DVOŘÁK'S

Rusalka

In-depth Guide
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Nov. 7 through Nov. 15

THE 2015-2016 SEASON
AT THE KAUFFMAN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
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I suspect that the first question many audience members will ask upon attending Antonin Dvořák’s *Rusalka* for the first time is “Where has this opera been all our lives?” The current Lyric production marks the first time this *Rusalka* has been performed in Kansas City, which in itself may be surprising enough. But consider its history elsewhere. While the opera was immensely popular on its native soil following its 1901 premiere, it has not travelled well outside of Eastern Europe. The first American production, at Chicago’s Sokol Hall, was not under the auspices of a regular opera company. The first British production was not mounted until 1959, and it finally reached the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1993. Since then it has grown in popularity, owing largely to the enthusiastic support of opera superstar Renee Fleming, who first attracted national attention when she sang *Rusalka’s* “Song to the Moon” in the Met Council auditions and since then has sung the complete role on numerous stages throughout the world.

In looking for reasons for its slow acceptance, one could cite the fact that few singers are versed in the Czech language. Yet the Lyric performed exclusively in English for the first forty years of its existence, and some Midwest companies still follow this practice. Clearly language alone does not answer our question.

Maybe the problem is that this opera was seen an insufficiently sophisticated for modern tastes. It is, after all, a fairy tale; yet unlike the most popular fairy-tale opera, *Hansel and Gretel*, it lacks the happily-ever-after ending that would make it appealing to young children.

Perhaps the real reason for its relative obscurity lies in its principal strengths – Dvořák’s lush, romantic score and the sweet simplicity of its plot. The turn of the century was a transitional time in Western music, and instead of looking forward to the avant-garde music and drama of the twentieth century, Dvořák’s music seems to look backwards to the romanticism of the nineteenth. The 1890’s and the years that followed marked the rise of verismo operas, with their gritty realism – think of the famous double bill of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*. 
along with Puccini’s most direct contribution to the genre, *Il tabarro*, all of which end with a jealous husband stabbing his wife’s lover. Of course Puccini’s *La bohème* remains a repertoire staple, but despite the romantic music, it is essentially a story of an impoverished woman whose death is in part attributable to her inability to afford medical care and a warm place to stay.

Beyond this, musical tastes were changing. Aria-based operas were giving way to a more dramatic style of music drama in which extended monologues and repetition were believed to slow down the action. Even the very concept of tonality came under attack. Any music which featured the flowing melodic lines that Dvořák loved – in short, the type of music most operagoers enjoy – was considered, to use the modern term, “retro.”

Even with revived interest in this opera, many companies seem to be embarrassed by its unabashed romanticism, especially in Europe. A Bavarian State Opera production portrayed Vodník, Rusalka’s loving father, as wicked child molester; another European production portrayed him as a murderer, who has killed his wife, concepts with no support in the actual text (though present in other versions of the legend). Other productions, displaying the directors’ discomfort with fairy tales, turn the entire opera into a dream sequence.

Times, however, have changed, and what was old has become new. Maybe we are ready for a romantic yet tragic love story set to music that is designed not simply to show off singers’ virtuosity but rather to tug at our heartstrings. Such an opera is *Rusalka*.
CAST, CHARACTERS, AND ARTISTS

General character information is listed below. To view the actual cast and artists in the Lyric Opera 2015-16 season production of Rusalka, visit kcopera.org/performances/rusalka-15/cast-characters-and-artists/.

Rusalka – A water nymph (Soprano)

Vodník – A water goblin and Rusalka’s father (Bass)

Ježibaba – A witch (Mezzo-Soprano)

The Prince (Tenor)

Three Wood Sprites (Soprano(s), Mezzo-Soprano(s))

Foreign Princess (Soprano)

A Huntsman (Baritone)
BRIEF SYNOPSIS

ACT I
Near a lake, three water sprites dance in the moonlight. Rusalka sits sadly by the water and laments to her father, Vodník, that she is in love with a human – the Prince. She met the prince when he came to swim in the lake and instantly fell in love. She now wants to be with him as a human. Although Vodník attempts to dissuade her, Rusalka insists and calls on the witch, Ježibaba, to help. Ježibaba agrees to create a potion that will turn Rusalka into a human, but notes that the transformation comes with conditions. Once human, Rusalka will lose her voice, and if she doesn’t find love, both she and the prince will be eternally damned. Rusalka agrees and drinks the potion. The Prince, hunting in the forest, encounters Rusalka, embraces her, and leads her off to his castle. Vodník and Rusalka’s sisters mourn her departure.

