



**CARMEN**  
**GEORGES BIZET**

## Opera Guides

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*Ann Howard as Carmen in the 1970 ENO production (photo: Donald Southern)*

## *PREFACE*

This series, published under the auspices of English National Opera, aims to prepare audiences to enjoy and evaluate opera performances. Each book contains the complete text, set out in the original language together with a current performing translation. The accompanying essays have been commissioned as general introductions to aspects of interest in each work. As many illustrations and musical examples as possible have been included because the sound and spectacle of opera are clearly central to any sympathetic appreciation of it. We hope that, as companions to the opera should be, they are well-informed, witty and attractive.

Nicholas John  
Series Editor

# *Carmen*

Georges Bizet

*Opera Guides*  
*Series Editor*  
*Nicholas John*



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## Introduction

*Nicholas John*

'I shall be delighted to . . . try to change the *genre* of *opéra-comique*. Down with *La Dame Blanche*!

Bizet to Camille du Locle, director of the Opéra Comique, in 1869

Before the première of *Carmen* on March 3, 1875, Ludovic Halévy (one of the librettists) said 'the thing had little importance for Meilhac and me'. When Bizet died, at the age of thirty-six, just three months later, he knew that *Carmen* had failed to please both management and audience. And yet a century on we can see that it boasts one of the best texts ever written and has uncanny box-office appeal.



*Célestine Galli-Marié, who had created the title role in Ambroise Thomas's 'Mignon' in 1866, created the title role of 'Carmen' in Paris in 1875, and sang it in 1886 for the first London performances in French.*



*Minnie Hauk, the first Carmen in London and New York. She refused to sing the role unless she was allowed to choose the rest of the cast including Campanini as Don José and Del Puente as Escamillo.*



Bizet's *Carmen* disappointed expectations in various ways. One of the directors of the Opéra Comique resigned because, instead of the conventional happy ending, it finished with a murder. His colleagues were worried that the scabrous story would — as it did — offend their regular audiences. Their theatre had, in fact, gained a reputation as a place where the most proper of engaged couples could meet. Parents were happy to rely on the innocuous entertainment which *opéra-comique* had become.

The two librettists tried to soften the aspects of Bizet's chosen subject which might cause offence. Their collaboration, which lasted over twenty years, was notorious for their texts of Offenbach's satirical operettas, which were certainly *not* performed at the Opéra Comique. While *Carmen* was in rehearsal between October and December 1874, they had no less than four other works staged in Paris. Meilhac was a playwright, with little interest in music, who supplied the dialogue and the comic relief. Halévy, the nephew of Bizet's teacher and father-in-law, the opera composer Fromental Halévy, wrote the verses. Their published text of *Carmen* differs considerably from what Bizet set to music. They continually proposed refrains and rhyming couplets which would have been ideal for conventional *opéra-comique*, or indeed for Offenbach's routines, and Bizet 'ferociously' altered and rejected them. They suggested Zulma Bouffar, the star of many operettas — especially *La Vie Parisienne* — for the title role; and in rejecting her, Bizet and the Opéra Comique management at least agreed on one point.

Bizet certainly delighted in comedy. He welcomed a chance to introduce the choruses of urchins and gipsies, as much as the many other moments of parody and laughter into his score. His intentions in *Carmen* were, however, more serious than those of his management or librettists. Aware of the constraints of French musical conventions, his deeply-questioning genius looked beyond them for inspiration in other arts and other fields of thought. Six months after his marriage in 1869, he described his wife in words which seem to reflect himself:

an adorable creature whose intelligence is open to all kinds of progress and reform, who believes neither in the God of the Jews nor in the God of the Christians, but in honour, duty, in a word morality.

This is the spirit which inspired *Carmen* and brought new life to *opéra-comique*.



*Georges Bizet (Royal College of Music)*

## Opéra-Comique

*Martin Cooper*

We know exactly the date at which Italian opera was introduced into France and can follow the course of its naturalisation in the works of the gallicised Italian, Lully. The origins of the *opéra-comique*, on the other hand, are both more various and more difficult to trace, as we should expect in the case of a spontaneous indigenous art-form. They are to be found initially in the sideshows of the big Parisian fairs of the middle ages, the Foire Saint Germain and the Foire Saint Laurent — popular entertainments consisting of slapstick and patter, miming and dumb-show, intelligible to the slowest wit and often crudely indecent. Apart from rough dancing, the first musical element in these sideshows was to be found in the use of popular tunes whose words were so familiar that merely to hum the tune was enough to provide a wordless comment on a situation. Gags would be topical; and in fact the Italian opera introduced to the Court in the 1640s provided an excellent subject for parody, the taking-off of Lully's high-falutin' mythological *tragédies lyriques*, which soon became an accepted practice. This, and the imitation of the improvised dramas performed by travelling Italian troupes of the *commedia dell'arte* gave *opéra-comique* a clear, if still primitive, character of its own by the end of the seventeenth century.

