

September 23, 2021 – Georges Bizet's *Carmen*

On this week's Thursday Night Opera House we'll hear an encore broadcast of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, hosted by the late **Al Ruocchio** (1937-2007). One of the most popular operas ever written, it was almost withdrawn during its initial run at Paris's Opéra-Comique. Near the end of the run, the theater was giving tickets away. Three months after the premiere, on March 3, 1875, Bizet died--at age 36. *Carmen* was not staged again at the Opéra-Comique for another eight years, and the composer never knew how popular it would become. Set to a libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, it was based on Prosper Mérimée's novella of the same name, itself possibly influenced by Alexander Pushkin's Russian narrative poem *The Gypsies*. Bizet's final opera transformed the *opéra-comique* genre, virtually erasing the distinction between it and *opera seria*, making way for the cult of realism known as *verismo*.

Carmen (mezzo-soprano **Tatiana Troyanos**), a tempestuous, wayward and beautiful Gypsy, works in a Seville cigarette factory. Arrested after a fight with one of her colleagues, she is assigned to the custody of Don José (tenor **Plácido Domingo**), a corporal in the local barracks whose fiancée, Micaëla (soprano **Kiri Te Kanawa**), has just arrived from their village. Thoroughly bewitched by Carmen, he allows her to escape and is himself arrested and imprisoned.

At the tavern of Lillas Pastia, the glamorous bullfighter Escamillo (bass-baritone **José Van Dam**) arrives with his entourage and sets his sights on Carmen. Although tempted, she decides to wait for José. Upon his release from prison, the corporal heads to the tavern to meet Carmen. He is soon involved in a fight with his superior, Zuniga (bass **Pierre Thau**). Although reluctant to do so, José is prepared to desert the army and join Carmen and a band of smugglers in the mountains.

The fickle Gypsy grows bored with José and, when Escamillo seeks her out, she agrees to attend his forthcoming bullfight in Seville. When Micaëla reappears, pleading with José to return home with her, Carmen tells him to go. Ignoring Carmen's change of heart and spurning Micaëla, the unhappy deserter follows the Gypsy to Seville and accosts her outside the bull ring, begging her to start a new life with him. Carmen refuses and, at the very moment the crowd erupts in excitement over Escamillo's triumph, the crazed José stabs Carmen to death.

Sir George Solti conducts the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the John Alldis Choir in this 1975 recording.

From a 2003 recording, Welsh bass-baritone **Bryn Terfel** sings Escamillo's act 2 aria "Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre": <https://youtu.be/pwblGiW0dW8>.