

Program Notes for P. I. Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake Suite*

Swan Lake is everybody's favorite ballet. Sure, *Giselle* is swell, and *Le Sacre du Printemps* is all rite, but it's *Swan Lake* that fills the seats.

Swan Lake is a story-ballet, a tale of young-love-betrayed told in dance and pantomime. The origin of the story is murky; it's not clear whether it is folkloric or merely folk-like. Its details vary from production to production, but most storylines go something like this:

For reasons known only to himself, the evil magician Von Rothbart likes to kidnap young girls and turn them into swans. The unfortunate Odette is one of his victims. Like the other swan maidens, she spends her days as a waterbird swimming gracefully about Swan Lake beneath Von Rothbart's castle, and her nights as a beautiful woman dancing gracefully in gauzy white. All the while she dreams of release from her enchantment through a vow of true love.

Meanwhile, Prince Siegfried is enjoying his twenty-first birthday, even as he dreads the sovereign responsibilities that come with it. One of his first duties will be to choose a bride at the castle ball the following night. But this evening there is still time for one last happy-go-lucky hunt with his buddies!

The hunt takes him to Swan Lake where he aims his new crossbow at a swan who, incredibly, changes into a ravishing young woman. It is Odette! He falls in love immediately and invites her to the next night's festivities.

At the ball, young women from around the world seek the prince's favor, but he is unmoved until Odette arrives. This time she's wearing a black getup instead of her usual chaste white outfit. She's beautiful and can she ever dance! The besotted Siegfried vows eternal love to her, which should break Von Rothbart's spell. Oops! The black swan is not Odette, but Odile, Von Rothbart's daughter. Siegfried has made a terrible mistake. And since Von Rothbart's contract allows no do-overs, Siegfried—and Odette—are stuck with his decision. Well, don't be too hard on him. Odette and Odile are usually danced by the same ballerina, so his confusion is understandable.

The stricken Siegfried rushes to Swan Lake. Upon learning of his misplaced vow that has sealed her fate, the distraught Odette drowns herself in the lake, and the heartbroken Siegfried follows suit. Their sacrifice magically releases the other swan maidens from their enchantment and causes Von Rothbart's castle and empire to crumble.

After accepting the commission for the *Swan Lake* score, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky completed the enormous project within a year, in time for the ballet's first production in 1877. Later he

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