

RITORNA VINCITORI!

Some of you may have thought the title of this program was a typographical error, since Aïda's famous aria is entitled *Ritorna Vincitor!*, singular... but look around you. Here we are, back together, able to share our lives again, and enjoy some of the greatest vocal music ever composed. That is a kind of victory in itself! We may not yet have conquered COVID-19, but we have survived to once more open our hearts and celebrate what we love and have fought to return to. Of course the Verdi Chorus was delighted to be back and singing together, even when we were on Zoom or rehearsing in masks, but now we have the missing element...to be able to bring our music to our treasured audience. Thank you for being here! It hasn't been the same without you.

AÏDA

By 1859, Giuseppe Verdi began to declare that he was retired and would write no more operas. Although he no longer composed at the unbelievable pace of what he called his "galley years," this period nonetheless brought forth *La forza del destino*, *Don Carlo*, major revisions of *Macbeth* and *Simon Boccanegra*, and finally *Aïda*. Verdi had declined an invitation to write a celebratory hymn for the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, although his longtime friend and assistant Emanuele Muzio had directed the music for the Canal's opening as well as *Rigoletto* for the opening of the new Cairo Opera House. The Egyptian leaders persisted, however, and Verdi agreed to write a new opera for Cairo provided it would have an Egyptian story and setting. The prominent French archeologist and Egyptologist Auguste Mariette promptly provided a scenario, and Verdi engaged Antonio Ghislanzoni (the librettist of the revised *La forza del destino*) as librettist. As he insisted for all of his libretti, Verdi constantly reminded Ghislanzoni that he wanted the "theatrical words" – i.e., the words that would develop characters or story, and not just high poetry arranged in a conventional way. (As usual, Verdi didn't hesitate to rewrite the words when he felt the need. If he found a lyric too highly wrought, he would sharpen it to a more direct statement suited to the character.) Staging and rehearsals were undertaken in Paris rather than Cairo so that suitable singers could be engaged and production values closely monitored. The long siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War delayed the opening of the production in Egypt until 1871, when it proved a great success. This was followed by *Aïda*'s premiere at La Scala in 1872, vigorously overseen by Verdi, fiercely resisting all management attempts to "strangle" the premiere by haste or false economy and relentlessly insisting on attention to ensemble work and staging. In spite of Verdi's usual pessimism, the Milan premiere proved everything he could have hoped for, and he was rewarded with an extraordinary personal ovation upon his return to a city and an opera house he had avoided for years.

Based on a number of sources, the story of *Aïda* suited the intense interest in Egyptian history aroused by the archeological finds of the 19th century (presaging the Egyptian mania later produced by the discovery of King Tut's tomb) as well as the opening of the Suez Canal. Seemingly the quintessence of grand opera due to the majesty of the setting and intense historical struggle of the principals, Verdi outdid himself in using the elaborate musical and theatrical frame to focus on the intense personal drama of the leading characters. The daughter of Amonasro, the King of Ethiopia, Aïda has been captured by the Egyptians, who are ignorant of

her royal status. She is now the enslaved servant of Amneris, the daughter and heir of the Egyptian king. Amneris loves the young Egyptian officer Radamès, unaware that Aïda is a princess and that she and Radamès are secretly in love. Discovering their love, Amneris vows to overcome her rival. Radamès triumphs over the Ethiopian army, returning with booty and prisoners. Aïda is shocked to see that her royal father Amonasro is one of the captured. Amonasro persuades his captors that he is only an Ethiopian general and that the king died in battle. To honor Radamès' valor, the Pharaoh spares the prisoners' lives and grants Amneris to Radamès as his bride. Aïda submits to Amonasro's demands that she save her country and betray Radamès by obtaining his plan to crush the Ethiopian army once and for all. Rather than defend himself against the subsequent charge of treason, Radamès goes to his death to find that Aïda has secretly joined him in what will be their living tomb, leaving Amneris to repent her jealousy and mourn her loss.

