**BIZET: *Carmen***

**Background information excerpt from Opera Today**

On June 3, 1875, thirty-six year old [Bizet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Bizet) died after having one, some say two, heart attacks preceded by other complications. Legend has it that the composer's death was hastened by the failure of his latest work, *Carmen*.

The opera premiered, three months before at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, on March 3, 1875, to a less than enthusiastic reception. Du Locle, manager of the theater had forewarned patrons about the nature of the story, but even this was not enough to prevent the disappointing results.

It is difficult for today's audiences to comprehend the reason for this failure but, to the Parisian bourgeoisie of late Nineteenth Century France, *Carmen* represented everything that went against the grain of propriety-even if members of the bourgeoisie were the worst offenders. The notion of a sexually liberated woman who lures "respectable" men to err on her command, was not something the theater's rigid patrons were willing to face, or accept. Neither could the marriage brokers, who practiced their trade at the Comique, afford the glorification of such a woman, and the negative impact she would have on their business. Respectable Parisians did not want their daughters and impressionable young sons to be corrupted by the depravity portrayed on stage. Ironically, in its haste to condemn, society made *Carmen* the talk of Paris.

In reality the opera was not the dismal failure it has been reported; it played forty performances–a respectable run under any circumstance. Whether the public came out of curiosity, enjoyment of the opera, approval of the subject matter, or out of respect for the dead composer, is hard to tell, and irrelevant. What matters is that within a short period of time *Carmen* achieved the success it rightly deserved from its inception, and it has remained one of the most popular works on the operatic stage. *Carmen* and Verdi's *Traviata* share the distinction of being the two operas every female singer wants to add to her repertoire–be she qualified to sing it or not. In *Traviata* the pathos and the musical challenges are the calling cards. In *Carmen*, it is the secret, inner desire in people and the excitement of being "bad" which makes it so alluring for singer and public alike.

Carmen, like that other "bad" girl of opera, Dalila, is a complex character straddling the fine line between love and hate; not only hers, but the audience's. These two characters are ageless, and somewhat open to interpretation, though Carmen's, as Dalila's, ever present seductive nature remains the moving force behind the story.

That the public would shy away from the subject of the opera is understandable, but the critics, and cognoscenti alike did not recognize Bizet's genius (one periodical referred to the score as having music which "babbled" on and on), or his greater contribution to the musical stage: Bizet's *Carmen* paved the way for the "verismo" movement in opera.[1](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "tthFtNtAAB) In *Carmen*, Bizet was the first to strip the sugarcoated varnish off the story and expose people's emotions at their most basic level. Disregarding convention and the effect on the public, Bizet took people from the lower echelons of society and made them the protagonists.[2](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "tthFtNtAAC) In rising the heretofore mundane characters to protagonists, Bizet eliminated their need to reform or apologize for their behavior. Their misfortunes became real, and a way of life to be appreciated and understood by the audience.

On hearing the opening bars of the prelude, one thing is obvious: Bizet's music is vulgar as it is sublime, powerful, and seductive; and like the main protagonist, it lures and captivates the listener. Bizet further personalizes the score by infusing original Spanish music and color into an unusually passionate score that is definitely French in origin.[3](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "tthFtNtAAD) Bizet's genius lays not only in the creation of a new musical style by combining elements from the Comique, Grand Opera, and local popular music, but also in the delicate psychological web he creates between the music and the characters.

The libretto for *Carmen* by [Henri Meihac and Ludovic Halévy](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/music/NYCO/carmen/librettists.html) is based on [Prosper Mérimée](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/merimee.htm)'s novella, which in turn is based on factual events.

**References**

[[1]](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "CITEmallach)

Allen Mallach, *Pietro Mascagni and his Operas* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002)

[[2]](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "CITEholden)

*The New Penguin Opera Guide*, Amanda Holden (ed.) (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2001)

[[3]](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "CITEewen)

David Ewen, *Great Composers: 1300-1900*, (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1966)

[[4]](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "CITEgolea)

Antoine Goléa, *Carmen* (liner notes, 1990)

[[5]](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "CITEsolti)

Georg Solti, *Carmen* (liner notes, 1975)

**Footnotes:**

[1](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "tthFrefAAB)*Verismo* in reference to opera is somewhat misleading. The term had been in use in literary circles for many years in Italy (*Naturaliste*, in France), and applied to the works of Giovanni Verga and his contemporaries. In 1883 Verga turned his short story of 1880, *Cavaleria Rusticana*, into a very popular play staring Eleanora Duse in the role of Santuzza. It was Mascagni's 1890 opera based on Verga's play which led to the transfer of the term from literature to opera.

[2](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "tthFrefAAC)The operas presented at the Comique often had disreputable, deceiving, lower class characters but they were almost always cast in a comedic situation and invariably would repent at the end of the opera.

[3](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "tthFrefAAD)The music for Habanera is an original Spanish piece written by Sebastian Yradier, which Bizet adapted to the opera. Bizet also added music to the lead character in the form of canto jondo, a style of sad singing from Andalusia.

[4](http://www.operatoday.com/content/001686print.html" \l "tthFrefAAE)For the production of *Turandot* the forbidden city was recreated on the stage.