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CARMEN: The Novel and the Opera

WHAT is the most popular opera in the world? Many might say *Faust*, but a poll taken by a Paris newspaper years ago put *Carmen* well at the top of the list. Though the test is interesting, Paris, whatever Parisians may think to the contrary, is not the world. It is pretty safe to say, however, that, taking the widest constituency, either *Faust* or *Carmen* is the most popular opera ever written. In our centennial year the New Zealand Broadcasting Service staged *Faust* with marked artistic success and presented it to highly appreciative audiences in the four centres. It is now preparing to do the same with *Carmen*.

The Theme of Passion

The two operas are French, with the difference that whereas Gounod worked on a German theme given to the world by a German, Bizet took a Spanish subject from a book by a Frenchman. Both deal with passionate love, the commonest subject in opera. In *Faust*, however, the mainspring of the story is the entry of the supernatural. Mephistopheles is the villain of the piece, and there is in him a touch of the saturnine evening-dressed cigarette-smoking ruiner of hearths and homes who used to stalk his way through Adelphi melodramas when we were very young. In *Carmen* there is no male villain. The heroine herself fills that part. In *Faust* the man is the seducer; in *Carmen* the woman. And the entirely earthly story that Bizet took from Prosper Mérimée, is simpler and more primitive than Goethe's poetical and philosophical version of the old Faust legend. Elemental passions spin the plot more starkly. *Faust* opens in the gloom of an old man's study; *Carmen* in the vivid sunlight of a Spanish street outside a tobacco factory. There is an important difference between the two musical settings. Gounod's music is entirely French. Bizet never went to Spain, but by the exercise of his imagination and some study of Spanish music, he was able to make us feel that the score conveys the warmth and colour and passion of the south. No doubt to say so does serious injustice to Spanish culture, but with a very large number of people,

perhaps to most, the mention of Spain calls up first, bull-fighting and *Carmen*. According to the *Oxford Companion to Music*, "one does not hear a Spaniard praise *Carmen*." He regards it as not a faithful reproduction of Spanish life and Spanish musical style.

The Novelist

Let us trace *Carmen* to its source. Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870) was a French writer. Fastidious in letters and life, he did not write much, but a good deal of what he wrote is first-class. Generations of British school-pupils know him through his *Colomba*. He spoke English perfectly, was at home in the clubs of London, and stayed with Gladstone. Mérimée was a citizen of the world. The original of the opera is his short novel, or long short-story, also called *Carmen*. Mérimée tells how he goes to Spain to do some archaeological work (he himself was Inspector of Historical Monuments in France), and, riding in the country one day, meets a brigand called Don José, on whose head there is a price. When his guide goes off to summon the soldiery, so as to get the reward, he warns José, who escapes. Later the traveller meets Carmen, who is associated with José. Returning to the district, he finds that José has killed Carmen and lies under sentence of death. In prison José tells him the whole story of his relations with Carmen, from their first meeting outside the tobacco factory in Seville. It is this story that provides the material for the opera.

It is agreed that Meilhac and Halévy who supplied Bizet with his libretto did a particularly good job—at any rate up to a point. They showed great skill in introducing so many of the leading incidents of the story in "the brief traffic of the stage." Their "book" is exciting, dramatic, well-knit, and the result shows that it admirably suited Bizet's powers. But important changes were made, and judging the libretto as literature in comparison with the original, we see that a good deal was lost. The librettists would have argued that to get the necessary effects for opera, this had to be. They could have pointed out that in their version there is less killing. In the novel, Carmen has a husband, but not in the opera. In the book Carmen feels only a passing fancy for a bull fighter; his name is Lucas and he is a mere picador. Though Carmen's relations with him come into the final tragedy, he makes only a fleeting appearance in the story. In the opera he becomes the matador Escamillo, a full-length character.

José's Character

There is no Micaela in the book, and though she may be necessary for the balance of the opera, her introduction complicates Mérimée's psychological picture. It makes José appear worse than he really was. Ernest Newman, the famous English musical critic, remarks that the beginning of José's downfall lies in his description of his first meeting with Carmen. He was a Basque, and Carmen was something quite new to him—an impudent devil. "In my country, at the sight of a woman dressed like this everyone would have crossed himself."



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