In the *Finale to Act II*, the Pharaoh and his court have come to Thebes to greet the triumphant Radamès following his victory over the Ethiopians. As the captured soldiers are brought forward, Aïda has inadvertently exclaimed, "My father!" Amonasro signals Aïda not to betray his royal status and informs the Egyptians that he is indeed Aïda's father, a soldier in the service of the Ethiopian king, and that their king was killed in battle. *The people hail the glory of Egypt ("Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside"), their sacred protector Isis, and their Pharaoh, and cheer the conquering hero as they lay laurel and flowers in his path. The women twine laurel wreaths for the army as they call on the young girls to dance like the stars in the sky. The priests give thanks to their army and the gods who have brought this lucky day. To the sound of Verdi's famous Triumphal March, Radamès enters the city gates. The assembled throng cheers him and his victorious warriors, thanking the gods for their victory and returning them safely to their country.*

In Act I, the Ethiopians are preparing to attack Egypt. In the palace at Memphis, the Egyptian high priest Ramfis has advised Radamès that the goddess Isis has selected a new commander of the Egyptian troops, and Radamès prays that he is the one chosen. His dreams of glory inspire a paean to his heavenly Aïda ("*Celeste Aïda*"), *crowned with light and flowers, the queen of his thoughts, the splendor of his life. If he returns triumphant, he will return her to the beautiful sky and sweet breezes of her native land and raise for her a throne close to the sun.*

Radamès learns that he has been chosen to lead the Egyptian troops against the Ethiopians. In the second scene, of Act I, he stands before the altar of the god Fthà to have his mission consecrated. *The High Priestess leads the other priestesses in a prayer invoking mighty Fthà ("**Possente Fthà**"), creator and animator of the world, the source of fire and light, and the priests invoke great Fthà as the life of the universe and the source of eternal love.*

In Act III, Aïda awaits Radamès for a secret meeting outside the temple of Isis. *She wonders what he will say and trembles to think that he may plan a final farewell. If so, the dark whirlpools of the Nile will provide her a tomb and perhaps oblivion. She thinks of her fatherland ("**O patria mia**") which she will never see again – its blue skies, its sweet air, where the beautiful morning of her life shone. Never to see it again! And its green hills, its sweet-smelling*

riverbanks, its cool valleys where her love promised her they would go, but now that dream of love has vanished. O fatherland! Never to see it again!

At the end of Act III, Radamès has inadvertently revealed to Aïda the plans for his army's attack on the Ethiopian army, unaware that her father Amonasro was secretly listening. Amnesia and Ramfis had also been hiding inside the temple and when they burst forth, Amonasro moves to kill them. Radamès intervenes and Amonasro and Aïda escape while the Egyptian guards enter and arrest Radamès. In Act IV, Radamès is brought before the priests, charged with treason. He has resisted Amneris' entreaties to deny his guilt and told her he will neither deny his crime nor swear to abandon Aïda in order to save his life. As he is led into the inner court of the Temple of Justice, Amneris stands bereft outside the door. *Ramfis and the other priests call on the Spirit of Justice to descend on them ("Spirito del Nume") and enliven them with the ray of eternal light. Through their lips let the Spirit be expressed. Amneris begs the gods to have pity on her broken heart - he is innocent, let the gods save him! Her grief is desperate and terrible. Oh, who can save him? Ramfis calls forth Radamès three times and says he has revealed the secrets of his fatherland to the foreigners - he must defend himself. Radamès is silent and Ramfis and the other priests declare him a traitor, repeating their imprecations three times. Ramfis continues the list of Radamès' crimes: He deserted the field on the day before the battle. He violated his oath and perjured himself to his country, his King, and his honor. After each charge, Radamès is silent, and the priests proclaim him a traitor. Ramfis tells Radamès that his fate is decided: he will have the death of the disgraced and be entombed beneath the altar of the angry god. Amneris cries out in anger against the judges, who are never sated of blood - and they call themselves ministers of heaven! As Ramfis and the priests leave the judgment chamber, Amneris denounces them, saying they are infamous tigers thirsty for blood. They outrage the earth and the gods and punish one who isn't guilty. Ramfis and the priests reply that he is a traitor and must die. Amneris says they know that she loves the man they are killing and that the curse of her tortured heart will fall upon them with his blood! The revenge of heaven will fall on them!*

