



*Georges Bizet*

# Bizet

HUGH MACDONALD



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# BIZET

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# BIZET



HUGH MACDONALD

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IN MEMORIAM



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## Preface

ENGLISH-SPEAKING READERS HAVE BEEN WELL SERVED FOR MANY YEARS BY THE books on Bizet by Winton Dean and Mina Curtiss in addition to the continuing stream of articles, reviews and popular glosses on *Carmen*. As one of the most frequently performed operas in the repertoire, *Carmen* offers a permanent challenge to stage directors whose concept of the femme fatale or of the place of gypsies in society or of the otherness (to the French) of Spanish music may be represented, it seems, in an infinite variety of ways. Conductors and singers continue to find the allure of the opera *Carmen* as irresistible as the gypsy Carmen was to Don José himself.

My own inclination to offer a new study of Bizet in English is prompted less by a desire to add anything new to the discussion of *Carmen*, and more by curiosity about the rest of his œuvre and by a desire to set the composer in the context of French music of the Second Empire in which he displayed, as far as his contemporaries could tell while he was still alive, great talent but not actual genius. For Bizet himself *Carmen* was a part of his consciousness only during the last two years of his life. It is easy to judge his earlier music with the hindsight that *Carmen* provides, but it is historically unfair to do so since each work had to contend with the librettists, the performers, the managements, the public and the press that circumstances offered, not with some distant goal of which not even an embryonic outline can be traced. I have attempted therefore to judge each work on its merits and on what it meant to Bizet himself and his public. I have avoided the concern with Verdi and Wagner that has obsessed critics from his own time up to the present, since although he may have occasionally adopted gestures or musical language from those composers, consciously or not, they were of little significance in his own development as a composer. I also discuss Bizet's operas and songs in the form in which he wrote them, not in any of the spurious versions that have become ingrained in tradition and habit.

Winton Dean's book in this series of *Master Musicians* appeared in 1948, and despite his harsh criticism of certain works he has always been seen as a champion of Bizet in the face of the casual dismissal that works other than *Carmen* continue to attract. He was also severe on the French for their failure to treat Bizet as a great national figure. There is still no critical edition of his works and no collected

correspondence, important tools for the study of his life and works whose absence would be unthinkable if Bizet had been German.

When Mina Curtiss's book on Bizet appeared in 1958, our knowledge of his life and character was enormously enlarged since she had access to a vast collection of documents passed down in the Halévy family through Bizet's widow. Dean accordingly expanded his book for a second edition in 1965. In the present book I do not claim to provide any deeper insights into those aspects of Bizet's life, especially since Bizet's more recent French biographers Rémy Stricker and Hervé Lacombe have both used the Halévy documents sensitively and comprehensively in their depictions of the composer.

My first aim was to establish a comprehensive catalogue of his works, a task which had not been attempted before, it being deemed impossible so long as the archives of the publisher Choudens remained inaccessible to scholars. In recent years, however, these materials have become more accessible, yet the catalogue remains provisional, as all such catalogues must be. My *Bizet Catalogue* is to be published online through Washington University Libraries ([digital.wustl.edu/bizet](http://digital.wustl.edu/bizet)) or in book form in due course.

In assembling the *Catalogue* it became clear to me that the story of Bizet's life needed to be rewritten since new works and new details about the composition, performance and publication of the known works were coming to light. I have divided the main part of the book into chronological sections, each one of which encompasses one of his nine main operatic adventures. The vast extent of Bizet's work as a transcriber of other composers' works, furthermore, has never been grasped before, shedding light on his relationships with his older contemporaries, especially Gounod and Reyer, and on his sometimes competitive, sometimes fraternal relationships with musicians of his own age. The work of the two French biographers just mentioned, Stricker and Lacombe, has provided much that needs to be incorporated in the story, as well as the invaluable work done by Lesley A. Wright over a period of thirty years. I am happy to acknowledge a profound debt to all three scholars and to dedicate the book to the memory of Winton Dean, whose encouragement over forty years ago (when my concern was Berlioz, not Bizet) has stood me in good stead ever since.

Hugh Macdonald  
St Louis, 2014

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T H E M A S T E R M U S I C I A N S

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# BIZET





## 1838–1857: *Le Docteur Miracle*

**G**EORGES BIZET WAS A PARISIAN ALL HIS LIFE. APART FROM THE TWO YEARS SPENT IN Italy as the winner of the Prix de Rome and short trips to Baden-Baden, Brussels, Beauvais, and Bordeaux, he barely ever ventured out of the capital, only to the outlying suburbs, and he showed no perceptible interest in provincial cities or foreign parts. French musicians and men of letters have always regarded Paris as the only possible place to live and work, many of them, like Berlioz and Balzac, definitively turning their backs on provincial life. The baby Bizet was delivered in 1838 into the heart of Paris's music, amid the greatest concentration of musicians in Europe and there he remained. This was the Ninth Arrondissement, the area north of the Boulevard des Italiens and the Boulevard Montmartre, which housed both the Opéra and the Conservatoire, twin magnets that drew into their ambit composers, pianists, singers and the whole cavalcade of aspiring musicians who swarmed to Paris during the July Monarchy. The area was to be violently disrupted in the 1860s by Haussmann's grandiose boulevardisation of Paris, but during Bizet's childhood and student years it had a homogeneity and community feeling that bred a unique concentration of cultural life, feeding the spectacular expansion in the output and consumption of music in Paris between the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848.<sup>1</sup> Parisian musical life at that time attained a level of prestige never equalled before or since.

