

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Georges Bizet (1838-1875) Opera "Carmen" (concert-style opera with Japanese supertitles)

The opera *Carmen* was to be composer Georges Bizet's final work in a life that was cut short at a very young age. It has become one of the world's most well loved operas in spite of its rough start, where in Paris at the Opéra-Comique its premiere was postponed by a number of delays, and the first performances received much criticism from both the audiences and theatre critics of the time.

Following the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1871, Bizet among other French artists began anew, composing music for their compatriots. He was commissioned to collaborate with Alphonse Daudet, on his play *L'arlésienne* (The Girl from Arles). Using a small chamber orchestra Bizet created the incidental music for the play, and the two artists created a production both were satisfied with, even though it too was not received well by the public.

In spite of this poor reception, Bizet (with the encouragement of a few local musicians, including Massenet), arranged four sections of the original music entitling it the First Suite from *L'arlésienne*, which was scored for a larger orchestra and performed in concert in November of 1872 with great success. It was at about this time that he began work on *Carmen*. Later a Second Suite from *L'arlésienne* was arranged in 1879, after Bizet's death, by his friend and colleague Ernest Guiraud, who had also collaborated with the composer on *Carmen*.

The directors at the Opéra-Comique, du Locle and de Leuven, had proposed that Bizet collaborate with librettists Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. It was apparently Bizet's idea to create a production based on Mérimée's novel, "Carmen", written in 1845. However, Bizet apparently

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took some liberties with the original plot and made a number of changes to the libretto. There were serious concerns about the risqué themes and violence in the storyline for the more conservative audiences that generally attended the theatre, but after numerous delays, finally in December of 1873, soprano Marié Celestine Galli-Marié, was cast in the title role. And although rehearsals continued to be delayed (due to complaints from the musicians as well as chorus members regarding the demands being placed on them), both lead singers for the roles of Carmen and Don José, supported the composer in his efforts to stage the work as written, threatening to resign if changes were made.

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On March 3rd, 1875 the work was premiered with seemingly good reviews following Act I, but as the production went on, the audience's reaction was less warm: "The first night audience, which expected a charming operetta, was stunned instead by one of the greatest tragic operas of the nineteenth century. That audience was understandably cool and some of the critics were scandalized by what they considered to be the immorality of the plot. The story of the irresistibly fascinating gypsy girl who deserts her soldier-lover for a strutting bull fighter and is murdered in the final scene by the jealous soldier was indeed something new to the world of opera." [NY Phil Archives 1964]

Bizet commented: "I sense defeat, I foresee a definite and hopeless flop. This time I am really sunk. ...All these bourgeois have not understood a wretched word of the work I have written for them." The press was even less generous the next day stating that *Carmen* was "obscene" and the music was "obscure and devoid of colour," "unoriginal and undistinguished in melody."

In spite of these dismal reviews, the production continued to run for forty-eight performances, seemingly attracting audiences for sheer shock value. Bizet's death on June 3rd of the same year also increased interest in the work before it closed there. But it wasn't until *Carmen* was performed in Vienna in October that the work would begin its worldwide tour of acclaim: "...the new realism took hold and the dashing brilliance of Bizet's orchestra, the emotional intensity of his melody, and the subtly Spanish character of his rhythms did the rest. *Carmen* triumphed... as it has triumphed ever since." [NY Phil Archives 1964].

The opera (originally composed in four acts), is in the *opera-comique* style, which features both spoken dialogue and sung sections, however outside of Paris it is typically presented with recitatives, scored by Bizet's friend Ernest Guiraud (who had also arranged the Second Suite from *L'arlésienne*). And even though the composer himself had never been to Spain, after researching the various musical forms and idiosyncratic sounds of the region in depth, he incorporated many of these elements, including those of popular Spanish and Latin American songs of the time. The TPO will be performing from the Alkor Edition for this concert series, with limited spoken dialogue, and presented as an extended three-act version, with Act 3 divided into two parts.

The Prelude of Act 1 sets the scene with a festive march and introduces the audience to the 'toreador' theme as well as the contrasting 'fate' theme in a minor key that will be heard throughout the work. A children's chorus displays a playful mockery of a military march before the 'cigarette' girls and their suitors join in with swirling melodies intended to represent the smoke rising in the air around them. Carmen joins in, but in spite of the demands from the suitors, she puts them off after her signature flirtatious gestures. The "Habanera" is considered by many to be the most famous aria sung in the opera, presented by Carmen in Act 1 as she seductively lures Don José into her affections. The melody was apparently taken from a popular tune composed by Sebastián Yradier, which had become so popular it appears it may have been initially mistaken for a traditional folk song.

