

VERIZON HALL

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3

8 PM

ARC WHEELER GREAT ORCHESTRAS ON TOUR**New York Philharmonic**

14,698th Concert of the New York Philharmonic

Lorin Maazel, conductor**Tchaikovsky**

Suite No. 3 in G Major, Op. 55 (1884)

Élégie (Andante molto cantabile)

Valse mélancolique (Allegro moderato)

Scherzo (Molto vivace)

Tema con variazioni (Andante con moto)

—Intermission—

Tchaikovsky

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36 (1877)

Andante sostenuto — Moderato con anima

Andantino in modo di canzona

Scherzo. Pizzicato ostinato: Allegro

Finale: Allegro con fuoco

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PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

(b. Votkinsk, Russia, 1840; d. St. Petersburg, 1893)
Suite No. 3 in G Major, Op. 55
Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36

Works composed:

Suite No. 3: April–July 31, 1884; dedicated to Max Erdmannsdörfer, who since 1882 had served as the principal conductor of the Moscow branch of the Russian Musical Society

Symphony No. 4: 1877; dedicated “To my best friend,” i.e., Nadezhda von Meck

World premieres:

Suite No. 3: January 24, 1885, at a concert of the Russian Musical Society in St. Petersburg, Hans von Bülow conductor

Symphony No. 4: February 10, 1878, at a concert of the Russian Musical Society in Moscow, Nikolai Rubinstein, conductor

The pressure of writing masterwork-symphonies in the wake of Beethoven was great, and a number of 19th-century composers responded by producing substantial, multi-movement “not-quite-symphonies” in addition to their official symphonies. When Tchaikovsky composed four orchestral suites from 1878 to 1888, he already had four of his six symphonies behind him. Of this group of suites, No. 3 is the finest, packed with winning melodies and evocative orchestration, all within the framework of Classical forms that help instill a sense of unified structure that is sometimes elusive in the composer’s larger works.

The supremely self-critical Tchaikovsky composed his **Suite No. 3** in the late spring and early summer of 1884, at the estate of his brother-in-law Lev Davidov in Kamenka, Ukraine. The diary Tchaikovsky kept during that time reveals that he conceived of this work as an alternative to a full-scale symphony. On April 28 he wrote:

Tried to lay the foundations of a new symphony both in the Trostyanka woods and at home after dinner, but I’m dissatisfied with everything. . . . Walked in the garden and conceived the seed not of a future symphony, but of a suite.

The next day he observed that he “noted down some ideas,” and the following day he refined that to “noting down some wretched ideas.” On May 1 he was “very dissatisfied” with himself “because of the banality of everything that comes into my head” and wondered, poignantly, “Am I played out?”

Bit by bit the new work began to coalesce, initially as a five-movement piece. On May 11 he declared that he had finished the *scherzo*, and by May 15 he’d composed “the sketch of the waltz.” He then decided, on May 23, to discard the opening movement he had planned, and the following day he wrote that “a new idea flashed into my head, and the matter sorted itself out”—meaning that he would drop the planned opening entirely, thereby leaving the piece in four movements. On June 4 Tchaikovsky reported that he had finished the suite, though the orchestration would occupy him through July. At the end of 1884 he would introduce further changes while preparing the score for publication.

In its final, four-movement form, Tchaikovsky’s Suite No. 3 comes across as a symphony *manquée* of modest proportions, a finely crafted work of winning spirit—though one that rarely broaches the kind of personal revelation that inhabits his late symphonies. Nonetheless, it is entirely idiomatic Tchaikovsky: no one else could have written the languid opening *Élegie*, with its gorgeous themes and fluttering accompaniments; the ghostly waltz, disquieting in its offbeat accents; the imaginative *scherzo*, in which a military band seems to march through in the middle; and the finely crafted concluding variations, which stand practically as an encyclopedia of Tchaikovskian orchestral practice, replete with a sudden, surprising interpolation of the funereal “Dies Irae” melody so dear to Berlioz, Liszt, and Romantic composers in general.

This suite proved instantly popular with both audiences and critics. “Reality far exceeded my expectations,” the composer wrote to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, following the first performance:

I have never before experienced such a triumph. I saw that the entire audience was moved, and grateful to me. These moments are the finest adornments of an artist’s life. Thanks to these it is worth living and laboring.

This same Madame von Meck would play a key role in the creation of the other work on this program: Tchaikovsky’s **Symphony No. 4**. Tchaikovsky began composing this piece at practically the same time that he became involved with von Meck; in fact, the two “projects” were greatly intermeshed in his mind. In letters to von Meck Tchaikovsky often referred to this work as “our symphony,” sometimes even as “your symphony.” By May 1877 he had completed the lion’s share of work on the new piece. “I should like to dedicate it to you,” he wrote on May 13, “because I be-

lieve you would find in it an echo of your most intimate thoughts and emotions.”

During the misadventure of Tchaikovsky’s wedding and his subsequent meltdown, work on the Fourth Symphony was put on hold. Only in the latter half of 1877 did he return to edit and orchestrate what he had composed between February and May. “Our symphony progresses,” he wrote to von Meck on August 24:

The first movement will give me a great deal of trouble with respect to orchestration. It is very long and complicated: at the same time I consider it the best movement. The three remaining movements are very simple, and it will be easy and pleasant to orchestrate them.

Tchaikovsky’s comment is apt: the center of gravity is indeed placed on the first movement, and the other three stand as shorter, less imposing pendants. When his patron begged him to reveal the meaning behind the music, Tchaikovsky broke his rule of not divulging his secret programs and penned a rather detailed description of the opening movement:

The introduction is the seed of the whole symphony, undoubtedly the central theme. This is Fate, i.e., that fateful force which prevents the impulse toward happiness from entirely achieving its goal, forever on jealous guard lest peace and well-being should ever be attained in complete and unclouded form, hanging above us like the Sword of Damocles, constantly and unremittingly poisoning the soul. Its force is invisible, and can never be overcome. Our only choice is to surrender to it, and to languish fruitlessly. . . .

When all seems lost, there appears a sweet and gentle daydream. Some blissful, radiant human image hurries by and beckons us away. . . . How good this feels! How distant now seems the obsessive first theme of the *Allegro*. . . .

No! These were dreams, and fate wakes us from them. Thus all life is an unbroken alternation of harsh reality with fleeting dreams and visions of happiness. . . . There is no escape. . . . We can only drift upon this sea until it engulfs and submerges us in its depths. That, roughly, is the program of the first movement.

So he continues, at length, for each of the ensuing movements: the second, “another phase of depression, . . . that melancholy feeling that comes in the evenings when, weary from your labor, you sit alone, and take a book—but it falls from your hand”; the third, comprising “the elusive images that can rush past in the imagination when you have drunk a little wine and experience the first stage of

intoxication”; the fourth, “a picture of festive merriment of the people.”

Even if we recognize that Tchaikovsky penned these words after he had essentially completed the symphony, we may find something authentic and convincing in his program, given the upheavals that he’d experienced in the preceding months. To his pupil and friend Sergei Taneyev, Tchaikovsky wrote:

Of course my symphony is program music, but it would be impossible to give the program in words. . . . But ought this not always to be the case with a symphony, the most lyrical of musical forms? Ought it not to express all those things for which words cannot be found but which nevertheless arise in the heart and cry out for expression?

Instrumentation: The Suite No. 3 is performed by three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, tambourine, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, harp, and strings. The Symphony No. 4 employs two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, and strings.

—James M. Keller, *New York Philharmonic Program Annotator*