Georges Bizet (1838-1875) – CARMEN [Revision Notes]

Summary of Lecture notes, *ENO Guide* (ed. Nicholas John); *Cambridge Opera Guide* (ed. Susan McClary); 'Operagrove' article (Hugh Macdonald); 'Sexual Politics in Classical Music' in *Feminine Endings* (Susan McClary).

Opéra-Comique

- Origins in the sideshows of the big Parisian fairs of the middle ages - popular entertainments consisting of slapstick and patter, miming and dumb-show.
- Two social groups championed the new form:
    - supporters of French as against Italian music, anxious to create a French equivalent of *opera buffa*, dealing with characters and situations drawn from everyday life instead of the gods, heroes and royal personages of the opera.
    - Thinkers and writers [Left-wing intellectuals] concerned with undermining the existing regime and preparing the ground for social and political revolution, attracted by the naturalness and simplicity of form, its popular character and its use for thinly disguised social propaganda
- remained an essentially topical form, reflecting the changing fashions and preoccupations of each decade, so that social criticism soon gave way to sentimental pastoral themes and (in the last years before the Revolution) 'tear-jerkers'.
- The development of 'French grand opera' after the Revolution, with its propensity to treat historical subjects, had an effect on *opéra-comique*. It began to lose many of its original characteristics – the rural or domestic setting, the often sophisticated 'innocence' of the characters and wit. The great successes of *opéra-comique* in the 1830s were melodramatically 'romantic' and set in exotic scenery.
- The feature that remained unchanged – often the only distinction between opera and *opéra-comique* – was the spoken dialogue, deeply rooted in the common French conception of music as something essentially secondary, either an accompaniment to dancing and spectacle, or an interlude.
- Opening of Théatre Lyrique in 1851 gave it a new lease of life – new works were accepted here on their merits rather than according to the formal genres to which they belonged. Bizets first two operas were produced here (though, more by chance than design, Carmen was actually given at the Opéra Comique).

Carmen and Opéra-Comique

The subject matter of Mérimée's story could obviously have been given the full operatic treatment, but it did not exclude the lighter form (the two most recent successes in *opéra-comique*, Gounod's Faust and Thomas's *Mignon*, were drawn from Goethe). Yet Bizet's librettists were nervous about staging the tale at the Opéra Comique, traditionally the scene of family outings. The elements of *opéra-comique* which appealed to the middle-class patrons were sentimentality, unambiguously morall plots, edifying characters and happy endings – all of the elements that Bizet violated in Carmen. Bizet know, however, that to reach a cosmopolitan audience he would have to replace the spoken dialogue with recitative – a project taken on by his friend, Ernest Guiraud, after Bizet's death, for a performance in Vienna seven months after the poorly-received Paris premier in 1875. The Vienna performance was hugely successful, perhaps due to a more liberal audience.

Advantages of spoken dialogue:

- makes possible more extensive and flexible interchanges among characters (recitative is cumbersome), so more of Mérimée's text is retained in the dialogues.
- permits the composer to exploit the difference between speech and song (e.g. Don José only speaks through much of the first act, only breaking into song when impelled to through emotional excess: first when Micaela reveals the letter from his mother, then when Carmen provokes him to passion. Guiraud's José sings from his first entry).

Other elements of *opéra-comique* used in Carmen:

- Prelude presents an array of catchy tunes that show up later in the opera
- Stock characters of Micaela (a foil to Carmen; her modesty, charm and stalwartness in the face of evil mark her as the stock opéra-comique heroine) and Escamillo (sporting exotic flair and boastful masculine prowess).
- The chorus, but used flexibly by Bizet to represent a variety of social groups

The importance of *Carmen*

- The work's popularity lies in the character of Carmen herself - how she behaves, what she represents and the music she's given
- It revitalised the Opéra-Comique (which had stagnated)
- The gritty portrayal of Carmen influenced the 'verissimo' tradition of later Italian operas (e.g. Puccini)
- It demonstrated the possibility of developing number operas with closed structures as an alternative to the continuous dramas of Wagner. It's a mixture of the two.
- An important step towards exoticism, but it's fairly generic – not really related to real Spanish idioms; a construction.
- Influenced future 'controlling' female characters, such as Strauss's Salome.

