



UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Pushkin and "Carmen"

Author(s): David A. Lowe

Source: *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer, 1996), pp. 72-76

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/746668>

Accessed: 16/09/2009 22:42

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucal>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *19th-Century Music*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Pushkin and *Carmen*

DAVID A. LOWE

Aleksandr Pushkin's narrative poem *The Gypsies* ([*Tsygany*] written 1824–25, published 1827) and Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen* (written 1844, published 1845) exhibit striking similarities. Both works tell the story of a fugitive male aristocrat who enters into a liaison with an independent-minded Gypsy woman and ultimately murders her because of what he perceives as her infidelity. Fate plays an important role in both narratives, as does a description of the Gypsy ethos. The parallels between these two classics of their respective national literatures have caused scholars to raise the question of influence, especially in view of Mérimée's demonstrated interest in Russian literature and his publication, in 1852, of his own prose translation of Pushkin's poem (*Les Bohémiens*). Some scholars write of Pushkin's influence on

Mérimée here as a given. In his history of Russian Romanticism, William Edward Brown states flatly: "[Mérimée's] *Carmen* owes not a little to Pushkin's *Gypsies*."¹ A monograph on Russo-French cultural ties by Elizaveta Mart'ianova informs readers that "the novella *Carmen* . . . also reflected the influence of Pushkin's work *The Gypsies*."² The noted Soviet Russian scholar Mikhail Alekseev writes: "There exists the opinion . . . recently confirmed by Mérimée's French biographer [Pierre Trahard], that one of Mérimée's most popular novellas, *Carmen*, was written under the noticeable influence of Pushkin's narrative poem *The Gypsies*."³

¹William Edward Brown, *A History of Russian Literature of the Romantic Period*, vol. III (Ann Arbor, 1986), p. 238.

²Elizaveta Mart'ianova, *Ob otrazhenii russko-frantsuzskikh kul'turnykh svyazei vo frantsuzskom iazyke i literature XIX veka* (Khar'kov, 1960), p. 52. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Russian and French are my own.

³Mikhail Alekseev, "Pushkin na zapade," *Vremennik pushkinskoikomissii* 3 (1937), 142.

This article's goals are to show that such categorical assertions rest in fact on extremely inconclusive data and sometimes on careless scholarship and that, rather, Georges Bizet's collaborators Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy must have drawn not just on Mérimée's novella but also on his translation of Pushkin's narrative poem in their adaptation of the novella *Carmen* for the lyric stage. In short, the case for Pushkin's *Gypsies* having a direct relationship to the libretto for Bizet's opera, specifically thanks to Mérimée's translation, far outweighs the case for Pushkin's narrative poem having had any impact on Mérimée's novella.

With regard to Pushkin's alleged influence on Mérimée's *Carmen*, the primary question boils down to when and how the French author could have become acquainted with *The Gypsies*. Here only one thing is absolutely certain: since Mérimée began his study of the Russian language no earlier than 1847 and published his translation of *The Gypsies* in 1852, his acquaintance with Pushkin's poem in the original Russian must postdate *Carmen*, which he wrote in 1844.⁴ All that the available documentation allows us to establish further is that, by the time Mérimée penned his tale of Gypsy life, he knew of the existence of a Russian poet named Pushkin, took a certain interest in him, had access to information about the poem *The Gypsies*, and could have read the work in French translation.

Mérimée began associating with Russians in Paris in the late 1820s, and by the early 1830s he was quite friendly with two significant men of letters, Aleksandr Ivanovich Turgenev and Sergei Aleksandrovich Sobolevskii, the latter an intimate of Pushkin and one of his publishers. Mongault conjectures that Sobolevskii urged the French writer to learn Russian and probably taught him a few words of the lan-

guage.⁵ Other scholars point to the likelihood that Turgenev and Sobolevskii would have told Mérimée quite a bit about the Russian poet.⁶ In any case, a letter from Mérimée to Sobolevskii written in 1835 testifies that by then the French writer at least knew the Russian poet's name and was aware that he had translated several of the ballads from *La Guzla* (1827), one of Mérimée's two (in)famous hoaxes.⁷ Not suspecting a mystification, Pushkin had included a number of Mérimée's fakes in his collection *Songs of the Western Slavs* (1833–35); in the 1835 letter, Mérimée asked Sobolevskii to convey his apologies to his friend the poet for having caused Pushkin embarrassment. Pushkin quoted the letter in a preface to a later edition of his collection, and in a note to the 1840 edition of *La Guzla* Mérimée mentions Pushkin as one of two poets taken in by his fabrication.⁸

