

Carmen



An opera in four acts  
Composed by Georges Bizet  
Text By Henri Meilhac & Ludovic Halévy

## The Characters

Don José  
a corporal of dragoons  
**tenor**

Carmen  
a cigarette girl and gypsy  
**soprano**

Escamillo  
a toreador  
**baritone**

Le Dancaire  
smuggler  
**tenor**

Le Remendado  
smuggler  
**tenor**

Zuniga  
a captain  
**bass**

Moralès  
an officer  
**baritone**

Michaëla  
a peasant girl  
**soprano**

Frasquita  
gypsy  
**soprano**

Mercédès  
gypsy  
**soprano**

## The basics of the plot

**Carmen** is the anti-heroine in this opera. Featuring as the disreputable factory worker and smuggling gypsy, she flirtatiously persuades the initially disinterested corporal Don José to aid her escape after being arrested for fighting. After a time in prison, Don José falls madly in love with Carmen and, battling with his devotion to his mother and her desire for him to marry the pure and gentle Michaëla, is reunited with her in a local tavern and follows her into the mountains with the smugglers. Carmen soon tires of his possessive, jealous ways and insists that he return to his mother with Michaëla who followed them to the mountains. In the final scene Carmen is on the arm of Escamillo the toreador who has been pursuing her. Don José's love and jealousy has consumed him so completely that the sight of Carmen with her new lover has disastrous effects.

## Synopsis

**ACT I**      *A square in Seville, with a tobacco factory and a guardroom*

Corporal Moralès and the soldiers while away the time watching the passers-by, among whom is Michaëla, a peasant girl from Navarre. She asks Moralès if he knows Don José, and is told that he is a corporal in another platoon expected shortly to relieve the present guard. Neatly avoiding the soldiers' pressing invitation to step inside the guard room, Michaëla escapes, planning to return later. A trumpet call heralds the approach not only of the relief guard but also of a gang of street urchins merrily imitating their drill. As the guards are changed, Moralès tells José that a girl is looking for him. Zuniga, the lieutenant in command of the new guard is apprehensive of the dangerous atmosphere and questions Corporal José about the tobacco factory. But both men are strangers to Seville: Zuniga having just been posted there, and José having been forced to flee his homeland of Navarre after a violent incident following a particularly heated game of pelota (a Spanish form of squash).

The factory bell rings and the menfolk of Seville gather round the female workers as they return after their lunch break. Of all the women, the gypsy Carmen is awaited with the greatest anticipation. As the men gather round her, she tells them that the love they desire, like a bird or a gypsy child, obeys no known laws. Only one man pays no attention to her, Don José, who is busy making a chain for his priming pin - Carmen teasingly throws a cassia flower in his face. The women go back into the factory and the crowd disperses. Left alone, José is half-embarrassed, half-fascinated by his experience. Michaëla returns, bringing news of José's mother. She has travelled south from Navarre and has sent Michaëla, the orphan girl who lives with her, with a letter to tell José that his past misdemeanours are forgiven. As they sing nostalgically of their homeland in Navarre, José feels that his mother is protecting him from afar. When he starts to read her letter, she runs off in embarrassment since it suggests that he marry her. Just as he concludes that he should do this, a fracas is heard from within the factory - Zuniga sends José to investigate. The girls stream out with sharply conflicting accounts of what has occurred, but it is certain that Carmen and one of her workmates quarrelled and that the other girl was wounded. Carmen, led out by José, scornfully refuses to answer any of Zuniga's questions. José is ordered to bind her wrists and take her to prison. While the lieutenant is in the guard room making out the order, Carmen remarks that José has kept the flower she threw and, when José forbids her to speak further, launches into song. She plans to go dancing at Lillas Pastia's tavern outside the walls of Seville but, since she threw out her latest lover yesterday, will have no one to dance with. But, she does know a certain corporal .... Mesmerised, José agrees to help her escape if she promises to become his mistress. He unties the rope and, following a prearranged plan as they leave for prison, falls when she pushes him. Carmen escapes.

**ACT II**     *Lillas Pastia's tavern*

Carmen and her friends Frasquita and Mercédès entertain Zuniga and other officers. Zuniga tells Carmen how José was demoted and imprisoned for his part in her escape, but is this very day due for release. Carmen is overjoyed. Then a torchlight procession in honour of the bullfighter Escamillo is heard passing, and the officers invite him in. He describes the manly excitements of his profession, and in particular the manly rewards that follow a successful corrida. Escamillo then propositions Carmen, but she replies that she is otherwise engaged for the moment - he says he will wait. Carmen refuses to leave with Zuniga, who is also in her spell. Leaving the tavern with his company, he threatens to return later. The smugglers Dancaire and Remendado enter. They have business in hand for which their regular female accomplices are essential. Frasquita and Mercédès are game, but Carmen refuses to leave Seville: she is in love. Her friends can't believe what they are hearing, but even as they taunt that her brave corporal will not come for her, José's song is heard in the distance. The smugglers tactfully withdraw.

