

TOREADOR TOPICS

By Robert Vineberg, Manitoba Opera Board of Trustees

A Young Talent Cut Short

Georges Bizet, like Mozart, was one of many brilliant composers who died young. Indeed, Bizet died of a heart attack, on June 3, 1875, just three months to the day after the première of *Carmen* at the Opéra-Comique in Paris. He was 36, the same age as Mozart at his death.

***Carmen* Not a Hit? You Must be Kidding!**

Carmen was not a huge success at its opening because it was quite different from the accepted French opera of the time, with pauses between conventional arias and choruses. Bizet had written an opera with continuous intense music throughout. He was even accused of the ultimate operatic sin among French circles, of “Wagnerism.” Parisian audiences of the time were also used to happy endings and Bizet certainly did not provide them with one in *Carmen*! Finally, even in sophisticated Paris, the earthy rawness of *Carmen* was shocking. Nevertheless, it was quickly picked up by opera companies in Vienna, London, and New York and returned to Paris five years later to great success. Unfortunately, Bizet did not live to receive the accolades he so well deserved.

Sources: Lang, Paul Henry, *The Experience of Opera*, p 194-196 and Cross, Milton and Kohrs, Karl, *The New Milton Cross Complete Stories of the Great Operas*, p 119,120.

If *Carmen* had been Canadian, Escamillo would have been a Hockey Star

While Bizet’s opera, *Carmen* focuses on the gypsy girl of the same name, it is set in Seville, Spain, against the backdrop of the huge popularity of bullfighting in Spain. The toreadors were the “rock stars” of the time and the best were enormously popular and had huge followings. The final act of *Carmen* takes place outside the Seville bullring and it is helpful to understand the nature of a bullfight in order to fully appreciate the climatic ending of *Carmen*.

Lang, in his *The Experience of Opera*, suggests a parallel between *Carmen* and a bullfighter:

Carmen always reacts to the state of mind and character of the other protagonists. Don José is a simple soldier caught in a passion beyond his comprehension, and we witness the gradual disintegration of what was once a man of character. Carmen watches the vacillating, demoralized man and moves in for the kill at the right moment and with the right accents. (Lang, Paul Henry, *The Experience of Opera*, p 194)

This is precisely the role of the toreador at the end of a bullfight...

Toreadors, Matadors, Picadors and others...

All you ever wanted to know (and possibly more) about bullfighting.

Spanish-style bullfighting is called *corrida de toros* (literally *running of bulls*) or *fiesta brava* (the *ferocious festival*). In the traditional *corrida*, three *torer*os (toreadors or *matadors*), each fight two bulls. Each matador has six assistants — two picadors ("lancers") mounted on horseback, three *banderilleros* ("flagmen"), and a *mozo de espada* ("sword page"). Collectively they comprise a *cuadrilla* or "entourage." Even by the time of *Carmen* in 1820, the *corrida* had become highly ritualized, with three distinct stages or *tercios*,

In the first stage, the *tercio de varas* ("the lancing third"), the matador first confronts the bull in order to observe its behaviour in an initial section called *suerte de capote*. Then one of the picadors enters the arena on horseback armed with a *vara* ("lance"). At this point, the picador tries to stab the mound of muscle on the bull's neck, in order to weaken its neck muscles. The manner in which the bull charges the horse provides important clues to the matador about which side the bull favours. If the picador is successful, the bull will hold its head and horns lower during the following stages of the fight, making the bull's charges less dangerous to the matador.

In the second stage, the *tercio de banderillas* ("the third of flags"), the three *banderilleros* each attempt to plant two razor-sharp barbed sticks covered with ribbons (called *banderillas*) on the bull's flanks, as close as possible to the wound where the picador drew first blood. These attacks are again designed to further weaken the bull's neck and shoulder muscles.

