

Bizet's *Carmen* - A discographical survey
by Ralph Moore

Given that *Carmen* is one of the two or three most popular and frequently performed operas in the world, it is remarkable how many misfires it has had in the recording studio; it seems that it is nowhere near as easy to bring off as the easy appeal of the music and visceral impact of the story might suggest.

There are in total well over two hundred recordings of *Carmen* to choose from; of those, if live and radio broadcast versions are included, there are approximately one hundred complete recordings in French available on CD, of which in turn over twenty were made in the studio. I discount those sung in anything other than French, as if ever an opera demanded to be heard in its original language, it is *Carmen*; there are even performances such as one with a wonderful cast in Moscow in 1963 which, as I say in my review, is sung "in Russian by all apart from Del Monaco, who sings in Italian except when the whim comes over him to drop occasionally into bad French"- fun, but hardly a serious candidate. Despite the plethora of recordings available, I would suggest that only a handful really do the work justice; it is so easy to trot the old warhorse round the paddock without regard for its dignity.

Another consideration is the eternal debate over whether the original spoken dialogues, Guiraud's recitatives, or a hybrid of the two can or should be used and which edition either best represents Bizet's intentions or is most effective musically; I do not propose to tie myself up in purist knots over that as so much depends upon the performers' familiarity with the French idiom and the conviction of their delivery. A successful recording of *Carmen* ideally needs to sound French in terms of style and language but not small-scale in impact; after all, it was conceived as a work which broke with the conventions of *opéra-comique* and was quickly perceived and presented as both Grand Opera and a harbinger of the *verismo* genre.

The great irony regarding the success of *Carmen* is that Bizet did not live to see its enduring popularity, although just before his sudden death at 36 years old it had at least already run for thirty-three performances at the Opéra-Comique – admittedly sometimes to half-empty houses - and he had just signed an agreement for a production of *Carmen* with the Vienna Court Opera, where its subsequent great success came too late for the composer himself to know it.

The eponymous title role may be sung either by a soprano or a mezzo-soprano, as long as she has sufficient lower register heft and top notes respectively, but Carmen's character and vocal colourisation points towards a lower, darker voice as preferable, especially to provide vocal and dramatic contrast with the sweet Micaëla, who is much of more of a conventional, pre-Carmen "pure, innocent heroine". A "short-voiced" soprano like Victoria de los Ángeles or Callas in her latter years could get away with it but the original casting was for a mezzo and I personally prefer to hear that. I have no doubt that Célestine Galli-Marié, Bizet's first Carmen, was properly trained in 19C vocal tradition and had a really solid lower register – as indeed should any female singer, regardless of vocal category. Shallow-voiced sopranos have no business undertaking the role and it irritates me beyond measure to read frequent assertions that the opera must be performed "with Gallic lightness and grace" – i.e. as if it were an Offenbach operetta; anyone with half an ear can hear that the music and action require a singer with tenorial low notes if Carmen is not to be a wilting victim or a shrieking harridan.

Interpretation of the psyches of the two doomed lovers is complex, and allied to the question of vocal category is that debate regarding how Carmen should be portrayed: is she a strong, independent, resourceful "liberated woman" who resists male oppression or, more traditionally, something of a sluttish tart with a heart who might not get what she deserves but certainly invites it, only to reject it when José turns possessive and wants her to be another devoted Micaëla? (Cue complaints from feminists who will quote elderly white judges who think that drunk, scantily clad women must bear some responsibility for becoming victims; I digress and refrain from committing myself to any opinion

at all in such a moral minefield). Either approach can work, I guess; Abbado and Berganza championed the former interpretation and some found it cool and uninvolved, I have now wearied of the already outdated interpretative wisdom that she is, underneath it all, something of a lady; Berganza simply underplays the role and its historical significance as opera's first heroine to create a scandal. At the other extreme, Callas sang it superbly but embodied a tigress supposedly without the allure some critics demand. For me, Leontyne Price presents some kind of ideal with her smoky tones and aural pout but I can also fully appreciate the more refined charms of such as Solange Michel and Victoria de los Angeles in their decidedly more restrained and ladylike portrayals for Cluytens and Beecham respectively.

Similar questions regarding vocal type and characterisation apply to the tenor, but it seems clear to me that Don José should be sung by a lirico-spinto or lyric-heroic tenor of a type once more common on French stages but now almost extinct. He and Carmen share the distinction of being operatic characters which anticipate verismo archetypes a generation before that genre became established, so too small a voice will not do. Some run a mile screaming from the can belto style of the Don José we hear from Corelli and Del Monaco and I agree that a truly French tenor like Thill, Vezzani or even the rougher Jobin are more in keeping with what Bizet surely intended. Some see José as at first a simple soul driven to madness by the manipulations of a fickle, heartless woman; for others he is an insecure mummy's boy smitten by a passion for a femme fatale and thereby gradually transformed into a vengeful psychopath – in which case, the portrayals by tenors such as Nicolai Gedda do not seem so apt after all.

Escamillo, however, is surely a simpler character - virtually a caricature: his shallow machismo is hardly in doubt and his triteness is reinforced by his facile, but highly memorable, music - which Bizet contemptuously dismissed as "ordure", forced upon him by the need to concede to popular taste. But he, too, can be sung either by different voice-types: either a baritone or bass-baritone, as long as, like Carmen, he has power and high notes.

Although the pre-WW2 studio recordings are of interest to the aficionado and historical buff, especially insofar as they provide guidance regarding authentic French style, the general collector will want something in decent sound, so I consider below one, sole radio broadcast and twenty-two studio recordings all made from 1950 onwards. There is any number of live recordings, some of which I know and like, and there might, for all I know, be gems hidden among the rest; be that as it may, I have restricted myself mainly to studio accounts for practical reasons. Preferences among those twenty-three recordings will depend very much upon how the listener perceives the central character and a subjective response to how individual voices best serve that perception, so, as my old Latin teacher used to say, "You pays your money and you takes your choice".

The Recordings:

André Cluytens – 1950 (studio; mono) EMI; Naxos; Cantus
Orchestra & Chorus of L'Opéra-Comique de Paris

Carmen - Solange Michel
Don José - Raoul Jobin
Micaëla - Martha Angelici
Escamillo - Michel Dens
Frasquita - Germaine Chellet
Mercédès - Raymonde Notti
Le Dancaïre - Jean Vieuille
Le Remendado - Frédéric Leprin
Moralès - Julien Thirache
Zuniga - Xavier Smati

This set is the antidote to the "international style" *Carmen* we are now accustomed to, in that it is wholly Gallic, employing an all-French cast who both sing and speak their dialogue with the lightness of touch we associate with l'Opéra-Comique but still have plenty of weight and penetration in their tone. Cluytens speeds are light and flexible; there's no heavy-handed grandstanding or verismo bawling. The crowd/chorus are really acting and we can relax in the knowledge that we are not going to have ears bashed by poorly inflected or accented French.

It's true that all the voices except Jobin are rather smaller-scale than is now the norm. Solange Michel is quite at home in the eponymous role although I could sometimes do with a little more richness and sensuousness in her tone; she can sound a little careful, as if she is husbanding her voice. Similarly, Michel Dens' lyric baritone hardly suggests the swaggering, macho Toreador of some listeners' dreams but he, like Michel, is the real thing if you forget the more Italianate exponents of the part. To complete a trio of French specialists, we have Martha Angelici as a charming Micaëla, sweet and precise. Raoul Jobin reminds me in timbre at times of a slightly rougher-voiced and less powerful Jan Peerce or Richard Tucker. He doesn't really use much subtlety but there's a special allure to his grainy, committed Don José.

