

Carmen

French *opéra comique* in Four Acts

**Music
by
Georges Bizet**

**Libretto by Henri Meilhac and
Ludovic Halévy,
after the novella by Prosper
Mérimée**

**Premiere at the Opéra-Comique in
Paris, March 1875**

**Adapted from the
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by
Burton D. Fisher**

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Story Synopsis

Carmen, a gypsy working in a cigar factory, is arrested for assaulting another working girl. The soldier assigned to guard her, Don José, becomes seduced by her charms, and allows her to escape.

After José serves a short prison term for aiding in Carmen's escape, he reunites with her at the Inn of Lillas Pastia. His commanding officer, Captain Zuniga, is also enamored with Carmen, and an argument ensues between the two rivals for Carmen. Now insubordinate, José is forced to desert the army; he becomes a renegade, and joins Carmen and her gypsy friends in the mountains.

Carmen tires of José, and her new love interest becomes Escamillo, a swaggering bullfighter. Desperately jealous, José confronts Carmen before the bullring where Escamillo is fighting. She ignores both his pleas and his threats, and as she tries to enter the arena, in a fit of jealousy and frustrated passion, José stabs her to death.

Principal Characters in the Opera

Carmen, a gypsy	Mezzo-soprano
Don José, a corporal in the dragoons	Tenor
Escamillo, a bullfighter	Baritone
Micaela, a country girl from José's home town	Soprano
Zuniga, a captain of the dragoons	Bass
Moralès, a corporal	Baritone
Frasquita, a gypsy friend of Carmen	Soprano
Mercédès, a gypsy friend of Carmen	Soprano
Lillas Pastia, an innkeeper	Spoken
Andrès, a lieutenant	Tenor
Dancaire, a gypsy smuggler	Tenor
Remendado, a gypsy smuggler	Baritone

Soldiers, young men, cigarette factory girls,
gypsies, merchants, orange-sellers, police,
bullfighters, and street urchins.

TIME and PLACE: Seville around 1830

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

Overture

The *Overture* to *Carmen* is divided into two parts: the first part presents the bullfight music: a vivid musical portrait of the exotic pageantry of Spanish life, its colorful crowds, magnificent dark Spanish beauties with their lace mantillas and heavily embroidered silken garments, and their brilliantly attired escorts. The high-spirited music is followed by the proud, steady beat of the Toreador, or Bullfight music.

Bullfight music:



The second part of the *Overture* presents a profound musical contrast: it is the *Death*, *Fate*, or *Fear* theme. This musical motto is haunting and foreboding, almost like an omen of danger or death: it conveys fear, irrational passions and desires, as well as powerlessness against uncontrollable fate and destiny.

The *Death* theme is a leitmotif, a musical designation, or signature, signaling the forthcoming tragedy. The theme echoes repeatedly throughout the score at portentous moments in the drama: in Act I after Carmen tosses José the fatal flower; in Act II before José's *Flower Song*; in Act III during the card reading scene; and in Act IV to musically underscore Carmen's murder.

Death theme:



ACT I: A square in Seville

It is the noon hour, and the square is filled with townspeople and soldiers.

Chorus: Sur la place

Allegretto

TENORS

*Sur la place, Chacun passe, Chacun vient, chacun va.....**On the square, people come, people go...*

Micaela appears, seeking José, a corporal in the dragoons. She is told by officers that he will arrive at the changing of the guard. Timid and frightened, she does not remain, and runs off.

Captain Zuniga and Corporal José are among the dragoons who arrive for the changing of the guard, the military ceremony eagerly watched by urchins and onlookers with excited curiosity.

Fellow soldiers tease José, telling him about the pretty girl who asked for him. José knowingly suspects that it must be Micaela, adding that she is the girl from his hometown with whom he is in love. José remains oblivious to the beautiful girls who have been loitering around the square, and preoccupies himself by trying to fix a small broken chain.

The bell of the cigar factory strikes the hour for recess. The factory gates open, and the working girls arrive and coquettishly flirt with soldiers and lounging young men. The crowd of voyeurs excitedly await the appearance of their favorite display of femininity, the beautiful gypsy, Carmen. When Carmen finally appears, the men swarm around her, and seek her attention.

Carmen responds to her admirers with the dazzling *Habanera*. (*Habanera* literally means “a woman from Havana,” and was originally a Cuban dance adopted by the conquering Spaniards: its accentuated cadence suggests that it is the rhythmic model for the tango dance.)

However, in the opera, the *Habanera* is Carmen’s gypsy lecture on the nature, volatility, and dangers of love. Carmen speaks of love as a rebellious bird that no force can hold: if you call it, you may be calling it in vain; it may not choose to come, but if it does, then you must beware.

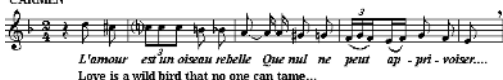
That bird in Carmen’s *Habanera* is a metaphor for the gypsy Carmen herself: free to love and

independent. However, the pursuer must beware that if Carmen decides to love him, then, just like the bird in her *Habanera*, he is captured, a prisoner of Carmen, and in mortal danger.

While Carmen sings the *Habanera*, she glances seductively at José, many times approaching him and almost touching him. Carmen seeks to win José's attention with insinuating vocal inflections, but José protects himself from her seductive charms by pretending to be unaware of her presence, and busily preoccupying himself with the repair of the broken chain.

Carmen: Habanera

Allegretto, quasi Andantino
CARMEN



Carmen throws a flower at the inattentive José who becomes irritated, springs to his feet, and starts to rush threateningly at her, but as their eyes meet, he stands petrified before her. The *Death* theme (or *Fate* or *Fear* theme) is heard, indicating that uncontrollable passions have been aroused. Carmen laughs at José, turns her back on him, and then rushes back into the factory.

Carmen's flower lies at José's feet. He stoops hesitatingly, and as if against his will, picks up the flower, presses it to his nostrils, inhales its mysterious perfume in a long, enchanted breath, and then places the flower under his blouse over his heart. Unwittingly, José has become bewitched by Carmen's fatal flower and its seductive aroma: José has now become the doomed victim of Carmen, her love charm acting like a sorceress's bullet in his heart.

