

# Contrast and Conflict: The Research on the Characters of the Four Main Characters in the Opera 'Carmen'

Yueliang Ding\*

University of York, York, UK

\*Corresponding author: xgg513@york.ac.uk

**Abstract.** This article focuses on the four main characters in the opera "Carmen". By analyzing their respective character traits, it reveals the complexity and uniqueness of the characters. The study finds that Carmen, as a rebellious and free female image, stands in stark contrast to traditional heroines; while Don Jose, as an officer, leads to tragedy due to his indecisiveness and love for Carmen. Escamillo, the heroic bullfighter, demonstrates a love outlook that is starkly different from Don Jose. Micaela's gentleness and obedience form a sharp contrast with Carmen, further enriching the layering of the characters. Through an in-depth exploration of the interactions among these characters, this article analyzes how they propel the plot forward and foster a dramatic atmosphere filled with intense contrasts and conflicts. This study offers readers a fresh perspective on understanding "Carmen," unveiling the significance of the intricate relationships among the characters and their impact on the overall plot.

**Keywords:** Carmen; opera; character analysis.

## 1. Introduction

If one were to select the most representative work from French operas, "Carmen" might be the first to come to mind. As the opera with the highest number of performances worldwide, "Carmen" has been enduringly popular and remains immensely popular to this day. This opera has attracted the attention of countless audiences and scholars with its unique charm. German philosopher Nietzsche once wrote to his friend praising it as "a work that makes people extremely happy." This work is the last opera created by French composer Bizet, adapted from the novel of the same name by French realist writer Merimee. The play mainly tells the story of a beautiful gypsy girl who attracts Don Jose and causes him to abandon his fiancée Micaela. Meanwhile, Carmen falls in love with a bullfighter and pursues freedom and bravery in love, ultimately leading to a tragic ending. It's worth considering that, given the social context at that time, it was quite rare for authors and composers to choose tobacco female workers and soldiers from peasant backgrounds as protagonists. Therefore, analyzing the personalities of the main characters in the opera may provide readers with some insights. The characterization of the characters helps reveal the core themes and ideas of the opera, which also represents the author's expression of their own theories. By mapping these theories onto the portrayed characters, readers can better empathize with them through character analysis. This article primarily analyzes and compares the characters of the heroine, the gypsy Carmen, the soldier Don Jose, the peasant girl Micaela, and the bullfighter Escamillo. Bizet skillfully crafts these characters with distinct personalities through his music. In his music, these four characters are interconnected, mutually influencing and contrasting, showcasing different personalities through their music. This article also hopes to provide readers with new perspectives and ideas through this analysis, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the opera "Carmen" from the perspective of its characters.

## 2. Female Characters: Carmen and Micaela

It is widely known that the opera "Carmen" revolves around four main characters, each with distinct and contrasting personality traits. Bizet portrayed these characters through rich and varied musical styles. For the heroine, Carmen, the contrast in music and dramatic conflicts further enhance her vivid and distinct portrayal.

## 2.1. Gypsy

When we mention the character of Carmen, the first thing that comes to mind is her ethnic characteristics. She is a gypsy girl, and with the popularity of Bizet's opera, the ancient and mysterious ethnic group of gypsies has also aroused people's interest. "Time is for wandering, the body is for love, life is for forgetting, and the soul is for singing (Gypsy proverb) [1]." Gypsies have no fixed residence and wander all year round. They are free and unwilling to stick to any rules and laws. They are good at singing and dancing and make a living by performing. They are also good at fortune-telling and divination, and Gypsy women also use this as a way to make a living [1]. At the same time, in the social environment at that time, Gypsies were generally not respected by local people because they had no fixed residence and no stable legitimate jobs. Some Gypsies would rob or steal. The Persian poet Firdawsi mentioned: "the ancestors of gypsies wandered, they had no home, no land, but were accompanied by dogs, and wolves followed everywhere, rushing day and night, stealing while walking[2]." Therefore, in history, gypsies have often been discriminated against and persecuted. In the first act of the opera, after a fight with a female worker, Carmen sings "*Je bravet tout, le feu, le fer et le ciel meme*". In the third act, the song "Trio" uses divination to predict her own fate, both of which fully embody the characteristics of a gypsy. Although she lives at the bottom of society, she is wild, pursues freedom and independence, and is passionate and unrestrained.