The city's population expanded beyond one million in this period in the wake of industrial and commercial enterprises of many kinds and the prosperity they brought. At the west of the city a grand new avenue, named after the Elysian Fields of mythology, led up to Napoleon's immense Arc de Triomphe, completed in 1836 at the same time that a tall Egyptian obelisk was erected at the eastern end of the

1. See Macdonald (2008).

avenue in the Place de la Concorde. The church of the Madeleine, consecrated in 1842, faced it from the north. The sprawling palaces of the Tuileries and the Louvre occupied the right bank of the Seine, while elsewhere the core of the city retained its maze of mediaeval streets. The ring of six large railway termini was added during the boom of the 1840s.

In the rapid advance of music at this time an institution and a machine led the charge. The institution was the Paris Opéra, already boasting a proud tradition from the time of Louis XIV and now housed in a large theatre built in 1821 on the Rue Le Peletier. It was heavily subsidised and closely regulated by the government, but its director enjoyed a franchise that allowed him to win or lose money on a grand scale. The Opéra presented the best French singers in a series of spectacular productions that emphasised large-scale, realistic décor and took advantage of the latest in lighting technology. Regular attendance at the Opéra was universal among Paris's educated classes, whether they were musical or not. Discussion and criticism being such an essential element of French social exchange, no one with any claim to intelligence could afford not to see the latest productions, and foreign visitors reported on the Opéra as a matter of course.

The genre we now call French Grand Opera flourished in these years. Its principal practitioners were the composers Giacomo Meyerbeer and Fromental Halévy and the librettist Eugène Scribe, together with some notable designers. It was not truly a French product since it grew out of the works of the Italian Spontini, played in the Napoleonic period, and was greatly indebted to the newer Italian style embodied by Rossini, who himself contributed to its repertoire. (Meyerbeer, born in Berlin and trained in Italy, never regarded himself as a Parisian.) These operas normally ran to five acts; they filled a long evening, featured virtuoso singing, a large chorus and corps de ballet, and the latest in instrumental novelty in the pit. They kept the audience riveted to a story in which private passion is thwarted by religious or tribal conflicts and ends (usually) with the deaths of both tenor and soprano. The genre is more familiar to us today from the works of Verdi, whose operas, at least in his early and middle years, leaned heavily on the French model. French composers prominent in this field are little heard today, notably Auber and Halévy, and even Meyerbeer's music is far from familiar. The most successful works of the repertoire at the time of Bizet's birth were Auber's *La Muette de Portici*, Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* and *Les Huguenots*, and Halévy's *La Juive*.

The machine that boosted the status of Paris was the piano. After its emergence in the late eighteenth century, the pianoforte expanded in range and volume and rapidly became the domestic instrument of choice, supplanting the harpsichord, guitar and harp. In its upright formulation the piano was cheap and popular; as a concert instrument it was now able to sustain an entire concert, in the form of

a recital, and produce sounds brilliant and shrill enough to beget a generation of great virtuosi, travelling from city to city and enthraling crowds with their dazzling fingerwork. Beethoven's preferred pianos had been Austrian and English, but supremacy was soon captured by French pianos. No less than 102 piano makers are listed in the 1836 Paris directory,<sup>2</sup> chief among them the Erard and Pleyel families of bold innovators and enterprising businessmen. To be heard and applauded in Paris and to be taken up by Parisian hostesses was the ambition of all young pianists everywhere. Liszt came from Hungary, Chopin from Poland, and both stayed for many years. Many others came, from all corners of Europe. The emergence of female piano virtuosi was a special feature of Parisian music too.

The list of foreign musicians drawn to Paris in these years includes almost anyone of any standing in the wider world. The Italians Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi all spent long periods in Paris. Cherubini had settled and risen to the position of Director of the Conservatoire. Paganini and Ernst were the visiting violin stars. Mendelssohn came in 1831, Wagner spent two years there, and that trio of foreign musicians, Halle, Hiller and Heller—all with great careers ahead of them—spent important portions of their lives there. Hiller reminisced about sitting at a *terrasse* on the Boulevard des Italiens with Chopin, Mendelssohn and Liszt as if it were perfectly normal company to be keeping, none of them French. Karl Halle eventually became celebrated in England as Sir Charles Hallé, and Stephen Heller adopted Paris as his home. French was the international language spoken by educated people everywhere, and French fashions and literature were exported all over the globe.

The French themselves displayed no resentment whatever at the intrusion of foreigners in their midst; they were proud of the prestige of their culture. After the fervent passions of the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars Paris cultivated a generous cosmopolitanism that welcomed foreign visitors and foreign artists, as it still does. Berlioz, whose compositions in the 1830s were the most strikingly modern by any Frenchman, had a circle of friends largely made up of foreign musicians, and he married an Irish actress.

An institution only marginally less prestigious than the Opéra was the Conservatoire. To read the reminiscences of Berlioz or Debussy about their studies there is to form an impression of hopeless stagnation and reaction, but in fact the influence and the teaching of the Conservatoire, founded soon after the Revolution, had a profound and positive effect on French music. We will look more closely at its teaching when Bizet enrolls there as a student, but it fulfilled its function of providing opportunities for talented musicians of all classes for little or no fee. It oversaw the publication of widely used teaching manuals and it turned out operatic, orchestral and military musicians with a thorough background in the techniques

2. *Agenda* (1836), pp. 75–79.

of music. As far as the public was concerned, its most visible activities were the concerts given by the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, an orchestra founded by Habeneck in 1828 to promote symphonic music and to give regular seasons of concerts for its subscribers. Both this organisation and its mother institution served as a model for many other conservatoires abroad founded on similar principles.

