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The Allure and Scandal of Otherness in the Operas of Georges Bizet and their Source Texts

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**The Allure and Scandal of Otherness in the Operas of Georges Bizet
and their Source Texts**

By

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May 1, 2014

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Introduction

« Ce qui me satisfait plus que l'opinion de tous ces messieurs [the critics], c'est la certitude absolue d'avoir trouvé ma voie. Je sais ce que je fais. – On vient de me commander trois actes [« Carmen »] à l'Opéra-Comique [...] Les portes sont ouvertes ; il a fallu dix ans pour en arriver là. » -Georges Bizet upon reading the reviews of the premiere of his opera « Djamileh »¹

The initial impetus for this thesis was a feeling of indignation, which quickly gave way to curiosity. Having admired Georges Bizet's 1875 opera *Carmen* just as much as most modern opera fans, I was unsurprisingly shocked to learn of the initial scathing reception of its Paris premiere, and further saddened by the knowledge that Bizet died just months later, never knowing the future success of his last operatic work. Indeed, within today's so-called ABCs of most frequently performed operas, *Carmen* easily secures a place in the category (A and B representing Giuseppe Verdi's *Aïda* and Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*). How, then, could an opera so well-loved today have been described by a journalist present at the premiere as, “cet enfer de corruptions ridicules et sans le moindre intérêt[?]”² As this question began to spawn more and more queries concerning late nineteenth-century Paris, it became clear that a historical investigation of the social and political atmosphere in which these operas and their source texts appeared was called for.

When searching for the complete history of a time period, presumably the best approach would be to live in said time, simply examining or documenting one's surroundings. However, since such study has not yet been made possible, the primarily

¹ “That which satisfies me more than the opinions of all these gentlemen [the critics] is the absolute certainty of having found my path. I know what I am doing. –They have just asked me for 3 acts [Carmen] for Opéra-Comique [...] The doors are open; it has taken me ten years to get here.” Georges Bizet, *Lettres à un ami : 1865-1872* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy), 199-200.

² “[T]his entirely uninteresting hell of ridiculous corruptions.” Oscar Commetant, “Revue Musicale,” *Le Siècle* (Paris, March 8, 1875), 2.

used method consists of the chronological study of historical events, often approaching a practically sterile level of objectivity. Upon examination, both of these methods seem equally restrictive. Neither suffices in revealing more than explicit detail, in the sense that none of the extremely telling undertones of social opinion are immediately evident.

Where to look for a more inclusive portrait of a time period, then? By turning from documentation of politics, military activity, economics, and so forth, we find the key: art. Art, in all of its forms, has long been a vehicle of expression for all things implicit, and therein lies the beauty of it; it is perhaps nothing new but certainly worth repeating that what may be impossible to state frankly can often be subtly expressed through an artistic medium. Visual art provides a prime example of this implicitness, when things as seemingly innocuous as the position of the feet on a statue, the color scheme of a watercolor, or even the brush strokes of a painting can tell almost as much about the artist's context as they can about the work itself.

Literary or musical art can be just as powerful a messenger as any visual medium. Once again, the clues lie in elements that may all too easily be overlooked. The irregular rhythmic structure of a poem or a symphony, for instance, can parallel the unrest of the author/composer, which can, in turn, be extremely telling of the social atmosphere surrounding him. Imagine, then, an art form such as opera, which combines visual art in its costumes, dance choreography, and staging, written word in the form of a libretto and, above all, music. A complexity of interpretation is thus inevitable, especially when an opera has as a basis an already highly thematic work of literature. This is undoubtedly the case with two of the source texts of Bizet's operas: Alfred de Musset's *Namouna* (the

basis for *Djamileh*) and Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen* (the inspiration for the opera of the same name).

Musset wrote his poem *Namouna* in 1832 amidst immense political upheavals in Paris. Study of this poem is therefore impossible without consideration of the events that surrounded its writing. *Namouna* consists of 147 strophes, divided into three "chants", and was the inspiration for the libretto of Bizet's opera *Djamileh* forty years later. The disparities between the two, however, extend far beyond the change in title, as does the reception of the two works. *Djamileh* was particularly poorly received by the public at the Parisian Opéra-Comique, and was effectively forgotten after a premiere run of only ten shows. Similarly, *Carmen* was inspired by an older literary work, Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella of the same name. Mérimée's eponymous heroine also underwent numerous changes in her transition to the operatic stage, as did the structure and several other characters of the work. Once again, Bizet's rendition of the work incited significant displeasure, although many of his fellow composers lauded his musical abilities. To understand what took place between the appearance of the source texts and the presentation of the operas to change popular opinion of their subjects so drastically, the historical context of each work (the two operas and the two original texts alike) must undergo examination alongside the works and performances themselves.

My first chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the rest of the analyses in the essay, because essential to an examination of specific operas is, naturally, a broader look at opera as a genre. Therefore, I consider opera in the context of late nineteenth-century France, and also somewhat in the context of one of its significant operatic neighbors, Germany. After all, the stylistic parameters of French opera would change in large part

due to nationalistic sentiment, hence the use of “wagnerien” as a criticism in describing Bizet’s work. In all art forms, opera included, the most prominent themes change constantly, and late nineteenth-century France was certainly not immune to such shifts. I will outline the major, shifting operatic themes, as well as how colonization and exploration heightened the pervasive French fascination with far-off things, a category that comfortably encompasses the themes of both *Djamileh* (set in Egypt) and *Carmen* (set in a gypsy-inhabited Spain). Not to be ignored, of course, are the inevitable parallels between changing artistic themes and a changing social and political climate in France. Beyond its themes alone, an understanding of opera’s prominence and relevance in Parisian culture is paramount to a comprehension of its effect on an audience composed of specific classes of people. As we read in press reviews of Bizet’s works, the composition of the audience at the opera was almost as significant as the music itself.

Once I establish an analytical basis for opera (French opera in particular), the works themselves must be considered. The second chapter consequently begins with the earlier source text and opera. I approach Musset’s *Namouna* from a literary perspective, and to that end first provide some background on Musset as an author. The historical context of the poem is then established, as well as its oriental theme in this context. *Namouna*’s poetic and plot structures also feature significantly, especially the minimal amount of the poem in which Namouna herself actually appears, which is only the last dozen strophes. After being somewhat marginalized in Musset’s work, however, she gains most of an entire opera at the hands of Louis Gallet, the librettist of *Djamileh*. Given a gap of forty years, the historical context for Bizet’s opera unsurprisingly differs greatly from that of Musset’s “conte oriental”. The narrative content also strays far from the original. The

conception of this opera by its librettist, composer, and the commissioning opera director contributes not only to its final product, but also to its critical reception. Between composition and critical reception lies the premiere performance itself, and I construct an image of this mainly from descriptions given by Bizet himself in his letters, from press reviews, and from the accounts of audience members.

Immediately following *Djamileh*, the Opéra-Comique commissioned a three-act opera from Bizet, which is the subject of my third chapter. If one traces this opera, too, back to its source, one again finds a markedly different source work in Mérimée's novella. I first consider the historical climate around 1845, as well as the structure and publication of the work itself. Although like *Djamileh*, the opera shares a female protagonist and, loosely, a plot structure with its original text, a great deal of adaptation between text and opera is as evident as it is important. Given that it was written a mere three years later (a time period made even more significant by the brevity of Bizet's career), *Carmen* shares much of its historical context with *Djamileh*. Conceived in 1874 and premiered in 1875, the opera, with its longer libretto, allows for more development by the writers, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, as well as by Bizet himself, who had a hand in writing the words as well as the music. The structure was thus modified notably from the original four-part novella, and some characters significantly added or omitted. The musical elements also prove important to the opera's effect on the audience, as reflected once again in the documented reactions of critics and audience members.

This is not the first, nor will it be the last academic paper attempting to provide a more complete picture of a period of French history. Its singularity, however, lies in the cross-generic method of study employed. I intend to uncover the source of the intense

uneasiness of the Parisian public at the presentation of Bizet's work by studying the music and texts themselves, as well as the reactions thereto, and the audiences' political and social surroundings. My scrutiny of all these factors will reveal an underlying disquiet in Bizet's first audiences at his bold portrayals of the powerful and inescapable Other.

Chapter 1: Parisian Opera in the nineteenth century

In the study of any period of French history, even the most cursory examination yields a wealth of tumultuous political and social disruptions. Indeed, the symbols associated with France we know today are symbols of revolution: *La Marseillaise*, the national motto³, even down to the tri-color flag. The nineteenth century was no different: it was a century rife with conflicts and upheavals, especially in Paris. As change begot change in the political and social world, the influence on art appeared everywhere. Artwork in various media such as Victor Hugo's drama *Hernani* or Eugène Delacroix's painting *La Liberté guidant le peuple* appeared in 1830 (the former several months before the July Revolution and the latter inspired by it), and both vividly demonstrate the effects of societal context on artistic media and the public's reception thereof. Hugo's work provoked conflict in his audience almost every night of its initial run, when his fellow Romantics came to support his work against the censorship it might have incurred when its main character, *Carlos*, was interpreted as a fairly deliberate allusion to Charles X. Delacroix's painting, on the other hand, depicts the female embodiment of Liberty leading the French revolutionaries on through Paris. In both cases, neither work would have had as strong of an effect – nor perhaps even existed – had it not been for the historical tumult surrounding it. As we saw with *Hernani*, artistic themes began to change, not just in the visual realm, but in performance as well; these changing themes evidenced the parallels between significant historic events and artistic movements. As the epicenter of French art and culture, Paris became the inescapable destination for aspiring French composers such as Georges Bizet who were left with, “qu'une solution; comme

³ “Liberté, égalité, fraternité.”

tous les héros de roman, il doit conquérir la capitale.”⁴ However, once arrived, he and his contemporaries had to navigate the treacherous, socially influenced artistic arena that was the Parisian opera of the second half of the nineteenth century.

An opera of social dynamics

At the outset of the nineteenth century in Paris, two distinct schools dominated the operatic scene. When Napoleon I took power he did away, among other things, with the smaller operatic theaters that had flourished in the city, leaving the city with only three opera houses. The Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, fairly established in their reputations and their different functions, held a sort of operatic monopoly of the genre in Paris, alongside the somewhat less successful Théâtre-Italien⁵. The Opéra was situated in the Académie des Beaux-Arts, but then moved in 1875 to the grandiose Palais Garnier, still in use today as the locus of Parisian opera. The works shown here consisted of traditional operas containing recitative (sung dialogue) in place of spoken word. The Opéra-Comique, on the other hand, presented works with dialogue in French, such as *Carmen*. Bizet entered this environment rather advantageously. In 1857, he won the highly prestigious Prix de Rome, an annual arts scholarship that allowed the recipient to study his craft at the Villa Medici in Rome. He returned to Paris in 1860 with some of his grant money still left over,⁶ and soon discovered the “véritable topographie sociale” that he had to navigate to find success.⁷

⁴ “[B]ut one option; like all the heroes of novels, he needed to conquer the capital.” Hervé Lacombe, *Les voies de l’opéra français au XIX^{ème} siècle* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997), 223.

