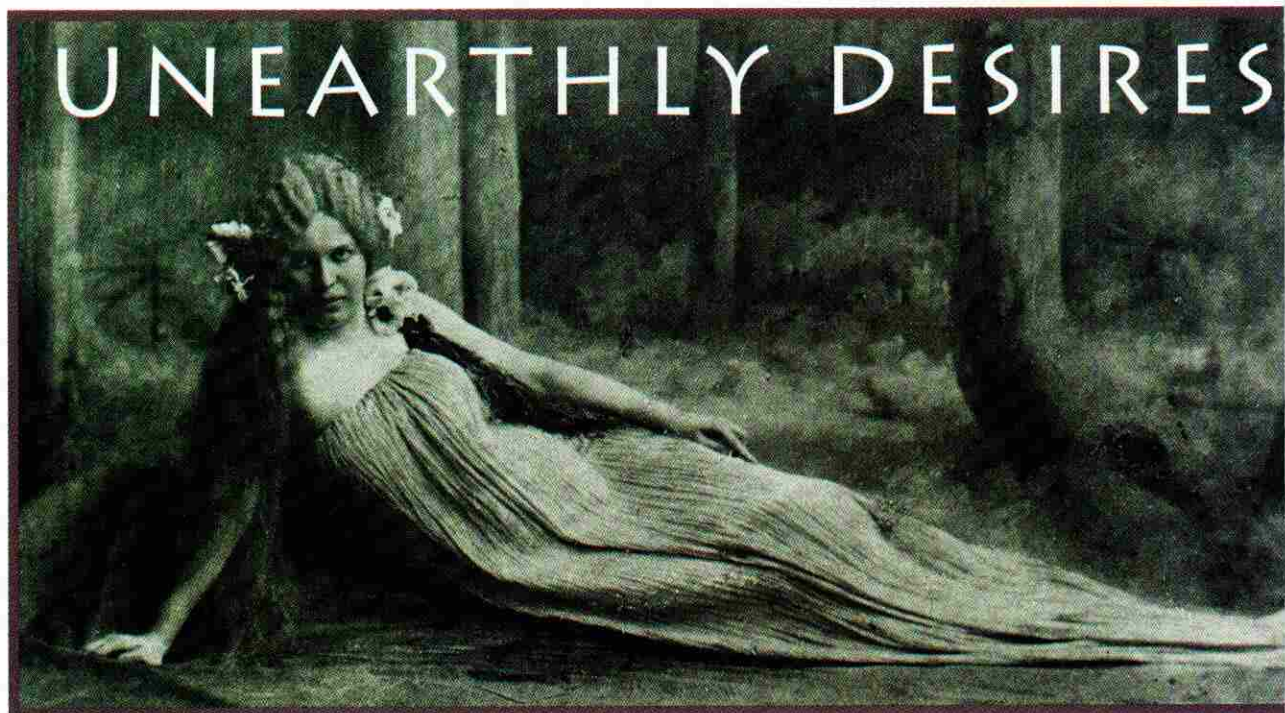


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RODNEY MILNES REVEALS RUSALKA'S  
PASSIONATE MUSICAL UNDERCURRENTS



ONE OF THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING INVOLVED WITH A MAGAZINE THAT PRINTS WORLDWIDE OPERA LISTINGS IS THAT YOU GAIN A CLEAR IMPRESSION OF RISES AND FALLS IN POPULARITY AND TASTE. TWENTY YEARS AGO, FOR EXAMPLE, *LA FANCIULLA DEL WEST* WAS A COMPARATIVE RARITY

outside the U.S.; now it is among the most frequently played of Puccini's operas. Equally rightly, the operettas of Kalman seem to have overtaken those of Lehár in Central Europe. *Rusalka* too used to be something of a rarity, restricted mostly to Czech opera houses. Over the last fifteen years, frequency of performance has risen noticeably. A successful and influential production by David Pountney (1983) stayed in the ENO repertory at the London Coliseum for eight years. Now the work is about to hit the Met — good news to someone who believes it to be one of the truly great operas. That is a large claim, and requires some degree of justification, if not special pleading. (Declaration of interest: I made the singing translation for the ENO production.)

Happily, Czech opera never obeyed the rules, never conformed to Italian or German ideas of what a well-made opera ought to be. Since the whole genre was inextricably entwined with Czech nationalism, there were good reasons for this; opera was a symbol of an independent national culture.

But Czech composers had to rely on German publishers, hence tinkering with Smetana's scores and the well-meaning but harmful efforts of Max Brod and others to make Janáček's craggily individual operas comprehensible to non-Czech audiences.

Today we still think of Dvořák primarily as a symphonist and a composer of chamber music; he obstinately considered himself a composer of operas. He wrote eleven, most of which were and remain successful in his homeland. Some are to all intents and purposes "well-made" — *The Jacobin*, in which the emotive power of Bohemian musical traditions plays a pivotal role, and *The Cunning Peasant*, an enchanting amalgam of *The Bartered Bride* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, bursting with scrumptious tunes — but *Rusalka* breaks the rules by being composed largely on symphonic principles. No harm in that; the same could be said of mature Wagner and much Strauss. But symphonic thought often governs the dramatic shape and pace, so the first thing to be said, Gentle Reader, is don't get impatient. This opera is not going to proceed like Verdi or

Puccini; the dialogues are not going to crackle along; Dvořák is not going to finish a dramatic paragraph or a scene until he has said everything that has to be said, symphonically. And as he is one of the greatest of all symphonists, there is no harm in relaxing and enjoying it. As well as being worked out with extraordinary intricacy, the music of *Rusalka* is almost indecently beautiful.

