

---

H-France Review Vol. 23 (June 2023), No. 104

Richard Langham Smith, *Bizet's "Carmen" Uncovered*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021. xxviii + 296 pp. Colour plates, black and white plates, music examples, bibliography, and index. £29.95, \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781783275250; £19.99, \$24.95 U.S. (epdf). 9781787449213; £24.99, \$29.95 U.S. (epub). 9781800100466.

Review by Tommaso Sabbatini, University of Bristol / McGill University.

With *Bizet's "Carmen" Uncovered*, Richard Langham Smith has set himself the task of illuminating the cultural background to Georges Bizet's 1875 *opéra comique*. The esteemed scholar of Claude Debussy (to whom we owe, among other things, the rediscovery of *Rodrigue et Chimène* and the Cambridge Opera Handbook of *Pelléas et Mélisande*) shifts his focus back in time by one generation. Debussy, after all, had studied with Bizet's friend Ernest Guiraud, now chiefly remembered as the composer who transformed *Carmen* into a sung-through opera in order to facilitate its circulation beyond France. In fact, Langham Smith reaches not just further back than Bizet, but also further back than *Carmen's* literary source, Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella of the same title, and embarks on an upstream journey that leads him all the way to the Napoleonic wars, which put French (and English) culture into contact with Spain.

Langham Smith has spent the past few years immersed in *Carmen*. He has prepared a new edition of the score for Edition Peters, and has co-curated, with Clair Rowden, an ambitious research project on the performing history of the work, "*Carmen* Abroad," which has resulted in an edited volume as well as a wealth of online resources.<sup>[1]</sup> He has also, as the acknowledgements section shows, been in constant dialogue with performers and practitioners in the opera and recording industry. This is of course a great strength of his, which however leads him to be weirdly modest about the intended readership and argument of his book. His preface makes it sound like he wrote it to help dramaturges and directors who wish to stick to the prescribed Spanish setting in future productions of *Carmen* ("This volume is addressed to those who think the Spanish context of the story may still be of interest in putting *Carmen* on stage," p. xxi). To be clear, a dramaturge or a director would dream of receiving something like *Bizet's "Carmen" Uncovered* as a contribution from a musicological consultant: it moves smoothly among music, literature, and the visual arts; it is erudite, engagingly written, helpfully broken down into small subsections, and richly illustrated (including with a full-colour gallery). But there is no need to subscribe to a particular aesthetic agenda for one to benefit from it, and a dramaturge or director *not* wishing to adopt a Spanish setting would also read it with profit. And for all the reasons I have just listed, the book will appeal far beyond the theatre professions: in fact, it is accessible to any music lover, the only prerequisite being some familiarity with *Carmen*. On this front, too, Langham Smith is too modest. He claims that his "is certainly not an 'opera guide'" (p. xxi), but its central chapters

(“From Novella to Libretto” and “Libretto into Opera”) can be used as an introduction to *Carmen*. They could, for example, be assigned to students as a complement and update to the equivalent chapters in Susan McClary’s classic Cambridge Opera Handbook.[2] If anyone needs a word of warning before approaching Bizet’s *“Carmen” Uncovered*, it may be academics. Although written by a musicologist, enjoyable by musicologists, and physically indistinguishable from the “Eastman Studies in Music” series and other academic volumes with which it shares a publisher, it feels like what the publishing industry calls a “trade book”—a terrible expression, but not a terrible thing, quite the contrary.

Chapters one to three—“Vitoria and Waterloo: French Music and the Peninsular Wars,” “Pictures and Jottings: *Carmen* and the Rise of Andalusian Tourism,” “Spain on the Paris Stage”—explore the cultural landscape from which *Carmen* (the novella as well as the *opéra comique*) emerged. Chapter one describes the circulation of Spanish music in France and Europe, with an emphasis on the Napoleonic era and the Restoration; chapter two broadens the scope to the visual arts and literature; chapter three zooms in on Spanish dance, or dance branded as Spanish. All the usual suspects make their appearance: the García family, Sebastián Iradier, Théophile Gautier, Édouard Manet, Fanny Elssler and her *cachucha*—along with less obvious names such as the Andalusian dancer Petra Cámara, or Gustave Doré in his capacity as illustrator of Charles Davillier’s *L’Espagne*. The value of such a survey resides precisely in having brought this impressive cast of characters together in one place. This is the foundation on which the later chapters are built, particularly the final section (“Carmen’s Places,” “Carmen the Gypsy,” “In the Pit, On the Stage”), which illuminate the way in which the Spain of *Carmen* interweaves fact and fiction, realism and Orientalism, the documentary impulse and the Romantic imagination.

