

The libretto in brief

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Per gentile concessione. Dal programma di sala *Rusalka*, Torino, Teatro Regio, Stagione 2006-2007.

Act I

Rusalka, a water nymph, sits pensively among the branches of a willow tree over-hanging the lake. The moonlight has drawn the wood nymphs to a clearing, and they now partake of round dances on the grass, their songs attracting Ondin, the old water goblin, from the depths. When they leave, Rusalka confides her suffering to him: she has fallen in love with a prince who occasionally bathes in the lake, and she wants to become human, with a human soul, in order to know the passion of his embraces and the sweetness of his kisses. The water goblin, alarmed, senses that this love will be fatal to her, but seeing that she won't listen to him, he advises her to seek the help of the witch Ježibaba. Alone, she entrusts the silvery moonlight with a message for her beloved far away. After the distant voice of the water goblin tries once again, in vain, to dissuade her, Rusalka decides to visit Ježibaba. The witch knows how to change the water nymph into a human being, and is willing to help Rusalka, but warns her: once she is made human, she will be mute, and if she is disappointed in her love, a curse will plunge her once again beneath the waves, and her beloved will also be doomed. Rusalka, certain of the strength of her love, accepts these conditions. While the witch casts the spell, the wood nymphs gather, frightened, in the meadow, and once again the prophetic voice of the water goblin rises from the depths. The morning light filters through the leaves, and while hunting horns resound in the distance, the

song of a huntsman is heard. Rusalka's beloved prince, in pursuit of a mysterious white doe, appears in the meadow. A mysterious force prevents him from leaving the spot, and not even the sad, prophetic song of the huntsman can divert his attention. Meanwhile, Rusalka, transformed into a beautiful young girl, leaves Ježibaba's cottage, and the prince is dazzled by her beauty. From the depths of the lake, Rusalka's companions and the old water goblin try again, in vain, to stop Rusalka, but the prince takes her away with him to the castle.

Act II

The castle is full of guests invited to the prince's wedding. In the garden, the old forester exchanges gossip with a kitchen boy: it seems that the prince's passion for his strange fiancée has already cooled, and he is now interested in a foreign princess who is one of the guests. The words of the prince—who arrives with Rusalka—prove that his love is no longer the same as before. He hasn't found in her that fiery passion that he desired, and he has tried, to no avail, to penetrate the mystery of this creature deprived of the gift of speech. Exasperated and impatient, he pays the princess his ardent compliments when she enters, and after telling Rusalka to go and dress for the ball, he goes off to the castle with the princess. Rusalka leaves without concealing her dejection, while a sad melody rises from the pond in the garden. Suddenly the garden is illuminated, joyous fanfares resound, and the dances begin as the prince's lively group of guests comes out of the castle. After the guests have dispersed in the gardens, the water goblin rises from the pond: he has realised that the prince is neglecting Rusalka, and despairs of the nymph's cruel destiny. His broken-hearted voice is intertwined with the wedding song of the guests as they return from the gardens. Rusalka can no longer ignore the misfortune which has struck her. Disconsolate, she reappears in the by-now-deserted garden, and seems pulled by an irresistible force towards the pond. Seeing the water goblin emerge, she confides

her disheartenment to him. At that very moment, the prince and princess enter; after an exchange of ardent words of love they embrace, and continue to do so even after Rusalka has appeared. The water goblin then rises from the pond with his most ferocious guise, and after having warned the prince that his unfaithfulness will not go unpunished, he takes Rusalka and they disappear among the waves. The prince is terrified and asks the princess to protect him, but she makes fun of him, and leaves scornfully.

Act III

Rusalka cannot avoid the expiation of her error. Again sitting sadly among the branches of the willow tree, she laments her fate. Nothing can save her. The witch Ježibaba, drawn out of her cottage by Rusalka's weeping, is unable to help her. Only the death of her unfaithful lover can redeem her from the curse, but she rejects this solution with horror. Sighing, she sinks into the waters, drawn by the melancholy song of her companions. A remedy for the love-sickness of the prince, evidently bound to Rusalka by a spell. However, they obtain nothing, and the water goblin, who has heard them and promises to take revenge on the human race, terrifies them and puts them to flight. The wood nymphs gather for a nocturnal round dance in a festive display of joy. The water goblin cannot share their gaiety: he tells them of Rusalka's fate, and the nymphs, lamenting their friend's destiny, disperse into the woods. However, just then the prince hastens towards the lake, visibly upset. Overwhelmed by his sense of remorse, he invokes Rusalka, who emerges from the lake. Disconsolate, she reproaches him gently for his betrayal, and warns him that her kiss would be fatal for him. He is not afraid of death, but only wants forgiveness; throwing himself into Rusalka's arms, he dies happy. His death, though, will not save Rusalka from her destiny, warns the water goblin from the water's depths. And yet, she has found peace: after kissing the prince for the last time, she descends resigned into the kingdom of the waves.