

Rusalka (iii)

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Lyric fairy-tale in three acts by Antonín Dvořák to a libretto by Jaroslav Kvapil after Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine*; Prague, National Theatre, 31 March 1901.

Rusalka <i>a water nymph</i>	soprano
Prince	tenor
Foreign Princess	soprano
Vodník <i>a water gnome</i>	bass
Ježibaba <i>a witch</i>	mezzo-soprano
Hunter	baritone
Gamekeeper	tenor
Turnspit	soprano
First Wood Nymph	soprano
Second Wood Nymph	soprano
Third Wood Nymph	contralto
Wood nymphs, guests at the castle, the Prince's entourage	
<i>Setting</i> A meadow by a lake and the grounds of a castle	

Kvapil's libretto for *Rusalka* takes elements from a number of literary sources but derives principally from Fouqué's *Undine* (1811). Hans Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* and the French legend of Melusine were also cited by Kvapil as part of the background to *Rusalka*. In addition, the name if not the nature of Ježibaba is taken from the Czech translation of the play *Die versunkene Glocke* by Gerhard Hauptmann. The debt which Kvapil claimed he owed to K. J. Erben's *Kytice z pověstí* ('A Garland of National Tales') seems to have been more in its generalized national feeling than specific characterization. The libretto is suffused with a fairytale atmosphere which drew from Dvořák (who had used Erben as the basis for four symphonic poems in 1896) music of extraordinary poetry particularly his evocation of the Bohemian forest. Having written his libretto in the autumn of 1899, Kvapil showed the text to Oskar Nedbal, Josef Foerster, Karel Kovařovic

and Josef Suk before Dvořák, who found it entirely congenial. He began his sketch on 21 April 1900 and became absorbed with his work, producing one of his most fluent sketches. In the course of composition, he made use of material from his American sketchbooks. By 27 November 1900 the full score was completed. The National Theatre put its finest resources at his disposal, and the work was a great success.

In many ways, *Rusalka* stood outside the kind of operatic subject favoured by Czech composers in the 1890s and early 1900s, who were more inclined to naturalism. Nevertheless, *Rusalka* soon became Dvořák's most popular opera both in the composer's native land and in other countries. Although Mahler (who was conductor of the Vienna Hofoper at that time) took an interest in the work, the first performance in Vienna was given in 1910 by a Czech company. Its German début was on 10 March 1935 in Stuttgart, in a translation by J. Will. The first professional production in England, given at Sadler's Wells on 18 February 1959 in a translation by Christopher Hassall, had only a moderate success. A new production by David Pountney in a translation by Rodney Blumer, given by the ENO on 16 March 1983, has proved more durable.

Synopsis

ACT 1 A meadow by a lake, surrounded by a forest

In the moonlight three wood nymphs taunt the water gnome Vodník, who responds good-naturedly. Rusalka calls to him from the willow tree where she is sitting. She asks about the immortality of the human soul and confesses in a brief, exquisite aria, 'Sem často přichází' ('Often he comes here'), that she has fallen in love with a human, the Prince, who swims in the lake. Horrified that she wants to become human, Vodník sinks into the lake, telling her that she must ask the help of Ježibaba. Rusalka in 'Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém' ('Song to the Moon') calls on the moon to tell her beloved that she waits for him. She then turns to Ježibaba, who agrees to let her walk on land but warns her that if she does not find love as a human being she will be accursed for ever. Undaunted, Rusalka begs Ježibaba to transform her, and in a humorous conjuration scene ('Čury mury fuk') Ježibaba turns her into a human, except that she cannot speak. As the warnings of Vodník fade with the night, dawn brings the sound of hunting horns. The Prince, feeling strangely drawn to the lake, sends his retinue home. He sees Rusalka; bewitched by her beauty he takes her home to the castle.

The end of this act is one of Dvořák's most effective. He circumvents the difficulty of having no opportunity for a love duet by providing the Prince with lyrical repeated phrases over a magnificently sustained accompaniment.

