## 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

arranged excerpts from the score into the *Swan Lake Suite*. Tonight we'll hear some movements from it.

Its first movement, *The Lake of the Swans*, evokes the malevolent mystery and magic of the lake. It starts with the oboe playing the famous Swan Lake Theme, which recurs in various guises

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throughout the ballet.

The Swan Lake Theme

Prior to *Swan Lake*, music for ballets had mostly consisted of simple airs that were easy to dance to, usually sixteen bar ditties with a solid boom-chik accompaniment. As *The Lake of the Swans* demonstrates, Tchaikovsky took a more symphonic approach, which earned him the disapprobation of conservative critics. Nowadays we think of *Swan Lake's* score as the epitome of ballet music, but at its premiere some pronounced it "undanceable."

In the *Waltz* movement, though, Tchaikovsky showed he could write conventional ballet tunes as well as anyone. This energetic music is danced by the carefree Siegfried and his courtiers at his birthday party.

When they're not dodging royal huntsmen, the swan maidens pass their hours in terpsichorean diversions. *Dance of the Swans* features four "little swans" who dance in tandem, arm-in-arm (wing-in-wing?).

The *Spanish Dance* and *Neapolitan Dance* are two of the characteristic dances performed by the retinues of the princesses seeking the prince's interest at the castle ball. Tchaikovsky's music validates the observation that the most fiery Iberian and Italian music is often written by composers from cold climates.

The orchestra will also play a portion of the Black Swan's dance in which Odile wins Siegfried's heart with her fleet footwork.

Unfortunately, many of those who love Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* music are not very unfamiliar with the ballet. But the music is only part of the show. Tonight the Alexandra Ballet will provide a glimpse of what the dancers are doing while the musicians play those gorgeous melodies.

These days you can see a full performance of *Swan Lake* just by accessing YouTube. And that's a good start. But keep your eyes and ears open. Chances are there will soon be a live performance of somewhere near you, and it has a seat waiting for you to fill.