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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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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Examples.....	vii
List of Figures	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction – <i>Rusalka</i> in Context	1
1.1 Getting to Know <i>Rusalka</i> -the-Polymorph	1
1.1.1 The Nature of <i>Rusalka</i>	2
1.1.2 <i>Rusalka</i> / <i>Rusalka</i> and Psychology	3
1.2 Dvořák, <i>Rusalka</i> and Nationalism	5
1.2.1 <i>Rusalka</i> , Mahler and Politics	6
1.2.2 Dvořák in Vienna	9
1.2.3 Nationalism, Symphonies and Operas	10
1.3 <i>Rusalka</i> and Feminism	11
1.3.1 Women and Weininger	12
1.3.2 Feminism and Musicology	13
1.3.3 <i>Rusalka</i> ’s Silence	14
1.4 <i>Rusalka</i> Research	15
1.4.1 <i>Rusalka</i> , Nationalism and Flaws.....	16
1.4.2 <i>Rusalka</i> in the 1980s	17
1.4.3 The Music	18
1.4.4 The Underlying Themes	19
1.4.5 Psychological Approach	19
1.4.6 Interpreting <i>Rusalka</i> ’s Silence	20
1.5 Psychological Concepts	20
1.5.1 Overview of the Analysis.....	21
1.5.2 Freud’s Model of the Psyche.....	22
1.5.3 Repetition.....	23
1.5.4 <i>Jouissance</i> and the Cry	25
1.5.5 The Gaze.....	26
1.6 Conclusion.....	26
Chapter Two: The Libretto	27
2.1 Introduction	27

2.2 Inspiration and Adaptation: Sisterhood of Aquatic Creatures.....	28
2.2.1 Rusalkas.....	29
2.2.2 Kvapil's Inspiration	30
2.2.3 La Motte Fouqué's <i>Undine</i>	31
2.2.4 Andersen's <i>The Little Mermaid</i>	31
2.2.5 Kvapil's <i>Rusalka</i>	32
2.2.6 The Connection and the Meaning.....	33
2.3. Psychological Interpretations: The Castration of Rusalka	35
2.3.1 Natural/Unconscious and Human/Conscious	36
2.4. Inside Rusalka's mind: Rusalka's <i>Lebenstriebe</i>	37
2.4.1 Vodník	39
2.4.2 Ježibaba.....	41
2.4.3 Mute Rusalka and the Conscious Realm	44
2.4.4 The Prince and the Foreign Princess	45
2.4.5 The Gamekeeper and Turnspit	48
2.5 Repetition in <i>Rusalka</i>	51
2.5.1 Rusalka, Vocatives and Imperatives.....	52
2.6 Conclusion	53
Chapter Three: The Music.....	54
3.1 Composing <i>Rusalka</i> : Symphonies and Instrumental Forms	54
3.1.1 The Influence of Wagner.....	56
3.1.2 Musical Continuity	57
3.1.3 Leitmotifs	58
3.1.4 Labelling the Leitmotifs.....	59
3.1.5 Motivic Repetition.....	63
3.2 Repetition.....	64
3.2.1 The Prelude	65
3.2.2 Rusalka and Repetition of Theme A in Acts I and III	66
3.2.3 Rusalka and Repetitions of Theme B	69
3.3 Silent Rusalka	70
3.3.1 Silence and Repetition of Theme A and B.....	72
3.3.2 The Silencing of Rusalka.....	73
3.4 Motivic interconnections	74
3.4.1 Rusalka - the Prince.....	74
3.4.2 Rusalka - Ježibaba	76

3.4.3 Rusalka, Ježibaba and the Prince's Death	77
3.5 Conclusion	78
Chapter Four: Voice	80
4.1 Introduction	80
4.2 After the Silence Comes the Cry	80
4.2.1 Rusalka's Cry	81
4.2.2 Ježibaba's Cry?	92
4.2.3 The Prince's Cry	93
4.3 Conclusion	95
Chapter Five: The Stage	97
5.1 <i>Rusalka</i> : The Fairy-tale Issue	97
5.1.1 The Influence of Disney	97
5.1.2 Fairy tales in Psychology and on Stage	99
5.2 Staging <i>Rusalka</i> : Now and Then	100
5.2.1 Shift Towards Psychology: Bringing out the Repressed	102
5.3 The Silence	105
5.3.1 Silent Rusalka on Stage	106
5.4 The Voice vs. The Gaze	108
5.4.1 The Cry on Stage	109
5.4.2 The Function of the Voice and Gaze	110
5.5 The Gaze	110
5.5.1 The Power of Rusalka's Gaze	111
5.5.2 Types of Gaze	113
5.5.3 Vodník's Gaze and the Audience	113
5.5.4 The Audience and Rusalka	115
5.6 Conclusion	115
Conclusion	117
Bibliography	121

List of Examples

Example 3.1: Theme A (the 'Rusalka' theme), bb. 3-7	61
Example 3.2: Theme B, the Prince's 'theme', bb. 27-28	62
Example 3.3: Motif C, b. 169	62
Example 3.4: Act I, Rusalka - Ježibaba scene, bb. 697-698	67
Example 3.5: Rusalka, aria Ó marno to je' ('Oh, it is futile'), Act II, bb. 1142-1143	67
Example 3.6 Rusalka's aria 'Vyrvána životu v hlubokou samotu' ('Torn from life into deep solitude'), Act III bb.498-499	68
Example 3.7: Sem Často přichází ('Often He Comes'), Act I, bb. 362- 365	75
Example 3.8: The Prince, Act II, bb.1227-1231	75
Example 3.9: Rusalka, 'Necitelná vodní moci', Act III, bb. 184-185	76
Example 3.10: Ježibaba, Rusalka - Ježibaba dialogue, Act I, bb. 812-815	77
Example 3.11: Rusalka Act II, bb. 1004- 1010	77
Example 4.1: Act II, bb. 956 - 960	82
Example 4.2 Act II, bb. 961 - 963	83
Example 4.3 Act II, bb. 968 - 971	83
Example 4.4: Act II, bb. 1007 - 1009	84
Example 4.5: Act II, bb. 1026 - 1028	84
Example 4.6: Rusalka's aria 'Ó Marno To Je', Act II, bb. 1043 - 1061	86
Example 4.7: Act II, bb. 1035 - 1039	88
Example 4.8: Act II, bb. 1162 – 1170	90
Example 4.9: The Prince's cry, Act III, bb. 1276 - 1277	94
Example 4.10: The Prince's cry, Act III, bb. 1295 - 1299	94

List of Figures

Figure 5.1 *Rusalka* - 29. January, 1960 99

Figure 5.2 *Rusalka* in Prague- 29 January, 1960 101

Figure 5.3 *Rusalka* in Prague, Act II - 29 January, 1960 101