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Romance, Revolution & Reform

Review: Natalie Abrahami and Ann Yee (dirs.), *Rusalka* (Royal Opera House, London), 21 February – 7 March 2023.

DYLAN PRICE AND EMMA KAVANAGH

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK'S *RUSALKA* (1901), a captivating tale of water sprites and witches, is a mainstay of the operatic repertory. Much about the opera's idyllic subject matter supported a Czech nationalist project at the time—not least its landscape imagery, a common feature of nationalisms in many contexts—and the opera has since grown to be popular in Dvořák's native Bohemia (now Czechia) as a result. 'At the National Theatre in Prague *Rusalka* became an instant and permanent "hit"', David R. Beveridge notes, 'retained in the repertoire almost continually to the present day'.[1] But the opera's folkloric emphasis has also lent it a wider popular appeal beyond Czechia. Dvořák's music has long been received positively in Britain, not least because he made several visits between 1884 and 1886, 1890 and 1891, and in 1896. Though *Rusalka* was not premiered in the UK until 1950, it has since become similarly popular due to its delicate orchestration, pictorial character, and luscious musical themes.

The opera's more recent history at the Royal Opera House has been somewhat chequered: in their 2012 production, for example, Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito provocatively chose to set the opera in a brothel, a choice that prompted raucous booing from the audience on opening night. Fortunately, *Rusalka*'s most recent outing at Covent Garden in early 2023—directed by Natalie Abrahami and Ann Yee—was considerably more successful. This new production offered a no less politicised reading, but did so by bringing Dvořák's opera into dialogue with the theme of climate change rather than sex trafficking. Though the new production's efforts in this direction were not entirely sustained, it nonetheless had much to recommend it, and its reception has been a considerable improvement upon that of its predecessor. It prompts many questions about how scholars of nineteenth-century culture might respond to ecocritical issues, especially surrounding knowledge exchange with the creative and cultural industries. Ecocritically-minded productions such as *Rusalka* open a rich seam

[1] David Beveridge, 'A Rare Meeting of Minds in Kvapil's and Dvořák's *Rusalka*: The Background, the Artistic Result, and Response by the World of Opera', in *Czech Music around 1900*, ed. by Lenka Krupková and Jirí Kopecky (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2017), pp. 61–80 (p. 76).

of possibilities for scholarly impact, a project of special importance in a period of growing public engagement with environmental issues.

Much about the plot's conflict between its 'human' and 'natural' worlds lends itself to an ecocritical reading. Based on a libretto by Jaroslav Kvapil, *Rusalka* draws upon the kinds of supernatural and folkloric themes that motivated much of Dvořák's later music—most notably *Vodník* (*The Water Goblin*, 1896). This folkloric basis was interpreted nationalistically by many Czech critics at the time, who praised (as Beveridge describes) 'the distinctively Czech qualities of both the libretto and the music', but it lends itself also to contemporary ecological priorities.[2] The plot bears much in common with Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* (1837). The water sprite Rusalka falls in love with a Prince from the human world and asks the witch Ježibaba to make her human. Ježibaba grants this wish, but only on the condition that Rusalka loses both her immortality and her voice. The second Act depicts the consequences of this transformation, as the mute Rusalka comes to the painful realisation that the Prince's eye has been caught by a visiting Duchess. She retreats back into her lake and becomes a spirit of death, lurking in the watery depths. In a dramatic denouement, Rusalka and the Prince meet again in the opera's third Act. Their kiss is fatal but, by sacrificing himself for the woman he had earlier forsaken, the Prince ultimately achieves redemption.

The production design contained elements that responded, with varying approaches, to these ecological priorities. The sets—designed by Chloe Lamford—surely benefited Abrahami and Yee's ecological reimagining, putting the murky underwater realm of the water sprites at odds with the glossy artifice of the human world. For example, the first Act, which takes place beneath the surface of the lake, was sparsely dressed with moss-covered boulders and dangling stems of slick seaweed; a hanging piece overhead allowed a tantalising view of the sky above. These choices largely corresponded to the set designs of previous productions, going back to the premiere (which, as archival evidence from Prague's National Theatre shows, depicted its underwater setting in similar ways). In contrast, Lamford's set for the second Act presented us with a white rectangular prism, the Prince's castle, in which the terrestrial action took place. This prism helped to support a particular kind of ecological reading: it starkly juxtaposed the lake (which remained visible behind), thereby drawing a clear

[2] Beveridge, p. 74.

distinction between its 'human' and 'natural' worlds and highlighting the violence that inheres between them. Although the set succeeded in making this juxtaposition explicit, it also meant that the performances themselves were somewhat confined, limited as they were to a relatively small part of the ROH's stage. The production design improved in the third Act, which (following Rusalka's encounter with the Prince and the Duchess on land) presented the dirtied, polluted waters of the lake. Though the transformation of the set felt like a heavy-handed metaphor for the titular character's loss of innocence, it was visually striking nonetheless.

