Synopsis

Act I
Seville

Act II
Lillas Pastia's tavern

Intermission

Act III
The smugglers' hideout in the mountains above Seville

Act IV
Outside the bullring in Seville

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. 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. 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. Mesmerized, he agrees to let her get away. As they leave for prison, Carmen escapes. Don José is arrested.

Act II

Carmen and her friends Frasquita and Mercédès entertain the guests at the tavern. Zuniga tells Carmen that José has just been released. The bullfighter Escamillo enters, boasting about the pleasures of his profession, 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. 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. 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. 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.

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. Micaëla appears, frightened by the mountains and afraid to meet the woman who has turned José into a criminal. 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. 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.

Act IV

Back in Seville, the crowd cheers the bullfighters on their way to the arena. 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. 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.

Georges Bizet

Carmen

Premiere: Opéra Comique, Paris, 1875

Bizet's masterpiece of the gypsy seductress who lives by her own rules, no matter what the cost, has had an impact far beyond the opera house. The opera's melodic sweep is as irresistible as the title character herself, a force of nature who has become a defining female cultural figure. This drama of a soldier torn between doing the right thing and the woman he cannot resist bursts with melody and seethes with all the erotic vitality of its unforgettable title character. *Carmen* was a scandal at its premiere and was roundly denounced in the press for its flagrant immorality. The power of the music and the drama, however, created an equally vocal faction in favor of the work. The composer Tchaikovsky and the philosopher Nietzsche both praised the opera, the latter identifying in the robustness of the score nothing less than a cure-all for the world's spiritual ills.

The Creators

Georges Bizet (1838–1875) was a French composer whose talent was apparent from childhood. *Carmen* was his final work, and its success was still uncertain at the time of his premature death (although the opera was not quite the total failure in its initial run that it has sometimes been called). Henri Meilhac (1831–1897) was a librettist and dramatist who would subsequently provide the libretto for Jules Massenet's popular *Manon* (1884). His collaborator on the libretto for *Carmen* was Ludovic Halévy (1834–1908), the nephew of composer Jacques Fromental Halévy (composer of the opera *La Juive* and Bizet's father-in-law). Composer Ernest Guiraud (1837–1892), born in New Orleans, was a friend of Bizet's who wrote the recitatives between the set numbers when *Carmen* moved from the Opéra Comique (where dialogue was customary) to the opera houses of the world. The libretto of *Carmen* is based on a novella by Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870), a French dramatist, historian, and archaeologist. According to one of his letters, the book was inspired by a true story that the Countess of Montijo told him during a visit to Spain. Published in 1845, it was Mérimée's most popular work.

The Setting

The opera takes place in and around Seville, a city that, by the time *Carmen* was written, had already served many operatic composers as an exotic setting conducive to erotic intrigues and turmoil (Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, among others). The hometown of Don Juan, the city also inspired Mozart with *Don Giovanni*, and Beethoven used Seville as the setting for a study of marital fidelity in *Fidelio*. *Carmen* is particularly associated with this beguiling city of colorful processions, bullfights, and vibrant gypsy community.

The Music

The score of *Carmen* contains so many instantly recognizable melodies that it can be easy to overlook how well constructed it is. The orchestra brings to life a wide palette of sound. The major solos are excellent combinations of arresting melody and dramatic purpose, most notably the baritone's famous Toréador Song, the tenor's wrenching Flower Song in Act II, and Micaëla's soaring Act III aria. Carmen and the lead tenor have three remarkable duets marking the stages of their fateful relationship: the seductive phase (Act I), conflict (Act II), and tragic explosion (Act IV). Unlike in traditional operatic duets, however, they almost never sing at the same time, a device that emphasizes their inherently disparate natures. Interestingly, while Carmen has several solos in the form of songs—that is, moments in which the character is actually supposed to be singing within the context of the drama—she has no actual aria. It's a dramaturgical device that suggests she is seen first as a sort of celebrity, performing for others, and then as a projection of the fantasies of others.

