

# OpPop

# Carmen



## 4. Carmen

May 4, 2023

## Background to the Opera

**GEORGES BIZET (1838–75)** based *Carmen* on an 1845 book of the same name by the writer and archaeologist **Prosper Mérimée (1803–70)**. The story of the gypsy Carmen and her effect on the antihero Don José is only a small section of the book, which is essentially a realistic study of Romany life, and not the glamorous spectacle the opera has become.

Bizet adapted the book as an *opéra comique*—that is to say, a spoken play with music (not necessarily comic), that relied on drama rather than spectacle. But it received a lukewarm reception at its 1874 premiere in this form, and Bizet died believing his final opera was a failure. After his death, his executors commissioned sung recitatives to replace the dialogues and made other adjustments that effectively changed the genre of the piece into *grand opéra*, a form that relies absolutely on scale and spectacle. And in that form, *Carmen* soon became one of the most performed operas of all time.

In the first hour, we shall watch most of the first act in the 2010 Met production by **Richard Eyre**, which uses the sung recitatives and gives *Carmen* the full grand-opera treatment. In the second hour, we will continue the story in the 2011 Barcelona production by **Calixto Bieito**, who strips away the glamor and plays up the gritty drama of Bizet's original version and Mérimée's novel. *rb.*

## The Story of the Opera

**ACT ONE. A square in Seville.** A group of soldiers relaxes in the square, waiting for the changing of the guard and commenting on the passers-by. Micaëla appears, seeking José. The Sergeant invites her to wait with them, but she declines. José arrives with the change of guard, who are imitated by a crowd of urchins. As the bell rings, the women emerge from the cigarette factory, followed by Carmen, who sings her provocative *habañera* on the untamable nature of love. The men

plead with her to choose a lover, and after some teasing she throws a flower to Don José, who thus far has been ignoring her. As the women go back to the factory, Micaëla returns and gives José a letter and a kiss from his mother. [*The women stream from the factory in agitation, saying that Carmen has attacked a woman with a knife. The officer orders José to guard her while he prepares the prison warrant.*] Left alone with José, Carmen beguiles him with a **seguidilla**, in which she sings of a night of dancing and passion with her lover—whoever that may be—in Lillas Pastia's tavern. Confused yet mesmerized, José agrees to free her hands; as she is led away she pushes him to the ground and runs off laughing. José is arrested for dereliction of duty.

**ACT TWO: Lillas Pastia's Inn, outside the city walls.** [*Two months have passed. Carmen and her friends are entertaining some officers in Pastia's inn. The toreador Escamillo arrives with some supporters and sets his sights on Carmen, who brushes him aside. Lillas Pastia hustles the crowds and the soldiers away. Two smugglers arrive, trying to persuade the women to join them in an adventure, but Carmen refuses, since she wishes to wait for José, who has been released from prison.*] He arrives, and Carmen treats him to a private exotic dance, but her song is joined by a distant bugle call from the barracks. When José says he must return to duty, she mocks him, [*and he answers by showing her the flower that she threw to him in the square. Unconvinced, Carmen demands he show his love by leaving with her.*] José refuses to desert, but as he prepares to depart, the Lieutenant enters looking for Carmen. He and José fight, but are separated by the returning smugglers, who restrain the officer. Having attacked a superior, José now has no choice but to join Carmen and the smugglers.

**ACT THREE: A wild spot in the mountains.** [*Carmen has now become bored with José and tells him scornfully that he should go back to his mother. Telling her fortune with her friends, Carmen joins them and finds that the cards are foretelling her death, and José's. The women leave, and José is placed on guard duty. Micaëla enters with a guide, seeking José and determined to rescue him from Carmen. On hearing a gunshot she hides in fear; it is José, who has fired at an intruder who proves to be Escamillo. José's pleasure at meeting the bullfighter turns*

*to anger when Escamillo declares his infatuation with Carmen. The pair fight, but are interrupted by the returning smugglers and girls. Inviting everyone to his next bullfight in Seville, Escamillo leaves.*] Micaëla is discovered; at first, José will not leave with her despite Carmen's mockery, but he agrees to go when told that his mother is dying. As he departs, vowing he will return, Escamillo is heard in the distance, singing the toreador's song.

**ACT FOUR: A square in Seville outside the bull ring.** An excited crowd awaits the arrival of the bullfighters. [*Escamillo enters with Carmen, and they express their mutual love. As Escamillo goes into the arena, Carmen learns that José is nearby, but she is unafraid and remains to speak to him.*] While he pleads vainly for her to return to him, cheers are heard from the arena. Carmen contemptuously throws down the ring he gave her and attempts to leave. He then stabs her, and as Escamillo is acclaimed by the offstage crowd, Carmen dies. As the crowd exits the arena, José confesses to killing the woman he loved.

— adapted from Wikipedia

## *Productions Sampled*

**METROPOLITAN OPERA**, 2010. Elina Garança (Carmen), Roberto Alagna (Don José), Barbara Frittoli (Micaëla); c. Yannick Nézet-Séguin; d. Richard Eyre

**BARCELONA**, 2011. Beatriz Uribe-Monzón (Carmen), Roberto Alagna (Don José), Marina Poplavskaya (Micaëla); c. Marc Piollet; d. Calixto Bieito

The class website is [www.brunyate.com/OpPop](http://www.brunyate.com/OpPop)  
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