

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra June 19 & 21 complementary content

Rusalka is performed using the 2022 Critical edition by Jonáš Hájek and Robert Simon, supplied by Faber Music, London on behalf of Edition Bärenreiter, Kassel.

Domingo Hindoyan

[Domingo Hindoyan](#) was born in Caracas in 1980 to a violinist father and a lawyer mother. He started his musical career as a violinist in the ground-breaking Venezuelan musical education programme El Sistema. He studied conducting at [Haute Ecole de Musique in Geneva](#), where he gained his masters, and in 2012 was invited to join the Allianz International Conductor's Academy, through which he worked with the London Philharmonic and the Philharmonia Orchestra and with conductors like Esa-Pekka Salonen and Sir Andrew Davis.

He was appointed first assistant conductor to [Daniel Barenboim](#) at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin in 2013, and in 2019, he took up a position as principal guest conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra. In the same year, he made his debut with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and was appointed as the Orchestra's new Chief Conductor in 2020, taking up his position in September 2021. He has now extended his contract with the Orchestra to 2028.

Lada Valesova

Czech/British conductor Lada Valesova brings the vast wealth of her professional experience as a music director, pianist, and a vocal and language coach to her conducting, uniting the various strands of her expertise and drawing on each facet of her musicianship.

Lada Valesova conducted the award-winning production of Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen* for Hampstead Garden Opera, which won the Off West End Award in Opera Ensemble. This season Lada is Cover Conductor and Assistant Conductor to Jakub Hruša on *Jenůfa* at Royal Ballet & Opera, Assistant Conductor to Principal Conductor Karina Canellakis on Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* at Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Assistant Conductor to Principal Conductor Dinis Sousa with Royal Northern Sinfonia and pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, and Assistant Conductor on

Pavel Haas *Šarlatán (The Charlatan)* at The National Moravian Silesian Theatre.

In recent seasons, Lada conducted a new production of *Eugene Onegin* to great critical acclaim for Opera Holland Park, *Two Widows* for Birmingham Opera Company, Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*, a UK professional premiere of opera *Svadba* by Canadian/Serbian composer Ana Sokolović for the Waterperry Opera Festival, an opera double bill of Martinů's one-act operas *Comedy on the Bridge* and *Alexandre bis* for the Royal Academy of Music, *Eugene Onegin* for Opera West Green House, and an opera double bill at the Royal Scottish Conservatoire, which included the UK premiere of the orchestral version of *Four Sisters*, an opera by prominent British composer Elena Langer.

As a natural and engaging communicator whose background bridges a number of cultures, Lada is passionate about sharing music with the widest circle of the audiences delivered to the highest standard, transforming the existing pre-conceptions, bringing down the barriers and making the life-enhancing process of being part of the musical experience accessible to all.

Sonya Yoncheva

Superstar soprano [Sonya Yoncheva](#) has been heralded as one of the most acclaimed and exciting performers of her generation. The recipient of the 2021 Opus Klassik as Singer of the Year is an acclaimed fixture on the most important stages of the world, including the Metropolitan Opera, Royal Opera House, Teatro alla Scala, Bayerische Staatsoper, Berlin Staatsoper, Wiener Staatsoper, and the Opéra de Paris. Her unforgettable portrayals of iconic roles have received tremendous acclaim from critics and audiences alike.

Yoncheva's extensive repertoire includes jewels of the Baroque canon, as well as works by Bellini, Cherubini, Giordano, Mascagni, Puccini, Tchaikovsky, and Verdi. Celebrated for her distinctly beautiful voice and exceptional dramatic presence, she is equally at home on the concert and recital stage, having performed to critical acclaim in cities including Athens, Barcelona, Berlin, Brussels, Budapest, Buenos Aires, Dresden, Hamburg, Madrid, Mexico City, Milan, Monte-Carlo, Montevideo, Moscow, Munich, New York, Paris, Santiago de Chile, São Paulo, Salzburg, Tokyo, and Vienna.

Born in 1981, Yoncheva graduated with performance degrees in piano and voice in her hometown of Plovdiv, Bulgaria under the tutelage of Nelly Koitcheva, later obtaining her master's degree in voice at the Conservatory of Geneva, studying with Danielle Borst. Yoncheva is also the winner of several renowned international competitions, including top prize and the special CulturArte prize at Plácido Domingo's Operalia competition (2010). She was honoured as the Singer of the Year at the 2021 Opus Klassik Awards and the Newcomer of the Year (Singer) at the 2015 ECHO Klassik Awards. She was also the winner of the 2019 Readers' Award of The International Opera Awards and was named the 2017 medici.tv Artist of the Year.

