

Synopsis

ACT I:

In the late afternoon. A meadow near the castle.

Prince Siegfried is celebrating his twenty-first birthday. His friend Benno and tutor Wolfgang have invited guests from the surrounding estates to join in the celebration. The party is interrupted by the arrival of the Queen Mother, who presents her son with a crossbow and reminds him that it will be his duty at his coming of age to choose a bride from six eligible princesses. The Queen departs and the festivities continue until Benno sights a flight of swans. Inspired by his new crossbow, the Prince calls Benno to organize a hunting party and the young men leave in search of the swans.

ACT II:

Some hours later, after sunset. By the lake.

As Prince Siegfried enters the forest, he suddenly sees a magnificent swan in flight. He carefully takes aim, but to his astonishment, the bird transforms into a most beautiful maiden. At first the maiden is frightened by Siegfried, but he assures her he will do no harm and asks her to explain the marvel he has just seen. She tells him she is the Princess Odette, of high birth who fell under the spell of an evil sorcerer, and now her fate is to be a swan; only in the hours of darkness may she assume her human guise. Indeed, this very lake is filled with her mother's tears. She tells him she is condemned for eternity, and only if a young man, true of heart, swears eternal love to her and marries her, will the spell be broken. But if he should betray her, she will remain a swan forever. Siegfried realizes his destiny has changed, and swears his love and faithfulness to Odette. At that moment, the sorcerer appears. The Prince in his passion reaches for his crossbow, but Odette pleads with him not to shoot, for she knows if the sorcerer is killed before the spell is broken, she too will die. Dawn approaches, the sorcerer disappears, and Odette is compelled by the spell to return to her guise as a swan.

Intermission

ACT III:

The next night. The Great Palace Hall.

Guests assemble for the birthday ball, including six princesses from different countries whom the Queen Mother has chosen as eligible maidens for her son's hand. Prince Siegfried dances with each beautiful young princess, and is urged by his mother to make a decision, but he is haunted by the memory of Odette and refuses to choose a bride. Suddenly, a fanfare announces the arrival of Baron Von Rothbart with his daughter Odile. Siegfried is thrilled to see the young maiden, who is the image of his beloved Odette. He is dazzled by her beauty and vibrance, and deceived into declaring his love and fidelity to Odile. As Prince Siegfried swears his love, a fleeting vision of the real Odette appears. Von Rothbart, with Odile, triumphantly reveals their wicked ruse. Siegfried realizes he is victim of an evil plot and exits the great hall in search of Odette.

Intermission

ACT IV:

Later that night. By the lakeside.

The swan-maidens are anxiously waiting the return of Odette. She appears and tells of Von Rothbart's treachery. Before dawn, she intends to die. A great storm rages. Siegfried, bursting into the glade, discovers the tearful Odette and begs her forgiveness. As dawn approaches, Von Rothbart appears again in his disguise as a sorcerer. Odette tells Siegfried she must kill herself, or forever be a swan. Siegfried, knowing his heart belongs only to Odette, declares he will die with her, thus breaking the power of Rothbart. The lovers throw themselves into the lake. Rothbart is mortally struck and his power is ended.

Apotheosis: The lovers are united in life after death.