The Spanish Musical Sources of Bizet's *Carmen*

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GEORGES BIZET HAD more than a casual interest in Spanish themes. At the age of twenty-one he began work on an opera, *Don Quichotte*, based on Cervantes's text. The project was not completed. Soon thereafter he wrote a symphonic ode, *Vasco de* [da] *Gama*, containing a *bolero* that he will use repeatedly.[1] Bizet was also especially attracted to southern French themes: witness a projected opera on a text by Frédéric Mistral and the *L'Arlésienne Suite* on the novel by Alphonse Daudet. Between these two comes another work with Spanish overtones: the heroine of his opera after Alfred de Musset's poem *Namouna*. In 1873, Bizet returned to Spanish letters, beginning an opera based on Guillén de Castro's *Las mocedades del Cid*.[2]

After the *bolero* of *Vasco da Gama* (1860), Bizet composed another, *Guitare* (1866), on a poem of Victor Hugo.[3] The next traces of Spanish music appear in the "Gypsy Dance" of his opera *La jolie fille de Perth* (1866) and then in various passages of *Djamileh* (1871), based on Musset's poem. Winton Dean declares that Bizet "seems to have divined by instinct the Moorish link between North Africa and Spain."[4]

It is highly probable that an early interest in Spanish music on Bizet's part derived from a school-day friendship that is for the most neglected by Bizet's biographers—probably because there is little correspondence to document the friendship. Bizet was admitted as a student at the Paris Conservatory at the age of ten. After six months he won the first prize in solfège and would continue to distinguish himself as one of the best students at the Conservatory for nine years, finally winning the *Prix de Rome* and departing for Italy in late December of 1857. Almost two years previously a brilliant young student arrived at the Conservatory from Pamplona, Spain. In his very first year, young Pablo Sarasate won first prize in violin and the next year first prize in solfège as had Bizet before him. For two years, Bizet and Sarasate were two of the shining stars of the Paris Conservatory. Bizet was an excellent pianist, Sarasate a virtuoso violinist. It appears probable that not only did the two youths know each other well but that they also would have performed together officially, and quite possibly for private amusement as well. How much Spanish music Bizet learned from Sarasate at this time is an intriguing question.[5]

[1] This bolero provided the opening bars for the *Chanson bohème* of *Carmen*. Subsequently the bolero was published in the *Vingt mélodies* of Bizet by Choudens (Paris, 189?) with the title *Ouvre ton coeur*.

[2] "The strongly melismatic vocal line is also borrowed from Iberian folk song" (Frits Noske, *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc*, tr. Rita Benton [New York, 1970], 198).

[3] For an excellent chronology of Bizet's compositions see Winton Dean, *Georges Bizet, His Life and Work* (London, 1965), 260–271.

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[4] *Ibid.*, 198.

[5] The two men would still be in touch apparently to the end of Bizet's life, twenty years later: "Mme Bizet Straus remembered that he [Sarasate] came sometimes to the house" (D. C. Parker, *Bizet* [London, 1951], 148).

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It is important to note Bizet's interest in folk music of all types and his use of it at appropriate times for purposes of authenticity. Three pieces from *L'Arlésienne*, for example, are drawn for reasons of plot directly from Provençal folk tunes, including the well-known "Farandole."

With these various Spanish literary and musical antecedents he now considers a new venture. In the early summer of 1872 Bizet first suggested to his librettist an opera on Prosper Merimée's tale *Carmen*, published twenty years previously—its author recently deceased. It is amusing to recall that Merimée began his literary career in 1825 with a hoax: *Le Théâtre de Clara Gazul*, six short plays ascribed to a fictitious Spanish actress. Merimée continued to be attracted to Spanish themes, and we do well to remember that the theme of Spain is a strong legacy of the romantic movement in France throughout both arts and letters.

From this time on, Bizet worked intermittently on the score for *Carmen*. Rehearsals were scheduled for the fall of 1874, and throughout the summer Bizet worked feverishly to complete and fully orchestrate the score: 1200 pages of music. He was pleased with the finished product and declared that "this time I have written a work . . . full of colour and melody."[6]

The question of Spanish influence on Bizet's score has received comment of predictable as well as unimaginable strains. This one is typical: "The exotic parts of the score were never intended as a literal evocation of Spain."[7] The statement is misleading, and there are various indications to the contrary.[8]

Let us remember that *Carmen* was written as *opéra-comique* (the same format as *zarzuela*) and not as grand opera—the dialogue was converted to *recitatif* after Bizet's death with the addition of music by Ernest Guiraud, born in New Orleans.[9]

The composer of the famous *Habanera* is not Bizet but rather Sebastián Yradier of Spain and Paris (possibly also Cuba), who is best known today through his song *La paloma*. Prior to his marriage Bizet maintained a connection with a colorful personage not completely unlike Carmen: Countess Moreton de Chabrillan—by turns prostitute, actress, circus rider, author, and café singer, who often performed songs by Yradier, some of them to be found in Bizet's music library.[10] Bizet's lifting of Yradier's melody—the original called *El arreglito*—is curious in that only after the fact did he identify Yradier as the composer.[11] It must be remembered that it was Bizet who thrust the Carmen tale on his unwilling collaborators, and it would appear to be beyond

[6] Winton Dean, *op. cit.*, 109.

