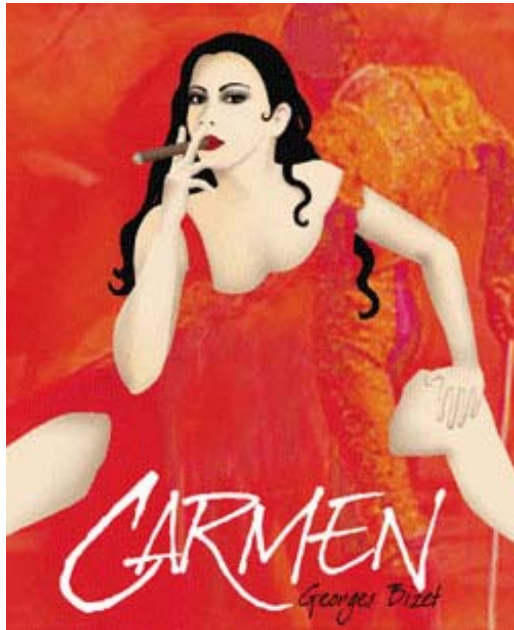


The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Carmen



Music by Georges Bizet

**Libretto by
Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy**

Opera-Comique in Four Acts

**Setting: A sleepy town in Seville, Spain
Time: Around 1830**

Characters

Carmen, a gypsy (mezzo-soprano)	Elina Garanča
Don José, a corporal (tenor).....	Roberto Alagna
Micaëla, a peasant girl (soprano).....	Barbara Frittoli
Escamillo, a bullfighter (bass/baritone).....	Teddy Tahu Rhodes
Frasquita, a gypsy (soprano).....	Elizabeth Caballero
Mercédès, a gypsy (soprano)	Sandra Piques Eddy
Moralès, a corporal (baritone).....	Trevor Scheunemann
Zuniga, a lieutenant (bass).....	Keith Miller
Dancaïre, a smuggler (tenor/baritone).....	Earle Patriarco
Remendado, a smuggler (tenor).....	Keith Jameson
Solo Dancers	Maria Kowroski and Martin Harvey

Conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin
The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Chorus and Ballet

Première performance in Paris, March 3, 1875

Synopsis

Act I

A public square in Seville



On a typical, sleepy day in Seville, soldiers linger in the square outside the armory, next to a cigarette factory, as the townspeople go about their business. The soldiers watch the appearance of a shy country girl from Navarre named Micaëla. She is looking for Don José. Corporal Morales tells her that Don José is expected shortly with the relief guards. He invites her to wait in the guardhouse. Micaëla recoils, taken aback by the lecherous soldiers' interest in her, and tells Morales she will return later.

A trumpet heralds the approach of the relief guards. As the guards are changed, Morales tells José that a girl is looking for him. Zuniga, the lieutenant in command of the new guard, asks Don José about the cigarette factory girls. Don José insists he pays no attention to them.

A ringing bell signals a smoke break for the factory girls, which attracts a crowd of young men hoping to catch their attention. The girls enjoy the ritual but, in truth, the men are interested in only one girl — the mysterious and alluring Carmen, who is unfazed by their attention, as they beg her to choose one of them as her lover. She tells them that love obeys no known laws and sings the Habañera (“L’amour est un oiseau rebelle”). Love is as untamable as a wild bird, as prone to wandering as a gypsy. Carmen provocatively throws an acacia flower at the one man in the square who pays no attention to her — Don José, who is repelled by her boldness yet immediately drawn into her spell. He quickly hides the flower in his tunic. The women go back into the factory and the crowd disperses.

Micaëla returns, bringing Don José a letter and some money from his mother, as well as a kiss. In the letter, Don José’s mother begs him to marry Micaëla and, when his tour of duty ends, return to live near her. Embarrassed by the suggestion, Micaëla leaves, saying they will meet again shortly.

A fight breaks out in the cigarette factory. Zuniga is surrounded by screaming girls trying to tell him that Carmen slashed the face of another girl. He sends Don José inside to break it up, who emerges with a defiant Carmen who laughs in Zuniga’s face. Zuniga leaves to obtain a warrant for her arrest and Don José is ordered to tie Carmen’s hands and take her to the prison.



