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PART I

Establishment in Paris and the
Repertoire

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1 | *Carmen* at Home and Abroad

CLAIR ROWDEN AND RICHARD LANGHAM SMITH

Carmen Abroad takes a single, prodigiously successful opera from the nineteenth century and traces the way it was performed and received internationally until the 1940s. ‘Why *Carmen*?’ some have asked. Well, of course, the flippant answer is ‘Why not?’, yet there are specific issues at stake with *Carmen*. The most important seem to us to be that her story is intrinsically one about migration and border crossings, and that ‘*Carmen* the opera’ has been transcended by ‘*Carmen* the myth’ – or what one contributor to the book has termed ‘Carmenism’, whereby *Carmen* has been abstracted from the opera to serve as a mythological symbol.

Opera, as lyric spectacle, has huge potential to strengthen its characters: music, text, scenery, costume and – especially in *Carmen* – performative elements all effectively project characters while still leaving the spectator space for personal interpretation. This book explores the ways in which *Carmen* – the music, the spectacle, the myth – has been reinterpreted in various places, with their vastly different political, religious and cultural situations. All manner of subtexts are highlighted among the details of the story, and – as views of relationships, power and gender change – the story, whether or not set in its Spanish context, accrues new meanings.

***Carmen*: A Modern Myth?**

Although opera has, from its inception, been deeply rooted in mythology – of Greek or Roman sources at first, later of fairy tales, myths and epics – few operas can be said to have created myths in themselves. Robinson Crusoe can hardly be said to have achieved mythical status through Offenbach’s *opéra-comique* and, although international dissemination of the Don Juan story was certainly catalysed by Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, it had already reached the stage in several plays.

Perhaps the first (and best) exploration of *Carmen* that developed this view was initiated in the writings of Dominique Maingueneau, whose *Carmen: Les racines d’un mythe* interrogates the opera as a libretto, deliberately avoiding any comparisons with Prosper Mérimée’s original

novella.¹ Maingueneau at one point tantalisingly describes the essence of myth as exploring ‘something we always knew’. Pursuit – by singers, directors, producers and commentators – of what this elusive ‘something’ is has been the essence of *Carmen*’s subsequent performance history, including the early international stagings explored by our writers.

Mérimée’s ‘Significant Moments’

Soon after Mérimée’s death in 1870 – preceding the gestation and staging of the opera by only a few years – translations of his story began to appear. It is very possible that the opera’s premiere in 1875, combined with Mérimée’s death during the Paris Commune, was in part responsible for the run of translations. After all, the opera enjoyed worldwide success in the 1880s as it travelled around the globe. Translations of the novella into English appeared (1881 and 1887 with illustrations) alongside the first Russian translations (1882 and 1886), of which there were many more than in other languages, followed by versions in Italian (1893), although the libretto had necessarily appeared in Italian somewhat earlier (see Chapter 6). The novella itself had first appeared in German very soon after its first French edition.² In Britain it appeared alongside *Colomba* in a collection entitled *Popular French Novels*, and we can safely assume that some of the anglophone audiences described in this volume – Ireland, Australia and the United States (see Chapters 7, 11, 12 and 13) – were thus enabled to play the game that Maingueneau rejected: that of comparing novella and libretto.³

Mérimée (b. 1803) visited Andalusia only once, in 1830, escorted by the *costumbrista* writer Calderón, who was committed to teaching Mérimée the details of Andalusian life, especially bullfights. Mérimée wrote the novella – ‘from memory’ – in 1842, but revised it in 1845 when he wrote to his friend Mme de Montijo, mother of the future French empress Eugénie, recounting the way in which he had composed the story after a tale she had told him fifteen years earlier of a ‘*jaque* [young blood] from Malaga who had killed his mistress’.⁴ In France, the opera came to the stage

¹ Dominique Maingueneau, *Carmen: Les racines d’un mythe* (Paris: Éditions du Sorbier, 1984); and *Féminin fatal* (Paris: Descartes, 1999).

² See Pierre Trahard and Pierre Josserand, *Bibliographie des œuvres de Prosper Mérimée* (Paris: Champion, 1929); rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1971.

³ *Popular French Novels* (London: Vizetelly, 1881).

⁴ ‘Je viens de passer huit jours enfermé à écrire. . . une histoire que vous m’avez racontée il y a quinze ans et que je crains d’avoir gâtée. Il s’agissait d’un *jaque* de Malaga qui avait tué sa

in the knowledge that many among its audiences would know Mérimée's tale, inquisitive to see how this minor masterwork had been adapted as a lyric spectacle. Yet the reputation of Henri Meilhac, Ludovic Halévy and Georges Bizet's work soon overtook it. Mérimée's earlier *Lettres d'Espagne*, sent back to Paris in 1830 while he was travelling, would be reread – and had been reread – by the two librettists, who had incorporated some of its context into their libretto.⁵ Thus, the novella reflects Mérimée's own peregrinations in the Iberian Peninsula and his encounters with Castilian, Andalusian, Basque and gypsy cultures (and a touch of the English too), all seen through French-tinted glasses.

