
BIZET'S *CARMEN*
STUDY GUIDE
FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

BY CARLO DELFRATI

STUDY GUIDE FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Music in life

Nietzsche famously said, "Life without music is nothing but error, noise, exile." The philosopher wrote it as a result of his love, almost infatuation, for *Carmen*. The opera was a failure when first performed, audiences being repelled by the audacity of the subject. But it has established itself in theaters around the world as one of the absolute masterpieces of the opera repertoire.

This music seems to me perfect. It arrives light, delicate, courteous. The divine walks on tender feet. The music conveys feelings that I never experienced before. It gives me freedom, redemption from myself, as if observing myself from afar. It also strengthens me, and every evening performance (I have heard *Carmen* four times) is followed by a morning filled with determined thoughts and discoveries. It amazes me. It is as if I had bathed in a natural element. Without music, life would be but an error...¹

A timely theme

The first thing that comes to mind, when the teacher is invited to introduce students to a work like this, is the relevance of its basic theme, that violence against women which fills the news dramatically.

Stories like the one recounted a century and a half ago by the writer Prosper Mérimée and the librettists who wrote the dialogues for the opera (the novella *Carmen* was published in 1842; the opera was performed for the first time in 1875) appear every day in the newspapers or TV news programs: a man is unable to accept the independence of the woman he loves and inflicts violence on her, kills her (while the opposite is very rare, the

case of a woman attacking a man). The crux of the story can be put in a few words: Carmen, a young woman who falls in love easily, first seduces the military brawler José by taking him from his fiancée, then she realizes he is not her type. She abandons him for a more macho bullfighter and José, blinded by jealousy, stabs her to death.

This is the perfect opportunity to enable young people to think about the ethical and psychological issues underlying the story. It offers ways to discuss the rights of women to be themselves, with their own ideas and life choices, and a man's duty to defend his own affections as best he can, but in the end to accept those choices, however much pain they may cause him.

"Love is like a rebellious bird," which flies where it wants, sings the heroine, and no one can tame it. Just as its appearance is unpredictable, so is the moment when it disappears. If it ends for both lovers, then they are at peace. But what happens when love is still alive in one of them? This is what we see in the opera. Carmen shows herself sincere and coherent from the moment she appears on stage, when she declares that she is incapable of loving constantly: she falls in love easily and her love fades in the same way. So, in love, "prend garde à toi," look out for yourself! In front of the whole group of soldiers of the city guard, who have a passion for her, she also states that she cannot bear a man to be indifferent to her. She shows it at once with the only one who seems not even to see her, the soldier Don José. She provokes him by throwing a flower. And the gesture troubles Don José, even though his fiancée, the seventeen-year-old Micaëla, has come from her village to search for him and is nearby.

There are obviously a thousand ways to tell the story; a thousand different characters, places and situations that an artist can imagine. Opera does it by using all the languages of musical theater: the words of the dialogues, the sets and the stage, the actions of the characters on the stage, and of course the music. An opera, we know well, lives as a synthesis of all forms of expression. But as we will see, it is music that stamps a character on it: music is the most expressive and significant dimension in the opera house.

Portraits

In primary school the teacher often asks children to draw their father or mother, or a sibling... And our young people, how would they represent the character of Carmen? How do they see her physical features. What sort of costume would they imagine for her? Or even the way she moves and behaves? How would she speak to Don José and the other characters?

We should choose the crucial moment, when Carmen lets Don José know that she no longer loves him, that she has fallen in love with someone else. What words would you use? And how would Don José react? The task would be best carried out by forming groups, for instance of three, and in the end discussing them with the others, testing the students' *verbal* skills. What would the two say? What words would they use? And if we then imagine the characters by depicting them, using pencils, felt-tip pens, a movie camera, and in short all the media available for a *visual* interpretation of the character: how should we do it? Here an individual performance of the task is more usual. Less common (if it is thought advis-

able, the teacher could ask some students to volunteer) is an interpretation of her *gestures* and *movements*: how would Carmen move on the stage (without neglecting the spatial relationships, the distances between her and the others, in short the *proxemics* of the drama)?

The cinema offers us more than one version. The one we know best is that by Francesco Rosi, with Julia Migenes in the title role.

Verbal language, visual language, motor language: three different ways of representing Carmen. A task like the previous one depends on the teacher's resourcefulness. A simpler way, but no less valuable, would consist of looking at the ways directors, singers, set designers and costume designers have approached the problem of imagining Carmen in the various productions available on YouTube. And here a warning is clearly called for: the Carmen that appears a given production was not chosen for her physical appearance (a film director's typical approach) but her vocal talents. All too often, in the case of Carmen—or Violetta, Mimi or Turandot—it may seem more appropriate to keep our eyes on the lyrics than on the singer. This was particularly true of the singers in the past. Today far more attention is paid to physical appearance. The same is true of motor skills: by concentrating above all on the voice, a singer may be largely concerned with vocal qualities and rather neglect to act like a particular character in a given situation. Even here it is worth looking for convincing versions, which may well differ widely. Seeing how Anna Netrebko moves on the stage is much more interesting than could easily be conceived by seeing the photographs of many famous Carmens from the past.

Musical portraits?

All the above points are valid if the work to be understood is not Bizet's opera *Carmen*, but the novella by Prosper Mérimée (or if you like the libretto that Meilhac and Halévy derived from it): namely a play for the theater. We have imagined representing Carmen in her physical appearance, her clothing, in the way she moves, in what she says. But in our project, in the "Vox Imago" project, all this work can only be seen as preparatory, introductory. The question we now need to formulate is: *how to represent Carmen musically?* No longer in words, with felt-tip pens, in her clothes or gestures, but by using notes, melodies, rhythms and harmonies.

In a middle school (even in an elementary school) we can invent musical dialogues. Different pairs of students compete in succession. If a keyboard is available, Carmen can be placed at one end and Don José at the other (who will be better in the upper register, Carmen or Don José?). Otherwise even rhythm instruments are enough: a tambourine and two maracas can well give life to a dialogue made of *piano* and *forte*, fast and slow, *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *accelerando*, *rallentando*, and particular rhythms; without neglecting the pauses...

On the other hand, if we are in a musical high school, then the endowment of techniques and concepts available to the students is greatly extended, but the teaching principle, the motivation and the working method, remain basically the same. The result we ought to expect is a two-stage improvisation on a theme (literary theme and/or musical theme). Even these last proposals, in a project like ours, dedicated to understanding the language of opera, are largely introductory.

Because the task will soon be to understand the *musical Carmen*, Bizet's *Carmen*: how he interprets the heroine and all the other characters, as well as situations and events. Our introductory work has repeated what we know: that the image *speaks*, to those who can look at it; gesture and motor action *speak*, and the word *speaks*. Now, music *speaks*. It communicates. It enables us to understand. This will be the heart of our task: to bring the musical component of the opera closer by what it has to say to us, saying it as music, rhythms, melodies, harmonies, in the voice and in musical instruments. Which is precisely the specific and basic dimension of the opera house. So basic as to reduce all others to little more than mere supports, however indispensable. We can now start again from the essential support, the libretto.

The dialogues

The opera is in French of course, and even though the students may not have studied it, this should be borne in mind when reading the libretto, while working on the translation. At the moment of listening to an aria or a duet, the translation should be scrolled simultaneously with the French words, as is done on the small screens used in the major theaters.

A quarrel breaks out at the factory, culminating in a (slight) wound that Carmen has inflicted on the forehead of another of the cigar girls. When Lieutenant Zuniga interrogates her, her response is to sing mockingly. Don José is given the task of taking her to prison. She does, says and sweet-talks him so much that he eventually gives in. She kindles a passion that will seal his fate. He

allows her to escape, and for this he is in turn arrested and demoted.

Carmen describes herself as a gypsy. Together with other smugglers, she frequents Lillas Pastia's tavern. Before everyone leaves, Escamillo turns up. The famous toreador is on the lookout for easy loves. He is astonished that Carmen fails to fall at his feet, as he expects of his admirers. But Carmen is in love with the handsome soldier Don José and she is waiting for him. And here begins the first misunderstanding. Don José leaves prison a month later. He goes to the tavern, already tormented by the obsessive jealousy that will destroy him. When he hears the signal for Retreat being played at the barracks, he prepares to leave. Carmen, who now wants to keep him close to her all the time feels offended. His military superior Zuniga intrudes: he has come to fetch Don José back to the garrison. He too is captivated by Carmen. Don José defies him and only Carmen's intercession prevents them coming to blows. By now Don José is hopelessly infatuated and cannot help but join the band of smugglers.

In the mountain camp a scene like the previous one is repeated. José longs to return to his village to see his dying mother. This is enough to chill Carmen's love for him even further. Escamillo turns up and, without knowing he is speaking to Don José, he recounts that he has supplanted a poor soldier in Carmen's favors. Don José challenges him to a duel. And once again Carmen prevents the worst. But by now she is devoted to the bold toreador, though well aware of the danger she runs from Don José's murderous rage. But for now Don José cannot help but follow Micaëla, who

has come to persuade him to visit his dying mother.

The last act takes place outside the bullring. Inside, the crowd sings the bullfighter's praises. Outside, Carmen meets Don José, who confesses that he cannot live without her. She tells him bluntly that she does not love him any longer. Her heart is wholly Escamillo's. In telling the story to a group of young people who are unaware of the tragic ending, you can prompt them to say what they would do if they were in the Don José's position. A knife? Disfigurement? Violence? This is the kind of thing we read in the crime pages of newspapers. But Carmen has never lied. She has always been sincere in confessing her fickleness, then her love for Don José, then the fading of her feelings for him. Even high school students may have fallen in love one summer at the beach, and then been resigned once distance has separated them and passion has faded. But Don José has lost what every sensible young person boy is capable of mastering: reason, the ability to accept reality. To accept others' freedom to be themselves. Now he can only accept his destiny: "You can arrest me... It was I who killed her." He then closes with a cry capable of moving those who feel the troubled frailty concealed beneath his madness: "Ah Carmen, my beloved Carmen!"

The music

The few previous lines tell us no more than the verbal outline of the plot of *Carmen*, what emerges from the *words* of the dialogues. But what about the musical design? What emerges from Bizet's music? Here things become complicated. Because music, in all the sung parts (we will ignore

the instrumental ones for the time being) is superimposed on the words, or rather it shapes the words in its own way, according to its own system. It is easy to fall into the trap: to talk about Bizet's opera, the plot, the characters, etc., by referring essentially to the libretto, to the words, not the musical dimension. (Even experts in their listening guides sometimes fall into this trap.) The task of a musical educator should rather be to guide the pupils to derive all their observations, interpretations and inferences from analysis of how the specific factors of musical language are manipulated in the sung passages, the ways music is used by the composer.

The basic question is: how does the music *talk to us* about Carmen, or about the other characters, just like the verbal text, or the pictorial one, or the motor one? We know the answer: it can do it in two ways: the first is by entering into the words of the dialogues with its own instruments, starting with the melodic development: it is song, speech that becomes song; the second is the integration of the instrumental component.

Speech spoken, speech sung

Let's consider the first, the way that song reveals character. In musical expression, it is not what the characters say that matters, but *how* they say it. We can approach this through another kind of experience, well known in all the phases of the history of music: *prosody*, or as Cicero explicitly put it, "even in everyday speech there is a sort of hidden music." From the late Renaissance down to the present, a continuous leitmotiv is of composers who affirm their own way of putting into music the lines of a dialogue

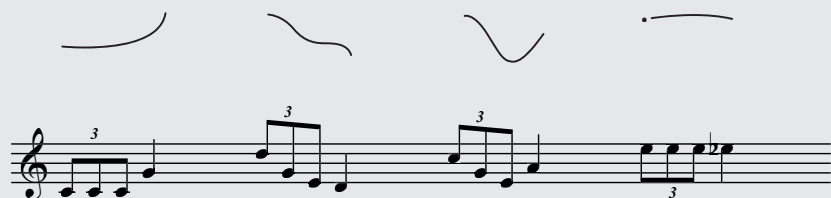
by devoting attention to how those same words might be uttered: with what melodic progression, up or down, with what rhythm, with what intensity, at what speed... Obviously depending on the state of mind and above all the feeling of the character. Just think how many different ways there are of speaking a simple phrase like "Come with me." However it is uttered it reflects a mood. When Bizet puts these words in Don José's mouth he has clearly in mind the devastated state of mind of his character, now a hopeless victim of jealousy: from the *cantus obscurior*, from the intonation that would express it, to the sung intonation, the step is short. It is the rules of vocabulary, grammar and musical syntax that prompt the way it is expressed.

Here is a small parenthetical observation, to be presented to the students as a problem. Prosody and singing exploit the same elements (intonation, intensity, etc.). So where does the difference lie? We could easily say: in the fact that singing (music of a traditional kind), unlike prosody, uses *scales*. A scale of high and low, first of all, precisely what we commonly call a *scale*. For us it is made up of twelve sounds, set at a distance of one semitone apart (and other scales in other cultures). Between C and C sharp there are an infinite number of sounds, and it is on this sound continuum that speech is based; on the contrary in that fraction of heights only those two are allowed. All the intermediate sounds are described as "off key". The same applies to duration: just think of our notation, which represents what the ear teaches us: each time interval lasts half the previous one. Here, too, there is a scale, from whole note (semibreve) to hundred twen-

ty-eighth note (semihemidemisemiquaver). The metronome indication is also in some way a scale, while only the fourth aspect of sound, the intensity, renounces the scale, and lets itself be carried away by the way of presenting the other factors (Messiaen and the radical serialists were able to imagine a *scale of intensity*, from *ppp* to *fff*).

A whole course in prosodic education would be worth practicing at school. Many young people, when they read a text, sound like automata, quite unaware of its meaning. We can verify this by giving them the libretto to read. It goes without saying that students possess the full range of expressive nuances when they talk to their friends. The difficulty—the inhibition—arises when they are asked to read or simply express themselves with a *specific* expression. How would you say “Come with me” in different tones—melancholy, arrogant, cheerful, sad, languid, angry, dreamy, and so on?

Example 1



The experiment can be repeated systematically with key phrases in the libretto. At this point we can only listen to what Bizet did, compare it with our intonational curves, and obtain a possible interpretation

In a more advanced phase we should encourage pupils to be aware of the intonational profile, the up-and-down tone of the voice. It is an exercise of perceptive education, of ear training, that is traditionally a part of the music syllabus and which we now apply to the spoken word. Here follows a series of profiles on that phrase, to be read, interpreted and recognized by listening and repeating using even longer sentences.

From speech to song

The results of these exercises are spoken expressions. They are intonations *without a scale*. At this point the crucial experience awaits us, the one on opera composers work: modeling speech by fixing it to the *scale* of heights. In other words, passing from spoken to sung, respecting the line. This drawing shows one possible result, from the graphs to the pentagram, on the phrase “Come with me”:

of Bizet’s original: “C’est moi que tu suivra” (meaning “It is me you will follow”). We are approaching the last bars of the opera. The voice of Don José, deranged with jealousy, is fixed to that ascending semitone, which rises

a little ($E_4 - F_4$) to the following words: “Je suis las de te menacer” (“I’m tired of threatening you”). Melodizing on a few sounds suffices to show that Don José’s murderous aberration has now reached its climax.

This experiment can naturally continue with every scene in the opera. The criterion remains to compare the many ways in which each line can be uttered in speech, then sung, and the way Bizet has it sung. Our aim is to derive an interpretation, the portrait of the character depicted by Bizet. No longer a verbal portrait, and even less a visual one, or a motor portrait, but a *musical portrait*. So now we can look at the portraits of the

main protagonists. They are taken not from the libretto, but from the way the music is played on the framework of the libretto—the verbal support—(melody and rhythm in particular).

Musical portraits: 1. Carmen

She makes her entry with the celebrated *Habanera*. The rhythm of the dance and above all the chromatic melody of the song depict a woman who feels free to live the dynamics of desire: free to kindle love and free to accept that it ends. The descending trend of the chromatism seems to suggest the second phase even more than the first:

Example 2



A similar descending chromatic passage is found, no longer expressing the end of love but disappointment at the point in the first

scene when Moralès sees Micaëla elude his courtship:

Example 3



Words and music combine in the *Habanera* to show us a woman free to adopt, without hesitation, the kind of conduct habitual with males, certainly not subject to social cen-

sorship. Hence the scandalized reaction of the first viewers of the work. How could they have accepted this, the right-minded people of the *Belle Époque*?

How could they endure that a common cigar-maker (this is her profession), more-over a gypsy, could show such self-mastery, to the point of deriding an officer and replying to his question with a mocking refrain (*tralalalala*)?

Obviously the censor would have seen ruthlessness, even immorality in Carmen's next aria ("Près des remparts de Seville": "At the ramparts of Seville"). This was the scandal that beset the opera the first time it was performed. How could a woman dare to do what had always been a prerogative of men? But with reflections of this kind we have not yet touched on the heart of our task. Supposing that we want to speak of immorality, we can find it in the *verses* of the song. What the music gives us is something else. First of all, it tells us about Carmen's social status: the *Seguidilla* is a popular dance, and Carmen is a young woman of the people, and it is not the music's task to convey that she is a gypsy. What counts most is the atmosphere of festive exuberance that the song brings with it. Here we have a woman who senses that the handsome Don José will be her next experience of love. He is captivated by her fire and this is the seed of the tragedy that will be follow.

Messages without words

For now, let's try to see, or rather hear, Carmen at the most serene moment of her now firmly established love for Don José. Grateful for his arrival at the tavern, she dedicates a song and a dance to him. No need for words, just *tralalalala* accompanied by castanets.

It may seem that this song does not concern Carmen's character: it is in fact what

in films is called *diegesis*, *internal* music: as when a character in a film is singing or listening to music (as opposed to *external* music, the accompaniment inserted by the film director). Here it is Carmen herself who sings. Cases of *internal* music in opera are frequent. And they are rarely inserted at random: in reality the composer "speaks," and makes his characters speak, even in these cases, by linking the music closely to the context in which the characters are set. Cases of internal music in *Carmen* are frequent, beginning with Escamillo's aria ("To-reador en garde"), with the various repetitions of *tralalalala*, and of course Carmen's dancing and singing.

