MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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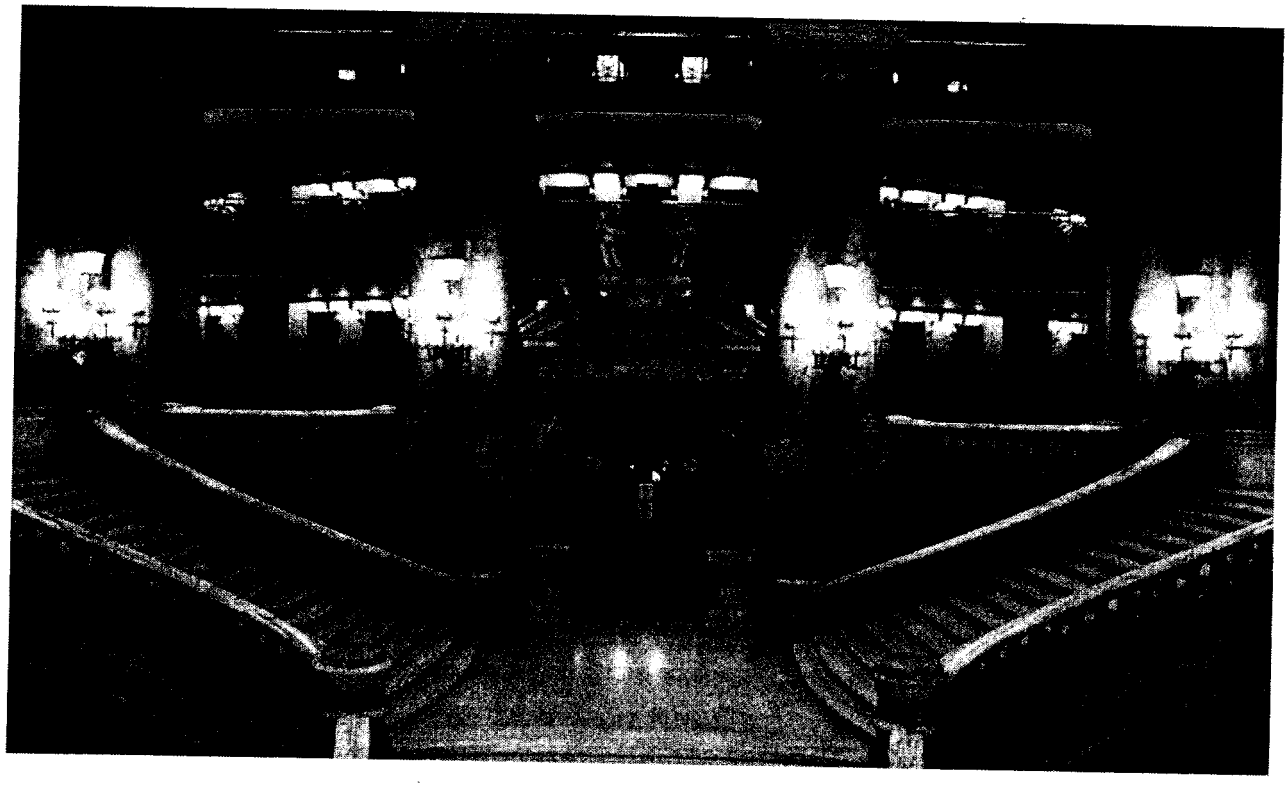


Figure 9.5: *Lobby of the Opéra in Paris, designed by Charles Garnier*

Admiralty between 1877 and 1880—thus at the time of the premiere of *Pinafore*—and who, like Sir Joseph, had no naval experience when appointed to his post. After the premiere of the operetta, he became known as "Pinafore Smith."

FRENCH OPERA

Perhaps no operatic work of the later nineteenth century better embodies popular appeal, a strategic mixture of styles, and an engagement with issues of social and ethnic identity than Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1875). To place it in context, we need first to return to the operatic world of late-nineteenth-century Paris, where each theater was associated with a distinct type of work. Offenbach's operettas or *opéras bouffes* were primarily written for the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens and the Théâtre des Variétés. The other most important venues were the Paris Opéra, the Opéra-Comique, and the Théâtre Lyrique.

