

SPOTLIGHT



Van d'Argent's portrait of the "Little Mermaid"

Early on in many Broadway musicals, the protagonist (usually a woman) takes center stage to deliver what is known as the "I want" number. It's the moment at which she announces her hopes and dreams — the motivating forces that will propel the show's action. In *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle's "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" is the "I want" number; in *Funny Girl*, it's Fanny Brice's "I'm the Greatest Star." Opera has its own "I want" numbers, including Senta's ballad, Violetta's "Ah fors' è lui" and Aida's "Ritorna vincitor."

But no aria in the repertoire so nakedly states the "I want" theme as the song to the moon, from Dvořák's *Rusalka*. It's by far the most famous passage in the opera; until recent decades, it was the only music most Western audiences had ever heard from the piece, a recital favorite even when *Rusalka* itself was undiscovered territory. The aria well deserves its popularity, and only partly because of its sheer beauty. Its most remarkable aspect is its emotional specificity. You could know nothing of the opera's plot, or of the Czech language, and still immediately understand that this is a song of longing and supplication. The octave leap that launches the refrain could be an aural ideogram of yearning. The rising three-note orchestral figures that answer the end of each verse are like musical question-marks: will Rusalka be able to achieve her wish?

A Fish Out of Water

What does Rusalka want?

This month audiences at both the Met and Lyric Opera of Chicago will have the chance to find out.

By Fred Cohn

Dvořák's setting of Rusalka's second big solo, "Mladosti své pozbavena" (I am deprived of my youth), gives an explicit answer to the question. The aria comes right at the top of Act III, directly after the disintegration of the heroine's hopes in Act II, and it is clearly a musical kin to its predecessor. But now, instead of calling up to the moon, Rusalka looks down at the lake, the "unfeeling watery power" that is dragging her back "to the depths." The melodic gestures throughout point downward, in striking contrast to the earlier arias soaring upward intervals. The opening three notes are a near-rearrangement of the earlier "question-mark" figure, but now the motif is turned in on itself. The aria is in F major, a half-step down from the G-flat major of the song to the moon: even though most of us wouldn't consciously be aware of the shift, the sense of a harmonic "letdown" is palpable. "Mladosti své pozbavena" is as unmistakably a depiction of crushing disappointment as the song to the moon is of rapt expectancy.

The unhappy fact, though, is that even as early as the song to the moon, we know that Rusalka is doomed to have her hopes dashed. Her subsequent fate is a demonstration of the dictum "Be careful what you wish for." She is a water nymph, a spirit without a soul, in love with a human prince. She wants him to love her, but he can neither see nor hear her: when she caresses him, all he feels is a wave passing over his body. She asks the moon to guide her love toward her, and moreover, to *tell* him of her existence. The catch: she can only be real to him if she takes human form. In other words, what Rusalka wants is to be something that she is not. It's a recipe for psychological disaster.

Her father, the Water Gnome, her fellow water nymphs and the witch Ježibaba all in their own ways warn her of inevitable ruin. But we hardly need their words to comprehend the futility of Rusalka's wish. For all the explicit tragedy of the opera's last act, Act I is every bit as sad, since it contains all the seeds of the heroine's downfall. Even the Prince's odd half-a-duet at the act's close feels less like a declaration of burgeoning love than like a threnody: his love for Rusalka has been awakened, but on some unconscious level, he already realizes that he and she will never find happiness.

Ježibaba does give Rusalka human form, but in diabolical fashion. I refer not only to the Faustian bargain she strikes: if Rusalka fails to retain the Prince's love, both she and he are doomed to eternal damnation. But the witch's real treachery comes in the kind of human existence she gives the nymph. After Ježibaba's

ministrations, Rusalka *looks* human, but clearly she is not. From the moment she achieves her in-between state, the opera makes us understand what a disturbing place she has reached.

In constructing his libretto, Jaroslav Kvapil drew on many different versions of the myth of Undine — the water nymph who achieves human form. A significant source was Hans Christian Andersen's strange, sad 1837 fairy tale "The Little Mermaid." The bargain that Ježibaba strikes with Rusalka is almost identical to the deal that the Sea Witch gives the Mermaid. And like Rusalka, the Mermaid must acquire feet and legs before she can join the human realm. But while the opera's libretto makes little of the change in its heroine's anatomy, in Andersen's tale it is a fearsome thing. "Every step you take will make you feel as if you were treading on a sharp knife, enough to make your feet bleed," the Sea Witch says. Martin Kušej's disturbing 2010 Bavarian State Opera production of *Rusalka* amplified this idea by having Rusalka stumble around painfully on her new legs; her heartbreaking clutziness branded her as a pariah amid the graceful dancers in the Prince's court, making clear in an instant why the Prince's Turnspit would find her "creepy."