Carmen good-humouredly upbraids José for not using the file and money that she sent him concealed in a bread roll. She also tells José that she has been dancing for his officers. When he reacts jealously, she agrees to dance for him alone. As she does so, bugles are heard sounding the retreat. José says that he must return to barracks. Amazed at his loyalty to the army, Carmen mocks his callousness, but he answers by producing the flower she threw and telling her how its faded scent sustained his love during the long weeks in prison. She replies that he doesn't love her; if he did he would desert and join her in a life of freedom in the mountains. When, torn with doubts, he finally refuses, she dismisses him contemptuously. As he is leaving, Zuniga reappears who, seeing the two together, scorns Carmen for choosing a junior soldier in place of an officer of rank. In jealous rage José attacks him, only to be restrained by the smugglers who have returned. With mock respect they put Zuniga under temporary constraint. José now has no choice but to desert and join the smugglers.

**ACT III**     *The smugglers hide-out in the mountains above Seville*

The gang enters stealthily with contraband and pauses for a brief rest while Dancaire and Remendado go on a reconnaissance mission. Carmen and José quarrel bitterly, and José gazes regretfully down to the valley where his mother is living. Carmen scornfully tells him to join her. The women turn the cards to tell their fortunes: Frasquita and Mercédès foresee rich and gallant lovers, but Carmen's cards spell death, for her and for José - she calmly accepts their prophecy. Remendado and Dancaire return with the names of the three customs officers guarding the pass: Carmen, Frasquita and Mercédès know how to deal with them. All depart.

**ACT III** *cont.*

Michaëla enters, guided by a shepherd. He leaves her, nervously, but she says that she fears nothing so much as meeting the woman who has turned the man she once loved into a criminal. Even so, she hurries away in fright when a shot rings out. It is José firing at an intruder, who turns out to be Escamillo taking time off from rounding up bulls to visit Carmen. When he refers scornfully to the soldier whom Carmen once loved, José reveals himself and they fight. Escamillo toys with his opponent, goading him to ever greater fury, but then slips and falls. Before José can kill him, Carmen and the smugglers return, once more halting the fight.

As Escamillo saunters away, he invites everyone, especially Carmen, to be his guests at the next bullfight in Seville, leaving José at the end of his tether. Michaëla's hiding place is discovered, and she begs José to go with her to his mother but, since Carmen encourages him to do so, he furiously refuses. Michaëla then reveals that his mother is dying. José has no choice but to go, and he promises Carmen that they will meet again. As José and Michaëla leave, Escamillo is heard singing jauntily in the distance.

**ACT IV** *Outside the bullring in Seville*

Amid the excited crowd cheering the bullfighters are Frasquita and Mercédès, who have heard that José is on the loose with a warrant is out for his arrest. Carmen enters on Escamillo's arm. Frasquita and Mercédès warn Carmen that José has been seen in the crowd - she says that she is not afraid. José enters. He implores her to forget the past and start a new life with him, but she tells him calmly that everything between them is over. Even though the cards have prophesied that he will kill her, she will never give in: she was born free and free she will die. While the crowd is heard cheering Escamillo, José tries to prevent Carmen from joining her new lover and in jealous rage seeks to drag her away. Carmen finally loses her temper, takes from her finger the ring that José once gave her, and throws it at his feet. In a fit of passion José stabs her. As the crowd pours out of the bullring, he confesses to the murder of the woman he loved.

## Bizet, Georges

(b Paris, 25 October 1838; d Bougival, nr Paris, 3 June 1875)

Bizet's childhood was steeped in music: his father was an amateur singer and composer, and his mother came from a highly musical family. In October 1848, just before his tenth birthday, he began to attend the Paris Conservatoire where he developed extraordinary gifts as a pianist and score-reader and won prizes for both piano and organ playing. In 1855, aged only 17, Bizet launched his operatic career with *La maison du docteur*. In 1857, he won the Prix de Rome, a scholarship which allowed him to study in Italy. During the three years he spent there, Bizet acquired a taste for Italian art, music and architecture and also allowed himself for the first time to indulge his taste for women (he would later parent an illegitimate child with his father's maidservant). His gregarious, lively (and often blunt) personality was much in demand in arts circles at this time, as were his outstanding pianistic gifts (Liszt is later said to have been dazzled by Bizet's skills in sight reading).

In his late 20's, Bizet fell in love with the daughter of his first composition teacher, Fromental Halévy. Geneviève Halévy was a beautiful young woman and the couple were engaged in October of 1867. But the family, prosperous Jewish bankers on her mother's side, who were in the strange position of being both wealthy yet currently hard up, disapproved of her marriage to an unsuccessful composer and the engagement was broken off. Had her father still been alive, Bizet's path to marriage might have been smoothed. In the event they were married in a civil ceremony (Bizet had no tolerance for established religion) in June 1869 and were very happy for a while. But Bizet's lack of serious success, his brusque character and her persistent neurosis touching on mental disorder, made the last years of Bizet's short life less than tranquil.