ACT II
At the Prince’s castle, the Prince and Rusalka enter and he expresses his frustration about how cold Rusalka has been. The Foreign Princess, who has arrived for the wedding, catches the Prince’s eye. The Prince sends Rusalka away so he can accompany The Foreign Princess to mingle with wedding guests.

In the garden, Vodník appears in the lake. Rusalka runs to him and suddenly recovers her voice. She begs for his help, telling him that the Prince has rejected her. The Prince and The Foreign Princess enter, and the Prince confesses his love for The Foreign Princess. Rusalka runs to the Prince, imploring him to return to her, but he rejects her yet again. Vodník warns the Prince of his fate, and disappears into the water with Rusalka. The Prince asks The Foreign Princess for help, but she tells him to follow his love to hell.

ACT III
Back at the lake, Rusalka mourns her fate to Ježibaba. Ježibaba says that she can avoid her fate by killing the Prince. But Rusalka refuses, and sinks into the lake where she is also rejected by her sisters. When Vodník tells the three water sprites what has happened to Rusalka, they stop dancing and fall silent.

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The Prince enters, and asks Rusalka to return to the castle with him. She refuses and explains that if she kisses him now, he will die. The Prince begs her to kiss him and give him peace. She does, and he dies in her arms. Rusalka asks for mercy on his soul and disappears into the water.
DETAILED PLOT OUTLINE

ACT I

The shore of a lake. The house of the witch is visible. Rusalka, a water sprite, is sitting in the branches of a willow tree.

Before beginning the narrative, we need to make an important point. While the most direct source for this opera is The Little Mermaid, Rusalka is not a mermaid but a water sprite (much to the relief of costume designers and of sopranos who realize that “flipping their fins, they don’t get too far.”)

A brief prelude introduces some of the major thematic music of the opera – themes associated with both Rusalka and the Prince. Three wood nymphs enter, singing a playful song about the moon. They jokingly explain that the Vodník may soon come to the surface, hoping to nab one of them as a wife – a wish they have no interest in granting. This situation, along with their chants of “Ho, Ho, Ho,” are clearly an allusion – a sort of tip of the hat – to Richard Wagner’s Ring cycle, in particular the opening of Das Rhinegold and Alberich’s attempted seduction of the Rhine Maidens.

Since Vodník is unable to leave the water entirely, the Wood Nymphs realize that they can safely tease him from a distance. Seeing her father partially arise from the water, Rusalka approaches him and tells him of her desire to become human and to possess an immortal soul (a concept more fully developed in Andersen’s story). Vodnik warns her of the downside of possessing a soul – souls are full of sin and sorrow – but she persists. She tells him that she has fallen in love with a human prince, but since she is only a spirit, he perceives her only as a wave (note the departure here from Andersen – and Disney). Realizing that he cannot win the argument, the Water Gnome tells her that the witch Ježibaba can help her. With a sigh of “woe,” he exits.

The sound of the harp introduces the opera’s most famous aria, Rusalka’s “Song to the Moon,” a haunting melody that must be on most opera lovers’ short list of favorite arias. Opera critic Fred Cohn has commented on this aria that “You could know nothing of the opera’s plot or of the Czech language, and still
immediately understand that this is a song of longing and supplication.” He notes that the octave leap that begins the chorus is itself an expression of yearning. In this aria Rusalka begs the moon to bring her love to her.

Rusalka calls out to Jezibaba, who, after a dramatic orchestral interlude, emerges from her house, as we hear Vodník’s lament. Rusalka praises the witch’s powers and begs for her help. Ježibaba says that she has the power to help her, but she warns her of the consequences: once she has become human, she can never return to her previous life, and if the man she loves betrays her, both she and the object of her affection will be damned forever. Furthermore, she will be mute to all human beings and must win the Prince’s love without verbal communication. (In what again appears to be a departure from the Andersen/Disney version, here the loss of her voice seems to be a natural consequence of being transformed into a human, not a malevolent act of the witch). Rusalka is confident enough of the power of her love to accept the risks, and as the orchestra plays another extended instrumental passage, Ježibaba prepares the potion as she chants some mystic incantations (in what is essentially a comic aria), and she gives it to Rusalka to drink.