So Carmen's singing is not irrelevant: it enables us to understand more fully who she is. In this case the meaning is evident: it is a tribute full of affection and gratitude for the return of what her music reveals to be her great (yet ephemeral) love.

How is such a character likely to react when Don José, instead of appreciating her affectionate gesture, abruptly interrupts the musical gift by saying he has to return to barracks. It is an insult to such a vital and exuberant woman. Carmen's reaction is immediate and resentful. As a passage of opera that shows the composer skillfully making a character express herself in a given situation, this is exemplary. Carmen seems to see a curtain fall when Don José prefers attending roll call to her love. Her song now breaks off, giving way to sarcasm: "Ah! J'étais vraiment trop bête" ("I was really too stupid").

The two sides of Carmen

If the previous situation explains how easy it

is for Carmen to feel that love has crumbled, the wholly different one in Act III shows beyond all doubt that Carmen is not just the creature all passion that events so far might suggest. Carmen has a profound sense of the tragic, of the darkness ready to engulf us at every moment in life. A dark F minor, to a static accompaniment, fuels the most tragic page of the whole opera. It matters little that the cause is the verdict of the fortune tellers. "Death," the cards say, and the previously smiling Carmen is stoically ready to accept it.

These dramatics, recorded in a minor mode, are an anticipation of the crime towards which the last act of the opera is moving with ever greater intensity. Don José's aria is restrained, as if seeking to coax her into returning to him. But at the price of death Carmen celebrates her right to freedom: she was born free and will die free.

Musical portraits: 2. Micaëla

The figure that contrasts most deeply with Carmen musically is Micaëla, Don José's seventeen-year-old fiancé. Micaëla and Escamillo are not found in the original version of the story by Prosper Mérimée. They were created by the librettists and Bizet himself to bring out the central characters more fully. From the very beginning Micaëla appears to be as mild and diaphanous as

Carmen is energetic and full-blooded. Her musical lines are as predictable as Carmen's are always surprising: "I'm looking for a corporal..."

This is simple, everyday speech, without any particular sign of feeling. The expression of a humble, simple girl, poor in spirit. Her music recalls the hymns sung in church: "My corporal is called Don José. Do you know him?"

Yet she is anything but a fool. The soldiers have set eyes on her, and they tell her the corporal Don José will return when the new guard relieves the old. Micaëla replies to the soldiers' open advances by mimicking them, repeating their tone of voice: "I will return when the new guard relieves the old." The change occurs immediately (there is no need for strict temporal coherence between one musical episode and another, only the consistency dictated by the musical logic itself). The long scene of Micaëla's meeting with Don José opens here. She has come to bring a message from the soldier's mother, crowned with a kiss. The superficial listener may find Micaëla's way of expressing herself excessively "sentimental," after Carmen's bold and exuberant tones. Her melodies flow placidly, largely by close gradations, ascending and descending, and with equal rhythmic values, eighths on eighths: "From her I bring..."

Example 4

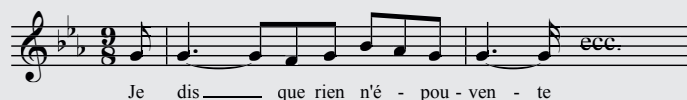
J'ap - por - te de - sa part, fi - nè - le mes - sa - gé - re

But we must not forget the principle that regulates the composer's choices. What we hear here is precisely the *musical portrait* of Micaëla. Bizet has masterfully created a person with a simple soul, humble, naively in love with Don José, a love tenderly entwined with his mother's. For this psychological climate Bizet has resorted to the graceful stylistic features of French opera of his time, in particular Gounod. Even more in the spirit of Gounod is Micaëla's great aria in Act III. She has been

dragged into the drama without her even being able to imagine Don José's derangement. She knows he has been seduced by Carmen, she knows Carmen is beautiful. And she is fearful. She is afraid of what has happened and she is afraid of Carmen. Hers is now like a long prayer to God: simple, naive, with the same tender melodizing of the previous air (in the first part), but certainly unable to avoid the anxiety that troubles her (in the second part): "I say that nothing frightens me..."

Example 5

Andantino molto



Allegro molto moderato



Bizet wrote a humble aria, not because he was incapable of anything more challenging, but to sketch the young woman's humility (in music), with the addition of a church-style harmonic setting. Micaëla returns to the stage soon after, in the last desperate attempt to persuade Don José to go away with her. She observes his duel with Escamillo and Carmen's mockery. Her only weapons are prayer and the domestic affections. Don José's mother is dying, and Micaëla's musical heart is not

belied: it is again, for the last time, the affectionate melody taken from the melodic stock of the opera of the time. (There is a great deal of pseudo-liturgical music in the works of the time: think of Puccini's *Tosca* or Massenet's *Manon*: "There is the cottage...")

Musical portraits: 3. Escamillo

Conceited, confident of himself, his strength and swordsmanship, and above all his irresistible charm with the women. Of this character we also read that Bizet lowered the

tone of his inspiration. But the note that the composer added to Escamillo's aria shows that it was his intention to portray musical-ly the moral and mental emptiness of the character, which makes him speak fatuously, "avec fatuité," as Bizet noted in the score. The banal "musical words" serve to fix unmistakably the banality of the character. In this respect the toreador aria can be paired with "La donna è mobile" sung by the Duke of Mantua in Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

It is not only the more famous toreador aria, "Toreador en garde," with the pompous section that precedes it, that lays bare his emptiness together with his boldness. The scene in Act III when he meets Don José at the camp would be almost comic, except that it is the cause that unleashes the soldier's fury. Don José knows the bullfighter only by fame, without ever having met him. The bullfighter likewise has never met Don José before. Imagine when Don José hears that the other is now Carmen's lover and that she left a stupid soldier for him! The fight that follows further brings out the bullfighter's arrogance.

