

INTRODUCTION

From the violence of *West Side Story*, the romantic emotionalism of *Madama Butterfly*, and the madcap comedy of *Così fan tutte*, Lyric Opera of Kansas City now turns to the French classicism of Georges Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* (*Les pêcheurs de perles*) to conclude the 2018-19 season. Having become accustomed to the subtleties of plot and character we experienced in the previous operas, we will now encounter a stark landscape and story-line with its roots in ancient Greek tragedy.

Classicism played an important role in the development of French literature, and its influence can be felt in a number of ways in this opera. The classic unities are observed. The entire action takes place in a time span of little more than twenty-four hours. There are only four individual characters—not a page, messenger, or servant in sight—and a chorus which, as in Greek drama, functions as a separate character. There is no subplot. Above all, the action is motivated not only by character but by a sense of inexorable fate.

The classicism of *The Pearl Fishers* can also be heard in the delicacy and restraint of Bizet's musical language, which is quintessentially French, showing the influence of his friend and mentor Charles Gounod. Mozart may have been more subtle, Rossini more clever, Verdi and Puccini more passionate, and Wagner more powerful, but in the world of opera, no one surpasses the French for sheer melodic invention. If you like to leave the opera house humming the melodies, you won't be disappointed.

Eugène Cormon and Michel Carré, the librettists of this opera, were quoted some years after its premiere as saying that if they realized how great Bizet's music would be, they would have spent more time developing the characters. They needn't have apologized. *The Pearl Fishers* succeeds on its own terms. But as we enjoy this opera, we may also gain a greater understanding of the extent to which a mere twelve years later, Bizet was to shake the very foundations of the operatic world with the most revolutionary opera ever produced—the violent and passionate *Carmen*—a work so far ahead of its time that only later generations could truly appreciate it.

CHARACTERS

Leila (leh-ee-LAH), soprano. A Brahmin priestess.

Nadir (nah-DEER), tenor. A hunter.

Zurga (zoor-GAH), baritone. The island chieftain

Nourabad (new-rah-BAHD), bass. An elderly fisherman.

Chorus, representing the community of pearl fishers.

THE STORY

Act 1: A wild and savage beach on the island of Ceylon

The opera opens not with a full overture but with a brief prelude. The pearl fishers are setting up their encampment. (We will use the term “fishers” in accord with the traditional translation, though “divers” would be more accurate). The men sing a chorus whose minor key suggests the opera’s exotic locale. They encourage the women to dance and drive away the evil spirits. Their music is accompanied by percussive Hindu instruments, again suggestive of the Far East. The mood changes as they sing solemnly of the mission

they embark on annually to dive for pearls, and of the inherent danger of their occupation. This is followed by a return to the wild dance melody.

Zurga enters and reminds the people that they must elect a leader, and the chorus replies in unison that Zurga is their choice for king. The fact that this is an annual event and that an ad-hoc king is chosen suggests that the expedition is as much a ritual as a profitable venture. Zurga accepts, on the condition that he is to be given absolute power.

Nadir, recognized as the "hunter of the woods," enters. Zurga greets him as an old friend. In a brief aria, Nadir describes how he has probed the mysteries of the forest in search of wild beasts. The tone of his aria suggests a larger-than-life, mythical pursuit. Zurga invites him to join the pearl fishers, and he accepts.

The two men are left alone. There follows an exchange which is justifiably the most celebrated tenor-baritone duet in all of opera. The two men reminisce about a time when they had attended a religious service at the temple of Candi and both had become

hopelessly infatuated with a beautiful Brahmin priestess, leading to a bitter rivalry between them. As the dialogue progresses, they relive that moment as if it were happening again. A musical theme which will be associated with Leila at various times during the opera is introduced on the flute as they describe the crowd's reaction to the "goddess." Eventually, the two men join their voices to the melody of Leila's theme. They swear that despite their past rivalry, nothing will come between them again. (If you believe that they will keep this vow, you don't know opera).

Incidentally, the duet as we now know it was somewhat different from that in the original version. Bizet's original score had been lost for several years but was rediscovered in 1975. Nevertheless, the current version of the duet is generally considered superior to the original and is believed by many to be Bizet's own revision.

