

FACT SHEET

Piano Concerto 2 (original version)

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composed: 1879-1880

Genre: Orchestral

First Performed: New York, 1881

Length: 50 mins

In Brief:

In 1877, Tchaikovsky began a lonely, nomadic existence that took him away from Moscow, St Petersburg, and the excruciating fall-out from his disastrous marriage. The next four years, visiting only close friends and family in the Russian countryside or staying abroad, were unsettled and somewhat rootless. Only at his sister's home in Kamenka in the Ukraine, was he to find stability, and it was here that he started work on his second piano concerto. *'I feel a certain emptiness... I have to get on with something'*, he wrote there. But he was soon gripped with inspired fervour: *'Today I began to create something, and the boredom vanished as if by magic'*, and, filling his emotional void with some glamour and grandeur, this music must have seemed like a lifeline to the musical scene he was missing.

Structure:

- I. Allegro brillante e molto vivace
- II. Andante non troppo
- III. Allegro con fuoco

In Depth:

Following the catastrophic end to his astonishing marriage in 1877, Tchaikovsky left Moscow and a year later resigned from the Moscow Conservatory. Without regular contact with the musical world, and constantly ill at ease from travelling, he lacked creative impetus and energy. The resulting dispiriting ennui was hard to shake off in the circumstances.

Eventually in October 1879, on a prolonged stay at his sister's estate at Kamenka (Ukraine), he began a determined effort to write his second piano concerto. Visits to Paris and Rome saw more progress on the work, and when he returned to Kamenka the following spring he began to orchestrate it. He dedicated the concerto to the same pianist to whom he'd tried to

dedicate his first concerto, Nikolai Rubinstein, even though the eminent virtuoso had utterly dismissed his earlier work. But Rubinstein died suddenly in March 1881, before he was able to play the première, which was eventually given in New York by Madeleine Schiller in November 1881. Tchaikovsky persuaded his colleague and contemporary Taneyev to give the first Russian performance, which took place in May 1882. By 1888, Tchaikovsky had made a number of revisions suggested by Taneyev, though he rejected comments from another friend, Alexandr Ziloti. Interestingly however, these latter comments were incorporated into an edition that was published after Tchaikovsky's death.

Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto 2, sometimes specified as G major, finds the composer experimenting more freely with form and structure, perhaps reflecting its unpressured genesis and the composer's solitude. As with his first piano concerto, the first movement is substantial, and it contains several extravagant cadenzas. It's an alluring, rich work in a grand style: the piano expands phrase after phrase across the octaves, while the orchestra surges and punctuates alongside.

The first movement is episodic in form, with the orchestra playing the first subject in G major before the piano, which then goes on to play a cadenza in the unexpected key of in E flat. A long development ensues, which contains two more cadenzas for the soloist.

The second movement brings extensive violin and cello solos, which even contains some cadenza writing for the cello. In contrast to the grand scale of the first movement, the piano, violin and cello form a grouping akin to the intimate concerto grosso baroque style. The movement ends with another piano cadenza.

The emotional core is distilled in the third movement, where the second theme appears in the related minor key of E minor. A third theme leads to a recapitulation through F major and D minor, and the movement ends with suitable panache.