

Carmen

An Opera in Four Acts

Based on *Carmen*

A novella by Prosper Mérimée

Music by Georges Bizet

Libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy

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Carmen

Premiere

First performance on March 3, 1875 at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, France.

Cast of Characters

Carmen, a Romani woman
Don José, a corporal
Escamillo, a bullfighter
Micaëla, a young countrywoman
Frasquita, Carmen's friend
Mercédès, Carmen's friend
Remendado, a smuggler
Le Dancaire, a smuggler
Zuniga, a lieutenant
Moralès, a corporal
Chorus

Mezzo-soprano
Tenor
Bass-baritone
Soprano
Soprano
Mezzo-soprano
Tenor
Baritone
Bass
Baritone



2024-2025 Season Brief Summary

Don José, a soldier, is attracted to Carmen, a beautiful and flirtatious Romani woman who works at the local cigarette factory. When Carmen is arrested for attacking a co-worker, she charms Don José into allowing her to escape. He is imprisoned for helping Carmen.

Don José meets Carmen at a local inn upon his release. She tries to entice him, insisting that he desert the army and come away with her. He refuses, but before he can leave he is confronted by his officer, Zuniga, who has come to romance Carmen. Don José becomes angry and insubordinate, and tries to fight Zuniga. Carmen intervenes, asking smugglers Remendado and Le Dancaire to restrain Zuniga. Don José decides he has no choice but to flee with Carmen to the mountains, having marred his reputation in the army.

Carmen eventually tires of Don José and becomes interested in the bullfighter Escamillo. Don José becomes increasingly jealous and he swears he will never give up on Carmen. However, Micaëla, a young woman from Don José's village, finds him in his mountain hide-out and convinces Don José to return home to see his dying mother.

In Don José's absence, Carmen returns to Seville and becomes Escamillo's lover. A desperate Don José finds Carmen in Seville outside the bullring. He tries to convince her to return to him. She refuses, valuing her free will and independence above all else. In a passion of frustrated desire and misery, Don José kills Carmen. He sobs over her body, calling out her name, as he surrenders to the police.

Detailed Synopsis

Time/place: 1820s, southern Spain (around Seville)

ACT I

A company of soldiers is gathered outside their post in a public square in Seville. Corporal Moralès spots a shy young woman and flirts with her. She is looking for another soldier, Don José. When she learns that he will be arriving when the guards change shifts, she departs. Don José arrives and is told about the young woman who was asking after him. Don José explains that her name is Micaëla, a young orphaned woman from his village who was raised by his mother. He also tells his lieutenant, Zuniga, about the women who work in the nearby cigarette factory who will be returning from the lunch break. A crowd gathers to watch them walk by.

The factory bell rings and the cigarette workers walk toward the factory. Carmen is the last to appear, an event eagerly awaited by the men present. As she passes by she sings about the fickleness of love in the aria, “L’amour est un oiseau rebelle,” (“Love is a rebellious bird”). The aria, called the “Habanera” because of its rhythmic pattern, has a descending chromatic melody, which accentuates its seductive quality. All the men are captivated by her, except Don José who pays her no attention. His indifference provokes Carmen, and she focuses her attention on him. Micaëla returns and gives Don José a letter and a kiss from his mother. The two reminisce about their village. After she leaves, Don José reads the letter in which his mother suggests that he marry Micaëla. He promises himself that he will.

An uproar is heard from the factory and the workers stream out, shouting that Carmen has wounded one of them. Zuniga tries to sort out the accusations and then sends Don José into the factory to arrest Carmen. When she is brought out, Zuniga questions her; Carmen is defiant. Zuniga leaves her in Don José’s custody while he prepares arrest papers. Left alone with Don José, Carmen seduces him, assuring him that her love is there for the taking. She will be awaiting him at a local tavern. In the duet that follows, Don José succumbs to her enticements and with promises of love, loosens her restraints. As she is led away by other officers, Don José allows himself to be pushed away and Carmen successfully escapes.

