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‘Poor, pale, Rusalka’: The Polymorphic  
Nature of the Heroine of Dvořák’s *Rusalka*

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## Abstract

Rusalka, the protagonist of Antonín Dvořák's eponymous opera, is probably one of the most unique operatic heroines. Rusalka's burning desire to become human in order to be with one and have a soul takes her on an interesting, yet tragic journey. From water nymph to human to will-o-the-wisp, Rusalka goes through three different states and two metamorphoses that leave her desire unfulfilled and cause her to suffer continuously. The two metamorphoses cause Rusalka to remain between the natural and human worlds, both of which reject her. This in turn leads to her eternal suffering. Her tragic fate and constant agony portray her as a victim. And yet Rusalka is also a powerful character who is in command of her own story: as the opera's sole protagonist, we are encouraged to identify with her perspective. She is constantly present throughout the opera. Even in the scenes that do not require her presence, she communicates with us through absence and through other characters that are, like us, influenced by her presence. And when Rusalka is silent, she connects with us through the language of orchestral music; her mute exterior on stage eludes us and seeks our understanding and sympathy. Thus, her powerful presence and the complexity of her nature draw us as the readers/listeners/spectators to experience Rusalka's story through her subjective perspective.

In order to reveal the nature of the character and how it affects us as readers/listeners/spectators, I will use various approaches, with an emphasis on psychological concepts that will provide a new insight into Rusalka and the opera as a whole. My research will also suggest the impact of fin-de-siècle misogyny on Rusalka and specifically her silence, which is the perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the opera and its protagonist. The thesis will follow Rusalka's journey, from the time and culture of its creation to modern times, as portrayed in some of the more recent dramatic productions that resituate these themes in light of more current perspectives. I will expose in turn the layers in *Rusalka*: from the libretto and the music, to the use of voice, and finally the playing with meaning in a few representative stage productions. In the second and third chapters, focusing on the libretto and music respectively, I discuss the ways Rusalka articulates her nature, using the Freudian structural model of the psyche for the analysis of the narrative and repetition in the libretto and music. The analysis of music also points toward repetition as a key method, and I suggest connections with the psychological concept of repetition, linked with desire and the death drive, as observed by Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl. In the fourth chapter, I focus on the voice, more specifically the cry, in order to explore the ways in which we experience the voice, which I believe is the central element that causes a painful enjoyment (*jouissance*) in some of us, and in turn is key to our sympathetic empathy with Rusalka. Finally, with *Rusalka* on stage, I explore the ways in which we, as audience, relate to Rusalka's suffering, focusing mainly on her silent state. With the addition of the layer of the gaze, I focus on the spectators' reaction to mute Rusalka and how, in a way, they participate in these moments of suffering precisely through the gaze. Throughout the thesis, I demonstrate how Rusalka communicates with us through the opera's layers and how in return we respond to them, either by sympathising or identifying with the protagonist.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction – *Rusalka* in Context

### 1.1 Getting to Know Rusalka-the-Polymorph

Ženou ni vílou nemohu být,	<i>Neither woman nor fairy can I be,</i>
nemohu zemřít, nemohu žít!	<i>I cannot die, I cannot live!</i> <sup>1</sup>

With these words Rusalka, the protagonist of Antonín Dvořák’s eponymous opera, describes her tragic fate. Rusalka sings these words in despair in Act II, which raises a question about her story: what caused Rusalka to be in this situation? In Act I, Rusalka introduces herself as a water nymph who desperately wants to leave her natural world and become a human. She reveals that she is in love with a human and that she wants to have a soul that lives on after death. To end her agony in the natural world, she seeks help from Ježibaba, a witch, who tells Rusalka that she will suffer as a human—she will be mute. As a silent human being, she is not able to fulfil her desire to be with the Prince. In silence, she watches him lose interest in her and fall in love with the Foreign Princess. In a brief moment as a human, or in her own words, ‘half-human’, she regains her voice and sings the words above.<sup>2</sup> What follows is the final act, which centres on Rusalka’s last metamorphosis as will-o-the-wisp, an immortal state she did not want. In this cursed state, she is rejected by both the human and natural world, destined to suffer eternally.

The opera is clearly about Rusalka’s unfulfilled desire (to be with the Prince and have a human soul) and the suffering that overshadows the entire story. In a way, her desire and suffering are almost entangled, as they describe the futile journey and the sacrifice of the protagonist. She goes through three different states and two metamorphoses, and in each state she suffers, as her desire

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Cheek, *Rusalka: A Performance Guide with Translation & Pronunciation* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 177

<sup>2</sup> My translation, unless specified otherwise.

remains unfulfilled. Her metamorphoses cause her to remain in between the two worlds, natural and human, never truly belonging to any: In both of her metamorphoses, Rusalka desires to be part of the human/natural world, yet she suffers as she is never perceived as ‘one of them’.

### 1.1.1 The Nature of Rusalka

Because of the strong emphasis throughout the story on the suffering and desire and the two futile metamorphoses that amplify Rusalka’s tragic fate, we automatically perceive her as a victim. ‘Oh, poor, pale, Rusalka’, some of us might say, in agreement with Vodník. The poor decision to become a human that makes her sacrifice so much, and the fact that neither world wants to accept her certainly help create the notion that Rusalka is a victim. However, the word ‘victim’ does not fully explain Rusalka’s character. She actually creates her own story - she is completely in command of her own fate, even though it leads her to an immortal state which she did not desire. Rusalka does not let other characters decide for her or take her story away from her—Rusalka is the opera’s sole protagonist and *she* tells *her* story from *her* perspective. Through every single scene in the opera, through her voice or silence, in her absence and through other characters, Rusalka communicates with the reader/listener/spectator. Victim or not, we cannot help being drawn to her perspective on the events. In fact, in our various roles as listeners, readers and spectators, we experience the story from her point of view, which makes us sympathise and even identify, to some extent, with Rusalka.

In the story of Rusalka, the loss of the protagonist’s voice becomes the most striking feature in the opera. Her silence encourages us to sympathise with her, as we read the description in the libretto of how Rusalka feels inside her silent exterior, or as we experience the lyrical music of the orchestra that represents her while mute, and finally as we witness her silent and haunting presence on stage. Although a short phase in the opera, silence is definitely an element in the story that stands out, due to the fact that this is an opera, where the voice is generally considered to be the most important layer. Her silence, occurring at the most crucial stage, leads to three questions: 1) how does she communicate while mute; 2) how does it affect us as readers/listeners/spectators; and 3) what it means to be a woman, since she is silenced in order to join the patriarchal world. The questions that

Rusalka's silence raises could shed a new light on Rusalka and the opera. For that reason, this thesis will address the issue of Rusalka's silence amongst many other aspects that describe the protagonist. Before I turn to my own analysis, I would like to offer a brief overview of some of the tensions and issues concerning women's rights that were present historically at the time the opera was written. This overview of women's rights will follow the discussion of nationalism, an issue that affected the opera's reception and its discourse, which will lead to a summary of the ongoing research that sets up the background information on the psychological theories for my own research.

### 1.1.2 *Rusalka*/Rusalka and Psychology

*Rusalka* is an opera with a multi-layered libretto, as described by Timothy Cheek, for instance, and as such, it richly rewards analytical approaches.<sup>3</sup> From the 1980s onwards, its many layers, including the psychological, have been of interest to musicologists who began to interpret *Rusalka* in different ways. However, the psychological layer has not been discussed in great detail. Nevertheless, a psychological reading seems compelling because as a fairy-tale opera, *Rusalka* begs to be interpreted in psychological terms, since fairy tales occupy a special role in psychology. *Rusalka* is, as its librettist Jaroslav Kvapil it, an 'absolute fairy-tale, completely moonlit'.<sup>4</sup> Psychologists, including Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung, have analysed fairy tales in order to understand the human mind. Yet *Rusalka*, as a fin-de-siècle fairy-tale opera, has hardly been discussed in psychological terms. One of the rare examples of the psychological interpretation of *Rusalka* is by Dr Ludwig Haesler, which has not been translated into English. Because it is in Czech, a language that is not widely spoken, for the majority of the Anglo-American scholars his valuable interpretation remains virtually unknown. While there are secondary sources that summarise Haesler's interpretation, the analysis still remains untranslated.

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<sup>3</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 41

<sup>4</sup> Marketa Hallová, 'Rusalka and its Librettist, Jaroslav Kvapil: Some New Discoveries', in *Rethinking Dvořák: Views from Five Countries*, edited by David R. Beveridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 109

In addition to this, psychological readings of opera tend to concentrate on Austrian/German composers, especially Richard Wagner and his followers. Wagner's musical influence is obvious in Dvořák's *Rusalka*, especially in terms of the use of leitmotifs and harmonic technique. Given that *Rusalka* is a fin-de-siècle fairy tale, influenced by Wagner and written at a time that witnessed the birth of psychology, this opera thus seems almost to beg to be read in psychological terms. For these reasons, our understanding of *Rusalka* would benefit from a psychological approach. Using psychology as one of the several tools in order to understand the nature of *Rusalka*, this thesis will offer a new understanding of the opera and its protagonist.

My interpretation of *Rusalka* will illustrate in many ways how *Rusalka* expresses her nature, how she communicates this, and how it affects us as readers/listeners/spectators. In order to do this, I will turn to Freud's topographical model of the psyche, in which the narrative will be set, thus placing the story inside *Rusalka*'s mind and seeing the story through her eyes/mind. For the analysis of the music, I will connect textual and musical repetition with the understanding of the connection between repetition, desire, and the death drive, as articulated by Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl. Through the union of these concepts I will explain *Rusalka*'s desire and suffering—her failure to fulfil her desire, which causes her to suffer. Further, I consider that desire and suffering in fact infuse the experience of the listeners'/spectators': that is, that the character of *Rusalka* triggers their own experience of desire, as well as a particular reaction to the protagonist's suffering. In order to explain the experience of the listener/spectator, I will turn to three concepts: the cry and *jouissance*, both elaborated by Michel Poizat, and the gaze, drawing on both early and modern psychology. Combining these different concepts will show how: 1) *Rusalka*'s desire and suffering, which are one of the key aspects of her complex nature, are manifested in all of the opera's layers; and 2) how certain moments in the opera, through *Rusalka*'s perspective, create a connection between the protagonist and readers/listeners/spectators and how they affect us. I will elaborate the given concepts above in this chapter, providing background information for the analysis.

## 1.2 Dvořák, *Rusalka* and Nationalism

Summarising the connection between opera and national identity, William A. Everett draws attention to a phenomenon that finally culminated in the nineteenth century in the era of Romantic nationalism:

Opera and national identity come face to face in the realm of national opera, a construct that encompasses a complex web of issues including ethnicity, nation-hood, language, politics, and music.<sup>5</sup>

Due to European politics of the nineteenth century, operas of some composers were often regarded as nationalistic manifestos. Such is the case with many Czech operas of the period which, as Alexandr Stich points out, were considered a ‘political issue par excellence’.<sup>6</sup> If what Stich states is true, what are the implications for Dvořák’s *Rusalka*?

*Rusalka* is a water fairy—a cousin of sirens, mermaids and loreleis. In the nineteenth century, there was a strong association between sirens and nationalism. The appearance of the loreleis in German literature coincides with the rise of nationalism; the siren on the coat of arms of Warsaw symbolises Polish nationalism.<sup>7</sup> In regards to this, there is a possibility that the audience at the time would see *Rusalka* as a Czech water nymph, set to destroy the Habsburg Empire. This nationalistic layer of the opera no longer resonates with us today. However, we have to remember what Stich says about the way in which many Czech operas were perceived at the time. In fact, there is a high chance that the issue of nationalism played an important role in slowing down the progress of *Rusalka*’s international success on the stage, and with it its scholarly and critical responses.

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<sup>5</sup> William A. Everett, ‘Opera and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Croatian and Czech Lands / Opera i Nacionalni Identitet u 19. Stotljeću u Hrvatskim i češkim Zemljama’, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* Vol. 35, No. 1 (Jun.,2004), 63

<sup>6</sup> Alexandr Stich, ‘Kvapilova *Rusalka* Jako Jazykový, Slohový a Literární Fenomen’, *Estetika* 29 (1992), 11

<sup>7</sup> Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya, ‘Introduction: Singing Each to Each’, in *Music of the Sirens*, edited by Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006),

### 1.2.1 *Rusalka*, Mahler and Politics

In 1901, *Rusalka* was premiered in Prague. The premiere was successful, despite a few negative critiques, mostly regarding Kvapil's libretto. Shortly after its premiere Gustav Mahler, then the music director of the Vienna Hofoper, had wanted to have a premiere of *Rusalka* in Vienna.<sup>8</sup> After many rehearsals and some delay, it was supposed to be performed in 1902. Unfortunately, due to some production issues, the Viennese premiere of *Rusalka* was postponed until the next season, only to be postponed again.<sup>9</sup> Mahler had everything prepared for *Rusalka* to be premiered in Vienna: he read the libretto and began to learn the work; a German translation was provided; there were many rehearsals.<sup>10</sup> When Dvořák passed away in 1904, his widow Anna and his student Oskar Nedbal contacted Mahler in order to discuss *Rusalka*'s premiere in Vienna.<sup>11</sup> According to Dvořáková and Nedbal, Mahler gave two reasons as to why the opera would not be performed under his baton: 1) He did not believe in the success of *Rusalka*; and 2) Mahler wanted to avoid any chauvinistic attacks.<sup>12</sup> In order to understand the last comment, it is crucial briefly to review the politically charged atmosphere in Vienna, as witnessed by Mahler himself. When Mahler first came to the Hofoper in 1897, the first opera to be premiered was Smetana's *Dalibor*. *Dalibor* was considered a typical Czech nationalist opera by German nationalists in the Empire. One month after the premiere, there were anti-Czech protests in Vienna. It was during these protests that Mahler received an anonymous letter which condemned his choice to stage *Dalibor* in Vienna, an opera by an 'anti-dynastic, inferior Czech'.<sup>13</sup> As someone who was not German himself, but a Jew from Bohemia, it is easy to understand why Mahler had to be extra cautious at the time and had reason to be wary of being seen to provoke further discord.

If Mahler knew he had to be extra cautious with Czech works in Vienna, why did he want to set up the premiere there in the first place? Mahler often performed works by Slavic composers and as

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<sup>8</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 56

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 56-7

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 56

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 57

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 57

<sup>13</sup> 'So *Dalibor* is back in the repertoire! - So you insist on fraternising with the anti-dynastic, inferior Czech nation which has been carrying out acts of violence against the German and Austrian states. Such self-humiliation defies comprehension!', Ibid, 58

Cheek observes, he was their avid supporter.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, we can see why he wanted to perform *Rusalka* in the capital. However, soon after he received the German translation of the libretto, Mahler changed his mind about the opera's success. Mahler never removed the opera from his programme - he only kept postponing *Rusalka's* Viennese premiere, until Dvořák's widow requested that everything be returned. Therefore, based on these facts and in addition to what Mahler said to Nedbal and Dvořáková we could conclude that: 1) Mahler liked *Rusalka* but feared that the opera would not be accepted by the Viennese audience; and 2) he kept delaying the opera's premiere in hope that better days would come for the work to be performed in Vienna.

In this context, we can see that Czech operas at the time were understood by Austro-German nationalists as nationalistic manifestos. Smetana's *Bartered Bride* was one of the rare examples of Czech operas to be accepted by a Viennese audience, possibly because it was a comic opera about Czech villagers, and therefore not seen as a threat to Austro-German cultural hegemony.<sup>15</sup> In the context of the general attitude towards Czech operas and the culmination political tension, Cheek suggests that it is possible that Mahler saw a nationalistic layer in *Rusalka*.<sup>16</sup> *Rusalka*, a 'Czech', wants to be with the Prince, who represents the Empire; her Czech father, Vodník, warns her against the union, claiming that it is unnatural and it will end in ruins. When her father's words become reality, *Rusalka's* future is ruined (as she cannot live among the 'Czechs' anymore) and she ends up giving the Prince the kiss of death.<sup>17</sup> Cheek suggests that this interpretation of the opera lies behind Mahler's thought that the opera would not be a success in Vienna.<sup>18</sup>

Because of these political tensions and Mahler's unfortunate decision, *Rusalka's* passage to international waters was blocked for some time. Its acceptance outside of Czech lands progressed slowly over the course of the twentieth century. Vienna, of course, was the capital of the Empire—an operatic success there would pave the way to international acclaim; conversely, any opera written, especially those by a Slav, would have to go through German doors—more precisely, through the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 55

<sup>15</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 58

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 59

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 59

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 59

doors of Vienna, in order to receive recognition outside the Habsburg Empire.<sup>19</sup> Finally, eight years later (in 1910) it was performed in Vienna, in a production by a Czech group called Brno Company.<sup>20</sup> Even though the opera did not enjoy a success in Vienna at the time, it was again performed in 1924, this time it was more warmly received by the audience.

From its premiere in 1901, *Rusalka* has been performed every year at the Prague National Theatre. Additionally, two opera films were released in 1962 and 1975. To the Czechs, *Rusalka* is a fairy tale, as it was described by the librettist and critics, such as Karel Knittl, at the time of its premiere.<sup>21</sup> For nearly four decades after the Second World War, *Rusalka* remained predominantly behind the Iron Curtain, with exceptions: productions of the opera were organised mostly by Czech immigrants and Czech companies in North-West Europe and in the United States. It was in the 1980s that *Rusalka* finally started to get more acclaim outside of Czechoslovakia, as evidenced by two productions in particular: in 1981, a Munich production by Otto Schenk, and David Pountney's ground-breaking production at the English National Opera in 1983, which I will examine in Chapter 5.

Therefore, Mahler's decision not to perform *Rusalka* affected the opera's path to international success: the political situation at the turn of the century did not 'allow' Mahler to help the opera achieve the success it has today. Around the time of *Rusalka*'s premiere in 1901, the issue of nationalism culminated in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in which many nationalistic movements, including Czech and Austro-German, were at their peak, and were essentially threatening the power of the central government that the Empire represented. The rise of pan-Slavism threatened to end Austro-German hegemony. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, a whirlpool of different ethnic groups, stood in the centre of Europe. With the rise of nationalism amongst the Slavs, which crushed the neighbouring Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire feared a similar fate. The nationalism of different Slavic groups in and outside the Austro-Hungarian Empire played an important role in 1914 as it was one of the issues that caused the First World War.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 54

<sup>20</sup> John Clapham, *Antonin Dvorak: Musician and Craftsman* (London: Faber, 1966), 286

<sup>21</sup> Karel Knittl, 'Opera', in *Dvořák and His World*, translated by Tatiana Firkušný, edited by Michael Beckerman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 256

### 1.2.2 Dvořák in Vienna

In the world of music, according to Brahms's biographer and critic Max Kalbeck, the late nineteenth-century was the era when 'music became mixed up in politics'.<sup>22</sup> At the time in Vienna, and in the German parts of the Habsburg Empire, it appears that Wagner's question of 'was ist Deutsch?' was a main criterion used to decide whether music was worth listening to or not.<sup>23</sup> With the rise of German nationalism, any other nationalism in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was seen as both a threat and as conveying the appeal of the exotic. In order to succeed in Vienna, the capital and the cultural centre of the Empire, the 'threatening' element would have to be removed from music. Brahms, an influential figure in Vienna who helped Dvořák, preferred his *Slavonic Dances* and *Moravian Duets*, works that had the 'exotic' element, over those that were composed in a German style.<sup>24</sup> Dvořák's 'Czech' pieces were successful in all the major cities, such as Berlin (where it offered an 'exotic thrill'), Budapest, London and New York, but not in Vienna.<sup>25</sup> The reason why it was not warmly received in Vienna, in the same way that Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* were, is that Dvořák's 'exoticism' was not the same as that of Brahms. Brahms was a German who incorporated these non-German folk music elements, making it exotic, thus it was acceptable to the Viennese audience. Dvořák, on the other hand, was a Czech from Bohemia, a territory that was a thorn in the Austrian flesh. His 'exoticism' was not in any way considered the same as Brahms's - it represented a threat to the Austro-German culture and its music. Many critics at the time acknowledged this fact. Ludwig Speidel, who reviewed Dvořák's Rhapsody for *Neue Freie Presse* wrote that:

The Slavic folk school is not loved in Vienna; when faced with it the Viennese feels himself to be decidedly German. A rhapsody that is written by a Czech and proclaims itself Slavic will encounter a quiet opposition in Vienna.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David Brodbeck, 'Dvořák's Reception in Liberal Vienna: Language Ordinances, National Property, and the Rhetoric of Deutschtum', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 71

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 72

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 76

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 77

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 81

Dvořák was accused by Speidel of being too political, and Speidel suggested that he should not have presented a musical piece before the Viennese audience with the word 'Slavic' in the title. Eduard Hanslick, one of Dvořák's supporters in Vienna, addressed and criticised allegations that Dvořák had connections with the Czech National Party and rejected the claims that the composer's works were political.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.2.3 Nationalism, Symphonies and Operas

The issue of nationalism echoed well into the twentieth century. Richard Taruskin, as one of the leading figures on nationalism in music, states that Dvořák's ethnicity was a barrier in the composer's acceptance by Anglo-American scholars as one of the greatest.<sup>28</sup> After the Second World War, another political issue - communism - prolonged the animosity towards Dvořák who was, as Taruskin puts it, a 'peripheral' composer.<sup>29</sup> Germans who emigrated to America, such as musicologist Alfred Einstein, brought German views on Czechs and their opera with them, which affected American scholarship.<sup>30</sup>

Along with nationalism, another assumption affected scholarship on Dvořák's operas, which was the view that he was a symphonic/instrumental composer. This view has been present from the outset, with even Dvořák reflecting on it towards the end of his life.<sup>31</sup> Some scholars have addressed the issue. For example, in 1952 Otakar Šourek wrote:

People are accustomed to regard Dvořák's operatic works as something of secondary importance which only supplement his symphonic work, chamber music and oratorios without attaining their level of quality and importance.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 82

<sup>28</sup> Richard Taruskin, 'Nationalism' In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/50846>> (15 March 2013)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid (15 March 2013)

<sup>30</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 64

<sup>31</sup> 'People see in me only a writer of symphonies, but for many years I have demonstrated my liking for dramatic composition', in Otakar Šourek, *Antonín Dvořák: His Life and Works* (Prague: Orbis, 1952), 95

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 95

Jan Smaczny discusses the same issue in his essay on Dvořák and his operas. Smaczny provides material from nineteenth-century Czech critics, dating back to 1879, in which they emphasise the fact that Dvořák was primarily perceived as an instrumental composer.<sup>33</sup> David Beveridge observes that for the majority of the twentieth century, Dvořák's opera have generally been ignored.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, any writing on Dvořák's operas in German and Anglo-American scholarship was almost non-existent until the very last two decades of the previous century.

Thus in relation to both the performance history and critical reception, the issue of nationalism certainly affected *Rusalka*'s path from the time of its premiere to today. However, my own reading of *Rusalka* will not discuss the opera in these terms. While the issue of nationalism and its connection to *Rusalka* are important, any nationalistic messages that would have been obvious to people at the time of the opera's premiere no longer resonate with us. My research will instead focus on an issue that was relevant at the end of the nineteenth century and still is: women's rights. Even in Europe, where the situation has improved drastically since the fin-de-siècle era, women still fight discrimination to this day. An overview of feminism and opposition to it at the turn of the century will help us understand: 1) the final decades before women got their rights in the territories of former Austro-Hungarian Empire, in which this dialogue culminated; 2) our situation today; 3) the feminist reading of operas from this historical era; and, most importantly for this thesis, 4) *Rusalka*'s situation and her silence.

### 1.3 *Rusalka* and Feminism

As mentioned above, the women's rights movement saw its rise at the same time as the rise of nationalism. It was during this era that the Empire saw 'first wave' feminism. While discussing the rise of the Austro-German supremacism and the culture behind it, Lawrence Kramer points out that

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<sup>33</sup> Jan Smaczny 'Dvořák: The Operas', in *Dvořák and His World*, edited by Michael Beckerman (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1993), 104

<sup>34</sup> David Beveridge, 'Introduction', in *Rethinking Dvořák: Views from Five Countries*, edited by David R. Beveridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 4

the supremacist culture is a ‘culture of panic.’<sup>35</sup> Unlike the rise of Czech and German nationalism, which caused the clash between the two ethnic groups, women’s rights affected all ethnicities. The intention here is not to compare Czech nationalism and women’s rights as the two movements affected by German male dominance, nor to posit the question of Kvapil and Dvořák’s attitude towards women’s rights. Rather, this issue is important for our understanding of the protagonist and her striking silence - the silent exterior under which she suffers and desires and also the spectator’s desire to watch Rusalka suffer.