From the 1870s the Opéra was housed at a spectacular and ornate building designed by Charles Garnier. Both the architecture and technology of the Palais Garnier, as it was known, were advanced for the time. Especially striking was the Grand Staircase, a massive double stairway created from marble of different colors (Fig. 9.5). In such a setting the patrons themselves became part of the show, as Garnier intended: "The spectators leaning on the balconies garnish the walls, rendering them alive, as it were, while those going up and down the stairs themselves added to this impression. In adding materials

and hanging draperies, chandeliers and candelabra, and with the marble adorned with flowers, a sumptuous and brilliant composition will result." For its productions the Opéra used the most up-to-date gas lighting system, equipped with an "organ" of distribution pipes that could simulate night or day at the pull of a lever. In 1881, electric lighting was installed. Operas performed at the Palais Garnier included works by Meyerbeer, Verdi, Gounod, and (in the 1890s) Wagner and Camille Saint-Saëns.

The Opéra-Comique, which had been established in 1783, was the main rival to the Opéra. Its name reflected the genre that it was created to produce. *Opéra comique* refers not to "comedy" in a narrow sense, but to plots or situations on a more human scale that steer clear of the epic, historical, and often tragic themes that dominated at the Opéra. Until 1864, all operas staged at the Opéra-Comique were required by law to have spoken dialogue rather than recitative in between the musical numbers, another feature that distinguished them from grand opera. As the nineteenth century wore on, many of these differences began to erode, and after 1870 any firm link between genre and theater was broken. Operas produced at the Opéra-Comique often dealt with serious topics and sometimes involved strong, independent heroines. Examples included Bizet's *Carmen*, about a rebellious, defiant Gypsy woman; Jules Massenet's *Manon* (1884), tracing the decline of a young girl into deceit and promiscuity; and Gustave Charpentier's *Louise* (1900), about a poor dressmaker in working-class Paris. The Opéra-Comique also presented the premiere of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), the Impressionist masterpiece about doomed lovers.

During its 18 years of existence, from 1852 to 1870, the Théâtre Lyrique was the most important rival to the Opéra and Opéra-Comique. During the directorship of Léon Carvalho the house was especially known for introducing major works by contemporary French composers that fell between grand and comic opera, including Charles Gounod's *Faust* (1859) and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867). The Théâtre Lyrique also familiarized Parisian audiences with foreign works in translation, among them Italian operas by Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi, and German works by Weber and Wagner.

BIZET'S *CARMEN*

From its somewhat modest beginnings at the Opéra-Comique, Bizet's *Carmen* has become perhaps the most popular of all operas. The authors of its libretto, based on a novella by Prosper Mérimée, were also Offenbach's collaborators, Meilhac and Halévy. Halévy would later recall how the codirector of the Opéra-Comique, Adolphe de Leuven, was dubious about Bizet's idea for this opera. "Carmen! The Carmen of Mérimée?" de Leuven exclaimed. "Wasn't she murdered by her lover? And the underworld of thieves, Gypsies, cigarette girls—at the Opéra-Comique, the theater of family, of wedding parties? You

would put the public to flight. No, no, impossible!" Halévy tried to reassure de Leuven:

> I persisted, explaining that ours would be a softer, tamer Carmen. In addition, we would introduce a character in the tradition of the Opéra-Comique—a young innocent girl, very pure [Micaëla]. True, we would have Gypsies, but Gypsy comedians. And the death of Carmen would be glossed over at the very end, in a holiday atmosphere, with a parade. . . . After a long, difficult struggle, M. de Leuven acceded. "But I pray you," he said, "try not to have her die. Death—at the Opéra-Comique! This has never been seen!"

Carmen's death at the end of the opera can hardly be said to be "glossed over" by a holiday atmosphere at the bullfight, but Halévy did make good on many of his promises.