Musical portraits: 4. Don José

The (musical) image of the three previous figures remains essentially the same from beginning to end of the opera. (Carmen is always proud, even when facing death, first anticipated by the cards, then present before her in the soldier's dagger; Micaëla mildly trusts to prayer, even in the most dramatic moments, and Escamillo is always a braggart.) But the character of Don José is transformed as the opera develops, and it is the transformation of Don José that keeps the drama alive and enables the plot to unfold.

In the melodramatic tradition the handsome soldier would have made his entrance preceded by a fanfare and singing a predictably martial air. At first Bizet gives him only a few marginal brushstrokes. Not even his scandalized reaction to Carmen's provocation (the flower thrown at his feet) is given musical substance (except, as we shall see, in the orchestra). To bring him into the foreground Bizet waits until he meets Micaëla, with the long duet that follows. This is because the meeting is the most direct and effective way to introduce us to Don José as he was before he knew Carmen, the soldier not yet enslaved by the gypsy's love games. The dialogue, the duet, turns wholly on the evocation of his mother (with whom Micaëla lives). It is Micaëla above all who expresses herself in the duet, and when Bizet does turn to José and gives him space, we feel that he presents him as emotionally closely aligned to Micaëla's expressive world. They speak the same musical language, until they identify with each other through the most immediate artifice: the canon: "Ma mère je la vois..."

But even without the obvious recourse to the canon, it is the character of the melody that identifies the world of Don José, the world of his values, with the young woman's. And it is also here that the melody belongs to the repertoire of church songs of the time. This is Don José before he meets Carmen: emotionally a simpleton. By the pious upbringing he has received, he places the image of his mother above all else because, as we are led to believe, as a child she took him to church with her.

There is a very different significance in the canon, or rather the *fugue*, initiated by

muted violas and cellos, which closes the first act. Music here conveys a more kinetic rather than a psychological significance: it evokes the same impression often physically linked to running. Carmen persuades Don José to let her escape...

The transformation of Don José

Don José's bold entrance, which the experienced opera-goer would have expected according to tradition in the opening scenes of the opera, is finally presented by Bizet in Act II. The soldier arrives singing at Carmen's camp after a month passed in jail for allowing the gypsy to escape.

And the first shock to his naivety comes when he abruptly interrupts the tribute of singing and dancing Carmen is paying him because he has to attend roll call at the barracks. At Carmen's scandalized reaction, first, as a good soldier, he compels her to listen to him, but he then goes so far as to do what the listener could never have foreseen: he confesses the inner revolution that led him to forget Micaëla and kindled within him an overwhelming feeling that he has never experienced before, true psychological subjugation to Carmen.

This is the famous, impassioned aria that begins "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée" ("The flower that you threw me"). In it he reveals that he lives only for Carmen and her love. This is a dangerous confession, addressed to one with a temperament like Carmen's, whose understanding and experience of love is very different, as we know. The Don José of the restrained quasi-religious melodies of Act I has disappeared. Now the melodic intensity of the music in the grand lyric aria style abandons all trace of pietism

for good. We are not surprised by his first explosion of blind fury, when he attacks the officer sent to take him back to barracks, interrupting his wooing of Carmen. Now Don José is altered. He has set off down that inexorable slope that leads him to commit his fatal gesture. The scene between the two characters that opens the last act does not begin, as our students might expect, with an explosion of anger, the anger repressed since the day that Don José returned to the village to see his dying mother again. No, the singing begins with an almost monotone recitative, and with a *moderato* tempo: the feeling is screwed down. Don José can only implore Carmen, even though he hears her repeat, without any possibility of misunderstanding, that everything is finished between them.

The duet has very little to do with the classic duets in vogue until then, with its broad melodic sweep entrusted now to one and now the other. Now the tragic scene is broken into continuous fragments. But it does not produce a disconnected image. On the contrary, what we see is an emotional collapse towards the inevitable catastrophe, and Don José's last cry almost makes us feel that he, the murderer, is also a victim: "Ah! Carmen! Ma Carmen adorée!"

This observation is generally valid for every musical phrase sung. Indeed, it may already be true when that phrase is spoken: the wider the range of sounds, from high to low, and the wider and more changeable its intervals, the more intense the state of mind of the person who utters it. The voice of an angry person moves very differently from someone reciting the rosary! Let's reconsider the *Seguidilla*. Carmen reveals herself

uninhibitedly in the song that springs decisively and varyingly up and down the octave. We have seen what this melodic treatment expresses. Now we have reached the moment when Don José affronts Carmen by interrupting her dance in his honor and seeking to obey the signal to return to barracks. Though she may not have forgiven him, she at least urges him to go away with her and the whole clan to the mountains. Don José has barely finished his passionate declaration of love (with the flower aria: "La fleur que tu m'avais getée") when Carmen reproaches him: "No, you do not love me" repeated three times. Ask your pupils: how would you get her to utter these words (and

then possibly even sing them)? It is easy to imagine the ups and downs of the voice, in a person who has been so clumsily insulted in her deepest feelings.

But no: Bizet puts into Carmen's mouth a strictly monotonous song, on the central note of its range, G. Violation of the rule? Or is the rule wrong? It would be like affirming Bizet's inability to create the melody suited to the situation. The situation that the monochordal song makes clear: it is certainly not coldness, absence of emotion. It is as if Carmen wanted to throw water on the fire shown by Don José in the flower aria, and at the same time it expresses her own sharp disappointment:

Example 6

Andantino molto

Non _____ tu ne m'ai - mes pas! _____

Non! _____ Car _____ si tu m'ai - mais,

la - bas, _____ la - bas _____

_____ tu me sui - vrais! _____ Oui! _____

Suggested approaches

A teacher, especially in the lower secondary school, knows that not everything written in the previous pages can be conveyed to pupils listening quietly to the lesson. Young people want to be interested and involved. All teachers have their own ways of doing it, their own methods, their own stratagems. If not all of them work all the time, however, we know that some have better *chances* of working than others.