### 1.3.1 Women and Weininger

The issue of women’s emancipation did not bypass the Habsburg Empire. Women in the Empire argued for their inclusion into the public spheres, entry into the male professions, political rights and an improvement in their education.<sup>36</sup> In 1903, Otto Weininger, a well-known Austrian misogynist who promoted a serious case of gynophobia, published *Geschlecht und Charakter (Sex and Character)*, which in the words of Lawrence Kramer became an influential ‘misogynist manifesto’ in Europe and in the United States.<sup>37</sup> Kramer quotes Weininger, who states that women ‘are purely material beings, mindless, sensuous, animalistic and amoral; lacking individuality, they act only at the behest of a “universalised, generalised, impersonal” sexual instinct’.<sup>38</sup> Weininger sees women as a ‘complete nonentity’.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, as Agatha Schwartz observes, Weininger wants women to ‘be kept from having a share in anything that concerns the public welfare, as it is much to be feared that the mere effect of female influence would be harmful.’<sup>40</sup>

Weininger also believes in the old Madonna-whore dichotomy. To summarise his claims in the simplest terms, Weininger suggests that feminists fit in the latter category, as they were often

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<sup>35</sup> Lawrence Kramer, ‘Fin-de-siècle fantasies: *Elektra*, degeneration and sexual science’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Jul., 1993), 150

<sup>36</sup> Agatha Schwartz, ‘Austrian Fin-de-Siècle Heteroglossia: the Dialogism in Misogyny, Feminism and Viriphobia’, *German Studies Review* 28/2 (2005) 348

<sup>37</sup> Lawrence Kramer, ‘Fin-de-siècle fantasies’, 141

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 141

<sup>39</sup> Katherine Chandler, ‘The Ritual Sacrifice of Women: Misogyny and Art in *Fin-de-Siècle* Vienna’, *Concept* Vol. XXXIV (2011)

<sup>40</sup> Schwartz, ‘Austrian Fin-de-Siècle Heteroglossia’, 355

described by misogynists at the time.<sup>41</sup> According to him, they (the feminists) have ‘merely a desire to be "free" to shake off the trammels of motherhood; as a whole the practical results show that it is revolt from motherhood towards prostitution’.<sup>42</sup>

The writings of Weininger summarise a perspective on women that developed in the nineteenth century that echoed into the twentieth century. This attitude towards women was evident in various ways across the arts.<sup>43</sup> Agatha Schwartz observes that ‘women had been used as ‘projection surfaces’ for the male imagination in literature and art’.<sup>44</sup>

### 1.3.2 Feminism and Musicology

The issue of gender and the role of women in opera were finally addressed in the 1980s and 1990s and have been developed since then. Feminist scholars raise various questions, including questions about the relationship of operas to the cultures in which they were written. One of the first to address the issue of gender and culture was Catherine Clément, who wrote a book in 1979 entitled *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Clément discusses opera in relation to its historical and social context and focuses on the text—in her words ‘the forgotten part of opera’.<sup>45</sup> Clément analyses the horror that lies in the libretto, the tragic fate of women in the opera, and the social order that requires their death or submission. Other scholars soon built on this feminist approach. Susan McClary analyses the construction of gender and sexuality in music in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*. In her ground-breaking book, McClary discusses: 1) ‘musical constructions of gender and sexuality’; 2) ‘gendered aspects of traditional music theory’; 3) ‘gender and sexuality in musical narrative’; 4) ‘music as a gendered discourse’ and 5) ‘discursive strategies of women musicians’.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Chandler, ‘The Ritual Sacrifice of Women’, 3

<sup>42</sup> Schwartz, ‘Austrian Fin-de-Siècle Heteroglossia’, 352

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 347

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 347

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Clément, *Opera, Or the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing (London: Virago Press Limited, 1989), 12

<sup>46</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*, *Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 7-18

While the contribution of both Clément and McClary to the feminist discourse in operatic criticism is invaluable, their analysis attracted criticism. Many scholars point out that Clément's discussion is predominantly limited to operatic plots. In *Unsung Voices*, Carolyn Abbate, one of the leading scholars in operatic criticism, reflects on Paul Robinson's critique of Clément, pointing out that she neglects the singer's voice.<sup>47</sup> Robinson observes (and Abbate agrees) that the voice of the female singer is unconquerable, triumphant—'this undefeated voice speaks across the crushing plot'.<sup>48</sup> The writings of Clément, McClary and Abbate influenced feminist operatic criticism. The criticism has also been enriched by the contribution of Marcia Citron, Suzanne Cusick, Ruth A. Solie, Mary Ann Smart and many others.<sup>49</sup>

The historical circumstances are necessary for our understanding of fin-de-siècle culture, especially since *Rusalka* is a product of that culture. While all the given feminist perspectives are interesting and persuasive, I will connect *Rusalka* with only a few select feminist approaches in my analysis, such as her communication through music while mute and also her empowerment in all of the opera's facets and through voice. Clément's discussion in *Opera, Or the Undoing of Women* will be loosely applied to my analysis of the narrative in the following chapter. Her view on women in the opera will help us understand *Rusalka*, especially during her mute stage when she transforms into a human.

### 1.3.3 *Rusalka*'s Silence

As mentioned above, the silence of the protagonist (and by extension, her fate), posits a question about what it means to be a woman. *Rusalka* is not the first mute operatic character: Weber's *Silvana* is silenced for most of the opera that bears her name (and regains her voice in the end); Auber's

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<sup>47</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), ix

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, ix

<sup>49</sup> See *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (edited by Ruth A. Solie); Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Cannon* and 'Feminist Approaches to Musicology' in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, ed. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou; Suzanne Cusick, 'Gendering Modern Music: Thoughts on the Monteverdi-Artusi Controversy'; Mary Ann Smart, 'The Silencing of Lucia' and as an editor *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*

Fenella in *La Muette de Portici* is also mute. The latter opera and its protagonist Fenella, a role designed for a ballerina rather than an opera singer, has been discussed recently by both Smart and Mary Simonson.<sup>50</sup> Fenella, unlike Rusalka, is mute throughout the opera. Through her gestures Fenella narrates her story. However, Rusalka, unlike Fenella, is denied not only the power of speech, but also of the ability to communicate in any form to humans, including the Prince. By contrast with Fenella, Rusalka does not dance, that is, she does not have dance music. Dvořák does not give this kind of music to aquatic creatures such as Rusalka. With the Polonaise, the dance scene in the opera, he depicts Rusalka's alienation from the human world. While both Rusalka and Fenella have their voice taken away from them, Dvořák and Auber give their heroines a voice through music.

#### 1.4 *Rusalka* Research

In light of the limited nature of the opera's reception internationally, it should be no surprise that scholars have been slow to offer any kind of detailed research on *Rusalka*. John Clapham, an English musicologist, started properly to discuss Dvořák's operas in the late 1950s. In his discussion on *Rusalka*, Clapham talks about the obvious influence of Wagner in this opera, such as the use of leitmotifs, which in his view underlines most of the opera. He discusses the transformation of motifs, such as the one commonly associated with Rusalka, which, in his observation, reflects the protagonist's changes of moods, rather than her physical metamorphosis.<sup>51</sup> Clapham names the motifs and connects them with either the characters, such as Rusalka, the Prince and Ježibaba or with the tragedy of Rusalka, such as the four-note motif.<sup>52</sup> Although Clapham made a significant step in the *Rusalka* criticism, the step was small as it did not venture far enough - he remained for some time the only one with a keen interest in the composer's operatic legacy. It was not until the early eighties that the opera started to be discussed more by both European and American scholars.

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<sup>50</sup> See Smart's *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* and Simonson's *Body Knowledge: Performance, Intermediality, and American Entertainment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*

<sup>51</sup> Clapham, 'The Operas of Antonín Dvořák', 66-7

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 66-7

#### 1.4.1 *Rusalka*, Nationalism and Flaws

Marketa Hallová points to the interpretation of M. Schlumpf, who suggests that *Rusalka* is an allegory for the national awakening of Slavic minorities which resulted in the eventual disintegration of the Habsburg Empire.<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey Chew also suggests a similar allegory in which the fragile, endangered Rusalka personifies Czech culture facing modernism in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>54</sup> Along with these interpretations, Jarmila Gabrielová in her article 'Dvořáks und Kvapils Rusalka und das Lebensgefühl des fin de siècle' mentions Karl Heinrich Wörner's interpretation of Rusalka the character as the representation of an 'Eastern' soul, the typical Slavic, submissive and passive, a tortured and suffering female form, with the typical "Eastern" view of the ruthless and mysterious power of nature and the Fate.<sup>55</sup>

The connection between nationalism and the fact that *Rusalka* is a fairy tale was also mentioned in 1975 by Hans W. Heinsheimer, who states:

Only a few of Dvořák's operas made the perilous voyage across the frontier, and never with any lasting luck. Their stories were too unappealing if not incomprehensible to audiences not familiar or in natural sympathy with their background, their characters, their spirit and language...Dvořák's operas resist transplanting.<sup>56</sup>

The assumption that *Rusalka*, in particular, was too nationalistic and too Czech to appeal to international audiences affected the attitude of people in North-West Europe and in the United States towards the opera. Cheek summarises this attitude perfectly: 'since the Czechs like the opera so much, it must have special qualities that only native Czechs can appreciate; it must be so nationalistic that it cannot be understood outside its own country'.<sup>57</sup>

Along with this attitude came other assumptions about *Rusalka*. Because it took some time for the work to be known outside the Czech lands, people in the non-Czech parts of the world also

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<sup>53</sup> Hallová, 'Rusalka and its Librettist, Jaroslav Kvapil: Some New Discoveries', 111

<sup>54</sup> Geoffrey Chew, 'The Rusalka as an Endangered Species: Modernist Aspects and Intertexts of Kvapil's and Dvořák's *Rusalka*', *Hudební věda* 40, no. 4 (2003), 379

<sup>55</sup> Jarmila Gabrielová, 'Dvořáks und Kvapils *Rusalka* und das Lebensgefühl des fin de siècle', in *Aspekte der Musik, Kunst und Religion zur Zeit der Tschechischen Moderne*, edited by Aleš Březina and Eva Velická (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 67

<sup>56</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 62

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 62

assumed that the opera must be flawed. Either the libretto or music was bad, or the work was ‘too lyrical’.<sup>58</sup>

If the opera was ‘too nationalistic’ and ‘too Czech’ outside the Czech borders, inside those borders, *Rusalka* was considered by some to be too German or not Czech enough. This view was emphasised by Zdeněk Nejedlý, who criticised *Rusalka* at the time of its premiere, while only reluctantly admiring its orchestration.<sup>59</sup> Chew summarises Nejedlý’s negative review—to him *Rusalka* is ‘insufficiently Wagnerian, insufficiently Czech, undramatic and unmodern’.<sup>60</sup> The issue of nationalism in the Habsburg Empire and Nejedlý’s opinion lead to an interesting parallel between the reception of the opera and its protagonist, as they are both caught up between two worlds - Czech/German or human/natural. In the eyes of some of their observers, neither of them completely belong to either of the worlds, which leaves them destined to wander, trying to be understood.

#### 1.4.2 *Rusalka* in the 1980s

The ‘recovery’ of *Rusalka* happened due to the efforts made by European musicologists, and the work subsequently became of interest to musicologists across the Atlantic also. This critical recovery coincides with the opera’s long-awaited international recognition and success in the 1980s. The opera had to go through German doors in order to be accepted and researched elsewhere. Jürgen Schläder published an article in 1981, in which he discussed two alternatives in interpreting/staging of *Rusalka*, either as a fairy tale or a symbolist drama.<sup>61</sup>

This relatively new interest led to many interesting approaches to *Rusalka*, which has shown itself to be richly responsive to a range of approaches. One of these aspects is nature, which is essential to *Rusalka*, since most of the opera is set in the natural world. Alena Vašubová stresses that

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 60

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 63

<sup>60</sup> Chew, ‘The *Rusalka* as an Endangered Species’, 372

<sup>61</sup> Jürgen Schläder, ‘Märchenoper oder symbolistisches Musikdrama? Zum Interpretationsrahmen der Titelrolle in Dvořáks „*Rusalka*“’ *Die Musikforschung* 34. Jahrg., H. 1 (Januar–März 1981), 27

Rusalka is ‘musically conceived as a drama of nature and its elements’.<sup>62</sup> Jiří Bělohlávek, a Czech conductor writes:

Two worlds, the natural and the human, exist from the ages beside one another; one is not better and the other worse, each is just different. Therefore they are mutually contradictory, and each offense of certain laws is punished.<sup>63</sup>

Scholars such as Clapham, Smaczny and Viktor Fischl, have focused on researching the background of the opera, discussing the collaboration between Kvapil and Dvořák, and the work’s influences and inspiration. The usual discourse is centred on various stories that influenced Kvapil, such as Andersen’s *Little Mermaid*, La Motte Fouqué’s *Undine* and Erben’s Czech folk stories and how his story fits with all the other stories on water nymphs. In contrast to this discourse, Alexandr Stich focuses solely on the libretto, as he analyses its unique literary aspects, such as the use of repetition, interconnections, and homophones, amongst many others.

#### 1.4.3 The Music

Discussion of the music typically emphasises Dvořák’s use of leitmotifs—in other words, Wagner’s influence on the composer. Clapham, as discussed above, talks about the Wagnerian musical construction of *Rusalka*. Although Wagner’s influence is obvious in the opera, many scholars, such as David Beveridge, Jarmila Gabrielová and even Clapham have acknowledged a sense of ambiguity when it comes to the meaning of the motifs. Beveridge and Michael Beckerman also analyse various motifs and a particular harmonic progression in *Rusalka*. While this kind of research is unquestionably valuable, it is ultimately quite limited because the authors seem to repeat each other, hardly providing any significantly new information or interpretations of the work.

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<sup>62</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 44

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 45

#### 1.4.4 The Underlying Themes

Scholars, such as Fischl, emphasise the underlying themes in *Rusalka*, such as the central character's metamorphosis to womanhood. Similarly, Brett Cooke focuses on Rusalka's sexual constraint in a highly patriarchal world, while discussing the symbolism in Kvapil's libretto (in which the moon is the ancient symbol of sexuality) and the setting (water, forest and swamp). And Gabrielová, as one of the main Czech authorities on Dvořák in general, approaches *Rusalka* as an opera about woman's emancipation, which is presented as a painful path to complete freedom as a human being. Gabrielová focuses solely on the heroine and the last act in the opera, discussing the connection between the libretto and the music (especially in Rusalka's aria 'Oh the horror!') and the drama that connects the two elements. In 'Rusalka aneb Marnost Pozemské Lásky' ('Rusalka, or the Vanity of Earthly Love'), Haesler looks at the structure of the plot, the dramatic and musical development of characters.

#### 1.4.5 Psychological Approach

As mentioned above, some psychological analysis has also been undertaken. Haesler, for instance, offers a rare example, seeing *Rusalka* as:

an allegory expressing the problems of a person who cannot successfully separate from a primordial, mother-defined infancy and become a mature individual, in this case because of the inability to speak and communicate repressed feelings.<sup>64</sup>

Hallová also briefly points towards a psychological interpretation of the opera. In her essay on Kvapil's libretto, Hallová mentions the presence of a 'psychological essence' in *Rusalka*.<sup>65</sup> She also mentions the fact that the productions of *Rusalka*, such as David Pountney's 1983 production at the English National Opera, emphasise Rusalka's psychological level. However, Hallová does not expand on this: she merely mentions these psychological elements along with many others.

The connection between psychology and *Rusalka* is more emphasised in contemporary Central and Northern European productions, since they often give the opera a psychological

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<sup>64</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 48

<sup>65</sup> Hallová, 'Rusalka and its Librettist, Jaroslav Kvapil', 110

(Freudian/Jungian) framework. The psychoanalytical approach in opera productions is quite common in Central and Northern Europe, as they are trying to explore various settings, offer different interpretations of operas and step away from a more traditional approach. Although some of the productions can be quite extreme in their retelling of the story, they all seem to have one element in common: to convey and emphasise Rusalka's psychological trauma, which a psychological reading of the libretto inevitably points towards.

#### 1.4.6 Interpreting Rusalka's Silence

The various approaches to *Rusalka* are interesting and persuasive if one looks closely at the story and the development of the protagonist. However, scholars hardly discuss Rusalka's silence, either in terms of her voice or the staging of the opera. And yet her silence is possibly the most significant element in the opera. She loses her voice, one of the most important layers in the opera and the key to an operatic character's quest for meaning and communication with the audience.

Scholars who do address Rusalka's silence suggest that the orchestra represents mute Rusalka. While the idea is interesting, the fact that the protagonist is *silenced*—a high price she has to pay so that she could become human—is more than what some scholars suggest; it is more than orchestral representation. The orchestra has a complex relationship with Rusalka while she is mute - it expresses her unconscious desires and it helps her communicate with the listeners, yet at the same time it silences her with diegetic music. We have to remember also that the silenced character is a female - Rusalka is silenced in order to be able to function in the patriarchal world. Yet she discovers that even silenced she does not belong there.

#### 1.5 Psychological Concepts

With my research on *Rusalka*, I will expand on the ongoing research on the opera, using certain concepts from psychology. By taking these terms to analyse not just the libretto, but also the music, the voice and specific productions can provide new frameworks for interpreting Rusalka's behaviour.

Using theories from the field of psychology could provide a model for interpreting Rusalka's desire and suffering in ways that reveal the protagonist's nature. Psychological concepts could also explain the eternal conflict that is Rusalka's tragic fate, as she remains caught up between two worlds. With concepts from psychology, all of its layers—the libretto/the narrative, the music, the voice and the staging will be explored.

My readings of the opera will draw on a range of historical perspectives. Some aspects of a psychological reading, in relation to the ideas formulated by Freud, play on aspects of *Rusalka* that stem from the time of its inception. Concepts laid out by Jacques Lacan, Michel Poizat, Slavoj Žižek, and other Lacanian commentators, on the other hand, offer a current perspective. Their ideas have been successfully applied to other operas and could be beneficial for the analysis of *Rusalka*.<sup>66</sup> Certain concepts from Lacan and his followers could effectively explain *Rusalka*'s many facets and more importantly desire and suffering by focusing on certain elements in the opera such as silence, repetition, the cry, *jouissance* and the gaze.

### 1.5.1 Overview of the Analysis

My second chapter will focus on an analysis of the libretto, which will be divided into two sections: one will focus on the overall narrative interpretation, and the other on repetition, as a key feature of the text. The issue of repetition is crucial, as a technique that creates a central point of connection between the libretto and the music. Repetition is also an important concept in psychology, and connected specifically to trauma, especially in early psychology. However, I will connect repetition with modern psychology, which unites repetition, desire and the death drive, in order to explain Rusalka's desire and suffering. In Chapter Four, I discuss the vocal cry, which becomes central in consideration of both the music and of a variety of opera productions. Finally, in Chapter Five, I turn my consideration to the opera in production, which brings in another crucial element to our consideration of the opera: the notion of the gaze. In my conclusion, I bring all these concepts

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<sup>66</sup> See Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar's *Opera's Second Death* and Michel Poizat's *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*.

together and explain their significance in our understanding of *Rusalka/Rusalka* and our relationship that we develop with the protagonist.

### 1.5.2 Freud's Model of the Psyche

I apply Freud's model of the psyche to narrative because Kvapil's setting specifically offers an analogy with Freud's model of the psyche, known as the iceberg model: *Rusalka* moves from the edge of the lake to the actual surface where humans live and then to the depths of the lake. With this setting, it feels as if the story of *Rusalka* evokes the iceberg model that is used in Freudian psychology, as she moves through different realms of the human mind. In the iceberg model, the unconscious part of the mind is represented by the part of the iceberg that is under water, whereas the conscious mind is the iceberg part above the surface. Seeing the setting of *Rusalka* in these terms suggests a somewhat different interpretation of the narrative. Considering that this opera is the story of *Rusalka* and having in mind the 'iceberg' setting, my analysis of the narrative posits the idea that the story actually takes place in *Rusalka*'s mind, with all the characters as elements of *Rusalka*'s mind rather than independent identities.<sup>67</sup> This psychological interpretation actually connects with some of the previous research on *Rusalka*, such as those that focus on metamorphosis to womanhood (Fischl) and sexual constraint (Cooke).

Freud divides the human psyche into three states: the Id, the Ego and the Super-Ego. Whereas the parts of the Super-Ego and the Ego are above the surface so to speak, the Id, as an entity, is in the unconscious, completely below the surface. The Id is the impulsive part of the psyche and it seeks to react immediately, controlled by the drives named Eros and Thanatos (Freud actually uses *Lebenstriebe* for the former and *Todestriebe* for the latter). According to Freud, Eros combines all of the self-preservation instincts, such as hunger, thirst, the impulses of the ego and species preservation drive, which is the sex drive. Thanatos, or the death drive, is all about self-destruction, aggression and destruction in general.

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<sup>67</sup> David Pountney's production at the English National Opera in 1983 deals with this idea. See p. 101 for more information

The easiest way to explain the Ego lies in two words: common sense.<sup>68</sup> Although it is ruled by reason (unlike the Id), Freud suggests that the Ego is not completely separated from the Id because the below-the-surface portion merges into the Id.<sup>69</sup> He also states that the Ego, because of its position, absorbs influences from the external world, because of its above-the-surface portion.<sup>70</sup> The Ego then, bears the external influence upon the Id and its tendencies.<sup>71</sup> With the external influence and reason, which reins over the Ego, the Ego tries to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle.<sup>72</sup> Freud uses an interesting metaphor to describe the relationship between the Id and the Ego - a man on horseback, in which the man must use reason and control 'the superior strength of the horse'.<sup>73</sup>

The Super-Ego is an entity in the human mind where the 'essential personal traits', inherited from parents, are situated.<sup>74</sup> Its main role is to prevent and prohibit the Id and its tendencies, in order words, to control the impulsive Id. The drives in the Id, mostly its sexual and aggressive tendencies, do not comply with social mores. Therefore, the Super-Ego suppresses these tendencies so that they cannot reach the conscious—they must remain below the surface, in the unconscious. Because of their different natures and contrasting functions, conflicts often arise between the Id, the Ego and the Super-Ego.

### 1.5.3 Repetition

Repetition is an important aspect in both the libretto and music, which in my view is also used to illustrate Rusalka's desire and suffering. In the text, the repetition of certain verbs, words and word units on the behalf of Rusalka emphasise her desire and suffering - this is especially evident in her use of vocatives and imperatives, which are used for direct address. With them, Rusalka expresses her

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<sup>68</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and The Id*, translated by Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1947), 15

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>74</sup> Philippe Julien, *Jacques Lacan Return to Freud*, translated by Devra Beck Simiu (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 22

desires. However, since she achieves nothing with their use, as she becomes silenced and later on cursed, they also depict her suffering. In music, repetition of certain musical motifs depicts Rusalka's desire and suffering as she circles around her object of desire (the Prince) and in Act III she circles around death.

In psychology, the discourse on repetition is quite broad because of the constant development of the concept. Therefore, I will bring up the definition of repetition in relation to desire and the death drive (which essentially is every drive, according to Lacan and his followers), as discussed by Žižek and Salecl. The way in which they connect repetition with desire and the death drive could explain repetition in the music.

As one of the predominant features in both the libretto and music, repetition follows Rusalka on her journey and through all the metamorphoses. Due to the nature of the story and two different objects that Rusalka desires, the Prince and death in the final act, Rusalka's use of repetition will be divided into two parts, with one focusing on Act I and II and the other one focusing on Act III. In the first part, I see repetition functioning to aid Rusalka in her quest of trying to satisfy her desire; in the second part, repetition is connected with the death drive, a new cycle in which Rusalka is trapped in a compulsion to repeat, circling around death.

Žižek elaborates the connection between the drive and the repetition: the drive is satisfied, since it is 'achieved in the repeated failure to reach the object, in repeatedly circling around the object'.<sup>75</sup>

Salecl further explains the difference between desire and the drive as follows:

The logic of desire would be: 'It is prohibited to do this, but for that very reason, I will do it.' Drive, in contrast, does not care about prohibition: it is not concerned about overcoming the law. Drive's logic is: 'I do not want to do this, but I am nonetheless doing it.' Thus, we have an opposing logic in drive, where the subject does not want to do something, but nonetheless enjoys doing just that.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London, New York: Verso Books, 2012), 367

<sup>76</sup> Renata Salecl, 'The Silence of Feminine *Jouissance*', in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, edited by Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Durham University Press, 1998), 180

The drive is, as Salecl explains, a constant pressure, which causes *jouissance*, as it forces the subject to circle around an object.<sup>77</sup>

#### 1.5.4 *Jouissance* and the Cry

In the section above, I briefly mention Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, an important idea that will come up in all the chapters. The English language does not have an adequate word for *jouissance*. It is often translated as 'enjoyment', 'desire' or 'pleasure', with sexual connotations. Lacan used the word 'pleasure', as Freud did. *Jouissance*, led by the subject, tends to transgress the limit of enjoyment, in other words, to go beyond the pleasure principle.<sup>78</sup> The transgression causes pain, which led Lacan to refer to *jouissance* as suffering.<sup>79</sup>

The concept of *jouissance* has also been discussed by Michel Poizat in relation to opera—specifically to the voice as an object of an opera fan's *jouissance*.<sup>80</sup> In his Lacanian approach to opera, Poizat puts music and words in a relationship that was revolutionary in 1986. In *The Angel's Cry*, Poizat argues that female characters in opera often die, but not entirely because the plot demands their death—rather, it has to do with their voice. Before they die, they are 'allowed' to cry, which is the moment when the 'voice is at its peak'.<sup>81</sup> While Poizat uses a range of Lacan's concepts, in opera criticism, the concept of *jouissance* has become rather important.

The cry, which Poizat discusses in great detail in the aforementioned book, is the concept that will be the focus of my chapter on the voice. The experience of the cry is subjective: some opera fans will experience *jouissance*, the painful enjoyment at certain moments in the opera. The listener/spectator is 'swept away' by the ascending melodic line that leads to a climax, which ends

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 180

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan (London and New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 184

<sup>79</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, 'Lacan with Artaud: j'ouis-sens, jouis-sens, jouis-sans', in *Lacan: the Silent Partners*, edited by Slavoj Žižek (London and New York, NY, 2006), 351

<sup>80</sup> Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. by Arthur Denner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 35

<sup>81</sup> Salecl, 'The Silence of Feminine *Jouissance*', 181

with the cry of an opera singer.<sup>82</sup> The cry is the moment in which everything—the music, the stage, the words and the body of the singer become auxiliary. The focus is solely on the voice. The voice becomes ‘an autonomous object detached from the body’.<sup>83</sup> The cry in *Rusalka* is interesting since it emerges from the protagonist’s silence—she ‘hides’ the voice from us, which we desire, only to cause *jouissance*, to suffer, in sensitive operaphiles the moment we hear her voice again.

#### 1.5.5 The Gaze

The gaze is the final concept will be introduced in the very last chapter that will focus on the staged *Rusalka*. The gaze is an interesting feature when it comes to *Rusalka* on stage, especially during her silent state: when she is reduced to silence, she becomes like a painting, an exhibit in a museum that everyone observes, both the audience and characters on stage. The concept of the gaze will be discussed using concepts from classical psychology, as explained by Elisabeth Bronfen and also drawing on the visual arts and film theories, as mentioned by Mladen Dolar and Žižek.

#### 1.6 Conclusion

By analysing *Rusalka*, layer by layer and using various approaches, I wish to analyse the ways the protagonist expresses herself through the text, the music, the voice and performance. All of the opera’s layers, using various concepts, will reveal Rusalka’s complex nature. They will help us not only understand Rusalka and her story, but also aid her in expressing her subjectivity that in return will have an effect on us, as readers/listeners/spectators. *Rusalka* takes us on an unforgettable journey, through all of the opera’s facets, which will create an unbreakable bond.

