

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

RUSALKA

BY ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK | NOVEMBER 7, 11, 13, AND 15, 2015

VERDANT VISIONS: LYRIC'S 'RUSALKA' EXPLORES BEAUTIES OF 'LITTLE MERMAID' TALE

November 9, 2015

By Paul Horsley

The **INDEPENDENT**
WWW.KCINDEPENDENT.COM

The Lyric Opera of Kansas City deserves applause for taking on an opera in Czech for the first time in its history, but the opening performance of its *Rusalka* on November 7th at the Kauffman Center offered mixed results. Dvořák's shimmering score—with its delicious colors, sophisticated use of motif, and seamless integration of Slavic melodies and rhythms—make this opera an aural treat, though as a piece of dramatic art it is a tough sell. Erhard Rom's striking, conceptualized set designs take a bit of the fairy-tale fun out of the piece: The rocky, verdant-watery environs of Acts I and III are lovely to look at if a bit clumsy at times, but Act II is set in a sort of dungeon-like box rather than the lavish palace grounds indicated in the score. This is in keeping with director Eric Simonson's view of the opera's troubled world, which is filled with wrong-headed characters driven by sinister motives. In this version, the stark aristocratic world of Act II is like a prison to the hapless, mermaid-out-of-water *Rusalka*, and the contrast between her verdant natural world and the Prince's soulless realm is potent indeed.

Ellie Dehn in the title role took control of the dramatic elements of the role, which requires the soprano both to sing gloriously and to master the art of “gesticulation” during the scenes in which she is unable to express herself verbally (because of the curse attached to becoming human). Her voice had a silvery tone and clarity of purpose, though in the famous “Song of the Moon” (“*Měsíčku*”) aria it seemed that the mouthful of Czech consonants hindered her from producing a forthright “long line.”

She was not the only one dealing with language, as the cast sought to balance good diction (which they achieved, to a degree) with comfortable vocal production. Maxim Aksenov as the Prince sang with querulous pathos, and although his voice sounded heroic only in the upper range his characterization was convincing. Bass Robert Pomakov was thunderously earnest as *Vodník* and Nancy Maultsby sang *Ježibaba* with cavalier wit, though both voices came with considerable wobble. Kirsten Chambers was aptly chilly as the Foreign Princess for whom the Prince dumps our heroine. A musical delight of the evening was the trio of wood-sprites—Ashley Yvonne Wheat, April Martin and Samantha Gossard—who “swam” good-naturedly about the watery stage singing like deftly integrated Rhine-Maidens.

Käarin Kopischke's costume designs were elegant and astute throughout. She dressed *Rusalka* in watery rags for the opening scene, and when the mermaid appeared subsequently in a gorgeous gown worthy of a princess it was arresting indeed. Lighting by Robert Wierzel lent a dreamy quality, and projections by Wendall K. Harrington included comforting woodsy landscapes and a rippling lake. Choreography by David Justin injected stylishness and a dose of (intentional?) flippancy to the courtly scenes, though I found the concept of accompanying the wood-sprites with “interpretive” dancers a trifle broad.

Debating conductor Alexander Polianichko led with conviction and obvious affection for the score, and the Kansas City Symphony responded with vigorous playing. But the orchestral riches too often came at the expense of the singers, whom we struggled

to hear, especially during substantial portions of Act II. Alexander had clear ideas about tempos, too: Ellie's "Měsíčku" aria, for example, was a sort of tug-of-war between the conductor's desire for forward-motion and the soprano's need for more time. Balance problems in opera are complex. The Muriel Kauffman Theatre has shown a tendency to overemphasize sound from the pit, especially in late-Romantic operas. (Its acoustics were not custom-designed in the same way as those of Helzberg Hall next door.) But a company must find a way to make this work. The Lyric's *Rusalka* offered much, but in the end its musical landscape, visual splendor and stage direction simply weren't interesting enough to make us feel we'd devoted three well-spent hours to the theater.