

## Habanera

## G. Bizet (1838-1875)

Georges Bizet had a brilliant start to his musical career: his *Symphony in C*, for instance, written when he was 17, is as good as anything written by Mozart or Mendelssohn at the same age. Sadly, early promise was not sustained and Bizet's inability to produce works of consistent quality saw him become more of a high-class musical hack than a successful composer. Despite a handful of small scale successes, his reputation rests largely on his final work, *Carmen*.



*Carmen* was written for the Opéra-Comique in Paris and is based on a novella by Prosper Mérimée. It is a low-life tale of passion and murder set against a background of gypsies, thieves and workers in a cigarette factory. The 'depraved' nature of Carmen herself and the way Don José declines from simple honesty through insubordination, desertion and smuggling to murder is hardly in the tradition of morally upright heroes and heroines. It was pretty racy fare and not what Parisian opera-goers were used to.

When rehearsals began in October 1874, the orchestra complained that parts of the score were unplayable and the chorus that some of their music was impossible to sing. In addition, the chorus were not happy about acting as individuals, smoking and fighting on stage rather than just standing around in lines. The Opéra-Comique tried to interfere by modifying parts they deemed 'improper' and it was only when the leading singers threatened to withdraw that the management gave way.

The first performance on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1875 was not a success, but neither was it a complete disaster. True, most critics were damning, but a few saw that here was something new and exciting. Théodore de Banville, for one, applauded Bizet for presenting a drama with real men and women instead of the usual Opéra-Comique 'puppets'. The composers Massenet and Saint-Saëns were also complimentary, yet Bizet could only perceive 'a definite and hopeless flop'.

Despite the problems, *Carmen* continued to run and was past its thirtieth performance when Bizet's health went into a rapid decline. Following two heart attacks, he died on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1875 at the age of 36. His funeral was attended by four thousand people, and Charles Gounod, who gave the eulogy, was too upset to finish it. In the years following, *Carmen's* popularity grew and it was performed throughout Europe and America. Composers such as Tchaikovsky and Brahms (who, legend has it, attended 20 performances) championed the work, and Wagner wrote:

*Here, thank God, for a change is somebody with ideas in his head.*

*L'amour est un oiseau rebelle* (Love is a rebellious bird) or *Habanera*, as it is better known, is written to the rhythm of a Cuban dance. It is sung by *Carmen* early in the opera as she flirts with a group of soldiers outside a cigarette factory in Seville.

### English Translation

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!

Love is a gypsy's child,  
It has never, ever, known a law;  
Love me not, then I love you;  
If I love you, you'd best beware!

The bird you thought you had caught  
Beat its wings and flew away...  
Love stays away, you wait and wait;  
When least expected, there it is!

All around you, swift, so swift,  
It comes, it goes, and then returns...  
You think you hold it fast, it flees,  
You think you're free, it holds you fast.

Love! Love! Love! Love!

Love is a gypsy's child,  
It has never, ever, known a law;  
Love me not, then I love you;  
If I love you, you'd best beware!



The music for *Habanera* is based on what Bizet believed to be a folk tune, but it was actually a piece called *El Arreglito* written by Spanish composer Sebastián de Yradier (1809-1865). Once he realised his mistake, Bizet added a note to the score acknowledging its source.

*The picture is of Galli-Marié, the original Carmen.  
Her first night performance was described by one hostile critic as  
'the very incarnation of vice'.*