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LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO  
2016/17

**BACK-STAGE  
PASS!**

# Carmen

By Georges Bizet



Photo: Lynn Lane/Houston Grand Opera

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## Carmen

Opera in four acts, sung in French with projected English titles

by Georges Bizet  
Libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy from the story by Prosper Mérimée

Premiered March 3, 1875, Opéra-Comique, Paris

### THE CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE)

**Moralès**, an officer ..... Bass  
**Micaëla**, a peasant girl ..... Soprano  
**Zuniga**, a lieutenant ..... Bass  
**Don José**, a corporal ..... Tenor  
**Carmen**, a gypsy ..... Soprano  
**Mercédès**, a gypsy, friend of Carmen ..... Mezzo-soprano  
**Frasquita**, a gypsy, friend of Carmen ..... Mezzo-soprano  
**Escamillo**, a toreador ..... Baritone  
**Remendado**, a smuggler ..... Tenor  
**Dancaïre**, a smuggler ..... Baritone  
**Cigarette girls, soldiers, an innkeeper, smugglers, dancers**

### SETTING

Seville, Spain; ca. 1820

#### ACT I: A public square

In a town square in Seville, Spain, soldiers guarding the cigarette factory idly watch the passersby (Chorus: **Sur la place, chacun passe**). Micaëla, a young country girl, enters the square in search of one of the soldiers, Don José. Led by an officer, Moralès, the soldiers surround her and try to detain her, but Micaëla flees. Afterwards, José's military unit arrives.

At noon, the young men of the town gather to watch the women as they come out of the cigarette factory on a break from work (Chorus: **Dans l'air, nous suivons des yeux**). One of the women, the gypsy Carmen, tells her friends that love is "a wild bird that cannot be imprisoned" (Habanera: **L'amour est un oiseau rebelle**). Before returning to work, she flirtatiously tosses a flower at Don José. Micaëla returns, this time with a letter from José's mother (Duet: **Parle-moi de ma mère**). José resolves to honor his mother's wishes by marrying Micaëla.

Suddenly, screams are heard from the factory: Carmen has been involved in a fight and has slashed another woman's face. While Lieutenant Zuniga drafts the order for her imprisonment, she is put into José's custody. Carmen persuades him to let her escape by promising a future rendezvous (Seguidilla: **Près des remparts de Séville**).

#### ACT II: Lillas Pastia's tavern

At Lillas Pastia's tavern, Carmen and two friends, Frasquita and Mercédès, sing of the gypsy life (Gypsy song: **Les tringles des sistres tintaient**). Lieutenant Zuniga tells Carmen that José was thrown in prison for allowing her to escape, but that he has just been released. The bullfighter Escamillo arrives with his entourage (Toreador song: **Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre**) and asks Carmen if she will ever love him. Dancaïre and Remendado, two revolutionaries, try to convince Carmen and her friends to accompany them on their next mission (Quintet: **Nous avons en fête**). Carmen refuses, saying she is in love with José and is awaiting his return.

When José arrives, Carmen sings and dances for him (Duet: **Je vais danser en votre honneur**). During her dance, distant bugles sound and José says he must return to the barracks immediately. She invites him to desert the army and join the revolutionaries, but he refuses, and Carmen mocks his cowardice. In an attempt to calm her fury, José reveals his love for her (Flower song: **La fleur que tu m'avais jetée**). As he is leaving, José encounters Zuniga, who has come in hopes of seeing Carmen. The jealous José strikes his superior officer. Now an outlaw, he has no choice but to desert the army and join Carmen and her friends.

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## ACT III: A mountain pass

The revolutionaries are busy moving their goods through the dangerous hillside (Sextet and chorus: **Notre métier est bon**). Carmen, now tired of José's jealousy, reads her fortune in the playing cards. She draws the death card (Aria: [En vain, pour éviter](#)).

When the revolutionaries head down the mountain to bribe the customs officer, José is left as a lookout. On her way up the mountain to find José, Micaëla hears a rifle shot and takes cover. José has fired a warning shot at Escamillo, who has come in search of Carmen (Duet: **Je suis Escamillo**). Escamillo tells José he is in love with Carmen and they start to fight, but are separated by the returning gang (Finale: **Holà! Holà! José!**). Remendado then discovers Micaëla, who has come to beg José to return home to his dying mother. Carmen urges him to leave; José is convinced she wants to be rid of him in order to take up with Escamillo. José leaves with Micaëla, warning Carmen that he will come back.

## ACT IV: Outside the bullring

A crowd begins to gather for the bullfight and vendors sell their wares (Chorus: **A deux cuartos!**). Suddenly, the toreros arrive and the crowd becomes excited (March and chorus: **Les voici!**). Escamillo enters with Carmen at his side and they exchange vows of love. Carmen declares she has never loved another man as much as she does Escamillo.