In the final stage, the *tercio de muerte* ("the third of death"), the matador is alone in the ring with his small red cape (*muleta*) and a sword. The matador uses his cape to attract the bull in a series of passes. Good matadors try to get very close to the bull, thus demonstrating their control over it. This performance, known as the *faena* (literally *job*) is usually broken down into "tandas" or "series." The *faena* ends with a final series of passes in which the matador use his *muleta* to maneuver the bull into a position to stab it between the shoulder blades through its heart. This final act of thrusting the sword is called an *estocada*.

Occasionally, if the public, or the matador, believe that the bull has fought bravely, they may petition the president of the plaza to grant the bull an *indulto*. Then, the bull's life is spared and it is retired to stud.

Source: *Wikipedia article on "Bullfighting"* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bullfighting> retrieved on August 8, 2009

Fate and Destiny

A haunting "fate" motive runs through *Carmen*. Both Don José and Carmen believe in "Destiny." Early in Act Three, following an argument between the two over her apparent callousness towards him and his agonizing choice to desert the Army and join the smugglers, Carmen predicts that Don José will probably kill her. When Don José makes no reply, Carmen says, almost to herself, that nothing matters because, Destiny, after all, is the master (*Que m'importe?*)

Après tout, le destin est le maître.). To reinforce this theme, elsewhere on the stage, Carmen's friends Frasquita and Mercedes are reading their fortunes with playing cards.

It appears that they were using normal playing cards rather than others such as Tarot cards, as there are references to diamonds and spades which are not found in Tarot. However, throughout Europe, from the middle ages, *Cartomancy* or the practice of divining from playing cards was widespread.

Both Frasquita and Mercedes read happy fortunes and then Carmen comes over to try her hand. She turns over her cards: "*Carreau! Pique!*" – "Diamonds and Spades!" she cries and then to the accompaniment of the fate theme concludes,

La mort! J'ai bien lu - moi d'abord, ensuite lui - pour tous les deux, la mort!
Death! I've read them right – first me, then him – both of us are to die!

Carmen is doomed. The cards are never wrong. No matter how often she may try, the cards will never lie. Only death awaits her ... and him.

What was going on in Spain at the time of the Opera?

Spain, in 1820, was past its years of imperial glory. The occupation by Napoleon and the determined resistance by Spaniards fighting the first guerrilla was (literally "little war" in Spanish) followed by Wellington's Peninsular War which caused terrible destruction. When the French retreated across the Pyrenees to France in 1814, they left behind an impoverished and deeply divided country, a weak monarchy and a demoralized army, into which Don José was conscripted.

What was going on in France when Bizet was composing *Carmen*?

France, in 1875 was still suffering from its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), which resulted in the loss of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and their incorporation into the newly proclaimed German Empire. The war also ended the reign of Emperor Napoleon III, who was captured by the Prussians at the battle of Sedan. Subsequently, the French Assembly declared the creation of the Third Republic. The next several years were marked by infighting between monarchists and republicans. The only thing they seemed to agree on was the need to avenge the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. This was achieved only through the horror of the First World War.

What was going on in Winnipeg in the 1870s?

Once the new provincial government decided to locate the legislature in Winnipeg, the community lobbied the legislature for incorporation as a city. Winnipeg was incorporated as a city in 1873, just two years prior to *Carmen's* première. The CPR had not yet reached Manitoba, and both Selkirk and Winnipeg were locked in a struggle as to where the railway would cross the Red River. The community that won would be the one that would boom. In 1879, the Federal Government advised Winnipeg that the crossing would be there *if* the city would build the railway bridge. It was a small price to pay as once the location of the bridge had been decided, the real estate and industrial boom began with eastern money pouring into Winnipeg. The Manitoba Club was founded in 1874, the Manitoba Scientific and Historical Society in 1875, and the University of Manitoba, the Law Society, and the College of Physicians and Surgeons were all founded in 1877.

Source: *Encyclopedia of Manitoba*, article on Winnipeg.