Every aspect of her being brands her as an alien in the Prince's court. The Turnspit says "no human blood runs in her veins." The Prince sings of her "cold embrace." The Foreign Princess, manifestly a creature of flesh and blood, offers him a "blazing fire" in place of Rusalka's "pale moonlight"; the polarity makes her poaching of the Prince all too inevitable. The clear implication is that Rusalka is incapable of sexual response. "I was born of cool water, and such passion is alien to me," she sings. She has won her Prince, after a fashion, but she lacks the most essential component needed to bring that love to fruition: she is, literally, frigid.

Still, the element that most renders Rusalka a spectral presence is her inability to speak to the humans around her. Andersen's Little Mermaid, too, is rendered mute by her transformation — an element that adds poignancy to her situation. But it is one thing for the protagonist of a fairy tale to be unable to make sound, and quite another for the heroine of an opera. Through a good stretch of the piece, Rusalka has no recourse to her most essential expressive outlet. Her inability to give voice to her feelings makes for an unsettling spectacle: a mute prima donna is a contradiction in terms. We have come to know Rusalka *through* her voice — especially the song to the moon, in which she has revealed the inner recesses in her heart. Because we have heard her sing, we understand her much more intimately than the Prince can hope to. No wonder she seems cold and lifeless: her voice — the very thing that (for us) gives her life — has gone missing. Her silence gives Act II a harrowing, almost Strindbergian intensity.

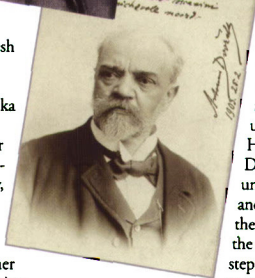
Rusalka is a creature of fantasy, but her plight is real and recognizable. The longing to be something other than oneself is built into the human condition: if we didn't fall

prey to it, therapists would have to close up shop. In fact, the theme resonates in our era in ways that Dvořák and Kvapil could never have anticipated in 1901. (This could well be one reason for the work's newfound popularity.) The Internet provides cyber-embraces more ghouly than the wave that passes over the Prince's body. Look around you on any given night at the opera, and you'll see aged faces reconfigured to achieve a simulacrum of youth, creating a truly "creepy" disconnect. Modern medicine has allowed people to live into extreme old age, while often failing to protect them from debilitation and loneliness, offering them a kind of twilight existence — a there-and-not-there-ness — very much like Rusalka in human form.

But *Rusalka* is a Romantic opera: it doesn't leave us in a state of modernist alienation. (If it had been written later in the century, Rusalka might have met her grim fate without ever seeing her Prince again.) The final act is drenched in melancholy, but it doesn't evoke the deep discomfort of Act II; we're saddened, but not horrified. Its final scene, with its ravishing duet, even brings a measure of solace. For one thing, we finally get to hear Rusalka and the Prince *sing* together,



Librettist Kvapil, above, and Dvořák



resolving the horrible tension that has characterized their relationship throughout the opera. The duet's climactic andante section begins with the Prince's line "Kiss me, kiss me, give me peace" (*Libej mne, libej, mř mi přej*), and the music itself lets us feel that "peace" being attained. Here Dvořák modulates to a luxurious D-flat major and largely stays there until the curtain falls. This is, in fact, another harmonic "letdown": in Act I, the Prince delivered his apostrophe to the mute Rusalka in D major. The half-step drop here makes the duet seem like a consequence of his strange earlier love song, as if now he can fall into a true declaration of his passion.

The opening line rises from D-flat through an octave and a third, but heavily emphasizing the lower and upper Fs, making it seem to define an interval of an octave. Unlike the octave leaps that characterized the song to the moon, though, this melody proceeds in steps, as if the Prince were filling in Rusalka's bold earlier statement of yearning and making her wish whole. The effect is deeply satisfying; the duet brings a near-Wagnerian sense of culmination, as sure-footed as the closing minutes of *Tristan* or *Parsifal*.

Rusalka is a truly sympathetic figure. Even though we know what she wants is unattainable, we can all share in her desire. Perhaps it is because we identify so thoroughly with the heroine that the final scene, for all its sadness, unfolds with such cathartic effect. Here, finally, Rusalka gets the answer she had been craving when she first cried "I want." □

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