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# The Scene Designs for the First Performances of Bizet's *Carmen*

EVAN BAKER

L'Opéra-comique a monté avec un grand luxe de costumes et de décors cet ouvrage d'un jeune maître.<sup>1</sup>

The last twenty years have seen an increasing interest in the documentation and re-creation of the visual elements of nineteenth-century operatic premieres.<sup>2</sup> Rich sources of such information are the surviving scenic and costume designs for the works first produced in Paris at the Académie Royale (later Impériale) de la Musique—otherwise known as l'Opéra—and

those of the Théâtre de l'Opéra-comique. Hundreds of these designs are located in the holdings of the Bibliothèque et Musée de l'Opéra at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (F-Po).<sup>3</sup>

The designs can be found in two forms: "originals" (that is, watercolors, oils, and so on) and lithographs or prints. The printed formats were utilized mostly by music publishers, such as Heugel and Choudens. When theaters rented the music, the publishers sent reproductions of the original designs along with a staging manual as part of the rental package. These were in-

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I wish to thank Holly Ware for her assistance in the preparation of this article. I am grateful to Philippe de Bros, formerly general director of the Lucerne City Theater, Switzerland, for providing the opportunity to study this subject.

<sup>1</sup>*Illustration*, 13 March 1875 (Paris), p. 173.

<sup>2</sup>H. Robert Cohen, "On the Reconstruction of the Visual Elements of French Grand Opera: Unexplored Sources in Parisian Collections" in *Report of the Twelfth Congress, Berkeley 1977* (Kassel, 1981), pp. 463–81.

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<sup>3</sup>The Bibliothèque Nationale has recently published the first volume of an illustrated catalog for the holdings of scene designs in the Bibliothèque et Musée de l'Opéra: Nicole Wild, *Décors et costumes de XIXe siècle. Tome I. Opéra de Paris* (Paris, 1987). The second volume, now in preparation, will be a catalog of the designs for other Parisian theaters, including the Opéra-comique.

tended as guides toward the eventual physical production, particularly for the theaters in the provinces and outside France.

Although many of the *original* designs of nineteenth-century opera survive in major public Parisian archives such as the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, the lithographic reproductions of the set designs are rare and may be found, for the most part, only in the archives of certain music publishers, notably in those of the Choudens firm. Reproductions of costumes are not as rare: over 2,600 prints of costume designs for various productions in Parisian theaters were published by Martinet during the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Set designs, however, were almost never offered for sale: in many contemporary piano-vocal scores the designs were advertised as being available only for rent either from the publishers or from the theaters in which the work had received its first performances.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of *Carmen*, first performed at the Opéra-comique on 3 March 1875, questions have arisen about the location (and even the existence) of the set designs for the premiere. At present, it is uncertain who was responsible for them: the printed librettos offered for sale at Opéra-comique performances often did not list the names of the scenic designers. Moreover, reviews published in the newspapers and weeklies often mention the production only in passing and seldom provide detailed descriptions of either the settings or the costumes. In this instance only the names of the costume designers are known: Clairin, who designed the costumes for *Carmen*, and Detaille, who designed the costume for the dragoons.<sup>6</sup>

In 1968, as part of his historical overview of scene design for opera, Hellmut Christian Wolff published two illustrations of designs by Emile

Bertin purporting to be "reconstructions" of the original designs for acts I and IV of *Carmen* (plates 1 and 2).<sup>7</sup> Although the drawings were labeled *Décors de la création 1875, reconstitué par Emile Bertin*, this claim seems doubtful. In the first place, it has not been possible to date these designs with certainty. Moreover, Bertin cannot have seen the original production: he was not born until 1878. Wolff acknowledges all of this, but still claims that "[Bertin's] drawings have historical worth, for without a doubt [he] referred to the [contemporary] illustrations and reports in order to make these drawings."<sup>8</sup> Wolff's certainty, however, lacks the support of clear evidence. Yet on such authority these illustrations have been reproduced in encyclopedias, books, exhibition catalogs, and program books with the claim that they are the "original designs from the first production" or, as Bertin himself wrote, "reconstructions."<sup>9</sup> But, again, based on the evidence alone, they are neither.

