

Rusalka

Music by Antonín Dvořák • Libretto by Jaroslav Kvapil

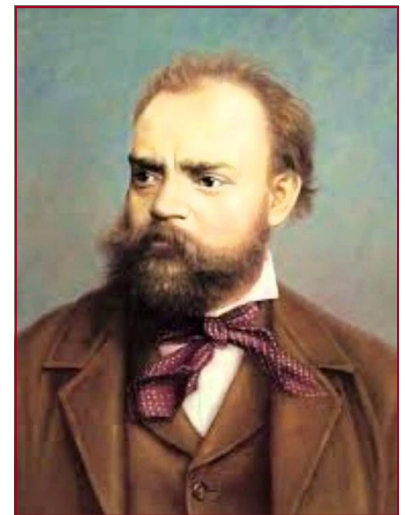
Study Guide to the Opera

Glyndebourne 2019 production photo of *Rusalka* by Tristram Kenton



Dvořák: Beloved by his native Czechs

The musical legacy of Antonín Dvořák is a remarkable tribute to European cultural heritage; his music is revered in his native country. He was celebrated internationally for his chamber, choral, and symphonic music, especially in London and New York, and towards the end of his life Dvořák was frequently described as the world's greatest living composer. On an international level, Dvořák's music is performed more than any other Czech composer. Over four decades, he produced nearly 200 complete works, yet his nine operas found little renown beyond his native Bohemia.



Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

Dvořák's position in music history is all the more noteworthy because he had only two years' official music education that provided him with basic skills in compositional technique. He compensated for his lack of formal education by studying the scores of the masters and by his extraordinary will power. In addition to playing organ and violin, his experience playing viola in opera orchestras in Prague provided him with direct experience of operas in many styles by Mozart, Weber, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner, and Smetana.

Over time, Dvořák overcame his lack of formal training. He remarked: "I would have an idea, I'd write a few bars, but then I'd be stuck. It took a lot out of me before I finally discovered how to write a decent long movement!" For someone whose total compositional output would take 85 hours to play, and whose opera *Rusalka* takes more than three hours to perform, Dvořák clearly succeeded as a composer and as a creator who could express a sense of human happiness in his work. For Czechs, pride in Dvořák's compassionate and gracious music is unequivocal. A visitor to the Antonín Dvořák Museum in Prague discovers tangible evidence of how much he is loved.

Rusalka Synopsis

World Premiere: National Theater, Prague, 1901
Sung in Czech. Estimated full opera run time is 3:45.

Act I

The water nymph Rusalka has fallen in love with a human—the Prince—when he came to swim in her lake. Now she wants to become human herself and live on land to be with him. Rusalka's father, Vodník (the Water Sprite) is horrified and tells her that humans are evil and full of sin. When Rusalka insists, claiming they are full of love, he says she will have to get help from the witch Ježibaba. Rusalka calls on the moon to tell the Prince of her love. Ježibaba arrives and agrees to turn Rusalka into a human—but warns her that if she doesn't find love she will be damned and the man she loves will die. Also, by becoming mortal, she will lose her power of speech.

Convinced that her feelings for the Prince can overcome all spells, Rusalka agrees and Ježibaba gives her a potion to drink. As dawn breaks, the Prince appears with a hunting party and finds Rusalka by the lake. Even though she won't speak to him, he is captivated by her beauty and leads her away to his castle. From the lake, the voices of the Water Sprite and the other water nymphs are heard, mourning the loss of Rusalka.

Act II

At the Prince's castle, the Gamekeeper and the Kitchen Boy talk about the approaching wedding of the Prince and his strange new bride, whose name nobody knows. The Prince enters with Rusalka. He wonders why she is so cold toward him but remains determined to win her. A Foreign Princess, who has come for the wedding, mocks Rusalka's silence and reproaches the Prince for ignoring his guests. The Prince sends Rusalka away to dress for the ball and escorts the Princess into the castle for the beginning of the festivities.

In the deserted garden, the Water Sprite appears from the pool. Rusalka, who has become more and more intimidated by her surroundings, rushes from the castle in tears. Suddenly recovering her voice, she begs her father to help her, telling him that the Prince no longer loves her. The Prince and the Princess come into the garden, and the Prince confesses his love for her. When Rusalka intervenes, rushing into his arms, he rejects her. The Water Sprite warns the Prince of the fate that awaits him, then disappears into the pool with Rusalka. The Prince asks the Princess for help but she ridicules him and tells him to follow his bride into hell.



Hans Zatzka, *Symphony of the Water Nymphs*

Characters

Rusalka, a water nymph *soprano*

The Prince *tenor*

Vodník *bass*
Rusalka's father, the Water Sprite (goblin/gnome) and Spirit of the Lake

Ježibaba *mezzo-soprano*
A witch who makes Rusalka human, but warns her that she will lose her power of speech

The Foreign Princess *soprano*
Wedding guest who mocks Rusalka

First wood sprite *soprano*

Second wood sprite *soprano*

Third wood sprite *contralto*

Gamekeeper, the Forester *tenor*

Turnspit, the Kitchen Boy *soprano*

Hunter, voice of a Huntsman *baritone*

Coro: Wood nymphs, guests at the castle, entourage of the Prince

Act III

Rusalka waits by the lake once again, lamenting her fate. Ježibaba appears and mocks her, then hands her a knife and explains that there is a way to save herself: she must kill the Prince.

