

Carmen

Music by Georges Bizet • Libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy

Study Guide to the Opera



Pittsburgh Opera 2015 *Carmen* production photo by David Bachman

Carmen: Shocking character, successful opera

by Jill Leahy

French composer Georges Bizet was named Alexandre César Léopold Bizet at birth and grew up surrounded by music—his father was a singing teacher and his mother a fine pianist. A prodigy, Bizet was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire at the age of nine; his teachers included Antoine-François Marmontel, Fromental Halévy (one of the founders of French grand opera, whose daughter Bizet married), and the composer Charles Gounod.

In 1857, at the age of 19, Bizet wrote an operetta (*Le Docteur Miracle*) for a competition organized by Jacques Offenbach. Bizet shared the first prize, *Miracle* was staged, and his name became known in the best musical circles. He attended Rossini's famous Saturday evening soirées and won the Prix de Rome from the Académie de Musique. After three happy years in Italy, Bizet returned to Paris and unhappiness. He had few successes, his mother died, and his first opera of any significance in Paris, *The Pearl Fishers* (1863), was praised by Berlioz but disparaged by most others. Bizet's only success was *The Pretty Maid of Perth* (1867), which earned praise at the time but is rarely performed today.



Georges Bizet (1838–1875)

In 1873, the Opéra-Comique in Paris commissioned Bizet to write an opera. He chose Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen* (1845) and worked closely with librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. *Carmen* faced many obstacles in reaching the stage—many considered the story too salacious for public performance, and critics denounced *Carmen* as immoral even before it was complete. The title role was rejected by nearly every mezzo-soprano, and the theater pressured Bizet for rewrites, to avoid financial calamity.

Today, *Carmen* is one of the most popular operas in the standard repertoire, but Bizet did not live long enough to see it gain acceptance. Sadly, Bizet died just three months after *Carmen* had its world premiere at the Opéra-Comique in Paris on March 3, 1875. Johannes Brahms saw the opera 20 times and said that he would have "gone to the ends of the earth to embrace Bizet."



Portrait of Emilie Ambre as Carmen,
Edouard Manet (1832–1883)

Carmen Synopsis

ACT I In Seville by a cigarette factory, soldiers comment on the townspeople. Among them is Micaëla, a peasant girl, who asks for a corporal named Don José. Moralès, another corporal, tells her he will return with the changing of the guard. The relief guard, headed by Lieutenant Zuniga, soon arrives, and José learns from Moralès that Micaëla has been looking for him. When the factory bell rings, the men of Seville gather to watch the female workers—especially their favorite, the gypsy Carmen. She tells her admirers that love is free and obeys no rules (**L’amour est un**

oiseau rebelle). Only one man pays no attention to her: Don José. Carmen throws a flower at him, and the girls go back to work. José picks up the flower and hides it when Micaëla returns. She brings a letter from José’s mother, who lives in a village in the countryside (**Ma mere, je la vois**). As he begins to read the letter, Micaëla leaves. José is about to throw away the flower when a fight erupts inside the factory between Carmen and another girl. Zuniga sends José to retrieve the gypsy. Carmen refuses to answer Zuniga’s questions, and José is ordered to take her to prison. Left alone with him, she entices José with suggestions of a rendezvous at Lillas Pastia’s tavern (**Près des remparts de Séville**). Mesmerized, he agrees to let her get away. As they leave for prison, Carmen escapes. Don José is arrested.

Intermission

ACT II Carmen and her friends Frasquita and Mercédès entertain the guests at the tavern (**Les tringles des sistres tintaient**). Zuniga tells Carmen that José has just been released. The bullfighter Escamillo enters, boasting about the pleasures of his profession (**Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre**), and flirts with Carmen, who tells him that she is involved with someone else. After the tavern guests have left with Escamillo, the smugglers Dancaïre and Remendado explain their latest scheme to the women (**Nous avons en tête une affaire**). Frasquita and Mercédès are willing to help, but Carmen refuses because she is in love. The smugglers withdraw as José approaches. Carmen arouses his jealousy by telling him how she danced for Zuniga. She dances for him now, but when a bugle call is heard he says he must return to the barracks (**Je vais danser en votre honneur**). Carmen mocks him. To prove his love, José shows her the flower she threw at him and confesses how its scent made him not lose hope during the weeks in prison (**La fleur que tu m’avais jetée**). She is unimpressed: if he really loved her, he would desert the army and join her in a life of freedom in the mountains. José refuses, and Carmen tells him to leave. Zuniga bursts in, and in a jealous rage José fights him. The smugglers return and disarm Zuniga. José now has no choice but to join them.