Everything moves swiftly and intensely towards a gripping climax. The sound is clean mono without distortion although there is some audible pre-echo or print-through on the original tapes. I have a few reservations but I'm glad to have it as a souvenir of a vanished style.

Fritz Reiner – 1951 (studio; mono) RCA; Urania

RCA Victor Orchestra; Robert Shaw Chorale & the Lycée Français Children's Chorus

Carmen - Risë Stevens

Don José - Jan Peerce

Micaëla - Licia Albanese

Escamillo - Robert Merrill

Frasquita - Paula Lenchner

Mercédès - Margaret Roggero

Le Dancaïre - George Cehanovsky

Le Remendado - Alessio De Paolis

Moralès - Hugh Thompson

Zuniga - Osie Hawkins

This celebrated 1951 vintage recording has now been re-mastered in 24-bit sound and has come up very well. There is some peaking and screeching in ensembles and on loud, high notes, but the casual listener will hardly be able to hear at first that this is merely mono, the depth and balance are so good, with the merest hiss.

However, French it isn't. That's not necessarily so bad; other favourite grand and large-scale versions such as that by Karajan, with which this most readily compares, aren't especially Gallic either and tend towards Italianate verismo, but if Karajan's set is as French as Wiener Schnitzel than this recording is as French as a Papaya King hot-dog, being an almost all-American - indeed all New York City - undertaking. First, the French is Standard Sung International and of course we hear the old Guiraud recitatives; Jan Peerce has the most idiomatic accent and Robert Merrill's and Risë Stevens' is pretty good, even though she pronounces the "n" in words like "entre", while Licia Albanese's French isn't very impressive either. There are a couple of weak appearances in the supporting cast - a tremolo-ridden Frasquita and a dull Zuniga - but generally it's a good ensemble and we do have the children choir from the local Lycée to add authenticity. What a sobering thought that all the members of that chorus will now be in their seventies or no longer with us.

Stevens' *Carmen* is not refined and lady-like in the manner of Berganza, von Otter or Kozena; this is the smoky, sultry, sexy *Carmen* of the old-fashioned, slutty type and as far as I'm concerned, all the better for it. Stevens' vibrant characterisation is closest to that of the young Leontyne Price; she has a powerful lower register, basically sings the part straight and gives the role real presence. Her top notes can be a tad sour but vocally she is in fine estate - and boy, didn't she look the part!

Her Don José is the still under-rated Jan Peerce. He is in his finest, most youthful voice and often sounds uncannily like his brother-in-law Richard Tucker but without the latter's tics and mannerisms. He is sometimes a little nasal but that makes him sound more authentically French, more like another in the line of French lyric-heroic tenors now extinct, such as Thill, Vezzani, Jobin and Chauvet. He sings with taste and can be either powerful or restrained as necessary; his concluding duet with Stevens is impassioned and convincing.

Robert Merrill is also in finest, most virile voice; his Toreador really swaggers and has charm, too; his "Si tu m'aimes" duet with *Carmen* goes beautifully. For me, the weakness amongst the principals is Albanese's rather breathy, matronly Micaëla, who should sound pure, innocent and naïve. This part is often under-cast – as is the case with the otherwise splendid Maazel recording of the film with Migenes-Johnson and Domingo, despite it still being among my favourites - and we have been spoiled by hearing the likes of Cotrubas, Guiot, Freni and Te Kanawa make such a success of it.

Reiner and his band are first-rate; the Entr'actes are very atmospheric and he generally gives a Spanish flavour to proceedings. The dances from *L'Arlésienne* interpolated into Act 4 are charming.

The set is rather extravagantly laid out onto three CDs as the duration is only two and a half hours but that means you have each of the first two Acts on one CD each and the final two on the third, so there are no irritating breaks. This doesn't displace more authentic, Gallic classics by Wolff or Cluytens, but it's a fine production nonetheless.

Albert Wolff – 1951 (studio; mono) Preiser
Orchestra & Chorus of L'Opéra-Comique de Paris

Carmen - Suzanne Juyol
Don José - Libero De Luca
Micaëla - Janine Micheau
Escamillo - Julien Giovannetti
Frasquita - Denise Boursin
Mercédès - Jacqueline Cauchard
Le Dancaïre - Jean Vieuille
Le Remendado - Serge Rallier
Moralès - Marcel Enot
Zuninga - Henri Médus
Lilas Pasta - Pierre Germain

The clean, bright, "toppy" mono sound here is perfectly tolerable and Wolff directs in typically brisk, French, no-nonsense style. Grainy, nasal woodwinds and similarly nasal supporting singers - all francophone - consolidate an authentic Gallic feeling to proceedings; as ever, it is a relief to hear the exchanges sung in flawless accents even if ensemble is sometimes a bit ragged; crowd "rhubarb" noises and (excessive) giggling from the ladies of the chorus add to the sense of a live performance. The smugglers are a lively bunch and everything goes with a swing.

French opera specialist Libero De Luca had a voice of traditional French stamp for Don José: boyish and attractive but penetrating with considerable power; he sings his big aria with admirable clarity, passion and sincerity. Suzanne Juyol and Janine Micheau are similarly light of timbre – perhaps too much so for modern tastes – but they sing cleanly and without injecting "fake dark" sounds into their tone.

Juyol actually had a large voice and sang Wagnerian roles, so is by no means underpowered as Carmen. There is sometimes something of an edge to her voice but she is in command of the role. Micheau's coloratura soprano is rather piping but she sings prettily and feelingly, effectively conveying the naïve yet determined character of Micaëla. Julien Giovannetti hasn't the juiciest of baritones but he has style in abundance and commands the role.

This recording oozes authenticity and even if it is by no means the most vocally or sonically sumptuous on offer, it provides a thoroughly satisfying experience.

Pierre Dervaux – 1956 (studio; mono) Preiser

L'Orchestre de l'Association des Concerts Padeloup; Choeurs du Conservatoire

Carmen - Jean Madeira
 Don José - Nicola Filacuridi
 Micaëla - Janette Vivalda
 Escamillo - Michel Roux
 Frasquita - Vivette Barthelemy
 Mercédès - Irène Sicot
 Le Dancaïre - Jean-Christophe Benoit
 Le Remendado - Michel Hamel
 Moralès - Daniel Marty
 Zuninga - Robert Geay

Both this recording and the principal artists here are somewhat forgotten today; Jean Madeira was a beautiful woman with a rich contralto voice who sang over 300 performances at the Met but died young at 53; many will know her as Erda in Solti's studio *Rheingold*. Her voice is an impressive instrument but rather too heavy and mature-sounding for the role, generally lacking delicacy and charm, and she tends to overact by injecting too many breathy emphases into the line. Egyptian-born tenor of Greek extraction Nicola Filacuridi enjoyed a prominent career in Italy during the 50's. He has a clear, robust tenor but like Madeira, lacks nuance, barrelling through the part without attempting much feeling and his tenor sounds too subordinate to Madeira's booming tones in the final confrontation. Michel Roux had a long career as a leading French baritone, but was somewhat in the shade of Massard, Blanc and Bacquier, having a smaller, neater, throatier sound than they and not one especially suggestive of a lady-killer.

The tinny, over-reverberant mono sound is no asset and the manner in which Dervaux drives the pace is disconcerting – the overture goes off like a rocket and speeds in general are frenetic – but we are hearing yet another very French performance as opposed to the more “international” recordings which followed. The supporting cast is typically idiomatic and mostly pleasing even if the women are rather shrill; unfortunately, Micaëla is sung by Minnie Mouse and enough to make me press the fast-forward button to spare my ears.

In other words, not really a serious option, given the competition.

Thomas Beecham - 1958-59 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestre Radio-Symphonique de Paris; Chorus; Maîtrise et Choeur de Radio-France & Les Petits Chanteurs de Versailles

Carmen - Victoria de los Ángeles
 Don José - Nicolai Gedda
 Micaëla - Janine Micheau
 Escamillo - Ernest Blanc
 Frasquita - Denise Monteil

Mercédès - Monique Linval
 Le Dancaïre - Jean-Christophe Benoit
 Le Remendado - Michel Hamel
 Moralès - Bernard Plantey
 Zuniga - Xavier Depraz

This is often vaunted as a very French account, but even though the orchestra, chorus, bulk of the cast and location were French, the conductor was a Francophile Englishman and baronet, and the two principal singers are French specialists rather than native-born. Nor would you guess the difficulties encountered in recording it: it was done over fifteen months and even had to deal with replacing the Mercédès owing to the first singer's death in the interim between recording sessions. I admit to having mostly avoided it over the years, as Gedda is for me the weakness in the Callas set and I have never seen the gentle de los Ángeles as an ideal Carmen, but the exigencies of this survey have made me conscientiously return to it.

My first impressions on reacquaintance were of the drive, power and passion of Beecham's direction – my goodness, that overture makes the listener sit up; again and again he brings the music alive with the subtlety and *slancio* (to use an inappropriately Italianate term) of his phrasing. The sound is really very acceptable, too, for so old a stereo recording: rich and beautifully balanced, if rather resonant, more redolent of the theatre than a studio, as perhaps a good recording should be.

I find Gedda's timbre too precious and narrow to embody adequately the latent murderer in José, but I can say that if you like his tenor, he is at his peak here and in fresher voice than for Callas. I do find his "La fleur" a bit weedy, however. The surprise is de los Ángeles' Carmen: you would think of her more as a Manon, and indeed, instead of attempting the kind of snarling vamp beyond her vocal resources, she aims for sly seductiveness; she suggests flashing-eyed allure effortlessly and makes welcome excursions into her lower register to avoid sounding too pallid. Like Gedda, her French is impeccable and her use of words magical - unequalled except by Callas – which is just as well, as some brief spoken dialogue is employed here. The top of the voice can turn scratchy but the meat of the role lies just where her tone is golden. She finds real fire for the final scene; it has been a slow burn but she gets there. Gedda never has the ring and ping of the best French heroic tenors but he rises to the drama of that final, fatal confrontation.

Janine Micheau repeats her very French, rather edgy-toned, Micaëla and Ernest Blanc exploits his very individual, slightly husky baritone to portray a forthright, swaggering matador. He was, after all, a successful Wagnerian baritone who sang at Bayreuth and has plenty of weight in his voice.

My reservations about Gedda are personal and subjective; if you do not share them you will find this recording to merit its reputation as a classic and be close to ideal. It is certainly worth acquiring for the supremacy of the conducting alone and I certainly now think much more highly of it than I did previously. It must be among the best options.

Ivan Marinov - 1960 (studio; stereo) Capriccio; Laserlight
 Orchestra of the Sofia National Opera; Chorus of the Sofia National Opera & Bodra Smjana Chorus

Carmen - Alexandrina Milcheva
 Don José - Nikola Nikolov
 Micaëla - Liljana Vassileva
 Escamillo - Nicola Ghiuselev
 Frasquita - Cvetanka Arsinkova
 Mercédès - Stefka Popangelova
 Le Dancaïre - Verter Vrachovski
 Le Remendado - Milen Paunov

Moralès - Georgi Genov
 Zuninga - Pavel Gerdzhikov

Very well played and conducted, and in good stereo sound, this all-Bulgarian budget recording has many assets and would have been more enticing had it fielded more attractively-voiced singers than Liljana Vassileva as Micaëla and tenor Nikola Nikolov: her large, screechy soprano is all wrong for the role of ingénue and he belts out José's music unfeelingly in execrable French and with many a gulp and bleat to disturb its line. Milcheva could hardly fail to be better than that; she deploys ringing top notes and a nice fruity lower register to suggest Carmen's sensuality, but no-one would mistake her for a Frenchwoman. A very young Ghiuselev, despite being a true bass, wraps his large, grainy voice around the Toreador's couplets with considerable success and has surprisingly little difficulty with the top note, making quite an impact - but that is not enough to redeem a recording which is best passed over.

Herbert von Karajan – 1963 (studio; stereo) RCA
 Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus of the Wiener Staatsoper

Carmen - Leontyne Price
 Don José - Franco Corelli
 Micaëla - Mirella Freni
 Escamillo - Robert Merrill
 Frasquita - Monique Linval
 Mercédès - Geneviève Macaux
 Le Dancaïre - Jean-Christophe Benoit
 Le Remendado - Maurice Besançon
 Moralès - Bernard Demigny
 Zuniga - Frank Schooten

It has become fashionable and even de rigueur to patronise this recording as "as French as Wiener Schnitzel"; another factor contributing to its despisal is knee-jerk Karajan-bashing, whereby the works of this great conductor must be routinely derided by the prejudiced and ill-informed. I appreciate that many favour an authentic French recording such as that by Cluytens, but Bizet's masterpiece is now world property and Karajan routinely directed some of the best operatic recordings and performances ever made, and I suggest that if this set is appraised objectively and open-mindedly, it will be found to have a great deal going for it.

First of all, it offers beautiful sound with some very effective stereo effects, such as that of the boys marching in from stage right to left, the distant bells and bugles, and the general sense of air and space to suggest town squares and bull-rings.

Secondly, a largely French-speaking supporting cast; only the four principals aren't French and of those, Robert Merrill was an excellent linguist and Price and Freni sing good, standard, "international" French. Corelli...well, is Corelli. Actually, there are patches where his struggle with the language is considerably less apparent but also moments when it's just as well that he's singing a Latin anti-hero. To be fair, Domingo isn't so much better for Solti, although by the time he gets to the second recording Maazel made (forget the first with a quasi-voiceless Moffo and a bellowing Corelli) his French has improved and he makes a major contribution to what I still consider to be one of the best, all-round-compromise recordings.

But back to this Karajan recording: The VPO plays wonderfully and although one sometimes misses a certain earthiness in the gorgeous sounds they and Karajan make, this is not a performance without energy. The singing is divine: Mirella Freni in her first contribution to major opera recording is perfect, with her melting, lyric tone and spinto reserves for the big emotional outpourings. Merrill is the epitome of machismo, as good as Massard for Prêtre, and Price rivals Callas for smoky allure. Like

Callas, a true soprano sfogato, Price could, before the lower register became too cloudy, inject heft and a dusky timbre into the bottom of her voice while retaining brilliance up top. If you love Corelli, as I do, and also enjoy big-voiced tenors such as Del Monaco, you will revel in his trumpeting tones and famous diminuendos.

In short, the reputation of this recording - degraded by the usual suspects at the "Gramophone" and by such as Rodney Milnes in "Opera on Record" - has been unfairly demeaned; it stands up well against versions by Solti while being considerably more exciting than the de Burgos recording with Vickers and Bumbry, whose French is no better and who commit the worse fault of simply sounding dull, whereas Price and Corelli are visceral in the bloody dénouement.

