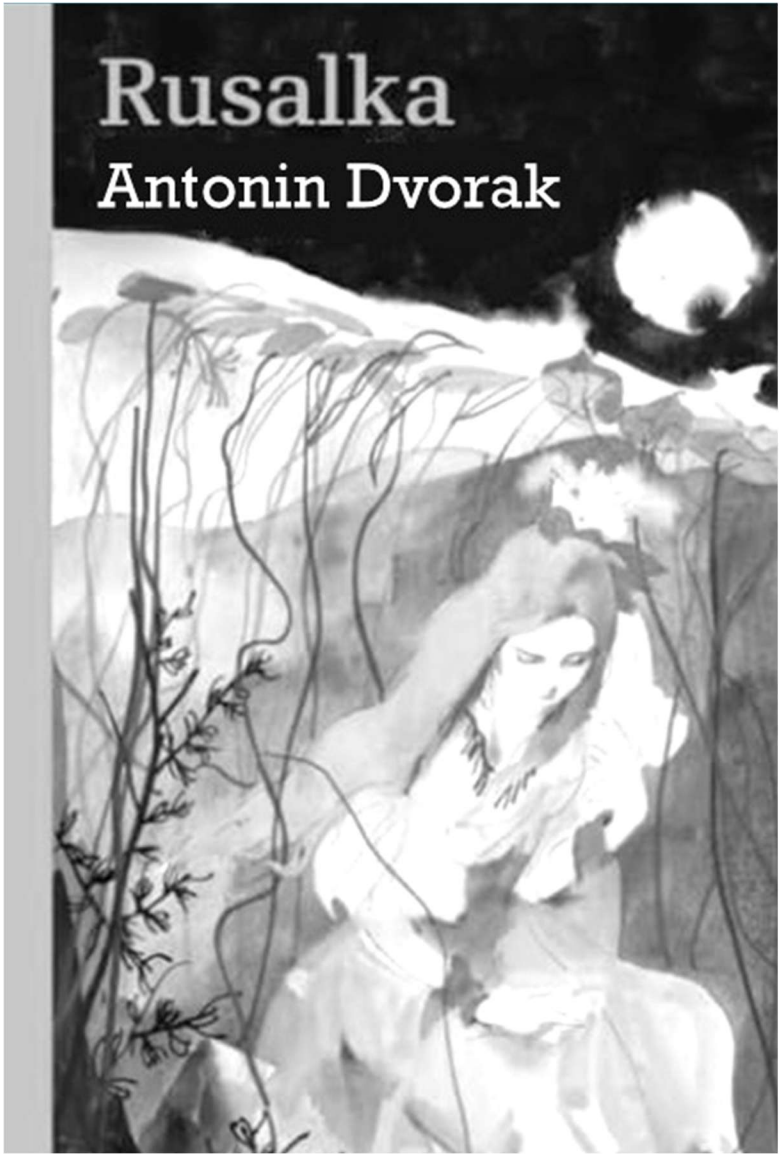
B. Mirror Variations

Aided by his brilliant designer, **Michael Levine**, Robert Carsen sees the opera as an interplay of mirror images, real and false, the place where one belongs and an almost-identical one where one doesn't. We will watch a montage of seven short scenes, introduced by text slides.

Dvorak: *Rusalka*, montage of selected scenes (Paris 2009; James Conlon, *conductor*; Robert Carsen, *director*; Michael Levine, *designer*; Philippe Giraudeau, *choreographer*. Renée Fleming, *Rusalka*; Larissa Diadkova, *Jezibaba*; Eva Urbanova, *Foreign Princess*; Sergei Larin, *Prince*; Franz Hawlata, *Water Gnome*)

The class website is **www.brunyate.com/RenInstProduction/**
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Opera Production



12. Reframing the Fairytale

December 8, 2026

12. Reframing the Fairytale

Fairytales are fungible. Stories like *The Little Mermaid* that are found in many cultures tend to reflect the sensibilities of that culture. So it is with the 1901 opera *Rusalka* by Antonin Dvorak: as thoroughly Czech as you could wish, but recognizably the same story as the one Hans Christian Andersen penned in Denmark.

And the same tale can be retold in different ways. In this class, we will sample three different productions of Dvorak's opera. First, 2 minutes of the old **Otto Schenk** production at the Met, an old-fashioned spectacle with romantic painted scenery. Then 12 minutes of a 2011 production in Munich by **Martin Kusej**, who rips a notorious sex-abuse case from recent newspapers to create something that begins lurid, turns surreal, and ends in the chill of total insanity. Finally, 32 minutes from the most brilliant production of all, staged in Paris in 2009 by **Robert Carsen**, who treats the subject as a fascinating affair of mirrors and broken symmetry. *rb*.

About the Opera

The following synopsis is adapted from Wikipedia. Sections in square brackets will not be shown in any version today; the rest will crop up in one or more of the three productions mentioned above.

Act 1. *A meadow by the edge of a lake*. Three **Wood Sprites** tease the water goblin, **Vodník**, ruler of the lake. [His daughter **Rusalka**, a water nymph, tells him that she has fallen in love with a human prince who comes to hunt around the lake, and she wants to become human to embrace him. He replies that it is a bad idea, but nonetheless steers her to a witch, Ježibaba, for assistance.] Rusalka sings her *Song to the Moon,* asking it to tell the prince of her love. **Ježibaba** tells Rusalka that, if she becomes human, she will lose the power of speech and her immortality; moreover, if she does not find love with the prince, he will die and she will be eternally damned. Rusalka agrees to the terms and drinks a potion. [The prince, hunting a white doe, finds Rusalka, embraces her, and leads her away, as her father and sisters lament.]

Act 2. *The garden of the prince's castle*. A **Gamekeeper** and his nephew, the **Kitchen Boy**, note that the prince is to be married to a mute and nameless bride. They suspect witchcraft and doubt it will last, as the prince is already lavishing attentions on a **Foreign Princess** who is a wedding guest. The foreign princess, jealous, curses the couple. The prince rejects Rusalka. Rusalka then goes back to the lake with her father the water goblin. Though she has now won the prince's affections, the foreign princess is disgusted by the prince's fickleness and betrayal and she scorns him, telling him to follow his rejected bride to Hell.

Act 3. *A meadow by the edge of a lake.* [Rusalka returns to the lake and laments her fate. She asks Ježibaba for a solution to her woes. Ježibaba gives her a knife and tells her that she can save herself if she kills the Prince with it. Rusalka rejects this, throwing the dagger into the lake. She then becomes a will-o'-the-wisp, a spirit of death living in the depths of the lake, emerging only to lure humans to their deaths. The prince, comes to the lake and calls Rusalka; when she appears, she is now able to speak.] He asks her to kiss him, even knowing her kiss means death. They kiss and he dies. Rusalka tells the prince, "For your love, for that beauty of yours, for your inconstant human passion, for everything by which my fate is cursed, human soul, God have mercy on you!"

A. Transformation

After a quick synopsis of the opera, we sample the Schenk and Kusej productions mentioned above.

Dvorak: *Rusalka,* Song to the Moon, first verse (Metropolitan Opera 1993; Otto Schenk, *director*; Renée Fleming, *Rusalka*)

Dvorak: *Rusalka,* montage of selected scenes (Munich 2011; Martin Kusej, *director*; Kristine Opolais, *Rusalka;* Günter Gröissböck, *Water Gnome;* Klaus Florian Vogt, *Prince*)