During the preparations for an exhibition centering on the first production of *Carmen*, I was able to examine a set of hand-colored, lithographed stage designs for the opera in the Choudens archives in Paris. Each design measures 25.8 cm × 18.8 cm, and all of the lithographs are mounted on larger sheets and bound together as an album with an ornate title page (plates 3–6). The signature of A[uguste] Lamy can be seen in the lower left corners of the third- and fourth-act designs; it is not clear, however, that Lamy was the actual scene designer. Two of the designs were previously published in 1912 without attribution in the French periodical, *Musica*.<sup>10</sup> After comparing these lithographs with other extant materials, I began to

<sup>4</sup>*Petite Galerie dramatique ou recueil de différent costumes d'acteurs des théâtres de la capitale* and *Galerie dramatique, costumes des théâtres de Paris*. A complete set is in **F-Po**, and an almost complete set in **US-NYp**. Cf. Cohen, "On the Reconstruction," pp. 478–79.

<sup>5</sup>An example occurs in the first edition vocal score issued by Heugel for Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* (Paris, 1864). At the bottom of the table of contents one reads: "S'adresser pour les parties d'Orchestre aux Editeurs. Pour la mise en Scène à la Régie du Théâtre des Variétés."

<sup>6</sup>Mina Curtiss, *Bizet and His World* (London, 1959), p. 379. Several prints for *Carmen* and Don José are in **F-Po**, cataloged as *Cost. Est.*

<sup>7</sup>Hellmut Christian Wolff, *Oper: Szene und Darstellung von 1600 bis 1900* (Leipzig, 1968), pp. 186–87. Bertin's designs are preserved in **F-Po**, cataloged as *Esq. O.C. 1875*. Emile Bertin (1878–1957) was active in both the theater and opera; he was one of the better-known French scene designers after 1900.

<sup>8</sup>Wolff, *Oper*, p. 186.

<sup>9</sup>*L'Opera—repertorio della lirica dal 1597* (Milan, 1977), p. 267. An American edition of this work was published in 1985 by Simon and Schuster and further published in: *Carmen: Text-Materialien-Kommentare*, ed. Egon Voss (Hamburg, 1984), title page; *Mostra: Bizet* (Milan, Museo Teatrale alla Scala, 1975); program books for the Bavarian State Opera (Munich, 1984) and the Teatro alla Scala (Milan, 1985).

<sup>10</sup>*Musica* 117 (June 1912), p. 109. This issue was dedicated to Bizet.



Plate 1: Emile Bertin, act I.

suspect that they might well be the original designs for the 1875 production.<sup>11</sup> If this is the case, as I now believe it is, these Choudens scene designs would take on a special importance, for there are no other iconographical and documentary materials that have any direct relationship with the *Carmen* premiere in 1875. No other production records appear to survive: most likely, they were destroyed in the catastrophic fire of 1887 at the Opéra-comique. Evidence to support the premise that the Choudens designs are indeed the originals will be drawn from the following:

<sup>11</sup>I am indebted to the generous kindness of M. Chevrier de Choudens, director of Maison Choudens, for access to the archives and permission to photograph the lithographs.

1. The scenic descriptions in the printed libretto by Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac (hereafter cited as *L*).<sup>12</sup>

2. The *Livret de mise-en-scène* (staging manual) deriving from the first performances published by Choudens (hereafter cited as *M*).<sup>13</sup>

3. A full-page reproduction of scenes from the opera published with a review of the same in the Parisian weekly *l'illustration* on 13 March 1875.

4. The poster (*affiche*) from the first performances of *Carmen*.

<sup>12</sup>All references to the libretto are cited from Calmann-Lévy's edition, *Théâtre de Meilhac et Halévy . . . Carmen. Opéra-comique en quatre actes* (Paris, 1901), VII, 389–474. While I have used this edition for ease of access, the scenic descriptions are identical to those of the 1875 edition of the libretto.

