

Swan Lake – Original Version

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If you ask the average person who has never attended a ballet before what image does the word “ballet” invoke in their minds they will frequently answer “a swan” and on further enquiry they will describe their picture of a ballerina wearing a white tutu dancing “on tippy toes”. They will not know what the equivalent male dancer is called. Asked to name a dancer an Australian will likely have heard of Anna Pavlova (thanks to the méringue desert named after her), Li Cunxin (thanks to the movie *Mao’s Last Dancer*) and perhaps Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn. This answer will of course differ depending on the country in which you are asking the question. As they have heard of it, they will assume that the iconic “*Swan Lake*” represents the very best of classical ballet and knowing that it derived from Russia also assume Russian companies are among the best in the world (which to be fair is true today of the Bolshoi and Merensky companies in Moscow and St. Petersburg).

Pre-Covid, cobbled together Russian named ballet companies touring Australia exploited their countries reputation, knowing that as long as the prince looks passably handsome, and the principal ballerina can complete 32 *fouettés* without falling over or travelling so far across the stage that she disappears into the wings or falls into the orchestra pit, then the audience will be satisfied. Unfortunately for many people, fooled into expecting they are going to see the world’s best dancers in action, and leaving the theatre underwhelmed this will be the first and consequently, sadly, the last ballet performance they will ever attend.

Indeed, the attending public expecting to see the best that ballet can offer would be astonished to learn that “*Swan Lake*” is commonly asserted to have been a failure on its debut and that following the Russian revolution when Russian ballet abandoned its heritage and turned its focus to stories about tractors and grain harvests etc. that if it had not been for artists and staff fleeing to the west and taking their choreographic knowledge, librettos and dance notations etc. with them that these 19th century ballet classics would have been lost to the world. It is no thanks to Russia that the choreography of Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov has survived. The public also would be astonished to learn that during Imperial times when Russian ballet peaked in the late 19th century, thanks to foreigners such as Petipa (French), that the prima ballerinas starring in his ballets comprised a succession of virtuoso Italian dancers¹, many from the La Scala school in Milan, and were not Russian.

The premiere of *The Lake of Swans* (*Swan Lake*) took place in March 1877 at the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, the music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, libretto by Vladimir Begichev, choreography by Vaclav (Julius) Reisinger and featuring Pelageya (Polina) Karpakova as Odette/Odile and the Bolshoi’s Premier Danseur Victor Gillert as Prince Siegfried. This first version of *Swan Lake* is almost universally described today as a failure, and it was only after the success of Lev Ivanov’s Act II memorial tribute to Tchaikovsky in February 1894 that the full ballet was revived.

But was it really a failure and if so, why?

¹ It was Italian dancers who introduced point work to Russia and France and developed the art to modern standards.

In the spring of 1875, Tchaikovsky accepted a commission from the Directorate of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow to prepare a new ballet, *"The Lake of Swans"*, based on a story derived from a German fairy tale. In a letter to Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in September 1875 he explained: *"I took this work on partly for the money, which I need, and partly because I have long wanted to try my hand at writing this type of music"*². He started out by studying various ballet scores, in particular that of Adolphe Adam's *Giselle*, which at the time was his ideal.

Karl Valts (aka Waltz) the Bolshoi's machinist and stage designer at this time, noted in his memoirs that it was *"standard practice for choreographers to give precise instructions to the composer, saying what melodies they required for so and so a dance"*. Unfortunately, it seems that this level of detail did not happen and the collaboration between Tchaikovsky and Reisinger was very distant. The Marius Petipa Society view based on the evidence of the holograph score, a published poster and the listed numbers from the ballet, which did not always agree, is that *"this was a collaboration in which the two men decided on a scenario for their new ballet and then went their separate ways to prepare their material – Tchaikovsky composed the score, to which Reisinger set his choreography only after it was completed"*.

Support for this view is given by Valts who recalled that *"Tchaikovsky spent a lot of time looking for someone he could ask for exact specifications regarding the music which was required for the dances"* and *"even asked me how he should go about the dances, that is how long they ought to be, how many steps they were supposed to have and that kind of thing"*, although of course Valts was hardly able to help him.