No sooner have the two men vowed eternal friendship than we hear ominous chords from the orchestra. Zurga announces that he sees a canoe approaching. Its passenger is a young woman who

has been enlisted to pray for the pearl fishers as they engage in their dangerous profession. As the veiled woman enters, followed by Nourabad, we hear the music from the prelude, and then, as if we had not already guessed her identity, Leila's theme is heard in the orchestra. The chorus, accompanied by Eastern instruments, greets her.

Zurga proceeds to swear in the priestess, exacting a promise from her to abjure male companionship for the duration of the pearl-fishing expedition. She responds, "je le jure" (I promise) to his three questions, each time a minor third (one and one-half tones) higher. Zurga reminds her that the penalty for breaking her vows will be death. Suddenly, she recognizes Nadir. Noticing her nervousness, Zurga offers her a chance to leave, but in a brief passage that may remind us of a similar incident in the final act of *Carmen*, she affirms her resolve to stay, though the result could be her death. The chorus responds with a hymn to Brahma, the chord structure of which follows that of Leila's theme, and she is led away to the temple.

At this point, a word would be in order about the religious assumptions upon which the opera is based. Brahminism is a branch of Hinduism which relies primarily on magic, calling to mind the old adage that in magic we try to get the gods to do our will, while in religion we seek to do God's will. In other words, properly performed magic rituals can coerce the gods' actions. Under this assumption, it makes sense that the pearl fishers believe that Leila's failure to perform her ritual functions properly would endanger their lives. It is pointless to ask whether Bizet and his librettists have represented Brahminism fairly. Sensitivity to diverse religious beliefs was not an issue in 19th-century France.

Nadir is left alone. In a recitative soliloquy, he tells us that while he and Zurga promised each other that they would not pursue Leila, he had in fact followed her at the time of the previous encounter. In an aria labeled in the score as a "romance," he sings of how he was enchanted with her voice. The pitch of the romance is exceptionally high, even for a tenor, creating an ethereal quality. Bizet achieves an interesting effect at the end of the aria, as Nadir ends on an

unresolved note (not the tonic), leaving the English horn to complete the phrase as Nadir falls asleep.

Nourabad charges Leila to begin praying for the fisherman. Beginning with an Asian-sounding melody, she soon shifts to a more European-sounding coloratura, singing over the prayers of the chorus—an effect which Bizet appears to have borrowed from Bellini. Hearing her voice, Nadir awakens, and he realizes who she is. From the foot of the rock he proclaims his love, and she reciprocates. Their voices blend with those of the chorus as the act ends with a magnificent ensemble.

Act II: Night in the ruins of an Indian temple

French opera audiences were fond of nighttime scenes, and the second act opens with a chorus which creates the nocturnal atmosphere, accompanied by the sound of bells, invoking the sounds of the East. Nourabad tells Leila that she can suspend her prayers and get some sleep. He tells her that she is well protected, and he reminds her of her oath. She responds by telling him that she can be trusted, narrating an incident from her childhood when she

had helped protect a fugitive at the risk of her own life. In exchange, he gave her a chain, which she still wears. In a lovely number designated as a cavatina (short aria), she attempts to sing herself to sleep with thoughts of Nadir. (Some critics have seen this aria as a forerunner of Micaela's aria in *Carmen*.)

Before she can fall asleep, however, she hears Nadir singing a tender love song, accompanied by a harp. He enters the chamber, and the two sing a duet in which they express their love for each other, though Leila warns Nadir that they are risking their lives. A storm is heard in the distance. Nadir leaves, promising to return the following night.

As he leaves, gunshots are heard offstage. Nourabad enters, followed by several of the pearl fishers. Some guards drag Nadir in. Nourabad informs the crowd that a man has violated the sanctity of the temple. The crowd calls for their death, while Nadir vows to save Leila.

