

A perfect storm of seduction:
Investigating tactical femininity in Bizet's *Carmen*

by

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B.Mus, Queen's University, 2015

B.Ed, Queen's University, 2016

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We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Premiered in France in 1875, Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen* (with libretto by Henri Meilhax and Ludovic Halévy, based on a novella by Prosper Mérimée) provided audiences with a main character who is not only aware of her sexuality, but who knows how to use it as a source of power and self-satisfaction. Carmen, often viewed as an ambiguous protagonist of questionable morals, embodies a triple threat toward male characters in the opera: this paper explores the tactical implementation of her words, her music, and her body as sexual weapons against men. First, the uniquely self-centered dialogue Bizet chose to give Carmen created a distinct sense of unease in early audiences. Her text is pointed and specific about her personal intentions rather than abstractly romantic. Secondly, closely tied to her libretto, the sultry and seductive moments in the music backing Carmen's dialogue are also manipulative tools she uses to tease and taunt. Thirdly, the way that she uses her body to seduce men in the opera is developed as its own weapon. Though Carmen dies at the hands of the man she spends the entire opera emotionally tormenting, her character has resonated with countless audiences over the years. Carmen's unapologetic awareness of her own sexual prowess was instrumental in uprooting societal expectations for a woman on the stage. This paper examines how the concurrence of Carmen's three key personality traits ultimately set up a perfect storm of seduction, as well as the creation of an indelible female character.

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Introduction

Why *Carmen*?

Bizet's *Carmen*, premiered in Paris in 1875, presented audiences with a main character who was, for all intents and purposes, cast outside the mold of a 'proper woman' by way of her sexual prowess. My goal is to cultivate a unique, feminist investigation of the character in *Carmen*, in which I explore the weaponization of her sexuality as a means of societal critique. Breaking her character down into three main sections, I will analyze how she uses the lyrics of her arias, her physical movements, and her music as separate weapons through which to ensnare the men around her.

Because love and anger have been inextricably linked in the world of opera, sexuality itself can be seen as a weapon against the social norms surrounding a given opera. For example, opera seria prior to the 1770s contained a subgenre of soprano repertoire called the "rage aria," in which the unbridled rage of the female character was channeled through one musical number within the opera.¹ Additionally, there is evidence through lyric analysis that rage arias composed in the opera buffa style provided an outlet for female characters to exhibit the decidedly 'unfeminine' traits of unbridled rage coupled with lyrics of romance.²

Bearing this in mind, we can assess the evolving interpretations of *Carmen*'s character in a multitude of ways. Her death has represented everything from a necessary dramatic evil to martyrdom for femininity; her 'outlaw sexuality' has proven to resonate deeply with marginalized communities, and musicologists who have aimed to make *Carmen* studies *not*

¹ Mary Hunter, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment* (United States: Princeton University Press, 1999), 141.

² *Ibid*, 146.

about gender have fallen by the wayside.³ As one of the most powerfully memorable female characters in operatic history, scholars are behooved to continue updating its surrounding discourse to include and embrace modern feminist perspectives.

“Whatever else it is, *Carmen* is emphatically *not* a story about fate.”⁴ Aptly stated by Susan McClary, this is a foundational element in much research on *Carmen* and how its main character is full of confident self-awareness. Scholarship surrounding *Carmen* has taken different forms since the opera’s premiere in 1875, with its main areas of scholarship having come from research into exoticism and gender studies. My own study builds on, and expands upon, these same areas of research. As I will show, my musical analyses of select arias in *Carmen* provide ample insight into both of these areas, thus challenging long-held beliefs that the harmonic content of much of the opera is almost simplistic in its construction.⁵

Scholars like Susan McClary have taken firm feminist positions on analyzing *Carmen*, providing in-depth analyses of its various aspects in order to curate a thorough examination of intersectional gender relations throughout the opera. McClary’s seminal work *Georges Bizet: Carmen*, written in 1992, provides invaluable information about the opinions regarding the treatment of female sexuality in places as public as the opera stage. McClary brings to light the issue that though *Carmen* is canonized, this does not diminish the importance and greater significance of the role its main character’s sexuality has played in shaping the opera over time. Despite initial feedback regarding the overt sexiness of the opera, the work has ultimately sustained its popularity as an exploration of serious themes masquerading within a lighter opera.⁶

³ Susan McClary, “Paradigm Dissonances: Music Theory, Cultural Studies, Feminist Criticism,” *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1, (1994), 75.

⁴ Susan McClary, *George Bizet: Carmen* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 43.

⁵ McClary, “Paradigm Dissonances,” 72.

⁶ McClary, *Carmen*, 121.

In order to create an effective analysis, I have curated a personal definition of ‘feminism’ for the purposes of this paper. I recognize that it is impossible to judge Carmen by modern standards, and as such, I have actively attempted to maintain a proprietary definition of feminism centered on the inherent patriarchal power relations expected of most 19th-century opera. Additionally, incorporating aspects of postcolonial feminism allows for a wider analytical lens in respect to gender relations.

Much of Carmen’s longevity stems from her relatability to marginalized communities, just as much of Carmen’s brash femininity stems from the manipulation of her body and behaviours which actively disrupt the status quo. Aspects of *Carmen* are readily visible in queer theory, as the internal struggles of its main character are echoed in the struggles of the queer community. Wayne Koestenbaum’s *The Queen’s Throat* provides insight into this parallelism; he asserts that the dichotomy between singing and speaking represents secret-keeping, with singing being a “willingness to confess” without openly doing so.⁷ In opera, singing a secret in recitative form maintains its privacy, whereas speaking it in dialogue does not. In essence, the escaping sound from a vocalist during emotionally tense musical moments is a ‘coming out’ through vocalization.⁸ Koestenbaum also references the implicit meanings and power structures in instrumental music, which can reveal information and ‘come out’ to audiences without words.⁹ Knowledge of the implicit information present in various power structures in opera can also be applied to postcolonial impermanence, in that the postcolony lends itself easily to disruptive subversion. *Carmen* reimagines power structures through the normalization of her sexual transgressions in the same way that queerness can be seen as “transgression and freedom from

⁷ Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 158

⁸ Ibid, 157.

⁹ Ibid, 190.

norms and power relations.”¹⁰. Given that the status quo for the opera lies in patriarchal hierarchy, her free body movements speak to the rigidity of society and its ineffectiveness at placing a chokehold on the human condition.¹¹

In examining *Carmen*, there were distinct parallels between feminist musicology and queer theory. Koestenbaum brings to light the similar struggles shared by *Carmen* and the quintessential opera diva. At the core of *Carmen*’s personality, she exhibits many musically masculine traits. She is loud, sings chromatically, and has a self-centered libretto. In this respect, one can almost constitute the relationship between *Carmen* and Don José as having inherently queer undertones, perhaps embracing abstract gender fluidity. In contrast to *Carmen*, Micaëla is reminiscent of heterosexual nostalgia, fulfilling the audience’s desire to see a male/female relationship saturated with logical emotional simplicity.¹² This comparison rings true in respect to the sexual antagonism present in *Carmen*’s actions throughout the opera.

Additionally, Western tonality presents a certain set of prescribed binary narratives which present themselves through the music: masculine and feminine, power and weakness, wholesomeness and fragmentation of phrases.¹³ Plato had hypothesized that text and music were to remain separate in order to avoid effeminizing the male spirit. Koestenbaum further asserts that “every opera is a coupling: not an affair of actual flesh, but an abstract romance of words and music.”¹⁴ *Carmen* is rife with musical binaries, with the masculine/feminine and power/weakness binaries coming through both visually and musically. The instrumentals in *Carmen* represent both sides of these binaries, and the tonal syntaxes make them clearly

¹⁰ Ayo A. Coly, “*Carmen* goes Postcolonial, *Carmen* goes Queer: Thinking the Postcolonial as Queer,” *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 57, no. 3, (2016), 394.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 397.

¹² Koestenbaum, *Queen’s Throat*, 232.

¹³ *Ibid*, 183.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 187.

recognizable to listeners. As the importance of the instrumental music in opera became more prominent in the 18th century, the tonal syntax present became more important to the music's interpretation.¹⁵ Tonality can thus be seen as musical grammar with implied formal relationships, with tonal ambiguity representing a loosening of said syntax.¹⁶ Opera history presents itself as an oscillation, with alternating periods of operas being music-dominant and text-dominant. Wagner described this music/text dichotomy as being a male/female binary, casting an interesting light on how we can interpret Carmen's actions.¹⁷ Though she can be seen as a beacon for femininity, there are instances where her femininity is antagonistic to the point of being interpreted as masculine. Despite the harshness of the word "antagonistic," I view this as a positive character trait. The harshness present in Carmen's brazen femininity is at the core of her personality and is essential for her character development.

Carmen's main character has historically been painted in two key ways: as a woman who is unafraid to use her sexuality as a means to reach her own ends, and as a character who is emblematic of 'otherness' in a larger cultural context. Susan McClary speaks directly to her existence as an exotic woman in Spain, and specifically an Andalusian Gypsy. In *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*, Ralph Locke examines the different facets of Carmen's sexuality and how it is represented through her arias and interactions with other characters. Locke also finds significance in the cultural interaction between the characters in the opera and how this contributes to further othering of Carmen. From the outset we see Don José and his virtuous girlfriend Micaëla, who hail from northern Spain. Carmen, on the other hand, is not only

¹⁵James Anderson Winn, *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations between Poetry and Music* (United States: Yale University Press, 1981), 203.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 239.

¹⁷ Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (United Kingdom: Cornell University Press, 1984), 112.

from Seville in the south of Spain, but she is also set apart as being an Andalusian Gypsy.¹⁸ There is an element of queerness at work in Carmen's othering as well. Before the rise in popularity of the 'black diva,' Koestenbaum links the idea of the diva to the concept of 'blood,' making the diva emblematic of 'otherness' regardless of the singer's gender. Specifically, part of the diva's vocal quality derives from the desire to cover up the 'white' tone of voice, and the designation of her voice as a 'treasure' she can bestow upon the colonies.¹⁹ We see this represented in *Carmen*, with Bizet's specified tone quality for the main character. See Chapter 4 – Body as Weapon – for exoticism.