Even more striking was the production's very opening. Partially shielded from view by a translucent scrim, two dancers depicted the first meeting of Rusalka and the Prince in a spellbinding aerial ballet to the opera's overture. Yee's sinuous choreography perfectly captured the subtleties of underwater movement, and made for a breathtaking opening to the onstage action. Annemarie Woods's costumes continued the opposition of the plot's aquatic and human worlds. The three wood sprites were dressed in green costumes, bedecked with leaves and flowers. Vodník wore a long, billowing cape evoking the lake's rippling waters. Rusalka's cloak, also evoking her aquatic home, was stripped from her as she transformed into her human body; it was not long, however, until she was coerced into a tight-laced corset ahead of her doomed wedding to the Prince. The wedding guests' attire—all in black and splattered with oil slick—furthered the ecocritical angle of the production, making a marked contrast to the paler costumes of Rusalka and the Prince. These choices in costume and choreography suggestively intertwined dramatic bodies and their settings—precisely the kinds of entanglements of humans and their environments that have defined so much work in the environmental humanities.[3]

This ecological reading of *Rusalka* was in many ways successful, and the production offered a generous model for others to follow. Much repertoire from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contains themes that can be brought into contemporary discussions about climate change. For instance, both E.T.A. Hoffmann's opera *Undine* (1816) and Léo Delibes and Ludwig Minkus's ballet *La Source* (1866) lend themselves readily to ecological interpretation. Critical work in this line has already been

[3] For example, these themes have motivated much work by Tim Ingold. See Tim Ingold, 'The Eye of the Storm: Visual Perception and the Weather', *Visual Studies*, 20.2 (2005), pp. 97–104.

advanced by musicologists such as Daniel Grimley and Holly Watkins, as well as by cultural historians such as Felicia McCarren.[4] These scholars have compellingly shown the humanities' value for discussions about climate change, but there is more to be done to make these ideas accessible to a wider audience. That a high-profile venue such as the Royal Opera House has chosen to undertake this task is a welcome development, and it is our hope that other opera companies (both in the UK and further afield) might follow suit.

In this instance, however, some closer attention to the minutiae of the adaptation would have gone a long way. That the production did not furnish its ecological aspects with a dramatic reason to exist within the plot on its own terms meant that they ran the risk of feeling tokenistic. More could have been done to complicate the distinction between the plot's 'human' and 'natural' worlds, a common thread in the ecocritical literature raised above. This distinction felt somewhat overdrawn by the staging, which ignored the liminality—the murky transformations of the titular character as she dissolves between one realm and another—that characterises Dvořák's original. The reinterpretation of *Rusalka* through an ecological lens also somewhat diluted the moral and religious charge of the original text. Like Dvořák's *Vodník* (1896) or his *Svatební košile* (*The Spectre's Bride*, 1884), *Rusalka* features a young woman who does not 'know her place'. In other words, it offers a moralising, misogynistic lesson about so-called 'proper' behaviour.[5] But what are the ramifications of infusing contemporary environmental discussions with these kinds of meanings, however inadvertently? In neither the onstage action nor the programme were these problems properly explored, to the detriment of both the production and the environmental politics to which it sought to contribute. In this respect, the opera raised many questions for musicologists, not just about how opera might benefit from ecomusicological insights, but also about

[4] Daniel M. Grimley, *Delius and the Sound of Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Holly Watkins, 'Musical Ecologies of Place and Placelessness', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 64.2 (2011), 404–8; Felicia McCarren, *One Dead at the Paris Opera Ballet: La Source, 1866-2014* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[5] For a discussion of the opera's gendered and queer meanings, see Christopher Campo-Bowen, 'Ježibaba's Ambiguities: Binaries, Power, and Queer Alterity in Antonín Dvořák's *Rusalka*', in *Women in Nineteenth-Century Czech Musical Culture: Apostles of a Brighter Future*, ed. by Anja Bunzel and Christopher Campo-Bowen (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

how these productions might become objects of study (and critique) in themselves. Further research remains to be done on the assumptions that underpin contemporary opera productions, and these areas have, thus far, not received the full attention that they deserve.

The opera's ideological problems might have been lessened by reimagining the original libretto and score more substantially, and by integrating the climate change themes more fully within a revised plot. Yet, perhaps in response to the 2012 production, this new outing sought to have its cake and eat it: to reconceive the original, but without alienating traditionalists. This twin approach was less effective than it might have been, had it courted one audience more single-mindedly. This is not to say that the production was unsuccessful: it made some valuable political strides forward, laying some of the groundwork required for subsequent cultural engagement with themes of climate change and environmental destruction. Given the production's staging issues, and the ideological problems surrounding its reimagining of Dvořák's text, however, it is the opinion of these reviewers that this *Rusalka* ultimately amounted to less than the sum of its parts.

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