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<sup>82</sup> Poizat, *The Angel’s Cry*, 38

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 35

## Chapter Two: The Libretto

### 2.1 Introduction

Kvapil's libretto has many layers that support different interpretations of the opera. In order to analyse the way in which the libretto reveals Rusalka's nature, it is helpful to look at some of the artistic ideals of the nineteenth century and works that inspired the young librettist. Accordingly, I begin my study by explaining the sisterhood of the water creatures and more specifically rusalkas, and exploring their function in stories that inspired the librettist, such as La Motte Fouqué's *Undine* and Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. In the second section, I turn to consider two psychoanalytical approaches to Andersen's fairy tale by Sabrina Soracco and David Johnston. Soracco connects the loss of voice with castration as something that is 'essential' for the little mermaid to undergo in order to be human in a patriarchal world, which I will connect with the prevalent misogyny of the fin-de-siècle era. Johnston discusses the two worlds in *The Little Mermaid* in terms of unconscious (mer-world) and conscious (human), which links directly to my analysis of the narrative.

Following these introductory sections, I will then provide my own analysis of the opera's text, using some of the psychological terms and concepts introduced. My analysis will initially concentrate on the first two acts, since they set up a path to Rusalka's damnation that shapes the entire final act; my final section then focuses on all three acts. The majority of headings in the first part of the analysis contain the names of the characters, as I describe them each in terms of their characteristics, their relation to Rusalka and their psychoanalytical interpretation. The chapter will then conclude with a final section on the repetition of words and word units in the libretto and how they convey Rusalka's desire and suffering.

## 2.2 Inspiration and Adaptation: Sisterhood of Aquatic Creatures

Rusalkas and their sisters with more familiar names in Western culture, such as mermaids and sirens, are complex creatures that are neither fish, fowl nor mammal.<sup>84</sup> The stories about these water-beings can be found in a variety of folklores and mythologies, from ancient times to today. Their ‘natural habitat’ stretches from the basin of Amazon, across the African and the European continents, all the way to the Far East. Regardless of the name they adopt in different cultural and geographical settings, their stories have the tendency to resemble each other. However, for Dvořák’s *Rusalka*, the most relevant focus for discussion will be on the nineteenth-century stories about water nymphs of Central and Northern Europe, which inspired his librettist Kvapil.

The powers of these creatures who inhabit the waters have been discussed for centuries. In the nineteenth century, as both Kramer and Inna Naroditskaya observe, the sirens epitomised the love-death idea, which was popular during the era of Romanticism.<sup>85</sup> The popularity of sirens at the turn of the century is evident in all forms of the arts - visual, musical and literary. Sirens resurfaced into public consciousness in the nineteenth century, after being ‘banned’ during the era of Enlightenment.<sup>86</sup> Seductiveness, as their main attribute, created anxiety in men - as Lawrence Kramer explains:

The more women want, the more they demand access to public spheres and private pleasures, the more men worry about being lured by them into a fatal immersion.<sup>87</sup>

The role of sirens in the nineteenth-century arts was not only to efface masculinity; as Kramer points out, sirens not only aided people to cope with desire and modern identity, but with modernity in general, as they represent ‘an alternative to the standard modern forms of world construction’.<sup>88</sup> While

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<sup>84</sup> Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya, *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 9

<sup>86</sup> Lawrence Kramer, ‘Longindyingcall: Of Music, Modernity, and the Sirens’ in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 195

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 195

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 197

discussing these watery creatures, Dijkstra points out the difference between sirens/mermaids and ondines. In terms of their sexuality, sirens were considered aggressive, whereas the ondines were passive.<sup>89</sup>

### 2.2.1 Rusalkas

The variations in storytelling in the territories where the West Slavs (Czechs, Slovaks and Poles) and the East Slavs (Russians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians) live make it difficult to reduce the rusalka to a single set of defining characteristics. Rusalkas were nocturnal creatures, half-fish and half-woman, often described as ghosts, water nymphs or dreadful water/mermaid demons, who lived in either a river or in a forest. Inna Naroditskaya adds that rusalkas were once women ‘inflamed by love and burned by betrayal’.<sup>90</sup> In their afterlife these women, now rusalkas, would become vengeful and would enchant men with their singing and dancing and lure them into death.<sup>91</sup> Kvapil’s Rusalka in a way corresponds to this idea, as she is also burned by betrayal after her desire to be with the Prince was not satisfied. However, Rusalka is far from vengeful—she constantly suffers, even in her final metamorphosis into a will-o-the-wisp, luring men to their death.

Dijkstra gives an interesting example from Prosper Mérimée’s story ‘Lokis’, in which a character called Ioulka tells us what rusalkas are really like:

A russalka is a water nymph. There is one in each of the pools of black water which adorn our forests. Never go near them! The russalka comes out, even lovelier than I, if that is possible; she drags you down to the bottom, where in all probability she gobbles you up!<sup>92</sup>

To this the narrator of the story says ‘A real siren!’<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 258

<sup>90</sup> Inna Naroditskaya, ‘Russian *Rusalkas* and Nationalism: Water, Power and Women’ in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 219

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 219

<sup>92</sup> Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 263

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 263

### 2.2.2 Kvapil's Inspiration

If we take all this into account, Kvapil as a librettist was thus working within a clearly established nineteenth-century tradition, drawing inspiration from many literary works of his time. He was certainly influenced by well-known Czech fairy-tale writers Karel Erben and Božena Němcová, who collected many legends and folk tales from the Czech lands. One of Erben's well-known stories is entitled 'Vodník' ('The Water Sprite'), to which Dvořak set a symphonic poem in 1896. Vodník later became a character in *Rusalka*. In his memoirs, Kvapil mentions the moment of the highest inspiration:

In the homeland of Andersen, on the Danish island of Bornholm, where I spent the year in 1899 vacationing, I was reminded of my childhood, of Andersen's fairy tale of the mermaid, in which because of her love for a human she endured the suffering of muteness and even a cursed oath if her sweetheart abandoned her, unless she resolved to redeem her freedom through his blood. I began from this theme to design an opera text with the tone of Erben.<sup>94</sup>

Although *Rusalka* is connected in name with a creature from Slavic mythology, Kvapil's treatment of the story is similar to the stories of loreleis, mermaids and undines, Rusalka's sisters from the West. Kvapil unites the tragic fate of these women who turned into rusalkas with the tragic fate of mermaids and undines. Kvapil's Rusalka, as with mermaids and undines in Western traditions, is willing to sacrifice herself and lose a significant part of her identity in order to be with a human. Indeed, her desire to be with a human is so strong that Rusalka is willing to suffer if it will help her be with the Prince and therefore satisfy her desire. This treatment of mermaids and undines is precisely where the main influences in Kvapil's writing of *Rusalka* lie: in particular, with Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811) and Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* (1837). In his letter to his friend Foerster, Kvapil writes about his fairytale libretto, which he suggests contains only ('only' is emphasised in the letter) elements from Andersen's *Little Mermaid* and La Motte Fouqué's *Undine*.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 7-8

<sup>95</sup> Hallová, 'Rusalka and its Librettist, Jaroslav Kvapil', 109

### 2.2.3 La Motte Fouqué's *Undine*

La Motte Fouqué's *Undine*, a fairytale novella, attracted many composers and librettists before Kvapil. Operatic treatments include works by E.T.A. Hoffmann (1814), Albert Lortzing (1845) and Tchaikovsky (1869). *Undine* is based on a medieval French folk-tale about *Melusine*, a female water spirit who marries a knight on condition that he never sees her on Saturdays, which is when she resumes her mermaid form. La Motte Fouqué's *Undine* is an adopted child of an old fisherman and his wife. She is actually a daughter of a powerful water-prince, who wished for his daughter to possess a soul. *Undine* was brought to the fisherman and his wife by an uncle. In order to gain a soul, she marries Huldbrand, a knight, who would come to the fisherman's house. After their wedding, she reveals that she is a maid of the sea. Huldbrand's feelings towards her change after she tells him the truth about her and he falls in love with Bertalda, a human, who is *Undine*'s adoptive parents' long lost daughter. *Undine* feels that she is losing the love of her husband and warns him that if he betrays her love and marries Bertalda, he will have to die, according to the laws of the water world. Huldbrand ignores this threat and marries Bertalda. *Undine*, hurt from her husband's betrayal, comes and kills him with a kiss, which also is her own kiss of death. She becomes a spring that encircles his grave.

### 2.2.4 Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*

La Motte Fouqué's *Undine* was Andersen's main literary source for *The Little Mermaid*.<sup>96</sup> Andersen updated the tale and made it differ from *Undine*, with the ending being the most obvious alteration. Andersen did not agree with the nature of La Motte Fouqué's ending of the story. In a letter to his colleague and a friend, Bernhard Ingemann, Andersen writes that he will not allow his mermaid to depend on an 'alien creature, upon the love of a human being' in order to gain a soul.<sup>97</sup> However, the main difference between the two stories is, as Jack Zipes points out, that in *The Little Mermaid* the

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<sup>96</sup> Boria Sax, *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature*, (Blacksburg, VA: McDonald and Woodward, 1998), 156

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 157

emphasis is on the suffering of his protagonist, both physical and emotional.<sup>98</sup> In Andersen's tale the little mermaid, at the age of fifteen, is allowed to explore the world where humans live. One stormy night, she saves a prince from nearly drowning and falls in love with him. Because of his unconscious state, he does not see the little mermaid leaving him on a shore. After finding out from her grandmother that when humans die they gain an eternal soul in the afterlife, the little mermaid wishes to become a human, so she can be with the prince and have an eternal soul, instead of turning into sea foam upon her death. She asks the Sea Witch to aid her. The Sea Witch gives her a potion that will give the little mermaid legs in exchange for her tongue; she warns her that once she takes the potion she cannot return to the sea. The little mermaid's transformation into a human results in a horrendous pain in her feet, as if she is constantly walking on sharp knives. As a human, she meets the prince she loves and he becomes enchanted by her beauty and dancing. However, her love is unrequited, as he is in love with a princess who is his soon-to-be wife. Her suffering becomes greater after the wedding of the prince and princess. To ease her suffering, her sisters bring her a knife to kill the prince—if his blood drips on her feet, she will be transformed back into a mermaid. Unable to commit such a horrendous act, she throws herself into the sea and becomes a daughter of the air. She will gain an eternal soul if she decides to help other people and ease their suffering.

#### 2.2.5 Kvapil's *Rusalka*

The two stories by La Motte Fouqué and Andersen are the clear foundation on which Kvapil's *Rusalka* is based. In Andersen's fairy-tale, the emphasis, as stated above, is on the suffering, which echoes in Kvapil's *Rusalka*. Additionally, Kvapil continues the pattern present in both La Motte Fouqué and Andersen's tales— accentuating the inability of the two worlds to connect. Because of the failure of the two worlds to communicate, through desire and sacrificial metamorphosis of the protagonists, the little mermaid and *Rusalka* (and to some extent, *Undine*) constantly suffer.

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<sup>98</sup> Jack Zipes, 'Hans Christian Andersen and the Discourse of the Dominated', in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 84

Rusalka is a daughter of Vodník, a water sprite. One night, she tells her father that she is in love with a human and wants to become mortal and human, so that she can be with him and gain a soul. Vodník warns her that she will be doomed but nonetheless tells her to seek help from Ježibaba, a witch who lives near the lake. Ježibaba warns her about the consequences of her actions: that if a human betrays her love they will both be doomed, and that she will be mute as a human. However, Rusalka is determined to become human and be with the Prince at all costs. When she becomes human, she meets the prince, who is besotted with her and decides to marry her. Two characters, the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit, discuss the situation. They see Rusalka as an evil enchantress, who will soon marry the Prince. However, according to the latest gossip, the Prince has already lost interest in the mute Rusalka and is courting a foreign princess. The Foreign Princess does not care about the Prince. Infuriated, she becomes determined to break the union between the Prince and Rusalka. The seductive Foreign Princess steals the Prince away from Rusalka. Betrayed by the Prince, Rusalka becomes *bludička*, a will-o-the-wisp, a spirit who lives in the depths of the lake, luring humans to their deaths. Rusalka seeks help from Ježibaba, who tells her that she must kill the Prince. Rusalka refuses to kill him, stating that she prefers to suffer. The Gamekeeper and the Turnspit come to the woods to seek for Ježibaba to help the Prince who is gravely ill, cursed by the mute enchantress. Vodník hears their accusatory remarks, rises from the depths of the water telling the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit that it was the Prince who betrayed Rusalka and swearing vengeance. The Prince comes near the lake and senses Rusalka's presence. Since he is cursed, just like Rusalka, he asks her to kiss him, knowing that it is the kiss of death. Rusalka kisses the prince and he dies in her arms.

#### 2.2.6 The Connection and the Meaning

The influence of La Motte Fouqué's *Undine* and Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* in Kvapil's writing is quite obvious. However, as Kvapil wrote in a letter, only elements of these stories are present. Kvapil preserved the tragic essence of the protagonist—her suffering before and after the metamorphosis, which is similar to Andersen's protagonist. The three stories are connected by the Romantic interest in

the union of humanity and nature.<sup>99</sup> All three protagonists are described as supernatural creatures who wish for a human soul since they do not possess one. In his commentary on La Motte Fouqué's *Undine*, W.J. Lillyman has pointed out that the elemental spirits manipulate the humans until they get what they want.<sup>100</sup> The most obvious example of this is Undine herself, who takes everything from poor Bertalda, who is always perceived as Undine's antagonist. Undine, with the help of her uncle, takes Bertalda's place in her family; she steals Huldbrand from her and when Undine gains a soul, she even takes that from Bertalda. In a way, she completely overtakes her existence.<sup>101</sup> This is not the case with the little mermaid and Rusalka. Even though perceived by humans as creatures without a soul, ironically, through their actions, the little mermaid and Rusalka show the human side more than all the other characters. It is precisely because of this sympathetic perspective that we connect and sympathise with Rusalka: she reveals her soul, an essential part of her nature, which speaks directly to us. This is where the little mermaid and Rusalka differ from their predecessor (Undine). The little mermaid wants a soul, just like the one the Prince has. Rusalka, on the other hand, wants to become a human so that she can be with the prince. In the analysis of La Motte Fouqué's *Undine*, Lillyman points out that to have a soul means to be a victim, which, at least in the terms of these three stories, is accurate.<sup>102</sup> Finally, critics emphasise the fact that through these supernatural creatures, each writer poses the question 'what it is to be a human'.<sup>103</sup>

The question of what it is to be a human leads to another question: what it is to be a woman. As explained in the Introduction, the fin-de-siècle Habsburg Empire saw the rise of panic within the Austro-German cultural hegemony, as many national and women's rights movements were seen as a threat to the cultural status quo. The presence of women in the public spheres was not welcomed. Both the little mermaid and Rusalka desperately want to become part of the human, patriarchal world, even if it means to suffer in silence in order to belong there. The literal silence of the little mermaid

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<sup>99</sup> Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 151

<sup>100</sup> As suggested in W. J. Lillyman, 'Fouqué's "Undine"', *Studies in Romanticism* Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring, 1971), p 94-104

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 102

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 104

<sup>103</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 16

and Rusalka could be interpreted as a metaphor of silencing of women in the era from which they emerge. Their silence in the patriarchal world stands as a reminder of their place in the society and the struggle that many women had to face in the fin-de-siècle Habsburg Empire.

Kvapil adds something new with Rusalka's muteness, which makes Rusalka's silent presence in the human world somewhat different to that of the little mermaid. He adds characters—that is, the humans,—who observe and discuss mute Rusalka, emphasising that her presence disturbs and/or frustrates them. As we shall see below in my analysis of Act II, the tension in the real world will be further explored when conscious Rusalka experiences difficulties with the human characters, notably the Prince, the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit. Even silenced, Rusalka's mere presence awakens both male anxiety and desire.

### 2.3. Psychological Interpretations: The Castration of Rusalka

What separates Rusalka and the little mermaid from Undine is the inability to speak. The loss of the protagonist's voice is the common element in both *Rusalka* and *The Little Mermaid* that is impossible to ignore. The voice, which would aid these misunderstood creatures in their quest for love and human soul, is taken away from them. And it is precisely this silence of the female protagonist and inability to communicate that intrigues us and make us sympathise with them. In Andersen's fairy tale, the way the little mermaid loses her voice is shown in a radically brutal fashion: the Sea Witch cuts off the little mermaid's tongue. Kvapil softened this brutal representation. Instead, with her magic, Ježibaba turns Rusalka's tongue into wood, making her unable to speak to humans.

The issue and symbolism of losing the voice leads, in psychoanalytic terms, to the question of castration. In her psychoanalytical approach to *The Little Mermaid*, Sabrina Soracco argues that the journey of the adolescent protagonist could be understood as an attempt to work through the Oedipal crisis.<sup>104</sup> The mermaid wishes to leave the matriarch, mer-folk world and replace it with the patriarchal (human) world. In order to live in the patriarchal world, the mermaid must sacrifice her

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<sup>104</sup> Pil Dahlerup, Ula Thomsen, Sabrina L. Soracco, Niels Ingwersen, Faith Ingwersen, Gregory Nybo, 'Splash! Six Views of "The Little Mermaid"', *Scandinavian Studies* Vol. 63, No. 2 (Spring 1991), 145

voice. As Soracco observes, the mermaid's castration in Freudian terms is a 'prerequisite for the phallic desire that she directs towards the prince'.<sup>105</sup> She adds that in Lacanian terms, the castration prevents the mermaid from completely joining the Symbolic order, in which she should be able to express herself.<sup>106</sup>

Freud's theory of female castration—suggesting that all females are born castrated—is still considered highly controversial and is often disputed. The castrated female, according to Freud, blames the mother for her condition.<sup>107</sup> Both Andersen and Kvapil place a female in the role of the castrator (the Sea-Witch and Ježibaba), who actually 'aids' these water creatures to become human. In both stories, the birth mother figure is absent. This negative image of female as a castrator correlates to Freud's notion of the mother as a castrator. Soracco states that the Sea-Witch, because of her role in the fairy tale, could be seen as an 'ambivalent mother'.<sup>108</sup> The Sea-Witch 'helps' the mermaid to become human and supports her separation from the mer-world. At the same time, as Soracco observes, the Sea-Witch prevents the mermaid from succeeding in her quest for a human soul, so she could return to the matriarchal mer-world.<sup>109</sup> The Sea-Witch later offers the mermaid a knife to kill the prince, an act that would enable the mermaid to return to the mer-world, which is something that the mermaid rejects. Therefore, in order for the little mermaid and Rusalka to fulfil their desire and be part of the patriarchal world, they must lose their voice, even if it causes them to suffer.

### 2.3.1 Natural/Unconscious and Human/Conscious

In his article on the little mermaid and the repressed elemental anima, David Johnston observes a distinction between the two worlds of the story, the world of the mermaids and the world of the humans. Relying on Jungian theory of the collective unconscious/conscious and the concept of anima, Johnston sees the sea-world as the repressed unconscious, whereas the human world represents the

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 145

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>109</sup> Pil Dahlerup, Ula Thomsen, Sabrina L. Soracco, Niels Ingwersen, Faith Ingwersen, Gregory Nybo, 'Splash! Six Views of "The Little Mermaid"', 146

conscious. The mermaid's sisters lure men into death and 'the sweetness of unconsciousness'.<sup>110</sup> However, the little mermaid does not want to participate in the destruction of men, but rather wants to become human/conscious. For the little mermaid to become human/conscious, there needs to be 'a full cooperation between the unconscious and the conscious ego'.<sup>111</sup> In other words, for a human to function properly in the real world, the two parts of the mind must communicate and inner conflicts between the wishes of the unconscious and ego must be 'resolved'.

Johnston points out that the little mermaid's suffering is 'virtually instinctual and unconscious', but when she becomes human, she suffers consciously.<sup>112</sup> The Little Mermaid's suffering, Johnston observes, is 'that of Eros, and feeling at a natural and elemental level, especially when such values are rejected by the collective mind at large and not understood by the prince'.<sup>113</sup> In this discussion between the two worlds of the little mermaid (sea-world/unconscious and human/conscious), we can see the connection with Kvapil's *Rusalka*. Her suffering, just like Andersen's little mermaid, is both on the unconscious and conscious level, since the cooperation between the two worlds, natural/unconscious and human/conscious, is never accomplished. This inner conflict between unconscious and conscious is quite essential to *Rusalka*. It is due to the lack of understanding/communication between the two worlds that *Rusalka* ends up not belonging to either of them, stuck forever in between. This inner conflict and what it does to *Rusalka* will be observed in my analysis.

#### 2.4. Inside *Rusalka*'s Mind: *Rusalka*'s *Lebenstriebe*

Andersen's little mermaid wishes, more than anything, to become human. To become a human means to gain a soul, something the little mermaid does not have. The human soul is immortal; therefore, she

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<sup>110</sup> David Johnston, 'Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid* and the Repressed Elemental Anima', <http://www.davidbear.ca/content/hans-christian-anderson%E2%80%99s-little-mermaid-and-repressed-elemental-anima> (3 April 2013), 6

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 3 (3 April 2013)

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 8 (3 April 2013)

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 8 (3 April 2013)

wants to possess, like the Prince, ‘an immortal soul’.<sup>114</sup> Rusalka also wishes to become human in order to gain a soul and be with the Prince. In her first aria ‘Sem často přichází’ (‘Often He Comes’), Rusalka tells her father Vodník that she longs to be with the human who often comes and bathes in the lake:

<p>Sem často přichází a v objetí mé stoupá; šat shodí na hrázi Leč pouhou vlnou jsem a v loktech mých se koupá mou bytost nesmí zřít Ó vím, že člověkem dřív musela bych býti, jak já jej objímám a vinu já jej v ruce,  by on mne objal sám a zulíbal mne prudce by on mne objal sám, sám, on sám, on sám a zulíbal mne prudce!</p>	<p><i>Often he comes here and in my embrace he runs up; he slips off his clothes on the pier and bathes in my arms. But I am a naked wave he may not behold my essence. Oh, I know that first I have to be human so that when I embrace him and entwine him in my arms he himself would embrace me and kiss me passionately He himself would embrace me, he himself, he himself And kiss me passionately!</i><sup>115</sup></p>
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The aria is Rusalka’s lament. What is striking in her lament is the overtly erotic charge, as she describes her body as a naked wave and its connection with the prince, who bathes in her arms. Cheek notices the various verbs that Kvapil uses, which are all translated into English as the verb ‘to kiss’.<sup>116</sup> The verb ‘zulíbat’, which is in the last line of the aria, has a very erotic connotation. Cheek explains that this verb in Czech denotes ‘free, unbridled kissing all over the body’.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, it is obvious that Rusalka wishes to be intimate with the prince. With the erotic sentiment explicit, I propose that the ‘unconscious’ Rusalka is the embodiment of Eros, the instinct of libidinal energy and self-preservation.

The drives, according to Freud, must react immediately. From the dialogue with Vodník, it is evident that Rusalka is determined to be with the Prince at all costs. In the dialogue, Rusalka remains

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<sup>114</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, ‘The Little Mermaid’, in *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*, edited by Maria Tatar (New York : Norton, 1999), 224

<sup>115</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 98-99

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 13

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 13

deaf to her father's words, who upon hearing that his daughter is in love with a human, becomes worried and tries to warn her that she will be doomed. Her deafness ends when Vodník tells her to seek Ježibaba's help. Therefore, Rusalka's Eros makes her act like an impulsive child; her desire to be with the Prince is so strong that she will 'cry' until she gets what she wants.

The erotic charge of the aria and the presence of her father make Rusalka feel guilty. The line 'jak já jej objímám a vinu já jej v ruce' contains the word 'vinu', which is the first-person singular form of the verb 'to entwine' ('vinout' in Czech).<sup>118</sup> The word sounds exactly like the accusative form of the noun 'vina', which means 'guilt'.<sup>119</sup> In psychology, the feeling of guilt is conscious, but is connected with the unconscious need for punishment. According to Freud and Lacan, the punishment must come from a 'parental authority', in this case from Vodník.<sup>120</sup> Interestingly, the return to Vodník's realm, after the failure in the human world, is Rusalka's punishment. Therefore, it is possible to interpret Rusalka's aria and the dialogue that follows as her unconscious need for punishment, as she wants to disobey her father and her world.

#### 2.4.1 Vodník

Rusalka's father Vodník (the Water Sprite), like his daughter, has connections with both Western and Eastern Slavic folklore. Vodník's character is, like Rusalka's, mutable. Both characters can be portrayed as good or bad, with human features and habits. Although Kvapil named this character Vodník, there is a contrast in the libretto between his 'given' name Vodník and Hastrman (how he is referred to in *Rusalka*).

Vodník is present in all three acts. His reference to 'ubohá Rusalko bledá' ('poor, pale Rusalka'), the words he says when he hears of his daughter's plans, resonate throughout the opera and direct the storyline while prophesying and emphasising the tragic end and Rusalka's doom. Vodník is bound to his water realm. Thus, in my Freudian interpretation of the libretto, he belongs to the unconscious mind. His words that signal Rusalka's damnation from the beginning could be

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 17

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 17

<sup>120</sup> Julien, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud*, 22

interpreted as the death drive, which is always present in the protagonist's head. Although the idea is quite tempting, we must acknowledge two facts: Vodník is not the character that dooms Rusalka - Rusalka brings a curse upon herself; and he is, if we want to stay true to the literal sense of the story, her father. Therefore it would perhaps be more accurate to think of Vodník, in Freudian terms, in terms of the unconscious Superego—an internalised father figure.

If Vodník represents Rusalka's unconscious Superego, Lacan's interpretation of the concept is interesting since it could further explain the role that Vodník plays in the opera. Lacan links the Superego with *jouissance*, a concept that will be further discussed in other chapters. In his seminar on feminine sexuality, Lacan discusses the connection between Freud's Superego and *jouissance* and points out that 'nothing forces anyone to enjoy except the superego. The Superego is the imperative of *jouissance*—Enjoy!'<sup>121</sup> Žižek explains that *jouissance* is essentially suffering, as it 'brings more pain than pleasure'.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, with his appearance in every single Act of the libretto, in which he sings his 'Běda', Vodník is a constant reminder of Rusalka's *jouissance*. Vodník is not her *jouissance* - his actions and the words he says to Rusalka reflect this idea of the Superego forcing a subject to enjoy. Vodník does not stop Rusalka in her pursuit for the object of desire, but he knows that this will turn into a painful experience for her. In Act II, when he discovers how unhappy Rusalka is and that the Prince rejects her, Vodník tells her that she must continue (continue to suffer). In Act III, he accepts her punishment, whereas Ježibaba is a character who offers her a solution to her problem (she gives her a knife to kill the Prince and end the suffering). This Freudian/Lacanian interpretation of Vodník as a character who forces Rusalka to 'enjoy' is important because it portrays him in control (so to speak) of Rusalka's fate, as he catapults her into a path towards eternal damnation.

