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The Aria That Created a Legacy

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Abstract

Antonin Dvořák's operas, while well-loved in Czechoslovakia, were almost completely unknown in the United States until recent years because they were often considered musically and stylistically confused. *Rusalka*, his most renowned opera in Czechoslovakia, did not premiere on the popular stage until the Metropolitan Opera's production in 1993 which featured acclaimed Czech singer Gabriela Beneckova. After many mediocre reviews, it did not appear again on the Met stage until 1997 when Renee Fleming played the title role. This paper draws from press reviews to argue that Renee Fleming and her performance of the well-known aria "Song to the Moon" are responsible for the opera's prosperity in the United States. It also hypothesizes that success can be achieved not only through a complete, well-produced work of art, but also in the ability of a leading lady to carry a production.

Introduction

When most theatre-goers see an opera, they want to be engaged. Of course, there is no accounting for taste. Some people like serious opera, comic opera, operetta, while others would prefer a musical or play. However, most people agree that, whatever your taste, the production as a whole must provide a good experience for the run to be considered a success. A few minor bad actors or missing notes are excusable if everything else goes right. But how much can be wrong before the audience decides that it is not worth one's time? For most, it would take more than one amazing aria to make a show worth seeing, but that is exactly how one opera gained acceptance and acclaim in the United States. The debut performances of Antonin Dvořák's "Song to the Moon" from *Rusalka* by two accomplished singers garnered the opera quick popularity, despite problems with the score, story, and artistic direction.

Dvořák's Life and Career

Antonin Dvořák was born in 1841 in Nelahozeves, a village just north of Prague which is modern day Czechoslovakia. He started his musical education in 1847 and became proficient in the violin and organ. In 1859, he joined Karel Komzák's dance orchestra and stayed with the group when it partnered with the new Prague Provisional Theatre as its orchestra in 1862. This is where Dvořák gained extensive knowledge of several types of opera and operetta. Dvořák's first compositions were strictly instrumental and song-based. He composed concertos, symphonies, chamber music, and song cycles. Eventually, he began composing opera due to his history of performing in the orchestra and a growing public interest in strictly Czech opera like those composed by Smetana and Janáček.

He had some moderate success with his first opera *Alfred* in 1870, but *The King and Charcoal-Burner* was rejected by the Provisional Theatre in 1873 because it was too difficult for their company to produce. Throughout the rest of his career, Dvořák continued to dabble in opera, with much of his time focused on orchestral and chamber music. He garnered international acclaim for his *Slavonic Dances*, which allowed him to travel abroad and perform his pieces. At the height of his fame, Dvořák even accepted the position of Director for the National Conservatory of Music of America located in New York City. After returning to Prague in 1895, he began to focus on Bohemian folklore. The last years of his life were dedicated to writing opera that gave Czechoslovakia its own national identity. He accomplished this by

setting popular Czech folk legends such as *The Devil and Kate* and *Rusalka*. Dvořák died in 1904 from a stroke in his home in Prague (Doge).

Dvořák's style is different from many composers of the 19th century, in that it is not unique at all. His opera style is not his own, but a compilation of composers he admired. He followed the example of Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Schumann during his early composition period, evidenced by the style of his first two operas: *Alfred* and *The King and the Charcoal Burner*. His works from the 1880s, like the opera *Dimitri*, also display the influence of Brahms. Overall, the composers whose styles most consistently influenced his musical career are Smetana and Wagner (Doge). Smetana was older than Dvořák and therefore more established in the music community (Hollander, 316-317). According to many scholars, Smetana began the trend of Bohemian, or Czech, nationalism. For example, Smetana composed many of his operas about cultural and political matters of the day; this secured his place in Czech history as an influential nationalist composer (Hollander, 314). Dvořák began composing opera because he felt "it was the most suitable form for the nation." Thus, he naturally attempted to follow all the trends that were being used by the popular composers (Furie). He set political and cultural stories while utilizing folk music, like Smetana. Many of his operas also attempt to be grand, large scale works comparable to those of Wagner. However, it wasn't until his late period of composition that he had any real success in combining his own personal ideas with the style of the time. *Rusalka* is the realization of that success, combining folk story, folk music, a fantastic setting, leitmotifs, and his own personal ability to write gorgeous, lyric melodies (Hollander, 314-316).

