



An Analysis of Emotional Expression and Musical Features in Dvořák's Opera Rusalka "Song to the Moon"

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Abstract: This study examines the emotional expression and musical features in Antonín Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*, with a particular focus on the aria "Song to the Moon." The aria is analyzed in terms of its portrayal of Rusalka's longing, vulnerability, and hope, through Dvořák's use of melody, harmony, orchestration, and vocal writing. This research explores how the musical features amplify Rusalka's emotional state, emphasizing the delicate interplay between voice and orchestra. The study also delves into the broader thematic significance of the aria within the opera's narrative, exploring themes of transformation, love, and the tension between the human and the supernatural. By combining musicological analysis and emotional interpretation, the paper demonstrates how Dvořák masterfully bridges emotional depth with Czech cultural identity, weaving nationalistic elements into the opera's emotional and dramatic fabric.

Keywords: Dvořák, *Rusalka*, "Song to the Moon", emotional expression, musicological analysis, opera,

Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1 Study Background

Rusalka is an opera composed by the renowned Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, premiered in 1901 at the National Theatre in Prague (Figure 1). Written during a significant period in Dvořák's career, when he was firmly established as a leading figure in Czech music, *Rusalka* is considered one of his greatest operatic achievements [1]. The opera's libretto, written by the Czech poet and playwright Jaroslav Kvapil, is based on Slavic folklore and myths, particularly the legend of a water nymph who desires to become human in order to experience love. The opera blends elements of romanticism with Czech nationalistic features, showcasing Dvořák's unique ability to merge folk-inspired melodies with sophisticated orchestral writing [2].



Figure 1, Antonín Dvořák (Source: the Kennedy Center)

The story of *Rusalka* centers around its eponymous heroine, a water nymph who falls in love with a human prince. In order to be with him, she seeks the help of a witch to transform her into a human, sacrificing her voice in the process. However, her transformation leads to heartbreak and tragedy, as the prince, unable to recognize her as the nymph he once adored, becomes involved with another woman. The opera's emotional depth and tragic narrative are communicated through Dvořák's masterful use of orchestration and vocal lines, making *Rusalka* one of the most emotionally charged works in the operatic repertoire [3].

One of the most iconic moments in *Rusalka* is the aria "Song to the Moon" ("Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém"), sung by Rusalka in the first act. In this aria, Rusalka, alone by the water, addresses the moon, pleading for help in her quest to become human and to win the love of the prince. The aria captures her emotional vulnerability, longing, and sorrow, and it remains one of the most famous and

beloved arias in the operatic canon [4]. Dvořák, drawing on his rich national heritage, integrates Czech folk elements into the opera's musical fabric, adding an extra layer of emotional and cultural resonance. The opera's themes—love, transformation, and yearning—are intricately conveyed through Dvořák's mastery of orchestration and harmonic development. Particularly in "Song to the Moon," the delicate interplay between the voice and orchestra creates a musical portrayal of Rusalka's vulnerability and desire [5].

This study will explore the emotional expression in "Song to the Moon," focusing on how Dvořák's musical features—including melody, harmony, orchestration, and rhythm—serve to enhance and communicate Rusalka's feelings of longing and vulnerability. Additionally, the study will examine the broader thematic significance of the aria within *Rusalka*'s narrative structure, exploring how the aria connects to the opera's exploration of the tension between the human and the supernatural, as well as the broader themes of transformation and identity. By analyzing both the musical and emotional aspects of the aria, this research will offer insights into how Dvořák's operatic composition bridges the emotional and cultural landscapes, demonstrating his ability to intertwine emotional expression with musical form in a way that



resonates deeply with audiences.

1.2 Study Objectives

This study aims to explore the emotional expression in "Song to the Moon" from *Rusalka*. The primary objective is to identify and analyze the emotions conveyed in the aria, focusing on themes of longing, sadness, and hope. These emotions are central to *Rusalka's* character, and the study will examine how they are musically expressed, particularly in relation to the broader themes of love, transformation, and the tension between the human and supernatural.