Musical style

- melodies adapted from folk songs, from other composers and Bizet's own works (e.g. entr'acte music preceding Acts II and III from L'Arlésienne)
- use of Spanish dance rhythms to add local colour (e.g. Toreador Song [Act II] and 'Près des ramparts de Seville' [Act I])
- choruses and ensembles in characteristic operetta style
- occasional repetition of motifs is of no more significance than it was in Verdi's Rigoletto
- firm, concise, exact musical expression of every situation; "the typical Gallic union of economy of material, perfect grasp of means, vivid orchestral colour, and an eclectic vitality and rhythmic verve, together with an objective, cool, yet passionate sensualism" (Grout)
- Stylistic contrasts (between the types of music given to different characters) as a dramatic compositional procedure

Narrative etc

There are five main characters: Carmen, Micaëla, Don José, Escamillo and Zuniga. The story concerns a love triangle between Don José, Micaëla, and Carmen, along with the competition between Don José, Escamillo and Zuniga for Carmen.

Not merely a convincing portrait of a soldier's moral disintegration and a gypsy's murder, Carmen reaches the level of genuine tragedy in its representation of an all-consuming passion that develops into jealous obsession.

Carmen is intrigued by Jose, a man for whom love is not a game, and who is so deadly serious about it. It is death she finally challenges by accepting, despite all warnings, to meet Don José. By killing Carmen, and not Escamillo, DJ fulfils a need to possess her. By confronting him with courage, Carmen proclaims her free will and firmly asserts her ego; she deliberately chooses to accomplish her destiny.

The function of the chorus is to give voice to joy and freedom in everyday life. A sense of anarchist immorality in it: official values and authority being often the butt of the popular voice.

The opera, unlike the novella (where a solitary female character is sought after by two principal men), is organised in terms of the traditional Western dichotomy between proper and improper constructions of female sexuality, between the virgin and the whore.

'Bizet's musical strategies…set up almost unbearable tensions that cause the listener not only to accept Carmen's death as "inevitable", but actually to desire it" [p62]

- in the final scene outside the bullring, as José pleads with Carmen to give in, the harmonic bassline turns into a maddeningly slippery chromatic floor. Not only José but also the listener (drilled in terms of classical tonal discourse) longs for this flood of chromaticism to be stopped, for stability to be re-established – even though we know that the triumph of tonal closure means the violent murder of Carmen.
    - chromaticism, defined throughout the opera as 'the feminine' is purged once and for all, as though by natural necessity: the major triad prevails.

Musical Outline

PRELUDE

- demonstrates Bizet's mastery of orchestration: strings always to the fore, with brass and woodwind used for striking effects, e.g. the low range of the flute of Carmen's seductive moods
- the appearance of the FATE motif at the end (identified with Carmen's fatal influence on Don José) – it occurs only once in each Act, and is characterised by an 'Exotic' augmented 2nd interval

ACT I

A series of daily rituals set the scene in Seville – a chorus of soldiers, the urchins' march, the cigarette girls.

Enter Micaela as a foil to Carmen. She's representative of Don José's conservative world. She brings news from his mother. They sing what sounds like a love-duet, but say very little to each other. Don José resolves to marry Micaela, though, on instructions from his mother.

Carmen's impertinence; the character an epitome of rebel to authority and a strong woman to the domination of men, illustrated by her reaction to her arrest (i.e. singing a song)

The final scene of each act is where the relationship between Carmen and Don José is developed. In Act I, she uses the Séguedille to seduce him. It's followed by a fugue in F minor, accompanying/symbolising their plotting.

ACT II

Note the juxtaposition of Don José's jaunty military tune in the Entr'acte with the Gypsy song that follows.

The bombastic arrival and departure of Escamillo, the bull-fighter.

Quintet (No.15), in Opera Buffa style

- transparent orchestration
- rapid declamation
- close harmonies
- shifting voice groupings

José enters alone (unlike Escamillo), and his military tune is simple and unaccompanied – contrasts with the defined forms given the music of Escamillo and Micaela.

Love duet between José and Carmen descends into a quarrel, as he intends to return to the barracks. Attempting to prove his love, José shows Carmen the flower she gave him. His music here is different from the language of the man who sang with Micaela – he has already changed. Carmen paints a seductive picture of vagabond life together. José chooses love over duty, finally, but only as a result of his jealousy and uncontrollable temper. He joins the smugglers.