In 2023, she received the title 'Doctor Honoris Causa' from the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts of Plovdiv, and in 2024 was named Officière de l'ordre de Arts et des lettres, one of the most important distinctions by the French government. Solo albums as an exclusive Sony Classical recording artist include *Rebirth*, *Handel*, *The Verdi Album* and *Paris, mon amour*, as well as on Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* and several recordings on DVD/Blu-Ray. Her discography also includes CD recordings of *Le nozze di Figaro* (Contessa) for Deutsche Gramophone and Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* from the Salzburg Festival.

In 2023, Yoncheva released her solo album *The Courtesan* on her own label SY11 Productions. This was followed by her first recital album *GEORGE*, released in January 2025 on Naïve Records in collaboration with SY11 and revolving around George Sand. Her first book, *Fifteen Mirrors*, a glamorous photo book with Yoncheva presenting 15 iconic opera characters, was also released by SY11 Productions in 2023 and is available in English, German, and Bulgarian. Yoncheva has also been a UNICEF Ambassador in Bulgaria and is a global ambassador for Rolex.

Pavel Cernoch

Pavel Cernoch is considered one of the leading tenors of today. He regularly performs at major opera houses such as the Vienna State Opera, Paris National Opera, Royal Opera Covent Garden, Berlin and Munich State Opera. He is renowned for his versatility and is particularly praised for his interpretation of the Czech and Slavic repertoire, but he also excels in French and Italian roles. Cernoch has worked with many top and international conductors, including Daneil Barenboim, Kirill

Petrenko, Simon Rattle, Andris Nelsons, John Eliot Gardiner, Jakub Hruška and many others.

Among the highlights of the 2023/24 season were his acclaimed roles as the Prince in *Rusalka* at the Vienna State Opera and in a new production at the Berlin State Opera, his debut at the Lyric Opera of Chicago as Laca in *Her Shepherdess*, his return to the Paris National Opera as Albert Gregor in *The Makropulos Affair* and to the Hamburg State Opera as Sergei in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. He also portrayed Sergei in a new production directed by Alex Olle at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona.

Jongmin Park

South Korean bass [Jongmin Park](#) has distinguished himself as one of the most outstanding operatic singers of his generation. He was born in Seoul and studied singing at the Korea National University of Arts. As alumnus of the Accademia del Teatro alla Scala, Milan, he was taught by Mirella Freni, Luciana Serra, Luigi Alva and Renato Bruson.

From 2010-13 he was a member of Ensemble at the Hamburg State Opera, Germany, and from 2013-20 he was a member of Ensemble at the Vienna State Opera, Austria with whom he sang a number of leading roles. Park won first prize at the 2011 International Tchaikovsky Competition, the Birgit Nilsson Award for Wagner and Strauss roles at the 2011 Operalia Competition and was the winner of the [BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Song Prize in 2015](#).

A member of the prestigious ensemble at Wiener Staatsoper from 2013-19, since the 2020/21 season he has been a guest singer at major houses and festivals around the world including the Metropolitan Opera, Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Teatro Real in Madrid, Berlin State Opera Unter den Linden, Salzburg Festival, Arena di Verona, Savonlinna Opera Festival, BBC Proms, Vienna Musikverein, Wigmore Hall in London, NHK Hall and Suntory Hall in Tokyo. On the concert platform, he has appeared at the BBC Proms, at the Wiener Konzerthaus, Royal Festival Hall, Royal Albert Hall; he has performed solo recitals in Munich and Frankfurt, as well as the Musikverein in Vienna and Wigmore Hall.

This season, along with his operatic engagements Park has made his Maggio Musicale debut in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and Ninth Symphony, sung Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* with the Czech Philharmonic

and Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Hunding *Die Walküre* with the Orquesta y Coro Nacionales de España and Beethoven's Ninth with the Toronto Symphony. A highlight of recent seasons was his debut at the prestigious Bayreuth Festival as Pogner in a new production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

Jennifer Johnston

Widely regarded as one of Britain's most commanding vocal talents, Liverpool-born mezzo-soprano [Jennifer Johnston](#) has carved out a distinguished career as a consummate interpreter of the monumental works of Mahler, Wagner, Britten, Beethoven, and Elgar, making her the soloist of choice for many of the world's foremost orchestras and conductors.

In 2021, [Johnston](#) was awarded the Royal Philharmonic Society's Singer Award, honouring her "commitment and emotional force" in both performance and education and, beyond the stage, she is a passionate and articulate advocate for the Arts.