[7] Winton Dean, "Georges Bizet," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, II (1980), 760.

[8] Julien Tiersot quotes a note from Bizet in the library of the Paris Conservatory: "Je demande communication des recueils de chansons espagnoles que possède la Bibliothèque" and suggests the possibility that Bizet consulted their copy of *Echos d'Espagne* (Paris, 1872). See his "Bizet and Spanish Music," *Musical Quarterly*, XIII (1927), 566–581. A copy of the *Echos* was at some point acquired by Bizet for his own library. See Mina Curtiss, *Bizet and His World* (New York, 1958), 472–474. Juan Manén declares enthusiastically that "Lo extraordinario, lo maravilloso de esta ópera es que . . . es intensamente española, porque toda ella es ambiente, es espíritu español . . . Los aires y ritmos . . . ingenuamente españoles" (*Diccionario de celebridades musicales* [Barcelona, 1973], p. 137).

[9] The score traditions, as well as even the dialogue treatment, of *Carmen* are a veritable hornet's nest of betrayals of Bizet's intentions: ". . . they raise almost every conceivable issue of scholarly standards and editorial ethics." For a cogent discussion of this highly convoluted matter see Winton Dean, "The Corruption of Carmen: The Perils of Pseudo-Musicology," *Musical Newsletter*, III, 4 (October, 1973), 7–12 and 20. This study was prompted by the 1973 recording of the opera by the Metropolitan Opera Company following their new production (première: September 19, 1972). See also Henry E. Phillips, *The Carmen Chronicle: The Making of an Opera* (New York, 1973).

[10] See Mina Curtiss, *op. cit.*, 474.

[11] *Ibid.*, 401, and Bruce Carr, "Sebastián Iradier," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, IX (London, 1980), 292. However, both the *Diccionario de la música Labor*, II, 1288, and *The New Grove*, IX, 291, err in citing Iradier's birthplace (both dictionaries use the spelling "Iradier," which will be the spelling used throughout this biographical note). He was born January 20, 1809, at Lanciego (Álava) and died December 6, 1865, in Vitoria, Manuel de Aranegui traced Iradier's lineage in "La familia Iradier," *Sociedad Excursionista Manuel Iradier* (Vitoria), n.º 94 (1966), 18–19.

On April 27, 1825, Sebastián de Iradier at age 16 became organist of the parish church of San Miguel at Vitoria. On June 5, 1827, aged 18, he was elected organist of the parish of San Juan Bautista in Salvatierra. There, on July 29, 1829, he married a native of Salvatierra, Brigida de Iturburu. On July 7, 1833, he asked for a short leave of absence, which because of the Carlist wars was greatly extended. His interim successor, who had been his pupil, was appointed June 19, 1836. After serving in 1839 as solfège teacher in the Madrid Conservatory founded by Isabel II in 1830, Iradier in a letter received from Madrid May 17, 1840, notified the Salvatierra parish authorities of his desire to return to his post of organist and *sacristán mayor*. Two months later, salary disputes having not been resolved, he sent them his official resignation in a letter from Madrid dated July 18, 1840.

For more details, see Dionisio Preciado, "Sebastián de Iradier (1809–1865), organista y 'sacristán mayor', en Salvatierra de Álava," *Revista de Musicología* (1984), 125–170.

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mere coincidence that Carmen's first aria in the opera is to the melodic strains of Yradier—shades of the countess?

The next piece of Spanish origin occurs in Act I, Scene 9, Carmen's defiance of Lieutenant Zúñiga. The melody is from a genuine folksong of Ciudad Real, possibly transcribed for Bizet at this time by his old school chum Pablo Sarasate.[12]

Toward the close of Act I Carmen tells us she is off to the tavern of Lillas Pastia. The aria is entitled *Séguidille*, i.e., *seguidilla*. Bizet may intend the term to apply to the metrical as well as the musical form. One critic notes that the piece makes effective use of the harmonics, rhythms, and instrumentation of flamenco music.[13] As yet no melodic Spanish antecedent has been found.