Feminist philosopher Catherine Clément's work *Opera, or, the Undoing of Women* also provides insight into Carmen's status symbol as a beacon of freedom for female opera characters. Clément explores the role of the dead woman in opera - a role Carmen dances confidently toward during every performance of the opera. Knowing that the Romani word for "freedom to travel" – *faremen* – is essentially synonymous with one's existence, Clément emphasizes the importance of Carmen's penchant for lyrics and musical motifs which are representative of her freedom as a Gypsy woman, irrespective of the culture around her.²⁰ The gendered implications of Carmen's every move resonate throughout all aspects of the opera, and serve as signposts to understanding the extent of her female prowess.

Throughout this paper, I will explore Carmen's various tools of sexual manipulation as a multi-faceted weapon. The foundation of her character can be broken down into three main weapons: her words, her body, and her music. Carmen thus has a veritable sexual arsenal with which to bend the wills of those around her and present alternative behaviour for female

¹⁸ Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 162.

¹⁹ Koestenbaum, *Queen's Throat*, 106.

²⁰ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, the Undoing of Women* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishing, 1997), 50.

characters in opera. Despite her death at the hands of a scorned lover, Carmen proves to have withstood the test of time as a beacon for the power of femininity. Though her downfall is a direct result of thinly veiled, fragile masculinity, she will undeniably continue to exist in perpetuity, enraging and entertaining audiences in equal measure.

Chapter 1

Setting the Scene: Cultural Background and History

Before beginning to unpack the sexual warfare rampant in *Carmen*, we will attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the context in which the opera's characters interact. Bizet was commissioned in 1869 by the Opéra-Comique in Paris to create a large-scale work of three to four acts. Bizet selected a text by French author Prosper Mérimée, a novella called *Carmen*, which depicted the moral downfall of the good soldier Don José. Mérimée's *Carmen* was published in 1845 as an exotic tale of women abroad but was later amended in 1846 to include a social critique on the Gypsy people.²¹ Bizet was aware that this commission would have the potential to create a fundamental shift in the genre, as he believed that the Opéra-Comique was nearing the end of its popularity, with all staged performances having emotionally-driven plots with readily intelligible and predictable dialogue.²² Despite this sentiment, Bizet complied with the norms of the Opéra-Comique for this composition: *Carmen* is smattered with spoken dialogue and two-verse songs (couplets) through which characters are introduced. With his understanding that sections of spoken dialogue would inevitably need to be re-written in order to reach a wider audience, Bizet's original composition included ample opportunity for character development by means of conversation or monologues unhindered by the constraints of traditional recitative. In fact, before the re-writing of the dialogue sections following Bizet's death, there was much more context given throughout the opera on vital plot points such as Don José's violent past and his lack of physical attraction for the native women of Spain. The implied

²¹ McClary, *Carmen*, 1.

²² Michael Rose, *The Birth of an Opera: Fifteen Masterpieces from Poppea to Wozzeck* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 203.

racism of Don José's attractions is important context for the audience to understand the strength of the transformative effect Carmen has on him.²³

Carmen is an opera in four acts, with dialogue interspersed between musical numbers. The opera takes place in Seville sometime between 1820 and 1830 and begins in a town square outside of a cigarette factory where Carmen works. In Act I, we meet Micaëla, the demure fiancée of soldier Don José, who is seeking him out before the factory bell rings to dismiss the cigarette girls. Toward the end of Act I, Carmen makes her tantalizing vocal entrance with her famously provocative "Habanera" aria ("L'amour est un oiseau rebelle") during which she sets her sights on Don José as a conquest before returning to work. After a brief interlude between Don José and Micaëla, it is revealed that Carmen has attacked another cigarette girl inside the factory, and she is arrested. Her captor is Don José, and she ultimately seduces him into letting her go free, leading to his own arrest for not fulfilling his duties. Act II takes place in Lilas Pastia's Inn, a tavern which Carmen had alluded to during her Act I aria "Seguidilla" ("Prés de remparts de Seville"). Here we meet famed toreador Escamillo, who expresses interest in Carmen but it is not reciprocated. When Don José returns from prison, Carmen taunts him for not wanting to join her group of smugglers, and he ultimately caves in after lashing out at his superior officer and is ousted from the military. Act III follows the smugglers through the mountains and is when we see Carmen beginning to tire of Don José. It is revealed to Don José that Escamillo is also interested in Carmen, and we see a foreshadowing shift in his personality. Act IV takes place back in Seville, just outside of the bullfighting ring where Escamillo is soon to be entertaining the crowds. Carmen and Escamillo express feelings for one another, and Carmen is confronted by an irate Don José as soon as Escamillo exits the scene. After an

²³ McClary, *Carmen*, 45.

emotional final aria, Don José stabs Carmen in a fit of jealous rage, and sings of how he loved her while kneeling over her lifeless body. Cheers for Escamillo emanate from the bullfighting ring as Carmen dies outside, signalling a dark resolution to a morally confusing opera.

The premiere of *Carmen* gave the audience a surprise when Bizet forewent what was expected to be a light opera and evolved the interactions between the characters into something much more dramatic and darker, even tragic. Victoria Etnier Villamil, American soprano and author on singing, has shown that while the premiere started off promising, audiences were quickly taken aback at the end of Act I when Carmen sings her aria “Prés de remparts de Séville” and presents an air of specifically directed promiscuity.²⁴ In order to balance out the unpredictable sexuality of his female lead character to audiences outside of the Opéra-Comique, Bizet painted Escamillo, the famed Spanish toreador, as a testosterone-fueled macho man who could easily be categorized in the grand scheme of the Opéra-Comique genre. Escamillo’s boastful masculinity was likely written as a counterweight to Don José, thus providing the opera with a balanced equilibrium between the personalities of the two male leads. Bizet was aware of the public’s desire for a character of Escamillo’s grandeur, as well as their unacceptance of those same traits in a female character. He was famously resentful of his composition of Escamillo’s aria, the “Toreador Song” (“Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre”), which he had explicitly written to appease audiences: “So they want trash? All right; I’ll give them trash.”²⁵ Bizet’s fundamental undermining of the Opéra-Comique genre was thus not entirely intentional, as his goals were not initially to re-imagine the entire genre, but rather to expand the public’s perception of what the Opéra-Comique *could* be comprised of.²⁶

²⁴ Victoria Etnier Villamil, *‘O ma Carmen’: Bizet’s Fateful Gypsy in Portrayals from 1875 to the Present* (North Carolina: McFarland Publishing, 2017), 11.

²⁵ McClary, *Carmen*, 46.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 45.

Despite *Carmen*'s provocation of the French public, the history of opera censorship in the nineteenth century sheds light on how it gained so much popularity. Napoleon's 1807 restriction of creative process and censorship of the arts made for compositions at the time using the same, somewhat bland, template. Many works composed for the Opéra-Comique in the first half of the nineteenth century have been all but forgotten, as a direct result of the unimaginative restrictions designed to ensure composers were churning out works which all followed the same formal plot conventions.²⁷ By 1858, much of the 'comique' in the Opéra-Comique had already become much more serious, and critics had in fact been noting a lack of laughter in the theatre for decades. This could be considered a move by the Opéra-Comique to be regarded in a more serious light, perhaps aiming to be on the same plane as the Opéra. In 1864, just four years before Bizet was commissioned to write *Carmen*, Napoleon III reversed the 1807-era restrictions placed on the arts by his uncle Napoleon, thus permitting recitatives in the Opéra-Comique, as well as allowing operas to be performed on any stage. This was one of the channels through which *Carmen* was able to make its way to larger theatres after its premiere, despite its initial reception.²⁸

France in the nineteenth century was a stringently regimented time to be an ambitious female, in that women in the public sphere were often criticized more heavily than their male counterparts. Under Napoleon, equal rights for all citizens had become officially recognized at the turn of the century, but women were excluded from citizenship. As a result, nineteenth-century French feminism relied on Romantic language to idealize a woman's place in society even though they recognized the deep inequalities that had been cemented by Napoleon's Civil Code.²⁹ The female 'self' created out of a need to establish a role in society created a feminine

²⁷ Hugh Macdonald, "From Opéra-Comique to Opéra-Sérieux," *Revista de Musicología* 16, no. 6 (1993), 3114.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 3117.

²⁹ Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the 19th Century* (New York: SUNY Press, 1984), 18.

category outside of the expected domesticity, irrespective of their marital status.³⁰ However, women such as actresses in the public sphere – regardless of how admired they were by others – were often stuck in the paradox of being accepted as a public figure, but also scorned by the for what they represented. Jean-Jacques Rousseau described the role of an actress as a promiscuous mixture of public and private life: even when portraying a virtuous woman on the stage, the female actress is still debasing herself for the enjoyment of others.³¹ We can apply this concept to initial audience reactions to the character of Carmen, in that she was admired for her feminine strengths and wiles, but the audience was always assuaged with the knowledge that she would be resigned to die as a direct result of her libidinous ways.

Some of *Carmen*'s most seductive aspects stemmed from the fact that differing portrayals of the main character were made to reflect the moral compass of the society in which the opera was staged. The end of the nineteenth century was a definite time of social unrest in France; the public and private spheres that had become the norms in the eighteenth century made the disparity between 'feminine' and 'masculine' quite pronounced in a bourgeois-centered society, repressing and suppressing women's voices in equal measure.³² *Carmen*'s portrayal of a public woman who falls outside the moral norms governed by society incited mixed feelings from audiences, who had rarely been privy to such loose moral standards on a scale as large as the Opéra-Comique. Carmen's death, though necessary for the plot, was initially deemed "too strong," and audiences were additionally pushing back against the chorus of cigarette-girls acting provocatively by smoking and being rowdy in public.³³ This public/private dichotomy became a

³⁰ Jo Burr Margadant, *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (California: University of California Press, 2000), 3.