## 2.2. Habanera

In the fifth scene of the first act in the opera, Carmen's appearance captured the attention of everyone present, radiating beauty and charm. To capture Don Jose's attention, Carmen performed "Habanera," the most popular aria in the opera. This is one of the most representative works of Carmen and also her first aria in this opera. The mezzo-soprano singer Galimari, who played the Carmen for the premiere, believed that Carmen's first appearance should have an excellent song, so Bizet tailored this aria for the character, also known as "Love is Like a Mischievous Bird" [3]. The composer employs Spanish-style folk music to showcase Carmen's passion, frankness, and courage in love and hate. This aria is a direct expression of Carmen's view on love. As a gypsy, her love is free, just as she sings: "When will I fall in love with you? I do not know, maybe never, maybe tomorrow." Love is an unruly bird, coming and going without a trace. Love is the child of gypsies, unrestrained. Even if you do not love me, I insist on loving you. Once I fall in love with you, you have to be careful [4].

The entire song is in 2/4 time with an allegretto tempo, quasi andantino. There are many dotted rhythms and triplets, creating a lively, free, and smooth music. The design of the jumps and legato in the prelude, as well as the pianissimo, sets the tone for the entire song. Coupled with the continuous descending semitones starting from the fourth measure, the tonal progression shifts between major and minor keys, making the melody mysterious yet attractive(Fig.1).

N° 5. Habanera.º)

The musical score for the beginning of the Habanera is presented in a standard format. It includes a vocal line for Carmen and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as 'Allegretto, quasi Andantino'. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor). The time signature is 2/4. The vocal line starts with the lyrics 'L'amour Love is'. The piano accompaniment begins with a piano (pp) dynamic and a descending semitone pattern.

Fig. 1 The beginning of habanera[4]

The short melody before entering the second part is composed of four lamours, but they are handled differently. The first two lamours are marked as pianissimo leggero in intensity, while the third gradually increases in intensity and the fourth gradually decreases. This handling can also express Carmen's teasing towards Jose as well as her exclamation or doubt about love (Fig.2)

The image shows a musical score for the aria 'L'Amour est un oiseau' from the opera Carmen. It is written for soprano and tenor. The score is in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are in French and English. The music includes dynamic markings like 'espress.' and 'pp legg.' and various articulations like slurs and accents. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system ending at measure 14117 and the second starting at measure 46.

Fig. 2 Handling of four different "lamour" situations[4]

This aria, as a representative work for mezzo-soprano, can better express Carmen's enthusiasm and sincerity with its rich and full sound. This is a work that requires both singing and acting, with the use of props and body movements clearly expressing Carmen's personality. To portray Carmen's freedom and ease, it may be necessary to interact with the opposing actor while singing, or even sing and dance at the same time. Strong breath support is particularly important. The singer needs to carefully study and find the most suitable performance style to portray the character. When singing, the singer can pay attention to handling the small slurs, distinguishing between the singing of slurred and staccato parts, and emphasizing the accents at the beginning of each measure to reflect the strong and weak patterns of the 2/4 beat. All of these can portray the charm and posture of this gypsy lady from the details.

This piece fully showcases Carmen's yearning for love, passionate and unrestrained nature, freedom, and unshackled personality through the perfect combination of music and lyrics.