The first is to exploit as far as possible the *heuristic* principle. Instead of explaining to the youngsters that Don José and Micaëla are perfectly close at the beginning and that we understand this in particular by their canon, let's ask them the question: do the two seem to you to have a close or distant relationship? And above all: what makes you feel this? In short, the principle consists of turning the information that we give into questions, starting from those offered till now. With a series of possible variants. For example, by entrusting the search for answers to young people working in groups, reasoning among themselves and, if possible, listening to the music to give substance to their answers.

Activation techniques (more recent in form, but always practiced in substance by the good teacher) are so-called *reality tasks* or *authentic tasks*. The reality and authenticity are simply those with which we perform a task, not because the teacher wants us to but because we could find ourselves faced with it concretely in life. According to this "utilitarian" orientation, against a study of *Carmen* undertaken simply because it has been decided by the teacher, the study to prepare the guide to the work that we imag-

ine commissioned by the local opera house or a presentation to be broadcast on radio or TV.

Another educationally valuable principle is to play as far as possible on comparisons. Even simply deducing the personalities of the four main characters from their most significant arias done more effectively by identifying the differences and similarities between them.

A music distant from the musical tastes of young people (like opera, though not alone) will become familiar if it is listened to several times. For this reason, setting different tasks around a single piece of music can lead to that understanding and willingness to work that is unlikely to appear after hearing it just once.

Another principle is to accompany the listening with rhythms (or also melodies, or even just the pedals) produced by the students. It is a technique that was much used in the past in English schools, giving rise to a rich production of sheet music. Many melodies by Mozart, Tchaikovsky or Rossini were complemented by rhythms produced with tambourines, woodwinds, cymbals, triangles. In the case of *Carmen* there is no need to go far. Bizet offers us a readymade piece in the scene where Carmen dances and sings for Don José. Here the melodic line of her song, on *lala*, can be sung and played by the pupils: in this case of course not over the original! Here is the page ready to be used:

Example 7

Canto

p La la la la ecc. _____

Castagnette

The musical score for Example 7 consists of four systems of music. The first system shows the vocal line (Canto) starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic and the castagnette accompaniment. The second system features a repeat sign with first and second endings, a forte (*f*) dynamic, and a trill. The third system includes a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and trills. The fourth system concludes with first and second endings and a 'Da Capo al fine' instruction.

The practice of the pupils learning passages from the opera that they can sing and play on their own is more obvious and it is a tried and tested method. There are several suitable pieces for the younger secondary-school pupils. (For the older ones, whose voices are changing, they should be adapted.) The most famous examples are the children's chorus in the first act, and the bullfighter's song.

Two ways of listening

We only need to read a few comments on a page of music to realize that there are essentially two approaches or criteria underlying the comments. The first is the attempt to describe and make the reader aware of the critic's subjective emotional and metaphorical response; but without giving a justification in terms of the characteristics of what one hears (rhythm, melody, etc.). The second approach is more strictly *technical*. The critic uses the pure terms of analytical musical vocabulary to describe objectively how the music unfolds, but without deriving an interpretation, a meaning, from it.

In compulsory education it is the first model that seems to prevail decisively. The latter is considered more suitable for Conservatory studies. Aren't theme, monody, polyphony, counterpoint, progression, modulation, variation, tone, mode, interrupted cadence, dominant chord, and so forth, words for experts, sterile and very off-putting in compulsory schooling?

The eternal debate on *skills* offers us a different way of looking at the question. It basically tells us that both of the approaches will not increase competence (let's say the ability to conduct mature listening) if they are taken separately, without being mutual-

ly confirmed. The first approach leaves the pupils where they were at the beginning. They have done nothing but apply to the new music they listen to the same criteria they have always practiced when listening. They fail to develop any new competence that will help them gain new tools for understanding a passage of music.

The second has the traits of the rote-learning model too well known and widely practiced, where the technical information obtained from the scholar's lexicon is an end in itself, added as a dead weight to the living experience of intelligent listening. Knowing that a melody descends by semitones, that the mode is minor, that the sonata is tripartite and so forth, notions learned from end to end, are a sterile burden. It risks not increasing competence but creating a barrier between anyone subjected to it and the music. Against the methodological, notional, *static* principle that inspires the second approach and against the lax, *recreational* model with which to (dis)engage the pupils by the first approach, a dynamic model calls for an *interaction* between the two. It asks for the statements made when speaking of music to be tested on its ways of being. If I say that Micaëla is a naive young woman, the reader has the right to ask me what my statement is based on: on what musical elements (meaning melody, rhythm, etc.). This is how skills are fostered and pupils develop the ability to understand music better and more deeply. Extending a knowledge of technical, analytical elements is not rote-learning, but a crucial phase of education.

The reflections on the four previous *portraits* sought to derive the elementary meanings of the different moments of the opera from

their musical specifics, melodic progression and rhythms. And this works, it goes without saying, if the pupils can recognize those specifics by listening to them. In the *Habanera*, Carmen reveals her heart through that chromatic descent. But will the pupils notice the chromaticism? It doesn't take a diploma from the conservatory to recognize it, but a minimum of practice. Our students should practice distinguishing a semitone interval from a tone interval, recognizing them and producing them with their voices. This is just one example of how competent listening to music requires a well-trained ear. In other words the teacher has to engage in a parallel path of education to perception, of ear training, as we say today (evidently forgetting that for the fully aware teacher it has always been an important part of musical education).

The art of counterpoint

An important musical device can, by itself, reveal the independence of the verbal code from the musical one. This is counterpoint, polyphony, the simultaneous superimposition of different musical materials. It would be out of the question for the author of a stage play to present five characters talking all together (unless as a deliberate paradox to suggest incomprehensibility).

In *Carmen* Bizet has some unforgettable passages in which two or more voices are entwined. And then there are the choruses: here the polyvocality obviously evokes the multiplicity of the crowd. On the other hand, when two characters express themselves with that typical musical procedure that is the canon, then the field is open to a more subtle interpretation. We find a canon in the first meeting between Don José and

Micaëla ("Ma mère je la vois": "I see my mother"): closes with the couple singing in unison. Here it is clear that the two devices can be interpreted as expressing the closeness between the two characters. It is a confirmation that in this first part of the work Don José speaks the same language as Micaëla. The relationship between Don José and Escamillo provides a sharp contrast, when they meet in Act II and challenge each other. The soldier expresses his fury, the toreador his astonishment: simultaneously, with two voices. The most surprising passages are the quintet in Act II and the trio in Act III. In the quintet, Carmen and her four partners in crime exchange invitations to join in a crooked operation, superimposing their voices in a Rossinian crescendo. If he had lived longer (Bizet died at 37) he would have been able to give us a comic masterpiece.

