

= The Dying Swan =

The Dying Swan (originally The Swan) is a solo choreographed by Mikhail Fokine in 1905 to Camille Saint-Saëns 's *Le Cygne* from *Le Carnaval des animaux* as a *pièce d 'occasion* for the ballerina Anna Pavlova , who performed it about 4 000 times . The short ballet (4 minutes) follows the last moments in the life of a swan , and was first presented in St. Petersburg , Russia in 1905 . The ballet has since influenced modern interpretations of *Odette* in Tchaikovsky 's *Swan Lake* and has inspired non-traditional interpretations and various adaptations .

= = Background = =

Inspired by swans that she had seen in public parks and Alfred , Lord Tennyson 's poem " The Dying Swan " , Anna Pavlova (who had just become a ballerina at the Mariinsky Theatre) asked Michel Fokine to create a solo for her for a 1905 concert being given by artists from the chorus of the Imperial Mariinsky Opera . Fokine suggested Saint-Saëns 's cello solo , *Le Cygne* (which Fokine had been playing at home on a mandolin to a friend 's piano accompaniment) and Pavlova agreed . A rehearsal was arranged and the short dance completed very quickly . Fokine remarked in *Dance Magazine* (August 1931) :

It was almost an improvisation . I danced in front of her , she directly behind me . Then she danced and I walked alongside her , curving her arms and correcting details of poses . Prior to this composition , I was accused of barefooted tendencies and of rejecting toe dancing in general . The Dying Swan was my answer to such criticism . This dance became the symbol of the New Russian Ballet . It was a combination of masterful technique with expressiveness . It was like a proof that the dance could and should satisfy not only the eye , but through the medium of the eye should penetrate the soul .

In 1934 , Fokine told Arnold Haskell , author of *Balletomania* :

Small work as it is , [...] it was ' revolutionary ' then , and illustrated admirably the transition between the old and the new , for here I make use of the technique of the old dance and the traditional costume , and a highly developed technique is necessary , but the purpose of the dance is not to display that technique but to create the symbol of the everlasting struggle in this life and all that is mortal . It is a dance of the whole body and not of the limbs only ; it appeals not merely to the eye but to the emotions and the imagination .

= = Plot summary = =

The ballet was originally entitled *The Swan* but acquired its now familiar title following Pavlova 's tremulous interpretation of the work 's dramatic arc as the expiration of life . The dance is composed principally of supple upper body and arm movements and tiny , nibbling steps called *pas de bourrée suivi* .

The French critic André Levinson wrote :

Arms folded , on tiptoe , she dreamily and slowly circles the stage . By even , gliding motions of the hands , returning to the background from whence she emerged , she seems to strive toward the horizon , as though a moment more and she will fly ? exploring the confines of space with her soul . The tension gradually relaxes and she sinks to earth , arms waving faintly as in pain . Then faltering with irregular steps toward the edge of the stage ? leg bones quiver like the strings of a harp ? by one swift forward gliding motion of the right foot to earth , she sinks on the left knee ? the aerial creature struggling against earthly bonds ; and there , transfixed by pain , she dies .

= = Performances and critical commentary = =

The Dying Swan was first performed by Pavlova at a gala in the Noblemen 's Hall , St. Petersburg , Russia , on Friday , 22 December 1905 , and first performed in the United States at the Metropolitan Opera House , New York , on 18 March 1910 . American dance critic and photographer Carl Van

Vechten noted that the ballet was " the most exquisite specimen of [Pavlova 's] art which she has yet given to the public . " Pavlova performed the role some 4 000 times and , on her deathbed in The Hague , reportedly cried , " Prepare my swan costume . "

Fokine 's granddaughter , Isabelle , notes that the ballet does not make " enormous technical demands " on the dancer but it does make " enormous artistic ones because every movement and every gesture should signify a different experience , " which is " emerging from someone who is attempting to escape death . " She notes that modern performances are significantly different from her grandfather 's original conception and that the solo today is often made to appear to be a variation of Swan Lake ? " Odette at death 's door . " The ballet is not about a ballerina being able to transform herself into a swan , she states , but about death , with the swan simply being a metaphor for that .

= = Legacy = =

Pavlova was recorded dancing The Dying Swan in a 1925 silent , nearly complete film , to which sound is often post -@-@ applied . The short ballet has influenced interpretations of Odette in Tchaikovsky 's Swan Lake , particularly in the parting of the lovers in the first lakeside scene .

The dance was almost immediately adapted following its premiere by various ballerinas across the globe to suit their techniques and temperaments . As a result , Fokine published an official version of the choreography in 1925 , highlighted with 36 photographs of his wife Vera Fokina demonstrating the ballet 's sequential poses . At a later date , Kirov @-@ trained Natalia Makarova commented :

Of Fokine 's original choreography [...] only scattered fragments remain [...] he created only the bourrées [a walking or running ballet step usually executed on the points of the toes] for Pavlova . Subsequently , every performer [...] has used the piece at her own taste and at her own risk [...] In Russia I had danced Dudinskaya 's version and [...] experienced a certain discomfort [...] from all the sentimental stuff ? the rushing around the stage , the flailing of the arms [...] to the contemporary eye , its conventions look almost ludicrous [...] the dance needs total emotional abandon , conveying the image of a struggle with death or a surrender to it [...] As for the emotional content , I was helped by Pavlova , whose film of the work I saw . Even today , her Swan is striking ? the flawless feeling for style , the animated face ? although certain melodramatic details seem superfluous .

The ballet has been variously interpreted and adapted . The 1917 Russian film The Dying Swan by director Yevgeni Bauer , for example , tells the story of an artist who strangles a ballerina . Maya Plisetskaya re @-@ interpreted the swan simply as elderly and stubbornly resisting the effects of aging , much like herself . Eventually the piece came to be considered one of Pavlova 's trademarks . More recently , Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo perform a parody version that emphasizes every excess dormant in the choreography , and , in 2000 , street theatre artist Judith Lanigan created a hula hoop act based on the Fokine / Pavlova ballet divertissement that has been performed at international street theatre festivals , comedy and burlesque events , and in traditional and contemporary @-@ style circuses .

Several figure skaters have performed The Dying Swan with skate @-@ choreography inspired by the original ballet . Maribel Vinson (1936 Olympic bronze medallist from the US) reviewed Sonja Henie 's 1936 professional debut for The New York Times and noted :

The crowd settled quickly into a receptive mood for Sonja 's famous interpretation of the Dying Swan of Saint @-@ Saëns . With spotlights giving the ice the effect of water at night , Miss Henie , outlined in a blue light , performed the dance made immortal by Pavlova . Whether one agrees that such posturing is suited to the medium of ice , there is no doubt that Miss Henie 's rendition is a lovely thing . Too much toe work at the start leaves the feeling that this does not belong to skating , but when she glides effortlessly back and forth , she is free as a disembodied spirit and there is an ease of movement that ballet never can produce .

Some ballerinas , including Ashley Bouder of New York City Ballet and Nina Ananiashvili , formerly of American Ballet Theatre , have used " Dying Swan " arms in Swan Lake when making Odette 's

exit at the end of Act II (the first lakeside scene) .