

'Swan Lake', 1976

Ballet in 4 Acts

Music by:

P. I. Tchaikovsky

Libretto:

Vladimir Begichev and Vasily Geltser

Choreography:

Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov

Director:

Yuri Grigorovich

Production designer:

Simon Virsaladze

Conductor:

Algis Zhuraitis

Performers:

Maya Plisetskaya

Odette / Odile

Alexander Bogatirev

Prince Siegfried

Boris Efimov

Von Rothbart

Vladimir Abrosimov

Jester

Galina Pritvorina

Brides:

Tatiana Gavrilova

Galina Teselkina

Galina Kozlova

Irina Vozianova

M. Karnauhova

Three Swans:

T. Kuzmitcheva

M. Kruchkova

O. Golova

Four Swans:

T. Negrebetskaya

T. Popko

E. Popandopulo

E. Bobrova

Waltz:

K. Riabinkina

A. Fedorova

E. Cherkasskaya

Members of the Bolshoi

Ballet

Orchestra of the Bolshoi

Theatre

Running time:

2:23:14

History of the ballet:

Swan Lake is a ballet by P. I. Tchaikovsky and was composed between 1875 and 1876. Initially, the scenario is in four acts, fashioned from Russian folk tales. It tells the story of Odette, a princess who has been turned into a swan by an evil wizard's curse.

The origins of the ballet are disputed to this day; critics are dubious as to the original source of the Swan Lake story. Fedor Lopukhov, a Russian ballet patriarch, refers to Swan Lake as a 'national ballet' because of its swans, who originate from Russian lyrically romantic sources; whereas many movements of the corps de ballet have originated from Slavonic ring-dances. Critics have argued that the underlying story of Swan Lake, the plot, the imagery and the very idea of faithful love, are essentially Russian concepts.

The general outline of the libretto is based on a story by the German author Johan Musaus, 'The

Stolen Veil'. Moreover, the Russian folk tale 'The White Duck' also bears some resemblance to the story of Swan Lake and could have been another possible source to the plot. Several contemporaries of Tchaikovsky elicited the composer taking a great interest in the life story of Bavarian King, Ludwig II, whose tragic life had supposedly been marked by the sign of the Swan and who was chosen as the prototype of the idealist Prince Siegfried.

There are very few records to have survived concerning the first production of the work; hence, there is only speculation about who the author of the original libretto was. One of the most commanding theories sees that it was written by Begichev, director of the Moscow Imperial Theatre during the time when the ballet was originally produced and possibly Geltser, danseur of the Moscow Imperial Bolshoi Theatre. Nonetheless, in all probability, Geltser was merely the first person to copy the scenario for publication, as one of the few surviving copies bears his name. Considering that the first publication of the libretto and the actual music composed by Tchaikovsky, in many instances do not correspond, it can be inferred that the first actual published libretto was possibly constructed by a newspaper writer who had viewed the initial rehearsals. This notion arises as at the time, new productions of ballets and operas were always reported in the newspapers of Imperial Russia, along with their individual scenarios.

Tchaikovsky had earlier created a small ballet entitled 'The Lake of the Swans' in 1871, according to two of his relatives. This ballet had featured one of the most famous leitmotif's, known as the 'Swan's Theme'. In 1875, Begichev commissioned the score of Swan Lake from Tchaikovsky for a modest fee of approximately 800 roubles and soon he began to select artists that would partake in the formation of the ballet. Julius Reisinger was the assigned choreographer to the production, at the time he was a ballet master at the Moscow Imperial Bolshoi Theatre since 1873. It is not known what sort of collaboration Tchaikovsky and Reisinger were involved in, it is however likely that in the composition of Swan Lake, Tchaikovsky had some form of instruction.

At the turn of the 19th century until the beginning of the 1890s, majority of the scores for ballets were almost always written by composers known as 'specialists'. These were composers who were highly skilled at scoring the melodious, decorative, light and rhythmically clear music that was at the time in trend for ballets. Having studied the music of 'specialists' such as Ludwig Minkus and Cesare Pugni, Tchaikovsky had altered his rather negative opinion of 'specialists' in ballet music and was relatively enthralled by the almost immeasurable diversity of infectious melodies their scores contained. He set to work on Swan Lake having gathered influence from the 'specialists' surrounding his era. Working on Swan Lake, the composer used the technique known as leitmotif, associating particular themes with certain characters and moods, after having admired the feature of this technique in Adam's 1844 score for Giselle.

