

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

RUSALKA

BY ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK | NOVEMBER 7, 11, 13, AND 15, 2015

DVOŘÁK'S 'RUSALKA' GIVEN AN EVENLY FINE PERFORMANCE
BY KANSAS CITY LYRIC OPERA

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By Floyd Gingrich

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The story of Rusalka, composed by Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904) and first performed by the Kansas City Lyric Opera last Saturday evening, and repeated last night (Nov 11) is common to several folk cultures. Most familiar to Americans is the Hans Christian Anderson telling of “The Little Mermaid,” or the Disney Studio’s version with the happy ending.

Czech poet Jaroslav Kvapil[1] (1868–1950) wrote the libretto from the telling by Karel Jaromír Erben and Božena Němcová. Anderson’s version has the little mermaid fall hopelessly in love with the Prince when she rescues him from a shipwreck. In the Czech version, it’s love at first sight, and she is ready to lose her voice, risk dying, or becoming toxic to her intended to have a shot at wooing him into marriage. Well, it doesn’t work out; he falls prey to the wiles of the Foreign Princess, sung by Kirsten Chambers. The Prince discovers he made a mistake and he really loves her, and demands that she kiss him even if he might die. She finally does and he dies. Joyce DiDonato said that opera is a stupid art form.

So, why bother? For the music, silly. And the music soared. The most famous number from this work, performed as a concert piece long before the recent popularization of this opera is “Rusalka’s Song,” begging the moon to help her achieve her love (be careful with your wishes). Soprano, Ellie Dehn, in the title role knocked the ball out of the park, the aria was well-done, too. She carried off the girl-in-love, and the jilted girl-in-love with a natural, graceful, musical finesse with which she commanded the stage.

The least character development is in the Prince, sung ably by Maxim Aksenov. His longing, aria about the metaphoric white doe, whom he identifies as Rusalka, once she has become visible, was a soaring tour de force, although the composer defeated the natural inclination to applaud such performances by providing no break in the music. The Prince never loses his naivete until all is lost, sort of a Dido and Aeneas situation.

Canadian bass Robert Pomakov sang Rusalka’s father, Vodnik, the water gnome and the voice of reason (father knows best) even of salvation. His deep, house -filling, foreboding warnings came as

a bit of a surprise after his playing grab-a-toe with the sea nymphs shortly after the opera opened. He was adamant that his daughter would be destroyed should she pursue transition to a human with a soul, but when she persists he sends her to aunt Ježibaba (mezzo soprano, Nancy Maultsby) with a full knowledge that she is sealing her own doom.

Ms Maultsby dominated the scene in which she bargained with Rusalka; her expressive voice was even and full, well portraying the evil potion-maker who ruins Rusalka's chances of winning her prince in time to achieve happiness by demanding Rusalka pay with her beautiful voice, leaving her a mute. In fact, there was an even level of quality throughout the singing parts, notably the mood-setting wood sprites: sung by Ashley Yvonne Wheat, April Martin, and Samantha Gossard.

Soprano Kirsten Chambers did not sing much, but she was convincing as the beautiful, conniving Foreign Princess, who wins the Prince's heart, for a while. Her statuesque presence and shivery matter-of-fact voice perfectly personified the princess-on-a-mission.

Strong acknowledgement for making this tale credible on stage go to conductor Alexander Polianichko, director Eric Simonson, and a cooperative cast. There was no sense of a series of concert appearances, but actual, earnest interactions between people.

The orchestra interpreted moods, predicted action, and built a sense of gravity. Precise and working as one, it was an essential part of the successful performance.

The set, costumes, and lighting, designed respectively by Erhard Rom, Kärin Kopischke, and Robert Wierzel, created a sense of mythology brought to life. A minimum of hardware moving was achieved by clever lighting, projections (the sky-dominating moon was great) and flown-in backdrops.

The Lyric has challenged itself with its first production in Czech (nicely translated on the little Figaro screen in front of each patron). The good news is that there are few Kansas Citians who will recognize a mispronunciation.

If your kids would be crushed by a sad ending, hire a babysitter, otherwise, they would be entranced. There are two more performances, Friday at 7,30 PM and Sunday afternoon at 2,00 PM.