Zurga enters and silences the chorus, reminding them that he has absolute authority over the affairs of the community. In an aside,

he tells the couple to flee, but Nourabad rips off Leila's veil, and, as Leila's theme is heard again, Zurga recognizes her. Realizing that Nadir has betrayed him by breaking his vow, he joins the chorus in demanding the couple's death. The storm intensifies; the chorus reprises the hymn that was heard earlier, as the curtain falls.

Act III: Scene 1: An Indian tent

Zurga is alone on stage. In a lengthy monologue, he agonizes over the decision to have his friend executed. Leila, under guard, enters. As the flute plays her theme in the background, she asks to be alone with Zurga. Here, as in a few other places, Bizet uses an interesting technique that was relatively innovative in his time. While the flute carries the melody, Leila sings only some of the notes, almost as if she is talking over the music. While Mozart experimented with this device in *The Marriage of Figaro*, we most commonly associate it with Puccini, as in "E llucevan le stele" from *Tosca*.

In a multi-phrase duet, Leila begs not for her own life but for Nadir's, making the absurd claim that Nadir encountered her by accident. Zurga is about to be swayed by her arguments until she

admits that she loves Nadir. This stirs up Zurga's jealousy again, and he angrily declares that they both shall die.

Nourabad returns to escort her to the execution site. Once more, Leila's theme is heard in the orchestra, more slowly than before. She approaches one of the pearl fishers and removes her necklace, asking that it be returned to her mother after her death. As she is led off, Zurga recognizes the necklace and runs off after the entourage. Though he does not say anything at this point, we realize that he was the fugitive whom Leila had saved so many years ago.

Act III: Scene 2: The forest

Nadir is on a pyre where he and Leila are to be burned to death. The chorus, in song and dance, eagerly awaits the coming of the dawn, when the sacrifice is to occur. Nadir says that he wishes he could save Leila through his own death. Suddenly, the mood turns solemn, as Nourabad brings Leila in. In a duet which may remind some of a similar scene in *Aida*, Leila and Nadir sing of their confidence that heaven awaits them, as the chorus impatiently watches for the sunrise.

As they are about to be executed, however, Zurga arrives. He informs the fishers that the light they see is not sunlight but a fire that has broken out in the camp. He urges them to delay the execution and return to the camp to save their children from the flames. The people run off.

Zurga informs Nadir and Leila that it was he who set the fire, as a diversion for their escape. He tells Leila that she once saved his life, and now he is returning the favor. He tells them to flee quickly. The three sing a trio based on Leila's theme; while the two lovers express their joy, Zurga bemoans his lost opportunity for love. Nadir asks Zurga what will become of him, and he replies, "Only God knows the future." Zurga is left alone on stage, holding an ax.

Thus, in the original libretto, the opera ends. However, when the opera was revived after Bizet's death, the ending was changed, and Nourabad, who has remained behind and heard Zurga's confession, stabs him to death at the final curtain. Since Bizet's original score was lost for several years, this latter ending became the standard one, and it was used in Lyric Opera of Kansas City's

2007 production. As of this writing, it is not clear which ending the director will choose. In any event, as some critics have noted, even in the original version Zurga most likely would have been killed when the community discovered his treachery.

Writing in *Le Constitutionnel* a week after the premiere, opera critic Nestor Roqueplan wryly observed, "Leila accepts Nadir, whom she loves because he is a tenor; she does not love Zurga, because he is a baritone. That rule applies in India as it does in Europe, so it seems. Poor baritones! They are loved less and paid less than tenors." Fellow critic G. de Saint-Valry added that Zurga was a "loyal baritone; as a tenor, Nadir has a less steadfast heart."

Both men seem to have overstated Zurga's virtues. He is, after all, willing to kill two people out of a desire for vengeance, not genuine religious zeal. And in saving the lovers at the end, he endangers the lives of all of the children of the community, who have been left behind in the camp, Nadir, on the other hand, is not much better. Out of impetuosity, he refuses to wait until the diving season is over, thereby endangering not only himself, but also the life

of the woman he loves. But maybe Roqueplan was on to something. No one who sings so beautifully can be all bad, and we forgive him because of the lovely melodies he gives us.