The Conservatoire's location in the Rue de la Cité-Bergère, five minutes' walk from the Opéra, ensured the concentration of musicians' residences in that same *quartier*, while the *haute-bourgeoisie* remained in the Faubourgs St-Honoré and St-Germain. Even closer to the Opéra was the Opéra-Comique, housed just across the Boulevard des Italiens in the Salle Favart. Its new theatre opened there a few months after Bizet was born, replacing an earlier theatre occupied by the Théâtre-Italien, which moved a little further away to the Salle Ventadour. These three companies, the Opéra, the Opéra-Comique and the Théâtre-Italien, enjoyed a triple monopoly set up by Napoleon, who laid down specific distinctions between them: the Opéra's repertoire was to be the grand, all-sung, serious opera; the Opéra-Comique had to play lighter fare with songs interspersed with dialogue; and the Théâtre-Italien had to play Italian opera sung in Italian. Bizet's career in opera was shaped by the Conservatoire and geared to this administrative hierarchy, with the addition of the Théâtre-Lyrique, which emerged in the 1850s and contributed to the evolution of the new framework of Parisian opera within which he was to work.

Sacred music and chamber music were not invisible, but they were the domain of their own circles of practitioners and adherents. Every concert with an orchestra would have involved a chorus and vocal soloists too, although choral singing in large groups did not take off as a popular activity until the middle of the century. During Bizet's childhood and student years opera was supreme, it was accessible to all comers, whether musically literate or not, and it was *fashionable*, a word the French eagerly adopted from English. Reviews in the press of new operas always preceded reports of concerts, even in the three specialist music journals that sprang up in this period.



Bizet was born in the heart of this musical mecca because his parents were musicians. His father, Adolphe-Amand Bizet, aged twenty-eight at the boy's birth, was born to artisan parents in Rouen where he entered the trade of wigmaker and hairdresser. At the age of twenty-five, according to Gallet,<sup>3</sup> he decided to become a musician. He could sing and he could compose, but where and when and even whether he received any instruction in these arts is not known. He was listed in 1837 as still living in Rouen and plying the wigmaker's trade, yet within three months, at

3. Gallet (1891), p. 3.

the time of his marriage in December 1837, he is described as a teacher of singing, with an address in Paris. Of his two sisters, Bizet's aunts, one lived in Blois.

His wife, Bizet's mother, Aimée-Marie-Louise-Léopoldine-Joséphine Delsarte, aged twenty-two at her son's birth, was from Cambrai, near the Belgian border. She was the daughter of an eccentric individual, variously described as a lawyer, café proprietor, inventor and doctor,<sup>4</sup> whose failure to provide for his family led to divorce. The four children went to live with their mother, whose death in 1837 caused Aimée to seek refuge with her older brother François, who was married and living in Paris. It seems likely that she met Adolphe Bizet through his shared profession with François, also a singing teacher, although it is possible to imagine a scenario by which they had met before they came to Paris and that Aimée introduced Adolphe to her brother when she learned that he wanted to set up in Paris as a singing teacher. Her mother's family were alarmed at Adolphe Bizet's lack of prospects, but François Delsarte vouched for his acceptability as a husband, and so they were married before the end of the year. Their only child, a son, was born within a year of the marriage, on 25 October 1838.

He was registered as Alexandre-César-Léopold Bizet, and perhaps they intended to call him Alexandre, or even César (Léopold was the name of an uncle who died young), but by the time the boy was baptised, on 16 March 1840, his name was plain Georges, and so he remained. Uncle François Delsarte lived with his wife Rosine (née Andrien) at 23 Rue Buffault, in the heart of the musicians' *quartier*.<sup>5</sup> Both were teachers of singing and both played a major part in their nephew's initiation into music. Through them the young newly-wed Bizets found living quarters at 26 Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, a narrow street a few minutes' walk away, where a plaque today commemorates the composer's birth.<sup>6</sup>

From the day he was born Bizet was surrounded by musicians and music. Without siblings, he would have played in the street with children whose homes were organised around different walks of life, but no one nearby thought music a strange profession to be engaged in. For his parents it was not easy to maintain the necessities of life, for although his mother taught him how to read and how to play the piano, we do not know whether she had paying pupils as well. His father perhaps continued his earlier *métier* as hairdresser for a while, yet he was clearly determined to work as a musician. He was never a teacher at the Conservatoire but taught singing lessons at home, on which the boy Bizet eavesdropped from outside the door. His ear was so sharp that at an early age he could memorise and reproduce the

4. Curtiss (1958), p. 4; Lacombe (2000), p. 20.

5. *Agenda* (1836), pp. 59, 224.

6. The original building has been replaced. Although no. 26 is the usual address given, Lacombe reports that at the time of Bizet's baptism the family were at no. 22. See Lacombe (2000), p. 18.

pieces he had heard, and as soon as he was able, he would accompany his father's pupils in their lessons. As a mature musician he was an incomparable sight-reader, a gift that manifested itself very early and which enabled him to consume swathes of piano music and opera—whatever he could lay his hands on—with the same facility as reading books, an occupation he also ardently pursued. It might well have been hard to drag the boy from the piano and from his books even if his parents felt any urge or obligation to do so.

Of his father an image has come down to us of a good-looking man of moderate ability who could compose and who could teach, but who was unremarkable in every way. There is no sign that he ever performed in public. He composed some songs, a few piano pieces, and even a string quartet.<sup>7</sup> He was devoted to his talented son and outlived him by eleven years, long enough to witness the worldwide success of *Carmen*. His is a presence in Bizet's life that hovers in the background without exercising any powerful influence upon him. His mother's stronger personality guided Bizet's upbringing with deep affection and much common sense. If she escaped the eccentricity that marked her father and her brother, she was evidently dogged by ill health, and her early death in 1861 was a severe blow to her son; had she survived, her counsel might have more productively steered the course of a career that was, as Bizet himself admitted, full of uncertain turns and dashed hopes. It was her side of the family that was more generously endowed with intelligence and artistic sensibility, while his father provided the creative urge.

