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Rusalka - Triumph of Lyricism and Drama

Vienna State Opera, 18.01.2026 [ENA]

The Vienna State Opera once again affirmed its reputation as one of the world's foremost houses for Romantic opera with a deeply compelling staging of Antonín Dvorák's beloved fairy-tale masterpiece Rusalka. The performance was under the insightful musical leadership of Robert Jindra, and in a provocative, psychologically resonant production by director Sven-Eric Bechtolf.

It offered a vivid embodiment of the opera's elemental tensions — between nature and civilization, longing and betrayal, love and loss. This evening's cast, led by Nicole Car as Rusalka and Piotr Beczala as the Prince, delivered performances of extraordinary vocal beauty and dramatic nuance. Both singers brought not only technical mastery but a rare emotional intelligence to their roles — lifting the production from a simple retelling of a familiar story to a profound exploration of human vulnerability and desire.

Rusalka, composed by Antonín Dvorák and premiered in 1901, occupies a unique place in the operatic canon. Drawing on Slavic folklore and echoing the timeless story of the mermaid who longs for a human soul, the work combines lush, folk-inflected lyricism with an evocative orchestral palette. Its score is at once richly Romantic and hauntingly introspective — an ideal vehicle for the vocal talents of a company like the Vienna State Opera.

This production, revived as part of the January 2026 season schedule, was presented against a stark, elemental backdrop. Bechtolf's staging emphasized a landscape of snow and desolation, with barren woodland and open, icy spaces suggesting Rusalka's psychological isolation after she forsakes the world of water for that of humanity. These visual metaphors — simultaneously surreal and deeply affecting — created a powerful frame for the unfolding drama, encouraging the audience to surrender intellectual expectation and be drawn into the characters' emotional depths.

The Vienna State Opera Chorus and orchestra were fully equal to the demands of Dvorák's score, delivering an orchestral sound that was both rich in color and sensitive to the intricacies of the composer's harmonic language. Under Jindra's baton, the music moved with dramatic purpose through shimmering woodwinds, poignant strings, and the score's unforgettable melodic lines — from the iconic "Song to the Moon" to the heartbreaking final act. The result was a performance that balanced musical precision with expressive warmth throughout.

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At the heart of this evening's success was Nicole Car's portrayal of Rusalka, which stood as a masterclass in operatic characterization. Car brought to the role a voice of radiant clarity and emotional immediacy, lending her every phrase an expressive nuance that kept the audience utterly captivated. In Act I, as Rusalka gazes beseechingly toward the moonlit world she dreams of joining, Car's Lied an den Mond ("Song to the Moon") unfolded with a fragile, shimmering beauty that encapsulated Rusalka's yearning. Her line — pure, lyrical, and palpably sincere — seemed to float effortlessly above the orchestral texture, conveying both innocence and a profound sense of longing.

This was a performance of not just vocal brilliance but deep narrative empathy: we saw in Rusalka not merely a mythical being but a young soul grappling with impossible choices. Car's coloring was equally effective in the subsequent acts, where Rusalka's transformation into a speechless human brings both tragedy and a sublime sense of melancholic beauty. Even in silence, the emotional arc of her portrayal was unmistakable — an embodiment of Dvorák's idea that music can express what words cannot. Her presence onstage anchored the production's emotional core; she was not merely sung but inhabited her role with a rare commitment that resonated long after the final curtain.

Opposite Rusalka, Piotr Beczala's performance as the Prince was an object lesson in vocal refinement and dramatic sensitivity. Renowned worldwide for his distinguished tenor voice and interpretive insights, Beczala brought to this role a tone of exceptional warmth and lyrical sweep. His voice possessed both the sheen and emotional resonance that this character demands, allowing him to communicate the Prince's inner conflicts with remarkable clarity. From his first interaction with Rusalka, Beczala demonstrated a compelling blend of romantic ardor and human fragility.

Unlike portrayals that lean heavily on youthful impetuosity, his approach was grounded in a mature musicality — one that acknowledged the Prince's allure as well as his inevitable shortcomings. When his ardent phrases intertwined with Rusalka's own melodic lines, the stage seemed to breathe with a heightened sense of dramatic urgency.
Particularly in the pivotal moments of Acts I and II, Beczala's vocal presence shaped the narrative's emotional architecture. His phrasing was not merely beautiful in itself, but dramatically charged — each ascent into the higher register carried expressive weight, and each descent suggested inner turmoil.

In the delicate balance between yearning and regret, Beczala revealed the Prince's essential humanity, bringing him convincingly to life as a figure both enchanting and flawed. The chemistry between Car and Beczala was one of the evening's defining elements. Their duets were shaped not only by vocal compatibility but by a profound sense of mutual artistic responsiveness. In these shared moments, the emotional stakes of the narrative — Rusalka's desire and the Prince's conflicted heart — were rendered with an intensity that left no doubt as to why Rusalka remains one of opera's most moving romantic

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dramas.

While Car and Beczala commanded the spotlight, the wider ensemble significantly enriched the evening's dramatic tapestry. Alexander Vinogradov's Wassermann lent the opening scenes an authoritative yet sympathetic gravitas, his commanding bass voice anchoring the elemental world from which Rusalka emerges. Eliška Weissová as the Foreign Princess offered a striking contrast to Rusalka's innocence, her voice projecting regal poise in vivid relief. Other members of the cast — including Monika Bohinec as Jezibaba, Jusung Gabriel Park as the Hunter, and the trio of elves — contributed strongly to the opera's atmospheric richness.

Each brought their distinct vocal personalities to bear, enhancing the production's textural depth without ever distracting from the central protagonists. Instrumentally, the orchestra was a constant, compelling presence. Jindra's interpretation pulled closely to Dvorák's idiom: the lushness of the strings, the nuanced woodwind solos, and the chorus's ethereal contributions all underscored the opera's shifting moods — from dreamlike wonder to tragic resignation.

Bechtolf's staging was both imaginative and provocative. By setting the opera amidst stark, snow-laden vistas and disquieting woodland imagery, he drew the audience into a world of elemental contrasts — the boundary between water and land, voice and silence, spirit and flesh. The aesthetic worked as a visual metaphor for Rusalka's own dislocation and the wider existential challenges at the heart of the opera.

The Vienna State Opera presented Rusalka not merely as a work of lyric beauty, but as a deeply human story told through voices of astonishing range and expressive depth. Nicole Car and Piotr Beczala — as Rusalka and the Prince — delivered performances that will be remembered for their emotional resonance, technical finesse, and artistic integrity. Together with a superb supporting cast, an orchestra and chorus of exceptional quality, and a bold theatrical conception, this production demonstrated once again why Dvorák's masterpiece holds such enduring power on the operatic stage. This performance was not simply a night at the opera — it was an invitation into a world of music, myth, and the most intimate human emotions converge.

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