FINDING THE WAY TO RUSALKA

BY LARRY ROTHE

Undine by Friederich de la Motte Fouqué, *illustrated by Arthur Rackham (1867—1939)*

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Having reached his late fifties, Antonín Dvořák refused to be the kind of aging man that William Butler Yeats would lament as "a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick." Like Yeats, Dvořák knew time could condemn anyone to irrelevance. And, like Yeats, he understood that the spirit calcifies "unless soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress." So now, with a 30-year career behind him and having won a following that spanned the Atlantic, Dvořák determined to embrace an even broader audience, shifting his creative focus from symphonies and chamber music to opera. That new focus would be his way of clapping his hands, singing, and doing what he did best.

In that late-19th-century world of European music, composers fell into two camps—traditionalists (like Brahms) who wrote so-called "absolute" music in conventional genres, and radicals (like Liszt and Richard Strauss) who saw themselves as musical storytellers, and who produced tone poems that illustrated underlying programs. Dvořák had always been a reliable member of the first camp. In fact it had been Brahms, impressed years before by the impoverished young Czech's sober approach to composition, who championed him and helped him gain traction. But in 1896, the 55-year-old Dvořák had recently returned from a sojourn in America, where homesickness intensified his already consuming love for his native country. In the literary ballads of the folklorist Karel Jaromír Erben, Dvořák found his affection for the Bohemian countryside echoed and the Czech essence dis-

tilled. Four Erben ballads inspired him to compose the first tone poems he had ever written. Those works—*The Water Goblin, The Noon Witch, The Golden Spinning Wheel,* and *The Wild Dove*—are Czech folklore in music. The flesh-and-blood titles seemed to belong to another composer, not one whose catalog was filled with entries as abstract as Symphony in D Major or String Quartet in F Major. Something had changed.

No one but Dvořák could have produced those tone poems. What changed was his attitude. He came to accept the value of musical storytelling—a new way to extend his audience and fulfill what he believed was his mission. Dvořák treated his genius as an endowment from heaven. (Reading the phrase "Thanks be to God!" at the end of his manuscripts, you practically hear him sigh: one more work he'd been granted time and capacity to complete.) Although he never would have described his relationship with his maker as a partnership, he understood he possessed the power to embellish God's world, and that, with his talent, he could unlock a listener's sense of inner grandeur, offer a nudge toward the vistas that music is uniquely equipped to reveal. Perhaps Dvořák experienced a late-life revelation as did Tolstoy, whose taste for increasingly simple art led him to condemn Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and renounce his own earlier writing, including *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina.* While Dvořák never went that far, never turned his back on music he had already composed, he shared the Russian's eagerness to broaden his appeal.

But Tolstoy was a grouch. Dvořák was a mensch. His disposition seemed to improve with the years. "Dvořák emanated some kind of rare affability," said another Czech composer, Bohuslav Martinů, "a sense of humanity and well-being. If anyone expressed a healthy and joyful attitude to life, it was him."

Hungry for work and a steward of his gifts, Dvořák now engaged with one more genre. As he told a reporter for a Vienna newspaper in 1904: "I wanted to devote all my powers, for as long as the dear Lord gives me health, to the creation of opera. This is not, however, because of a yearning for glory as far as the stage is concerned, but simply for the reason that I consider opera to be the most suitable form for the people. The broad masses listen to this music, and very frequently...." A symphony, he said, could take forever to reach them. Writing symphonies interested him no longer.

Dvořák knew what made opera work. Early on, as violist in the orchestra at Prague's National Theatre, he learned about the stage. By 1901, when *Rusalka* was premiered, he had already written eight operas, although none had attracted much interest outside Bohemia. *Rusalka* changed that. It brought him his biggest theatrical triumph, at home and abroad. In *Rusalka,* Dvořák's opera ambition coincided with his love of legend.