Jaroslav Kvapil's libretto was based partly on La Motte Fouqué's *Undine*, source of *The Little Mermaid* (story and movie); he purloined two comic characters — Gamekeeper and Kitchen Boy — from Lortzing's popular operatic setting of Fouqué, and the whole was transported to deepest Bohemia. No problems there: fairytale characters cross all known frontiers, and Dvořák already had investigated two of them in his magnificent late tone poems based on grisly verses by K. J. Erben, *The*

ABOVE: THE FIRST RUSALKA, RŮŽENA MATUROVÁ, WAS HEARD AT PRAGUE'S NATIONAL THEATER IN 1901

## RUSALKA BREAKS THE RULES BY BEING COMPOSED ON SYMPHONIC PRINCIPLES.

*Noon Witch* and *The Water Goblin*. The characters in the opera are not named: they are designated by their function, whether as humans or personifications of nature. Prince, Foreign Princess, Gamekeeper and Kitchen Boy are straightforward. So are the three Wood Nymphs or dryads, and the Water Gnome, or "Vodník," a more benign but no less powerful version of the protagonist of the tone poem. Ježibaba is not a name but a job de-

nothing was specified. Ježibaba was a black-bombazine, Mrs. Danvers-style governess. Humankind was grown-ups. (Interestingly, several critics in 1983 assumed that the Prince was Rusalka's father, a notion that never once occurred to the translator, nor to anyone involved in the production. Funny people, critics — but then, fairy tales are a good deal funnier.) This concept fitted neatly and chillingly with some of the imagery in the text — the

white and red roses of the wedding hymn (terror of menstruation and loss of virginity), the coldness of watery Rusalka versus the mature warmth of the Foreign Princess. It made sense of the Prince's strange attraction for someone who couldn't, as it were, answer back. It was a deeply disturbing evening in the theater. Yet I have seen the opera in the simplest of representational, not to say tatty, settings,

about the suave, jovial waltz that accompanies her spell in the first act), the "operatic" passion of the vocal lines with which the Foreign Princess ensnares the Prince — are these anything but the outpourings of a born opera composer? Should one be surprised at the beauty with which Dvořák paints nature, or the magical change of his sound world from nighttime spells by the Witch's hut to dawn and the arrival of the Prince's hunting party? Not if one knows Dvořák the symphonist. But it is Act III that pierces the soul — Rusalka's resignation to her fate, the supremely painful, unbearably truthful dialogue with her unthinking betrayer (the Prince is only a Czech Pinkerton, feckless but not malign) and her final blessing. Their passionate Liebestod is for me among the greatest passages of opera writing, the scrunchy, pre-*Salome* discord at the fatal kiss simply heartrending.

Symphonically speaking, the whole score is based on a group of themes proposed in the prelude — save, oddly enough, for the Song to the Moon, which appears to be entirely independent (I say "appears" because after ten years I am still discovering things about *Rusalka*). Articles could be written on the way this basic material is developed, transformed and manipulated, the dramatic use to which the transformations are put. A first-time listener might care to note just two themes in the prelude, Rusalka's basic C-minor motif ...



RUSALKA (EILENE HANNAN) AND JEŽIBABA (SARAH WALKER) IN ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA'S 1983 PRODUCTION

scription of one of the army of witches who inhabit the Bohemian countryside, just as Rusalka is not a name but the Czech word for naiad, or water nymph.

**R**usalka was completed the same year as the publication of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), a book for which opera had been preparing for half a century, in the sense that music had been saying what librettos had not specified (*vide* Tchaikovsky and Massenet, as well as Dvořák). *Rusalka* is a fairy tale rich in opportunities for Bettelheimian investigation. On one level it is about the dangers of crossing boundaries of age, race, religion, even that waviest of boundaries, gender. It is about non-communication, about trust betrayed. It is also about forgiveness. It cannot help striking an answering chord in the heart.

The famous ENO production concentrated on the age boundary. It was set in an Edwardian nursery. Rusalka was a girl on the threshold of puberty; the Water Gnome was literally her grandfather; the Foreign Princess was perhaps her elder sister, the Prince the sister's fiancé —

in which the audience had to do all the work, and it was just as stirring.

Because perhaps the most extraordinary thing about *Rusalka* is the way Dvořák, devout Christian, avid train-spotter, responded to the dangerous erotic currents swirling beneath the innocent fairytale surface. Did he really know what he was doing? Perhaps — like most composers, before Freud spoiled everyone's fun by spelling things out — not. But one is certainly brought up short by the passage in Act I when Rusalka, as water, tells the Water Gnome how this handsome man comes at eventide, takes all his clothes off and dives into her, unknowing as her ripples caress him. Wow! The sense of physical longing in her Song to the Moon speaks of more than mere train-spotting. The end of Act I is one of the most sensuous love duets in opera, all the more remarkable in that there is only one singer (and note how cunningly Dvořák hots up the pace by moving without any warning from triple to duple time, or the rapturous modulation at the moment the Prince first sees those ripples in human form).

The angular malevolence of Ježibaba's music (there is something really creepy



... and the E-flat-major tag for the Prince ...



and hear what happens to them in the course of the opera. One of the many things that happen is that, having hitherto been heard in quasi-opposition, they are combined with utmost ingenuity in the Liebestod: through their intermingled musics, the two characters meet properly for the first time in death. The tenth- or hundredth-time listener will continue to marvel at Dvořák's fertility of musical imagination in one of the densest, most cogently thought through and, at a purely human level, most painful of all operas. □

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