After Radamès is sealed in the crypt beneath the Temple of Vulcan, he discovers that Aïda has hidden herself away there in order to die with him. As they realize that they are already exhausting the air in the crypt, they hear the priests and priestesses above them, *invoking Fthà, the animating spirit of the world. Radamès says it is the celebration of the priests, and Aïda recognizes it as the hymn of their deaths. Radamès tries in vain to move the fatal stone covering the crypt, but Aïda tells him that everything on earth is finished for them. Together they bid farewell to the earth, the valley of tears. Their dream of joy which vanished in grief opens up for them in the heavens, and their wandering souls fly to the rays of eternal day. Amneris appears dressed in mourning and prostrates herself over the stone covering the crypt. She begs for peace for the adored body of Radamès - may Isis be placated and open heaven to him. As Aïda dies in Radamès' arms, they see heaven opening to them.*

DIDO AND AENEAS

Dido and Aeneas is considered Henry Purcell's only true opera, although he wrote extensively for the stage in the last few years of his short life, setting to music songs in revivals of prominent Tudor and Stuart plays as well as masques and "semi-operas" such as *King Arthur* and *The Fairy*

Queen. Believed to be the first true English opera, the premiere in 1689 was performed not in the thriving commercial theater or at the English court, but by the students of Josias Priest's Chelsea dancing school for young gentlewomen.

To a libretto by Nahum Tate, the poet laureate at the time, *Dido and Aeneas* takes up a story that has appealed to such classical authors as Virgil, Ovid, Saint Augustine, and Christopher Marlowe. The founder and queen of Carthage, Dido, is enamored of Aeneas, the last of the Trojan royal family. He escaped the destruction of Troy by the Greeks and now wanders the Mediterranean in obedience to the gods' orders to found a new Troy in Lyceum (which will become Rome, the city and empire that will ultimately destroy Carthage). Purcell's Dido is notable in that she is not the languishing, abandoned woman of Virgil's epic Latin poem, but a strong and independent ruler who is broken as much by her pride and refusal of pity as by the departure of Aeneas. The entire opera occupies barely an hour's time but, due to Purcell's remarkable gifts of dramatic expression, is a rich and satisfying piece.

Dido has fallen deeply in love with Aeneas, who reciprocates her love but feels he has no choice but to leave when the gods order him to sail from Carthage and fulfill his destiny. When Dido discovers Aeneas and his crew preparing to follow the gods' command and leave Carthage, she excoriates Aeneas for his faithlessness. He vows to stay with her and ignore the gods, but the proud Dido refuses to have a lover who has even thought of leaving her. After Aeneas departs, Dido surrenders to her grief and dies. A chorus of cupids appear to scatter roses over her tomb as the court mourns her death, lamenting "*With drooping wings.*"

MADAMA BUTTERFLY

The American playwright and impresario David Belasco based his 1900 one-act play *Madame Butterfly* on an 1898 American short story of the same name by John Luther Long, which in turn was taken partly from the very successful 1887 French novel *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti (another of whose semi-autobiographical novels was the basis for *Lakmé*). Belasco's one-act play opened in London in 1900 after its success earlier that year in New York. Puccini was in London to supervise the London premiere of *Tosca* and saw the successful play while there. In spite of speaking little English, Puccini recognized its power and appreciated the simplicity of its plot, as he wanted his operas to be understood without knowledge of the language in which they were written. The libretto by his frequent collaborators Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa diverged fairly strongly from the original short story and play, which treated Butterfly with little respect or understanding. Puccini also recognized the weaknesses of Belasco's play and wanted his heroine to be truly heroic and tragic, which his librettists achieved. The basic plot, however, was fairly similar to the original. Butterfly is a 15-year old girl who has been forced into life as a geisha because of her family's poverty. She enters into an arranged marriage with the American naval officer Pinkerton and believes that it is a real marriage. He leaves her for three years, during which she has their child and remains faithful to her husband in spite of poverty and her chances to make another match. On Pinkerton's return, Butterfly is initially overjoyed that he has come back to her, but soon discovers that he has returned with an American wife and wishes to claim his child to take back to America. Butterfly submits and allows the child to go with him, using her father's ceremonial sword to kill herself to protect her honor, as her father had done.