That Tchaikovsky as composer and Reisinger as choreographer worked independently is further attested by a letter that Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modest in April 1876: *"Yesterday in the school's theatre studio, the first rehearsal of some pieces from the First Act of that ballet took place. You should have seen how amusing it was to watch the choreographer creating dances to the sound of solo violin and trying to look profound and inspired"*. Below he added: *"The whole theatre was delighted with my music"*.

By mid-October Tchaikovsky had completed the rough sketches for Act I and had embarked on the instrumentation of the ballet which he was *"rushing to finish as soon as possible so that I can start on an opera"*. In March 1876 he had written in a letter to Anatoly Tchaikovsky *"I am up to my eyes in the scoring of the ballet With 2½ acts still to do, I have decided to devote the whole of Easter to this endlessly boring task"*. However, he managed to finish quickly by reusing previously written scores from his first opera *The Voyevoda* that he had abandoned in 1868 and the opera *Undina* of 1869 and by reusing the principal theme he had composed and choreographed for an impromptu one-act short children's ballet called *The*

² *Swan Lake* was not his first attempt at scoring for ballet. In October 1870, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modest *"Among other things, think that I took it upon myself to write music for the ballet Cinderella and that the huge four-act score must be ready in mid-December!"*. For unknown reasons (though likely time pressure) he never continued the score, but the ballet project was resurrected the following year with Yuli Gerber commissioned as composer and Reisinger as the choreographer. However, the music was eventually provided by the German composer Wilhelm Mühldorfer and not Gerber.

Lake of Swans. He had created this ballet to entertain his nephews and nieces in 1871 whilst staying with his sister Alexandra and her family during the holidays. Thus, by mid-April 1876 he was able to add to the bottom of his manuscript “*The End!!!*”.

But not quite the end, for Reisinger requested he add (according to the manuscript score) a “*Russian dance for the third act of Lake of the Swans (for Madame Karpakova)*”. Later, a *pas de deux* was added for another ballerina – Anna Sobeshchanskaya. Pavel Pchelnikov in his recollections of Tchaikovsky relates a story he was told by the conductor Stepan Ryabov. “*Without naming the ballerina, Pchelnikov reported that she went to Saint Petersburg to ask Marius Petipa if he could furnish her with a pas de deux. The number was set to music by the composer Ludwig Minkus. Not wanting to allow music by others in his ballet, Tchaikovsky wrote his own pas de deux, preserving the length and divisions of Minkus’ piece*”. This meant the choreography prepared by Petipa did not need to be changed. Sobeshchanskaya was so pleased she asked Tchaikovsky to compose a new additional variation for her, which he did.

Although angry when she went behind his back and contacted Petipa in St. Petersburg for a new *pas de deux*, Tchaikovsky obviously thought she was a ballerina of some talent as in March 1878, replying to Sergei Taneyev on what constituted ballet music, he wrote “... *ballet music is not always banal – sometimes it is good And when the music is good, then is it not all the same, whether Sobeschanskaya dances to it or not?*”

Tchaikovsky was invariably enthused and pleased with his music whilst he was composing it but, like many authors, would then be critical of his work after it was completed. In November 1877 he wrote to Nadezhda von Meck from Vienna after watching a staging of the ballet *Sylvia* and being enchanted by Léo Debiles music: “*I can assure you that The Lake of Swans is not fit even to hold a candle to Sylvia.*” The following month he wrote to his student Sergey Taneyev regarding Debiles music for *Sylvia* which he considered to be “*not just the principal, but also the sole interest I was ashamed of myself. If I had known this music before, I wouldn’t have written The Lake of Swans.*”

Subsequently his views changed such that he no longer liked *Sylvia* but became even more enthusiastic about another of Debiles’ ballets – *Coppélia*. By September 1882 his view of his own work had mellowed, and he wrote to Pyotr Jurgenson: “*Since ballet is a thing without firm foundations, he (i.e. Debiles) made a concert suite from it. The other day I thought about my own Swan Lake, and I wanted very much to save this music from oblivion, since it contains some fine things. And so I decided to make a suite from it³, like Debiles.*”

At the premiere, Tchaikovsky’s score received some criticism as being too “*symphonic*”, too “*Wagnerian*” and too “*noisy*” and basically just too complicated for ballet, as the Moscow ballet attendees expected the usual infectious rhythmic dancing melodies - a waltz, march or polka. However, Yuri Bakhrushin, a Russian scholar and author of several books on history of Russian ballet quotes a report from the premiere: “*If one judges by the number of curtain calls, with which the public received the composer, then perhaps it is possible to say that his ballet was successful*”. Tchaikovsky’s own view was expressed in an answer he wrote in

³ This intention was not realized and it was only seven years after his death in 1882 that a suite from the music to *Swan Lake* was published. It is unknown who made the selection of numbers.

