



12. Carmen Translated

December 15, 2022

Carmen Translated

ALTHOUGH TWO OF OUR PRODUCTIONS ARE SUNG IN ENGLISH, this class is not about literal translation so much as how the words of the original writer may be turned into spoken dialogue, recast as sung recitative, cut or expanded, or perhaps converted to a different medium altogether. All these things can be seen in the fate of Georges Bizet's 1875 opera *Carmen*, the genre-change that rescued it after the composer's death, and the many attempts in subsequent productions to bring it closer to the gritty realism of its original, the 1845 novella by Prosper Mérimée. *rb.*

A. Whose Carmen Is It?

Prosper Mérimée (1803–70) was an archaeologist as well as a writer so it is no surprise that his novels an archaeological (or at least anthropological) flavor also, being set in fringe communities such as peasants in Corsica or gypsies in Spain; he originally published *Carmen* as a serial in a travel magazine. The librettists **Henri Meilhac** (1831–97) and **Ludovic Halévy** (1834–1908), one of the best-known teams in the business, had to remove three-quarters of the book to reach the central story of Carmen and Don José—but they also added to it by creating alternate love-interests for each of the characters: the matador Escamillo for Carmen and José's home-town sweetheart Micaëla.

Georges Bizet (1838–75) wrote *Carmen* originally as an *opéra comique*, a somewhat realistic piece with spoken dialogue. He died believing his opera to be a failure. But his heirs commissioned recitatives from another composer, **Ernest Giraud**, and in this form it was hailed as one of the grandest of grand operas and achieved the huge success it has enjoyed since. We shall sample extremes of both approaches:

D. Dat Rhythm on a Drum

In 1943, **Oscar Hammerstein** made his own adaptation of *Carmen*, using Bizet's music, but writing entirely new lyrics and a new script to go with them; the result was the musical *Carmen Jones*, performed on Broadway with an all-black cast. He set it in a Southern town with a small Army base and a wartime parachute factory, thus absolutely contemporary. By the time **Otto Preminger** made a movie version in 1954, the war was well over, so it is almost a period piece—doubly so now. The movie stars **Dorothy Dandridge** and **Harry Belafonte**, both singers, though their songs were dubbed by others with more operatic voices; **Carmen**, for example, was sung by the young **Marilyn Horne**, well before she became famous in opera.

The film is unusual in that, instead of spreading the songs evenly throughout, it has some parts that play for 15 minutes or more without music, and others that are like a compressed version of the opera. We shall hear two of the latter sequences, equivalent to the openings of Bizet's Acts I and II. We shall also sample Hammerstein's equivalents of the seguidilla and murder duet heard in the first hour.

- **Hammerstein/Preminger** film, 1954

Dorothy Dandridge (Marilyn Horne), Harry Belafonte (LeVern Hutcherson), Olga James, Pearl Bailey

“Send Them Along” [Chorus]

“Lift 'Em Up an' Put 'Em Down” [Children's Chorus]

“Dat Love” (Habanera) [Carmen]

“You Talk Jus' Like My Maw” [Joe and Cindy Lou]

“There's a Cafe on the Corner” (Seguidilla) [Carmen]

“Beat Out Dat Rhythm on a Drum” [Frankie]

“Stan' Up an' Fight” (Toreador Song) [Husky Miller]

“Whizzin' Away Along de Track” [Quintet]

Final Duet [Carmen and Joe]

Franco Zeffirelli's spectacular production at the Met, and *La tragédie de Carmen*, the stripped-down chamber version devised by **Peter Brook** in 1981 to return it to the gritty texture of Mérimée's original.

- **Franco Zeffirelli** production, Metropolitan Opera, 1996
- **Peter Brook** film, 1983
Hélène Delavault, Howard Hensel

B. To Speak or Sing?

Most productions of the opera today have abandoned Giraud's recitatives in favor of at least a cut version of the original dialogue. How much difference does this make? We shall watch the same scene—Carmen's seduction of José in her *Séguedille* near the end of Act I—in two different productions: the current version at the Met by **Richard Eyre** (an unusual exception in still using recitative), and a 2006 production by **Martin Kusej** in Berlin that performs the dialogues virtually uncut.

- **Peter Eyre** production, Metropolitan Opera, 2010
Elina Garanca, Roberto Alagna
- **Martin Kusej** production, Berlin 2006
Marina Domschenko, Rolando Villazón

C. In the Vernacular

Another way of approaching the realism of Mérimée's original is to eliminate romantic trappings and sing in the language of the audience. **Calixto Bieito's** 2015 production for the English National Opera did both of these things. We shall watch the final scene.

- **Calixto Bieito** production, ENO, 2015
Justina Gringyte, Eric Cutler

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