Class 12: Carmen Translated

A. Whose Carmen is it?

1. Class title 1: Carmen Translated

There is only one setting of the 1845 novella *Carmen* by **Prosper Mérimée**: the opera written by **Georges Bizet** (1838–75) in the last year of his life, 1875. So this class is not about different settings of the same novel, but about different treatments of this one setting; it is relevant, because most of them have to do with language, and the way the story is told. But first, let's get the ball rolling with the opening scene from the old **Franco Zeffirelli** production at the Met. I lead into it with two lithographs of the original 1875 production.

2. Zeffirelli production, opening (2:04)
3. Franco Zeffirelli's *Carmen* at the Arena of Verona

I chose this because you don't get more grand-opera than that! *Carmen* has long been associated with big stage spectacle; I counted 12 horses I saw at a production in Paris back in the day. This is Zeffirelli's production for the Arena in Verona, where you at least expect that kind of scale, but on an indoor stage, such profusion is way over the top. And the irony is that this was not the way Bizet and his librettists imagined it, and it is certainly not the atmosphere of Mérimée's novella. This is the paradox I intend to explore for the rest of the class.

4. The creators of *Carmen*

Let's look at the creators of *Carmen.* **Prosper Mérimée** (1803–70) was a writer and translator, but his day job was as Inspector General of Historical Monuments for the French state. His novels had something of an archaeological (or at least anthropological) flavor also, being set in fringe communities such as peasants in Corsica or gypsies in Spain. *Carmen* was originally published as a serial in a travel magazine. Bizet's librettists, **Henri Meilhac** (1831–97) and **Ludovic Halévy** (1834–1908), were one of the best-known teams in the business, already responsible for many of the operettas by **Jacques Offenbach**. **Georges Bizet** (1838–75) had been a childhood prodigy, but was less successful as an opera composer, although *Les pêcheurs de perles* (1863) had eventually done quite well.

5. *Carmen*, from novel to opera

This slide shows the combination of compression and expansion that Meilhac and Halévy managed for Bizet. The **compression** comes in ways already familiar to us from this class: by cutting out everything not relevant to the main story (eg. Mérimée's anthropology), removing duplications (eg. Carmen's on-off-on-off relationship with José, and her other lovers), simplifying the action for greater psychological impact (José is not directly involved in any murder until he kills Carmen), and excising minor characters (most obviously Carmen's husband). The **expansion** comes in adding an entirely new character, **Micaëla**,

José's hometown sweetheart, and expanding Mérimée's mention of a bullfighter as one of Carmen's lovers into the famous matador **Escamillo**; both of these characters are secondary to the main pair, but still major roles. The librettists also took care to set up each of the four acts in a picturesque locale, and to provide opportunities for catchy musical numbers to achieve this.

6. *Carmen*, act-to-act

So if we look at a breakdown of the opera, we see that the amount taken from Mérimée is actually rather small. In the first act, we have the first encounter of Carmen and Don José, her arrest, and manipulation of José to allow her to escape. In the second, we have the scene where she welcomes him on his release from prison, but rejects him when he says he cannot stay the night. Although the details are different, we also have the fact that José is compromised when his superior officer is killed, and thus forced to join the bandits. The third act is a compression of Mérimée's account of José's life as a bandit, but takes little direct from the novella, and adds important scenes involving the new characters Micaëla and Escamillo. The fourth act ends in Carmen's refusal to return to Don José and thus to her murder, but the setting is a lot more theatrical. Indeed, each of the acts is placed in a highly theatrical context: the *plaza* in Seville, the gypsy dance at the inn, the two choruses of the smugglers, and the brilliant procession to the *plaza de toros*.

But I want to give you another vision of *Carmen.* Here is the opening of the film that the English director **Peter Brook** (1925–2022) made of his stage production from 1981.

7. *La tragédie de Carmen*, opening sequence (2:15)
8. — still from the stage production

The differences were even more striking in the small theatre Brook used in an out-of-the-way *quartier* near the *Gare du Nord.* The audience sat on bleachers around a patch of sand; with a very few props, the sand was the entire set. Brook's aim was to remove all the grand-opera flash that had become attached to the piece, and bring it closer to the gritty realism of Mérimée's original. So he removed the choruses and folklore, reduced the characters to the main four (never mind that two of them were not even in the Mérimée), had the composer **Marius Constant** (1925–2004) arrange the music for a small chamber orchestra, wrote some additional dialogue with playwright **Jean-Claude Carrière** (1931–2021) and put the whole thing together into an unbroken act 75 minutes long.