ACT II

Carmen and two friends, Frasquita and Mercédès, are enjoying themselves at the local tavern with Zuniga and some other soldiers. Zuniga has fallen under Carmen's spell. The tavern is closing but the soldiers are not interested in going home. They invite the three women to accompany them elsewhere, but Carmen and her friends refuse the invitation. Zuniga discloses to Carmen that Don José had been imprisoned for allowing her to escape and that he has just been released.

Outside of the tavern a crowd gathers around the famous bullfighter, Escamillo. His entrance marks the first occurrence of the "toreador" or "bullfighter" theme. Escamillo is immediately drawn to Carmen, but she rebuffs him. Both Zuniga and Escamillo leave, with Zuniga promising Carmen he will be returning to see her.

Back in the tavern, the three women learn that infamous smugglers Remendado and Le Dancaire have arrived. The group discuss their smuggling plans. Carmen, however, informs them that she cannot take part in their plans because she is in love and awaiting the soldier who let her escape. Don José's voice is heard outside the tavern, indicating his arrival. The small group departs, leaving Carmen and Don José alone. Carmen greets him warmly, but Don José does not reciprocate. Carmen mocks him, saying he does not love her; she demands that he choose her or the army. Offended by Carmen's ultimatum, Don José prepares to storm out when his officer Zuniga returns to the tavern. Zuniga orders him to leave but Don José refuses. The two men are about to fight when Carmen intervenes and calls on the smugglers to restrain Zuniga. They bind him and hold him hostage as they make their escape. Carmen asks Don José if he has made his decision - her or the army. Having angered his superior officer, he replies that he now has no alternative but to join the smugglers' band. Carmen assures him he will love the free life in the mountains.

ACT III

Don José and the smugglers have stopped at a mountain hideaway. A flare-up occurs between Carmen and Don José - it is clear that Carmen is already tiring of him. Don José, however, is still smitten with her but expresses remorse that his mother still believes that he is an honorable man. Carmen retorts contemptuously that he should return to his mother. Carmen's response angers José and he responds threateningly.

Frasquita and Mercédès bring out a deck of cards in order to tell one another's fortunes. Carmen turns over the cards and they spell out death for her and Don José. She comments fatalistically that the cards never lie. Dancairo and Remendado enter, preparing to transport their stolen goods - they take along the three women to distract the customs guards. Don José is left behind, placed on guard duty. He conceals himself behind a rock and waits.

A man appears and looks around cautiously. He is a guide who has brought Micaëla to find Don José. He motions to her and she moves forward, terrified by her surroundings; she prays for God's protection. Suddenly Don José fires a shot. Micaëla thinks he is shooting at her and she hides. However, it is not Micaëla whom Don José has aimed at, but Escamillo. The bullfighter has come looking for Carmen because he has heard gossip that her affair with Don José is over. Don José is stung by this statement, and identifies himself and challenges Escamillo to a knife fight. Don José gets the upper hand when Escamillo falls, but before he can finish the fight Carmen and the others return. Carmen stays Don José's hand and Escamillo vows to finish the fight at another time. He leaves after inviting everyone to the bullfight in Seville.

As the smugglers prepare to leave, Micaëla is discovered. She tells Don José his mother wants him to return home. He resists, not wanting to leave Carmen. Carmen takes this opportunity to encourage him to go, saying that this itinerant life is not for him. José refuses, believing that Carmen simply wants to run after Escamillo. However, when Micaëla reveals that his mother is dying, he agrees to return home.

ACT IV

The square outside of a bullfight arena in Seville is filled with throngs of people all eagerly awaiting the arrival of the matadors. The excitement of the crowd builds, leading to the arrival of Escamillo. A richly dressed Carmen is at his side. Frasquita and Mercédès pull Carmen aside and warn her that Don José is in the crowd. Carmen says she does not fear him and purposefully remains behind when everyone else goes inside the arena.

