Swan Lake Study Guide
2017-18

Presented By the
Department of Community Engagement

MILWAUKEE BALLET
MICHAEL PINK, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
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The Quintessential Ballet

Welcome to the Study Guide for Swan Lake, perhaps the world’s most widely recognized ballet aside from The Nutcracker. It has been called the “quintessential ballet” (quintessential means the purest and most perfect or the embodiment of, in this case, ballet!) and is often the show that pops into people’s minds when the word ballet is mentioned. Since its premiere in Moscow, Russia, it has been presented in over 150 versions by more than 100 companies in at least 25 different countries.

That’s a lot of swans!

Swan Lake didn’t start out successfully – which is surprising, considering its fame today. It premiered on February 20, 1877, and although Tchaikovsky’s spectacular music was used from the beginning, the choreography, originally done by Julius Reisinger, was less than stellar. A critic who was at the performance wrote, “Mr. Reisinger’s dances are weak in the extreme. Incoherent waving of the legs that continued through the course of four hours - is this not torture? The corps de ballet stamp up and down in the same place, waving their arms like a windmill’s vanes - and the soloists jump about the stage in gymnastic steps.” Ouch!

Unfortunately Reisinger failed to mesh his choreography with the psychological, beautiful music Tchaikovsky created. Over the years, other choreographers tried their hand at choreographing this bird ballet but it wasn’t until 1894, when Lev Ivanov choreographed act two for a program commemorating Tchaikovsky after his death in 1893, that a decision was made to restage the entire ballet. Lucky for us, the version that famed Frenchman Marius Petipa and assistant Lev Ivanov created got it right. It has survived until today so that audiences over one hundred years later can still experience the magic of Swan Lake.

“This version of Swan Lake is deeply rooted in the classical tradition. It was not my intention to delve into the psychological aspects of its narrative or to find change for the sake of change. I see this as an age-old power struggle for dominancy and good triumphing over evil.” – Michael Pink

Photo by Brian Lipchik
Milwaukee Ballet’s Swan Lake

Directed by: Michael Pink
Traditional Choreography: After Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov
Additional Choreography: Michael Pink
Ballet Masters: Luz San Miguel and Denis Malinkine
Lighting Design: David Grill
Scenic and Costume Design: Jose Varona

Prologue and Act One
The Queen’s confidante, Count von Rothbart, plots to depose the crown and proclaim himself ruler. Through his mystical powers, he creates the effigy of Odile in the image of Princess Odette to lure Seigfried, the heir apparent, to his death.

Prince Siegfried laments the loss of his childhood sweetheart Princess Odette, who mysteriously disappeared with her friends whilst playing by the lakeside.

The day before Siegfried’s twenty-first birthday, he celebrates with his friend Benno. Count von Rothbart salutes the young prince with a chalice containing a hallucinogenic drug. Now he can lure him to the lakeside where he will reveal his true love, Odette. Von Rothbart has placed a curse on Odette and her friends, they appear as Swans during the day and women in the hours of darkness. Their salvation is dependent on Siegfried promising eternal love to Odette and none other.

Act Two
The next evening in the Palace ballroom guests arrive to celebrate Siegfried’s birthday. It is his duty to choose a bride from three eligible Princesses. Despite his mother’s insistence that he choose a wife, Siegfried refuses, until the arrival of Odile. She casts her cunning spell on him and he chooses her to be his bride and Queen. Count von Rothbart reveals to the Prince and to the court the vision of Odette; the Prince has been deceived, he has sworn eternal love to Odile. He runs from the palace in pursuit of his true love. The monarchy has fallen under the rule of Count von Rothbart.

Siegfried finds Odette by the lakeside where she begs him to forget her, as they can never be together. The Prince would rather forfeit his life than leave her.

In the ensuing fight, Rothbart mortally wounds Odette. Siegfried carries her to the lakeside and together they plunge into their watery grave.

The power of true love rises out of the lake and engulfs Rothbart and Odile. The image of Odette and her prince united in eternal love rises from the lake.
Swan Lake has been called a “work in progress” because it is, in some ways, always undergoing change. Despite the fact that its most well-known version was choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov for the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, little was written down about the choreography. Ballets are like good family stories – they are passed down from generation to generation, so naturally, they may be altered throughout the years.