As long as his mother was alive, Bizet's uncle and aunt played a major part in his life. Delsarte was a well-known figure in Parisian music with leading composers and singers among his friends. Trained at the Conservatoire, his ambitions as a singer were hindered by vocal weaknesses for which the critics found a number of circumlocutions. He sang minor tenor parts at the Ambigu-Comique and the Opéra-Comique and was occasionally honoured by appearances at the courts of Louis-Philippe and Napoléon III, but his appearances in public were almost entirely given in the context of reviving forgotten French music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and championing early music at a time when it was generally dismissed as unfit for a modern audience. This was not mere eccentricity in the style of his failed father but a real cause to which he devoted his energies, publishing an anthology of vocal music by Lully, Rameau, Campra, Gluck and others according to enlightened editorial principles.

Berlioz described his uncle as a singer “without much voice, but full of energy, soul and passion, who brings out the full emotion of great music by Gluck and others to the point where these masterpieces are made familiar to the least welcoming

7. Bizet *père's* compositions are reviewed in detail in Lacombe (2000), pp. 40–49.

listeners and where the expression gets through to the dullest hearts.”<sup>8</sup> Berlioz’s own devotion to Gluck took a rather different slant, leading to passionate debates between him and Delsarte, always conducted in a civil and scholarly manner. Saint-Saëns described Delsarte’s vocal teaching as “deplorable and destructive”, but greatly admired his declamation and gestures when he was reciting Racine or La Fontaine and drawing a red handkerchief from his pocket with impeccable timing. Saint-Saëns recognised the debt his own generation owed to Delsarte for opening up the riches of French baroque music. “All who knew him recall one of the *illuminati*, a true apostle.”<sup>9</sup>

With the painter Ingres and the composer Reber, Delsarte formed a little group dedicated to the classical heritage and implicitly opposed to the extremes of modern music and art. His wide circle of friends nonetheless included the composers Auber, Adam and Halévy (all of whom lived nearby), and his pupils included Jean-Baptiste Faure and Caroline Miolan, both later to play important parts in Bizet’s career. Jenny Lind came from Sweden to hear him sing. At the Delsartes’ apartment young Bizet would have seen well-known musicians and impoverished pupils endlessly coming and going, and he would have heard plenty of musical gossip.

He also had playmates there since the Delsartes had three boys a little older than himself with five more children appearing in the next dozen years. The atmosphere in the house was strange, since the Delsartes cultivated an ascetic style of genteel poverty and were also obsessively devout. Neither religious devotion nor an obsession with old music made any impact on Bizet’s intellectual development, but the connection with other musicians certainly did, for Rosine Delsarte was herself gifted as both pianist and singer and she had taught solfège at the Conservatoire before her burgeoning family took over too much of her time. She was said to have married François at the age of sixteen against her will, but she shared her husband’s mystical bent and was a devoted mother to her large family. Her sister, Thérèse Wartel, was an exceptionally fine pianist, married to Pierre-François Wartel, one of the Opéra’s principal singers, and their son was to be a fellow-student with Bizet at the Conservatoire. Thérèse Wartel was also a composer and a writer who published a book on the Beethoven piano sonatas; she died relatively young in 1865.

In the homes of the Delsartes and the Wartels, not to mention his own, and in the daily business of the Ninth Arrondissement, young Georges acquired a musical culture and a familiarity with the nuts and bolts of the musical profession that any future composer might envy. As soon as he was old enough he would accompany the grown-ups to the music-sellers’ shops to browse through the latest publications, especially piano music, which at that time flowed from the presses in torrents.

8. *Journal des débats*, 24 January 1841, reprinted in Berlioz (1996), t. IV, pp. 429–30.

9. Saint-Saëns (1913), pp. 243–249.

He would have sat in on rehearsals and later attended concerts performed by friends of the family. He would have heard discussion of the major musical events of the 1840s and the gossip that attended them: the arrival of Adolphe Sax's workshop in a nearby street and his newfangled instruments; Félicien David's *Le Désert*; Donizetti's last appearances in Paris; Verdi's first appearances; Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*; Duprez's ascendancy as the leading tenor at the Opéra; the constant speculation about Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*; the endless succession of virtuoso pianists, including Thalberg, Dreyschock, Herz, Marie Pleyel, even occasionally Liszt or Chopin. If the 1830s had been a peak for French poetry in the hands of Hugo and Lamartine, the 1840s saw a surge of great novels from the pens of Dumas, Sand and Balzac. Because the French passion for cultural and political argument has never excused musicians from the obligation to be *au courant* with even the most trivial of new publications and current events, members of the narrowly focused circles in which Bizet was brought up would have unhesitatingly traded opinions on recent literature as they did on recent music. And when it came to politics, they would have been fully aware of the discontents brought on by industrialisation and the steady slide of popular feeling against Louis-Philippe's government.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Before he was nine Bizet began to attend the Conservatoire. Children could not be accepted before the age of ten, so a special case had to be made for him to sign on for the 1847–48 year. His talent was obviously exceptional and he had support from the singer Alizard (a friend of his father), the pianist Marmontel, and the horn-player Meifred (both friends of Delsarte) sufficient to waive the rule. When Meifred tested the boy's musicianship, Bizet identified every chord and every modulation correctly; whether or not he had perfect pitch, he had a remarkable ear and could reproduce everything he heard on the piano. He also had a prodigious memory.

