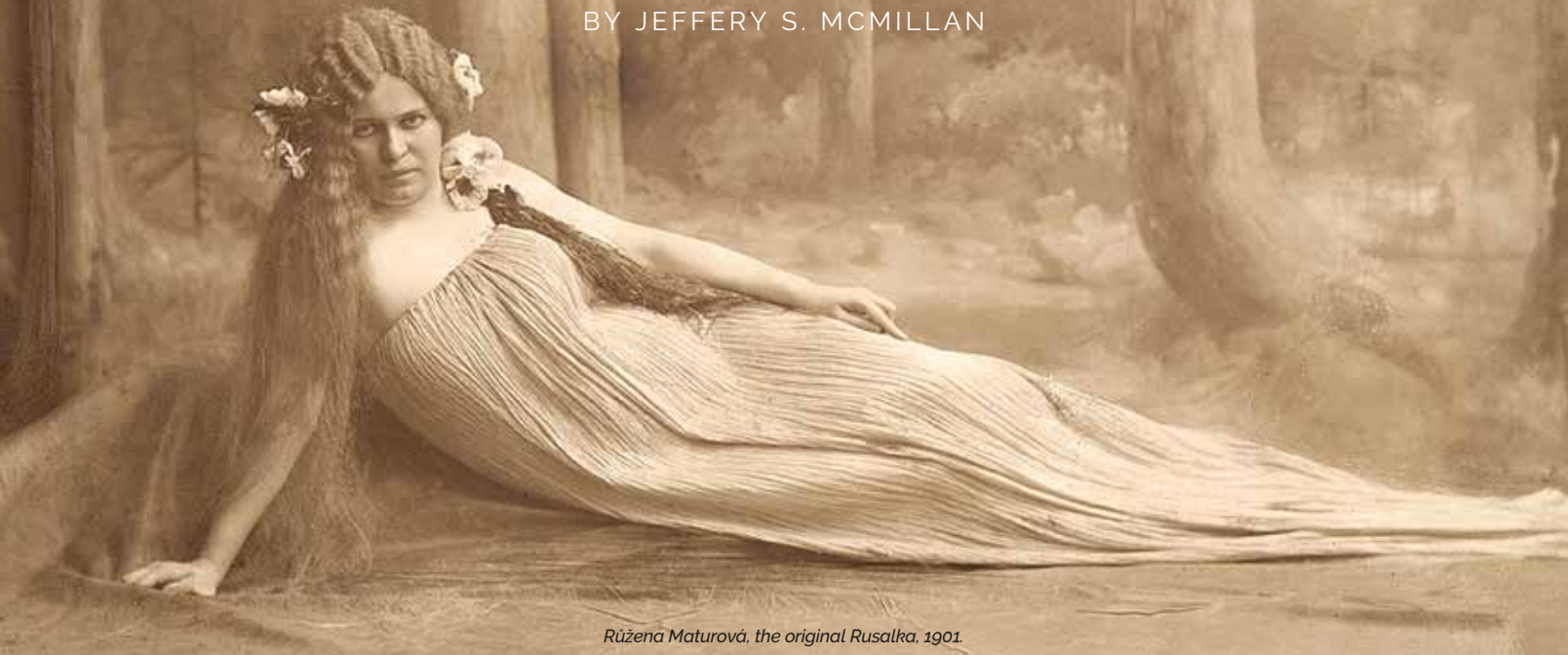


RUSALKA IN THE NEW WORLD

BY JEFFERY S. MCMILLAN



Růžena Maturová, the original Rusalka, 1901.

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Throughout his American sojourn (1892–1895) as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák longed for his native Bohemia and channeled his homesickness into some of his most poignant and emotionally stirring music, including *Symphony No. 9 in E minor (From the New World)* and “American” string quartet. Among his musical jottings from the period was a melancholic, four-measure idea intended for a cello sonata. The unused melody found expression nearly a decade later as the central motive for his new opera, *Rusalka*, which had its premiere on March 31, 1901 at Prague’s National Theatre.

Dvořák’s fairy tale work about a lovelorn water spirit and her unattainable prince was an immediate hit in Bohemia, but slow to catch on elsewhere. Like many turn-of-the-century Czech operas, *Rusalka*’s foreign exposure was circumscribed by language barriers, nationalism, and the turbulent history of Dvořák’s homeland during the twentieth century. It would take generations of artist-evangelists to secure the opera’s future abroad.

The successful export of *Rusalka* seemed, at first, assured. Shortly after its premiere Gustav Mahler, director of the Vienna Court Opera (1897–1907) and staunch advocate of fellow Bohemian composers, agreed to present *Rusalka* in German translation. The premiere was delayed several times and, when Dvořák died in 1904, the opportunity passed; Vienna would not present the opera until 1987.