Act I terminates with a brief reprise of the habanera.

Carmen's first aria in Act II, the *Chanson bohème*, as well as the introduction to Scene 3, are identified by various critics, foreign and Spanish, as within the framework of *cante flamenco*: guitar, successive fifths, irregular descending scales, augmented seconds.[14]

The Spanish scholar and violinist, Juan Manén, finds in Carmen's song and dance for Don José, with castanets, a quadruple rhythm shift typical of Andalucía. This is the penultimate scene of Act II.

The prelude to Act III uses an authentic Spanish *canción de cuna* which appears in Pedrell's *Cancionero*, not published until after Bizet's death. The most likely source for Bizet is Sarasate.[15]

The prelude to Act IV is one of the most famous of the opera. Bizet is only the arranger. The composer is Manuel García (father of the famous Spanish opera singer María Malibrán and the first impresario to bring opera to New York). García's original composition is entitled *El criado fingido* written in the musical form *polo* (a wild Andalusian *tonadilla*). The melody apparently derives from a folk source. This *polo* was reprinted in the aforementioned *Echos d'Espagne* (1872),[16] the book still part of Bizet's collection.

An especially important ingredient of the entire work, identified by musicologists alternately as Carmen's leitmotif, the Fate theme, or the motto theme, is of hispano-moresque origin. Attempts to associate its transmission to Bizet through Manuel García's music are not convincing. The most likely candidate again is Sarasate. These five notes in descending pentatonic scales probably derive from an Andalusian *saeta*.[17] The theme is used repeatedly throughout the opera in two basic patterns, one for Carmen, and the other for Don José. In Wagnerian fashion they symbolize impending disaster for each of the two characters. Their instrumental treatment varies constantly. The first appearance of the motif is in the overture, and its last use in the finale as José stabs Carmen and the curtain descends.

Three other musical passages require attention. According to one critic we might assume that the

[12] Edgar Istel in *Bizet und Carmen* (Stuttgart, 1927) is apparently the first to identify the source and to link its transmission to Sarasate (see Dean, 1966, 230–231).

[13] See Dean, 1980, 760.

[14] See Dean, p. 230, and Manén, p. 137. There would appear to be more than a casual relationship between the countermelody of *Chanson bohème* and *Chanson espagnole-Boléro* of Léo Delibes, known as *Les Filles de Cadix*. Indeed, the countermelody emerges as the lyric melody in the last bars of the refrain of *Les Filles de Cadix*. Apparently composed in 1874, the same year as the composition of *Carmen*, which then premiered in March of 1875, Delibes' *boléro* is analyzed both by Henri de Curzon (*Léo Delibes. Sa vie et ses oeuvres, 1836–1892*, Paris, G. Legouix, 1926) and by André Coquis (*Léo Delibes. Sa vie et son oeuvre, 1836–1891*, Paris, Richard-Masse, 1957) but without reference to *Chanson bohème* or to a possible Spanish source. Coquis finds the song "un très joli compromis entre le *despejo* andalou et l'élégance française" (p. 154). Curzon also gives it high marks, ironically adding "Bizet n'a pas fait mieux" (p. 218).

[15] Apparently the first to determine the relationship was Domenico de Paoli. See "Bizet and His Spanish Sources," *The Chesterton*, XXII, No. 153 (January, 1948), 68–70. Also see Curtiss (p. 453), who gratuitously suggests that Pedrell's collection (published in 1918) was "probably unknown to Bizet" (p. 401). Curiously enough, this melody also appears to be geographically correct. Paoli makes the point that it is from the Asturian mountains where Don José and the smugglers would have left the Basque country (pp. 69–70). The melody was also used by one of Pedrell's most distinguished pupils, Manuel de Falla, for the motif of his score for Pedro de Calderón's *auto sacramental, El Gran Teatro del Mundo*. Falla's score premiered in a production at the Alhambra in 1927. See the present author's "Manuel de Falla's Score for Calderon's *Gran Teatro del Mundo*: The Autograph Manuscript," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, XVI (1969), 63–74. Manén, unaware of Bizet's source, suggests that the *Intermezzo* "podría ser una variante o una reminiscencia del vito" (p. 138).

[16] After the *Habanera*, this source is the most widely recognized and commented (Dean, pp. 229–230, and Curtiss, p. 401). García used his melody both in the *polo* reproduced in the *Echos d'Espagne* and in the aria "Yo che son contrabandista" of his opera *El poeta calculista* (see Tiersot, 574–581).

