

# From Pointe to Skates: Yuzuru Hanyu and the Swan

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*Music, Play, and Performance*

*Final Essay*

The lake has frozen over, and the pointe shoes have been replaced by ice skates. Clothed in a white feathered top, a deep v-neck and embroidered with gemstones, Yuzuru Hanyu, Japanese figure skater and consecutive Olympic gold medallist, brought the swan to the ice during the figure skating gala in Pyeongchang, 2018.<sup>1</sup> It all started with Russian coach Tatiana Tarasova recommending *Notte Stellata* to Yuzuru, a vocal arrangement by Il Volo of Camille Saint-Saëns *Le Cygne*, and the swan was born. With clear references to swans from the world of ballet, there has been an ongoing discussion about the gendered meaning of this performance. The musical side of Yuzuru has been labelled as feminine, having performed more historically female roles such as Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet*. The grace he portrays here immediately brings up the traditional ballerina swan in the viewer's head, thus making Yuzuru generally seen as a feminine performer. Yet, what does this mean, and what exactly makes Yuzuru's performances gendered? In this analysis on Yuzuru's *Notte Stellata* program, I will take a deep dive into Yuzuru's performance persona, looking into the movements and their figure skating history, the historical product of the swan, and the social perception of both the audience and the performer that Yuzuru portrays in this program. This morphed analysis of different perspectives should lead to an answer of the question: "How is gender found in the meaning of movement in Yuzuru Hanyu's *Notte Stellata* performance?" To specify this question further, the meaning of movement will come from Elisabeth Le Guin's theory on how certain physical movements can have a generalised meaning. For this case study, I will focus on gender performance in movements that have a direct gendered meaning in figure skating itself, the perception of viewers, and the historical context of the music.

## Theoretical framework

As has been said, this analysis will be based upon Le Guin's ideas about musical

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<sup>1</sup> "Yuzuru Hanyu's *Notte Stellata* Figure Skating Gala Tribute: Music Monday," video file, 5:13, YouTube, posted by Olympics, February 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z4LLfviaR4>.

meaning in movement.<sup>2</sup> Le Guin explores how her physical experience while playing the cello can convey meaning beside the music itself. With the term *sentire*, she emphasises the point of learning meaning in music by feeling rather than only performing or listening, with the conclusion that, even though not every performer will feel the same while performing a certain piece, there are generalised meanings that both the performer and viewer or listener can get from certain movements. In my case study essay, I proposed to use this statement on meaning in movement and connect it to gender performance as explained by Kiri Miller.<sup>3</sup> She explores the perception of gender in *Game Central* by both interviewing the developer and looking into reviews of the player. With this, the case of Yuzuru Hanyu will be analysed by how certain movements convey gendered meaning in the historical context of the swan and the figure skating context, looking into the perception of the audience and the performer himself, as Philip Auslander explains that the combination of both parties creates the final persona of the performer.<sup>4</sup> Auslander argues that the persona of a performer is formed by the frames of performance, wherein the social frame defines the social context wherein the performance takes place. This frame will have an important part in this analysis and the perception of gendered meaning in movements. There will be taken a look into the story that Yuzuru is trying to convey by his movements to his costume and music.

To deepen the figure skating context and gender performance in movements further too, Mary L. Adams<sup>5</sup> and Iris Young<sup>6</sup> will be taken into account for their exploration of social discourse around gender performance, both inside and outside figure skating. In their articles, they explore the way gender has been perceived through the history of the sport, focussing on the men's field. They will help create a framework to understand the perception of gendered meaning that has been connected to Yuzuru's *Notte Stellata*.

### **Figure Skating: A Gendered Context**

“But what that gala exhibition showed, is that he even studied the history of the sport.

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Le Guin, “‘Cello-and-Bow Thinking’: The First Movement of Boccherini’s Cello Sonata in E-flat Major, Fuori Catalogo,” in *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 14-37.

<sup>3</sup> Kiri Miller, “Dancing Difference/Gaming Gender,” in *Playable Bodies: Dance Games and Intimate Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 61-92.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Auslander, “Musical Personae,” in *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 87-128.

<sup>5</sup> Mary L. Adams, “Manliness and Grace: Skating as a Gentleman’s Art,” in *Artistic Impressions: Figure Skating, Masculinity, and the Limits of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 81-104.

<sup>6</sup> Iris Young, “The exclusion of women from sport: Conceptual and existential dimensions,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Gender in Sport and Physical Activity*, ed. Paul Davis and Charlene Weaving (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 13-20.