⁵ Donald J. Grout and Hermione W. Williams, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 285-287.

⁶ Winton Dean, *Bizet* (London: J.M. Dent, 1948), 40.

⁷ “[V]eritable social topography.” Lacombe, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

The opera house functioned, as it often had throughout its history, as a sort of societal meeting place where being seen by fellow spectators was just as important as seeing the opera itself. At the premiere of Charles Gounod's 1851 opera *Sapho*, fellow composer Hector Berlioz attended as a musical writer for the *Journal des Débats*, and observed that:

Pour l'immense majorité des habitués de l'Opéra, ce n'est ni pour la pièce ni pour la musique qu'ils viennent à ce théâtre, *mais pour les accessoires seulement*⁸; et quant au reste, qui croit aimer dans un opéra l'opéra lui-même, ce n'est pas le beau qui lui convient, ce n'est pas le mauvais non plus, c'est le médiocre, c'est ce qui lui ressemble.⁹

For the vast majority of the Opéra's regulars, it is neither for the work nor for the music that they come to this theater, *but for the accessories alone*; as for the rest, whoever thinks they love opera for opera, it is not beauty that suits them, nor is it the unpleasant, it is the mediocre that reflects them.

Berlioz's impression of Parisian operagoers reveals a great deal about the dynamic



In the Loge by Mary Cassatt (1878)

between the audience and the work, but also about the audience and the composers themselves. He suggests that most of the contemporary audience cared for little beyond the social interactions they expected from a night at the opera. An 1878 painting by impressionist painter Mary Cassatt, *In the Loge*, visually represents Berlioz's classification of opera as a societal event. In this work, an upper-class woman looks through her opera glasses

⁸ Our emphasis.

⁹ Hector Berlioz, «Théâtre de l'Opéra,» *Le Journal des Débats* (Paris : Apr. 21, 1851), 1-2.

straight ahead rather than downward at the stage, while in the background a man in another box looks across at her (*supra*). This painting depicts the importance of status in opera audiences, as well as many audience members' real motivations for attending: not necessarily for the presences on stage, but rather for the other presences in the audience. As for the music, the more innocuous the better, it would seem, so as not to interfere with their contact with fellow spectators. Their opinion of the music itself, then, was far from impartial. Consistent with Berlioz's conclusion, the opinions of other composers often diverged vastly from popular opinion where new operas were concerned, as we shall see was the case with both *Djamileh* and *Carmen*. Beyond audience dynamics, the politics of opera extended up through the composer and performers to the opera director himself. It was the job of the director, after having commissioned a work deemed promising, to garner interest for the upcoming work, as "toute l'habilité des directeurs de théâtre est de savoir piquer la curiosité."¹⁰ Here, again, the opera remained at the mercy of societal structure, as the director had to enjoy some sort of standing in order to attract an audience of sufficient social caliber. Newer composers like Bizet who had yet to establish themselves in Parisian opera felt these pressures most heavily. French opera seemed caught in an unending loop of unoriginality, as many of the well-reputed, older composers adhered strictly to the stylistic constraints expected by the Parisian public, and young composers, unable to find a breakthrough, were forced to work on commission or teach music lessons, and had little time left for original production or innovation. In an 1863 issue of *La Patrie*, a conservative, imperialist publication of the time, critic Franck-Marie expressed that, "[i]l est impossible de croire cependant qu'une si incroyable situation soit due à la stérilité de nos jeunes auteurs [...] Ceux-là qui sont arrivés déjà, qui

¹⁰ "[A]ll the talent of a theater director is in knowing how to pique curiosity." Lacombe, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

ont un nom, une réputation éclatante ou modeste, sont seuls acceptés.”¹¹ Indeed, Camille Du Locle, director of the Opéra-Comique in the 1870s, took a significant risk in commissioning *Carmen* from the young Bizet, considering the relatively poor reception of his previous works (especially *Djamileh* two years prior), but recognized musical prowess in the budding artist. Clearly, the stage was set for change, but it remained to be seen whether the change would originate with the audience or the composers.

Perhaps the most telling example of the role of social or monetary influence in the reception of an opera was the phenomenon known as *la claque*. Historically, a *claque* was a group of people planted in an audience to influence its reception with excessive cheering. Its origins trace back to the first century, when ancient Roman emperor Nero had a personal *claque* (*fautores histrionem*) to applaud him heartily in his acting endeavors.¹² Many centuries later, French opera at the time of Bizet was no different. In addition to the money dispensed for production of the actual opera, opera directors and composers themselves handed money over to groups of people to applaud the performance at pre-determined intervals, thus encouraging the performers and prompting the rest of the audience to do the same. According to Hervé Lacombe, “toute personne désireuse de réussir dans le milieu des théâtres doit apprendre à négocier avec la claque.”¹³ Negotiation was necessary because not all *claqueurs* were paid for positive feedback. On the contrary, sometimes they were paid to heckle a performance or refrain

¹¹ “[I]t is impossible to believe, however, that such an incredible situation is due to the unproductiveness of our young authors [...] Those who have already arrived, who have a name, a reputation, brilliant or modest, are the only ones who are accepted.” Lacombe, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

¹² Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2003), 59-60.

¹³ “[A]nyone wishing to succeed in the theatrical word needs to learn to negotiate with the *claque*.” Lacombe, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

from doing so, as was the case to which we now turn with the French premiere of Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*.

Wagner and French opera

Richard Wagner was a German composer of great fame throughout Europe during the nineteenth century, who was exiled from Germany for revolutionary activity and moved to Paris in 1859. His initial foray into Parisian opera with his work *Tannhäuser* was a notorious disaster. The opera had first premiered in Dresden in 1845, and Wagner intended to stage a version of it in 1861 while in Paris. As the work to be performed at the Opéra, it was subject to certain stylistic constraints such as the inclusion of a ballet in the second act. As a result of this fairly well-established tradition at the Opéra, the Jockey Club de Paris routinely came to the opera at the second act to applaud their favorites, the ballerinas. Wagner, however, slightly altered the formula, putting the ballet in the first act instead, which caused outrage at his perceived insolence among the members of the Jockey Club. They attended the premiere and the two following performances, and booed and whistled the performance so aggressively that the opera was pulled from the stage after only those two performances.¹⁴ Clearly, the whims of the Parisian elite often dictated the success of an opera much more than its musical merits alone. Some of Wagner's erudite contemporaries, though, held him in much higher esteem than the raucous Jockey Club. Most notably, Charles Baudelaire often expressed his admiration for Wagner's works and composed an essay on the subject entitled, "Richard Wagner *Tannhäuser* à Paris". The essay, published the year of the premiere of *Tannhäuser*, traced Wagner's work in Paris up to that point, and in it Baudelaire sings *Tannhäuser*'s praises,

¹⁴ Vincent Giroud, *French Opera: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), 163.

saying, “Je me souviens que, dès les premières mesures, je subis une de ces impressions heureuses que presque tous les hommes imaginatifs ont connues, par le rêve, dans le sommeil.”¹⁵ Baudelaire was not the first artistic contemporary of a composer who expressed a positive opinion contrary to that of the general Parisian public, nor would he be the last.¹⁶

Wagner unwittingly contributed even more to French opera, down to the very vocabulary employed in musical critique, especially of Bizet’s work. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, critics began to use the term *wagnerisme* in their writings as almost a blanket term for unfamiliar sounds in opera. One of the primary recipients of this misdirected criticism was Georges Bizet, who was frequently referred to as *wagnerien* and heard his music called the same. “Les grands journaux ont loué la partition...tout en blâmant mes tendances wagnériennes (?)”¹⁷ Bizet had expressed his admiration for some of Wagner’s work, and yet not even he understood the references to the German composer in writings on his own work. He presumably would not have been ashamed to be compared to Wagner, had the latter actually influenced him, but much like the Parisian audience’s reaction to *Tannhäuser*, these allegations had very little to do with the actual music, and much more to do with politics, in the broad sense of the word. The origin of this pseudo-insult can be traced back to Wagner’s first stay in Paris from 1839-1842, at which time he wrote a text about French composer Hector Berlioz, which was

¹⁵ “I remember that, after the first measures, I gave in to one of those happy feelings that almost all imaginative men have know by dreaming, in sleep.” Charles Baudelaire, *Richard Wager et Tannhäuser à Paris* (Paris: Libraire de la Société des gens et des lettres, 1861), 14.

¹⁶ Wagner was an incredibly influential figure in the literary avant-garde of the late 19th century, leading many symbolist scholars to attribute his name to a veritable movement originating with eight sonnets in the *Revue Wagnerienne* in January, 1886. Cf., Jean-Nicolas Illouz, *Le Symbolisme*.

¹⁷ “The big newspapers have praised the score...all the while blaming my Wagnerian tendencies (?)” Hugues Imbert, *Portraits et études: Lettres inédites de Georges Bizet* (Strasbourg: Typographie de G. Fischbach, 1894), 192.

published over forty years later in *Le Ménestrel*. In it, he expresses both his admiration for and his disappointment in Berlioz, claiming him to be too susceptible to French tendencies in his composition, in the sense that, “le Français [...] aspire à trouver dans les classes les plus extremes de la société ce principe de son activité productrice.”¹⁸ Wagner here pins down one of the primary reasons for the lack of advancement of opera in the latter half of the 19th century. Namely, French composers were held back by stylistic limitations imposed by tradition, and their very creative forces were stifled in the process. Not only does this reveal a point of contention for Wagner concerning French composition of the time, but it also suggests a reason for the reactions to Wagner’s work in France. If Wagner’s criticism of Berlioz’s work was its lack of innovation and its excessive restraint, then the opposite could be true of Berlioz’s aversion to certain of Wagner’s works. The proof of this lies quite clearly in an article Berlioz published while musical editor of *Le Journal des Débats* entitled, “Concerts de Richard Wagner: La Musique de l’Avenir”. He describes, in his article, the sampling of works presented by Wagner to the Parisian public, as well as their reaction to it. In the following excerpt, Berlioz details the audience’s opinion of the music:

Le résultat de l’expérience tentée sur le public parisien par le compositeur allemand était facile à prévoir. Un certain nombre d’auditeurs sans préventions ni préjugés a bien vite reconnu les puissantes qualités de l’artiste et les fâcheuses tendances de son système ; un plus grand nombre n’a rien semblé reconnaître en Wagner qu’une volonté violente, et dans sa musique qu’un bruit fastidieux et irritant...Il a osé composer le programme de sa première soirée exclusivement de morceaux d’ensemble, chœurs ou symphonies. C’était déjà un défi jeté aux habitudes de notre public...¹⁹

¹⁸ “[T]he French wish to find in the most extreme classes of society this principle of productive activity.” Richard Wagner, “Une page inédite de Richard Wagner sur Hector Berlioz,” *Le Ménestrel* (Paris: Oct. 5, 1884), 5.

