

= Les pêcheurs de perles =

Les pêcheurs de perles (The Pearl Fishers) is an opera in three acts by the French composer Georges Bizet , to a libretto by Eugène Cormon and Michel Carré . It was first performed on 30 September 1863 at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris , and was given 18 performances in its initial run . Set in ancient times on the island of Ceylon , the opera tells the story of how two men 's vow of eternal friendship is threatened by their love for the same woman , whose own dilemma is the conflict between secular love and her sacred oath as a priestess . The friendship duet " Au fond du temple saint " , generally known as " The Pearl Fishers Duet " , is one of the best @-@ known numbers in Western opera .

At the time of the premiere , Bizet (born on 25 October 1838) was not yet 25 years old : he had yet to establish himself in the Parisian musical world . The commission to write Les pêcheurs arose from his standing as a former winner of the prestigious Prix de Rome . Despite a good reception by the public , press reactions to the work were generally hostile and dismissive , although other composers , notably Hector Berlioz , found considerable merit in the music . The opera was not revived in Bizet 's lifetime , but from 1886 onwards it was performed with some regularity in Europe and North America , and from the mid @-@ 20th century has entered the repertory of opera houses worldwide . Because the autograph score was lost , post @-@ 1886 productions were based on amended versions of the score that contained significant departures from the original . Since the 1970s , efforts have been made to reconstruct the score in accordance with Bizet 's intentions .

Modern critical opinion has been kinder than that of Bizet 's day . Commentators describe the quality of the music as uneven and at times unoriginal , but acknowledge the opera as a work of promise in which Bizet 's gifts for melody and evocative instrumentation are clearly evident . They have identified clear foreshadowings of the composer 's genius which would culminate , 10 years later , in Carmen . Since 1950 the work has been recorded on numerous occasions , in both the revised and original versions .

= = Background = =

Bizet 's first opera , the one @-@ act Le docteur Miracle , was written in 1856 when the 18 @-@ year @-@ old composer was a student at the Conservatoire de Paris . It was Bizet 's winning entry in a competition organised by the celebrated composer Jacques Offenbach , and gained him a cash award , a gold medal , and a performance of the prize work at the Théâtre des Bouffes @-@ Parisiens . In 1857 Bizet was awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome , and as a result spent most of the following three years in Italy , where he wrote Don Procopio , a short opera buffa in the style of Donizetti . By this time Bizet had written several non @-@ stage works , including his Symphony in C , but the poor reception accorded to his 1858 Te Deum , a religious work he composed in Rome , helped convince him that his future lay primarily with the musical theatre . He planned and possibly began several operatic works before his return to Paris in 1860 , but none of these projects came to fruition .

In Paris , Bizet discovered the difficulties faced by young and relatively unknown composers trying to get their operas performed . Of the capital 's two state @-@ subsidised opera houses , the Opéra and the Opéra @-@ Comique , the former offered a static repertoire in which works by foreign composers , particularly Rossini and Meyerbeer , were dominant . Even established French composers such as Gounod had difficulty getting works performed there . At the Opéra @-@ Comique , innovation was equally rare ; although more French works were performed , the style and character of most productions had hardly changed since the 1830s . However , one condition of the Opéra @-@ Comique 's state funding was that from time to time it should produce one @-@ act works by former Prix de Rome laureates . Under this provision , Bizet wrote La guzla de l'Emir , with a libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré , and this went into rehearsal early in 1862 .

In April 1862 , as the La guzla rehearsals proceeded , Bizet was approached by Léon Carvalho , manager of the independent Théâtre Lyrique company . Carvalho had been offered an annual grant of 100 @, @ 000 francs by the retiring Minister of Fine Arts , Count Walewski , on condition that

each year he stage a new three @-@ act opera from a recent Prix de Rome winner . Carvalho had a high opinion of Bizet 's abilities , and offered him the libretto of Les pêcheurs de perles , an exotic story by Carré and Eugène Cormon set on the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) . Sensing the opportunity for a genuine theatrical success , Bizet accepted the commission . Because Walewski restricted his grant to composers who had not had any previous work performed commercially , Bizet hurriedly withdrew La guzla from the Opéra @-@ Comique ; it has never been performed , and the music has disappeared .