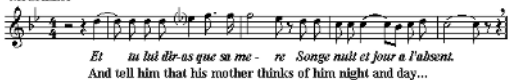
Micaela returns, and joyously rushes to greet José. Micaela brings José a letter from his mother, money from his mother's savings, and a kiss from his mother that she delivers to him with shyness and modesty. His mother's letter forgives him for running off and joining the army, but also urges him to marry Micaela.

Micaela's arrival brings a welcome change of thought to José: he is now in fear and senses danger, subconsciously realizing that he has become the prey of Carmen's demonic power.

José joins Micaela in reminiscence about his hometown and his mother.

***José and Micaela: Et tu lui diras que sa mère,
Songe nuit et jour à l'absent***

Poco meno mosso
MICAELA



After Micaela departs, José takes Carmen's flower from under his blouse, and is about to throw it away, but is interrupted by screams coming from the factory. Suddenly, the square is crowded with frightened girls, soldiers, and townspeople. The cause of the disorder is Carmen who had quarreled with one of the girls and slashed her with a knife. (According to Mérimée's original *Carmen*, the fight resulted from an insult to Carmen by a fellow gypsy who accused her of not being a "true" gypsy.)

When Carmen is interrogated by the dragoons, her insolent response is *Tra la la la*: in effect, her contemptuous refusal not to provide details and remain silent. The officer orders that Carmen's hands be tied, and then enters the guardhouse to write a warrant for her arrest.

José is ordered to guard Carmen. Alone with her, he is fearful and is determined to avoid direct eye contact with her. Carmen coquettishly asks him: "Where is the flower I threw to you?" Carmen then proceeds to arouse José, using her powers of seduction and temptation.

The *Seguidilla* is a traditional Spanish dance, but in this scene, the "exploitation" scene, the *Seguidilla* becomes the accompaniment to Carmen's irresistible invitation to José: in effect, a promise that he can have sex with her if he unties her and sets her free.

Carmen: Seguidilla

Allegretto
CARMEN



Carmen's promises turn José into a feverish heat. He becomes mesmerized, trapped, and explodes with desire. José surrenders to Carmen's seductive invitation, and unloosens her bound wrists just enough so that they appear to be tied. In lieu of possessing Carmen, José has arranged her freedom: instinctive passions have overcome reason, and José has lost self control, oblivious to consequence and punishment.

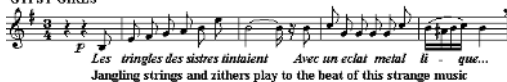
The captain returns from the guardhouse with a warrant for Carmen and orders José to accompany her to prison. Carmen is placed between dragoons under José's command. As they reach a corner of the square, Carmen frees her hands, pushes the soldiers aside, and before they realize what has happened, dashes away amid the gleeful shouts of the onlookers.

ACT II: The Inn of Lillas Pastia

Two months later, at Lillas Pastia's Inn, gypsy women entertain guests, off-duty officers and soldiers, and gypsy smugglers from the mountains. Carmen and her fellow gypsies rise to sing and dance, explaining how gypsies are inspired and bewitched by dazzling music and rhythms: the music accelerates and builds to a wild and feverish frenzy that becomes more vivid with the rhythmic clash of tambourines.

Gypsy Dance: Les tringles des sistres tintaient

Andantino
GYPSY GIRLS



One of the officers informs Carmen that the handsome young corporal who had allowed her to escape has just been released from prison, and is enroute to the Inn to meet her.

From outside, shouts are heard: “Long live the toreador! Hail Escamillo!” The famous bullfighter, Escamillo, master at the bullring at Granada, joins the guests in a toast. Escamillo provides a vivid picture of his public and private life as he boasts about the rewards of a courageous toreador: his reckless daring, the bloodshed, the adoration and cheering of the crowds, and the irresistible sexual power of men who kill bulls.

Escamillo: The Toreador Song

Bruscamente, ben ritmato

ESCAMILLO



Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre, Senors, senors car avec les soldats..
I will gladly return your toast, for you are soldiers.

Carmen and her gypsy friends flirt with Escamillo, and Carmen in particular, succeeds in getting his attention; their encounter is a turning point in the drama, and the beginning of the love triangle and rivalry that leads to ultimate tragedy.

Carmen and her friends, Frasquita and Mercédes, are approached by two gypsy smugglers, Dancaire and Remendado, who request the girls' help in seducing the coast guard into sidestepping their duty so they can smuggle their wares. A rollicking Quintet expresses their amusement at the idea.

Quintet: Nous avons en tete une affaire...

Allegro vivo

FRASQUITA, MERCEDES, EL REMENDADO, EL DANCAIRO



Nous avons en tete une af-fai - re Est - elle bonne, dites nous?
We have a job in mind. Is it a good one?

Carmen waits at the Inn, and anticipates the arrival of José. When he arrives, Frasquita and Mercédes admire his appearance and suggest to Carmen that she persuade him to join their gypsy band: Carmen responds to their idea with delight and enthusiasm.

Carmen joyfully welcomes José, and immediately plays to his jealousy by telling him that she danced and entertained for the officers. However, she now promises José that she will dance only for him. Carmen dances, clicks castenets, and fully absorbs José in her sensuous motions.

Carmen's Dance: La, la, la.....

Allegretto
CARMEN



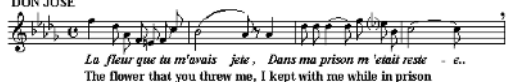
Their reunion is interrupted by bugle calls that signal the retreat, a reminder for all soldiers to return to their quarters. José stops Carmen's dancing, and informs her that he must depart.

Carmen is chagrined, upset, and feels betrayed that he would dare leave her. In a sudden fury, she hurls his cap and saber at him and orders him to leave her forever. Carmen now proceeds to taunt José, and presses him to prove his love for her. She tells him that if he truly loves her, he must desert the army and flee with her to the mountains where they will share the free gypsy life together.