Regarding Micaela, the secondary female character in this opera, she possesses a completely distinct personality from Carmen. In the original novel, Micaela only exists in Don Jose's memories. She is Jose's mother's adopted daughter and his fiancée. She takes care of his elderly mother while Jose is away in the military camp, which constitutes the entirety of her life [5]. Micaela embodies the traditional image of a submissive, disciplined, and obedient female character, who would never go against the wishes of her mother and Jose [6]. In the opera version, Micaela's image is portrayed in a very rich manner, and her every appearance plays a crucial role in advancing the plot. The composer also utilized this character to complete the soprano vocal range, in addition to the tenor, mezzo-soprano, and baritone.

### 2.3. Rural Girl

For Micaela, she forms a stark contrast to the gypsy girl Carmen. Carmen advocates freedom and is sexy and charming, while Micaela, on the opposite side of Carmen, has been living in the countryside since childhood and is inexperienced in the world. Carmen and her friends make a living by smuggling and are skilled at manipulating people's hearts, while Micaela is pure and innocent, and her love for Jose is more shy and difficult to express. Carmen symbolizes the image of ignoring

traditional European social rules, while Micaela, on the opposite side, symbolizes the constraints and traditions under social rules.

## 2.4. Je dis, que rien ne m'epouvante

When Micaela made her appearance in the first act, it was her first visit to the military camp to look for her fiance Jose. Faced with the soldiers' teasing, she felt shy and scared, wanting nothing more than to flee [7]. However, by the third act, Micaela had transformed into a brave and resilient mature woman. In order to win back Jose, who had fallen in love with someone else, she carried the instructions of her dying mother and ventured into the terrifying area frequented by smugglers in the middle of the night. In the opera version, Micaela's role spans a wide range, with a rich transformation of inner emotions. Before Micaela's arrival, Carmen and her smuggler friends are discussing smuggling operations, with their music being lively and upbeat, forming a contrast to the upcoming aria of Micaela. This aria is the only one in the entire opera for Micaela, and it enriches her character image through this song, showing her strong side hidden behind her gentle appearance that she has never revealed before.

This aria begins with a 4/4 rhythm and a tempo of moderato, featuring a brief recitative section that reveals the reason for her being there (here is the usual place for the smugglers to gather. I shall see him, he will be here)[4]. The first chord of the recitative is a dissonant flat major E, portraying Micaela's nervous and uneasy emotions. During performance, attention should be paid to the tone of the recitative, avoiding excessive singing style, reflecting her self-talk and uneasy state, while also finding and emphasizing the accents in the sentences [5] (Fig.3).

Nº 22. Air.

Moderato.

Micaela.

Piano. *p dolce.*

*Recit. Micaela.*

C'est des contreban - diers le re - fuge cr-di -  
Here is the usual place for the smugglers to

nai-re. Il est i - ci, je le ver - rai Et le de -  
gather. I shall see him, he will be here! The du - ty

**Fig. 3** The beginning of Micaela's aria[4]

The beginning of the aria section is characterized by its singing quality, distinct from the Habanera of Carmen, which is rich in syncopation, staccato, and rhythmic flair. Bizet's compositions for Micaela predominantly feature major keys, accompanied by continuous, lyrical, flowing melodies, conveying sincere emotions. Singers should pay attention to breath support during performance to maintain the coherence of their voice. This aria follows an "ABA" structure, with section A repeated twice, and is played at a piano dynamics, reflecting her tense mood at this moment. Both Micaela and Jose's mothers are devout Christians, so she is praying to God for courage and strength.

In Section B, Micaela's mood shifts from fear to anger (Whose wanton, treacherous art has achieved the shame of the man whom once I loved with all my heart) [4], the tempo in this section changes to Allegro molto moderato accompanied by crescendo markings, and finally to fortissimo. (I



to give up his military status for love [9]. Amidst such inner turmoil, he made the decision to hurry back to the barracks. At that moment, Carmen soberly realized, "You do not love me." To express his love for Carmen, Don Jose sang the renowned song "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée." This song not only served as a recollection of his affection for Carmen but also served as a declaration of his feelings towards her.