In 1872, the directors of the Opéra-Comique invited Bizet to compose an opera in three acts. Meilhac and Halévy were named as librettists and various subjects suggested. It was Bizet himself who put forward Prosper Mérimée's novel *Carmen* as a subject. The librettists were enthusiastic, but the directors were alarmed at the thought of *Carmen* being killed on stage and other elements unsuitable in what he regarded as a family opera house. However, a change of management allowed the project to continue and Bizet began work on the score in 1873, completing the orchestration in the summer of 1874. During this time, Bizet's marriage was under constant strain due to the composer's moods and to his wife's increasingly unstable mental state. Though there is no hard evidence, it is rumoured that both had affairs - Bizet with his *Carmen*, Galli-Marié .

Rehearsals began in September 1874. During the unusually long rehearsal period (over six months) Bizet had to contend with objections from both the orchestra, who found Bizet's forthright style of scoring beyond their reach, and the chorus, who were expected to act convincingly as individuals rather than respond in unison as a group. Fortunately Bizet was firmly supported by Galli-Marié and his *Don José* Lhérie, so that few compromises had to be made. The most shocking features of the opera were Carmen's blatant sexuality and her readiness to discard men like picked flowers; also the rowdy women's chorus who both fight and smoke on stage. To have Carmen murdered on stage at the final curtain was simply too strong for many tastes.

The opera eventually opened on 3 March 1875. Despite the notorious response of the press and the evident outrage of many in the audience, Carmen was not truly a failure. It ran for 45 performances in 1875 with three more in 1876, sustained partly by its reputation as a shocker and by the appalling misfortune of Bizet's untimely death. Discerning musicians, such as Saint-Saëns and Tchaikovsky, recognised its force and originality from the first. Parisian managements, however, kept clear of the work until 1883, by which time it already enjoyed world success.

Soon after Carmen opened, Bizet suffered a recurrence of quinsy (an inflammation of the tonsils and throat). It seems that the melancholy he was experiencing at the poor reception of his opera may well have weakened his resistance to ailments from which, in other circumstances, he might have recovered. He was soon badly rheumatic. Then, on 30th May 1876, after foolishly swimming in the Seine, he suffered two heart attacks and died three days later on 3rd June. He was 36 years old.

Bizet would surely have extended his list of masterpieces had he lived. The Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi only found his true voice at about the same age as Bizet and lived into his 80s. The German composer Richard Wagner at 36, had still to write his seven greatest operas. It is indeed sad to think of Carmen as the tip of an iceberg that will never be revealed.

## Opera Glossary

**aria** A song for solo voice reflecting how the character feels (usually miserable) about what has just or is about to happen.

**auditorium** Space within the theatre occupied by the audience.

**baritone** Middle-range man's voice, lurking somewhere between bass and tenor.

**bass** Lowest male voice. Often plays characters with dubious moral fibre.

**chorus** A body of singers who (mostly) sing and act as a group to make the crowd scenes a bit more plausible. Also the term used for any musical number sung by this group.

**conductor** Hand-waving-head-honcho, positioned to obscure the view of the lady sitting in the centre of the front row. Makes sure everyone is performing the same piece.

**contralto** (or alto) Low-pitched woman's voice. Not to be confused with... counter tenor High-pitched man's voice. Nearest we have nowadays to a castrato (from the verb to castrate...ouch...)

**ensemble** From the French word for "together". When two or more soloists try to have their say at the same time (can get rather messy...). Ensemble for two is a duet, three is a trio, four a quartet and so on.

**finale** The final number of an act - sung by an ensemble (see above).

**intermezzo** A piece of music played between the acts of an opera (usually just long enough for the prima donna to put on her sixth frock of the show).

**interval** A (welcome) break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around, catch up on what's been happening, join the chorus at the bar...

**libretto** The text of an opera. Written by a librettist.

**mezzo-soprano** Female singer who can't quite reach those top notes. Not much glass-shattering action here.

**orchestra** Group of musicians found in the pit.

**overture** Music at the start of the show. Sets the scene, warms up the orchestra and reminds the audience that the performance is about to begin.

**prima donna** The leading woman singer in an operatic cast. Not to be confused with Guy Ritchie's wife...

**props** Mobile pieces of the set which help to make it all a bit more believable.

**proscenium arch** Wall in front of the curtain, dividing the stage from the auditorium.

**recitative** The bits which aren't the songs. Closer to the rhythm of speech and often accompanied by just a harpsichord or piano. Used to further the action of the story (we'd never get home if the plot was told through the arias...).

**repetiteur** from the French for to repeat. This tortured soul sits in on rehearsals and pretends to be an orchestra at the piano.

**score** The full score contains all the sung and orchestral parts in the opera. The vocal score has the voice parts and a piano reduction of the orchestra (for rehearsals - see repetiteur).

**soprano** High female voice. Watch out for those delicate window panes...

**synopsis** Outline of the plot. Especially useful during the interval when it is once more light enough to find out what on earth is happening.

**tenor** A high male voice. The good guy, pure of heart and all that.