Carmen *at the Met*

Carmen entered the standard Met repertory slowly, premiering on tour in Boston in 1884, sung in Italian. After several performances in German, it finally became a Met staple in the original French in 1893 with Emma Calvé, her generation's leading interpreter of the title role, who performed the part more than 130 times at the Met before 1904. Enrico Caruso sang the lead tenor role between 1906 and 1919, and the charismatic Geraldine Farrar appeared as the gypsy temptress from 1914 to 1922 (she also played the role in a popular silent movie of 1915). In more recent decades, famous Met Carmens have included Risë Stevens (1945–61), Marilyn Horne (1972–88), Denyce Graves (1995–2005), and Olga Borodina (2000–10). Among the memorable tenors to perform in the opera were Giovanni Martinelli (1915–41), Richard Tucker (1952–72), James McCracken (1966–75), Plácido Domingo (1971–97), and Neil Shicoff (2000–04). Leonard Bernstein conducted *Carmen* for the opening night of the 1972–73 season, and Music Director James Levine has led more than 40 performances dating back to 1986. The current production by Richard Eyre opened on New Year's Eve 2009, with Elīna Garanča, Roberto Alagna, Barbara Frittoli, and Mariusz Kwiecien in the leading roles, with Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducting.

Program Note

The death of Georges Bizet on June 3, 1875, exactly three months after the famous opening night of *Carmen* at the Opéra Comique in Paris, is one of the cruelest ironies in the history of music. While it was certainly tragic that Puccini never lived to see *Turandot* and that Berlioz never lived to see *Les Troyens*, those composers were at the end of illustrious careers. Bizet was only 36 and had just revealed for the first time the true depth of his operatic genius. If Verdi, Wagner, or Strauss had died at that age, not many of their works would be heard in our opera houses today.

Just a few extra months granted to Bizet would have shown him that the Vienna Opera had presented *Carmen* to a reception quite different from the shocked incomprehension that greeted it in Paris; just three more years would have given him the satisfaction of knowing that it had played in Brussels, Budapest, St. Petersburg, Stockholm, London, Dublin, New York, and Philadelphia, and he would at last have made a respectable living as a composer instead of having to toil over four-hand arrangements of lesser operas by lesser composers.

If only those pig-headed Parisians on the first night had been less parochial in their judgment, we like to think, success and recognition might have staved off the quinsy and rheumatism that led to Bizet's death, probably precipitated by depression. Bizet was used to failure, since none of his theatrical ventures had been successful before. But none of them displayed the genius that lifts every page of *Carmen* to starry heights. His early works *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, *La Jolie Fille de Perth*, and *Djamileh* all show glimpses of what he could do. In *Carmen* Bizet invested more energy and passion than ever before.

The crucial idea, Bizet's own, was to base the story on Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen*. In 1872, he was commissioned to write a three-act opera for the Opéra Comique, a theater where operas traditionally ended happily, with villainy and sin put firmly in their place; loyalty and fidelity were always rewarded. It was a family theater where audiences would be amused and entertained, excited even, but never shocked. The choice of *Carmen* inevitably led to an impasse, since the heroine is the villain, and meets her death on stage. She flaunts her attractions and boasts of her conquests. She smokes, seduces soldiers, corrupts customs officials, and smuggles on the side. But she is fascinating, clever, beautiful, and sometimes even tender, and her music is so alluring that no one can escape her magnetism. French society lived out a convenient hypocrisy by indulging its fancies in private while maintaining a correct exterior. What people saw at the Opéra Comique was unfortunately very public: sensuality was presented here in the raw, to music of unmistakable appeal. Social mores have so radically changed in our century that the complexity of the response to *Carmen*—a mixture of distaste, fascination, and guilt—is not easy to disentangle.

Bizet was not attempting to engineer social change or storm the barricades of propriety; he simply recognized a good subject for music and knew he could bring it to life on the stage. This is musical theater charged with an unprecedented realism that makes the two principal figures, Carmen and Don José, as vivid as flesh and blood, destroyed by their appetites and their weaknesses. The librettists, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy (an experienced and expert team), made the story convincingly operatic by introducing two balancing characters, neither of any importance in Mérimée's story. First is Micaëla, whose purity, devotion to Don José, and attachment to his dying mother make Carmen's personality all the more striking and brazen. And Escamillo is the irresistible lure that entices Carmen from Don José, though the bullfighter, unlike the soldier, would never shed a tear over her infidelity.