In the prison Carmen entices Don José to go dancing at Lillas Pastia’s tavern on the outskirts of Seville. He is unnerved by her attention and eventually agrees to untie her hands so she can escape. When Zuniga returns Carmen is led away. She suddenly pushes Don José to the ground and runs away laughing. Her friends thwart the soldiers’ attempts to recapture her and Don José is arrested and led to the brig.

Act II

Lillas Pastia's tavern



Carmen is holding court at Lillas Pastia's tavern with her gypsy friends, Frasquita and Mercédès. They sing and dance to the great enjoyment of the soldiers, led by none other than Zuniga. Carmen is cool to Zuniga, who thinks she is angry at him for trying to have her arrested. She is actually piqued that he had Don José thrown into prison, but is delighted to hear that the unfortunate soldier is being released that very night.

They are interrupted by a torchlight procession for Escamillo, the great toreador of Granada. The officers invite him in and Zuniga offers to buy him a drink and gives a toast in his honor. He describes the excitement of his profession, in particular the amorous rewards that follow a successful bullfight (Toreador's Song). Escamillo is immediately drawn to Carmen, who teases and seduces him with her indifference. Zuniga and his men leave with Escamillo, who tells Carmen that he will return later to see her.

Once the crowd has left, a nervous Lillas Pastia tells Frasquita that the smugglers, Dancaïre and Remendado, have returned. The gypsy women are delighted, however, and learn that the smugglers need their help in bringing in contraband from Gibraltar. All agree that women are indispensable in such an enterprise, though Carmen surprises them by saying that she will not join them, telling them that she is in love. They laugh at her, but she insists that she is only interested in waiting for Don José's release from prison.

Don José's voice is heard in the distance. Dancaïre suggests Carmen enlist his aid and have him run away with them. She agrees to try. She hustles the smugglers out of the tavern so that she can properly greet the young soldier.

Carmen teases Don José by telling him that she has been dancing for his officers. He becomes jealous when Carmen tells him that Zuniga has been pursuing her. She then calms him by agreeing to dance for him alone.

As she dances, a bugle call is heard in the distance, summoning the troops back to the barracks. Don José says that he must return to the barracks. Carmen explodes in rage, ridiculing his passion and his sense of duty, while berating herself for wasting her time on him. Don José produces the acacia flower that she tossed him in their first encounter. With feverish intensity, he tells her that the flower has been his emblem of hope during his long weeks in prison — proof of his passionate love for her.



Carmen, seeing her opportunity, scoffs at his assurances and insists that if he really loved her he would join her and her friends in a life of freedom in the mountains. Don José is initially seduced by the idea, then recoils at the thought of being a deserter. He prepares to leave, telling her again how much he loves her. Zuniga suddenly enters and, in a jealous rage, Don José draws his sword on Zuniga. Carmen calls for help from Dancaïre and Remendado, who enter with the other gypsies who disarm him and tie him up. When Carmen again asks Don José to join them he realizes now that he has no choice. Carmen assures him that he will come to love the carefree life of the gypsy.

Act III

A rocky place near Seville at night, several months later

The band of smugglers, still hauling contraband over the mountains, enter. They pause to rest. Dancaïre and Remendado go on ahead to figure out how to slip into the next town unnoticed. Don José is

clearly miserable, and Carmen has become bored with him. Don José, gazing wistfully down to the valley, tells Carmen that his mother lives nearby. When she advises him to join her he flies into a rage.

As a diversion, Frasquita and Mercédès bring out the tarot cards to read their fortunes. Frasquita and Mercédès foresee rich and gallant lovers, but Carmen's cards spell death for her and Don José. Carmen fearfully accepts her fate.

Remendado and Dancaïre return, announcing that customs officers are guarding the pass and that they need the women's help in distracting them. Carmen, Frasquita, and Mercédès leave to deal with them. The increasingly despondent Don José is left to guard the loot.