= = Roles = =

= = Synopsis = =

Place : Ceylon

Time : Ancient times

= = = Act 1 = = =

The scene is a desolate seashore , with the ruins of a Hindu temple in the background . A chorus of pearl fishermen sing of the dangerous tasks that lie ahead (" Sur la grève en feu ") , and perform ritual dances to drive away evil spirits . They then elect one of their number , Zurga , as their leader , or " king " . Nadir enters , and is hailed by Zurga as a long @-@ lost friend . Left alone , the pair reminisce about their past in the city of Kandy , where their friendship was nearly destroyed by their mutual love of a young priestess whose beauty they had glimpsed briefly . They had each renounced their love for this stranger and had sworn to remain true to each other . Now , reunited , they affirm once again that they will be faithful until death (" Au fond du temple saint ") .

A boat draws up on the beach bearing the veiled figure of Leila , the virgin priestess whose prayers are required to ensure the safety of the fishermen . Although neither of them recognises her , she is the woman from Kandy with whom Nadir and Zurga had been in love . As Zurga is explaining her duties , she recognises Nadir , but she says nothing and shortly afterwards is led up to the temple by the high priest Nourabad . Zurga and the fishermen go down to the sea , leaving Nadir alone . In a troubled soliloquy before he sleeps he recalls how , in Kandy , he had broken his vows to Zurga and pursued his love for the veiled woman (" Je crois entendre encore ") . It was the rumour that she might be found in this place that brought him here . Alone in the temple , Leila prays and sings . Nadir wakes and , recognising the voice of his long @-@ desired lover , traces it to the temple . Leila briefly draws her veil aside , he sees it is she and the pair declare their renewed passion . On the beach , the fishermen plead with her to continue protecting them , but she tells Nadir she will sing for him alone (" O Dieu Brahma ") .

= = = Act 2 = = =

In the temple with Nourabad , Leila expresses fear at being left alone , but Nourabad exhorts her to be brave and to fulfil her vows to Brahma on pain of her own death . She tells him of the courage she once displayed when , as a child , she had hidden a fugitive from his enemies and refused to give him up even when threatened with death (" J 'étais encore enfant ") . The fugitive had rewarded her with a necklace that he asked her always to wear . She had kept this promise , as she would her vows . On the priest 's departure , Leila quietly muses on the former times when she and Nadir would meet together secretly (" Comme autrefois dans la nuit sombre ") . Nadir then enters ; in her fear of Nourabad 's threats Leila begs him to leave , but he remains and the two declare their love in a passionate duet (" Léïla ! Léïla ! ... Dieu puissant , le voilà ! ") . He goes , promising to return next night , but as he leaves he is captured by the fishermen and brought back to the temple . Zurga , as the fishermen 's leader , at first resists the fishermen 's calls for Nadir 's execution and advocates mercy . However , after Nourabad removes Leila 's veil , Zurga recognises her as his

former love ; consumed by jealousy and rage , he orders that both Nadir and Leila be put to death . A violent storm erupts , as the fishermen unite in singing a hymn to Brahma (" Brahma divin Brahma ! ") .

= = = Act 3 = = =

In his tent on the beach , Zurga notes that the storm has abated , as has his rage ; he now feels remorse for his anger towards Nadir (" L 'orage est calmé ") . Leila is brought in ; Zurga is captivated by her beauty as he listens to her pleas for Nadir 's life , but his jealousy is rekindled . He confesses his love for her , but refuses mercy (" Je suis jaloux ") . Nourabad and some of the fishermen enter to report that the funeral pyre is ready . As Leila is taken away , Zurga observes her giving one of the fishermen her necklace , asking for its return to her mother . With a shout , Zurga rushes out after the group and seizes the necklace .

Outside the temple , Nadir waits beside the funeral pyre as the crowd , singing and dancing , anticipates the dawn and the coming double execution (" Dès que le soleil ") . He is joined by Leila ; resigned now to their deaths , the pair sing of how their souls will soon be united in heaven . A glow appears in the sky , and Zurga rushes in to report that the fishermen 's camp is ablaze . As the men hurry away to save their homes , Zurga frees Leila and Nadir . He returns the necklace to Leila , and reveals that he is the man she saved when she was a child . He recognises now that his love for her is in vain , and tells her and Nadir to flee . As the couple depart , singing of the life of love that awaits them , Zurga is left alone , to await the fishermen 's return (" Plus de crainte ... Rêves d 'amour , adieu ! ") .