The trio between Carmen Frasquita and Mercédès is completely different in tone. The colors are dark: the cards say "death". But the interest lies in the contrast between the cheerful singing of Carmen's friends and the ominous long notes of one who knows that her hour is approaching.

There is an even stronger in the extraordinary scene of the finale, where Bizet strains our feelings by simultaneously contrasting the singing of the festive crowds in the arena and the solitary scene in the street, where the murder takes place.

A collateral theme: the art of orchestration

So far we have considered one of the two ways music has of "speaking" in an opera: voice, song. The second way is the orchestra, the instrumental dimension. The instru-

ments also help to draw the profile of the characters, enabling us understand their states of mind, intentions and characters. As a way to begin raising the students' awareness of this, a pair of elementary experiences should suffice. Those who follow our courses will be familiar with them. In the first, we can ask our pupils to imagine a theatrical situation like this: Micaëla reads her mother's message. What is written in it? While reading, an instrumental music flows, for example the coda of the prelude. What is the pupils' most common interpretation? But if instead of that background music there was another, for example the instrumental opening from Act I, would they keep to this interpretation? Predictably the majority will be induced to change it. And so we can ask: how is music able to "speak," to say different things about that imaginary situation, even when there are no words to guide us? This is a first, embryonic experience to capture the semantic potential of a sheet of music. Bizet's score is extraordinarily rich in the instrumental dimension, in the musical intelligence that makes instruments speak. Even a master of orchestration like Richard Strauss, half a century later, observed: "If you want to learn how to orchestrate, study the score of *Carmen*. What a splendid economy, how each note, each pause, is in the right place."

Exemplary material

The topic deserves special attention, and if you like, another introductory approach. To grasp the expressive potential of the different instruments in the orchestra, *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* by another great orchestrator, Benjamin Britten, is always exemplary. The English musician com-

posed it for a film devoted to presenting the instruments. He set himself a clear task, very valuable for our work on *Carmen*: to make the spectators-listeners understand the expressive qualities *characteristic* of each instrument: to reveal, so to speak, *the character, the soul*, of each instrument.

He chose a musical theme written in the 17th century by his great compatriot Henry Purcell, and he expounded it on all the instruments, one at a time. But precisely because of the particular character that each instrument has, we explain can to our students, each ends up expressing things—the theme—in its own way. Technically this is called the *instrumental idiom*.

First Britten plays us the theme, performed with the full orchestra. Before passing to the individual instruments, he offers a kind of "test of character" by entrusting the theme in turn to each of the four families of instruments: first the *woodwinds*, then the *brass*, then the *strings* and finally the *percussion*.

The only percussion instrument that produces clearly distinct notes are the timpani, while the others (triangle, tambourine, drum, cymbals, bass drum) perform the rhythmic profile. The whole orchestra takes up the initial theme. At this point, each of the instruments is given its say.

If the pupils have worked on Britten's *Guide*, we can suggest a creative experiment: the instrumental setting of a piano piece. The objective remains the same, now shifted to a practical, creative task. There is perhaps no activity of the professional musician that cannot be known and practiced, even at an embryonic level, by our pupils. This is the case with the art of orchestration.

A possible starting point: a black and white

drawing that can be filled in with colors. We've done this so many times. You can do something similar with music too. You take a piece written for a single instrument, and have it performed by many different instruments. This practice, we will inform them, is called *orchestration*. Composers often do this. For instance, they write a piece for the piano, then transcribe it for the instruments of the orchestra, choosing them according to the effects they want to achieve. For example, certain phrases will need to be "colored in" more heavily, others touched in more lightly. For the first group, we will choose instruments with a fuller sound, for example the brass. For the others, instruments with a more delicate sound, for example violins. The percussion will be used to underscore certain important moments. We can create aerial effects with the harp and cavernous effects with the tuba. We can set up oppositions between different instruments if we are to distinguish the motif clearly well its accompaniment. And so forth. Now, we invite the pupils to think of themselves as all orchestrators! There are two possible ways:

a) by deciding which instruments should accompany their songs;

b) by *guessing* games about how a musician might have orchestrated a sheet of piano music.

Maurice Ravel is an excellent model for this last activity. His orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Paintings at an Exhibition* is exemplary. We can set the pupils to work like this:

- listening to a passage of Mussorgsky's composition for piano;
- analyzing it and dividing it into its principal phrases;
- deciding which other instruments could be used to perform it: the pupils work individually or in groups;
- comparing the different decisions;
- hearing how Ravel orchestrated it, and discovering similarities and differences with our orchestrations.

The Bizet orchestrator

We can put what we have learned from our previous work to good use by applying it to Bizet's score and the way he used the instruments. What instruments would the pupils feel they could use to express this or that situation of the work? Perhaps just the different parts of the prelude?

First prepare a map like this:

Allegro <i>ff</i>		<i>pp</i>		Toreador <i>p</i>	Toreador		Andante <i>ff</i>
A	A	B	A	C	C	A	D

Everyone offers their suggestions, and above all they explain why, and then they listen to Bizet's own choice. Which is this: *First section* (bars 1-16: A repeated): theme A entrusted to piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinet, violins; the accompaniment to horns,

trumpets, trombones; while timpani, bass drum, triangle and woodwinds underline the strong points. We have seen the effect: the setting of the story in an unabashedly exhibitionist world of smugglers and bull-fighting.

Second section (bars 17-34; repeated): the brasses are silent, inserted only to close the semi-phrases; the complete strings take over. *Section C* (bars 55-78, repeated): compact strings in unison; all the others are silent except for trumpets and trombones, inserted to mark a comma at each measure.

Section D (last 28 bars): clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, all low-pitched, and cellos; in this way Bizet introduces an unexpectedly dark and ominous atmosphere.