Outside the ring, Frasquita and Mercédès pull Carmen aside and tell her to be careful because José has been seen in the crowd. Carmen, however, ignores their warnings and bravely remains for a final encounter. José pleads desperately with her to come back to him (Duet: [C'est toi? C'est moi!](#)). As she tells him she can never love him again, the crowd is heard cheering Escamillo's victory in the ring. Realizing that he can never possess Carmen, José stabs her to death and cries out, "You can arrest me—I killed her. Ah, Carmen, my adored Carmen!"

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By Maia Morgan

**When Bizet's *Carmen* premiered in Paris in 1875, it shocked audiences with its plot, its music—and especially its heroine.**

*Carmen* was performed at the Opéra-Comique, a theater known for light, family-friendly fare. Ludovic Halévy, who coauthored the libretto, described how director Adolphe de Leuven reacted to the suggestion of an opera based on the novella by Prosper Mérimée. "He actually interrupted me," Halévy recalled, "'Mérimée's *Carmen*! Isn't she killed by her lover? And these bandits, gypsies, and girls working in a cigar factory! At the Opéra-Comique! You'll frighten our audience away.'" (Halévy) The character *Carmen* is brazen, opinionated and manipulative. She is a gypsy and an independent woman earning her own living. Her willingness to use her sensuality to get what she wanted scandalized the Opéra-Comique's middle class patrons.

In Latin, the word *carmen* means song, verse or enchantment. It's a fitting name for Bizet's heroine, who seems to cast a spell over men. After their first encounter, Don José remarks, "If there really are witches/she's certainly one." One of the charges frequently leveled against gypsies was that they dabbled in the dark arts of sorcery and magic. Gypsies were outsiders in Spain, living on the fringes of mainstream society; throughout Europe, discriminatory laws were passed against them for centuries. They were stereotyped as a people ruled by instinct, less civilized than lighter-skinned Europeans. In a similar vein, women in the 19th century were described as less rational than men, susceptible to being overcome by their emotions. As a woman and a gypsy, then, *Carmen* was already established as a temptress, not to be trusted.

It is significant that *Carmen* works in the cigarette factory. She is unmarried and independent, earning her own income. In Bizet's time, a woman's proper place was thought to be in the home. A woman went from her father's home to her husband's when she married. An independent woman was suspect. *Carmen* openly relishes her freedom: In Act II she sings, "The open sky, the wandering life,/the whole wide world your domain;/for law your own free will,/and above all, that intoxicating thing:/Freedom! Freedom!" The men of *Carmen*, by contrast, speak to the women in terms of



Photo: Lynn Lane/Houston Grand Opera

coercion and possession, whether it is the soldiers insisting to Micaëla "You'll stay!" as she protests, "Indeed, I won't!" or Don José agonizing over *Carmen*: "For you had only to appear,/only to throw a glance my way,/to take possession of my whole being,/O my *Carmen*,/and I was your chattel! I shall compel you/to bow to the destiny/that links your fate with mine!" *Carmen* is unwilling to sacrifice her freedom for love; Don José is willing to murder his beloved, rather than allow her to assert her independence.

When he pitched the idea for *Carmen* to the skeptical director of the Opéra-Comique, librettist Halévy sang the praises of a character he and Meilhac had added to Mérimée's story: one "perfectly in keeping with the style of the opéra-comique...a young girl of great chastity and innocence." (Halévy) He was alluding, of course, to Micaëla, *Carmen*'s foil and Don José's intended. *Carmen*'s use of her sensuality to get what she needs is contrasted to Micaëla's sweetness and submission. Demure and proper, Micaëla represents the Victorian ideal of womanhood—home, family

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and purity. After his encounter with Micaëla, Don José compares Carmen unfavorably with her. If she was a witch before, now she's sunk lower still: "I love Micaëla/and I shall take her for my wife./As for your flowers, filthy witch!" Micaëla highlights the double standards women were subject to. Not even a woman as pure as she is immune from the leering soldiers, who try to compel her to join them in the guard house.

The episode of *Carmen* that concerned Adolphe de Leuven the most was her murder at the hands of Don José. "Death at the Opéra-Comique," he protested to Halévy. "That's never happened before, do you hear, never." (Halévy ) But die Carmen did. Some critics maintain that Carmen was such a troubling character for audiences, that her amoral behavior had to be punished. She could not be allowed to get away with ruining a good man like Don José. Others see Carmen as an active participant in her own demise. Left with limited choices, she elects death over a life as a man's property. She is defiant to the end, singing, "Carmen will never yield!/ Free she was born and free she will die!" Bizet parallels Don José's killing of Carmen with Escamillo's bullfight. As Jose fatally stabs the woman he claims to love, the chorus sings, "Look! Look! Look!/The tormented bull/comes bounding to the attack, look!/Struck true, right to the heart,/look! look! look!/ Victory!" But the scene is ambiguous. Is Don José victorious, having justly punished an unfaithful lover? Or is Carmen the victor over Don José, having gone to her death still refusing to be his?

