

As Tchaikovsky had predicted, Bizet's *Carmen* has become the most popular opera in the world, and its melodies are the best known from any opera even if the opera is not performed as frequently as those of Verdi, Puccini and Mozart. The familiarity of its tunes, whether in parodies, commercials or in their original settings, make it hard to understand why it was a failure at its premier in Paris in March 1875. Its failure, which was followed three months later by Bizet's death at the early age of 36, is still considered one of the cruelest misjudgments in history.

Bizet was born in Paris in 1838, was admitted to the Conservatoire at the age of nine and at nineteen he won the prestigious Prix de Rome which brought him to study in Italy for three years. As he returned to Paris he found himself working in a highly competitive environment and in search of good librettos. His first two operas, *The Pearl Fisher* in 1863 and *The Fair Maid of Perth* in 1867 were not the best librettos and were shelved only after a few performances.

In 1872 Bizet was commissioned by the Opéra-Comique to write a three-act opera and it was his idea to use as the libretto's source a very famous short story by Prosper Mérimée. This novella dealt with the erratic and fatal relationship between Carmen, a Spanish Gypsy, and Don José, the captain of the guards who had arrested her. A team of the two librettists, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, both brilliant theatrical creators, also gave Bizet the opportunity to transfer this powerful study of obsessive passion on stage. This short story *Carmen* by Merimee deals with the 19th century fascination in Europe with the foreign and the exotic and the setting of the story is the world of the Gypsies of Andalusia, in Spain. In 19th century Europe, the Gypsies as an ethnic group were widely despised by the people, but they were highly romanticized by the popular imagination and the arts. Gypsies were viewed as anti-Christian, and everything about them was defined as immoral, evil and indecent. Because of their lack of morals, their lives were ruled by instincts and with no sense of honor. Gypsies women, who had neither regard for decency nor respect for their body, were defined as free-spirited, strong, demanding women who gained favors through sex. The choice of *Carmen* by Mérimée might not have been a good one for the Opéra-Comique, which was then a theatre where operas ended happily and where loyalty and fidelity were always rewarded. Now the heroine Carmen is a villain, who flaunts her attractions, boasts of her conquests and is brutally killed on stage. She smokes on stage, seduces soldiers, corrupts customs officials, and smuggles on the side. But she is also beautiful,

fascinating, clever, fatalistic and at times even tender, and her music is so alluring that no one can escape her magnetism.

Carmen knows that she is doomed, and so is Don José, who neglects his mother and Micaëla, the girl he had promised to marry, disobeys his military orders and joins the smugglers. They are both destroyed by their appetites and weaknesses.

Even the settings of the opera are very theatrical: the square in Seville where soldiers change guard and factory girls gather in Act I. The tavern of Lillas Pastia's in Act II, where all forms of low life gather; the smugglers' hide-out in the mountains in Act III and in Act IV the bullring where the slaughter of bulls inside (offstage) acts as dramatic counterpoint to Jose's desperate murder of Carmen outside (onstage).

All of this coming to the Opéra-Comique in 1872 was such a blow that the theatre manager, and it is hard to believe, tried his best to caution the public and to keep high officials away.

The first performance in March 1875 received a lot of criticism, but the opera was not taken off, it ran for two seasons. Bizet died three months later, and did not witness the extraordinary success of the opera, which was performed in Vienna shortly after his death. There the Viennese public apparently was not afraid of what they might see on stage and loved it. Since then the opera has been a favorite in every opera house.