[17] " . . . flamenco music, to which the augmented seconds of the Carmen motif perhaps also owe their origin" (Dean, 1980, 760); " . . . nos recuerda los melismas de la saeta" (Manén, 138).

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overture is not "composed" music at all but rather somehow transported directly from an Andalusian bullring to the Paris opera:

> The Overture is blatant and tawdry, sparing no sensibilities and leaving nothing to the imagination. Here is the bright, picture-postcard colouring of Southern Spain, the extrovert bull-fight music, and the facile swing of a popular entertainment: this is not evocation, not poetry, but realism. . . . The middle section (later in the opera, the song of the toreador) has a *canaille* swagger, an outrageous self-confidence: and it is only at the end of the overture that realism gives way to evocation, journalist's prose to poetry.[18]

The implication that there is "something Spanish" about the "Choeur des gamins" (I, 3) and the "Toreador Song" (II, 2) as well as the bulk of the overture has, perhaps, an odd echo in the commentary on *Carmen* made by the Spanish musicologist José Subirá. Intercalated in his discussion of the Spanish contributions (Yradier and Manuel García) to the score of *Carmen*, Subirá lists six different musical segments, four of which are included in the foregoing list of Spanish-influenced musical passages.[19]

The questions of the extent and the importance of Spanish musical influence on the score of *Carmen* are indeed complex and intriguing. The answers remain incomplete to date. But there is a general undertone to most criticism that obfuscates and mars the issue. A sub-chapter in D.C. Parker's oft-excellent study is typical of the problem: "Is *Carmen* a Spanish opera?"[20] (pp. 146 ff.). The author examines the evidence, somewhat questionably asserting that the "Spanish-like" elements constitute "a surprisingly modest part of the whole," and concludes roundly that "Carmen is a French not a Spanish opera." The ingenuous answer is no more than a simple statement of patent historical fact which takes on an ominous and unflattering meaning in the reflected light of the improper question. The implication is that Bizet attempted a fraud, a bogus *Spanish* work, and has been found out: Bizet "unmasked" as it were. The composer emerges from this posthumous verbal mugging as a defeated, inept trans-national—his opulent Spanish wig and comb askew, thus revealing his chic French coiffure, and his flamenco skirt ripped to show his Parisian *slip*! This underlying attitude is the critical norm with respect to the Spanish question: " . . . the local color in his opera gives the illusion of authenticity in every country but Spain" (Curtiss, p. 402); "This is a French, not a Spanish, opera, as any Spaniard will confirm" (Dean, p. 231).

It was never Bizet's intention to pass himself off as a Spanish composer—or as a commitedly French composer, for that matter. Rather he found the ambience and especially the evil heroine of Merimée's tale irresistible—probably because of personal experience. Nonetheless, he seems to have known more about Spanish music than is usually recognized—quite probably through Pablo Sarasate—and in any event he obviously made it his business not only to learn more but to use authentic Spanish compositions. His purpose was to write an *opéra-comique* (a *zarzuela, not* a grand opera) *about* Spain for an audience which happened to be French, as was he. Bizet's intentions are best compared to those of Leonard Bernstein, for example, in his use of Latin popular music for *West Side Story*. The result is an international, an outside but *well-informed*, look at a Hispanic ambient. As such, and especially in its original *opéra-comique* format, it is successful not only for non-Spaniards but even can be for Spain. Indeed, Noske maintains that "Bizet's stylistic excellence shows to best advantage when he leaves the French climate for foreign atmosphere; he was the first *mélodie* composer to cultivate true local color . . . , utilizing *all* the elements of musical technique, harmony and melody as well as rhythm, in the depiction of exotic atmosphere" (p. 198). Paoli even surmises that "the Spaniards themselves have adopted several of Bizet's tunes which, a hundred years hence, will perhaps have become authentic 'Spanish popular songs' for the greater joy of folklorists of the future" (p. 69).

There is a great deal of work yet to be done in terms of refining our knowledge of the Spanish musical backgrounds of *Carmen*.

[18] Martin Cooper, *Georges Bizet* (Westport, Connecticut, 1971), 105.

[19] José Subirá, *Historia de la música*, II (Barcelona, 1947), 405-406.

[20] These remarks were originally prepared in script form for a special symposium on *Carmen* presented at the Louisiana Conference on Hispanic Languages and Literatures held at New Orleans on February 26, 1987. In revised form they were again delivered *viva voce* at the annual convention of the Association for Recorded Sound in Washington, D.C., on May 19, 1987. Further revised, and with special debt to Marjorie Riley of the Renaissance Society of America and to Brother Eric, O.SS.T., this oversimplified treatment of an extremely complex matter is with trepidation now offered in homage to a consummate musicologist.