ACT III
José's encounter with Escamillo shows how he's changed – he's willing to kill Escamillo through jealousy. Before, there was an impulsiveness and passion to his actions; now there is a cruel intention to his anger.

At the end of the Act, Don José's intention to kill Carmen if she will not love him becomes clear. Here the musical styles of the characters are heightened and play against each other to maximum effect.

ACT IV
More city rituals – the market and bullfight.

A brief dialogue between Escamillo and Carmen: he speaks of his love first, with suave lines in the manner of his last appearance. Carmen continues in the same vein: how unlike the stormy exchanges with José.

Final duet – its genius lies in its emotional logic and concise dramatic structure. Begins with a few cold, tense words in recitative. The second section begins with Don Jose's emotional realisation that he cannot salvage their love. The climactic section is interspersed with backstage choral outbursts. José stabs Carmen as Escamillo is acclaimed by the people – an ironic counterpart to the stage action.

The musical languages of *Carmen*

"…a composition produces meaning through its use of codes transmitted and reproduced within a variety of repertories, its generic affiliations, the social contexts in which it is written and received, as well as through the strategic arrangement of its particular parts."

- Carmen cannot be taken as anything other than a French work, despite claims of Wagner's influence. It is true that Bizet refuses to remain within the 'watertight' compartments of discrete musical numbers – in the manner of his colleagues – yet he also refuses Wagnerian through-composition.
- Don José as 'German' – his music threatens to overflow its bounds with 'lyric urgency' [Dalhaus]; his vision of his relationship with Carmen is 'endless melody'; his discourse refuses the immediate gratification of the 'popular folk songs' and 'four-square music' of the more conventional characters

Exoticism
Serious 'Orientalism' dates from Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798 – an invasion that stimulated interest in Middle Eastern archaeology, religions, linguistics and anthropology.

Victor Hugo – Les Orientales (1829): His preface describes his exploitation of the East not as active volition, but rather as the East's having seduced him into surrendering his Western rationality over to its agendas.

Whatever the reality of Spain's history or culture, French orientalists ascribed to it the same qualities they imagined to be characteristic of the entire Middle East.

…and French officials drew upon the vivid fictions of novelists and painters in shaping their Middle Eastern policies.

'Some people believe that the best Spanish music has been written by French composers' (Elaine Brody, 1987)

- problem with this position is that (a) it confuses the image of the ethnic 'Other' created by the North European with the thing itself, then castigates the ethnic for failing to match the effectiveness of the caricature, and (b) it is difficult to understand how composers such as Bizet constructed images of 'Spain' that seem so convincing (at least to everyone except the Spanish!)
- Bizet's use of Hispanic music is hardly authentic; his sources are always mediated – The Habañera was based on a song by the Spanish composer Sebastiàn Yradier, but Yradier did not compose his exotic music as an expression of his own ethnic culture, but rather as an exercise in exoticism.
- Bizet's agenda was not ethnography, despite the influence of actual sources – the exotic passages in *Carmen* are primarily products of Orientalism: fantasies about the Other. They enhance the illusion of authenticity, but only for the French audience for whose pleasure the works are designed.
- Code for the depiction of the 'Oriental' in music: pentatonicism, the Dorian 6th, Mixolydian 7th, Phrygian 2nds, the raised 2nd and augmented 4th, non-functional chromatic colouration, bass drones, ostinatos, pedal points, colourful timbral effects (esp. percussion), simple formal designs and insistent dance rhythms.
- To a European listener, the imitation of native may sound more 'authentic' than the original, for it delivers a concentrated image of 'difference', purged of all those element sthat might have been perceived neither as intelligible nor as satisfyingly exotic.
- Extensive melodic chromaticism may invoke the microtonal inflections of some Eastern musics, but in exoticist music it operates within four-bar phrases and conforms to tonal logic at the cadences. The listener is treated to the thrill of illicit pitches, but is spared the burden of trying to unravel an alien musical language.