At the Conservatoire Bizet encountered Paris's leading musicians, even if only passing them in the corridor. Many of them he would have seen before. The Director, Auber, lived comfortably on the fruits of his operas, which were played regularly at the Opéra-Comique and occasionally at the Opéra. He was sixty-five, with more than twenty years still to serve in a job to which he devoted less than his full energy, preferring his country home and his horses. Composition was taught by Bazin, a nonentity, and Halévy, whose part in Bizet's life was to be far-reaching. The piano was taught by Pierre Zimmerman, who retired in 1848 at the age of sixty-three, to be succeeded by his pupil Antoine Marmontel, aged thirty-two. Carafa taught counterpoint; Thomas and Reber taught solfège. Berlioz, never entrusted with any teaching responsibilities, held the derisory office of librarian and was occasionally to be seen in the building. During the early months of the year the Société des Concerts gave its performances in the Conservatoire hall every Sunday afternoon. These were

invariably sold out to subscribers, but Conservatoire students were allowed to attend the final rehearsals on Saturday mornings.<sup>10</sup> Particularly valuable to Bizet was the opportunity to meet other students and to test his skills against musicians of the same age, some of whom would remain friends for the rest of his life.

It is not clear exactly what class or classes Bizet attended that first year. His name is to be found added in pencil to the official list of students, and according to Victor Wilder's lengthy obituary from 1875 he was permitted to sit in on Marmontel's piano class. Marmontel was not officially on the teaching staff, but he was substituting for Henri Herz, who spent more and more time abroad and was at this time on a long tour of the United States. It is quite likely that Bizet was also taking solfège (the skill of sight-singing while naming the notes *ut*, *ré*, *mi*, and so on, and learning intervals and clefs) along with many of the 356 men and 224 women who were listed as Conservatoire students that year, but the school offered no classes in what we would regard as general education. Happily Bizet was a voracious reader, so he was absorbing literature and history (though probably no languages) alongside the steady expansion of his musical horizons. He later reported that his parents concealed his books so that he should not be distracted from his musical studies.<sup>11</sup>

The year was in any case disrupted by the events of February 1848, which brought the July Monarchy to an end and saw the creation of the Second Republic. Throughout 1847 the injustice of a largely disenfranchised population and the severe limits imposed on political meetings guaranteed the eruption of civil disorder on the lines of the 1830 Revolution, which had forced the abdication of Charles X. Now it was Louis-Philippe's turn to face the reality of mob violence. Some noisy protests on 22 February 1848 were peaceful, but the following day, as the crowd faced troops on the Boulevard des Capucines, a single gunshot triggered a bloody cannonade that left fifty-two dead. After that, despite the cold, the dark and the rain, barricades were set up all over Paris, and it took a third day, just as violent as the second, to persuade Louis-Philippe to abdicate. The Boulevard des Italiens, one of Paris's main thoroughfares, was the scene of much of the action, but north of it, in the narrow streets that housed most of Paris's musicians, things were quieter. If the Bizet parents were sensible, they would not have let their nine-year-old son's curiosity lead him into areas of the city that were definitely unsafe. We do know that a year later they attended a meeting of freelance teachers planning to create some kind of union, and that young, well-behaved Georges went along too.<sup>12</sup> Years later Bizet referred to "that pointless, foolish, useless revolution".<sup>13</sup>

10. The history of these concerts is told in full in Holoman (2004).

11. Gallet (1891), p. 4.

12. Lacombe (2000), p. 71.

13. Imbert (1894), p. 175.

Theatres were closed for a week or so, and when the Opéra reopened it was no longer the Académie Royale de Musique but now the Théâtre National. Since the Conservatoire and most theatres were dependent on government funding, a change of régime could threaten everyone's livelihood. But artists of all stripes soon took heart when the poet Lamartine was acclaimed president of the new provisional government, and it became clear that under the Second Republic, which was officially proclaimed on 24 February, the musical world would continue as before even though finances would be tight for at least a year.<sup>14</sup> Universal male suffrage was introduced immediately and an election in April produced a moderate-to-conservative constituent assembly that only provoked further riots by working-class groups encouraged by revolutionary action almost everywhere else in Europe. The months of May and June 1848 were far from peaceful on the streets of Paris, but distant memories of the Terror left little sympathy for the radical left, and when a presidential election was held in December, it was won by a wide margin by Louis Napoleon, nephew of the first Napoleon. Monarchists and conservatives (including Berlioz, who reacted by writing a *Te Deum*) breathed a sigh of relief. Three years later Napoleon staged a *coup d'état* by dissolving the Republic and declaring himself Emperor Napoleon III. The nineteen-year-long Second Empire, under which Bizet spent the bulk of his short career, began. The Conservatoire became the Conservatoire Impérial de Musique and the Opéra became the Académie Impériale de Musique.

Bizet's studies at the Conservatoire began in earnest that autumn, 1848, just before his tenth birthday. On 9 October he competed with twenty-one other boys for admission to Marmontel's piano class, as Marmontel was now officially to succeed Zimmerman as principal piano teacher. Bizet was one of only two accepted, although another two were assigned to other classes. Marmontel was struck by Bizet's performance of Mozart sonatas and his preference for correct style rather than striving for effect; teacher and pupil became lifelong friends.<sup>15</sup> The class met three times a week at 11.30 A.M. following the solfège class. Since he lived only fifteen minutes' walk away from the Conservatoire, Bizet must have become thoroughly familiar with those streets in his ten years as a student, spending more and more time in the Conservatoire building and less and less time at home.

At the end of the year Bizet won a "Deuxième Premier Prix" for solfège, which he had been studying under Napoléon Alkan, brother of the reclusive virtuoso Valentin Alkan. We translate "prix" as "prize", but these prizes can best be viewed as grades or classifications since there was regularly more than one student awarded a particular

14. The first comprehensive history of these events (*Histoire de la Révolution de 1848*, three volumes, Paris, 1850–53) was written by Liszt's former mistress Marie d'Agoult under the pen-name Daniel Stern.

15. Marmontel (1881), p. 249.

prize. A Premier Prix was in effect a graduation from that class. A fellow-student in Alkan's class who won the same prize for solfège was Josef Wieniawski from Poland, who was only a year older and already a virtuoso pianist. He won a Premier Prix in piano the same year (Bizet did not achieve that for another three years) and went on to an international career, often accompanying his brother, the violinist Henryk. A Deuxième Prix in solfège was awarded to a boy two years older than Bizet, Léo Delibes. In 1848 another talented boy entered the Conservatoire: Camille Saint-Saëns was thirteen, already acclaimed as a prodigy by several Paris audiences and now intent on becoming an organist; he studied with the Conservatoire's respected organ teacher François Benoist. Many years later Bizet dedicated the six pieces that make up his piano work *Chants du Rhin* to six musicians all of whom had ties with him at the Conservatoire: they were Marmontel; Francis Planté (a year younger than Bizet); Félix Le Couppey, who taught solfège and piano; Charles Delioux de Savignac, a student of Zimmerman and Halévy; Charles de Bériot, son of a famous violinist and the diva Malibran; and Saint-Saëns. Ten years at the Conservatoire bred friendships that Bizet could count on for many years to come.

In 1850, when Bizet won no prizes, the piano prizes went to Planté and Jules Cohen, who was fifteen. In 1851 first prizes were awarded to Deschamps and Lestoquoy, while Bizet won a second prize. All of these were Marmontel's pupils. In 1852 Bizet, now thirteen, won a first prize along with Edmond Savary, aged seventeen, the set work that year being Herz's Piano Concerto no. 3, a brittle, showy piece that required long hours of practice, even for talented young boys such as those. The *Revue et gazette musicale* reported that "M. Bizet is a consummate musician, endowed with feeling and powerful expression; he played as if he were four or five years older than his rival when in fact it was the other way round."<sup>16</sup> At the Conservatoire's annual *séance publique* on 12 December 1852, with another student named Marie Colin, he played Thalberg's *Grand Duo sur les motifs de Norma* for two pianos, and a few days later he accompanied two violinists at a soirée given by Count Emilien de Nieuwerkerke, an aristocrat of Dutch origin and a leading figure in French cultural circles. His long liaison with Princesse Mathilde Bonaparte, Napoleon III's cousin, created one of the leading salons of the Second Empire. They liked Bizet; their salons were to be two of the few places where he would agree to play the piano in later years.

The following year Bizet entered Benoist's organ class. Benoist was the teacher of Alkan, Franck, Saint-Saëns and other eminent organists, and although he was no star player himself, he was a good teacher, according to Saint-Saëns, even if he was in the habit of composing ballet scores in class while his students played.<sup>17</sup> His new pupil

16. *Revue et gazette musicale*, 1 August 1852, p. 251.

17. Saint-Saëns (1913), p. 40.

remained in the class for three years and progressed steadily if not spectacularly, winning a Premier Accessit in 1853, a Deuxième Prix in 1854 and a Premier Prix in 1855. Surrounded by goodwill from all his teachers, Bizet must have contemplated a career as a pianist, or perhaps a career as an organist, and his family might have wondered if he would turn into a singer. His true direction, however, was already emerging in 1850, the year of the earliest Bizet compositions that have come down to us. We may attribute this appearance of buds on the young plant to the influence of Zimmerman, who was so impressed by Bizet's evident talent that although he was officially retired and in poor health he agreed to give him private lessons in counterpoint. He was a kindly and sympathetic teacher (as was Marmontel also) and was teased by his family for, as they thought, wasting his time with unpromising pupils.<sup>18</sup> Zimmerman taught him from Cherubini's counterpoint treatise and brought order into whatever the boy might have been improvising on the piano. Bizet was to write innumerable fugues and contrapuntal exercises in his student years, although in his mature compositions there is scarcely a fugue to be found anywhere.

A ten-page manuscript<sup>19</sup> contains a "Vocalise" for one voice and piano, followed by a "Barcarolle" for two sopranos and piano, both without words. The piano writing is plain but the vocal writing is elegant and assured, and both pieces are carefully shaped. Either piece (if it had words) might have come from an opéra-comique of the period. No less than four times in the manuscript Bizet wrote "J'avais 11 ans et 4 mois", assigning it to February or March 1850. The manuscript also contains the fragment of a cantata written a month later, still with no words but this time with indications of an intended orchestration and a certain dramatic energy that makes us regret that no more than thirty-nine bars have survived.

He was also composing piano music. A dozen piano pieces from the years 1851 and 1852 were published by Michel Poupet in 1984, and they give a vivid impression of Bizet's piano technique and taste. In class he was expected to study sets of variations and long concerto movements, but these published works are all short pieces with as yet no clear sense of style. His models were not Liszt and Chopin, whose music was in both cases too idiosyncratic, but the compositions of Zimmerman, Heller, Hünten and the swarms of composers who were putting out caprices, preludes, waltzes and etudes in those years for the amateur market. A second manuscript<sup>20</sup> headed *Compositions diverses par Georges Bizet premier prix du conservatoire de Musique* contains four extremely modest "Préludes" given the opus number 2, a "Thème", a "Romance sans paroles" with a wildly florid right-hand part, a

18. Curtiss (1958), p. 20.

19. F-Pn MS 422.

20. F-Pn MS 421.

“Valse”, and a “Romance”, which is of interest as being perhaps his first vocal piece with words (by Lamartine) and because the poem was also set by Bizet’s father.<sup>21</sup> Each of three verses concludes with a change of time-signature and of mode, ending on a charming cadence (Example 1.1).

Example 1.1

Où la ter - re fé - con - de Voit un pré - sent des cieux!

voit un pré-sent des cieux,

*rall.* *sf* *smorzando*  
voit un pré-sent des cieux, des cieux!

Only one bar of the “Thème”, notated on three staves and marked *Brillante*, is required to show its adventurous piano texture (Example 1.2).