December 1885 to F. Makkar regarding an invitation to stage *Swan Lake* in Brussels: “*I do not relate negatively to the music of my ballet Swan Lake; it seems to me that it is not so bad, but the subject is boring and I fear for its success*”. Ultimately his disappointment with the ballet’s reception was such that it was to be another 12 years before he tried his hand again at composing music for ballet.

According to Tchaikovsky’s brother Modest “*The poverty of the production, meaning the décor and costumes, the absence of outstanding performers, the Balletmaster’s weakness of imagination, and, finally, the orchestra all of this together permitted (Tchaikovsky) with good reason to cast the blame for the failure on others*”. And Modest has a point – for the ballet we know and love today is still scored to Tchaikovsky’s music, albeit somewhat rearranged, with pieces moved, revised and added to fit a different libretto from the original.

In 1891, Tchaikovsky wrote to Valts regarding a libretto for a proposed opera-ballet called *Watanabe* and expressed his views on suitable ballet music. He agreed to write the music only on the condition that “*Watanabe must be a ballet-féerie and not an opera-ballet*” as “*It must be one thing or the other; either my characters will sing, or they will mime. To have them do both at the same time is quite inconceivable for me*”. He did regard *Watanabe* as an excellent ballet subject as the principal characters “*are beings who in my view lie outside the real world, and I really can see no other way of portraying them truthfully other than in a symphonic manner*”. So, Tchaikovsky did not regret using symphonic music – he considered it essential for portrayal of non-human characters.

It was Reisinger’s choreography, which was thought to be “*unimaginative*” and “*unmemorable*”, that received the sharpest criticism at the premiere. Reisinger had spent 11 months choreographing the ballet and while Tchaikovsky attended rehearsals, as noted above, he merely watched as a spectator rather than collaborator.

Ballet companies around the world, when planning their future season offerings, will reprise ballets in their repertoire but try, funds permitting, to create at least one new ballet production each year. A few of these will be hits, a few will be flops, but the vast majority will be neither. Your average new ballet will be just that – average. Risk takers who defy convention and attempt new things will be responsible for most of the hits; conversely for that very reason they will also be responsible for most of the flops⁴. Reisinger was no risk taker – he produced many new ballets, some of which such as his *Cinderella* were labelled “*successful*”, but he stuck to the accepted choreographic standards of the day. According to historian Galina Chelombitko “*he felt and interpreted the biedermeier style, then favoured by the bourgeoisie world of central Europe, in art and as a way of life*”. It is interesting to reflect that while Reisinger was choreographing to accepted standards in Moscow, at the same time

⁴ This comment applies to today when the role of artistic director and choreographer have diverged such that an AD does not necessarily also have to be a choreographer. In the 19th century the ballet master was also responsible for choreographing new ballets and many, although having had successful dance careers, did not have the requisite skills – thus the number of flops was higher. Some resorted to simply copying other people’s successful ballets – a trick no longer possible with modern copyright legislation.

Marius Petipa in St. Petersburg was choreographing the extraordinary and innovative Kingdom of the Shades scene from *La Bayadère*.

Czech born Reisinger had risen to the position of leading soloist by 1850 when he partnered Lucille Grahn in *Esmeralda* (Phoebus) and *Giselle* (Hilarion) and in 1852 he succeeded in securing an eight-year engagement on the German and Austrian stages. In 1860 he was appointed as choreographer to the Nove Mesto Theatre in Prague and in 1864 he was invited to Leipzig to direct the company there until about 1872. He was appointed director of Moscow Ballet in October 1873 and stayed until 1878, from whence he returned to Prague to be once again head of the new Prague National Theatre ballet company for the 1883/84 season. His long career does not attest to him being considered a failure by his contemporaries. Yes - he never rose to great heights as a choreographer but neither was he a complete failure. His detractors silence on the matter allows us to deduce his real skill and why he was in such demand – he could produce new ballets of acceptable average standard on time and on budget, a skill valued by directors of every ballet company in any century.