(In the revised version of the ending introduced after the opera 's 1886 revival , Nourabad witnesses Zurga 's freeing of the prisoners and denounces him to the fishermen , one of whom stabs Zurga to death as the last notes sound of Leila and Nadir 's farewell song . In some variations Zurga meets his death in other ways , and his body is consigned to the pyre .)

= = Writing and compositional history = =

The libretto was written by Eugène Cormon and Michel Carré . Cormon was a prolific author of libretti and straight drama , usually in collaboration with other writers . In his career he wrote or co - wrote at least 135 works , of which *Les dragons de Villars* , set to music by Aimé Maillart , was perhaps the most successful . Carré , who had initially trained as a painter , had worked with Jules Barbier on Gounod 's opera *Faust* and had co - written the play *Les contes fantastiques d 'Hoffmann* , which became the basis of the libretto for Offenbach 's opera *The Tales of Hoffmann* . Before *Les pêcheurs de perles* Cormon and Carré had previously written a libretto for Maillart on a similar theme , *Les pêcheurs de Catane* , which had been performed in 1860 ; they had originally planned to set their new story in Mexico before changing its location to Ceylon .

By general critical consent the libretto of *Les pêcheurs de perles* is a work of poor quality . The weak plot , as Bizet 's biographer Winton Dean observes , turns on the unlikely coincidence regarding Leila 's necklace , and no real effort is made in the text to bring any of the characters to life : " They are the regulation sopranos , tenors , etc . , with their faces blacked " . Mina Curtiss , in her book on Bizet , dismisses the text as banal and imitative . Donal Henahan of *The New York Times* , writing in 1986 , said that the libretto " rank [ed] right down there with the most appallingly inept of its kind " . The writers themselves admitted its shortcomings : Cormon commented later that had they been aware of Bizet 's quality as a composer , they would have tried harder . Carré was worried about the weak ending , and constantly sought suggestions for changing it ; Curtiss records that in exasperation , the theatre manager Carvalho suggested that Carré burn the libretto . This facetious remark , Curtiss asserts , led Carré to end the opera with the fishermen 's tents ablaze as Leila and Nadir make their escape .

Because he did not receive Carvalho 's commission until April 1863 , with the projected opening night set for mid - September , Bizet composed quickly with , Curtiss says , " a tenacity and concentration quite foreign to him in his Roman days " . He had some music available on which he

could draw ; through the previous winter he had worked on the score of an opera , Ivan IV with the promise , which fell through , that the work would be staged in Baden @-@ Baden . Ivan IV provided music for three numbers in *Les pêcheurs de perles* : the prelude ; part of Zurga 's " Une fille inconnue " ; and the third act duet " O lumière sainte " . The " Brahma divin Brahma " chorus was adapted from the rejected *Te Deum* , and the chorus " Ah chante , chante encore " from *Don Procopio* . It is also likely that music composed for the cancelled *La guzla de l'émir* found its way into the new opera 's score , which was completed by early August . The libretto was changed frequently during the creation process , even when the work had reached the rehearsal stage ; the chorus " L 'ombre descend " was added at Bizet 's request , and other numbers were shortened or removed .

= = Performance history and reception = =

= = = Premiere and initial run = = =

The premiere , originally planned for 14 September 1863 , was postponed to the 30th because of the illness of the soprano lead , Léontine de Maësen . The first @-@ night audience at the Théâtre Lyrique received the work well , and called for Bizet at the conclusion . The writer Louis Gallet , who later would provide several librettos for Bizet , described the composer on this occasion as " a little dazed ... a forest of thick curly hair above a round , still rather childish face , enlivened by the quick brown eyes ... " The audience 's appreciation was not reflected in the majority of the press reviews , which generally castigated both the work and what they considered Bizet 's lack of modesty in appearing on stage . Gustave Bertrand in *Le Ménestrel* wrote that " this sort of exhibition is admissible only for a most extraordinary success , and even then we prefer to have the composer dragged on in spite of himself , or at least pretending to be " . Another critic surmised that the calls for the composer had been orchestrated by a " clique " of Bizet 's friends , strategically distributed .