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<sup>121</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by B. Fink (London and New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 3

<sup>122</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, (London and New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 79

#### 2.4.2 Ježibaba

Ježibaba's role in the opera's story is quite complex and crucial. When she asks for her help, Rusalka says that Ježibaba is both an element and human— 'Sama jsi živlem, sama jsi člověkem' ('you yourself are element, you yourself are human').<sup>123</sup> She calls her 'tetko milá' ('dear auntie'), yet she says that all the rusalkas are terrified of her presence. -'Rusalky za nocí hrozbou svou strašíš' ('at night the water nymphs are terrified of your menacing presence')<sup>124</sup>

As suggested before, the Sea-Witch from *The Little Mermaid* could be seen as an ambivalent mother-the-castrator in Freudian terms. Even putting aside this psychoanalytical view of the Sea-Witch, she is clearly predominantly seen as an evil character, a witch who only brings misfortune to both humans and supernatural creatures. These characteristics are easily transferable to Ježibaba. The 'evilness' of Ježibaba is reflected in the first part of her name—'ježi'. In all the Slavic languages, the word has a negative connotation, e.g. in Serbian/Croatian, word 'jeza' means 'horror', in verb form 'ježiti se' means 'to shiver'. Ježibaba is a West Slavic cousin of Baba Yaga, a famous character in Slavic folklore (although predominantly present in East Slavic folklore). These old women are often portrayed as villains or donors (a character in fairy-tales who tests the hero). Andreas Johns suggests that Baba Yaga/Ježibaba can be seen as an 'ambiguous mother'.<sup>125</sup> In his discussion on the role of Baba Yaga as a mother, Johns observes Freudian and Jungian approaches. Johns summarises the Freudian interpretation:

The individual's infantile and early childhood experience accounts for the perception of the mother found in cultural projections such as the folktale.<sup>126</sup>

A Jungian approach offers a different interpretation of Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga could be seen as an archetype of the 'Great Mother'. Erich Neumann explains that a child sees his mother as an 'all-

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<sup>123</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 113

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 112

<sup>125</sup> Johns Andreas, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2004)

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 37

powerful numinous woman, on whom he is dependent in all things'.<sup>127</sup> Another Jungian scholar, Marie-Louise von Franz, identifies Baba Yaga as a perfect example of the dual aspect of the Great Mother archetype, precisely because of the fact that she can be both good and bad.<sup>128</sup>

In terms of both Freudian and Jungian interpretations, then, Ježibaba could be seen as Rusalka's ambiguous mother, mother-the-castrator and the Great Mother. However, as Otakar Šourek explains, 'she is more of a dear old aunt to Rusalka'.<sup>129</sup> Before I explain her placement in the opera and in relation to Rusalka, characteristics of Ježibaba in the libretto must be elaborated in detail.

Rusalka talks about Ježibaba's menacing presence in the woods, and she is not the only character who refers to Ježibaba in such way: the Gamekeeper also describes Ježibaba as one of the terrifying creatures that live in the dark forest near the lake. In fact, the Gamekeeper sees all the characters of the forest/the unconscious as evil-spirited. In Act II, he describes Ježibaba to his nephew, the Turnspit:

Je li v těle duše slabá,  
Uhrane ji Ježibaba

*If the soul in the body is weak,  
Ježibaba will put a curse on it.*<sup>130</sup>

Her disturbing presence naturally comes from Kvapil. He describes her eeriness not only through the eyes of other characters such as Rusalka and the Gamekeeper, but through Ježibaba's 'sound'. In the Rusalka-Ježibaba dialogue in Act I, a couple of descriptions in the libretto show how Ježibaba talks to Rusalka: 'with a devilish laugh', 'viciously', 'with humour, but more and more viciously' and 'with a hideous, eerie tone'.<sup>131</sup> Even with all the characterizing hints given in the libretto, it seems to me that there is still a question to be answered: namely, how evil is Ježibaba?

In order to be with the Prince and become human, Rusalka asks for Ježibaba's help. Ježibaba asks for her translucent watery veil in return. In this transaction between Rusalka and Ježibaba, we see

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>129</sup> Šourek, *Antonín Dvořák: His Life and Works*, 110

<sup>130</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 143

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 114-116

that Ježibaba is nowhere as sinister and brutal as the Sea-Witch, who cuts off the little mermaid's tongue. Ježibaba warns Rusalka that she will suffer and be mute to all humans:

A než nabudeš jí, trpět budeš těž,	<i>and before you will gain love, you will suffer</i>
Pro všechn lidský sluch něma zůstaneš!	<i>to all human ears you will remain mute!</i> <sup>132</sup>

In Act III, when she is betrayed by the Prince, Rusalka asks Ježibaba for help because she longs to be with her sisters and end her suffering. Ježibaba tells her that the only way to be with her sisters is to kill the prince. Horrified, Rusalka rejects the knife that Ježibaba hands over to her. Later in the same act, the Gamekeeper and his nephew come to her hut to ask for help, to aid the prince who is ill. This scene clearly shows Ježibaba's sarcastic side, as she teases the Turnspit, who is clearly terrified of her.

Although the characters perceive Ježibaba as evil, they come to her hut and beg her to help Rusalka and the Prince. They acknowledge her wisdom and are willing to put both their own and someone else's fate into her hands, because she can cure them. Therefore, it is easy to see that Ježibaba is not simply a malicious character. The way she speaks to other characters is rather sarcastic and bitter, but not evil. She abhors humans, claiming that they are all cursed.<sup>133</sup> But her words and her sarcastic and borderline misanthropic tone of voice, which sound as if they are coming from someone who has been hurt in the past by humans, are often interpreted by the characters as evil.

Because of Ježibaba's access to both the supernatural and human world—or unconscious and conscious in psychoanalytical terms, she is the embodiment of the Freudian Ego. The Ego is ruled by the reality principle. According to Freud, its role is to moderate the wishes of the Id, the Superego, the external world and with the reality principle, to make an individual acceptable in society.<sup>134</sup> In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud suggests that the Ego has to serve three rather cruel masters: the Id and its irrational drives, the strict Superego and the external world.<sup>135</sup> Because the Id is ruled by the pleasure principle and the Superego by the morality principle, the Ego often suffers because it is sometimes not powerful enough to control the other parts of the mind. One of the Ego's roles is, according to Freud,

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 117

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>134</sup> Freud, *The Ego and The Id*, 51

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 46

to test reality.<sup>136</sup> This is precisely what Ježibaba does—she ‘places’ mute Rusalka into a foreign and predominantly male environment to test reality and the social spheres from which women (at the time) were excluded.

### 2.4.3 Mute Rusalka and the Conscious Realm

Rusalka’s muteness is probably the most intriguing part of the opera. For the last scenes in Act I and the most of Act II the protagonist, the one on whom we all focus on is silenced. Her silence seems like a high price to pay, indeed, and ultimately leads us to ask why she has to be mute at all?

The rationale for Rusalka’s muteness could be found in Freud’s topographical model. Eros is, as mentioned, situated in the Id, which is in its entirety in the unconscious mind. The Id, unlike the Ego and the Superego, does not have a part that is in the conscious mind. Therefore, when Eros in Rusalka ‘reaches’ the conscious mind, muteness is a must because of its inability to function in the realm of the conscious, cognitive, context. Within Freud’s topographical model, Rusalka’s silence could be perceived as a product of the Ego (Ježibaba), trying to please the Superego (Vodník), its morality principle and the reality. Unlike the little mermaid who is not able to speak to anyone because of her ‘tongue-ectomy’, Rusalka is still able to speak to Vodník in Act II. Therefore, her muteness is strictly reserved for the human world—the world of the conscious mind. The conscious mind is entirely about our perceptions, subjectivity and the things we are aware of in the external world. Thus what we see at the end of Act I and in the majority of Act II, during Rusalka’s silent state, is Rusalka’s conscious experience, based on her perceptions.

When she is silenced, we must depend on other characters for our understanding of her narrative—what they say about her and how they perceive her. Ranging from frustration with her silent presence (the Prince), jealousy and maliciousness (the Foreign Princess) to anxiety (the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit), the humans express their negative attitude towards and about Rusalka.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 18

Their opinions shape the story and emphasise Rusalka's suffering, as she is not able to communicate with them and be part of their world.

While silenced, we also depend on Kvapil's vivid description of Rusalka's appearance and facial expression—we see her paleness, her pain and fury. In her silent state, Rusalka becomes like a painting that is observed by everyone. Rusalka could be compared to Munch's 'The Scream', which Žižek sees as a painting from which you expect to hear a sound.<sup>137</sup>

Although the entire opera focuses on the suffering of the protagonist, it is in Act II when Rusalka's pain is highlighted, and at this point her suffering clearly stems from her inability to fit into the human world, due to her lack of speech.

#### 2.4.4 The Prince and the Foreign Princess

The Prince is Rusalka's love object introduced at the end of Act I. If we understand the two worlds in the opera as symbolic of the unconscious and the conscious, the Prince would become the first 'layer' of Rusalka's conscious, her internalised object of desire. We first encounter the Prince in the woods, with the Hunter. He sings about Rusalka and remembers her 'wet embrace':

Potají ty vody mne v lokty své lákají,	<i>These waters secretly entice me into their arms</i>
jak bych měl divojký lovu cit	<i>As if the savage feeling of the hunt</i>
v objetí jejich za ochladit	<i>Would cool back down in their embrace.</i> <sup>138</sup>

The Prince remembers the same event, which Rusalka talks about in her aria 'Sem často přichází'. At the end of Act I, the Prince appears to be besotted with Rusalka, whom he refers to as his 'pohádka' ('fairy tale'). Although he keeps on calling her his fairy tale and a golden star, which might seem romantic, the Prince's intentions are quite clear:

Vím, že jsi kouzlo, které mine, a rozplyne se v mlžný rej, leč dokud čas náš neuplyne,	<i>I know you are magic that will pass and dissolve into a play of mist. but while our time lasts,</i>
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<sup>137</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'I Hear You with My Eyes'; or, the Invisible Master', in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, edited by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham and London: Durham University Press, 1996) 93-4

<sup>138</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 126

ó, pohádka má, neprchej!

*oh my fairytale, do not flee!*<sup>139</sup>

From these lines, it is obvious that the Prince knows that the relationship with Rusalka will not last, possibly due to her nature. In their first appearance in Act II, the Prince keeps revealing his true colours more and more:

Má sňatek dát mi teprve,  
co láska dávno chtěla,  
by rozhořela jsi do krve  
a byla ženou mou zcela?

*Am I to find only in marriage  
what love has long craved?  
That your ardour might be ignited  
and you might be my woman completely!*<sup>140</sup>

The Prince concludes his monologue with ‘mít musím tebe docela!’ (‘I must have you completely!’), which he repeats over and over again.

In the eyes of the Prince, Rusalka is not an aggressive siren or a ‘ravishable ondine’, with ‘appropriate female passivity’.<sup>141</sup> The way the Prince treats her is more in line with how some artists, such as Arthur Hacker, Gabriel Guay, treated women whose ‘natural habitat’ was the woods. Dijkstra talks about the nineteenth-century thinking about women, trees and nature. The trees, as he points out, are ‘rooted in the earth and fundamentally passive’, represent ‘only static energy’ and as such they stand for the ‘feminine mentality’.<sup>142</sup> Often portrayed lying prostrate in the woods, the women in paintings such as Hacker’s ‘Leaf Drift’ (1902), Guay’s ‘Poem of the Woods’ (1889) as Dijkstra observes, are ‘passive, but in the intensity of their primal needs their passivity is the source of aggressive suggestions’.<sup>143</sup> The Prince’s *pohádka*, it appears, reanimates these suggestions.

The Foreign Princess, on the other hand, does not seem to fit neatly into any of these fin-de-siècle fantasies. The appearance of the Foreign Princess stops the Prince’s intentions towards Rusalka. Unlike Rusalka the Foreign Princess is, in the Prince’s mind, able to respond to his needs. Often interpreted as Rusalka’s antagonist, she poses a real threat to Rusalka’s relationship with the

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 134

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 151

<sup>141</sup> Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 258

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 96

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 99-100

Prince. Infuriated with jealousy, the Foreign Princess wants the Prince to suffer by making him fall in love with her, thus destroying his union with a mute and pallid beauty, only finally to reject him in his moment of complete infatuation. Stich points out in his analysis of the libretto, *Cizí kněžna* (literally the foreign duchess), that the word ‘*cizí*’ has a negative connotation, referring to hostility, suspiciousness and hazardousness’.<sup>144</sup>

The way the Foreign Princess treats Rusalka and how harshly she addresses her is out of pure maliciousness (the sound of her voice is described as malicious), since Rusalka is in her place, or in her words ‘*že jiná dlí, kde já jsem chtěla být*’ (‘that another woman dwells where I wanted to be’).<sup>145</sup> Moreover, Cheek observes the use of formal and intimate *you*. The Foreign Princess addresses both the Prince and Rusalka with formal *you* (*vy*). Cheek points out the difference in a way she uses the formal *you* when addressing the two characters. The Foreign Princess and the Prince always address each other with formal *you*, as a sign of their aristocratic class. However, when the Princess address Rusalka with the formal *you*, she says it in ‘mock politeness’.<sup>146</sup> With her clever use of words, the Foreign Princess tells Rusalka that she is not part of their world.<sup>147</sup>

In the libretto, Kvapil tells us that Rusalka looks at the Foreign Princess with fury and pain.<sup>148</sup> However, Rusalka is not angry with the Foreign Princess: it is the *fickle* Prince, as the Turnspit describes him, she is angry with, precisely because of his fickleness.<sup>149</sup> She appears when the Prince is already bored with mute, pale and ‘cold’ Rusalka. With the following words, ‘*Jí hoří v očích vášně síla*’ (‘in her eyes there blazes the force of passion’), Rusalka describes the Foreign Princess to Vodník.<sup>150</sup> The passion that the Foreign Princess possesses is something that Rusalka lacks as a human. This particular contrast between Rusalka and the Foreign Princess is important, since the passion that the readers were able to experience through Rusalka’s words in Act I stops the moment she turns into a human and, as a result, loses her voice. Therefore, it appears as if the Foreign

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<sup>144</sup> Stich, ‘Kvapilova *Rusalky*’, 20

<sup>145</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 154

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 191

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 157

<sup>149</sup> The Turnspit quotes his aunt Háta, who calls the Prince ‘fickle’.

<sup>150</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 174

Princess, through her own voice that exudes passion, takes over Rusalka's nature and identity. The loss of voice therefore signifies the loss of passion, all of which are the result of Rusalka's unsuccessful metamorphosis, which causes her to remain between two worlds.

In a psychoanalytical analysis of the Foreign Princess, Lacan's interpretation of Freud's concepts of ideal ego, ego-ideal and superego would be helpful. In his return to Freud, Lacan makes a clear distinction between the three terms. Žižek summarises Lacan's interpretation: 'the ideal ego—idealised self-image of the subject (the way I would like to be, I would like others to see me)', the Ego-Ideal as an agency which one tries to impress with his/her ego image.<sup>151</sup> Therefore, in Freudian/Lacanian terms, the Foreign Princess could be perceived as Rusalka's ideal ego, something that she would like to be, how she wants the Prince to see her. The Foreign Princess is also Rusalka's ideal ego because she has something that Rusalka does not—the voice. Unlike silenced Rusalka, the voice of the Foreign Princess is heard in a society that wants to silence it; she is present in the society that does not want her there. This is precisely what Rusalka wants, to be heard and an active member of the human world, without causing anxiety in others.

#### 2.4.5 The Gamekeeper and Turnspit

It is often considered that the characters of the Gamekeeper (Hajný) and Turnspit (Kuchtík) are in the opera to offer comic relief. Stich observes that these comic characters were conventional Czech characters.<sup>152</sup> Some non-Czech productions cut out the scenes that include the two characters (along with some other scenes), due to the lack of faith in their comic appeal. However, even if the characters' comic side might not appeal to non-Czechs, with their removal, the opera loses an important layer. The two characters not only provide a musical contrast, but also a non-aristocratic perspective on the events and their view on the world of nature.<sup>153</sup> With their gossipy nature, they represent society in the opera. Not only do they provide the latest gossip, but the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit's opening scene in Act II reflect the prevailing negative attitudes towards women in the fin-

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<sup>151</sup> Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 80

<sup>152</sup> Stich, 'Kvapilova *Rusalky*', 20

<sup>153</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 26

de-siècle era. Cut this layer out, and the opera becomes detached from the time and culture of its creation and in a way loses a link with modern times, in which these attitudes still resonate.

The Gamekeeper and the Turnspit do not know what kind of creature Rusalka is. Relying on the fact that the Prince found her in the forest, and that she is therefore not one of them, they immediately see Rusalka as an evil enchantress. The Turnspit describes her with the following words:

Holka je ti němá,  
kapky krve nemá,  
chodí jako vyjevená,  
to by byla čistá žena!

*The girl is mute,  
does not have a drop of blood  
she walks as if were stunned,  
she would be a fine wife!*<sup>154</sup>

The word 'čistá' is often translated as 'perfect' or 'fine', but it also means 'pure'. The use of the word could be interpreted as questioning of Rusalka's purity. Brett Cooke, in his article 'Female Constraint in Kvapil and Dvořák's *Rusalka*', offers a description of established social norms in traditional societies, which could be applied to the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit's view on Rusalka:

It does not matter what really happened but what we perceive may have happened. In traditional societies and in much of modern art, a woman commits her reputation irrevocably when she 'plights her troth' to a man; if things do not work out, she cannot regain her perceived virginity and, hence, cannot attract another man.<sup>155</sup>

The two characters are not aware of the real situation between Rusalka and the Prince. Rusalka's 'impurity', in the mind of the gossip folk and her menacing presence in the castle is easy to connect with an overall negative view of all the characters that live in the woods, including Vodník, Ježibaba and the wood sprites. In their eyes, Rusalka is an embodiment of all the evil things that exist in the forest. She is Vodník that will drag the Prince into her realm; she is Ježibaba with her powers and also like the dancing wood sprites that can daze humans. The way the Gamekeeper describes the wood sprites could be seen as his interpretation of how Rusalka enchanted the Prince:

A kdo vidí lesní žínky

*And whoever sees the wood sprites,*

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 140-141

<sup>155</sup> Brett Cooke, 'Female Constraint in Kvapil and Dvorak's *Rusalka*', [https://www.academia.edu/843913/Constraining\\_the\\_Other\\_in\\_Kvapil\\_and\\_Dvor\\_aks\\_Rusalka](https://www.academia.edu/843913/Constraining_the_Other_in_Kvapil_and_Dvor_aks_Rusalka), 13 (15 April 2013), 13

bez košilky, bez sukýnky,  
omámí ho lásky chtíč.

*without shirt, without skirt,  
will be dazed by the desire of love!*<sup>156</sup>

Notice the verb ‘omámí’ in the description. The Turnspit uses the same verb to describe the Prince ‘bloudí jako omámen’ (‘he fumbles around as if he is in a daze’) after the Gamekeeper’s description of the forest creatures above.<sup>157</sup> Therefore, the Gamekeeper’s views are confirmed by the Turnspit: the Prince is in a trance. The verb ‘omámit’ is significant because it is a synonym for *obloudit*, meaning. *Obluda* (*monster*), a word that derives from the verb *obloudit*, can be seen in this act, as it is used by the Turnspit to describe Rusalka (his last word in Act II). Therefore, the two synonyms suggest Rusalka’s fatal attraction and danger that comes with it and also the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit’s anxiety.

In both Act II and III, the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit express their negative views, dominated by fear. Interestingly, they do not show this kind of animosity towards the Foreign Princess: she is only mentioned as the Prince’s new interest. Their old aunt Háta, whose guidance they seek, remains invisible at all times. Ježibaba, whom they fear, yet ask her to help them/the Prince, lives in the forest, and so do the tempting wood sprites.

The views of Gamekeeper and the Turnspit towards women are therefore quite interesting, as they tend to reflect certain attitudes from the era in which *Rusalka* premiered. In her article on misogyny and art in fin-de-siècle Vienna, Katherine Chandler points out that the misogynists of the era were trying to preserve the ‘ancient status quo’, which meant keeping women away from public spheres.<sup>158</sup> Therefore, there is a visible connection between the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit’s words and Weininger’s writings that summarise (through his own views) the prevailing gynophobia in the fin-de-siècle Habsburg Empire.

As the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit discuss Rusalka, they feel threatened by her presence and the possible influence she might have on the Prince and to an extent on their society. To the two characters Rusalka, even mute, manages to disrupt the status quo. The presence of a woman, such as

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<sup>156</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 144

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 145

<sup>158</sup> Chandler, ‘Ritual Sacrifice of Women’, 4-5

Rusalka, in their view, could change society for the worse. The negative views on Rusalka, as expressed by these two human characters, make us sympathise with the protagonist. What stands out in their opening scene in Act II is Rusalka's omnipresence and the fact that even silent and absent she narrates the story through the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit. With their negative views, Rusalka silently tells us of her struggle in the human world and of the fact that she is not welcomed amongst the humans.

### 2.5 Repetition in *Rusalka*

One of the most striking features in the libretto is the repetition of words/word units at a more local level, and across the libretto as a whole. As one of the key literary techniques of the opera, repetition does not escape a single character. Various types of repetition are used to put the emphasis on certain elements in the libretto. The simplest example of the repetition is its use in order to highlight the relationships between the characters: *tatičku* (daddy), *dítě* (child), *tetko* (auntie) *sestřičko* (little sister) and *strýčku* (uncle).<sup>159</sup> These nouns are all in the vocative case, referring to a person being addressed. The simple repetition is enriched, either with interjections or by adding more information that creates a feeling of disbelief: in Act I, Vodník says 'Dítě dítě, z noci do noci tvoje sestry budou pro tě plakat!' ('Child, child, night after night your sisters will cry for you!'). Another way to emphasise incredulity could be found in the opening scene of Act II. With repetition, the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit show their disbelief about the situation in the castle: 'to by byla, to by byla, to by byla čistá žena!' ('she would be, she would be, she would be a perfect woman'). To intensify characters' wishes, intentions or feelings, Kvapil uses the repetition of entire sentences or clauses. Rusalka's aria 'Sem často přichází' is a perfect example of this kind of repetition, since she emphasises her wish to be intimate with the Prince.

The other noticeable use of repetition is in the form of the imperative: 'Měsíčku, nezasni, nezasni!' ('Oh moon, do not fade, do not fade!'), 'Pomoz mi pomoz, zázračná ženo!' ('help me, help

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<sup>159</sup> Stich, 'Kvapilova *Rusalky*, 28

me, oh wondrous woman!'), 'Spas mne, spas' ('Save me, save me').<sup>160</sup> The imperatives end the story of Rusalka and her Prince, as he asks her to kiss him (*libej me*) therefore kill him and she tells him that she must destroy him ('musím tě, musím zahubit').

### 2.5.1 Rusalka, Vocatives and Imperatives

The repetition of vocative nouns and the imperatives emphasises one important feature of the libretto: that is, as Stich points out, the characters' need for contact that cannot be found.<sup>161</sup> Therefore, when Stich mentions the use of vocatives and imperatives in order to emphasise the need for contact, we can assume he means Rusalka's urge for contact specifically. The libretto affirms this idea, as Rusalka is never able to connect with the Prince the way she wanted. Rusalka's use of imperatives and vocatives creates an interesting effect on us as the readers. As we read the story, we see that repetition is futile. This futility makes us connect with Rusalka, as we desire to react upon her imperatives and vocatives ourselves and communicate with her.

Both the vocative case and the imperative are used for direct address. Even though all the characters repeat vocatives and imperatives, their use differs from Rusalka's, as their use is always directly or indirectly related to Rusalka and her situation. For example, Vodník's vocative 'ubohá Rusalko bledá', which is directed at Rusalka, echoes throughout the opera and affects the reader's reception of the protagonist. Some of the repeated vocatives and also the repetition in succession, especially in the case of the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit sound like everyday speech. Most of the Prince's vocatives and imperatives are directed at Rusalka - his final one, *libej me* (kiss me) is fulfilled by her. Additionally, since the entire story is told from Rusalka's perspective, in a way, all of the directives come from her subjectivity.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 28

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 28

## 2.6 Conclusion

In the analysis of the narrative, I have placed Rusalka within Freud's model of the psyche in order to depict her inner conflict in Act I and II. The inner conflict remains unresolved, as she ends in an aporetic state, stuck between the two worlds, natural/human or unconscious/conscious. I have also pointed to the importance of repetition, mainly the use of vocative nouns and imperatives, for the libretto's literary structure. This repetition, evident in Rusalka's vocabulary in Act I, leads to a state of silence and in Act III to the Prince's death. But repetition itself is also revealed as futile, as it leads her to sacrifice, and to turn the Prince into her first victim. With repetition, Kvapil emphasises the protagonist's pain and the inevitable tragic finale to the maximum. With her final transformation into a will-o-the-wisp, she constantly wanders and repeats the same task of luring men into their death.

In the chapter on the music that ensues, we will see that the idea of repetition, which I posit as so essential to *Rusalka/Rusalka*, continues to be of central importance. However, the nature of the repetition in music differs in essential ways from way repetition in the text functions. After laying out the way the musical repetition functions, I will connect the musical repetition with psychological concepts of desire and the death drive, as explained by Žižek and Salecl. By connecting these concepts with the repetition in music, I will discuss how together they reveal another facet of Rusalka's nature. An analysis of repetition in music will demonstrate ways in which Rusalka expresses her subjectivity and an impact it has on us as the listeners.

## Chapter Three: The Music

### 3.1 Composing *Rusalka*: Symphonies and Instrumental Forms

‘They look upon me as a composer of symphonies and yet I proved to them long years ago that my main bias is towards dramatic creation’.<sup>162</sup>

This quotation from Dvořák’s interview for the Viennese *Die Reichswehr*, two months before his death, suggests the importance of his operas and dramatic conceptions in general for his identity as a composer. Moreover, he stresses the importance of not being categorised simply as a symphonic or operatic composer, but as a composer of dramatic works of music, regardless of the genre. And yet of course Dvořák is most widely perceived as an instrumental/orchestral composer. The composer’s own in-between status, which has overshadowed the reception of his operas in particular across the twentieth century, could be seen reflected in the opera itself and its protagonist Rusalka, who remains stuck between two worlds, never belonging to any of them. My analysis of the music, with the focus on the repetition of themes and motifs, will focus on both of these aspects, rejecting the tendency to receive the musical language of the opera as either instrumental or Wagnerian, and instead to reflect on the dual aspect of Rusalka’s nature as she constantly tries to communicate through repeated themes and motifs to situate her relationship with either the natural or human world.