The ballet dancers also came in for criticism. The ballet had been conceived for the highest paid dancer, prima ballerina Lydia Geiten, a dancer whom Tchaikovsky admired. Rehearsals began at the end of March 1876, and she rehearsed the ballet until she decided the music was not for her, decades later saying that she had found the ballet “*boring*”. The role would then have normally passed to prima ballerina Anna Sobeschanskaya, as lead roles were assigned according to seniority, but she was withdrawn from the premiere for unclear reasons. According to Valts it was due to a scandal involving Sobeschanskaya and a government official, the Governor-General of Moscow, Vladimir Dolgorukov. He claimed he had presented her with gifts from his family jewel chest, which she had accepted and then sold after she married Victor Gillert. This resulted in her period of service at the theatre being cut short. More likely is that in agreement with Geiten, she did not like the ballet and did not want to dance Reisinger’s unimaginative choreography. Such feelings would explain her trip to St. Petersburg to ask Petipa to choreograph new dances⁵.

With neither of the prima ballerinas available, the role of Odette/Odile at the premiere fell to second string dancer Polina Karpakova, for whom the premiere was a given as a benefit performance. Although no performance review exists⁶, only comments from attending patrons in letters, diaries and memoirs, in a different production Karpakova was described as “*beautiful*” but “*her dancing is heavy and her miming inexpressive*” and she would never have been selected for the role except for “*the benefit of certain influence*”. Another writer observed “*a spectator who had seen her in one ballet could easily visualize her performance in another*”. Karpakova danced the *pas de six* in Act III that had been created for her up to the end of the 1878 season and from January 1878 replaced it with a *pas de dix*, although it

⁵ Two years earlier, Sobeschanskaya had also turned to Petipa for new choreography when she danced in Reisinger’s ballet *Ariadne*. These included all *Ariadne*’s solo dances and the *Dances of the Amazons*. However, Petipa was likely too busy in 1876 choreographing for his own *La Bayadère* to assist her.

⁶ According to historian Galina Chelombitko in an article about Vaclav Reisinger published in *Sovietsky Ballet* in 1988 “*Due to unprocessed historical material, all press references of the period remain inaccessible*”. So perhaps one day a review of the *Swan Lake* premiere performance will be found.

is unclear whether this was a new creation or merely the original *pas de six* with four more dances added.

It was in the fourth performance in May 1877, that Sobeschanskaya eventually made her debut as Odette/Odile, performing her new *pas de deux* in the third act after a *pas de cinq* in place of the original *pas de six* that Karpakova had danced. She continued to dance this new number, which was considered successful, in all her subsequent performances⁷.

By the end of 1879, Sobeschanskaya, Gillert, Karpakova and Reisinger had all left Moscow. Reisinger was replaced as choreographer by Joseph Hansen who staged a revival of *Swan Lake* in 1880 and again in 1882. The first revival in January 1880, staged as Hansen's benefit performance, featured a student from the ballet school, Evdokia Kalmykova, as Odette and Alfred Bekefi as Siegfried. According to The Marius Petipa Society: "*For this production, Hansen changed the outline of the ballet, adding a seduction scene to the first act and choreographed a pas with garlands to the Dance with the Goblets, retained all the national dances and Sobeschanskaya's pas de deux in the third act*".

The revival was warmly received and considered better than Reisinger's production with the dances for the *corps de ballet* considered the most successful part, particularly the second act. In November 1882, Hansen produced another revival that was given four performances, the last in January 1883. One of the few things that is known about this last revival is that it included an interpolation of national dances in the third act entitled *La Cosmopolitana*, for ballerina Lydia Geiten, which was set to music by Cesare Pugni and which had no relevance whatsoever to the ballet.