¹⁹ Hector Berlioz, « Concerts de Richard Wagner : La Musique de l’avenir, » *Le Journal des Débats* (Paris : Feb. 9, 1860), 1.

The result of the experiment attempted on the Parisian public by the German composer was easy to foresee. A certain number of listeners without prejudices or bias quickly recognized the artist's powerful qualities and the disagreeable trends of his system; an even greater number seemed to see nothing in Wagner but a violent passion, and nothing in his music but irritating and tedious noise [...] He dared compose the program of his opening night exclusively of ensemble, choral, or symphonic pieces. This was already a challenge against the habits of our audience.

Along with the title of the article, this passage, even in its language, goes a long way toward explaining the leap in logic that led journalists to criticize Bizet as *wagnerien*. Berlioz emphasizes Wagner's concert as an "expérience"²⁰ that was "tentée"²¹ on the Parisian public, situating them as the experimental group for new musical works through which composers attempted to gain approval. Furthermore, he employs harsh adjectives such as "violente"²² and "fastidieux"²³ to describe the music's effect on the audience, thus leaving no doubt as to how negatively the music was received. Berlioz categorizes Wagner's music as diverging too far from what was expected and popular in Paris at the time. According to his article, the public heard it as nothing but irritating noise. However, he also entitles his article "La Musique de l'Avenir,"²⁴ and goes on to suggest that Wagner's unappealing music qualifies as the music of the future because, "on la suppose en opposition directe avec le goût musical du temps présent, et certaine au contraire de se trouver en parfait concordance avec celui d'une époque future."²⁵ The "avenir"²⁶ that he mentions has an etymological inevitability about it (from its Latin root, *ad venire*, meaning to come), suggesting that he sees music cycling to the point at which Wagner

²⁰ experiment

²¹ attempted

²² violent

²³ tedious

²⁴ "The Music of the Future"

²⁵ "[O]ne imagines it in direct opposition with the musical taste of the present time, and certainly far from being in perfect harmony with that of a future era." Berlioz, *art. cit.*, p. 1.

²⁶ future

already arrived. However, the more abstract “*époque future*” could be a musical ideal, and therefore could not resemble the alleged dissonance demonstrated by Wagner. Berlioz’s article thus situates Wagner’s music, and consequently all music not in keeping with the Parisian standard, in an inescapable negative frame. This *wagnerisme* of the future is graphically represented in an 1869 caricature in *L’Eclipse* (*infra*), which portrays Wagner literally breaking the eardrum of a metaphorical France as he hammers a musical note into it. When we apply such assessments to Bizet’s work, it appears his operas’ weakness was they simply conflicted with his audience’s expectations or their traditional standards. Hervé Lacombe succinctly observes that, “[l]es voix conservatrices de la presse (longtemps les plus importantes) se rassemblent pour chanter les valeurs traditionnelles, réaffirmer la toute-puissance d’un goût et d’un esthétique nationaux.”²⁷ This claim carries through to the negative reviews of Bizet’s operas as well. Although his letters demonstrate even his own bafflement at the parallels drawn between himself and Wagner, Bizet continued to be compared to the German composer until the end of his brief career, suggesting something other than a musical basis for the claims. Indeed, beyond just the aesthetic criticism lay a nationalistic sentiment, as following



Caricature of Richard Wagner by André Gill in *L’Eclipse*, 18 April 1869

national.”²⁷ This claim carries through to the negative reviews of Bizet’s operas as well. Although his letters demonstrate even his own bafflement at the parallels drawn between himself and Wagner, Bizet continued to be compared to the German composer until the end of his brief career, suggesting something other than a musical basis for the claims. Indeed, beyond just the aesthetic criticism lay a nationalistic sentiment, as following

²⁷ “[T]he conservative voices of the press (for a long time the most important) gather together to praise traditional values, to reaffirm the omnipotence of a national taste and aesthetic.” Lacombe, *op. cit.*, p. 82-83.

French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871), anti-German sentiment peaked. Robert Tombs describes the popular opinion of Germans as having, “won because of their cultural and moral inferiority: brute force, machine-like obedience, ruthlessness, trickery.”²⁸ An understanding of Wagner’s incongruence with late-nineteenth century French opera is absolutely essential to understanding the progression of the genre in this time period, as well as the reviews of Bizet’s operas themselves.

Evidence demonstrates, then, that the reception of an opera often had little to do with the music itself, and much to do with public opinion influenced by the aforementioned factors. However, this opinion began to change, and a paradoxical fascination and resentment of all things non-French became evident, greatly influencing the Parisian audiences reactions to exotic or oriental subject matter.

Changing operatic themes

The nineteenth century witnessed a definite shift in artistic themes. The French began to see the scope of their cultural awareness literally expanded as their country continued to obtain or regain colonies when Napoleon III’s Second Empire pushed colonization on multiple continents around the world. In 1830, the French invaded and began to conquer Algeria. They then intervened in Mexico in the 1860s around the time of the American Civil War, and continued by invading Southeast Asia. In the later nineteenth century, after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, France acquired further colonies, and the French naturally developed even increased curiosity for the new, far-off worlds. In 1849, *L’Illustration* published “Lettres sur L’Inde”, a collection of letters that included numerous ornate illustrations. This compilation appealed to the fascination of Parisian

²⁸ Tombs, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

readers, while allowing them to observe such discoveries at a safe distance, but this increasing fascination with the exotic had a downside, however.

While the public was interested and even enthralled by this subject matter in the visual and literary arts, music presented something of a problem for the traditional audience, and many Parisians found it difficult to accept the musical differences between their beloved French opera and the exotic themes introduced by such a composer as Bizet in *Djamileh* and *Carmen*. There might be several explanations for this phenomenon. To begin with, while an audience can more easily escape a visual stimulus by simply not looking at it, an auditory one proves more difficult to avoid. Furthermore, tendencies toward the exotic in music often manifested as what might seem like dissonances, whereas in visual arts they appeared as embellishments. Changes in harmonic and melodic structure upset the order of things, while exotic visuals merely ornamented what was already there.

Opera as a genre, however, caused people to experience different aspects of exoticism simultaneously, since, “l’opéra réunit trois domaines distincts qui nécessiteraient, dans le cas de sujets exotiques, un traitement particulier: le spectacle scénique (décors, costumes et danse), le livret, la musique.”²⁹ These three artistic media would likely have been received quite differently if changed and presented individually, but when delivered together, had the power to shock a nineteenth century audience. Press reviews of exotic-themed operas of the time reveal the tendency towards an appreciation of the visual and a rejection of the musical, as Bizet discovered in 1872 with the premiere of his opera *Djamileh*. Forty years prior, Alfred de Musset wrote an entire poem’s-worth of

²⁹ “[O]pera unites three distinct domains that each necessitate, in the case of exotic subject matter, a particular treatment; the scenic spectacle (decorations, costumes and dance), the libretto, and the music.” Lacombe, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

debauchery into an oriental setting in *Namouna*, to very little public outcry. As we have seen, though, the content alone does not suffice to guarantee the popularity of a work of any medium. Bizet would realize this when he added music to Musset's scenario, garnering reactions that were far from complimentary.

Chapter 2: Namouna becomes Djamileh

Separated by several decades of history and changing opinions, Alfred de Musset's *Namouna* and Georges Bizet's *Djamileh* were bound to be different in ways beyond just their respective media. Musset wrote 147 strophes of his "conte oriental"³⁰ in 1832. Forty years later, Camille du Locle bestowed on Bizet a forgotten libretto by Louis Gallet based on Musset's poem as matter for his newest opera. Musset's poem tells of Hassan, a wealthy French national of oriental descent who lives a life of leisure and debauchery, picking a new slave girl for his pleasure whenever he tires of the previous one. This continues until he meets the beguiling Namouna, who ultimately leads him to abandon his lecherous ways for love. To the original narrative, Gallet added the character of Hassan's man, Splendiano, as well as changing Namouna's name to Djamileh (at Du Locle's urging), and giving her a much more prominent role in the story. These changes alone, however, do not explain the subsequent change in the public's reaction. *Djamileh's* opening performances were not at all positively received, so much so that even Bizet acknowledged his audience's opinion of the opera. In a letter to his friend Edmond Galabert, he bluntly states in the very first sentence that, "*Djamileh* n'est pas un succès."³¹ This perceived failure of the opera was indicative of a much deeper uneasiness concerning its unfamiliar content in an unsettled Paris constantly on the brink of political and social upheaval. To find out what led to such negative reactions toward inherently promising subject matter (that turned out to be too jarringly different for the Parisian audiences) we need to examine the respective contexts and contents of both Musset's poem and Bizet's opera. The evidence suggests that these reactions had little to do with

³⁰ oriental tale

³¹ "*Djamileh* is not a success." Bizet, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

the quality of the work itself, but instead with, among other things, a social uneasiness towards the unknown due to the context in which it premiered.

