

Oxford KEYNOTES

GEORGES BIZET'S
Carmen

NELLY FURMAN



GEORGES
BIZET'S *CARMEN*

Oxford KEYNOTES
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Georges Bizet's Carmen
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SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

OXFORD KEYNOTES REIMAGINES THE canons of Western music for the twenty-first century. With each of its volumes dedicated to a single composition or album, the series provides an informed, critical, and provocative companion to music as artwork and experience. Books in the series explore how works of music have engaged listeners, performers, artists, and others through history and in the present. They illuminate the roles of musicians and musics in shaping Western cultures and societies, and they seek to spark discussion of ongoing transitions in contemporary musical landscapes. Each approaches its key work in a unique way, tailored to the distinct opportunities that the work presents. Targeted at performers, curious listeners, and advanced undergraduates, volumes in the series are written by expert and engaging voices in their fields, and will therefore be of significant interest to scholars and critics as well.

In selecting titles for the series, Oxford Keynotes balances two ways of defining the canons of Western music: as lists of works that critics and scholars deem to have articulated key moments in the history of the art, and as lists of works that comprise the bulk of what consumers listen to, purchase, and perform today. Often, the two lists intersect, but the overlap is imperfect. While not neglecting the first, Oxford Keynotes gives considerable weight to the second. It confronts the musicological canon with the living repertoire of performance and recording in classical, popular, jazz, and other idioms. And it seeks to expand that living repertoire through the latest musicological research.

Kevin Karnes
Emory University

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INTRODUCTION

THE MAKING OF A MYTH

ONLY A FEW OF the countless tales told over the centuries are remembered generation after generation. It is difficult to say what makes a story at a given time more memorable than any other, but when a story's popularity persists, we confront a cultural event that invites further exploration. From the written page to the lyric stage and the silver screen, the story of *Carmen* is just such a cultural happening. When asked in 1983 why he chose to bring *Carmen*, as opposed to any other opera, to the stage in a completely reworked format, renowned director Peter Brook explained that very few operas were really popular. "Out of the ten most popular operas, there is one that is the most popular—*Carmen*. And it's not only an opera; it's a phenomenon."¹ Tchaikovsky, who hailed Bizet's *Carmen* as

a masterpiece, accurately predicted the opera's astonishing success: "I am convinced," he wrote, "that within some ten years or so *Carmen* will be the most popular opera in the world."² Today, the name of Carmen and the sounds of Bizet's music are recognized across continents. Carmen qualifies as an iconic figure, and Bizet's instantly recognized score proclaims her eminence as a referential sign on the world's cultural stages.

One of the most beguiling figures born of the nineteenth-century imagination, Carmen made her first public appearance in a novella by Prosper Mérimée, published in 1845. Thirty years later, Georges Bizet immortalized her on the lyric stage. Since that time, she has been the heroine of several ballets³ and over seventy feature films, many produced by illustrious international directors, from Charlie Chaplin to Otto Preminger, Carlos Saura, Jean-Luc Godard, and Ramaka Gei. She has appeared in Broadway musicals and even attracted the world's attention at the 1988 Winter Olympics, when both of the two top women figure skaters chose Bizet's score for their individual programs, an encounter dubbed "the Battle of the Carmens."⁴

In moving from print to the lyric stage and from opera to the silver screen, the story of Carmen has been endlessly rewritten—authored by many, and thus (as it were) fathered by none. In fact, the story's earliest published version, Mérimée's 1845 novella, is actually not its first account, for in one of his letters Mérimée tells us that he heard it from a woman friend.⁵ Past and present renderings of Carmen give different inflections to the story, which, in each of its remakes, mirrors the changing concerns and shifting values of individual authors and their societies. It is precisely

through this process of repetition and change across countries, generations, and media that Carmen has attained the status of myth.

Because the mythic process is one of constant repetition and change, the first recorded history of a myth does not necessarily explain its subsequent versions, nor is the most recent version a cumulative product or totalizing rendering of the story as such. There is, says the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, “no single ‘true’ version of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth.”⁶ Accordingly, one can apprehend any occurrence of the story as a starting point for analysis. While Mérimée’s novella is the founding literary text, the version that actually set the story on its mythical course is not the novella but Bizet’s opera, which can be credited with launching a cultural industry bearing the unofficial trademark of Carmen’s name. Although Mérimée’s novella precedes the opera by thirty years, it is the popularity of the opera and the filmic renditions of the story that inflect our understanding of Mérimée’s narrative. Hence my decision to anchor this study in the opera’s libretto, and break the linearity of time by a turn back to the novella followed by a jump forward to the cinematic medium, discussing some memorable films in which Carmen is portrayed before considering the deployment of themes and other elements that may account for the story’s success.

There is, of course, no single path to understanding myths; like other cultural artifacts, myths belong at one and the same time to several modes of expression and representation. Thus they can be analyzed punctually, synchronically, or diachronically, and, like other cultural artifacts,