The widely accepted idea that Dvořák is only an instrumental/symphonic composer is emphasised by some scholars in the *Rusalka* discourse in order to counter the influence of the omnipresent Wagner and his techniques on our reading of Dvořák’s opera. In her analysis of *Rusalka*, for instance, Gabrielová claims that Dvořák works chiefly as an instrumental composer’.<sup>163</sup> David Beveridge adds to this notion, stating that Dvořák was ‘comfortable in the relatively circumscribed

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<sup>162</sup> Otakar Šourek, *Antonín Dvořák: Letters and Reminiscences*, trans. Roberta Finalyson Samsour (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985), 223

<sup>163</sup> Gabrielová, ‘Dvořák’s und Kvačils *Rusalka* und das Lebensgefühl des *fin de siècle*’, 74-75

forms of symphony and chamber music, and perhaps even more so in his sets of short dances'.<sup>164</sup> In one of the earliest reviews of *Rusalka*, Karel Hoffmeister writes that the fairy-tale, lyric atmosphere that Dvořák creates for the supernatural world comes from his symphonic poems.<sup>165</sup> Viktor Fischl describes the opera as a 'richly sustained symphonic poem', which he attributes to Dvořák's 'imaginative use of the orchestra'.<sup>166</sup>

As many scholars have observed, some of the musical techniques employed in *Rusalka* do indeed come from Dvořák's instrumental compositions. One of the most important motifs, known as the 'four-note motif' in the opera, has its origins in Dvořák's Symphony No.2 in B-flat Major.<sup>167</sup> Even the easily recognisable theme that is associated with *Rusalka* comes from Dvořák's sketchbook, in which the theme was conceptualised for a sonata for cello and piano that he sketched during his stay in America.<sup>168</sup> From the American sketchbooks, the main theme for the Polonaise in Act II is also derived, which was originally intended to be part of a piano piece entitled *Dithyramb*.<sup>169</sup> These materials from Dvořák's sketchbooks never fulfilled their destiny to become instrumental pieces, instead becoming an important part of *Rusalka*. The mutation of instrumental material into the opera might thus seem to reaffirm the idea that Dvořák took instrumental forms as the basis of his compositional approach for opera as well as instrumental music.

The fundamental paradox, however, as Beveridge has pointed out, is that Dvořák manages to achieve something quite unique in *Rusalka*.<sup>170</sup> The uniqueness of this technique, so to speak, is that although he uses formal units that are typical of instrumental music in such way that the instrumental basis of the forms are clear, these units at the same time tend to be very discreet and well integrated in

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<sup>164</sup> David Beveridge, 'Formal Structure in Dvořák's "Rusalka"', in *Musical Dramatic Works by Antonín Dvořák: Papers from an International Musicological Conference, Prague, 19-21 May, 1983*, edited by Markéta Hallová and Jarmila Tauerová-Veverková (Prague: Česká hudební společnost, 1989), 132

<sup>165</sup> Karel Hoffmeister, 'Antonín Dvořák's *Rusalka*' in *Dvořák and His World*, translated by Tatiana Firkušný, edited by Michael Beckerman, 253

<sup>166</sup> Viktor Fischl, *Antonin Dvorak, His Achievement, by Gerald Abraham (and others)* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1970), 163

<sup>167</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 23

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 22

<sup>169</sup> <http://www.antonin-dvorak.cz/en/rusalka>, (1 December 2013)

<sup>170</sup> Beveridge, 'Formal Structure in Dvořák's "Rusalka"', 132

the opera, without damaging the notion of melodic continuity.<sup>171</sup> In that respect, Beveridge argues that Dvořák created operatic music that even ‘Wagner would have admired’;<sup>172</sup> perhaps, I might add, his unique blend of instrumental perspectives into opera is a perfect example of this technique, he notes the opening section in Act I (the scene with the Wood Sprites). The playful opening scene is made complex by the way Dvořák employs instrumental forms. The overall structure of the scene is in a rondo form.<sup>173</sup> What is more, Beveridge points out that the large section that appears before the modulation to C sharp major is in miniature sonata form.<sup>174</sup> A rondo form, similar to the one from Act I, also appears at the beginning of Act II.<sup>175</sup> In addition, everyone’s favourite example of this device is ‘Měsíčku Na Nebi Hlubokém’ (the famous ‘Song to the Moon’) in Act I, which resembles a strophic form ‘with two verses plus coda, the sections being separated by a brief orchestral ritornello during which Rusalka stretches her hands out to the moon’.<sup>176</sup> Despite the prevalence and interest of these instrumental forms, however, they do not in themselves define the musical techniques with which Dvořák illuminates the dramatic content.

### 3.1.1 The Influence of Wagner

The use in *Rusalka* of instrumental forms and of music intended for instrumental works has been noted by some musicologists, as we have seen. However, the majority of scholars focus their attention on Dvořák’s use of techniques that are attributed to Wagner. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was impossible to remain indifferent to the influence of the omnipresent Wagner within the borders of the Habsburg Empire. Dvořák is certainly not an exception. Some scholars tend to place Wagnerian influence at the beginning of Dvořák’s career. However, as Gabrielová observes, Wagner’s influence was present throughout Dvořák’s musical career, to the end of his life.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>177</sup> Jarmila Gabrielová, ‘Antonín Dvořák and Richard Wagner’, translated by David Beveridge, *Muzikologija: časopis Muzikološkog Instituta Srpske Akademije Nauka i Umetnosti* 6 (2006), 314

Gabrielová gives examples, such as Dvorak's article on Franz Schubert, in which Dvořák expresses his admiration of Wagner, praising the condensation of 'all his genius into ten great music-dramas' and also Wagner's ability to invent 'weird harmonies'.<sup>178</sup> In his letter to Kvapil, Dvořák asked him for the text of the only duet in *Rusalka* between the Prince and the Foreign Princess. Although he was decisively against duets, Dvořák believed that the duet between the two characters could work well, specifically comparing it to Wagner's *Tristan* at the end of Act II.<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, Beckerman suggests that Dvořák's time in America influenced the composer to focus more on opera composing, in general.<sup>180</sup> In addition, he posits that Wagner's popularity in America seems to have influenced Dvořák more than the German composer ever had back in the homeland.<sup>181</sup>

### 3.1.2 Musical Continuity

Scholars do not rest with establishing the influence of Wagner in Dvořák's life; they also search for Wagnerian elements in *Rusalka* itself. One of the most interesting Wagnerian features in *Rusalka* is the sense of musical continuity. Beveridge notes the application of Wagnerian continuous music in *Rusalka*, because of the way the 'borders' between free passages and set numbers are erased.<sup>182</sup>

Beveridge explains this as follows:

One factor in this feeling of continuity is the fact that the modulatory, recitative-like passages which connect the principal numbers of the opera are themselves interspersed with smaller or slightly less consolidated areas of stability.<sup>183</sup>

He gives another example of this 'blurring' technique, which he describes as 'gradual consolidation', rather than a sense of 'disjuncture'.<sup>184</sup> Beveridge provides a beautiful example of this, which is the transition from the Prelude to the opening Wood Sprites scene; with a prolonged harmony on the

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 313

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 314

<sup>180</sup> Michael B. Beckerman, *New Worlds of Dvořák: Searching in America for the Composer's Inner Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 224

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 224

<sup>182</sup> Beveridge, 'Formal Structure In Dvořák's ''Rusalka'', 132-3

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 132-3

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 133

dominant, which ends the Prelude, the following scene commences, still on the dominant.<sup>185</sup> Thus, the listener is left with a feeling of confusion, as the clear end to the Prelude and the beginning of the opening scene are not really given musically.

As a reaction against a feeling of being ‘trapped’ in a continuous melody, Beveridge stresses the importance of dividing the opera into a various ‘musical gems’, which are the sections in *Rusalka* with a different tonic centre. He elaborates this notion further with some musical examples from Act I and concludes that:

the advantage of this division into separate units is that the listener can take his musical bearings, mark his progress, as it were, through the expanse of the work rather than feeling that he is adrift in a continuous musical flux.<sup>186</sup>

This idea of being ‘adrift in a continuous musical flux’ is precisely how Poizat describes the effect that Wagner’s continuous melody produces in some listeners. Poizat presents a discussion between opera fans, in which they discuss the feeling of *vertigo*, madness and the powerful effect of *drowning*, which Wagner’s melodic continuity causes in some of the listeners.<sup>187</sup> Wagner himself was aware of this effect in his operas, especially in the last act of *Tristan*.<sup>188</sup> The sense of melodic continuity is strongly present in *Rusalka*. Therefore, Beveridge advises us to mark certain sections in the opera in order to save ourselves from melodic drowning.

### 3.1.3 Leitmotifs

Beveridge also observes that the sense of unity in *Rusalka* is created by the use of repetition of melodic motifs.<sup>189</sup> The assimilation of Wagner’s famous leitmotif technique is hard to miss in *Rusalka*. In fact, the use of leitmotif technique that Dvořák employs is discussed far more than any other ‘Wagnerian’ techniques, such as continuous musical flow, avoidance of ensemble writing,

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 133

<sup>186</sup> Beveridge, ‘Formal Structure in Dvořák’s ‘*Rusalka*’, 132

<sup>187</sup> Poizat, *The Angel’s Cry*, 74

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 74

<sup>189</sup> Beveridge, ‘Formal Structure in Dvořák’s ‘*Rusalka*’, 133

chromatic harmony and appoggiatura.<sup>190</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, Clapham discussed the system of leitmotifs in the 1950s, as a system that underlines most of the opera. Both Gabrielová and Beveridge note the ambiguity in Dvořák's use of leitmotifs. The ambiguity is a result of a confusion—whether to interpret the use of leitmotifs as a symptom of Dvořák's instrumental legacy or as a symptom of Wagnerian influence. Gabrielová states that Dvořák works with leitmotifs 'in terms of autonomic ('absolute') music.'<sup>191</sup> Beveridge states that the use of leitmotifs in *Rusalka*: 'is very similar to that of the Wagnerian leitmotif, except that the appearance of a given motif in many cases seems to have a more purely musical significance than is usually the case with Wagner'.<sup>192</sup>

Beveridge also adds that Dvořák's approach to the recurrent motifs resembles the approach in some of his instrumental works, in which a motif is 'well displayed in many passages where he subjects them to intensive development'.<sup>193</sup> He also observes the transformation of the repeated motif in 'unexpected contexts', in moments when they appear unrecognisable.<sup>194</sup> An example of this is the transformation of the first motif in the opera, which later becomes an instrumental introduction to the Polonaise in Act II.<sup>195</sup> Summarising Beveridge and Gabrielová, Cheek concludes that Dvořák's use of leitmotifs creates an effect that suggest they are 'not arbitrary at all', yet at the same time they do not seem to be specific.<sup>196</sup> He also adds that this ambiguous feeling that the composer creates with his interesting use of leitmotifs fits well with the general ambiguity of *Rusalka* and the fin-de-siècle era.<sup>197</sup>

### 3.1.4 Labelling the Leitmotifs

The practice of labelling the leitmotifs in *Rusalka* occupies an important place in the majority of the analyses of the opera. The main motifs in the opera have been labelled in various ways by

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<sup>190</sup> Fischl, *Antonin Dvorak, His Achievement*, 228

<sup>191</sup> Gabrielová, 'Dvořák's und Kvapil's *Rusalka* und das Lebensgefühl des *fin de siècle*', 74-75

<sup>192</sup> Beveridge, 'Formal Structure In Dvořák's "Rusalka"', 133-134

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 134

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, 134

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 134

<sup>196</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 24

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, 24

musicologists such as Šourek, Beveridge and Gabrielová. Each suggests different interpretations, together with different ideas about what each motif means in *Rusalka*. The scholars tend to agree that certain motifs are the most important and as such the most repeated in the opera, such as the themes associated with Rusalka, the Prince and the four-note motif respectively. The themes and the motifs that the scholars analyse definitely stand out in *Rusalka*, as they are indeed the key musical passages that follow the protagonist on her path and convey her experience to us. However, when an analysis relies on labelling the motifs, the nature of the interpretation ends up focusing on the nature of the label assigned, which I find can just as often lead to mislabelling and misinterpretation. In *Rusalka*, the motifs multivalent and ambiguous nature makes their labelling a frustrating, and not particularly useful, enterprise. Instead, my analysis will explore the repetition of musical motifs themselves (whatever we call them), as they become essential in conveying Rusalka's sad operatic fate.

My analysis of the repeated themes and motifs will try to demonstrate how they depict the protagonist's desire and suffering through this notion of repetition, in connection with the text. My analysis, divided into three sections, aims to demonstrate what music does for Rusalka on her journey in the opera, focusing on three different musical levels in which Rusalka's suffering and desire are illustrated. The first section will be centred on the repetition of the themes A (Ex. 3.1) and B (Ex. 3.2) and their relationship to Rusalka and her object of desire; the second section will focus on the use of the repetition of these themes during Rusalka's silent phase and also how Dvořák heightens her suffering in other ways, such as the complete silencing of Rusalka during the scenes in which she does not participate; the final section will illustrate the musical interconnection that Dvořák creates between different scenes and characters.

The lyrical theme, which is strongly associated with Rusalka, is the opera's main theme; because for me the core idea of desire and suffering, which I identify as the basis of the opera, sits at the heart of our musical and dramatic experience. As the most repeated theme in the opera, it is associated with Rusalka: it always appears when she is present; when the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit gossip, on the other hand, the theme becomes completely distorted. When the Foreign

Princess asks the Prince about Rusalka, it is obvious that he is thinking about her as the ‘Rusalka’ theme is heard.

Example 3.1: Theme A (the ‘Rusalka’ theme), bb. 3-7



The idea that this theme is associated with Rusalka comes from its premiere. In his review, Hoffmeister mentions the ‘Rusalka’ motif and writes about its variations and modifications.<sup>198</sup> The motif associated with Rusalka indeed is an essential part of the fairy-tale, lyric atmosphere: that is, the epithets that describe the natural world. It is not tied to the natural world though; rather, it follows Rusalka on her voyage. The ‘Rusalka theme’ is essentially different to the music and rhythm of the humans, such as the Foreign Princess and the polka rhythm (as Karel Knittl observes) in the music of the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit.<sup>199</sup>

The theme associated with the Prince is not as lyrical as the ‘Rusalka’ theme. It appears numerous times in association with the Prince, although it is not heard when the Prince is courting the Foreign Princess. His ‘theme’ is the last one to be heard in the opera. Its last appearance, with its weak, almost ethereal quality in the end, is interpreted as symbolising the Prince’s death.

<sup>198</sup> Hoffmeister, ‘Antonín Dvořák’s *Rusalka*’, 255

<sup>199</sup> Karel Knittl, ‘Opera’, in *Dvořák and His World*, translated by Tatiana Firkušný, edited by Michael Beckerman, 259

Example 3.2: Theme B, the Prince's 'theme', bb. 27-28



The four-note motif, which in my analysis I will label as motif C (Ex. 3.3), appears throughout the opera in many different shapes.

Example 3.3: Motif C, b. 169



As such, its 'role' in *Rusalka* is ambiguous. Due to this quality of the motif, musicologists offer a range of different interpretations. Otakar Šourek calls this the motif of water magic.<sup>200</sup> Decades later, Beveridge names it the motif of frustrated yearning. Gabrielová, in her analysis of Act III, or more specifically, the second dialogue between Rusalka and Ježibaba, refers to motif C as a 'fate motif'.<sup>201</sup> This change between 'the magic of water' and the interpretations of Beveridge and Gabrielová shows a shift in the interpretive modes of *Rusalka*, moving away from the 'nature', fairy-tale-like setting and leaning towards other types of interpretations.<sup>202</sup> Although both Beveridge and Gabrielová do not assume a Wagnerian perspective in relation with Dvořák's use of leitmotifs, their analysis of *Rusalka* appears to be a result of a traditional Wagnerian labelling of the leitmotifs, especially in Beveridge's case.

Through the use of this leitmotif technique, then, repetition becomes an important aspect of *Rusalka*'s musical language. Interestingly, the importance of musical repetition offers a musical analogue to the repetition that is such a prominent feature of the libretto.

<sup>200</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 23

<sup>201</sup> Gabrielová, 'Dvořák's und Kvapil's *Rusalka* und das Lebensgefühl des *fin de siècle*', 76

<sup>202</sup> <http://www.antonin-dvorak.cz/en/rusalka>, (1 December 2013)

### 3.1.5 Motivic Repetition

Motivic repetition is an important element in *Rusalka*, enriching the story and fundamentally shaping the listener's experience. It does not completely match the repetition of the text; rather, it is attached to the story since it follows its development. At the same time, Dvořák takes the melodic repetition to another level, creating interconnections between the two worlds and the characters where Kvapil does not make such connections. This composing technique and constant repetition of various motifs create a link between the scenes in the opera; and as the story develops, repeated motifs act as a reminder of both the scenes and also the words. The motivic repetition, as I will argue, depicts Rusalka's desire and suffering. Moreover, the following analysis will break away from the previous labelling of the motifs in Wagnerian terms (that is, as having a single meaning across the opera), and instead interpret what they mean when connected to the libretto in specific contexts, and also the relationship that Dvořák creates between some other motifs. My discussion of the use of repetition in the music more generally in the opera will allow me then to shift focus to the mute Rusalka, as possibly the most fascinating aspect of the protagonist's nature, in which I believe Dvořák sets up our experience of her subject position, despite her operatic silence. My analysis of motivic repetition itself relies on psychological concepts: namely, on the sense of a desire that is always unsatisfied, and of the death drive that is satisfied by a repeated failure/inability to die. Rusalka's unsatisfied desire relates to the Prince, whereas her painful immortality relates to the death drive. Since she cannot die, Rusalka constantly circles around it, failing to reach it and gain satisfaction from it.

In the libretto, it is clearly stated that Rusalka desires to become a human, in order to possess a human soul and to be loved by the Prince. According to current psychoanalytical theories, desire is defined as seeking out 'something prohibited or unavailable', which is precisely the case with Rusalka's desire.<sup>203</sup> These current psychological ideas, as laid out by Lacanians such as Žižek and Salecl, could be applied to Rusalka's tragic fate. Her desire remains unsatisfied: she loses the love of the Prince and does not gain a human soul. As a result, the destructive force, the death drive, takes over. Completely in the realm of the death drive Rusalka, therefore, becomes trapped in what Salecl

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<sup>203</sup> Salecl, 'The Silence of the Feminine *Jouissance*', 180

refers to as ‘the self-sufficient closed circuit of the deadly compulsion-to-repeat’ and this repetition satisfies her death drive.<sup>204</sup> However, this satisfaction is not similar to what satisfying her desire would have brought to her, because on the level of the drive ‘there is only *jouissance*’, a painful satisfaction.<sup>205</sup> Therefore, the story becomes divided into two sections: Act I and II, which are all about Rusalka’s desire, and Act III, which is about Rusalka’s death drive. The search for the satisfaction of the desire and the death drive creates two circles in the opera—one for Act I and II, which focus on Rusalka circling around the object of her desire (the Prince) and the second one for the death drive in Act III.

Motivic repetition does not lead anywhere specific: indeed, in that sense the repeated motifs help communicate Rusalka’s own futility, as she never attains the object of her desire. Rather than labelling the motifs in a Wagnerian analytic fashion, I argue that all of these motifs convey both Rusalka’s desire and suffering, the very nature of the protagonist and her constant struggle to belong in the natural and/or human world. The various motifs cannot be labelled as either ‘desire’ or ‘suffering’; rather, as I will argue, their development across the opera suggests that the musical development mirrors and illustrates the essential dramatic development of Rusalka herself. I will focus predominantly on two of the themes that appear throughout the opera, the themes associated with Rusalka and the Prince, which in my analysis will be labelled as the theme A and B. Also, I will be analysing musical/textual interconnections in the opera, focusing on three examples that are important for the development of the story.

### 3.2 Repetition

I open with a discussion of the Prelude, in which themes A and B occur for the first time, before being repeated. With the discussion of the Prelude, I will only demonstrate how the motivic repetition is set up at the beginning. Moving away from the Prelude, I will then try to demonstrate the ways in which the repetition of themes A and B illustrates Rusalka’s suffering and desire.

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 179

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 180

### 3.2.1 The Prelude

As asserted above, musical repetition can be heard in the opening Prelude. In its own way, the Prelude could be interpreted as telling the story of Rusalka's journey, through the way it portrays a musical motivic transformation, which connects with Rusalka's coming dramatic transformation into a human. Theme A (Ex. 3.1) is a quite lyrical theme. It sets up the much-discussed fairy-tale atmosphere of the opera, with the help of *con sordino* violins and violas and the woodwinds, which give the theme quite a soft sound. The passage containing the short rhythmic motif and theme A is then repeated in different keys. When theme A is repeated for the second time, it develops into a bridge, set in E-flat major, played by the strings, the woodwinds and the horns. The bridge section finally melts into theme B (Ex. 3.2). When at the end of Act I the Prince sees Rusalka in the woods and wants her to come with him, he actually sings the main melody of the bridge section. At that point, this music explicitly becomes the bridge between the Prince and Rusalka, as he sings 'Můj skončen lov' ('My hunt is over'). This scene in Act I is the last time this motif is heard, as the connection of the two characters slowly fades in Act II.

In the Prelude, theme B, played by the woodwinds, is also quite lyrical. The theme is repeated twice and in the middle of the development of the theme A can be heard played by the clarinets. The short rhythmic motif ends theme B, and we return to theme A played by the strings and by the bassoons (bb. 42-46). In this second appearance, the first half of theme A is played by the trombones. The harsh sound of the trombones transforms the original lyricism of the main theme, setting up an almost tortured version of the theme, which could be taken to prefigure the pain that Rusalka will come to experience from the cruelty of the human world and her inability to become a part of that world. Theme A leads us to the conclusion of the Prelude, which ends with a dominant seventh E major chord.

### 3.2.2 Rusalka and Repetition of Theme A in Acts I and III

Theme A is one of the themes that appears most frequently in the opera. In its structure, it is almost always unstable. Due to the harmonic context in which it appears, theme A always seeks a development or resolution. Even in its last appearance as a funeral march, theme A, through variations of the last segment of the theme, seeks a resolution. However, it only leads into a new tonal section in bar 1337 (the modulation is announced in bar 1336). Therefore, because of the strong association of this theme with Rusalka, the motif's relative instability ends up creating a constantly shifting musical depiction of both desire and suffering. The musical lack of resolution of theme A establishes, for the listener, a desire for something or someone to complete the theme. Due to a strong association of theme A with Rusalka and/or through the theme A's musical characteristic, the listeners themselves end up being invited to feel the same sense of restless desire.

Interestingly, theme A, which is so strongly associated with Rusalka throughout the opera, is absent from an important and intimate aria 'Sem často přichází' ('Often he comes') in Act I. In 'Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém' ('Song to the Moon', Act I) the theme, played by the oboes and the clarinets, introduces Rusalka, and later, played by the cor anglais, accompanies the end of the aria. Across the course of the opera, the theme is constantly developed and altered until it finally becomes, as Beckerman points out, a funeral march in the final act.<sup>206</sup> Clapham suggests that the transformation of theme A reflects Rusalka's mood changes, rather than her two metamorphoses.<sup>207</sup>

What is interesting is that, unlike theme B, none of the characters sing theme A: rather, it is played exclusively in the orchestra, with three major exceptions, in each of which it is Rusalka who sings it. Each time Rusalka sings theme A, or rather a fragment of it, she is in a different state. In each state, theme A is altered. While the idea that Clapham asserts is plausible, I believe that the vocal alteration of the theme reflects her polymorphism. The following three examples of Rusalka singing theme A in three acts illustrate this idea.

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<sup>206</sup> Beckerman, *New Worlds of Dvořák*, 201

<sup>207</sup> Clapham, 'The Operas of Antonín Dvořák', 66

We first get Rusalka singing theme A in Act I (Example 3.4), when she is talking to Ježibaba and is still a water nymph. The words she sings are ‘tvá odvěka’ (‘your age-old’, referring to Ježibaba’s wisdom). Interestingly, the entire line that Rusalka sings is ‘dovede proměnit moudrost tvá odvěká’ (‘you can transform them with your age-old wisdom’, referring to transformations from monster to human and vice versa).<sup>208</sup> With this line, Rusalka alludes to her current state and her future transformation.

Example 3.4: Act I, Rusalka - Ježibaba scene, bb. 697-698



The second instance in which Rusalka sings theme A is in Act II, when she regains her voice. In this scene, desperate Rusalka sings about her realisation that there is no place for her in the human world and that the Prince has betrayed her ‘pro něj ztracena’ (for him lost’):

Example 3.5: Rusalka, aria Ó marno to je’ (‘Oh, it is futile’), Act II, bb. 1142-1143



The third example is also altered and appears in Act III. In this scene (Ex. 3.6), Rusalka sings ‘miláčku, vím, to vím’ (‘sweetheart, I know, I know’), with the following text – ‘nikdy víc tě nespátřím’ (‘never more will I set eyes on you’).<sup>209</sup>

<sup>208</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 112

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid*, 210



the moment of *jouissance*. Theme A changes its meaning with Rusalka's final metamorphosis - once illustrating restless desire, it now depicts the restless death drive, another circuit from which she cannot escape. Again, through repetition, Rusalka establishes a connection with the listeners. As she communicates with us through repetition, she wants us to sympathise especially as she kills/kisses the Prince. As a will-o-the-wisp, it is in her nature now to lure and to kill. Therefore, in the very last appearance/repetition of theme A, Rusalka wants the listeners to understand not only the pain she feels as she kills the Prince, but also her nature.

### 3.2.3 Rusalka and Repetitions of Theme B

Theme A, as asserted before, is not the only theme that could be interpreted as depicting Rusalka's suffering/desire through repetition. Theme B, which is considered to represent the Prince, could also be considered to depict the aforementioned ideas related to Rusalka, since there is some ambiguity in the opera between the musical representation of the Prince, Rusalka's object of desire, and the representation of Rusalka's desire/suffering.

