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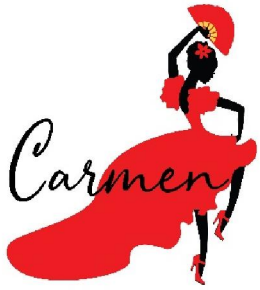

From *Carmen* on the Page to *Carmen* on the Stage

In a letter dated June 17th, 1872, Georges Bizet wrote to his pupil Edmond Galabert, "I have just been ordered to compose three acts for the Opéra-Comique. Meilhac and Halévy are doing my piece. It will be *gay*, but with a gaiety that permits style." Bizet received this commission less than a month after his one-act opera *Djamileh* was first produced at the Opéra-Comique. Although *Djamileh* was not a great popular success, the most discerning critics perceived that the opera's basic weakness lay in its libretto and that Bizet's score contained many brilliant and original ideas. The director of the Opéra-Comique, Adolphe de Leuven, expressed confidence in the thirty-three-year-old composer by asking him to write a new opera with the seasoned librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. By 1872, Meilhac and Halévy had already enjoyed considerable success as a libretto-writing team, having supplied the books for several of Offenbach's operettas, including *La belle Hélène*, *Barbe-bleue*, and *La Vie parisienne*.

When Bizet suggested doing an opera on Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella *Carmen*, his new collaborators were not immediately sold on the idea. Mérimée's tale of murder and lust was a far cry from the farcical *opéra bouffe* plots on which Meilhac and Halévy built their reputations, and the book's subject matter was sure to the scandalize at least some of the Opéra-Comique's patrons. Although Bizet ultimately prevailed upon his librettists to consent to the project, many of the novella's sordid details were softened or omitted in the libretto. Far from being mere concessions to mid-nineteenth-century standards of propriety, these plot alterations actually add layers of complexity to the characters of Don José and Carmen which are absent, or merely hinted at, in the novella. We may gain a deeper appreciation for the dramatic genius of Bizet and of his librettists by considering the ways in which their opera departs from its literary model.

Perhaps the most striking difference between *Carmen*, the book, and *Carmen*, the opera, is that the former contains far more bloodshed than the latter. When Don José kills Carmen at the end of the opera, we, the audience, may feel some of the murderer's own horror at his crime and we can marvel at how far the dutiful soldier of Act I has fallen. In Mérimée's telling, Don José already has at least three murders to his name by the time he stabs Carmen. Early in the book, we learn that José enlisted with the army after fleeing his native Navarre to escape the consequences of his victory in a violent quarrel over a tennis match. Later in the book, when Don José finds out that he has a rival for Carmen's affection in an officer from his own company, he doesn't merely raise his sword to the officer, as he does in his confrontation with Zuniga in Act II of the opera, but goes so far as to thrust his blade through the officer's throat. Upon running off with Carmen and her band of smugglers, José finds himself working alongside a fellow named Garcia, the One-Eyed, whom he describes as "the ugliest monster that Bohemia ever reared" and "the most thoroughbred rascal that I have ever met." In one particularly gruesome episode, one of the smugglers, named Remendado, is injured by a policeman's bullet, and Don José drops his packet of contraband and tries to carry him. Rather than offering assistance, both

Garcia and Carmen command José to drop the wounded man and save the booty, but José refuses. When fatigue compels José to lay Remendado down for a moment, Garcia creeps up with his blunderbuss and fires it in the poor man's face, saying to José, "He will be clever who will recognize him now." Even if it were not for this shocking display of callousness, Don José would have had ample reason to hate Garcia, for Carmen had made it no secret that Garcia was her husband and that José's presence would not alter this fact. One night, when Carmen is away, José draws his latest rival into a knife fight and kills him. When Carmen returns and learns that she is a widow, she reprimands José for having taken such a foolish risk, but takes him as her husband all the same. If Don José ever imagined he would have Carmen to himself with Garcia out of the way, his illusions are shattered when Carmen begins talking incessantly about a handsome picador named Lucas whom she saw at the bull-fights in Granada. Overcome with jealousy, José pleads with Carmen to forget about Lucas, to set aside her evil ways, and to start a new life with him in America. Unmoved by these entreaties, Carmen admits to Don José that she no longer loves him, and that she would rather die than live with him. Sensing that she is destined to die at Don José's hand and that he really does intend to kill her, Carmen allows him to lead her to a solitary gorge, where he plunges his knife into her throat as she glares defiantly in his eyes. After burying Carmen's body, Don José rides off to the prison at Cordova and turns himself in.