Micaëla appears led by a guide. She is searching for Don José. She tells the guide that she will proceed alone, fearing nothing so much as meeting the woman who has turned the man she once loved into a criminal. Suddenly a shot rings out and Micaëla cowers behind a rock. It is Don José firing at an intruder, who turns out to be Escamillo, the bullfighter, transporting bulls to Seville. Escamillo enters and tells Don José that the shot just missed him. He introduces himself and tells Don José that he is looking for Carmen, with whom he is in love. Don José becomes furious and challenges Escamillo to a knife fight. Escamillo, obviously a far more skilled fighter, is amused by Don José's passion. He humors him, but then stumbles and suddenly is at Don José's mercy. Only the arrival of Carmen and the other gypsies save him. Escamillo laughs at the delicious irony of his salvation and invites Carmen and her friends to be his guests at the bullfight in Seville.

The smugglers discover Micaëla hiding in the rocks. She tells Don José that his mother is dying and wants to see him one last time. Carmen tells him to go and, though he resists, he leaves with Micaëla. Don José warns Carmen that their relationship is not over. Once he leaves Carmen's fancy turns to the distant sound of Escamillo's singing.

Act IV

Outside the bullfight arena in Seville



The excitement is growing in anticipation of the great bullfight that will feature Escamillo. A huge crowd awaits the ceremonial procession to the bullring, culminating in the arrival of Escamillo in his toreador regalia and Carmen on his arm. Frasquita and Mercédès warn Carmen that Don José — who is now pursued by the army as a deserter — has been seen in the crowd. Carmen says that she is not afraid and sends them on into the arena.

Alone in the square, she awaits her destiny. Don José emerges from the shadows and tells her that he has not come to harm her. He pleads with her to accept the inevitability of their love. He implores her to forget the past and start a new life with him. Calmly she tells him that everything between them is over. She will never give in — she was born free and will die free. He does not believe her and begs her to take him back.

Carmen, distracted by the crowd's cheers for Escamillo, tries to make her way to the bullring, but Don José blocks her way, demanding to know if she and Escamillo are lovers. Carmen answers that she and the toreador are indeed lovers and that not even the threat of death can make her deny it. Carmen takes the ring from her finger that José once gave her, and throws it at him. The full weight of Carmen's contempt finally hits Don José. Shattered, his ears ringing with the cheers of Escamillo's admirers, Don José attacks Carmen, stabbing her to death. He collapses over her body, confessing to the murder of the woman he once loved.



Georges Bizet

Born: Paris, France on October 25, 1838 — Died: Bougival, France on June 3, 1875



Georges Bizet, trained by his musical parents, was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire just before his tenth birthday, where he became a brilliant pianist. Bizet's exceptional talent as a composer were already becoming apparent in the products of his Conservatoire years, notably the Symphony in C, a work of precocious genius dating from 1855 (but not performed until 1935). In 1857 Bizet shared with Lecocq a prize offered by Offenbach for a setting of the one-act operetta *Le Docteur Miracle*; later that year he set out for Italy as holder of the coveted Prix de Rome. During his three years in Rome Bizet began or projected many compositions; however, only four survive, including the *opera buffa*, *Don Procopio* (not performed until 1906).

Shortly after his return to Paris, in September 1861, Bizet's mother died. The composer consoled himself with his parents' maid, by whom he had a son in June 1862. He rejected teaching at the Conservatoire as well as the temptation to become a concert pianist, but completed his obligations under the terms of the Prix de Rome. The last of these, a one-act *opéra comique*, *La guzla de l'emir*, was rehearsed at the Opéra-Comique in 1863, but withdrawn when the Théâtre-Lyrique director invited Bizet to compose *Les pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishermen*). Bizet completed it in four months and it was produced in September 1863, but was met with a generally cool reception. In the ensuing years Bizet earned a living arranging other composers' music and giving piano lessons. Not until December 1867 was another opera staged — *La jolie fille de Perth*, which shows a surer dramatic mastery than *Les pêcheurs*, despite an inept libretto. It received a good press, but had only 18 performances.

