



The Death of Carmen (1890). Oil on canvas by Manuel Cabral y Aguado Bejarano.

SOTHEBY'S. LONDON/AGK-IMAGES

THIEVES, GYPSIES, CIGAR-MAKERS

BY PAUL THOMASON

When Napoleon's French army invaded Egypt in 1798 it eventually brought about an important change in French culture, one that was repeated (albeit on a smaller scale) by the Peninsular War (1807-14).

One result of the four-year French occupation of Egypt was *Description de l'Égypte* which initially appeared in 1809 and eventually grew to include 24 volumes, lavishly documenting Egyptian culture in every aspect and profoundly influencing the arts in France. But the invasion also energized serious academic interests in religion, linguistics,

archeology, and anthropology among others. "Oriental" became the rage: in music, painting, literature, architecture, the decorative arts, fueled by travelers who could actually visit Egypt for themselves, and also the popular press. After the Peninsular War many Spaniards who had allied with France, thinking that would bring modernization and liberty to their country, including ending the Spanish Inquisition, were exiled to France, bringing their culture with them.

In the preface to his 1829 collections of poems, *Les Orientales*, Victor Hugo wrote that the Orient had become a "sort of general preoccupation," and done so without him

quite realizing it. (In other words, he had been seduced by the Orient, an important part of “Orientalism.”) “Oriental colors ... imprint themselves on all his [Hugo’s] thoughts, all his dreams; and his dreams and his thoughts found themselves, in turn, and almost without having wished it so, Hebraic, Turkish, Greek, Persian, Arab, even Spanish, because Spain is still the Orient; Spain is half African, Africa is half Asiatic.”

Since Egypt and the Near East are also the land of the Bible, Biblical stories became overlaid with the exotic (and often erotic) hue of this new obsession. For instance, the story of Salome dancing before Herod and demanding the head of John the Baptist was the basis for Gustave Moreau’s painting *L’Apparition* (1876), Flaubert’s story *Herodias* (1876–77), and Massenet’s opera *Hérodiade* (1881). Massenet’s *Esclarmonde* (1889) and *Thaïs* (1894) are further examples of Orientalist opera, as are Delibes’ *Lakmé* (1883) and Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalila* (1877), to name just two. Though it is important to remember a quip leveled at Ravel’s 1911 opera *L’Heure Espagnole*, that it is “Spain seen from the heights of Montmartre.” However exotic this music, painting, and literature might seem, it was always *French* music, painting, and literature, tinged with some foreign color and designed to be enjoyed by French consumers.

One of the numerous publications that specialized in articles from or about exotic places was the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. In 1855 it published a few of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* poems; Henri Murger, whose *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* became the basis for the libretto of Puccini’s *La Bohème*, was an occasional contributor. And in 1845 the *Revue* published the first version of a novella by Prosper Mérimée called *Carmen*. Originally it produced only moderate interest, but over time it gained more admirers, one of whom was the composer Georges Bizet.

In 1872 the co-directors of the Opéra-Comique, Camille Du Locle and Adolph de Leuven, suggested that Bizet write an opera for them, collaborating with the experienced librettists Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac whose work with Offenbach was so successful. The directors made several suggestions for possible subjects, but Bizet insisted on Mérimée’s *Carmen*. Halévy and Meilhac were enthusiastic and Du Locle approved, but de Leuven was scandalized. “*Carmen!*” he exploded. “Mérimée’s *Carmen*? Isn’t she killed by her lover?—And that background of thieves, gypsies, cigar-makers!—At the Opéra-Comique, a family theater! The theater where marriages are arranged! Every night five or six boxes are taken for that purpose. You will frighten off our audience.—It’s impossible!”

Halévy, who had been sent to cajole de Leuven into agree-

ing to the subject, quickly explained their *Carmen* would be “softened, toned down.” Among other changes they had introduced “a pure opéra-comique character, a very innocent, very chaste young girl.” (That was Micaëla who does not, in fact, appear in Mérimée’s story.) He also admitted that, yes, there were Gypsies but they would be “comic” Gypsies. And as for Carmen’s death, he claimed people would hardly notice it because, unlike Mérimée’s ending that happens in the woods with only Carmen and Don José present, in the opera it would be “sneaked in at the end of a very lively, very brilliant act, played in bright sunlight on a holiday with triumphal processions, ballets, and joyous fanfares.”