Given its beloved place in the repertoire, it's noteworthy that its 1904 opening at La Scala in Milan was a total fiasco, drawing catcalls and derisive comments from the audience. Puccini immediately withdrew it for revisions, including expanding it from two acts to three, and its reappearance three months later in Brescia was a success. He continued to make revisions to it for a few years, and its 1907 premiere at the Metropolitan Opera (the Met's first world premiere) with a starry cast including Geraldine Ferrar and Enrico Caruso was an enormous success. It has since remained a staple in theaters around the world along with Puccini's *La Bohème* and *Tosca*.

At the end of Act II, Butterfly hears the cannon announcing the return of Pinkerton's ship and hastily strews the house with flowers from her garden, dressing in her bridal gown to welcome him. Although her servant and child fall asleep waiting beside her, Butterfly sits up all night awaiting his arrival, with the passage of the night indicated by the famous *Humming Chorus*. Although most contemporary productions no longer take an interval at this point, the *Humming Chorus* was actually the end of Act II. Such a remarkable act ending – no large ensemble scene, no thundering choruses – was a daring innovation on Puccini's part.

MEFISTOFELE

Although trained as a composer, Arrigo Boito is perhaps best known as a librettist, notably for Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff* and Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*. He was a respected poet, critic and novelist, as well as a leading member of the Italian *avant garde* and the companion of Eleonora Duse. *Mefistofele* was Boito's first opera (the only one performed in his lifetime), with the distinction of being the first opera performed at La Scala for which the libretto was written by the composer. His second opera, *Nerone*, was premiered at La Scala in 1924, six years after his death. Aside from these, he composed little else, although he apparently completed but destroyed another opera, *Ero and Leandro*. In spite of the brilliance of his libretti for Verdi, we have good reason to lament that he wrote no other operas aside from the two mentioned above, based on the genius displayed in *Mefistofele*. The opera was premiered unsuccessfully at La Scala in 1868 (when Boito was only 26); its premiere aroused riots and duels over its supposed "Wagnerism" and perceived anti-religious viewpoint, and it was closed by the police after two performances. However, Boito condensed and extensively rewrote the opera (six hours in length at its premiere), including transforming Faust from a baritone to a tenor. It met great success upon the premiere of the revised version in Bologna in 1875.

The enduring legend of Faust, in which a learned man sells his soul to the devil, inspired the plays *Dr. Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe and Goethe's two part play in verse, *Faust*, as well as a number of operas: Berlioz' *La damnation de Faust*, Busoni's *Doktor Faust*, and the most famous of all, Gounod's *Faust*. Boito drew on Goethe's work when he wrote his own libretto for *Mefistofele* and set it in a prologue, four acts, and an epilogue. Unlike the other operas based on Goethe's *Faust*, which draw almost exclusively on Goethe's Part 1, Boito's libretto uses both Parts 1 and 2 as the basis for his story, and adheres more closely to the philosophical and spiritual viewpoints of the Goethe play. Faust is an aged scholar who yearns to comprehend all experience, and promises his immortal soul to Mefistofele in order to do so. In the process, he will find love and then abandon the innocent young Margherita, and, once again an old man,

mourn his past life. Faust appeals to heaven to save him from Mefistofele, and he dies to a triumphant song of the celestial choir, as Mefistofele loses his wager with heaven.

Following the Prologue in which Mefistofele wagers with God that he can turn Faust to a life of evil, Act I opens on Easter Sunday as a crowd of peasants gathers in the town square to celebrate (“**Juhé! Juhé!**”). *They sing of the young men who have come to the fest with ribbons in their doublets and hats crowned with flowers. Under the poplars the young women and the masters throw themselves into the dance in a mad gallop! All of them go higgledy-piggledy against the music, singing and pounding their feet on the ground in a circle. The women laugh as they wheel about, their skirts flying in the wind, both brunette and blonde holding tight to one another in flight.*

Hoping to corrupt Faust, Mefistofele transports him to the highest summit of the witches’ hill to observe the orgies of the Witches’ Sabbath as they pay tribute to their master Mefistofele. *The witches and warlocks dance wildly around them, laughing and encouraging Faust to join them (“Ah! su! riddiamo, riddiamo”) as they cavort on the ancient splinters of the doomed world. The dreadful night of the Sabbath resounds with their infernal reel as they dance themselves into a frenzy.*

