

Director's Notes

by Hugo de Ana

The story of Carmen, told in music by Georges Bizet, has very view points in common with the environment, the atmosphere and the emotions that are described in the novel that Mérimée wrote in 1845 and by which librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy were inspired.

In fact, in that period, operas whose protagonists were gypsies, thieves, cigar makers and smugglers were not appreciated by the audiences of the Parisian opera theatres. The visceral, carnal Spain described by Mérimée is softened by the “colour” of the music, by bright dances and choruses.

To make the story even more suited to opera performance, the character of Micaela was even introduced, who, with her positive aspect, offers a counterpart to the decision and violence of Carmen.

Carmen's music is full of contrasts. Tchaikovsky himself asserted: “I do not know anything else that better represents the graceful element, *le joli*”, but he too immediately also acknowledged the other side of the Bizet masterpiece, its authentic dramatic power: the portrait of Don José, who was full of complexes, his final entreaties to Carmen, the gloomy fortune-telling terzet, the agitated finale... the presage even appears in light-hearted moments.

Mérimée, in his novella, describes Carmen as a demoniac miserable gypsy and, listening carefully to Bizet, perhaps we manage to glimpse this protagonist. I want to begin this production of the opera starting from this point.

“Carmen”, the woman who fights to assert her freedom, equality and rights. What period in time is more suited to telling the gypsy's story than that of the Spanish civil war, during the 1930s, a war that saw, in the women's struggle, a true social event.

From that moment, women's image acquired a new dimension, enabling them to be “proud”, enabling them to be on the winning side even at the cost of dying for what they believed in.

In the 1920 decade, everything was founded on art and the new artistic avant-garde meant that the character was a revolutionary woman who could harmonically live with another traditional one. This Carmen becomes almost a lay character, so to say, to the point of managing to transform herself and represent the symbol of the Republican fight during the civil war from 1936 to 1939.

This character illuminates all the visual arts, to the extent of becoming the image of a Spanish postage stamp and even being “stuck” in Francoism, until 1950.

In this way, this Spanish Carmen continues to live in a privileged place, even mounting the pedestal of not only Spanish but also European legends. The legend outlived all the representative arts beyond the 19th and 20th centuries, in spite of the temptation to downplay the character in relation to the truth that it represents. When all's said and done, she represents the quality that people's imagination sees in Spanish women.

To tell the truth, Carmen will always be a woman that causes fear because, deep down, she continues to be a “witch”. She is an “earth” woman, more than seducing, she frightens men who don't want to face women's true reality: being free enterprising human beings. This free woman, faithful only to herself, becomes the symbol of Spain's revolutionary identity and also becomes Spain itself.

In romantic Spain, religion and laity are mixed in a chaotic manner: in the representation, a soldier can normally adore his woman in a *Marian* manner and, at the same time, this woman can be an angel or a demon, a virgin or a seductress. In this sense Carmen represents the woman/witch who, with her irresistible seduction, can lead men to ruin with her demoniac strength, even with just a glance.

This glance can contain a series of dark rites that are part of seduction in all the representation of the meaning of “Spanishness”.

Mérimée describes Carmen as follows: «She has three black things: her eyes, eyebrows and eyelashes, and three white things: the hue of her skin, her teeth and the palm of her hands; and there are also three shades of pink: her lips, her cheeks and her nails.” We can consider this as Mérimée's representation of woman as an object.

In *Carmen*, both the novella and the opera, the fundamental myths of the human being are presented and associated with the story taking place: freedom, as a destiny that produces tragedy and death.



Freedom can be associated with the figure of Carmen: this woman perhaps represents it perfectly and above all desires and longs for freedom to live, to love and to be herself. As opposed to the feminine archetype of that period, Carmen is a truly independent woman and will defend this freedom until the moment she dies. From an ethnic point of view Carmen is a gypsy, an ethnic group that cannot consider living in any other way than in freedom and constant *motus vivendi*.

This is freedom conceived in the most absolute meaning of the term, which opposes a patriarchal society and all the social conventions, and is a product of the society of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Carmen will pay with her life for this concept, this way of always being herself, right to the end. This is clear in the last phrase written by Mérimée, which is also the climax of Bizet's opera: «Carmen was born free and will die free».

With the Spanish Civil War, women's lives underwent a transformation, which gave them greater freedom of movement and decision. In spite of the hard living conditions, for many women the civil war was an exciting experience that enabled them to increase their potential in society, not only behind the lines, but also actively, taking up arms and personally fighting to assert their ideals. Woman could also decide how to dress and so workers' overalls became a symbol of the revolution and a means for female emancipation, as they made men and women equal.

The other important character, which never appears, is the character that conditions the true meaning of the tragedy.

The music describes it in an omnipresent manner, making it become a non-existent additional character, which we can all recognize in the *leitmotiv* "of destiny".

Destiny will lead to Carmen understanding that the way to live as she wants is to yield to *fatum*, so she accepts her death without complaining about anything, because she knows she is marked by this destiny. She knows from the begin who will free her from herself by killing her.

Carmen also represents untameable, savage, strong and overwhelming passion. This character is absolutely revolutionary, above all considering the period in which it was created by Mérimée and represented by the music of Bizet, when women, for the society of those days, were only allowed to live as wives, mothers or nuns, or as prostitutes, a choice that represented the rejection of society in general.

In contrast to the passion, there is the strength that enslaves Don José and puts him at the mercy of Carmen, who dominates him completely. Don José feels he is dominated and destroyed as a man. He believes that offering her a life elsewhere means freeing her, but this is not the real meaning of the freedom Carmen wants.

Carmen represents chaos and Don José society's pre-established order. When for the first time she seduces Don José, making him fall in love, we can think chaos has won over order.

To tranquillize society, we can say that in the finale, in order that everything returns to its primitive context, with the death of Carmen, order prevails over chaos.

Chaos belongs to the world of obscurantism, of the black art of necromancy which Carmen knows how to use, and brings the unknown, that dark world that brings her close to the devil, phrases repeated several times when Don José talks about.

The triumph of the myth shows the triumph of feminine superiority over the weakness of man, who is reduced to being subjugated for his primeval instincts, without reason managing to get the better of passion. This results in the acceptance that, in the reality/fiction of the opera, woman defeats man with death. In reality, Carmen survives and, by means of her freedom, becomes a legend. Carmen exploited man's weakness to subjugate him and obtain triumph, with her death.