GEORGES BIZET

As has been the case with most musical geniuses, Georges Bizet's musical gifts were discovered at an early age. Born into a Parisian musical family, October 25, 1838, he found himself at age nine enrolled in the Conservatoire, Paris's leading school of music. At age fourteen he began his studies with the man who was to be his most influential teacher, the renowned opera composer Fromental Halévy, who is best remembered for his opera *La Juive*. Several years after Halévy's death, Bizet's life was to intersect with Halévy's family in two significant ways: Bizet's marriage to his teacher's daughter, and his collaboration with Halévy's nephew Ludovic, on *Carmen*.

Whereas in other countries great composers were dispersed through the country, French opera, like French culture in general, was concentrated in Paris. Bizet had the opportunity to make the

acquaintance of several of France's leading composers, including Charles Gounod, composer of *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette*, who was to have a major influence on Bizet's music. He also had the opportunity of interacting with the Italian expatriate Gioachino Rossini, and he later established friendships with Jules Massenet and Camille St. Saëns.

In 1857, Bizet won the prestigious Prix de Rome, which afforded him the opportunity to study in Italy for three years. It was at this time that the chronic throat ailment which was eventually to take his life first manifested itself. Upon his return to France he immersed himself in composing, but much of it was hack work, such as preparing transcriptions of other people's music.

Though early in his career Bizet wrote of number of symphonic pieces, his first love was opera. "I need the theatre," he once remarked to a colleague; "without it, I don't exist."

In 1863, he received his first big break in the operatic world. Léon Carvalho, administrator of the Théâtre Lyrique, commissioned him to write an opera. Whereas the Opéra was known for its

conservatism, preferring the works of established composers, the Lyrique was willing to take a chance on newer composers. Carvalho himself was an exceptionally warm person, who treated fledgling composers with a degree of respect they rarely received elsewhere. Thus *The Pearl Fishers* was born.

French audiences at the time were becoming increasingly interested in the exotic. They had been introduced to Ceylonese culture by the recently published “L’île de Ceylan et ses curiosités naturelles” by Octave Sachot, and the librettists took advantage of the growing interest in that region of the world. In one sense, *The Pearl Fishers* signaled the direction that Bizet’s music was to take in future years—a focus on exotic locales: *La jolie fille de Perth* (Scotland); *Djamileh* (Egypt); and, of course, *Carmen* (Spain).

The premiere, in September of that year, was enthusiastically received by the public. The critics, however, were less impressed. Many of them saw the work as derivative. This assertion is not without merit; the influence of Gounod is strongly evident in Bizet’s style. On the other hand, the assertion that the work was too Wagnerian (the

kiss of death for French music of that era) seems ludicrous in retrospect. It is true that, like Wagner, Bizet put greater emphasis on the orchestra than most of his contemporaries, but he never abandoned the French love of melody in the vocal line. Some of the criticisms were truly petty. He was criticized for taking a curtain call, a practice which was not customary for composers at the time. Of the major critics, only Hector Berlioz—a composer of note himself—recognized the opera's merits.

The Pearl Fishers ran for eighteen performances—a moderate success—but it was never performed again during the composer's lifetime. In the 1880's, it was staged several times in Italy, with greater success. In 1893, it was finally revived in Paris.

In 1873, Bizet began work on *Carmen* for the Opéra-Comique, in collaboration with one of the most successful libretto-writing teams of the day, Meilhac and Halévy. Fans of the Comique were used to lighter stuff, and the raw emotions of the opera were somewhat unsettling for the first-night audience. Like *The Pearl Fishers*, *Carmen*

was panned by most of the critics. Nevertheless, it had a moderately successful run.

Shortly afterwards, unfortunately, the various ailments which had afflicted Bizet throughout much of his life got the better of him; the story that his death was the result of his depression over the failure of *Carmen* is most likely the product of romantic legend. He died May 30, 1875, never to realize the fame that his masterpiece was to receive posthumously.

THE LIBRETTISTS

As frequently has been the case in opera, while the music is the work of a single composer, the libretto is the result of a collaboration between two writers, in this case Eugène Cormon and Michel Carré. Carré appears to have been primarily responsible for the plot development, while Cormon wrote the actual words Bizet was to set to music. (Broadway musicals often have a similar split between the lyricist and the writer of the book, but in opera the division is less formal).