Hansen left Moscow in 1883 for London and that was the end of *Swan Lake* in Moscow. Ivan Vsevolozhsky had been appointed as Director of the Imperial Theatres for Moscow with responsibility for the city's two main venues (the Bolshoi and Maly Theatres) in 1881 and Director of the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1886, at which time a subordinate director was appointed in Moscow. On Hansen's departure, Vsevolozhsky instituted an administrative reorganization of the Moscow theatres that involved retirements, firings and reduction of funds. With reduced financial support 20 dancers were transferred to St. Petersburg and about 100 others fired⁸. This allowed for an increase in salaries for the remaining artists and workers. There had even been talk about liquidating the Moscow company altogether until Petipa and Lev Ivanov pointed out that the opera would always need a supply of dancers. Among the works removed from the Moscow repertoire was *Swan Lake*, not because it was a failure, but according to Moscow music critic Nikolai Kashkin because the sets were falling apart, and costumes were worn out.

⁷ This *pas de deux* was not published with the full *Swan Lake* score and was forgotten for 70 years until it was discovered in the archives of the Bolshoi Theatre in 1953. It came to the attention of George Balanchine who used the music to choreograph his famous *Tchaikovsky Pas de deux* which premiered in New York in March 1960.

⁸ According to Nadine Meisner, prior to this, in 1881, the St. Petersburg dancers numbered 69 male and 143 female dancers for a total of 212.

Hansen was replaced by Alexei Bogdanov who arrived from St. Petersburg where he had been the *régisseur*⁹ since 1873 and saw himself as Petipa's rival. But as it turned out, Bogdanov's own ballets in Moscow were abject failures and to redress the situation he was asked by his superiors to revive *Swan Lake* and other ballets from the Moscow repertoire. It is evident therefore that *Swan Lake* was not considered a failure by the Moscow Ballet Directorate (i.e. Vsevolozhsky). Bogdanov refused to restage it on the reasonable basis that he could not revive a ballet he had never seen. An additional factor was that everyone involved in its original production had now left the company.

Vsevolozhsky continued to show an interest in reviving *Swan Lake* and to the delight of Tchaikovsky it was eventually agreed that Petipa would mount a new production in St. Petersburg. Petipa, in his memoirs, claims it was he himself that proposed the new version to Vsevolozhsky as he believed the lack of success in Moscow could not be attributed to the music. Unfortunately, Tchaikovsky died in November 1893 before the project could come to fruition. The rights to Tchaikovsky's works passed then to his brother Modest.

Swan Lake had been kept on the stage for seven years and performed a total of 41 times – despite its numerous problems, and on this basis alone while not an instant hit it must be considered more successful than the average ballet. Although the music, conductor, orchestra¹⁰, choreography, dancers, costumes and sets¹¹ all came in for some criticism and the story was considered silly with the characters having unpronounceable (to Russians) names, the biggest problem all seem to agree was Reisinger's weak choreography. Tchaikovsky and the ballerinas were of the same opinion and used the same description – “*boring*”. We can only conclude that it was Tchaikovsky's music alone that led to the ballet's survival and eventual success.

Final Word: In 2015, at a symposium in Moscow it was announced that Sergei Konaev, principal researcher at the Institute for Art Studies in Moscow, had recovered from the old Bolshoi building as part of a recent renovation, a violin rehearsal score and a viola part with notes beginning in 1876 and other materials describing original costumes, sets, dozens of staging cues and casting and even financial records. Unfortunately, full details are yet to be released (at least to my limited knowledge). What we do know is that the notes confirmed Begichev as the author of the ballet's scenario, named the dancer for whom the ballet was conceived as Lydia Geiten and confirmed that the score was played in its original order. The famous Black Swan *pas de deux* that Tchaikovsky wrote for Act I, Siegfried danced with a young woman described as “*first villager*” who then does not return. In Act III when Odile arrived, she immediately took part in the *pas de six* and in 1877 it was Odile, after a costume change, that performed the Russian dance to a Gypsy-type solo violin, evidently to complete her seduction of Siegfried.

⁹ Meaning he was responsible for the staging of the ballets.

¹⁰ The orchestra played badly claiming the music was too difficult.

¹¹ The production was created from old Bolshoi sets and costumes.

Key References:

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https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Swan_Lake

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