# Carmen

An Opera in four acts.
Sung in French with English supertitles
Music by Georges Bizet
Libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Havléy,
After the novella by Prosper Mèrimèe
Premiere: Paris Opèra Comique, March 3, 1875

PROGRAM NOTES
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Georges Bizet composed *Carmen* – the last of his sic completed operas – when her was only 36 years old. Although it ultimately found its place as Bizet's finest operatic masterpiece, judged by many as one of the greatest operas ever written, it came at the end of a musical career fraught with anxiety and disappointment.

Like most French composers, Bizet shaped his musical skills at the Paris Conservatorie. Having entered at the age of 9, he capped his exceptional student career by winning the coveted Prix de Rome. In 1860, following three relatively unproductive years in that city, he returned to Paris where, for the rest of his life, he faced unrelenting personal and professional setbacks. His opera, *Les Pêcheurs de perles (The Pearl Fishers)* premiered in 1863, but garnered little public support and was treated severely by the critics. Bizet went on to complete three more operas during the next decade, but all were received with little enthusiasm. The Parisian critics caustically branded them "Wagnerian." His operas were premiered only at the smaller Parisian theaters, the elite Paris Opèra having rebuffed him, unwilling to take on a composer it considered a mere beginner.

Throughout his career, Bizet was distressed over his critics' unwillingness and inability to embrace his music. His failures weighed heavily on him, causing him to develop insomnia and argumentative and nervous disposition, made worse by his neurotic wife and mother-in-law. To make matters more intolerable, he suffered from angina and painful absences of the throat.

"They make out that I am obscure, complicated, tedious." Bizet once wrote, "more fettered by technical skill than lit by inspiration." His contemporaries, however – Gounod, Berlioz, Halevy, Saint-Saens and others – took Bizet's work seriously, recognizing its unique originality.

In 1872, Camille du Locle, co-director of the *Opèra Comique*, asked Bizet to collaborate with librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy on a new full-length opera. By this time, Bizet's health was worsening, but he eagerly accepted, proposing that it be based on Prosper Merimee's novella *Carmen*. He knew many French critics were prejudice against him, but when the opera was completed in 1875, Bizet was certain they would at

last be satisfied. “This time,” he wrote “I have composed a work that is all clarity and vivacity, full of color and melody.” But once again he was to be disappointed.

*Opèra Comique* was an operatic genre designed to appeal to families of bourgeois respectability who wanted to be artificially entertained. But with *Carmen*, Bizet transformed it by vividly expressing the torments inflicted by sexual passion and jealousy. It proved to be too much for the Parisian audience, who were shocked by the blatant expression of sexual desire, girls smoking and fighting on stage, and the brutal murder.

The critics responded more fiercely than ever. They branded it “educated noise,” “audacious Wagnerism,” “shocking and repugnant.” One proclaimed that the stage of the *Opera Comique* was no place for “characters who have sunk to the sewers of society.” Librettist Jean Dupin groused, “Your Carmen is a flop, a disaster! The music never stops. That’s not music! That’s not an opera! A man meets a woman. He finds her pretty…He loves her, she loves him… She doesn’t love him anymore… He kills her… And you call that an opera? It’s a crime, do you hear me, a crime!”

Three months after the premiere, Bizet died believing his work a failure. Later that year, Carmen was produced in Vienna with the spoken dialogue replaced by recitatives composed by Ernest Guiraud. Soon, *Carmen* began to conquer the entire operatic world, with audiences, critics and musicians singing its praises. Richard Strauss believed it to be unrelieved perfection. “If you want to learn how to orchestrate, don’t study Wagner’s scores, study the score of *Carmen*.”

Although he composed *Carmen* in the traditional framework of aria and spoken dialogue in an era dominated by Verdi and Wagner, Bizet achieved a vital and original music drama whose naturalism and tragic power profoundly influenced the realistic *verismo* composers to follow, notably Mascagni and Puccini.

Carmen had its New York premiere, sung in Italian, on Oct. 23 1878 at the Mapleson Academy of Music. The Metropolitan Opera first performed it, also in Italian, on Jan. 5, 1884.