Namouna before the stage

Musset, merely twenty-two when he wrote *Namouna*, had already produced a great deal as an author. Having shown promise at a very early age, Musset was accepted into the Cénacle, Charles Nodier and Victor Hugo's literary *salon*, when he was just seventeen. The French public began to notice his literary prowess after the publication of his first collection of poems, *Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie*³² (1829), which already displayed the fashionable subject matter of "contes"³³ from other cultures. He wrote and published the compilation containing *Namouna* in Paris amidst considerable political unrest. 1830 saw the end of the Restoration monarchy and the "Trois Glorieuses" for Paris, a city as yet uncertain as to whether the momentous events meant, "the beginning of a new era of revolution, or a return to normality,"³⁴ and indeed, the new regime of Louis Philippe as a replacement for Charles X only lasted until 1848 (admittedly fairly long by nineteenth-century French standards). Musset, therefore, found himself writing in a Paris divided (not at all out of the ordinary for the city), but a change in politics was not the only calamity that struck the city and its inhabitants as Musset prepared to publish his works. A ferocious disease, unfamiliar to Parisian doctors, began to spread through the city, growing into an epidemic that claimed nearly 20,000 lives, including that of Musset's own father.³⁵ This was later identified as Paris's first outbreak of cholera, and

³² *Tales of Spain and Italy*

³³ tales

³⁴ Tombs, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

³⁵ Philippe Van Tieghem, *Musset: Connaissance des Lettres* (Paris: Hatier, 1969), 31.

the effect of the outbreak on the city was swift and drastic, and not without its long-term consequences. Politically, there were those who suspected conspiracy, especially as the disease did away with several prominent politicians of the new July Monarchy, which only exacerbated the instability of the new and relatively untested government.³⁶ In more visible terms, the cholera outbreak came to affect the shape of the city itself, as hygiene was put at the forefront in all subsequent urban planning in Paris. The city thus underwent both social and more physical changes during this period. Musset, left fatherless, had to make his writing a priority for the sake of financial stability, not just creative pursuit. Because his 1830 work, *La Nuit Vénitienne*, was so unsuccessful in its theatrical run, he swore off staging his plays for quite some time, and chose to publish a drama and a comedy (*La Coupe et les Lèvres* and *A Quoi rêvent les jeunes Filles*) in a book he called *Un Spectacle dans un fauteuil*, inviting the reader to peruse the plays at his leisure, “sans quitter [son] fauteuil.”³⁷ These two works alone, however, did not provide enough material for a proper collection, and Musset composed *Namouna* to supplement them. The circumstances surrounding its creation tend to lead readers to overlook the poem as mere filler in the context of its accompanying plays, though. Further examination reveals a biting witty and alluring, yet introspective poetic endeavor, which would later inspire an equally meritorious opera at the hands of Georges Bizet.

In his sonnet to the reader at the beginning of the collection, Musset compares his own work to opera, expressing very much the same sentiment as Berlioz in his article for the *Journal de Débats*, and admitting that, “Il se peut qu’on t’amuse, il se peut qu’on

³⁶ Tombs, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

³⁷ “[W]ithout leaving his wheelchair.” Alfred de Musset, “Un Spectacle dans un fauteuil,” *Musset: poesies completes* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche Classiques, 2006), 215.

t'ennuie; [...] Qu'importe? c'est la mode, et le temps passera."³⁸ As he notes, most of what motivated people to attend opera was social position, and therefore publishing his works in a book instead of subjecting them, unprotected, to the immediate reactions of a theatrical audience saved him some measure of the embarrassment he had undergone with his *Nuit Vénitienne*. This work did not run the same risk of being consumed merely for show, as operas so often did. Having published rather than staged the works, Musset could anticipate a genuine interest on the part of his audience, which would only be enhanced by the exotic theme to the book's final poem.

Namouna consists of 147 strophes of alexandrines divided into three *chants*. The division into *chants*, typical of epic poems, in fact produces a rather parodic effect when coupled with the somewhat satirical and contradictory language within. Directly beneath the title, Musset immediately identifies the work as a "conte oriental," already enticing his readers by suggesting exotic material. Not coincidentally, it appeared almost in tandem with such works as Victor Hugo's *Les Orientales* (a collection of poems depicting the Eastern Mediterranean). The subject of the Orient was a very popular one at the time Musset's poem was published, and the theme ensured that it would appeal to a wide audience. In his *Orientalism*, Edward Said distinguishes the nineteenth-century French attitude towards the oriental as much more aesthetically than scientifically motivated. Indeed, he claims, "the nineteenth-century French pilgrims did not seek a scientific so much as an exotic yet especially attractive reality."³⁹ According to Said, this increased fascination with the Orient had little to do with science and much to do with the aesthetic attractiveness of the foreign lands. Everything about an initial examination of

³⁸ "It is possible we will amuse you, it is possible we will bore you [...] What does it matter? It's fashionable, and the time will pass." Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

³⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 170.

Musset's *Namouna* promises the reader the very attractive exoticism of which Said writes: its title and exotic name, its subtitle classifying it as oriental, even the quotation beneath the subtitle.

Musset begins each *chant* with a quotation or proverb, the first being, "Une femme est comme votre ombre : courez après, elle vous fuit ; fuyez-la, elle court après vous."⁴⁰ Already, the similarity in tone is evident between this poem and Bizet's later opera, both about love in far-off lands (or inlands perceived as culturally distant such as *Carmen*'s Spain). Arguably the most famous aria from Bizet's *Carmen* is the "Habañera" from the first act, in which the heroine sings, "si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime, si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!"⁴¹ In both cases, the writers portray the foreign woman as fickle, unpredictable, and downright dangerous. In *Namouna*, having introduced the poem with this feminine epithet, Musset proceeds to focus almost entirely on his male protagonist, Hassan, and describes him, his life, and his habits for all but twelve of the 147 strophes of the poem. The apparently male-dominated structure is discordant with the language utilized. Musset appears to mock the genre of epic poetry and its archetypes, beginning his so-called "conte" with Hassan, his protagonist, lounging on a sofa in the nude, and going on to describe him in mostly feminine language ("Il était nu comme Ève à son premier péché"⁴²). He creates an image not unlike an odalisque in a painting ("le visage olivâtre, [...] un corps d'albâtre"⁴³), despite Hassan being the hero, not the concubine.

⁴⁰ "A woman is like your shadow: run after it, it flees; flee from it pursues you." Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 324. This maxim can be attributed to Musset himself, as he indicates no other origin for it.

⁴¹ "[I]f you don't love me, I love you, if you love me, beware!" Georges Bizet, *Carmen* (Hamburg: 1973), 25.

⁴² "He was nude like Eve at the original sin." Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

⁴³ "[T]he olive face [...] a body of alabaster." Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

This feminization of the Orient was a mechanism employed throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Said describes writers of this era portraying the Orient and its, “eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability.”⁴⁴ This is almost exactly the image of Hassan that Musset creates in his opening lines. While a male character, Hassan still acts as a metaphor for the erotic, feminine “other” that was the Orient. In their desire for expansion and conquest, many Western powers were wont to view foreign lands as penetrable, thus the feminine image of the Orient that dominated popular literature. A poem such as Musset’s therefore had no trouble gaining popularity by appealing to this desire for exotic imagery. Furthermore, contrary to the message of the opening couplet, it is Hassan who chases after women, only to dispose of them once bored, much like Bizet’s *Carmen* does with men many decades later. In both cases, the exotic Other is portrayed as both passionate and indifferent, enticing and untrustworthy. What follows the construction of this setting is strophe upon strophe of Musset’s conversation with his own readers, describing and defending Hassan’s character, questioning the nature of vice and virtue, and finally naming Namouna in the fourth strophe of the third and last *chant*. This narrative structure alone provides something of an insight into the relative failure of the opera.

One of the underlying threads of all the criticism of *Djamileh* was its lack of action or enough driving plot. In his biography of Bizet, Winton Dean notes that, “there is almost no action, and one of the few incidents [...] takes place in spoken dialogue; and with only one real character little dramatic conflict is possible.”⁴⁵ Dean draws attention to an important aspect of the poem that made its dramatization far more difficult than that of

⁴⁴ Said, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

⁴⁵ Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

another poem may have been: in *Namouna*, Hassan never quite takes on the form of a fully-fledged dramatic character. He serves primarily as a vehicle for Musset's own insecurities or confusion, and the poem consequently reads as a contemplative journey, rather than a narrative *conte*. The critics of Bizet's opera noticed this as well. An article of *Le Figaro* on May 25th, 1872, stated that, "[c]e qu'on appelle une pièce, c'est-à-dire une action nouant des situations et des scènes et les dénouant logiquement, n'existe pas dans *Djamileh*. Il faut donc brusquement passer à la musique."⁴⁶ The poem itself contains no real plot development until the final *chant* (the shortest one). At this point, Musset as narrator remembers himself and excuses himself to the reader, claiming that, "[j]'ai laissé s'envoler ma plume avec sa vie, / En voulant prendre au vol les rêves de son coeur."⁴⁷ Not only does this line speak to the unpredictable nature of Musset's protagonist (avian images for the writer himself and for Hassan's flighty dreams), but it acknowledges the apparent absence of a true dynamic narrative.

Namouna enters the poem as, "une petite fille / Enlevée à Cadix chez un riche marchand."⁴⁸ Musset offers very little description of her beyond her origin, but this solitary descriptor adds another dimension to the exoticism of her character. The audience first encounters her in an oriental setting, and then learns that she, like Carmen, also comes from an exotic background. Then, a mere eleven strophes after the first mention of her name, the poem ends in ambiguity:

Et si la vérité ne m'était pas sacrée,
Je vous dirais qu'Hassan racheta Namouna ;
Qu'au lit de son amant le juif la ramena ;

⁴⁶ "[T]hat which we call a play, that is to say an action tying together situations and scenes and resolving them logically, does not exist in *Djamileh*. We must thus move brusquely on to the music." Bénédict, "Opéra-Comique," *Le Figaro* (Paris, May 25, 1872), 3.

⁴⁷ "I let my quill fly away with his life,/wanting to give wings to the dreams of his heart." Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

⁴⁸ "[A] young girl/taken out of Cadiz from a rich merchant." Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

Qu'on reconnut trop tard cette tête adorée ;
Et cette douce nuit qu'elle avait espérée,
Que pour prix de ses maux le ciel la lui donna.⁴⁹

And if the truth were not sacred to me,
I would tell you that Hassan freed Namouna;
That the Jew took her back to her lover's bed;
That this adored face was recognized too late;
And this sweet night that she had hoped for,
For the price of her wrongs heaven gave to her.

The impeccable poetic structure employed by Musset consists of strophes of six lines, each line an alexandrine divided by a *cesure* at the sixth syllable. In this penultimate strophe, Musset seems to leave it to the reader to decide whether his oriental *conte* ends in romance or in tragedy. This *conte*, while retaining the structure expected of a work classified as such, contains very little in the way of an actual account of anything. It instead conveys Musset's poetic musings while appealing to his readers' desire for imagery and sensuality.