Eugène Cormon (1810-1903) was born Pierre-Étienne Piestre, though he used his mother's name of Cormon professionally. He was a prolific writer of both plays and librettos. Besides being the co-author of *The Pearl Fishers*, he also co-authored the libretto for Offenbach's *Robinson Crusoe* (1867), and one of his stage plays, *Phillipe II, roi d'Espagne* (1846) was later adapted into Verdi's opera *Don Carlos* (1867). In addition to his literary career, he also served as stage director of the Paris Opéra for over ten years.

Michel Carré (1822-1872) is no stranger to Lyric audiences. Along with his favorite collaborator, Jules Barbier, he was responsible for many of the most enduring French operas, including Gounod's *Faust* (1859) and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867), Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* (1868), and Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffman* (first produced after his death).

FRENCH OPERA

When the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini decided to write an opera about the life of the French courtesan Manon Lescaut, a story which had already been the subject of an opera by the French composer Jules Massenet, he characterized the differences between the two nations' approach to opera as follows: "Massenet feels it as a Frenchman, with the powder and the minuets. I shall feel it as an Italian, with desperate passion." While this was, of course, and oversimplification, he did point to some truths about the characteristics of French opera.

French composers, more than their Italian counterparts, strongly emphasized text and diction, writing music that followed the poetic meter of their librettos rather than forcing the text into a melody. Their music generally is freer in form and does not have the strong musical beats associated with operas in other languages. On the other hand, French composers of the nineteenth century never lost their love of gorgeous melody, leading to the occasional criticism that such operas consist simply of one beautiful melody after another. French melody is generally characterized by a sense of

delicacy, more subtle and introverted than the music of the Italians and Germans.

More than that of any other nation—even the United States—France's operatic tradition was formed by immigrants and foreigners. The Italian-born Jean-Baptiste Lully (17th century) was the first great French composer, and in later years the German immigrants Gluck, Meyerbeer, and Offenbach were among the most prominent French composers. What is significant is that all of these composers wrote music that is distinctively French, in contrast to the Italian composers in late 18th-century Vienna, who wrote operas in the Italian style (and language) for the Viennese court and public. Even the Austrian-born Mozart wrote several Italian operas.

Moreover, when foreign composers wrote for the Parisian stage, they composed to French librettos and followed French conventions. Among such composers were Rossini (*William Tell*), Donizetti (*The Daughter of the Regiment*), and Tchaikovsky (*Joan of Arc*). Verdi sometimes wrote two entirely different versions of his operas for the French and Italian opera houses.

Paris was the center of operatic creativity. Most prominent was the institution known simply as the Opéra, which featured French grand opera, with huge casts and choruses, grandiose sets, and elaborate ballets. Among the most popular composers of grand opera were Halévy and Meyerbeer, whose works are rarely performed today.

Across town a more democratic (translate: lower ticket prices) and less rigidly formal tradition of French opera was developing at the Opéra-Comique. The Comique style of opera somewhat resembled the modern Broadway musical, with spoken dialogue replacing the recitatives that linked the arias and ensembles in traditional opera. The word comique can be misleading. *Carmen* had its premiere at this theater. Other operatic venues, such as the Lyrique, existed as well, including one that was established for the production of operettas. While the Opéra is better known, thanks in part to the novel *The Phantom of the Opera*, the vast majority of the French operas that are still performed today had their premieres at other venues.

The fact that French operatic activity was so strongly centralized in one city had its good and bad points. On one hand, the major composers of any given era had ample opportunity to interact and share ideas. On the other hand, composers had fewer opportunities to premiere new works than did their counterparts in Italy, where venues for new works could be found in virtually every major city.

Young composers faced additional obstacles as well. Organized "cliques" could maliciously disrupt an opera premiere, and sometimes they had to be bribed to applaud instead of booing. At the Opéra, especially, opera was a social affair, where people came more to be seen than to hear the music. No opera could be successful without a ballet, which had to be inserted no earlier than the second act in order to accommodate latecomers. Directors had little respect for the integrity of an opera, often making changes without consulting the composer. In view of these conditions, it is amazing that so much great music was actually composed.