The arc of the book, as Langham Smith himself stresses, has 1875 as its endpoint. This makes it a good companion to two recent books on the reception of *Carmen*: the *Carmen Abroad* volume and Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz’s *“Carmen” and the Staging of Spain*. [3] Taken together, the three books cover a span of almost a century and a half, evenly divided between the prehistory and the afterlives of *Carmen*. Another volume that could be read alongside these is Karen Henson’s *Opera Acts*, which profiles, among others, the originator of the role of Carmen, Céléstine Galli-Marié. [4]

*Bizet’s “Carmen” Uncovered* is written in a witty, conversational prose: Langham Smith has the gift of the gab and is not afraid to use it. He is, I suppose, fully aware that his humour will not work equally well with every demographic but chose nonetheless to go for the personal touch. Sometimes, however, it is a fine line between sounding casual and sounding inconsiderate. Most notably, he does not problematize the use of “Gypsy” for the Romani people of southern Spain (and the Romantic trope based on their idealization). When referring to the cooptation of Spain by the Orientalist imagination, he describes in passing Spain as “half-European, half-African.” This is surely a tongue-in-cheek reference to a famous passage by Victor Hugo (“l’Espagne est à demi africaine, l’Afrique est à demi asiatique,” from the preface to *Les Orientales*), but the naive reader might think he is taking the Orientalist cliché at face value. Langham Smith’s command, and display, of Spanish and French vocabulary is admirable, but can occasionally lead to a faux pas: *baisade* (a word famously associated with Flaubert) does not work as a euphemism for a place where sexual intercourse happens, as it refers to intercourse itself, and is not euphemistic in the least. The observation that Lillas Pastia’s business is, in modern terms, a love hotel is a good and pertinent one, and there is no need to shroud it in euphemisms. It deserves to be spelled out,

precisely because Bizet's contemporaries have shirked from making it in writing (although Opéra-Comique manager Léon Carvalho seems to have been very outspoken in private). [5]

Langham Smith excels at teasing out multiple layers of meaning and intertextual connections. This is normally a blessing, which allows him, for instance, to hear a *pasodoble taurino* in the overture or an echo of church style in a suspension-filled passage of the Micaëla-Don José duet. But it can turn into a curse when he becomes too enamoured with a hypothesis. For example, he provides an otherwise very sensitive, in-depth reading of the first encounter between Carmen and Don José, but he puts undue faith in the idea that the *fleur de cassie* that Carmen throws at the soldier must have nothing to do with an acacia and must belong to the genus *Cassia*. In fact, the word *cassie* does derive from "acacia," and it describes the Mediterranean plant known in English as sweet acacia (*Vachellia farnesiana* or *Acacia farnesiana*).

Similarly, the chapter on "The Forgotten Englishman" is astute and fascinating, but at the same time overly reliant on a leap of faith. In her contribution to the *Carmen Abroad* volume, Michela Niccolai brought attention to a *mise en scène* for *Carmen* containing a page with the heading "Ancienne mise en scène" (old production) and having the indication "Scène de l'Anglais" in the position where Moralès's *scène et pantomime*, cut during the first run of *Carmen*, used to be. Langham Smith jumps to the conclusion that "old production" must refer to the 1875 Opéra-Comique première, that the "Scène de l'Anglais" must be the *scène et pantomime*, and therefore that the *scène et pantomime* must have featured an Englishman. But this conclusion rests solely on a document that is probably a twentieth-century copy of an ostensibly lost original; the stage layout (the *plantation*) does not match the set of the première; "old production" could mean any superseded production at any theatre; and it would seem strange for a *mise en scène* not to give any direction other than a laconic "Scène de l'Anglais" for an elaborate *pantomime* involving three characters. This, of course, does not invalidate Langham Smith's discussion of the trade between Spain and England, of the presence of the English in Mérimée's and Bizet's *Carmens*, and of stereotypes of the English in *opéra comique*. These pages do make for interesting reading and could indeed inspire future productions of *Carmen*: that would be enough even without the thinly supported claim that an Englishman appeared in the 1875 *pantomime*.

