

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

RUSALKA

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

DVOŘÁK MASTERPIECE RECEIVES STAR TREATMENT

Antonín Dvořák's fairy-tale opera "Rusalka" came to life in a winning combination of musical and visual delights in its Kansas City premiere by the Lyric Opera.

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By Christopher Gage



To any casual fan of Disney movies, the story of *Rusalka* is familiar—female lake-dweller falls in love with a human and yearns to be human herself, only to be made mute upon her arrival on land. Antonín Dvořák's opera, of course, is decidedly darker and more complex, requiring the full gamut of emotions and passions, which were ably delivered by the cast and musicians of the Lyric Opera of Kansas City on Saturday night.

Ellie Dehn, who portrayed Rusalka, was stunning: even when her character was unable to speak, her facial expressions and body language dominated the stage, leaving no questions as to Rusalka's thoughts or feelings. This laudable acting made the audience silently beg for her to produce sound. When she was singing, her voice was magnificent, floating above the orchestra and enriching the emotional content of the opera. Perhaps the finest moment in the production was the duet between her and Maxim Aksenov's Prince at the moment of their kiss, during which she knows that her embrace will kill him. The singers conveyed the conflict and yearning with incredible conviction, doing justice to this powerful scene.

The other cast members gave excellent performances, too. As the water-gnome Vodnik, Robert Pomakov played the weary, mourning father with a beautifully melodic bass voice. Nancy Maultsby, who sang the role of the witch Ježibaba, brought impressive subtlety to her role.

Conducted by Alexander Polianichko, the orchestra played brilliantly, and if there was one musical flaw during the production, it was that the instrumentalists occasionally played over the singers. Certainly Dvořák's sweeping orchestration and lush harmonies deserve their due, but the orchestra could have, without ill consequences, pulled back during several moments in the opera.

A review of *Rusalka* would be remiss without mentioning the magnificent direction by Eric Simonson, set design by Erhard Rom, and choreography by David Justin in this production. The set, with shimmering colors by lighting designer Robert Wierzel and gently pulsating fabrics, gave the impression of truly

being in the lake among the water sprites, whose dancing was graceful and effortless. On land, four pairs of dancers acted out a ball, with Rusalka looking on; in a powerful convergence of staging, costumes (by Kärin Kopischke), and choreography, *Rusalka*, separated from the merry dancers, was the only one in color, the attention drawn to her even as she was the least active person on stage. It was these frequent special moments that made the Lyric Opera's *Rusalka* a wonderful performance. *Rusalka* is a fairy-tale dream come to life.