³¹ *Ibid*, 177.

³² *Ibid*, 2.

³³ Macdonald, "From Opéra-Comique," 3119.

subject of scholarly intrigue as the societal roles of women shifted over the course of the French Revolutions and well into the nineteenth century.³⁴ Given this belief in the strict gender conventions of the time, seeing Carmen on the stage in a position of power in spite of her social standing was one of the reasons for the initial dislike of her character.

A seismic shift in what art was meant to convey also occurred during this time period, moving away from Romantic-era Idealism toward newly-developed Realism. Where Romanticism portrayed highly stylized and often unrealistic scenarios, Realism provided levels of truth by integrating fictional narratives with relatable experiences.³⁵ In literature, this was termed Naturalism, and was referred to as ‘verismo’ when put into the context of opera.³⁶ An example of this concept is found in Mérimée’s *Carmen*, though its thorough and specific depictions of sexuality and criminality had rarely been discussed in works for public consumption. Bizet’s colourful descriptions of the Gypsy characters within the opera point audiences toward the fact that he was proud and confident in his creation of hedonistic female characters and their abilities to create a forward-moving link between Idealism and Realism. Carolyn Abbate asserts that opera at its core is hedonistic: she firmly believes that audiences inherently sexualize opera characters as a result of our conditioning from Romanticism.³⁷

Regardless of how it is interpreted, *Carmen* serves as a moral lesson. It can be seen as a comment on general terror surrounding the female body, or as the condemnation of women who dared to overstep the boundaries of social order. Since the regulation of societal expectations

³⁴ The public/private dichotomy was a natural evolution from the salon culture of the seventeenth century. Joan B. Landes’ book *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* discusses the empowerment of the elite in society, and how women were given fleeting opportunities to experience aristocratic privileges in isolated instances. This allowed women to exist outside of the private sphere, but since salon culture was akin to experiencing nobility in a vacuum, it was accepted since it did not destabilize the greater social order.

³⁵ Lawrence Schehr, *Rendering French Realism* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 16.

³⁶ Burton D. Fisher, *Bizet’s Carmen: Opera Classics Library Series* (Florida: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2005), 14.

³⁷ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years* (United Kingdom, Penguin Publishing: 2012), 72.

surrounding sexuality has predominantly happened at the hands of men, the fact that Carmen took a position of power regarding her bodily autonomy and provocative behaviour was particularly destabilizing.³⁸ Since women participating in warfare were considered to be taking over the positions of men, if war and love are to be conflated, Carmen was an influential figure who set a moral precedent for future female characters.

³⁸ Helen M. Kinsella, *The Image Before the Weapon: A Critical History of the Distinction between Combatant and Civilian* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), 80.

Chapter 2

Text as Weapon

Text and music play important roles in emphasizing certain words within musical numbers; Carmen's music and libretto are two manipulative tools which, while inextricably linked, are also weaponized independently. Because *Carmen* is an artistic restaging of a novella, there are natural overlaps between both texts. However, Bizet had famously revised the text of the "Habanera" following the initial libretto written by Ludovic Halévy, and in doing so made significant changes to how Carmen was perceived by the other characters in the opera.³⁹

Let us begin by looking at the original French text followed by the English translation of the "Habanera"⁴⁰ (font style alterations are my own for analysis):

L'amour est un oiseau rebelle
qu nul ne peut apprivoiser,
Et c'est bien en vain qu'on l'appelle,
s'il lui convient de refuser

Love is a rebellious bird
That no one can tame
And it is in vain that it is called
If it befits him to refuse

Rien n'y fait, menace ou prière,
L'un parle bien, l'autre se tait;
Et c'est l'autre que je préfère:
Il n'a rien dit; mais il me plait
L'amour! L'amour! L'amour!

Nothing moves it, neither threat nor plea
It can be bold, or it can be shy,
And I prefer the shy one.
Love is a force no one can hold.
That's love! Love! Love! Love!

L'amour est enfant de bohême,
Il n'a jamais connu de loi.
Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime;
Si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!

Love is a gypsy child,
that knows no law.
If you don't love me, I'll love you. And if I love you,
if I love you, you'd better watch out!

L'oiseau que tu croyais surprendre
battit de l'aile et s'envola.
L'amour est loin, tu peux l'attendre;
Tu ne l'attends plus, il est là!

The bird you thought you caught,
beat its wings and flew away.
With love far away, you can be waiting for it,
And when you least expect it, there it is.

³⁹ Judith Nowinski, "Sense and Sound in Georges Bizet's *Carmen*", *The French Review* 43, no. 6 (1970): 896.

⁴⁰ Fisher, *Carmen Libretto*, 11.

Tout autour de toi vite, vite, il vient,
S'enva, puis il revient,
Tu crois le tenir, il t'évite,
Tu crois l'éviter, il te tient!
L'amour! L'amour! L'amour!

Love is all around you.
It comes and goes, and then it returns.
You think you've caught it, and it escapes,
catching you later by surprise!
That's love! That's love! That's love!

Si tu ne m'aimes pas, si tu ne m'aimes pas,
Je t'aime, mais si je t'aime,
si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!

If you don't love me, if you don't love me,
I love you, but if I love you,
if I love you, you'd better watch out!

Comparing the opening stanza from Bizet's text and the original libretto by Halévy below, we can already observe the alteration of Carmen's fundamental essence.

Illusion and fantasy,
Thus begins the loves.
And here it is for life,
Or for six months or for eight days.⁴¹

While Halévy's version is more abstract and implores the listener to create an image of their own traditional fantasy of love, Bizet re-writes it to construct a powerful metaphor. His version evokes Carmen basing her choices on urges and feelings rather than the search for idealized love. The following stanza has Carmen refer to love as "a Gypsy child that knows no law," indicating that her perception of love is volatile and uninfluenced by tradition. Carmen's descriptions of the rebellious bird and gypsy child make it apparent that she is alluding to herself, and that she is openly opinionated in her selecting lovers: "if [myself] wants to refuse you." If we recall the Romani word *faremen*, the term for freedom to travel and indication of one's sense of Gypsy identity, her self-assuredness and allusions to freedom become more impactful and connected to

⁴¹ Nowinski, *Sense and Sound*, 896.

her roots as a Gypsy woman. Her freedom of choice insinuates danger for the male characters in the opera, as it becomes evident that Carmen is self-reliant and willing to act in socially unorthodox ways to fulfill her personal desires. Carmen reinforces this later on in the aria, when she sings the line “l’oiseau que tu croyais surprendre battit de l’aile et s’envola” [“The bird you thought you caught beat its wings and flew away”], indicating her acute awareness of her actions and not so subtly foreshadowing her taunting behaviours toward men. Carmen’s “Habanera” provides a clear picture that from the outset, she brands herself as tantalizingly rebellious and untameable, an identity which sets up her coming actions in the opera.

This text is Carmen’s introduction to the audience, and its content is unusually intimate in its warnings of falling in love with her (and its foreshadowing of the consequences). Perhaps the most striking indicators of her strong personality are the verbs she associates with her own actions (underlined above). When she refers to herself, the corresponding action is one of desire in her own favour: I prefer, I love, I love, I love. This is particularly impactful as she is expressing her autonomy to make decisions about her body, and even goes so far as to imply that her emotions are irrespective of whomever she is pursuing (“If you don’t love me, I’ll love you, if I love you, you’d better watch out!”). Carmen’s willingness to unabashedly address her desires in public already plants her in the camp of being a headstrong rival to traditional femininity.

The repetition and insistence that “if I love you, you’d better watch out” (bold and italicized above) is also of note in Carmen’s lyrics. Here she is implying that her love comes at a certain price, though it is not clear at the outset of the opera what exactly that price will be. Knowing the elements of foreshadowing present in the phrase “better watch out,” by acknowledging its repetition throughout the “Habanera,” we can extrapolate that Carmen is being purposefully touted – by her own admission or otherwise – as a force to be reckoned with.

“Prends garde à toi” is repeated sixteen times over the course of the aria, whether being sung by her or repeated back by the male chorus. Carmen is aware that her presence is dangerous for the men in the opera, and though they understand the message she is sending, she is ultimately setting up an atmosphere within which to employ the sexual weapons at her disposal.

Because Bizet anticipated that the actions and libretto he wrote for Carmen would be an issue for audiences at the Opéra-Comique, Bizet instructed Halévy to write in a character to counterbalance his notorious female lead: Micaëla. This character did not exist in Mérimée’s *Carmen* aside from one passing mention of an additional female character, but rather was written into the opera as a foil in order to offset the sexually explicit main character. Micaëla was written to speak and act like the bourgeois standards of an exemplary woman; this made her no threat to the male characters in the opera.⁴² With Don José and Micaëla both hailing from Northern Spain and Carmen from Andalusia in Southern Spain, Bizet created an ‘internal other’ within the opera. Ralph Locke points out that this is an emphasis on racial disparity and incompatibility, adding an additional layer of separation between the characters and audience, while further othering Carmen.⁴³ Micaëla is thus more relatable as a character and she reinforces the dichotomy between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ female characters in the opera. Because of this, Bizet uses Micaëla as a dramatic device by which the audience understands exactly how far from grace Don José falls at the hands of Carmen. Halévy’s assumption was, correctly, that French audiences would be more open to the idea of having such a vocally and physically provocative main character should there be a visible juxtaposition between her and Micaëla, the pinnacle of female righteousness, in the opera.⁴⁴

⁴² Susan McClary, *Reading Music: Selected Essays* (United Kingdom: Routledge Publishing, 2017), 156.

⁴³ Locke, *Exoticism*, 162.

⁴⁴ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* (California: University of California Press, 1989), 280.