Bizet orchestrates *Namouna*

The genesis of the libretto for *Djamileh* pre-dates Bizet's opera by some years. Louis Gallet first wrote the libretto, and Camille du Locle, the director of the Opéra-Comique at the time, gave it to a composer named Jules Duprato, who was then dismissed for failing to meet the deadline with *Namouna*.⁵⁰ Several years later, however, du Locle decided to entrust a young Georges Bizet with the project. Having just returned from a voyage to Cairo, du Locle was inspired to change the name of the heroine and the opera itself; thus *Djamileh* was born ("Djamileh" translates from the Arabic as "beautiful"). Indeed, the review of the premiere of *Djamileh* in *Le XIXe siècle* (journal républicain conservateur)

⁴⁹ Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

⁵⁰ Louis Gallet, *Notes d'un librettiste: Musique contemporaine* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1891), 12.

notes that, “[o]n sent qu’il y a l’intervention d’un artiste et d’un voyageur qui connaît son Orient comme les canotiers parisiens connaissent Asnières.”⁵¹ This appreciation of visual representations of the Orient was nothing new in France, nor did it constitute a short-lived fascination. The aforementioned odalisque-like image described by Musset in the opening strophes of his poem was interpreted several times on canvas. One of Bizet’s fellow Prix de Rome winners, painter Henri Regnault, provided one such interpretation in 1870 with *Hassan et Namouna* (*infra*). The image is one of opulence, full of patterned rugs, fine cloths, and even a lion-skin rug on which Namouna sits playing her lute, while Hassan lounges on the bed above her,



Henri Regnault, *Hassan et Namouna* (1870)

looking off disinterestedly at something beyond the frame. Even two years before *Djamileh*, the portrayal of Musset’s Orient was one of lavishness and luxury, and the reviews confirm that this image was certainly not lost on the audience of the premiere. However, beyond the praise of the visual aspects of the opera, the dramatic content and vocal performance left much to be desired, according to the critics.

Reactions to *Djamileh*

Bizet’s opera premiered just a year after the end of the Franco-Prussian War, a conflict from which France did not emerge victorious. At the very origin of the conflict was a Prussian claim to the Spanish throne and, as Robert Tombs put it, “Spain was

⁵¹ “[O]ne feels the contribution of an artist and a traveller who knows his Orient like the boaters of Paris know Asnières.” Charles de la Rounat, “Courrier des théâtres,” *Le XIX^e Siècle* (Paris, Jun. 4, 1872), 3.

regarded by the French as their sphere.”⁵² The French feared Prussian power, but the war ended in German unification and French revolt, as the Paris Commune arose very soon after. The wealthy audiences of Bizet’s opera clearly had reason to be uneasy about the possibility of action by the marginalized Others of their own city, as the past decades in Paris had seen more upheavals and changes in authority than most cities.

From the outset, *Djamileh* seemed musically and narratively out of character for the stage at the Opéra-Comique, with its exotic style and apparent lack of plot. Several significant changes appeared in the transition from Musset’s *conte* to Louis Gallet’s libretto apart from just the names of the protagonists (Namouna to Djamileh and Hassan to Haroun). One attempt at injecting the story with some more dramatic potential was the addition of Splendiano, Haroun’s man. In Gallet’s narrative, Splendiano attempts to persuade Haroun to keep Djamileh because he himself is in love with her, thus creating a love triangle. Even this failed to enthuse the critics, some of whom could not divorce Gallet’s libretto from its source text, which they made clear with such comments as, “[s]i *Namouna* m’était conté, j’y prendrais un ennui suprême.”⁵³ Essentially, the content of one did not fit the context of the other. The apparent absence of drama was not the only criticism of *Djamileh*, however. Even Bizet recognized the anomalous nature of the work commissioned of him, attributing its relative failure partly to this fact: “[l]a pièce est trop en dehors des habitudes de l’Opéra-Comique.”⁵⁴ The implications of this claim extend beyond just the unusual style of the piece to the expectations of the audience concerning said style. As previously noted, much of an operatic audience’s intention besides entertainment consisted of socializing with their social equals and rivals, which rendered

⁵² Tombs, *op. cit.*, p. 422.

⁵³ “[I]f [the story of] *Namouna* were told to me, I would be supremely bored.” Rounat, *art. cit.*, p. 3.

⁵⁴ “[T]he piece is too far from the customs of the Opéra-Comique.” Imbert, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

any kind of jarring musical accompaniment rather unwelcome. They did not expect the foreign style Bizet had composed for them.

Bizet's orchestration included instruments like tambourines and lutes, and the musicality of the opera was distinctly non-traditional. Bizet also intertwined pentatonic scales and harmonic dissonances into his opera amidst traditional tempos and harmonies. In his book, *Counterpoint: The Polyphonic Vocal Style of the Sixteenth Century*, Knud Jeppesen outlines that, "[b]y 'pentatonic' music is meant, of course, the musical style associated with the pentatonic (5-tone) scale. This succession of tones, which is characteristic of primitive music, seems consciously to avoid the half-tone step [...] In this scale we can recognize the tonal language of exotic peoples, especially the music of the Far East."⁵⁵ Bizet's use of these musical mechanisms suggests a search for authenticity with regard to the setting of the work, yet the response to these efforts was high praise for the visual aspects of the oriental theme, but resistance to the musical innovations. Émile Abraham wrote for the *Petit Journal* that, "[v]oilà un ouvrage qui sort tout à fait du genre ordinaire de l'Opéra-Comique. Ce n'est pas un acte intrigué, se terminant par l'inévitable mariage, c'est un tableau oriental pour lequel le librettiste, le compositeur et la direction, en ce qui concerne la mise en scène, se sont surtout préoccupés de la couleur locale."⁵⁶ For him, the opera lacks intrigue, but the *mise en scène* displays a definite attempt at veracity. His reference to the opera as a "tableau oriental" further demonstrates the fascination with visual exoticism. However, his claim

⁵⁵ Knud Jeppesen, *Counterpoint: The Polyphonic Vocal Style of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 68.

⁵⁶ "[H]ere is a work that diverges absolutely from the normal genre of the Opéra-Comique. It is not an intriguing act, ending in the inevitable marriage, it is an oriental scene for which the librettist, composer, and directors, when it came to the mise-en-scene, were preoccupied above all with local color." Émile Abraham, "Théâtres," *Le Petit Journal* (Paris, May 26, 1872), 3.

that the work strays from the Opéra-Comique's usual fare once again hints at the audience's uneasiness of the musical Other, as it seemed too close at hand and volatile, much like the omnipresent Parisian masses that constantly threatened to rise up against them. In the same article for *Le XIXième siècle* in which the author claims boredom at the plot of *Namouna*, the author professes,

Je me bouche les oreilles et j'ouvre les yeux, et je contemple, dans un costume merveilleux de soie, de gaze d'or, la ravissante image d'une femme de la plus rare beauté, dont les grands yeux veloutés, habitués aux scintillements du soleil sur les flots du Bosphore, me regardent, pleins de rayons humides et chargés de langueurs.⁵⁷

I block my ears and open my eyes and contemplate, in a marvelous costume of silk and golden gauze, the ravishing image of a woman of the rarest beauty, whose large, velvety eyes, used to the sparkling of the sun on the waves of the Bosphorus, look at me, full of humid rays and languor.

The critic describes his vision in quite a detailed fashion. He, like many of his fellow audience members, derived great pleasure from watching the oriental scenes unfold, as they could cultivate the exotic mental image of Djamileh's character. Her characteristically non-French attributes appealed strongly to the audience, in contrast to Bizet's accompanying music, and the disapproval of those foreign characteristics in the music appears in numerous reviews of the premier. The review in *Le Gaulois* refers to one scene, "écrite en 2/4 et accompagnée par le luth ; c'est un morceau qui veut être original et n'est qu'excentrique."⁵⁸ Here eccentricity is used as a criticism for Bizet's lack of conformity in this particular opera. His use of different instruments, themes, and tonalities shocked his audience, perhaps in part due to the musical Otherness feeling too personal to the French audience amidst political turmoil.

⁵⁷ Rounat, *art. cit.*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ "[W]ritten in 2/4 and accompanied by the lute, it is a piece that wants to be original but is nothing but eccentric." Barbé D'Arromanches, "Musique," *Le Gaulois* (Paris, May 24, 1872), 3.

After the relative success that was Musset's *Namouna* and given the French taste for the exotic, Bizet's *Djamileh* might have been expected to be a great success from a budding young composer. Indeed, when the Parisian audiences saw what the directors had prepared for them, they were in awe of the visual richness of the piece. In the *Petit Journal*, Émile Abraham offered, "[m]ille compliments à la direction pour le goût qu'elle a apporté jusque dans les plus petits détails de la mise en scène."⁵⁹ However, it has been established that the glory or the downfall of an opera can lie in the confluence of several media. In the case of *Djamileh*, once the audience heard the sounds that accompanied the visual before them, their opinion changed drastically. The main complaint throughout the reviews was essentially of an excess of originality (hence the comparisons to Wagner) that came across as dissonance or harsh sounds. In a France fresh from defeat by the Germans, the foreign being so unavoidably displayed for them aggravated the already existent disquiet amongst the audience members.

⁵⁹ "[A] thousand compliments to the directors for the taste they brought to even the smallest details of the mise-en-scene." Abraham, "Théâtres," (May 26, 1872), 3.

Chapter 3: Two Carmens and their Josés

Before she dominated the operatic stage in Paris in 1875, Carmen appeared in 1845 in Prosper Mérimée's novella in three parts published in the Paris-based *Revue des deux Mondes*. In nineteenth-century Paris, this monthly publication, still in existence today, was a vehicle for stories, poems, reviews and accounts which brought the Parisians glimpses of foreign lands. The French public's voracious appetite for this sort of material ensured Mérimée's work a place in the very first pages of its issue of the *Revue*, and led to its subsequent success. Mérimée's archeologist narrator created a scientific framework for the tale of Carmen and her fellow gypsies. The tale of deceit and intrigue in exotic Spain titillated readers. When observed thus at a safe distance, Carmen fascinated nineteenth century readers. The novella did not merely seek to tell a tragic tale of bohemian Spain since, as Corry Cropper notes, "whether Mérimée's narratives are set in the past or in an exotic world [...] their intent is to uncover what is being ignored in contemporary France."⁶⁰ When treated as more than just a novella, then, *Carmen* becomes a metaphor for the sometimes dangerous influence and power of the marginalized Other. Mérimée's narrative structure, however, manages to mitigate the shocking immorality in the tale, and tames Carmen with a masculine narrator, and a passionless, scientific context to neutralize her enticing danger and seductiveness. Thirty years later, though, Georges Bizet eliminated safety from the narrative, presenting the savage, seductive Carmen in all her exotic glory, complete with non-traditional music.

⁶⁰ Corry Cropper, "Prosper Mérimée and the Subversive 'Historical' Short Story," *Nineteenth Century French Studies* 33 (1/2, 2004), 69.