ACT 2 The grounds of the Prince's castle

The Gamekeeper and the Turnspit, whose music is breathless and has affinities with the idiom of the bagpipe song, spin tales of the forest and gossip about the strangeness of the Prince since he met Rusalka in the woods. The Prince is to marry Rusalka, but he is frustrated by her silence and frigidity. During an exchange in which he tells her desperately that he must win her, a visiting Foreign Princess chides the Prince for neglecting his guest. As evening falls other guests arrive for a ballet, dominated by a graceful polonaise. As the merrymaking continues, Vodník appears in the lake, lamenting Rusalka's fate and

singing about her future rejection; ironically, this is set against the bridal chorus sung by the guests. Rusalka, who has become gradually more intimidated by her surroundings, rushes into the gardens and, suddenly recovering her voice, begs Vodník to help her. Her desperate outburst takes the form of an effective though conventional aria, 'Ó, máрно to je' ('Oh, useless it is'); rejected by the Prince, she can neither live nor die. The Prince, accompanied by the Foreign Princess, is dissatisfied with Rusalka; he professes his love for the Foreign Princess, whose music has a dotted, perhaps Polish rhythmic quality. Despite the passionate nature of her duet with the Prince, the music remains deliberately cold. At the climax of the duet, Rusalka intervenes and is pushed away by the Prince. Vodník pronounces his vengeance as the Prince appeals to the Foreign Princess for help. In a cruel and cutting couplet, she tells him to follow his love to hell.

ACT 3 *The meadow by the lake*

Rusalka is mourning her fate. Ježibaba offers the possibility of returning to her original form if she murders the Prince. In fury and horror Rusalka refuses and sinks sadly into the lake, only to be rejected by her sisters. The Gamekeeper and the Turnspit ask Ježibaba to help the Prince, who has fallen ill since Rusalka left. Enraged by their temerity, Vodník emerges from the lake and chases them away. A *divertissement* follows for the three wood nymphs, who sing of their loveliness and tease Vodník. He responds sadly and in a passage rising to an extraordinary climax tells them of Rusalka's cursed state. The Prince, delirious comes looking for Rusalka and asks her to return with him. She tells him of her fate resulting from his rejection and that now a kiss from her would kill him. He begs her to kiss him and give him peace. This climactic passage is relatively brief, and although the Prince and Rusalka do not sing simultaneously, the relative simplicity of the music is poignant. Rusalka asks for mercy on his soul and accepting her sad fate disappears into the lake.

Ex.1

The image shows two systems of musical notation for 'Ex.1'. The first system is marked 'Andante' and includes a clarinet part (cl) and a string part (str, with mute) playing *ppp*. The second system continues the music, ending with a *pp* dynamic marking. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one flat, and various musical symbols such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Ex.1

The success of *Rusalka* derives from a number of factors. While much of the opera (especially the final act) is static, Dvořák provides music of extraordinarily sensual beauty. To a greater extent than in any of his previous operas, the musical texture is through-composed, although there are occasional isolated numbers which may be extracted. Apart from the delicate beauty of such motifs as Rusalka's, which occurs in the prelude and on her first appearance (ex.1), and is associated with her throughout the opera, the separable numbers provide a focus for exquisite lyricism, notably in the most famous aria in the opera, 'Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém'. Dvořák's word-setting is also at its most expressive and most flexible in this work. There was also opportunity for nationally inflected passages in the more vigorous episodes with the wood nymphs at the beginning of Act 1, the first-act aria of Ježibaba, 'Čury mury fuk', and the exchanges between the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit in Acts 2 and 3. Each character has distinctive music reinforced by a consistently used series of motifs. Dvořák's debt to Wagner is apparent not only in the leitmotivic use of personal motifs but occasionally in the harmonic language. *Rusalka* represents Dvořák at the height of his maturity, exercising superb control over musical and dramatic resources.