Thomas Schippers – 1963 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestre de la Suisse Romande; Chorus of the Grand Théâtre de Genève

Carmen - Regina Resnik
Don José - Mario Del Monaco
Micaëla - Joan Sutherland
Escamillo - Tom Krause
Frasquita - Georgette Spanellys
Mercédès - Yvonne Minton
Le Dancaïre - Jean Prudent
Le Remendado - Alfred Hallet
Moralès - Claude Calès
Zuniga - Robert Geay

I have tried to reconcile the verdicts of some really vituperative and absurdly negative reviews with what I hear in this set and have concluded that the problem with those who hate it must arise from their fixed idea that *Carmen* must be performed in an authentic, Gallic, *opéra-comique* style and refuse to recognise that an opera which so quickly became truly international also has a more robust performing tradition which permits a grander, more robust approach of the kind we find in superbly sung but frequently scorned, classic accounts by such as Karajan, Solti et al.

So I'll summarise the attractions and demerits of this set as I hear them. First, most people seem to agree that Schippers is a superb, energised and dynamic conductor, just as you might expect; he gets its considerable best out of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande which plays with great colour and feeling. Secondly, the sound is first rate for 1963; it's crystal clear with John Culshaw producing special spatial effects such as the guard marching past from right to left and the crowd applauding the Toreador approaching atmospherically. Thirdly, the supporting cast is excellent, with a lively chorus, including a robust children's choir, several native speakers with good voices and a young Joan Sutherland singing Micaëla gorgeously, even if she isn't quite at home in French. Tom Krause as Escamillo is virile and cruel sounding but also rather crude and even a little unsteady, as the part clearly lies a shade high for his bass-baritone, so he lacks the ease and elegance that a true French baritone such as Robert Massard, or even an all-purpose Verdi voice like that of another Robert, Merrill, can bring to the role. He is audibly under strain and occasionally either sounds as if he is about to crack or even momentarily does so in his big aria. Of course, his French and vocal acting are superb (he spoke seven languages fluently). Del Monaco still has plenty of voice and thrills simply by virtue of the size and sound, even if subtleties are few. His French is certainly not great - but the accent comes and goes and at times is passable. I still enjoy his gung-ho onslaught on the role, but Vickers, who also had a big, if very different, voice, was rather more varied as Don José.

Which leaves Regina Resnik. Some have accused her of sounding too "matronly". I don't buy that: she simply has a rich, even husky, mezzo with a strong lower register but that fits the more conventional concept of Carmen as tough and streetwise. She might be "chesty" (in every sense) but she's not

frumpy; her mode is closer to that of Risè Stevens and Elena Obraztsova. Her French is quite good except for her over-aspirating the "h" in "bohème". If you want a more ladylike Carmen, you must go elsewhere.

In the end, this affords considerable pleasure for anyone receptive to the broader, more generic way with this opera but there are in truth much more truly French versions to be had.

Georges Prêtre – 1964 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra of L'Opéra de Paris; Choeurs René Duclos

Carmen - Maria Callas
 Don José - Nicolai Gedda
 Micaëla - Andrea Guiot
 Escamillo - Robert Massard
 Frasquita - Nadine Sautereau
 Mercédès - Jane Berbié
 Le Dancaïre - Jean-Paul Vauquelin
 Le Remendado - Jacques Pruvost
 Moralès - Claude Calès
 Zuniga - Jacques Mars

Returning to this recording after a good few years has been an interesting experience. First of all, I find Prêtre's conducting to be much better than I had remembered. It is - surprise, surprise - very French, as is the whole performance: fleet, delicate and nuanced without quite the heft I'd like at key points - for example, the children's soldier chorus is far too polite for street urchins - but his approach is far preferable to turning the score into a verismo parody and the climax of the smuggler-gypsy quintet is thrilling - Prêtre whips up a storm. Similarly, the Entr'acte before Act 4 is full of life and colour, making quite an impact. As the French tradition in singing and performance becomes more and more diluted, a recording which is wholly Gallic with the exception of the two principal singers is increasingly valuable - and both Callas and Gedda were very conscientious, adaptable artists able to immerse themselves successfully in different idioms, as here. Both were excellent linguists and it shows.

The sound was always good - typically EMI 60's, slightly peaky, eminently listenable; the acoustic of the Salle Wagram was rendered less reverberant with drapes to permit sufficient warmth.

My admiration for Callas' Carmen increases with time. She cleverly exploits a potential flaw - the pronounced break between her two registers - to bewitching effect. Previous commentators such as the reliably perverse and wrong-headed Rodney Milnes have accused her Carmen of being all tigress with no allure; you have only to listen how subtly she effects certain key phrases such as "Je suis amoureuse" to give that the lie. A couple of sour top notes apart she sings with a smoky voice recast especially for the role: hard, cupped, with a trenchant lower register. She sometimes moves between notes with an enchanting "yodelling" effect and often goes for a sardonic, disingenuous understatement. It is almost de rigueur to criticise her French yet she spoke the language fluently and lived in Paris from 1962 until her death. I speak French and think she sounds pretty authentic when she delivers lines like, "l'on m'avait même dit de craindre pour ma vie" with real attention to the correct pronunciation of tricky vowel sounds as in "loin" and to the two French "r" sounds in "craindre".

I have never been a big fan of Gedda - I find his voice fundamentally bleaty. However, within that limitation he does a fine job, especially in the last act where he almost manages to transcend the lack of steel in his voice to convey José's manic passion - but he's not ideal. Robert Massard - still happily with us at 93 years old as I write - is insufficiently remembered today but I have always loved his neat, powerful, expressive baritone - so very French and perhaps, like so many deceased French tenors, the last of a vocal genre. He is perhaps too refined for Escamillo but he sings so idiomatically and the voice

itself is fundamentally so attractive. Andréa Guiot was no comprimario but a star in her era; no milkop she, she gives Micaëla the gutsy profile she too often lacks, especially in her main aria which she delivers in a big, slightly edgy and very positive manner rather than the usual wilting appeal and I like it.

The tagline for the recording was "Callas is Carmen"; in fact, Carmen is Callas here and none the worse for it; no-one else has encompassed the role as completely as she does here - and the fact is that it doesn't date as her conception of the character was already very modern. "Jamais je n'ai menti" declares Carmen, and Callas brings just such a searing honesty to her portrayal.

Georges Prêtre – 1967 (live radio broadcast; mono) Frequenz
Orchestra & Chorus of the RAI Roma

Carmen - Shirley Verrett
Don José - Albert Lance
Micaëla - Isabel Garcisanz
Escamillo - Robert Massard
Frasquita - Nadine Sautereau
Mercédès - Jacqueline Broudeur
Le Dancaïre - Bernard Demigny
Le Remendado - Michel Hamel
Moralès - Claude Genty
Zuniga - Anton Diakov

It's a pity about the airless mono sound of the commercial broadcast here, as everyone is in excellent voice: Verrett, in her first documented Carmen, frequently plunges into her lower register and lets fly with ringing top notes. Tenor Albert Lance was Australian-born as Lance Albert Ingram but became a dual national after his move to France; he is ardent, open-toned and refined. Garcisanz sings sweetly apart from one nasty, squealed and essentially missed top C in her big aria and Massard typically brings a touch of elegance to Escamillo's bombast. Prêtre drives matters along with his customary flair and the whole performance crackles with tension. It helps to have so many francophone singers surrounding Verrett — even if we were in Rome. Some audience coughs apart, the sound is tolerable if a bit distant.

The recording is punctuated by an announcer scene-setting. I really enjoy this: it's gutsy and well sung but not crude; if it were in stereo it would be a top contender.

Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos – 1969 (studio; stereo) EMI
Orchestra of L'Opéra de Paris; Chorus of L'Opéra de Paris & Les Petits Chanteurs à la Croix de Bois

Carmen - Grace Bumbry
Don José - Jon Vickers
Micaëla - Mirella Freni
Escamillo - Kostas Paskalis
Frasquita - Eliane Lublin
Mercédès - Viorica Cortez
Le Dancaïre - Michel Trempont
Le Remendado - Albert Voli
Moralès - Claude Meloni
Zuninga - Bernard Gontcharenko

First, I don't mind the use of native French actors for the dialogue here, in that their presence avoids the usual problem of singers coping with the language when it is sung but understandably struggling

with it in its spoken form; as long as there is no grinding mismatch between the speaking and singing voices, it's a pleasure to hear the text properly and authentically delivered - and it frees us of the cumbersome Guiraud recitatives.

This is the most complete version on record, even including the little pantomime for the old man and his young wife at the beginning commented on by Moralès. Recorded in 1969 and 1970 when Bumbry and Vickers were in their prime, it is indubitably well sung by the two principals and Freni as Micaëla, but it is oddly low-key when set alongside the Solti or later Maazel version with Domingo and Migenes-Johnson. The conducting lacks snap and Kostas Paskalis, with his mangled French and ordinary baritone, lacking tonal allure and firmness despite decent top notes, is a distinct liability as Escamillo alongside Merrill, Massard, Milnes or even Raimondi. The best thing here is Jon Vickers' very individual Don José, combining strength and sensitivity, with a plangent, falsetto and pianissimo B flat at the end of a very convincing "Flower Song" and lovely grading of dynamics - but again, some idiosyncratic French pronunciation. The murderous climax of the opera is somewhat muted despite the brooding desperation in his voice because Bumbry does not match him for passion. For all the shining top and the gratifying power of her lower register, best heard in "toujours la Mort" in the Card Scene, she can be a little bland.

The supporting cast is good without being exceptional except for the rich mezzo-soprano of under-recorded Romanian Viorica Cortez as Mercédès. This is decent bargain version but ultimately not as gripping as the very best recordings.

Lorin Maazel – 1970 (studio; stereo) Sony
Orchestra & Chorus of the Deutsche Oper Berlin

Carmen - Anna Moffo
Don José - Franco Corelli
Micaëla - Helen Donath
Escamillo - Piero Cappuccilli
Frasquita - Arleen Augér
Mercédès - Jane Berbié
Le Dancaïre - Jean-Christophe Benoit
Le Remendado - Karl-Ernst Mercker
Moralès - Barry McDaniel
Zuniga - José van Dam

Where do I start? I'll begin with Maazel's hopelessly idiosyncratic and inconsistent conducting. He pulls tempi about mercilessly from the absurdly frenetic introduction to the unbelievably turgid accompaniment to Escamillo's "Votre toast". Apart from those singers involved who are actually Francophone, everybody's French is terrible, especially that of Corelli and Cappuccilli and at best, as with the chorus, it sounds like a Berlitz International lesson, stilted and book-learned with no wit or charm. What a relief when van Dam's Zuniga sings and speaks; otherwise the poor remains of dialogue we are permitted are severely mangled, except when we are wrenched from the instantly recognisable voices of the singers to the uncredited actors who say the few words of "mélodrame" left and sound nothing like their singing counterparts.

Both principals are well past their prime and wholly out of their depth. Please understand that just as I admire, esteem and cherish certain of Maazel's recordings, I am an equally ardent fan of both Moffo and Corelli but this sorry set should never have been made. Maazel was ever wilful and inconsistent and, in this case, gets it badly wrong. Moffo is close to voiceless and cannot centre her tone, crooning embarrassingly in an attempt to sound seductive. She was presumably trading upon her legendary comeliness but wherever did the idea come from that Carmen is a role for fading sopranos? Corelli bawls relentlessly, his lisp very much to the fore, sounding as if Turiddu had strayed into Seville.

Cappuccilli could hardly sound less idiomatic, also bawling tonelessly without a hint of the sleek, cruel suavity which the toreador should exude.

As Moralès, Barry McDaniel, another singer I generally like, sounds so Anglo-Saxon with his rather white, light, polite tone (yes; I know he's American, but...); compare him with Thomas Allen for Solti and you'll hear the problem. That fine singer Helen Donath is pretty as Micaëla but too bland and correct.

While there might be a long and honourable tradition of performing *Carmen* in Germany and, especially, Vienna, there is no excuse for this sad mish-mash, cut and truncated, horribly sung and almost unrecognisable as Bizet's Gallic masterpiece.

The awfulness of this recording is made all the more incomprehensible by the fact that the recording derived from Maazel's 1982 film soundtrack is amongst the most recommendable.

Alain Lombard – 1974 (studio; stereo) Erato; Naive
Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg; Chorus of l'Opéra du Rhin (Strasbourg)

Carmen - Régine Crespin
Don José - Gilbert Py
Micaëla - Jeanette Pilou
Escamillo - José van Dam
Frasquita - Maria Rosa Carminati
Mercédès - Nadine Denize
Le Dancaïre - Jacques Trigeau
Le Remendado - Rémy Corazza
Moralès - Paul Guigue
Zuniga - Pierre Thau

Lombard could sometimes be a sluggish conductor, but not here – his conducting is very positive and confident, neatly bringing out orchestral colour and details. The sound is very good – full and nicely balanced; the supporting cast and chorus are fine except for a windy Moralès. They are wholly francophone, which you can hear in the ease and fluency of their delivery, although the sung recitatives are used rather than dialogue. Pilou sings a pleasant, serviceable Micaëla of no particular charm or distinction. A young van Dam lacks the bottom notes and resonance to encompass the macho swagger; there are tell-tale signs of forcing in a tremolo which I have before heard in his singing. His recording for Solti made only a year after this shows him in much better voice, evincing considerably more heft than we hear in this performance.

However, it is the two principal singers who leave the most to be desired. I have never been much of a fan of Crespin's gritty soprano, although I can admire her at her best – which she is decidedly not here: her tone is thin and wholly lacking the rich, sensuous timbre of truly seductive Carmens and her use of the words is surprisingly inert – she could be singing about virtually anything in her opening aria and she rarely sounds engaged. Py has a throaty, constricted tenor which sounds old and not in the least heroic, yet he was only just past forty at the time of recording; he really is a blot on the set.

You may safely pass over this.

Leonard Bernstein – 1972 (studio; stereo) DG
Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera; Chorus of the Manhattan Opera and the Metropolitan Opera Children's Chorus

Carmen - Marilyn Horne

Don José - James McCracken
 Micaëla - Adriana Maliponte
 Escamillo - Tom Krause
 Frasquita - Colette Boky
 Mercédès - Marcia Baldwin
 Le Dancaïre - Russell Christopher
 Le Remendado - Andrea Velis
 Moralès - Raymond Gibbs
 Zuniga - Donald Gramm

You would expect Bernstein to be able to enter into the sensuous spirit of this opera and so he does, but entirely in the wrong way; right from the ponderous overture, however, it is all very heavy and underlined; the diametric opposite of Gallic charm. He encourages his singers to overdo it, too; Marilyn Horne digs for every swoop, slide, primp and pout in her repertoire, McCracken is so hammy and overwrought from the start that his adenoidal tenor has nowhere to go, and the chorus sounds as if it is singing Beethoven's Choral Symphony instead of impersonating various bands of common folk. For me, it really is all too much; the Metropolitan Orchestra is similarly directed to play with as much lush indulgence as possible. Adriana Maliponte has a most peculiar, "bottled" or "covered" tone which, again, seems to fit Bernstein's concept of over-egging and is the antithesis of the fresh, plucky Micaëla. The opening to "La fleur" is so etiolated as to be absurd and when McCracken enters in falsetto, continues to portray José as clearly hysterical and concludes with more falsetto whimpering, the impression of everyone trying too hard to emote is further enhanced. Tom Krause makes a sturdy Escamillo but his bass-baritone is rather too woofy and leaden to suggest virile allure and Bernstein's plodding tempi further drain the life out of his characterisation.