I find Langham Smith more persuasive when he questions the prevailing view that the 1875 vocal score of *Carmen*, approved by Bizet, closely reflects what was performed at the Opéra-Comique in March of that year. He argues that Bizet might have consented to leave out some music from the vocal score, as vocal scores "are perhaps best regarded as a set of parts for the singers" (p. 247). This is an excellent point—I would add that vocal scores also had to serve the needs of domestic music-making, and I can confirm that in the case of Jacques Offenbach's *Le roi Carotte* (1872) some of the melodramatic music was indeed omitted in the vocal score. But I can also think of several possible counterarguments. An *opéra comique* commanded greater respect for its musical text than a *féerie* such as *Le roi Carotte* did; omitting portions within numbers, as opposed to entire numbers, would make vocal scores harder to use as "parts for the singers"; and singers were not the only theatre professionals to rely on vocal scores, which is probably why fin-de-siècle French vocal scores tended to include even the smallest melodramatic cue. If Opéra-Comique performances contained more *mélodrame*—dialogue spoken on orchestral music—than the vocal score does, Guiraud, when adapting *Carmen* for the international market, would probably have transformed those passages into a *parlante* texture, instead of writing recitatives from scratch. (Zuniga's *mélodrame* lines towards the end of act one, which are included in the vocal score, were transformed into *parlante*, and later on Jules Massenet's *Manon* would travel

abroad with all its *mélodrame* converted into *parlante*.) Of course, I am not suggesting that the music dropped from *Carmen* by Bizet (or with his assent) is not worth listening, and one can make a case for including it in performances regardless of whether it was heard at the Opéra-Comique in 1875.

I offer a final note that I hope could help readers of the book navigate the tricky nomenclature and history of Parisian theatres in the nineteenth century. The Salle Favart (which is a venue, not a company) gets called within a few pages “the Opéra-Comique” (p. 11), “the Théâtre Italien” (p. 16), and “the second Salle Favart” (p. 24). During the period at hand—the First Empire and the Restoration—the Salle Favart had ceased to be the home of the Opéra-Comique; “Théâtre Italien” must be understood here as a late eighteenth-century synonym for “Opéra-Comique”; and “second” is incorrect, as the building was still the original one. The second Salle Favart, which did host the Opéra-Comique throughout its existence, would not open until 1840, after a fire destroyed the first. When “the Ventadour” is mentioned at page sixty-seven, the reference is to the Opéra-Comique, which was at one point housed at the Salle Ventadour. The première of *Carmen* took place at the second Salle Favart. It is untrue, however, that “it was the first staging of a new opera after the 1874 fire in the Salle Favart” (p. 154): Langham Smith must have thought of the fire that destroyed the Opéra in 1873. The Salle Favart did burn down again in 1887, though. *Carmen* was among the first works that the Opéra-Comique revived after the fire (at what is now the Théâtre de la Ville, on place du Châtelet), and it was the work that Albert Carré chose for the Opéra-Comique’s inaugural performance at the third, and still standing, Salle Favart in 1898.

## NOTES

[1] Richard Langham Smith and Clair Rowden, eds., *Carmen Abroad: Bizet’s Opera on the Global Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); <https://carmenabroad.org> (last accessed April 5, 2023).

[2] Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet, “Carmen”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[3] Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz, *“Carmen” and the Staging of Spain: Recasting Bizet’s Opera in the Belle Époque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[4] Karen Henson, *Opera Acts: Singers and Performance in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[5] See Maurice Lefèvre, “Georges Bizet, le musicien,” *Musica*, no. 117 (June 1912), 102–3.

Tommaso Sabbatini  
University of Bristol / McGill University  
[tommaso.sabbatini@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:tommaso.sabbatini@bristol.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for

---

edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172