<sup>13</sup>All references to the staging manual are cited from *Carmen: Opéra-comique en 4 actes par Georges Bizet. Mise en*



Plate 2: Emile Bertin, act IV.

In advancing the claim of these designs' authenticity, we may find it helpful to recall the practical context of the creation of *Carmen*: the scenic style during the period in question, the technical facilities of the Théâtre de l'Opéra-comique, and its repertory at the time of the premiere of Bizet's opera. The Théâtre de l'Opéra-comique moved into its present quarters in 1840. Its stage was 17.5 meters deep and 15.5 meters wide, with a proscenium opening 11.5

meters wide and 12 meters high.<sup>14</sup> (In comparison, the stage area at the Opéra-comique is slightly more than one quarter that of the old Opéra at the rue Le Peletier.) A series of *costières* (slits in the stage floor) and *trappillons* (traps) provided flexibility for the changes of scenery with *mât chantignole en chariot* (removable flats on wagons) in the *costières*. The rear part of the stage was probably utilized as a storage space for drops and flats from other productions in the repertory. These technical facilities notwithstanding, it is important to note that the stage of the Opéra-comique was

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*scène* (Paris, n.d.). Copies of the *livret de mise-en-scène* may be found in F-Po (cataloged as B.400 (4), lacking the title page) and in the library of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Rome (I-Rsc). A page of the latter copy was reproduced in the program book of *Carmen* for the Teatro alla Scala, 1985. M. Choudens kindly supplied me a photocopy of the *livret de mise-en-scène*.

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<sup>14</sup>Clement Contant, *Parallèle des principaux théâtres modernes de l'Europe et des machines théâtrales française, allemande et anglaise* (Paris, 1860), plates 1–6.



Plate 3: Choudens, act I.

Plates 3–6 reproduced by permission of Les Editions Choudens.

38, rue Jean Mermoz — 75008 Paris.

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cramped and provided little wing space. This would have been a practical restraint in the design for any production at the Opéra-comique.

Set design of the period was highly naturalistic and required quite a bit of scenery to represent a given scene realistically. The sets utilized drops, borders, and wings. *Praticables* were scenic pieces that were used by performers; these included platforms and steps which served as balconies, stairs, and bridges. The Opéra-comique functioned as a repertory company; performances were given every night, and rehearsals were staged almost every afternoon. In the period from 3 October 1874 to the premiere

of *Carmen* on 3 March 1875, there were over twenty-one productions in repertory at the Opéra-comique. In effect, this meant that only the mornings were free for the changeovers from one production to the next, as well as for setting up whatever scenery was required for the rehearsals on the stage. Staging rehearsals also took place in the foyer of the Opéra-comique; rehearsal scenery would be needed in that space as well. Moreover, the stage scenery would have to have been compact and light, both in order to facilitate rapid changes of scenery between acts and scenes and also to save on storage space during the performance itself.



Plate 4: Choudens, act II.

According to the preserved rehearsal schedules (*livret de bord*), the preparations for the new opera began on 2 October 1874 and continued intermittently until 1 December, when the actual blocking rehearsals for the soloists began.<sup>15</sup> The chorus was added to the staging rehearsals after 7 January 1875. The *livret de bord* first mentions the sets on 14 February for a stag-

ing rehearsal of the second act with the sets (*dé-cors*), properties (*accessoires*), and rehearsal lighting (*demi-luminaire*). From this point until the premiere two weeks later, the scenery appears to have been utilized for all of the staging rehearsals. Complete lighting rehearsals (*luminaire complet*) took place on 1 and 2 March and during the afternoon of the premiere on 3 March.<sup>16</sup>

Each of the Choudens archive designs (plates 3–6) closely follows the descriptions printed in the first libretto. Each illustrates a specific episode during the act and the staging is corrob-

<sup>15</sup>The rehearsal schedules of the Opéra-comique are preserved in F-Po. Through the kind courtesy of Herr Wolfgang Timaeus of Bärenreiter Verlag, Kassel, who loaned me a microfilm of the *livret de bord*, I was able to examine the complete schedule of rehearsals during the preparations of *Carmen*. The schedule for 3 March 1875 was reproduced by Fritz Oeser for his edition of *Carmen* (Kassel, 1964), p. 714 of the *kritische Bericht*.