Don José comes forth disheveled and in rags; he and Carmen are alone. She states she is not afraid of him and he pleads with her to start a new life with him. Filled with contempt she tells him his entreaties are useless because she no longer loves him. The more he begs her, the angrier she becomes. She tells him that she was born free and she will die free. The "toreador" theme and the cheers of the crowd inside the arena punctuate their confrontation. Carmen tries to pass him and enter the arena but Don José blocks her way. Furious, Carmen challenges him to kill her or let

her pass. She again affirms her love for Escamillo, disregarding the danger that José's rising temper creates. Filled with anger and indignation, Carmen removes the ring Don José once gave her and throws it at him. She tries to pass him but he stabs her while the crowd cheers Escamillo's victory in the bullring. As the crowd exits the arena, they are horrified to encounter an aggrieved Don José kneeling by Carmen's lifeless body. He confesses to her murder and calls out her name one last time before surrendering to the police.

About the composer

Georges Bizet was born in Paris on October 25, 1838 into a musical family. His father, Adolphe Bizet, was a voice teacher. His mother came from the famous musical Delsarte family and was an excellent pianist. Bizet's uncle, Francois Delsarte, was a celebrated singer. It, therefore, came as no surprise when Bizet showed signs of musical talent at a very early age. He was admitted to the Paris Conservatory at the age of nine.

Bizet quickly rose to prominence at the conservatory. His most influential teacher was Jacques Halévy (1799-1862), who taught composer Charles Gounod (1818-1893), and was himself a prominent opera composer. Bizet was also mentored by Gounod who wrote several operas, the most well-known of which are *Faust* (1859) and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867). At age eighteen Bizet competed for the coveted Prix de Rome. The judges awarded no first prize that year and Bizet won second prize. He entered again the following year, in 1857, and won.

The Prix de Rome, founded in 1666 by Louis XIV, was a scholarship that could be awarded to musicians, painters, sculptors or architects. The winner spent time abroad, particularly in Rome, studying in their field. In addition, living expenses were provided for three to five years. At the end of each year the prize winners had to submit a specified work (known as an envoi) so that a panel of judges called the Académie des Beaux-Arts (Academy of Fine Arts) could determine their progress. The Académie shared both public and private feedback with the artist about the piece in question. Other famous Prix winners were composers Hector Berlioz (1803-1869), Jules Massenet (1842-1912), Gounod, and Claude Debussy (1862-1918).

In 1857, Bizet departed for Rome and spent three years there. He studied the landscape, the culture, Italian literature, and art. Musically he studied the scores of revered composers such as Wagner, Verdi, and Mozart. At the end of the first year he was asked to submit a Christian work as his required composition, as was standard practice. As a self-described pagan, Bizet felt uneasy and hypocritical writing a Christian piece.¹ Against the standard practices of the Académie, he submitted a comic opera, *Don Procopio* (1859). The Académie praised Bizet's musical talent in its public review. In its private review, the Académie conveyed its displeasure with Bizet's departure from standard practice.

¹ In a letter to fellow Prix de Rome winner, French artist Félix-Henri Giacomotti, Bizet reveals that "I am more pagan than Christian." See Winton Dean, *Georges Bizet: His Life and Work* (London: J.M. Dent, 1965), 26.

Early in his career, Bizet displayed an independent spirit that would be reflected in innovative ideas in his opera compositions. Bizet’s fourth and final envoi was a one-act opera, *La guzla de l’émir* (*The Emir’s Guzla*, 1862).² After abruptly pulling it from its intended premiere at the Opéra-Comique in Paris in 1863, Bizet repurposed parts of it to fulfill a commission to compose and stage his 1863 opera *Les pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*) at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris. Though *Pearl Fishers* is now Bizet’s second most well-known opera after *Carmen*, it received mixed to negative reviews after its premiere.