There was little markers all through that gala performance.”<sup>7</sup> This is what commentator Belinda Noonan stated as Yuzuru takes his bow at the end of *Notte Stellata* at the Pyeongchang Olympics in 2018. What this means is that this performance does not only show the playing of a swan: Yuzuru shows what the sport has to offer in one single program. This makes it interesting to look at the meaning of the movements in the context of figure skating, emphasising the gendered meaning they might have in this context. First of all, gala performances are choreographed to focus on the performance instead of points, differentiating itself from competition programs where artistry may play a lesser role in this sport, as there are more points to be earned with athletic components, such as jumps and spins. This analysis will thus focus on the choreography of the program.

From start to finish, what is clear is that there is a great use of long lines in arms and legs. To zoom in on one moment, the start of the program shows Yuzuru looking up as the orchestral introduction swells up. He accentuates the start of the oboe solo with a twirl and spread arms, a melody that he then starts chasing while taking off from his first position. He continues in running steps and ends with wide arms open while he circles on one foot around the centre of the ice. When the vocals start, he moves his arms in the exact intensity of the voice; when the voice’s rhythm speeds up, Yuzuru’s movement grows greater and faster, as if he is creating the music with his movements. What stands out in this first verse is the highlighting of the prolonged note of the word ‘noi’ (we), where Yuzuru creates tension with a crescendo of twizzles, which are turns traveling over the ice. These drawn out points in the music are often highlighted by grander technical elements of figure skating. For example, at the end of the second verse, Yuzuru executes a long layback Ina Bauer at the crescendo of the belt. The layback Ina Bauer, named after the female skater with the same name, is an element executed by the more flexible skaters where they put their blades in a parallel position and bend their backs backwards. This movement is more often seen in the women’s field.

This is where the meaning of the movements is getting more interesting. Another element that is not quite often seen in the men’s field, is the Biemann spin, named after Denise Bielman, a layback spin where the skater pulls their free leg above their head with both hands, creating a circular figure with the bending of the leg and arms. This spin has again a special place in the music, as the last spin to finish the first bridge. The voice modulates in the middle of the last word, and the tension is built up and loosens again in the music. Yuzuru creates the highest tension with straining his whole body into the Biemann spin, and slowly

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<sup>7</sup> “Yuzuru Hanyu’s *Notte Stellata*,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z4LLfviaR4>.

letting it go.

What can be taken from this brief analysis of special elements and how the music emphasises them, is that Yuzuru lays focus upon movements that have gotten their historic spot in the world of figure skating. He pays a tribute to the sport by taking elements from individual athletes, and puts a spotlight on them. He embodies figure skating here, but in a very peculiar way: He highlights movements that are not only created by women of the sport, but also are often only performed by women. The flexibility that is needed for these elements cannot always be asked of a man's body, as Iris Young states,<sup>8</sup> so it is logical why these elements are only seen in the women's field. It could be said that the figure skating context of these elements gives a feminine connotation to the elements that Yuzuru executes here, as they are associated with the women's field and flexibility by the experienced viewer.

However, this is not the only part that needs to be discussed. The analysis here has also shown how Yuzuru performs most of the program beside the grander elements: there is a picture of grace created by the way Yuzuru portrays the music with his body. Now, there is a question of what grace means in the context of figure skating. Mary Adams goes through gendered meanings of the sport by going through the history of it. A fast conclusion right now in the perspective of Western art would be to say that grace equals femininity. Yuzuru is all round movements, and together with the swelling of the music, it can be argued that this is a feminine program.<sup>9</sup> This is what the movements convey in ballet tradition, and as figure skating has gotten its fundamentals from ballet, these conventions could also be taken into account when looking at figure skating. Yet, Adams notes that in the origin of the sport, grace was seen as a nicety of a gentleman, especially during the Romantic period of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> During this period, the sport became popular in the wealthy groups of society during, and then grace was celebrated as refined masculinity. The meanings of the sport that were tried to be conveyed were about the individualism and connection to nature, as figure skating takes place on ice. These are both ideals of the Romantic period.<sup>11</sup> When skating with movements began to grow into an organised sport, the first skating textbook stated: "Easy movement and grace are the sole object of skating."<sup>12</sup> Grace has been the centre of the sport since its birth, and has no direct connection with femininity. This means that the social discussion around figure skating being a feminine sport is a discussion of the present. Grace

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<sup>8</sup> Young, "The exclusion of women from sport," 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Paskevskaja, "Brief Historical Perspective," in *Ballet Beyond Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Adams, "Manliness and Grace," 82-83.