José is hurt, confused, and humiliated. From his uniform, he removes the flower she threw him that fateful day in the square at Seville. In an ecstatic outpouring of love - the *Flower Song* – whose beginning is ominously underscored with the *Death* theme music, José tries passionately to reason with Carmen, frankly revealing how she has captured his soul, and how the aroma of her flower sustained him during his dreary days in prison. The *Flower Song* confirms that José is overcome with deep passions of love for Carmen.

Flower Song: La fleur que tu m'avais jeté

Andantino
DON JOSE



Carmen is touched by José's loving sentiments, but now she is determined more than ever to force him, if he truly loves her, to abandon the military and join her in the mountains and enjoy the freedom of gypsy life. Carmen again uses her erotic power and paints an exotic picture of gypsy life in the mountains: adventure, dangers, escapades, and long nights under the stars.

José realizes that if he acquiesces to Carmen, he will be a deserter, a man of shame and dishonor. But duty forces him to realize that he must leave, and as he approaches the door, there is a knock, and moments later, Captain Zuniga bursts in. After seeing José, Zuniga coldly tells Carmen that she is doing herself an injustice by having an affair with a mere corporal rather than himself: an officer.

Zuniga brusquely orders José to leave and then strikes him. José becomes mad with rage and draws his saber against his commanding officer. Carmen calls to her companions for help in order to avoid bloodshed, and when her fellow gypsies arrive, they overpower and separate the fighting soldiers, leading Zuniga away under their guard.

At this turning point in the drama, José's loyalty and career as a dragoon has ended. He is guilty of insubordination through his physical assault on his superior officer. He has but one choice: join Carmen and the gypsies and become a deserter, an outcast and a renegade. The act closes with a brilliant chorus in praise of the gypsies' free lifestyle.

Act III: The gypsy camp in the mountains.

In the mountains outside Seville, the gypsy smuggler band has gathered. José is seen in an extremely pensive mood, in remorse and shame that his career has been destroyed, and is obsessed with thoughts about his mother who would certainly condemn his actions.

Carmen sarcastically suggests to José that if

he is unhappy with gypsy life, he should leave. But in truth, Carmen has now tired of José, and looks to the colorful bullfighter Escamillo as her new lover. José responds menacingly and threateningly to Carmen's apparent rejection of him; Carmen nonchalantly shrugs her shoulders, and calmly replies to José that killing her does not matter; she will die as fate dictates.

Carmen watches Frasquita and Mercédès telling their fortunes with cards: the cards predict a future for them filled with love, wealth, and happiness.

Frasquita and Mercédès: Et maintenant, parlez mes belles

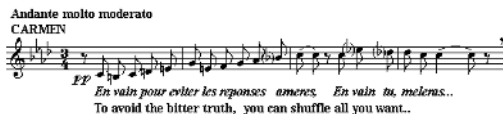
Allegretto
FRASQUITA and MERCEDES

Et maintenant, parlez, mes belles, De l'avenir donnons nous nouvelles.
Now little cards tell us about the future, what is in store for us?

Carmen seizes a pack of cards, and casually begins to read her own fortune. Each time, she draws spades: an omen of death. The ominous and terrifying *Death* theme resounds as Carmen exclaims darkly that some unseen, fatal hand of destiny seems to be threatening her.

Carmen: En vain pour éviter les réponses amères...

Andante molto moderato
CARMEN



En vain pour éviter les réponses amères, En vain tu, meleras...
To avoid the bitter truth, you can shuffle all you want..

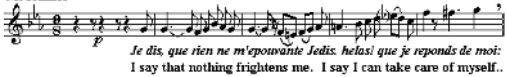
Carmen and her friends help the smugglers in their attempt to leave the mountain pass with their contraband. José is stationed behind some rocks to act as a sentry to protect their actions.

Micaela has come to the camp in lieu of finding José. Scared and petrified, she prays for heaven's protection.

Micaela: Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante.

Andantino molto

MICAELA



A shot rings out, forcing Micaela to hide among the rocks. José had fired at a stranger coming up through the pass, and when the man arrives, he waves his bullet-holed hat and exclaims that if the shot had been an inch lower, he would have been dead. The man José almost shot is his rival, Escamillo. Daggers are drawn, and the renegade soldier and the bullfighter struggle together.

Escamillo falls and José stands above him holding his dagger at his throat. The fighters are immediately separated by Carmen and the gypsies. Escamillo rises gallantly, thanks Carmen for having saved his life, and with his accustomed bravado, invites them all to the bullfight at Seville. As Escamillo calmly departs, José tries to rush after his rival, but is restrained by the gypsies.

At that moment, Micaela is discovered and brought into the gypsy camp. She is appalled to see José, the man she loves, in such a distraught condition, and begs him to leave the gypsies and return to his mother. Carmen interrupts them, and tauntingly suggests that José should indeed go, repeating again that gypsy life does not suit him. José's passions of jealousy are animated as he interprets Carmen's recommendation as a rejection of him, and an excuse for her to run off with her new lover, Escamillo. José turns into a violent rage, a reminder of how quickly the passions of love can turn into hate.

When Micaela tells José that his mother is dying, he agrees to leave with her. He turns to Carmen, and angrily vows that they will meet again. As José leaves with Micaela, Escamillo is heard in the distance, singing his boastful *Toreador Song*.

loves him. José promises her anything if she does not leave him, but Carmen remains indifferent to his pleas and threats. Finally, Carmen coldly and proudly rejects José, telling him: “Carmen will never yield! Free she was born, free she shall die!”

A victorious fanfare is heard from the bullring as the crowd hails the victorious toreador, Escamillo. Carmen starts to run toward the arena entrance, but José, insane with jealousy, blocks her passage. Now becoming even more sinister, José says: “This man they shout for is your new lover!” Defiantly, Carmen again tries to pass, but José again blocks her way and swears: “On my soul, you will never pass! Carmen come with me!”