He found his libretto by accident. Jaroslav Kvapil was a Czech dramatist almost 30 years Dvořák's junior. In 1900, he completed a libretto commissioned by Josef Jiránek, a composer about whom virtually nothing is known today. Nothing much was known of him then, either, and that was Kvapil's problem. He believed his *Rusalka* was too good a piece for Jiránek. So he began shopping his libretto around. (We can assume he accepted no payment from Jiránek since no legal issues appear to have arisen.) But while he wanted to pair his work with a better composer, he now failed to aim high enough. Never imagining someone of Dvořák's stature would be interested, he offered the libretto to Oskar Nedbal, Josef Bohuslav Foerster, Karel Kovarovic, and Josef Suk. Busy with other projects, they each turned him down. Then he spotted an ad placed by the National Theatre. The great Dvořák was looking for a libretto. Kvapil took a chance. When Dvořák saw what the young man had written, he was sold.

Kvapil created *Rusalka* from several sources—mainly Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid*, but also *Undine* by the German writer Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué. With their aquatic settings and fantastic characters, these stories provided material that Kvapil framed as a folk tale, meshing with Dvořák's current passion. Kvapil claimed he had emulated the spirit of Karel Jaromír Erben's ballads and guessed that his Erbenesque tone may have "captured Dvořák's imagination more than the libretto itself." The libretto indeed reveals few particularly Slavic elements beyond the names in the *dramatis personae* (although the witch Ježibaba will reappear in operas by another Czech composer, morphing into one of Janáček's mean-spirited village crones). Dvořák's music is what makes this opera Czech.

Whether it was the story Kvapil told or the tone he adopted, his libretto touched Dvořák. Awful librettos have derailed many operas. Too often, mediocre literary talents imagine music will complete what their imaginations could not. Dvořák had seen his earlier operas doomed by weak librettos. In *Rusalka* he found a captivating story—a human story, presented as a fairy tale.

Rusalka's humanness resides in its complexities. The water sprite Rusalka faces one of those dilemmas that can trigger madness. She must become human if she has any hope of approaching the man she loves. But the witchcraft that can transform her will cost her the power of speech,

ensuring she will never be able to communicate her love. No one here lives happily ever after.

Jaroslav Kvapil
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For all its folkloric appeal, Kvapil's libretto is distinctively *fin de siècle,* though Dvořák's straightforward style, developed in the very different world of earlier times, never feels at odds with the action. The composer seems unbothered by a sometimes blurry plot with the potential to encourage considerable interpretive leeway. While Debussy would have relished the mystery and symbolism—*Pelléas* premiered exactly a year later—Dvořák folded these into the musical context of Slavic legend. We hear the bardic harp as Rusalka is introduced, and again as the Prince meets her. We hear melodies inspired by Czech folk tunes and dances. Kvapil dwells on images of the moon, whose mysterious light radiates throughout a world fraught with the dangers of wished-for enchantment. Early on, Dvořák offers his most beguiling music as Rusalka implores the moon to enrapture the Prince, binding him to her with its glow. This gorgeous aria is kin to Rusalka's motif, the first identifiable theme we hear, moments into the prelude. That motif returns again and again, but no less important is Rusalka's moon aria, to which Dvořák also harkens back at crucial moments. As Act I concludes, the Prince, ravished at the sight of the water nymph-turned-woman, addresses her—"a golden star"—in music whose contours, serenity, and ecstatic harmonies resonate with traces of her song to the moon—spanning the act in that single stroke, uniting the earlier moment with this moment, just as the lovers' passion unites them. And at the opera's end, the final decrescendo is followed by a brief postlude, closing the work with a reference to the lunar aria.

Rusalka, a late entry in the annals of 19th-century musical nationalism, displays Dvořák's trademark melodic abundance and rhythmic energy, fusing in what seems unforced spontaneity. His speed in completing *Rusalka*—late April through late November, 1900—suggests that the stories about his working style are true: that he simply notated the music surging from some bottomless inner well. But what we hear, as his biographer John Clapham tells us, resulted from methodical effort. "A line will take us hours maybe"—Yeats again, describing how good poets work—"yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, our stitching and unstitching has been naught." Dvořák knew how much labor genius demands, a fact learned over the long haul of his professional life. After *Rusalka,* only three years remained to him. For now, he showed no signs of stopping.

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