The Orientalist message
- reinforces notions of the essential irrationality of the exotic
  - ♣ structures are simplistic; complex formal processes considered a unique accomplishment of the West
  - ♣ static bass lines betray a belief in the lack of interest of progress among 'Orientals'
  - ♣ scores exploit colour in place of 'purely musical ideas'
  - ♣ music animated through dance rhythms calculated to engage the body in a set of sensual physical responses

Characterisation

Carmen

Bizet's essential innovation in the genre of *opéra-comique* is his attitude towards the character of Carmen herself. In the theatre, any heroic stand outside the law and morality had previously been a male privilege. In the *opéra-comique*, perhaps even more than elsewhere, women were expected to be gentle, biddable, always sinned against but never sinning. Merimée's character – the liberated woman who is in total control of events – was a new phenomenon in opera and therefore created a controversy in a way the novel never had. There are precedents (Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*, Lady Macbeth in Verdi's *Macbeth*, Isolde in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Queen Elizabeth I in Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*) but none quite so controlling, sexy and liberated as Carmen.

Carmen is not an immoral character; her values may be different to those of the bourgeois audience, but she never compromises her own integrity. She attracts José and the audience because of her easy relationship with her body, but she instils dread for the same reason.

Carmen is the 'dissonant Other' who is necessary for the motivation and sustaining of the plot. Bizet grounds Carmen's music in the physical impulses of exotic, pseudogypsy dance. Significantly, her principal numbers are referred to neither by their texts nor by conventional operatic designation (e.g., aria or duet), but by their dance-type designations: Habañera and Seguidilla.

- she arouses desire, and has power to deliver or withhold gratification
- her music marked by chromatic excesses- her melodic lines tease and taunt, forceing the attention to dwell on the moment
-

Carmen's music

Habañera ('L'amour est un oiseau rebelle…')

- Seductive ostinato bass line, all the way through on a pedal D
- Non-tonal melodic line (no seeming direction)
- Rapid alternation between minor and major: tempestuous, not quite moral, a certain volatility
- ♣ but a remarkably rigid musical structure [A A` B A A` B], basic harmonic progression (I ii^7 V I) and four bar phrases.

Seguidilla ('Près des ramparts de Séville')

- A modified da capo aria
- Straightforward antecedent and consequent phrasing
- More tonally ambiguous than the Habanèra
- Could be read as one long V-I progression in Bm, but a long-winded one!
- Seductive sliding internal lines – there's a tonal ambiguity suggesting you can never pin the character down; she's in control

Duet between Carmen and Don José in Act II

For a reunion like this, a conventional operatic couple would normally sing a standard love–duet, praising the circumstances that brought them together and looking forward to a sublime future. For Carmen and Don José, however, whose expectations of each other are so conflicting, their duet descends into argument.

CARMEN : Je vais danser en votre honneur…	Carmen makes José sit down. She sings and dances, accompanying herself on castanets. Bb major tonality with regular antecedent/consequent phrasing: not as seductive as we've seen before, because he's already been ensnared.
DON JOSÉ : Attends un peu, Carmen…	He hears bugles calling the retreat. She stops singing but her music continues. A remarkable counterpoint between Carmen's music and the bugle calls symbolises José's choice – amour or devoir.
CARMEN : Bravo ! bravo ! j'avais beau faire	Carmen's line becomes more chromatic as she realises she is wasting her time. She tries dancing again, only to be stopped once more.
CARMEN : Ah ! J'étais vraiment trop bête !	She complains bitterly, mocking the sound of the bugle, becoming increasingly passionate and lashing out like a disappointed child.
DON JOSÉ : C'est mal à toi, Carmen de te moquer de moi !	He expresses his reluctance to leave, while she mocks him
DON JOSÉ : Ainsi, tu ne crois pas à mon amour !	Their exchanges become quicker and more impassioned. Carmen's fate motif sounds on the cor anglais, offering further evidence of her effect on him.

DON JOSÉ : La fleur que tu m'avais jetée…	Db major tonality, fairly diatonic but more passionate : a new musical language for José. He expresses his love for Carmen.
CARMEN : Non ! tu ne m'aimes pas !	Abrupt change of key shows the emotional distance between Carmen and José. A rising bass–line generates building tension.
CARMEN : Là–bas, Là–bas, dans la montagne…	She paints a seductive picture of vagabond life together, and expresses her love of liberty. A tarantella (6/8) rhythm, at odds with José's lyricism. José surrenders momentarily.
DON JOSÉ : Non ! je ne veux plus t'écouter !	Unable to bear the loss of his soldier's honour, he says he cannot desert. Another change of key. They say goodbye.

