

Carmen

Étienne Jardin (*Palazzetto Bru Zane*)

Thirty years after its publication in the *Revue des deux mondes* (October 1845), Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen* was adapted for the Opéra-Comique in Paris. At a time when Marshal de MacMahon's 'Moral Order' reigned over a France shattered by the defeat at Sedan and the Paris Commune, the work naturally caused a scandal.

It was the composer Georges Bizet who initiated the project of adapting *Carmen*. The choice of Ludovic Halévy – who, with his collaborator Henri Meilhac, had written Offenbach's greatest successes during the Second Empire, from *La Belle Hélène* to *Les Brigands* and *La Vie parisienne* – can be explained by the friendship and family ties between Bizet and Halévy, who were cousins by marriage. The Opéra-Comique commissioned the work from the triumvirate in 1872: 'It will be *gay*, but the kind of gaiety that allows room for style', declared Bizet before turning his attention to Mérimée's tale.

Halévy and Meilhac purged the original narrative of its darker aspects: a liar and thief who incites murder in Mérimée's novella, Carmen became a sincere, free-spirited character whose duplicity is admittedly mentioned (in the Act Two Quintet), but never shown. The brunette Carmen is thus closer to the blonde Hélène whom the authors had thought up for Offenbach ten years earlier: a figure less criminal than transgressive. Indeed, of the many murders that punctuate the itinerary of Don José and Carmen in the novella, the librettists retain only the last one. But that was already too much for the traditionalists: at that time, no character had ever been killed on the stage of the Opéra-Comique, an institution renowned for the decorum of its productions. According to Halévy (writing forty years after the fact), the introduction of a few comic passages (between *Le Dancaïre* and *Le Remendado*) and, above all, the character of Micaëla – 'a very innocent, very chaste young girl' – convinced the theatre's management to accept *Carmen*.



Célestine Galli-Marié (1837-1905), whom the Opéra-Comique's director Camille Du Locle chose to create the title role in 1873, was to play an important part in the work's conception. Herself

the daughter of a singer (Mécène Marié de l'Isle), she made her breakthrough in the 1860s at the Théâtre des Arts in Rouen in Balfe's *La Bohémienne* (*The Bohemian Girl*) before joining the company of the Opéra-Comique, where she created the role of Kaled in Maillart's *Lara* (set in Spain) and the title role in Ambroise Thomas's *Mignon* (1866). She bore the aura of an actress-singer and immediately left her mark on Bizet's 'Bohemian girl':

Carmen is Madame Galli-Marié, the only artist capable of being the Carmen of Don José, of the espada and of the others, with the proud bearing, the dark look of a girl who is generous with her love, but 'who has never lied'. She plays, she sings, she mimes this role like the great actress that she is, and brings to it the biting quality of that strange, wild voice, ever untamed and ever seductive, which is one of her peculiarities.

Armand Gouzien, *L'Événement*, 6 March 1875)

Just as Bizet had taken a part in rewriting the libretto, Galli-Marié forced the composer to go back to the drawing board several times before she was happy with her key number, the Habanera. In the end, he managed to satisfy his leading lady by making use of a song by Sebastián Iradier (1809-65) called *El arreglito*. This

late borrowing – the only one in the work – sheds light on Bizet's approach to his subject: the Spain he depicts is not a land he has observed, but which he has imagined and documented through reading and listening in Paris.



Carmen became the high point of Bizet's career through sheer force of circumstance – he died three months after the premiere. Yet there is nothing testamentary about the score: every page is brimming with life, almost to excess, in order to conjure up the morbid passion that sweeps Don José off his feet and leads him to murder. Building on the genre of *opéra-comique* to portray a drama; going even further in the exploration of exotic sound worlds; glorifying a title character with murky morals: *Carmen* gives every appearance of being a provocation addressed to the French public of 1875. Creating a scandal was perhaps a way of forcing the hand of fate for this virtuoso composer, whom the press of the time persisted in classifying among the 'Wagnerians', the 'symphonists' or, in other words, the new generation subservient to victorious Germany which had brought France to her knees.

The lukewarm reception of the premiere and the first run in Paris, which chalked up only forty-eight performances from

March 1875 onwards, soon gave way to an international triumph. The work circulated essentially in a version with the spoken dialogue replaced by recitatives by Ernest Guiraud. Vienna, Brussels, Antwerp, Budapest, Liège, St Petersburg, Stockholm, London, Dublin, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Melbourne, San Francisco and so forth: in the course of five years, the opera travelled the globe, and the Paris revival of 1883 marked its definitive entry into the repertory. The Opéra-Comique even celebrated its thousandth performance there in 1904. Having been spurned at first, by the twentieth century *Carmen* had become, and still is today, a pillar of the repertory in opera houses everywhere.