Let us make a brief comparison between Micaëla and Carmen's respective first lines of dialogue. In Act I Scene I, Micaëla is being eyed by the approaching soldiers and questioned by Moralès about whom she is searching for. Her first spoken line in the opera is as follows: "Moi, je cherche un brigadier" ["Me, I'm looking for a brigadier"]. It is revealed in the following lines that the object of her affection is Don José for whom Micaëla is waiting patiently. In contrast, the first line sung by Carmen does not come until Act I Scene IV, where right at the end of the scene she responds to frenzied cries from the soldiers outside the cigar factory questioning when she will love them: "Quand je vous aimerai? Ma foi, je ne sais pas" ["When will I love you? Well, I do not know"]. The intentions of these two female characters come from starkly different perspectives: Micaëla is reserved and patient, while Carmen introduces herself as more of a playfully cunning character who uses her words to tease with the men of Seville rather than making explicit reference to whom she intends to be romantically involved. Her line about the timeliness of her love is actually doubly important because of its playfully crafted cadential statement (addressed in deeper detail in Chapter 2), as the power in her words is amplified by the coy interplay between the orchestra and the vocal line leading into the "Habanera."

During Carmen's first appearance on stage, she is exiting the cigarette factory amidst catcalls from the surrounding men – "La voilà! Voilà la Carmencita!" – who very quickly begin making advances and demanding she reveal on what day she will love them. Before she even enters the scene, the duality of the two names she is called by the men ("Carmen" and "La Carmencita") evoke two very different characters. The addition of "ita" on the end of words is a linguistic process called affective derivation. In Spanish, the ito/ita suffix is diminutive, often referring to making something "little" and "nice."⁴⁵ The nickname of 'la Carmencita' suggests a

⁴⁵ Ralph Penny, *A History of the Spanish Language* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 294.

playfulness in how the men are referring to her, as though she is the toy they are playing with. It is with great purpose that Bizet presents Carmen with this duality, as she is able to successfully manipulate those around her despite their colloquial interactions with her.⁴⁶ In recognizing this, Carmen's use of language can be seen as a powerful weapon which she uses freely in the warfare of desire rampant throughout the opera.

Aside from the actual libretto, we can also look at the titles of the musical numbers in which Carmen is the soloist. Susan McClary points out that the titles of two of her principal numbers make specific reference to the type of dances that they represent: "Habanera" and "Seguidilla."⁴⁷ While not readily apparent to the average listener, the fact that Bizet has made this specification has a double meaning: the dance terminology enhances the physicality of the musical numbers, and the fact that this music is diegetic, with Carmen dancing along, ultimately reinforces that she is aware of the physical impulses implied by the tunes.

The very essence of *Carmen* can be distilled differently depending on the lens the audience chooses to interpret it through. In fact, the protagonist/antagonist understanding of the character structure can very well shift depending on the scene and the tone of voice by which the lines are delivered. When interpreting Carmen as the protagonist, the opera's conflict can be largely centered on various interpersonal struggles with other characters getting in the way of her romantic satisfaction. Thus, the opera's conclusion will be a tragic twist with the hero being undone by the villain. On the other hand, if Carmen is viewed as the antagonist, as was the case in the early reception history of the opera, the story becomes a cautionary tale for men about avoiding the sensuous advances of women with little virtue. Given that *Carmen* has such a

⁴⁶ Arthur Gross and Roger Parker, eds., *Reading Opera* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 181.

⁴⁷ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 57.

versatile moral message, it is of no surprise that the opera has been restaged so many times to reflect societal evolution and female empowerment.⁴⁸

Carmen's control over others comes as a partial result of her flippantly tantalizing attitude. Toward the end of Act I, as she is convincing Don José to undo the binds around her wrists and adopt a lifestyle of freedom and debauchery, the two exchange the following dialogue:

[Original text followed by English translation⁴⁹]

Don José:

Carmen, je suis comme un homme ivre,
Si je cede, si je me libre, ta promesse, tu
La tiendras ah! Si je t'aime, Carmen,
tu'm'aimeras?
Chez Lillas Pastia, tu le promets!
Carmen, tu le promets!

Carmen, I am like a drunk man,
If I free you, and I give in, will you keep
your promise?
If I love you, Carmen, will you love me?
You promised we'll meet at Lillas
Pastia's!
Keep your promise, Carmen!

Carmen:

Près des remparts de Séville,
Chez mon ami Lillas Pastia,
Nous danserons la seguidilla
Et boirons du Manzanilla
Tra la la la la la la la la
Tra la la la la la la la la la

Near the walls of Seville,
At my friend Lillas Pastia's,
We will dance the seguidilla
And drink the Manzanilla
Tra la la la la la la la
Tra la la la la la la la

Within this exchange, it becomes clear that Don José is wholly ensnared by the words of his potential lover as she dangles a tantalizing lure before him in the form of an honest promise. This is a logical chain of events, as Carmen has once again used her words to convince Don José that

⁴⁸ Ann Davies and Phil Powrie's book *Carmen on Screen: an Annotated Filmography and Bibliography* provides an annotated bibliography of the approximately eighty adaptations of *Carmen* since the start of the twentieth century. Ann Davies has also partnered with Christopher Perriam in *Carmen: From Silent Film to MTV* to curate a more in-depth study of specific restagings of the story, including the 2001 "Hip-opera" starring Beyoncé Knowles, and parodied by Charlie Chaplin in 1916 in his *Burlesque on Carmen*. Joseph Gai Ramaka's Senegalese staging entitled *Karmen Gei* portrays Karmen as a bisexual African libertine, and a main character whose struggles are different yet parallel to Bizet's *Carmen*.

⁴⁹ Fisher, *Carmen*, 21.

doing what she asks of him will end in their sexual union, by alluding to dancing sensually while being under the influence. The objective word in Don José's comments above is 'promise': given the history and prior understanding of Carmen's personality, the audience would at this point be aware that there is no eventuality in which she would willingly commit herself to one man without having ulterior motives. In this scene, the audience is also cognizant that this manipulative tactic is expressly for her own personal gain. In the sexual warfare of *Carmen*, her deployment of the word 'promise' in this exchange has hit its intended mark. It is as though Don José is a sort of hostage to her intentions, which is richly ironic since Carmen is literally bound at the wrists by cords during this exchange.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of Carmen's self-awareness comes from the dichotomy between the last line of her stanza and the last line in Don José's: while he is insisting on upholding promises, she further taunts him with an offhand "tra la la". This flippant vocalization has roots in exoticism and emphasizing 'otherness,' as French operas of the nineteenth century frequently employed the cliché of "alien birdsong," or an operatic exchange wherein female characters will sing entire vocal lines which don't consist of words, but rather just elongated syllables.⁵⁰ The purpose of this was to enforce the physicality within the words, as the absence of communicable language takes the focus off of what the character has to say, and instead re-centers it on the physical labours embodied by the character in order to create the sound. Abbate refers to this concept as "carnal stereophony," and it is indicative of how closely linked her physical movements are to the vocal sounds she produces.⁵¹ The concept of alien birdsong thus holds true for the relationship between her and Don José: he cannot take his eyes off her while

⁵⁰ Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 171.

⁵¹ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (United States, Princeton University Press: 1996), 11.

she is singing despite the fact that she is effectively mocking his sincerity. Carmen's offhand use of "tra la la" in lieu of singing actual words in response to Don José is also indicative of another facet of her character profile. While undeniably rooted in exoticism, her lack of verbal response to Don José's statements comes across as willfully mocking, as though she hears his sentiments but is unwilling to dignify them with a response.

Knowing that Carmen's word choices are intentionally provocative, it is worth addressing the exchange between her and Don José in the final moments of her life, right before she is slain by her scorned former lover (original text and English translation below). During their final exchange, her tone of voice remains steadfast and strong, purposefully pushing Don José's buttons and further angering him by refusing his romantic insistence despite her predicament. The end of the opera presents the audience with their final quarrel, as Carmen refuses to commit herself to Don José and intends to abandon him in pursuance of a romantic relationship with famed toreador Escamillo instead.

Don José: Non, par le sang, tu n'iras pas!

Carmen: Non! Non! Jamais!

Don José: Je suis las de te menacer!

Carmen: Eh bien! Frappe-moi donc, ou laisse-moi passer!

Don José: Pour la dernière fois, démon, veux-tu me suivre?

Carmen: Non! Non! Cette bague autrefois, tu me l'avais donnée, tiens!

Don José: Eh bien, damnée!

[English translation⁵²]

Don José: No, by my blood, you shall not go! Carmen, you're coming with me!

Carmen: No! No! Never!

Don José: I'm tired of threatening you!

⁵² Fisher, *Carmen*, 59.

Carmen: All right, stab me then or let me pass!

Don José: For the last time, you devil, will you come with me?

Carmen: No, no! This ring that you once gave to me – Here, take it!

Don José: All right, damn you!

Even in her final moments, we can observe Carmen's unwillingness to go down without a (verbal) fight. Though initial audiences of the opera once considered this scene to be vindication for her preceding hours of insolence, her aggressive tone still solidifies her character as one who is unapologetically violent in her approach to communication. Within this excerpt of dialogue, Carmen utters only three verbs: stab, pass, and take. The first two, in a dramatic juxtaposition, offer up a purposeful ultimatum to Don José. As much of the opera shows Carmen luring him in through various means, her ultimatum to Don José is set up to test the boundaries of his affection, as she boldly asserts that she would rather die than be tied to him. Under this assumption, Carmen believes that if he truly loves her as much as he claims, there is no way he would actively choose to end her life. From looking at Don José's portion of the dialogue, he gives her multiple opportunities to change her mind. He expresses that he is going through emotional turmoil – "I'm tired of threatening you!" – because the idea of murdering his lover is deeply unappealing given their tumultuously romantic history together. Even though she is being actively threatened by Don José, the line "stab me then or let me pass" can be interpreted as a daring phrase, designed to verbally joust with him and, in a roundabout way, taunt him for not acting as enough of a man to go through with stabbing her. Bizet has also, in a rather morbidly humorous way, punctuated this exchange with cheers and applause coming from the offstage bullring where Escamillo is fighting throughout the scene. The chorus erupts into a raucous cheer of "victory!" immediately following Carmen's do-or-die question to Don José, leading the

audience to react emotionally according to which character in the opera they view as the protagonist at this point. Carmen's tactical ultimatum of course ends up being futile in terms of keeping her alive, but the fact that she recognizes and uses the power of her words in such a specifically cunning way shows her unwavering strength in the face of adversity.