Anatolii Vinogradov notes that Sobolevskii was the first publisher of *The Gypsies* and owned a copy of the poem with an autographed inscription by Pushkin.⁹ It is thus tempting to speculate that Sobolevskii may have shown the copy of *The Gypsies* to Mérimée and described the contents of the work. Alternatively, Mérimée could have learned of *The Gypsies* from another of his Russian acquaintances, Barbe de Lagrené (née Varvara Dubenskaya), on a trip to Athens in 1841, or from his distant cousin, Henri Mérimée, who traveled to Russia in 1839–40.¹⁰ Moreover, Mérimée could have learned something about *The Gypsies* from articles in the French press. Jacques Tolstol published a relevant piece in the *Revue encyclopédique* in 1825, and J.-M. Chopin published two articles containing references to *The Gyp-*

⁴Maurice Parturier ("Notice," in Prosper Mérimée, *Romans et nouvelles*, intro., chronology, bibliog., and notes Maurice Parturier [Paris, 1967], p. 341) states flatly that the French writer did not yet know Russian when he was working on *Carmen*. Henri Mongault ("Mérimée et la littérature russe," in Mérimée, "Études de littérature russe," *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Pierre Trahard and Edouard Champion, vol. I [Paris, 1927–33], p. xxiii) argues on the basis of Mérimée's correspondence that Mérimée could not have begun serious study of Russian before 1847 and that he probably began it in 1848.

⁵Mongault, "Mérimée et la littérature russe," p. x.

⁶See, for instance, Alekseev, "Pushkin na zapade," pp. 141–42; Pierre Trahard, *Mérimée de 1834 à 1853* (Paris, 1928), pp. 301ff.

⁷In his first essay in mystification, Mérimée presented his collection of plays, *Le Théâtre de Clara Gazul* (1825), as translations from Spanish. His second hoax was *La Guzla* (1827), a collection of ballads allegedly translated from the Illyrian.

⁸See Mongault, "Mérimée et la littérature russe," pp. xvii–xviii.

⁹Anatolii Vinogradov, *Merime v pis'makh k Sobolevskomu* (Moscow, 1928), p. 175.

¹⁰See, for instance, Auguste Dupouy, *Carmen de Mérimée* (Paris, 1930), p. 88; Alekseev, "Pushkin na zapade," p. 142.

sies in 1828 and 1843.¹¹ Auguste Dupouy provides a false lead here, writing that George Borrow's *Zincali* (1841), the recognized source of most of Mérimée's information about the Gypsies, contains a note about Pushkin's poem.¹² Although Borrow does devote a few pages to Russian Gypsies, he in fact says nothing about Pushkin.¹³ Finally, at least two French translations of *The Gypsies* had appeared by the mid-1840s, the first in the St. Petersburg French-language newspaper *Le Nord* in 1829,¹⁴ the second in the Paris newspaper *Le Temps* for 10 March 1833.¹⁵ It is not known, however, whether Mérimée actually read any of the articles or translations mentioned above.

In the final analysis, it is impossible to prove that, before writing *Carmen*, Mérimée knew much about Pushkin other than that the Russian poet had been a victim of one of Mérimée's own literary hoaxes. All claims for Pushkin's influence on Mérimée's *Carmen* ultimately rest on highly circumstantial evidence: broad similarities in plot, Mérimée's early acquaintance with knowledgeable Russian men of letters, and the fact that the French writer had available several sources of information about Pushkin's poem. The most accurate statement here belongs to Parturier, who cautiously asserts: "Pushkin's *The Gypsies* . . . may have had a certain influence on the composition of *Carmen*." Mart'ianova and Alekseev appeal to authorities that on closer inspection turn out to be misquoted. The former cites Vinogradov in support of Pushkin's direct influence; Vinogradov in fact makes no such claims. Alekseev cites Pierre Trahard as confirming the case for influence; Trahard qualifies his remarks with the all-important word "perhaps." Brown's statement completely lacks supporting documentation; it depends entirely on an appeal to Bizet: "*Carmen* owes not a little to

Pushkin's *Gypsies*, as even Bizet's operatic version clearly shows."¹⁶

In treating Mérimée's *Carmen* and the opera as the same work, Brown makes a logical error, but even so he stumbles onto something important. It is evident that Bizet's libretto indeed owes not a little to Pushkin's narrative poem, but that fact does not in the least depend on Mérimée's having drawn on Pushkin for his novella. Rather, it depends on Bizet's librettists having consulted Mérimée's translation of *The Gypsies* even as they based their adaptation, of course, on the French author's novella.