For the most part, big productions of Swan Lake are usually done in four acts. The choreography in acts one and three is based on Marius Petipa’s work and the lakeside acts by Lev Ivanov. Usually they all contain the more well-known choreography that we associate with Petipa and Ivanov’s version – the pas de trois (dance for three) in act one in the Prince’s honor, the adagio (the opening section of the classical pas de deux – dance for two) between Siegfried and Odette expressing their tragic love for each other, the pas de quatre (dance for four) of the little swans, a dance for the two big swans, the party scene in act three with the famous Black Swan pas de deux between Siegfried and Odile in which she does 32 fouettés (whip turns) and then the self-inflicted death of the heartbroken Odette and Siegfried at the end of act four. These acts look and feel different, not just because they were choreographed by different people, but because Swan Lake itself is about opposites: night vs. day, dark vs. light, good vs. evil, humans vs. animals, freedom vs. imprisonment, love vs. betrayal, and the natural world of the lake vs. the human world inside the castle.

Much like productions of The Nutcracker, each choreographer is allowed to add his or her own twist to the ballet. Throughout history Swan Lake has been shortened and cut to make the story more succinct. Sergei Diaghilev shortened the ballet to two acts for the Ballet Russes in 1911, because in his opinion, some of the original choreography was “dull and repetitive.” Not all of the new Swan Lakes are based on the version of the 1800’s. For Milwaukee Ballet, Michael Pink has shortened the ballet to two acts because, as in all of his full-length ballets, he wants the audience to have a clearer sense of the story and the characters. Instead of interrupting the theatrical story with dancing just for the sake of dancing, Michael Pink’s version blends classical dance with a relentless story all the way to the thrilling end.
Here are some notes and highlights about the three choreographers who have contributed to Milwaukee Ballet’s production of *Swan Lake*…

**Marius Petipa**

You could say that Marius Petipa had no choice about what his career would be – his father Jean was a dancer, teacher and choreographer and he wanted Marius to follow in his footsteps – or dancesteps, as it were. Marius spent his youth traveling around Europe (and even to New York when he was 21), learning to dance and soon to perform. He had 17 brothers and sisters and their mother was an actress, which made the Petipas quite the artistic family. Marius made his dancing debut as Jocko, a Brazilian Ape in one of his father’s productions. He rose up through the ranks and at 16 he became a *premiere danseur* (the highest rank for a male dancer) and even began producing short ballets for the Belgian company his father was running.

After traveling and dancing on his own for awhile, he accepted a one-year contract with the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatre in 1847. Little did he know that he would stay there for the rest of his life and change the course of ballet in the process. In his 50 years as Ballet Master, he produced 50 ballets, revived 17 older ones and arranged the dancing for 35 operas. He is the godfather of some of ballet’s biggest hits including *Don Quixote, La Bayadère, Sleeping Beauty, Raymonda* and of course – *Swan Lake*!
A Petipa Highlight – 32 fouettés

Petipa’s most famous contribution to Swan Lake is the Black Swan Pas de Deux that Odile (the evil daughter of Rothbart who tries to fool Siegfried into thinking she’s Odette) performs. Odile performs 32 fouettés (pronounced FWET-tays) in the dance. These “whipped turns” are incredible because her turning leg never rests!!! As an audience member you can start clapping for this dancer even before she’s finished; people familiar with ballet usually start applauding around during turns 12 to 16!

The first dancer to perform this incredible display of talent was Pierina Legnani (pictured right), who first showed this off in Petipa’s Cinderella. For a long time, Russian dancers couldn’t figure out Pierina’s secret to these mesmerizing turns.

Eventually a dancer named Mathilde Kschessinka realized that if your eyes return to the same fixed point everytime you turn – what we call “spotting” today – you can turn and turn and turn and never get dizzy!

Why don’t you try to do spot turns? First, find a place where you aren’t going to crash into any furniture. Now pick a spot on the wall, a hanging picture or a window for example. Start turning around, but keep your eyes on your spot. At the last second, when you have to turn because your eyes can’t see your spot anymore, whip your head around and fix your eyes back on the spot. By spotting, you can turn without getting dizzy, but start slow until you are comfortable doing this – it takes some practice!

Luz San Miguel, Photo by Brian Lipchik
Unlike Marius Petipa, who was forced into becoming a dancer, Lev Ivanov wanted to be a dancer as soon as he saw his first ballet when he was a little boy. Lev grew up very poor, even having to spend some time in an orphanage when his mother couldn’t make ends meet. He was lucky enough to be sent to the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg where room, board and ballet lessons were free. Once there, Lev learned ballet from some of the greats. Ironically — he made his debut while training under Jean Petipa — Marius’ father! Lev never quite made it to center stage in the way that Marius did, even though he did eventually rise to the rank of premier danseur. He was, if anything, reliable and always happy to be dancing, even if he didn’t stand out like other stars.

When you read about Lev in history, it seems a shame that he wasn’t seen at the time as a more influential figure. Throughout his career, Lev’s impeccable memory came in handy. He was able to jump into a role almost without rehearsing it and it helped him to gain the position of Ballet Master because he could reproduce a score on the piano by just hearing it once and was called a “walking reference book” who could set any ballet the company needed him to do.

By the time the creation of Swan Lake came around, Lev had proved to be a good assistant to Marius Petipa. After restaging act two of the ballet (which had previously been a flop) Petipa asked him to stage acts two and four of the ballet — the “white acts” (because of the swan costumes). Swan Lake still didn’t receive rave reviews — at best they were average. Even though Petipa got most of the credit for this ballet, years later, we acknowledge and appreciate the huge impact Ivanov had on this classic ballet. (Photo above by Brian Lipchik)
An Ivanov Highlight – the lakeside scenes

The glorious swan scenes are what we think of when Swan Lake is mentioned. Lev Ivanov really brought Tchaikovsky’s music to life – to flight! Here are some things to look for when you watch the swan corps de ballet (the “body of the ballet” or the big group of dancers who are swans in the show) and Odette dancing.

• The Swan Corps are women who have been put under a spell that turns them into swans during the day. Since they are stuck halfway between being women and being swans, try to decide when you think they are more birdlike and when they are more maidenlike. Think of their arms as wings – sometimes they move slowly with rolling motions as if they are hovering over the lake, sometimes they flap and flutter nervously, sometimes they preen and fluff themselves, sometimes they hide behind a wing.

• The swans aren’t always sweet, docile birds – watch as they throw their arms behind them and aim their heads down as they swoop to attack, protecting themselves against von Rothbart.

• The swan corps is constantly moving in and out of lines and formations – similar to birds flying in a “V” formation when they prepare to head south for the winter.

• Watch as the dancers’ whole bodies create the shape of a swan – when they raise their legs bent slightly but high behind them, they look like swans coasting across the water.

• Siegfried wants Odette to be a human, not a swan, so that he can marry her and live happily ever after. When they dance together you can see him wrapping his arms around her in an embrace, but also enclosing her wings and pulling her out of the air so that she cannot fly away.

• When Siegfried turns Odette, sometimes the turns are slow – not always the fast turns a male dancer assists a female dancer with – these are more deliberate and unhurried. These turns show us that Odette is, for the first time since the curse was put on her, relaxing and learning to trust someone, but also expressing her sadness at the situation she is in. Odette does find happiness though, as she falls in love with Siegfried. If you watch the rapid beating of her pointed foot against the other, it is as if we see her heart beating faster and faster with excitement.
Milwaukee Ballet’s Artistic Director Michael Pink is an incredible story teller. He has taken some of the world’s most well-known stories and transformed them into ballets – often showing people that ballet can be scary, magical or silly in addition to being beautiful and dramatic. He has shown audiences the world over how dance can tell a great story just as well as words can. His works such as *Dracula*, *Esmeralda* (based on *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), *Romeo & Juliet*, *Peter Pan*, *Mirror Mirror*, *Dorian Gray* and his most recent world premiere, *Beauty and the Beast*, have sometimes been called dance drama for the incredible way that they meld theatrical effects and classical ballet. Through music, sets, props, costumes, and lighting, Michael takes audiences on journeys to faraway places, fantastical worlds and other time periods and can make you think that people can fly, that vampires are real or that Princes turn into Beasts.