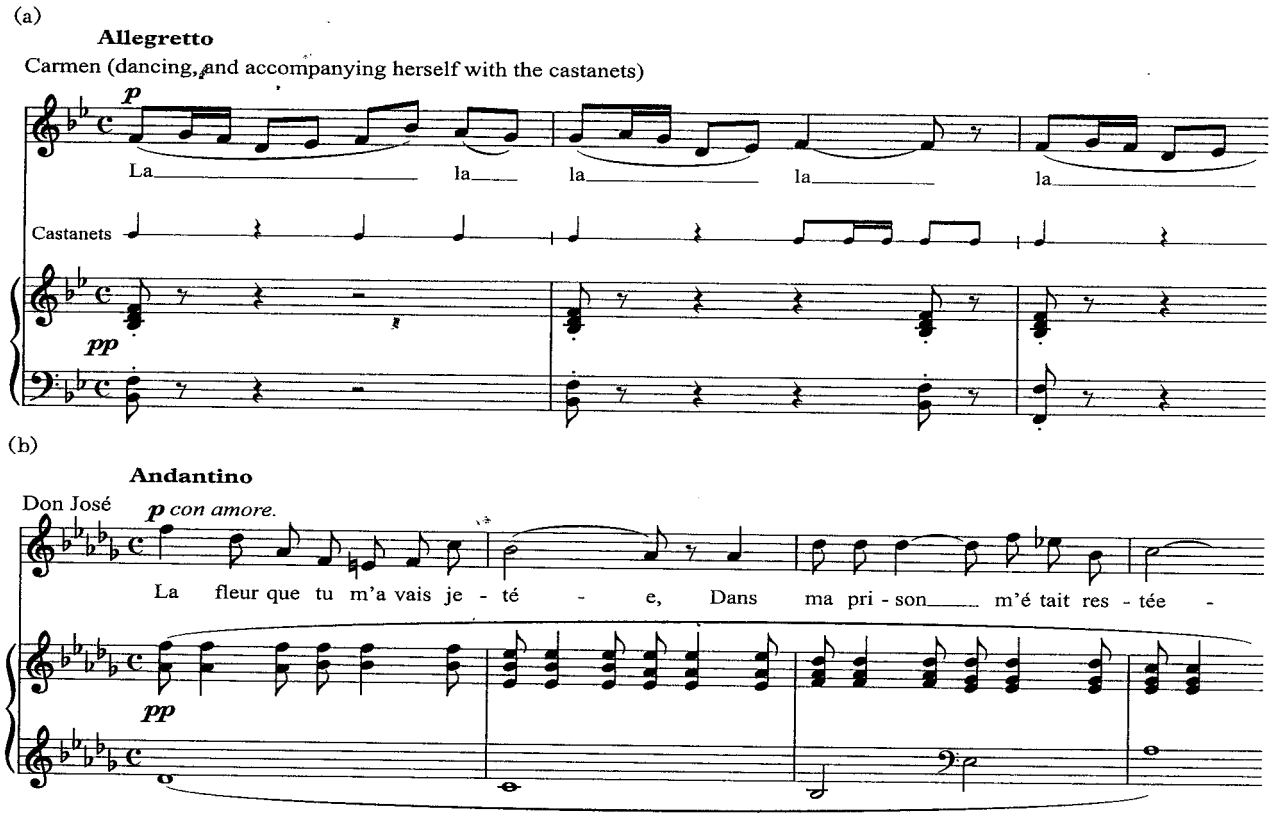
In *Carmen*, a Spanish soldier (Don José) on duty in Seville is seduced by Carmen, a rebellious cigarette factory worker who has been arrested and is under his watch. The love-struck Don José abandons his responsibilities to join Carmen and her Gypsy friends in smuggling activities. Even a visit from his hometown girlfriend, Micaëla, does nothing to dissuade Don José. Eventually Carmen abandons him for the handsome matador Escamillo and is murdered by her jealous former lover.

One can understand de Leuven's concern: the character of Carmen in Bizet's opera is an Other embodying several stereotypes that would have seemed threatening—but at the same time alluring—to the French bourgeoisie. Carmen is a foreigner, an ethnic outsider; she comes from the lower class; she flouts the law; she is sexually available and promiscuous, even if not specifically a prostitute. The character of Micaëla (invented for the opera, as we have seen) is her polar opposite—a sweet, somewhat sexless white middle-class woman who espouses family values. Don José is caught directly between these women, and it is his inability to resolve the conflict that leads ultimately to his demise.

