



## Bizet's Music

It is one of the great tragedies of opera history that composer Georges Bizet's short life was filled with so much pain, and that his short creative career would be marred by a crisis of confidence that affected his composing output for over a decade. However his name is immortal, if only for the creation of his final operatic masterpiece, *Carmen*.

Just before his 10th birthday Bizet was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire, getting special dispensation as he had not reached the regulation age of entry. Once enrolled he continued to impress, and earned the admiration of the great French composer Charles Gounod. Bizet returned that admiration and, although in later years he would be critical of that composer's work, Gounod's style had a powerful effect on Bizet. The young student earned some money on the side by arranging some of Gounod's music for him, an enterprise he would fall back on in later years when his composing failed to earn him enough money.

Bizet was also a very talented pianist: as a young adult he attended a party where Liszt was present. Bizet sight-read a very challenging piece by the composer, who declared Bizet one of the three greatest pianists in Europe.

In 1855, at the age of 17, Bizet completed his *Symphony in C*, a remarkable achievement, even moreso considering his youth. Almost as remarkable is that this symphony wasn't performed until 1935. This work showed the very real influence of Schubert and also of Gounod's *First Symphony in D* which Bizet had been arranging.

In 1857 he composed the operetta\* *Le Docteur Miracle* (*Doctor Miracle*, 1857) which showed influences of



Larisa Kostyuk as the title role in *Carmen* (COC, 2005).  
Photo: Michael Cooper

### \* operetta:

A genre of light opera, both in terms of music and subject matter, often featuring spoken dialogue. It is also closely related, especially in English-language works, to other forms of musical theatre.

Offenbach and Rossini. For this work Bizet won the Prix de Rome, his reward being a three-year paid stint to work and study in Italy.

It was at the end of his time in Italy that Bizet seemed to succumb to a crisis of confidence. As much as he admired composers such as Rossini and Mozart for their natural and uninhibited creativity, Bizet attempted consciously to mould his music more after Gounod's. This terrible denying of his own natural "voice" would hinder his composing for 10 years.

Other composers Bizet admired included Beethoven, Gluck and Weber. He had mixed feelings about Verdi, whom he thought was imitating Wagner. It was ironic then that the first opera Bizet composed that would have lasting impact, *Les pêcheurs de perles* (1863), replete with hypnotic lyricism, was accused of imitating Wagner and Verdi. Later in life Bizet would admit to admiring some of Verdi's scores.

The next opera of any note was *La jolie fille de Perth* (1867) and was unique amongst his operas for being well received by the press. With this piece Bizet was evolving from the graceful, delightful melodies of his earlier works, to pieces that had more dramatic impact. *La jolie fille de Perth* is a

clear step on Bizet's compositional development towards his ultimate masterpiece, *Carmen*. Ten years had passed since his crisis of confidence and once again Bizet took time to reassess his creativity and how he expressed it. From now on, his self-conscious striving for a certain style was set aside, and he allowed his natural gifts to be fully expressed. This new style was evident in his opera *La coupe du roi de Thulé*, which was performed for the first time in its remarkable remaining fragments in 1955. It shows strong anticipation of his work on *Carmen*.

*Djamileh* (1872) was the first opera with which Bizet felt he'd found his true path, but it failed miserably when first produced. Dramatically inconsistent, its score is richly subtle and composer Richard Strauss acclaimed it. His incidental music for Daudet's play *L'Arlésienne* (1872) is one of his works that has truly stood the test of time. But it was with *Carmen* (1875), at first received fairly coolly by press and audience, that would immortalize Bizet's name forever. The emotions of real people were expressed in real gestures with none of the grand ensembles and arias of the past. *Carmen* was a strong precursor to *verismo*\*\* opera and is acclaimed widely as a true masterpiece. With his early death at 36, we can only imagine what other developments Bizet might have made had he lived a long life, and what other thrilling works he might have created.

**\*\* verismo:**

A literary movement in southern Italy beginning in the 1870s, characterized by gritty realism, a concern with poverty, the use of everyday rather than poetic language, quotes from popular songs of the day, and a tragic ending. *Verismo* literature influenced opera, and the first verismo work to be adapted for the operatic stage was *Cavalleria rusticana* (Mascagni, 1890). Although *Il Tabarro* (Puccini) was written much later, in 1918, many opera lovers agree that it is the quintessential *verismo* opera.