This is a classic case of Bernstein hugging a score to death and leaving it dead in a ditch.

Georg Solti – 1975 (studio; stereo) Decca

London Philharmonic Orchestra (& National Philharmonic Orchestra); John Alldis Choir & the Haberdasher's Aske's School Boys' Choir

Carmen - Tatiana Troyanos
 Don José - Plácido Domingo
 Micaëla - Kiri Te Kanawa
 Escamillo - José van Dam
 Frasquita - Norma Burrowes
 Mercédès - Jane Berbié
 Le Dancaïre - Michel Roux
 Le Remendado - Michel Sénéchal
 Moralès - Thomas Allen
 Zuniga- Pierre Thau

I do not think Solti has been given his due as an opera conductor, yet he was at the helm for at least half dozen recordings which are always in the top recommendations. This *Carmen* joins that elite group: it is impeccably played and cast from Opera Central Casting Heaven.

I have long favoured the 1982 Maazel filmed version for its *verismo* thrills (yes; I know *Carmen* isn't *verismo* but nor do I want it too Gallically refined and under-stated - or indeed, undersung) and I still greatly esteem that version, (especially on DVD, although I rarely watch opera in that medium) but Tatiana Troyanos' knockout Carmen exposes the vocal frailties of Migenes-Johnson's circus trick of even being able to sing the role at all with such a comparatively light voice. Troyanos is everything you want: dusky, smoky, sexy and nuanced. Her French, both sung and spoken, is miraculously good for an American - and I don't mean that patronisingly; it's just that non-native singers nearly always struggle

with French and she doesn't; the way she balefully intones "Toujours la mort" is spine-tingling and every fleeting mood is captured without caricaturing Carmen as a femme fatale.

Solti gives us his own deeply considered amalgam between the Choudens original performing version and the complete Oeser score, not feeling bound by either but making judicious decisions about what to restore and where to return to the 1875 first night if it works better dramatically. Bizet was no doubt constrained by performance considerations to make some cuts he wanted to resist whereas in this recording Solti felt able take a more leisurely approach and include some lovely music unnecessarily discarded; thus, this version is some fifteen minutes longer than most but seems wholly satisfying as a dramatic experience. The rationale behind Solti's additions and choices is detailed in the booklet.

Domingo is in superb voice in a role which perhaps best suited his gifts - and his noticeable accent is no handicap in playing a Spanish corporal; in fact, he handles the dialogue quite well and sings an absolutely beautiful "La fleur" - his falsetto is honeyed and his top notes ring out. Te Kanawa's ravishingly pure Micaëla points up where the workaday Faith Esham for Maazel is lacking and José van Dam's virile and smoothly vocalised Escamillo tops even Raimondi's account, his idiomatic French bringing greater authenticity to his vocal acting (not that Raimondi, an excellent linguist, is faulty). Smaller parts are expertly filled by mostly French singers yet the British Norma Burrowes brings Frasquita alive more vividly than any other singer I know in that role; her singing is vibrant and charming. Similarly, the young Thomas Allen's Moralès is a treat.

This ticks most boxes and is one of the most recommendable sets on offer.

Claudio Abbado – 1977 (studio; stereo) DG

London Symphony Orchestra; Chorus of the Scottish Opera

Carmen - Teresa Berganza
 Don José - Plácido Domingo
 Micaëla - Ileana Cotrubas
 Escamillo - Sherrill Milnes
 Frasquita - Yvonne Kenny
 Mercédès - Alicia Nafé
 Le Dancaïre - Gordon Sandison
 Le Remendado - Geoffrey Pogson
 Moralès - Stuart Harling
 Zuniga - Robert Lloyd

I remember that this set was received with some disappointment when it was released on LP all those years ago; many were puzzled by what they perceived as the excessive coolness of Berganza's portrayal and the underwhelming restraint of the singers' performances in general. She and Abbado set out in the accompanying booklet notes their case for jettisoning the prevailing characterisation of Carmen as sluttish and predatory and according her more dignity by depicting her as a "strong, independent woman". As I say in my introduction, I think that is a valid approach but I also still find it overworked here and as such running the risk of giving us a rather prim Carmen whose behaviour is devoid of sexual frisson; if you want a subtler heroine, de los Ángeles does it better. In any case, in the end she hardly has the right voice for Carmen; it lacks the necessary earthy, gutsy quality and sometimes she is even dull.

There are still a lot of good things going for this recording, not least Abbado's intermittently energised conducting, Milnes' virile Escamillo, Domingo's scrupulously musicianly Don José, Robert Lloyd's beautifully sung and spoken Zuniga and Cotrubas' charming Micaëla. Abbado made some good opera recordings but he also made a lot with the wrong singers; Berganza's bee in her bonnet that the "traditional" depiction of Carmen was somehow a slight on all Spanish women caused her to make

Carmen too refined and sophisticated. Domingo's heavily accented French – fortunately in heavily truncated Oeser dialogue - is considerably more Hispanic than for Maazel six years later and both he and Milnes offer more generalised characterisations than specifically French artists; Milnes in particular sounds oddly muted instead of rampant. Given that this was made in the wake of live performances at the 1977 Edinburgh Festival, one might have hoped for a more theatrically animated result than this; the sound, too lacks atmosphere. I honestly think that the best thing in it is Cotrubas' Micaëla, which rivals Freni's – but if that is so, that raises questions about the quality of the performance as a whole.

Herbert von Karajan – 1982 (studio; digital) DG

Berliner Philharmoniker; Choeurs de l'Opéra de Paris & Schöneberg Boys' Choir

Carmen - Agnes Baltsa
 Don José - José Carreras
 Micaëla - Katia Ricciarelli
 Escamillo - José van Dam
 Frasquita - Christine Barbaux
 Mercédès - Jane Berbié
 Le Dancaïre - Gino Quilico
 Le Remendado - Heinz Zednik
 Moralès - Mikael Melbye
 Zuniga - Alexander Malta

I remain in two minds about this *Carmen*; the problem is that, good as it is, Karajan meets his nemesis in himself, in that it must inevitably be measured against his own recording made two decades before. With the possible exception of Baltsa, who was always a fine Carmen and actually possessed of a more developed lower register than Leontyne Price, every singer here is surpassed by their earlier counterparts. Another disadvantage is that the decision was taken to use the Oeser spoken dialogue but with French actors rather than risk having the singers themselves struggle with it; that almost never works because there is nearly always a mismatch between the spoken and sung voices. The digital sound here is fine but there was little wrong with early 60's analogue sound from RCA.

The main vocal weaknesses here is Ricciarelli's quavery, tentative Micaëla sung in very poor French and not a patch on Freni, who long owned the role and managed to sound sweet without being limp. A slight beat is beginning to creep into Carreras' tenor under pressure by this stage of his career, but his French, if hardly idiomatic, is considerably better than Corelli's and the plangent beauty of his voice gives considerable pleasure, including a sensitive "La fleur" ending on a poised falsetto B flat. His desperate appeals to Carmen are heartfelt and moving; his voice was always uniquely geared to conveying pathos and melancholy. Baltsa is vocally secure and shining, and sings in decent French. She has an intrinsically smoky sound but is rather formidable; she does scorn and defiance magnificently but she is less adept in suggesting allure, nor is there always the requisite chemistry between her and Carreras. Van Dam makes an excellent Escamillo but his top notes are now not quite as good as those by his younger self for Solti - and Merrill was even better.

Karajan's conducting is grand and sweeping, but occasionally a bit slow and heavy-handed, and geared to underlining the Grand Opera rather than the *opéra-comique* elements. However, he constantly brings out the beauty of Bizet's scoring builds "Les tringles des sistres" to a thrilling climax. A final moan: the Schöneberg Boys' Choir is unaccountably weak and under the note – not that it matters much but they have some rousing urchin music which should be sung more robustly than they manage. There is much to enjoy here and another bonus is that it offers one of the fullest Oeser editions but I do not think this is quite in the front rank.

Lorin Maazel – 1983 (filmtrack; digital) Erato

Orchestre National de France; Choeur de Radio France

Carmen - Julia Mignes-Johnson
 Don José - Plácido Domingo
 Micaëla - Faith Esham
 Escamillo - Ruggero Raimondi
 Frasquita - Lilian Watson
 Mercédès - Susan Daniel
 Le Dancaïre - Jean-Philippe Lafont
 Le Remendado - Gérard Garino
 Moralès - François Le Roux
 Zuninga - John-Paul Bogart

I sympathise with those who want their *Carmen* quintessentially French, more in the *opéra-comique* tradition, with lighter voices, perfect accents and generally more Parisian than Viennese, but this recording provides such a complete dramatic experience that for me, it leaves many of the others - and there are an awful lot of them! - in the dust. The only other recordings to bring out the drama so effectively are Solti's and the even more unauthentic but beautifully sung, hugely dramatic Karajan reading with Corelli (French worse than Domingo's and without the excuse of at least sounding a bit Spanish), Price (smoky, alluring but very grand) and Merrill (vocalising marvellously without bothering much about characterisation details). The *Carmen* here, Migenes Johnson, re-trained her voice to acquire plenty of gutsy chest register without losing the delicacy of her top and she delivers that famous music with some lovely portamenti - not at all vulgar, in my opinion, just properly in character; the problem is that one feels she has cajoled her voice into sounding mostly right without really having the essential vocal make-up.

Domingo sings his best Jose on record; powerful, with a more tense and rapid vibrato than usual and some easy, plangent top notes – not always his strong point; he seems to have been in exceptionally good voice around this time. The surprise for me was Raimondi's Escamillo; it is one of the best on disc and the voice sounds truly baritonal - which perhaps explains why I have sometimes found his timbre too light for some of the true bass roles he has undertaken. Maazel's direction is masterly; all the tempi are beautifully judged and the authentic French orchestra, chorus and secondary roles are a delight to the ears. My only slight disappointment is encountered in Esham's Micaela; she sings neatly and expressively but the fundamental tone of her soprano is thin; I miss the creamy beauty of Te Kanawa's sound in this role. A blot on the set but it doesn't really spoil it; this remains a prime recommendation.

(Incidentally, you don't have to have seen the film to appreciate Maazel's account here but it happens to be one of the very best visual realisations of any opera.)

Seiji Ozawa - 1988 (studio; digital) Philips; Decca
 Orchestre National de Paris (France); Choeur de Radio France (Paris)

Carmen - Jessye Norman
 Don José - Neil Shicoff
 Micaëla - Mirella Freni
 Escamillo - Simon Estes
 Frasquita - Ghyslaine Raphanel
 Mercédès - Jean Rigby
 Le Dancaïre - François Le Roux
 Le Remendado - Gérard Garino
 Moralès - Nicolas Rivenq
 Zuniga - Jean-Philippe Courtis

This recording has always been perceived as something of a miscalculation on Ozawa's and Jessye Norman's part, and it's not hard to see why; Carmen is temperamentally just not the majestic Jessye's thing even though her soprano Falcon ought to suit it. Her velvety voice glides over the music, mostly in a breathy half-voice perilously akin to crooning, presumably under the mistaken impression that such an affect conveys kittenish allure but the actual effect is oddly narcoleptic – a result made all the more apparent on the rare occasions when she does open up full voice or use a proper lower register. She certainly comes alive in the final scene but that's late in the day. She clearly intends the effect she gets but for me it's all too contrived.

There is a problem with Neil Shicoff's tenor, too. Its core is essentially rather throaty with a fast vibrato and a constant lachrymose bleat in the gear changes, so he tends to fall into the weak Don José category. He sings well enough within his limitations and uses the text very expressively but makes some ugly sounds attempting vehemence in the last scene and José as a wet rag means that an important dimension in the characterisation is missing.

Mirella Freni reprises a role for which she first became famous but there is no denying that her voice no longer has the virginal sweetness of yore, and years of singing heavier roles have rendered it a heavier instrument with something of a beat on loud, high notes – fine for the right part but not for Micaëla. Estes is just awful as Escamillo – a dark, woofy blare of a sound, devoid of élan, all bass growl and no baritone squillo; he sounds like Porgy after a heavy night. The supporting voices are squally.

Ozawa's conducting is languid, in keeping with the general mood. In sum, the casting issues and general languor which pervade this recording make it a rather dispiriting experience.

Alexander Rahbari – 1990 (studio; digital) Naxos

Czechoslovak Radio Symphony Orchestra, Bratislava; Slovak Philharmonic Chorus & Bratislava Children's Choir

Carmen - Graciela Alperyn
 Don José - Giorgio Lamberti
 Micaëla - Doina Palade
 Escamillo - Alan Titus
 Frasquita - A. Liebeck
 Mercédès - Dalia Schaechter
 Le Dancaïre - Ján Durco
 Le Remendado - Miroslav Dvorsky
 Moralès - Vladimir Chmelo
 Zuniga - Danilo Rigosa

This is yet another in the series of bargain opera recordings Naxos produced around this time, which were often surprisingly good, especially in terms of sound and conducting. The choice of singers was sometimes more of a lottery, however, although they were rarely less than competent and often excellent. Unfortunately, this was not one of the more successful issues. The French accents here, particularly among the rather too polite children's chorus and some soloists, are decidedly wobbly, as is, unfortunately, the voice of the Carmen. Graciela Alperyn's mezzo is weak, tremolo-ridden and oddly lacking in body; her lower register is hollow and she has an unfortunate habit of growling and squawking for emphasis. The combination of her sound with the harsh, strained tenor of Giorgio Lamberti is not a happy one. His French is worse than Corelli's but the voice is simply dire, whereas Corelli's is glorious. Alan Titus does what he can to enliven Escamillo but the voice is coarse and lacking in glamour. The Micaëla is harsh-toned and another wobbler. Really, this is very poor; I cannot imagine what Naxos was thinking in allowing its release.

Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1995 (studio; digital) Teldec
Orchestra & Chorus of the Bayerische Staatsoper

Carmen - Jennifer Larmore
Don José - Thomas Moser
Micaela - Angela Gheorghiu
Escamillo - Samuel Ramey
Frasquita - Nathalie Boissy
Mercédès - Natascha Petrinsky
Le Dancaïre - Jan Zinkler
Le Remendado - Ulrich Reß
Moralès - Jean-Luc Chaignaud
Zuniga - Maurizio Muraro

I am a big fan of Jennifer Larmore and usually love the fresh insights Sinopoli brings to the operas he conducts, but one thing immediately rules out this recording for me: the presence of Thomas Moser as Don José. I was always baffled by his brief, comparative success as a leading tenor, finding his voice ugly, constricted and utterly unheroic with an unpleasant beat. He sings “La fleur” in an absurd mixed-falsetto which never gets out of second gear. This means that the presence of several other distinguished singers, in addition to Larmore, is all to no avail if we have to endure Moser’s hoarse bleating. Not that they are necessarily ideal, either; Ramey – a singer I generally much admire – is secure but rather stolid, being a true basso cantante without the baritone squillo required, although he sings, as ever, in very good French; Gheorghiu is lovely as Micaela - in the right role and rather than Carmen herself – and rivals Cotrubas and Freni for charm and beauty of voice; Larmore deploys her smoky mezzo alluringly although some might find her cupped lower register disconcerting and her portrayal lacks the tonal variety other singers find.

Finally, many of Sinopoli’s tempi are oddly cautious and even plodding for a conductor usually so dynamic. He was sometimes given to extremes which often came off; I don’t think that is the case here and some passages and arias – such as the famous Habanera and “Près des remparts de Séville” – even drag. The Act 2 Gypsy Song begins very slowly and takes too long to get going before too abruptly becoming frenetic – not well-judged. Like Karajan in 1983, this offers a full Oeser edition of the score, but it is not a contender.

Michel Plasson – 2002 (studio; digital) EMI
Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse; Choeur d'enfants de Toulouse & Les Eléments

Carmen - Angela Gheorghiu
Don José - Roberto Alagna
Micaëla - Inva Mula
Escamillo - Thomas Hampson
Frasquita - Elisabeth Vidal
Mercédès - Isabelle Cals
Le Dancaïre - Nicolas Rivenq
Le Remendado - Yann Beuron
Moralès - Ludovic Tézier
Zuniga - Nicolas Cavallier

Michel Plasson is a vastly experienced conductor of his native music and does a fine job here, with the Toulouse orchestra, chorus and supporting cast all first rate, sounding elegantly French and clearly immersed in the correct style. The recorded sound is excellent, too: warm, balanced, with plenty of space around the voices but no loss of detail.

The main issue is with the casting of at least three of the principal roles. Least debatable is Alagna; his tenor was never that large an instrument - hence the La Scala Radamès debacle – but his acumen in French lyric-heroic roles gave him an advantage and the role of Don José suited his gifts. However, for many, Gheorghiu's beautiful soprano is intrinsically too light an instrument to encompass the earthiness of Carmen's personality; certainly, she took a risk in essaying it, given her voice-type. She was ideal as Micaëla for Sinopoli - in fact, the best thing in that recording – but can she carry off Carmen? She musters considerably more heft in the lower regions of her voice than one might have thought possible and sparks fly in the final scene where she matches Alagna's passion - and if true sopranos like Leontyne Price could sing Carmen, there is no particular reason why Gheorghiu shouldn't, too. Then married to Alagna, her French is consequently very good and her vibrant, glittering soprano is in prime condition, even if ultimately I want a gutsier voice in the role. Having said that, some of those mono, all-French recordings from the 50's have soprano Carmens and are successful, so sample this recording on YouTube and decide for yourself.

There is surely less debate regarding the unsuitability of Hampson's soft-grained baritone to Escamillo: the voice is all wrong, being laboured on top notes and woefully under-powered on low ones. He sounds not the least bit macho. Sadly, Inva Mula is also a disappointment as a bland Micaëla, being over-vibrant on loud notes and lacking the sweetness of tone and fragile innocence suggested by Gheorghiu herself for Sinopoli and by other eminent predecessors such as Freni.

My MWI colleagues Bob Farr and Robert McKechnie [reviewed](#) this recording back in 2003 and they make clear their reservations as well as identifying its virtues – which, apart from some superb singing include a very full score and the inclusion of an additional aria for Carmen following the Habanera, but Robert provides examples of how cuts and alterations in the edition here have made a nonsense of the plot – irritating.

The weak Toreador and Micaëla disqualify this from being a top recommendation; a pity, as much else is very satisfying as long as you enjoy Gheorghiu in the title role.

Sir Simon Rattle – 2012 (studio; digital) EMI

Berliner Philharmoniker; Chor und Kinderchor der Deutschen Staatsoper Berlin

Carmen – Magdalena Kozena

Don José – Jonas Kaufmann

Micaëla – Genia Kühlmeier

Escamillo – Kostas Smoriginas

Frasquita – Christina Landshamer

Mercédès – Rachel Frenkel

Le Dancaïre – Simone Del Savio

Le Remendado – Jan-Paul Fouchécourt

Moralès – André Schuen

Zuniga – Christian van Horn

Eyebrows were raised and accusations of nepotism were muttered when Sir Simon gave the eponymous role of this recording to the third Mrs Rattle here. Frankly those unkind suspicions seem to be vindicated, in that to my ears Kozena is here about as seductive as a utilities bill and the performance in general is very weak tea indeed. She has an essentially small, “baroque” voice, limited at both ends of its compass by a weak lower register and squealed top notes, as per the nasty sound at the end of “Près des remparts de Séville”. There is so little tonal variety in her delivery of her big arias that she might as well be singing anything; she is just so damned ordinary. The disparity between her dispassionate detachment and the conviction of Kaufmann's acting is undeniable and almost comical; the problem with Kaufmann is not with his acting but his vocal production and its unsuitability to the role of Don José. His tenor was already beginning to take on a cloudy timbre as he abandoned

the clearer sound of his youth and injected more and more artificial darkness into his tone; his husky tone is far from the ringing, heroic, authentically French sound the role demands. The supporting cast is feeble, too; Kostas Smoriginas is utterly forgettable: his voice lacks all centre and is a cloudy, husky blare with very weak low notes and a laboured top. Genia Kühlmeier as Micaela is much better if not especially striking and her top B is shrill; besides, as with the Sinopoli recording, nobody buys *Carmen* for the Micaëla.

Obviously the orchestral playing is splendid but Rattle generates little heat. I can see no reason for preferring this over a dozen alternatives.

Recommendations

Any one of the batch of almost exclusively French, post-war recordings made before *Carmen* became international property, as it were, affords the listener with an authentic experience, and probably the best of those is the Cluytens. However, there is no denying that a performance by bigger, more glamorous voices than those of Parisian house singers brings an extra dimension to the work and stereo sound is surely desirable. Every digital recording over the last thirty years is in some way flawed, which, as I so often find to be the case in my surveys, obliges us to return to what increasingly appears to be a mini Golden Age of recording from the late 50's to the early 80's, when the technology of recorded sound had evolved to render it more than acceptable and there were still voices of real stature and distinction to be captured in those recordings. So once again, I insincerely apologise for passing over more recent issues and recommending recordings "of a certain age".

It is easy to discard the duds, but choice among those remaining is made more difficult by my affection for certain individual performances, such as Callas' or Leontyne Price's *Carmen* or even Corelli's Don José, mangled French and all. If a compromise is to be found which offers great singing, excellent sound, vivid conducting, an acknowledgement of French style and a sustained sense of drama, then Solti's and the later Maazel recordings go to the top of my list.

Studio; mono: Cluytens – 1950; Wolff – 1951

Studio; stereo: Beecham - 1958-59; Karajan – 1963; Solti – 1975*

Studio digital: Maazel – 1983 (filmtrack)

Live radio broadcast; mono: Prêtre – 1967

*First choice

Ralph Moore