Abandoned by Faust, Marguerite is accused of drowning their child and also suspected of poisoning her mother with a sleeping potion that Faust provided so they could pursue their illicit affair without interference. Imprisoned and losing hold of her senses, she is alone in her prison cell. *She mourns that her child was drowned the other night in the depths of the sea (“L’altra notte in fondo al mare”), and now to drive her mad, people say that she did it herself. The air is cold and the cell is dark, but she will let her soul stray like a sparrow in the wood, flying away. She begs for pity. Now her mother also lies dead and to add to her horror, they charge that Marguerite poisoned her.*

In the *Epilogue*, Faust is again an old man. As he sits in his laboratory reminiscing about his life, Mefistofele hovers, gloating about Faust’s approaching death. Outside can be heard the voices of penitents. *With their tears and their song for salvation from the blind world below, they appeal to the queen of heaven (“Salve Regina”) and pray for the dying. They are comforted by a celestial choir of cherubim, who describe the dance of the angels that they perform on behalf of those in the hour of need, flying like blazing flames through the air. The penitents, cherubim, and celestial spirits join in a chorus of praise to the Lord. Faust is moved by their holy song and Mefistofele is alarmed as Faust becomes transfixed by the sight of the Bible, finally realizing that this is the beautiful thing he had pursued. Mefistofele vainly tries to divert him as the chorus of cherubim proclaim God’s glory and Faust prays to be taken from this mocking demon. As Faust cries out that this is the single perfect moment he has sought, he falls dead. Mefistofele bitterly realizes that he has no power against the strength of heaven. The angels proclaim that Faust’s spirit is rising to heaven and Mefistofele admits that the Lord has triumphed over him.*

PAGLIACCI

Opera verismo – “truthful” opera – developed during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Diametrically opposed to the Romantic movement, it sought its subjects

among the lives and language of common people, rather than royalty and historical figures, and was notable for its passionate intensity, showing the sordid and brutal and playing upon the emotions in swift, often violent, action. Among the seminal works of *opera verismo* in Italy is *Pagliacci*.

Born in Naples in 1850, Ruggiero Leoncavallo studied composition in Naples, then literature at the University of Bologna, which aroused an interest in music coupled with drama, particularly as exemplified by Wagner. He struggled to survive by giving voice and piano lessons and accompanying singers in cafés all over Europe while he tried to establish himself as an opera composer. Finally, with *Pagliacci*, for which he wrote the libretto himself as he did for most of his works, he became internationally famous at the age of 42. Its Milan premiere in 1892 was quickly succeeded by productions in London and New York the following year. Sued for plagiarism over *Pagliacci* by another author, he successfully defended himself with his testimony that the story was based on an actual case of murder that took place in a theatrical touring company in Calabria. (As a child, he attended the trial, over which his father presided as judge, of a jealous actor who killed his wife after a performance.) Although he wrote a number of other operas and operettas that were successful at the time, and several arias from those works remain popular, *Pagliacci* is his only work that continues to be a standard part of the opera repertoire. Leoncavallo became an early adopter of the gramophone and its potential, and in 1907 he directed a recording of *Pagliacci*, which became the first Italian opera to be commercially recorded in its entirety.

Pagliacci literally means “clowns” and refers to traveling theatrical players in a *commedia* troupe. They arrive in a village in Calabria for the August Feast of the Assumption in the 1860’s. The leading player of the company, Canio, discovers that his wife Nedda is in love with a young villager. In the course of a performance in which Canio plays a comical, cuckolded husband, the line between art and life blurs. Canio kills Nedda onstage, then her lover, before the eyes of the stunned audience.

In the Prologue, the clown Tonio appears before the curtain and asks for the audience’s indulgence (“*Si può?*”) *He explains that the author wishes to revive the ancient theater custom of the prologue. However, he will not reassure them, as in the ancient dramas, that the tears that the actors shed are false. No, the author has tried instead to paint for them a fragment of life, for he is inspired by truth. A nest of memories sang in his soul one day, and he wrote with real tears punctuated by sighs. Thus the audience will see love as humans actually love, and the bitter fruit of hatred. They will hear the pangs of grief, howls of rage, and cynical laughter! Therefore, instead of seeing their poor actors’ clothes, the viewers should contemplate the actors’ souls, for they are flesh and blood and breathe the same air of the orphan world as the audience does.*

In the first scene, the villagers are excited that the troupe has arrived (“*Son qua!*”). *They’ve returned, and everyone follows them into town, the old and the young, all applauding them and their witty quips! Oh, that one’s very serious, bowing as he passes and beating on his great drum. The urchins shriek and throw their caps in the air. And here comes the wagon! Hooray for the prince of clowns! He drives away their cares with humor, but blessed Lord, what an uproar. When does the show start? Canio attempts to quiet the crowd and finally they agree to listen.*

Canio announces that there will be a great show at 11 o'clock prepared by him, their humble servant.