9. Two images of *Carmen*: traditional and Peter Brook

Here is the traditional version contrasted with Brook's: all those Spanish trappings versus none at all. We have seen that Bizet wrote a lot of folklore into his score, and judging from this picture of the first production, there was a lot onstage as well.

10. Bizet: *Aragonaise* (Act IV prelude) (0:45)

B. To Speak or Sing?

11. Section title B: To Speak or to Sing?

Nonetheless, Bizet wrote *Carmen* as an ***opéra comique,*** which means an opera with spoken dialogue, whether comic or not (and in this case not!). When it failed, more or less, at its first production, and Bizet died thinking that it was a failure, his heirs 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*).

12. Roberto Alagna and Elina Garanca in *Carmen* (Met, 2010)

Although most companies have now gone back to dialogue, it so happens that the excellent Met production from 2010 uses the recitatives. I want to play you the scene leading up to the one you see here, beginning with the recitative I showed on the screen. There has been a fight among the cigarette workers, and Carmen has cut one of them on the face with a knife. Don José is detailed to take her to prison, but she seduces him into letting her escape. The singers are **Roberto Alagna** and **Elina Garanca**, and the director is Richard Eyre.

13. Eyre production: Seguedilla sequence (9:01)
14. Martin Kusej's *Carmen* in Berlin, 2006

There are some pretty stellar performances there, and the production values are superb. So it may not be fair to offer this comparison with **Martin Kusej's** deliberately stripped-down 2006 production in Berlin. Although the performers, **Rolando Villazón** and **Marina Domschenko**, are very good, I don't want you to compare simply on which performer you like best. But watch especially for how, in the spoken version, the musical numbers arise out of speech and break for speech. Also how Carmen's reply to the officer when he tells her not to speak, "I'm not speaking, I'm singing," makes much more sense when other parts *are* spoken. I'll start the scene a little earlier than the one from the Met.

15. Kusej production: Seguedilla sequence (14:31)

What did you think? To my mind, the dialogue makes all the difference. I would not go to the Kusej production for color, but the stripped-down production in modern costumes does bring the drama into the here-and-now.

C. In the Vernacular

16. Calixto Bieito's *Carmen* in London, 2015

Here is a production by the Spanish director **Calixto Bieito**, who updates the production even further, and reduces the scenery act by act until at the end it is no more than a rope stretched across the sand-covered stage to hold back the eager crowd cheering a procession that we do not actually get to see. Bieito's production has neither dialogue nor recitatives. He repeated it all over Europe, always sung in French, until he came to the **English National Opera** where, in keeping with house policy, it was sung in English—which is another way of getting to somewhere like Mérimée's realism. Here is the very end of it; the singers are **Justina Gringyte** and **Eric Cutler**. What does the English do for you?

17. Bieito production: ending (5:57)
18. Class title 2

Did that work for you? The parent company of the ENO, the **Sadlers' Well Opera**, established the opera-in-English policy long before the era of supertitles; using British artists and singing in English was the main thing that distinguished them for the Royal Opera at Covent Garden. I am not sure it still makes sense now. That apart, I do like the very basic dynamics of Bieito's production, and especially the way he makes it clear that Carmen knows she is going to die—she has read it in the cards in Act III—and essentially accepts her destiny.

D. Dat Rhythm on a Drum

19. Section title C (*Carmen Jones* LP cover)

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, but I think it still works. The movie starred **Dorothy Dandridge** and **Harry Belafonte**. It seems odd that their names are the ones given prime billing on the LP of *musical* numbers, since all the songs were dubbed by others; Carmen, for example, was sung by the young **Marilyn Horne**, well before she became famous in opera.

20. Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones* (1954)

I apologize for ending a course on opera with a musical, but it absolutely fits my theme of how librettists adapt a story for singing. I also have personal reasons. If there was any one thing that got me into opera, it was seeing this movie, which was the only film with an early enough showing that I could catch in Liverpool while waiting for the mid-afternoon train to take me to boarding school. So for the rest of the class, I am simply going to play an abridged version of the musical, with lots of cuts. I will play two