

MUSIC NOTE

Music Director and Chief Conductor Nicolette Fraillon talks to Rose Mulready about Tchaikovsky's revolutionary score for *Swan Lake*.

RM: What was groundbreaking about Tchaikovsky's music for ballet?

NF: Until Tchaikovsky agreed to write *Swan Lake*, ballet music was written by specialist composers, akin to today's jingle writers or film-score composers. They were given a task by the choreographer, who would hand the composer a scenario with very detailed instructions: "This needs to be a fast solo for the prima ballerina, because she's particularly good at fast footwork, then we need a grand adage..." The composers had to be experts in their field and very ballet-literate, but they weren't necessarily great creative artists. So the music was pretty, and dominated by melody and rhythm. Those who were good at writing ballet music, and commissioned over and over again - Ludwig Minkus, Adolphe Adam - were great melodists who wrote very beautiful, tuneful work which was descriptive in a superficial sense, but there was no great depth. There may have been melodic themes associated with a particular character, as in *Giselle* or *La Sylphide*, but they don't musically develop, they just recur as fragments, so there's no storytelling in the music.

Music doesn't exist in a vacuum, and Tchaikovsky was aware of the work of Wagner and other operatic composers, in particular the development of the leitmotif as a theatrical device. This involved taking a melodic fragment that represents a character, as Minkus and Adam would do, but using all aspects of music - harmony, rhythm, tempo, melodic form - and changing that to represent the psychological growth of the character. *Swan Lake* is not just a series of dances - there are harmonic and rhythmic relationships. Melodies return and are developed in more and more dramatic forms.

At the time, the music was criticised for being too symphonic; critics worried that ballet music this complex would rival the stage, and

detract from the dancers. However, Petipa realised that music like this made choreographers' work look even greater, and gave them even more possibility for really profound storytelling and character development. He would go on to commission Tchaikovsky to write *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty*.

RM: What made Tchaikovsky hesitate to accept the commission for *Swan Lake*?

NF: Because ballet composers were subservient to choreographers and dancers, composers who wanted their music to be more complex or abstract, to be the gods of their own creation, didn't tend to venture into the ballet world. So when Tchaikovsky, who was already in the 1870s acknowledged as one of Russia's great composers, was asked to write *Swan Lake* he thought twice about it; he was interested in it, but he thought it wouldn't be good for his reputation as a "serious" composer.

Tchaikovsky grew up in a very artistically and theatrically literate family. There were opera singers around all the time, he was taken to the opera and the ballet, and we know from his own writings that he loved music in a theatrical context. So thankfully, his interest in writing a ballet won out over his doubts; he took on the commission, and changed the course of music history. He brought all his brilliance as a composer and his knowledge of theatrical music and produced a masterpiece virtually from nowhere, on his first try.

RM: The version of the score used in the Murphy *Swan Lake* has been controversial. Why is that?

NF: The original *Swan Lake*, even before it hit the boards, was being mucked around with. Tchaikovsky, even though he was a genius, was still subject to the whims of the choreographers and the dancers. There is actually not an original *Swan Lake* score to tell you the order the music was set in, although people have tried to piece it together, using things like

theatre posters from the first performances. Of all the Tchaikovsky ballet scores, it was the most bastardised. There is the story of one prima ballerina who didn't like her pas de deux and variations, so while Tchaikovsky wasn't around, somebody else wrote them. Tchaikovsky insisted that only his music should be in the ballet, but the variation was already choreographed - so the ballerina did her variation, and he wrote music to it. And it's wonderful music - the score George Balanchine used for his *Tchaikovsky Pas de deux*.

The music for what we all know as the Black Swan Pas de deux was originally conceived to be in Act I. But at some stage in the 19th century it was moved to Act III, and became the pas de deux for Odile and the Prince. Graeme Murphy, advised by [designer] Kristian Fredrikson - who'd done months of research into the score - and the conductor Richard Bonyngue, put that music into Act I of his ballet. Ironically, he has been frequently been attacked for being unmusical, for daring to shift its position, but there is every indication that was its original place.

What Murphy has done is to pare out a lot of non-essential music (for instance, some of the national dances, or the endless variations) - but I have no problem with that, as there is always a good dramatic reason for it. Graeme and Kristian wanted to have everything focused on the three main characters. It's a very pure version.

Every year, Nicolette Fraillon gives a series of free Pre-performance Music Talks, providing fascinating insights into the score you're about to hear. More info: australianballet.com.au/discover

Rose Mulready is The Australian Ballet's content specialist