José, finally expresses what he had been thinking but could not say: he asks Carmen if she indeed loves the toreador, Escamillo. Carmen replies bravely: “Yes, I love him! Even before death, I would repeat it, I love him!”

José becomes increasingly more violent, his voice now bitter with despair and jealousy. He again threatens Carmen menacingly: “And so I have sold my soul so that you can go to his arms and laugh at me!” The *Death* theme resounds turbulently in the orchestra as the crowd in the arena is heard acclaiming Escamillo.

Now thoroughly disgusted, Carmen throws down José’s ring, and as she dashes toward the amphitheater entrance, José overtakes her, draws his dagger, and plunges it into her heart.

As Carmen falls, the crowd comes pouring out from the arena. José declares himself guilty, bends over Carmen’s lifeless body, and cries with heartbroken sobs, “Carmen, my adored Carmen.”

Bizet.....and Carmen

Georges Bizet – 1838 to 1875 – demonstrated extremely gifted musical talents at the age of nine years old that served to earn him acceptance in the Paris Conservatory. His most prominent teacher was Jacques Halévy, the teacher of Charles Gounod, as well as the composer of some twenty operas, his most well-known, the inspired grand opera masterwork, *La Juive*.

In 1857, at the age of nineteen, Bizet won the *Prix de Rome*, and proceeded to complete his music studies in Italy. Later, he returned to Paris to embark on a career as an opera composer. But even his marriage to Geneviève, Halévy's daughter, would only provide him with the humble existence of an unrecognized composer. In 1872, at the age of thirty-four, the composer was finally acclaimed for his incidental music to Alphonse Daudet's *L'Arlésienne*, to this day his most popular orchestral work.

Bizet's French opera contemporaries were Jacques Offenbach, the composer of over one hundred stage works that include the extremely popular *La Belle Hélène*, *La Périochole* and *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*; Charles Gounod, whose thirteen works include *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette*; and Jules Massenet, whose twenty-eight operas include *Manon* and *Thaïs*.

As a French opera composer, Bizet never achieved full recognition. Nevertheless, his opera, *Les pêcheurs de perles*, "The Pearl Fishers," written in 1863, currently maintains a firm place in the contemporary international repertory. His ultimate operatic legacy comprises fourteen works, some of which failed at their premieres and have never been produced thereafter, and some of which survive only in fragments after having been destroyed in a fire at the Paris Opéra

Bizet's last opera, *Carmen*, was introduced at the Opéra-Comique in March, 1875. *Carmen* received thirty-seven performances that season, a valid argument to counter legendary claims that it was a failure. *Carmen* proved that Bizet was truly an operatic genius, and a composer with firmly

established gifts for glorious melody and intense music drama. *Carmen* has since become the world's most popular piece of musical theater. Bizet died three months after the premiere of his greatest work, his premature death at the age of thirty-seven attributed primarily to heart complications rather than the apparent disappointment with *Carmen*'s initial "failure." As in the early deaths of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Chopin, one can only speculate what he could have achieved had he lived longer.

The eighteenth century Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, were a battle for the soul of humanity, eventually becoming the fuel that fired the inspiration for those momentous events in Western history; the American and French revolutions: Enlightenment ideals were embodied in the works of Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke, and Jefferson.

The next century's Romantic movement represented a backlash against Enlightenment reason: the Reign of Terror and the carnage emanating from Napoleon's pursuit of empire were perceived as the Enlightenment's greatest failures.

Romanticism's idealistic fountainhead recognized man's right to dignity, freedom, and liberty; so Enlightenment reason was transformed into a passionate sense of human freedom and feeling; an idealization of love and the nature of love; a glorification of sentiments and virtues; a sympathy and compassion for man's foibles; and an idealization of noble sacrifice as man's ultimate redemption.

Those ideals of freedom and feeling – the essence of Romanticism – were aptly expressed by the French champion of the human spirit, Jean Jacque Rousseau, who said: "I felt before I thought." The German writer, Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, likewise expressed his conception of Romanticism in his *Sorrows of Young Werther*, an exaltation of sentiment to justify suicide as an escape from unrequited love.

In opera, Beethoven's "rescue" opera, *Fidelio* (1805), idealized freedom from oppression with its deep Romantic sense of human struggle and triumph that he musically hammered into every note. By mid-century, the towering icons of operatic Romanticism, Verdi and Wagner, would epitomize the nineteenth century "Golden Age of Opera" with monumental works that expressed their idealistic vision of a more perfect world. Romanticism's tension between desire and fulfillment exalted sacrifice and the redeeming power of love.

Art expresses truth and beauty, but the essential interpretation of that truth varies with the spirit of the times. As the second half of the nineteenth century unfolded and approached its *fin du siecle*, the foundations of the old order and perceptions of society came into question. Philosophically, the era became spiritually unsettled as man became self-questioning and began to become conscious of a cultural decadence pervading society.

Nietzsche, the quintessential cultural pessimist of the century, said it was a time of "the transvaluation of values," in effect, the recognition of spiritual decadence and deterioration caused by the dramatic ideological and scientific transformations of society that had been introduced by Marx, Darwin, and Freud. Society would be further confounded by utopian frustrations caused by paradoxes emanating from the maturing of the Industrial Revolution: colonialism, socialism, materialism, as well as the failure of the French Revolution's promise of democracy and human progress.

Whereas the artistic manifestation of the Romantic spirit glorified human ideals in its quest for excellence and perfection, late nineteenth century man began to view Romanticism as a contradiction of universal truth. As a result, art shifted its focus from the idealism of Romanticism to the more realistic portrayal of the common man and his everyday, personal life drama, and even, his degeneracy.

The new revolutionary genre of artistic expression that would evolve from Romanticism became known as Realism. In literature, it was called *naturalism*: in opera, *verismo* in Italian, and *verisme* in French. In Realism, human passions became the subject of the action; no subject was too mundane, no subject was too harsh, and no subject was too ugly. Realism, becoming the antithesis of Romanticism's sense of idealism, avoided artificiality and sentimentalism, and averted affectations with historical personalities or portrayals of chivalry and heroism. As a result, Realism, objectively searching for the underlying truth in man's existence, brought violent and savage passions to artistic expression.