A critic of Bizet's time found fault with Célestine Galli-Marié, the singer who first played Carmen, complaining that her "reading of the part allotted to her possessed fire, life, and exuberant vitality; in fact, she did not escape censure on the score of excessive realism. [She] seems to take pleasure in accentuating the unlovely aspect of this dangerous role." (Parker) If Galli-Marié did enjoy embodying the fierce character, she wasn't the last performer to do so. In 2007, another celebrated Carmen, Denyce Graves, said of the character, "I'm a great admirer of this woman. I have drawn a lot of strength from who she is. I wish I could be more like her." (Huizenga) Today's audiences likely see Carmen differently than that first audience at the Opéra-Comique. For some, she is an empowering character, a resourceful woman who makes the most of what she has in a society that severely restricts women's activities. Manipulative though she may be, she does it to get by in a culture that demeans and devalues women. *Carmen* shines a light on the challenges women faced in Bizet's era and provokes modern audiences to reflect on what has changed and what remains the same.

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- In Act III *Carmen*, Mercédès and Frasquita describe how they will help the smugglers get past the customs officers: "It's simply a question/of letting ourselves be taken by the waist/and listening to a compliment./If it's necessary to go as far as a smile,/ what of it?—we'll smile!" What are the women saying in this passage? How do they feel about their role in dealing with the customs officials?
- Tennis superstar Venus Williams was asked by a reporter why she wasn't smiling during a press conference, and commentators tweeted that Hillary Clinton should have smiled more during her acceptance speech for the presidential nomination. Why do you think this is? Can you find other examples?

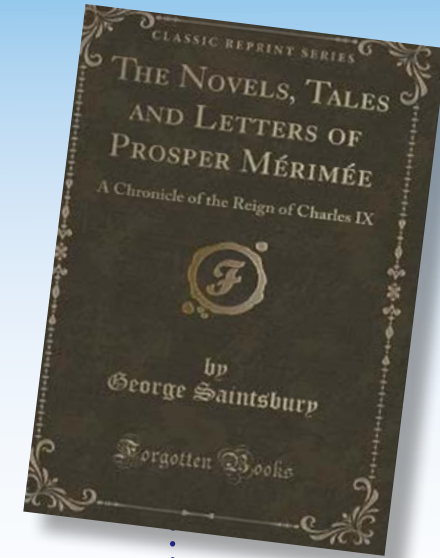
By Maia Morgan



Romani with their wagon, photographed in the Rheinland of Germany in 1935.



Georges Bizet in 1875.



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King of Spain Philip III commands that all tobacco grown in the Spanish new world be shipped to Seville, Spain, making it the heart of the tobacco trade.

The Spanish government issues the first documented laws discriminating against the Romani people, also known as gypsies. (Bennahum) By the time *Carmen* premieres, Romanis—as well as Jews and Moors—will have endured centuries of government-sanctioned persecution. Romani settlements will be broken up; Romanis will be barred from speaking their language, from holding public office, or from being guild members.

1478

1614

On October 25, Georges Bizet is born in Paris. His father works as a hairdresser and wigmaker before becoming a singing teacher. His mother will give Bizet his first piano lessons.

1838

Bizet is admitted to the Conservatoire de Paris, a prestigious music academy, two weeks before his 10th birthday.

Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen* is published. According to a letter from Mérimée to his friend, a Spanish countess, his inspiration was a story she'd told him on a six-month trip to Spain. The daughter of the countess, Eugenia, will marry Emperor Napoleon III of France in 1853.

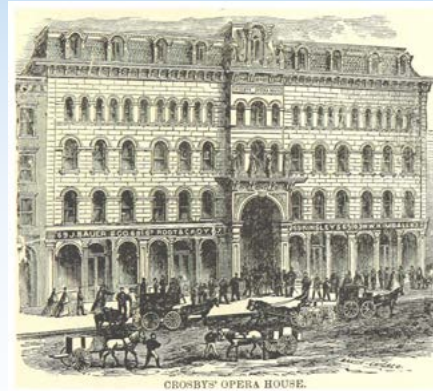
1845

1848





A Burial At Ornans is a painting of 1849–50 by Gustave Courbet, and one of the major turning points of 19th-century French art.



Crosby Opera House



Addams is honored in the 'Famous Americans Series' postal Issues of 1940.

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Henri Meilhac meets Ludovic Halévy. Together they will write the libretto for *Carmen* as well as many others over the course of a twenty-year collaboration.

