

“La Mogador” Was she Carmen?

La Mogador:

Moderation is no part of my nature. I feel with a passion that devours me...I have always been capricious and proud. No one, among women whose tendency it is to say “yes,” derives more pleasure than I do from saying “no.” So the men to whom I have given the most are those who asked the least of me.

From the *Memoires* of Celeste Venard, “La Mogador,” as quoted in Opera Offstage by Milton Brener, Walker & Co., NY, 1996.

Celeste Venard received the epithet “La Mogador” because her dance-hall employer, noting that she had to fight off the many men who wanted to dance with her, compared her to the Moroccan city then under attack by French forces. She had risen from the slums of Paris and had been that dance hall girl, an equestrienne, a librettist and translator, an actress, novelist, theater director and singer, as well as a most successful *femme fatale*. When Bizet was 27 he met the 41-year-old Celeste on a train to the French village where she had purchased an estate next to his home. She insisted that their relationship was platonic, a claim not entirely convincing since Bizet preferred to visit her when she was home alone. There are aspects of (opera) Carmen’s personality that are more similar to Celeste’s than to the character in Merimee’s novel on which the opera is based. Was she the model for Bizet’s Carmen? He married four years before he composed the opera, and he never said.

Adolph de Leuven, a director of the Opera-Comique, on the proposal to stage *Carmen*:

Carmen! Merimee’s *Carmen*? Isn’t she killed by her lover? And that background of thieves, gypsies and cigar makers! At the Opera-Comique, a family theater! The theater where marriages are arranged! Every night five or six boxes are taken for that purpose. You will frighten off our audience. It’s impossible. (Brener, *ibid.*)

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Georges Bizet, who had 14 unfinished operas and 4 that never reached the stage:

“They [the critics] make out that I am obscure, complicated, tedious...Well, this time I have written a work that is all clarity and vivacity, full of colour and melody.”

Quoted in The New Penguin Opera Guide, Holden, ed., Penguin Books, London, 2001

An early reviewer, on Celestine Galli-Marie, the first Carmen:

“To see her, rocking her hips like a filly on a stud farm in Cordova: what realism, but what scandal!”

Quoted in A History of Opera, Abbate and Parker, Norton & Co., NY, 2012

Carmen, from Proser Merrimee’s novel of 1845:

“Chien et loup ne font pas longtemps bon ménage.”

(“Dog and wolf do not long live happily together.”)

Quoted in History, *ibid.*

Richard Strauss, composer:

“If you want to learn how to orchestrate, don’t study Wagner’s scores, study the score of *Carmen*. What wonderful economy, and how every note and every rest is in its proper place.”

Quoted in Holden, *ibid.*

Although the critics were not kind at the premiere, Bizet’s peers felt differently. Not only Strauss, but Wagner, Brahms, Gounod, Debussy, Grieg, Puccini, Tchaikovsky and Saint-Saens all praised it. Tchaikovsky predicted that it would soon be the most popular opera in the repertory. Unfortunately, its worth was first recognized only with its production in Vienna, three months after its premiere in Paris. By that time Bizet was dead at the age of 36 after suffering two heart attacks. The enormous subsequent popularity of *Carmen* encouraged the revival of other of his operas like *The Pearl Fishers* and *The Fair Maid of Perth*.

Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester