

1895 Libretto

The first scene of Act 1 takes place in a park outside Prince Siegfried's castle, where the Prince is celebrating his 21st birthday with his friends and peasants, including his best friend Benno and his tutor Wolfgang. However, in the midst of the celebrations, Siegfried's mother the Queen arrives unannounced and protests the merry-making, reminding her son of his duties. Now that he has come of age, he will be king soon and must marry. A ball will be held at the castle the following evening and the Queen reminds Siegfried that he is to choose a bride from the eligible maidens attending. Siegfried is uneasy at the thought of parting with his bachelor life and the joys that come with it, but his mother is adamant on the matter. After she departs, the celebrations continue and Wolfgang, who is now drunk, attempts to join in the dancing by dancing with one of the girls, but she teases him and sends him spinning to the ground. When the celebrations have ended, the peasants depart and Siegfried suggests to Benno and their friends that they end the evening with a hunt. Benno has just caught sight of a flock of swans flying into the forest, so, armed with crossbows, the hunting party sets off.

The second scene takes place at an enchanted lake by the ruins of an old chapel deep in the forest. The swans are swimming on the lake and leading them is one wearing a crown. Siegfried, Benno and the hunters arrive in a clearing by the lakeside. Siegfried sends the others to search for the swans, when the crowned one appears by the shore and he prepares to shoot it, but before he can, the swan transforms into Princess Odette. She is terrified when she sees Siegfried, but he lays down his crossbow and promises he will not harm her. When he asks for her story, she explains that she and her friends have been enchanted by an evil genie in a spell that leaves them women by night and swans by day. The lake where they live was formed by the tears of Odette's grieving mother and the spell can only be broken by a vow of eternal love and fidelity to Odette from one who has never loved before. The Evil Genie appears in the guise of an owl and Siegfried attempts to kill him, but Odette intercedes: the genie's death would only make the spell permanent. Odette's friends, the Swan Maidens, and Siegfried intervene in time to stop Benno and the hunters from killing them. As the night passes by, they all dance together by the lake and Siegfried and Odette fall in love, and he swears to love and marry her. Dawn approaches and the Evil Genie returns as Odette and her friends are forced back onto the lake as swans.

The second act takes place in the ballroom of Siegfried's castle, where the ball is underway. Siegfried arrives with his mother and she introduces six princesses, one of whom he must choose to marry. Siegfried dances with the princesses, but rejects them all, remembering his vow to Odette. The Master of Ceremonies announces the arrival of two uninvited guests – the knight Von Rothbart, who is really the Evil Genie in disguise, and his daughter Odile, who he has magically disguised as Odette. Siegfried falls for the trickery and dances with Odile, failing to notice the real Odette in her swan form at the window, trying in vain to warn him that he is being deceived. Afterwards, Siegfried chooses Odile as his bride and, believing her to be Odette, swears eternal love and fidelity to her. With this, the Evil Genie and Odile burst out laughing in triumph, revealing their true identities, and Siegfried finally sees Odette at the window, but it is too late. Distracted, he flees from the castle in search of her.

The third act takes place back at the lake, where the Swan Maidens await Odette's arrival. She rushes in and tearfully tells them about Siegfried's betrayal and that she yearns for death, the only thing that can now free her. The Swan Maidens take her into their midst and comfort her, until Siegfried arrives and finds her among her friends. He falls to his knees, begging her forgiveness, and she tenderly forgives him, but the Evil Genie arrives and taunts them by reminding Siegfried of his vow to Odile. Siegfried refuses to comply and Odette runs to his side, driving the Evil Genie off and declares, despite Siegfried's pleadings, that she will escape the spell through death. Fleeing from his arms, Odette throws herself into the lake and Siegfried follows her. The Evil Genie falls down dead, the spell is broken and, as the sun rises, Siegfried and Odette are seen together in a swan-drawn boat, sailing into the afterlife.

