

About *SWAN LAKE*

One of the world's most beloved ballets, *Swan Lake* is a staple of the repertoires of most major ballet companies. It is regarded as one of the great classical ballets and its popularity seems indestructible, for it has the overwhelming and universal appeal of a tragic tale of young lovers trapped by outside forces. *Swan Lake* remains a favorite among ballerinas as well as audiences. All leading dancers want to perform *Swan Lake* and all audiences want to see them dance it.

The plot is based on the ancient myth of the "Swan Maiden," a theme which reappears in slightly different forms in the literature of almost all countries, including India, Persia and Arabia, where it forms the basis of one of the tales in *The Thousand and One Nights*. There are even references to the Swan myth in ancient tales of a bird particularly associated with the Muses, the nine goddesses who presided over literature, arts and sciences.

Incredibly, the first production of *Swan Lake* was unsuccessful. Staged by Julius Reisinger at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre in 1877, it featured Pelagaya Karpakova in the role of the White Swan. According to contemporary sources, Karpakova could not appreciate Tchaikovsky's music and had difficulty counting it.

In 1895, Marius Petipa created his own version of *Swan Lake* at the Maryinsky Theatre (now the Kirov Theater) in St. Petersburg. Petipa delegated the choreography of the swan scenes to his assistant, Lev Ivanov. While the rest of the ballet has changed, Ivanov's choreography for the first lakeside scene is still performed almost intact. With their *Swan Lake*, Petipa and Ivanov achieved a perfect blend of brilliant choreographic composition, dazzling virtuosity and expressive intensity. It was a resounding success.

The classical ballet style, so perfectly exemplified in *Swan Lake*, was developed after 1850 and achieved its apotheosis around 1890, when Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov premiered their crown trio of Tchaikovsky ballets. As a style, classicism demands more precision in executing classical steps than does the earlier, romantic style of ballet, most clearly illustrated in the ballet *Giselle*. The classical style, writes Natalia Makarova in her autobiography, "...does not tolerate any romantic elusiveness: all the positions are clearly defined, the extensions are bigger, the arabesque and attitude are stretched to the limits, while the torso is absolutely straight. The legs are exposed, all lines revealed, and you cannot conceal the slightest slip from the audience. The legs must express something: they have a responsibility they share with the arms. And this expressiveness demands tremendous professionalism, precision in every movement."

More than any other classical ballet, *Swan Lake* demands from the ballerina special physical qualities. According to Makarova, "It is no coincidence that in the former

Maryinsky and my own Kirov, *Swan Lake* was given only to those ballerinas possessing...soft, flowing lines of the body, long legs, expressive, elongated arms with a specific relaxation at the elbow and a clearly pronounced arch. What's more important is the flexibility of the body and the 'singing' lines of the arms."

The Petipa/Ivanov production featured Italian ballerina Pierna Legnani, whose perfect interpretation of the dual role of Odette-Odile, the White and Black Swans, was a major factor in the ballet's triumph. Legnani's performance marked the first time a ballerina had tackled both roles. While some *Swan Lake* productions feature different dancers in the two roles, it is now customary for one ballerina to dance both Odette and Odile.

This dual role is a supreme test of the dancer's ability to create character. From the dramatic point standpoint, it requires the ballerina to represent first the tremulous reserve and ecstatic surrender of the swan maiden, then the provocative and magnetic fascination of Odette's evil double. One is an enchanter, the other an enchantress.

On the choreographic level this duality is matched by the romantic, academic style of the two "white scenes" and the glittering virtuosity and skill of the third act, which culminates in thirty-two *fouettes* at the end of the grand pas de deux. Those 32 *fouettes* are a legacy from Legnani, who, it seems, could not restrain herself from injecting her specialty into the ballet. Today, thirty-two *fouettes* are a standard for the ballerina in the coda of most classical *pas de deux*.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was careful to show the difference between good and evil in the score for this ballet, using flat keys to represent the forces of evil and sharp ones for the pure world of the White Swan. The eloquence of Tchaikovsky's music lives through Odette. Ivanov breathes life into this fairyland creature in the rippling movements of her arms, an expressively arched torso and the trembling beats of their pointed feet. At once fluttering and passionate, her composite nature is dramatized by the posing of the head and neck to suggest at once a swan nestling in her downy shoulder and the ardor of a real woman.

It is unfortunate that Tchaikovsky died without seeing the ballet's great success. With *Swan Lake*, the composer hoped to create a score that the Bolshoi Theatre would accept with the same regard that orchestras accepted his symphonic works. Reisinger's uninspired 1877 production practically assured its failure. Critics of the time found the music monotonous, beyond their comprehension and interesting only to other musicians. Only after Tchaikovsky's death was *Swan Lake* given the recognition it deserved. While he later composed music for two other great ballets, *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake* is still considered his masterpiece.