Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Drame lyrique

Charles-François Gounod

Jules Massenet

Georges Bizet

LYRIC DRAMA

Chapter: CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size
Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The closest parallels and antecedents to *Eugene Onegin* can be found in France, where a new genre—sometimes rather redundantly called *opéra lyrique* (or *drame lyrique*) after its bastion, the Paris Théâtre Lyrique (opened 1851)—had arisen in more or less conscious opposition to the bloated *grand opéra*, or at least as an alternative to the latter and a challenge to its proud status as the national opera of the French. The Théâtre Lyrique's showpieces were two operas by the prolific Charles-François Gounod (1818–93): *Faust* (1859), after Goethe's famous dramatic poem, and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867) after Shakespeare. As exemplified by Gounod, the genre could be described as a hybrid that retained the accompanied recitatives of the grand opera (albeit tuneful ones), but that cut the musical forms (and, consequently, the characters who express themselves through them) down to comic-opera size. The musical emphasis, like Chaikovsky's, is on characterization through attractive melody reminiscent of "domestic romances" and ballroom dances, rather than impressive musico-dramatic structures.

Thus unlike Boito, whose fame as Verdi's late literary collaborator has eclipsed his reputation as a composer, Gounod made little attempt to embody the metaphysical content of Goethe's poem in his Faust opera. Its character as a religious drama of redemption through love is surely respected, but the accent is placed not on the "message" but rather on the emotional lives of the leading man and leading lady. There is no lofty Prologue in Heaven, and Gounod's very unsatanic Méphistophélès is for the most part reduced to a merry puppet master who sings in an appropriately swaggering opera buffa style: his strophic "Calf of Gold" aria in jig time, one of the opera's most popular numbers, is a drinking song in everything but name. The comedization or "lowering" of the role is entirely calculated, and a well-aimed slap at German pretension.

That has not prevented many critics, in thrall to German thinking in its "historicist" phase, from excoriating Gounod for "popularizing" (that is, trivializing) a great play. For Joseph Kerman, Gounod's opera was, "as Wagner observed, the classic case" illustrating the threat an unworthy opera can level at a literary masterpiece. "Goethe's play has given us an adjective, 'Faustian,'" he wrote, "but the world in which the Faustian spirit strives is entirely dissipated by Gounod's pastel timidities."[11] The suggestion that the dissipation in question was unintended surely misses the point of *opéra lyrique*.

fig. 12-4 The French bass Pol Plançon (1851–1914) as Méphistophélès in Gounod's *Faust*, a role with which he was particularly associated.

Pastel shades will not be thought amiss in *Roméo et Juliette*, and the same expert muting of Goethe and Shakespeare can be observed in the work of Gounod's slightly older contemporary Ambroise Thomas (1811–96), whose most successful operas were *Mignon* (1866), after Goethe's romantic novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, and *Hamlet* (1868), written in collaboration with the same team of librettists (Michel Carré and Jules Barbier) as Gounod's *Faust*. Thomas's *Hamlet* ends (timidly? audaciously?) not with the title character's death but with his victory and coronation.

Gounod's and Thomas's heir in the next generation was Jules Massenet (1842–1912), who combined the techniques of *drame lyrique* with the more contemporary and realistic subject matter favored by Bizet, Chaikovsky, and others of his generation. He, too, paid his respects to Goethe (*Werther*, 1892), but his most enduring contribution is *Manon* (1884), after an eighteenth-century novel about rapturous but ultimately disastrous illicit love, *L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731) by Antoine-François Prévost d'Exiles, known as Abbé Prévost. Under cover of a period setting, the opera treats its subject with a frankness that surpassed that of *La traviata*, prefiguring the naturalism (or verismo) that soon radiated from Italy throughout

the world of opera. (In fact the same novel furnished the subject for the first significant opera by Giacomo Puccini, whose works will come into focus at the end of this chapter.)