This rapprochement of the previously distant Other unsettled the Parisian audiences in a way that few works had done before.

The Carmen of 1845

Prosper Mérimée sets up a narrative duality in his novella by switching narrators and frameworks several times. At the outset of the novella, an archeologist narrates from Andalusia, where he and his guide, Antonio, encounter a man with a strange accent, and soon discover him to be Don José, a notorious bandit. Antonio decides to turn Don José in, so the narrator wakes him and warns him, and the chapter ends with Don José's escape. This first section introduces the reader to the Andalusian setting, creating an authentic expository moment, emphasized by the lack of translation of foreign words. When Mérimée references an Andalusian or Basque word, he leaves the reader with only context from which to glean the meaning. For instance, when the narrator and Antonio accompany Don José to a hotel, he begins to sing and play the mandolin, and the narrator remarks, “[s]i je ne me trompe, lui dis-je, ce n'est pas un air espagnol que vous venez de chanter. Cela ressemble aux *zorzicos* que j'ai entendus dans les *Provinces*, et les paroles doivent être en langue basque.”⁶¹ Throughout the first three sections, Mérimée's tactic of leaving the reader to guess the meaning of the unknown words heightens the exotic verisimilitude of the setting, and causes the reader of the novella to experience the same disorientation that affected the operatic audience many decades later. The author subjects them to a series of unfamiliar, foreign sounds that they must attempt to decipher unaided. Because the narrator himself approaches the language from a standpoint of doubt, he and,

⁶¹ “[I]f I am not mistaken, I said to him, it was not a Spanish air that you just sang. It resembles the *zorzicos* that I heard in the *Provinces*, and the words must be in Basque.” Prosper Mérimée, *Carmen* (Paris: Pocket, 2004), 25.

by extension, his audience are deprived of the essential aspects of communication, language and meaning, which might make a foreign Other considerably less unsettling and more relatable. The narrator's description of Don José's music further highlights the very same sense of unfamiliarity. He characterizes the voice as, "rude, mais pourtant agréable," and the song itself as, "mélancolique et bizarre[.]"⁶² Mérimée makes the reader privy to his own point of view in his role as a scientist investigating a culture. This objective viewpoint, coupled with the cultural authenticity of the language, infuses the first sections of the work with the feel of an almost historical account of the archeologist's travels.

Mérimée's Don José differs notably from his later operatic counterpart, partly by virtue of the timing of his introduction to the audience. The appearance and demeanor of the Don José of 1845 already bear the signs of all the troubles Carmen has brought upon him. The narrator first describes the darkness of his once fair features, and goes on to note that, "sa figure, à la fois noble et farouche, me rappelait le Satan de Milton."⁶³ The comparison to John Milton's Satan, the epitome of the romantic anti-hero, only darkens the image of Don José further, giving the reader little indication of whether they should trust or dislike this mysterious bandit. This reference also echoes his description of Carmen as a servant of the devil, foreshadowing their connection. (This dynamic of Carmen as the inferior character disappears in the opera, in which her character dominates the plot.) Furthermore, despite Don José's former military rank, the narrator treats him more as a *bohémien* than as an ex-soldier, yet struggles to classify him definitively as either. In *The Fate of Carmen*, Evelyn Gould points out that, "José's life is

⁶² "[H]arsh, yet pleasant," and "melancholy and bizarre." Mérimée, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁶³ "[H]is figure, simultaneously noble and savage, reminded me of Milton's Satan." Mérimée, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

summed up by a series of degradations,⁶⁴ and indeed the narrator finds his identity as hard to pin down as José himself does.

In the second chapter, the narrator experiences the culture of Cordoue (Córdoba) more intimately, at once including himself in it and separating himself from it. Throughout the initial descriptions of the chapter, he primarily employs the pronoun “on”.⁶⁵ This relates him directly to the culture in question, while establishing him definitively apart from them, maintaining a relative distance. At the outset, he witnesses a group of women bathing in a river, and describes, “des cris, des rires, un tapage infernal.”⁶⁶ Here again Mérimée draws attention to the disagreeable sounds created by the foreign characters. This chaotic sound of the bohemian Other, even when not musically represented, speaks to an underlying uneasiness surrounding the unavoidability of marginalized groups such as these women. It is in this setting that the narrator encounters Carmen for the first time:

Un soir, à l'heure où l'on ne voit plus rien, je fumais, appuyé sur le parapet du quai, lorsqu'une femme, remontant l'escalier qui conduit à la rivière, vint s'asseoir près de moi. Elle avait dans les cheveux un gros bouquet de jasmin, dont les pétales exhalaient le soir une odeur enivrante... à l'obscur clarté qui tombe des étoiles, je vis qu'elle était petite, jeune, bien faite, et qu'elle avait des très grands yeux.⁶⁷

One evening, at an hour when nothing was visible, I was smoking, resting on a parapet of the quay, when a woman, climbing back up the stairs that led to the river, came to sit near me. In her hair she had a large bouquet of jasmine, whose petals emitted an intoxicating odor into the night... in the dim clarity coming from the stars, I saw that she was small, young, good-looking, and that she had very large eyes.

⁶⁴ Evelyn Gould, *The Fate of Carmen* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins UP), 81.

⁶⁵ one

⁶⁶ “[C]ries, laughter, an infernal racket.” Mérimée, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁶⁷ Mérimée, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

In contrast with his later descriptions, the narrator's first impression of her is purely sensory (visual and olfactory, the most evocative of the senses). He sees a pretty, young woman of alluring presence, and creates an almost innocent image of her at their initial meeting. He describes her clothing as simple and black, and he sees her face as her *mantilla* (scarf/shawl) slides to her shoulders. Her large eyes and small frame do little to betray her duplicitous nature. This rather dispassionate description notwithstanding, the narrator clearly finds Carmen's presence alluring as he describes the intoxicating smell of the jasmine in her hair, further eroticizing her. Having invited her to go get ice cream with him, he soon learns her identity, and his description of her quickly changes, as her reputation has preceded her. He now refers to her as, "une servante du diable."⁶⁸ Even so, Carmen entices him all the way back to her home, where they are surprised by her lover, Don José, who, despite this betrayal, shows mercy on the man who previously allowed him to escape the authorities. Only after leaving does the narrator realize Carmen has stolen his watch. Her deceptively sweet appearance draws him in, but turns out to belie her nature. Therein lies a thinly veiled metaphor for the exotic Other, suggesting that it seduces but cannot be trusted. Mérimée leaves little of this appearance to the imagination as he provides his readers with a



Carmen by Prosper Mérimée

⁶⁸ "[A] servant of the devil." Mérimée, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

watercolor of his protagonists (*supra*). In the image, the two occupy a room in disarray, and Carmen clings to a much taller Don José, who simultaneously dominates the frame in centrality and stature and is mostly overshadowed by Carmen. Mérimée thus depicts José as the protagonist, but suggests Carmen's exotic allure attempting to overpower him. This watercolor demonstrates the importance both of José as the main focus of the narrative and of Carmen's effect on him. The Oriental Other, Carmen, seeks to undermine the dominance of the central, Western, character of José.

Having learned that Don José has been imprisoned and having gone to visit him, the narrator agrees to listen to his tale, and in chapter 3, we begin to hear Don José's story straight from his own mouth. This portion is the only part of Mérimée's novella that corresponds directly to the opera. Don José describes being stationed in Seville near a cigarette factory full of alluring women who, "se mettent à leur aise, les jeunes surtout, quand il fait chaud."⁶⁹ One of these exotic, uninhibited women is Carmen, with whom he falls madly in love, and for whom he abandons his military duty. In Mérimée's tale, unlike in the opera, Carmen is already married to one of the bandits in the troupe she leads. The Carmen of 1845 is much more deceitful, wild and faithless than Bizet's later character, who still shocked audiences, despite being a more tame, civilized version of her literary counterpart. The third chapter ends abruptly when Don José murders Carmen, and vows that, "[c]e sont les *calé* qui sont coupables pour l'avoir élevée ainsi."⁷⁰ According to Don José, the entirety of the blame lies with her gypsy upbringing; the savage culture in which she was raised formed her treacherous nature.

⁶⁹ "[M]ade themselves comfortable, the young ones especially, when it was hot." Mérimée, *op. cit.*, 46.

⁷⁰ "[I]t is the *calé* who are guilty for having raised her this way." Mérimée, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

The first publication of *Carmen* in the *Revue des deux Mondes* ended where Don José's narrative did. However, the novella was published as a book two years later with an added and incredibly incongruous chapter. Mérimée completely abandons the narrative structure of the previous sections, apparently re-assuming the role of the archeologist he introduced in the first chapter. This section reads like an encyclopedia entry, consisting of what seem to be anthropological observations of the gypsies with no follow-up whatsoever to the preceding narrative. It seems impossible to reason through the addition of this final chapter, but it does effectively create, once again, even more distance between the narrator and his subject. Having gotten almost uncomfortably close to this gypsy culture so fraught with crime and deceit in the previous chapters (especially with Carmen's murder just pages before), Mérimée once again retreats behind his scientific persona, affecting to give a purely impassive description of the people with whom he had interacted so closely, a lawless people whose culture José sees as having corrupted his love and ultimately caused him to murder his lover. Many audience members of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* would later share José's decidedly negative perception of this foreign influence.

Carmen's operatic debut

Following the poor response (from both critics and audiences) to *Djamileh*, Bizet's relationship with the Opéra-Comique might have reached an impasse, had it not been for the admiration of one of the directors, Camille Du Locle. He not only saw potential in the young Bizet to revitalize the repertoire of the Opéra-Comique, but also had a well-known passion for the exotic. It was he, remember, who commissioned and renamed *Djamileh*.

The other director, Adolphe de Leuven, presented a much more conservative front at the prospect of an opera based on Mérimée's *Carmen*,⁷¹ but Bizet was insistent on the subject, as well as on his preference for leading lady. He chose Célestine Galli-Marié, who had been his first choice to play Djamileh.⁷² She had a hand in writing the opera with Bizet, and seemed perfect for a part that was, after all, written to some degree specifically for her. Evidence of the addition of a female author's voice to the opera's narrative appears in Carmen's bold character and staging. Galli-Marié's was certainly a much more fiery and independent female lead than Opéra-Comique audiences had ever witnessed. A further challenge for these audiences was presented by the narrative content. De Leuven in particular was hesitant to accept the morbid subject matter of *Carmen*, apparently extremely averse to the idea of a death on stage. The fare at the Opéra-Comique was, true to its name, usually much lighter than at the Opéra, and targeted a more middle-class, family audience, and an on-stage murder thus had the potential to shock the spectators de Leuven expected to show up at his opera house. He finally agreed to stage the opera, but requested that Bizet keep Carmen's death off stage.⁷³ Even before its premiere, *Carmen*'s stark realism proved too much for some.

Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac, a well-known librettist duo in Paris, undertook the re-imagining of Mérimée's novella. The standard approach was for a librettist to do his work first, presenting the composer with the words to which he would then set music. In the case of *Carmen*, however, Bizet worked very closely with Halévy and Meilhac to achieve the final product he envisioned, but there survives very little documentary

⁷¹ Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁷² Imbert, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁷³ So strong were his feelings on the issue that the eventual inclusion of this resulted in his resignation as director of the Opéra-Comique.

evidence of the cooperation as the three collaborated mostly in person.⁷⁴ The libretto contains all the action of the novella's third chapter, while including several characters and embellishing the personalities of others. The most obvious change to the original text was to the narrative structure itself. Carmen becomes more than simply the title character: whereas she received recognition only in the third person thirty years prior, here she dominates the entire opera and fearlessly drives the plot forward. She appears in nearly every scene of the opera, but still endures some inevitable social alienation as a character. Besides her marginalized identity as a Spanish gypsy, Bizet's Carmen also defied class sensibilities as an independent and entirely empowered female lead, despite the fact that the librettists had somewhat subdued her feisty character. She no longer led the group of smugglers as she had done in the novella, nor was she as harshly disloyal. The nineteenth-century Parisian audience suddenly saw a confident, beguiling woman with complete control over all she met; in other words, they witnessed an exotic Other deceiving José and leading the initially virtuous soldier astray into a life of crime and betrayal. In her extremely popular first aria, the "Habañera", Carmen warns her admirers, "[s]i je t'aime, prends garde à toi!"⁷⁵ She explicitly cautions the listener as to her deceptive nature, and she does not claim to be loyal or honest. As a representation of all of her fellow gypsies, Carmen casts the Others of this opera in a distinctly unfavorable light. In a further departure from the novella's narrative structure, the opera proceeds in a straightforward, chronological manner, as opera is not a medium that lends itself to alternative timelines, as theater does. The audience is therefore denied the same safe

⁷⁴ Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁷⁵ "[I]f I love you, beware!" Bizet, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

distance from this troublingly seductive alterity that Mérimée's thrice-framed novella allowed them, as Carmen draws them irresistibly along through her dangerous plotline.

The writers also provided a moral compass for the opera in the form of Micaëla, Don José's childhood friend whom he intends to marry in accordance with his mother's wishes. According to Ange-Henri Blaze in an article for the *Revue des deux Mondes*, “[j]’ai nul besoin de remarquer ici que ce personnage absolument poncif n’est pas et ne pouvait être de Mérimée.”⁷⁶ Indeed, this young, innocent woman was a stock character of the Opéra-Comique, added as the librettists (perhaps at de Leuven's insistence) attempted to adhere more closely to the expectations of the audience. As Lagenevais notes, she contains none of the depth or realism seen in the rest of Mérimée's characters. She serves the sole purpose of giving the audience a safe-hold amidst the dangerous exoticism of Bizet's other characters. Indeed, Micaëla, loyal to José and continuously attempting to steer him back to morality represents the absolute antithesis of Carmen. In her book, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, Susan McClary notes that Micaëla, “represents the stereotypical Angel in the House: the sexless, submissive ideal of the bourgeoisie.”⁷⁷ This submissiveness might have appealed to the audience as what they wished to see exhibited by their own inescapable Other in Paris, at times so volatile and uncontrollable in their uprisings.

The beginning of Bizet's work resembles that of the novella in its implication of the audience as an observer. Following the overture, the first act begins with a group of

⁷⁶ “I do not need to point out that this absolutely cliché character is not and could not be Mérimée's.” Ange-Henri Blaze, «Revue Musicale,» *Revue des Deux mondes* (Paris : Mar. 15, 1875), 475-480.

⁷⁷ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of California Press), 57.

soldiers people-watching in a square, remarking, “[d]rôle de gens que ces gens-là!”⁷⁸ Just as Mérimée’s narrator observed the bathing women, the soldiers watch the passersby, casting José and his soldiers as the audience, and causing the actual audience to identify most closely with them. Immediately afterwards, however, Bizet disconcerts the audience for the first time when the soldiers harass the innocent Micaëla who comes through the square looking for José. The audience struggles to find a moral foothold as these supposedly upright soldiers who embody virtue for the audience and to whom they relate fall short of their high expectation.

The composition and orchestration of *Carmen* showcase Bizet’s musical aptitude through his portrayal of exotic peoples. Several of the main themes of the opera, including the “Habañera,” are based on traditional Spanish themes, with his own orchestral stylizations and Halévy’s words. Also of note in his composition is the lack of a duet between Carmen and Don José. Don José has an extremely touching duet with Micaëla, but when on stage together, he and Carmen merely sing at each other, and never with each other. Micaëla and José’s perfectly blended harmonies as they sing together are in stark contrast to Carmen’s songs with José which, while sung at the same time, rarely have anything to do with what he sings (musically or lyrically). Here we see a parallel with Mérimée’s narrative in that Bizet’s Don José becomes extremely close with Carmen physically, but remains completely separate from her musically in much the same way that Mérimée’s narrator is immersed in Carmen’s culture while in Cordoue, but distances himself from the dangerous Other linguistically and narratively. When Carmen and José do sing together, their musical styles contrast with one another just as the characters themselves. Carmen’s themes contain an abundance of chromaticism (half-steps),

⁷⁸ “[F]unny sorts of people, these!” Bizet, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

straining toward the resolution expected by the audience, but taking ample time to reach it, and triplets upset the tempo of Carmen's "Habañera". These irregularities both unsettle and seduce the listener with their exotic dissonance. By contrast, José's themes are ones of "the 'universal' tongue of Western classical music."⁷⁹ These familiar sounds created a comfortable connection between the audience and José. However, the listeners are then complicit in his disloyalty and because they are just as easily seduced by the foreign temptress as the traditional musical character with whom they are all but forced to empathize. The audience is put under not insignificant psychological strain, as Bizet's skillful composition demands their attention, only to then prove treacherous to their regulated Parisian sensibilities.

Critical Reception of Bizet's *Carmen*

When the reviews for *Carmen*'s premiere were published, it seemed de Leuven's fears had been realized. The critics and the audience had not been receptive to Bizet's boldly realistic and racy portrayal of the exotic tale. One especially biting review of the opera appeared in *Le Siècle* five days after the premiere, in which Oscar Comettant wrote as follows:

Il faudrait, pour le bon ordre social et la sécurité des impressionnables dragons et toréadors qui entourent cette demoiselle, la bâillonner et mettre un terme à ses coups de hanches effrénés, en l'enfermant dans une camisole de force après l'avoir rafraîchie d'un pot à eau versé sur sa tête. L'état pathologique de cette malheureuse, vouée, sans trêve ni merci, comme le notaire des *Mystères de Paris*, aux ardeurs de la chair, est un cas fort rare heureusement, plus fait pour inspirer la sollicitude des médecins que pour intéresser d'honnêtes spectateurs venus à l'Opéra-Comique en compagnie de leurs femmes et de leurs filles.⁸⁰

It should be necessary, for the sake of social order and the safety of the impressionable dragoons and bullfighters who surround this damsel, to gag her

⁷⁹ McClary, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁸⁰ Comettant, *art. cit.*, p. 2.

and put an end to her mad hip-swinging, confining her in a straitjacket after having refreshed her by pouring a tub of water over her head. The pathological state of this poor soul, fated, relentlessly and thanklessly, like the notary in *The Mysteries of Paris*, to the heats of the flesh, is luckily a very rare case, more suited to the concern of doctors than the interest of honest spectators come to the Opéra-Comique in the company of their wives and children.

Relentless in his criticism, Comettant seems to mock Meilhac and Halévy's adaptation, relegating Carmen to yet another misunderstood faction of society: the insane. Having been thus thrice devalued (female, gypsy, and mentally unbalanced), Carmen could not hope to be shown any sympathy by her audience, and indeed, just as Comettant deemed the character unfit for the family audience of the Opéra-Comique, so the critics fiercely condemned Galli-Marié's scandalous portrayal of her. Note that Commetant describes Carmen as disrupting the social order, a very telling criticism in a city fraught with social and political upheavals. Not only was Carmen a woman, but she was a revolutionary who in no way attempted to hide the fact that she could not be trusted. She took an upstanding military man and brought him so low that he committed the ultimate crime, all accompanied by song and dance. The crowds' and critics' wariness of her came as no coincidence as they wished such figures as soldiers to be dependable and trustworthy, but saw their supposed cultural incarnation of virtue brought down by a marginalized seductress.

Just as telling as the criticism was the praise *Carmen* received from musical critics and Bizet's contemporaries alike. Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky could hardly contain his excitement over Bizet's new work. His brother wrote of his enthusiasm at attending a performance of the opera's initial run in Paris, saying,

The reason for this is that, although he was already familiar with the opera's music, it was here that he first became acquainted with the beauties of the score's orchestration, and, moreover, the astonishing interpretation of the role of Carmen

by Mme Galli-Marié also had a considerable effect on his appreciation. She was not outstanding as a singer, because her vocal resources were far from first-rate, but as an actress, on the other hand, she was one of the most spellbinding talents. Carmen in her interpretation, whilst preserving all the vitality of this figure, was at the same time shrouded in [...] indescribable charms.⁸¹

Tchaikovsky was not the only one of Bizet's musical contemporaries to recognize his great talent, but he went on to note the performance of Galli-Marié. In describing her as "spellbinding" and with "unbridled passion and mystic fatalism", Tchaikovsky acknowledged something it would take the French public several years to come to terms with. What the Parisian audiences perceived as threatening, he could appreciate as an asset of Carmen's character. Perhaps because he was culturally removed from the turmoil of nineteenth-century France, a composer such as Tchaikovsky was immune any anxiety or discontent Carmen's character caused her French audiences. Even Friedrich Nietzsche had nothing but positive comments, and also provided an extremely perspicacious look at the character of Carmen. He observed how "another kind of sensuality, another kind of sensitiveness and another kind of cheerfulness make their appeal. This music is gay, but not in a French or German way. Its gaiety is African; fate hangs over it, its happiness is short, sudden, without reprieve. I envy Bizet for having had the courage of this sensitiveness, which hitherto in the cultured music of Europe has found no means of expression, —of this southern, tawny, sunburnt sensitiveness."⁸² Not only is his interpretation acutely perceptive, his own analysis is indicative of Western views at the time. His description of the piece as African illustrates the interchangeability with which foreign lands were viewed, and how any foreign, marginalized Other in fiction could be

⁸¹ Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Letters to His Family: An Autobiography* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1981), 246.