Throughout the creation of Swan Lake, Tchaikovsky drew on previous compositions of his. In the second scene of Swan Lake, he formed an aria from the opera The Voyevoda, which he had abandoned in 1868. From this opera, he also used the aria 'Valse des fiancées' from the third scene and the theme of 'Entr'acte' from the fourth scene. It was evident that Tchaikovsky was profoundly excited by Swan Lake, due to the speed with which he composed the pieces. Having commissioned the score in 1875, in a mere year by April 1876, the score was complete and rehearsals had begun.

Plot summary:

Princess Odette is the lead ballerina role and one of the most challenging. In the production, Von

Rothbart's daughter Odile, is danced by the same ballerina, which explains how Odile is able to trick Prince Siegfried into being unfaithful to Odette. Odile appears in the majority of the version of the ballet but by no means all. Odette is an enchanted princess, under the spell of the evil wizard Von Rothbart. She is transformed into a swan by day and can only regain human form at night. She is labelled as the 'Swan Queen' by her companions who are all under the same spell. Odette is forced to live by a lake that was formed magically by her grieving mother's tear when she was kidnapped by Rothbart. The only way to break the spell is through the power of eternal love, with a man who will remain faithful to her; if the vow of eternal love is broken, she will remain a swan forever.

Von Rothbart is the central antagonist and is rarely seen in human form in most productions, as he appears as an evil bird creature for most of the ballet. His human form is seen once when he and his daughter Odile appear at the Ball. Rothbart is a very powerful sorcerer who has enchanted Odette although the reason for his curse is not known.

Prince Siegfried is the lead male ballet dancer role; his character is full of enthusiasm and bright spirit. His hobby is hunting and he has no interest in getting married, he is not in love and is enjoying life as it is. One day, when Prince Siegfried ventures to the lake while out hunting, he sees a swan in the lake wearing a crown and prepare to shoot but before he does Odette transforms from a swan to her human form. He is awestruck by her beauty and falls in love with her at once, promising to love her forever when Odette reveals her story to him and invites her to the Royal Ball at his castle so he may choose her as his bride. They spend the night together, dancing and falling ever more in love with each other until dawn and Odette is forced to return to the lake as a swan. Siegfried waits for Odette at the ball and believes she has arrived when two strangers arrive however; it is actually Rothbart and his daughter Odile in disguise. Odile only appears in the third act, dressed in black and magically disguised as Odette, in some productions Odile is known as the 'Black Swan' and playing as Odette's evil twin (this version is seen in the production by the Bolshoi Ballet). Odile's disguise helps Rothbart trick Siegfried into breaking his vow to Odette. Odile and Siegfried dance together and he fails to notice the real Odette appearing in the window in her swan form, wanting to warn him of Rothbart's plot and pleading for him to remain faithful. Rothbart's plan is a success when Siegfried declared his eternal love to Odile and he joyfully reveals that Odette is now forever in his power.

Odette flees to the lake heartbroken and distressed, with Siegfried following her begging her forgiveness. She forgives him but states that she will never be freed from Rothbart's spell unless she dies; for she would rather die than live without Siegfried. He declares that he cannot bear to live without Odette and states that he will die with her. With Rothbart's appearance, both Odette and Siegfried throw themselves in the lake. In the climax of their sacrifice, Rothbart's powers are destroyed and the spell is broken; Odette's companions are freed from their enchantment. As dawn comes, Siegfried and Odette ascend into heaven, united in love for all eternity.

Act synopsis:

Act 1: set in a splendid park before the palace

Prince Siegfried is celebrating his birthday with his tutor, friends and peasants. The revelries are interrupted by Siegfried's mother, the Princess, who is concerned about her son's carefree lifestyle. She informs him that he must choose a bride at the royal ball the following evening. Siegfried is upset that he cannot marry for love. His friend Benno and tutor try to lift his troubled mood. As

evening falls, Benno sees a flock of swans flying overhead and suggests they go on a hunt. Siegfried and his friends take their crossbows and set off in pursuit of the swans.