A key goal is to analyze the musical features—melody, harmony, rhythm, orchestration, and texture—that enhance the emotional expression of the aria. The study will investigate how Dvořák's compositional techniques, such as modulations, melodic contour, and orchestral color, amplify the emotional impact of the music.

Additionally, the research will examine the relationship between the singer's vocal expression and the orchestra, assessing how their interplay conveys *Rusalka's* internal conflict and vulnerability. This analysis will highlight how the interaction between voice and orchestra contributes to the emotional depth and dramatic power of the performance.

2.. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study combines musicological and philosophical perspectives, examining how emotion is conveyed through musical features and the role of opera in expressing human experience.

2.1 Musicological Perspectives on Emotional Expression in Opera

Musicology offers valuable insights into how music, particularly in opera, conveys emotion. Scholars have long examined the connection between musical structure and emotional expression. One prominent approach is expressive musicology, which focuses on how musical elements such as melody, harmony, rhythm, orchestration, and form evoke emotional responses from listeners [6]. In this context, *Song to the Moon* will be analyzed in terms of how Dvořák uses these musical features to represent *Rusalka's* emotional state—especially her longing, vulnerability, and despair [7].

Another significant musicological perspective is the concept of tonal expression, which examines how tonalities and modulations within a piece of music signal emotional shifts. The use of major and minor keys, as well as modal and chromatic passages, is vital to the emotional interpretation of Dvořák's composition [8]. By analyzing these tonal aspects, the study will explore how the tonal structure of *Song to the Moon* communicates *Rusalka's* yearning for the human world, as well as her sadness and sense of loss [9].

2.2 Philosophical Approaches to Emotion in Music

The German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno explored how music can convey emotions beyond simple representation, offering a more profound expression of human subjectivity. According to Adorno's concept of musical expressionism, music does not merely represent an emotion but embodies it, offering a direct experience of that emotion [10]. This perspective helps frame the analysis of *Song to the Moon*, emphasizing how Dvořák's music doesn't just reflect *Rusalka's* emotional state but immerses the listener in it, making the emotion a tangible, lived experience.

Similarly, Martha Nussbaum's philosophical work on emotions as responses to perceived values is relevant to this study. Nussbaum argues that emotions are tied to beliefs about what is valuable or meaningful and that they are shaped by broader existential concerns. This framework can be applied to *Song to the Moon* to examine how *Rusalka's* emotions are not merely individual but are rooted in larger themes of transformation, love, and identity, which are central to the opera's narrative [11]. Nussbaum's approach will help understand how Dvořák's music reflects *Rusalka's* shifting values—her desire for transformation and the costs that accompany it.

3. Methodology

This study will combine musicological analysis and emotional interpretation to examine the emotional expression and musical features of "Song to the Moon" from Antonín Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*. The goal is to understand how Dvořák's music reflects *Rusalka's* emotional depth, focusing on the interaction between melody, harmony, orchestration, and vocal expression, and how these elements convey longing, vulnerability, and transformation.

3.1. Musicological Analysis

The methodology begins with a detailed analysis of the aria's musical structure. This will include examining the melody and how its shape, intervals, and phrasing express *Rusalka's* emotions, particularly her longing and vulnerability. The study will explore how the orchestral accompaniment complements the vocal line to create emotional intimacy. Harmony and tonality will be analyzed to understand how key changes and modulations reflect shifts in *Rusalka's* emotional state. The orchestration and texture will be explored, focusing on how Dvořák uses orchestral color to enhance the aria's emotional atmosphere. The rhythm and pacing will be examined for their role in highlighting *Rusalka's* vulnerability. This musicological analysis will be supported by a score study and an examination of recorded performances to explore how interpretations affect the emotional impact of the piece.

3.2. Emotional Interpretation

The emotional depth of the aria will be explored through textual analysis, focusing on *Rusalka's* plea to the moon for transformation. The study will uncover the emotional subtext of the aria, including themes of desperation, yearning, and sorrow. The emotional complexity of *Rusalka's* character will be contextualized within the opera's broader narrative, analyzing her inner conflict between love, transformation, and her supernatural nature. Performance interpretations will also be examined, focusing on how different renditions emphasize the emotional nuances of the aria. Vocal techniques, such as dynamics and ornamentation, will be analyzed in relation to the portrayal of *Rusalka's* emotional state. A psychological approach will be applied, drawing from theories like Martha Nussbaum's theory of emotion and Theodor Adorno's concept of musical expressionism, to deepen the understanding of *Rusalka's* internal struggle and emotional

vulnerability.