Theme B, seen as representing a human, is not very different from the music commonly associated with the natural world. It is quite lyrical, and as such it certainly stands in stark contrast to the music assigned to the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit: their music has a folk-like melody, due to their non-aristocratic social status. Theme B is heard in almost all of the scenes in which the Prince appears. However, it is missing from the scene in which he declares his love for the Foreign Princess. Further, after Rusalka's transformation into a human, theme B is hardly heard, as the Prince becomes disinterested in her. Therefore, theme B does not seem to have something to do with the Prince himself, but with the Prince in relation to Rusalka: perhaps it represents his love for Rusalka, or even depicts how Rusalka perceives him, how she imagines him. In fact, since we hear the story from Rusalka's subjective perspective, we are drawn to see the Prince through her eyes and feel, through the repetition, her struggle to connect with him.

The lyricism of theme B creates a strong connection with Rusalka and her music. As the Prince distances himself from Rusalka during Act II, and the theme disappears completely, it is as if

her object of desire has become even more unattainable. In the finale, theme B appears again and suggests a different meaning. In the context of the last scene and the overall idea behind Act III, the Prince transforms from Rusalka's object of desire to her first victim. For Rusalka, the experience of kissing/killing the Prince is the moment of her *jouissance*.

### 3.3 Silent Rusalka

Although Rusalka's mute phase is considerably shorter than her singing one, her muteness in the opera is too important to be ignored. For Kvapil and Dvořák to create a title character who is also mute is certainly unusual by operatic standards. Voice, it could be argued, is one of the central communicators of operatic meaning; moreover Rusalka's voice, our guide throughout the opera and the essence of her dramatic characterisation, is completely removed from us at the most crucial period in her character's development. She is not able to speak to humans; only in her final metamorphosis is she able to speak to the Prince.

In Act I, when Rusalka makes a deal with Ježibaba, she is told that she will suffer as a human, as she will be mute:

a než nabudeš jí, budeš trpět též: pro  
všechn lidský sluch něma zůstaneš!

*and before you will gain love, you will  
also suffer: to all human ears you will  
remain mute.*<sup>210</sup>

Thus, there is a strong correlation between muteness and suffering. The entire opera focuses on the protagonist's suffering and unfulfilled desire; yet in Act II, these central themes are highlighted by her muteness. In the opera's text, Kvapil provides information about how Rusalka looks and feels inside the silent exterior. However, when we listen to the opera, we are aware of her condition, although not to the same extent as when reading the libretto or watching the opera.

While mute, Rusalka, like her predecessors, Weber's Silvana and Auber's Fenella, communicates through music. The idea of Rusalka-as-orchestra is interesting because it describes her

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<sup>210</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 117

place in the opera while mute, as she turns into a pale shadow. In her own way, Rusalka communicates with us, as we hear those fairy-tale-like motifs that we associate with her coming from the orchestra. Therefore, we could argue that what Dvořák does with Rusalka in Act II and at the end of Act I is that he lets us get inside her head and experience her subjectivity and feel what she feels inside. Through orchestral music, using repetition as one of the main tools of expression, Rusalka invites us to see the story from her point of view, thus experience her tragedy. As a result of the connection that Rusalka creates with the listeners, especially while mute, we, as listeners, end up sympathising with her.

If this is true, then, what is the nature of Rusalka's silence? While the idea that the orchestra represents her while mute is accurate, it does not completely explain the complexity of the relationship that Rusalka has with the orchestra. The orchestra assists Rusalka and fails her at the same time. Moreover, it silences her with the music that makes her become more alienated from the human world. This idea exists in the use of diegetic music, such as the Polonaise and the wedding chorus song 'Květiny bílé po cestě' ('White flowers along the road'). In the Polonaise, she does not participate—as a character that is not entirely human, she is excluded from the dance, with its emphasis on sociable physicality. Indeed, Dvořák does not give dance music to watery creatures, such as Rusalka, her sisters and Vodník, thus creating another contrast between the two worlds. During the wedding chorus, the choir sings indirectly to her, further creating distance between humans and Rusalka.

Whether Rusalka is either mute or not, the orchestra's role remains the same as in Acts I and III—to get to the object of her desire through the motivic repetition. It also, as stated above, silences her with the music of the Polonaise and the wedding chorus song. With the information above, I will try to explain in the following paragraphs how the motivic repetition prolongs Rusalka's failure in trying to reach the Prince, and also indicate some other ways in which Dvořák emphasises her silent desire and suffering.

### 3.3.1 Silence and Repetition of Theme A and B

In Act II, there are couple of scenes which clearly illustrate the failure of the motivic repetition on behalf of Rusalka. The most vivid example of this is the second scene in Act II, the scene in which the Prince sings to Rusalka. He clearly wants to be with her (even force her), yet she is unable to respond either vocally or physically. The repetition of themes A in the scene is quite important as it depicts Rusalka's desire circling around the Prince. Although theme B is not as repeated in this scene as theme A, its appearance is important as it also depicts the protagonist's attempt to attain the object of her desire.

In this scene, theme A musically dominates—we hear it a couple of times before the Prince starts to sing (first appearance bb. 380-389 and later bb. 400-406/first measure). The orchestra plays variations of the last segment of theme A until, with an ascending melody, it leads straight into dance-like music. The dance-like music interrupts the motivic repetition of the theme A (bb.391-400/first measure), but it is theme A that leads to the Prince. As the Prince continues to sing (the altered dance-like theme, bb. 406/last measure-418/first two measures), the last segment of theme A is played by the cor anglais (bb.408-417) until the entire theme is picked by the cello (bb. 418-420). The cello also plays the entire theme A (bb. 418-421) and the horns in F join (bb. 419-421).

After many repetitions and variations of theme A that depict Rusalka's restless desire, we hear theme B, which the Prince sings (b. 421/last measure), while Rusalka silently (although we can hear her) follows him and responds to him in her own way. Themes A and B completely disappear towards the end of the scene, right before the Foreign Princess starts to sing (b. 449). The repetition of theme A, in its entirety or just in fragments, and also theme B before and while the Prince sings, depicts Rusalka's desire circling around her object of desire, which she is unable to attain. Therefore, this example fits within the general idea of Rusalka's entangled desire and suffering, something that as a silent human, she is not able to express to other humans, such as the Prince. The Prince is unaware of the restless desire underneath Rusalka's silent exterior in this scene. The listeners, however, are able to feel this through the repetition characteristic of her musical idiom. As a result,

the Prince becomes frustrated with her passivity and coldness, and the listeners become frustrated with the Prince, due to his inability to connect with Rusalka.

### 3.3.2 The Silencing of Rusalka

Dvořák makes Rusalka's suffering in silence vivid by depicting moments in which the listener is made acutely conscious of her inability to respond vocally, such as the scene with the Prince in Act II (discussed above), and also later on in two scenes with both the Prince and the Foreign Princess in the same act. Dvořák also emphasises her suffering in scenes in which she is not able to participate, such as the Polonaise, in which all the humans are able to join together in dance. As asserted above Rusalka, as an aquatic creature, does not have dance music.

The Polonaise, which excludes Rusalka, incorporates theme A and its variations. It is interesting that the diegetic music that depicts the distance between Rusalka and the humans would repeat theme A, the theme that is an essential part of Rusalka's musical idiom. The repetition of theme A could be interpreted as silent Rusalka trying to be part of the Prince's world, even if it means that she would have to remain in the background. However, the appearance and repetition of theme A in this scene does not necessarily have to depict the given idea. Indeed, its repetition suggests Rusalka's shadowlike nature while mute, confined to the background where, according to the humans, she belongs. These two ideas are what, from my perspective, Rusalka expresses through the repetition of theme A. The diegetic music in the Polonaise silences and alienates her from the humans, yet Rusalka does not let the orchestra or humans take over her story. Even in this scene, Rusalka is the one who narrates her tragic tale - with the repetition of theme A, she communicates with us, the listeners, and tells us of her forced exclusion from the human world and the inability to become part of it.

The scene with the chorus 'Květiny Bíle Po Cestě' ('White Flowers along the Road'), a wedding song that centres on Rusalka and the Prince, also depicts Rusalka's suffering. In the song, she is described as 'Květiny bílé nejdříve úpalem slunce zašly' ('the white flowers died the soonest

from the scorching sun').<sup>211</sup> The wedding song is not Rusalka's lament, as it describes the Prince's journey into manhood; the lament comes from Vodník who joins the chorus (although none of the other characters can hear him) and interprets the chorus' words, as he reflects on Rusalka's agony and her anathema. Interestingly, before Vodník starts to sing, the orchestra plays theme A, signalling yet another failure to fulfil the desire.

Therefore, during her mute phase, Rusalka's desire is sabotaged in two ways: the failure of motivic repetition, which always remains unconscious, and also her inability to sing. With silence, Kvapil and Dvořák heighten Rusalka's suffering and the failure, through voice, to reach the Prince and to fulfil her desire.

### 3.4 Motivic Interconnections

As asserted above, Dvořák creates interconnections between characters and scenes through the way in which he interweaves repeating music. It is this recurring musical element in *Rusalka* that triggers the listener's memory and leads us to make the connections. Rather than establishing clear motivic connections, they obviously serve to connect certain moments in the opera. Cheek and Beveridge discuss some of these interconnections, such as the vocal link between Rusalka and the Prince. Beveridge also observes the alteration of the chords in the Rusalka-Ježibaba dialogue and links it with the Prince's death. The two examples will be also discussed below, as I will take these observations further by connecting them with desire and suffering, and also with the concept of desire and the death drive. To these two examples I will add an example of the interconnection between Ježibaba and Rusalka that I have noted above.

#### 3.4.1 Rusalka - the Prince

These three of the most memorable examples join Rusalka, Ježibaba and the Prince, through the musical, and not coincidentally also the textual interconnections. In each case the link is created both

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 166

through the orchestral and vocal melody. Cheek points out the musical link between the main theme from ‘Sem Často Přichází’ (‘Often He Comes’), which Rusalka sings in Act I, and the theme that the Prince sings in Act II:

Example 3.7: Sem Často přichází (‘Often He Comes’), Act I, bb. 362- 365

*Moderato ma un poco più mosso* ♩=100  
(toužně a horoucně)

Rusalka

Sem ča-sto při-chá-zí a v obje-ti mé stou-pá

Detailed description: This is a musical score for Rusalka's aria 'Sem často přichází'. It is written in 3/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major). The tempo is 'Moderato ma un poco più mosso' with a quarter note equal to 100 beats per minute. The mood is 'toužně a horoucně'. The score shows the vocal line for Rusalka, starting with a piano (p) dynamic. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. There are three measures shown, with the third measure containing a triplet of eighth notes and a fermata. The lyrics are 'Sem ča-sto při-chá-zí a v obje-ti mé stou-pá'.

Example 3.8: The Prince, Act II, bb.1227-1231

The Prince

A let-ní noc to ne-po-ví že za-ja-la mne kou-zla ji-ná a

Detailed description: This is a musical score for The Prince's aria 'A letní noc'. It is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major). The tempo is 'Moderato ma un poco più mosso' with a quarter note equal to 100 beats per minute. The mood is 'toužně a horoucně'. The score shows the vocal line for The Prince, starting with a piano (p) dynamic. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. There are three measures shown, with the third measure containing a triplet of eighth notes and a fermata. The lyrics are 'A let-ní noc to ne-po-ví že za-ja-la mne kou-zla ji-ná a'.

The original theme that Rusalka sings is altered in the Prince's version. The music takes us back to Rusalka, whereas the Prince's words take us back to the scene of which she sings. The union of music and words tells an interesting story. Rusalka's aria, and its main theme, lays out the starting point of Rusalka's desire, in which she sings about watching the Prince take his clothes off and swim naked in the lake. However, when the Prince sings the similar vocal line, moving from Rusalka's F major to C major, he rejects Rusalka and proclaims his love for the Foreign Princess. By reiterating the same vocal line with a slight alteration, it encourages us in the first instance to recall Rusalka's desire. However, the recollection of her desire in this instance points also to her suffering, since the Prince has, at this point, lost all of his interest in Rusalka. The Prince's newfound desire is also Rusalka's suffering, an unfortunate result of her desire. For the listener, therefore, this moment signals Rusalka's complete failure to attain the object of her desire.



Example 3.10: Ježibaba, Rusalka - Ježibaba dialogue, Act I, bb. 812-815

vě - čné - ho vě - čné - ho tvé - ho pro - kle - tí!

Example 3.11: Rusalka Act II, bb. 1004- 1010

Bě - da! Bě - da!

5 Bě - da, kdo člo - vě - ka po - zná!

Her transformation into a human was supposed to fulfil her desire and end her suffering in the natural world. Unfortunately, the transformation only prolonged her suffering and led Rusalka to her aporia. Thus, it is the musical connection that draws us to connect the unfulfilled desire with its curse and also to Rusalka's futile sacrifice which causes her to suffer.

### 3.4.3 Rusalka, Ježibaba and the Prince's Death

The third example connects the moment in Act I when Rusalka pleads to Ježibaba to help her become human with the Prince's death in Act III. Beveridge has observed the alternating D-flat and G major triads that appear during both of these two scenes.<sup>213</sup> The same chords are heard when the Prince dies.

<sup>213</sup> Beveridge, "Formal Structure in Dvořák's "Rusalka", 135

Beveridge observes that the musical recall serves as a reminder of the sad result of the arrangement between the two.<sup>214</sup> The D-flat and G tritone, the ‘devil’s interval’, is associated mostly with Ježibaba, as it appears in her scenes in Acts I and III, leading to an obvious assumption that the D-flat/G major alteration and the tritone are associated with the powers of Ježibaba.<sup>215</sup> However, it could also be interpreted as a link between desire and suffering, the point where the two meet and/or separate. As a character, Ježibaba represents a door between the two worlds and also a door that is supposed to lead to the fulfilment of Rusalka’s desire. However, on the other side of the door Rusalka continues to suffer. Her futile sacrifice leads to her will-o-the-wisp condition, which leads to the Prince’s death. Rusalka continues her cursed and deadly existence.

Although these examples connect three characters, they all point towards Rusalka, her desire and suffering. They demonstrate in particular the variety of ways in which Rusalka’s desire and suffering are linked, and indeed are shown to be inextricably connected. However, it could be argued that these specific music examples show the futility of Rusalka’s pursuit. What the circular repetition of these motifs that interconnect points at is the sad result of Rusalka’s futile sacrifice from which she gained absolutely nothing- not the Prince nor a human soul or death. We could also argue that the circle that these melodic interconnections create indicate the circles of desire and the death drive, through which Rusalka must go.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The main idea behind this chapter was to illustrate the ways in which the music, with the assistance of the text, depicts the basis of this opera, which is Rusalka’s suffering and desire. Through different ways, either using motivic repetition, interconnection, voice, silence and the diegetic music, Rusalka constantly communicates with us. Using these various ways to connect with the listeners, she influences our experience and understanding of the opera. Her failure to connect with the Prince, her sacrifice and the inevitable tragic end that she depicts so strongly through music make us sympathise

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid, 135

<sup>215</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 25

with her. The following chapter, which focuses on voice, will illustrate how Rusalka, through an unintelligible cry, communicates and shares her tragic experience with us, and how she affirms her dominance in the story as its sole protagonist through whose subjective perspective we experience the music and drama of the opera.

## Chapter Four: Voice

### 4.1 Introduction

The cry, as asserted in Chapter One, has the power to evoke a feeling of painful enjoyment (*jouissance*) in some listeners. In *Rusalka*, three different cries, from Rusalka, Ježibaba and the Prince, invoke the listener's sympathy. Yet it is Rusalka with whom we sympathise in the end, even though we listen to three different characters and experience their cries, because, as I will demonstrate, through every layer of the opera, we are drawn to her subjective perspective. The following analysis will therefore illustrate moments/scenes in *Rusalka* in which the three cries occur. I will use musical examples from the score and the description of the cry by Poizat in order to explain how the listener connects with Rusalka through these cries.

### 4.2 After the Silence Comes the Cry

Although the opera contains three different cries, Rusalka's cry is the most striking one, due to its placement in the opera, since it comes after a period of silence in Act II. Kvačil sets the stage for Dvořák to develop this crucial moment, which is the transition from silence to sheer cry. During the series of events that precede the cry, Rusalka becomes more and more convinced that she does not belong in the human world. She silently listens to the words of the Prince who is losing interest in her; he courts the Foreign Princess in front of Rusalka—he leaves with the Foreign Princess and speaks harshly to Rusalka as he leaves. This leads to the Polonaise—the scene in which Rusalka does not participate, which thus distances her further from the Prince and his world. Vodník's aria 'Celý Svět Nedá Ti, Nedá' ('The Whole World Will Not Give You') follows the Polonaise and predicts Rusalka's fate as a will-o-the-wisp. Finally, we hear the happy wedding song 'Květiny Bílé Po Cestě' ('White Flowers Along the Road'); Vodník sings against the chorus, summarising Rusalka's sad fate that hides beneath all the cheerfulness. The chorus makes an obvious reference to Rusalka: 'Květiny

bílé nejdříve, úpalem slunce zašly' ('the white flowers died the soonest from the scorching sun'); they sing, contrasting her to red roses which refer to the passionate Foreign Princess.<sup>216</sup> All these unfortunate events, all of which occur right before Rusalka or are about her, point to the sad result of her sacrifice. Rusalka suffers in silence, unable to respond or change the situation. As a result of her situation, it could be argued that the listener wants to hear Rusalka scream in agony. Therefore, I believe that the moment in which Rusalka's cry occurs happens immediately after all these scenes, in a scene that develops four cries.

#### 4.2.1 Rusalka's Cry

Due to the placement of the cry, the listener gets the impression that the intention of both Kvapil and Dvořák is to create a shock: after the silence, the emergence of Rusalka's voice is startling. The moment is actually not about Rusalka anymore: in Salecl's terms, 'her voice assumes the status of the object detached from the body'.<sup>217</sup> In the scene, even the interruption of Vodník between three sections does not make the listener lose focus, because Rusalka's voice has become, for the listener, an object of desire. Vodník therefore 'ceases' to exist - his role in the scene becomes auxiliary.

Kvapil vividly describes the moment when Rusalka realises she is able to speak to Vodník:

Rusalka zprvu jako by nemohla, ale pak se z ní vyderou slova a náhla vykřikne

(At first it is as if Rusalka cannot answer, but then she struggles to speak, and all of a sudden she cries out).<sup>218</sup>

What Kvapil describes first is her struggle to speak - after so much suffering and silence, she needs time to 'find' her voice. With the word 'vykřikne' (screams or cries), Kvapil points out that the scene in which the protagonist becomes able to speak/sing again will result in a cry. The *cry* comes as a result of Rusalka's inability to sing and her struggle to speak.

Poizat describes in general those operatic moments that lead to the cry:

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<sup>216</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 166

<sup>217</sup> Salecl, 'The Silence of Feminine *Jouissance*', 181

<sup>218</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 168

The listener is swept away by the spiralling melodic ascent, by *presentiment* (a kind of *call*) of a culmination yet to come, which eventually bursts forth as a musical cry.<sup>219</sup>

The orchestra definitely helps in the process of culmination that leads towards Rusalka's cry. The ascending melody (Example 4.1) sets the stage for the entire cry scene.

Example 4.1: Act II, bb. 956 - 960

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Oboe and Violin I. Both parts are in 6/8 time. The Oboe part begins with a melody marked *mp* (mezzo-piano) and then rises to a higher register, marked *f* (forte). The Violin I part begins with a melody marked *p* (piano) and then rises to a higher register, marked *f* (forte). The two parts are written on a grand staff with a brace connecting them.

The scene, which begins with the ascending melody above, follows this description:

Rusalka vyběhne zoufalá za síně do sadu a zmatena, nevědouc kdy kam, rozběhne se k vodě

(Rusalka runs out of the hall in despair to the gardens, and in confusion, not knowing where to go, she quickly runs to the water).<sup>220</sup>

With this description, the listeners become able to hear what they cannot see, which is Rusalka running in despair and confusion, not knowing where to go. The ascending line also depicts another thing we cannot see: Rusalka's actual despair, which we are able to feel with the help of the orchestra. The rest of the strings are static at this point, until the first violin carries the second violin into a musical turmoil which leads to a repetition of a distorted first part of theme A:

<sup>219</sup> Poizat, *The Angel's Cry*, 38

<sup>220</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 168

Example 4.2 Act II, bb. 961 - 963

The musical score for Violin I and Violin II, measures 961-963, is in 6/8 time and D major. The Violin I part begins with a melodic line in measure 961, which continues into measure 962. The Violin II part follows a similar pattern. In measure 963, both parts play a descending melodic line with accents and fortissimo (ff) dynamics.

As Vodník asks her if she knows him, the orchestra, especially the violins and oboe, emphasise Rusalka's struggle to speak, in an ascending and descending motion:

Example 4.3 Act II, bb. 968 - 971

The musical score for a vocal line, measures 968-971, is in 6/8 time and D major, marked 'molto appassionato'. The melody begins in measure 968 with an ascending line, followed by a descending line in measure 969. The melody continues in measure 970 with a descending line and ends in measure 971 with a descending line.

In the bars that immediately precede her singing, part of theme A is repeated. The culmination that leads to the first cry starts at bar 991, with the repetitive motifs in the strings and almost a chromatic and quite a slow progression in the vocal part. When the culmination occurs, the first segment of theme A is repeated twice before the cry. The first cry confirms its definition: at that moment in *Rusalka* the orchestra stops and only the voice can be heard, the 'pure voice alone persists', in Poizat's words.<sup>221</sup>

<sup>221</sup> Poizat, *The Angel's Cry*, 32

Example 4.4: Act II, bb. 1007 - 1009

Rusalka *ff*  
Bě - da, kdo člo - vě - ka po - zná!

Piano *fz* *f* *ff*

Rusalka: Běda, kdo člověka pozná *Wretched is the one who knows humans*

The second cry is also preceded by the fragment of theme A, repeated in the woodwinds and the strings. In this development of the cry, it feels as if the music is leading the voice to the culmination, leading to a sheer cry, Rusalka's weeping. This fits Kvapil's description of the sound of her voice as 'úpěnlivě' ('pleadingly'). However, even if the listeners are not aware of the description in the libretto, Dvořák's orchestration helps to emphasise exactly that element of the cry: the music in the strings stops and the brass slowly decrescendo to *piano* and *pianissimo*, making the voice stand out on its own: the descending figure in the vocal part, combined with staccato, creates a weeping effect:

Example 4.5: Act II, bb. 1026 - 1028

*rit.*  
Ru - sal - - - ku pros - sto - vla - sou!

Rusalka: Rusalku prostovlasou *Rusalka with the flowing hair*

The third cry is in the aria 'Ó Marno To Je' ('Oh, It Is Futile'). Here, the cry is at its peak. It has been argued that 'Kvapil's text at this point has no sense of drama, and is more resigned and plaintive in character'.<sup>222</sup> Therefore, what Dvořák does is turn the aria into a cry, a 'supreme culmination'.<sup>223</sup> The two preceding cries were only a couple of bars long, whereas this entire aria is Rusalka's cry, as the words become completely unintelligible. The listeners enter yet another section of musical turbulence. However, unlike the first cry in which it is the orchestra (the violins) which creates turmoil, in 'Ó Marno To Je', it is the voice which creates the same effect.

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<sup>222</sup> <http://www.antonin-dvorak.cz/en/rusalka>, (1 December 2013)

<sup>223</sup> Poizat, *The Angel's Cry*, 37

## Example 4.6: Rusalka's aria 'Ó Marno To Je', Act II, bb. 1043 - 1061

Rusalka

*f* zoufale, beznadějně 1045

Ó, mar - no to je, ó, mar - no to je, a prázd - no - ta je

*dim.* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *mf* *fz*

*dim.* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *mf*

1047

v srd - ci mém, jsou mar - ny všech - ny vdě - ky mo - je, když zpo - la jsem jen

*fz* *fz* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fz* *fz* *fz* *fz*

*fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

1051

*f*

člo - vě - kem, jsou mar - ny, jsou mar - ny všechny vdě -

*fz* *fz* *fz* *fz* *fz* *f*

*fz* *fz* *f*

The image shows a musical score for Rusalka's aria 'Ó Marno To Je' from Act II, measures 1043-1061. It consists of three systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line for Rusalka and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The first system (measures 1043-1046) starts with a vocal line marked 'f' and 'zoufale, beznadějně'. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern with chords and moving lines, marked with dynamics like 'dim.', 'fp', 'mf', and 'fz'. The second system (measures 1047-1050) continues the vocal line with lyrics 'v srd - ci mém, jsou mar - ny všech - ny vdě - ky mo - je, když zpo - la jsem jen'. The piano accompaniment maintains its rhythmic intensity with 'fp' and 'fz' markings. The third system (measures 1051-1061) shows the vocal line with lyrics 'člo - vě - kem, jsou mar - ny, jsou mar - ny všechny vdě -'. The piano accompaniment concludes with 'fz' and 'f' markings. The score is written in a standard musical notation with treble and bass clefs for the vocal and piano parts respectively.

1053

ky mo - je, když zpo - la jen zpo - la jsem

1059 rit. *p* člo - vě - kem!

rit. *p* in tempo *fp* *fp*

Rusalka: Ó marno, ó marno to je,	<i>It is futile, it is futile,</i>
a prázdnota je v srdci mém,	<i>And an emptiness is in my heart,</i>
jsou marny všechny vděky moje,	<i>All my charms are futile,</i>
když zpola jsem jen člověkem!	<i>When I am only half human!</i>

The aria is preceded by the well-known chord progression that needs to be resolved somewhere in the opera (Example 4.7), which is here heard accompanying Vodník. The progression now leads to the new key of G minor (which is the key of the aria). Every time the chord progression appears, the listener is prepared to hear a resolution of this progression, however, it becomes lost in motif C (G minor), which takes over the melody and leads directly to Rusalka's cry:

## Example 4.7: Act II, bb. 1035 - 1039

The third cry, occurring in the aria ‘Ó Marno To Je’ is divided into three sections, resembling a ternary form with a coda. The first and third sections are in G minor, whereas the second section opens in G major. The motivic pattern in the first part of the aria is fairly repetitive, although with some alterations. The orchestra appears to be imitating Rusalka’s singing, or at least the movement of the vocal line. Rusalka completely carries the melody, without any assistance from the orchestra. Rusalka’s aria, in which her voice reigns supreme, depicts the moment of her empowerment, through the voice. This moment in the opera is precisely what Abbate, relying on Paul Robinson’s ideas discusses - the unconquerable voice that the orchestra, the male singers and the murderous plots cannot conceal.<sup>224</sup>

The fourth and final cry occurs after the aria, at the end of the entire section, attached to the coda (Example 4.8). Rusalka and the orchestra prepare for the fourth cry together. In an almost recitative fashion, similar to the recitative moment in ‘Měsíčku Na Nebi Hlubokém’ (‘Song to the Moon’), Rusalka starts the development in a descending chromatic line. In bar 1158, the strings create a maddening effect, in the original fast tempo, which leads Rusalka to her final cry. For three bars, the voice is not heard; at bar 1162, she starts to sing again, signalling and carrying the listeners to her final cry, which occurs in bar 1168, sung in *fortissimo possibile*. The orchestra extends Rusalka’s cry,

<sup>224</sup> Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, ix

playing theme A, finishing the section with the musical cry, played by the violins, the flutes and oboes. At the end of the scene, Kvapil gives a stage direction: Rusalka 'kleka k rybníku' ('she kneels by the pond'), in despair and completely ruined by the human world and the sacrifice she has made, almost annihilated.

