unique snapshot of pianistic treatment and mood. The 'Mélodie' [29] is as placid as it is simplistic, held together by the insistent open fifth in the left hand. The 'Carillon et Ronde', a spirited piece that depicts a village parade [30], is reminiscent of 'Fête-Dieu à Séville' from Albeniz's *Ibéria*. One hears the ruckus of a distant procession, and with each repetition of the opening bell motif the parade approaches the listener. What follows is an episodic display of various mazurka-like gestures, frequently using a short-short-long rhythmic pulse. The 'Berceuse' [31] is a haunting piece with a repetitious left hand providing the foundation for a floating soprano line. When the melody shifts from a single line to *pianissimo* ninths, the result is one of the spookiest moments in Tansman's entire keyboard output. The quirkiest of the five is the 'Humoresque', a piece driven by an ostinato bass and unrelenting melody [32]. The tension increases until it culminates with a boisterous crash, whereupon a single-note *sforzando* suddenly jars the listener, unleashing the basic humour and sarcasm of the piece. The set concludes with one of Tansman's hallmarks: a motoric and unrelenting drive to the end [33].

The American pianist **Danny Zelibor** is becoming a musician to watch on the international scene. His most recent season was highlighted by a return to the Valencia International Piano Academy to perform Beethoven's 'Emperor' Concerto with the Orquesta de Santa Cecilia de Cullera, as well as a top prize in the Los Angeles International Liszt Competition. Danny Zelibor's years of study at Texas Christian University – he is a native Texan – yielded numerous accolades, including the Nordan Scholarship (the sole full scholarship at TCU for music students) and numerous collaborative and solo performances throughout Dallas-Fort Worth. In addition to Spain, his concert career has also taken him to Austria and the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz.

Danny Zelibor's passion for the music of Spain and Latin America led initially to a thesis presentation at TCU, and has subsequently yielded a wide exploration of the Latin American and Spanish piano repertoire. His continued examination of this rich literature is giving him a degree of prominence among young American pianists. But it is his interest in the music of Alexandre Tansman that is shaping his career most, resulting in a thorough academic and musical exploration of the man and his work. He is currently continuing his doctoral studies at the University of North Texas under the guidance of Joseph Banowetz, having previously studied with Tamás Ungár at TCU.



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# Alexandre TANSMAN Piano Music, Volume One

## Sonata Rustica (Piano Sonata No. 1) (1925) 15:18

- [1] I *Allegro agreste – Un poco meno vivo – Più lento – Tempo primo – poco meno mosso – Meno vivo* 5:41
- [2] II *Cantilena: Largo* 5:44
- [3] III *Danza festiva: Molto allegro – Un poco meno mosso – Più vivo – Tempo primo* 3:53

## Quatre Danses miniatures (1923)\* 5:20

- [4] I Gavotte 0:50
- [5] II Menuet 0:57
- [6] III Mazurka 'à la Chopin' 2:39
- [7] IV Petite marche 0:54

## Mazurkas: Book I (1918–28) 17:26

- [8] I Oberek: *Vivo* 1:14
- [9] II *Moderato – Più lento – Tempo primo – Moderato – Più lento – Tempo primo* 3:51
- [10] III Oberek: *Molto vivo* 0:50
- [11] IV *Andante espressivo* 1:30
- [12] V *Modéré* 2:25
- [13] VI *Moderato* 1:25
- [14] VII *Moderato* 1:16
- [15] VIII *Moderato* 1:36
- [16] IX Oberek: *Molto vivace – Molto meno mosso – Molto vivace* 2:28
- [17] X *Berceuse: Lento* 1:51
- [18] *Étude-Scherzo (1922): Molto vivace* 1:18

## 7 Préludes (1921)\* 13:10

### Vol. I: Trois Préludes 6:04

- [19] I *Moderato – Lent – Tempo primo* 3:18
- [20] II *Andantino cantabile* 0:54
- [21] III *Moderato – Lento* 1:46

### Vol. II: Quatre Préludes 7:06

- [22] IV *Lent* 2:24
- [23] V *Lent* 1:49
- [24] VI *Andante – Più vivo – Più lento – Più vivo (come prima) – Tempo primo* 2:30
- [25] VII *Moderato – Un poco più vivo* 1:23

## Sonatina (No. 1) (1923) 8:45

- [26] I *Modéré – Tranquillo – Animando* 3:31
- [27] II *In modo polonico: Allegretto – Un poco più vivo – Tempo primo* 3:01
- [28] II *Toccata: Vivace – Tranquillo* 2:54

## 5 Impromptus (1922–25)\* 8:09

- [29] I *Mélie (1925): Andante cantabile* 1:29
- [30] II *Carillon et ronde (Fête villageoise polonaise) (1925): Allegro marziale – Più vivo (Tempo di Mazurka) – Meno mosso – Tempo primo* 4:17
- [31] III *Berceuse (1922): Lento* 2:20
- [32] IV *Humoresque (1924): Molto vivace – Lento* 1:03
- [33] V *Étude (Toccata) (1924): Presto – Prestissimo* 1:00