



Carmen Listening Guide

The heat, dust, blood and sand of the story of *Carmen* is illustrated magnificently in Bizet's sensual music. Some of the melodies might be recognizable to you, but no matter how familiar or unfamiliar you are with *Carmen*, we hope this listening guide will give some added insight into this exciting opera. The tracks listed below correspond to the complimentary Listening Guide CD provided to school group bookings only.

Not coming to the opera but looking to explore *Carmen* in the classroom? The excerpts below can be found in the recording from Decca, featuring the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the John Alldis Choir under conductor Sir Georg Solti, with singers Tatiana Troyanos, Kiri te Kanawa, Plácido Domingo and José van Dam.

Track #	Musical excerpt	Connection to the story	Musical elements and significance	Strategies for Listening
1	Overture	An overture is an orchestral piece which introduces a larger musical work.	The overture is comprised of three major themes that are used later in the opera; it begins with the music that is sung by the chorus at the beginning of Act IV as they excitedly prepare for the bull fight, with an interjection of the theme from the famous Toreador Song sung by Escamillo in Act II. The overture finishes [2:12] with a mysterious and unsettling musical theme which is meant to represent both Carmen as well as the concept of "fate." This theme will appear many times during the opera, usually accompanying important events in the plot.	An overture or prelude can introduce an audience to musical themes that recur throughout the opera. It is like a sampling of what is to come. By listening to this piece, can you predict what might happen? Based on the third theme how do you think the opera will end?
2	Habañera: "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" ("Love is a rebellious bird")	A crowd of men has gathered to watch the cigarette-girls pass by as they leave their factory. The men have been waiting to see the gypsy woman Carmen, who makes a grand entrance and sings the Habañera. Don José is the only	The Habañera is perhaps the most recognizable aria (solo) in the opera. It is heavily influenced by Spanish musical style, both metrically and melodically. The <i>habañera</i> is a song style that originated in Cuba and became popular in the 19th century, spreading throughout Spanish colonies all over the world, including those in Europe. The four-note tango rhythm heard at the very beginning can be continuously heard throughout the entire duration of the aria. The cellos play this rhythm over one hundred times!	How does the music shape your opinion about Carmen's character? What do you think she is going to be like based on the feel of the music?

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		one who seems uninterested in Carmen; she responds by throwing him a flower.		
3	“Les tringles des sistres tintaient” (“The jingles of the sistrums tinkled”)	In a popular tavern, officers and gypsies are entertained by singing and dancing led by Carmen and her gypsy friends Frasquita and Mercédès.	The music begins very calmly, both in tempo (speed) and dynamics (volume). After a lengthy orchestral introduction, Carmen sings three verses (each followed by a refrain in which she is joined by Frasquita and Mercédès). With each passing verse, the music becomes faster, louder, and more heavily orchestrated, thus progressively increasing the excitement and rhythmic drive of the piece. The piece is about gypsy girls being seduced by gypsy boys with music.	How does the music mimic flirting?
4	Toreador Song: “Votre toast... je peux vous le rendre” (“Your toast... I can return”)	The famous <i>toreador</i> (bull fighter) Escamillo has just entered the tavern, surrounded by an entourage of admirers. He leads the crowd in a lively song depicting the life of a <i>toreador</i> .	The Toreador Song alternates between two contrasting styles; the verses are sung in a minor key, which give Escamillo’s words a heightened sense of drama and suspense as he sings about the heroic activities of the <i>toreador</i> during a bull fight. The refrain (line or lines of music that are repeated in a song), however, is in a major key. This change of key complements the Toreador’s words: he switches from singing about bull fights to dreaming of potential love. Still very dramatic, the music sets a more joyful mood, and as the chorus joins Escamillo later in the refrain, the excitement of the crowd becomes increasingly apparent.	The grandeur of this music is quite exaggerated; what does this say about Escamillo’s character? Based on this piece, how do you think Escamillo feels about being a <i>toreador</i> ? What gives you this impression?
5	“La fleur que tu m’avais jetée” (“The flower that you tossed to me”)	Having just been released from prison, Don José has traveled to the tavern to find Carmen, where he tells her of his obligation to return to service. This infuriates Carmen,	The aria begins with the “fate” motif played by the English horn; the same theme that was heard at the end of the overture. The placement of this theme directly before Don José begins to sing implies that it was destiny that led him to meet Carmen, and is an example of using music as a storytelling device.	Don José sings that fate has brought Carmen into his life. Fate means that it was destined to happen – regardless of what either one of them did in life – it was unavoidable that they would meet. Does this music suggest Fate to you? Why? How

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		who begs him to instead follow her to the mountains. Don José then sings about how he has saved the flower that she threw to him when they first met.		would you represent Fate through music?
6	“Je dis que rien ne m’épouvante” (“I say that nothing can frighten me”)	Micaëla is traveling to the mountains in search of Don José with the intention of convincing him to return home. She is afraid, but also very determined, and prays for the courage to continue.	This is Micaëla’s only aria in the opera, and a prime example of the extent to which a character can be represented by the music they sing. The mood of this aria is completely different than that of any of the music Carmen sings, which is indicative of how dissimilar the two women are. Micaëla sings of the courage she will need when facing Carmen who has bewitched her beloved Don José. The aria starts off quite timid, with the tempo and dynamics increasing as Micaëla gains strength and conviction in her quest, and ends with a gentle plea for God to protect her and give her courage.	What is it about this music that is different than the Habañera which Carmen sings in Act I? Listen to this aria and to the Habañera from Act I. What personality traits do you think the music suggests about each woman?
7	“Les voici, voici le quadrille!” (“Here they are, here’s the quadrille!”)	A large crowd of spectators has gathered and excitedly awaits the procession of the bull fighters and Escamillo.	This section begins quietly as members of the crowd sing the words “Les voici!” (“Here they are!”); this text is sung numerous times throughout the chorus as the excitement builds. The entrance of the <i>toreadors</i> is marked with a cymbal crash [0:23] and a reprise of the lively music that was heard at the beginning of the overture. To achieve the effect of a large crowd of people who are all talking excitedly, Bizet divides up the chorus and has them take turns singing about different aspects of the procession. When Escamillo finally enters, the crowd once again sings the theme from the Toreador Song.	This theme is heard when we first meet Escamillo. What do you think of when you hear this theme again? Why is it useful to use the same tune again in opera? Imagine you are directing this scene: what do you visualize happening when you hear this piece?

By Andrew Harper, the COC’s Music Library and Resource Centre Assistant.