3. Research Tools

To support the analysis, relevant literary and philosophical texts will be consulted, particularly those addressing psychological theories of emotion in music. Secondary academic literature such as musicological essays and opera critiques will provide further context for understanding Dvořák's compositional techniques and emotional expression in *Rusalka*. These sources will help frame the study's findings and offer insights into how the music reflects the emotional complexities of *Rusalka's* character.

4. Discussion

4.1 Emotional Expression in "Song to the Moon"

"Song to the Moon," as a key aria in Antonín Dvořák's *Rusalka*, encapsulates the profound emotional layers of longing, vulnerability, and hope. The aria presents *Rusalka's* plea to the moon for transformation, hoping to become human and thus be worthy of the prince's love. The emotional trajectory of the aria moves from quiet yearning to desperate plea, conveyed not just through lyrics but through musical features that evoke these intense feelings. Dvořák's orchestration and vocal writing work together to provide a stark contrast between the external beauty of the moon and *Rusalka's* internal, turbulent emotions. The music reflects the emotional and psychological complexity of *Rusalka's* character, as she balances between the divine and the human, a theme Dvořák imbues deeply into the aria.

In the opening lines of the aria, "Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém," (Moon, high and deep in the sky), *Rusalka's* voice is accompanied by a delicate string section, which creates a serene, ethereal feeling. This sets the emotional tone of longing, suggesting that she sees the moon as her only friend and confidante. But as her plea becomes more intense, the orchestra grows in volume and complexity, reflecting her emotional evolution (Figure 2).

Figure 2, the opening of "Song to the Moon"

4.2 Analysis of Emotional Expression through the Czech Lyrics and Music

Czech Lyrics	English Translation
Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém	Moon, high and deep in the sky
Světlo tvé daleko vidí,	Your light sees far,
Po světě bloudíš širokem,	You travel around the wide world,
Díváš se v příbytky lidí.	and see into people's homes.
Měsíčku, postůj chvíli	Moon, stand still a while
Řekni mi, kde je můj milý	and tell me where is my dear.
Řekni mu, stříbrný měsíčku,	Tell him, silvery moon,
že jej objímá mé rámě,	that I am embracing him.
Aby si alespoň chvíličku	For at least momentarily
vzpomněl ve snění na mně.	let him recall of dreaming of me.

Czech Lyrics	English Translation
Zasvět mu do daleka,	Illuminate him far away,
Řekni mu, řekni mu kdo tu naň čeká!	and tell him, tell him who is waiting for him!
O mněli duše lidská sní,	If his human soul is, in fact, dreaming of me,
ať se tou vzpomínkou vzbudí!	may the memory awaken him!
Měsíčku, nezhasni, nezhasni!	Moonlight, don't disappear, disappear!

Table 1 Lyrics and English Translation of "Song to the Moon" from Dvořák's Opera Rusalka

The above lyrics is interpreted to reveal the emotion of the drama theme.

"Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém" (Moon, high and deep in the sky)

The opening phrase is serene and expansive, with the image of the moon as an eternal, far-reaching presence. The majestic interval of a rising fifth in the melody evokes a feeling of grandeur and calm, as the moon is portrayed as an otherworldly figure with its "light far away." The melody in this opening is long, sustained, and smooth, reflecting a sense of quiet yearning, as Rusalka begins her plea to the moon. The orchestral accompaniment is gentle and flowing, matching the gentle, reflective mood of the text. This peaceful yet somewhat melancholy opening creates a sense of longing, a feeling that Rusalka is addressing a distant, unreachable force.