Maingueneau's refusal to engage in the pastime of comparing the characters in the novella with those of Meilhac (1831–1897) and Halévy (1834–1908) is in line with a strain of drama criticism in which structure is seen as more important than character-study.⁶ Seen from that point of view, rather than regarding the novella's characters as diluted in the opera, structural points emerge as more significant. One of Mérimée's most notable techniques – that of structuring his novella around a series of 'significant moments' – rendered *Carmen* an ideal basis for an opera libretto, since these moments so easily lend themselves to musical transformation: the throwing of the flower; the riot in the factory; Carmen's seductive dance for José; the interrogation; and, of course, the final murder. Locations such as the plaza, the tavern scene and the entry into the bullring could be conjured up from the earlier *Lettres d'Espagne* and from travelogues by the countless other writers who had visited Spain.

Gypsies and the 'Wandering Life'

As the chorus of gypsies trek over the sierra in Act III, they sing a paean of praise to 'the open skies, the wandering life'. In a sense, *Carmen* is an opera about characters displaced: vagrants, nomads, migrants. Jean-Paul Clébert describes gypsies as representing 'the unique example of an ethnic whole perfectly defined which, through space and time for more than one thousand years and beyond the frontiers of Europe, has achieved success in

maitresse. . . ' Mérimée to Mme de Montijo, Paris, 16 May 1845, in Prosper Mérimée, *Correspondance générale*, ed. Maurice Parturier, vol. IV (Paris: Le Divan, 1945), p. 294.

⁵ See Richard Langham Smith, 'From novella to libretto', chap. 7 in *Bizet's Carmen Uncovered* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020).

⁶ Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

a gigantic migration'.⁷ And yet (Spanish) gypsy communities themselves are essentially regionalist: they think of themselves as coming from their home town.⁸

Particularly important in the nineteenth century were the studies of gypsies by Heinrich Grellmann and George Borrow, the former largely denigrating them at every opportunity and ridiculing their 'skill' at fortune-telling. The latter, a Scottish Bible peddler, a critique of whose book on Spanish gypsies Mérimée added as a fourth chapter to his original novella, was more respectful of their manners.⁹ Reputed to come from the east, gypsies are also referred to by the etymological synonym 'égyptiennes' in both the novella and libretto. Andalusia was thus an ideal topos for a tale dependent on the confrontation of two cultures: the meeting place of Europe with Africa. Carmen's character, as an outsider whose own vocabulary divided gypsies from non-gypsies, was clearly that of a proud independent woman set against the status quo of society, but a society that was radically changing.¹⁰ She does, after all, have a proper job in a modern, highly organised royal tobacco factory while engaging, in her spare time, in the old ways of gypsy life – robbery with violence, divination, banditry, smuggling and occasional prostitution if some high-ranking soldier with 'good guineas' approached – all to the noble end of 'redistributing wealth' in what was virtually a serfdom. Above all, as more modern readings of her have stressed, she had the honour of her race in her bloodstream.¹¹ Like the gypsy emblem of the salamander on the Japanese sheet music cover adorning this book, she would endure torture or the fire rather than betray gypsy secrets, or incriminate another gypsy; and she would not brook insults from the non-gypsy girls who worked beside her in the tobacco factory.

⁷ Jean-Paul Clébert, *The Gypsies*, trans. Charles Duff (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), pp. xvi–xvii.

⁸ Telephone interview with Flamenco guitarist Pedro Cortès, 4 October 2010, by Ninotchka Devorah Bennahum, in her *Carmen: A Gypsy Geography* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), p. 94.

⁹ Heinrich Grellmann, *Histoire des Bohémiens, ou Tableau des mœurs, usages et coutumes de ce peuple nomade* (Paris: J. Chaumerot, 1810), translated from the German second edition of 1787 (it was also published twice in English); George Borrow, *The Zincali, or, An Account of the Gypsies of Spain, with an original collection of their songs and poetry, and a copious dictionary of their language* (London: John Murray, 1841), published in French as *La Bible en Espagne* (Paris: Amyot, 1845).

¹⁰ For Spanish gypsies, Mérimée gives *caló* as masculine, *calli* as feminine and *calés* plural; *payllo* for a non-gypsy and *chipe calli* for the name of the gypsy language. Prosper Mérimée, 'Carmen', in *Romans et nouvelles*, ed. Maurice Parturier, vol. II (Paris: Garnier, 1967), 337–409, 658–76, pp. 378, 668.