Around the beginning of the 20th century, Impressionism (with its less defined melodies) exerted its influence; the most prominent example is Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902). 20th-century French opera has not attracted the attention of the rest of the world, though Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* (1957), a powerful depiction of the martyrdom of a group of nuns during the reign of terror (with obvious parallels to Nazism and the rise of the Soviet dictatorship) is periodically revived.

UNIS JUSQU'A LA MORT (UNITED UNTIL DEATH)

While *The Pearl Fishers* could be described as the story of a love triangle, in a sense the relationship between the two male leads is the most important one in the opera. The first-act tenor-baritone duet is the best-known number from the opera. And when Zurga agonizes over the decision to sacrifice the couple, he thinks only of his conflicted feelings for Nadir—his long-standing friendship vs. his anger at Nadir's broken oath. At this point, Leila does not figure in his decision.

A small number of other operas have focused on masculine friendship. We are not speaking here of erotic relationships; not until 1995's *Harvey Milk* and 2014's *Brokeback Mountain* were openly gay characters portrayed positively on the opera stage. Even Benjamin Britten, whose gay sexual orientation was an open secret among those who knew him, portrayed same-sex attraction as an unhealthy obsession in *Death in Venice*, *Billy Budd*, and, to some extent, in *The Turn of the Screw*.

One early opera which is focused on the male-male relationship is Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*. While the title character is an obsessive pursuer of women, his only lasting relationship is with his servant, Leporello. At times, he appears to be seducing women primarily to impress his servant; as Leporello tells us, Giovanni even seduces ugly women simply for the pleasure of adding them to his list. Women may feed his physical desires, but only the admiration of another man can truly satisfy his ego.

Another important master-servant relationship can be seen in Massenet's *Don Quichotte*, in which Sancho Panza is much more

than a hired hand. He is the one who serves as his master's emotional ally, given the hopeless nature of Quichotte's love for the elusive Dulcinea.

One could also cite the relationship between Hoffman and Nicklaus in Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffman* as an example of friendship that is greater than heterosexual love. Hoffmann's relationships with women are all stories of loss and betrayal; only Nicklaus stays true till the end. On the other hand, in some versions of the opera (which Offenbach left unfinished at his death) Nicklaus, who is played by a woman, turns out to be the author's muse, a mythical female figure.

The greatest example of male friendship in 19th-century opera is Verdi's *Don Carlos* (later revised as *Don Carlo*), a story of two men whose love of freedom joins them together. While it would be hard to prove direct influence, their stirring duet calls to mind a similar duet in *The Pearl Fishers*.

Puccini's *La bohème* could be described not so much as a love story but as a "buddy opera." The four male principal

characters are happiest when they are together. Women bring illness and betrayal (and maybe responsibility) into their world. Think how the mood changes in the middle of the last act when Musetta enters and stops their horseplay with the news of Mimi's illness. When Rodolfo first meets Mimi, he takes her to meet his roommates, and he assures them that she will be part of their company; that is, she is not taking him away from them.

Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd*, one of those rare operas without a female character, explores various aspects of masculine relationships. First, there is the surrogate father-son love that develops between Captain Vere and Billy. This is contrasted with the obsessive animosity which Claggart feels for Billy, possibly the result of repressed homoerotic desire. The opera also contains some lighter scenes which express the joys of the carefree male friendships that can develop when men are in each other's company for long periods of time.

Since non-erotic male friendship has been a dominant theme in American literature, it is not surprising that one of the greatest

“buddy operas” would be the work of an American composer: Carlisle Floyd’s *Of Mice and Men*. George loves Lenny like a brother, and it is his failure to protect Lenny from the world of women that ultimately leads to the opera’s tragic ending. George’s unselfish love for Lenny as the two men share their dreams of owning a farm together calls to mind King David’s sentiments about Jonathan in the Bible—that he loved him with a love that far surpassed the love of a man for a woman.

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