Rusalka refuses, throwing the weapon into the water. When her sisters reject her as well, she sinks into the lake in despair. The Gamekeeper and the Kitchen Boy arrive to ask Ježibaba for help. The Prince, they say, has been bewitched by a strange wood girl he was going to marry. Enraged, the Water Sprite rises from the lake, saying that it was the Prince who deceived Rusalka. Terrified by the supernatural sight, the two run away. The wood nymphs enter, singing and dancing, but when the Water Gnome explains to them what has happened to Rusalka, they fall silent and disappear.

The Prince, desperate and half crazy with remorse, emerges from the forest, looking for Rusalka and calling out for her to return to him. She appears from the water, reproaching him for his infidelity, and explains that now a kiss from her would kill him. Accepting his destiny, he asks her to kiss him to give him peace. She does, and he dies in her arms. Rusalka asks for mercy on his soul and disappears into the water.

—Adapted from the Metropolitan Opera

Song to the Moon

Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém

Oh moon in the deep sky,
Your light sees far,
You roam over the wide world,
And peer into human dwellings.
Oh moon, stay a while,
Tell me, where is my love?
Tell him, silvery moon,
That my arms enfold him,
So that for at least a moment
He'll remember me in his dream.
Shine for him into the distance,
Tell him who awaits him here!
If the human soul dreams of me,
May he awake with that thought!
Oh moon, don't fade!

Fairy Tale Inspirations

Early in his life, Dvořák's compositions included short piano polkas, symphonic works influenced by the Viennese classics, and fascination with German Neo-Romanticism, exemplified by Wagner and Liszt. By the 1870s, Dvořák was forging his own unique style and including sounds of Slavic music in his works. His "mature period" and "American period" followed, including pieces that are some of his most frequently performed. Similar to other 19th-century composers of the "national schools", Dvořák tapped folk music for inspiration.



Jaroslav Kvapil (1868–1950)

In his final years, Dvořák gravitated to opera and program music, which included fairy-tale motifs, fanciful themes, and supernatural phenomena. In 1899, Dvořák let it be known that he was seeking a new opera libretto. Jaroslav Kvapil was a Czech author who had already written a libretto for *Rusalka*, and when he offered it to Dvořák, the composer set it without asking for changes.

Origins of the story were the French *Mélusine*, Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine*, and Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Sunken Bell*. While other composers of the time—such as Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and Puccini—were creating *verismo* operas, Dvořák's work was far different in story and musical style. *Rusalka*, inspired by fairy tales, is a triumph of lyricism by a composer who was a major symphonist.

Kvapil's libretto, in Czech, was based on fairy tales about water sprites from Slavic mythology: a **melusine** was a female spirit of fresh water, **undines** were beings associated with water (nymphs), and **mermaids** were aquatic creatures with the upper body of a female human and the tail of a fish. Danish author Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid* has become famous thanks to the Disney adaptation, but neither the opera nor the Anderson tale end happily.

The basic outline of *Rusalka* parallels other tales: a mermaid desires a human body to obtain a soul, falls in love with a human, experiences a disastrous marriage because of another lover, and must choose to murder her lover to save herself. A love triangle, a dark ending, and magnificent music—those are the inspirations for *Rusalka*.



Where is Bohemia, Dvořák's birthplace?

Dvořák was born in Nelahozeves, a Bohemian village on the Vltava River north of Prague. Bohemia, the westernmost and largest historical region of the Czech lands in the present-day Czech Republic, can also broadly mean the entire Czech territory, including Moravia and Silesia.

During Dvořák's lifetime (1841–1904), Bohemia was part of the Austrian Empire. In the preceding centuries, Bohemia had been a Great Moravian duchy, an independent principality, and a kingdom in the Holy Roman Empire. After World War I and the establishment of an independent Czechoslovak state, the whole of Bohemia became part of Czechoslovakia.

1918 Czechs + Slovaks = Czechoslovakia

Across from the Benedum Center in Pittsburgh's Cultural District, an historical marker honors "The Pittsburgh Agreement", which ensured the formation of a democratic Czechoslovakia, a combined country of two small eastern European nations. Why Pittsburgh? Allegheny County has the highest percentage of people who claim Slovak heritage of any county in the United States.



Slovaks immigrated to western Pennsylvania to work in the coal mines and steel industry. With the onset of World War I, boundaries in Europe began to change, and it looked like Slovakia wasn't going to win out over the Central powers of Germany, Austria, and Hungary. So Slovak Americans and Czech Americans joined forces to create a new country for themselves in order to protect their culture.

1993 Czechoslovakia = Czech Republic and Slovakia

Fast forward decades to when communism fell, and Czechoslovakia amicably split and became two independent nations. The little village where Dvořák was born has thus been part of numerous nations or empires, but it is still a part of Bohemia.

For more info: www.wesa.fm/post/how-country-czechoslovakia-was-created-downtown-pittsburgh#stream/0

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Czech mates:

Bohemia produced three outstanding operatic composers:

- Smetana**,
known for *The Bartered Bride*,
influenced
- Dvořák**, known for *Rusalka*,
influenced
- Janáček**,
known for *The Cunning Little Vixen*.

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