Vladimir Nabokov seems to have been first to remark Pushkin's presence in Meilhac and Halévy's libretto for *Carmen*. Pushkin's heroine, Zemfira, sings the following words:

Staryi muzh, groznyi muzh,
Rezh' menia, zhgi menia:
Ia tverda; ne boius'
Ni nozha, ni ognia.¹⁷

(Old husband, menacing husband,
Cut me, burn me:
I'm firm, I'm not afraid
Of either the knife or the fire.)

In Mérimée's translation, the second line reads: "Coupe-moi, brûle-moi."¹⁸ Nabokov asserts: "From there the line is transferred to Meilhac and Halévy's libretto, where Carmen sings it derisively in I, ix."¹⁹ Nabokov's use of the passive voice begs the question of the agency by which Pushkin's turned up in the libretto. Since *The Gypsies* is hardly Nabokov's primary interest in his commentary to *Eugene Onegin*, he does not address this question; nor does he cite a number of other textual correspondences that lack any parallel in Mérimée's novella and therefore suggest that Bizet's librettists were consciously borrowing from Pushkin.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 341, 52, 142, 218, 238.

¹⁷Aleksandr Pushkin, *Tsygany*, in *Zolotoi tom: sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1993), p. 92. Further quotations from this source will be indicated by page numbers within text.

¹⁸Aleksandr Pushkin, *Les Bohémiens*, trans. Prosper Mérimée, in Mérimée, *Œuvres complètes*, VII, 89. All further quotations from this source will be indicated by page numbers within the text.

¹⁹Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, trans. with comm. Vladimir Nabokov, vol. III (rev. edn. Princeton, N.J., 1975), p. 156.

¹¹See Mongault, "Mérimée et la littérature russe," p. xxxiv.

¹²Dupouy, *Carmen de Mérimée*, p. 88.

¹³George Borrow, *The Zincali* (London, 1841).

¹⁴Cited in Mongault, "Mérimée et la littérature russe," p. xxxiv.

¹⁵Cited in Parturier, "Notice," p. 341. I have examined the issue of *Le Temps* in question: the prose translation there is anonymous.

In reaction to Zemfira's song, Aleko, her lover, says: "Molchi. Mne pen'e nadoelo / Ia dikikh pesen ne liubliu" (Shut up. I'm fed up with your singing, / I don't like wild songs) (p. 92). To which Zemfira replies: "Ne liubish'? mne kakoe delo! / Ia pesniu dlia sebja poiui" (You don't like them? What do I care? / I'm singing my song for myself) (p. 92). In Mérimée's translation, Zemfira says: "Cela ne te plaît mas? que m'importe! je chante la chanson pour moi" (You don't like that? What do I care! I'm singing the song for myself) (p. 90); and Aleko threatens: "Tais-toi, Zemfira!" (Shut up, Zemfira!) (p. 90). In the Seguidilla and duet from act I of *Carmen*, José reminds Carmen that he has told her not to sing: "Tais-toi! Je t'avais dit de ne pas parler!" (Shut up! I told you not to speak!)²⁰ Carmen responds, repeating Zemfira—in Mérimée's translation—nearly word for word: "Je ne te parle pas, / je chante pour moi-même" (I'm not speaking to you, / I'm singing for myself). This exchange, so reminiscent of the one between Aleko and Zemfira, has no parallel in Mérimée's novella.

In the same first act Carmen sings her famous "Habanera," the opening lines of which read:

L'amour est un oiseau rebelle
que nul ne peut apprivoiser,
et c'est bien en vain qu'on l'appelle,
s'il lui convient de refuser. (no. 4)

(Love is a rebellious bird
That no one can tame,
And it's quite in vain to call it,
If it suits it to refuse.)