On the morning of his execution, Don José tells his sad tale to a visiting French archaeologist, who represents Mérimée himself. The prisoner also entrusts the archaeologist with a silver medal and instructs him to, "wrap it in paper and […] carry it or have it sent to a good woman whose address I will give you. Say that I am dead, but say not how I died." Nowhere else in the novella is this "good woman" mentioned, so we can only guess at her relationship to Don José. Meilhac and Halévy may have drawn some of their inspiration for the character of Micaela from this passage, but otherwise Micaela has no analogue in the novella. By introducing Micaela, the librettists create a dramatic foil to the character of Carmen and gave Bizet occasion to compose what turned out to be the only number for which practically every critic who saw the opera's first production had kind words, the aria "Je dis, que rien ne m'épouvante." Micaela's pure, chaste love for Don José allows the protagonist's moral degeneration to proceed more slowly than in the novella, so that we, the audience, may feel empathy, and not mere pity, for him right until the very end.

In the opera, the matador Escamillo plays a far more prominent role than the picador Lucas plays in the novella. Lucas does not come into the picture until the final pages of Mérimée's story, and even then, Don José never meets him face-to-face, nor do we ever learn much about his personality. Escamillo, on the other hand, emerges as a formidable rival to Don José fairly early in the opera, when he sings his own praises in the "Toreador Song." Escamillo's haughty, macho demeanor serves to deepen Don José's own sense of insecurity and inflame the jealousy that eventually leads him to ruin. It is most fitting, then, that Escamillo's offstage triumph in the bullring should provide a musical and dramatic counterpoint to Don José's final quarrel with Carmen.

In adapting Mérimée's book for the stage, Bizet and his librettists managed to preserve, or even heighten, the drama of the original while dispensing with many of the book's most shocking details. Nevertheless, *Carmen* would not be *Carmen* if its title character were not a seductress or if Don José were not slave to his passions; thus, a certain amount of eroticism and violence will be inevitable in any

adaptation of this story. Even before *Carmen* was first performed, it created something of a scandal when Adolphe de Leuven resigned as director of the Opéra-Comique in protest against the final murder. When the opera opened on March 3rd, 1875, it was greeted in the press with predominantly negative reviews. One critic opined that Micaela was "the only decent and sympathetic character in the midst of this inferno of ridiculous and uninteresting corruption." According to another critic, the heroine of *Carmen* "is an abandoned woman, destitute not only of any vestige of morality, but devoid of the ordinary feelings of humanity—soulless, heartless and fiendish." Despite the bad reviews, *Carmen* played forty-five times at the Opéra-Comique before the year was out and had an additional three performances in early 1876. As musicologist Winton Dean has observed, this exceptionally long run can be attributed partly to rumors that the opera was very shocking, and partly to Bizet's death, at the age of thirty-sixth, on the night of the thirty-third performance. Had Bizet lived just a few months longer, he would have had the satisfaction of seeing *Carmen* triumph in Vienna, where it won the admiration of both Wagner and Brahms. After attending one of the final performances of the original Paris production, Tchaikovsky predicted that within ten years *Carmen* would become the most popular opera in the world. Since then, there have in fact been a number of concert seasons in which *Carmen* received more performances worldwide than any other opera. According to the website Operabase.com, the only operas performed more frequently than *Carmen* between 2004 and 2018 were *La traviata* and *The Magic Flute*.

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