

BIZET

“Carmen” Suites

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Mark ERMLER



Georges Bizet

Carmen Suite No. 1

1	I. Prélude and Aragonaise	3:30
2	II. Intermezzo	2:37
3	III. Séguedille	1:52
4	IV. Les Dragons d'Alcala	1:31
5	V. Les Toréadors	2:16

Carmen Suite No. 2

6	I. Marche des Contranadiers	4:02
7	II. Habanera	2:10
8	III. Nocturne	5:42
9	IV. Chanson du Toréador	2:47
10	V. La Garde Montante	3:39
11	VI. Danse Bohème	4:54

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Mark Ermler, *conductor*

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All Saints Church, Petersham, Surrey.

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Original engineer: **Dick Lewsey**

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

One of the most commonly pondered musical 'what ifs' is that surrounding **Georges Bizet's** influence on French music and opera in the 19th century. His premature death at the age of 36 robbed the world of a composer whose greatest work *Carmen* was three-quarters of the way through a respectable first run. The negative reactions of the critics had failed to consign this masterpiece to an early grave. However, in common with so many French compositions, it took a foreign production (Vienna October 1875) for the work to catch on (albeit with interpolated recitative rather than with its original dialogue) and by the

time *Carmen* reappeared in Paris, many cities throughout the world had come under its spell.

Georges Bizet was born in Paris in October 1838 to musical parents who encouraged their son to take up music at an early age, with the result that he was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire shortly before his 10th birthday in 1848. His precocious talent enabled Bizet to be a prize-winner in several classes but he found himself most drawn to the composition classes run by Fromental Halévy (1799–1862), composer of *La juive* (1835), who had also taught Gounod and Saint-Saëns. During his student days Bizet also came to know and respect Gounod, who taught part-time at the Conservatoire and who always showed great interest in Bizet's work. For his part Bizet avidly studied Gounod's scores and claimed that Gounod was his greatest influence.

Carmen, composed in 1873-4 for the Opéra-Comique, was based on a story by Mérimée by Halévy and Meilhac with important contributions from Bizet himself. Numerous changes were made to Mérimée's original and the work presented a challenge to participants, critics and audiences (who were unused to seeing such immoral goings-on on the stage of the Opéra-Comique). The principals, who were fully supportive of the new work, discouraged Bizet from making alterations. Despite initial adverse criticism, *Carmen* had a respectable number of performances in its first season but Bizet, discouraged by its critical reception, suffered two heart attacks and died after its thirty-third performance in June 1875, shortly before *Carmen* began its triumphal progress through the world's opera houses.

Following Bizet's death, his friend Ernest Guiraud (1837-92) was asked to substitute recitatives for the original dialogue (he also arranged and had published the two suites of music from *Carmen*). Guiraud had the sense largely to retain Bizet's orchestration (rated superior to that of Wagner by Richard Strauss) but made no attempt to follow the opera's narrative. The Fate motif from the first act leads into the entr'acte before Act IV (Aragonaise). An Intermezzo is taken from the entr'acte before the third act when the action moves outside Seville to the smuggler's encampment. The Seguidille occurs during the opening act as Carmen dances seductively for Don José in a successful attempt to gain her release. Les dragons de Alcala is the marching song of Don Jose's regiment.

The *Second Suite* opens with the smugglers chorus from the third act. Next comes Carmen's entrance, the Habanera from Act One. Nocturne is an instrumental version of Micaela's lovely aria, sung as she arrives at the smugglers hideout in a vain attempt to win back José. After the famous Toreador Song we return to the opening act for Garde montant, sung by street urchins as they copy José's regiment marching. The Suite closes with the thrilling Danse bohémienne, sung and danced by Carmen's gypsy companions in the second act.

James Murray

NOTES ON THE ARTIST

Mark Ermler (1932-2002) was born in Leningrad to Vera Bakun, a film set designer, and Fridrikh Ermler, a film director. He began to study piano at age 5. In his teens, he studied at the Leningrad Conservatory with Boris Khaikin, making his debut in 1952. He joined the Bolshoi Theatre in 1957, and in 1960 he conducted the first staging of Prokofiev's *Story Of A Real Man*, making his debut as a ballet conductor in 1964. He led the Bolshoi in notable tours to the West in 1974 and 1999 and subsequently became a familiar figure at Covent Garden. Ermler was especially noted for his conducting of ballets. He conducted, among others, *Swan Lake*, *Petrushka*, *The Firebird*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*. He made complete recordings of all three of Tchaikovsky's ballets and Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* with the orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. In addition to being Guest Conductor with several orchestras worldwide, including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in the 1990's he was at the time of his death Music Director with the Moscow Philharmonic, the Seoul Philharmonic as well as the Bolshoi.

Audra Fendrick

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