Johnston's 2025/2026 season has been marked by several significant role debuts, notably Ježibaba (*Rusalka*) both in Tatjana Gürbaca's production for Den Norske Opera under the baton of Edward Gardner and here with Royal Liverpool Philharmonic under Domingo Hindoyan, and Fricka in *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* with Sinfonieorchester Wuppertal. She has also returned to her acclaimed interpretation of Judith in *Bluebeard's Castle* with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and made her debut at Opéra Comique in the French premiere of Matthias Pintscher's new work, *Nuit sans aube*.

On the concert stage this season, Johnston has brought her signature depth and artistry to Mahler's *Symphony No.3* with Taiwan Philharmonic and *Symphony No.2* with the Antwerp Symphony Orchestra. She has also performed Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder* with Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, and Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with the Gulbenkian Orchestra. A passionate advocate for song and programme curation, she has unveiled two new programmes this season: *The Golden Age of Hollywood* at London's Cadogan Hall with Julius Drake and *Lost in the Stars* at Wigmore Hall with Malcolm Martineau.

Mahler's works have been a central feature of Johnston's career, with key performances including *Symphony No. 8* with Royal Concertgebouw, Wiener Philharmoniker, Bayerisches Staatsorchester, NDR Radio Philharmonic and the Prague Philharmonic; *Symphony No. 3* with Cleveland Orchestra and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and *Symphony No. 2* with the Philharmonia Orchestra (released on disc).

In huge demand on the concert platform, other notable repertoire includes Judith (*Bluebeard's Castle*), Ravel *Schééhérazade*, Jocasta (*Oedipus Rex*), Wagner *Wesendonck Lieder*, Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* with BBC Symphony Orchestra as part of the First Night of the BBC Proms, Schumann's *Faustszenen* and Britten *Phaedra* with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic.

Johnston has enjoyed a close collaboration with Bayerische Staatsoper, where she has sung over 80 performances. Highlights elsewhere have included her critically acclaimed Judith (*Bluebeard's Castle*) for the ENO, Juno (*Semele*) for Glyndebourne Festival Opera, Mrs Grose (*The Turn of the Screw*) and Gaia (Battistelli's *CO2*) at Teatro alla Scala, Carmi (Mozart's *La Betulia Liberata*), Leda (*Die Liebe Der Danae*) and Lady De Hautdesert (Birtwistle's *Gawain*) at Salzburg Festival, and Dido (*Dido and Aeneas*) at Festival d'Aix-en-Provence.

A former BBC New Generation Artist, and a graduate of Cambridge University and the Royal College of Music, Johnston has an extensive discography including her first solo recording, [*A Love Letter to Liverpool \(Rubicon Classics\)*](#), the Grammy-nominated Vaughan Williams's *Four Last Songs* (Albion Records), Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (LSO Live), Wagner's *Die Walküre* (Waltraute) with Sir Simon Rattle and Bayerischer Rundfunk Orchester and Gramophone Awards' 2022 Recording of the Year, Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* from Bayerische Staatsoper.

Giselle Allen

Northern Irish soprano Giselle Allen has garnered a reputation for her dramatic role portrayals, establishing a versatile career with leading international opera houses and orchestras.

Her career highlights have seen her perform with Irish National Opera; The Royal Opera and Ballet; Opernhaus Zurich; La Monnaie; Komische Oper Berlin; Opéra National de Lyon; Canadian Opera Company; Glyndebourne; English National Opera; Opera North; Bergen

International Festival, Aldeburgh; Welsh National Opera; Northern Ireland Opera; Opera Australia the Hallé Orchestra; City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra; the Philharmonia Orchestra; the Ulster Orchestra; Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra; National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland; Scottish Chamber Orchestra; and Edinburgh International Festival under conductors such as Sir Simon Rattle, Sir Mark Elder, Marin Alsop, Gianandrea Noseda, Richard Farnes, and Edward Gardner.

Ella Taylor

A graduate of London's National Opera Studio, Ella Taylor was born in Sheffield. During the pandemic, they were a Momentum Artist, and in 2024 were conferred Associateship of the Royal Academy of Music.

They made debuts with Opera North at Nevill Holt Festival as **Fiordiligi** / *Così fan tutte* and at Staatsoper Hamburg as **Composer** / *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and their operatic engagements have further included projects with London's Royal Ballet and Opera, English National Opera, Graeae, Wild Arts and Dutch National Opera.

