

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

RUSALKA

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

LYRIC OPERA'S 'RUSALKA' A BEAUTIFUL TELLING OF
LOVELORN WATER NYMPH

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By Libby Hanssen

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The Lyric Opera of Kansas City's production of "Rusalka" has the elements for success – gorgeous visuals, powerful performers, an incredible score – though the action dragged at times.

Saturday night in the Kauffman Theatre was the company's first presentation of Czech-language opera, using Antonín Dvořák's setting of Jaroslav Kvapil's libretto, the first of four performances. This particular artistic concept has made its way around the country with director Eric Simonson.

The well-knit combination of scenery (Erhard Rom), lighting (Robert Wierzel) and projections (Wendall K. Harrington) added a fantastic dimensionality to the naturalistic aspects of shimmering water, gleaming moonlight, and shadowed forests. The design proved versatile, with dreamlike, wavering transitions, and dramatic, the watery home of the water goblin as a rugged stone cleft, the palace a prison of stark, rust-stained concrete walls. Figure-hugging costumes by Kärin Kopsichke accentuated the contrasting characters, as did the wig styling of Alison Hanks.

The Kansas City Symphony, conducted by Alexander Polianichko, relished the high drama in Dvořák's score, with its lovely melodies and instrumental colorings, a little too much perhaps. The singers all performed well when allowed full power and also maintained nuance in delicate moments, but across the board the low- and mid-range projection suffered and the orchestra was not responsive to it.

Ellie Dehn was convincing as the tormented title role, with a gorgeous "Song to the Moon" but also compelling during her silence. Robert Pomakov, as the Water Goblin, was tender, sympathetic, despite his booming, portentous tones. Nancy Maultsby played Ježibaba as reluctantly distraught by Rusalka's choice rather than evil or conniving. Maxim Aksenov was the fickle, untrue Prince, while Kirsten Chambers brought a wicked allure as the Foreign Princess.

Unfortunately, Simonson had the singers crisscrossing the stage, the awkward, circuitous movement

adding little to the intended tension of the scenes. In particular, Rusalka's broken-hearted aria in Act III could have been better served as a stoic, and above all still, version.

Likewise, dancers cavorted distractingly through many a scene as water nymphs, though the choreography was not particularly enticing or well executed. In the prominent Act II episode, they used elaborate balletic gestures to mime relationship squabbles and indicated gradual inebriation, detracting from, instead of highlighting, the Prince's betrayal and Rusalka's despair.

This rendition removed the comic characters of the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit, but used three teasing Wood Sprites, sweetly voiced and pleasantly acted by Ashley Yvonne Wheat, April Martin, and Samantha Gossard.