21. F-Pn MS 3822.

## Example 1.2

The musical score for Example 1.2 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature. It contains a series of notes, including a complex sixteenth-note passage. The lower staff is in bass clef and begins with a bass clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature. It contains a series of notes, including a complex sixteenth-note passage. The marking "m.d." is written above the first few notes of the bass staff.

The most interesting of these early pieces are the two works entitled “Caprice original”. Both were written in or before 1851 and both are found in this second manuscript and also copied into a third, larger manuscript collection now in Stockholm.<sup>22</sup> This is a book of over 160 pages in which Bizet has copied a number of works by other composers, including Dussek’s piano sonata op. 9, the fugue from Mozart’s *Requiem*, Scarlatti’s “Cat’s Fugue”, and works by Herz, Czerny and Zimmerman. The first “Caprice” is in C sharp minor, the second in C major. Both are modestly ambitious works for a twelve-year-old. The first calls for some dexterous octaves in the right hand, and in the second one, thanks to the second manuscript (there is also a third), we can observe Bizet replacing simple harmony (Example 1.3) with something more adventurous (Example 1.4).

## Example 1.3

The musical score for Example 1.3 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a complex sixteenth-note passage. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a series of notes, including a complex sixteenth-note passage.

## Example 1.4

The musical score for Example 1.4 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a complex sixteenth-note passage. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a series of notes, including a complex sixteenth-note passage.

22. S-Ssm MMS 323:1.

Dated 13 June 1852, when Bizet was thirteen, is a curious “Étude”, still unpublished.<sup>23</sup> It presents a melody accompanied by four independent parts with difficult rhythmic combinations and hand-stretches, as if intended to tease. He wrote on it: “a poor imitation of a Ries étude—worthless—it’s antiquated and as idiotic as can be.” The mystery is that no étude by Ferdinand Ries seems to have been published at that time.

★ ★ ★ ★

If Bizet was alert to new music at this young age, he would have found a way to hear Meyerbeer’s *Le Prophète*, whose long-awaited opening at the Opéra in April 1849 was the sensation of the year. The composer had done everything to ensure its success. Pauline Viardot and Gustave Roger in the principal roles established their leading status in that theatre, and the noisy presence of twenty-four saxhorns, visible on stage, made a strong impression on everyone (including Wagner). For the ballet the dancers put on roller skates to suggest skating on ice, even though this had no bearing on the drama. The other successes of 1849 were Ambroise Thomas’s *Le Caïd* and Adolphe Adam’s *Le Töréador* at the Opéra-Comique, restoring the fortunes of that theatre after the upheavals of the previous year and set respectively in Algeria and Spain. The latter opera is one of many French opéras-comiques in the ancestry of *Carmen*, this one with a bullfighter as the leading character. Each of these two composers had premières again in 1850 at the Opéra-Comique: Thomas’s *Le Songe d’une nuit d’été*, in which Shakespeare is improbably represented as being in love with Queen Elizabeth; and Adam’s *Giralda*, again set in Spain, with the twenty-two-year-old Caroline Miolan making her début in the title role. In addition to those by Adam and Thomas, new works were constantly appearing from the pens of Auber and Massé at this time, feeding a growing appetite for light, tuneful, Italianate music that enchanted the public but exasperated men of finer sensibilities like Berlioz. The most perceptive observers had already noticed a decline of Parisian taste in the 1840s, to be crowned by the imminent and triumphant appearance of Offenbach in the mid-1850s.

In April 1850 a little-known composer, Ernest Reyer, presented an “ode-symphonie” at the Théâtre-Italien entitled *Le Sélam*, modelled on Félicien David’s *Le Désert* (which Reyer had never actually heard), and two weeks later *Le Sélam* and *Le Désert* were heard on consecutive evenings. Whether Bizet heard these exotic concert pieces then or later, they were to be a model for his own ode-symphonie, *Vasco de Gama*, composed ten years later. In October 1852 Parisians had a rare chance to hear Berlioz’s mighty *Grande Messe des morts*, performed in the church of St-Eustache with the composer conducting. Bizet and his friends would surely not have missed such an opportunity as that.

23. S-Ssm, MMS 323:34.

Viardot's success in *Le Prophète* gave her the influence at the Opéra to persuade the management to accept an opera by the newcomer Charles Gounod, who had won the Prix de Rome in 1839 but had devoted himself almost entirely, since his return, to church music. *Sapho*, with a libretto by Emile Augier, was composed in 1850 and staged at the Opéra in April 1851. The critics, including Berlioz, had good things to say about it, but even with Viardot in the title role it had only a handful of performances, and a single performance in London in August was a disaster. Gounod soon began to play an important part in Bizet's life, but when they met is not certain. In May 1852 Gounod married Anna Zimmerman, daughter of Bizet's occasional teacher, so it may be presumed that the Zimmerman family was the link. Old Pierre was himself in rapid decline, and when he was unable to teach, he asked Gounod to stand in for him.<sup>24</sup> He was alarmed by the swarms of pianists that descended on Paris "like locusts". "It's terrible," he said, "everyone plays the piano nowadays and everyone plays it well." "That leaves just you and me," replied Berlioz, who was no pianist.<sup>25</sup>

Gounod was entering a highly productive period that culminated in *Faust* in 1859, and in most of his compositional enterprises Bizet was to play an important subsidiary part. Gounod was older than his protégé by twenty years. Like the Delsartes he was deeply devout, having thought more than once about entering the priesthood, but he was now a family man with his sights set on success in the theatre. He soon became the director of the Orphéon, a large choral group that grew steadily in size and importance, and throughout the 1850s, in the view of the critics, he was the composer to watch, as Berlioz had been twenty years before. His correspondence with Bizet, which survives from 1853 onward, has an avuncular, if not paternal, tone, for he was clearly aware of the boy's special talent and was glad to help him. In one letter he speaks of "mon enfant Bizet".<sup>26</sup> In return Bizet was glad to assist his mentor, as for example in the Salle Herz (just around the corner from the Delsartes' apartment) on 24 April 1855 when he played the piano for the first performance of Gounod's "intimate scene" *Deux vieux amis*. You were the beginning of my life as an artist—I spring from you," Bizet told Gounod in later years after a period in which he showed the unmistakable anxieties of influence. It may be argued that Gounod's influence was not all good, for although Bizet was introduced to a style of music he found highly sympathetic, Gounod also plied him with work in the form of arranging scores for publishers when he might have better spent the time composing. We know that Bizet was taking piano pupils as early as