Highlights of their concert career have included performances with BBC Concert Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Huddersfield Choral Society, London Sinfonietta, the Philharmonia and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

They are a regular soloist for Joe Hisaishi, their engagements including *Joe Hisaishi: Symphonic Concert: Music from the Studio Ghibli Films of Hayao Miyazaki* at OVO Arena Wembley, *Joe Hisaishi in Concert* with Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at La Défense, Paris, and *Joe Hisaishi The End of the World* with Future Orchestra Classics at Suntory Hall, Tokyo, now available on DG CD.

Ella Taylor will return to Dutch National Opera next season to sing **Lidion** in Shostakovich's *Cherry Town* and their current engagements further include creating **Blaze** in Lucy Armstrong's *Spark* for Glyndebourne, J. S. Bach's *B Minor Mass* for Waterperry Opera Festival, Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* for The Academy of St Mary le Bow, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* with Opus 48, Mahler's *Symphony No. 8* with Magna Sinfonia, Verdi's *Requiem* at Cheltenham Festival and *Avond von de Filmmuziek* at AFAS Dome, Antwerp.

Passionate about creating new work with and for the LGBTQ+ community, Ella Taylor is an advocate through talks and events for trans classical singers.

Natasha Agarwal

Natasha Agarwal is a British Indian soprano from Liverpool, described as an “actress and singer of equal stature” (Seen and Heard International). After studying Mathematics at the University of Warwick, she trained at the Royal Academy of Music and National Opera Studio. She is supported by Opera Prelude, and her awards include the Charles Wood International Song Prize and Opera Holland Park Award for Outstanding Emerging Talent.

She made her debut at Glyndebourne as Zoe Green in Jonathan Dove’s *Uprising* and revived the role of Jack Lofte in Dove’s critically acclaimed *Itch* at Opera Holland Park (having created the role in 2023). She also made a “stand out” (The Times) role debut as Neera in the world premiere of Will Todd’s *Migrations* at Welsh National Opera. Other recent and future engagements include Frasquita *Carmen* (Opera Holland Park and Opera North), Cinderella *Little Listeners: Cinderella* and cover Amor *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Opera North), Gianetta *The Gondoliers*, Anne Milbanke *Ada and the Code Crusaders*, Alex Little *Terror*, Milly *The Wellies*, cover Lucia *The Rape of Lucretia* and cover Giannetta *The Elixir of Love* (English Touring Opera), Pamina and Papagena *Die Zauberflöte* (Royal Ballet & Opera: Create & Sing), Lapák *The Cunning Little Vixen* and cover Galatea *Acis and Galatea* (Opera Holland Park), Zorah *Ruddigore* and Kate *The Yeomen of the Guard* (Opera Holland Park with Charles Court Opera), Musetta *La bohème* (DEBUT Opera in a Day), Baby Bear *Peace at Last* (OperaUpClose), Zora *Svadba* (Waterperry Opera Festival), Medea *Medea Goperia* (Thee Black Swan), Sukanya’s Friend *Sukanya* (London Philharmonic Orchestra), Selena *Apollo’s Mission* (Tête à Tête), Carolina *Il matrimonio Segreto* and Nerina *La Fedeltà Premiata* (Royal Opera House Mumbai), Susanna *Le nozze di Figaro*, Adele *Die Fledermaus* and Hanna Glawari *The Merry Widow* (Opera Warwick). Concert highlights include *An Evening with Amjad Ali Khan* (London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall), *Messiah* (Ripon Cathedral), *Carmina Burana* (St George’s Hall Bradford & Coventry Cathedral) and Mozart’s *C Minor Mass* (Spire’s Philharmonic), as well as recitals at The National Gallery, Royal Opera House and Two Temple Place.

Natasha is passionate about using music as a means to break down barriers and help those in the community. She has performed several charity concerts in India and has done a variety of outreach and educational work with opera companies across the UK. She was recently invited to speak on a panel at the Opera Europa conference in Copenhagen/Malmö about racial and gender stereotypes in opera. She is also an award-winning dancer (trained in the styles of ballet, tap, contemporary, jazz and classical Indian dance) and an ambassador for All England Dance.

Lily Mo Browne

Described by The Times as having ‘a richly hued, deep voice,’ which ‘generated expressive, emotional and dramatic power’ mezzo-soprano Lily Mo Browne joins the Jette Parker Artist Programme at the Royal Ballet and Opera in 2026. She studies with Ben Johnson, is an alumnus of the Royal College of Music, and the National Opera Studio, London.