### 3.2. La fleur que tu m'avais jetee

This is the longest and most lyrical piece by Jose in the entire play. He took out the hibiscus flower that Carmen threw at him when they first met. Although it had withered, he still treasured it, which is also the origin of the name of this piece: "Song of the Flower" .

This aria is imbued with the romanticism of France, performed at an andantino tempo. The opening notes are high-pitched but marked with con amore, and the dynamics are piano. The lyrics go: "This flower that you threw to me, I kept it still while in the jail. This rare perfume was my delight, I saw your face at dead of night [4]." Although he was imprisoned due to Carmen and lost the opportunity for promotion, Jose did not harbor any grievances. Now, his only feeling towards Carmen is love (Fig.5).



Fig. 5 Don Jose express his love for carmen[4]

Singing this song, his thoughts were drawn back to the prison. He leaned on this flower to reminisce about Carmen and express his love for her. After this line, the intensity slightly increases, marked as "poco animato" and "cresc" in dynamics. He wonders why fate made us meet. Unlike the gentle reminiscences in the previous sentence, here Jose is confessing to Carmen: "Then I began to curse your name, and to detest you, and to detest you. Why must it be that, in my way, she should be set by destiny [4](Fig.6)."



Fig. 6 Emotional transformation for Jose[4]

However, the doubts about fate didn't last long. Jose, who was deeply in love, was ultimately undone by love. His emotions erupted completely: "I only knew a sole desire, a sole desire, one hope a lone, Carmen, to see you, see you. And I lived only yours to be. Carmen I love you!" [4] Jose's unreserved and unashamed expression of his feelings for Carmen, although it is a sustained high note, is marked with a pianissimo (pp) requiring a delicate touch, which greatly tests the singer's control over breath and technique (Fig.7).



Fig. 7 The expression of Jose's love for carmen[4]

After the gentle and affectionate aria ended, Carmen remained unmoved. She calmly said, "Non, tu me mames (no, not for me)." For Carmen, she had realized that Jose did not love her wholeheartedly. Carmen's view of love is to devote herself fully to it, which she has done, but Jose cannot. During the standoff between the two individuals, Zuniga appeared at the door. He was Jose's superior but had a close relationship with Carmen. He teased Carmen for choosing the wrong person, while Jose's possessiveness and control could not be restrained. Don Jose attacked the lieutenant, and he completely separated from military life to join Carmen's smuggling operation.

It's worth mentioning that Jose did not voluntarily join Carmen's smuggling gang. In the early stages, he had already made a choice between Carmen and the military camp. Although he loved Carmen, he would not give up his honorable military identity. The reason why Jose joined Carmen's smuggling organization here was only a helpless act of desperation. This is the main contradiction of his character. Like Micaela, he was originally a representative of orthodoxy, a figure within traditional rules, representing people disciplined by social rules. Carmen pulled Jose away again and again, while Micaela's appearance every time would pull Jose back into the rules [10]. At the same time, he possesses traditional thinking, hoping that Carmen would be obedient like Micaela and submit to his will. However, for the gypsy girl, freedom is more important than anything else. Love can be a wholehearted commitment, but one cannot give up independence and be shackled by love. The polarized views of the two individuals also led to a tragic ending. "He could not tolerate the freedom defined by Carmen and insisted on reimposing control, just replicating the behavior pattern he wanted to escape. Fear and despair made him retreat to the patriarchal safe zone with clear black and white, and he killed Carmen, but at the same time, he severely hurt himself [10]."

During his smuggling activities with Carmen, Jose experienced a significant ideological shock. His traditional upbringing made it difficult for him to accept his participation in a team that was breaking the law every day. However, his love for Carmen kept him there, causing him immense pain and conflict. Meanwhile, the emergence of bullfighter Escamillo pushed Jose's desire for control over Carmen to an extreme, leading to the ultimate tragedy.