¹¹ 'Je brave tout, le feu, le fer et le ciel même', Carmen sings during her Act I interrogation song.

Migratory status is something shared by all the protagonists of the opera, including Micaëla – the country girl who visits the town – and Escamillo – the bullfighter. The lifestyle of itinerant bullfighters was well known: their macho appeal, despite the risks of syphilis, was irresistible. For those women who fell for it – the *aficionadas* – ‘scoring’ with a torero would be something akin to the collection of a trophy. These characters, often claimed to be invented by the librettists, are in fact skilfully developed from fleeting allusions in the novella, becoming the foils so necessary for nineteenth-century operatic dramatisation and the contrast of voice types: Micaëla (a lyric soprano) is one of the dutiful, pious, chalk-skinned girls José remembered from his youth in Navarre; Escamillo (a *basse chantante*), based on a picador called Lucas with whom Carmen has a brief affair, is transformed into a fully fledged torero.

It should not be forgotten that Don José is also uprooted, serving in a brigade far from his native Navarre, partly because soldiers were particularly deployed in Andalusia because of its high crime rate, and partly because of his hot temper, which caused him to murder a fellow player in a game of pelota, forcing him to escape the vengeance of the law and flee to the south. Not only is he homesick, missing his mother, but he dislikes both Andalusia and its people. Even as a soldier he was a wanderer, but when he ‘changes sides’ – in the cleverest number of the opera, when his sexual desire for Carmen and his honour collide musically (Carmen’s seductive dance with the bugles of the barracks behind) – he is forced to join another itinerant band and follow the gypsies and smugglers, adopting their ‘vie errante’. Even the unnamed narrator in the novella – usually seen as an alter ego of Mérimée himself (whose job, from 1833, had been, essentially, to travel and assess monuments for restoration) – is always on the move, delighting in chance encounters and their consequences. Moreover, José in the opera is not a lone soldier: the discipline of the garrison, very much to the fore in the on-duty/off-duty opposition of the first two acts of the opera, portrays orderly discipline before the sergeant major, in contrast to disorderly behaviour with the local girls. After all, soldiers and soldiering were an omnipresent part of everyday life all over Europe during the nineteenth century, not just for the men drafted or volunteered but for local communities, which lived cheek by jowl with garrisons that were part and parcel of the political, economic and social fabric.

The libretto takes care to retain the north–south opposition of the novella, an opposition inscribed into the very languages used by the characters, marking the distances between them and the axes along which their differences are articulated. To her one-eyed gypsy husband Carmen speaks *chipe calli* (the gypsy language), while her local utterances

use the Andalusian dialect, and she sometimes speaks to José in Basque; she, at least, is at home and at ease linguistically wherever she sets her hat. Along with the mapping of other binaries onto the geographical divide are such issues as progressive versus regressive, normative versus ‘other’, moral versus corrupt, bulls versus the *cuadrilla*, honour versus free will, domesticity versus free love, pastoral versus urban. These crucial oppositions are retained in the opera’s text and musical style and play a central role in the interpretation and reception of the principal characters.

French Hispanomania

French interest in Spain burgeoned during the middle of the nineteenth century, supported by a network of cultural and political migrations and the beginnings of a secure rail network, whose advertising in the *Guide Joanne* boasted in 1866 that it was no longer necessary to make a will before travelling to Spain.¹² The countless literary travelogues (both professional and amateur) published in the era testify to the beginnings of modern tourism. In the Parisian artistic sphere, cross-fusions between Spain and France created Spanish tropes for French artists and musicians to adopt, but the migration of musical materials and musicians in both directions, compounded by the commercial concerns of music publishers, meant that the idea of ‘authentic’ Spanish material was already a muddled one for both the French and Spanish by the middle of the nineteenth century.¹³

Nonetheless, publishing Spanish music – particularly songs – in Paris (and London) thrived in this growing hispanomania, cashing in on the very issue that Bizet had to address: how to satisfy an audience hungry for the traditional music of the Opéra-Comique yet integrate it with the excitement of exotic Spanish music. Music-publishers recognised that publishing Spanish music was a lucrative business, catering for the Spanish community in Paris, and there were also many French *musicomanes* who wanted to sing in Spanish, play the castanets (such as Théophile Gautier) and learn the Spanish guitar from expert immigrants such as Fernando Sor and

¹² ‘Dans l’opinion vulgaire, l’Espagne est encore l’un des pays que l’on ne peut visiter sans au préalable avoir fait son testament. [...] Le réseau des chemins de fer comprend près de 5,500 kilomètres en exploitation. Ces lignes desservent les points principaux de la Péninsule et en rendent désormais l’accès facile aux touristes.’ *Guide Joanne* 1866, quoted in Édouard Manet, *Voyage en Espagne*, ed. Juliet Wilson-Bureau. (Caen: L’Échoppe, 1988), pp. 15–16.