<sup>11</sup> Adams, "Manliness and Grace," 86-87.

<sup>12</sup> Adams, "Manliness and Grace," 87.

has gotten the label of femininity only during the last century, as Adams states.<sup>13</sup> With the present came the influence of media, creating a harsh binary opposition and differentiation of the two traditional gender performances in sport: femininity and masculinity. The two sexes never play against each other, and so every performance of both man and women discipline will be put against each other. This means that the grace that Yuzuru portrays by performing his musicality and round movements does not particularly have a feminine connotation when looking at the figure skating history as a whole. The label of femininity has only come with time, and the social frame the audience of the present has.

### **Gender in the Swan: Historical Connection to Yuzuru's Swan**

The program has gotten its figure skating context, but as Auslander argues, there is more to the persona than the performance itself. What is interesting to look into as well is the way Yuzuru performs the swan here. As the music itself has a rich historical context, as has the role of the swan in the art of dance, there is no question of not exploring this further. In this paragraph, I will again take a look at Yuzuru's movements, but now from the perspective of the music's context, thus Yuzuru's portrayal of the swan.

*Notte Stellata* (Starry Night) by Il Volo is a vocal arrangement of *Le Cygne*, a classical suite composed by Camille Saint-Saëns. The original was never intended to be performed by a dancer, but in 1905, Mikhail Fokine brought the piece into new light by choreographing it and renaming it *The Dying Swan*.<sup>14</sup> This choreography would become one of many swan programs for ballerinas. What can be easily stated is that the swan, either Tchaikovsky's famous swan queen or the dying swan from Fokine, has been portrayed by women. This has been the same case for figure skating: looking at the last twenty years, well-known swan programs were done in the ladies field (e.g. Alina Zagitova (2017/2018) and Mao Asada (2012/2013)). This means that also in the figure skating context, the role of the swan has been more taken on by women.

The question that comes with that is why. What can be said is that in symbolic context, the role of the swan was always to portray purity, grace and elegance, looking at the white of the feathers and the royalty it has portrayed in Western performance art and literature.<sup>15</sup> To go back to Fokine's choreography, he tells that "Arms folded, on tiptoe, she dreamily and slowly

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<sup>13</sup> Mary L. Adams, "'They Left the Men Nowhere': The Feminization of Skating," in *Artistic Impressions: Figure Skating, Masculinity, and the Limits of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011) 157.

<sup>14</sup> "The Dying Swan," *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*, last modified June 21, 2021, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095737506>.

<sup>15</sup> Roland J. Wiley, "Swan Lake," in *The Life and Ballets of Lev Ivanov: Choreographer of the Nutcracker and Swan Lake* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 170-183.

circles the stage. By even, gliding motions of the hands...she seems to strive toward the horizon, as though a moment more and she will fly—exploring the confines of space with her soul.”<sup>16</sup> Is this also the swan that Yuzuru is portraying?

A short analysis of Yuzuru’s swan would conclude that Yuzuru not only pays tribute to the history of the sport and its meanings, but also portrays a swan here. Yet, this swan is not a character; it is still Yuzuru, so from Auslander’s theory, only persona has to be considered rather than taking a character that is being played into account. First of all, *Notte Stellata* creates a different meaning than Saint-Saëns original piece. *Notte Stellata* is more about love for nature than a swan, with an emphasis, naturally, on the setting of a Starry Night. It has been established that Yuzuru got the music from Tatiana Tarasova rather than picking it himself, but in multiple interviews Yuzuru has stated that this picture of a starry night refers to the starry skies that he saw on the nights after the Great earthquake of 2011 in East Japan.<sup>17</sup> As his city Sendai had been demolished by the earthquake and tsunami, Yuzuru found comfort in the clear sky full of stars that were present after the disaster. This picture became a symbol of hope, and this is also what he always tells he is portraying in his program.<sup>18</sup> This means that the swan has also taken a different meaning than its commonly known elegant and pure role in Western art.