No serious French musician interested himself in what remained part adaptation, part parody, with much improvisation and more speech than singing. Although Favart had already given the texts of these small pieces a literary character, it was not until an Italian company gave a season of *opera buffa* in 1752 that the possibility of creating a French equivalent in the *opéra-comique* seems to have occurred to French musicians. Even then the first properly 'composed' works were by an Italian, Duni, who wrote half a dozen successful *opéras-comiques* between 1755 and 1770.

Two quite distinct social groups championed the new form. The supporters of French as against Italian music were anxious to create a French equivalent of *opera buffa*, dealing with characters and situations drawn from everyday life instead of the gods, heroes and royal personages of the opera. At the same time what we should today call the left-wing intellectuals — thinkers and writers concerned with undermining the existing régime and preparing the ground for social and political revolution — were attracted by the naturalness and simplicity of form, its popular character and its use for thinly disguised social propaganda. Thus by the 1760s we find the peasant characters in the *opéras-comiques* of Philidor — cobbler, blacksmith, woodcutter — speaking their own countrified French and loudly voicing their resentment of the pretensions of squire, schoolmaster and local Justice. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's small piece, *Le Devin du Village* (*The Village Sorcerer*) — parodied by Mozart in *Bastien et Bastienne*, had its mild note of subversiveness, although Madame de Pompadour herself took part in one performance.

*Opéra-comique*, however, remained an essentially topical form, reflecting the changing fashions and preoccupations of each decade, so that social criticism soon gave way first to sentimental pastoral themes and, in the last years before the Revolution, to sentimental 'tear-jerkers' — *pièces à mouchoirs* or *comédies larmoyantes*, as they were called. If the sentimental pastorals



Edmond Clément as Don José (Stuart-Liff Collection)

found a parallel in Boucher's painting, such works as Monsigny's '*Le déserteur*' and Grétry's '*Lucile*' belong to the same world as Greuze's '*Cruche cassée*' and '*Oiseau mort*'.

Grétry was the most accomplished musician to dedicate himself entirely to the *opéra-comique*, and he explored its possibilities in many directions — among them fairy opera (*Zémire et Azor*), medievalism (*Aucassin et Nicolette*) and historical romance (*Richard Cœur de Lion*). These and other works of the '60s and '70s were given all over Europe, wherever Courts followed French fashions. Thus it came about that at Bonn, for instance, the young Beethoven grew up familiar with works by Monsigny and Grétry, while Gluck adapted or imitated fashionable Parisian pieces for the Viennese Court; and in Russia Catherine the Great characteristically employed these French imports for her own devious political purposes.

Although the Revolution was reflected in the *opéra-comique*, and the first Théâtre de l'Opéra Comique National was constituted in 1793, such topical works as Kreutzer's *August the Tenth, or the Fall of the Last Tyrant* and *The Reduction of Toulon* were essentially short-lived. One of the most popular works of the Revolutionary years was Devienne's *Les Visitandines* which, though marked by some mild and obvious 'blasphemies', is in effect no more



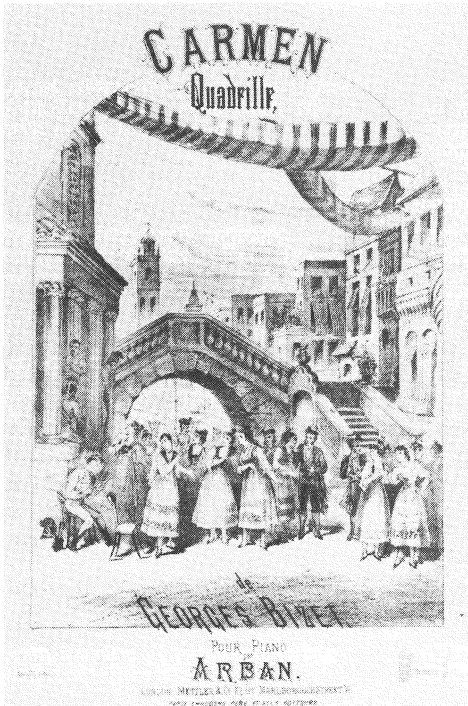
Zélie de Lussan as Carmen, a role she sang in New York and London

than the story of a young blood and his comic valet disguising themselves in order to remove the heroine from a convent. Sentiment was of course still fashionable, though it often took more heroic forms in 'rescue' operas, as in Gaveaux's setting of Bouilly's *Léonore, ou l'Amour conjugal*, which Beethoven was to transform into *Fidelio*.

