

# Operaphoria™

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METROPOLITAN OPERA, LIVE IN HD

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## Carmen Simulcast

Carmen is one of the three most performed operas of all time—approximately 1,000 performances at the Metropolitan Opera alone. Since its premiere at the Opera Comique in 1875 it has captivated audiences in virtually every operatic theater in the world, and it shows no signs of letting up. The opera is based on Prosper Mérimée’s hot-blooded Carmen, who works in a cigar factory. In her first scene she spots Don José in the crowd. Because he is

committed to the loyal and innocent Micaëla, he is the only man not lusting after Carmen, and this is exactly what catches her attention. She sees it as a challenge to seduce him, and tosses a cassia flower at him, which hits him in the chest.

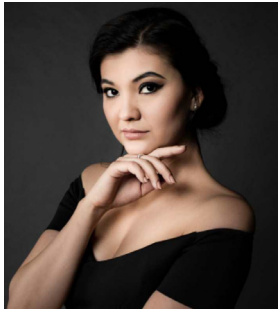
The orchestra plays it as a sharp, loud shot, so we know from the beginning that this man will be no match for her seductions. In the next scene, Carmen slashes the face of a fellow worker with her cigar knife. Unrepentant, she is handcuffed and taken to jail, where Don José must guard her. It is no contest. By the end of Carmen’s *seguidilla*, the vulnerable Don José cannot resist her advances. He helps her escape in exchange for her promise to meet him later for a drink and a dance at Lillas Pastia’s—a down-scale bar in Seville.

The plot is uncovered, and Don José must spend a month in jail for helping her escape, although Carmen herself gets away with it because she has connections in the police department. When his

month is up, he goes to the bar to find her. True to her word, she brings him to an upstairs room where she begins her best seductive dance routine, just for him. But, unfortunately, the dance is interrupted by a distant trumpet sound calling him back to his military duties. They argue about it, and Carmen becomes totally disgusted with his responding to the call of duty, which makes no sense to her. She tells him to get out, which he does, but on the way out he bumps into his Captain, who has come to Pastia’s for the same reason as Don José. (Carmen always works both sides of the street.) A fight ensues. Don José draws his sword against a superior officer, and his fate is sealed. The act ends with the chorus singing a rousing nonconformist national anthem to the glories of freedom and irresponsibility.

In Act 3 Don José has joined Carmen and her band of smugglers, but, as we might suspect, their relationship is not working out. This is not the kind of thing that can be improved with marriage

*(continued...)*



*The dazzling Russian mezzo-soprano, Aigul Akhmetshina, will sing Carmen*

(continued from front)

counseling. She is bored with him, and is now more interested in Escamillo, the toreador who is bold and fearless, like her. Escamillo shows



*Piotr Beczala is  
Don Jose*

up at the smugglers camp and announces he is there to seduce Carmen. The jealous Don José unwisely challenges the famous toreador to a knife fight. Escamillo toys with him, disarms him, and releases him. Micaëla then arrives

at the camp, looking for Don José, to tell him that his mother needs him. Carmen encourages him to go home to his mother. He is humiliated by her dismissal, but goes home with Micaëla, swearing he will return to get Carmen, and he will force her to like him. Meanwhile, Escamillo has magnanimously invited everyone to the bullfight in Seville, where, he is certain, he will be at his most brilliant.

The last act takes place outside the bullring in Seville. Don José has come looking for Carmen. She fearlessly approaches him and tells him she knows he wants to kill her. “Either kill me or leave me alone. I no longer care about you.” It is the final statement of the woman who says she believes in freedom and liberty. Don José kills her, and then falls over her dead body, howling about how he has just killed the one thing he loved.

It is easy to criticize the pathology of these characters. However, it is important to acknowledge that this opera has survived because it speaks to us. It presents profound truths about wounded people forming passionate attachments. We see pieces of ourselves in these characters. We are reminded of how we, too, foolishly attempt to attach ourselves to people we hope will make us complete, or provide the piece we fear is missing, or make us happy when we can’t make ourselves happy. We, too, destroy parts of ourselves as we harm the ones we love. – GP

## Carmen As Art



These two paintings by Edouard Manet were inspired by Bizet’s *Carmen*. The painting on the left is from the Princeton University Art Museum, recently displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in their historic “Manet/Degas” show. It was an unfinished work discovered in Manet’s studio after his death, and was first purchased by Degas. When sold to Princeton it was titled “Gypsy With a Cigarette,” although it had earlier labels, including “Indian With a Cigarette” and “Mexican Woman With a Cigarette.” Princeton changed the title to “Woman With a Cigarette.” On the right is “Portrait of Emilie Ambre as Carmen,” now on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. – GP

### Production

#### *Carmen*, by Bizet

Sat, Jan 27, 2024 12:55 p.m.

Conductor: **Daniele Rustioni**

Production: **Carrie Cracknell**

Carmen: **Aigul Akhmetshina**

Don Jose: **Piotr Beczala**

Micaela: **Angel Blue**

Escamillo: **Kyle Ketelsen**

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**Next Simulcast:** March 9, 2024  
*La Forza del Destino*, by Verdi

## Carmen Follies

When *Carmen* opened at the Paris Opéra-Comique (1875), it almost exploded into opera history. Nothing like it had been seen before, and the Comique audience was horrified. There, self-satisfied, middle-class patrons were accustomed to sentimental, morally uplifting operas; after all, they came to arrange their children's marriages and to be seen in all their finery. But *Carmen's* troubles began even earlier, in rehearsal, where the musicians found the music too difficult, too complex, too Wagnerian. And the women choristers rebelled at being required to smoke and fight: too unladylike. To all this, opening night reviewers added their shock, one swearing, "If *Carmen* went one step further the police would have been called in." Another damned it as "a delirium of castanets, of leers, of provocative hip-swinging, of knife-stabs gallantly distributed among both sexes; of cigarettes roasted by the ladies; of St. Vitus dancers, smutty rather than sensuous." Never before had the Opéra-Comique seen a "woman who openly seduced a man on the stage and proudly proclaimed a series of lovers, with allegiance to none!"