The year of 1868 was a year of crisis for Bizet, with more abortive works, attacks of quinsy¹ and a reexamination of his religious stance. During this time Bizet's attitude toward music deepened. In June 1869 he married Geneviève, daughter of his former teacher, Halévy. The next year they suffered hardships caused by the Franco-Prussian War. Bizet enlisted in the National Guard, but found little time for sustained composition. In 1871, he produced the delightful suite for piano duet, *Jeux d'enfants* (some of it scored for orchestra as the *Petite Suite*), and worked on a one-act opera, *Djamileh*. Both the opera and Daudet's play, *L'arlésienne*, for which Bizet wrote incidental music, failed when it was produced in 1872. However, in neither case did this have anything to do with the music.

Bizet was convinced that in *Djamileh* he had found his true path — one which he followed in composing his operatic masterpiece, *Carmen*, which is Bizet's greatest achievement and also of *opéra-comique* in general. The opera, however, was condemned for its "obscene" libretto, and the music was criticized as erudite, obscure, colorless, undistinguished and unromantic.

The disastrous reception of *Carmen* left Bizet acutely depressed. He fell victim to another attack of quinsy and, in June 1875, he suffered two heart attacks from which he never recovered. Bizet died the day after the opera's 33rd performance at the age of 36. It was his wedding anniversary. Ironically, only after Bizet's death was *Carmen*'s true stature fully appreciated.

¹**Quinsy** — An inflammation of the throat, or parts adjacent, especially of the tonsils, attended by considerable swelling, painful and obstructed swallowing, and accompanied by inflammatory fever. It sometimes creates danger of suffocation. Also called squinancy and squinzey.

Carmen

In 1872 Georges Bizet, the French composer, accepted a commission from Paris' *Opéra-Comique* to write a full-length opera in three acts. Given carte-blanc to pick his own source material, Bizet chose *Carmen*, a violent and risqué “novella” which was written by Prosper Mérimée in 1845.

Carmen is not considered an opera in the strict grand opera sense of the word, but rather an *opéra comique*.² The opera followed an old tradition of setting operas in Spain (more than twenty operas had been set in Seville alone). Bizet's *Carmen* is more complicated than Mérimée's novel — more characters were added and stereotypes were exaggerated. Because of Carmen's blatant sexuality and her readiness to discard men like picked flowers, the story had to be toned down to conform to the conventions and expectations of the audience, who were more accustomed to bourgeois melodrama — the opera was a little too shocking for family entertainment. Also shocking were the rowdy cigarette factory girls, who both fight and smoke on stage. To offset Carmen's promiscuity and faithlessness, Micaëla's innocence was played up. The gypsies became comic characters, rather than lowlifes and criminals. And, instead of committing multiple murders, Don José would only commit one — Carmen.

Carmen opened in 1875 at the *Opéra Comique* in Paris. Despite the notorious response of the press and the evident outrage of many in the audience, *Carmen* ran for 45 performances with three more in 1876. It was sustained partly by its reputation as a shocker and by the appalling misfortune of Bizet's death the day after *Carmen*'s 33rd performance. The opera quickly spread to many cities all over Europe and beyond.

For three-quarters of a century *Carmen* was regularly played, not as an *opéra comique* with spoken dialogue as Bizet wrote it, but as a revised version by Ernest Guiraud, in which sung recitatives³ replaced Bizet's original spoken dialogue. It is only in recent years that Bizet's original version has been revived, now playing almost everywhere in *opéra-comique* format.

Carmen soon became the most popular opera of all time, with numerous versions and resurrections on stage, on screen and even on ice. There were numerous film adaptations, beginning as early as 1896. In 1954, the popular film, *Carmen Jones*, was produced with Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte.

Carmen has remained one of the most frequently performed operas in the entire opera repertory, with many great singers associated with its leading roles. It is listed as #4 on Opera America's 2008 list of the 20 most-performed operas in North America. (*Madama Butterfly* is #1.) The memorability of Bizet's tunes will keep the music of *Carmen* alive forever, and the title role will always be a challenge for great singing actresses.



