

# Class 4: Carmen

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## A. Carmen as Grand Opera

1. Class title 1 (Carmen and Don José)
2. Metropolitan Opera and Barcelona Liceu compared

I didn't use the same pictures, but the image I had on the website was something like this, comparing **Richard Eyre's** colorful traditional production of *Carmen* at the Met with the muted palette and updated staging by **Calixto Bieito** from Barcelona, later taken up by opera houses all over the world. For most of you, I would imagine, there will be no comparison. I realized when I did the class on *The Barber of Seville* two weeks ago that if I start with a good traditional production from a major opera house, anything else may pale by comparison. So the question is going to be, "If it's as good as that, why bother?" Two reasons. First, it's *seldom* as good as that; the productions on DVD emerge after long rehearsal with top casts at the peak of their form; more frequently, even at the Met, we see old productions thrown together with far less rehearsal and with singers who flew in the same week. The second reason is that the grand-opera version is *not* what the composer, **Georges Bizet** (1838–75) intended.

3. — the above, with menu labels.

I'll explain more after the break, when I show you scenes from each act of the Barcelona production. But in this hour, I am going to take you through key moments from the first act of the splendid Met production, which is grand opera at its grandest. And as always, we ask the question: what makes it so popular? Let's start with curtain rise. We are in a soldiers' barracks looking onto a busy square in Seville.

4. Bizet: *Carmen*, Act I opening (Metropolitan Opera, 2010)
5. What makes it popular?
6. What makes it popular? Some answers

So what does make it popular, at least as a grand opera? I put up some answers: this first section is an unbroken sequence of melodies in simple rhythms that you can sing, and that stay with you. The staging brings an entire community to life (though we have yet to see the women), and is full of realistic detail. And both music and staging are awash with local color. Plus the **characters**. We are about to meet the anti-hero **Don José (Roberto Alagna)**, though I have to cut the recitative in which he first sings. I will start where **Carmen** herself appears (**Elina Garanča**), and sings her famous **Habañera**. She is by far the leading character, though Bizet gives her a foil, whom we have already seen: Don José's home-town sweetheart **Micaela (Barbara Frittoli)**. José tries to ignore Carmen, but once she sets her sights on somebody, it game over.

7. Bizet: *Carmen*, Carmen's entrance and Habañera (Metropolitan Opera, 2010)

Micaela now meets up with Don José. I've cut their short recitative in order to move directly onto the duet, "Speak to me of my mother," which I consider one of the loveliest sequence of tunes in the entire opera. See if you don't agree.

#### 8. Bizet: *Carmen*, Micaela/José duet (Metropolitan Opera, 2010)

No sooner has Micaela gone, then the women rush back in screaming. There has been a catfight in the factory, and Carmen has cut one of the other girls. The Lieutenant, **Zuniga**, orders Don José to take her to prison. Now she sings her second great aria of the act, also a sung version of a Spanish dance, the **Seguidilla**. This turns into a duet as José is gradually persuaded to let her escape—which is exactly what happens, even though it means a spell in prison and demotion to private.

#### 9. Bizet: *Carmen*, Seguidilla and Act I finale (Metropolitan Opera, 2010)

#### 10. Class title 2: Elina Garanca as Carmen

## B. *Carmen* as Music Drama

#### 11. Class title 3: Beatriz Uria-Monzón: *Carmen* as Music Drama

Latvian mezzo-soprano Elina Garança was one of the most stunningly beautiful women on the opera stage. **Beatriz Uria-Monzón**, who plays the title role in Calixto Bieito's production, does not have her glamor—but Bieito does not attempt to glamorize her either; he is after something that is a great deal more down to earth: **music drama** rather than **grand opera**. [Incidentally, despite her Spanish name, Uria-Monzón is French, as is her Don José, Roberto Alagna once more, despite his Italian one.]

#### 12. Opening picture of Calixto Bieito's *Carmen*

So instead of a full city square, you get a bare parade ground with a flagpole in the middle and a telephone box to one side. All contemporary. As I want to show something from each of the four acts, I need to cut to where Carmen first appears, with her Habañera. I would imagine that you will find Uria-Monzón a good deal less sexy than Garança—it is pretty much an impossible comparison—but is there anything that you get from this production that would spark your interest?

#### 13. Bizet: *Carmen*, Carmen's entrance and Habañera (Barcelona, 2011)

What did you think? Does this production have anything going for it? I mentioned that the grand opera version we saw in the first hour was not what Bizet intended. In 1875, when the opera was presented, there were two kinds of opera in France: **grand opéra**, which was all about spectacle and larger-than-life dramatic situations, and **opéra comique**, which was basically a spoken play with music; despite its name, it was not necessarily comic. The book by Prosper Mérimée which Bizet adapted, was in part a study of the gypsies of Northern Spain, and the story is just one part of a documentary. But, like last week's *Traviata* and next week's *Bohème*, *Carmen* was a failure at its first production, and Bizet died soon after. His heirs revitalized it by changing its genre completely, commissioning music to replace all the

dialogues, emphasizing the choral and dance sequences, and pumping up the décor, thus transforming the gritty little drama into the grandest of grand operas. I won't say that Bieito doesn't have his moments of theatrical spectacle too, but on the whole he is much closer to Bizet's original intention, and he really shines in action sequences that involve just a few characters. So these are what I'll play.

#### 14. Act II in Calixto Bieito's *Carmen*

Act Two is traditionally set in a tavern swirling with drunken patrons and gypsy dancers. Bieito has Carmen and her friends drive an old car out into the desert, and have a party there. It gives a specially raunchy quality to her scene with Don José, when he finally gets out of prison. This is *not* one of the great musical highlights; in fact it is accompanied at the beginning only by castanets, and the barrenness of Bieito's staging is a perfect match. But then José hears the bugle from the barracks, and says he has to go, which is not what Carmen wanted at all.

#### 15. Bizet: *Carmen* Act II, Carmen's dance (Barcelona, 2011)

Don José pleads, and Carmen taunts him. But at the end of the act, something happens to clinch the deal. José's lieutenant, Zuniga, arrives and taunts the newly-demoted private. José goes for him, but it is Carmen's friends who finish him off (he has stumbled into the middle of their smuggling operation), and now José is implicated in his murder, and *cannot* go back.

#### 16. Bizet: *Carmen* Act II, ending (Barcelona, 2011)

Act Three is set in the smugglers' hideout—more cars, more contraband—and José remains something of an outsider, especially since Carmen is clearly going off him. When the place is empty for a few minutes, Micaela arrives with a message from his mother, but hides when the smugglers return. I'll pick it up at the very end, when Micaela is discovered. Musically, this has now moved far beyond the catchy melodies of the opening, to something altogether more operatic. And Bieito excels at such drama.

#### 17. Bizet: *Carmen* Act III, ending (Barcelona, 2011)

Act Four takes place outside the bull ring where Camen's new lover, Escamillo, is the featured matador. Bizet introduces it with a fiery Spanish dance and then another crowd scene filled with people jostling excitedly, buying oranges, programs, and sherry, then cheering as the bullfighters parade by. In the grand opera version, it is a showstopper, and here for once Bieito simply has to introduce a bit of color.

#### 18. Bizet: *Carmen* Act IV, opening (Barcelona, 2011)

You may have noticed that, despite the crowds, the stage still remains a bare sandy arena, which is now marked out in a circle as though it has become the bullring itself. And it is there that José and Carmen have their final confrontation, she refusing to run away, but facing whatever fate has in store for her. It is long, but I'll pick it up for the last six minutes.

#### 19. Bizet: *Carmen* Act IV, ending (Barcelona, 2011)

#### 20. Class title 4