The Realism expressed in literature – *naturalism* – probed deeply into every area of human experience. Prosper Mérimée wrote *Carmen* in 1845, a short story – a novella – that dealt with sex, betrayal, rivalry, and murder. Later, Emile Zola, who is actually recognized as the founder of literary *naturalism*, wrote novels about the underbelly of life, and brought human passions to the surface in works that documented every social ill, every obscenity, and every criminality, no matter how politically sensitive: *The Dram Shop* (1877) about alcoholism; *Nana* (1880) about prostitution and the demimonde. Similarly, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) portrayed the romantically motivated adulteries of a married woman whose pathetically overblown love affairs end in her suicide. And in England, Charles Dickens presented the problems of the industrial age poor, its focus, the portrayal of moral degeneracy in the slums.

In 1875, Bizet's opera *Carmen*, adapted from Mérimée's novella, introduced *verisme* to the opera stage. The Italians would follow with *verismo* from their *giovanni scuola*, their "young school" of avant-garde composers: Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890); Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* (1892); and eventually, Puccini's *Tosca* (1900) and *Il Tabarro* (1918).

In the genres of *verismo* and *versimé*, good does not necessarily triumph over evil.

Prosper Mérimée, the literary source for Bizet's *Carmen*, once commented:

"I am one of those who have a strong liking for bandits, not that I have any desire to meet them on my travels, but the energy of these men, at war with the whole society, wrings from me an admiration of which I am ashamed."

Mérimée, like many of his contemporary French writers, turned to exotic locales for artistic inspiration. Spain, a close neighbor just to the southwest, bore a special fascination, particularly the character of its arcane gypsy culture. These gypsies, considered sorcerers, witches, and occultists, were the traditional enemy of the Church, and were almost always stereotyped as an ethnic group of bandits and social outcasts dominated by loose morality. From the comfort of distance, Mérimée told fascinating picaresque tales about gypsies, in a moralistic sense, using their evils, loose mores, and bizarre idiosyncrasies, to imply to the reader a sense of renewal and redemption.

Mérimée's particular *verisme* was his obsession with human nature in the raw: violence, extreme passions, and death. He was fascinated and intrigued with the barbarian side of man: primitive and unspoiled man who demonstrated an uninhibited spontaneity. In Mérimée, men were ennobled through their courage, energy, and vitality.

Mérimée depicted the latent animal within man, the "noble savage," that man who was true to his natural inclinations and not stifled by what he considered the hypocrisy of society's conventions: those presumptions of civilized values called reason and morality. In Mérimée's world of *verisme*, beneath that veneer and façade we call civilization, lurked brutal and cruel passions, violence, bestiality, irrationality, and dark, mysterious forces.

In Mérimée's novella, his tragedy of *Carmen*, he presents those forces of violence, unreason, and erotic love, as sinister, fatal powers often equated with death. In *verisme*, man is portrayed as

barbaric, cruel, evil, immoral, and mad; in *verisme*, death becomes the supreme consummation of desire.

Bizet once commented on the essence of *verisme*: “As a musician, I tell you that if you were to suppress hatred, adultery, fanaticism, or evil, it would no longer be possible to write a single note of music.”

Captivated by the human passions of *verisme*, Bizet would summon all his faculties in the coalescence of *Carmen*, ultimately creating a heavy breathing, sex-driven melodrama, that would become the groundbreaker for the portrayal of true *verisme* on the opera stage. *Carmen*’s violent and savage crime of passion signaled the end of nineteenth century Romanticism: *Carmen*’s *verisme* became the death knell to Romanticism’s glorification of sentimentalism and noble ideals; in *verisme*, man was solely a creature of instinct.

Today, *Carmen* is considered *the* smash hit of opera. Nevertheless, at its premiere in 1875, legend and legacy indicate that the opera was an absolute fiasco and failure. The Opéra-Comique audience was shocked and offended by *Carmen*’s story about a hip-swinging, hot-blooded gypsy woman with loose morals; its story about thieves and smugglers; its depiction of rowdy cigar factory girls who smoked and fought amongst each other; and its jealous rivalry that led to cold-blooded murder on stage.

At the time of *Carmen*’s premiere, there were two major opera theaters in Paris, each bearing strict rules and regulations regarding the type, style, and category of opera they could perform. The Paris Opéra was reserved for grand operas: spectacles containing ballets, large choruses, magnificent scenery, and grandiose effects: Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* and *Roberto du Diable*; and Berlioz’s *Les Troyens*.

The Opéra-Comique, at that time actually a comedy theater, performed smaller or lighter works like Offenbach’s *bouffes*, or works containing spoken dialogue or recitative. According to those

existing performance rules, *Carmen*, an opera in which its set-pieces were separated by dialogue, could only be performed at the Opéra-Comique. As a result, the Opéra-Comique audience was expecting a comedy; *Carmen's* story was far from comic, so the staging of this violent tragedy ultimately puzzled its audience.

The Opéra-Comique was also a “family theater.” As a result, the sexy spitfire heroine and her exploits were obviously a little too risqué for a “family” audience in which middle class parents took their children. Not only was *Carmen's* story entirely too much *verisme*, but its highly sensual music was deemed too offensive; in an earlier generation, mothers prevented their daughters from hearing Beethoven's music because they feared they would be corrupted, influenced, and even seduced by what they perceived as its latent eroticism.

From a theatrical point of view, the emotional impact of *Carmen* lies in its passionate feelings and violent actions, but the French Opéra-Comique public became outraged by the portrayal of those deep-seated savage passions presented openly on the stage: *Carmen* presented too much stark tragedy, and was too lurid in its characterizations.

In the end, *Carmen* was considered downright disagreeable, coarse, blatantly vulgar, and even immoral. In particular, the audience considered Carmen's murder on stage as unsuitable for a family opera house, and legend reveals that the audience actually booed the last act, an act that is perhaps the greatest musical-dramatic feat and *tour-de-force* in all opera. (Their booing either defends their sensitivities to the story, or represents a lasting indictment of French musical taste.)

The Spanish joined the condemnation of *Carmen* by denouncing Bizet's pseudo-Spanish style as a blatant plagiarization of Spanish music; their argument was based on the score's punctuated rhythms that saturate the *Habanera*, the *Seguidilla*, and the *Gypsy Dance*. Nevertheless, Bizet had no intention of writing Spanish music per se, but rather, his intent was to capture the spirit and exoticism of Spanish song and dance in essentially his own music and style.

In truth, Bizet never visited Spain, and his music is more French than Spanish, exemplified by that unique French lyric style, quality, and character, perfected by his predecessor, Gounod in his *Faust* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and by Saent-Saëns's *Samson and Delilah*. The French lyrical style features a driving, sustained, and almost floating melodic line, and Bizet certainly adheres almost religiously to its inherent character in the poignant Act I Duet between Micaela and José, *Et tu lui que sa mere, Songe nuit et jour l'absent*; José's *Flower Song* in Act II; and Micaela's aria in Act III, *Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante*.

Even the anti-Wagnerians condemned Bizet. In 1861, Wagner's *Tannhauser* was a colossal failure at its Paris premiere. The perennially obstinate and Franco-phobic Wagner refused to place the opera's ballet in Act II as French convention of the time had established. The French became duly insulted, and after the *Tannhauser* fiasco, the name Richard Wagner became anathema, a "dirty word" to the French.

To add fuel to the fire, after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, there were few German-ophiles left in France. As a result, any French composer who attempted to introduce a slightly unconventional musical style, particularly in the use of leitmotifs which were synonymous with Wagner's art, was accused of following Wagner's German *music of the future*, a reference to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which Wagner theorized the perfect integration and fusion of drama and music, and the symphonic weaving of leitmotifs. In late nineteenth century France, the political climate was so tense that any inference to "Germanism" or "Wagnerism" in opera was considered both political and artistic treachery and blasphemy.

Bizet did not use leitmotifs in the Wagnerian style. His continuous echoing of *Carmen's* *Death* motive (*Fate* or *Fear*) and the *Toreador Song* music throughout the score are motives that are repeated musical themes that identify particular characters or ideas. But Wagnerian leitmotifs must be woven

together in a symphonic web with other leitmotifs: the *Death* theme, although appearing often with different coloration, appears by itself, far removed from any other themes, and in its true context, is not a Wagnerian-style leitmotif. In that same sense, even before Wagner, Verdi used leitmotifs in *Ernani*. Nevertheless, for a short period after its premiere, the French condemned *Carmen* as being a feeble imitation and stereotype of Wagner.

However, *Carmen* was viewed by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosophical conscience of nineteenth century culture, and by that time in 1875 an enemy of the developing Wagner cult, to have introduced a Mediterranean clarity that dispelled “all the fog of the Wagnerian ideal.” What Nietzsche meant was that *Carmen* created an alluring character in its title role, a character who brought to opera a new thrust of realism – the French *verisme* - through Carmen’s passionate determination, and her sometimes brutal and unmerciful exercise of her erotic power over men. To Nietzsche, *Carmen* was a healthy antithesis to those introspective, philosophizing characters who pervaded Wagner’s operas.

More importantly, *Carmen* became the great French connection in opera. French opera, just like Italian opera, derives from the same Latin roots and origins. Both are mired in basic emotions and passions, and both usually deal with those same great primal conflicts of the spirit and the flesh, be it love, lust, greed, betrayal, jealousy, hate, or revenge.

Italian opera can be more direct, more declamatory, and much more naked in its passions, and most of the time, intensely sizzling as it goes right for the jugular and brings us right into the fray. But French opera, even though it presents those same Latin emotions and passions, generally can be more oblique, more subtle, even at times, overly refined and sophisticated, but notwithstanding style and traditions, French opera, and particularly *Carmen*, delivers the same dramatic and emotional intensity as Italian opera.

Eventually, *Carmen* achieved acclaim all over the world. In 1883, eight years after its “failed” première, the Opéra-Comique was forced by

popular demand to give *Carmen* another chance. However, to satisfy the antagonists, *Carmen* had to be liberated from what was considered its “impurities” and “improprieties.” The result was a new production in which Lillas Pastia’s Inn in Act II, in its original, considered by the civilized French to have the odor and appearance of a house of ill repute, was changed into a chic restaurant filled with elegant guests. In addition, the original Carmen portrayed by Celestine Marie Galli-Marie, an exotically beautiful singer and actress, was replaced with Adele Isaac, a less sexy and less provocative Carmen who was perhaps slightly more attractive, and more importantly, more sophisticated than her predecessor. Afterwards, *Carmen* would become a permanent fixture on the French and international operatic stages.

Carmen’s tale about a crime of passion involving love, jealousy, rivalry, betrayal, and murder, judged by contemporary media news and events, is thematically very modern. Audiences no longer reel from outrage at this story’s portrayal of loose morals, hot tempers, fiery passions and raging jealousies; those classic confrontations that lead to the tragic and violent destruction of its two principal characters, José and Carmen. Modern audiences receive their daily share of *Carmen*’s violence in their newspapers and on television.

Likewise, *Carmen*’s story varies only slightly from themes that dominated our post-war *film noir* genre in which life compelling flesh and blood characters were portrayed in hopeless and desperate situations, where fatalistic, overpowering forces control destinies, where good does not necessarily triumph over evil. *Film noir* presents characterizations no different from those in the *Carmen* story, a portrayal of strong, unrepentant, determined female characters who contradict the mainstream, react at times as caged animals, and who try to survive in the hard, cruel reality of a hostile world: *Double Indemnity* with Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, *Laura* with Dana Andrews and Gene Tierney, and almost all of the Bogart/Bacall films.