A guzla made in Bosnia, Yugoslavia, likely in the 19th century. Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

When Bizet returned to his native Paris he supported himself as a freelance musician by giving piano lessons, producing orchestrations and piano transcriptions, and composing operas. Financially, he found his chosen profession difficult. In an article he wrote for the *Revue Nationale et Étrangère* (*National and Foreign Review*), he described music composition as “a splendid art” but “a sad vocation.”³ He endured no less than five operatic failures before writing *Carmen*. His critics, however, clearly recognized his abilities as a composer, as they still complimented moments of compositional genius in his works.

² ‘Emir’ is an Arabic word for a monarch, high-ranking officer, or other person in an authoritative position. A ‘guzla’ or ‘gusle’ is a bowed single-string instrument commonly used in folk music in southeastern Europe.

³ Quoted in Joseph Bennett, “The Great Composers,” *The Musical Times and Singing Class Curricular* 27, no. 525 (November 1886), 646.

In 1867 he became engaged briefly to G enevi ve Hal evy, the daughter of his former teacher at the Paris Conservatory. The family of Bizet's mother objected to the marriage because the Hal evys were Jewish and the Hal evy family objected because of Bizet's bohemian lifestyle and financial irresponsibility. The two married in 1869 but it was not to be a happy marriage.

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 spurred Bizet's patriotic spirit and he joined the National Guard in defense of Paris. The war also had an effect on the opera world. Prior to the war, composer Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880) had reigned in Paris. After the emotional, political, and economic turmoil of the war, his light-hearted satires were no longer as appealing to Parisians. Looking for the next generation of Parisian opera composers, the Op era-Comique engaged Bizet to write a one-act comic opera, *Djamileh*, in 1872. It was a failure, but the work won high praise for its music. As a result the Op era-Comique commissioned to write a full, three-act opera. The libretto was to be furnished by Ludovic Hal evy, G enevi ve's cousin, and Henri Meilhac - the pair was a very popular libretto team of the time. The topic of the opera was to be decided by Bizet, the librettists, and a representative from the Comique. Bizet and the librettists rejected the suggestions from the Comique in favor of the novel *Carmen* by Prosper M erim e as the source for the opera. Written in 1845, M erim e's novel contained sex, dishonor and murder. As implied in the name, the Comique typically presented more comic and light-hearted operas, so the management was very unhappy with the chosen subject matter. Blatant sexuality and a violent on-stage murder had never been seen on the stage of the Comique.

Bizet was enthusiastic and took an active part in writing the libretto. He was committed to the realistic nature of the characters and the plot. Bizet intended to capture the perceived exoticism and flair of Spain in his music while remaining true to his lyrical French roots. As a result, his orchestration brought a new dimension to the French operatic stage that was unfamiliar to French audiences. By the time the opera went into rehearsal a furor had arisen over it. Management tried to change the ending and newspapers were suggesting that the Op era-Comique would no longer be a family theater.⁴ In rehearsal chorus members were unhappy about being asked to move about the stage freely and act while they sang. The orchestra

⁴ One reviewer for *Le Gaulois* declared that C elestine Galli-Mari  (the mezzo-soprano who created the role of Carmen) portrayed Carmen with such evocativeness that "it would be difficult to go much farther without provoking the intervention of the police." Quoted in Winton, *Georges Bizet*, 117.

found the music difficult and unidiomatic. By the night of the opening, however, everyone involved with the production was fully supportive.

On March 3, 1875, the opera had its premiere. It was deemed a colossal failure. Bizet's music was assailed, the character Carmen was too lewd and the whole event was too sordid for the respectable public. It did have forty-eight performances, but played to smaller and smaller audiences.

Bizet's health, never robust, suffered, and he became depressed. He died at his country estate on June 3, 1875, believing he was a failure. It was three months to the day of the opera's premiere, and it was also his sixth wedding anniversary. He was thirty-six years old. Four thousand people attended his funeral, and Charles Gounod served as one of the pallbearers.

About the librettists

Henri Meilhac (1830-1897) was a prolific opera librettist and playwright; he wrote nearly 100 libretti for operas and other staged theater pieces. Meilhac was born in Paris and showed a talent for writing and humor at a young age. He periodically wrote comic pieces for Parisian newspapers as a creative outlet.