Immediately, Rusalka finds herself to be in human form. The first sound she hears is an offstage hunter singing a folk song about a man who shoots what he believes to be a dove, only to find that it was his beloved – a ballad perhaps best known to English-speaking audiences as “Polly Von.”

The Prince enters, saying that he has been enchanted by a vision he has seen. Rusalka approaches him, and he is immediately overwhelmed by her beauty. In a lyrical aria, he sings of his love but also expresses his doubt as to whether she is truly human or a creature from a fairytale. Rusalka tries to answer him but realizes that she has indeed lost her voice. Offstage, her fellow sea creatures notice that she is missing.

Despite the lack of verbal communication, the Prince is infatuated. He takes her under his cloak and leads her into the forest – possibly hinting at consummation – as the curtain falls.

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ACT II

One week later. The grounds of the Prince’s castle. In the background, we can see the ballroom. In the foreground there is a small fish pond.

The Prince and Rusalka enter. He is still puzzled by her silence, but he is even more frustrated by her lack of passion, which we know is a result of the fact that while Rusalka has a human body, she is not really human and apparently does not feel human sexual passion. Rusalka still cannot speak, but the Foreign Princess enters and provides a counter-melody to the Prince’s aria, as she complains of the Prince’s lack of hospitality. Rusalka tries to embrace the Prince, but he has become impatient with her silence. He tells her to dress for the ball and escorts the Princess back to the castle. The orchestra plays a melancholy version of Rusalka’s theme.

In the castle the guests partake in an extended dance – essentially a ballet – and we are reminded that in addition to his love of opera, Dvořák was a skilled instrumental composer. As the ballet concludes, Vodník rises from the fish pond (though he cannot exist on dry land, apparently he can transport himself from one body of water to another). Realizing that her quest to win the Prince’s love has slipped away, he laments his daughter’s fate. While the “Song to the Moon” is justifiably the most famous aria in this opera, as an expression of parental love, Vodník’s aria is equally touching.

In the background the chorus sings a folksong. Rusalka rushes from the palace and approaches her father. She is in tears, realizing that she has lost the Prince’s love (note: we should remember that Rusalka did not really lose her voice – it is only in the human world that she is mute. Perhaps the librettist made this distinction because he realized an opera heroine could not remain mute for the duration of the opera.) Rusalka tells her father of her despair, but he realizes that there is nothing more that he can do for her.

The Prince and Princess enter. They engage in a genuine love duet, and when Rusalka tries to intervene, he rejects her. Vodník angrily curses the Prince and tells him he will never be free of Rusalka. He takes Rusalka and disappears with - continued -
her into the pond. Apparently tired of the rivalry, the Princess rejects the prince as well, telling him to dwell with Rusalka in Hell, as the curtain falls.

ACT III

Same setting as Act I: Late evening, fading into a moonlit night.

A lengthy, ominous orchestral interlude reinforces Rusalka’s tragic situation. Rusalka sings her second big aria, longing for the life she had before she became human and wishing for death. Ježibaba comes out of her hut. She mocks Rusalka’s misery, cursing the human race. She informs Rusalka that she still has a way out of her predicament – she must kill the Prince. Ježibaba offers her a knife to do the deed, but Rusalka, admitting that she still loves the Prince, throws the knife into the lake. Ježibaba exits in disgust, unable to understand Rusalka’s attachment to the human race.

As Rusalka resumes her lament, the voices of the water nymphs are heard offstage, explaining that Rusalka has been corrupted by her contact with humans and can no longer cavort with them.

The Woodsprites reappear and sing a playful song, as they did in the first act, mockingly calling to Vodník to come and catch one of them. Vodník suddenly appears, but only to lament Rusalka’s sad fate.

The Prince rushes from the woods in a daze, looking for Rusalka. She suddenly appears to him. Now that she is no longer human she can speak with him. She tells him that it is too late; his betrayal has damned her for all time, and she is destined to be the cause of his death and damnation as well. One kiss would be his last. He says he no longer wishes to live. They kiss, but as he is dying Vodník reappears to tell him that he will not find redemption through his self-sacrifice. Rusalka, on the other hand, prays to God to have mercy on his human soul, and she disappears into the lake as the curtain falls.