Act 2: a lakeside clearing in a forest, beside the ruins of a chapel. A moonlit night.

Siegfried has become separated from his friends. He arrives at the lakeside clearing, just as a flock of swans land nearby. He aims his crossbow at the swans, but freezes when one of them transforms into a beautiful maiden. At first, she is terrified of Siegfried. When he promises not to harm her, she tells him that she is the Swan Queen, Odette. She and her companions are victims of a terrible spell cast by the evil sorcerer Von Rothbart. By day they are turned into swans and only at night, by the side of the enchanted lake – created from the tears of Odette's mother – do they return to human form. The spell can only be broken if one who has never loved before swears to love Odette forever. Von Rothbart suddenly appears. Siegfried threatens to kill him but Odette intercedes; If Von Rothbart dies before the spell is broken, it can never be undone.

As Von Rothbart disappears, the swan maidens fill the clearing. Benno and his companions also arrive and aim their crossbows at the maidens; Siegfried stops them just in time and dismisses them. Alone with Odette and the swan-maidens, Siegfried sets about winning Odette's trust. They fall in love with each other. But as dawn arrives, the evil spells draws Odette and her companions back to the lake and they are turned into swans again.

Act 3 a luxurious hall in the palace

Guests arrive at the palace for a costume ball. Siegfried's mother commands him to dance with six princesses and ultimately choose one as a bride. Siegfried complains that he does not love any of them. Von Rothbart arrives in disguise with his daughter Odile. He has transformed Odile so that she appears identical to Odette, in all respects except that she wears black rather than white. The prince mistakes her for Odette and dances with her. Odette appears as a vision and vainly tries to warn Siegfried that he is being deceived. But Siegfried remains oblivious and proclaims to the court that he intends to make Odile his wife. Von Rothbart shows Siegfried a magical vision of Odette and he realises his mistake. Grief-stricken, Siegfried hurries back to the lake.

Act 4 by the lakeside

Odette is distraught at Siegfried's betrayal. The swan-maidens try to comfort her, but she is resigned to death. Siegfried returns to the lake and finds Odette. He makes a passionate apology, she forgives him and the pair reaffirm their love. Von Rothbart appears and insists that Siegfried fulfill his pledge to marry Odile, after which Odette will be transformed into a swan forever. Siegfried chooses to die alongside Odette and they leap into the lake and are united in death. This breaks Von Rothbart's spell over Odette, causing him to lose his power over them and he dies.

Performance history:

Swan Lake is one of the most famous and adored ballet performances in the world. Choreographers throughout the years, from different backgrounds, have pondered over the ballet attempting to comprehend the mysteries and philosophical depth of the music; composed by Tchaikovsky. However, the white swan, born out of a fantasy by the great composer, will always be a symbol of Russian ballet; its noble beauty a sign of purity and greatness. It is not by chance that Russian ballerinas, playing the part of the queen of swans Odette, are remembered as the most beautiful legends – Marina Semenova, Galina Ulanova, Maya Plisetskaya, Natalia Bessmertnova and others.

In composing the ballet, Tchaikovsky was looking at this fabulous story with ideas and attitudes that were close to him and his contemporaries. Thus, the product was born, wherein following the action on the stage; you see the relationship of heroes clash between good and evil, light and darkness, in their despair and hope, in an attempt to defend their right to happiness.

The ballet premiered by the Bolshoi Ballet on March 4th, 1877 at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. By that time, Tchaikovsky was already established as a famous composer, despite his youth. His lyricism became the basis of the music in Swan Lake, placed in history as an album of soulful songs without words. The premiere was not well received, with virtually unanimous criticism concerning the orchestra, dancers and décor. It was unfortunate that in the debacle of the poor production, Tchaikovsky's masterful score was lost; many considered it to be far too complex for ballet, although there were few critics who had recognized its virtues. While the production was not appreciated in its time, given the negative reviews, today it is seen as Tchaikovsky's most valuable work and has surged him into the realm of the most important ballet composers.

