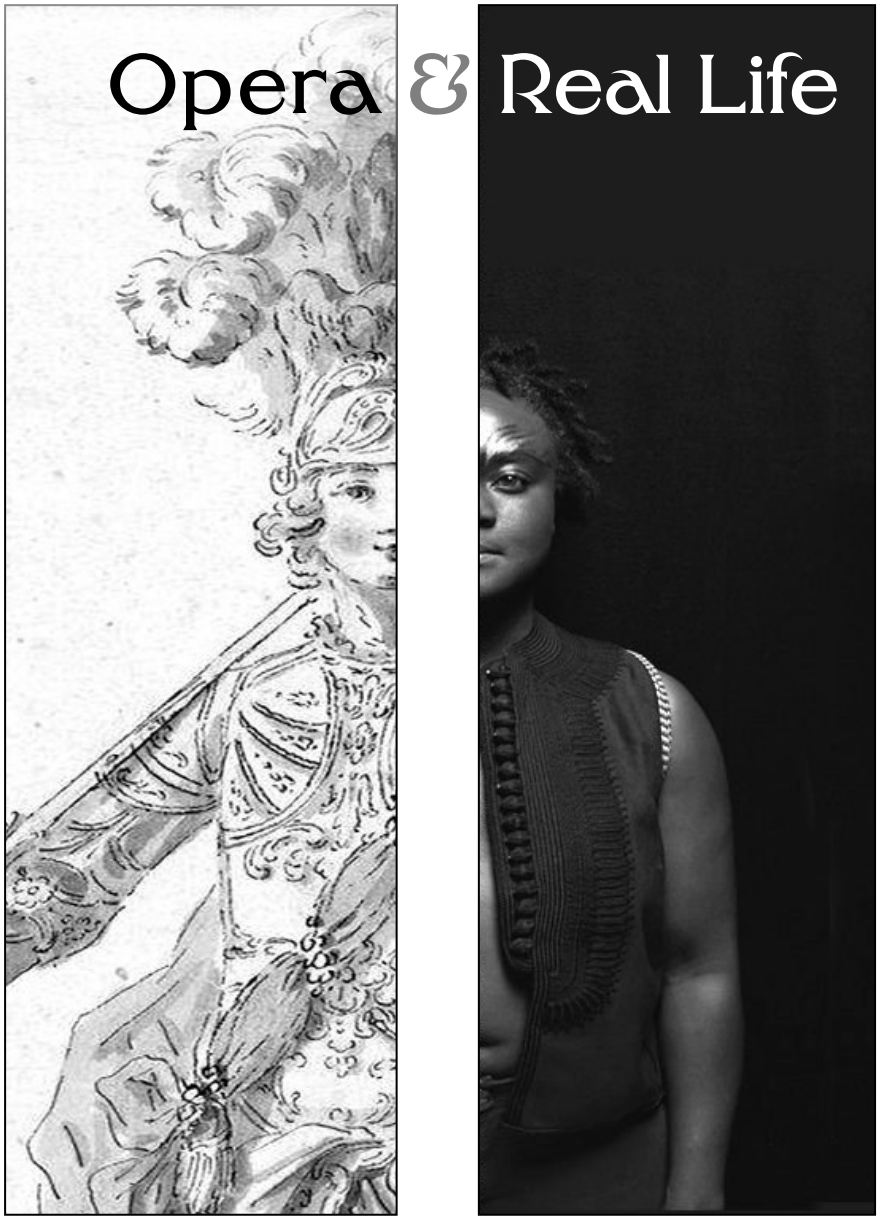

3. Fantasy Made Real

March 15, 2022

Fantasy Made Real

Baroque Opera thrived on fantasy: myths, allegories, dances, and divertissements. These were entertainments made for the expectations of their age. Should they now be set aside because modern tastes have changed? Rameau's *Les Indes galantes* (The Amorous Indes) is a loose collection of stories celebrating both French colonialism and Enlightenment thought; we look at two recent attempts to make it relevant to the 21st century also.

Fantasy was also a staple of the Romantic repertoire, in the form of fairy-tales and folk myths. It can still work on its own terms, of course, but in a post-Freudian and socially-fraught age we tend to glimpse darker ideas lurking behind the storybook surface. For some reason, Dvorak's *Rusalka* has recently attracted a large number of such reinterpretations. We look at one that frames the tale within a horrific real-life story from newspaper headlines.

A. Empire and Enlightenment

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) wrote several versions of *Les Indes galantes* (The Amorous Indes) from 1735 on, adding a little more each time. For it is in fact a kind of variety show: a prologue, plus four different *opéra-ballets*, each telling a different story in a pretty much equal mixture of singing and dance. The acts (or *entrées*) are all set in foreign climes—Turkey, Persia, Peru, and the Wild West—and they are all love stories, about separated lovers who only come back together as the result of enlightened accord between the two cultures.

Neither 21st-century production we shall see attempts to eliminate the fantasy completely. Working in Bordeaux in 2014, **Laura Scozzi** offers a series of picture postcards that turn out to be quite different in reality. While she retains a light touch throughout, she also makes important points about Americanization, consumerism, the subjugation of women, and the destruction of the environment.

Working for the venerable Paris Opera in 2019, **Clément Cogitore** gives the fantasy a modern setting. But his biggest stroke was to bring in choreographer **Bintou Dembélé** who fills the stage with movements taken from break dancing, hip-hop, vogue, and krump, familiar enough from the streets and projects of modern Paris, but never before seen on the august stage of the Palais Garnier.

Rameau: *Les Sauvages* (1725). Jean Rondeau, *harpsichord*

Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, brief excerpt
Paris 2003; c. William Christie, d. Andrej Serban

Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, excerpts
Bordeaux 2014; c. Christophe Rousset, d. Laura Scozzi

Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, excerpts
Paris 2019; c. Leonardo García Alarcón , d. Clément Cogitore, ch. Bintou Dembélé; Sabine Devieilhe & Florian Sempey, singers

B. The Dark Side of the Fairy Tale

The 1901 opera *Rusalka* by **Antonin Dvorak** (1841–1904) is an Eastern European variant of the *Little Mermaid* myth. The water nymph Rusalka has seen a handsome Prince hunting by her lake, and wants to become mortal so that she may be with him. The Witch Jezibaba grants her request, but lays out the conditions: she will lose her voice, and she can never return. Rusalka meets her Prince, who takes her back to his palace and prepares to marry her. But, frustrated by Rusalka's inability to speak, he betrays her with a visiting Foreign Princess. Rusalka flees. Jezibaba gives Rusalka a dagger, telling her to kill the Prince if she is to save herself. Rusalka refuses, and thus remains in limbo. In the final scene, the Prince visits the lake once again, and begs Rusalka to forgive him. Fully knowing that it will mean his death, he asks her to kiss him. She does.

In showing scenes from the 2010 production in Munich by director **Martin Kusej**, we shall skip over the fantasy elements of the tale, which are still there, albeit in the manner of a surreal nightmare. What is especially unusual in this version is the frame that Kusej creates for the story, before and after Rusalka's sojourn at the palace—and this comes from a place as far removed from fairy-tales as possible. [I think he meant this to be a surprise for the first audience, so I'd ask those that don't already know to remain in ignorance until class time.]

Dvorak: *Rusalka*, brief clip from the film by Petr Weigl (1977)

Dvorak: *Rusalka*, Song to the Moon (brief excerpt)
NY Met 2017; c. Yannick Nézet-Seguin, d. Mary Zimmerman; Kristine Opolais (Rusalka)

Dvorak: *Rusalka*, scenes from Acts I and III
Munich 2010; c. Thomas Hanus, d. Martin Kusej; Kristine Opolais (Rusalka), Gunther Groissböck (Water Goblin), Klaus Florian Vogt (Prince)

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