

The Rest of the Opera

Act Two: *a tavern on the edge of the city that is also a haunt for smugglers.* The matador **Escamillo** arrives and makes a play for **Carmen**, who says she is waiting for José to join her on his release from prison. He arrives and she begins to make love to him, but is interrupted by a distant bugle signaling the return to barracks. When **Zuniga** appears at an inopportune moment, drunk and amorous, the smugglers are forced to kill him. Now implicated in the murder, José deserts the army and goes with the gang into the mountains.

Act Three: *a cave in the mountains.* Bored with José, Carmen joins her friends in fortune-telling, but *her* cards predict only death. The gang go off, leaving José on guard. For a moment, the stage is empty. **Micaëla** enters with a message for José that his mother is dying. Before she can deliver it, however, Escamillo arrives and the two men fight. They are interrupted by the return of Carmen and the gang, who find Micaëla hiding. Carmen dismisses José and promises to join Escamillo at his upcoming bullfight in Seville.

Act Four: *outside the Plaza de Toros in Seville.* The procession of the toreadors excite the crowd. Carmen enters on Escamillo's arm. Her friends have spotted José in the crowd and beg her to go inside, but she insists on staying to meet her fate. After pleading with her in vain, José stabs her, just as the crowd in the ring are cheering for his rival.

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Great Scenes in Opera



7. Carmen

March 26, 2026

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CARMEN IS NOW THE SECOND MOST OFTEN PERFORMED OPERA in the world. But it was not always so. Its composer, **Georges Bizet**, died a few months after its 1875 premiere believing his masterpiece to have been a failure. Perhaps because in many respects it was a hybrid work. It combined the gritty drama of characters of the fringes of society with colorful folkloric spectacle, and it used spoken dialogue for its connective tissue rather than the recitative of grand opera. Shortly after Bizet's death, his heirs commissioned recitatives to turn the work into conventional grand opera. More recent productions, however, have veered more to realism and restored the spoken dialogues. Oddly enough, though, the 2009 production by **Richard Eyre** at the Met that we shall watch retains both the spectacles and the recitatives, yet it still works.

Carmen is a distillation by librettists **Henri Meilhac** and **Ludovic Halévy** of the novella by **Prosper Mérimée**. A social anthropologist as well as a writer of fiction, Mérimée wanted to paint an accurate picture of Gypsy life, and his story of the army corporal ensnared by a promiscuous woman until he becomes in turn a deserter, gangster, and murderer is merely a case in point. Bizet's librettists tone down his misdeeds, make him much more sympathetic, and introduce the character of Micaëla, his hometown sweetheart, to provide some more conventional romance. *rb*.

A. So Which Carmen?

We compare two very different versions of the opening of the opera to discuss the respective roles of spectacle and realism.

Bizet: *Carmen*, opening (Met 1996; Franco Zeffirelli, *director*)

Bizet-Constant: *La tragédie de Carmen*, film based on 1981 Peter Brook's 1981 production at the Bouffes du Nord, Paris

B. To Speak or Sing?

Two approaches to the Act I scene where Carmen is sent to jail, one with sung recitatives by **Ernest Giraud**, the other with the original dialogue.

Bizet: *Carmen*, recitative (Rouen 2025; Romain Gilbert, *director*)

Bizet: *Carmen*, dialogue (Berlin 2006; Martin Kusej, *director*; Rolando Villazón, José; Marina Domashenko, *Carmen*; Christof Fischesser, *Zuniga*)

C. Bucks the Trend, but Works

The last half-hour of Act One in the 2009 production at the Met. We are in Seville; the women from the cigarette factory are out on a break, and the men come to ogle them, especially the gypsy **Carmen**, the most attractive. But, in the famous *Habanera*, she says that she will make her own decisions about whom to love, and when. She gives Corporal **José** a rose. He tries to hide his attraction, especially when his sweetheart **Micaëla** comes in with a message from his mother. No sooner has she gone than a fight breaks out among the women. Carmen has cut another girl, and is sent to prison. But, in her *Seguidilla*, she seduces José into letting her escape.

Bizet: *Carmen*, end of Act I (Metropolitan Opera 2009; Richard Eyre, *director*; Yannick Nézet-Séguin, *conductor*; Elina Garanca, *Carmen*; Roberto Alagna, *Don José*; Barbara Frittoli, *Micaëla*; Keith Miller, *Zuniga*)