

Georges Bizet (1838-1875)
***L'Arlesienne* Suites 1 and 2**

Suite No. 1	Suite No. 2
Prélude	Pastorale
Minuet	Intermezzo
Adagietto	Minuet
Carillon	Farandole

When Alphonse Daudet penned his literary classic '*L'Arlesienne*' – or 'The Girl from Arles', it is unlikely that he would have imagined that it would gain a certain notoriety, beyond his other works. Daudet, though a contemporary of Dickens, had more in common with a Dickensian character than with fine authorship. His tragic life, early promiscuity, later syphilitic paralyses, controversial social activism, anti-semitism and a few other specifically Daudet characteristics make him an unlikely figure to remember, - and perhaps one would not, if Bizet hadn't stepped into the mix.

Daudet wrote this little novella in 1869, as part of a collection entitled "Letters from a Windmill", with a story line true to *verismo* form. A woman gets involved in infidelity before marriage, and characteristically the end result is betrayal, jealousy and a final suicide. In 1871, Daudet was encouraged to rework the story into a three act play, for which Bizet wrote 27 incidental sections. Three years before his death and three years before *Carmen* his Magnum Opus - the 27 sections had been adapted into four concise musical treats that are known as Suite No. 1, which got their premiere on November 10th, 1872.

The tragedy of Bizet's early death is all the more poignant by the fact that, like Mozart, he never knew the full scope of his influence. He never knew how successful *Carmen* would be. He never knew that musicologists would regard him as that historical pivot that brought *verismo* opera to a juncture. He was simply writing away – with an ardent love of theatre and how to capture it in music. When unsuccessful in the French Opera House, Camille Saint-Saens is attributed to have said to Bizet, "*Since we are not wanted there, let us take refuge in the concert hall*". Bizet's response is critical to understanding his mindset, and critical to realizing his legacy. "*I must have a stage. Without it, I am nothing!*"

The legacy Bizet leaves in the fashion of 'realism' – is noted in the spoken dialogue of *Carmen*. We know that this was not well received, not well acted in the premiere, sabotaged by director and cast alike, and considered so out of the norm as to warrant derision. We all now concede that the opera is most successful with the flowing theatrical advantage of real dialogue. We all now realize that Bizet's format was to provide perfect vignettes of music from section to section – creating a real driving force within the music whilst being absolutely married to the theatrical moment. Bizet, having taken French Opera from the refined statistic of Meyerbeer and delivered it to the raw, heart thumping of Verdi and Puccini, who indeed was Ernest Guiraud to write up all those musical *recitative* sections. Certainly, in the first 50 years of *Carmen* performances, Guiraud's additions and amendments held sway in a performance world unwilling to accept what Bizet was offering. As arranger and puppeteer behind the *Carmen Suites*, it is no surprise that 'L'Arlesienne, Suite No. 2 was entirely Guiraud's creation as well, coming to fruition four years after Bizet's death, in 1879.

Nevertheless, these extraordinary vignettes are terrific music. There is something wonderfully warm and open about the Bizet sound. It is not just a phenomenon of orchestration, - it is also a tapping into the psyche of the common man. Like Handel compared to Bach, 120 years earlier, he creates an irresistible sound while ostensibly writing the same music as his contemporaries. His Symphony in C Major, along with the other orchestral tableaux, proves that he would have made as fine an orchestral composer, had he not been spiritually chained to the stage.

To further my thesis on Bizet's particular allure, it is fitting to end with this assessment from the great Nietzsche. All of us are bound to agree.

"His music has the tang of sunny climates, their bracing air, their clearness. It voices a sensibility hitherto unknown to us."