A nymph to die for

By Ismene Brown

22 April 2005 • 12:01am

Ismene Brown reviews Ondine at the Royal Ballet in Covent Garden

Of Sir Frederick Ashton's four full-length ballets, Ondine is the one that hovers most tantalisingly between being unmissable and something best left to dignified ossification. This whimsical fable of a sea nymph who loves a mortal strains between

picturesqueness and full-on tragedy, offering a gem of a ballerina role and lashings of fun for the technical crew and orchestra, but its impact now is as dependent on the lustre of its leading lady as it was on its 1956 première when Margot Fonteyn took the stage in her long black ponytail and filmy, sea-green slip.

Ondine is a magical creature, a mermaid and - as far as bridegroom Palemon is concerned - a siren of sexual freedom. In a story reminiscent of La Sylphide, he is about to be married to a sensible girl with a mannish taste in dress, when Ondine oozes supernaturally out of a mossy waterfall, quivering with the virgin lustiness of Eve in Eden.

Everything terrestrial is a discovery to her, from finding that she has a shadow to enjoying her ability to rock boats with her power over storms. At the same time, she

discovers that her heart is turning from fish to human, making the story build tragic impetus. In parallel, Palemon is fighting off his unnatural attraction to her and returning to his earthly mate.

The ballet, and its florid designs by Lila de Nobili, shows Ashton's instinctive attraction to exotic 19th-century ballets where copious scenery and ingenious tableaux vivants meld deliciously into fables that brush powerful feelings lightly through major set-pieces of dancing.

Kenneth MacMillan's real, hot-blooded girls would soon knock Ashton's nymphs out of fashion, yet Ondine does pulse with a fascinating emotional profundity, under a certain excess of Pre-Raphaelite artificialities.

Written originally as a love-letter for Fonteyn, this ballet finds a wondrous new incarnation in Tamara Rojo, an Ondine of unfathomable seductiveness, caprice, innocence and imaginative charm. Her arms wind like sea wrack, her feet beat like little fins, her back flows into curves and eddies - Rojo casts a dazzling enchantment that blurs away the baggier parts of the narrative, the brasher bits of choreography, and the imperfection of Hans Werner Henze's music.

A major score, it is more satisfying to listen to than it is as stage music for Ashton - despite a fine performance under Richard Bernas. Its split between Italianate courtliness and waves of Stravinsky-Schoenberg impressionism is frequently at odds with the more classical Ashton.

When Ashton wants to rise to tragic potential - as when Ondine confronts the split between her two worlds on board a ship in Act 2 - Henze's music sounds unsure.

But he and Ashton finally are at one in the terrific last pages, as Ondine, bedraggled and grieving, kisses Palemon to death and takes his body to the seabed.

Palemon is drawn as something of an elegant stick, a man of indecision and inaction, but Jonathan Cope's sudden surges whenever Rojo is around explain everything perfectly, and Ricardo Cervera pulls off a memorably nimble, Oberon-like mysteriousness as the jealous Lord of the Sea.

- Until May 24. Tickets: 020 7304 4000