



GEORGES BIZET (1838-1875) INDEPENDENT BUT TROUBLED SPIRIT

The composer of *Carmen* would have had to have a streak of independence, for the opera shocked its audience and the theater management with its free-living heroine and her brutal onstage murder. But Bizet was also extremely self-critical and had difficulty finding his artistic way. Many of his fine compositions were never finished, among them several operas, and others were never performed or staged during his lifetime. Although he enjoyed some moderate successes, such as *The Pearl Fishers*, he died before knowing what an immense triumph his last opera became.

He was born into a musical family, and was perhaps as great a prodigy as Mozart or Mendelssohn; it is said that he could read and write music at the age of four. It seems his parents hid books from him to encourage his focus on music, and he was admitted to the Paris Conservatory when he was nine. His principal teacher there was the accomplished composer of *La Juive*, Fromental Hálevy, he was also mentored by Gounod. He won many prizes as a student, and composed his *Symphony in C*, which is a popular concert piece today. True to form, however, he declined to have it performed at the time, afraid that it would be criticized as imitative.

In 1857 Bizet won the Prix de Rome, a scholarship for artists founded in 1666 by Louis XIV, which provided living expenses for studying abroad, particularly in Rome. Periodically students had to submit work to the judges. At the end of the first year, he had been asked to render a religious composition, but Bizet was an atheist and rather than be a hypocrite, gave the judges a comic opera instead.

Bizet returned to Paris three years later. Unfortunately, he had to take time away from composing by supporting himself with piano lessons and arranging the orchestral and opera scores of other composers. He called music “a splendid art, but a sad trade.”

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After several opera failures, he wrote *Les pecheurs de perles* in 1863. Bizet had been working on a short comic opera, but abandoned the project when the prestigious commission came from the Theatre Lyrique. He destroyed the score he had been working on and probably used some of the music in the new opera. It was a moderate success with the public, but many critics hated it. All except Hector Berlioz, perhaps the greatest of them all, who said that Bizet had much talent and a brilliant future. The opera has always been known for the beautiful Act I duet, "Au fond du temple saint" which provides a theme used throughout the opera to signify the effect of Leila the priestess on the friendship of Zurga and Nadir. Again true to form, Bizet considered the opera an "honorable failure."

He failed to complete another opera with an exotic setting, *Ivan IV* (1865). In 1867, his opera *La jolie fille de Perth* met with praise from the critics, but only a lukewarm reception from the public. Also in 1867, he married Genevieve Hálevy, the daughter of his former teacher, but the marriage was not a happy one. Another opera with an exotic Egyptian location, *Djamileh* (1872) was greeted by the critics with accusations of Wagnerism, hardly considered a compliment by the Parisians. But in the period 1870 to 1874, Bizet wrote much of his best and best-known music, including *L'arlesienne* suites. In 1875 came *Carmen*, which established him, together with Berlioz, as the greatest 19th century French composers.

The critics did object to *Carmen*, but mostly on moral grounds. It was initially only a modest success, until it reached Vienna a few weeks later and went on to triumph all over the world. Unfortunately, by that time Bizet was dead, having suffered two heart attacks, at age 36. Tchaikovsky was saddened at his death, and predicted that *Carmen* would become the most popular opera in the world.

- Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester