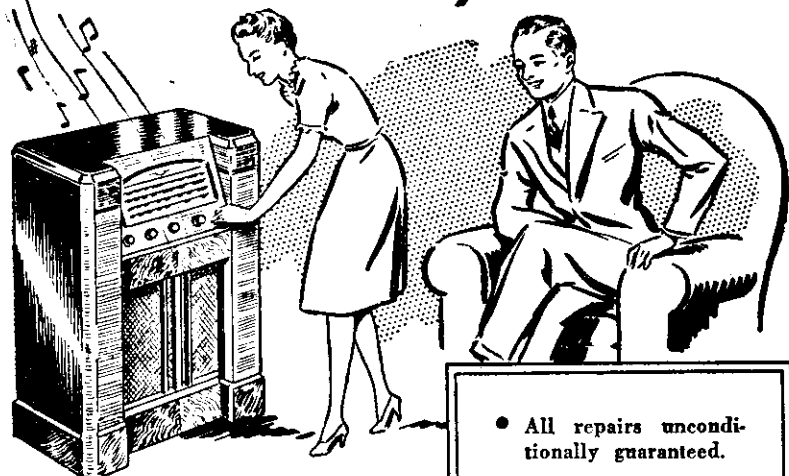


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BACKGROUND TO "CARMEN"

(continued from previous page)

in Paris. In accordance with the convention of what was called "opéra comique," it was given with spoken dialogue. The completely composed version, with recitatives, which is presented on most stages to-day, came into existence after Bizet's death. The recitatives were composed in Bizet's style by Ernest Guiraud, one of his intimate friends. The substitution of recitatives for dialogue widened the gap between novel and opera, because when everything is sung it is harder to follow the plot. One of the most popular items in the opera, the "Habanera," was put in to meet the wish of the original Carmen, for an aria in the opening scene. Bizet adapted a Spanish song, and re-wrote it a dozen times during rehearsals.

Failure at First

Carmen had 37 performances at the Opéra Comique in 1875, but at the time it was rated a failure. Some of the criticism was harsh. This was only a few years after the defeat at Prussia's hands, so Germany was the enemy. Bizet was charged with belonging to the school of Wagner. A few years later, when Carmen had established itself, Bizet was acclaimed an anti-Wagnerite hero in France and elsewhere. Some people in Paris found Carmen immoral. When the director of the theatre was asked by a statesman for a box for the opening night, he advised him to attend the general rehearsal first as he might find the opera unfit for his children.

Bizet did not live to see his genius recognised by the world. He died on June 3, 1875, aged 37. It has been said that his death, three months after the first performance, was hastened by disappointment. It may have been, but he seems to have been a seriously sick man, and no doubt the strain of composing and rehearsal was heavy.

Eagerness of Stars

Production in Vienna and London was the turning point for Carmen. The opera conquered the Germanic societies as well as others. Brahms told Debussy he had seen it 21 times, and that Bismarck had beaten him with 27. One proof of the general conquest by the opera was the eagerness of star singers to play Carmen. Hitherto the great ambition of sopranos had been to play Marguerite in Faust. Now, if they had the necessary lower notes, they, as well as mezzos and contraltos, wanted to sing Carmen. So keen were singers that they had clauses inserted in their contracts stipulating that they should have the right to appear as Carmen once during the season. Sometimes the result was unfortunate, for there were singers who took the part with only the foggiest idea of what Carmen was like. Of one great soprano it is written that she represented Carmen "as a sweet, mild, persuasive, well-behaved girl," whom men were bound to deceive and maltreat. But Carmen has now long been recognised as a specialised part.

—A.M.

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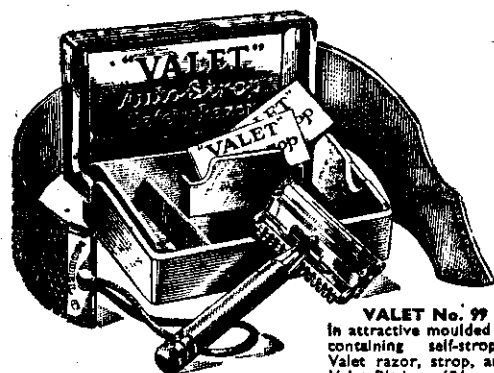
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