Believing his opera to be a failure, Bizet dies at the age of 36—just three months after *Carmen* opens.

*Carmen* scandalizes audiences at its premiere at the Opéra-Comique in Paris.

Gustave Courbet ushers in the Realist movement in art with his painting *A Burial at Ornans*. Courbet and other realist painters depict ordinary people in their paintings, a departure from the idealized, romantic or grandiose historical works of art that had been the norm. A similar movement in literature is already underway. Realist writers include Honoré de Balzac, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Mérimée's *Carmen* falls within the realist tradition.

Chicago's first opera house burns down in the Great Chicago Fire. The building, which was built in 1865 by a business magnate who wanted to bring a great opera hall to the Windy City. The hall hosted the 1868 Republican National Convention, which nominated General Ulysses S. Grant for president of the United States.

At age 27, Jane Addams attends a bullfight on a trip to Madrid. At first enthralled, she is later disgusted by the bloody spectacle. She will write in her memoir that the experience will influence her to spend her life helping others. Addams will become one of the most influential social reformers of her time and will found Hull House in Chicago.

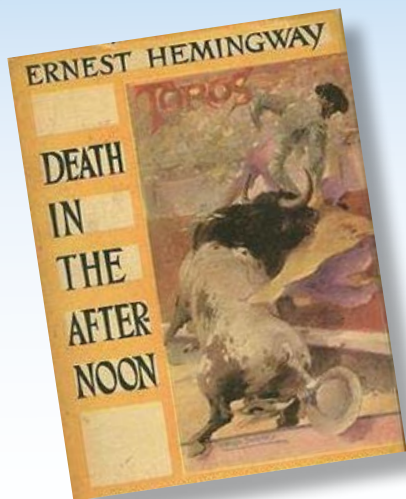
1850

1860

1871

1875

1887



Main façade of the former Royal Tobacco Factory, now the seat of the rectorate of the University of Seville, seen from the San Fernando Street.

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Bizet's first symphony is discovered in the archives of the Conservatoire de Paris library. He wrote it in November 1855, at age 17. It will be performed for the first time in 1935, to high praise from critics.

The musical *Carmen Jones* premieres in New York. It reimagines the story in World War II era America and features an all-Black cast singing new lyrics for Bizet's music, written by Oscar Hammerstein II.

The Royal Tobacco Factory of Seville moves out of its imposing facility, built in 1758. The historic building becomes the headquarters of the city's university. A 19<sup>th</sup>-century visitor to the factory wrote, "One room alone contained no less than 3,300 women. The *cigarreras*, many of whom are great beauties, form a class by themselves, and unhappily are not noted for their chastity." (Downes)

Ernest Hemingway attends his first bullfight in Pamplona, bringing along his pregnant wife Hadley in hopes that the event will have a positive influence on their unborn son. He will write an entire book on the subject, *Death in the Afternoon*, which will be published in 1932.

Roma people (gypsies) are among the groups the Nazi regime deems racially inferior. By the end of World War II, around 25 percent of all European Roma will die at the hands of the Nazis.

1923

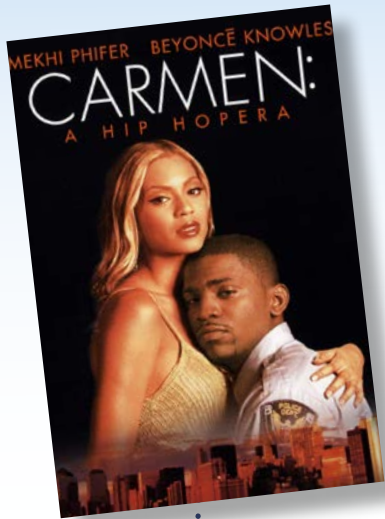
1933

1939

1943

1950





Beyoncé stars in *Carmen: A Hip Hopera*, a musical film on MTV directed by Robert Townsend.

2001



A matador seen with the bull in the final sequence of the bullfight. Taken in Madrid Spain.

On January 1, a ban on bullfighting goes into effect in Catalonia, a region in Spain, in response to popular protest. Catalonia is the second region to ban bullfighting. Today there is a movement to revoke the ban; its advocates argue that bullfighting is part of Spain's cultural heritage.

2012



The *Habanera* aria from *Carmen* is featured in an episode of the TV show *Glee*. Music from *Carmen* has been used in the soundtracks of dozens of movies and TV shows, making Bizet's music some of the most familiar in the world.

2013

## For Further Investigation

**Carmen Jones.** This 1954 film based on the Broadway musical of the same name won a Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy. The film starred Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge (whose performance was the first by a Black actress to be nominated for an Academy Award). The film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”

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Photo: Lynn Lane/Houston Grand Opera

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