Even more at seeming variance with its comic form was the stark horror at the core of Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), after a luridly naturalistic novella of seduction and murder by Prosper Mérimée (1803–70). It was composed, originally with spoken dialogue, for performance at the Théâtre National de l'Opéra Comique, a "family theater" whose codirector, Adolphe de Leuven, resigned rather than present an opera that culminated in a brutal "crime of passion" in which the tenor stabs the soprano in full view of the audience. Some comedy! Even the music gave offense to some, because the popular genres on which its music was based were not those of good French homes, but of vagabonds, gypsies, and others thought socially undesirable.

But of course what gave offense to some was powerfully alluring to others. As the title character's famous *couplets* or strophic song in the form of a Habanera shows (see Ex. 7-8), Bizet's opera drew the connection more strongly than ever between "orientalism"—the musical evocation of what from the audience's perspective were essentially alien or forbidden beings (in this case gypsy girls who worked in a cigarette factory, an only slightly camouflaged "house of ill repute")—and forthright sex appeal. The Habanera (literally, "Havana song") was a Cuban import of supposedly Negro origins. Bizet's was a "found object": a song (*El arreglito*) by Sebastián Yradier (1809–65), a Spanish composer who claimed to have collected it on location, leading Bizet to believe it was a folk song. As we may remember from chapter 7, its descending chromatic scale was a badge worn by "oriental" femmes fatales all over Europe. One could hardly spell things out more plainly than Carmen does in her refrain: "If I say I love you, watch out!"

fig. 12-5 Georges Bizet in 1874.

fig. 12-6 Set and costume sketch by Émile Bertin for the last scene in the original production of Bizet's *Carmen*.

In the end, of course, “morality” wins out (and so the opera, for all its brutality and sexuality, has become a family favorite after all). The seductress is killed by her prey, exacting society's revenge. The music powerfully endorses his act, even as it had formerly intensified her dangerous appeal. Nowadays it is as easy to question the justice of the plot's horrific resolution as it is difficult to resist the music's blandishments. As in *Manon* and *La traviata*, a woman whose allure has led a man astray pays with her life. The difference lies in the unflinching portrayal of allure and vengeance alike. Unlike Verdi's Violetta or Manon, Carmen has no “heart of gold”; and she meets a much more violent end.

Bizet's achievement is almost universally regarded as greater than Massenet's. But here is a disquieting thought: does his greater achievement lie in the greater power of his music to subvert? And are there not two subversions: the one by which Don José, a good soldier, is degraded by a sexual obsession set in motion by the Habanera, and the one by which we spectators are finally led to cheer his crime? Both moments in the opera pose old questions—what is the relationship between esthetics and ethics? what should it be?—with new potency.

In all of these effects the music is aided by its colorful popular or “vernacular” base, and, paradoxically, by the comic style, which speeds action and objectifies moments of passion. The most insightful comment on the opera's power, and (implicitly) on the problems it raises, came from Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, who saw in its cleanly articulated forms and dance rhythms a liberation from the Wagnerian spell. It embodied in its pleasant forms a bitterly ironic truth (a “tragic joke”), which Nietzsche located with wonderful precision in the opera's very last line, in which the full horror of the situation is expressed in a beautifully lyrical phrase heavily redolent of popular song (Ex. 12-10):

> This music seems perfect to me.... It is precise. It builds, organizes, finishes: thus it constitutes the opposite of the “infinite melody.” Have more painful tragic accents ever been heard on the stage? How are they achieved? Without grimaces.... Love is translated back into nature. Love as fate, cynical, innocent, cruel, and at bottom the deadly hatred of the sexes! I

know no case where the tragic joke that constitutes the essence of love is expressed so strictly, translated with equal terror into a formula, as in Don José's last cry, which concludes the work—"*Yes, I have killed her/my adored Carmen*!"[12]

DON JOSÉ: You can arrest me.
I'm the one who killed her!
Ah! Carmen! My adored Carmen!

ex. 12-10 Georges Bizet, *Carmen*, Don José's last line

Notes:

(11) Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (rev. ed.; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 226.

(12) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner* (condensed), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 157–59.

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