In Mérimée's novella none of the characters says anything even remotely similar, but in *The Gypsies* the Old Man counsels Aleko: "Vol'nee ptitsy mladost'; / Kto v silakh uderzhat' liubov'?" (Youth is freer than a bird; / Who can restrain love?) (p. 94). In Mérimée's translation: "La jeunesse n'est-elle pas plus volontaire que l'oiseau? Quelle force arrêta

l'amour?" (Isn't youth freer than a bird? What power can restrain love?) (p. 92). The overlapping imagery is highly suggestive, despite the difference in wording.

The final examples of borrowings from Pushkin occur in the opera's last scene. There Carmen tells José: "L'on m'avait même dit de craindre pour ma vie, mais je suis brave et n'ai pas voulu fuir" (I was even told to fear for my life, but I am brave and refused to run away) (no. 25). In her final confrontation, Mérimée's heroine says nothing of the sort. In *The Gypsies*, however, Zemfira reacts to Aleko's murdering her lover by exclaiming: "Net, polno, ne boius' tebia!— / Tvoi ugrozy preziraiu" (No, enough, I'm not afraid of you!—I despise your threats) (p. 93). Mérimée renders Zemfira's words as "Eh bien, je ne te crains pas! Je méprise tes menaces" (Well then, I'm not afraid of you! I despise your threats) (p. 96).

In Mérimée's novella, just before José murders Carmen, she expresses a sort of world-weariness, telling him that although she used to love Lucas the bullfighter, just as she used to love José himself, she now loves nothing.²¹ In the opera, Carmen expresses quite different sentiments. Pressed by José, she flaunts her love for Escamillo: "Je l'aime, et devant la mort même, je répéteraie que je l'aime" (I love him, and even in the face of death, I would repeat that I love him) (no. 25). Here Carmen's sentiments echo Zemfira's, whose last words are "Umru liubia" (I'll die loving) (p. 94), which Mérimée translates as "Je meurs en l'aimant" (I die loving him) (p. 96).²²

The existence of numerous passages from Pushkin's *Gypsies* that find a clear parallel in the libretto to *Carmen* but have no basis in Mérimée's novella argues that Bizet's librettists drew on both the novella and Pushkin's poem. In looking for confirmation of this double source for the libretto, one naturally turns to documents related to the composition of Bizet's opera. Unfortunately, however, one runs immediately

²⁰*Carmen: Opera in Four Acts*, music by Georges Bizet, words by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy (New York, 1959), no. 9. Further references to the libretto are from this source.

²¹Mérimée, *Carmen, Œuvres complètes*, II, 84.

²²Mongault ("Mérimée et la littérature russe," p. xxxv) points out that Mérimée never quite mastered Russian verbs, which probably accounts here for the present tense in place of the future in the original Russian.

into a blank wall, as Susan McClary explains:

Unfortunately, we find it necessary to assume or guess quite a bit concerning the genesis of *Carmen*, for few documents from the collaboration survive. This is true for two reasons. First, the artists were in close daily contact, and they seem to have transacted few of their deliberations in writing. . . . Second, the letters and diaries of Bizet and his family (including those of Ludovic Halévy, a cousin of Bizet's wife) for precisely this period were systematically censored after Bizet's death: that is, accounts of events were either blacked over or excised from the pages.²³

Thus, as with the question of whether Mérimée drew on *The Gypsies* for *Carmen*, one is ultimately in the realm of conjecture in maintaining that Meilhac and Halévy borrowed from Pushkin's poem for their adaptation of

²³Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 19.

Mérimée's novella. But in the case of Pushkin and Mérimée there is absolutely no textual evidence to suggest influence; while with Pushkin and Meilhac-Halévy the sheer number of textual parallels and the degree of their closeness argue strongly that, in their work on the libretto for Bizet, Meilhac and Halévy in one way or another stumbled onto the existence of an additional work in Mérimée's *œuvre* on a Gypsy theme, and that they decided to season their adaptation with passages from his translation of the Russian poem. That the works share such profound similarities in overall plot and in the character of the heroine could only support such a decision. It turns out, then, that Aleksandr Pushkin's influence on operatic history is even greater than we had known. Of course the Russian school of opera is unthinkable without Pushkin, but it looks very much as though even Bizet's *Carmen* sings several lines whose ultimate source is Pushkin too.