The gypsy character Carmen is an enduring, charismatic personality. Carmen is beautiful, and Carmen is blatantly sexy. She works in a cigar factory, but among her various activities, she acts as a decoy in the criminal escapades of her fellow gypsy robbers and smugglers. Notwithstanding other aspects of her character, Carmen is very much a study in female criminology.

Carmen is Carmen because she is relentless in her passion for independence. She is obsessed to enjoy her freedom and its intrinsic rewards: the excitement and pleasures of sex and love. Carmen's favorite sport is to use sex as her weapon to exploit and manipulate men, an erotic power that she wields with unabashed zeal. Carmen is always the huntress, and in this story, Don José becomes her doomed prey: her weapon, the fatal flower she casts at José that unconsciously serves to arouse his desire.

Carmen the temptress is irresistible. She is the supreme archetypal incarnation of the *femme fatale*, the quintessential enchantress, and the alluring seductress who is powered by an instinct for lust, delight, and entanglement. Carmen's destructive power surrounds her like an aura of mystery, magic, and malevolence. She exerts her fatal charm on the weak and unwary, exploiting her sexuality and the mystique she has created in order to further her own ends; José becomes an easy victory for Carmen when she lures him in the *Seguidilla*, a moment when he becomes overpowered by his uncontrollable passion and desire.

Many operatic attempts have been made to enthrone the *femme fatale*: Venus in *Tannhäuser*, Delilah in *Samson et Dalila*, as well as their many operatic cousins, such as Kundry in *Parsifal*, Lulu, and, of course, Salome. But Carmen also has many sisters in modern film: Glen Close's role in *Fatal Attraction*, and Sharon Stone's role in *Basic Instinct*.

Carmen's unscrupulous, illegal, and immoral behavior no longer shock us. Modern psychology, and well as liberal ideology, view Carmen as a caged animal deserving of our sympathy and compassion. In the sense of pure

human freedom, when Carmen is free and liberated, we tend to justify her seductive exploitations. But some modernists no longer view Carmen as a sluttish and lecherous *femme fatale* who destroys a decent upright soldier: they tend to interpret Carmen as a woman unjustly murdered by a jealous lover, murdered by a man who is perhaps a maternally dominated psychopath.

The great appeal of Carmen's character is her classic, archetypal ambivalence. On the one hand, she is dishonest, unruly, promiscuous, unsentimental, brash, vicious, and callous, a woman who discards men like picked flowers, yet on the other hand, she is vivacious, energetic, enterprising, resourceful, and indomitable. But before all else, Carmen is independent and loves her freedom, her freedom to love whomever she wants and not allow one man to call himself her master for long; freedom becomes for Carmen, like all mankind, her ultimate aspiration; her release from life's prison.

Therefore, Carmen's greatness lies in her willingness to be Carmen, a determination to be free and follow her own bliss. That freedom and independence provides our fascination with that unattainable reality that truly lies within the soul of the Carmen character: a woman who contradicts the mainstream, a woman who uses all of her cunning and sexual attractiveness to control her world, and a woman who will defy men without hesitation: the classic *Film noir* female portrait. Carmen's greatest attraction is her indomitable will power, her tireless obsession to control her own destiny.

But the ultimate power of the story resides in her courage and dignity - almost Stoical - when she faces death. Carmen resigns and submits herself to Fate; in effect, she accepts the failure of her will and her ultimate defeat at the hands of uncontrollable destiny.

The essence of *verismé* characters is that emotion, rather than reason, powers their actions; that the profane will vanquish the sacred; that flesh

will conquer spirit. The Enlightenment viewed man powered by reason: the Romantics viewed man powered by an ideal of freedom and feeling; and the Realists ultimately viewed man as a creature of instinct.

The tragedy of Don José is that he is the quintessential *verismé* victim: a simple, luckless army corporal, whose great tragic flaw is that he becomes infatuated and bewitched, and eventually rejected and abandoned by Carmen. Carmen becomes José's fatal destiny, and José's hyperventilating emotions cause him to fall victim to his uncontrollable and impulsive passions to love and possess Carmen. Carmen is indeed José's *femme fatale*: José may be a trivial toy in Carmen's game of life and love, but to José, Carmen is his life's passion and fulfillment.

In Mérimée's novella, José eventually realizes that Carmen is a servant of the devil, but he cannot exorcise the demon. In Mérimée, José is a more brutal character than in Bizet's portrayal. After deserting the military for Carmen, he becomes transformed into a sort of Spanish Jesse James and becomes a renegade, highwayman, and outlaw. Among his laundry list of crimes, Mérimée recounts three murders: He kills an army lieutenant in a jealous rage after he finds him with Carmen, even though Carmen explains that she lured the lieutenant for the purpose of robbery; he kills Carmen's husband, the one-eyed gypsy bandit Garcia after Carmen freed him from jail by seducing the jail surgeon - Jose catches Garcia cheating at cards and murders him; and the third murder, José kills his beloved Carmen.

Escamillio is portrayed as a bravura, egotistical sexual athlete, a famous matador thriving on the conquests of bulls and women. In the *Toreador Song*, he immodestly paints a vivid picture of his public and private life, boasting about himself and the irresistible sexual power of men who kill bulls. In modern terms, he would be considered a glossily packaged, supermarket object of sex appeal.

But Escamillo also becomes mesmerized by the lure of Carmen, and becomes the third part of the love triangle: Escamillo becomes Carmen's

next prey after she gives José his walking papers. (There is no such word as Toreador in the Spanish dictionary. A bullfighter is a *matador* or *torero*, and the word Toreador was Bizet's own creation from the root words *toro* and *torero*.)

Micaela is mentioned in only one-line in the original Mérimée novella, but her development is the invention of librettists Meilhac and Halévy, a counterbalance intended to represent a stark contrast to the feisty gypsy character of Carmen.

Micaela is that sweet seventeen year old who was an orphan adopted by José's mother. She is the mother-image substitute, the stereotypical good-girl-next-door, the symbol of innocent virtue, and, of course, José's hometown sweetheart, who is in love with him and hopes to marry him.