Of the opera itself , Benjamin Jouvin of *Le Figaro* wrote : " There were neither fishermen in the libretto nor pearls in the music " . He considered that on every page the score displayed " the bias of the school to which [Bizet] belongs , that of Richard Wagner " . Bertrand compared the work unfavourably with those of contemporary French composers such as Charles Gounod and Félicien David . " Nevertheless " , he wrote , " there is a talent floating in the midst of all these regrettable imitations " . Hector Berlioz was a voice apart in the general critical hostility ; his review of the work in *Journal des Débats* praised the music 's originality and subtlety : " The score of *Les pêcheurs de perles* does M. Bizet the greatest honour " , he wrote . Among Bizet 's contemporaries , the dramatist Ludovic Halévy wrote that this early work announced Bizet as a composer of quality : " I persist in finding in [the score] the rarest virtues " . The youthful composer Émile Paladilhe told his father that the opera was superior to anything that the established French opera composers of the day , such as Auber and Thomas , were capable of producing .

In its initial run *Les pêcheurs de perles* ran for 18 performances , alternating with Mozart 's *The Marriage of Figaro* . It closed on 23 November 1863 , and although it brought the theatre little financial success , Bizet had won admiration from his peers . Carvalho was satisfied enough to ask Bizet to quickly finish *Ivan IV* , with a view to its early production at the Théâtre Lyrique . This idea eventually came to nothing ; *Ivan IV* remained unperformed until 1946 .

= = = Early revivals = = =

After its opening run , *Les pêcheurs* was not performed again until 11 years after Bizet 's death when , on 20 March 1886 , it was presented in Italian at La Scala , Milan . After this it received regular stagings in European cities , often with the Italian version of the libretto . These revivals , which possibly reflected the growing success of *Carmen* , were followed by the publication of several versions of the music that incorporated significant differences from Bizet 's original . In particular the finale was altered , to provide a more dramatic ending ? " a grand Meyerbeerian

holocaust " according to Dean . This revised conclusion included a trio composed by Benjamin Godard . These corrupted scores remained the basis of productions for nearly a century .

The opera received its British premiere on 22 April 1887 , at London 's Covent Garden , under the title *Leila* . The part of Nadir was sung by Paul Lhérie , the original Don José in the 1875 *Carmen* . Press reactions were muted ; The Times 's music critic found much of the music incompatible with the exotic setting ? the hymn to Brahma was , he suggested , reminiscent of a Lutheran chorale . The Observer 's reporter found " no trace of genuine inspiration " , and drew unfavourable comparisons with *Carmen* . When Covent Garden repeated the production in May 1889 the Princess of Wales and other members of the British royal family were present . The Manchester Guardian 's correspondent praised the singers but found that the work " becomes weaker and weaker as it goes on " .

Les pêcheurs returned to Paris on 20 April 1889 , when it was performed ? in Italian ? at the Théâtre de la Gaîté . Despite a distinguished cast ? Emma Calvé , Jean @-@ Alexandre Talazac and Lhérie , now a baritone , in the role of Zurga ? critical reviews were no more enthusiastic than those which had greeted the original performances . Le Ménestrel excused Bizet on account of his youth , while The Manchester Guardian 's report summed up the Parisian view of the work as " almost entirely lacking in ... boldness & originality " . On 24 April 1893 Carvalho revived the work , in French , at the Opéra @-@ Comique , its first performance at what would later become its regular home .

Productions continued to proliferate in Europe , and further afield ; on 25 August 1893 the opera received its American premiere in Philadelphia . Two @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half years later , on 11 January 1896 , the first two acts were performed at the New York Metropolitan Opera (the " Met ") , as part of a programme that included Jules Massenet 's one @-@ act opera *La Navarraise* . The cast was led by Calvé and the Italian baritone Mario Ancona .