Also in Act 1 we hear a duet between Mikaela and Don José, where he is given a letter from his mother which has him reminiscing and pledging to make her proud. The “Seguedilla” is a Spanish song and dance that is heard near the end of Act 1 which Carmen uses to seduce Don José into releasing her from prison. In the finale of the first act, Carmen escapes after devising a scheme to push Don José aside as a distraction, which has the crowd cheering for her.

Act 2 features a rustic folk tune on the bassoon to set the change of scene. Carmen then sings another aria, this time with bohemian overtones and including a gypsy dance with her compatriots Frasquita and Mercedes. “Les Toreadors” is one of the most recognizable pieces in the entire opera in a fast march style, presented next in Act 2. It depicts the energetic procession of matadors on the way to the bullring in Seville, as well as signals the entrance of the toreador, portrayed by Escamillo who also sings the ‘Toreador Song’, describing the many adventures of a bull-fighter in the bullring. In a quintet setting, the smuggler characters plan their next escapades before Don José approaches the gypsy camp singing the tune from the opening of the act.

In the finale of Act 2, there are five pieces presented without break to close this portion of the opera. Carmen continues to capture Don José’s attention with seemingly simple, (yet flirtatious) “tra la la’s” before the trumpets announce retreat as he prepares to leave. Don José then takes his turn reminiscing about the feelings stirred when Carmen first tossed a flower his way, and proclaims his love for her. Carmen then attempts to lure Don José to abandon his mission and follow her into the mountains, without success. The Lieutenant arrives in search of Don José where a fight ensues, and Carmen even playfully tries to convince him to join them as well. The act closes with a glorious tribute to liberty in spite of the fact that Don José no longer has his own liberty.

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The prelude to Act 3 is believed to have been originally intended for the composer's score for the play *L'arlésienne* and features flute and harp. Next, a mysterious march accompanies the smugglers as they enter. Carmen, Mercedes and Frasquita follow, reading their fortunes in a 'card scene trio', which turns up good fortunes for the two, but foretells of Carmen's fate when she repeatedly turns over symbols of death. As the gypsies depart they sing taunts, before Mikaela sings a beautiful, and yet mournful aria lamenting what has become of Don José. The increasing tensions between the two lead characters, Carmen and José, can be heard in the music throughout this act, as Carmen's attention is drawn more and more toward Escamillo. Before Don José's reluctant departure, Mikaela reveals that his mother is dying.

The entr'acte to the final section highlights the lively rhythms of a traditional Spanish dance featuring castanets and tambourines, and setting the scene on the lively streets of Seville just before the start of the bull fight. The winds play a melody that is based on an Andalusian folk dance while the strings add a pizzicato accompaniment below before joining in with the catchy tune. A chorus joins in to celebrate the festivities, before a parade leads Escamillo into the arena after he and Carmen have professed their love for each other. Mercedes and Frasquita attempt to warn Carmen of her impending doom before reluctantly leaving her to her fate.

In the final scene of the opera, Carmen and José are alone on the stage which is set outside of the bullring. Their eventual fatal confrontation is interrupted with interjections of loud cries from inside the arena cheering Escamillo's supposed triumph there — a metaphoric mirror. Many scholars consider this scene to be 'one of opera's most remarkable and brilliantly constructed scenes'.

Perhaps in fitting tribute, as had been done with Bizet's incidental music to *L'arlésienne*, two orchestral suites were arranged, posthumously. As musicologist Hugh MacDonald states, this was not to be the last tribute: “[*Carmen*] has been adapted in a bewildering variety of different screen and stage presentations and its music has been arranged for every imaginable ensemble.” (Grove) A fitting tribute indeed to a composer whose life was cut short in time but extended as his music lives on.

Original work: Prosper Mérimée “Carmen” **Libretto:** Ludovic Halévy, Henri Meilhac
Work composed: 1872-1874 **World premiere:** 3rd, Mar. 1875, at the Opéra-Comique in Paris

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling on English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion (castanets, tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals), harp, strings

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April L. Racana / As a Music Specialist, Ms. Racana completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (BS/Piano Pedagogy) and her graduate studies at San Francisco State University (MA/Music). In addition, she was accepted as part of a post-graduate fellowship at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music, as well as for the Japan Studies Program at International Christian University. Having been a Music Specialist teaching both in California for nearly a decade, and at Nishimachi International School where she taught for more than 25 years, she feels she has learned as much from her many students as she has taught them over more than three decades, and especially appreciates the opportunity to share her musical insights to an even wider community, as program annotator for the TPO.