

FACT SHEET

Suite 3

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composed: 1885

Genre: Orchestral

First Performed: Moscow, 1886

Length: 41 mins

In Brief:

Tchaikovsky's Suite 3 saw the composer enjoying the orchestra's scope freely, unconfined by the plot of an opera or ballet or the accepted format of a symphony. The happy result is vintage Tchaikovsky in lighter mood and in musical styles that he found especially comfortable, expressed in characteristic terms: melodies and exclamations are exchanged between the different instruments in the orchestra, dance-like lyricism is led by high treble instruments, and the bass lines are responsive and fluent.

Structure:

1. *Elègie*. Andantino molto cantabile (G major).
2. *Valse mélancolique*. Allegro moderato (E minor).
3. *Scherzo*. Presto (E minor).
4. *Tema con variazioni*. Andante con moto (G major).

In Depth:

Following the production of his opera *Mazepa* in Moscow in February 1884, Tchaikovsky went abroad. He wrote to his sister-in-law Praskov'ia Tchaikovskaia from Paris on 23 February 1884: *'I'm still not feeling wholly myself due to exhaustion, and I think that without the peace and tranquillity of the countryside I shall not be able to do any work, but at the moment I feel the urge to start something new'*.

Over the next few months, Tchaikovsky seems to have considered writing a symphony, a piano concerto, and then a suite. Arriving at Kamenka, Ukraine in April, he began rough sketches for a future symphonic work. Surviving diary entries, letters and sketches in one of his notebooks provide a blow-by-blow account of the composition process.

On 13 April 1884, Tchaikovsky recorded: *'Hit upon an idea for a concerto for piano, but it still sounded too poor and unoriginal'*. The first mention of a Third Suite occurs in his diary entry for

16 April, '*...conceived the seed not of a future symphony, but of a suite*', and finally on 27 April in a letter to his patron Nadezhda Von Meck, Tchaikovsky wrote: '*I have begun a new composition in the form of a suite. This form is especially attractive to me, since it is uninhibited and not subject to any sort of conventions or traditions. This suite will be in five movements, the last of which will be a set of variations.*'

According to his diary, he had already begun to compose the Scherzo by 27 April, and finished it on 29 April. From 30 April to 3 May he worked on sketches for the Valse, writing in his diary on 2 May: '*Waltz squeezed out of me with enormous difficulty. No, I'm growing old ... Until almost 7 o'clock I toiled over the waltz, making no progress at all*'. It seems that on 4 May Tchaikovsky set about making the sketches for the Andante (*Elégie* in the published score), noting on 5 May: '*Until 7 o'clock struggled with one place in the andante. Was tired*'. He finished the Andante on 9 May.

On 10 May, he set about the first movement of the suite, *Contrastes*, but only two days later he remarked in his diary: '*The 1st movement of the suite, called Contrastes, with the themes: ... has become so loathsome that, after wrestling with it all day, I have decided to abandon it and to write something completely different*'. Later, he wrote, '*After dinner forced from myself the suite's wretched movement*'. On 12 May, '*... was beginning to struggle again with the loathsome Contrastes, but suddenly a new thought flashed into my head, and things sorted themselves out*'. This was his decision to omit *Contrastes* and leave the Suite in four movements. A note in his diary for 15 May shows that he had set about the variations, beginning with the final variation, 'Pollacca', and among the surviving sketches for the Suite in one of the composer's sketchbooks is a page with the note '*Polonaise trio*', bearing the date 14 May 1884.

Working with great effort, Tchaikovsky completed the sketches by the end of the month and days later he had finished an arrangement of the suite for piano duet. He moved to his brother Modest's house in Grankino and immediately began to orchestrate the Suite, also beginning work on a Concert Fantasia in which he made use of the rejected first movement of the Suite.

Writing to his pupil and fellow composer Sergei Taneyev on 30 June, Tchaikovsky reported: '*I am presently writing my Third Suite. I wanted to do a symphony, but it wouldn't come off. Anyway, the name doesn't matter; in any case, I've written a large symphonic work in four movements, namely: 1) Andante, 2) another waltz, 3) Scherzo, 4) Theme with 12 variations. Probably it will be the end of the summer before all this is ready, because I am working very painstakingly and diligently*'. Aiming to complete work before his return to Moscow, he finished the instrumentation of the entire Suite on 19 July (according to the autograph date on the manuscript). By 1 August 1884 the Suite was being engraved, and from September to December 1884 he was occupied with the proofs.

The Third Suite was premièred with great success in St Petersburg on 12 January 1885, conducted by Hans von Bülow. The first Moscow performance was five days later on 19 January 1885, conducted by Max Erdmannsdörfer, its dedicatee.