He began his career as a lawyer, but had transitioned to writing as his fulltime career by 1860. He gained fame for his witty and satirical comedies, often exploring themes of love, marriage, and societal norms.

He is best known for his collaborations with composer Jacques Offenbach and playwright Ludovic Halévy, with whom he wrote the libretto for *Carmen*. Some of Meilhac's other opera libretti, such as *La Belle Hélène* (*The Beautiful Helen*, 1864) and *La Vie Parisienne* (*Parisian Life*, 1866), both created in collaboration with Offenbach and Halévy, played a significant role in shaping the genre of French operetta during the 19th century. His enduring legacy lies in his sharp dialogue, clever wordplay, and contributions to French theater.

Meilhac died in Paris in 1897 and is buried in Montmartre Cemetery.

Ludovic Halévy (1834-1908) was born in Paris to a creative family. Though his father, Léon Halévy, worked as a civil servant, writing was a frequent hobby of his. Ludovic's uncle, Jacques Halévy, was a popular opera composer in Paris at the time and music teacher – Bizet was one of his students.

Similarly to Meilhac, Halévy did not start out his career as a writer, despite showing an early talent for it. He held various administrative positions for the French government while writing and publishing a few works in the 1850s and early 1860s. Many of these works were in collaboration with Offenbach.

The libretto he wrote with Hector Crémieux for Offenbach's comic opera, *Orphée aux enfers* (*Orpheus in the Underworld*, 1858) helped make Halévy famous. In 1860 he met Meilhac and the two collaborated on several comic theater works such as operettas, vaudeville, and farces. In 1865 he retired from public administration and shifted to writing full time. His collaborative relationships with Offenbach and Meilhac helped him have a fruitful career.

Because Halévy had made his career primarily on comedic and farcical works, his number of published works and commissions steadily decreased after 1870. Parisians began to lose interest in comic theater productions, particularly after the Franco-Prussian War. The war exposed the harsh class differences in Paris and magnified the decadence of the ruling class. Comic theater works that mixed the classes in favor of some sort of moralistic resolution were no longer palatable by the majority of the Parisian public. Though Halévy and Meilhac wrote the libretto for *Carmen* during this period, it was not a high point in either of their careers.

Halévy's later works, both with and without Meilhac's collaboration, focused on the portrayal of the lower classes in France and castigated the aristocracy. Halévy wrote a few novels in the 1880s which were well-received by the French public.

Though he wrote very little from the 1890s until his death in 1908, he remained active in Paris's intelligentsia as a member of Académie française and the Society of Dramatic Authors, among other groups.

He died in Paris in 1908 and is buried in Montmartre Cemetery.

Historical Background

France was the operatic capitol of Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century. During this period a type of musical drama was established that came to be known as “grand opera.” This term helped to differentiate it from the less serious opéra comique (comic opera) which had spoken dialogue in between the musical numbers. In addition to sung dialogue, called recitative, grand opera had other essential features. The subject matter is typically of a serious and heroic nature. The style of singing, instrumental music, and staging are also grandiose in scope and complexity. Over time, opéra comique broadened its scope to include more serious subjects, but the tradition of spoken dialogue remained. As the century progressed, grand opera became somewhat more predictable and less original and the opéra comique became the venue for the introduction of new and more innovative works.

Literary trends in France also had an impact on the arts and eventually, opera libretti. In a reaction to the prevailing spirit of Romanticism there was a desire to challenge idealism and replace it with realism. Eventually, literary realism bled into the opera world, resulting in *vérisme* opera in France and eventually, *verismo* opera in Italy. Writers, artists and opera composers began to portray everyday life, the common man in his personal struggles, and even those who were considered immoral or degenerate rather than the mythical and the heroic.

The opera *Carmen* is based on a literary work, the novella *Carmen* by Prosper Mérimée. It was written in 1845 and is an early example of realism. In addition to its unsentimental view of its characters’ lives, it contained other elements that fascinated the public, such as the allure of the foreign and the exotic. Its setting was in southern Spain and the main character was Romani, which highlighted a country and culture that most of the public would have found foreign and exciting. Mérimée used the framing device of a narrator, and his characters were coarse and unscrupulous. Carmen herself was a thief and the leader of a band of smugglers and bandits, of whom Don José was a member.

When Bizet was commissioned by the Opéra-Comique theater to write a full-length opera in 1873, he actively pushed for the Mérimée novella to be used as the basis for the libretto. He worked closely with the librettists, Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac, to shape the libretto, even writing some of the words himself. The resulting opera differed from Mérimée’s story in several ways. The realist setting was retained but the narrator was eliminated. The Carmen character became one of

the smugglers, not the leader, and her criminal activities were minimized. She was portrayed more as a *femme fatale* who values her freedom above all else. The role of Don José was also softened, showing his downfall and making him more of a victim. The characters Micaëla and Escamillo were created to serve as foils for Carmen and Don José. These changes streamlined the story and heightened the drama.

In the opera, Bizet portrays Carmen as a woman who had deliberately thought through her philosophy of life and refuses to depart from it. For Carmen, to be free and independent is primary. She has rejected all restraints of accepted society. Conversely, Don José has been raised in a small village with a strict, moral upbringing. The conflict between them arises when Don José is confronted with Carmen's philosophy, which is in direct opposition to his own. The introduction of Micaëla and Escamillo sharpen this conflict. Micaëla represents the moral society in which Don José was raised and symbolizes his ideal woman. Don José feels great passion for Carmen but also wants the same relationship with her that he might have had with Micaëla – one in which Carmen would have to play the role of a submissive wife. Carmen does not share his values or his desire for a stable married life; therein lies Don José's downfall. Escamillo, on the other hand, is Carmen's ideal lover. He is patient and does not require her eternal faithfulness. He adores her but does not need to possess her. The opera *Carmen* is more about the downfall and transformation of Don José than about Carmen herself. She is the catalyst that triggers Don José's downfall from honorable soldier to murderous outcast.

The failure of this early example of French *véritisme* opera and its subject matter has been well-documented. After the end of the fourth and final act (an act received in icy silence by the audience), Bizet walked the streets of Paris all night, frustrated by the public's inability to understand his music and what he was trying to achieve. He retired to the country, depressed by the outpouring of criticism, and believed his greatest work was a failure. Within three months he was dead, having suffered two heart attacks.

Interest in the opera was not dead, however. Many famous composers were effusive in their praise. Some in the musical community felt the opera might be better received as a grand opera. A fellow composer and friend of Bizet, Ernest Guiraud (1837-1892), composed recitatives to replace the spoken dialogue so that *Carmen* could be presented as a grand opera for its premiere at the State Opera House in Vienna on October 23, 1875. In little more than four months after Bizet's untimely death, his opera was a resounding success. *Carmen* had been produced

in Vienna as a spectacle, with a ballet added in Act II using music from one of Bizet's other dramatic pieces. The composer Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) saw the Viennese production twenty times and was fulsome in his praise. Soon afterward the opera was presented in Brussels with the newly-composed recitatives but without the extra ballet and spectacle. Again, it was a sensation. In the next few years *Carmen* made the rounds of the great opera houses of the world before returning to success in Paris eight years later.

The triumph of Bizet's *Carmen* had been predicted by a towering figure of the music world, the Russian composer Peter Illyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893). He had seen an early performance of *Carmen* and stated in a letter to a friend that it is, "a work destined to reflect in the highest degree the musical tastes and aspirations of an entire epoch."⁵ Those prophetic words have been borne out by history.