Dvořák's *Rusalka*

Rusalka, Dvořák's most popular opera in his own country, has received mixed reviews in the United States. The first American production was at Chicago's Sokol Hall in 1935, but it was not produced by a well-known company, so there is little recognition that this was the opera's true debut in the U.S. (Lewis). The opera was not seen again until the New York Metropolitan Opera produced it in 1993 with Gabriela Beneckova in the title role (Metropolitan Opera Premiere *Rusalka*). Its slow acceptance into the opera world's popular repertoire seems odd at first glance.

The story, although not particularly sophisticated, is a timeless classic. *Rusalka*, which translates to water nymph, falls in love with a human prince, but she is made of water and he cannot see her. Ignoring her father's advice on the evil ways of humans, she acquires a potion from the witch Jezibaba that will make her human (What to Expect From *Rusalka*). However, the potion comes with a price: no human will ever be able to hear *Rusalka* speak and if she doesn't find love with the Prince, they will be eternally damned (Lewis). The Prince sees *Rusalka* and immediately falls in love with her, so he takes her back to his palace. He soon grows tired of *Rusalka* because she does not speak, so he turns his attentions to a foreign princess. *Rusalka* begs her father for help, but he can do nothing. The Prince professes his love for the foreign princess but she rebuffs him. *Rusalka* runs back to the forest and seeks the advice of Jezibaba who tells her the only way to save herself is to kill the Prince. She refuses just as the Prince returns to the lake searching for *Rusalka*. He professes his love for her, but *Rusalka* says it is too late, warning him that if he kisses her now he will die. The prince, accepting this fate, kisses *Rusalka* and falls lifeless into her arms (What to Expect From *Rusalka*).

1993 Metropolitan Opera Premiere

Up until the 1990s, the Met had only been known to perform the well-loved classics, never straying too far from popular opera. However, the 1993 season was different. They produced Britten's *Death in Venice*, Verdi's *Aroldo* and *I Lombardi*, and Dvořák's *Rusalka*. The Met took on an unprecedented challenge in choosing old operas that were often overshadowed by the composers' more famous works. Britten's opera had its American premiere in 1974 and had not been staged since due to poor audience reception. *Aroldo*, originally written under the name *Suffello*, as well as *I Lombardi* were less performed works of Verdi's and this was to be their debut at the Met. To counteract the unfamiliar titles, the Met paired famous singers and conductors with these operas, including James Levine, Aprile Millo, Luciano Pavarotti, and Samuel Ramey (Holland). *Rusalka* had expectations and hurdles of its own. Not only was it almost completely unknown, but leading lady Gabriela Beneckova had heightened expectations as a Czech national and this was John Fiore's conducting debut at the Met. Kenneth Furie of The New York Times pondered whether "non-Czech audiences will enter into the spirit of the thing? Or will they be too distracted by the clear ties to Wagner's *Rheingold*?"

With a drama that can only be found at the opera, on November 11, 1993, the Metropolitan Opera House premiered Dvořák's *Rusalka* (Metropolitan Opera Premiere *Rusalka*). It received fair reviews. Edward Rothstein, of the New York Times, felt "Benackova's performance had a classic status with eloquently shaped phrases and a natural ease that carried great authority, giving an unearthly vulnerability to her character." Not everyone found this to be the case, however. John Freeman commented in *Opera News*, "The gloriously intoned but rather inert characterization of Gabriela Benackova holds back conductor John Fiore." He also commented that "the score tends to lie still in the water unless stirred along by a conductor more determined than John Fiore" (Freeman). However, these reviewers did agree on some matters. Both felt the costumes, set design, and Neil Rosenshein as The Prince left something to be desired. The premiere was an overall success, at least enough to run for about a month with the same cast (Ross). Then in December of 1993, the run was continued with a new cast which had somewhat problematic results. Alex Ross of The New York Times understood that Dvořák's operas were somewhat confused and stylistically cluttered, which would present a challenge to the performers. However, the new cast did not impress him. "The characters seemed static and episodically sketched and John Fiore drew inflexible, overloud playing from the orchestra" (Ross). After this rather tragic end to what could have been a successful debut of an opera, The Met hid *Rusalka* away, as it was not performed there again until 1997 (Metropolitan Opera Premiere *Rusalka*).

