

GEORGES BIZET: A BRILLIANT BEGINNING

BY LARRY HANCOCK

Georges Bizet was born in Paris on October 25, 1838. His father was an amateur singer, composer, and voice teacher; his mother was a piano teacher with whom Georges studied as a small child. They lived surrounded by the Paris Conservatory, and a range of theaters. Musicians were in and out of their home as a matter of course. Recognizing his unusually mature gifts at the piano, Bizet's parents had him audition for the Conservatory at age eight, where he was allowed to audit classes for one year until, shortly before his tenth birthday, he became a fully matriculating student.

Bizet quickly proved to be a brilliant pianist and won top prizes in both piano and organ. He studied composition with the successful opera composer Fromental Halévy, whose daughter he would marry, and he was greatly influenced by Gounod, who would become one of the most influential composers in France throughout Bizet's short life. As a student, he composed a number of piano pieces, and at age 17 he completed his Symphony in C Major as well as his first opera, *La maison du docteur*. Two years later he completed *Le Docteur Miracle*, an operetta composed for Offenbach's annual competition and he tied for first place. Also at age 19, he composed the cantata

Clovis et Clotilde, which won him the coveted *Prix de Rome* (1857) as well as enthusiastic praise in the press. The *Prix de Rome* provided Bizet with financial support from the French government for five years and housing in the Medici palace in Rome for three years where he could concentrate on composition.

Unfathomably, when Bizet came back from Rome he no longer had the enthusiastic critical support he had enjoyed as a student. *Les Pêcheurs de perles* (Théâtre Lyrique, 1863), his first professional opera commission (you'll likely know it from the famous *Pearl Fishers* duet), was coolly received by all but Hector Berlioz, who found it exceptional. The Théâtre Lyrique also commissioned and produced *La jolie fille de Perth* (after Scott's *The Fair Maid of Perth*) in 1867, but the libretto was so weak that the opera did not survive beyond its initial 18 performances. In 1872, Bizet had his first unqualified success as a professional composer for his incidental music for the play *L'Arlésienne*; his expanded version of this music is still heard in concert halls. That same year he composed the one-act opera *Djamileh* for the Opéra-Comique, which met with no success, though Bizet believed he found his true voice in that work.

The years from his return to Paris until 1875 saw many projects begin, but very few finished. For the most part, these were projects suggested by various theatres that fell through despite Bizet's excellent work. In the five years prior to his last commission Bizet was able to maintain a meager income by arranging popular music for piano. He and his wife moved to a cottage on the outskirts of town where Bizet contended with a serious loss of confidence and his wife suffered from mental illness.



A portrait of Bizet by Camillo Midas.
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In what would prove his last work, an opéra comique (a play with musical numbers inserted), Bizet was determined to bring to the stage not only an artistic and public success, but also a work that would reinvigorate a moribund art form. He was offered this commission by the Opéra-Comique, and he suggested a subject that was in the forefront of a new movement in French art referred to as naturalism. Naturalism had until that time been restricted to the visual arts and literature, but would quickly influence theatrical performances, including opera, and not only in France but also in Italy, where it was called *verismo*. From there it would influence art throughout the West. The novel Bizet put forward was Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen*. This project led to the resignation of one of the co-directors of the Comique, as the subject matter was the antithesis of the romantic comedies that were the very definition of that company.

There were many difficulties in bringing *Carmen* to the stage. The orchestra found their parts so difficult that they refused to rehearse. Chorus members were stunned when asked to assume characters and act rather than stand in a line facing the conductor, and they went on strike when some were asked to engage in a stage fight. The greatest difficulty, however, was the nature of Carmen herself. Carmen is a woman who has control of her sexual life, who chooses the men she wants, and who frankly uses sexual favors as a necessity of survival. At the time, such a character was unheard of on the French stage, or any other stage. This character and the violent end she suffers doomed Carmen to fail with the Paris bourgeoisie who frequented the Opéra-Comique.

To make sense of this, one must take into account the Opéra-Comique's underlying mission. This company offered light entertainment to a specific public, and most of its boxes were subscribed by marriage brokers. After a couple had been matched, the financial negotiations between the parents had been settled, and all that was left was the proposal, the marriage broker scheduled the families for a box at the Opéra-Comique. At the last intermission, the family would leave the young couple alone in the box. Likely, they were alone for the first time (though in an open theatre), and there he would pop the question. *Carmen* is not exactly the perfect opéra comique to inspire a young lady to enter into marriage.

By the close of the premiere run of *Carmen*, the Opéra-Comique was bankrupt, as the director believed in the worth of this revolutionary work and stubbornly refused to close it, despite miserable box office returns—there are mixed reports on the financial success of *Carmen*'s first production.

It has been conjectured that Bizet, only 37 when he died of heart failure, just three months after the *Carmen* premiere, purposefully endangered his life by swimming in the cold Seine due to despair over the failure of what he thought was his best possible work. However, when one considers that June 3 was the date of his death, this cold-water suicide seems a little lukewarm, and especially so after noting that Bizet had been fond of swimming since his student days in Italy, and often went to this specific country retreat because he could swim there.

What is truly sad, however, is that Bizet would never know that in only five months, *Carmen* would become a runaway success in Vienna, and would eventually return to Paris where it would be received with wild enthusiasm. Indeed, *Carmen* quickly attained and still holds the status of the most performed opera in history.



OSJ's 2016 production of *Carmen*.