

SWAN LAKE

Music: Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Op. 20, 1875-1876)

Choreography: Kent Stowell

Staging: Francia Russell (after Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov)

Scenic Design: Ming Cho Lee

Costume Design: Paul Tazewell

Lighting Design: Randall G. Chiarelli

Original Production Premiere: February 20, 1877, Imperial Ballet, Moscow, choreography by Wenzel Reisinger; restaged on January 15, 1895, Imperial Ballet, St. Petersburg, choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov

Stowell/Russell Production Premiere: October 1, 1976; Frankfurt Ballet

Pacific Northwest Ballet Premiere: April 7, 1981; Seattle Center Opera House; new production September 25, 2003; Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, Seattle)

Swan Lake is considered by many to be the greatest classical ballet of all time. With its fantastical plot filled with romance, sorcery, and betrayal, *Swan Lake* offers ballerinas the ultimate challenge of a dual role—Odette, trapped in the body of a white swan while awaiting an oath of true love to set her free, and Odile, the temptress daughter of Baron Von Rothbart, who plots the downfall of Odette's true love, Siegfried. Pacific Northwest Ballet's 1981 production was a significant milestone as the first full-length ballet re-created for the Company. The current production of Kent Stowell's *Swan Lake*, in a revised staging and featuring new designs, premiered in 2003 to open PNB's inaugural season in Marion Oliver McCaw Hall.

The image of a swan has come to represent the lyrical image of a dancer, and for that we have to thank three men: composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky and choreographers Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. Tchaikovsky composed his score for Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet in 1877, but it was not until Petipa and Ivanov's St. Petersburg production of 1895 that *Swan Lake* took the form we know today. The ballet has since inspired countless choreographers, who, in their own productions, seek to extend the ideas and meanings suggested in the work of its creators.

Tchaikovsky longed for a successful revival of his first ballet. The original Moscow production, now generally regarded as a failure, actually achieved mild success and saw more performances over more years than most ballets premiered on the Moscow stage. The choreography, by the otherwise unknown German ballet master Wenzel Reisinger, was admittedly undistinguished. Anti-German sentiment perhaps fueled opinions against both the dance and the story, which was thought to have originated in Germanic legend. Tchaikovsky's score was admired but considered unsuitable for ballet—not sufficiently *dansante*.

Tchaikovsky died in 1893. A memorial concert in St. Petersburg the next year included a revival of *Swan Lake* Act II, the first lakeside scene, with new choreography by Lev Ivanov, ballet master Marius Petipa's assistant. The performance was a success and plans were laid for a revival of the entire ballet in 1895. Ivanov choreographed Act IV, the second lakeside scene, and Petipa supplied dances for Acts I and III. Tchaikovsky's brother, Modeste, labored to streamline the story, while conductor Riccardo Drigo took on the unenviable task of editing the sometimes unwieldy musical score.

What Tchaikovsky had composed was far ahead of its time, but the 1895 team forged on. Some compromises were inevitable. The score is mammoth and the relative length of the four acts unbalanced. With Petipa in the lead, some music was transferred between acts, some numbers cut, others added.

These efforts paid off. While not an unqualified hit, *Swan Lake* was a solid success. Petipa had a genuine star in ballerina Pierina Legnani, who danced the role of Odette/Odile at the revival's premiere. For years, the ballet master had imported Italian ballerinas as guest artists, infusing their strong pointe work with the lyricism of the French style that served as the basis for ballet training in Russia. Likewise, the Italians influenced their foreign colleagues, inspiring them to new feats of virtuosity.

Although Petipa succeeded with his choreographic contribution, Ivanov's "white" acts provided the images by which *Swan Lake* has become iconic. As the choreography has evolved over time, movements and poses suggest swan wings, necks, and bodies and offer images of flying, swimming, and preening in a purely stylized way that enables the

choreography to transcend the particular aesthetics of its time and become immemorially expressive.

The 1895 revival of *Swan Lake* has served as the basis for nearly every production since then. The dual role of Odette/Odile, still stamped with Legnani's artistry and brilliance, remains a coveted challenge for ballerinas and is broad enough in concept to sustain an endless variety of interpretations. Tchaikovsky's score, his first attempt to compose for ballet, came into its own during the 20th century, as dance and dance production developed to embrace it as *Swan Lake's* motivating force. But, as George Balanchine once commented, "*Swan Lake* is always changing. That is as it should be." Nineteenth-century tradition allowed choreographers *carte blanche* when approaching existing work. Total or partial revision of staging and choreography was standard, as was re-writing of the scenario, and liberties were taken with the musical score.

Following tradition, choreographers in our own century often have re-visited *Swan Lake*, for the ballet lends itself generously to new stagings and new interpretations. Pacific Northwest Ballet's *Swan Lake* dates from 1981, when Mr. Stowell and Ms. Russell mounted here the production they had first created for the Frankfurt Ballet in 1976. Preserving the best of the St. Petersburg original as it has come down to us through England's Royal Ballet, Ms. Russell researched and staged what has long been regarded as the soul of *Swan Lake*—nearly all of Ivanov's Act Two, where music and dance are sublimely fused. Petipa's Act One *pas de trois* and Act Three so-called *Black Swan pas de deux* were also retained. To enhance the story line, and following in the path of many choreographers, Mr. Stowell made important changes in the order of the musical numbers. He also re-choreographed most of Act One, the national dances in Act Three, and all of Act Four, rescuing the often forgotten last act with a radiant *pas de deux* and giving the conclusion dramatic power and unity.

© Doug Fullington, 2003, revised. These notes were written for Pacific Northwest Ballet.