Carmen is still a mainstay of contemporary global opera stages. It has also inspired several modern productions, particularly in the United States and Africa. Oscar Hammerstein II's 1943 Broadway musical, *Carmen Jones*, is set during WWII and features an all-Black cast. The 2001 film, *Carmen: A Hip Hopera*, is set in modern-day Philadelphia and Los Angeles. It features Beyoncé in the titular role. Senegalese director, Joseph Gai Ramaka, released a filmed production of *Carmen* entitled *Karmen Geï* in 2001. Set in modern-day Senegal, it is sung in French and Wolof. Elsewhere on the continent, South African grassroots opera company, Isango Ensemble, released an isiXhosa-language version of *Carmen* in 2005, entitled *U-Carmen ekhayelitsha* (*Carmen in Khayelitsha*). It is set and was filmed in Khayelitsha, one of Cape Town's townships.

⁵ Quoted in Herbert Weinstock, *Tchaikovsky* (London: Cassel, 1946), 217.

The Romani people

Carmen features five Romani characters: Carmen, Mercédès, Frasquita, Le Dancairo, and Remendado. The Romani people are believed to have originated from the Indian subcontinent, an area in Southeast Asia which encompasses present-day Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. They likely began to migrate westward around the ninth century. After traveling through the Middle East and the Byzantine territories (in present-day north Africa, Europe, and western Asia), they likely arrived in Europe sometime between 1300-1500. Currently, the Romani people have a wide-reaching diaspora, but are most concentrated in Bulgaria, Hungary, Turkey, Romania, and, as seen in *Carmen*, Spain.

The English word, “gypsy” and the Spanish word, “gitano” are both derived from the word “Egyptian,” due to the belief that the Romani people were itinerant Egyptians. According to British researcher Angus Fraser, this belief has varied origins. The practice of describing the Romani people as Egyptian was common in the Byzantine empire before the Romani even arrived in Europe. This could be because of the possible migration route that the Romani took from the Indian subcontinent – because they likely travelled through Egypt, residents of other countries may have assumed the Romani originated there. In Europe (including the portions of Europe in the Byzantine empire), Egypt was associated with occultism, mysticism, and nomadism. Because the Romani also lived a nomadic lifestyle and often made money as fortune tellers and entertainers, it is also possible that the Romani and the Egyptians were conflated by those unfamiliar with either culture.

Contemporary usage of the term “gypsy” is widely considered to be a slur, with some exceptions. In 1971, the first World Roma Congress voted unanimously to reject the use of the word “gypsy” in favor of the terms “Roma” or “Romani.” “Romani” tends to be the favored term in the US while “Roma” is more common in the UK. However, some Romani groups in England and Wales prefer the term “gypsy.” Still, the majority of Romani people reject the term “gypsy” because it is an exonym, or a term not used by the people it describes (e.g. “Navajo” is an exonym for the Diné people).

From the time that the Romani arrived in Europe in the 13th or 14th century, they have faced persecution. In what is now Romania, many Romani people were enslaved until the mid-19th century. Some Romani migrants, fleeing the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans, fled to Europe in the 15th century. Many Europeans assumed the Romani were associated with the Ottomans in some way due to their “exotic”

features. Because the physical appearance of the Romani (they generally had dark hair and medium-toned skin) often differed from the physical appearance of Europeans, they were a visible minority. This made them targets for sociopolitical issues across Europe from the 1500s to the mid-1800s. During that time period, Romani were blamed for epidemics, accused of spying for foreign powers, and were targets for ethnic cleansings.

Though *Carmen* is set in Spain, it is useful to examine how the Romani were treated and perceived in France. Both Bizet and Mérimée were French, as was the original audience for *Carmen*.

The French monarchy initially banned Romani from residing in France in 1504. This edict was renewed and the punishments made harsher by subsequent kings. By 1561, Romani who were found to be living in France could be executed according to French law. Such harsh punishments continued through the 1660s. Louis XIV was especially harsh – under his rule, Romani men were imprisoned and Romani women and children were beaten and branded before banishment. This policy stayed relatively consistent through the 18th century. In 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte maintained a ban of Romani residency in France. Women, children, and elderly Romani found living in France were sent to the poor house. Romani men caught living in France were enslaved or forced to join the French military.