In Michael’s ballet, the swans are in tattered dresses, they don’t wear tights, nor do they have ribbons on their pointe shoes. In the more traditional version, seen in the photo of American Ballet Theatre on the right, the swans are in flat, white, classical tutus, tights and pointe shoes with the ribbons. Why do you think Michael made this change? Which do you prefer?
Michael’s choreography is sometimes funny, sometimes terrifying, sometimes romantic, and always full of drama. One of the things that set him apart from other choreographers is his desire to see his dancers really take their roles seriously and do some acting. Often times when you see an art form such as ballet or opera, the artists forget that they are telling a story to people – not just performing amazing footwork or singing incredible arias. He wants the dancers to really think about the character they are playing so that they can bring truth and honesty to the role, so that we the audience can follow the story and connect with what’s happening on stage.

Michael likes to take famous stories and turn them into big, lavish, theatrical ballets – like *Dracula, Romeo & Juliet* or *Peter Pan*.

- What is a story that you love that might work as a ballet?

- Why do you think dance would be a good way to express this story on stage?

As you know, ballets don’t have any words in them. So, how do the dancers tell the audience what’s happening? How does someone become as good an actor as they are a dancer? Whether you realize it or not, people can sometimes just look into your eyes and know how you feel – but gestures and body language also help. Let’s see how well you do this. Go stand in front of a mirror and perform the following emotions, just by using your face:

- Happy
- Sad
- Angry
- Scared

Those are pretty easy. Now try these:

- Cautious
- Nervous
- Overwhelmed
- Ecstatic
- Shocked
- Ashamed
- Confused
- Mischievous

Now do them again using your whole body. Remember, you can’t use any words or sounds!
Would someone be able to tell what you felt if you didn’t say anything and just made these faces? In ballet, this is called **pantomime** (or sometimes just “mime”). In classical ballet, there are universal gestures that tell the story. **Read these descriptions and try the movements.** Then, see if you can put the ballet “sentences” together just using mime.

- **Anger** – fist shaken
- **Ask/Beg/Please** – hands clasped together in a pleading gesture
- **Beautiful** – hand circling face
- **Call** – hand or hands cupped around mouth
- **Crazy** – finger circling by ear
- **Dance** – hands circling around each other while arms are raised overhead
- **Death** – arms straight in front, crossed at wrists with hands in fists
- **Fear** – body leaning away with hands open and palms out
- **Goodbye** – hands waving
- **Headache** – back of hand to forehead
- **Hear** – hand pointing to or cupping ear
- **Hunger** – hands rubbing stomach
- **I/Me/Mine** – hand to chest indicating oneself
- **Love** – hands over heart
- **Marriage** – index finger pointing to ring finger on left hand
- **No/Never** – with palms down, hands waving over each other crossing at wrist
- **Pray** – palms together
- **Promise** – two fingers held together, raised upward toward the audience (palm facing audience)
- **Quiet/Don’t Speak** – finger pressed against lips or hand clasped over mouth
- **Reading** – hands together, palms facing upwards creating a book
- **Remember/Think** – touch or point to temple
- **Revenge** – clenched fist comes from overhead down in front of body
- **Royal** – hand circling top of head to indicate crown
- **Sad/Cry** – finger tracing tears down face or wiping tears away off cheek or face in hands
- **Scheming** – fingers moving down along sides of chin
- **See** – finger pointing to eyes
- **Shoot** – pretending to aim bow and arrow
- **Sleep** – hands in praying position held on side of face with head inclined as though resting on a pillow
- **Stop/Go away** – palm out or both palms out toward other person
- **Why/Where/What** – hands open, palms up in front or on sides of body
- **You** – arm extending to another person with hand open, palm up or direct point with finger
Can you put these sentences together with mime?

- You are beautiful and I want to marry you.
- Come here! I’m angry with you!
- I’m afraid. I hear the queen.
- The king is dead.
- You are giving me a headache.
- Let’s all dance!

Using the ballet mime dictionary, create your own silent sentences. Write them here and perform them for each other. See if you “speak” ballet mime!
In 1996 a choreographer named Matthew Bourne premiered his version of *Swan Lake* for his company Adventures in Motion Pictures. The same characters appear: a young prince, a determined and over-zealous queen and of course, swans. But Bourne’s swans are not the tutu-clad beauties we are used to seeing – in fact quite the opposite – they are males! Bourne’s swans are fierce and swarming, not graceful and lithe. Their costumes are in the form of feathery knickers and spiky (almost mohawk-like) hair coming to sharp triangular points.