The Met 's first complete staging of the opera came 20 years later , on 13 November 1916 , when a star cast that included Enrico Caruso , Frieda Hempel and Giuseppe De Luca gave three performances . According to W. H. Chase in the Evening Sun , the act 1 duet " brought down the house in a superb blending of the two men 's voices " ; later , in " Je crois entendre encore " , Caruso " did some of the most artistic singing in plaintive minor " . In The Sun , W. J. Henderson , praised Hempel for her " ravishing upper tones " , Da Luca was " a master of the delicate finish " , and the bass Léon Rothier , in the small part of Nourabad , " filled Bizet 's requirements perfectly " .

= = = Entering the mainstream = = =

In the years after the First World War the work lost popularity with opera @-@ house directors , and it was seen less frequently . The Met did not repeat its 1916 production , though individual numbers from the work ? most frequently the famous duet and *Leila* 's " Comme autrefois " ? were regularly sung at the Met 's concert evenings . The 1930s saw a return of interest in the opera , with productions in new venues including Nuremberg and the Berlin State Opera . Some revivals were unconventional : one German production used a rewritten libretto based on a revised storyline in which *Leila* , transformed into a defiant *Carmen* @-@ like heroine , commits suicide at the end of the final scene . Paris 's Opéra @-@ Comique staged a more traditional production in 1932 , and again in 1938 , Bizet 's centenary year . From that time onward it has remained in the Opéra @-@ Comique repertory .

After the Second World War , although the opera was shunned by Covent Garden , the Sadler 's Wells company presented it in March 1954 . The Times announced this production as the first known use in Britain of the opera 's English libretto . The stage designs for this production , which was directed by Basil Coleman , were by John Piper .

In the early 1970s , Arthur Hammond orchestrated the sections of the neglected 1863 vocal score that had been cut out from the post @-@ 1886 scores . This led to a production in 1973 , by Welsh National Opera , of a version close to Bizet 's original , without Godard 's trio and Zurga 's violent death ? the first modern performance to incorporate the original ending .

The Sadler 's Wells production was revived several times , but it was not until September 1987 that

the company , by then transformed into English National Opera , replaced it with a new staging directed by Philip Prowse . The Guardian 's report on this production mentioned that the " Pearl Fishers Duet " had recently topped the list in a poll of the public 's " best tunes " , and described the opera as " one of the most sweetly tuneful in the French repertory " . This production " ... [brought] out its freshness , never letting it become sugary " . Although the run was a sell @-@ out , ENO 's managing director Peter Jonas disliked the production , and refused to revive it . It did not reappear in ENO 's repertory until 1994 , after Jonas 's departure .

= = = Modern productions = = =

In the latter years of the 20th century the opera was a regular feature in many European cities , and was still breaking new ground ; in 1990 it made its debut at the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava . Vienna saw it for the first time in 1994 , at the Vienna Volksoper , in what John Rockwell in the New York Times described as " an awkwardly updated production " , though well performed . The opera had not so far proved particularly popular in the United States , where since the Met premiere of 1916 , performances had been rare compared with Europe . Lyric Opera of Chicago staged it in 1966 , but waited until 1998 before reviving it . In 1980 the New York City Opera mounted a production based on the 1863 edition , and staged it again in 1983 and 1986 . Reviewing the 1986 production , Henahan wrote that despite the inept libretto the work was saved by the " melodic suppleness and warmth " of Bizet 's score .

San Diego Opera first staged the work in 1993 , but it was this company 's 2004 production , designed by Zandra Rhodes , that generated new levels of enthusiasm for the opera throughout the United States . In the following few years this production was shown in seven other U.S. opera houses ; in October 2008 James C. Whitson , in Opera News , reported that worldwide , " between 2007 and 2009 , half of all major production of the piece have been or will be ... in the U.S. " . San Diego 's director , Ian Campbell , suggested that his company 's 2004 production was " created at a time when it seemed many U.S. opera companies were looking for a not @-@ too @-@ expensive production with melody , and a little off the beaten track [Our] *Les pêcheurs de perles* fitted the bill .

In January 2008 the opera received its first performance in Sri Lanka , the land of its setting . The conductor , Benjamin Levy , directed a large group of singers and musicians , mostly young and local . In October 2010 , after an interval of more than 120 years , the opera was reintroduced to London 's Royal Opera House . Two concert performances were given using a new edition of the score , prepared by Brad Cohen after the discovery in the Bibliothèque nationale de France of Bizet 's 1863 conducting score . Commenting on this performance in The Daily Telegraph , Rupert Christiansen drew attention to the " musing intimacy and quiet dignity " with which the duet was sung , as compared with more traditional macho renderings .