She won the Kathleen Ferrier competition in 2025. Lily made her international debut last summer as Filipyevna in Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* at the Verbier Festival. Other roles include Dido *Dido and Aeneas*, Old Lady *Candide*, Zweite and Dreite Dame *Die Zauberflöte*, La Regina *La bella dormente nel bosco* and Marie *Airtime* with the RCM International Opera Studio. During her first season at the Royal Ballet and Opera, Lily’s roles include Dritte Dame *Die Zauberflöte*, Feklušá *Katya Kabanova* and Maestra delle Novizie *Suor Angelica*. She has performed solos in Handel’s *Messiah*, Rossini’s *Petite Messe Solennelle*, Mahler’s *2nd Symphony* and Mozart’s *Requiem*, and Tippett’s *A Child of Our Time* under Martyn Brabbins.

As an avid recitalist, Lily has performed with pianist Graham Johnson, Roger Vignoles, James Baillieu and Simon Lepper. More competition success includes 1st prize in the Somerset Song Prize, where she also received the Audience Prize, 1st prize in the AESS’s Patricia Routledge Senior Song Prize, and the Sarah Harrison Prize in Hurn Court Opera’s Singer of the Year competition. Lily was awarded with the *Laurus Florentiae* in Florence in 2025, where she also won the award for the Best Performance of an Italian Aria.

Joshua Ellicott

Joshua Ellicott is a sweet-toned, flexible yet powerful lyric tenor, whose versatile musicianship has made him a sought-after artist across opera, concert and song. His wide-ranging repertoire, and the distinguished conductors and ensembles with whom he has worked internationally, reflect an artist equally at home in early music, classical and later repertoire.

He has a particularly strong profile in early music, having worked with Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Concentus Musicus Wien, Sir Roger Norrington and the Zurich Chamber Orchestra, Harry Bicket and The English Concert, Harry Christophers with The Sixteen and the Boston Handel and Haydn Society, Robert King and The King's Consort, Paul McCreesh with The Gabrieli Consort and Wroclaw Baroque Orchestra, Bernard Labadie and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and Emmanuelle Haïm and Le Concert d'Astrée. He has developed a special affinity with Bach, Handel and Monteverdi, and is especially admired as the Evangelist in Bach's Passions.

Joshua is also a committed interpreter of later repertoire, having worked with Sir Mark Elder, Daniel Harding and Esa-Pekka Salonen in works ranging from Wagner's Parsifal and Tristan und Isolde to Weill's The Seven Deadly Sins and Berg's Wozzeck. Song is central to his artistry, most notably in his deeply moving programme From Your Ever-Loving Son Jack, built around the First World War letters of his Great Uncle Jack, combining dramatic readings with song.

Recent highlights include the Evangelist in Bach's St Matthew Passion at Deutsche Oper Berlin and with the Residentie Orkest, All the Hills and Vales at The Cumnock Tryst, Handel with the Dresdner Philharmonie, Damon in Acis and Galatea at WDR Köln, Samson and Jephtha with the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, Tempo in Il trionfo del tempo e del disinganno at the Royal Danish Opera, George Walker's Lilacs with the BBC Philharmonic, and Handel's Messiah with the New York Philharmonic.

This season he returns to Lammermuir Festival for Unravelling Ravel with Al Hogarth, and sings Bach's Christmas Oratorio, St John Passion and St Matthew Passion with orchestras including the Copenhagen

Philharmonic, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig and Antwerp Symphony Orchestra.

Joshua was born in Manchester and studied at the University of York and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. In 2006 he won the International Vocal Concours in 's-Hertogenbosch.

Grace Durham

Winner of the First Prize at the 10th International Cesti Competition for Baroque Opera and the Grand Prix of the 2019 Concours international d'interprétation de la Mélodie Française de Toulouse, Grace Durham was born in London and now lives in Paris. A graduate of the Junge Ensemble at the Semperoper Dresden, she made her debut for London's Royal Ballet & Opera earlier this season singing the title role in *Ariodante* and will return next season to sing **La Ciesca** *Gianni Schicchi*.

Recent engagements have included **Marguerite** / *La Damnation de Faust* with City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, **Zaida** / *Il turco in Italia* for Glyndebourne, **The Presenter** / *New Year* for Birmingham Opera Company, **Angelina** / *La Cenerentola* for Nevill Holt Opera and **Tisbe** / *La Cenerentola* for English National Opera. Highlights of her operatic career have further included performances with Garsington Opera at Wormsley, Opéra national de Lorraine, Opéra du Capitole – Toulouse Métropole and Zurich Opera.