Some critics have posited that the ending represents a sort of redemption, interpreting Rusalka’s return to the lake as an indication that she has saved both the Prince and herself in her final act of forgiveness. Unfortunately, the text seems to contradict this interpretation. Rusalka can never return to her old life - continued -
but must live through eternity as a disembodied spirit, between the human and supernatural world, belonging to neither. There is no redemption through love such as one finds in the conclusion of Wagner’s *Ring* – only sorrow – and the eternal beauty of Dvořák’s magnificent score.
ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

“I wanted to devote of my powers…to the creation of opera….I consider opera to be the most suitable medium for the nation.” Thus Dvořák wrote late in his career, a statement which might come as a surprise to those who know him primarily for his instrumental works. Dvořák actually wrote nine operas, but only one, Rusalka, is performed with any regularity outside of his native land.

Antonín Dvořák was born September 8, 1841 in the town of Nelahozeves, Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic, but then part of the Austrian Empire). His parents were innkeepers, though his father doubled as a butcher, a trade for which Antonín’s parents initially had him apprenticed. Fortunately they also had him take music lessons, and his teacher was so impressed with his talent that he persuaded the young man’s parents to allow him to extend his studies in that field. Thus at the age of sixteen he left home to move to Prague, where he initially studied organ but also became proficient enough on the violin that he was able to join a band. He soon began writing chamber music.

The 1870’s were pivotal in his career. His first opera, Alfred, was written in 1870 but never performed during his lifetime. A second opera, King and Charcoal Burner, was written the next year. It likewise was rejected, though some years later, after a complete rewrite, it finally reached the stage. In 1873 he married Anna Cernakova, following an unsuccessful attempt at romance with her sister (which was probably a good omen, since Mozart had a similar experience.) In 1877 he composed the opera A Cunning Peasant, his most successful work to that date, as well as the choral work Stabat Mater, which is still performed frequently.

In 1882 his opera Dimitrij represented a breakthrough in his opera career. His cantata The Specter Bride, written the same year, was also a significant success, demonstrating his interest in the supernatural, which was to become a key element of his later writing, most notably Rusalka. The 1880’s were also important in his career as he began to receive international recognition and made several trips to England to conduct his works.
In 1892 the American philanthropist Jeanette Thurber, whose dream was to inspire an American school of music, invited Dvořák to come to New York to teach composition at the National Conservatory of Music. He spent three years in the U.S. (with one intervening trip home), during which time he traveled extensively, frequently meeting with Czech Americans. It was during this period that he composed the work for which he is best known in the U.S., his ninth symphony, *From the New World*. In it he tried to absorb the musical style of Native Americans and African Americans and to write original melodies in those modes. In 1922 one of his students, William Arms Fisher, wrote lyrics for the Largo movement, and the resulting song – “Going Home” – became so popular that many people still believe that Dvořák borrowed this old spiritual when he composed the symphony. Though the words were added later, many listeners can no more hear that movement without thinking of the words “going home” than they can hear Rossini’s *William Tell Overture* without thinking of the Lone Ranger (or, for that matter, hear Poncielli’s “Dance of the Hours” without thinking of summer camp). At one time Dvořák had begun working on an operatic setting of Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, and some of the music from that aborted project may well have found its way into the symphony.

A strong believer in nationalism in music, Dvořák preached that “The new American school of music must strike its roots deeply into its own soil. There is no longer any reason why young Americans who have talent should go to Europe for their education.” He encouraged American composers to root their compositions in the national music of “Negroes and Indians.” In an interview with the New York Herald, he said, “I am now satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the negro melodies… These are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them. All of the great musicians have borrowed from the songs of the common people.” The conservatory itself was unusual in its acceptance of African-American, well as women students. While none of Dvořák’s own students wrote music that has stood the test of time, these words could be seen as prophetic. The earliest American opera that is still performed today – *Treemonishia* – was written by the African-American composer Scott Joplin, though it was never performed
during the composer’s lifetime, and the first truly great American opera – *Porgy and Bess* – was written by a composer who was a great admirer of African-American music, George Gershwin, and the opera provides a perfect fusion of classical and jazz styles. To a great extent, American popular music is based on jazz, a genre of music initially created and developed by African-American musicians. Many early American operas were featured Native-American characters, but these are largely forgotten today. Years later, composers such as Aaron Copland and Charles Ives incorporated American folk motifs (albeit, not necessarily those of racial minorities) into their compositions, just as Leonard Bernstein was to incorporate the musical style of Puerto Rican immigrants into his masterpiece, *West Side Story*.

