



Biography of Georges Bizet

Georges Alexandre César Léopold Bizet

Born Oct. 25, 1838 in Paris, France

Died June 3, 1875 in Bougival, France

If you believe in fate as Don José from *Carmen* does, Georges Bizet's destiny was not attractive. Although he was an exceptionally talented musician, and his opera *Carmen* is one of the most popular in the world, Bizet did not have an easy life.

Georges Bizet was born in Paris to a musical family. He entered the Paris Conservatoire before his 10th birthday. He became an excellent pianist and gifted composer, producing his *Symphony in C* in 1855 at the age of 17. In 1857, at age 19, he shared a prize with Charles Lecocq, for setting a one-act comic opera, *Le Docteur Miracle*, to music. He set out for Italy later that year as the holder of the prestigious Prix de Rome, which provided him with three years of financial support so that he could concentrate on composition, rather than follow a career as a teacher or concert pianist, either of which were options for him.

After this seemingly brilliant beginning, Bizet's years in Rome were not very fruitful and he returned to Paris in 1861. His mother died shortly after his return and Bizet found comfort in a relationship with his parents' nurse. They had a son together in 1862, but Bizet would never publicly acknowledge him.

Bizet composed several operas including *La guzla de l'emir* (*The Guzla of the Emir*, 1862) and *Les pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*) for the Théâtre Lyrique in 1863. The first was never presented and the second was only a moderate success, being lauded for skilful scoring but criticized for stilted characters. Bizet's opera *La jolie fille de Perth* (*The Fair Maid of Perth*) premiered in 1867. It had a more dramatic style, but a poor libretto, and ran for only 18 performances.

Bizet was plagued by ill health and depression throughout most of his life. The year 1868 was particularly bad for

him as he suffered bouts of depression, attacks of quinsy* and a crisis of faith. In 1869 he married Geneviève Halévy, the mentally unstable daughter of his former teacher. They had one son who committed suicide 11 years after Bizet's death.

In 1870 at age 32, Bizet's health was further weakened after being called up for the National Guard to fight in the Franco-Prussian war. In 1871 Bizet wrote the opera *Djmileh*, and incidental music for a play, *L'Arlésienne*. His next project was *Carmen*, a commission from the Opéra-Comique, which allowed for spoken dialogue as well as song. The story of *Carmen* was seen as much too racy, realistic and depressing for the middle-class family audiences of the establishment, who were more accustomed to morally uplifting stories with happy endings. Bizet fought hard for the gypsy story to be used and eventually succeeded. At its premiere in Paris on March 3, 1875 the audiences were indeed shocked by the story and the dramatic music which carried it to its fatal end. Though the public reception was not good, his artistic contemporaries applauded the brilliance of the concept and the music.

Depressed by another perceived setback, he withdrew to the family house at Bougival. Three months after the opening of *Carmen*, he suffered another very serious attack of quinsy and died of a heart attack on June 3, 1875 at the age of 36.

*Quinsy is an advanced and painful complication from Tonsillitis. This infection causes an abscess in the throat that eventually leads to intense pain when swallowing, fever, head and neck pain, distortion of speech and swelling, to name a few of the unpleasant symptoms.