A committed recitalist, she was a laureate of the Académie Orsay-Royaumont with pianist Edward Liddall, going on to perform recitals at the Opéra national de Bordeaux, the Opéra de Lille, the Opéra de Montpellier, the Musée d'Orsay and London's Wigmore Hall. Her concert engagements have included collaborations with Nash Ensemble, Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, Collective Lovemusic, Orchestre national Auvergne Rhône-Alpes, Orchestre de Picardie, Les Talens Lyriques, Munich Bach Choir and Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz.

Her recordings include Traetta's *Rex Salomon* with THERESIA on cpo CD and *Aimer à loisir*, singing songs by Chausson, Fauré and Ravel, with Edward Liddall on B Records.

Grace Durhambegan her studies as a linguist, graduating with a First-Class Honours Degree in French and Italian from Clare College, Cambridge. The recipient of an Independent Opera Voice Scholarship, she continued her training as a singer at the Guildhall School of Music and

Drama, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the National Opera Studio.

Liverpool Philharmonic Opera Chorus

The Liverpool Philharmonic Opera Chorus has been formed for *Rusalka* and comprises professional and semi-professional opera singers who are from or based in the Northwest.

About the Music

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904): *Rusalka*

Libretto: Jaroslav Kvapil

Composed: 1901-2

First Performed: 31 March 1901, Prague National Theatre, Růžena Maturová (*Rusalka*), cond. Karel Kovařovic

Many would say that Antonín Dvořák's *Rusalka* is one of the loveliest, most moving things he ever created – which, given that we're talking about the composer of the *New World* Symphony, the Cello Concerto and the *American* Quartet, is making a very big claim indeed. If that's the case (a few doubters may be asking), why did it take the best part of a century to enter the international operatic repertoire? Well, one reason is that the libretto is in Czech, not an easy language to sing if you aren't born to it. *Rusalka*'s triumph in Prague naturally stimulated interest in other countries, and a German version had some success in other countries. But the problem is that Dvořák's setting is so finely attuned to the music of the Czech language that translations tend to fall a bit flat. And the fact the Communist Czechoslovakia jealously guarded its own singers meant that chances to hear *Rusalka* sung live with feeling and understanding this side of the Iron Curtain were rare until political strictures began to relax in the 1980s – strikingly, at the same time as Dvořák's countryman Leoš Janáček began to acquire the international reputation he deserved too.

The story of *Rusalka* is pure fairy tale – and, for listeners who know Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid*, quite a lot of it will seem fairly familiar. A 'rusalka' is a water sprite, one of those enchanting but dangerous sylphlike creatures who haunt the big rivers and lakes of the Slavic countries. *Rusalka* tells her father, the Water Goblin, that she has fallen in love with a handsome Prince who comes to hunt around his territory. She knows she will have to become human to enjoy a real (i.e. non-fatal) relationship with him. Her father knows it's bad idea, but he

agrees to help her by directing her to a rather splendid witch named Ježibaba. I'll help you, says Ježibaba, but first you'll have to renounce both your immortality and your power of speech – and if it doesn't work out, he'll die and you'll be eternally damned! But Rusalka is carried away by her feelings, and... well, we just know it will end in tears.

Alas, like so many handsome princes, this one turns out to be fickle, and Rusalka flees back to the lake. Ježibaba tells her she can only save herself by killing the Prince, but Rusalka still loves him too much. Eventually the Prince, now penitent, finds Rusalka and asks her to kiss him, knowing that her kiss means death to him. He dies, the Water Goblin comments wryly on the pointlessness of self-sacrifice, while Rusalka faces the reality of human inconstancy and the deceptiveness of good looks. 'May God have mercy on you', she sings to her once-beautiful, all-too-human lover.

It's a good story – Hans Anderson himself might well have approved it. But what really lifts *Rusalka* is Dvořák's music. He captures the contrast between Rusalka's magical watery world and the 'real' world of the Prince with great subtlety and tenderness. Rusalka's Act One aria 'Song to the Moon' is a lyrical highlight (if you're a regular listener to Classic FM you've probably heard it), and one eminent critic justly described the final scene between Rusalka and the Prince as 'twelve or so of the most glorious minutes in all opera.' Even more, it's one of those special operatic masterpieces that leaves you thinking. Is love always a good thing? How often does it lead us astray? And does the Water Goblin have a point about self-sacrifice? It's a tribute to the way Dvořák brings these characters and their predicaments to life that he leaves you really caring about them.