As a result of Tchaikovsky's death in 1883, Drigo was forced to revise the score, with both Petipa and Vseholozhsky involved. The value of the ingenious solutions created by Ivanov were realised at once by master Marius Petipa and invited him to create a full ballet jointly. On his instructions, conductor Riccardo Drigo prepared a new musical version and the younger brother of the composer, Modest, reworked the libretto. Modest was called upon to implement required changes to the libretto; the most prominent was his revision of the ballet's finale. Instead of the lovers simply drowning at the hand of the wicked Von Rothbart, as in the original scenario in 1877, Odette commits suicide by drowning herself. Prince Siegfried chooses to die as well, rather than live without her and soon the lovers' spirits are reunited in an apotheosis.

It was first staged January 27th, 1895, after the death of the great composer, on the memorial evening in his memory; choreographer Lev Ivanov staged Swan Lake for the Imperial Ballet at the Mariinsky in St. Petersburg, introducing a second act in his formulation. The modest choreographer at the Mariinsky had a rare gift, the ability to articulate musical images. He deeply and subtly felt the emotional world of Tchaikovsky's music and dance and had created a Symphony, the equivalent of the 'heartfelt song' by the composer. It has been over a century and the 'swan picture', composed by Ivanov, can still be seen in the performance of any choreographer; regardless of the staging concept in general. The premier was quite a success however not as much as it has been in modern times.

Consequently, the famous edition by Petipa and Ivanov was generated, which has existed on the ballet scene ever since. Although the ballet is presented in many different versions, majority of ballet companies base their performances, both choreographically and musically, on the 1895 revival by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. Chief choreographer of the Bolshoi Theatre of Moscow, Alexander Gorsky also repeatedly turned to this work. His production had gained recognition in 1922 and takes its rightful place in the modern scene.

In 1969, at the Bolshoi Theatre, viewers witnessed another outstanding performance of Swan Lake, as a result of Yuri Grigorovich's reflection on the score of Tchaikovsky. In Swan Lake, Maya Plisetskaya will always remain the principal ballerina. She has danced in more than 800 performances in the last thirty years, travelling the world. For any foreigner at the time, Swan Lake was known as Maya Plisetskaya. To many ballet dancers, there is no bigger challenge than that of Swan Lake. It requires perfect possession of all the items that make the art of classical dance. It is very arduous not only technically, but also physically. Throughout all her performances, Plisetskaya complicated and deepened the image of Odette further, perfecting the technique and elasticity and creating an image of perfection unmatched; connecting together the drama and music of the great composer.

This particular version of the ballet was staged to commemorate 100th anniversary of Swan Lake at the Bolshoi, it was taped live.

As this was staged to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the ballet's premiere, it is a noteworthy performance in that it has the musical edition of pure Tchaikovsky, without including the interpolations by Drigo, typically found in many other productions. This edition of Swan Lake is regarded as particularly well played and conducted, with sensible music paces and comprises the Russian dance in Act 3, as well as many more reiterations than in the usual stage productions of Swan Lake.

This commemorative staging of the ballet gives you the chance to witness an enthralling performance from some of the world's greatest dancers. Maya Plisetskaya contributes a mesmerizing recital as Odette and Odile; never ostentatious and performs with great poise. Although she is 51 in this performance, she more than compensates for this through her subtlety and profoundness in the role of the Swan Queen Odette. The incredible transformation she portrays from swan to woman, with tentative steps and somewhat rigid, is particularly mesmeric and very moving. Plisetskaya's talent in this sphere is unchallenged and unequalled; arguably she is the greatest dancer of this generation. Seemingly with age, her emotional expressiveness had deepened, particularly in Act 4. It is evident that Odette is wounded and aching, empathy cannot be held back at her torment. There is a sincere contrast between the beauty of the 'white swan' and the replicated sentiment of her 'black swan' Odile, which is subtle but certainly expressive. The supporting cast is led by Bogatirev; agile, strong and conveying noble innocence throughout. The performance also features strong recitalists in all the supporting roles. This is an unforgettably powerful performance.

This particular version of the ballet differs from others in its finale scene also; it has opted for the 'happy ending' which is more favoured, where Odette steps in front of the prince to protect him. The scene conveys a true feeling of eternal love that the pair share, timed perfectly to the escalating music, it is tremendously moving.