

FACT SHEET

Ballet Music: Swan Lake Act IV

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composed: 1875-86

Genre: Ballet

Length: 18 mins

First Performed: February 27, 1877, at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow as *The Lake of the Swans*.

History:

Surely the most popular classical ballet of all time, the score to *Swan Lake* was composed by Tchaikovsky in the late 19th century, commissioned by the director of the Moscow Imperial Theatre, Vladimir Petrovich Begichev, for a mere 800 rubles (£17 today!) It was the first ballet set to the score of a symphonic composer. From around the time of the turn of the 19th century until the beginning of the 1890s, scores for ballets were almost always written by composers known as "specialists" - composers who were highly skilled at scoring the light, decorative, melodious, and rhythmically clear music that was at that time in vogue for ballet. Tchaikovsky studied the music of these "specialists", such as the Italian Cesare Pugni and the Czechoslovakian Léon Minkus, before setting to work on *Swan Lake*. Tchaikovsky had a rather negative opinion of the "specialist" ballet music until he studied it in detail, being impressed by the nearly limitless variety of infectious melodies their scores contained. Delibes' work (the composer of *Coppelia*), is known to have been a great influence on composers such as Tchaikovsky. His ballet *Sylvia* was of special interest to Tchaikovsky, who wrote of the score: "what charm, what wealth of melody! It brought me to shame, for had I known of this music, I would have never written *Swan Lake*."

Tchaikovsky likely had some form of instruction in composing *Swan Lake*, as he had to know what sort of dances would be required. But unlike the instructions that Tchaikovsky received for the scores of *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, no such written instruction is known to have survived.

The premiere of *Swan Lake* in 1877 was not well-received, with near unanimous criticism concerning the dancers, orchestra, and décor. Unfortunately Tchaikovsky's masterful score was lost in the debacle of the poor production, and though there were a few critics who recognized its virtues, most considered it to be far too complicated for ballet. However *Swan Lake* was given a total of forty-one performances between its premiere and the final performance of 1883 - a rather lengthy run for a ballet that was so poorly received upon its premiere. The score has been changed and reworked repeatedly, both by Tchaikovsky and others, including his brother, Modest.

Performers:

Vladimir Jurowski *conductor*
Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

Synopsis:

The scenario, initially in four acts, by Vladimir Begichev and Vasilii Geltser was said to be fashioned from Russian folk tales as well as an ancient German legend, which tells the story of Odette, a princess turned into a swan by an evil sorcerer's curse.

Act 1

Swan Lake begins at a royal court. Prince Siegfried, heir to the kingdom, must declare a wife at his birthday ball. Upset that he cannot marry for love, Siegfried escapes into the forest at night. As he sees a flock of swans flying overhead, he sets off in pursuit.

Act 2

Siegfried aims his crossbow at the swans and readies himself for their landing by the lakeside. When one comes into view, however, he stops. Before him is a beautiful creature dressed in white feathers, more woman than swan. Enamoured, the two dance and Siegfried learns that the swan maiden is the princess Odette. An evil sorcerer, von Rothbart, captured her and used his magic to turn Odette into a swan by day and woman by night. A retinue of other captured swan-maidens attend Odette in the environs of Swan Lake, which was formed by the tears of her parents when she was kidnapped by von Rothbart. Once Siegfried knows her story, he takes great pity on her and falls in love. As he begins to swear his love to her - an act that will render the sorcerer's spell powerless - von Rothbart appears. Siegfried threatens to kill him but Odette intercedes. If von Rothbart dies before the spell is broken, it can never be undone.

Act 3

The Prince returns to the castle to attend the ball. Von Rothbart arrives in disguise with his own daughter Odile, making her seem identical to Odette in all respects except that she wears black while Odette wears white. The prince mistakes her for Odette, dances with her, and proclaims to the court that he intends to make her his wife. Only a moment too late, Siegfried sees the real Odette and realizes his mistake. The method in which Odette appears varies: in some versions she arrives at the castle, while in other versions von Rothbart shows Siegfried a magical vision of her.

Act 4

Realizing that the spell can never be broken, Odette and Siegfried drown themselves by leaping into the lake. This causes von Rothbart to lose his power over them, and he dies as a result.

Structure:

Act IV

Entr'acte: Moderato

Scène: Allegro non troppo

Dance of the Little Swans: Moderato

Allegro agitato, Molto meno mosso, Allegro vivace

Andante, Allegro, Alla breve, Moderato e maestoso, Moderato

The Music:

Perhaps for the first time in dance history, *Swan Lake* is a ballet with music as strong, if not stronger, than its choreography. The introduction sets the tone with a haunting woodwind theme. This represents the fate of Odette, a beautiful woman by night who is transformed into a swan during daylight hours until a prince swears his eternal devotion to her.

There are graceful waltzes, a famous brash scene for a group of cygnets (*Dance of the Little Swans*), and passionately lyrical passages danced by Odette and the prince who loves her. A pas de deux introduces a series of dances, beginning with a piece for both participants. Then there's a series of variations, the two dancers taking turns at solos. These aren't usually variations in the musical sense. The music accompanying each solo is not necessarily an elaboration of the opening theme, although it can be. Only contrast and brilliance really matter here, because this is where the primary dancers show off their highest leaps and most dizzying turns. Because dance is the focus of the pas de deux, the accompanying music can be utilitarian, as sometimes even Tchaikovsky's was. The most sparkling and colorful passages usually come in the sequence of character dances. As well as being influenced by Delibes' work, Tchaikovsky was also heavily influenced by Adam and his use of leitmotif, as seen in *Giselle*. Tchaikovsky featured this technique - associating certain themes with certain characters or moods - in *Swan Lake*, and later, *The Sleeping Beauty*. For example, the *Swan's Theme* (or *Song of the Swans*) is brought back at several points in the story, intensifying the work's dramatic effect.

Tchaikovsky drew on previous compositions in for his *Swan Lake* score. He made use of material from *The Voyevoda*, an opera that he had abandoned in 1868. The *Grand adage* (a.k.a. the *Love Duet*) from the second scene of *Swan Lake* was fashioned from an aria from that opera, as was the *Valse des fiancées* from the third scene. Another number which includes a theme from *The Voyevoda* is the *Entr'acte* of the fourth scene, which opens Act IV of *Swan Lake*, the last piece that we will hear this evening.