

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER

May 5, 1999 8-11 PM on PBS

New York City Ballet: "Swan Lake"

Music by P. I Tchaikovsky; Choreographed by Peter Martins
based on Petipa, Ivanov, and Balanchine.

Program Notes by MARTIN BOOKSPAN

In the early 1870's, Tchaikovsky was approached by Vladimir Begichev, the director of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, with a proposal for music for a ballet. The idea appealed to Tchaikovsky on two counts: as he wrote in a letter to Rimsky-Korsakov in 1875, "I accepted the work partly because I need the money" (it turned out to be something in the neighborhood of \$500.00) "and because I have long cherished a desire to try my hand at this type of music." Begichev himself, in collaboration with the father of the Bolshoi's prima ballerina, created the libretto, based on German fables having to do with chivalry. The resulting work was called "Swan Lake".

The first production took place in March of 1877, at the Bolshoi Theater. Like so many works which are now classics, it was not a success at first- mainly because the production was apparently a disaster. Even Tchaikovsky's friend, the critic Herman Laroche, wrote: "Costume, stage scenery, and machinery did nothing to conceal the complete emptiness of the dancing. For the balletomane there was barely more than five minutes pleasure in the dancing." But he went on to say, "music lover, however, had more luck. After just the opening bars of the overture, one could already sense that this was from the hand of a real master. A few pages later, and one knew that the master was not only in a good mood, but that he was also at the height of his genius."

As has been the case too frequently in the arts, the true worth of a work has not been appreciated until after the death of its creator. In March, 1894, barely six months after Tchaikovsky's death, the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg presented a gala memorial program of Tchaikovsky's output. Included was the section of "Swan Lake" which became for all practical purposes all that was seen of the ballet for many years: the ensemble of Swans, the dance of the little Swans, and the pas de deux of Odette and the Prince. But we're getting ahead of ourselves...

The performance history of "Swan Lake" is a complicated one. That portion of it which figured on the Maryinsky memorial program is actually the Second Act of the Four Act version, and is a ballet in and of itself. In the United States, the touring Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo wowed audiences in the 1930's with this version, with the famed Alexandra Danilova in the leading role. In 1951 the New York City Ballet introduced its own production of Act II with brilliant new choreography by its reigning Ballet Master, the legendary George Balanchine.

The principal roles were danced by Maria Tallchief and Andre Eglevsky. Two years earlier, though, London's visiting Sadler's Wells Company unveiled at New York's Metropolitan Opera House the first full-length version of "Swan Lake" to be seen in this country, with Margot Fonteyn in the principal role. The "Swan Lake" performance to be seen on May 5 on LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER will be the New York City Ballet's first full-length production of the work, with new choreography by Balanchine's successor as Director of the Company, Peter Martins. The New York City Ballet marks its fiftieth anniversary this season.

In an interview in Lincoln Center's house program for this new production, Martins is quoted as saying, "This music belongs in this house. Tchaikovsky's music is what makes me the most excited about choreographing 'Swan Lake'. It's a great score, with music that breaks your heart. This is Tchaikovsky's house, as well as Balanchine's." Martins goes on to say, "I read everything that was written about 'Swan Lake'. I got every videotape known to man of every production...and I studied them. And what became clear very quickly was that there's very little Petipa (the great Russian Ballet Master who was one of the choreographers of the first St. Petersburg production, with Lev Ivanov) in most productions of 'Sleeping Beauty' or 'Swan Lake'. Ironically, it appeared that Russian productions discarded more of their work than Western ones. I wanted to retain what I considered to be the best of Petipa and Ivanov. At the same time, when there were things that I thought could be updated a little bit, I introduced myself. And obviously, Balanchine was a major influence on me with respect to Tchaikovsky."

The story of 'Swan Lake' is a variant of boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy gets-girl (or does he? More later)--- with the complication that the "girl" in question has been transformed by an evil sorcerer into a swan.

The curtain rises on an elaborate celebration of the 21st birthday of Prince Siegfried. His Mother, the Queen, insists that, having come of age, Prince Siegfried must marry, and must announce his chosen one at the formal birthday ball the following evening. When a flight of swans passes overhead, the Prince and his retinue organize a swan-hunt. In the woods, the Prince encounters the Swan Queen, Odette, and is immediately smitten. She confides that she has been placed under the spell by the evil sorcerer, Von Rotbart; she remains a swan except between midnight and dawn- unless a man marries her and remains forever faithful to her. Siegfried vows to be that man and implores her to attend the ball the next evening, when he will announce their betrothal. Von Rotbart, she responds, will do everything in his power to foil the plan. Soon the stage is taken over by the other swans, and it is here that we experience the delicious Dance of the Little Swans as well as the extraordinary duet between Siegfried and Odette. With the approach of dawn, Odette and the other swans disappear.

At the ball the next evening, Siegfried is dispirited until a new couple arrives. It is Von Rotbart, who has brought with him his daughter, Odile, the very image of

Odette. Siegfried is entranced and the two of them dance what is known as the Black Swan duet. Unaware that he has been deceived, and believing her to be Odette, Siegfried asks for Odile's hand in marriage; Von Rotbart intervenes, demanding an oath of eternal loyalty to Odile, which Siegfried gives after some hesitation. There is a clap of thunder, the courtiers disappear, and Siegfried, seeing Odette in a vision and understanding that he has betrayed her, falls desolate to the floor.

Once again in the forest, a heartbroken Odette wanders; Siegfried, searching for her, comes upon her and swears undying love. But it is too late; she must die, for her life has been forfeited by his betrayal. She plunges into the lake; Siegfried unhesitatingly follows her. Von Rotbart returns to the scene, his powers lost, and he, too, dies.

At the end, in many productions, the figures of Siegfried and Odette reappear, transfigured. In the Martins production Odette remains a swan forever, and Siegfried is left alone to ponder his failings, "I thought this a much stronger ending," Martins has said. "Siegfried falls in love with the White Swan and then falls in love with the Black Swan. The moral lesson here is that you've got to choose. And when the curtain falls, he's got to start all over. Does he learn? This we don't know. Do we ever learn?"

The new Peter Martins production of this most classic of all classical ballets, danced by the New York City Ballet, will be our next LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER telecast on Wednesday evening, May 5. Check your local listings for date and time. See you then!