

MUSIC DIRECTOR'S NOTE



Since *Carmen* is one of the most popular operas in the repertoire, it is also one that I've had a long relationship with. I've been conducting it regularly since the late 1990s and this is my third time conducting it at Opera San José, more than any other opera since I started working here fifteen years ago.

In truth, every time I prepare for a production of *Carmen*, I tell myself that this is the last time I'm going to conduct this opera. Its buoyant, irresistible music, iconic characters, and dramatic sweep are very good at disguising how hard it is to pull off on its own terms. This is because the genesis and journey of *Carmen* from story to opera has created in it many contradictions, and those paradoxes are intrinsic and are in fact an essential element of its popularity. Mérimée's *Carmen* first appeared as a mock journalistic report, sandwiched between actual reports in the biweekly travel journal, *La Revue des deux mondes*. The story concerns a French narrator who, while searching in Spain for an ancient battlefield, runs into Don José who tells him, retrospectively, more or less, the story of the opera.

This slice-of-life tale then was shorn of the dispassionate perspective of the French narrator and told not from José's perspective, but as a naturally unfolding story. This was the first significant, necessary change on its way to being made into an opera. If you believe that part of a story is how it is told, then this change already significantly alters the load-bearing structure of its dramaturgy. Beyond that, however, a subtler but, for our musical purposes, more significant challenge was added.

For *Carmen*'s original audience in 1875 did not comprise patrons of the traditional Théâtre National de l'Opéra, where the famous Palais Garnier had

finally been completed only a few months earlier, but was instead the middle-brow audience of the Opéra-Comique. Operas presented there were typically lighter in subject matter, and used a lot of spoken dialogue. And though they incorporated a greater diversity of musical styles such as cabaret, dance, and café music, the audiences were more bourgeois, family-oriented and, in matters of sexual propriety, more reactionary than audiences at the Opéra would have been. So, on top of all the transmutations through which *Carmen* had already gone, it would now have to be composed in a specific musical language palatable for an audience hostile to its intent. A mock travelogue turned into straightforward tragedy was then brought to life through the prism of a very particular musical sensibility not obviously conducive to it.

There are very few straight lines in that evolution, and each of them are tightropes. Every performance is balancing on a hair's breadth between tragic and comic, sexy and vulgar, cabaret and classical, spoken and sung, glamor and meaning. And while that guarantees that each performance will be exciting it also means that few will be totally successful. *Carmen* is like a bedsheet that doesn't quite fit the bed: you pull over one corner and another flops out, you tuck in a side and the other side gets away, but every so often with some pluck and good fortune you can briefly cover all four corners as they vibrate and quiver against the sheet. That's what a great performance of *Carmen* is like, an apparent impossibility that nevertheless is attainable through an alchemy that is unpredictable and unrepeatable. Every great performance of this opera is a unique experience between the artists and the audience. You could see all six performances of our run and come away with six distinct experiences. That tightrope dynamic is why *Carmen* is so popular and exciting but it is also why every time I prepare to do it, I tell myself that this is going to be the last time. *Carmen* requires a sense of abandon from everybody who undertakes it and until I get out there, put my first step on the rope and start the overture, it can seem like the most daunting thing in the world.

My greatest hope is that you feel that same excitement from our performances, that you feel that you are there with us in the arena, walking the tightropes and subduing the bulls. Enjoy the show.

JOSEPH MARCHESO

MUSIC DIRECTOR