⁸² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms* (Project Gutenberg, 2008), 4.

taken to represent a troubling Other closer to home, and create tensions in a public such as that of *Carmen*'s premiere.

As Said mentions in *Orientalism*, most everything could be included in the category of the Orient for the purposes of argument. Indeed, there appears to be a fluidity in Bizet's representations of the Other between *Carmen* and *Djamileh*. Many of the same adjectives and references are used to describe the characters in the two operas, despite their being set on entirely different continents. It therefore hardly mattered whence *Carmen* hailed; the mere fact that she was a foreign, exotic character suddenly threw into harsh musical relief the reality of the power of a marginalized Other that Parisian audiences had perhaps come to the opera to avoid. With *Carmen*'s murder at the end of the opera, they were brutally reminded of the violence to which their country had been witness all too recently, and all of their resentment came through in the press as criticism of the musical style, of Galli-Marié's acting, and in the immediate unpopularity of the work.

Conclusion

Decades after the publication of the texts of *Namouna* and *Carmen*, Georges Bizet tested the boundaries of Parisian taste and even propriety with his musical renditions of those texts, but both would have to wait years until shortly after his death in 1875 to be widely recognized for their musical and artistic merit. Simple artistic analysis of the works themselves does not suffice to explain the massive shift in popularity that led to an appreciation of both works and led to *Carmen*, in particular, to become the world's most performed opera. The key, then, lies in examination of the reactions of the public, what informed those reactions, an understanding of the language used to express them, and how all these elements relate to the historical context of the operas. Few cities underwent as much political and social instability in the nineteenth century as Paris, where the middle and upper classes naturally experienced widespread uneasiness as they witnessed the powerful and rich repeatedly ousted and reinstated. Coupled with an ever-prevalent but fearful fascination with the Orient, this uneasiness led to highly conflicted reactions to *Djamileh* (1872) and *Carmen* (1875), with the net effect being days of negative reviews and no success for either opera in Bizet's lifetime. Ludovic Halévy, one of the librettists of *Carmen*, lamented the injustice of the reactions to Bizet's operas in his preface to fellow librettist Louis Gallet's *Notes d'un Librettiste*. He recalled the reviews of *Djamileh*, and states that, "[a]ussi cruels, aussi injustes, furent les articles sur *Carmen*."⁸³ Clearly, the cruelty of these articles may have been unfair, but was not entirely inexplicable once we understand their historical context.

⁸³ "[J]ust as cruel and unjust were the articles on *Carmen*." Halévy, Ludovic, preface of *Notes d'un Librettiste: Musique contemporaine* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1891), xiii.

Hardly has there ever been an artistic realm more socially governed than that of the nineteenth century operatic scene in Paris. For one thing, the public rarely attended the opera purely for the love of music, but used the occasion to interact with others of their same social status, to “see and be seen”, a truth blatantly obvious in press reviews of opera premieres, which spent almost as much time making observations about members of the audience as commenting on the music itself. Moreover, as we saw with the example of the importance of the *claque* in limiting the run of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, money and social status had an enormous effect in determining the popularity of an opera and by extension, in influencing the audience’s perception of the art. Wagner’s subversion of the traditional Opéra-Comique formula for an opera sentenced his work to a mere two performances, just over a decade before Bizet’s *Djamileh* upset its audiences with non-traditional sounds of the Orient and *Carmen* shocked them with debauchery and murder on the stage before their very eyes.

The two source texts and their corresponding operas span a total of forty-three years of French history, which might seem a brief span in the history of a whole country, but for France (and especially Paris) these forty-three years in particular contained more revolution and social upset than another country might experience in its entire history. In 1832, Musset composed his poem, *Namouna*, in the period following the establishment of French rule in Algeria, in a Paris recovering from an unexpected and crippling outbreak of cholera, the *Trois Glorieuses* and the reign of Charles X, all amidst the Romantic Era that was blossoming in the July Monarchy. His lengthy *conte oriental* appealed to the escapist fascination of the Parisian public, symptomatic both of their city’s unrest and of their desire for further conquest and expansion into foreign (Oriental) lands. In the wake

of all of this, Robert Tombs notes, “[t]he national question – hopes that France could recover her position as the mistress of a liberated Europe – led to excited calls to arms.”⁸⁴ The French remained intrigued and tempted by the Orient, an attitude we see exemplified by the exotic feminine language utilized in *Namouna*. Musset’s rich imagery, suggestive humor, and Romantic tones greatly appealed to his public, especially as the work was published in print, and not performed. The reader could thus enjoy the bewitching but dangerous work safely, “sans quitter [s]on fauteuil.”⁸⁵

Prosper Mérimée wrote *Carmen* fifteen years later, in an equally restless Paris. His tale was one of a virtuous soldier turned brigand by a Spanish seductress, undone by her, and driven eventually to murder her. Like the readers of *Namouna*, those of the *Revue des deux Mondes* in which the novella was first published were drawn in by the exotic protagonist and enticing images of unfamiliar lands. However, as Corry Cropper notes, “[a]t the most, [Mérimée’s narratives] allegorize failings of France’s ruling administrations, and serve as reminders of the violence that threatens these regimes while hinting at their dangerous misrepresentations of history.”⁸⁶ Indeed, the novella follows the progressive downfall of a soldier to a man, a man to a thief, and finally a thief to a murderer, all brought on by Carmen’s threatening exotic influence. The fact that Carmen is never given voice in the story even though the plot could not exist without her situates her as a powerful Other narratively oppressed by both José and the author. Even so, she eventually subverts the narrative and brings on the tragic denouement. None of this turmoil presented in the guise of exotic allure troubled the Parisian public unduly until it

⁸⁴ Tombs, *op. cit.*, p. 358-9.

⁸⁵ “[W]ithout leaving his wheelchair.” Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁸⁶ Cropper, *art. cit.*, p. 70.

was represented in a much more forward manner by Bizet thirty years later, in a very different Paris.

The poem's and the novella's operatic counterparts did not enjoy nearly the same positive reception as the original works. By 1872, the year of *Djamileh*'s premiere, Paris had already reached the Third Republic, and had undergone the Paris Commune and the Franco-Prussian War. Bizet thus presented his exotic work to a Parisian public recently demoralized and fragile from defeat. Tombs describes that, "[f]or those living in 1871, political collapse, defeat and revolution began a period of uncertainty. The Left feared a monarchical reaction; the Right, a return of the Commune. All feared war."⁸⁷ Indeed, the public at the opera would want more than ever to indulge in the sort of sociable, mindless escapism they had become used to in the long history of Parisian opera. In Bizet's opera what they got, instead, was what the reviews classified as dissonant and *wagnerien*, unsupported by any sense of action. The poem, with its rich imagery but rather thin plot, served much more as a literary canvas upon which Musset could create yet another oriental tableau, while indulging in his own artistic musings. Bizet attempted to do the same musically with the libretto by Louis Gallet, but to little avail. Despite the musical merits of the opera (as recognized by several of his contemporaries), what the public noticed in *Djamileh* were its visually rich and pleasing mise-en-scène and contrastingly unpalatable exotic sounds. The short, one-act opera did little to satisfy the Parisian public, composed of people who were, "féroces quand il s'agissait d'une dérogation aux règles de la poésie locale."⁸⁸ These audience members were all, as both Tombs and Gallet suggest, extremely wary of any change to the order of things, and had years of history to

⁸⁷ Tombs, *op. cit.*, p. 436.

⁸⁸ "[F]erocious when it came to an exemption from the rules of the local [poetic] aesthetic." Gallet, *op. cit.*, 15.

justify their anxiety. In this case, and later with *Carmen*, Bizet released an extraordinarily innovative work at a highly inopportune moment.

As Said observes, “[m]uch of the expansionist fervor in France during the last third of the nineteenth century was generated out of an explicit wish to compensate for the Prussian victory in 1870-1871[.]”⁸⁹ At the time when *Carmen* premiered in Paris, the desire for expansion into the Orient had not waned, and that desire fueled a definite need to prove the dominance of French power. Unfortunately, it was in this context that Bizet unleashed his then notorious but now celebrated representation of Mérimée’s leading lady. Célestine Galli-Marié’s portrayal of the feisty Carmen garnered an exorbitant amount of criticism for her eroticism and influence over the rest of the opera’s characters. Therein, though, lay much of the reason for the French audience’s discontent with the opera. Suddenly, they were inescapably faced with an exotic, feminine Other whom they, given the recent history of their nation, wished to dominate, but whom they saw controlling everyone on stage, leading the virtuous astray, and leaving a trail of moral and physical ruin in her wake. The parallels with contemporary anxieties of revolution and conflict were all too evident. The musical aspects of the opera only strengthened the bond between the audience and the traditional, Western-sounding Don José, then led them to be enticed and subsequently betrayed by Carmen just as he was. Furthermore, the very violence they came to the opera to evade, the violence they so feared in their own city and hoped to avoid at the family-friendly Opéra-Comique appeared starkly before them in the dramatic climax of the opera with José’s murder of Carmen as the opera closes. As Susan McClary states, “there is no aftermath to soften its finality.”⁹⁰ The Parisian public

⁸⁹ Said, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

⁹⁰ McClary, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

had, at that point, undergone a tremendous amount of relentless social and political upheaval and physical violence, and they unexpectedly found themselves once again faced with it in the very place they had sought to escape it.

Corry Cropper asserts in his article on Mérimée's subversive writings, "historical narrative [...] should be read with contemporary France in mind."⁹¹ The same can and should be said of works in any artistic medium, especially one combining as many interpretable elements as opera. The visual married with the textual and the musical provide a rich basis for analysis, but also illicit deeper responses on the part of the audience. So it is that simply analyzing the content without also examining the context would not only do the work an injustice, but would leave any critic with a woefully incomplete picture of the artist's intentions, the public's reactions, and the effect of the work on its surroundings and vice versa. I hope to have proven in the preceding pages that supporting artistic scrutiny of Bizet's operas and their source texts themselves with a close look at their respective historical settings and the nature of the audiences to whom they were presented provides a much more comprehensive explanation as to why works of such musical genius were so poorly received in nineteenth century France.

⁹¹ Cropper, *art. cit.*, p. 58.

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