= = Music = =

The opera begins with a brief orchestral prelude , the principal theme of which prefigures Leila 's entrance . The opening chorus is punctuated by a lively dance ? the critic John W. Klein describes it as " electrifying " . Nadir 's first significant contribution is his aria " *Des savanes et des forêts* " , sung to an accompaniment of cellos and bassoons under a string tremolo that indicates the possible influence of Meyerbeer . Flutes and harps are used to introduce the main theme of the celebrated " Pearl Fishers Duet " , in what the opera historian Hervé Lacombe identifies as " the most highly developed poetic scene in the opera " . The duet 's theme has become the opera 's principal musical signature , repeated in the work whenever the issue of the men 's friendship arises ? though in Dean 's view the tune is not worthy of the weight it carries . Dean suggests that Bizet 's ability to find the appropriate musical phrase with style and economy is better demonstrated in his treatment of Leila 's oath of chastity , where a simple phrase is repeated twice in minor third steps . Nadir 's aria " *Je crois entendre encore* " , towards the end of act 1 , is written on a barcarole rhythm , with a dominant cor anglais whereby , says Lacombe , " [t] he listener has the impression that the horn is

singing " .

In act 2 a short orchestral introduction is followed by an off @-@ stage chorus , notable for its sparse accompaniment ? a tambourine and two piccolos . After Nourabad reminds Leila of her oath and leaves her alone she sings her cavatina " Comme autrefois " . Two French horns introduce the theme , supported by the cellos . When her voice enters , says Lacombe , " it replaces the first horn whose characteristic sound it seems to continue " . Dean likens this song to Micaela 's aria " Je dis que rien ne m 'épouvante " from Carmen . Nadir 's " De mon amie " which follows the cavatina has , says Dean , " a haunting beauty " ; its introductory phrase recalls the oboe theme in Bizet 's youthful Symphony in C. Dean cites the second act finale , with its repeated climaxes as the crowds demand the errant couple 's deaths , as an example of Bizet 's developing skills in writing theatrical music . The third act , divided into two brief scenes , begins with Zurga 's entrance to quiet chromatic scales played over a tonic pedal , an effect that Bizet would later use in his incidental music to L 'Arlésienne . The duet " Je frémis " , says Dean , has clear hints of Verdi 's Il trovatore , and the fiery chorus " Dès que le soleil " is reminiscent of a Mendelssohn scherzo , but otherwise the final act 's music is weak and lacking in dramatic force . In the closing scene , in which Zurga bids a last farewell to his dreams of love , the friendship theme from the act 1 duet sounds for the final time .

According to Lacombe , Les pêcheurs de perles is characteristic of French opéra lyrique , in particular through Bizet 's use of arioso and dramatic recitative , his creation of atmospheres , and his evocation of the exotic . Berlioz described the opera 's score as beautiful , expressive , richly coloured and full of fire , but Bizet himself did not regard the work highly , and thought that , a few numbers apart , it deserved oblivion . Parisian critics of the day , attuned to the gentler sounds of Auber and Offenbach , complained about the heaviness of Bizet 's orchestration , which they said was noisy , overloaded and Wagnerian ? " a fortissimo in three acts " . The conductor Hans von Bülow dismissed the work contemptuously as " a tragical operetta " , and when it was revived after 1886 , resented having to conduct it . Modern writers have generally treated the piece more generously ; the music may be of uneven quality and over @-@ reflective of the works of Bizet 's contemporaries , says Dean , but there are interesting hints of his mature accomplishments . Others have given credit to the composer for overcoming the limitations of the libretto with some genuinely dramatic strokes and the occasional inspiring melody .

= = Musical numbers = =

The listing is based on the 1977 EMI recording , which used the 1863 vocal score . In the post @-@ 1886 revisions the act 1 " Amitié sainte " duet was replaced with a reprise of " Au fond du temple saint " . In act 3 the sequence of numbers after the chorus " Dès que le soleil " was changed after 1886 , together with cuts from and additions to the original . " O lumière sainte " , was recomposed by Benjamin Godard as a trio for Nadir , Leila and Zurga .