24. Pigot (1886), p. 4–5.

25. Berlioz (1972), t. IV, p. 301–302.

26. Lionnet (1888).

1853,<sup>27</sup> and there were few moments in his life when he could afford to refuse offers of paid work, never having a salaried job at the Conservatoire or elsewhere and never enjoying success in the theatre (in his lifetime) in the manner of Adam, Auber, Halévy, Gounod, Massé or Thomas.<sup>28</sup>

Although *Sapho* was not a success, Roqueplan, Director of the Opéra, had sufficient faith in Gounod to commission a second work from him. This was a Scribe libretto called *La Nonne sanglante*, based on the 1796 Gothic tale *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis. Berlioz had already embarked on a setting of the libretto but abandoned it in 1841. Gounod composed his score in 1852–53 and by October 1853 it was ready for rehearsal. Although Bizet's biographers claim that Bizet's first arrangement for Gounod was the music for Ponsard's play *Ulysse*, which opened in June 1852, that transcription was not by him: his first Gounod arrangement was the vocal score of *La Nonne sanglante*, 366 pages long, the printing being paid for by the Zimmerman family. Perhaps even earlier was the job of arranging Gounod's oratorio *L'Ange et Tobie* as a vocal score whose eighty-three pages Gounod also entrusted to Bizet. This score (renamed *Tobie*) was not published until 1866. A different kind of arrangement young Bizet took on was a set of a hundred very short extracts from the masters (Beethoven, Weber, Chopin, etc.) arranged for the "piano-scandé", an instrument invented by the piano makers Lentz and Houdart in 1853 which allowed the two pedals to be applied to single octaves at a time, thus allowing soft pedal in one register and sustaining pedal (or none) in another. Like so many inventions of the age, this instrument sank without trace.

*La Nonne sanglante* finally opened in October 1854. Although like *Sapho* it was not a success (Roqueplan's successor disliked it and struck it from the repertoire), the vocal score was reissued many times, first by the publishers Brandus & Dufour and then by a relatively new music publisher, Antoine Choudens, who was soon to assume the leadership in the publication of French opera. The name Choudens has become closely associated with Bizet's music, but young Georges can hardly have guessed that he was unknowingly passing his posthumous fate into the hands of a firm whose record remains to this day less than magnanimous.

Gounod's next work was a symphony, performed in February 1855 in the Salle Herz by the Société des Jeunes Artistes du Conservatoire, a new concert group conducted by an ambitious young musician, Jules Padeloup. Bizet was given the work to arrange for piano duet, published soon after by Colombier. A year later the

27. Wright (1988), p. 1.

28. For a detailed discussion of Bizet's relations with Gounod, see Gounod (1899), Poupet (1982) and Wright (1993).

same group introduced Gounod's Second Symphony, and this too was arranged by Bizet for piano duet and also for piano solo.<sup>29</sup>

★ ★ ★ ★

In October 1853 Bizet became a member of the composition class of Fromental Halévy, the centre of his formal Conservatoire studies for four years. Since the highest aim for any young French composer was the Prix de Rome, which Bizet won in 1857, bringing this phase of his student years to a close, we will return to his work in the classroom later. Meanwhile his extracurricular activities included the composition of a variety of works with which he may not have troubled his busy teacher, perhaps showing them to Gounod instead (although neither older composer can have had many minutes of spare time in that decade). These include more piano music, more songs, his first works for orchestra, and his first two operas. In February 1854 the *Journal des loisirs utiles*, which proclaimed itself to be “l’ami des jeunes filles”, included a “religious song” by Bizet entitled “La Foi, L’Espérance et la Charité”, his first published music. The author of the poem, a former monk named Rousseau de Lagrave, who had a brief career singing tenor roles at the Opéra, was no doubt a friend of the Delsartes. Young Bizet, who later expressed a vehement distaste for religion, pulls out all the stops in asserting St. Paul’s pillars of Christianity: all three strophes, set for bass voice and piano, end with a hugely forceful declaration of “Je crois en toi!”

Bearing the date September 1854 are two pieces for piano, the “Grande valse de concert” and the “Premier Nocturne”. The waltz’s length (476 bars) may justify the epithet “Grande”, but it is built entirely on popular clichés such as one might find in any ballet music of the period and shows no evidence of individuality. Bizet performed it in January 1855 in a Montmartre church, and initially dedicated it to Marmontel (the dedication was erased).

The “Premier Nocturne” in F (Bizet later wrote another “Premier Nocturne” in D) is a different matter altogether, revealing a balance and sensitivity that may derive from Chopin as well as a fine control of harmony and piano figuration. Allowing triadic harmony to shift chromatically over a pedal bass note already reveals a daring mind. In the same year, 1854, he published two more songs, modest settings of poems by Olivier Rolland, who must have been a cousin on his mother’s side. These were published by Madame Cendrier, whose music shop was next door to the Conservatoire building. Both songs have three strophic verses and both imagine flowers as living creatures: the first is a dialogue between a daisy and the young girl who is plucking its petals to divine the future, and the second imagines

29. These arrangements were published some years later by Choudens with no mention of Bizet’s name. For evidence of Bizet’s authorship, see the *Bizet Catalogue*, forthcoming.