## Example 4.8: Act II, bb. 1162 – 1170

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet in B $\flat$

Bassoon

Horn in F

Horn in F

Trumpet in F

Trombone

Tuba

Timpani

Soprano

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabass

1165

*fz* *fz* *f*

Ne- mohu ze - mřít, ne-mohu žít, ne-mo-hu ze - mřít,



#### 4.2.2 Ježibaba's Cry?

Dvořák creates an interconnection between this scene (which contains four cries) and the scene in Act I (Rusalka and Ježibaba dialogue), using the motivic connection to link them. What is interesting is that Dvořák connects the very last scene in which Rusalka sings in Act I with this one in which she regains her voice. However, the connection is not only between Rusalka's two vocal lines; it is also between Ježibaba in Act I and Rusalka in Act II. Both Kvapil and Dvořák create an interconnection between Ježibaba and Rusalka in their own way.

In Act I, Ježibaba gives Rusalka the final warning about her decision to become human, reminding her that she and the Prince will both be cursed, by singing about 'věčného tvého prokletí' ('your eternal damnation'). Reflecting on Ježibaba's warning in Act I, Rusalka sings 'běda kdo člověka pozná' ('wretched is the one who knows humans') in Act II. Strengthening the textual connection across these crucial two scenes, Dvořák creates his own separate musical connection by referencing the two motifs that appears the most in the opera, theme A and motif C. When Ježibaba sings the given text in Act I, motif C accompanies her, whereas when Rusalka sings to her reflection in Act II, the theme A is heard in the orchestra part. What Dvořák does here is connect the two scenes through the same (although slightly altered) vocal line, which both Ježibaba and Rusalka sing.

The scene in which Rusalka sings the same vocal line becomes her first cry. Due to a strong vocal connection between Rusalka's first cry and Ježibaba's voice, we could argue that Ježibaba's music is her cry in Act I. The uncanny similarity in the cry and also the similar chromatic line that precedes it creates the idea that this is Ježibaba's cry. Her cry, unlike that of Rusalka, is quite concealed and on the first listening it might not stand out. However, the more we listen to the opera, the more we understand this as Ježibaba's cry. Her cry precedes Rusalka's cry. Since she is the one who makes Rusalka mute, and therefore suffers in the human world, it is possible to assume that Ježibaba predicts Rusalka's cry through the same vocal line.

The connection between the two scenes, through voice, leads to a question about the unintelligibility of Ježibaba's word. In the aforementioned dialogue in Act I, Rusalka chooses to ignore Ježibaba's warning. Her suffering in the natural world is unbearable and her desire to be with

the Prince is so strong that she does not want to hear/understand the warning. Therefore, we could argue that Rusalka finds Ježibaba's words unintelligible. With Rusalka's decision to ignore these words, we choose to ignore them as well; therefore, they become unintelligible to us. In Act II, when Rusalka repeats the similar vocal line, it appears she has registered Ježibaba's words in her preconscious and brought them to her conscious mind during the first cry. The words remained unintelligible to Rusalka— the effect of Ježibaba's vocal cry was more powerful than words.

This connection between Ježibaba and Rusalka, in my view, is significant for several reasons. Kvapil and Dvořák point out Rusalka's failure to accomplish the task of marrying the Prince, together with her complete disappointment with humans. Rusalka's eternal damnation, of which Ježibaba warned her, awaits her. Further, in this poignant scene in Act II, Rusalka asserts that to know the humans is the curse that leads into a painful eternity: she has sacrificed herself and became human for nothing.

#### 4.2.3 The Prince's Cry

Although the cry, according to Poizat, requires a female soprano voice, which with its high notes carries the best possibility of becoming unintelligible, it is also possible for a tenor's high notes to reach towards the condition of the cry. The male cry is as rare as a female character's silent death, or even a *parlando* death such as Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*.<sup>225</sup> Poizat's main example of the male cry points to Don Giovanni (a baritone) in Act II as he is dragged into hell: a pure cry that is 'noted musically on the staff but unsupported by the text'.<sup>226</sup>

The Prince's death in *Rusalka* occurs in the final act, when he asks of Rusalka to free him from the agony brought by her curse. His vocal range stretches from c to c''. Interestingly, Cheek points out that the Prince's voice keeps getting higher throughout the opera.<sup>227</sup> And as his voice gets ever higher, the Prince approaches his death. The high C, as expected, comes at the end of the opera, before Rusalka kisses him, a moment before he will die in her arms. Just in terms of the Prince's vocal

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<sup>225</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 137

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid*, 137

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, 27

trajectory, then, that means that his voice, in its continuous ascent, leads him to his death. Poizat connects high voices with those male characters whose operatic destiny is to die.<sup>228</sup> This is the case with male heroic characters, often tenors; male characters that are destined for sacrifice sometimes have voices even higher than the tenor, such as alto, countertenor, and also the roles that in the past the castrati would have sung.<sup>229</sup>

In the score, the instruction for the Prince's high C clearly states 'nekřičet' - 'do not scream'.

Example 4.9: The Prince's cry, Act III, bb. 1276 - 1277

1276  
The Prince  
lí - bej mne, lí - bej, mír mi — přež  
nekřičet

The Prince: Líbej mne, mír mi přež *Kiss me, kiss, give me peace*

His final, dying words (Ex. 4.10) have a different description 'Stále hlasem slabším, jakoby už jen mluvil' ('with a voice that is getting weaker, as if he were only speaking').<sup>230</sup>

Example 4.10: The Prince's cry, Act III, bb. 1295 - 1299

1295  
The Prince  
Polib-ky tvo-je hřích můj po-svě-tí, polib-ky tvo-je hřích můj posvě-tí!  
(stále hlasem slabším, jakoby už jen mluvil)  
ritard.  
pp  
in tempo

The Prince: Polibky tvoje hřích můj posvěť *Your kisses will absolve my sin*

<sup>228</sup> Poizat, *The Angel's Cry*, 136

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 136

<sup>230</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 248

His dying scene, following the high C (Example 4.10), is similar to Violetta's *parlando* dying scene.

Poizat's summary of this scene could be applied to the Prince's final moments *Rusalka*:

That was not the logic which prevailed; once more the logic of jouissance holds sway with the inevitable upheaval that besets the listener on hearing the extraordinary lyric flight to which the initial words give way, thereby marking the reaffirmed and terrible victory of the cry over language.<sup>231</sup>

The Prince's cry is followed by his death in Rusalka's arms. His cry, unlike those of Ježibaba and Rusalka, leads to death, which is something that an opera fan expects. Rusalka's cry does not lead to her death, but it leads her to eternal damnation as will-o-the-wisp. She does not die, but becomes a personification of death in the end. The cries of the Prince, Ježibaba and Rusalka in a way create a link between them. In the analysis above, I explain the relation between Rusalka and Ježibaba through the cry. The Prince's cry (and his death), although not vocally connected, is also a result of Ježibaba's warning and Rusalka's sacrifice.

#### 4.3 Conclusion

In my analysis of three different cries by three different characters, my intention was to map the places in which the cries occur, and explore how they might connect and what kind of effect they could have on each other in the opera and eventually on the listener. Not only do they create a link story-wise, as illustrated above, but the cries also depict Rusalka's metamorphoses. During Ježibaba's cry, Rusalka is still an unhappy water nymph; Rusalka's cry reflects on her first metamorphosis; the Prince's cry and his eventual death reflect on Rusalka's second metamorphosis. The cries not only lead to/announce the Prince's death, but they lead the listener to the nature of Rusalka's character as someone who does not belong in the natural or human world. Therefore, through these cries, even when they are cries of other characters, Rusalka *sings* to the listeners, constantly reminding us of her tragic fate and the inevitable tragic end.

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<sup>231</sup> Poizat, *The Angel's Cry*, 137

It is through these moments of the cry that we as listeners sympathise and even identify with Rusalka, because we completely rely on her subjective perspective—we are drawn to it. In Act I, during Ježibaba's cry, Rusalka ignores her words—we ignore them as well; during Rusalka's cry in Act II, a moment that contains all the build-up agony, we suffer with her and feel her pain. Finally, in Act III, when the Prince begs her to kiss/kill him, we, as the listeners, do not sympathise with the Prince - rather, we sympathise/identify with Rusalka through her suffering.

The following chapter, which focuses on *Rusalka* as staged, will also explore the experience of the listener/spectator and the connection between the protagonist and the spectators. Moreover, the subject of the cry will be discussed in the following chapter, in order to explain what happens when we experience the cry when it is staged.

## Chapter Five: The Stage

### 5.1 *Rusalka*: The Fairy-tale Issue

‘There is clearly something about the story that lends itself to pluralistic interpretations.’<sup>232</sup>

Maria Tatar’s words, quoted above from her book *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, could be taken as referring to any and every single one of the fairy-tales. Further, Tatar suggests that often these pluralistic interpretations go to extremes.<sup>233</sup> The rich symbolism in fairy-tales leads psychoanalysts to focus on one aspect of the story, while ignoring all the others. As an example, Tatar cites Eric Fromm’s interpretation of the bottle (in his opinion a symbol of virginity) that Little Red Riding Hood carries with her, with a warning not to break it.<sup>234</sup> The problem with this kind of interpretation, in Tatar’s view, is that psychoanalysts ignore the variant forms of these fairy tales, which leads to a generalisation based on ‘false premises’.<sup>235</sup>

The same could be said about Dvořák’s *Rusalka*, especially modern stage productions from Central and Northern Europe, in which often ambiguous and psychological frameworks that update the stories in modern settings are given to many operas from the same era. Often referred to as ‘eurotrash’, for some audience members these new interpretations are confusing, and perceived as a ‘distortion’ of the original.

#### 5.1.1 The Influence of Disney

In the case of *Rusalka*, a reaction against a reinterpretation may be exacerbated by the fact that it is a fairy-tale. From the time of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937, Disney’s animated films,

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<sup>232</sup> Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, expanded second edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 42

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 42

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 42

many of them based on fairy-tales, have had all the extremely negative elements from the originals removed. Because film in general, and the Disney animated films in particular, have become so powerful and influential, the Disney approach to fairy tales has undoubtedly affected the general idea about what the fairy tales are supposed to be like. Furthermore, Cheek points out that because they are animated, these Disney fairy-tales came to be perceived as ‘cute’.<sup>236</sup> Stefan Herheim, a Norwegian opera director, states there is always a possibility of deception on the behalf of the spectators when they come to see his productions and discover that instead of a fairy-tale world, they see ‘the everyday nature of reality’.<sup>237</sup>

Today’s opera goer who comes to see *Rusalka* for the first time might have heard from someone that the story is very similar to that of Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*. The association might not be with the real story, but rather Disney’s *Little Mermaid*, which has been stripped of its true meaning. Disney’s adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* was released in 1989, eighty-eight years after Dvořák’s *Rusalka*. Interestingly enough, the eighties were the era in which *Rusalka* started to gain international success. However, Cheek points out that even before the appearance of Disney’s *Little Mermaid* Harold C. Schonberg wrote a review of Juilliard’s 1975 staging, stating the production was ‘handicapped by the direction that was more Disney than Dvořák’.<sup>238</sup> Therefore, even before 1989, a Disneyesque approach to fairy tales influenced the staging of *Rusalka*. In fact, Cheek observes that some productions tend to have one singer singing the parts of Ježibaba and the Foreign Princess, such as that of the Vienna State Opera in 1987, in which Eva Randová sang both parts.<sup>239</sup> Not only is this demanding (Ježibaba is written for a mezzo, the Foreign Princess is a soprano), but it seems ironically to mirror the Disney approach. These productions suggest that Ježibaba transforms into the Foreign Princess in order to sabotage *Rusalka*, which is basically what happens in the 1989 film *The Little Mermaid*, as Ursula transforms into dark-haired Vanessa.

Because of Disney’s influence, then, opera goers come to *Rusalka* with a particular set of expectations for the staging and story. Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* is quite shocking in its graphic

<sup>236</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 62

<sup>237</sup> MM, <http://www.lamonnaie.be/en/mymm/article/38/Interview-Stefan-Herheim/>, (17 January 2014)

<sup>238</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 62

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 28-29

description of tongue-cutting. Additionally, Tatar makes an interesting point while discussing the Grimm brothers' fairy-tales: that reading the original fairy-tales is sometimes an 'eye opening experience' for adults, due to the 'graphic description of murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide and incest'.<sup>240</sup> The greatest shock of all seems to be the fact that they were intended for children. A parallel could be drawn here: watching the modern productions of *Rusalka* could be seen as an eye-opening experience for adults, since they go to see the opera expecting a Disneyesque setting.



Figure 5.1 *Rusalka* in Prague, 29 January, 1960<sup>241</sup>

### 5.1.2 Fairy tales in Psychology and on Stage

Fairy tales, as suggested in Chapter One, have been analysed since the birth of psychology in order to explain the human mind, focusing mainly on the unconscious. Many contemporary opera directors, predominantly from Central and Northern Europe, have explored the psychological layers in *Rusalka*

<sup>240</sup> Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, 3

<sup>241</sup> <http://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz/ArchivniDokumentFotografie.aspx?ad=18522> (20 December 2013)

in a variety of productions, illustrating the powerful connection between fairy-tales and psychology that I propose in this thesis. What is interesting is that some of these European contemporary productions emphasise this psychological layer, whereas musicological criticism remains influenced by either a Wagnerian or instrumental analytical framework. In musicological criticism, (Ludwig Haesler being the only exception), any detailed exploration of the potential of the psychological contexts is almost non-existent.

## 5.2 Staging *Rusalka*: Now and Then

For most of the twentieth century, the staging of *Rusalka* stayed loyal to a traditional fairy-tale setting. Ondřej Šupka points out that despite the introduction of new technologies, which enhanced the fantasy in *Rusalka*, Czech productions kept the traditional fairy-tale setting; indeed, many of them still do, as is the case with Prague State Opera.<sup>242</sup> Even the stage designer Josef Svoboda (see Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3), who introduced new staging techniques, kept the ‘traditional’ essence of the fairy-tale *Rusalka*.

Two Czechoslovakian opera films produced in 1962 and 1975 illustrate this traditional approach, as they both present a contrast between the nature/forest and the human world/castle. The 1962 film seems to be set as a traditional fairy-tale. The 1975 film follows this model as well, even though the techniques used in it are quite modern and innovative for its time. In the 1975 film, they make the natural/supernatural characters appear as a reflection. One of the most fascinating examples of this technique in this film is a scene in Act II when Rusalka realises that she can speak to Vodník in her human form. The contrast between the human Rusalka and Vodník as a reflection is interesting because it posits an idea that Vodník is a voice inside Rusalka’s head, as she only hears him and does not see him. This film could therefore be seen as a predecessor to various contemporary productions, especially the ones that explore the psychological layer in *Rusalka*, such as Pountney’s, where the whole story is imagined by Rusalka.

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<sup>242</sup> Ondřej Šupka, ‘Proměny inscenační praxe Dvořákovy Rusalky’, <http://operaplus.cz/promeny-inscenacni-praxe-dvorakovy-rusalky-1/>, 1 (31 October 2013)



Figure 5.2: *Rusalka* in Prague, 29 January, 1960.<sup>243</sup>



Figure 5.3: *Rusalka* in Prague, Act II - 29 January, 1960.<sup>244</sup>

<sup>243</sup> <http://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz/ArchivniDokumentFotografie.aspx?ad=22313> (20 December 2013)

<sup>244</sup> <http://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz/ArchivniDokumentFotografie.aspx?ad=18523> (20 December 2013)

### 5.2.1 Shift Towards Psychology: Bringing out the Repressed

A ground-breaking production by David Pountney for English National Opera in 1983 takes a different approach, exploring the psychological layers in *Rusalka* and suggesting a Freudian framework. In Pountney's production, set in an Edwardian nursery, the entire opera is set up as occurring within Rusalka's imagination. Within this simple yet powerful setting, Pountney focussed on a pubertal Rusalka on the brink of sexuality. In his words, Pountney describes *Rusalka* as 'a story about a typical initiation into a social and sexual experience'.<sup>245</sup>

In a variety of contemporary productions from these parts of Europe, such as the Munich (2010), Brussels (2008), Salzburg (2008) and Göteborg (2012) productions, Freudian/Jungian frameworks are employed in order to emphasise the psychological layer in *Rusalka*. Using these psychological frameworks, the opera directors set *Rusalka* in the present, thus bringing it closer to our world and making it more familiar to the audience. In a way, they are restoring an aspect of the original horror of the nineteenth-century fairy tales, despite the fact that they use a modern setting. The problem that arises with these productions is that sometimes it feels as if they go to extremes with the staging and many other visual aspects, which lead the story and Rusalka as a coherent character to be lost. A common critique, along with the 'distortion' of the fairy-tale, is that contemporary productions create a lot of confusion. Mirek Černý, a Czech critic, notes that the subtitles are a downside for directors like Herheim, since the audience will realise that the action, the staging and the singers are not 'connected' with the text.<sup>246</sup> However, as Cheek, summarising Tatar's views on fairy-tales, writes: 'the meaning is so deep-rooted as to evade specific literal interpretation'.<sup>247</sup> Therefore, it could be argued that these provocative productions present two aspects of the fairy tale at the same time: 1) its text in the subtitles before us; and 2) its symbolism interpreted through psychological lenses on stage.

For some opera directors though, such as Stefan Herheim, the confusion indeed is calculated to demand careful watching and listening. Drawing on different ideas from the psychoanalytical

<sup>245</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 49

<sup>246</sup> Mirek Černý, 'Brusel - Nevšední Rusalka, od mýtu k realitě', <http://www.muzikus.cz/klasicka-hudba-jazz-clanky/Brusel-Nevsedni-Rusalka-od-mytu-k-realite~05~brezen~2009/> ( 31 October 2013)

<sup>247</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 50

writings of Freud and Jung, contemporary opera directors highlight different psychological aspects of Dvořák's *Rusalka*. The United Kingdom's Grange Park Opera production in 2008 explores female sexuality in the disturbing context of a 'deep-rooted male fear of women'.<sup>248</sup> This production, directed by Antony McDonald, takes *Rusalka* back to the time of its creation—the ambiguous fin-de-siècle—placing her in direct comparison with the famous femmes fatales of the era such as Salome and Elektra. As Bram Dijkstra points out about this era in general, 'the operatic stage, in fact became one of the major stalking grounds of the head huntresses, as well as of temptresses of any kind'<sup>249</sup> Among these temptresses, Dijkstra mentions Dvořák's *Rusalka*, in the company of Strauss' *Elektra*, *Salome*, Berg's *Lulu* and Wagner's operas.<sup>250</sup> *Rusalka*, therefore, becomes a fin-de-siècle prototype of a temptresses, as she enchants the Prince and lures him into an early grave.

Some contemporary productions focus on the repressed desires and shifting the role of the protagonist, on whose subjectivity we rely, from *Rusalka* to other characters. In 2009, Marion Wasserman's *Rusalka* at the Athens Opera House caused quite a stir because of her interpretation of the story. The director chose to retell the story from the Prince's point of view, as he struggles with homosexuality and his repressed desires, represented by *Rusalka*, his female alter-ego.

Stefan Herheim's production from 2012, mentioned above, is quite intriguing as it turns Vodník into a protagonist - the story of *Rusalka* becomes his story. The Norwegian director chose to set *Rusalka* through the eyes of Vodník for two reasons: first, he looks back at the nineteenth century in which, in his view, women were looked at as only love objects—*Rusalka* is an opera in which 'women are defined through the eyes of men; and second, Herheim looks at the score and identifies a motif in the opera with Vodník.<sup>251</sup> In his view, the omnipresence of a musical motif, which opens the score (I assume he means a short, rhythmic motif that appears throughout the opera) is connected with Vodník, thus he makes this character omnipresent.<sup>252</sup> Vodník is present at all times, even when he does not sing. Herheim also points out that because of this interpretation, he sees Vodník as a

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 49

<sup>249</sup> Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 376

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 376

<sup>251</sup> MM, <http://www.lamonnaie.be/en/myimm/article/38/Interview-Stefan-Herheim/> (17 January 2014)

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, (17 January 2014)

character who directs the actions of other characters. This interpretation is similar to my Freudian/Lacanian analysis of the same character as the Superego, whose words force Rusalka into her *jouissance*.

Herheim's production is quite ambiguous as it drastically adds new elements and remodels the story. The story shifts between the past and present, which at times could cause confusion for a spectator. In the words of the director, the story is about Vodník's 'repressed feelings and desires'.<sup>253</sup> In Act I, we see Vodník, a middle-aged man who is stuck in an unhappy marriage. His wife has a non-speaking role in Act I, but in Act II we realise that it is the Foreign Princess. In his midlife crisis, Vodník is on the streets of an unnamed European city. He is tempted by a streetwalker, which turns out to be Rusalka, who reminds him of a woman he once loved. The end of first act and the entire second act takes us to Vodník's past, which turns him into the Prince. Mute Rusalka becomes a symbol of his unfulfilled desire and it is not clear whether she is a real woman or an ideal. Vodník kills the young Prince at the end of Act II and Rusalka is killed in Act III by her 'sisters', dressed as nuns. The young Prince and Rusalka are joined in death in the poignant finale. Driven by the sad past, the choices he has made and the frustrating present, he kills his wife. Vodník is arrested for the murder and Rusalka (the streetwalker), sings her final words over the corpse of the Foreign Princess. The confusion over who is who in this production and what each character represents is (in a way) explained by the director himself: in his words, there are only two characters—a man and a woman.<sup>254</sup> The director was able to make a reduction like this one since the characters have no actual names (uncle Vaněk, the Gamekeeper is the only exception and his role is auxiliary).

Martin Kušej's 2010 Bayerische Staatsoper production sets *Rusalka* in a framework suggestive of the Josef Fritzl case. The real life story about a father who kept his daughter locked in a basement for twenty-four years, abused her and had children with her (further imprisoning the children with their mother) shocked readers around the world. In Kušej's *Rusalka*, Vodník becomes the unsettling Josef Fritzl figure, who keeps Rusalka and her sisters locked in a basement. They are

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid, (17 January 2014)

<sup>254</sup> MM, <http://www.lamonnaie.be/en/mymm/article/38/Interview-Stefan-Herheim/>, (17 January 2014)

victims of their father's constant sexual abuse. Rusalka manages to escape with the help of her 'mother' Ježibaba. Seeing how horrible the outside world is, she returns to the basement, only to end up with her sisters in a mental institution. Although unnerving, Kušej makes us think about *Rusalka* as a never-ending trauma in rather startling terms, using a case familiar to the audience. The feeling that a human is 'possessed' by a traumatic experience and has a compulsion to repeat it is evident in the finale when Rusalka and her sisters are in a mental asylum and pouring water over themselves, thus creating the environment of a damp basement. This ending brings in the concept of repetition compulsion, through which a traumatic event is relived. Also, with the emphasis on Rusalka's trauma, sexually explicit scenes and the skinning of deer, the production refigures the graphic violence of the nineteenth-century fairy-tales in modern terms.

I will turn now to a more detailed discussion of the last two mentioned productions by Herheim and Kušej across the following three sections, placing my analysis into the context of some of these other productions and films. In my view, the productions of Herheim and Kušej move beyond mere modernisation of the story, in spite of the fact that it could be their modernity, or the fact that they deal with themes that are considered taboo, that has garnered attention. Rather, I believe that their productions add something new to the whole experience of *Rusalka*, in ways that are deeply resonant with the issues that my analysis has pointed towards in both libretto and music; and the staged dimensions of their productions further enforce these themes by adding a new element, the gaze, which interacts with their readings in interesting ways.

### 5.3 The Silence

I have written at length in previous chapters about the various ways in which the libretto and the music help depict a mute Rusalka. With *Rusalka* on stage, we, the audience, see what the human characters see in the libretto: the pale and mute Rusalka. It is as spectators in the opera house, or through film or video, that we are able to see/hear the split between the silent exterior and the music that is supposed to represent Rusalka. With the pale beauty on stage, the spectators see Rusalka as an

object to be observed. Unlike the human characters within the story, though, the spectators can ‘hear’ her silence with the help of the orchestra.

Rusalka is mute to the characters on stage. She may be mute within the story, and from the point of view of the other characters, but according to a typical ‘reading’ of the score, she still ‘speaks’ to the listeners/the spectators. In Act II, when Rusalka is silent, Dvořák introduces other characters, such as the Gamekeeper, the Turnspit, the Foreign Princess, the chorus and the Prince. With their music, they ‘fill out’ Rusalka’s silence. The protagonist does not sing, nor does she engage in the activities that are happening in the castle. Therefore, with the appearance of other characters, who take Rusalka’s place in the music and overshadow her, it is easy to be distracted from Rusalka’s suffering and silent presence on stage.

### 5.3.1 Silent Rusalka on Stage

In more traditional productions and in that of Kušej, the connection between Rusalka and theme A, which everyone associates with Rusalka, is emphasised, as it announces her appearance and represents her while mute. With good acting, such as that of Kristīne Opolais (Kušej), the connection is made even stronger. As we watch her, we see the despair in her eyes and the appearance of theme A reflects on this every time it is heard. As the most lyrical motif in the opera, the link with the protagonist as sad, romantic and emotional, seems obvious. At the same time, though, with the added visual aspect, the question of how strongly we can connect the music of the orchestra with Rusalka becomes more complex, and interestingly, some of the more modern productions make this connection seem even more tenuous. In Herheim’s *Rusalka*, for example, the connection between Rusalka and theme A is not clearly defined. As it is quite lyrical, most of the time it only adds to the emotionality of scenes, rather than depict Rusalka’s emotional state. Moreover, since in this production Rusalka is not a central protagonist and therefore not entirely the focus of the story, it also becomes difficult to associate theme A with her emotional state while silent.