<sup>16</sup>The final dress rehearsal (*Tout le monde en costume*) took place on 1 March. During the morning of 3 March, the scenic painters made the necessary corrections to the sets.



Plate 5: Choudens, act III.

rated by the *livret de mise-en-scène* from the original production.

#### ACT I

The libretto:

A square in Seville. On the right, the door of a tobacco factory. At the back, facing the audience, a working bridge whose entire length crosses the stage. From the stage, one reaches this bridge by a winding staircase that turns to the right above the door of the tobacco factory. The bridge's underpass is functional. At the left at ground level, the guardhouse. In front of the guardhouse, a small covered gallery. Raised up two or three steps near the guardhouse, in a rack, the dragoons' lances with their red and yellow streamers (*L*, p. 391).

The staging manual:

Carmen goes straight to José, who pays no atten-

tion to her. Everybody's gaze follows Carmen. She stops for an instant in front of José, hesitates, then goes to the side of the factory, stops, and returns resolutely to José, speaks to him, then after his answer throws her flower between his eyes, and leaves quickly, laughing, toward the door of the factory, where she enters without returning (*M*, p. 6).

The act I design (plate 3) suggests a lack of spatial depth, due to the shallowness of the stage at the Opéra-comique, as well as to the lack of wing space. A backdrop provides a picturesque view of Seville with the bell tower and series of edifices placed in perspective up to the building directly behind the bridge. The bridge, which would have been a flat mounted on a *chariot* through a *costière*, is functional, but according to the staging manual it was used only during Carmen's escape at the end of the act. This means that it was probably a modest construction, built to



