

# Week 10

Exoticism and Gender in Opera and Operetta

# Exoticism and Gender

- The exotic “Other”=often associated with the feminine or effeminate or effeminizing or queer
- Western “Self”: associated with heteronormative, patriarchal masculinity
- Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* (Cleopatra and Tolomeo)
- Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalilah*
- Borodin’s *Prince Igor* (Konchakovna)
- Britten’s *Death in Venice* (Aschenbach’s desire for Tadzio)

# Bizet's *Carmen*

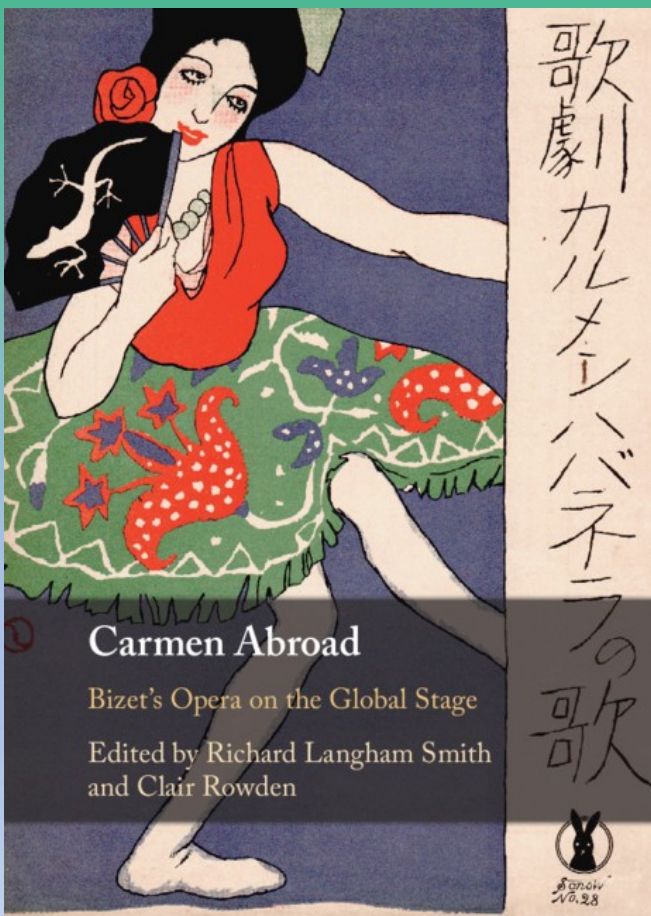
- Carmen=Spanish “Gypsy” Woman
- “Gypsies”=internal “Other”
- How is Carmen exotic?
- Habanera (#9): a “Gypsy” song?
- Melody: from a collection of Spanish art songs; rhythm: Afro-Cuban
- Seguidilla (#16): Spanish triple-meter dance + exotic elements: instrumentation, Phrygian twists
- Dance Song (#26)
- Only introspective song: B section of the “Card” Trio (#34, 3:00)

# The Spanish (“Us”) Characters in *Carmen*

- Micaëla’s aria (#36, 1:00)
- Don José vs. Carmen Motives in the scene following the Habanera (#10)
- Don José: duet with Micaëla (#12)
- The Murder of *Carmen*: #42 (4:00)

# Carmen Reception in Prague

- German Theater (Estates Theater, later Neues deutsches Theater): 1880
- Czech Theater (National Theater): 1884—first foreign opera to be produced at the NT
- German reception: Carmen=progressive, Wagnerian, proto-veristic opera=basically a German opera, the Germans understand it better than the French
- Czech reception: too cosmopolitan, regressive, commercial, immoral, sexual



14 | *Carmen* for the Czechs and Germans, 1880 to 1945

MARTIN NEDBAL

The first Prague performance of *Carmen*, in German, took place on 29 March 1880 in the Estates Theatre (Ständetheater, currently Stavovské divadlo), famous for hosting the 1787 world premiere of *Don Giovanni*. *Carmen* became popular immediately, receiving sixteen performances in 1880 alone (more than it received in Vienna in the first two years after its premiere in 1875). *Carmen* remained in the repertoire of the Estates Theatre, and after 1888 the New German Theatre (Neues deutsches Theater, currently Státní opera), until the Estates Theatre's closure in September 1938. On 3 January 1884, four years after the first German performance, *Carmen* was produced at the newly reconstructed Czech National Theatre (Národní divadlo), which first opened in June 1881, burned down two months later, then reopened in November 1883. *Carmen* was, in fact, the very first foreign opera production at the National Theatre.<sup>1</sup> On 15 May 1908 *Carmen* was also performed during the inaugural season of the newly established Czech Vinohrady Theatre. In the next two decades Prague audiences could choose between two Czech and one German productions of *Carmen*.<sup>2</sup> As one of the most popular works in Prague, *Carmen*'s performance history provides a fascinating glimpse into the city's cultural development during the politically turbulent decades between 1880 and 1945. The following pages discuss the alterations to *Carmen*'s text and music in Prague's productions, its conductors and the divas whose interpretations of the title role and the opera's score impressed Bohemian audiences and critics. The final section of this chapter focuses on the ways in which *Carmen*'s reception reflected increasing national and political tensions in the Bohemian capital.

<sup>1</sup> Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* was performed twice there in 1881 (before the fire), yet this was not a new production but one that had been prepared previously in the so-called Provisional Theatre (Prozatímní divadlo).

<sup>2</sup> In 1919 the Vinohrady opera company moved out of the Vinohrady Theatre, and in 1920 started operating in the nearby Píštěk Theatre, renamed as Vinohrady Opera (Vinohradská zpevohra). The company produced *Carmen* once again in 1924 but ceased operations, owing to financial difficulties, in 1932.