

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

RUSALKA

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“RUSALKA” A FAIRY TALE FOR ADULTS

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KCSTAGE

Tell someone that Dvorak’s “Rusalka” is similar to Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid”, and inevitably certain images arise. It is interesting to note the sheer mass of impact certain interpretations of the tale have had, to the point that it becomes difficult to view certain tales outside of a context that can only be called “Disneyesque”. And yet, Andersen was reaching back to a much darker tale indeed, a cautionary fable on the dangers of letting one’s heart rule one’s head. It is this darkness that drive Dvorak’s pen in this, the first Czech opera produced by the Lyric company.

The story involves “Rusalka” (Ellie Dehn), a water nymph who has fallen in love with the Prince (Maxim Aksenov), who frequently bathes near their pond. She begs her father Vodnik the water-goblin (Robert Pomakov), to allow her to become mortal so that she can be with him. He begs her not to do it, but in the end tells her to see the witch Jezibaba (Nancy Maultsby). Jezibaba agrees to help her, but warns the child that she will be mute to every mortal, and that if she does not win his love, they will both be forever cursed. She hesitates, but eventually agrees.

A week later finds herself the favored guest of the Prince in his castle, where they are to be wed. A foreign Princess (Kirsten Chambers), however, manipulates the Prince so he throws Rusalka over for her. Vodnik comes and takes his daughter home, and the Princess rejects the Prince. He returns to the pond where he found her, and where she now must live eternally luring mortals to their death. He begs for one last kiss, even knowing it is death. She relents, and as he passes away, she commends his soul to the heavens before disappearing, once more, into the depths.

There are not a lot of Czech-made operas out there: aside from Dvorak’s works, the only one of real note is Smetana’s “The Bartered Bride”. It’s no surprise, therefore, that this is the Lyric’s first foray into the works of that country. But it’s a good one: Dvorak did the bulk of his work in the late 19th century but had what this reviewer would call a very 20th-century sensibility when it came to his music. His reputation-making “New World Symphony” may just as well be called New Century.

His *Rusalka* is pretty much the only of his operatic works in common circulation, due in parts to the familiarity of the story, the ease of staging, and of course, the lead character's "Song to the Moon", one of the loveliest arias to come out of that time period. Ms Dehn does a wonderful job on said piece, injecting it with just the right amount of plaintiveness and technique. Indeed, sterling performances were turned in all round at Saturday's premiere performance. Mister Aksenov brings character to what can all-too often be an underperformed role; when he dies, one even feels a twinge of sympathy for the two-timing Lothario.

Of note as well is Erhard Rom's stage design, which goes quickly from the sylvan wilderness to the geometric sternness of the Prince's castle. The projections (which, like the rest, come from the Minnesota Opera Company's production) aid very effectively in this. David Justin Holmes' choreography works really very well with Dvorak, particularly during the ballroom scene in the second act. All in all it was a most effective production.

"*Rusalka*" is a melancholy work, a fairy tale for grown-ups. It is rightly remembered as one of Dvorak's greatest creations, and while its premiere in Kansas City has been a long time in coming, it is gratifying indeed to see it arriving in style.