

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz.** *Carmen and the Staging of Spain: Recasting Bizet's Opera in the Belle Époque*  
Oxford: OUP, 2019 (Currents in Latin American & Iberian Music)  
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**Reviewed by Bruno Forment**

Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) is frequently seen as the paradigm of Spanishness in opera. Encapsulating the late Romantic vision of 'Spanish customs, costumes, characters, and styles of music and dance' (p. xv), *Carmen* presents a wildly exotic realm populated by soldiers, bullfighters, gypsies, and smugglers. But Bizet's opera has seldom conveyed one and the same image, as Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz argue in this interesting volume. In the forty years following its premiere (1875–1915), dynamic 'processes of Hispanicisation' transformed the opera's representation and reception alike in more profound ways than has been assumed, engendering a rich legacy in music, dance, literature, and film. Though other monographs have already explored this rich afterlife—recently, for example, Victoria Etnier Villamil's monograph—*Carmen and the Staging of Spain* is the first study to paint the aforementioned transformation in truly panoramic dimensions, introducing readers to numerous overlooked characters and works.<sup>1</sup>

The volume's brief but informative Prelude, 'The Spains of Paris, Mérimée, and Bizet's *Carmen*', evokes the cultural-historical background against which Prosper Mérimée's novella (1845) and Bizet's opera made their mark. In a context of intense Spanish immigration, Mérimée's idealised Spain resonated with the *españolades*, that is, Moorish or Andalusian songs, dances, and guitar compositions, performed by famous émigrés such as the García family (with the singers Maria Malibran, Manuel Jr, and Pauline Viardot). The Parisian vogue for all things Spanish was fuelled by political events—such as Napoleon III's marriage to

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Etnier Villamil, *'O ma Carmen': Bizet's Fateful Gypsy in Portrayal from 1875 to the Present* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017).

Countess Eugénie de Montijo (1853), the exile of Queen Isabel II (1868), and the restoration of the Spanish monarchy (1874)—but it had its ups and downs, as the authors explain. *Carmen's* librettists, Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac, were confronted with an audience that had already had so much Spanishness in past decades that generous amounts of Spanish *couleur locale* needed to be infused into Mérimée's story in order to enhance its appeal for a bourgeois audience. In addition, Halévy and Meilhac sought to make up for a significant shortcoming in the novella: its weak characterisation of the heroine. The title role, as created by Célestine Galli-Marié at the Opéra-Comique, would have foregrounded Carmen's sensuality, while Spain's brutal, Moorish character was emphasised by the visual production. To what extent a stylised Spain *à la Mérimée* resulted from this operation, rather than a more contemporary take on the country, remains to be seen in the absence of solid iconographic evidence pertaining to the premiere. For example, some of the Choudens illustrations that purported to depict the premiere staging (as seen in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, at pp. 30–1) were only printed in 1889–1891, as Choudens's address at 30 Boulevard des Capucines bears out.

In the first of four parts, '*Carmen's* Early Escapades (1875–90),' Christoforidis and Kertesz explore the fate of Bizet's opera in Victorian London, contrasting Minnie Hauk's successful interpretation of the title role (1887) with Adelina Patti's flopped attempt (1885). My personal highlight in this section is, however, the discussion of the early *Carmen* parody by George R. Sims and Henry Pettitt, *Carmen Up to Date* (Gaiety Theatre, London, 1890). Its hilarious opening scene alone seems to warrant a modern revival: a chorus, 'Seville Is Gay Today,' is accompanied by '[y]oung ladies run[ning] on and instantly merg[ing] themselves in a perplexing wilderness of underclothing, and then other young ladies with trousers on enter[ing] and try[ing] to make believe they're young men' (p. 73).

Part Two, 'Spain Discovers *Carmen* (1887–91),' explains how Bizet's masterpiece, upon being transferred to the title character's (imagined) homeland, became embedded in a broader, extra-theatrical discourse that touched upon Spanish and Catalan nationalist sensibilities. At the opera's turbulent creation in Madrid (1887), local critics were outraged by a lack of accuracy in the libretto's depiction of *couleur locale*; they objected in particular to its fanciful portrayal of the *cigarreras*, bullfighters, and gypsies. Felipe Pedrell, that musical spearhead of Spanish nationalism, on the other hand, expressed admiration for Bizet's 'genuinely popular Spanish music' (p. 111) while criticising the *habanera* ('L'amour est un oiseau rebelle') for its lack of folkishness. These critiques furthered *Carmen's* Hispanicisation, producing Rafael María Liern's *zarzuela* adaptation, which reconfigured the title character's 'generic gypsiness into a more specifically Andalusian characterization' (p. 105), and encouraging *Carmen* performers at the Teatro Real to 'render their characters *more* Spanish' (p. 116). This fine section of the book is rounded out with a discussion of *Carmen's* reception in cosmopolitan and Wagnerian Barcelona via both the Gran Teatre del Liceu's maiden staging—mounted weeks before the 1888 World Exhibition—and Salvador María Granés's spoof *Carmela* (1891), which was to enjoy revivals throughout Spain and even in Cuba, Argentina, and Mexico. Both productions, intriguingly, reconfigure regional contrasts in the plot: *Carmela*, for instance, locates the plot in Madrid and makes the heroine an authentic *madrileña*, while José 'is caricatured in costume, accent, and vocabulary, portrayed as a rustic fool in an essentially comic role' (p. 134).

The largest section of the book, 'Authenticating *Carmen* in the Age of Verismo (1889–1908),' charts Emma Calvé's introduction of 'gypsy primitivism' into the title role through a dance-like

use of the entire body (including her hips), an alternative costume (of which the *mantón de manila* became a distinctive element), and an idiosyncratic vocal timbre (as Calvé's late recordings testify). Furthermore, Calvé's emergence took place in a context of new Hispanisation, ignited by the performances of Grenadian gypsies at the 1889 World Exhibition and those of Spanish-born dancers, such as the Andalusian gypsy Caroline 'la Belle' Otero (*née* Iglesias, 1868–1965). The latter built up a reputation both as a performer and as the mistress of at least eight royals, including Emperor William I of Germany, Tsar Nicolas II of Russia, King Leopold II of Belgium, and King Alfonso XIII of Spain. Otero fully exploited this courtesan image in embodying Carmen, which she even brought to the opera's home base, the Opéra-Comique, in 1912, in spite of her restricted vocal capabilities. Together with her rival, Rosario 'la Belle' Guerrero, Otero also managed to take Carmen overseas in danced and spoken adaptations. Little by little, Carmen also found herself a genuinely Spanish voice through the efforts of the Andalusian Elena Fons and the Catalan María Gay (*née* Pichot Gironés), both of whom differentiated their practice from Calvé's in staging not a 'gypsy', but a more sophisticated persona, deploying a broader spectrum of emotions. Gay became the first Spanish-born singer to make an international breakthrough as Carmen, but her sensational career was tinged with, and possibly accelerated by, scandal after her widely-publicised divorce from the composer Juan Gay Planella and her subsequent elopement with the tenor—and famous Don José—Giovanni Zenatello.

A word of criticism should be reserved for Christoforidis and Kertesz's discussion of naturalism and *Carmen's* contribution to that aesthetic. According to George Bernard Shaw (cited at p. 176), Emma Calvé helped transform the "Mérimee Carmen" into the "Zola Carmen," as part of the "naturalistic movement which was presently to turn Carmen into a disorderly, lascivious, good-for-nothing factory girl." Shaw's intriguing remark is, unfortunately, not exploited to the full, even though the authors concede that the arrival, in the 1890s, of Italian *verismo* through operas like *Cavalleria rusticana* helped Bizet's opera and performers like Calvé gain ground. Unfortunately, Émile Zola's naturalism, either via the author's novels and their dramatic adaptations, his influential essay *Le naturalisme au théâtre* (1881), or through modern scholarship,<sup>2</sup> is not related to *Carmen*, which is a missed opportunity. It appears, in fact, that Bizet's opera inscribed itself fully in a naturalistic vein from the start, taking cues from Zola's early—and no less controversial—stagings of *Thérèse Raquin* (1873), *L'Assommoir* (1879), and *Nana* (1881) in making a compelling statement pro (Darwinian) fatalism through anecdotal detail. Don José seems to be carried *linea recta* towards his doom, with no hope of redemption (contrary to his Romantic peers), while Carmen constitutes an equivalent of Zola's man-eaters (such as *Nana*). Romantic realism, as embodied by Mérimée's novellas, Millet's painted peasants, and Gounod's sun-drenched *Mireille*, never caught fatalism as acutely as *Carmen* did, rather portraying rustic characters, whose innocuous behavior seldom upsets bourgeois values, as does naturalism, which destroys every possibility of idealism, real or allegorical. Naturalism might have been exactly what made *Carmen* so difficult to imbibe for a great part of the Parisian public and press, who were still attuned to the Romantic ideals represented by Mérimée. At the same time, naturalism

<sup>2</sup> Manfred Kelkel, *Naturalisme, verisme et réalisme dans l'opéra de 1890 à 1930* (Paris: Vrin, 1984); Claude Schumacher, ed., *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre, 1850–1918* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

may have been what made *Carmen* so compelling to singers like Calvé, whom Shaw justly associated with Zola.

The fourth and last part of *Carmen and the Staging of Spain*, 'Carmen as Popular Entertainment (1900–15)', once more looks at *Carmen*'s aptness for its tropes to be transferred to other genres, most notably music-hall, flamenco, and ballet. But the highlight of the section deals with Geraldine Farrar's legendary passage at the Metropolitan Opera, her legacy on record, and her appearance in Cecil B. DeMille's 1915 film adaptation, which Christoforidis and Kertesz analyse in painstaking detail to thus bring their monograph to a grand conclusion.

*Carmen and the Staging of Spain* brings together twenty years of passionate research by two Australian musicologists, who have undertaken impressive source work to produce this volume, judging from the references to, among others, French, Spanish, and American newspapers. Many readers will also applaud the monograph's transmission of lesser-known Spanish musicological work (particularly from the Madrilenian Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales) to the Anglophone forum. As a bonus, Christoforidis and Kertesz's prose never fails to appeal, with many apt quotes, vivid descriptions, and lovely illustrations that bring forgotten spectacles before the reader's eyes. Score excerpts from the lesser-known parodies would have also been helpful. In short, this important book is a must-have for every 'Carmenite'.

#### **About the Author**

Bruno Forment researches historical stage sets for CEMPER, the Flemish center for music and performing arts heritage, while teaching at the Royal Conservatoire of Ghent and Catholic University of Leuven. Author and editor of three books, his articles on opera have appeared in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, *Staging Verdi and Wagner* (Brepols, 2015) and *Carmen Abroad* (Cambridge, forthcoming).