Following the arrival of the *commedia* troupe in the town and the players' lively appeal to come to the performance that evening, the excited villagers hear the sound of the bagpipers from another town ("***I zampognari***") who have arrived to join them in the celebration. *Friends call to each other to hurry to church while the older people comment approvingly on the crowd joyfully walking there. The church bells are calling them to the Lord, and they begin to echo the bells calling them to vespers ("***Din, don, suona vespero***") as the young people hasten in pairs to the church while the sun kisses the hilltop. The young ladies warn that their mothers are observing them and their companions should watch out! Everything is radiating with light and love, but the young men caution each other that the old folks are keeping a close eye on the bold lovers.*

Tonio, one of the other clowns in the troupe, has returned from the tavern to approach Nedda while she is alone and declare his love for her. Nedda first laughs at him and, when he tries to force himself on her, strikes him in the face with a whip and drives him off. After Tonio has left, vowing to revenge himself on her, the young villager Silvio appears and calls to her softly. *Nedda is surprised at his recklessness at such a time ("***Silvio! A quest'ora***") and Silvio replies that he saw her husband Canio and the others at the tavern, so came cautiously through the woods. Nedda is still upset about Tonio and says that she turned away his assault with a whip. Silvio asks if she will live forever with her fear and begs her to decide his destiny and remain with him. The troupe will leave tomorrow – and when she has gone away, what will become of him and his life? If it's true that she's never loved Canio and detests her wandering profession... if her great love for him isn't a fairy tale, then let them go away together that night! End pleads with him not to tempt her. Does he want to ruin her life? It's madness! She has trusted him, she's given him her heart, he shouldn't take advantage of her feverish love. He should pity her, and perhaps it's better if they part. Fate stands against them, and their words are in vain. And yet she can't tear him from her heart – she will live only on the love he's aroused there. Silvio exclaims that she no longer loves him, and she swears that she does. He asks if she will leave with them tomorrow – if she can leave him without pity, why has she bewitched him? Why has she kissed him so ardently? If she can forget those fleeting hours, he cannot. He still desires those burning kisses which set his heart on fire. Nedda admits she has forgotten nothing; she has been turned upside down by her love. She wants to live bound to him, enchanted, a life of calm and tranquil love. She gives herself to him, and he will rule her. She will take him and abandon herself completely. They swear they will forget everything as they declare their love to each other with a kiss. Silvio says to meet at midnight, and Nedda replies that she will then be his forever.*

Near the end of the first act, Canio has discovered that Nedda is unfaithful to him. Preparing for the performance, he speaks to his reflection in the mirror. *Perform! ("***Recitar!***") while he is gripped by delirium. He no longer knows what he is saying or what he is doing! And yet it's necessary - he must force himself! Bah! Is he perhaps a man? He's a clown! Don the costume ("***Vesti la giubba***") and powder your face. The people pay and they want to laugh here. And if Harlequin steals his Columbine from him, laugh, clown, and everyone will applaud! Turn spasms of pain and tears into comic routines, sobs and pain into a smirk...Ah! Laugh, clown, at your shattered love. Laugh at the suffering that poisons your heart!*

CARMEN

Georges Bizet was born into a world of music in 1838 in Paris and remained immersed in it throughout his brief life. Bizet's father was a sometime singing teacher and composer, and his mother was herself a talented pianist and the sister of a famous singing teacher. Both parents noted Bizet's talent as early as age four, and he was groomed to become a composer. In spite of being too young to be officially admitted (at the age of nine) to the Paris Conservatory of Music, his talent so impressed the faculty that he was granted admittance in short order just before he turned ten. Among the faculty under whom he studied, he became particularly close with Charles Gounod and Jacques Halévy (best known today for his opera *La Juive*), whose daughter he would later marry and whose nephew was one of the librettists for *Carmen*. Following three years of study and composition in Italy after winning the prestigious Prix de Rome at age 19, Bizet returned to Paris where he remained for the rest of his life.