Theme A in Herheim’s production becomes more connected with Vodník and his fantasies, or something that triggers them, such as Rusalka-the-streetwalker’s appearance in Act I, when she

speaks to him. In Chapter Two, I have interpreted theme B (commonly associated with the Prince) as a theme that gets Rusalka closest to the object of her desire. Herheim turns this idea around: the theme commonly associated with Rusalka becomes the theme that gets Vodník the closest to fulfilling his desire. For Vodník, the object of desire is mainly Rusalka—or women in general. The most interesting example of this idea in Herheim's *Rusalka* is in Act II when, according to the libretto, Rusalka is left alone, in despair.<sup>255</sup> However, in this production, she is with Vodník: he starts to run after her and as he tries to have his way with her theme A is heard and eventually he moves away.<sup>256</sup> Thus the scene could be seen as Vodník trying to fulfil his fantasy. After this, theme A continues to play with a certain lyricism and at this moment, as Vodník is sitting next to Rusalka, it sounds like a distant melody. In the same scene, new action unfolds upstairs in a building, as we see the Prince with the Foreign Princess.

Having all this in mind, the question remains: what is the spectators' reaction regarding Rusalka's silence, her mute body on stage? The spectators and the Prince want the same thing: to hear her voice. We want her to sing something to show her love for the Prince and defend herself against the Foreign Princess, who seduces the Prince right before her. The audience wants Rusalka to sing those melodies that the orchestra takes away from her. Therefore, the whole experience of Rusalka's muteness becomes transformed in fundamental ways when we watch the opera.

The experience is different when we watch *Rusalka*, when we see a person before us who is not uttering—or in the context of opera, even more importantly, not singing—a single word. As mentioned in the chapter on the libretto, Rusalka is like a painting, about which everyone has an opinion, but who has no way of communicating herself. All of the human characters express their opinions about her, even when she is present. And the spectator, like the characters on stage, must try to decipher this silent figure who can't communicate. In Kušej's production, tourist-like people enter during the scene of the Gamekeeper and the Turnspit, in which Rusalka is also present.<sup>257</sup> The tourists

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<sup>255</sup> <http://www.lamonnaie.be/en/myimm/media/1320/Rusalka---Antonin-Dvorak/>, (29 April 2012)

<sup>256</sup> Ibid (29 April 2012)

<sup>257</sup> Antonín Dvořák, *Rusalka*, Bayerische Staatsoper, dir. by Thomas Grimm, Unitel Classica (2010)

observe her, circle around her as if she were an exhibit in a museum, bringing to the fore the underlying question lurking beneath this scene: namely, what does the silent Rusalka on stage signify?

Silence, as its own issue, has been written about by a range of psychologists and philosophers. Mladen Dolar and Žižek discuss the *silent scream*, using a powerful example - Munch's *Scream*. In the libretto chapter, I mention that Rusalka is similar to this painting, from which a reader expects to hear a sound. As both Dolar and Žižek observe, the *Scream* is mute by definition.<sup>258</sup> Regarding the painting, Žižek makes an interesting point:

The next step is to reverse the logic of the voice as the filler of the body's constitutive gap: the obverse of the voice that gives the body to what we can never see, to what eludes our gaze, is an image that renders present the failure of the voice - an image can emerge as the placeholder for a sound that does not yet resonate but remains stuck in the throat.<sup>259</sup>

Here, Žižek posits that when we look at the painting we 'hear (the scream) with our eyes'.<sup>260</sup> Dolar adds that in this painting exists 'a source of voice to which no voice can be assigned, but which for that very reason represents the voice all the more'.<sup>261</sup>

The description of Munch's *Scream* as given by Žižek and Dolar seems directly relevant to how the spectators perceive Rusalka on stage. Our eyes follow her movement, but we cannot see her voice: it is hidden from us, both the spectators on stage and in the theatre. The voice is silent, but when we watch the body of the opera singer who is not allowed to sing, the 'placeholder for a sound that doesn't yet resonate but remains stuck in the throat'.<sup>262</sup> Her silent presence, with the 'stuck in the throat' voice, leads to her unintelligible cry.

#### 5.4 The Voice vs. The Gaze

Before I turn to discussion about the voice vs. the gaze, I would like to discuss the cry (which I have laid out in the previous chapter) in terms of staging. The cry is interesting in the context of staging of the opera because it is the moment in which everything, including the visual aspects, ceases to exist.

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<sup>258</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 69

<sup>259</sup> Žižek, 'I Hear You With My Eyes'; or, The Invisible Master', 93

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 93-4

<sup>261</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 69

<sup>262</sup> Žižek, 'I Hear You With My Eyes', 93

When the voice reaches its peak, that is, the moment of the pure cry, some of the more sensitive spectators close their eyes, which led them to this precise moment in opera in which they experience a painful enjoyment. The paradox, as Poizat explains, is that ‘no stage presentation draws more heavily on its visual elements than opera’: the lavish settings, costumes and all the visual aspects have existed since the creation of the opera. And yet all the extravagant stage settings collapse during the cry, as some of us close our eyes. Poizat explains that the lavish stage settings are in a way necessary, as the emptiness, the void that makes the cry perceptible.<sup>263</sup>

#### 5.4.1 The Cry on Stage

In the previous chapter, I identified six cries, the most important one occurring when Rusalka regains her speech. The cries of Rusalka and the Prince occur regardless of the production. Throughout Rusalka’s silent phase, our eyes follow her—our gaze leads to her cry. In Kušej’s production, Rusalka is present at all times, even during the opening scene in Act II. Thus the audience follows her visually throughout her entire silent phase. Our gaze, which was following Rusalka, leads us to her cry, to the moment when some of the spectators close their eyes for a moment. The Prince’s cry follows the same trajectory.

With his remodelling of the story, Herheim brings something new to the experience of the cry: for this experience, we need to keep our eyes open. The moment which I find the most interesting is Rusalka’s big aria in Act II, the scene that I see as her pure cry. On stage we have Rusalka and Vodník- she represents a female object and he represents the narrator and spectator. Thus he represents us, the spectators. At the end of the aria, she stabs herself. Vodník tries to pull the knife from her stomach and as she is falling (about to die) she starts laughing. Herheim, in my opinion, plays with this idea of the cry and the relationship between the singer (and her annihilation), the spectator and the voice between them. The desire to watch someone suffer is present in Vodník as he

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<sup>263</sup> Poizat, *The Angel’s Cry*, 85

watches Rusalka stab herself, yet this fantasy is destroyed by her in the end. Rusalka's second cry in Act III results in her death, something that the logic of vocal *jouissance* demands.<sup>264</sup> Interestingly, as she is stabbed to death by her sisters, Vodník stabs his wife.<sup>265</sup> His fantasy of watching a woman suffer becomes reality.

#### 5.4.2 The Function of the Voice and Gaze

The operatic voice is an object of *jouissance*, whereas the visual elements have a secondary role in order to 'arouse desire in the gaze of the Other'.<sup>266</sup> Lacan identifies the voice and the gaze as lost objects, adding them to Freud's list of 'partial objects'.<sup>267</sup> As partial objects, Lacan observes, they 'only partially represent the function that produces them'.<sup>268</sup>

In opera voice has the primary role, whereas the gaze has the secondary role in order to arouse 'desire in the gaze of the Other'.<sup>269</sup> Carl Zuccarini gives an interesting example of this: Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils'— 'through the gaze, mediated by the music, conceals and then gradually reveals and leads to the object of the listener's desire'.<sup>270</sup> Zuccarini concludes that it is the desire in the gaze that leads to a vocal *jouissance*.<sup>271</sup> The same could be applied to *Rusalka*— her silence, 'controlled' and led by the music, leads us to her cry and to our *jouissance*.

#### 5.5 The Gaze

Scopophilia, (the scopophilic drive), that is, the pleasure of looking, has a special place in *Rusalka*, as it is something that motivates Rusalka to become a human. Music lacks this drive, as it is centred on the quest for the vocal object, *jouissance* and the cry in the whirlpool of melodic continuity and

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<sup>264</sup> Carl Zuccarini, 'Enjoying the Operatic Voice: A Neuropsychanalytic Exploration of the Operatic Reception Experience', PhD. Diss., Brunel University, (October 2012), 30

<sup>265</sup> <http://www.lamonnaie.be/en/mymm/media/1320/Rusalka---Antonin-Dvorak/>, (29 April 2012)

<sup>266</sup> Zuccarini, 'Enjoying the Operatic Voice', 67

<sup>267</sup> Žižek, 'I Hear You With My Eyes', 90

<sup>268</sup> Zuccarini, 'Enjoying the Operatic Voice', 68

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 67

repetition. The libretto informs us of the scopophilic activities; when the visual aspect is added, these aspects come to life. Our protagonist admits her scopophilic activities in ‘Sem často přichází’ (‘Often He Comes’) in Act I. She describes herself as a ‘naked wave’, in whose embrace the Prince swims and she also watches him slip off his clothes. In ‘classical’ psychology, as Bronfen explains, scopophilia is a ‘sexual stimulation or satisfaction through gazing or exposing oneself to the gaze of another’.<sup>272</sup> For Rusalka, this event is definitely a sexual stimulant, since it makes her wish to become human so she could act upon her gaze.

### 5.5.1 The Power of Rusalka’s Gaze

Rusalka is unaware of the fact that the Prince is able to recall the same event of which she sings in Act I. Yet, we know, from the musical interconnection between scenes (as explained in Chapter Two), that the Prince is aware of her gaze. The Prince sings the altered main theme in Act II of Rusalka’s ‘Sem často přichází’ (‘Often He Comes’, Act I). Cheek observes that the Prince appears to be ‘distantly recalling some kind of feeling he had when he was in the water and Rusalka secretly embraced him in her watery form’.<sup>273</sup> Therefore, when the Prince sings the same melody (based on Rusalka’s gaze and secret embrace) the musical reference recalls Rusalka: specifically, the moment that he felt the power of her gaze.

Rusalka’s gaze, in her watery form and also as a human, which the Prince feels, could be explained using some examples from film theory. Žižek explains, using an example from Hitchcock films in which a heroine is looking at an ‘allegedly empty house’:

What makes the scene so disturbing is that we, the spectators, cannot get rid of the vague impression that the object she is looking at is somehow *returning the gaze*.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, ‘Killing Gazes, Killing in the Gaze: On Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom*’, in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, edited by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham and London, Durham University Press, 1996), 59

<sup>273</sup> Cheek, *Rusalka*, 25

<sup>274</sup> Žižek, ‘I Hear You With My Eyes’, 90



### 5.5.2 Types of Gaze

Bronfen reflects on two types of gaze, as identified by Freud: the masculine gaze, which is sadistic and active, and the feminine, which is masochistic and passive.<sup>279</sup> In this dichotomy, Rusalka's gaze is passive and masochistic, as we watch her suffer in the silent state. Her gaze is passive, even though she acts upon the desire behind it and transforms into a human so that she could be with the Prince. In all the productions, traditional or modern, her gaze remains passive and masochistic, as she watches all the action happen before her, which she is never part of.

One could compare Rusalka's gaze to that of the stuffed birds in Norman Bates' room (*Psycho*). In *Psycho*, Marion Crane (the female protagonist) looks at the birds with a certain amount of horror. It is as if in that moment, these dead, stuffed and passive (as Norman describes them) creatures are returning the gaze.<sup>280</sup> The Prince ascribes passivity to Rusalka and underneath that painting, dead-like exterior the voice is hidden, 'stuffed' inside. For the Prince, this experience of being gazed upon by Rusalka, who at this stage is an object (a painting), is disturbing because she returns the gaze, which upsets the entire set of assumptions of silence and passivity.

Interestingly, in Herheim's production at the end of Act I, during the scene in which the Prince sings to Rusalka, her sisters come and dance, switching the real Rusalka with a doll that looks like her. The switch does not create any confusion for the Prince, as he continues to sing to a stuffed doll as if she were the real Rusalka.<sup>281</sup> This reinforces the idea that a woman in this production is just an object of man's desire, more precisely that Rusalka is the object.

### 5.5.3 Vodník's Gaze and the Audience

The productions do not change the words, so the effect of Rusalka's gaze remains the same, regardless of the setting. Even in Herheim's production, with a different protagonist, Rusalka's gaze is passive. However, what happens when someone else's gaze becomes more powerful than Rusalka's?

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<sup>279</sup> Bronfen, 'Killing Gazes, Killing in the Gaze', 60

<sup>280</sup> Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho*, Universal City, CA : Universal Home Video, 1998

<sup>281</sup> <http://www.lamonnaie.be/en/mymm/media/1320/Rusalka---Antonin-Dvorak/>, (29 April 2012)

Moreover, what happens when Rusalka is the object of the gaze? In Herheim's production, when the story is told from Vodník's point of view, Rusalka becomes Vodník's object of desire. Vodník is present at all times. In a way, he is like Rusalka: he is mute during scenes which do not require his presence in the libretto and in music. However, Herheim does something more with this character: through Vodník, he puts us, the spectators, on stage. Indeed, the director emphasises our role as spectators. Herheim 'activates' us, by giving us Vodník's body.

Why would we want to be associated with Vodník? He is generally understood as a kind of father figure in the opera, a protective figure (although in Kušej's production he is abusive). Vodník's warning echoes in all three acts. The spectators understand Vodník's words and the consequences of Rusalka's actions and they too would like to warn her. Therefore, Vodník's perspective would be most akin to that of the spectators. Zachary Woolfe, a critic, points out what Herheim does with this production; the opera becomes 'less about a woman's suffering and more about a man who fantasises about watching a woman suffer'.<sup>282</sup> In this respect, Woolfe observes that the role of Vodník is somewhat like an opera fan.<sup>283</sup> The operaphiles in a way enjoy the moments in which the opera singer suffers (and eventually dies) on stage, since these are often the moments in the (female) singers powerfully express their vocal abilities.

Kušej also puts us on stage, but in a very different way from Herheim. In Kušej's production, we are the tourists who observe Rusalka, an object that attracts our gaze. Later in the same act, they become the chorus that sings the wedding song, with Vodník on stage as well. The tourists once again observe her as she stands before them, wearing a wedding dress, with a distraught look on her face. For the majority of the scene, Rusalka (Kristīne Opolais) has her back turned against them.<sup>284</sup> Their words obviously affect her, as they sing it so mockingly, as she grows more and more upset.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Zachary Woolfe, 'Nymph Out of Water, Disturbing the Peace of City Dwellers: Stefan Herheim's 'Rusalka,' at Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie', [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/10/arts/music/stefan-herheims-rusalka-at-theatre-royal-de-la-monnaie.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/10/arts/music/stefan-herheims-rusalka-at-theatre-royal-de-la-monnaie.html?_r=1&), ( 1 January 2014)

<sup>283</sup> Ibid (1 January 2014)

<sup>284</sup> Antonín Dvořák, *Rusalka*, Bayerische Staatsoper, dir. by Thomas Grimm, Unitel Classica (2010)

<sup>285</sup> Ibid

#### 5.5.4 The Audience and Rusalka

In an interview, Herheim states that he does not want the public to remain passive—he wants them involved in the creative process, becoming a part of the story.<sup>286</sup> Not only does he activate the audience by giving them the body of Vodník; he also uses other techniques with which they become like the characters in the opera. Mirrors, which Herheim uses in his productions, play an important part in this idea to make the audience participate. With the use of mirrors, the spectators see themselves watching and thus it becomes an essential part of their experience. In *Rusalka*, Herheim effectively uses mirrors in Act II. At the end of the Polonaise, mirrors are introduced, which reflect on the audience.<sup>287</sup> When the mirrors appear on stage, Rusalka appears with them, as she descends on stage.<sup>288</sup> As Vodník sings ‘Celý Svět Nedá Ti, Nedá’ (‘The Whole World Will Not Give You’), Rusalka stands above the stage, dressed like the Virgin Mary.<sup>289</sup> The mirrors stay on stage during Rusalka’s most crucial moments in Act II, as they reflect on her transition from silence to the scene in which she regains her voice.

In the Herheim production, because it contains so many details that could be confusing at times and also because the story is told from Vodník’s perspective, it becomes difficult to relate to Rusalka. However, in these rare moments, with the use of mirrors, Rusalka is able to express her pain, both silently and vocally, and thus create a connection with the public. In this setting, the audience is able to actively participate and sympathise with Rusalka through these moments in which she obviously suffers.

#### 5.6 Conclusion

Focusing on the staging of *Rusalka*, relying predominantly on the productions by Herheim and Kušej, I have discussed in this chapter various aspects of the staged *Rusalka*. This chapter explored the spectator’s experience of Rusalka’s desire and suffering—how we experience her silence, voice (the

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<sup>286</sup> MM, <http://www.lamonnaie.be/en/mymm/article/38/Interview-Stefan-Herheim/>, (17 January 2014)

<sup>287</sup> <http://www.lamonnaie.be/en/mymm/media/1320/Rusalka---Antonin-Dvorak/>, (29 April 2012)

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, (29 April 2012)

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, (29 April 2012)

cry) and Rusalka's constant suffering in Kušej's production. Additionally, the chapter explored the spectator's desire to watch a character in the opera suffer, as evident in Herheim's staging of the opera. Herheim achieves this by turning the spectators into a protagonist, as they fantasise about watching a woman suffering on stage, which, as Woolfe states, is what an opera fan essentially does.

Both Herheim and Kušej activate the role of the audience by 'putting' them on stage. Kušej does this in a scene with the tourists observing Rusalka as if she were an exhibit in a museum. Herheim, on the other hand completely activates us, not only through the use of mirrors, but by placing us on stage through Vodník's character. In his production, the Prince is essentially young Vodník, and it is through the eyes of the Prince/Vodník that we experience all the aforementioned things—Rusalka's silence, the cry and her gaze. Moreover, Herheim, and to some extent Kušej, transforms the audience's gaze, which is, to use Freud's/Bronfen's paradigm, passive and masochistic and makes it active and sadistic. Some of the modern productions, especially Herheim's, disrupt the connection that exists between the listeners and Rusalka, more specifically, the relationship based on the sympathy with the protagonist. Yet even Herheim cannot resist this idea—Rusalka's presence, especially when she is silenced, begs for the audience's sympathy. In his quite demanding production, Herheim, through Vodník, manages to get the spectators become more engaged in the story, yet at the same time the distance is created between them and Rusalka and other women on stage. The moment the audience sees mute Rusalka, they become like the human characters in the story/on stage, who constantly observe her. The audience, however, instead of remaining complete strangers, as they observe her, end up understanding her and sympathising with her through her never-ending suffering.

## Conclusion

‘Poor, pale Rusalka, alas!’—cries Vodník in all three acts, constantly reminding us of Rusalka’s tragic fate and her futile sacrifice. His words are so powerful that he transcends his frame as an opera character; they become a voice in the heads of the reader/listener/spectator as they accept, act after act, Rusalka’s fate. Thus Vodník’s prophetic words affect our experience of the opera and our understanding of the main character. His words also constantly remind us of two key themes that I have identified to be the core of *Rusalka*—desire, which always remains unfulfilled, and suffering that overshadows the story.

As I was able to demonstrate while analysing *Rusalka* through different lenses, Rusalka expresses herself in different ways. In each layer of the opera, Rusalka provides a new detail about her desire and suffering that reveals her nature. In my analysis, I have applied various tools in order to reveal the complexity of Rusalka’s nature focusing mainly on her desire and suffering, and about the opera as a whole. From Freud’s structural model of the psyche, to repetition, as discussed by Žižek and Salecl, and from the cry and *jouissance* to the gaze, I have shown how psychological concepts can be a useful tool that help us have a better understanding of Rusalka and the opera. Additionally, I have addressed the issue of her silencing as a female protagonist. Not only have these various approaches produced a new insight into the opera and Rusalka, but they have also aided Rusalka to articulate herself and therefore create a connection with the public. Rusalka is not able to connect with any of the characters—hence her tragic fate. However, she communicates with us as readers/listeners/spectators. Through these various concepts that I have applied, Rusalka connects with us, lets us get inside her head and experience the story through her perspective. In return, we sympathise with Rusalka and even identify with her.

The psychological concepts that I have applied in this thesis that have not been previously connected with *Rusalka*. While some psychological ideas have been discussed in relation to *Rusalka*, such as repressed desires (as discussed by Haesler), and while psychological frameworks are

employed in some contemporary productions, such as those of Herheim and Kušej (which emphasise desire and/or trauma), *Rusalka* is still significantly missing from psychologically inflected operatic criticism. There has never been much focus on Rusalka's silence—what it does to opera. After all, *Rusalka* is an opera in which the protagonist, whose story we follow, is silenced at the most crucial time in the opera. Rusalka's silence, at all of the opera's layers, is more than the idea that the orchestra represents her while mute, as I have sought to demonstrate in my research. Also, scholars have never connected *Rusalka* with Poizat's concept of the cry, *jouissance* or the gaze. These three theories have provided ways to see Rusalka's nature, that is, the power of her character, and to understand Rusalka's place in the story. Through the cry, Rusalka asserts her dominance over the plot that wants her to remain silent and that tries to destroy her. During the Prince's cry, we fulfil our 'destiny' to identify with her, as we join Rusalka to experience painful enjoyment. With her silent gaze, she is able to communicate with us in the audience and her silent presence attracts our gaze. Therefore, applying these three concepts has been useful, as they aided in our understanding of the protagonist and they have also connected us as listeners/spectators with Rusalka.

This thesis has illustrated various ways in which Rusalka expresses her nature, mainly through her unfulfilled desire and suffering. What we can conclude from the analysis of the opera's facets is that Rusalka suffers and desires both vocally and silently, unconsciously and consciously. Rusalka's two metamorphoses lead her to a tragic fate, as she is rejected from the natural and human world. The natural world rejects her because she vocally expressed that she wants to leave, whereas the human world rejects her because of her silence. Because of this, it is clear that Rusalka is a victim of the two worlds that were unable to accept her. While she is ultimately a victim, due to the inability of the natural and human world to 'cooperate', Rusalka is a powerful character from the outset, as she is the one who dictates the story. She is determined to become human and suffer in the human world (become mute) as a consequence. Rusalka also decides to remain in the will-o-the-wisp state and suffer for eternity.

Rusalka's empowerment lies in the fact that the entire story is told from her subjective perspective. All of the events, even when she is silent and/or absent, and when other characters are

centre stage, essentially appear to be framed by her perspective. Rusalka exists in every single scene, constantly telling us ‘this is what is happening to me’/ ‘this is what I see’. More importantly, she tells us that this is her story. Because we rely on her subjective perspective, it is almost natural that we, as readers/listeners/spectators, tend to sympathise and/or identify with her. When we read her story, we constantly sympathise with Rusalka as she suffers in silence. While reading those harsh words and Rusalka’s ‘inner voice’, which Kvapil provides, we are actually able to feel empathy. On the narrative level, therefore, we suffer with Rusalka.

Our sympathy with the protagonist does not end here. Rusalka invites us to share and feel her desire and suffering. Indeed, we feel her desire in the aria ‘Often He Comes’. We suffer with her every single time she sings about her tragic fate. In her repetition of vocatives and imperatives, we understand how desperate she is; we would like to answer to those calls and demands. With the repetition of the motifs, especially theme A, which is so strongly associated with her, she invites us to feel her restless desire. Through the repetition of various motifs, we feel how she suffers as she circles around the object of her desire and death in the final act. In the end, we are united in *jouissance* with her, as she kisses/kills the Prince. In the scenes when the cry occurs she imposes her agony on us as listeners, and as a result, those of us who are, in Poizat’s terms, sensitive to certain moments in music experience painful enjoyment. Therefore, we are connected with Rusalka on certain levels, as we experience her desire and suffering in the libretto, the music and the voice.

However, when we see mute Rusalka on stage, we are encouraged to identify with the human characters in the story, as we also observe her. Since we observe her from the outset, it is impossible to ignore the fact that she is in constant agony. Moreover, certain productions emphasise this. Kušej puts the traumatised Rusalka before the audience and does not let us forget for a second about her suffering. Through her traumatised nature, the audience connects and sympathises with Rusalka. Herheim, in his ever so wonderfully demanding production, gives Rusalka the role of a suffering woman and extends this role to other women in the opera. Due to certain changes (Vodník as a protagonist), the audience might lose the connection with suffering Rusalka. However, with the use of

interesting techniques (such as mirrors on stage), Herheim creates a connection, through suffering, between Rusalka and the audience in Act II.

What we can see from all this is that *Rusalka*, in a way, becomes a story about our joined desire and suffering, as we are drawn to experience Rusalka's perspective. We end up feeling what she feels, as she takes us not only on her journey towards her damnation, but she lets us get inside her head. This fairy tale about a water nymph essentially becomes our story. On some levels, such as the narrative, the libretto, the music and the voice, the central themes that depict the very nature of Rusalka lead to our identification with the protagonist. However, Herheim turns this around and makes the story about our desire, through Vodník, and about a woman suffering, through various female characters on stage, mainly through mute Rusalka and the Foreign Princess in the end. Thus it becomes our story as operaphiles, about our desire to watch the protagonist suffer and die on stage. If we connect Herheim's Vodník to the one from the narrative, as Rusalka's Superego and someone who forces her to enjoy, it means that we are the ones who force Rusalka on this journey of desire that always has to remain unfulfilled and that causes her to suffer in all the acts. Thus *Rusalka* offers two things at the same time: identification with the protagonist, through her desire and suffering, and also the spectators' desire to watch her suffer, which as it turns out, she also desires. Due to the complexity of her nature Rusalka, as a protagonist, can evoke sympathy through her suffering and/or evoke desire in others to see her suffer.

*Rusalka*, as stated in the Introduction, is an opera ripe for interpretations, including the psychological interpretation that I consider as one of the most essential to the opera. This type of interpretation, like any, enriches the opera and our understanding of it. The goal of this research, while employing various approaches to *Rusalka*, has been also been to encourage further analysis of the opera, exploring its many facets. *Rusalka* clearly has a lot to offer. After all, this is a fairy-tale opera, full of symbolism and as such invites us to interpret it. Either as a water nymph, a silent human or will-o-the-wisp, Rusalka will find a way to lure us into her story.

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