De Leuven was finally worn down and surrendered, but as Halévy left his office, the co-director begged, “Please try not to have her die. Death on the stage of the Opéra-Comique! Such a thing has never been seen! Never!” Six months later de Leuven resigned, largely because of his continued opposition to *Carmen*. As musicologist Susan McClary points out, the subject was about as sensational as possible at the time: “the humiliation and degradation of male, white authority at the hands of a woman of color.” And the woman of color not only smoked, she picked up and discarded lovers whenever she liked. She is both heroine and villain, another source of horror to the audience at the time. Like Mozart’s Don Giovanni, she is true to herself to the very end, even though she knows what it will cost her. That was, perhaps, her greatest sin for early audiences, her refusal to give up her freedom—either to society’s laws, or to a man.

There were numerous delays with the project but Bizet finished the orchestration during the summer of 1874 and rehearsals began that September. The soprano Célestine Galli-Marié had been invited to create the role after two other singers had turned it down. (“*Carmen*? What’s that?” she had asked at the time. She had never heard of Mérimée’s story.) A critic praised her debut in 1862 in Pergolesi’s *La Serva Padrona* by writing, “She is small and graceful, moves like a cat, has an impish, pert face, and her whole personality seems unruly and mischievous ... She sings in a full, fresh voice, piquant and mellow.”

She and the tenor creating Don José, Paul Lhérie, were ardent believers in the project, siding with *Carmen*’s creators against theater officials who constantly demanded the story be toned down. The chorus was used to walking on stage en masse and staring, motionless, at the conductor while they sang, and strongly resisted being asked to move while singing—to say nothing of smoking cigarettes and fighting. The orchestra pronounced parts of the score unplayable and it was only after extra rehearsals that they



La Carmencita by John Singer Sargent (1890)

MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS; BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

(grudgingly) admitted Bizet might know what he was doing.

But Bizet's music *did* sound very new to audiences at the time. It was so specific in its color and tone that it could only have been written for *that* specific moment in the opera, something early listeners often found difficult to follow. American composer Ned Rorem once wrote, "Had I never heard the orchestration but only seen it [by looking at the score], I'd say it couldn't work. I would be wrong. The chances we are taught to avoid when scoring for voices with instruments seem not to be chances to Bizet. Balances or areas on the page that look top-heavy or empty are to the ear always right; the scoring is unstintingly crystalline."

Bizet, who never visited Spain, did try to bring some authenticity to the music he wrote for *Carmen*, for instance

in Carmen's first aria, the "Habanera." The Habanera is actually a dance from Havana, and Bizet had based his music on a song by Sebastián Yradier, "El Arreglito." (Bizet had a copy of the song in his library.) Yradier was a popular figure in Paris. He was Spanish, but his pseudo-folk music compositions were largely drawn from what he called "Creole" music that he had heard in Latin America. What Bizet apparently thought was a Spanish folk song was actually African-Cuban. Yradier's music was a regular part of the programs sung by one of Bizet's neighbors, an extraordinarily interesting woman named Céleste Mogador, in the Parisian cabarets—another black mark against *Carmen*, that music from such sordid places would be performed at the Opéra-Comique.

The audience that attended *Carmen*'s first performance on March 3, 1875, was not the usual Opéra-Comique gathering. Du Locle had warned off the usual family parties. Composers Gounod, Thomas, Delibes, Offenbach, Massenet, Lecouq, and d'Indy (then a student) were there. Fans of Meilhac and Halévy's other work were there, along with various Offenbach stars, as were a number of singers from L'Opéra, including Jean-Baptiste Faure. There were numerous music publishers and a gaggle of *boulevardiers* who were hoping for the rumored scandal.

The first act was warmly received, with hearty applause greeting both Carmen's "Habanera" and the duet for Don José and Micaëla. The entr'acte was encoired and the second act began amid genuine enthusiasm. The Toreador's song was an enormous hit ("So they want trash? All right, I'll give them trash," Bizet had said when composing it), and the smuggler's quintet delighted the audience. But Don José's Flower Song and duet with Carmen were not well received, and the absence of a ballet disturbed the audience. In the third act only Micaëla's aria was applauded and act four flopped totally. The (now infamous) reviews were savage, in part because the director of the theater had not paid off the critics to ensure their enthusiastic praise. It is true *Carmen* had 48 performances during its first six months, but the attendance was poor and box-office receipts did not cover the cost of the production.

It was only when *Carmen* was given in Vienna on October 23, 1875, with recitatives rather than the original dialogue, that it found its audience and became the popular, enduring classic it is today. Bizet never knew of his (eventual) great success. He died on June 3, 1875 on the evening of *Carmen*'s thirty-third performance. He was 36 years old. 🌟

Writer, lecturer, and teacher Paul Thomason is currently writing a book on the music of Richard Strauss.