



RUSALKA AND HER JOURNEY

By Roger Pines



Czech soprano Ružena Maturova, Dvořák's first Rusalka

After its triumphant 1901 world premiere in Prague, Antonín Dvořák's *Rusalka* took most of the 20th century to find an international audience. This seems nothing short of scandalous – and an absolute deprivation for several generations of operagoers – since the music is some of the most glorious in the entire operatic repertoire. Fortunately, as singers become increasingly comfortable singing in Czech, *Rusalka* is now produced more frequently, with a grateful public

inevitably asking, “Where has this music been all our lives?”

Beyond the justly celebrated “Song to the Moon,” the heroine has two other equally memorable arias. There are also magnificent vocal opportunities for the other principals; a devastating final scene for Rusalka and her prince; rewarding supporting roles; and an orchestral contribution of dazzling imagination and superb technical accomplishment. Dramatically as well as

musically this opera is exceptional, presenting what Sir David McVicar, director of Lyric Opera's production, describes as “a fairytale for adults.” While colored by somber and occasionally even sinister qualities, the piece also reveals the essence of romantic longing with rare depth and truthfulness.

It is the central character's emotional arc that combines with Dvořák's music to give the work such an immediate appeal. Lyric's *Rusalka*, Ana María Martínez, has commented, “Of course, the story has to do with love, but it has to do with the journey toward *becoming*. Rusalka wants to be human and, more than anything, she wants a soul – she'll sacrifice whatever it takes to have that. The core of this piece is that quest, that desire, that journey.”

When Dvořák's name is mentioned, audiences think first of symphonic repertoire – this despite the composer's substantial operatic output. The fact remains, alas, that few of his ten operas have been successfully exported, and only *Rusalka* has finally established itself in the public's affection.

As a young musician Dvořák played viola in the orchestra of Prague's Provisional Theatre, the result being a thorough grounding in operatic repertoire. Once composing his own operas, he worked frequently with libretti that concentrated on country life in Czech villages. The composer was building on the heritage of the most notable Czech stage works (above all, those of Smetana, composer of *The Bartered Bride*). All sorts of “genre” scenes figure in Dvořák's first four operas, although he looked to historical tales as dramatic sources for three others. He followed *Rusalka* (1901) with his final stage work, *Armida* (1904), its legendary characters previously seen in operas of Vivaldi, Handel, Gluck, and Rossini.

Whatever resemblance *Rusalka* bears to Hans Christian Andersen's “Little Mermaid” story is evident *only* in the basic idea of a water creature in love with a human being and her refusal to kill him to end her own suffering. Librettist Jaroslav Kvapil did look

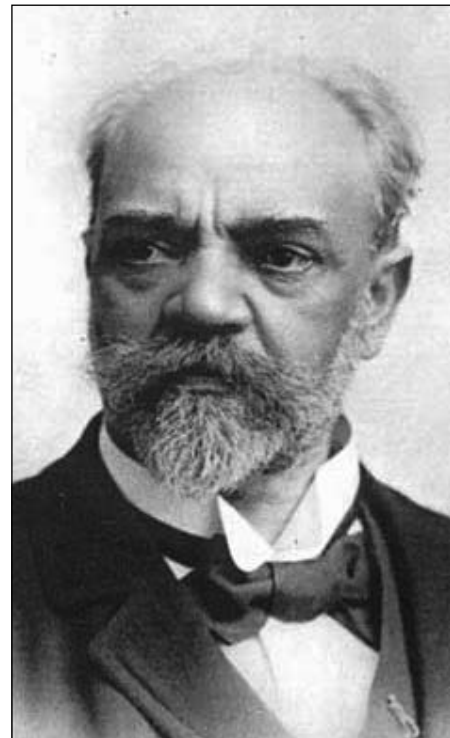
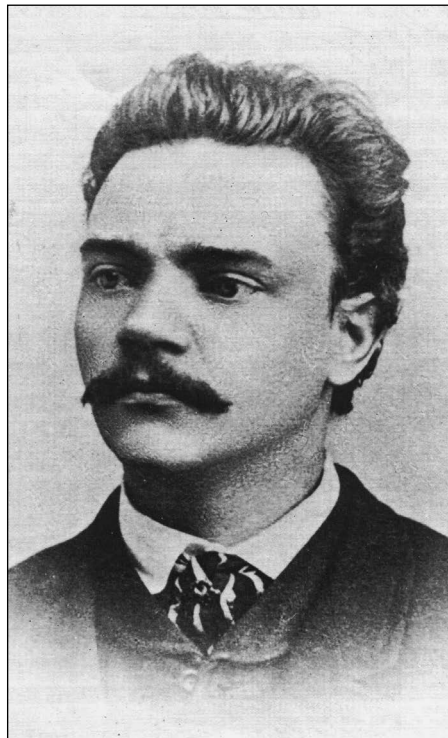


to Andersen, while giving attention to tales gathered by two remarkable 19th-century Czech writers, Karol Jaromír Erben and Božena Němcová. He also read Friedrich de la Morte Fouqué, the German Romantic writer remembered today chiefly for the fairytale novella *Undine* (1811), the heroine of which is one of literature's most celebrated water creatures.

