



Dvořák's *Rusalka*

Dvorak, like many composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was interested in the folklore and folk music of his native country. The water sprite mythology was a strong Czech tradition, and prior to the opera Dvorak wrote two tone poems based on similar characters from the poems and ballads of Karel Erben, a contemporary Czech historian and writer. Although he composed ten operas, *Rusalka* is the only one regularly performed outside of the Czech Republic. He is more internationally celebrated as a composer of instrumental music, but the fairy-tale nature of *Rusalka* seemed to inspire him, and allow him scope for the lyricism and nature poetry that came naturally to him.

The first known mermaid legend is said to date from the Syrians in 1000 B.C. Of course there is more than one kind of mermaid, and many versions of their stories, from sirens who lure men to their deaths in Homer's *Odyssey*, to flighty, innocent Ariel of the Disney movie. Most of these tales, however, are variations on the themes present in *Rusalka*, elements from the French writer Fouquet's novella *Undine* and Hans Christian Anderson's story *The Little Mermaid*. There is neither evil nor complete innocence, but there are desire, sacrifice, pain, betrayal, and reconciliation.

Dvořák's *Rusalka* is typically billed as a Fairy Tale Opera, often a "charming" and "lyrical" Fairy Tale Opera. It is indeed lyrical, but "charming" may not be an apt descriptor. It is not the "and they lived happily ever after" story we associate with the genre. It could more aptly be described as a cautionary tale – that the price for what you desire so strongly may be too high – that things can go drastically wrong, even for the good and innocent – that it may not be advisable to go against the nature you were given...

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And yet this story has fascinated authors, composers, and audiences alike. There are no fewer than 6 operas before Dvorak's, all called *Undine*, including ones by E.T.A. Hoffman and Tchaikovsky; and there are ballets, plays, poems, stories, sculpture, painting and films. Perhaps because both humans and water sprites can be compelled by desires so strong that they defeat rationality or render it irrelevant? What would you give up your voice for?

These themes are played out in the opera's tragic events. Rusalka is the daughter of the Water Goblin, neither good nor evil, living in joyous harmony with all of nature. She falls in love with a human, a handsome Prince, 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.

After sacrificing her voice to have her wish granted by the witch Jezebaba, the Prince does fall in love with her, but is ultimately unfaithful because she cannot fulfill his need for passion. In the end he is sorry and returns to Rusalka, who warns him that that the kiss he seeks 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.

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