Intermission

Characters

Carmen *mezzo-soprano*
[KAR-men] or [kar-MEN]
A Gypsy who uses her dancing and singing talents to bewitch and seduce men.

Don José *tenor*
[zho-ZAY]
A respectable corporal, he becomes an outlaw.

Escamillo *baritone*
[ess-kah-MEE-yoh]
A bullfighter who is attracted to Carmen.

Micaëla *soprano*
[mee-kah-EH-lah]
A loyal, kind, peasant girl in love with Don José.

Zuniga *bass*
[ZOO-nee-gah]
A lieutenant of the army and José’s commanding officer.

Moralès *baritone*
[mor-AHL-ehs]
An army corporal.

Gypsy friends of Carmen

Frasquita [frah-SKEE-tah]
Mercédès [mehr-SAY-dehs]

Smugglers

Dancaïre [dong-kah-EE-reh]
Remendado
[reh-men-DAH-doh]

Spoken roles

Lillas Pastia
[LEE-lahs PAH-styah]
A guide

Other Roles

Officers, Dragoons, Children,
Cigarette Girls, Gypsies,
Smugglers, Townspeople

Carmen Synopsis cont.

ACT III Carmen and José quarrel in the smugglers' mountain hideaway. She admits that her love is fading and advises him to return to live with his mother. When Frasquita and Mercédès turn the cards to tell their fortunes, they foresee love and riches for themselves, but Carmen's cards spell death—for her and for José (**Melons! Coupons!**). Micaëla appears, frightened by the mountains and afraid to meet the woman who has turned José into a criminal (**Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante**). She hides when a shot rings out. José has fired at an intruder, who turns out to be Escamillo. He tells José that he has come to find Carmen, and the two men fight (**Je suis Escamillo**). The smugglers separate them, and Escamillo invites everyone, Carmen in particular, to his next bullfight. When he has left, Micaëla emerges and begs José to return home. He agrees when he learns that his mother is dying, but before he leaves he warns Carmen that they will meet again.

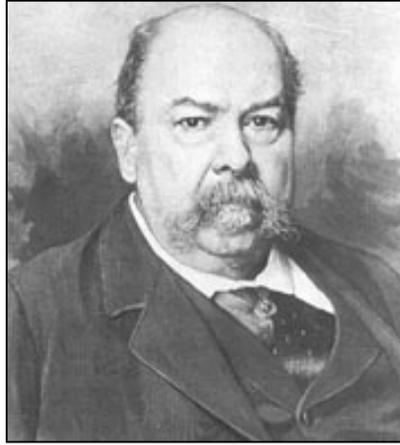
Pause

ACT IV Back in Seville, the crowd cheers the bullfighters on their way to the arena (**A deux cuartos**). Carmen arrives on Escamillo's arm, and Frasquita and Mercédès warn her that José is nearby. Unafraid, she waits outside the entrance as the crowds enter the arena. José appears and begs Carmen to forget the past and start a new life with him (**C'est toi! C'est moi!**). She calmly tells him that their affair is over: she was born free and free she will die. The crowd is heard cheering Escamillo. José keeps trying to win Carmen back. She takes off his ring and throws it at his feet before heading for the arena. José stabs her to death.

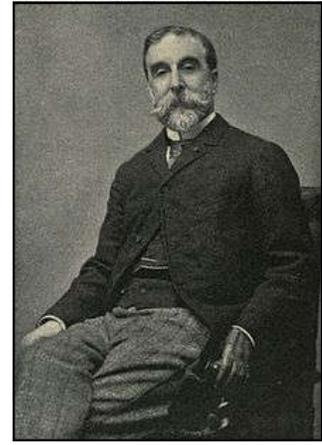
Freely adapted from *Opera News*

Meet the Team of Librettists

by Jill Leahy



Henri Meilhac
(1831–1897)



Ludovic Halévy
(1834–1908)

Around 1869, the co-directors of the Opéra-Comique were arch-conservative Adophe de Leuven and the more liberal Camille Du Locle. It was Du Locle who approached Georges Bizet with the commission to create an opera and arranged for him to work with librettists Halévy and Meilhac.

Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac were already a well-known and successful team who had written for vaudeville and operettas for over twenty years. With Bizet stubbornly insisting that he wanted to adapt Prosper Mérimée's novella, *Carmen*, the three of them convinced Du Locle to approach de Leuven for the go-ahead. When told of the plan, de Leuven reportedly exclaimed:

"Carmen! The Carmen of Mérimée? Wasn't she murdered by her lover? At the Opéra-Comique, the theater of families, of wedding parties? You would put the public to flight. No, no, impossible."

Halévy promised that this would be a "softer, tamer Carmen," that they would make various concessions to convention, and that they would work to diffuse the impact of the murder. Finally de Leuven consented with, "But I pray you, try not to have her die."

Working to make the opera more acceptable, Bizet softened Carmen, added warmer characters, such as a more kind-hearted girl named Micaëla, and made the gypsies humorous instead of harsh. He kept Carmen's death in the production, but softened it by adding a scene that was filled with light and laughter. After much persuasion, de Leuven agreed to produce the opera in his theater, despite Carmen's death in the end.

Following the tradition of writing for Opéra-Comique, Meilhac wrote spoken dialogue for *Carmen*, which was combined with lyrical pieces written by Halévy. However, after Bizet's death, his close friend Ernest Guiraud replaced the spoken dialogue with recitative. This is the version of Carmen that is most often performed today.

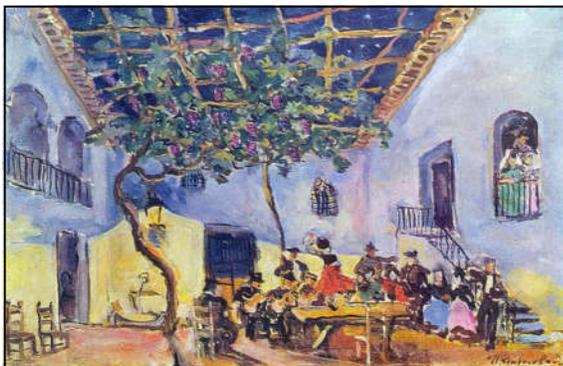
Adapted from Chadwick Jenkins, New York City Opera Project: *Carmen*

Did you know this about *Carmen*?

by Jill Leahy

CIGARETTE FACTORY

The opening scene of *Carmen* takes place outside a cigarette factory in Seville. This was an actual place, which once employed 6000



Diseño para la ópera de Bizet Carmen, by Pyotr Korochalovskiy, 1944

women as cigarette makers. The building still stands and, since the 1950s, has been the seat of the *rectorate* of the University of Seville. It is a splendid example of industrial architecture from the era of Spain's *Antiguo Régimen*.

HABANERA Bizet was very particular about Carmen's first aria, the "Habanera", which means a "dance from Havana." Originating in Cuba's capitol in the late 19th century, the musical style spread throughout the Spanish colonies and captivated European composers, including Bizet, who incorporated the style into *Carmen*. After wrangling with his librettist about the "Habanera," Bizet wrote most of the words himself and rewrote the melody 13 times.

Maria Callas is to the "Habanera" as Pavarotti is to "Nessun dorma." Most performances of the aria are measured against hers, even though she never performed the role on stage—she only

recorded it. Carmen's other arias are also accompanied by dance music: the *seguedilla*, the gypsy dance, and even the "Card Aria", a slow dance of death.

OPÉRA COMIQUE and VERISMO FILM The celebrated "Habanera" from Act 1 and the "Toreador Song" from Act 2 are among the best known of all operatic arias. *Carmen* forms a bridge between the tradition of *opéra comique* and the realism or *verismo* that emerged in late 19th-century Italian opera. To see a favorably-reviewed, realistic film version of *Carmen*, starring Julia Migenes, Plácido Domingo, Ruggero Raimondi, Faith Esham, and conducted by Lorin Maazel, search for the 1984 film directed by Francesco Rosi. In 1985, *Carmen* was nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Film.

The Habanera

Love is a rebellious bird
that nobody can tame,
and you call him quite in vain
if it suits him not to come.

Nothing helps, neither threat nor prayer.
One man talks well, the other's mum;
it's the other one that I prefer.
He's silent but I like his looks.

Love! Love! Love! Love!

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