Bourne wasn’t intimidated by creating a ballet so vastly different from its classical roots. He said, “How seriously do a lot of people take that [the classic interpretation]? To some people the original ‘Swan Lake’ looks ridiculous. As long as you approach the music in a truthful way, I don’t see why it must always have the same steps and the same images.”

If you created a version of *Swan Lake*, what would your swans be like?
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in a secluded part of Russia called Kamsko-Votkinsk, far from city life. From the time he was very small, he heard the beautiful folk music of the Russian countryside playing all around him. Even after he grew up and moved to the great cities to study and write for classical orchestras, this music influenced his work.

- Pyotr was born on May 7, 1840.
- In 1850 he begins to compose. How old was he when he started to compose?
- In 1854 his mother dies of cholera. (Look this up online—what is it?)

Pyotr had piano lessons when he was a child but got a regular academic education and worked for the government before settling down to study music seriously at the age of twenty. He studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and went on to teach at the Moscow Conservatory by the time he was twenty-six. Pyotr wrote many textbooks for music students and he also served as music critic for a major newspaper. He was lucky enough to be recognized as a great composer in his own time as well as in the years since his death.

Tchaikovsky was asked by the leaders of the Bolshoi Theatre to compose a ballet that would later become *Swan Lake*. At the time, he was given six months to finish the project (although it ended up taking two years!) Tchaikovsky had planned to use some music he had already been writing, for an opera called *Ondine*. As it turns out, the final duet of *Ondine* is identical to the second-act adagio of *Swan Lake*. This was, in fact, his first ballet and it is not clear why exactly he was asked to do the job. According to him, he decided to accept the job, “partly because I need the money and partly because I have long cherished the desire to try my hand at this kind of music.” In this score, Tchaikovsky did more than create music that could be danced to - this music was complex and full of characters and drama. The music is as important a character as Odette or Odile in *Swan Lake*!

Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s music was known for its emotional and highly individual style. The music he loved so much also communicated strong emotion. But many people believe that Pyotr’s own unhappy life put the brooding sound in his music. Tchaikovsky wrote many symphonies, operas and concerti but only three ballet scores. These three, written in the last years of his life, just happen to be the three of the most popular ballets of all time: *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*.

- What do you like about the music in *Swan Lake*?
- Have you ever heard this music before?
- Could you tell when something bad was going to happen by listening to the music?
Appendix A: Being a Good Theatre Audience

Unlike actors on television, performers on the stage are aware of their audience and want very much to communicate their art to you, and feel your appreciation in turn. In fact, by the time you arrive at a theatre for a scheduled performance, many people (choreographers, composers, dancers, technicians, costume and lighting designers, etc.) have worked very hard to bring you their best efforts. In order to show respect for those efforts, every audience member must give the performance their full attention and avoid any behavior that interferes with anyone else doing the same. We have rules that help us accomplish this goal, and you should do your best to understand and follow them:

1. Always arrive at the theatre with plenty of time to find your seats and settle down into them. Late arrivals mean disruption for everyone else, including the performers.

2. No shoving or running in the lobby.

3. No cameras or video recorders. Flashes are dangerous for dancers and unapproved photos and videos violate copyright laws.

4. No hooting, whistling or yelling during the performance. The performance has begun when anyone on stage starts talking or dancing, or when the orchestra starts playing. You are welcome to show your appreciation for the performance with applause at the end of the ballet or sometimes at the end of a section or solo. You are also welcome to laugh if someone on stage is being intentionally funny.

5. No talking or whispering during the performance. You will have plenty of time to discuss your impressions at intermission or after the show.

6. No gum, candy or food in the theatre (it makes noise and sticky messes).

7. Use the bathroom before the show begins or at intermission, not during the performance.
Sources and Special Thanks

Writing and Lay-Out by Alyson Chavez, Director of Community Engagement

Sources:
Michael Pink – Artistic Director, Milwaukee Ballet
Cast & Crew of Swan Lake

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