Dvořák returned to his native land in 1895. A few years later, he turned to Czech folklore to compose his opera *The Devil and Kate*, which today is second in popularity to *Rusalka*.

Around that time, the playwright Jaroslav Kvapil took a vacation trip to Denmark, and his own interest in national cultures led him to read the works of Hans Christian Andersen. One story in particular, *The Little Mermaid*, caught his attention, and he set about writing an opera libretto based on an amalgam of this story and a number of Czech fairytales. What happened next is somewhat unclear. According to Kvapil, he did not have any particular composer in mind when he wrote the opera, and it was only after the libretto was rejected by a number of composers that he showed it to the director of the Prague National Theater, Adolf Subert, who passed it on to Dvořák, a composer whom Kvapil was intimidated from approaching on his own. However, as early as 1897 Subert had written to Kvapil telling him that Dvořák was hoping to write an opera on a Czech fairytale plot. Also, one of Kvapil’s letters indicates that after completing the libretto he realized it was too good to give to an inferior composer. In any event, Dvořák loved the libretto and immediately began setting it to music, an enterprise which occupied him for seven months during 1900, leading to the premiere on March 31, 1901. The opera was an immediate success, though a contract dispute over a planned Vienna production slowed its achieving more widespread acclaim.

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Dvořák’s final opera, Armida, was first produced in 1904, and it was not well received. Sadly, Dvořák became severely ill during one of the final rehearsals, and a few weeks later, on May 1, 1904, he died of an undiagnosed illness. At the time of his death he was widely recognized as the greatest Czech composer, a reputation which remains intact to this day.
THE SOURCES

While the principal source of Rusalka’s story was Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*, Kvapil, the librettist, cited other source material as well, including Friedrich de la Motte Fouques’ 1811 novel *Undine* and Hauptman’s 1896 play *The Sunken Bell*. Actually, tales about sea creatures seeking to become human go back at least to Medieval times, most notably the tale of Melusine, a woman who was punished for her revenge against her wife-abusing father by being condemned to change into a half-serpent every Saturday. Virtually all versions of the legend, however, have the following plot elements in common: a non-human female is transformed into a human because she has fallen in love with a human male, who betrays her for another woman, leading to disaster.

Most Americans probably know *The Little Mermaid* from the Disney studio’s film adaptation, so this would be a good time to look at Andersen’s story. It tells of a Mermaid King, a widower with five daughters, one of whom was obsessed with learning about the world above the waters. At age fifteen mermaids are given the opportunity to swim to the surface and observe the world above. When the youngest daughter’s turn comes, she observes a shipwreck and rescues a prince from drowning. She falls in love with the prince and wishes she were human so she could join him in his world. She has a second motive – she has been told that humans, unlike mermaids, have immortal souls, whereas mermaids dissolve into sea foam when they die. (This “religious” element is absent in the Disney version). She is also told that she could obtain a human soul if she could win the love of a human man. However, she would die immediately if the prince were to marry someone else.

As in the opera (and Disney), she goes to a witch for assistance. The witch grants her request, asking for her voice in return. Once on land, she wins the love of the prince, but she is unable to confirm that she is the one who saved his life. He tells her he is considering marrying her, but his father is pressuring him to marry a princess from a neighboring country. Upon meeting the princess he erroneously believes that she, rather than the mermaid, is the one who saved

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his life, and he marries her. The witch tells the mermaid that she can save her own life if she kills the prince, but, as in the opera, she throws the knife into the sea, leading to her own death. However, she then discovers that the beliefs she had been taught were wrong. Rather than dissolving into foam, she becomes one of the “daughters of the air,” and she is told that she can obtain an immortal soul through the performance of good deeds.