The settings, too, are superbly theatrical: a square in Seville where soldiers change guard and cigarette-girls gather; Lillas Pastia's tavern, where all forms of lowlife meet; the smugglers' hideout in the mountains; and finally the bullring where the slaughter of bulls inside (offstage) acts as dramatic counterpoint to José's desperate murder of Carmen outside (onstage). Carmen, as even she herself knows, is doomed. So too is José, by his defiance of military orders, by joining forces with the smugglers, and by his willful neglect of Micaëla and his mother, not to mention his fatal passion for Carmen. In Mérimée's version, he has also committed two murders.

Fearing that such a story would frighten off his loyal though dwindling public, Camille du Locle, director of the Opéra Comique, did his best to soften the blow by cautioning his public and steering high officials away. He could make nothing of the music, in any case, and described it as "Cochin-Chinese." Such counter-advertising by a theater manager is hard to believe. The librettists similarly seem to have been willing to tone down the impact of the work that would make their names immortal. Throughout the long rehearsal period from October 1874 to March 1875, Bizet had to resist pressure for change and suffer the complaints of both orchestra and chorus that it was not performable.

But the composer had supporters, since his two principal singers believed in the opera from the start. Paul Lhérie, the Don José, was full of good intentions, though he sang disastrously flat in his unaccompanied entrance in Act II. In Célestine Galli-Marié, Bizet had a superlative, perhaps definitive, Carmen. She evidently brought to the role the blend of sultry sensuality and fatal bravado that all good Carmens need; her own private life was liberated (by the standards of the day) and she is said to have had an affair with Bizet, which is not unlikely given the pressures under which they were working and the uncertain state of his marriage. Further support for Bizet came from one or two good notices in the press and a few expressions of admiration from fellow composers.

The majority of the notices after that first night, though, were hostile and uncomprehending, and one or two were deeply insulting. The show did not close, however. It ran for more than 40 performances, not at all a disgraceful total, kept alive no doubt by its salacious reputation and, after a dozen performances, by the sensational irony of Bizet's death. By the time the Opéra Comique dared to stage it again, in 1883, the opera was a worldwide success.

Part of *Carmen*'s appeal rests on its brilliant evocation of Spain. Bizet went to some trouble to find authentic melodies. The famous Habanera, for example, was adapted from a tune by the Spanish-American composer Sebastián Yradier. But Bizet could invent good Spanish music of his own, too. The Séguedille that closes Act I is superlatively colorful and dramatic, as is the gypsy song that opens the following act in Lillas Pastia's tavern.

Yet much of the opera is not Spanish at all. Whatever its novelty, it belongs to the tradition of French opéra comique, as we can tell when leading characters present themselves in two-verse songs, or couplets. The depiction of the two smugglers Dancaïre and Remendado as comic figures belongs to the same tradition. There is also a strong strain of French lyricism in *Carmen*, derived from Gounod, Bizet's mentor, who jokingly said that Micaëla's Act III aria was stolen from him. It faithfully echoes his style in such works as *Roméo et Juliette* (on which Bizet had worked as pianist and assistant).

Those critics in 1875 who could see beyond the sensation of the story to the music were confused. Conventions were stretched and the dramatic immediacy of the music was stronger than anything they had heard before. Such departures from custom were invariably labeled "Wagnerian," a term of abuse in France at that time. Chromatic harmony and daring key shifts were assumed to be Wagner's monopoly. But Bizet had no intention whatever of imitating Wagner, whose music and theories he knew little about. His music was modern, and for many critics that was enough. His genius is evident in the brilliance of each individual number, finding sharply distinctive melodies and moods for every scene. Few other composers of the time could boast such fertile invention.

The French learned to love *Carmen*, but not before it had conquered the world's opera houses. In New York, it was first performed in Italian at the Academy of Music in 1878, then in English in 1881, reaching the Metropolitan Opera during its first season on January 5, 1884 (also still in Italian). It has remained in the Met's repertoire ever since, and may well be, as Tchaikovsky predicted, the most popular opera in the world.

—*Hugh Macdonald*