Bizet was also noted for his superb skills as a pianist, once astonishing Franz Liszt by playing at sight a piece Liszt thought no other pianist but himself capable of performing. Bizet feared that his instrumental skills would interfere with his composing, however, and he usually refused to play in public except for charity concerts. The young composer was as drawn to literature and theater as he was absorbed in music (his parents hid his books so that precious practice time would not be wasted in reading), and he always had a keen eye as well as an ear for theatrical possibilities. He was said to have told his friend Saint-Saëns that he required the theater rather than the concert hall to fulfill his talents. Since, at the time, composing for the opera was far better paid than other forms of music, he had an extra incentive to follow his natural inclination. However, the world of Parisian opera was rife with mismanagement, greed, and a fear of the unconventional, all of which caused Bizet no end of professional problems, up to and including his final masterpiece *Carmen*. He had had six operas produced by the time of *Carmen*, which became not only his most famous work, but one of the most enduring (and presented) of all operas. He died tragically young of a heart attack (at 36) on the night of the 33rd performance of *Carmen*, just as it was poised to bring him worldwide fame, eclipsing the disappointing critical response it received at its premiere.

Carmen was based on a short novel by Prosper Mérimée with a libretto by the French librettists and playwrights Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. Set in Seville around 1820, the restless young Spanish woman Carmen lives only for sensuality. Attracted by the young military officer Don José, she beguiles him into helping her escape arrest after she is embroiled in a brawl with some of her fellow workers at a cigarette factory. Don José is then sentenced to jail himself for his dereliction. Searching Carmen out after his release, Don José finds his passion is in conflict with Carmen's fierce independence. Jealously fighting with one of her suitors, his own commander Zuniga, he is forced to flee to the mountains with Carmen and her smuggler cohort. Ultimately rejected by Carmen, who has left him for the famous toreador Escamillo, Don José stabs her.

In the first act, the men wait outside a tobacco factory in a square in Seville. *Noting that the bell has rung ("La cloche a sonné"), they watch for the women to return to the factory. They will follow the dark-haired cigarette makers, murmuring words of love to them. Look at them! With*

*impudent glances and flirtatious looks, all of them with cigarettes between their teeth. The factory women appear, smoking and following the smoke through the air with their eyes (“**Dans l’air nous suivons des yeux**”). As the fragrant smoke gently rises to the heavens, how sweetly it goes to their heads and fills their souls. And the sweet talk of lovers is smoke, their raptures and their vows – that is smoke!*

*The men look for Carmen. As she enters, they crowd around her and tell her to be kind – she must tell them what day she will love them. In the **Habanera**, Carmen replies that she doesn’t know – perhaps never, perhaps tomorrow – but certainly not today. Love is a rebellious bird that no one can tame, and in vain do you call him to come if he refuses. Nothing helps, neither threat nor prayer. One man talks well, the other is silent, and she prefers the other. He’s silent, but he is the one she likes. Love is a Bohemian child and has never known any law. If you don’t love Carmen, perhaps she’ll love you. And if she loves you, then you should watch out for yourself!!*

*Don José’s village sweetheart Micaela has come to Seville to deliver a message from his mother. Don José is still stunned by his first encounter with the brazen Carmen and happy to see Micaela. Speak to me of my mother! (“**Parle-moi de ma mère!**”). Micaela replies that she is a faithful messenger sent with a letter for him...and also a little money to add to his salary, and also... José encourages her to go on, but she hesitates - truly, she doesn’t dare...and also another thing, worth more than money, which for a good son will without doubt be worth more. José asks what this other thing is? Speak! Micaela declares that she will speak, and that which his mother has given her, she will now give to José. His mother was leaving the chapel with her and it was then as they embraced that his mother told her, “You will go to the town, the road is not long, and once in Seville, you will look for my son, my José, my child. And you will tell him that his mother thinks night and day of her absent son, that she regrets and she hopes, that she forgives and she waits. All of this, lovely girl, you will say to him, and this kiss that I give you from me - you will give to him.” José is moved at the thought of a kiss from his mother, and Micaela responds that she will give it to him as she has promised. José exclaims that he can see his mother, yes, he sees again his village. Oh memories of other times! Sweet memories of his land! The dear memories fill his heart with strength and with courage. Micaela joins him in his vision of their home.*