¹³ See Kerry Murphy, ‘*Carmen*: couleur locale or the real thing?’, in Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist, eds., *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 293–315, pp. 299, 306.

Dionisio Aguado and their pupils. In some cases, dual-language sheet music presented accompaniments in a Spanish idiom for the guitar alongside more demure accompaniments for pianoforte, with Alberti basses and Rossinian embellishments. By the time he began to work on *Carmen*, Bizet had no shortage of published collections of Spanish songs and dances on which to model his Spanish numbers.¹⁴

Thus Bizet, without ever actually setting foot on Spanish soil, had clearly made himself aware of many of the underlying musical processes of Spanish music. And yet, however hard Bizet attempted to reinvent those traditions, the music of *Carmen* remains essentially Parisian, tied to the traditions of the Opéra-Comique, even though, to a Parisian musical and theatrical milieu, Spanish dance and spectacle were ubiquitous across stages – serious, lighter, parodistic – for all sectors of society, both high and low. Just, therefore, as gypsies absorbed and assimilated cultural artefacts such as dance and music from the many lands through which they travelled, ‘*Carmen* the opera’ and ‘*Carmen* the myth’ have been appropriated and renewed as a cross-cultural phenomenon. In this transnational spirit, *Carmen* has moved nomadically forwards and backwards, side to side, seeking to pollinate the global cultures from which she emerged.¹⁵

Transnationalism and Opera

The genre of opera itself can be read perhaps as the ultimate transnational artistic form, with its multilingual modes of storytelling and expression, whether textual, musical or dramatic. In opera’s migrations, attention is given to translation, yet sometimes this study can remain somewhat literal and text-based, rather than examining translation as a negotiation of differences,¹⁶ a complex network of mediation, domestication and manipulation, a *métissage*.¹⁷ Since the inception of the genre, opera has been

¹⁴ See, among others, for example, Ralph Locke’s speculation that the full text of Sebastián Iradier’s song ‘El arreglito’, which served as a model for Bizet’s Act I ‘Habanera’, also provided character detail and text for the ‘Séguirille’ at the end of the act. Ralph P. Locke, ‘Spanish local color in Bizet’s *Carmen*: unexplored borrowings and transformations’, in Fauser and Everist, *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer*, 316–60, pp. 353–8.

¹⁵ Bennahum, *Carmen: A Gypsy Geography*, p. 194.

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁷ Doris Bachmann-Medick, ed., *A Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 15. The following passage draws heavily on Bachmann-Medick’s compact synthesis of recent and contemporary literature at the start of her edited collection, pp. 1–22.

a malleable form, exported across national borders, translated multiple times, adapted to local performance traditions and material contingencies, appropriated in performance and reception for specific social and political ends. Different traditions of operatic or dramatic spectacle with music are themselves dialogically constructed, representing a threading and unravelling of ideas and practices that constitute complex national and regional formations.

Many of the chapters in the book provide new insights into these entanglements which proceed from transfers of performance traditions and processes of reception. In addition, complex interconnections arise from the portrayal of generalised images and projections of music, literature and drama, gender, morality, religion, class, race and ethnicity, self-understandings and self-legitimations. In paying close attention to the connections between translation and ongoing cultural transformation and appropriation, this book aims to provide fruitful analyses of the opera's cross-cultural translation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Practical questions beg to be posed about *Carmen* in a transnational context. What are the main sources of music, editions and translations? Which institutions and/or impresarios are key? How do the physical spaces of different theatres and performance venues affect performance? In which languages and musical adaptations was the opera performed? What artistic, social and cultural movements, histories, practices and debates have affected performance conditions? How was the opera judged against vernacular musico-dramatic traditions? How may the receptivity to, or the defence against, the themes and plot of *Carmen* be compared in different places? Which transfers work, and for whom? And which fail, and why? Which discourses were decisive in the opera's performance?

It is clear that, in our responses, all contributing factors in the production and reception of an opera must be analysed: public comment, critical journalism, media and artistic responses, specific institutional constellations, social movements, cultural conceptions, and many more besides. Indeed, these chapters elucidate the involvement of institutional networks, intellectual and performance practices, publishing and other processes of dissemination – that is to say, the political-cultural fields of power and production, the entangled histories of knowledge-formation and exchange.¹⁸

¹⁸ Bachmann-Medick, *A Trans/National Study*, pp. 7–9.