1997 Metropolitan Opera Production

Renee Fleming has a storied history with *Rusalka*. In 1988, she won The Metropolitan Opera's National Council Auditions with *Rusalka's* "Song to the Moon" (Metropolitan Opera Premiere *Rusalka* 1993). This was five years before the Met premiered the opera. Not only was this a huge turning point in Fleming's career, but in her own words, "that was the aria that put me on the map" (Delacoma 2014). Then in 1997, Fleming got her chance to play *Rusalka* in the Met's first revival of the opera since its premiere (Metropolitan Opera Premiere *Rusalka* 1993). As if attempting to redeem past mistakes, the Met hired Fleming, who is known for her emotional portrayal of characters, as well as new set and costume directors. However, John Fiore

was brought back to conduct The Met orchestra once again. Could these changes really turn the tides on *Rusalka*'s popularity in the United States?

Anthony Tommasini of the New York Times raved about Renee Fleming's portrayal of Rusalka. He wrote that "Fleming sang the lyrical passages with poignant sound and unmannered phrasing. Yet she brought darker hues and radiant power to Rusalka's tormented moments. She has obviously worked hard with Czech diction coaches, for her enunciation seemed quite comfortable" (1997). Even with this high praise, Mr. Tommasini also felt the confusion of Dvořák's composing:

Dvořák seems not to have been able to make up his mind whether he was writing a fairy tale like "The Magic Flute" or a morality play like "Tannhauser." The music is constantly inventive, with haunting melodies of folkloric simplicity, lilting dances and set pieces, all linked by a flowing current of subtly scored orchestral music. Yet it never comes together as a dramatic whole. It's as if Dvořák had been hesitant to tap too deeply into the implications of the tale. But Renee Fleming had no such hesitation (1997).

Despite the score's flaws, *Rusalka* was a resounding success and Renee Fleming's popularity and notoriety grew. She moved on to new roles. Then, in 2004 the Met announced that it would be bringing back the original 1993 production (design, costumes, sets, etc.) of *Rusalka* with Renee Fleming in the title role (Tommasini 2004). This would be the ultimate test of Renee Fleming's ability to carry a show. As stated above, the reviewers agreed that the costume design was misguided in reference to "children in mice and frog costumes that seemed borrowed from the company's Hansel and Gretel" (Rothstein 1993). They also felt that Dvořák's story called for a shimmering lake that holds an almost surreal beauty in comparison to the human world and instead they constructed "autumnal leaves, bare branches and a swamp atmosphere that seem all wrong" (Rothstein 1993). Would the audience still be distracted by these details with Renee Fleming at the helm? Evidently not. Anthony Tommasini of the New York Times wrote "The role demands wistful lyricism, creamy-toned beauty and fragile expressivity, all qualities that ideally suit Ms. Fleming's voice and temperament" (2004). As for the costumes and sets, there was not a word of discontent about them. In fact, John Woods of MusicalCriticism.com felt "the scenery was quite simply stunning." The reviewers also changed their perspective on Dvořák's composition style as a whole. Woods went so far as to write "[*Rusalka*] is an immensely rewarding work with a strong, theatrically successful libretto and richly inspired and varied music throughout all three acts" (2009). Ah, how fickle is the public opinion. Music that was originally considered disjointed and was not able to create a complete coherent work is now being heralded as "richly inspired" and "varied". Public opinion and reviews are always bound to change as time passes, but in reviewing the history of *Rusalka* in the United States it is clear who slowly brought about this complete change of opinion.

The Aria that Started It All

Renee Fleming found this beautiful aria and brought it to the forefront of opera repertoire by her skilled technique and acting. In doing this, she started a chain of events that would turn an unknown opera into something proclaimed as a simplistic masterpiece. Maybe the success and legacy of certain operas do not lie in the entire work being produced at the height of artistic representation. Maybe it lies in a single aria sung with such passion and beauty that the audience cannot help but feel the longing and heartbreak of the character. After all, what is the purpose of

art, or even an artist, if it cannot make you experience true, deep emotions? In any case, Dvořák would be quite happy and grateful to Renee Fleming for her portrayal of *Rusalka* because now his greatest wish as a composer has been fulfilled. *Rusalka* will live on as a shining example of Czech nationalism and Dvořák's opera legacy will live on with it.

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