Class 7: Carmen

A. So Which Carmen?

1. Title 1 (website title)
2. Section title 1 (Zeffirelli's *Carmen* at the Arena of Verona)

The chunk today is a long one, the last half-hour or so of Act One. But before we get to it, I'd like to take a few minutes to discuss what kind of opera *Carmen* is. So let's start with a comparison: the opening of **Franco Zeffirelli's** 1996 production at the Met (two before the current one), and the start of **Peter Brook**'s radical 1981 production at the *Bouffes du Nord* in Paris. The illustrations before the Zeffirelli starts are of the premiere production in 1875.

3. Zeffirelli: *Carmen,* opening
4. Brook: *La tragédie de Carmen,* opening
5. — stills from the above

Can you believe that these are the same show? Well actually, they are not. The Zeffirelli is a big-budget version of a standard production for its time, while Peter Brook has stripped away all the trappings to make a point about where the show is coming from. Each director makes choices, to emphasize one aspect even at the expense of others; what do you think is the emphasis in each case?

6. Novel and Opera

Carmen derived from a novella by **Prosper Mérimée** (1803–70), who was a social anthropologist as well as a writer of fiction. The main point of the book is to paint a gritty picture of Gypsy life; the story of Carmen is really a case in point. When **Georges Bizet** (1838–75) decided to make an opera out of it, he wanted to retain some of Mérimée's realism. So he wrote it as what the French call an **opéra comique**, which does not necessarily mean a comedy (and certainly not in this case), but an opera with spoken dialogue. Given the obvious folkloric color implied by the original sets and costumes, I don't think that Bizet was entirely consistent in this regard, but at least the gesture was made. The premiere, however, was not a success, and Bizet died a few months later believing his work to have been a failure.

7. *Carmen* productions by Romain Gilbert and Martin Kusej

So the original *Carmen* was a hybrid work, a gritty story in a spectacular framework. The solution, one would have thought, is either to scale up or pare down. Contemporary productions are more or less divided between those that retain the spectacle, like the Sesquicentenary one above by **Romain Gilbert** in Rouen, or those that keep it down and dirty, like the Berlin production by **Martin Kusej** below. I'll show parts of both in a moment. But there is something else going on here too….

B. To Speak or Sing?

8. Section title B (libretto and score)

Bizet, as I said, wrote *Carmen* as an *opéra comique,* which means an opera with spoken dialogue. When it failed, more or less, at its first production, and Bizet died thinking that it was a failure, his heirs thought that the problem was that audiences could not accept a tragedy in a form more generally used for comedy. So they set to work to refashion it as a *grand opera*, sung throughout. To do this, **recitatives** were commissioned by the American-born **Ernest Giraud** (1837–92). The slide shows part of the original text and the Giraud recitative for the same scene. You will see that it was not merely a matter of putting notes to the existing words, but of rewriting them completely, in much shorter form. Adding recitatives permitted performance of the opera on much larger stages, and it was in this version that it shot up to become the second most often performed opera in the world (after *La traviata* and before *La bohème*).

9. — repeat of stills, with labels

It is actually quite rare nowadays to find *Carmen* productions with sung recitative. I chose the one from Rouen because, no doubt in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the premiere, it uses recitative (as well as a very similar set). Here is a sample from each. We are now in the middle of Act One. There has been a cat fight in the cigarette factory where Carmen works, and she has cut the face of another girl. The lieutenant, **Zuniga**, details our hero, **Don Jose**, to tie her up and take her to prison. Let's compare the two media.

10. Gilbert: *Carmen,* recit after the cat-fight
11. Kusej: *Carmen,* dialogue after the cat-fight
12. — repeat of stills

What did you think? You can hear the advantage of the dialogue, can't you? The actors are able to fill the lines with passion, lust, defiance, or whatever other emotion seems appropriate. But it does require good French, as these three singers (**Rolando Villazón**, **Marina Domashenko**, and **Christof Fischesser** as the lecherous Zuniga) certainly have. You may also have heard that even the dialogue version contains passages of singing, in the unaccompanied song with which Carmen taunts her captors; when *everything* is sung the effect is lost. Note the the woman in blue who intervenes in the Kusej production is Jose's hometown sweetheart **Micaëla**. Her reappearance is entirely the director's invention. We'll be seeing more of her in just a moment.

C. Bucks the Trend, but Works

13. Section title C (Act IV from Richard Eyre's 2009 *Carmen* at the Met)

As I said, most *Carmen* productions today use dialogue rather than recitative. The 2009 Met production by **Richard Eyre** that I am going to show does not, perhaps because it would be revived many times over the course of a long run with singers from who-knows-where. It also bucks the trend in that it is a large-scale spectacle with crowd scenes and color to rival Zeffirelli's. But, as I hope you will agree, it is so good that, despite bucking the trend, it works.

14. Numbers in Act One

I'll pick up the action from Carmen's entrance in Act One, and play right through to the end. Here is a list of numbers. It sets up the triangle between the two women very clearly, although they do not come into contact with one another at this stage of the opera in a normal production. So you will see the lyrical **duet** for José and Micaëla (in gold), and before and after (in red), the two most famous arias for Carmen, the **Habanera** and **Seguidilla**. I say famous, because you will find them as stand-alone solos in any standard anthology for mezzo-soprano. But in fact both of them play as implied duets. The Seguidlla has some relatively minor lines for José, and he is her silent target in the second verse of the Habanera. What gives this half-hour scene its momentum on the stage is the fact that none of these numbers are stop-and-sing; all involve a continuous dramatic and sexual drive towards the action in the last half-minute that will change everything. The main singers are **Elina Garanca** as Carmen, **Barbara Frittoli** as Micaëla, and **Roberto Alagna** as Don José. Let's watch.

15. Eyre: *Carmen* at the Met, second half of Act One
16. — numbers in Act One, repeat