The swan here is thus not the swan from *The Dying Swan*, nor is it a character. Still, that there is clearly a swan being portrayed here. Only looking at Yuzuru’s costume shows the iconicity of the swan. The white basis with feathers and a low back line and low v-neck can be connected to the original costumes of the swans in *Swan Lake* and of *The Dying Swan*.<sup>19</sup> When looking at the program itself, not only is the music illustrated by movements, but there are certain movements that show the figure of a swan. The languid arm movements have already been named, but only in the context of the sport itself. These arms can also refer back to the original ballet, with arms spread like wings. There are a couple of other elements that are interesting to look into. During the first verse, Yuzuru is seen folding his hands over one another, spreading his arms in front of his face in a bend figure. This creates the picture of a swan’s neck and head while it swims swiftly through the water. There are two times when he

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<sup>16</sup> George Balanchine, and Francis Mason, *101 Stories of the Great Ballets* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), 137-138.

<sup>17</sup> “[ENG SUB] 180311 Yuzuru Hanyu – The Starry Sky 7 Years Ago,” video file, 10:22, DailyMotion, posted by BlueFlame for YUZU, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6smcbo>.

<sup>18</sup> “[ENG SUB] 180311 Yuzuru Hanyu – The Starry Sky 7 Years Ago,” video file, 10:22, DailyMotion, posted by BlueFlame for YUZU, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6smcbo>.

<sup>19</sup> Unknown, “Beyond The Bar: Costuming Swan Lake,” Interlochen, published on December 7, 2018, <https://www.interlochen.org/stories/beyond-barre-costuming-swan-lake>.

forms a swan figure in his spin combinations: One time is during the first bridge before the Biemann spin, another in his last spin combination, which is shot from above. He sits with his free leg crossed and his upper body bend over his leg. His arms are above him, bulging. It looks like a resting swan with its wings up. This figure comes again during the last note of the vocals when Yuzuru is moving across the ice. This shows that there are enough movements that either refer to the original ballet of the piece or create the iconography of a swan itself.

What does this mean for the gendered meaning of the performance? One conclusion is clear: as Auslander states, the persona is formed by the performer and the audience. This way, the social frame of the audience is quite important when looking for supposed gendered movements and meanings in Yuzuru's program. As the swan has been known to be played by a woman, portraying the swan as pure and graceful, this is first association that the audience has while watching Yuzuru's performance. With his costume, choice of music, and grace of the movements, the first connection that is made is the swan from the ballet tradition, which has been seen as feminine through history. This connection gives Yuzuru's movements a feminine meaning, because of the history of the role. The movements also show a clear reference to the swan, so it is understandable why this program has gotten labelled as feminine in the context of the swan, because Western art has given grace to the swan and made the swan always feminine. Yet, that the swan is being performed here does not mean that Yuzuru intended to perform a gendered role of the swan. He has never stated anything about wanting to create a gendered performance, only focussed on the context of stars and hope for the Japanese society who have lost people in the earthquake of 2011. This swan does not mean femininity for Yuzuru, but more of beauty that can be found after a disaster. The swan is a symbol of that beauty, as it is known to symbolise serenity and grace. This means that there is gender to be found in the performance because of the associations the audience might have, thus giving gendered meaning to this performance because of the female swans. Yet, this gendered persona can be nuanced when looking at the persona solely the performer is trying to create.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis started off with the question how gender could be found in Yuzuru Hanyu's performing persona in *Notte Stellata*. As the beginning heavily implied, the gendered meaning of the movements would lean towards femininity as there are certain elements of the movements that fit the present picture of femininity rather than masculinity. There is also the historical context of the music to consider, as the role of the swan is immediately connected to

feminine women because of Western art. Besides that, there is the elements that have a direct gendered connotation because of their figure skating context. Yuzuru showcases multiple elements that are named after women of the sport and which are commonly performed by women. Even though these movements do not necessarily symbolise femininity like the picture of the swan does, the context wherein they are performed is almost always feminine. These factors all create not only a gendered performance, but a feminine performance when it is solely taken from the viewer's perspective. However, the persona is not only created by the audience, but also the performer themselves. For this analysis, it means that the feminine meaning of movement can certainly be nuanced. As has been said, Yuzuru has never spoken about wanting to perform the swan in the traditional sense of it. Instead, he opts to use the swan as a symbol of serenity and beauty after a time of disaster, a kind of mascot for his people. Also, looking at the history of the sport that also goes through this program, the round and graceful movements that would be seen as feminine in the present context, were seen as refined masculinity when the sport was taking form. This means that the program is more than what can be seen on its surface. A conclusion would be that Yuzuru has never had the intention to perform femininity, but that this has been labelled by the audience because of the social gender norms we deal with every day. All in all, Yuzuru Hanyu shows that the image of gender performance is just that, and can change through history and culture. For him, the swan will always be a symbol of hope.

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