"Světlo tvé daleko vidí, Po světě bloudíš širokem" (Your light sees far, You travel around the wide world)

In these lines, the moon is described as a constant observer of the world. The melody here is melodic and flowing, but with rising phrases that mimic the idea of the moon's far-reaching gaze. The orchestral accompaniment is often painterly, with string textures and light woodwind gestures, which give a sense of the moon's ethereal and omnipresent nature. This section moves smoothly into a more contemplative mood, where Rusalka's voice becomes soft and dreamlike, symbolizing her own longing to be seen and recognized. The expanding orchestral textures here support Rusalka's sense of deep yearning and isolation, as she feels far away from her beloved.

"Díváš se v příbytky lidí" (And see into people's homes)

Here, the music takes on a slightly more dissonant edge, with chromaticism creeping in. This moment suggests that the moon's gaze into the homes of humans brings an awareness of Rusalka's own loneliness. The chromatic tension mirrors her internal emotional state — an underlying yearning, mixed with a sense of isolation and sorrow. This moment in the aria reflects Rusalka's emotional plea as she wishes the moon would help her find her lost love. Her voice, now marked with subtle shifts of intensity, conveys the sense of unfulfilled desire and sorrow.

"Měsíčku, postůj chvíli" (Moon, stand still a while)

This plea to the moon is delivered with a pleading, delicate quality in Rusalka's voice. The melody becomes slower, with longer note values, and is marked by long, sustained notes, capturing the emotional depth of the request. It is as though Rusalka wants to hold onto this moment of connection with the moon, to make the world stop so that she can feel its presence more fully. There is an emotional fragility in the delivery here, as Rusalka's desperation starts to show. The harmony might shift to reflect a minor tonality, conveying the desperation in her heart.

"Řekni mi, kde je můj milý" (And tell me where is my dear)

The melody becomes more intense, with the vocal line rising as Rusalka's urgency increases. This emotional surge is reflected in the music, with brass accents and dynamic changes in the orchestra, which intensify the expression of yearning. The dynamic crescendo in both the voice and the orchestra highlights Rusalka's emotional climax — a turning point in the aria where her desperation becomes clear. The vocal line's rising pitches evoke a feeling of searching, and her plea to the moon is filled with the intensity of a deep emotional wound. She is no longer merely yearning, but actively pleading for the return of the prince.

"Řekni mu, stříbrný měsíčku" (Tell him, silvery moon)

The introduction of the silvery moon creates a more mystical quality in the music, as though the very moon itself is a magical being that can bring the two lovers together. The ethereal quality of the orchestration, with its use of harp and light woodwinds, conveys this mystical nature. The text painting is evident here, as the orchestration rises and falls, symbolizing the moon's ability to illuminate and to be the guiding force that Rusalka hopes for. The tension in the voice reflects the emotional vulnerability, as she knows that only through the moon's intervention can her desire be realized.

"Aby si alespoň chvíličku vzpomněl ve snění na mně" (For at least momentarily let him recall of dreaming of me)

In this line, Rusalka's voice softens again, returning to a more vulnerable tone. The long, slow note values in the melody convey a sense of sadness and resignation, but also a flicker of hope. She is not demanding the prince's love, but only a moment of remembering her. The instrumental support is sparse here, focusing on the strings, which provide a soft, lilting accompaniment that suggests an air of wistfulness and dreaminess.

"Zasvět mu do daleka" (Illuminate him far away)

This phrase takes on a slightly more urgent character, as Rusalka wants the moon to illuminate the prince, to guide him back to her. The melody again rises, becoming more dynamic and robust, as though Rusalka is pleading for her love to be fulfilled. This rising action is supported by a strong orchestral outburst, particularly in the brass and strings, which amplify the intensity of Rusalka's desire. The emotional urgency is palpable in the music, as Rusalka's plea is no longer just wistful, but now empowered by a sense of hope that her desire might be realized.

"Řekni mu, řekni mu kdo tu naň čeká!" (And tell him, tell him who is waiting for him!)

Here, the music reaches a climactic point, where the vocal line soars, and the orchestra swells with full intensity. The music is fierce and dramatic, reflecting the full force of Rusalka's yearning. Her voice, now at a higher pitch and with greater volume, conveys the desperation in her plea. The orchestral response is rich and powerful, as if to mirror her emotional outburst. This is a moment of emotional catharsis, where Rusalka's internal longing and pain are given full voice.