Besides adding enough details to make a full-length movie, Disney’s writers made two significant changes from the original. One was making the witch a true villain (every Disney film must have a diabolical villain), one who actively plots to prevent the Prince and the mermaid from marrying. More important, this version may be the only one where the Prince and the mermaid marry and live happily ever after.

We have already discussed some of the ways that the opera differs from Andersen’s version as well as Andersen’s predecessors. Two additional changes should be noted. First, the character of the father is much more significant. In many versions the father is evil (in Undine, he forces his daughter into marriage for economic reasons); in the opera, he is a loving parent, who like most modern parents finds that his beloved child is out of his control. Perhaps the most significant change is the locale. Whereas all of the other versions take place in and around the sea, Rusalka takes place inland, by a couple of lakes. This is, after all, a Czech opera, and the Czech Republic has about as much sea coastline as Missouri or Kansas. By moving the story inland, Kvapil and Dvořák were able to make the story feel like a true Czech folktale.
HISTORY OF AN ARCHETYPE

While today mermaids and similar sea creatures and spirits are simply the subjects of folk literature, there was a time when people actually believed in their existence, especially in days when ocean voyages were rare and dangerous. Many seafarers whom we might normally consider to be reliable reported mermaid sightings. Most notable was Christopher Columbus, who reported having seen mermaids from a distance but observed that they were hardly as beautiful as they were reputed to be. What was going on? The most commonly accepted explanation is that he (along with some others) may have seen manatees or similar sea creatures, whose faces seem to have human features when seen from a distance.

Long before Darwin, in ancient times, people seem to have intuitively understood that life began in the sea. The Babylonian creation myth “Enuma Elish” described the key role played by the sea goddess Tiamat. The book of Genesis tried to de-mythologize the creation story, but many scholars have seen the reference to the “deep” in Genesis 1:2 as a remnant of the Tiamat story, in that the Hebrew word for “deep” is “tehom” (without a definite article). In Job 28:14, surprisingly, “tehom” is given a voice.

Mermaids per se seem to go back at least three thousand years, with the Assyrian legend of the goddess Atargatis, who fell in love with a human and was forced to return to a lake as half-fish, half-human. The Phoenician god Dagon was pictured as being half-man and half-fish. In Irish, Scottish, and Welsh folklore we have tales of “selkies” (or “silkies”), creatures that can transform themselves into human-like creatures when on land. The best known such tale is The Silkie of Sule Skerry, which became a popular folk song in America during the 1960’s.

Non-mermaid sea creatures also abound in various folklores around the world. There were the “sirens,” women who sang so beautifully that they could lure sailors to their death by causing them to sail too close to the rocks in order to get closer the source of their music. Perhaps the best-known version of the siren
legend is in Homer’s *Odyssey*, one of the oldest literary works that survives to this day. There were also numerous legends of water sprites throughout Europe, and a great variety of such legendary creatures throughout the world, in places as remote from Europe as Japan, Africa, and North America (among Native Americans, long before the arrival of Columbus). What is most remarkable is the universality of such legends and the similar traits among cultures who would have had little contact with each other.

Perhaps most important to our discussion is the creature called the rusalka, the Slavic version of the mermaid legend. While in the opera Rusalka is used as the heroine’s proper name, rusalki (plural form) were a particular form of water creature. Though their characteristics vary from one region to the next, they were generally the spirits of human women who had died young, most frequently homicide victims who died near a lake (or were drowned in one) and came back to haunt the lake, sometimes in mermaid form. They are capable of coming out on land on moonlit nights. Often, but not always, they are malevolent beings capable of killing the men they encounter. In earlier versions of the legend, however, they were more benevolent, and were linked with fertility goddesses. Scholars of folklore link them to the vili (vilia, singular form) who were reported to live near the Danube. A more benign version of the vilia is the subject of an aria in Lehar’s *The Merry Widow*. The use of the name Rusalka appears to be the librettist’s way of localizing the mermaid of Danish origin to Bohemia.

While no longer related to anyone’s belief system, religious or otherwise, mermaids continue to fascinate us. One of the most interesting treatments of the subject was a 1984 film, *Splash*, which includes many of the features of the legends we have discussed – a young mermaid falls in love with a human and follows him to his land-based home. As in the opera and many other versions of the legend, human civilization turns out to be corrupt. The film’s original twist, however, was to have the human leave his land-based environment to become part of the mermaid’s world.

