

Georges Bizet (1838-1875)

***Carmen* – Suite No. 1**

Prélude
Aragonaise
Intermezzo
Séguedille
Les Dragons d'Alcala
Les Toréadors

***Carmen* – Suite No. 2**

Marche des Contrebandiers
Habanera
Nocturne
Chanson du Toréador
La Garde Montante
Danse Bohême

To musicians, musicologists and historians alike, there is something extraordinary and irresistible about greatness. In almost every case, this greatness is derived from being an historic pivotal influence so profound in nature that the person and their work is the connecting point between two separate eras. Not only the connecting point, but the pivot by which all that went before is delivered to all that comes after. Bach, comes to mind. He so mastered and exhausted the contrapuntal style of the Baroque that his successors had to invent something entirely new to stay in business. Beethoven comes to mind as the consummate pivot point between the classical and the romantic. Picasso comes to mind in a similar role – the pivot point by which two artistic eras are joined. Not many think of Georges Bizet in the same light, but it is so.

The fact that Georges Bizet would not be widely known or appreciated if not for his opera *Carmen*, is tragically true. However, he is in a stronger position than Mascagni or Dukas, also cruelly judged as 'one hit wonders'. There is something powerful and alluring about Bizet's *Carmen* that is historically extremely important.

In the original opera, there was a lot of spoken dialogue – a tactic of opera buffa (comic) which allowed a realism to develop the story line. Typically, this spoken dialogue was the coarse, joking roughness of bourgeois comedy, but in *Carmen* it provides a compelling realism to a full and tragic libretto. The music of the opera is finely crafted in 'stand alone' moments of sheer dramatic force. Coupled with this dramatic force is a refined compositional style of elegant yet powerful music. It is seductive and overwhelming music – never getting between the audience and the story it seeks to tell – and for this reason, it is 'great opera'. It is universally recognized that Bizet's use of spoken dialogue in a tragic opera and his specific way of handling the musical elements – entirely overthrew the age old divisions between opera *seria* (serious) and opera *buffa* (comic) and joined them into a genre that would herald Italian *verismo*. *Carmen* shows a distinct link with the style of Verdi, as well as Wagner. It is also a viable link between the genre of Mozart and the genre of Puccini.

Unfortunately, Bizet would never know of his influence, nor revel in the success of *Carmen*. For whatever reason, *Carmen* was not an immediate hit at its Paris début on March 3, 1875. The co-directors were not entirely behind the production, one scandalized by the plot, the other worried about bad box office. The librettists both admitted publicly that they considered *Carmen* to be a sideshow. The cast complained about the action and spoken dialogue, because it was such a realistic novel approach. Some were urged behind Bizet's back to play down the inherent realism in the drama. The opera house, the *Opera Comique* where it was performed had fallen on hard times and was contracting out to weddings and social events, so the very venue was surrounded by a 'less than' notoriety. It was unfortunate that the evenings performance on March 3rd, did not match the nobility of Bizet being admitted to the *Legion d'honneur* that very morning.

Bizet died of a heart attack on 3rd June, 1875, perhaps from the rigours of a swimming race from which he caught a chill, but almost certainly with serious internal infections. He was 36.

Ernest Guiraud, a French/American from Louisiana, wrote musical recitatives in place of the spoken dialogue and the opera was again presented in Vienna on 23rd October, 1875. Here *Carmen* was accepted on its own terms by a willing audience well versed in the realism of Wagner – and has remained a complete success ever since. The success of Guiraud's revisions are controversial since they were adopted after Bizet's tragic death. They became the norm for the next 75 years, until producers, directors, conductors and musicians started reconstructing the merits of Bizet's original vision of spoken text. Many believe Guiraud's recitatives to be a damaging influence on the free flow of the original opera. *Carmen* was Bizet's 27th and last opera or theatrically based work. He was no novice, nor as it turns out, unworthy. The skeptic criticisms soon gave way to comparisons with Mozart, Verdi and Wagner, all praising the integrity of drama within the music. It is Ernest Guiraud that is responsible for the compilation of the two orchestral suites. The music of the Suites is a powerful set of 'stand alone' vignettes from the whole opera, ironically, not laden down by Guiraud's laborious recitatives.

Each Suite has six sections. The first Suite is a compilation of the Overture and Entr'actes between each Act, with the addition of a single orchestrated aria – *Près des remparts de Seville* from Act I. The second Suite, slightly longer in length – is an equally seductive grouping of 'great hits' from the opera - including the famous *Toréadors* aria, and the equally famous *Habanera* and *Danse Bohême*. The universal appeal of this music is undeniable, and the orchestral suites are hugely popular, allowing musicians and audiences to revel in this wonderful music without the weight of staging an entire opera.

Zane Dalal