Duet with Escamillo (Act IV)

- Very brief
- Escamillo expresses his love first, and she echoes his music
- lyrical, diatonic, slow, staid and reserved
- Regular 2 bar phrases

Don José

A soldier who abandons a pale sentimental love (Micaela) and plunges into an outlaw world of passion. His love for Carmen acts as a second birth, transforming this rather naïve character into a full-blooded man. His weakness is not that he follows Carmen, but that he is not able to follow her completely: he returns to his dying mother instead of responding to Carmen's vital challenge: he is not a free man and he loses her as a result.

Jose's melodies unfold solemnly and he refuses the immediate gratification of the 'popular folk songs' and four-square music of the more conventional characters. His music is 'transcendental', perhaps 'German' – Dalhaus claims it has 'lyric urgency'. He has no 'tune' – he is identified solely through his subjective passion (it is Escamillo's signature 'Toreador Song' that greets José at his moment of triumph). In the opéra-comique version, Don José only speaks through much of the first act, only breaking into song when impelled to through emotional excess: first when Micaela reveals the letter from his mother, then when Carmen provokes him to passion. His moment of greatest passion is his self-absorbed monologue, his internalised metaphysical narrative that has no room for another human voice. The dramatic discrepancy between Don José's lyrical register in his aria, ' La fleur que tu m'avais jetée' and Carmen's tarantella rhythm in 'Là-bas dans la montagne' does not allow them to go into a properly balanced duet: they speak a different language, have different values.

In the course of Acts 3 and 4, his lyricism loses all its gentleness and becomes imperious, tense and open to outbursts of extreme violence, showing the evolution of the character. By defeating the Escamillo, Don José displays the seriousness of his passion and his skill as a fighter.

Micaela

Invented by the librettists to illustrate José's youthful innocence and to contrast with Carmen. She is the conventional 'sweet girl' who first appears bearing a letter from the hero's mother. She represents Christianity, family bonds, legality and sentimental love: the sexless, submissive ideal of the bourgeoisie. Her signs of affection are carefully defined in terms of José's mother, for whom she is but the passive conduit of a maternal kiss.

Her musical discourse accordingly is simple, tender, lyrical, sweet: utterly antithetic to Carmen's songs and dances (throughout his score, Bizet makes a masterly use of this contrast). As she sings to

José in their initial encounter, her melody lines are diatonic (never deviating into insinuating inflections), her rhythms innocent of physicality.

In their First Act duet, Don José and Micaela immediately find a common musical language to evoke sweet feelings about their engagement and his beloved mother, which develops into a formal duet.

Micaela's music

Micaela's aria in Act III is placid, meek and innocent, but her strong vocal lines make her courage clear. It's rhythmically static, lacking the impulse that Carmen's arias have, and has a very conventional da capo structure.

Escamillo

Both Micaela and Escamillo are given music that is conventional (reminiscent of Gounod) compared with the rest of the opera, but it is for their conventional characters that they are needed dramatically.

Escamillo is an incarnation of sheer virility. The refrain ('Toreador, en garde!') of his couplets in Act 2, is marked by Bizet with the words *avec fatuité*, i.e. with huge self-complacency.

His love is gallantry of a kind similar to that which Carmen lightheartedly rebuked in Zuniga. He is ready to wait for his turn in Carmen's favours, without showing too much impatince. The quality of their relationship appears from the very abbreviated and underplayed duet they have in the final Act: they sign a superficial and quick engagement of love, in music which has a Mozartian flavour. If he appeals to Carmen, despite his shallow vanity, it is because he is on familiar terms with death: the first thing he offers her is 'to pronounce her name the next time he kills a bull'. He freely risks his life with every bull he fights and freedom is Carmen's strongest passion.

Escamillo's music: 'Toreador Song'

It has a rhythmic thrust, much like Carmen's music, emphasising his masculinity, and his pomposity. This is a conventional piece consisting of two strophes, in F minor. It contrasts with Don José, who comes across as much less macho.