Bizet conveys these character types and relationships with extraordinary musico-dramatic skill. He sets off the musical numbers with spoken dialogue, as was still the norm at the Opéra-Comique. The Gypsy world is captured by instruments like castanets and tambourines, and the use of Spanish-style dances, rhythms, and melodies. Carmen's two best-known solo numbers, the *Habanera* and the *Seguidilla*, evoke Hispanic dance prototypes. (See Anthology 16 and the Opera Sampler.) The *Habanera*, although suitably exotic in this context, would have sounded familiar to many in the audience, as Bizet based it on a song in Afro-Cuban style by a Spanish composer whose work was popular in Parisian cabarets. In *Carmen*, the respectable bourgeois world of Micaëla is conveyed by a tuneful musical style more characteristic of the Opéra-Comique.

The two musical idioms, exotic and conventional, clash most directly in the duet between Don José and Carmen in Act 2, a long, complex number that shows the great range of Bizet's musico-dramatic ability. Carmen dances

Example 9.5: *Bizet,* Carmen, *Act 2, Carmen–Don José duet*



The flower you tossed me, I kept in my prison.

seductively and plays castanets while singing a wordless Spanish-style vocalise. The melody, simple and repetitive, is really only one part of her "multimedia" act, an accompaniment to her dance (Ex. 9.5a). The sounds of an offstage bugle remind Don José of his military duties, which Carmen defies him to obey. Don José responds with a passionate aria, *La fleur que tu m'avais jetée* (The flower that you tossed to me), with pulsating rhythms, a broad lyrical melody, and chromatic harmonies (Ex. 9.5b). It ends with the phrase "Carmen, je t'aime" (Carmen, I love you), expressing feelings that she will never reciprocate. In this duet, each character has reverted to type, and we sense that their relationship is doomed.

As might have been predicted, at the opera's premiere in 1875 the role of Carmen offended many of the French bourgeoisie. One critic described Carmen as "a savage; a half Gypsy, half Andalusian; sensual, mocking, shameless; believing neither in God nor in the Devil . . . she is the veritable prostitute of the gutter and the crossroads." Such reactions fit Carmen and her music neatly into an Orientalist frame, as discussed above, in the sense that Bizet and his librettists present her as a stereotype to whom the audience can feel superior. But there is more to Carmen. Recent feminist readings of the opera, and stagings influenced by them, have interpreted the main character not as a

shameless savage, but as a heroic woman with the courage to resist sexual and societal exploitation, and as a tragic victim of violence in personal relationships. Both interpretations—Orientalist femme fatale and defiant heroine—are part of the rich legacy of this opera.

Soon after its premiere, *Carmen* won a place in the international operatic repertory, a development Bizet did not live to see. Praise came from distinguished figures outside France as different as Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Wagner, and Nietzsche. But there is a twist: *Carmen* became famous (and is often still heard today) not in its original form, but in a version from later in 1875 for which the composer Ernest Guiraud (mentioned above in connection with the completion of Offenbach's *Contes d'Hoffmann*) replaced the original spoken dialogue with recitatives. This significantly alters *Carmen* by giving it the more continuous style and feel of grand opera. At the same time, the change—which Bizet himself was apparently considering before he died—allowed it to be played more easily on stages across the world. The opera "industry" discussed earlier in this book can be both harmful and benevolent: even as it distorted the original form of *Carmen*, it helped to perpetuate and canonize the work.

As we have seen in this chapter, music theater of the later nineteenth century, designed mainly as entertainment and contained within four walls and a proscenium, was often a reflection of what happened outside the theater. Political tensions, the struggle for nationhood, differences between social classes, the role of women, and the status of "Others"—these issues and more were explored by the best composers and librettists of the day, including Verdi, Offenbach, Sullivan, and Bizet; and Piave, Boito, Meilhac, Halévy, and Gilbert. Whether the work was comic, tragic, or somewhere in between—whether the intention was to evoke laughter, tears, or just attentive engagement with the musical drama onstage—audiences in this era beyond Romanticism were always made to appreciate the tensions between art and the real world.

FOR FURTHER READING

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