

CARMEN – THE FAILURE THAT WASN'T

Henrietta Bredin

Georges Bizet was something of a youthful prodigy, born in Paris in 1838, the only child of Adolphe, a self-taught singing teacher, and Aimée, an accomplished pianist. When he showed signs of having an excellent ear and a precocious understanding of complex chord structures his doting parents decided that he must be enrolled for musical studies at the Conservatoire de Paris immediately. He gave an impressive interview and was admitted at the tender age of nine, swiftly becoming an excellent pianist, making friends for life and finding a mentor in Pierre Zimmerman, who had been the Conservatoire's professor of music and who gave him private lessons in counterpoint and fugue. Zimmerman had a number of daughters, one of whom married the composer Charles Gounod, who became a significant influence on Bizet's musical style and development.



Bizet photographed by Étienne Carjat (1875)

The great aim in those days for aspiring French composers was to win the Prix de Rome, which came with a generous financial grant for further study in Italy and Germany. Bizet accomplished this in 1857, after a failed attempt the previous year, and set off to join his fellow artists – painters, sculptors and writers were also eligible for prizes – at the Villa Medici in Rome. He was given a five-year grant (!), one year to be spent in Germany (he enjoyed his time in Italy too much and never got there) and two further years back in Paris.

By all accounts – including his own, in letters home – he had a whale of a time, loving Rome and travelling to other parts of Italy, including Naples and Venice. What he did not manage to do was compose a great deal of music, and after three years he received news that his mother was gravely ill and hurried back to Paris. For two more years he had the remainder of his Prix de Rome grant to live on but Bizet found, along with other young composers, including his friend Camille Saint-Saëns, that there was little appetite in Paris for new work. They worked in a highly competitive

environment, in which many gifted composers jostled one another to get their works performed in theatres run by old-fashioned, cautious managements. Jacques Offenbach ruled supreme in the field of operetta and the big beast of grand opera was Wagner, whose *Tannhäuser* had its Paris premiere in 1861, greeted by Bizet and others as a work of genius but by the general public with a storm of outraged boozing. Bizet was obliged to teach piano and composition, to play for rehearsals of other people's works and to make piano arrangements of operas, preparing vocal scores and transcriptions. All the while he was working on ideas for his own operas and eventually, in 1863, was commissioned to write *Les pêcheurs de perles* (The Pearl Fishers). It was staged in September of the same year but received a lukewarm reception.

All in all, Bizet composed more than a dozen operas and operettas but only five were performed in his lifetime, the most successful of which (at the time) was *La joliette de Perth*, based on a story by Walter Scott. He was popular, he was busy, he survived the occupation

From these unremarkable beginnings a story of erotic entanglement and violent jealousy unfolds



Prosper Mérimée (photo by Charles Reutlinger)

of Paris by the Prussians between 1870 and 1871, he married Geneviève Halévy, the daughter of the composer Fromental Halévy, who had taught him at the Conservatoire, and they had one son, Jacques; but unequivocal success eluded him. His 1872 one-act opera, *Djamileh*, set in Cairo and replete with exotic detail, was given a lavish production at the Opéra-Comique and was much admired in later years by Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss, but failed to stir the public interest.

Eventually, Bizet came across a text that truly inspired him. This was *Carmen*, a story by the writer, historian and archaeologist Prosper Mérimée, which had appeared in the journal *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1845. It had a sort of closely observed reportage style that, cleverly crafted into a libretto, could come to vivid life, and left plenty of room for music. The narrator of the story is, like Mérimée, a Frenchman and an archaeologist interested in languages who visits Spain in search of a lost battle site and comes across a sleeping man

who turns out to be Don José, a bandit on the run from the authorities. A little later he is in Cordova, where he stops for a smoke and is joined by a young woman who he invites to join him at a café for an ice-cream. She is Carmen, a gypsy. From these unremarkable beginnings a story of erotic entanglement and violent jealousy unfolds.

The co-director of the Opéra-Comique, Camille du Locle, was a librettist himself and a supporter of Bizet. He liked the *Carmen* idea and proposed a team of librettists, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy (Geneviève's cousin), who were both brilliant theatrical wordsmiths, having been responsible for a stream of operetta hits for Offenbach, including *La belle Hélène* and *La Vie Parisienne*. The writing – to which Bizet contributed a fair amount himself – and the composing went well, and the score was ready by the beginning of 1874. But there were problems. Du Locle's fellow director, Adolphe de Leuven, objected to the violent subject matter and to the amoral nature of the character of Carmen. It



Act 1 of the original 1875 production of Bizet's *Carmen*

Poster for the premiere of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (Prudent-Louis Leray)



PARIS, CHOUDENS PÈRE & FILS ÉDITEURS.

IMP. LEMERCIER ET C^o R. DE SEINE, ST. PARIS.

RUE ST HONORÉ 265 (près l'Assommoir)

CARMEN

Opéra-Comique en quatre actes.

H. MEILHAC et L. HALÉVY.

MUSIQUE DE GEORGES BIZET

Affiche pour l'Intérieur

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was he who insisted on the addition of Micaëla, the 'good girl' who loves Don José. Carmen was thoroughly disturbing, and to audiences of the day probably appeared to be more of a villainess than a heroine, seducing the hero, encouraging him to abandon his duty and his regiment, dropping him in favour of someone more glamorous, the toreador Escamillo. She also died on stage, not the first time this had happened to an operatic heroine, but they normally expired gracefully rather than as the result of a brutal stabbing.

Bizet became obsessed with the character of Carmen, re-working sections over and over again to get exactly what he wanted. He had unflinching support in his efforts from the singer cast in the title role, Célestine Galli-Marié, who worked tirelessly to convey Carmen's complex nature. Chorus members and orchestral players complained about the difficulty of

their music but finally, on 3 March 1875, *Carmen* opened at the Opéra-Comique to an audience crammed with figures from the Parisian artistic scene. Popular belief reports that the opera was a resounding failure but it was not as simple as that. The first act went well but after the interval something seemed to change, and not for the better. The audience's interest waned and the end was greeted in puzzled silence before a smattering of applause. The critics were unkind at best, vicious at worst.

Bizet stoically set to, made some changes and led more rehearsals with the performers to help with any difficulties they encountered. But he was devastated and his health - he already had an ongoing throat abscess and had suffered attacks of angina - took a turn for the worse. He and his wife and son went to their house at Bougival outside Paris so that he could rest. Galli-Marié was singing *Carmen* on 3 June 1875 and, during the card scene in Act Three, had a premonition that all was not well with Bizet. She fainted when she left the stage. In Bougival, Bizet went for a swim in the river, suffered two heart attacks and died later that same night. He was 36 years old.

Over the next two seasons at the Opéra-Comique, *Carmen* received 48 performances. In October 1875 it was performed in Vienna and was a considerable success. Within a few years it was taken up by opera houses from Brussels, London and Naples to St Petersburg, Melbourne and New York. It has remained one of the most popular of all operas ever since - in a 2019 survey based on numbers of performances around the world it took second place, beaten to the top slot by *La traviata* and followed by Mozart's *Magic Flute*. ■

Henrietta Bredin writes widely on opera and theatre and is deputy editor of *Opera* magazine. Her narrated song recitals - *My Dearest Hedgehog* and *Gounod and Georgina* - have been performed throughout the UK.



Bullfighting scene by René Bull, circa 1910