"Měsíčku, nezhasní, nezhasní!" (Moonlight, don't disappear, disappear!)

The final lines of the aria are marked by a final, desperate plea to the moon. The music here returns to the quiet, pleading tone of the opening, but this time, there is a sense of frantic urgency in the vocal delivery. The orchestra pulls back, allowing the voice to take the spotlight again. This final plea is marked by a heart-wrenching quality, with Rusalka almost begging the moon not to leave her in her loneliness. The music closes on a final unresolved harmony, suggesting that her emotional journey is unfulfilled, leaving the listener with a sense of longing.

4.3 The Role of Melody and Harmony

Dvořák's melodies alternate between long, flowing phrases and jagged, fragmented lines, mirroring the push-pull of her internal conflict. These changes in melody symbolize the clash between Rusalka's desires for love and her inability to reach that which she seeks. Take for instance the opening line "Měsíčku na nebi"—a melodic figure marked by smooth ascending intervals, representing Rusalka's initial hope and yearning. The interval of a major sixth at the start of the phrase (a relatively wide interval) suggests Rusalka reaching out for something far away and unattainable. In contrast, the melody in the later part of the aria, especially when she sings "Pomoz mi" (Help me), becomes more disjointed, with smaller intervals and sudden chromatic shifts, reflecting the intensifying emotional distress as she becomes increasingly desperate.

The transition from a melodic ascent (in the first phrase) to descend into more intense, contracted intervals as her plea becomes more urgent is a clear depiction of Rusalka's emotional shift from calm to desperation.

Figure 3, the transition part of "Song to the Moon"

The harmonic progressions in the aria are another key element in expressing Rusalka's emotional arc. Dvořák's use of modulations between major and minor keys is especially telling, marking the shifts in emotional intensity and hope.

For example, the modulation from minor to major at key moments signals Rusalka's brief moments of optimism or hope, only to return to the minor tonality as despair sets in again. In particular, when Rusalka sings, "Pomoz mi, měsíčku," (Help me, O Moon), the harmony modulates briefly to a major key before plunging back into the minor after a dissonant harmonic progression.

This back-and-forth tonality can be depicted with a chord progression diagram:

Progression	Harmonic Context	Emotional Effect
A minor to C Major	Modulation from sadness to brief hope	Momentary uplifting emotional shift
F major to E minor	Return to despair	Regressive emotional return to longing and loss

These harmonic modulations can be represented visually by plotting the tonal shifts over time. The rising tension in the harmony as the vocal line escalates can be illustrated in a graph of harmonic movement.

4.4 Cultural Significance and Folk Influence

Dvořák, known for his ability to blend nationalistic elements with European classical traditions, used folk motifs, rhythms, and harmonic language to create an opera that not only tells a fairy-tale story but also embodies a broader cultural

narrative about the Czech identity in the late 19th century. In this aria, Rusalka's emotional plea to the moon serves as a potent musical metaphor for the Czech people's connection to the land, nature, and traditional beliefs. This connection is reinforced by Dvořák's use of folk-like melodies, rhythmic patterns, and orchestral timbres, which contribute to the opera's resonance as a national and cultural work.

4.4.1. National Identity and Czech Folk Music in Dvořák's Composition

Dvořák was a strong advocate for integrating Czech folk music into his compositions, and *Rusalka* is a prominent example of how he utilized folk influences within a grand operatic framework. His works are steeped in Czech nationalism, reflecting the growing sentiment in the late 19th century to establish a distinct cultural identity in the face of Austrian rule in the Czech lands. Nationalism in music often involved the incorporation of local folk melodies, rhythms, and instrumental sounds to express pride in one's heritage and a sense of cultural unity.

4.4.2 Czech Folk Melodies and Dance Forms

Dvořák taps into the oral folk tradition through melodic shapes that suggest Czech folk song structures. The long, lyrical phrases in the melody echo the elegant simplicity of folk songs, which often feature simple yet expressive contours that are easy to remember and sing. These melodies were meant to evoke a connection with the everyday life and struggles of ordinary Czech people, celebrating their relationship with nature and the world around them. The aria's repetitive, lullaby-like structure is reflective of folk songs, many of which would have been passed down orally in rural communities and sung in intimate settings. Dvořák's use of simple yet elegant harmonies, which sometimes shift unexpectedly, further reflects the influence of folk music, which often favored consonant harmonies and pentatonic scales that evoke a sense of natural simplicity.