Author Skye Alexander, who has studied the lore extensively, has suggested a
few reasons for our continuing interest in the legends, relating not to beliefs but to our psychological needs. “Psychologically,” she writes, “mermaids have been said to represent the complexity of women’s emotions.” More fundamentally, she asks, “Does the shift from water spirit to human…symbolize our own evolution from creatures of the sea to human beings – and our own longing to return to the source from which we came?”
SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

One question that spectators might ask about this opera is whether the affair between the Prince and Rusalka is ever consummated. While it is never stated outright, several clues point to a positive answer to this question. As indicated at the conclusion of Act I, the Prince covers her with his cloak and leads her into the woods, where they would have some privacy, rather than back to his castle. Second, the prince’s complaints about her lack of passion seem to refer to something more than kissing. She apparently was only superficially transformed into a human, but with her other-worldly mentality she does not experience sexual passion. Finally, the implication of a sexual relationship seems implied in her father’s anger at the Prince’s betrayal. Most likely a man who deserted a woman he had merely kissed would not arouse such anger, but by the sexual mores of the time (which still persist in some places), a man who took a woman’s virginity and refused to marry her was worthy of condemnation.

We have already discussed the theme of nationalism in Dvořák’s music. One aspect we have not made note of is the identity of Rusalka’s rival as a “foreign princess.” As a foreigner who seeks to displace a Czech woman, albeit a mermaid, she is immediately suspect.

Some critics have also made note of the “love/death” motif in the opera, a theme which figured prominently in the operas of Dvořák’s principal model, Richard Wagner. The purest form of the “Liebestod” (love/death) appears in the conclusion of Tristan and Isolde. What could be more romantic than dying for love, whether by suicide (Werther), a jealous lover (Pagliacci, Francesca di Rimini, and others), exposure to the elements (Manon Lescaut), or a lover’s kiss, as in Rusalka?

Finally, there is the question of whether this opera has a deeper meaning for us beyond mere enjoyment of the story and the music. As critic Fred Cohn notes, “The longing to be something other than oneself is built into the human condition.” Does the opera suggest that one should not seek out forbidden relationships? To see the opera as moralistic in this way is to miss the emotional - continued -
impact of Dvořák’s music. John Simon has described the opera as expressing “the ultimate incompatibility of man and woman, the impossibility of love.” Again, this seems overly negative.

Some critics have found a feminist element in the story. This is not surprising. One of the defining differences between myths and fairy tales is that the former generally feature male protagonists whereas fairy tales feature female protagonists, though most of them are waiting for their Prince Charmings to rescue them. Consider how many Disney films feature princesses – the immensely successful Frozen being the most recent example.

John Simon points out that while the Prince dies a peaceful death and quite likely is saved by Rusalka’s forgiveness, Rusalka does not die but is condemned to live in a suspended state part of neither the aquatic or human community: “And this is the reward of female creature for having a greater love than that of the male….the incommensurability – or injustice – of love.” Katha Pollitt makes a stronger case for a feminist reading: “And from the female point of view? The feminist lesson is almost too obvious: Rusalka gives up her true self to win the love of a man….She silences herself at tremendous cost, only to find that her sacrifice makes her less appealing to the man she adores. Hers is the sad predicament of the good girl who tries too hard to become what she thinks men want.”

Beyond this, Ms. Pollitt sees a bigger picture: “Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Rusalka is about passion itself, about that part of oneself that is hell-bent on pursuing its own path despite warnings that it will lead to disaster – because not to pursue it means sitting forever in a boring lake with your sisters or idling away your life as a generic fairy-tale prince. It’s about people’s need to make their destiny and make themselves, about the drive to transgress limits and challenge fate.” She goes on to speak of the isolation of the characters, pointing out the lack of great duets in the opera: “That solitude is the tragedy at the heart of Romanticism: the more tempestuous the passion, the more one is alone. By that standard, Rusalka may well be the most Romantic of all operas.”

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Romanticism is characterized by people’s desire not to “play it safe.” Like Don Quixote, Romantic heroes and heroines are most admired when they “dream the impossible dream.” The cathartic effect of these works is our ability to sympathize with these dreamers and to feel elated by their ability take us out of our safe, ordinary lives.
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