### 3.3. Bullfighter

In the 19th century, Spanish bullfighters were highly respected social figures among the common people. In Spain and the entire Spanish-speaking world, they were regarded as brave and fearless men,

holding a status far above that of ordinary socialites. They possessed an elegant soul and were able to combine skill and strength, delicacy and robustness. They were symbols of bravery and strength, and also important inheritors of Spanish bullfighting culture.

Bullfighting, with a history spanning thousands of years, holds immense influence and is considered the national sport of Spain. Originating from ancient religious activities, it initially involved killing bulls for sacrifice, gradually evolving into a bullfighting performance. In the caves of Alta Mira in Spain, ancient murals depicting people wrestling with bulls were discovered, which further attests to the long history of bullfighting. Historical records indicate that Julius Caesar, who once ruled Spain, was fond of this sport. Initially, he participated while riding a horse, later transitioning to standing on the ground. Over the subsequent six centuries, bullfighting remained a revered sport among the nobility, symbolizing a distinguished status, which is also the reason why Escamillo, a character in the play, is so popular.

In the play, the appearance of the bullfighter Escamillo is truly magnificent. A parade celebrating his victory sings "vivat, le torero" from the square. Such a grand parade attracts Carmen's attention. Amidst the frenzied chorus of the crowd, Escamillo sings the famous French aria "Vivat! vivat le Torero!"

### 3.4. Vivat! vivat le Torero!

This aria is specially sung by Escamillo to express his gratitude and admiration towards his people and soldiers, and it also serves as a self-introduction for his character's first appearance in the play [11].

The entire song is imbued with a Spanish musical style, bearing the essence of a march. It follows a 4/4 time signature and is marked as *Allegro moderato*. The structure predominantly adopts a compound binary form, alternating between major and minor keys. The A section is set in f minor, with the opening marked as "bruscamente," signifying "suddenly," and "ben ritmato," indicating "precisely rhythmic." This section sets a fitting tone for the aria style and reminds the singer to pay attention to the intensity and rhythm, which can better convey the charm of the song and showcase the excitement and enthusiasm of the bullfighter as he enters the arena. (For the toast, your own will avail me, for all you men of war, like all toreros, as brother hail me) [4]. This part is marked as fortissimo, creating a very lively atmosphere throughout the A section and pushing the mood to a climax (Fig.8).

134

**Escamillo.**  
*bruscamente, ben ritmato.*

Vo-tre toast, je peux vous le ren - dre, Se-ñors, se - ñors car a-vec  
For a toast, your own will a -vail me, Se-ñors, se - ñors! For all you

les sol-dats — Oui, les To- ré- ros, peuvent s'en-tendre;  
men of war, — Like all To- ré- ros, as broth-er hail me!

**Fig. 8** The beginning of this aria[4]

Section B transitions to the same key, F major. Escamillo, seeing Carmen's loving gaze, falls in love, setting the stage for the subsequent plot (The bullfighter thinks of her, of a lady with dark eyes, and everyone can see that he loves her) [4]. The two pieces of music create a stark contrast (Fig.9).

(fatuously.)  
*p*  
 To - ré - a - dor, en gar - de! — To - ré - a - dor! —  
 To - re - a - dor, make read - y! — To - re - a - dor! —

To - ré - a - dor! — Et son-ge bien, oui, son-ge en combat - tant —  
 To - re - a - dor! — And think on her, on her, who all can see: —

12117

**Fig. 9** The part of section B[4]

The interlude features a chorus of praise for Esmicallo, emphasizing the admiration of the crowd. Following the chorus, the music returns to the *f* minor key, reprising the melody of section A. Here, Escamillo recalls the tense moments in the bullring, which are thrilling and heart-stirring. (With a mighty bound, the bull leaps out from the corral, charging with a rush! A horse lies down, and beneath it, a picador!) [4] (Fig.10).

