The Joffrey Ballet and Chicago Philharmonic
Set the Auditorium Theatre Ablaze in Swan Lake

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As symphony orchestras buckle, opera companies bite the dust, and ballet companies abandon live music or fold altogether, count as a rare blessing the Joffrey Ballet and its continued alliance with the Chicago Philharmonic.

The partnership delivered a glittering performance of Swan Lake on Saturday night, underpinned by a sensitive reading of Tchaikovsky's glorious score, with Scott Speck at the podium and Janet Sung on solo violin, alternately wistful and electrifying.

Choreographer Christopher Wheeldon embedded the classic tale of bewitched swan-maidens in a jewel-box setting at the Paris Opera of the 19th century, in the rehearsal studios haunted by French painter Edgar Degas. The traditional court scene of Act III is transformed into a fancy dinner at a club of the type frequented by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, complete with strippers and can-can dancers.

While daring in some aspects, Wheeldon did not mess with the concept of the White Swan/Black Swan. The Odette-Odile character is often regarded as a metaphor for the composer's double life
as a closeted homosexual -- the cause of great psychological turmoil, described candidly by Tchaikovsky in letters which for many years were censored by the Soviet authorities.

Wheeldon's is hardly the first, nor the most radical, revision of Swan Lake. Yet purists may object to his elimination of the court scenes and the bracing folk dances that add a more respectable character to Act III than the striptease and the can-can; they may also object to Wheeldon's swapping around of the music to fit his frequent shifting of the space-time continuum.