This story about a manipulative and exploitive woman places *Carmen* in the category of the classic battle of the sexes. The most formidable other operatic treatment of this battle is Mozart's famous libertine, Don Giovanni. *Carmen* and *Don Giovanni* are both operas that take place in Seville and deal with an archetypal main character; both stories center around sex and seduction; both stories were initially considered immoral by their public; both characters exercise their power to manipulate the opposite sex for no apparent reason than their own pleasure; and both leading characters are finally entrapped by their deeds with their deaths the final consequence of their actions.

Nevertheless, Don Giovanni is dragged into Hell for his sins, proud and unrepentant. Carmen, his female counterpart, similarly dies proud and unrepentant for her life-style, yet in her death, her ultimate nobility is that she dies not for her sins, but to preserve her freedom and independence.

Carmen and Don Giovanni appeal to us on both conscious and unconscious levels: every man would like to be a Don Giovanni, a Don Juan, and every woman a Carmen. Whereas a Don Giovanni represents many things to many people, he has no other charisma than being an educated nobleman

having an obsession for conquest; there is nothing else after his conquests but a carcass, prompting the modern Freudians to explain his great flaws as a “Don Juan” complex: man yearning to return to the bliss of the mother’s womb.

But Carmen is more dimensional, desired because she is complete, fulfilled, and self-defined. Carmen has become a heroine, not only because of her charismatic sexuality, but because she accepts the rules of life; when the final card is turned up, she bravely plays out her fate.

Don Giovanni supposedly seduced 2065 women in Europe alone, but the essence of the Don Giovanni character, and to some, the tragedy of the opera, is that all of his seductions were hapless failures. Carmen’s seductions are successes: in this story, we are only aware of her conquests of Don José and Escamillo. Carmen, by contrast, is an uneducated gypsy peasant with no class, but she is a free character, teasing and playing with emotions until she finds the man she wants to love. Indeed, she truly falls in love with Don José as well as Escamillo. Don Giovanni never fell in love. He was a pompous rake and the quintessential rapist of all time – mostly by invitation. But in the end, the arrogant Don had to work hard at his seductions, whereas Carmen did not. In the game of sexual conquest, Carmen will remain the quintessential seducer: the power of her will made her triumphant and victorious.

Carmen’s unique greatness is that its multifaceted heroine has struck deeply into the emotions of audiences everywhere; a character who transcends the bounds of her operatic existence and has become an archetypal, modern myth. Carmen can be seen as evil temptress, *femme fatale*, and an erotic demon. Within the zeitgeist of modern times, she can also be viewed as the classic underdog in society; a model of emancipation and symbol of the disenfranchised. As an outcast from society – a gypsy - she can be seen as a heroine to the poor, the class-conscious, and the minorities in racist societies. In point of historical fact, gypsies were a minority,

scapegoated, discriminated against, oppressed, tyrannized, pressured to assimilate, sometimes enslaved, shunned, marginalized, distrusted, and exploited.

But above all, Carmen can be seen as the modern champion of liberated eroticism. Freud postulated that when the erotic is sublimated, civilization cannot develop. In that context, civilization must periodically reach back to its erotic roots, rebel, regain, and recapture those roots. In that modern psychological sense, Carmen is a symbol to all civilized people of the triumph of the liberated spirit of eroticism: the pure eroticism that existed before the rise of civilization.

Bizet has the distinction of providing Mérimée's heroine with immortality, transforming a character who might not have outlived her author's time into a spirit capable of multiple reincarnations, a mythological goddess who is rediscovered over and over again. *Carmen* has become a timeless story that endures in multiple incarnations; for example, in 1943, Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones* updated the story for the modern theater and transferred its venue to a Southern parachute factory. Recently, Peter Brook created his 90 minute play, *La Tragedie de Carmen*, and provided the story with a contemporary flavor.

Today, 125 years later after the opera's premiere, Bizet's saucy *señorita*, the brazen temptress Carmen, has become, as Tchaikovsky predicted at the premiere, one the world's most enormously popular operas. Bizet's singular, phenomenal success – his operatic *tour-de-force* – brought to French opera not only a magnificent colorful and exotic atmosphere, but a music score saturated with hit tunes that have become the tops in the operatic song charts: the *Habanera* and the *Toreador Song* among the many.

More importantly, from the dramatic point of view of the lyric theater, the opera moves swiftly from scene to scene, pounding like a pulse with sensuous melodies, vivid orchestral harmonies, and captivating rhythms that are so "listener friendly," that there is hardly a note we could do without.

In the final scene of Act IV, perhaps the greatest act in all opera, the real dramatic power of the opera is demonstrated. It is in these final moments that Bizet presents savage contrasts, those contrasts that the operatic art form so well portrays because it speaks to its audience in two languages: text and music.

In the bullring we witness the pomp and panache of the bullfight as it celebrates the primitive struggle of matador vs. bull, a scene almost reminiscent of Hemingway's 1932 classic *Death in the Afternoon*. But outside the bullring, another primitive contest of wills is taking place between Carmen and José: this is Mérimée's *verisme* in which human nature in the raw and the primitive animal lurking within man comes to the surface and erupts into brutal, violent, cruel, and savage passions.

In the vicious contest of wills between José and Carmen, their savage and primitive struggle culminates with an explosion of fierce tempers approaching madness. Carmen, fearless and stoical, is resigned to her fate and destiny. Their differences are irreconcilable because Carmen is Carmen, and Carmen will never yield: she must be free and independent: free to love whom she wants. José has lost his soul, lost his senses, and has become tormented and destroyed by his passions of jealousy, betrayal, and rejection.

The drama ends with Carmen's murder. José can only be redeemed through Carmen's death. Violence and irrationality have erupted as sinister and fatal passions. The opera concludes with Bizet's *Death* theme thunderously exploding from the orchestra.

In *verisme*, death is the final consummation of desire.