Though he failed *Rusalka*, Mahler’s promotion of Bedřich Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*—the prototypical Czech national opera—was enormously successful. He conducted the opera in Hamburg, Vienna, and, in 1909, brought it to the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Mahler’s rearranged, German-language version of the work also became the first Czech opera to be presented by San Francisco Opera in 1934.

Music from *Rusalka* was first heard in America thanks to the creator of the title role, soprano Růžena Maturová. In 1903, representatives of the Czech community in Chicago invited this reigning diva of Prague’s National Theatre to headline a Chicago benefit. Maturová made the long journey and sang Czech folk songs and “Song to the

Moon” from *Rusalka*. Before returning to her homeland, she repeated her program for another Czech community, this time in Omaha, Nebraska.

The opera received an additional boost from another Czech soprano, Emmy Destinn, who, unlike Matur-ová, left Bohemia to establish an international career. One of the Met’s leading pre-WWI artists, Destinn sang “Song to the Moon” at a New York concert in 1912 and recorded the aria, in German, for the Victor record company in 1915.

Rusalka received its American premiere on March 17, 1935, in a concert presentation at Chicago’s Sokol Hall. Presented to honor the 85th birthday of Tomáš Masaryk, Czechoslovakia’s first president, the performance featured 63-year-old tenor Otakar Mařák—nicknamed “the Czech Caruso” in his heyday—as the Prince.

Ten years later, a Detroit opera troupe mounted a fully staged *Rusalka* in English with sets and costumes by innovative designer Richard Rychtarik and members of the Detroit Symphony in the pit, but the cast was unremarkable. In 1950, New York’s Sokol Hall staged a performance of *Rusalka* in Czech with piano accompaniment featuring soprano Lidia Bodenova in the title role and her husband, Boris, directing. These intrepid, amateur efforts were followed in 1955 by a Town Hall concert presentation conducted by Peter Herman Adler (no relation to longtime SF Opera General Director Kurt Herbert Adler) about which the *New York Times* commented, “We heard a delightful score, done with much sincerity and understanding that were contagious.”

Though *Rusalka*’s premiere at San Francisco Opera was still decades off, the 1960s saw significant engagement with Czech opera by the Company. In 1966, Leoš Janáček’s *Věc Makropulos* was given for the first time in the United States at the War Memorial Opera House. *Jenůfa* and *Kát’a Kabanová* followed, also in English translations, in 1969 and 1977 respectively, with *The Cunning Little Vixen* making its overdue premiere in 2004.

The Company’s 1980 revival of *Jenůfa* in Czech starring Sena Jurinac and Elisabeth Söderström established a new norm of performing these works in their original language. With Cold War tensions beginning to thaw in Eastern



Renée Fleming as San Francisco Opera’s 1995 *Rusalka*

MARTY SOHL

Europe, the late Sir Charles Mackerras became a driving force for Czech opera in San Francisco during the 1980s and 1990s. Along with reintroducing Janáček operas in corrected editions and with excellent casts, he conducted the Company’s first *Rusalka* in 1995. Years later, the Company’s lofty standards in the Czech repertory were reconfirmed in revivals of *Věc Makropulos* in 2010 and *Jenůfa* in 2016, both starring Finnish soprano Karita Mattila and conducted by the late Czech maestro Jiří Belohlávek.

As operas by the big three Czech composers—Smetana, Dvořák, and Janáček—won new audiences in America, *Rusalka*’s success began to

outpace the others; 1975 was the tipping point. A student production was mounted at The Juilliard School with African-American mezzo-soprano Florence Quivar as both Ježibaba and the Foreign Princess. On the West Coast, the University of Southern California staged the opera on campus and San Diego Opera, with Argentine director Tito Capobianco, unveiled arguably the first professional staging of Dvořák’s work in America.

Yet more than any artist before her, it was Renée Fleming who popularized *Rusalka* in America. After performing “Song to the Moon” in 1988 at the Met’s National Council Winners Concert, the American soprano portrayed the role at Seattle Opera (1990), Houston Grand Opera (1991), San Francisco Opera (1995), and in four Met revivals (1997, 2004, 2009, 2014). Her recordings and concert performances of the aria helped make it one of opera’s greatest hits.

Unlike the water nymph who tragically longs for an impossible human love in the opera, *Rusalka* has at last won a place in the hearts of humankind and that affection extends well beyond the borders of the modern-day Czech Republic. Despite nearly 100 years of geo-political strife in his homeland, including Austrian rule, a Nazi takeover, Russian occupation, and decades of isolation behind the Iron Curtain, Dvořák’s touching masterpiece has been embraced here in the land that, long ago, provided him with its spark. *Rusalka* has come home. 🌸

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