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A sultry and hot Los Angeles Opera 'Carmen' emerges in the person of Viktoria Vizin!



Photo: Robert Millard

**GEORGES BIZET
CARMEN
LOS ANGELES OPERA
NOVEMBER 15, 2008**

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

The month of November is the month for "Carmen." You can double your pleasure, double your fun, and you don't even have to buy a pack of Wrigley's gum to do it.

"Carmen" is being performed by the Washington National Opera and Los Angeles Opera, thanks to the companies' general director, Plácido Domingo. Do not despair though: the casts and productions are different, although one of the Micaëlas is singing on both coasts. Domingo believes in double-casting, and he seems to enjoy nurturing young singers, which is a noble gesture, and cost-effective, too.

Veteran mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves is the Carmen in D.C. After all, somebody has to serve as the model. But mezzo-soprano Viktoria Vizin is singing the role in Los Angeles, and she just might become the gold standard. Her Carmen is singular, unique, alluring, sexy, and she can sing, too. Her voice is rich, warm and dusky, and it has an evenness from bottom to top.

According to well-known voice teacher Seth Riggs, the key to singing correctly “is in understanding the bridges and the mix.”

Viktoria Vizin appears to be a master at it, although I doubt the two have ever met. She refrains from belting in the lower register because singing with all chest would make it impossible for her to move seamlessly upward. Her voice has a rich, chesty quality at its bottom while still maintaining enough head resonance so that it can move effortlessly upward. It’s a lusty, dusky voice, perfectly suited for Carmen, as was evident with her Habanera. And her acting? Well! When she sang with her castanets, later draping herself across a bench with one foot on the ground and the other on the bench, holding her skirt between her teeth and dragging it upward – she made all the men in the audience salivate. She was coquettish, enticing, playful and coy, never quite giving Don José all he wanted.

The young man sitting next to me was caressing his date’s fingers and cooing sweet nothings into her ear. At one point, he announced to her that there was a little bit of Carmen in him. I laughed. His date was doing a pretty good impersonation of Carmen herself. Who says that opera is for the old folks?

Most actors tend to play off each other. When one actor’s performance is superior, the other actors onstage subsequently act better because they have some meat to react to. The same is true for singers. I’ve heard tenor Marcus Haddock a number of times, but this was the first time that he revealed a degree of vocal and emotional passion. His “Le fleur que tu m’avais jeté” was formidable. I guess that no one could resist this Carmen.

On the other hand, Raymond Aceto’s Escamillo lacked flair, but he did have a formidable voice. The problem was that he darkened and covered his tones to excess, which is not the best prescription for vocal longevity.

The remaining members of the ensemble were impressive, especially Morgan Smith (Moralès), Kendall Gladen (Mercédès), and Wayne Tigges (Zuniga). Genia Kühmeier was a pure-sounding Micaëla. Kerri Marcinko (Frasquita) and Daniel Montenegro (Le Dancaïre) were noteworthy.

The first-act set was sunny and cheerful with beiges and peaches -- very modern Mediterranean, hardly Bizet’s direction for 1820’s Seville – sort of an upscale Miramar, Havana, or the new local mall in your neighborhood. The hues were more vivid in the second act: stone buildings in earthy green, Carmen in red. A dreary mountain path set the scene for Act 3, and then back to the Mediterranean for the outside of the bullring. Not totally Spanish in character -- the production originated at the Teatro Real de Madrid

where it was staged by Emilio Sagi with sets by Gerardo Trotti.

The orchestral music was consistently enlightening and invigorating under the expert direction of conductor Emmanuel Villaume. The entr'actes vividly set the mood. The lyricism of the Act 3 interlude for flute and harp with woodwinds and strings was especially lovely.

A little bit "Aida," a little bit Gounod, and ultimately Bizet: The dancers, chorus, costumes and music contributed to a spectacle and sentiment that somehow seemed appropriate for the beginning of the holiday season. Of course Don José did kill his Carmen. So much for the festivities, I guess.

But I did love this Carmen!

Libretto: Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. Based on a novel by Prosper Mérimée.

Conductor: Emmanuel Villaume

Original Production: Emilio Sagi

Director: Javier Ulacia

Set Designer: Gerardo Trotti

Costume Designer: Jesús del Pozo

Lighting Designer: Guido Levi

Choreographer: Nuria Castejón

Associate Conductor-Chorus Master: Grant Gershon

Los Angeles Children's Chorus Director: Anne Tomlinson

Concert Master: Stuart Canin