*ff*  
 Le tau - reau s'é - lance En bon - dis - sant hors du To - rill! —  
 With a might - y bound the bull leaps out from the To - rill! —

*pp*  
*f*

*f*  
 Il s'é - lan - ce! il en - tre, il frap - pe! — un che - val  
 With a rush — he comes, he charg - es! — a horse is

*p*

12117

**Fig. 10** Reprising the melody of section A[4]

In the repeated second part B section, Escamillo still shifted the topic from the bullfight scene back to love, focusing on Carmen. While Carmen was attracted by the bullfighter, those black eyes also deeply attracted Escamillo, laying the groundwork for the emotional entanglements among the three characters later on.

Escamillo's music contrasts with donjose's music. Compared to the coherence, lyricism, and free-flowing melodies of jose's music, the bullfighter's song exhibits passion, decisiveness, and distinct rhythmic emphasis. Although Escamillo and Carmen do not have much musical connection, their music types are similar, such as the habanera. Both works exhibit a dance-like quality, but the habanera often swaying and uncertain due to its seductive nature, while the bullfighter's song contains more stable elements, showcasing Escamillo's bravery and decisiveness [6].

## 4. Conclusion

In the opera "Carmen", the four main characters - Carmen, Don Jose, Escamillo, and Micaela - exhibit their unique personalities and fates, constituting a complex and conflict-ridden plot setting.

As a symbol of a free and unrestrained woman, Carmen challenges traditional societal notions with her strong personality and pursuit of love. Her confidence and independence make her stand out among the numerous characters, yet this freedom ultimately leads to her tragic fate. In stark contrast to Carmen, Micaela represents the traditional image of a woman, embodying tenderness and sacrifice. Her resilience and loyalty stand in stark contrast to Carmen's indulgence, showcasing two distinct female values.

Don Jose, initially a compliant soldier, was constrained by morality and a sense of duty. However, driven by his love and desire for Carmen, he gradually degenerated, exhibiting inner contradictions and struggles. Moreover, his fundamentally different views on love from Carmen led to the tragic ending.

Escarment represents another possibility of freedom and achievement. His character is more realistic and goal-oriented, symbolizing true masculinity and confidence. His appearance not only attracts Carmen but also intensifies the inner struggle of Don Jose.

Finally, through an in-depth analysis of these four characters, it becomes evident that their interactions and conflicts not only propel the plot forward but also unveil the complexities of human nature regarding love, freedom, and sacrifice. Each character faces choices on the path to pursuing their own happiness, and these choices ultimately shape their destiny, profoundly reflecting the universality and complexity of human emotions.

## References

- [1] Wang Bing: Gypsy Girl in the opera Carmen-China Conservatory of Music, 2018.
- [2] Li, Y. Gypsy culture in the context of music. *Music Life*, 2024, (5):86-88.
- [3] Liu, J. Analysis of the singing of the "Habanera" in the opera Carmen. Henan University Music College, 2019, J616(A), 475000.
- [4] The score is from: Bizet, G., & Guiraud, E. (Ed.). (1895). *Carmen* (Schirmer edition). G. Schirmer.
- [5] Ma, Y. Analysis of Micaela's main arias in the opera Carmen: A focus on "Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante". *Music Work*, 2012,(4):166-167.
- [6] Wang, J. The issue of "gender temperament" in the opera Carmen. *Journal of Xinghai Conservatory of Music*, 2020,(4):122-137.
- [7] Xu, M., & Zou, W. An analysis of the musical portrayal of Micaela in the opera Carmen. *Shandong Social Science*, 2012,(S1):36-37.
- [8] Liu, X. The musical portrayal of Micaela in Carmen: A case study of "Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante". *Contemporary Music*, 2019,(8):148-149.
- [9] Liu, S. An analysis of the tragic causes in the opera Carmen. *Home Drama*, 2023,(2):17-19.
- [10] McClary, S. *Feminine endings: Musicology and feminist criticism* (Z.Xintao, Trans.). Taipei: Shang Zhou Press. 2003. (Original work published 1991, pp. 128-129).
- [11] An, Z., & Liang, Y. An analysis of the form structure and singing techniques in the aria "Toreador Song". *Art Education*, 2019,(11): 62-63.