Chapter 3

Music as Weapon

Prior to the twentieth century, operatic roles were often generically cultivated in relation to the voice type they were written for. Let us begin with Carmen herself: a mezzo-soprano. The mezzo-soprano is often associated with intrigue, tragedy, and “evil intention,” and Carmen ticks all of those negative boxes.⁵³ Generally accepted that she is scored for a dramatic mezzo-soprano, she is sultry and requires impeccable pitch control to contend with all the chromaticisms Bizet has thrown her way. One can imagine that the sultriness we associate with Carmen would not be nearly as impactful if she were sung by a lyric soprano; the depth and darker colour of the voice would simply not be there.

The mezzo-soprano has also been associated with the more ‘masculine’ side of female characters,⁵⁴ in that they are often representative of resistance and treason: two traits which are quite representative of Carmen and how she uses her music to ensnare lovers.⁵⁵ Catherine Clément notes that while voice type categorization is not foolproof, we are able to confidently make these generalizations based on the historical consistency of associations between character traits and voice types.⁵⁶ If we examine the characters in *Carmen* through this lens, we can piece

⁵³ Richard Miller, *Training Soprano Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

⁵⁴ Helen Greenwald explains that the trend in the nineteenth century also moved toward the exaggerated juxtaposition between vocal ranges, meaning a shift away from lover characters having a similar timbral blend. Having an androgynous mezzo-soprano singing heroic roles had begun to fall out of fashion in the early nineteenth century, with a decrease in castrati voices acting as heroic characters.

⁵⁵ Mary Ann Smart, ed., *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

together a logically generic understanding of the characters and their motivations separate from the specifics of the libretto.

Let us briefly examine the other voice types Bizet chooses for his major characters. Don José, the sergeant who falls prey to Carmen's seductive ways, is scored for a tenor. The advent of the 'heroic tenor' in opera was a relatively new musical phenomenon in the early nineteenth century, and this role was instrumental in developing the quintessential 'heroic' persona. This character was often a hopeless romantic whose female lover – usually a lyric soprano – finds herself dead by the end of the many tragic operas.⁵⁷ The tenor character is generally bursting with courage, and most notably, is almost always involved in a relationship which is dangerous to his image. Roles scored for tenor voices also tend to have a rebellious streak, which Don José exhibits through his forbidden love and his opposition to the Spanish army.⁵⁸ Carmen does not fall into the category of being worthy (by nineteenth-century standards) of Don José, and as such she is forbidden from him for unvarnished racial reasons, being that she is a 'free woman' descended from elsewhere. Catherine Clément describes this as a celebration of "prohibited feelings;" their love is by no means textbook, but there is a hint of subversion of social order in that Bizet teases the possibility of their union throughout the opera – murder notwithstanding, of course.

Famed toreador Escamillo is scored for a baritone voice. His character has a large, commanding personality, as he is somewhat of a Sevillian celebrity, and he also becomes deeply infatuated with Carmen. Though he does not feature at all in Act I of the opera, his character's existence is instrumental in driving the plot toward its final murderous goal. The baritone is stereotypically a more mature character with the potential to have opposing viewpoints. Often a

⁵⁷ André, *Voicing Gender*, 171.

⁵⁸ Smart, *Siren Songs*, 22.

violent character, the baritone voice is known to make mature decisions based on scenarios which they have meticulously calculated ahead of time.⁵⁹ Victoria Johnson notes that the writing of multiple romantic couples in opera had been falling out of fashion in the early nineteenth century, and that composers were instead turning to the ‘love triangle’ approach, with two female and one male voice as the main characters.⁶⁰ While the main male voice was normally a tenor, occasionally a baritone would be added in for intrigue despite his personality making him an imperfect match for the female lead.⁶¹

The last of the more prominent characters in *Carmen* is Micaëla, scored for a lyric soprano, who is betrothed to Don José at the outset of the opera. She is very much a picture of the helpless soprano who lives her life more purely than Carmen, and her arias offer much more in terms of diatonicism and harmonic logic than her counterpart. Naomi André outlines the standard plot arc for the high soprano character as follows:

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the era of Verdi’s *Violetta* through Puccini’s *Tosca*, the sound of the high soprano voice came to be equated with the suffering heroine. Though she loved the tenor hero and he loved her, there inevitably was some situation or person that prevented their ultimate union.⁶²

Because Micaëla has a much smaller role than Carmen, the audience does not perceive her as the treble voice who is resigned to death. The audience therefore does not experience the same desire for her to end up with Don José romantically, despite the twist on the soprano’s expected suffering and her survival throughout the opera. However, Bizet has upset any expectations of a happy ending, as he has emotionally tormented Don José to the point that his character is

⁵⁹ Smart, *Siren Songs*, 23.

⁶⁰ Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher, Thomas Ertman, eds., *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 93.

⁶¹ Johnson, *Opera and Society*, 93.

⁶² André, *Voicing Gender*, 171.

fundamentally different by the end of the opera and no longer desires Micaëla as a romantic partner.

Carmen's provocatively boisterous demeanor comes through pointedly in her music. Her character is caught in the paradox of being both loved and hated, as she drains others emotionally despite her own disinterest in romantic stability. Her music within the opera has been criticized in its early reception for having obtrusively strong harmonies and overwhelming chromaticisms, though upon further analysis they never deviate too far from the original tonal center. Because of this, harmonic analyses of *Carmen* have been overlooked because of their straightforward harmonic structures.⁶³ In analyzing the music of *Carmen*, the abundance of overwhelmingly logical harmonic structures begs the question: why has an opera lacking in deeper analytical interest become a pillar of the scholarly opera canon? The answer lies in various melodic structures representative of the different characters, as well as the social contexts in which the opera is being performed. Notably, one of the most famous arias to come from *Carmen* is the "Habanera," wherein Carmen is willfully toying with the hearts of the young men outside of the cigar factory. While superficially quite simplistic in terms of harmonic structure, the "Habanera" has managed to remain one of the most famous arias in operatic history.

Though I will explore this in deeper detail in Chapter 4, one would be remiss to not make note of the rampant exoticism and sense of 'otherness' that saturates the compositional fabric of *Carmen*. Part of the character of Carmen's unorthodox appeal stems from her construction of Spain as an 'exotic' location. Even Bizet's score for the "Habanera" is starred with an asterisk which reads "imitated from a Spanish song" (Figure 1), explicitly outlining the forthcoming appropriation. Part of the timelessness of *Carmen* is that her sense of 'otherness' is transcendent:

⁶³ McClary, "Paradigm Dissonances", 72.

it can be in reference to the adversities of any non-white or non-male group, as the broadest examples, depending on the context of the staging.⁶⁴



Figure 1: The cello and bass lines in the opening eight bars of Carmen's "Habanera."

The opera is set in Spain around the 1830s, and Carmen is written as a Gypsy character with Andalusian roots, putting *Carmen* in the unique position of combining three separate aspects of cultural appropriation. Bizet had never actually been to Spain before embarking on the compositional process for *Carmen*, which makes his interpretation of Spanish music even further removed from the culture he was emulating. Having no solid knowledge of Spanish music, the extent of direct Spanish musical influence in the opera is quite limited: the habanera rhythm in the musical number of the same name, and the prelude to Act IV wherein Bizet borrows from a *polo* (flamenco style form with four octosyllabic verses) by Manuel García, a Spanish tenor.⁶⁵

During Act I, the workers are on a break at the cigar factory, and Carmen takes the opportunity to use music as a tool of provocation in conjunction with her seductive dancing. Spain in the nineteenth century saw a dramatic increase in women working in cigar factories, earning them the nickname of *cigarrera*. The *cigarrera* eventually became a symbol of Spanish art and literature, as a direct result of the success of *Carmen* and its cultural influence.⁶⁶

Cigarreras were often women from lower-class upbringings in Madrid who were considered conventionally attractive, and part of their notoriety came from their generally provocative style

⁶⁵ Rose, *Fifteen Masterpieces*, 215.

⁶⁶ Janet Pérez and Maureen Ihrle, *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Spanish Literature: A-M* (California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 136.

of dress. The other major aspect of the *cigarrera* archetype is her irresistibility to men. In *Carmen*, setting the scene before the Habanera aria involves having the cigarette-girls file out of the factory to an audience of men, whereas in real life that situation would have been much less dignified and far more fraught with harassment.

The image shows a page of a musical score for Bizet's *Carmen*. At the top, it is marked "Allegro moderato, ♩ = 92". The score is arranged in systems for various instruments: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Clar.), Bassoon (Bns.), Horns, Trumpet (Trump.), Violins, and Cello/Double Bass. The key signature has two flats. A red box highlights the text "(Entrance of Carmen)" in the Cello/Double Bass part. The lyrics "ci-ta!" are visible at the bottom of the score.

Figure 2: The descending sixteenth-note pattern in the high strings marks the foreshadowing of Carmen entering the scene.

Bizet purposefully pre-empts Carmen's entrance before the start of her aria, foreshadowing melodic themes which will feature in later numbers. However, as shown in Figure 2, the markedly dramatic shift between the playful teasing of the men and Carmen's

appearance on the stage features an ominous ambiance of diminished chords. The repeated *ff* descending pattern is also of note, as it foreshadows a descent into the destruction and chaos Carmen is soon to bring upon Seville. There is then a certain ironic playfulness in the way she delivers her lines prior to this moment, as she is toying with the emotions of the men while they wait with baited breath for her answer about when she will love them. Figure 3 shows Carmen’s playful maneuvers through different harmonies as she is denying the men an answer to their questions.

The image shows a musical score for Carmen's vocal line. It includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The score is marked with 'a tempo' and 'colla voce'. The vocal line is marked 'mf quasi recitativo' and 'p'. The piano accompaniment is marked 'mf' and 'pp'. The lyrics are: 'Quand je vous ai-me-rai ? ma foi je ne sais pas... Peut-ê - tre ja-mais !... peut-ê - tre de- rain !...'. The score also includes markings for 'arco' and 'colla voce'.

Figure 3: Carmen’s vocal line while she is teasing the men about when she will love them.

Measure 1 of Figure 3 begins in F minor, moving to an Ab7, to Bb minor on the word “jamais”, and quite jarringly a Bb major chord on the second “peut-être.” This momentary shift to a major triad incites a fleeting feeling of hope, which is quickly dismantled after the final cadential resolution of the scene – and a sideways glance at Don José – when she asserts “Mais pas aujourd’hui...c’est certain” [“But not today...that is for sure”] atop staccato accompaniment in D minor. This sense of harmonic freedom is meant to highlight the ‘exotic’ nature of Carmen’s singing by not following expected tonality, and as such disrupts the normative expectations of audiences. With the combination of her coy glance, teasing lyrics, and tongue-in-

cheek placement of the final chord, Carmen sends the message that she is perfectly comfortable with using every weapon at her disposal to make all the men susceptible to her ideations.

The word “habanera” itself translates to “woman from Havana,” which further emphasizes Bizet’s misappropriation and ‘othering’ of Carmen’s cultural identity, as the habanera rhythm has roots in traditional Cuban dance. Thought to have originated in Cuba in the late 1700s as an embellishment on African triplet rhythms, the habanera is essentially the cross-rhythm created when adding a duplet underneath a triplet in a 6/8 measure.⁶⁷ The rhythm was appropriated and ultimately exported back to Spain by sailors in the early 1800s, where it soon spread throughout Europe, though now notated in 2/4 so the cross-rhythms were not as easily recognizable. Recalling Figure 1, it is apparent that Bizet is aware of the habanera’s existence in Spain, and one can speculate that he was simply trawling for a musical outlet through which to further exoticize Carmen, and in doing so, reached for a dance style that was accessible to audiences while still maintaining the idea of otherness. According to Locke, it has been established that Bizet’s Spanish-inspired numbers were actually modeled on specific performance traditions, even if he did not personally experience them.⁶⁸

From the onset of the aria, the habanera rhythm is only presented in the cellos, and this allows Carmen’s chromatic melody to cut across the texture with ease. Throughout the entire aria, there are only three measures wherein the habanera rhythm is absent. While the dance genre includes characteristic shifts from major to minor, its driving force was historically the rhythm, meaning that even though evocative of a sense of exoticism, the languid chromaticisms presented in Carmen’s aria were uncharacteristic of the genre. Because her character is painted as a scandalous, sexually manipulative woman, it is fitting that the vast majority of Carmen’s phrases

⁶⁷ Jose Rosa, *World Music Survey* (North Carolina: Lulu.com Publishing, 2018), 26.

⁶⁸ Locke, *Exoticism*, 161.

contain heart-wrenching chromaticisms which toy with Don José – and ultimately the listener – in terms of expected phrase endings.

The image shows a musical score for the opening phrase of the "Habanera" from Bizet's *Carmen*. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system includes the vocal line for Carmen, the cellos, and the basses. Carmen's vocal line starts with a pickup of two eighth notes followed by a triplet of eighth notes in the second bar, which is highlighted with a red box. The lyrics under this triplet are "L'amour est un oi seau re-bel-le". The cellos and basses play a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The second system includes the vocal line for C and the cellos/basses. C's vocal line starts with a triplet of eighth notes in the first bar, highlighted with a red box. The lyrics are "bien en vain qu'on l'ap-pelle, s'il lui con-vient de re-fu-ser." The cellos and basses continue their accompaniment. The third system includes the vocal line for C and the cellos/basses. C's vocal line continues with a triplet of eighth notes in the second bar, highlighted with a red box, and another triplet in the fourth bar, also highlighted with a red box. The lyrics are "Rien n'y fait, menace ou pri-e-re, L'un par-le bien, l'au-tre se". The cellos and basses continue their accompaniment. The score includes markings such as "pp possibile" for the cellos and basses, and "portando la voce" for C's vocal line.

Figure 4: The opening phrase of the “Habanera,” with boxes around the triples emphasizing modal ambiguity in the vocal line.

Even within the opening phrase (Figure 4), it is clear that the part Carmen sings is not meant to be the beautiful lilting melody one often associates with a main female character, but rather one which snakes around its harmonic realm via a series of sultry descending chromatic passages. The way that the vocal entry is set up in these opening passages indicates Bizet’s painting of Carmen as a purposeful temptress: the cellos set up three and a half bars of D minor, followed by a pickup of two eighth notes in the vocal line. This implies, then, that the vocal line is either offset from the orchestral accompaniment by a beat, or Bizet is compelling the listener to hear the downbeat of bar 4 as the beginning of the phrase, which would mean the phrase begins with a triplet. Looking again at Figure 4, one can see that the triplets were deliberately placed on the downbeat of every second bar, whether they are eighth or sixteenth-note triplets. This is significant because beginning in bar 5, the eighth-note triples are all on a C natural, which

is the flattened scale degree 7 of the opening key of D minor. Instead of using this note as a passing tone, Bizet instead dwells on it for half the bar. The B naturals following it are then heard not necessarily as non-chord tones, but rather entice the listener into a modal ambiguity regarding which D-based scale the melody will end up. This melody is set up to entice Don José, as Carmen playfully upsets the expectations that her phrases will be rhythmically and harmonically logical; even in the sixth bar of Figure 4, the rhythm of the word “re-bel-le” showcases an ever-so slight difference in rhythm from the preceding triplet. Perhaps this is some coy humour about conformity to rhythmic expectations, as she is singing about being a rebellious bird who cannot be tamed!

The portando in this example is also noteworthy, as depending on a given performer’s interpretation, it can be – and usually is – performed quite seductively. Throughout the aria, they occur either between octave leaps or leaps of a minor seventh, which tend to be linking figures between individual passages. These come across as dramatic gestures, because the majority of the aria’s contour remains within the span of a ninth, and much of it moves in stepwise motion, especially within the chromatic passages. Proving Carmen’s capability to manipulate any person she sees fit, she essentially uses these portandi to tease the listener as well as other characters, as they mirror her unpredictable personality.

After Carmen finishes her first verse, the chorus of *cigarreras* and soldiers are heard for the first time. While she reinforces the theme of her aria (l’amour, l’amour, l’amour, l’amour), she is supported by a chorus underneath her singing the exact words in the pitches and rhythms from the beginning of the aria. The biggest difference, however, is that the modal ambiguity of earlier bars is resolved with the inclusion of scale degrees 3-2-1 in accordance with Carmen’s statement about her attractions (boxed in Figure 5). Here, Bizet has cleverly withheld the F# until

the second beat of the modulation (circled) – even in the upper winds and strings – so that the listener is tricked into thinking that once again the phrase has resolved to D minor as it had previously. Instead, not only has the tonal quality shifted, but the chorus parts enter on the same

The image shows a musical score for the ending of Carmen's first phrase. It consists of three staves: Soprani, Chorus Tenors, and Bass. The Soprani staff has a red box around the second beat of the modulation, which is circled in green. The Chorus Tenors and Bass staves also have green circles around the second beat of the modulation. A blue bracket under the Bass staff indicates the modulation from D- to D+.

Figure 5: The ending of Carmen's first phrase, leading to the unexpected modulation from D- to D+ when the chorus enters.

beat that the F#s are introduced, making the shift into this section even more unexpected.

A major aspect of what makes Carmen so appealing now, and comparatively so threatening at the opera's inception, is the obviousness of her influence over men, and control over her own body. While she sings salaciously seductive chromaticisms, Don José conversely adheres to expected tonal practices associated with moral righteousness, making him the perfect character to draw sympathy from the audience. As Susan McClary describes it, it is "his fate that hangs in the balance between the Good Woman and the Bad."⁶⁹ As one of the major male roles in the opera, audiences were quick to identify with him as a morally upstanding character, and were initially rooting for him to remain true to his fiancée, Micaëla. Though he often sings on themes of a sexual nature (for example, the "Flower Song" references his fantasies about Carmen), his character is still thought to be at Carmen's mercy as a result of her manipulative and highly sexualized ways. Thus, when Carmen dies at the end of the opera, the moral compass in Seville is reset; 'good' has triumphed over 'bad,' albeit in misogynistic terms.

⁶⁹ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 58.

Musically, the end of the “Habanera” presents some interesting moments (Figure 6).

Whenever the male chorus enters with their interjections, they express some of the only instances of a forte dynamic. This could be indicative of the male characters knowingly reinforcing Carmen’s warning to beware of her advances, as if they had possibly experienced her ways in the past, or simply that their opinions are more important and therefore need to be louder. This creates a dramatic dynamic difference compared to her quiet crooning about a choice of lover, which makes the punctuating by warning shouts from the male chorus even more effective at conveying their desired message. In the penultimate bar of the aria, we see the third instance of Bizet purposefully omitting the habanera rhythm from the cello. Because of this, the word emphasized with a fermata is much clearer: “beware”. The aria then concludes very suddenly, with no outro, and virtually every instrument playing some form of the V-I cadence. Depending on how long the fermata in the preceding bar is held, it almost seems as though the “beware” will have a longer duration than the entire cadence which succeeds it, highlighting the ominous undertones of the text.

The image displays a musical score for the end of the "Habanera" aria. It features five staves: three for Violins (top), one for Cello (middle), and one for Bass (bottom). The Violin parts are marked with "arco" and "pizz." (pizzicato) and include dynamic markings like "pp" and "cresc.". The Cello part is marked with "cresc." and "pizz." in the penultimate bar. The Bass part is marked with "pizz." and "arco". The male chorus part is written in a separate staff with lyrics: "t'ai-me : Mais si je t'ai-me ; Si je t'aime, prends garde à toi !". The lyrics are repeated in the Cello and Bass parts. Three red boxes highlight the male chorus's interjections: the first in the first bar, the second in the second bar, and the third in the penultimate bar. A blue box highlights the cello's pizzicato in the penultimate bar. The score concludes with a fermata over the final note of the male chorus's interjection.

Figure 6: The end of the “Habanera,” showing instances of the male chorus at a louder dynamic, and the cellos halting the habanera rhythm in the penultimate bar of the aria.

Part of the memorability that comes along with the “Habanera” is Bizet’s clever manipulation of lyric urgency within his characters. Carl Dahlhaus asserts that were it not for the “Flower Song” from Don José to Carmen, the opera itself would collapse from sheer lack of lyricism and passionately romantic singing – ‘romantic’ here meaning something quite different than how Carmen interprets it.⁷⁰ A master of emotional manipulation, we see her essentially stunted by her inability to produce melodic content with a genuine level of lyric urgency, instead choosing to slither ambiguously through tonal realms. Though she exhibits moments of passionate lyricism in her final duet with Don José, audiences are left wondering if the moments are simply superficial mimicry of her captor.

⁷⁰ Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 280.

Chapter 4

Body as Weapon

The way in which Carmen makes use of her movements and actions throughout the opera sets her apart as a sexually aggressive female lead. Knowing that her character is inherently sexual, we can further investigate the extent to which she knowingly utilizes her body as means to achieve her ends with the men in the opera. Part of the sexuality Carmen exudes stems from her existence as a Gypsy woman, which itself carries racial undertones that I will be addressing in this chapter. The social climate in France at the time of *Carmen*'s premiere also played a definite role in determining how the main character would be interpreted by the public, and indicated why her actions, when separated from her words and music, were particularly impactful. Despite what would now be characterized as racial fetishization, Bizet has written Carmen to be a character who is acutely aware of the effect she has on others, and how she is unafraid to use her body and actions in ways that not only acknowledge, but rather emphasize her sense of disruptive sexuality.

Fetishization of the 'Orient' during the Enlightenment emerged from a need for an outlet for artists to escape the bonds of traditional Romanticism.⁷¹ There are several layers to unpack regarding the exoticism written into Carmen's character, however the discourse surrounding these topics are broad and complex, and ultimately go beyond the scope of this project.⁷² Bearing

⁷¹ José F. Colmeiro, "Exorcising Exoticism: *Carmen* and the Construction of Oriental Spain", *Comparative Literature* 54, no. 2 (2002): 128.

⁷² Edward Said's 1978 publication *Orientalism* brought to light the Western practice of creating archetypal characters in art and literature based off imperialist biases. Despite the limitations of his work, *Orientalism* began a difficult conversation surrounding the Euro-centric interpretation of other cultures, and Said has since re-released an afterword to his original text in order to update the discourse.

this in mind, Bizet's choices become slightly more pointed, in that he has effectively created a character with multiple channels through which to emphasize her otherness.

Even with Spain being close in proximity to France, Seville was a peculiar but poignant choice for Bizet as the setting for *Carmen*. With the opera written from a French perspective, setting it in Spain was far enough to be considered 'exotic,' but not so far that the events would be unimaginable. Ralph Locke sums this concept up quite succinctly: "Opera's eternally sought Elsewhere was often simply Nowhere, or else – like it or not – Here."⁷³ Sevillians were still othered as unfamiliar people, but because Spanish is decidedly similar to many other of the Romance languages, it therefore served as a vehicle through which to project societal anxieties surrounding modernity and cultural differences.⁷⁴ The concept of a Spanish Andalusian Gypsy therefore presents all the necessary factors to create an idyllic character who is both alike and unlike initial audiences of *Carmen*. Located in southern Spain, Andalusia is an autonomous community whose capital is Seville. Setting *Carmen* here allowed for twofold othering of the main character by means of having her not only be Spanish but removed further still within that designation. Spanish culture has a richly sensual history, and Bizet's exacerbation of these stereotypes is therefore effective, if problematic by modern standards.

Writing music in a Spanish style was not unique to Bizet; historical appropriations of the bolero style had been infused into the Opéra-Comique since well before the 1850s.⁷⁵ Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz explain that by the time of Mérimée's publication of *Carmen*, French culture was already saturated with a romanticized fascination for Spanish art and cultural influence. Throughout the opera, Carmen sings a total of five numbers which are set

⁷³ Locke, *Exoticism*, 154.

⁷⁴ Colmeiro, *Exorcising Exoticism*, 130.

⁷⁵ Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz, *Carmen and the Staging of Spain: Recasting Bizet's Opera in the Belle Epoque* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

in Spanish styles: “Habanera,” “Tra la la; coupe-moi, brûle-moi,” “Séguedille,” “Chanson Bohème,” and the “castanet song.” Interestingly, all of these numbers take place early in the opera, and serve to effectively set the tone for the rest of the work.⁷⁶ Although the bolero was originally used to portray a visual array of ‘exotic’ dance moves, it became common practice for composers to write entire arias in bolero style because of its operatic popularity as opposed to its strictly dance-based roots.⁷⁷ Though operatic incorporations of Spanish dances were slightly less popular by the time of *Carmen*’s premiere, Bizet’s re-appropriation allowed audiences to experience the exoticization of his main character’s body movements as well as her actual musical content.

With *Carmen* effectively being a product of French Romanticism, the Spanish were understandably unenthused about the prospect of having her be representative of Spaniards— and more specifically Andalusians – on the world stage. Elizabeth Nash, in her research on the cultural history of Southern Spain, explains that *Carmen* did not become widely popular in Spain until the opera was re-saturated in real Spanish culture in the late twentieth century, when it was restaged in a flamenco style.⁷⁸ In re-appropriating the opera, *Carmen* was able to become an iconic character of Spanish descent, instead of the approximation of one concocted by a male French composer.

Bizet’s creation of *Carmen* as a physical manifestation of ‘otherness’ and exoticism superficially includes the way she moves her body to the music. Music which was ‘exotic’ by nature was often considered ‘underdeveloped’ and essentially less ‘complex’ than its Western

⁷⁶ Locke, *Exoticism*, 168.

⁷⁷ Sean M. Parr, “Dance and the Female Singer in Second Empire Opera”, *19th-Century Music* 36, No. 2 (2012), 109.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Nash, *Seville, Cordoba, and Granada: A Cultural History* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2005), 114.

counterparts, with many inaccurate assertions that intricate harmonic processes were one of the “unique accomplishments of the West.”⁷⁹ The idea that less ‘complex’ music was somehow inherently non-Western paved the way for yet another avenue of exoticism: namely, the notion that the harmonic simplicity provided a nearly blank musical slate on which a sense of sensuality could be adequately understood by listeners. As a commentary on the immorality of non-Western musical culture, there was a belief that if blatant sensuality were to be infused with more complex harmonic structures, it would require too much mental effort to adequately comprehend the logical music in conjunction with the illogical sexual material.⁸⁰ A key tenet present in Orientalist music was that its rhythms were designed to incite movement and engage the traditional movements of exotic dance.⁸¹ As Susan McClary very aptly observes: “Carmen attracts José and the audience because of her easy relationship with her body, but she instills dread for the same reason.”⁸² This observation actually wields a significant amount of power: a female character with bodily autonomy and conscious understanding of her impact on others was a dangerous combination. Through this lens, her character becomes not about perpetrating a wide-scale agenda of sexual manipulation, but rather a veritable sniper whose honed weapon is her own sex.

In nineteenth-century France, norms of sexual purity and virginity were touted as the feminine ideal, and women who separated female sexuality from maternity were deemed to be crossing social boundaries by pursuing sexual pleasure.⁸³ Subsequently, *Carmen* has faced backlash of varying degrees for its depiction of female sexuality, especially Carmen’s portrayal

⁷⁹ McClary, *Carmen*, 55.

⁸⁰ Nasser Al-Tae, *Representations of the Orient in Western Music: Violence and Sensuality* (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 17.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 55.

⁸² *Ibid*, 56.

⁸³ Margadant, *Performing Femininity*, 250.

as a martyr for radical feminism.⁸⁴ The sexual politics surrounding *Carmen* have been tumultuous since its initially lukewarm reception.⁸⁵ Because of the sexually uptight nature of nineteenth-century France, Carmen's overt sexuality was met with such criticisms as her existence casting "a plague on these females vomited from Hell", and that she "should be gagged, a stop put to the unbridled twisting of her hips...."⁸⁶ Compared to other female opera characters of that time period such as Donizetti's Lucia and Berlioz's Marguerite, Carmen was unabashedly one of the most sexual and thus the least fitting with the feminist narrative of the time, leading her to both fame and infamy. If interpreted as a *femme fatale*, audiences understood the necessity of her death; Bizet was not so much pushing the boundaries of feminine expression on the stage with this action, but rather reinforcing the generally accepted knowledge that promiscuity and willful sexuality will always lead to one's demise. As a result, promotional posters for the opera often depicted Carmen's lifeless body in varying levels of provocative dress, assuring the audience that their reservations about her lifestyle choices will be absolved and she will have gotten what she deserves as a direct result of her choices.⁸⁷

As the opera has evolved, Carmen has consistently been seen as a fiery symbol of female power, regardless of whether or not that power is interpreted as threatening. She has been interpreted as a woman of loose morals, even in Mérimée's novella where she is described as purposefully showing more skin than others. In the novella, we are first introduced to Carmen wearing "a very short red skirt, threadbare white silk stockings and adorable red morocco leather slippers attached with flame-coloured ribbons."⁸⁸ The image Nowinski describes here is one of

⁸⁴ McClary, "Paradigm Dissonances", 74.

⁸⁵ McClary, *Carmen*, 111.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 126.

⁸⁸ Nowinski, "Sense and Sound", 896.

provocativeness; she is wearing revealing clothing with emphasis on the colour red, euphemizing lust and passion. Her comfort with her body is exemplified by her lack of effort to cover up her exposed skin, despite the likelihood of inciting provocative actions by others. This set Carmen apart from other female operatic roles of the nineteenth century: she was openly sexual, and unapologetic in her actions of toying with the lives of men.

A large part of the revulsion that nineteenth-century French audiences felt for Carmen came as a direct result of the inherent power of her overt sexuality. The premiere of *Carmen* almost directly coincided with the historical spike in diagnoses of ‘clinical nymphomania’, coming from a time period when modesty was still very much one of the main social structures defining how women were made to function.⁸⁹ Originally termed a disease in the nineteenth century, Carol Groneman defines nymphomania as “the insatiable sexuality of women, devouring, depraved, diseased. It conjures up an aggressively sexual female who both terrifies and titillates men.”⁹⁰ In the context of war, the honours bestowed upon men were linked explicitly to their identity as *men* and the social power associated with that label in its expression of masculinity. However, the perceived takeover of traditionally male social powers such as seduction were often viewed as destabilizing actions which threatened the social order when exhibited by women. In such transgressions, women were viewed as vying for agency: a societal subversion which could potentially topple the current status quo.⁹¹ Because the latter half of the nineteenth century saw a definitive rise in nymphomania cases, we can thus draw a link between the purposeful and pointed ways in which Carmen uses her body to bend the wills of others, and the early gynecological notion that women who do not uphold the same modest standards as the

⁸⁹ Carol Groneman, “Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality”, *Signs* 19, no. 2 (1994), 341.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 337.

⁹¹ Kinsella, *The Image*, 80.

elites were more likely to fall victim to the woes of nymphomania.⁹² The idea of a nymphomaniacal woman aligns with the concept of the *femme fatale*, though they do not share the same medically-based support; by some external factor, a woman becomes a slave to sexual desires, and ultimately will suffer an unnecessary medical intervention or die in order to reset the societal equilibrium that her urges had upset.

In discussing the lustful effects Carmen has primarily on Don José, we can also turn to the work of Sigmund Freud to help evaluate the psychological ramifications of her advances. After attending a performance of *Carmen*, Freud formulated an evaluation that as human beings, we are inclined to retain our sense of integrity by means of not living spontaneously, and developing a level of refinement as a result of our repressions.⁹³ Westerink asserts that the clearest moment in the opera is directly following Carmen's seductive dance, when Don José is forced to choose between the lawful, refined world, and the lawlessly passionate world of his temptress: "given its connection with the lower classes, the world of the passions lies principally outside culture."⁹⁴ Backing up Freud's idea that repressions of passion create refinement, this comment actually rings poignant for many aspects of *Carmen*, in that the majority of actions between Carmen and the male characters in the opera are patently derived of lustful interactions which she incites. Touching on the idea of passion existing outside of 'culture', we can also apply this to the 'otherness' addressed earlier in this section. Given the confused state of cultural relations rampant throughout *Carmen*, demonizing passion as something instilled by a Gypsy woman upon morally upstanding men does nothing but reaffirm existing racial and sexual biases. Audiences watching the opera are then privy to the moral dilemmas imparted by Bizet, and were

⁹² Groneman, "Nymphomania", 347.

⁹³ Herman Westerink, *A Dark Trace: Sigmund Freud on the Sense of Guilt* (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2009), 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

delighted in repeatedly experiencing Don José falling prey to the unbridled sexuality of his seductress – coming as no surprise, *Carmen* was among Freud’s five favourite operas with its misogynistic triumph of vice over virtue in relation to the human condition.⁹⁵ Bizet’s purposeful curation of lustful feelings in Don José is done with malicious intent, with Carmen being described as taunting the passions of men purely for the purposes of her own entertainment and libidinous gain.

Carmen’s physical seduction of Don José is treated quite differently in the opera than it is in Mérimée’s novella. While Bizet’s version of Don José is blindsided by all sexual advances made on him, Mérimée’s original character construction is much more self-aware and spiritually driven. Mérimée’s Don José consciously understands that Carmen is doing the ‘Devil’s work’ by ensnaring unsuspecting male victims, but despite this he cannot rid his thoughts of her – a self-fulfilling prophecy, of sorts. His fatal flaw, then, is his own moral shortcoming at the hands of a woman with a rose.⁹⁶ Bizet’s Don José, however, paints a distinctly different picture of how the two main characters interact. In the opera, Don José’s initial seduction happens when Carmen first drops a rose at her feet, which is a rare instance in which she uses a tangible object by which to instigate her seductive behaviour. In thinking about the rose as the most literal allusion to Carmen’s sexual weaponization, the act of the rose being dropped can have militaristic consequences; if the rose is a grenade, Don José’s lust for her is a direct result of its detonation at his feet. While Don José is seen as a fated victim of unquenchable female lust in both treatments of his character, the biblical references are noticeably toned down in the opera. In doing that,

⁹⁵ Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 169.

⁹⁶ Burton D. Fisher, *Bizet’s Carmen: Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series* (Florida: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2000), 27.

Bizet has effectively made the focus on the body movements, dances, and Carmen's flower dropping more about satiating her own desires with no interference by an external power.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, a self-proclaimed *Carmen* enthusiast, was taken by its main character and her unmerciful power over men, as he believed there was no introspectiveness necessary to understand her character's motivations.⁹⁷ This transparency essentially created an artistic space wherein audiences could much more readily connect with what was going on onstage, which was a key tenet of the newly-emerging verismo. He felt that the indelible characters Bizet had created were, in essence, "the antithesis to Wagner's decadent modernism."⁹⁸ In fact, some of Nietzsche's statements on *Carmen* describe 'love' as "the war of the sexes, and in its basis their *mortal hatred*" [italics original].⁹⁹ If we take Nietzsche's description at face value, any love-related interactions can be construed as acts of war, and in turn any advances can be seen as strategic tactical maneuvers. Nietzsche has also asserted that *Carmen* is one of the only operas of the time to finally reveal the truth regarding sexual actions and their repercussions. His justification lay in the concept of a powerful female character being the living embodiment of not just fate, but rather the larger concept of evolutionary truths: those who break the social order will not have the opportunity to pass their knowledge onto future generations.¹⁰⁰ With this mindset, it becomes far easier to reconstruct the narrative of *Carmen* under the guise of being a war in which all the characters have various levels of willingness to participate.

⁹⁷ Fisher, *Bizet's Carmen Mini Guide*, 23.

⁹⁸ Gross and Parker, *Reading Opera*, 169.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 170.

¹⁰⁰ Susan McClary, *Carmen*, 119.

Conclusion

Navigating human interaction is often a veritable minefield of social expectations and personal desires. Bizet's *Carmen* provides a main character who is not only aware of her sexual arsenal, but who knows how to manipulate others in order to satisfy herself sexually. Already setting her apart from the timidly traditional female main characters of the earlier half of the nineteenth century, Carmen plays the important role of exposing society to an ambiguous protagonist in the form of a woman of questionable morals. If existence in society is viewed as an ongoing 'battle of the sexes', there is a logical conclusion that the participants must be armed in some way. Carmen embodies the true triple threat toward male characters in the opera, enticing them by means of her words, her music, and her body. In exploring these elements, we can conclude that much of Carmen's power as a strong female figure is derived from how she tactically implements them against men in the opera.

Carmen's existence as a manipulative figure in the opera's overarching power structure can be looked at through a postcolonial queer lens, specifically as her internal struggles as a character who is marginalized on multiple levels. As her sexuality is transgressive, audiences are presented with a disruptive force who frees them of the expectation that Carmen will embody the simple emotions of a binary relationship.¹⁰¹ Opera is rife with binary oppositions, reflecting how the prescribed narrative of gender relations saturates the status quo both in and outside of the opera. This binary is present in multiple aspects of the opera, including the notable relationship between the text and the music. The impermanence of postcolonialism in relation to gender

¹⁰¹ Koestenbaum, *Queen's Throat*, 232.

affects the audience's interpretation of Carmen's actions, and she is therefore seen as a powerfully subversive figure within the social hierarchy.

Language is an undeniable necessity in the act of seduction, and Bizet's choice to give Carmen such uniquely self-centered dialogue for a female character created a distinct sense of unease in early audiences. This was partially due to Carmen's brazen femininity being so overt and over-the-top that her actions could be construed as antagonistic. Recalling that Bizet had altered the original libretto for *Carmen* provides insight into how he had intended her to be perceived. Instead of speaking of love in an abstract way, Carmen is pointed and specific about her intentions. Although nearly every opera of the time included a plot or sub-plot revolving around love, *Carmen* remains an example of a woman not only articulating her desires but doing so in such a way that actively infringes on the lives of men. Closely tied to the language she uses, the music behind Carmen's dialogue is another method by which she can ensnare a potential lover. Sultry chromaticisms and pregnant pauses are both powerful tactics Carmen employs in order to achieve her amorous desires. In addition to her words and music, the way that Carmen uses her body to seduce men in the opera is its own separate weapon. Had her character's actions been more demure, her words and music would have not had nearly the same effect as they did in conjunction with her sensuous body movements. This concurrence of Carmen's three key personality traits set up a perfect storm of seduction from which male characters in the opera are seemingly unable to save themselves.

Carmen's unapologetic awareness of her own sexual prowess was instrumental in uprooting societal expectations for a woman on stage, while exemplifying what can be accomplished when the weapons at her disposal were imposed upon her by societal expectations. Though her character does die at the hand of the man she spends the entire opera emotionally

tormenting, *Carmen* has resonated with countless audiences over the years. In its infancy, the opera provided audiences with a female character who represented the loathsome siren who received her comeuppance. However, as *Carmen* remained a fixture in the opera world throughout history, its main character evolved into a versatile beacon of power: a symbolic representation of the havoc a seductive woman can wreak on the various power structures around her.

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