

## Dvořák's *Rusalka*

Dvořák's *Rusalka* is typically billed as a Fairy Tale Opera, often a “charming” and “lyrical” Fairy Tale Opera. It is indeed lyrical, but if you look deeply enough, “charming” may not be an apt descriptor. Fairy tales can be deep and contain more than meets the eye.

Spoiler alert: In this fairy tale, no one lives happily ever after.

The water nymph in one form or another is a common figure in European mythology. Various versions have various names and characteristics. There are the Lorelei, mermaids, naiads, ondine, sirens, nixies, melusina, vilia, Rhine maidens, among others.

These water spirits generally fall into two categories. Elemental spirits are benign, having no particular interest in humans; For example, the naiads of Greek mythology are daughters of the sea god and are generally disinterested in the affairs of humans. Others are malevolent: ghosts, unbaptised children, young women who have been abandoned by their lovers and drowned themselves, seeking revenge upon all men, luring them to their deaths. These are to be feared and avoided.

Our *Rusalka* begins as one in the former category, an elemental water spirit, daughter of the Water Goblin, neither good nor evil, living in joyous harmony with all of nature. Her trouble begins when she falls in love with a human, a handsome Prince who comes to bathe in her pond. She embraces him, but she is a disembodied spirit, and he is unable to sense her except as a wave. She wants to become a human and to possess a body and soul. Unhappy, she reveals her feelings to her father, the Water Goblin. He is shocked: “Wish not for a soul, which is full of sin!”, he admonishes. “And also full of love!”, she replies.

The witch, Ježibaba, agrees to make her human and give her body and a soul. The conditions, however, are dire: She will not be able to speak to any human and if her human lover is untrue to her, both will be eternally damned.

As Act I closes, the now-corporeal but mute *Rusalka* and the Prince head off ecstatically to his castle. But in Act II, everything falls apart. The Foreign Princess has arrived,

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determined to steal the Prince away from his exotic lover. She doesn't really love him – to her, he is just a trophy.

At the Prince's palace, Rusalka watches helplessly as the passionate, articulate, yet false and vindictive Princess seduces the Prince away from her. "I am only half a woman", Rusalka laments, "born of cool water, and passion is something I do not possess".

Now the Prince must choose between the passionate but false Princess or the mute and deeply loving Rusalka.

He makes the wrong choice.

The Foreign Princess, having won, now rejects the Prince, leaving him distraught and disconsolate. Rusalka must return to her pond, but now she is trapped in its waters, eternally cursed and deprived of all the joys she knew in her previous existence.

Ježibaba offers a solution. She gives Rusalka a knife; she must shed the blood of the human who betrayed her. Rusalka indignantly refuses. She throws the knife into the pond, preferring to be eternally cursed rather than shed the blood of her beloved!

But now the distraught Prince seeks out Rusalka and begs her for a kiss. Rusalka warns him that that would mean death for him. But he tells her he can no longer live without her, asks her for forgiveness and says that he will gladly die.

"All sacrifices are futile!", mournfully intones the Water Goblin.

She kisses the Prince – he dies in ecstasy. Rusalka kisses his corpse one last time. She sings, "Because you loved, because you were good, because you were humanly fickle, because of all which makes up my fate – God have mercy on you, human soul!" and submerges forever into the lake as the curtain falls.

And thus ends our tragic Fairy Tale: The Prince is dead and Rusalka is cursed and forever banished from the bosom of her family.

Dvořák's *Rusalka* is a dark, tragic and ultimately disturbing story. We may enjoy the charming music, but we ought also to perceive and ponder the deep and puzzling ideas beneath it.

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