PIOTR ILIICH TCHAIKOVSKY
Suite No. 3 in G major, Op. 55
Born: May 7, 1840, in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia
Died: November 6, 1893, in Saint Petersburg
Work composed: 1884

During his student years, Rachmaninov was fortunate to receive encouragement from the most respected Russian composer of the day, Piotr Tchaikovsky. Today, the connection between these two musicians seems quite evident. Rachmaninov extended into the 20th century the Russian Romanticism that Tchaikovsky’s music epitomizes, and his gift for writing expressive and memorable melodies have precedents in Tchaikovsky’s own

In the spring of 1884 Tchaikovsky embarked on the creation of a new symphony. He had completed four works of this type, but none since his Symphony in F minor, Op. 36, in 1877. Toward the end of April he noted in his diary: “I have been trying to lay the foundation of a new symphony ... but I am not at all satisfied.” Later the same day he wrote that while walking in the garden of his sister’s estate, where he spent the spring and summer of 1884, he “found the germ not of a symphony but of a future suite.”

Tchaikovsky did not put off composition of the new orchestral suite but, rather, committed himself to it at once. Progress did not come easily, however, and the composer’s diary records almost agonizing difficulties attending the early phase of the work’s creation. “Very dissatisfied,” he wrote a few days after beginning the piece, “since everything that comes into my head seems so commonplace. Am I played out?” Ten days later he noted that he “worked all day at the Valse, but without any conviction of success.” After nearly a week later he had made little progress. “The Valse gives me infinite trouble,” the diary attests. “I am growing old.” The first movement, Tchaikovsky later wrote, “has grown so hateful ... that I decided to set it aside and invent something else.” (Following through on his impulse, he abandoned this movement but subsequently rehabilitated it as the second movement of his Concert Fantasy for piano and orchestra, Op. 56.)

Characteristically, though, Tchaikovsky’s despair turned cautiously, and then confidently, to optimism as he found his way into the work. “Worked all morning [on the suite],” he wrote in May, nearly a month after beginning the piece. “Not without fatigue, but the Andante progresses and seems likely to turn out quite nice.” Then, later: “[I] finished the Andante. I am very pleased with it.” The final movement also progressed well, much to the composer’s satisfaction.

Once finished with the composition, Tchaikovsky seems to have forgotten his earlier doubts and discontentment. “A work of greater genius than the new suite never was!” he exulted to his publisher. “My opinion of the new-born composition could hardly be more optimistic.” That optimism was not misplaced. The first performance of the suite — given in Saint Petersburg, in January 1885 — proved an unqualified success. “I had a secret presentiment that it would please the public,” Tchaikovsky reported of the event. “But the reality far surpassed my expectations. I have never had such a triumph; I could see that the greater part of the audience was touched and
grateful. Such moments are the best in an artist’s life. Thanks to these, it is worthwhile living and laboring."

Yet the Third Suite has not achieved the widespread popularity of the composer’s symphonies, concertos or ballet scores. Conveying neither the high drama of the former works nor the enchanted musical reveries of the latter, it occupies a kind of middle ground that avoids the more extreme tendencies of Tchaikovsky’s Romanticism. But if the Third Suite is comparatively restrained in its rhetoric, it nevertheless offers finely wrought music and a nearly symphonic breadth of conception, without the very personalized Sturm und Drang that mark the composer’s late symphonies.

Tchaikovsky endowed the suite’s opening movement with rich, lyrical expression and a brighter character than its title, “Elegy,” would lead us to expect. The inner movements bring a waltz and a scherzo in turn. The comparatively cool, dark timbres of the former make the bright, colorful music in the latter all the more striking.

Tchaikovsky cast the finale as a theme with variations, a format he used rarely, the most famous other instance being the Variations on a Rococo Theme for cello and orchestra, Op. 33, which this movement resembles in several respects.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR
The suite’s first movement begins with a relaxed, almost bucolic theme stated by the strings, with echoing phrases from the winds. A second subject brings a broad melody over a plucked accompaniment, which the composer extends against animated figures for flute and clarinet. Tchaikovsky combines all these elements in a remarkable fantasy passages that forms the middle section of the movement. The coda passage that closes this initial part of the suite brings a substantially new theme, given out by the English horn.

In the second movement, a somewhat halting and unusual waltz melody alternates with a pair of secondary themes. There follows a fleet scherzo marked by rhythmic tattoos from the winds, skipping rhythms for the strings and a quasi-martial central episode.

The finale opens with a rather formal sounding theme for the strings. In the ensuing series of variations on this theme, some of the paraphrases preserve the outlines of the theme faithfully, their altered rhythms, instrumentation and contrapuntal embroidery notwithstanding. Others develop the subject theme’s initial motif in a more free fashion. The final variation leads to a brilliant coda in proud polonaise rhythms.

_Scored for 3 flutes, the third doubling piccolo; 2 oboes and English horn; 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani and percussion; harp and strings._

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