*Act 2 opens in the tavern of Lillas Pastia by the walls of Seville, a meeting place for both smugglers and off-duty soldiers who come to meet the worker women, and where Carmen had whispered to Don José that she would wait for him. Carmen watches the dancers and ignores Captain Zuniga, Don José’s superior, who is wooing her. Inspired by the sound of the sistrum (an Egyptian percussion instrument somewhere between a tambourine and a rattle), she suddenly begins to sing, joined by her friends Frasquita and Mercedes. *The rods of the sistrum (“**Les tringles des sistres**”)* jingled with a metallic brilliance and at this strange music the young women rose. The Basque drums and the frenzied guitars ground out under obstinate hands the same song, the same refrain. Copper and silver rings gleamed as cloth striped in orange and red floated in the wind. Dance was wed with song. Uncertain and timid at first, then livelier and faster, it mounted and mounted! The Bohemian men played their instruments with a vengeance and the dazzling noise bewitched the women. Under the rhythm of the song, burning, mad, fevered, intoxicated, they let themselves be swept away by the whirlwind.*

Don José has come directly to the tavern after being released from two months' imprisonment for having let Carmen escape. He is incensed that Carmen has been dancing for the officers in the tavern. *Carmen tells him that she'll dance for him in his honor (“Je vais danser en votre honneur”). Don José is transfixed by her dance until he suddenly hears the bugles sound his company's retreat. He tells Carmen to stop for a moment...yes, it's the buglers sounding retreat! Doesn't she hear them? Carmen says she did her best without music, but it's gloomy to dance without an orchestra. She thanks heaven for sending her the music of the trumpets and begins to dance again. As the trumpets draw nearer, Don José says that the trumpets mean he must return to his quarters for roll-call. Carmen is furious that he would return to his quarters. She really was too stupid for taking so much trouble to amuse the gentleman. She sang, she danced! God forgive her, she thinks she did a little more – she loved him! Ah – there's the bugle calling again. He's leaving – he's left – fly away, canary! She says to take his hat and his sword and get out, back to his barracks. Don José tells her she's cruel to mock him. It pains him to leave, because never, never has any woman before her so profoundly troubled his heart. Carmen continues to mock his retreat – oh my God, oh my God, it's retreat! He's going to be late, he loses his head, he runs! And this is his love! Don José begs her to believe in his love, to listen to him, but Carmen won't be appeased. He takes from his uniform the flower that Carmen had tossed to him when they first encountered each other.*

He tells Carmen that the flower that she threw to him (“La fleur que tu m'avais jetée”) stayed with him in prison. Withered and dry, it kept its sweet fragrance and for hours its scent would make him drunk with the memory of her, and during the night he would see her! He began to curse her, to hate her, to ask himself why fate had put her in his path. Then he accused himself of blasphemy and felt within himself only one desire – to see her again! She had only to appear, to cast one glance at him, to take possession of his entire being.

In Act II, at Lillas Pastia's tavern where Carmen is relaxing (while Don José languishes in jail), a crowd cheers the arrival of the toreador Escamillo after another triumph in the ring. *Escamillo returns their toast (“Votre toast”) and says soldiers and bullfighters can understand each other – their pleasure is in combat. He describes his feat: The bull ring is full and the spectators are losing their heads, calling to each other in a great fracas. Taunts and rowdy cries drive them into a fury, for this is the day of courage – this is the day for men with heart. Toreador, on guard! And think that as you fight, dark eyes watch you and love awaits you! Suddenly it falls silent – what is happening? No more cries, this is the moment. The bull springs forward, leaping from his pen! He comes, he strikes, bringing down the picador. “Bravo, Toro,” yells the crowd. The bull goes, then returns and strikes again. Shaking the banderillas, full of fury, he runs. The ring is full of blood and everyone flees, climbing over the fences. And now it is the toreador's turn – on guard! And think of the dark eyes that watch you and the love that is waiting for you. Mercedes and Frasquita woo Escamillo, but none can compete with Carmen.*

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