

Pop Culture Movements: *Swan Lake* Unfolded

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Introduction and Background

Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (1877) remains one of the most prolific and celebrated performances in contemporary ballet history. The story follows the tragic love story between Prince Siegfried and Odette, a young woman cursed to be a swan by day, whose relationship is doomed by deception and betrayal.

- Scholars have long documented its influence within dance, music, and performance studies.
- Although *Swan Lake* has been studied extensively within the context of ballet, its broader cultural symbolism and recurring presence in contemporary media are less thoroughly examined.
- This research addresses these gaps by observing *Bridgerton* (2020), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), and *Ted Lasso* (2020), all of which are streaming television series that make explicit reference to *Swan Lake*.
- The study presents an examination of thematic connections between *Swan Lake* and each of the shows, as well as peripheral thematic connections, or contextual webbing, with the greater popular culture.
- Through an in-progress companion podcast and website, the research makes these findings accessible beyond traditional academic settings.

Methodology

This study explores how *Swan Lake* continues to shape contemporary television by tracing recurring themes such as duality, positive masculinity, and restriction across popular culture. Materials analyzed included the amount of visual symbolism, character roles, and narrative structures associated with swan imagery and dual identity. Scenes were systematically coded for recurring motifs that align with *Swan Lake*'s symbolic framework, and comparable patterns were identified across multiple shows. The overall goal of the study was to use popular culture references of this classical ballet to explore a wide array of serious contemporary issues.

Key Focus Areas:

- Examine *Swan Lake*'s influence on contemporary television narratives.
- Synthesize diverse perspectives from collaborators and the public media about themes found in *Swan Lake*.
- Code scenes for swan-related symbolism, character roles, and narrative structures.
- Hypothesize the extent of *Swan Lake*'s covert persistence in culture.
- Seek to demonstrate the lasting cultural impact of classical art.



Figure 1: In S1E8 of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Serena gifts June a music box, a memento from Serena's childhood. When opened, the music box plays a tinny version of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Theme."



Figure 2: In S1E4 of *Bridgerton*, Queen Charlotte adorns a wig decorated with swans during the Rehearsal. As she scrutinizes the characters in the scene, her wig echoes the idea of elegance in the face of spectacle.



Figure 3: In S2E8 of *Ted Lasso*, Sam uses his one haircut a season from Isaac to prepare for a blind date. As the ceremonial haircut unfolds, Colin whispers, "It's like *Swan Lake*."

Results

Swan Lake emerges in various spaces throughout popular culture and expands far beyond the stage. Through contextual webbing, the study found multiple connections between *Swan Lake*, streaming television, and the greater popular culture. The most notable themes examined were:

- In *The Handmaid's Tale*; duality, swan symbolism, and music boxes.
- In *Bridgerton*; wigs, Eros & Psyche, and British balls.
- In *Ted Lasso*; barbershop culture, hair as a ritual object, and positive masculinity.

Collaborative analysis allowed for the further study of these core themes in popular culture through mixed media: novels, music, theatre, film, and social media.

Overall, *Swan Lake* is a deeply rooted pop culture phenomenon that reaches all genres of popular culture. Although some of the connections are implicit and often undetected, the influence of *Swan Lake* nonetheless persists, contributing to larger conversations about serious contemporary issues.

Discussion

The next phase of the project focuses on finalizing and launching a dedicated website and podcast, which will present a complete analysis of *Swan Lake* and its influence on *Bridgerton*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ted Lasso*, and other aspects of modern popular culture.

- Website structure, visual design, and written content will be refined for coherency and accessibility.
- The podcast will provide a deeper discussion of recurring motifs and themes of *Swan Lake*, *Bridgerton*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Ted Lasso* within broader pop culture contexts.

Completion of these platforms will extend the project's reach beyond traditional academic spaces and engage a wider public audience.

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References



Stay on the lookout for announcements from our members regarding the podcast and website release in April!