The most important composer in France between 1790 and 1810 was the Italian Cherubini, whose *opéras-comiques* (especially *Les Deux Journées*) marked a new musical standard, matched by those of his contemporary Méhul but not by the more popular works of Boieldieu, Dalayrac (a pupil of Grétry's) or the Maltese Isouard, whose *Cendrillon* was a European success. It is interesting to find Carl Maria von Weber at this time accepting the *opéra-comique* — which he describes as 'conversation-opera' — and discussing it in the same breath as Italian *opera seria* and that ideal German opera which he spent his life in shaping and developing.

The relationship between opera and *opéra-comique* changed after the Revolution. The operas written by Gluck during the 1770s were the highest musical achievement of the *ancien régime* in France and they marked the end of a musical as well as a social era. The spirit of the Revolution, which found expression in the *opéra-comique*, was essentially alien to the formal, aristo-

cratic splendours associated with opera, but something to take the place of those splendours was soon required by the Napoleonic Empire. It was provided not by Cherubini, but by another Italian, Spontini, whose *Fernand Cortez* was a deliberate piece of propaganda, martial and magnificent, designed to influence the public in favour of Napoleon's Spanish campaign. When similar historical themes were treated, with a maximum of scenic display, by Auber in *La Muette de Portici* and by Rossini in *Guillaume Tell*, 'French grand opera' was launched; and it only needed the works written by Meyerbeer during the 1830s to achieve a European significance. None of this was without influence on the *opéra-comique*. The new fashion for historical subjects initiated by the novels of Walter Scott, and very much in tune with the mood of the Bourbon Restoration, had been anticipated by Grétry's *Richard Cœur de Lion* (1784) and reappeared in Boieldieu's *Jean de Paris* (1812). Boieldieu took the subject of his most successful work, *La Dame Blanche*, from Scott and Auber, who was to become the leading *opéra-comique* composer from 1840 to 1870, did the same with his *Leicester, ou le Château de Kenilworth*. *Opéra-comique* was in fact losing many of its original, specifically French, characteristics — the rural or domestic setting, the often sophisticated 'innocence' of the characters and the wit which had distinguished the best pre-revolutionary librettists, Favart and Sedaine. These 'conversation-pieces', with their often primitive music, were still produced in plenty but perhaps the last to be still remembered today, Adam's *Le Postillon de Longjumeau*, dates from 1836. The great successes of *opéra-comique* in the 1830s were melodramatically 'romantic' and set in exotic scenery — Hérold's *Zampa* and Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, *Le Domino noir* and *Les Diamants de la couronne*. Hérold's *Le Pré aux clercs* was a miniature *opéra-comique* companion-piece to Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*.



Sheet music front for a quadrille arranged from the score showing the original Opéra Comique production and Carmen about to throw her flower at Don José. (Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection)



*Frasquita warns Carmen to take care — a print of the first interpreters of the roles. (Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection)*

The feature that remained unchanged, and was often the only rigid distinction between opera and *opéra-comique*, was the spoken dialogue. This was deeply rooted in the common French conception of music as something essentially secondary, either an accompaniment to dancing and spectacle, or an interlude, as in the old *comédie mêlée d'ariettes*. French taste in the matter was firmly realistic and easily sniffed the ridiculous in sung recitative, as it had earlier in the antics — and indeed the very existence — of the *castrato* singers. By 1830, when Rossini boasted that Italian training and Italian vocal standards had revolutionised French singing, only the more simple-minded audiences were still satisfied by the simple ditties and primitive orchestration associated with the old *opéra-comique*, and Parisian *mélomanes* for the next two generations were to favour the Théâtre-Italien, which acquired the social cachet once enjoyed by the Opéra. It was the bourgeois who kept the *opéra-comique* alive during those years, and their favourite was Auber.

The twenty-five works produced by Auber between 1830 and his death in 1871 were written to a formula elaborated by the composer and his chief librettist, Scribe, the greatest theatrical craftsman of his day. They were marked by physical verve and easy predictability in rhythms and melodies, primitive harmonic schemes and that self-complacent wit, both verbal and in this case musical, that has always been characteristic of the Parisian bourgeois. Emotionally Auber's music is empty, and this is perhaps the chief reason for its failure to compete with the new operetta introduced by Offenbach and immediately successful during the 1850s, the first years of Napoleon the Third's Second Empire. Saint-Saens described operetta as a 'daughter of *opéra-comique*, but a daughter who has gone to the bad'. It would be truer, perhaps, to see it as a revival of what had once been a major ingredient of *opéra-comique*, namely satire, both political and social; and it was this that