

Antonín Dvořák and the opera Rusalka



Antonín Dvořák, a Czech composer



- Born on September 8th, 1841, in Nelahozeves.
- His father was a butcher and an innkeeper
- Dvorak studies German in Zlonice, but also music with Antonín Liehmann, a *kantor*.
- 1857 : Organ School in Prague
- 1862 : he plays the alto in the main orchestra in Prague, and starts composing.



- 1878-92 : he becomes famous in Europe (*Slavonic Dances*, Czech folklore).
- 1892-95 : he teaches composition in the United States, writes his famous *Cello Concerto*, and the *Symphony "From the New World"*.
- 04/01/1896 : he conducts the *Czech Philharmonic Orchestra*.
- 01/05/1904 : he dies in Prague

Antonín Dvořák and nature



He spent the summer and each holiday in Vysoka, in a house sold by his step-brother, Count Vaclav Kounic, in 1884. There are lots of lakes and woods in the area. Dvorak kept pigeons there.

Dvorak was a romantic composer, he composed :

- symphonic poems : *the Wood Dove, the Water Goblin, the Golden Spinning Wheel*.
- an overture : *In Nature's Realm*
- the *9th Symphony*, which like Beethoven's Pastoral seems essentially linked with the outdoors. When he composed it, he traveled to Spillville (Iowa), Minneapolis and St Paul.



The myth of the Rusalka

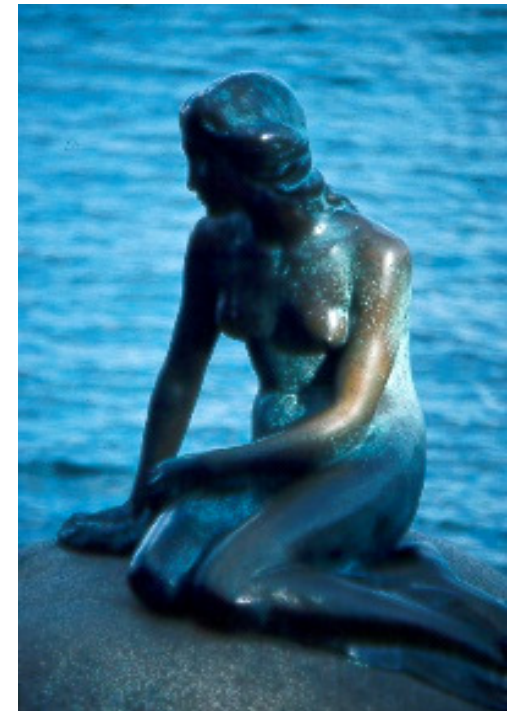


They are female water spirits, evil or not. The word might come from the “Rosalias”, ancient Romans celebrations before the Summer, which were mixed with Slavonic pagan celebrations of the death of Spring, or a “ruslo” which means a watercourse.

These creatures, water nymphs, appear in lots of mythologies : Slavonic, Russian, German (Lorelei), Scandinavian (The little Mermaid), even Greek (sirens).

Many writers, painters and composers have been inspired by this theme.

Dvorak himself had composed the Water Goblin, a symphonic poem (written by Erben) where an evil water creature kidnaps a young girl, and kills their child in the end.



Composing *Rusalka*



Dvorak composed *Rusalka* in Vysoka (in this house called the *Vila Rusalka* nowadays), from April to November 1900. It became his most famous opera.

Rusalka lives in a *tunka*, which is a small lake, only a few meters across, but very deep, like the ones you can find near Vysova.



The libretto was written in 1899 by Jaroslav Kvapil, who composed it in the country of Andersen, on the Island of Bornholm, thinking of Erben's poems.

