

Antonin Dvorak - Rusalka (Met 2014)

Written by bluesever

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1. Act I 2. Act II 3. Act III Piotr Beczala - Der Prinz Emily Magee - Die fremde Fürstin Renée Fleming - Rusalka John Relyea - Der Wassermann Dolora Zajick - Jezibaba Vladimír Chmelo - Heger Julie Boulianne - Küchenjunge Dísella Làrusdóttir - 1. Elfe Renée Tatum - 2. Elfe Maya Lahyani - 3. Elfe Alexey Lavrov – Jäger Metropolitan Opera Choir and Orchestra Yannick Nézet-Séguin – conductor 8.02.2014, Metropolitan Opera, New York

The nameless heroine of Dvorak's *Rusalka* is one of those hybrid creatures that crops up so often in myth and fairy tale, half woman and half fish. The Met's current quickie revival of this opera is also a half-and-half sort of thing: a charming musical performance welded to a dramatic production so old and stale that, like fish left out too long, it's starting to smell.

It often happens in opera that there's a disconnect between music and narrative. With *Rusalka*, the divide is wider than usual. The story is derived from central European tales of wood nymphs and water nymphs, who seek to seduce and destroy mortal males. This opera is a later, softer take on the legend, in many ways paralleling Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid*, most familiar from Disney's 1989 film version.

The *Rusalka* (it's not a proper name, but a generic term meaning "water nymph") longs for love, which she can find only in the arms of a human man. Though her father, *Vodnik* ("water goblin"), warns against it, *Rusalka* seeks the help of the witch *Jezibaba*, who transforms her into a human at the cost of her ability to speak. *Rusalka*'s lover, the Prince, betrays her, dooming them both: She becomes a demon whose kiss kills her lover before she returns, soulless, to the depths of the lake.

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For an opera running two-and-a-half hours, this is a very skimpy story. Even the Disney film, barely half that length, tricks the tale out with divertissements about wisecracking seagulls and calypso-singing crabs. In contrast, Jaroslav Kvapil's libretto concentrates on poetic evocation of mood, with Dvorak's score functioning more like a symphony with voices than a musical drama.

Conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin's reading surged and glimmered like the dark waters of Rusalka's lake, with a wealth of clearly defined detail in the yearning woodwind writing of the first act. In the flamboyant second act polonaise, a section where most conductors let the brass and percussion run wild, Mr. Nézet-Séguin kept the Met orchestra on a tight rein: The number sounded for once like real court music instead of a Hollywood soundtrack.

The one spot in the score where he seemed to take a false step was in the opera's most famous moment, the aria "Mesicku na nebi hlubokem," which English-speaking critics call "Song to the Moon." It's a piece that his production's Rusalka, Renée Fleming, has performed since her student days more than a quarter of a century ago; by now, it's essentially her theme song. Unfortunately, at this point, she seems unwilling to let the piece run its natural course, slowing the tempo to immobility. As a showcase of her superb breath control and ravishing high notes, Ms. Fleming's performance is exemplary, but as a depiction of a wistful girl's longing for love, it's overdone and self-indulgent.

Ms. Fleming took a less interventionist attitude toward the rest of the score, singing cleanly, with a lovely shimmering lyric soprano. The effect might be called "Botoxed"—the sound is seamless, unblemished, creamy but lacking in expression. She has all the notes and doesn't seem to tire, but the performance as a whole feels small-scale—not the sort of thing you'd expect from a diva so celebrated she does guest spots on *The Late Show* with David Letterman and sings the National Anthem at the Superbowl.

By contrast with Ms. Fleming's pleasant blandness, the other performers seemed all the more vivid. Most exciting was Piotr Beczala as the Prince, his lyric tenor darting into the theater like a silver arrow. Though his role isn't nearly as long as Ms. Fleming's, it includes what is probably the most gorgeous solo in the score, a wide-ranging melody leaping up to a high C as the Prince begs for the deadly kiss. Mr. Beczala unfurled these phrases as slowly as Ms. Fleming had sung in her aria, but this time, the daring choice of tempo didn't seem like such a stunt.

As Jezibaba, mezzo Dolora Zajick made the most of a worn voice, concentrating on the extreme ends of her range, booming down below and rattling the balcony with a massive high B-flat.

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Less imposing was John Relyea as the Vodnik, an attractive lyric bass in a role for a dramatic bass-baritone. In the short and ungrateful part of the scheming Foreign Princess, Emily Magee made a promising debut, disclosing a firm, colorful dramatic soprano with an easy top. Particular praise is due to the trio of Dísella Làrusdóttir, Renée Tatum and Maya Lahyani as Rusalka's sisters. They both blended beautifully and sounded distinctly individual in solos, a tricky balance to strike.

Had this been a concert, I would have had very few complaints. But the Met presents staged opera, and this 1993 production by Otto Schenk hardly scratches the surface of Rusalka as drama. The core story may be a fairy tale, but as with mythic material in general, Rusalka does not deal in trifles.

Recent productions of the opera elsewhere have focused on Rusalka's status as a representative of the femme fatale archetype, a sort of embodiment of societal concerns about female sexuality. For the Bavarian State Opera, for example, director Martin Kusej shunted aside the fairy tale plot in favor of a psychodrama suggested by the scandalous case of Elisabeth Fritzl, an Austrian woman confined in a basement and sexually abused by her father for more than 20 years. Released from the fantasy world she has concocted in self-defense, Rusalka is overwhelmed by real life, ending up confined to a mental institution. Unsupervised for a moment, she murders the Prince, who is visiting her.

In a very different production seen recently in a number of European cities, director Stefan Herheim interprets the story as a Jungian dream. Rusalka is not a real woman or even quite a real character; rather, she is the projection of the insecure sexuality of the Vodnik character. This secondary figure becomes the protagonist, not a shadowy water demon but rather an elderly working-class man who, prompted by a glimpse of the streetwalker Rusalka, relives his unhappy history of failed relationships with women. This version finishes with an eerie poetic touch: The Vodnik is led away from the house where he has murdered his wife, and Rusalka, unscathed, attracts the attention of an onlooker to the tragedy.

Even in a more literal production the darkness and depth of the story could be brought out far better than they are at the Met. The sets for the forest and the Prince's palace offer the unthinking romanticism of a Disney World ride, and Ms. Fleming's glitzy costumes are scaled-up Barbie dresses. Jezibaba, played mostly for laughs, exudes as much menace as a witch in a puppet show, and even Vodnik, the Father God, is reduced to popping his head out of a trap door like a big blue Whac-A-Mole.

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Before the staging is retired once and for all, this Rusalka will make an appearance on the Met's "Live from HD" series on Feb. 8. Mr. Nézet-Séguin will take good care of the music, and clever camera work can perhaps make the "trees" and "lake" look less like cardboard and tinsel. About Ms. Fleming's permasmirk, however, there is little to be done. ---James Jorden, observer.com

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