The *rusalky* of Czech mythology are water nymphs living in the depths of a river or lake. A *rusalka* is a young woman who had previously committed suicide after being rejected by her lover. In that respect these creatures resemble the unearthly wilis in the ballet *Giselle*. Where the wilis literally dance their lovers to death, a *rusalka* lures a young man who, in his attempt to pursue her, is drawn into the water only to die in her embrace. Many *Rusalka* productions place the heroine in a tree for the "Song to the Moon," which is, in fact, staying true to the mythological figure: although a water creature, the *rusalka* had legs (unlike Andersen's mermaid), and was apt to spend much of her time climbing onto tree branches to while away the hours singing.

There is another *Rusalka* – the opera by Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1856) – and the hapless water-nymph heroine has been seen in other incarnations in art, music, dance, and literature. One thinks particularly of what has emerged from German writers and composers – for example, Heinrich Heine's poem about Lorelei, set by more than 50 *Lieder* composers; the operas of E. T. A. Hoffmann (1816) and Albert Lortzing (1845), both entitled *Undine*; the entrancing ballet *Ondine* (1958), composed by Hans Werner Henze for Dame Margot Fonteyn; and *Melusine* (1971), a brilliant opera by Aribert Reimann. There have been numerous plays based on *Undine* (including one by France's Jean Giraudoux that starred the young Audrey Hepburn on Broadway in 1954). That character was also memorably painted by Turner and Gauguin.

Having written the *Rusalka* libretto in 1899, Kvapil didn't have Dvořák at the top of his list of desired collaborators; he showed his text to a number of other composers who expressed no interest. A fortuitously timed press report informed Kvapil that Dvořák was searching for a new libretto, and it was František Adolf Šubert, director of Prague's National Theatre, who recommended Kvapil to Dvořák.



Antonín Dvořák at the beginning and the end of his career



Jaroslav Kvapil, librettist of Rusalka



Variations on the water creature in love with a human being include Ondine, subject of a ballet danced in London in 1843 by one of the greatest 19th-century ballerinas, Carlotta Grisi.

Dvořák was apparently inspired by a lake in a small village, southwest of Prague, where he spent summers and holidays. He composed a good deal of music there, including *Rusalka* (it seems he saw a fairy standing above the lake). Instantly attracted to Kvapil's text, he began working on *Rusalka* in April of 1900. Incredibly, he was already finished with the full score by the end of November the same year. The honor of introducing the work went to Prague's National Theatre, which utilized all of its impressive resources vocally, orchestrally, and scenically, in order to do *Rusalka* full justice.

Premiered on March 31, 1901, the opera was heard more than 600 times in Prague during the first half-century of its performance history. Internationally there were some important productions, but sporadically – between 1948 and 1993 in Dresden, London, Vienna, Zürich, San

Diego, Munich, London again, and New York. The advocacy of Renée Fleming has been instrumental in creating excitement about the work among operagoers over more than two decades. Fleming first sang *Rusalka* onstage in 1990 (Seattle), subsequently reprising the role on CD and in seven major houses. Thanks in large part to her performances of the “Song to the Moon” in concerts and recitals, it has become the most familiar and cherished soprano aria in the Slavic repertoire.

This score is astoundingly varied and rich, with as many memorable highlights as one would find in anything in the standard repertoire. The Act-One prelude introduces the opera's most important theme – a soulful legato melody associated with the heroine, which returns in all her appearances onstage. The three wood nymphs then introduce themselves in several pages of scintillating three-part harmony, beginning

on the nonsense syllables “Hou, hou, hou!” The nymphs return midway in the last act, providing a notable “breather” from the dramatic goings-on elsewhere in the opera. Their languid, rapturously beautiful trio, with its soaring refrain (supported by a shimmering orchestra), presents one of the most intoxicating melodies to be found in any Czech opera.