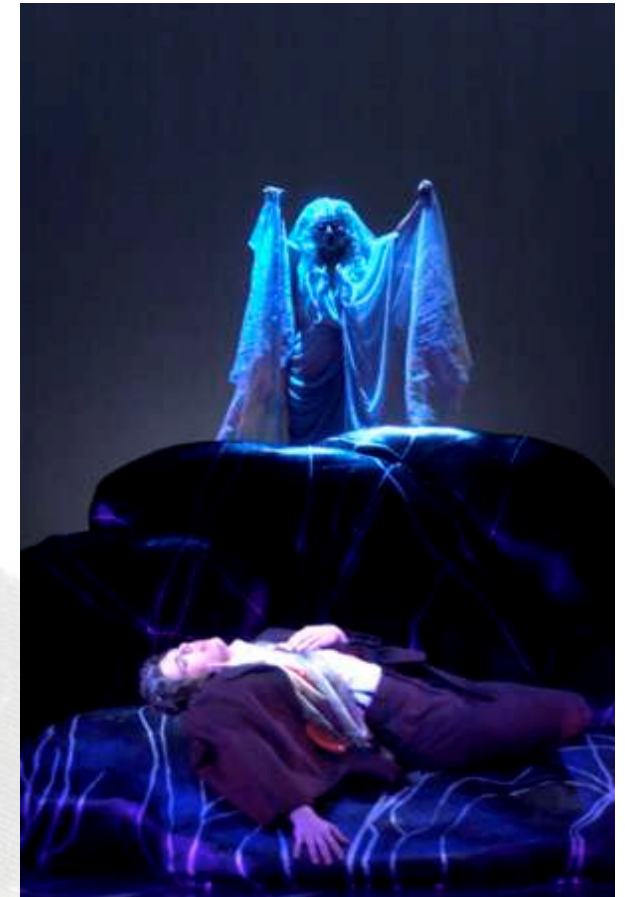
The story of Rusalka



Act 1 : Rusalka tells her father, the Water-Gnome, that she is in love with a human Prince. She asks Jezibaba, a witch, to help her become human. She accepts, but Rusalka loses the power of speech. The Prince, hunting, finds her, falls in love in enthusiastic crenscendi and takes her to his castle.

Act 2 : The Prince falls in love with a Foreign Princess and rejects Rusalka who goes back to her pond. The Princess, having won the Prince's affection, now rejects it.

Act 3 : Rusalka is told by Jezibaba that she can put an end to her woes by killing the Prince with a dagger. She refuses, so she becomes a *bludicka*, a spirit of death who goes out of her lake only to haunt humans. But the Prince goes back to the lake, asking Rusalka to kiss him even if he know this means death and damnation, and dies indeed. Rusalka thanks him for letting her experience human love, and goes back to the depths of the lake as a demon of death.



Rusalka, a Czech opera ?



As in many of Dvorak's masterpieces (expecially obvious in the symphonic poem *The Water Goblin*), the rythm of the music is closely linked to the one of the Czech language.

Some of the harmonies are typical of the Czech music, and can be found in other Dvorak's melodies.

The libretto is written in the same spirit as Czech ballades, or the poems by Erben.

As other aspects of the Czech culture, for example the architecture of Prague, it sums up elements of many European countries. Not only the myth, but also the notes : crescendi and peaks like in *Tristan and Yseult* by Wagner, and more linear choruses like in *Pelléas and Mélissandre* by Debussy.



Anyway, *Rusalka* immediately became very popular in Prague and is now considered as *The Czech opera*.

Discovering the opera Rusalka



It was first performed in Prague on 31 March 1901, and first performed in France only in 1982 in Marseilles, and in 2002 in Lyons and Paris (with Renee Fleming).

The most famous aria (even played by André Rieu !!!) of the opera is the *Song to the Moon*, sung by Rusalka in the first act. This song has inspired *Over the Rainbow* (from the *Wizard of Oz*) to Harold Arlen.

The CD of Rusalka, conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras, is considered as the reference.

References :

- The best website about Dvorak in French : <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/alain.cf/>
- Articles about Dvorak and Rusalka in the French and English Wikipedia : <http://www.wikipedia.org>
- Articles about Rusalka on the Prague Radio Website : <http://www.radio.cz/fr/article/55405> ; <http://www.radio.cz/en/article/56299>
- A colloque about Dvorak, organized by the Université Paris Sorbonne Paris IV, 20/11/2004, with Miroslav Srnka, Walter Zidaric, Alain Chotil-Fani, Tetiana Zolozova : http://www.paris4.sorbonne.fr/fr/article.php3?id_article=1820
- Rusalka in Lyons : <http://www.lyon-passionnement.com/sorties/opera/rusalka.htm>
- Rusalka in Paris : <http://www.operabase.com/fr/critiques/20020628-Bastille-Rusalka.htm>
- Rusalka, une mise en scène : http://home.clara.net/theatre/designs/rusalka/rusalka_pics.htm