At first glance, the basic principle adopted by Bizet is simple: the strings are the base; from time to time he then assigns specific expressive tasks to individual wind instruments. In the prelude, the color of the brass bolstered by the percussion and the very studied brass-band oom-pah-oom-pah,

first, and then the pulsation of the minor motif have a primary part in depicting the theatrical or even vulgar atmosphere of the bullfight, evoked in the beginning as the physical place where the crime will be committed. But as soon as the *Andante moderato* enters, the instrumental coloring changes completely. The expression is given to clarinet, bassoon, trumpet and double bass, accompanied by a throbbing *tremolo* on the violins. This part (D) is a motif characterized by the augmented second (C sharp - B flat), which rapidly traverses the scoring several times in various ways. The first time it unexpectedly appears at the end of the prelude to symbolize the protagonist's fatal destiny. The critics commonly term it the "fate theme":

Example 8

Andante



And here is its head, contracted and quickened, to introduce Carmen:

Example 9

Allegro



We hear it in full after Carmen sings her aria. In the fortune-telling scene, the foreboding of death is declared in the fate theme by the flute (in the lower register), cellos and double basses. We hear the short, quick motif in the English horn in Act II, and in the orchestra in Act IV. "There is a world of difference between (a) [the short quick motif] on flute and on the cellos and basses (before and after Carmen reads the cards) and (b) on the English horn (Act II) and the full orchestra (Act IV) [...]. Thus (a) represents Carmen herself, fickle, mocking, elusive, while (b) stands for her fatal influence on José."²

A different coloring accompanies the entrance on the scene of the children who play at imitating the soldiers: the music is a march, of course, a brilliant march, but above all the instrument specially loved by Bizet, the flute, properly the piccolo, or rather two of them, in counterpoint in its upper register, with the closed *pa-ra-pa-pa* of the trumpet. They speak to us of the affectionate attention that Bizet, like Schumann before him and his compatriot Debussy later, devoted to the world of children.

The music therefore also *speaks* through the timbre of an instrument alone: as when arpeggios of the muted strings and the ascending melody of the woodwinds seem to suggest the smoke spiraling up from the women's cigarettes.³

It is in helping to define the characters that the instruments perform their other essential narrative function. Some examples can be given with a generous scoring of instrumental touches of color:

- Micaëla's entrance: the young woman's naivety is suggested by the descending pattern of triplets given to the violins

alone; in a subsequent scene the accompaniment of woodwinds repeats the sound of the organ, evoking Micaëla's piety.

- Carmen's provocative behavior during questioning is echoed in the melody of the flute to the deep notes, then of the solo violin, then of the cellos, to "epitomize the rebel's defiance of authority and the strong woman's defiance of men".⁴
- The beloved flute used above all in its warm heavy tessitura returns shortly after and dialogues with Carmen in the canon.
- The horns that introduce timid Micaëla's effort to be brave in Act III: Bizet transfers the encouraging thought of her distant home to the instrument of distance. "Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante" ("I say nothing will frighten me").
- Act IV. Frasquita and Mercédès warn Carmen (score p. 342, Peters score p. 542). While the two flutes draw out a motif for thirds from high to low, two bassoons do the same from low to high: it might sound gracefully playful, were it not that the long pedal held by the trumpet casts a sinister coloring over the scene.

The opera is full of orchestral passages that help us understand particular moments in the story. An obvious example is the prelude, which in each work has something to recount. Between one act and the other then Bizet places an *interlude*:

- *Prelude*

The festive motif anticipates the grand finale in the arena, where Escamillo will reap his laurels. And it is immediately followed by the famous march by which the chorus in the last act leads him in triumph. But a dramatic idea unexpectedly closes the

Prelude: it is the fate theme. Over the popular festivity immediately falls the sinister shadow of fate imposed on the two protagonists. Thus the prelude in its own way epitomizes the essence of the whole opera.

- *The dragoons of Alcalá*
(intermezzo between Acts I and II)

This is the intermezzo between Acts I and II. The dragoons were a special body of troopers. This is made almost a caricature of a march by the sonorous notes of the bassoon: the military honor of the hero, the dragoon Don José, has been affected by the lure of the beautiful cigar-maker. The soldier has become a smuggler!

- *Intermezzo between Acts II and III*

The next intermezzo presents us with a very different picture. The innocent singing of the flute to the delicate accompaniment of the harp foreshadows the arrival of the sec-

ond female character, the fragile Micaëla, whom Don José has forsaken in the wild world of the smugglers. From high to low the harp accompanies the fresh motif of the flute, taken over from the clarinet. Meanwhile, the flute weaves a melodic pattern from high to low that enhances the emotional intensity, underscoring Micaëla's love, filled with the hope of being able to see Don José return to her.

- *Aragonese*
(intermezzo between Acts III and IV)

The last intermezzo leads us back into the searing atmosphere of the extreme, tragic confrontation in the square in Seville where José enacts his crime. The *Aragonese* is a Spanish folk dance, harsh and full-blooded, which heightens the characters' emotional tensions. To this pulsating rhythm the oboe sings a sorrowful melody:

Example 10

Allegro vivo



The soul seems to take heart with an energetic and powerful impulse. But it is only an illu-

sion, as we realize from the trombone, which enters *fortissimo*. Carmen's fate is sealed.

NOTES

1. Quotation from: Frans Gerver, "Bizet," *Nouvelle revue belge* (1945), 102.
2. Winton Dean, *Georges Bizet* (London: Dent, 1965), 232. Speaking of thematic appeals, the musicologist makes an interesting comparison with Wagner's use of it: "But whereas Wagner, with a different purpose in view, often produces an impression of stress and turmoil in which the voices have to struggle to be heard, Bizet's aim was always clarity and co-operation" (234).
3. This is how a musicologist attentive to the musical narration rather than the libretto: *Giorgio Bizet: "Carmen", guida attraverso il dramma e la musica*, edited by Antonio Annoni (Milan: Bottega di Poesia, 1924), 69. To Nietzsche, by contrast, they recalled the breeze from the gardens of Epicurus.
4. Lesley A. Wright, *Carmen* (London: Calder, 1982), 26.