4.4.3 Rhythmic Patterns

The rhythmic patterns exhibit influences from folk traditions, where rhythmic regularity and meter shifts are commonly used to create a sense of movement. In folk music, rhythm is often highly regular and flowing, with simple patterns that convey a sense of natural movement. In "Song to the Moon," the accompaniment features gentle, rocking rhythms (often in 6/8 time), which can evoke the lullaby or cradle song of Czech folk traditions. These rhythms are typical in Czech folk dances and provide a gentle, soothing backdrop to Rusalka's impassioned plea to the moon. Additionally, the use of syncopation in certain sections of the aria mirrors the irregularities found in folk music, where rhythmic emphasis can shift in unexpected ways, adding depth and emotional complexity to the musical narrative. This rhythmic structure evokes a sense of movement through nature, emphasizing the connection between Rusalka and the elements.

4.4.4 The Symbolism of Nature and Folk Beliefs

The aria's lyrics reflect Czech folk beliefs regarding nature, the moon, and the mystical relationship between humans and the natural world. In many Slavic folk traditions, the moon was not just a celestial body, but also a symbol of divine intervention, mystical power, and guidance. It was often thought to hold a special connection to the human soul and could even influence dreams, emotions, and relationships. Dvořák's choice of the moon as the central figure of Rusalka's plea is deeply rooted in Slavic folklore, where the moon was often seen as a benevolent and wise entity capable of guiding lost souls or bringing about transformation. The moon's role in the aria, as a mystical being who holds the power to illuminate and guide, resonates with Czech folk tales where the moon often serves as a mediator between the earthly and the spiritual realms. The moon's ability to shine into human homes reflects the belief in nature's intimate connection with people's lives. In *Rusalka*, the moon becomes a symbol of hope and longing, echoing Rusalka's desire to be united with her beloved. Dvořák's music evokes this mystical atmosphere through the use of lush, dream-like orchestration, particularly through string sections and light woodwinds. These instrumental choices are associated with the magical qualities of folk music, where nature and its forces are often personified through rich and evocative sounds.

4.4.5 Orchestral Techniques and Folk Instrumentation

Dvořák's orchestration in *Rusalka* also shows clear influences from Czech folk instrumentation. The violin, flute, and harp are frequently used to evoke a pastoral and magical atmosphere, with the harp often representing the mystical power of nature. The strings in particular take on a central role, creating a gossamer texture that complements Rusalka's vocal line, representing the ethereal, dreamy quality of her longing. This is similar to the folk orchestras that would have accompanied rural song performances in Czech villages. Dvořák's orchestration features a wide range of dynamic shifts, often moving between soft, intimate passages and more expansive, sweeping sections, mirroring the natural world's unpredictability in folk stories. These fluctuations in orchestral color serve to reinforce the emotional narrative in the aria, capturing the sense of hope and desperation in Rusalka's plea to the moon.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aria "Song to the Moon" from Dvořák's *Rusalka* serves as a poignant expression of emotional vulnerability, longing, and hope, with the music enhancing the dramatic depth of Rusalka's character. Dvořák's masterful orchestration, use of Czech folk music, and dynamic vocal writing intricately convey the emotional trajectory of the character, from calm yearning to desperate plea. The study highlights the emotional impact of the aria through the careful integration of melody, harmony, and orchestration, particularly the harmonic modulations that mirror Rusalka's shifting emotional states. Moreover, the aria functions within the broader thematic structure of the opera, reinforcing the tension between the human and supernatural realms, as well as exploring themes of transformation and identity. The aria's musical expression not only reflects Rusalka's internal struggle but also connects with broader cultural narratives in late 19th-century Czech identity, underscoring Dvořák's role in merging nationalistic elements with operatic form. This analysis reveals the profound emotional and cultural resonance of *Rusalka*, offering new insights into how Dvořák's music engages both the emotional and intellectual aspects of the audience.

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