Why Prosper Mérimée's steamy novel was selected for adaptation at the Comique remains a mystery. When impresario Adolph de Leuven learned of it, he was horrified: "You'll frighten the audiences away....Death at the Opéra-Comique. That's never happened before, do you hear, never! Don't let her die. I implore you." But die she did, and the opening night *Carmen* became a *succès de scandale*. Though its 48 performances through the remainder of the 1875 season suggest *Carmen* was something special, poor Bizet did not live to enjoy it. He died three months after the opening. Tradition has attributed his death to the critics' harsh treatment, but Bizet had long suffered ill health. Though his death at 37 was tragic, critics could claim no credit.

But not all critics were scandalized, and in short order Bizet was praised by both Brahms and Wagner, composers of vastly different tastes. Both recognized the power and originality of the music, Wagner adding: "Here, thank God, at last for a change is someone with ideas in his head." Tchaikovsky correctly predicted *Carmen* would become the most popular opera in the world. And Nietzsche, a Wagner apostate, could not see *Carmen* often enough.

All this seems curious today, after a century of flaming, and even tepid, *Carmens*. For modern audiences, realism on the lyric stage is the combination they crave. And *Carmen* has become the symbol of passion, a woman unyielding in her demand for freedom of heart and spirit.

Because of its raw sexuality, censors often sanitized early *Carmen* productions. For example, early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kansas City censors found scantily clad women, smoking and singing risqué lyrics, more than they could tolerate, so the management recast them as milkmaids, their chorus becoming a paean to drinking milk. But times change, and the 1984 Francesco Rosi film, starring Julia Migenes and Plácido Domingo, glorified the opera's sexuality. One publicity shot showed the spitfire Migenes rolling a cigar on the inside of her bare thigh. More recently, the Florence (Italy) *Carmen* took a stand against violence to women by altering the final scene. When Don Jose threatened to kill *Carmen* she grabbed his pistol and shot him, sparing herself to live and love again.

What can all this mean for the future of opera? Will we see Butterfly stab Pinkerton rather than herself? Desdemona hiding a dagger under her pillow to beat Othello to the draw? And will the history of Christianity be improved by having Salome poison Herod and save John the Baptist? Stay tuned. – GD

## Watching Women

In the first act of *Carmen* there is a scene in which the workers of the cigar factory take their lunch break. It is hot in the factory, and one of the officers refers to the women as being “scantily clad,” which makes them an interesting diversion for the soldiers. As the time approaches for the lunch bell, men gather in the square to get a good look at the women. This was an actual social convention in Seville in the 1850s, and one resource described it as a regular “tourist attraction” up until about the 1920s, ending only with the mechanization of the tobacco industry.

Clearly, there would be two conflicting opinions about that development. – GP

## Duets

In most operatic love stories, the lovers get to sing great duets. Romeo and Juliet have four love duets. Even failing love relationships in opera still get to sing together. Although Butterfly and Pinkerton are a miserable mismatch, their love duet is 14 minutes long. Anna Bolena and Percy are doomed, but they sing together rapturously for more than ten minutes.

Sometimes composers write duets to give us information about the nature of the lovers’ relationships. Violetta and Alfredo seem to be struggling while singing together. Otello and Desdemona sing at the same time for more than nine minutes, but it is more of a dialogue than a duet. There is no harmony in their singing. The harmony is in the orchestra.

Don José and Carmen *never* sing a love duet. It is the composer’s way of telling us who “makes music” together. In the first act there is a lovely duet with Don José and Micaëla. And, in the last act there is a brief but strong duet with Carmen and Escamillo. Those duets are harmonious. Those couples belong together. But not Don José and Carmen. Their communications are declamatory, not lyrical. They sing together only briefly, and only in death. – GP

## 2023/2024 Metropolitan Opera

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Schedule

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### *La Forza del Destino*, by Verdi

March 9, 2024 Note: 12:00 noon.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts the Met’s first new *Forza* in almost 30 years. Lise Davidsen brings her big voice to Leonora, one of the most spectacular heroine roles in all of opera. Brian Jagde sings Leonora’s forbidden lover Don Alvaro. Judit Kutasi is the fortune teller.

### *Romeo et Juliette*, by Gounod

March 23, 2024 12:55 pm

The Bartlett Sher production of this favorite romantic opera. Yannick Nezet-Seguín conducts a sparkling cast, featuring Nadine Sierra, who won the Met National Council Auditions with Juliette’s aria – “Je veux vivre.” Benjamin Bernheim as Romeo. Will Liverman sings Mercutio, and Samantha Hankey is Stephano.

### *La Rondine*, by Puccini

April 20, 2024 12:55 pm

Sometimes described as Puccini’s operetta – which is what he had been commissioned to write. A lyric comedy with a sad ending, set in Paris and the Riviera, full of music to set us dancing. Angel Blue is Magda, a French courtesan who, like Violetta, falls for an idealistic lover who convinces her to abandon her life of excess. Jonathan Tetelman is Ruggero. Maestro Speranza Scapucci conducts.

### *Madama Butterfly*, by Puccini

May 11, 2024 12:55 pm