



ANTONIN LEOPOLD DVORAK
Born: Muhlhausen, Sept. 8, 1841
Died: Prague, May 1, 1904
Occupation: violist, organist
Nationality: Czech



Born in a Bohemian village about fifty miles north of Prague, Dvorák was the son of the local butcher and innkeeper. He learned to play the violin as a small boy and was a chorister in the local church. When he reached the age of twelve he was sent to the neighbouring village of Zlonice to learn German and to study piano, viola, organ and harmony under Antonin Liehma nn.

In 1857, when he was only sixteen, Dvorák went to Prague to study at the organ school there.

While there he give in to the magic of Wagner and Smetana. He spent most of the 1860's as an orchestral player, first in a small band and then in the Czech National Opera Orchestra, conducted by Bedrich Smetana. All during this time he composed furiously but did not publish any of it. In fact, he burned most of his works.

It was only in the early 1870's that recognition started to come to Dvorák. In 1873 he le ft the Opera Orchestra to become the organist at a Prague church in order to have more time to devote to composition.

He received the Austrian State Prize for his music four years in a row, partly because of support from Johannes Brahms. Contracts with publishers and performances of his music in Berlin, Vienna, and London soon followed. A star was born! The rest is happy history. His fame spread rapidly throughout the musical world, and for a decade and more he enjoyed the fruits of his labour.

Honors were heaped upon him. In 1891 he was appointed professor of composition at the Prague Conservatory. A year later he accepted a position to head the New York National Conservatory of Music in the U.S. After three years in that capacity he decided to return home in 1895. Restored to a more congenial environment, he set to work on a number of symphonic poems. His closing years were devoted largely to creating operas, none of which were anywhere near as successful as his orchestral and chamber works. In 1901 he was made director of the Prague Conservatory, where he continued to teach until his death.

Dvorák's importance lies partly in his nationalist outlook. During the last half of the nineteenth century, Bohemia (later part of the Czech Republic) fought for its political and cultural independence from Germany. Like Smetana, Dvorák consciously looked to Bohemian folklore for artistic inspiration, imitating traditional melodies, as in the *Slavonic Dances*, or using traditional legends, as in his best-known opera, *Rusalka*, composed in 1900. He had a great gift for absorbing folk styles and reproducing them in the context of the classical tradition.

Opera in three acts. Music by Dvorak, libretto by Jaroslav Kvapil. First performed Prague, 31 Mar 1901.

Here is a brief synopsis of his most famous opera, rusalka

Having fallen in love with a Prince (tenor), the water nymph Rusalka (soprano) desires to become human. She enlists the aid of the witch Jezibaba (mezzo-soprano) who imposes conditions, one of which is that, should the Prince be unfaithful to her, both will be damned for ever. When the Prince abandons Rusalka for the Foreign Princess (soprano), the witches curse comes true. The prince repents and returns to rusalka and both he and Rusalka die to the taste of a kiss. His repentance however ensures the water nymph a human soul.

The music, like the libretto, draws from Czechoslovakian traditions. It incorporates, as does many of Dvořák's other compositions, many Slovakian dances. The nationalistic feel to the

music is heard particularly in “the more vigorous episodes with the wood nymphs at the beginning of where rusalka falls in love with the prince and speaks to her father, and the first act melody of Ježibaba the witch”. These folk influences give the music, at times, a lyrical tendency and we can imagine the nymphs dancing around. It just gives that whole feel of russian music. When I played this song at home, my mom jumped up and recognised it as typical Russian music.