²*Opéra comique* — A French term that has come to refer to an operatic work with comic elements that also has spoken dialogue. Usually held in a less pretentious place than in the grandiosity of an opera house, *opéras comiques* tended to draw a more bourgeois crowd and provided a more relaxed atmosphere for operatic entertainment.

³*Recitative* — A type of vocal writing, normally for a single voice, which follows the natural rhythms and accentuation of speech and its pitch contours. During the 17th century, the aria became the dominant element in opera, and *recitative* a vehicle for dialogue and a connecting link between arias.

Carmen: The Video (2010)

Starring: Elina Garanča and Roberto Alagna; Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conducting



When Peter Gelb announced a new production of *Carmen* for the 2009-2010 Metropolitan Opera season, the original cast was to have been the husband and wife team of Angela Gheorghiu and Roberto Alagna. Then, before the season started, the couple had a very well-publicized split, and Gheorghiu cancelled her performances as Carmen, though Alagna chose to remain in the production. Peter Gelb quickly replaced Gheorghiu with the fast-rising Latvian mezzo-soprano, Elina Garanča.

For a production that had so much cast shuffling, the HD broadcast that is now on DVD is a remarkably cohesive performance. Elina Garanča's voice is not what you'd expect for a Carmen — it's cool, with a slightly icy edge to it. When she first appears onstage she's wearing an unflattering curly dark wig and a plain raggedy dress, and doesn't seem overtly sexy. She doesn't do the typical Carmen hip sashaying, and coldly stares down all the men before beginning her famous "Habanera." But Garanča's interpretation is well-thought out — Carmen's coldness and elusiveness became part of her sex appeal, the ultimate "belle dame sans merci." Garanča's voice has been described as "creamy," "silken" and "lustrous," but it also has a surprising maturity, and even includes the trills written in Bizet's score. What sets Garanča apart from other Carmens is her ability to send shivers down the spine and make grown men salivate.

Roberto Alagna's Don José is now middle-aged and, in close-ups, a bit pudgy and tubby. But onstage he's still as boyishly eager as ever. He makes Don José a sympathetic character, a sweet boy led astray, but in the later acts of the opera when Don José's character takes a much darker turn, Alagna isn't quite as believable. His comfort with the French language, and the intensity with which he always throws himself into any role is much appreciated. Vocally, Alagna had some rough patches (including a crack on the B-flat in the Flower Song), which was "smoothed over" by the time this *Carmen* was broadcast on PBS.

This is the best Carmen of our day, though it is not without its flaws. While the rest of the cast adequately fill their roles, they did not measure up to Garanča. Escamillo, originally sung by Mariusz Kwiecien, cancelled at the last minute due to illness, so Teddy Tahu Rhodes was put in his place. He begins his portrayal of Escamillo as if he had learned only three hours before the performance that he was to sing that day — oh, yes, he did learn only three hours before — however, as the opera progresses, he does warm up to his part. Barbara Frittoli's Micaëla is the weakest link of the principal singers, coming across as almost mechanical, lacking in feeling and character. Perhaps she was frightened by the brutality of the soldiers in the opening act, which replaced the good-natured flirting usually seen. Keith Miller as Zuniga is the strongest of the supporting cast.

This production by Richard Eyre uses the revised version by Ernest Guiraud, in which sung recitatives replace Bizet's original spoken dialogue, changing it from the original *opéra-comique* format. The set also updates the opera to Franco's era, giving the soldiers more modern-looking costumes, but it does not change the story or basic theme of *Carmen*. The staging is a turntable yellow brick set that with right lighting and slight changes in décor, suggests the different scenes of the opera. The orchestral preludes include choreographed dances by Christopher Wheeldon, which add a delicate flavor to the music.

In the final scene Don José and Carmen are rotated offstage to reveal Escamillo standing over the defeated bull. This creative effect destroyed the feeling of the moment, and appeared crude and unnecessary. Bizet deliberately made the last scene of the opera all about Carmen and Don José, and for Eyre to change the focus so suddenly gives the viewers a rather campy last impression. Overall, though, this is a wonderful production that should be able to withstand many revivals and cast changes.