By the time *Carmen* premiered in 1875, France had not released any new laws regarding Romani living in France. It is possible that, while the harsh punishments of the Romani continued, the focus on the expulsion of the Romani people lessened as France went through decades of political turmoil during the 19th century. Between 1870 and 1879 alone, there were four different heads of the French government. Because of the long history of mistreatment by the French government and circulated political cartoons and other propaganda to the public, it is likely that the French public viewed Romani in a negative light in 1875. Romani were generally regarded as dangerous criminals at best and threats to national belonging and security at worst.

The representation of the Romani characters in *Carmen* is consistent with these stereotypes. From the first act, Carmen is in trouble with the law and even goes on the run with a group of smugglers who were also Romani. Typical of portrayals of Romani, Carmen is portrayed as desperate for freedom. Europeans often viewed Romani as cultural outcasts, partly due to their history of nomadism. Carmen desires both freedom from the legal system as she also desires romantic freedom.

Bizet's reinforcement of these stereotypes likely meant that the audience in 1875 did not sympathize with Carmen, but viewed her as a corrupting influence on Don José.

The World Roma Congress last met in 2023 to discuss contemporary issues affecting the Romani people. At this congress, Romani leaders discussed the violence that the Romani have faced from the twentieth century to present and how public policy in countries with Romani populations around the world allow for anti-Romani discrimination and violence to continue. The Congress called for a global reform of policies regarding the Romani. In particular, they called for public examination and reporting of anti-Romani violence in order to offer statistics to bolster proposed anti-discrimination laws against the Romani.

To learn more about the history and culture of the Romani people, visit worldromacongress.org.

Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen* (1845)

This novella was originally published serially in French magazine, *Revue des deux Mondes* (*Review of the Two Worlds*). The first three of four parts was published in *Revue* in 1845 and the final part was published for the first time in book form in 1846. *Carmen* is set in 1830 and is told from Mérimée's point of view, though he drew inspiration for *Carmen* from second-hand accounts of encounters with the Romani.

In addition to the omniscient narrator, there are also fewer characters in Mérimée's novel. Micaëla, Frasquita, and Mercédès are all characters of Bizet's creation. The novel also provides a background for Don José prior to meeting Carmen - he tells his story to the narrator from his prison cell after killing Carmen. When Don José finishes telling his story to the narrator, he remarks that the Romani are to blame for how they raised Carmen. This marks the end of the part III of Mérimée's novel.

Part IV of his novel offers some historical, linguistic, and ethnographic information about the Romani people - particularly in Spain, where the novel is set. It is difficult to know where Mérimée received this information or the accuracy of it, but there were a few sources about the Romani that could have been available to him. Mérimée claimed that much of *Carmen* is a creative re-telling of a story that a Spanish countess told him during his visit to Spain in 1830. English author, George Borrow, published a book on the Romani called *The Zincoli: An Account of the Gypsies in Spain* in 1841. It is evident that Mérimée was familiar with this book although it was in English. He references it in a letter written to a friend in 1844. A scholar of the Russian language, Mérimée likely also would have been familiar with Alexander Pushkin's 1827 poem, *The Gypsies*.

Both Bizet and Mérimée similarly center Don José's narrative and treat Carmen's Romani culture as something to be feared and even blamed for her death. In both accounts Carmen meets a tragic end, but she is not treated tragically.

Discussion questions

1. Who is the story about – Carmen or Don José? Explain your answer.
2. What is Carmen’s philosophy regarding how she leads her life? How does her philosophy compare to Don José’s? Do their philosophies conflict?
3. Compare and contrast Micaëla and Carmen. How are they characterized? What about the music used to portray them?
4. Describe the function and importance of the chorus. Do they add to a sense of realism? Focus in particular on the role of the chorus in the final scene.
5. How are the Romani portrayed in Virginia Opera’s production of *Carmen*? How is the portrayal similar or different to how the French audience would have seen the Romani in 1875?