When we first behold them, the wood nymphs are singing about the moon above the lake, and about Vodník nodding his old greenish head. Most of their music, however, requires tremendous high spirits. In contrast, Vodník himself brings with him a decidedly somber vein of expressiveness. When he first confronts his water-nymph daughter *Rusalka*, her desperate desire for a human soul leaves him appalled. He responds to her yearning phrases with immensely dramatic declarations, punctuated by repetitions of the word “Běda! (“Woe!”), that will



“The Mermaids,” painted by Ivan Nikolajevich Kramskoy (1837-1887)

be heard from him in all his subsequent appearances. His affection for Rusalka, and his concern for her, will emerge in Act Two with a lulling, lullaby-like, strophic aria, exquisitely hushed and intimate in its mood.

It is her opening scene with Vodník that introduces us to Rusalka – when she’s terribly unhappy and begs him to let her speak with him. Instantly we feel the aching sincerity that is the heart of this extraordinarily touching heroine. Her music can be inward-looking, but also warmly expansive, as we hear in the ensuing “Song to the Moon”; Dvořák makes the aria’s simple opening phrases genuinely dulcet, before lifting the voice gently into the wonderfully buoyant main theme. A gentle, silky-textured accompaniment immeasurably enhances the aria’s effectiveness (the two verses vary hardly at all up to the final page, where the voice rises gradually to a potentially thrilling sustained high B-flat).

It will surprise many listeners to discover that Rusalka has two other superb arias: the one in Act Two is hair-raisingly, vehemently dramatic, with her revelation that she is neither nymph nor woman, unable to live *or* die; and in Act Three the central melody is profoundly sad, centered much lower in the voice, expressing a painful despair and resignation to her fate.

Following the “Song to the Moon” we’re introduced to the forest witch Ježibaba. This hugely rewarding role is a gift for a big personality possessing a dramatic-mezzo instrument suited to, say, Azucena in Verdi’s *Il trovatore*. Ježibaba’s aggressiveness could hardly present a greater contrast with Rusalka’s sweet, plaintive phrases. Central to the second half of their first scene together is Ježibaba’s repeated incantation, “Čury mury fuk” (roughly translated as “Abracadabra”), with Dvořák’s delicious touches of cymbals and triangles.

Both in this act and in her two appearances in Act Three, the singer portraying Ježibaba must put her characterization across as much through relish of the text as through the role’s imposingly wide vocal range.

The prince – our tenor, naturally – is initially light, lyrical, and captivating. Once Rusalka mysteriously appears before him, his passion for her is instantaneous and his ardent phrases turn more and more expansive. By the end of Act One, Dvořák is giving him climaxes of thrilling fervor worthy of Verdi’s Manrico, reaching an apex of excitement when he refers to the lovely, wordless young woman before him as “pohádka má,” “my fairytale.”

The folk-dance element is vivid in Act Two’s brief orchestral introduction, as it also frequently is in the lively gamekeeper/kitchen boy dialogue (although the kitchen boy turns notably mysterious and intense as he describes the silent Rusalka, with the

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Ana María Martínez (Rusalka) and Brandon Jovanovich (Prince) in the Glyndebourne production of Dvořák's opera, 2009.

gamekeeper also taking on a note of mystery in speaking of Ježibaba). Their scene leads directly into the first of two scenes in which the foreign princess confronts the prince and the mute Rusalka. Effectively sung by both dramatic mezzos and sopranos, the princess expresses herself in an exciting style, ultra-energized, driving, and thrustingly powerful.

Act Two also brings us the chorus playing the prince's guests, and their arrival is presented in some of Dvořák's most bustling, festive music, followed by a brief but elegant ballet sequence and a buoyant, folk-style chorus. We don't see the chorus again onstage, but the women are heard offstage in Acts One and Three as Rusalka's sister water nymphs. Especially expressive musically is their third-act music: they're heard declaring that Rusalka cannot join in their dancing – they'll retreat if she comes near them. They anticipate that her only companions will be found among human graves. Their music begins with a cool otherworldliness, but then turns darker and more aggressive as their message to Rusalka becomes more severe.

The final confrontation between the prince and Rusalka that ends the opera is, quite rightly, the emotional apex of the entire work. It alternates between shattering intimacy – when she asks why he took her in his arms and lied to her – and heights of almost *Tristan*-esque ecstasy, with the prince's line ascending to high C when he insists that Rusalka kiss him, even if it means his death.

After the prince floats his dying phrases and the orchestra plays its sad interlude, we hear Rusalka's last speech. Her wish for God to pardon the prince is expressed in a mere 60 seconds of music, but what deeply eloquent music it is! She is in limbo for eternity – neither nymph nor human being – but the sheer depth of *human* emotion emerging in this magnificent passage will leave any listener shattered. It is the final evidence of what Ana María Martínez says of this heroine: she represents “absolute, pure love” in everything she says and does. “She takes responsibility for her choices, and always – even in such pain – she stands for love.”

Roger Pines, Lyric Opera's dramaturg, writes frequently for major opera publications and recording companies internationally.