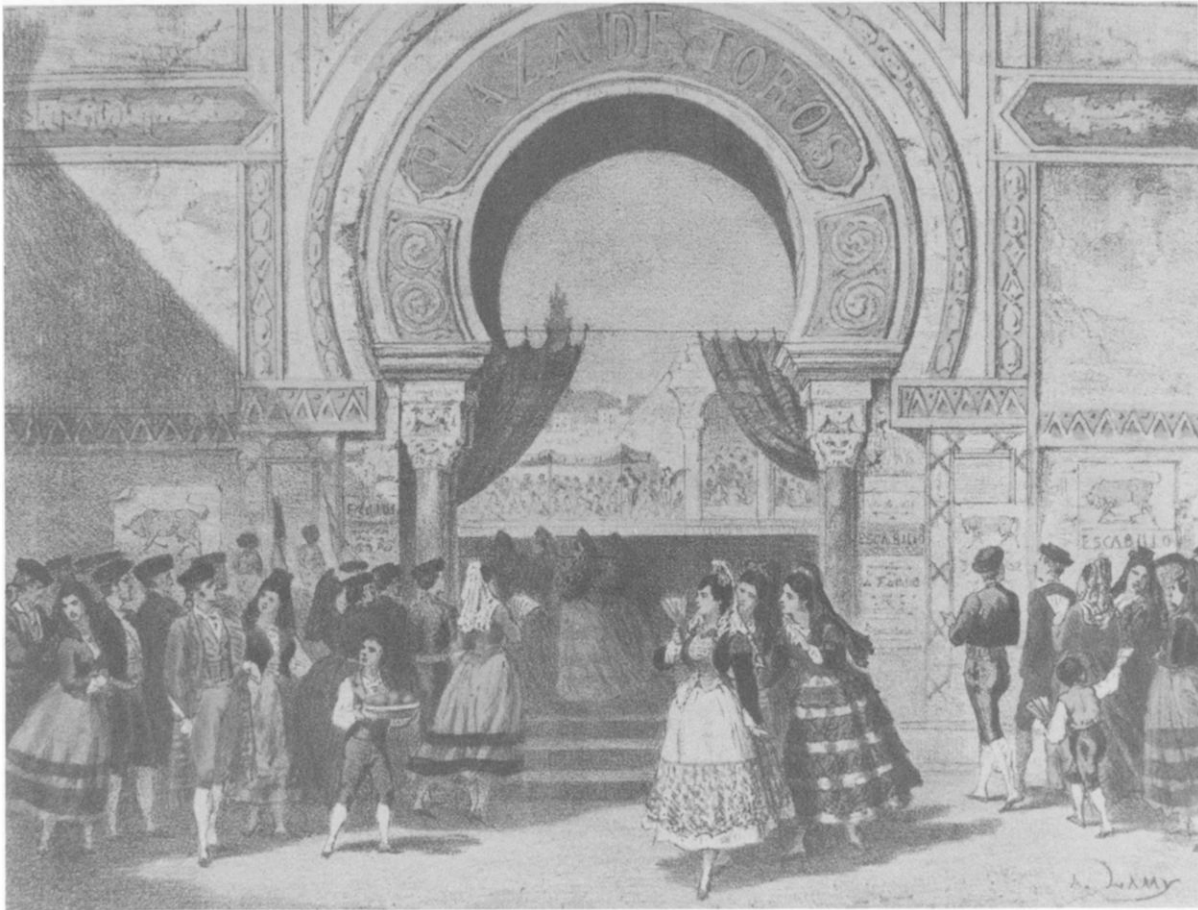


Plate 6: Choudens, act IV.

be easily stored at the end of the act. The tobacco factory was probably a book flat, large enough to extend to the first series of steps leading to the bridge. The guard house on the left was also built on a platform with steps, painted archways, and a roof attached to another flat. The banner at the top took the form of a border (*soffitte*), which masked the row of gaslights.

#### ACT II

##### The libretto:

The tavern of Lillas Pastia. Tables to the right and left (*L*, p. 419).

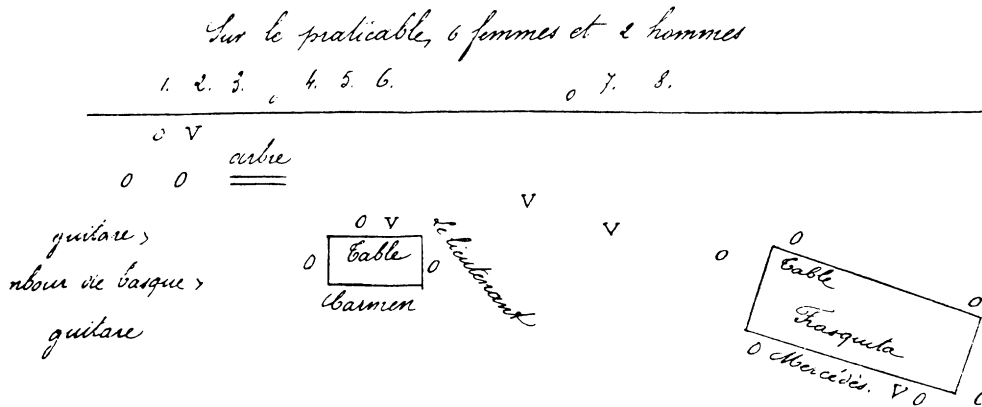
The staging manual is also specific to the design, albeit indirectly (see fig. 1).

At the extreme left, two guitarists seated on the ground and one Basque drummer seated on a little bench. Between the tree and the draperies, three women seated on stools, one standing of-

ficer. One woman seated at the left of the table, one behind. Carmen is in front of the table, the lieutenant to her left. One officer stands behind the table. At the back of the stage are two officers. Around the large table, four or five women. Mercedes, seated in front to the left, Frasquita dances on the table. One officer in front of the table. Two dancers in the middle of the scene, dancing during the ritornello (*M*, p. 12).

Again, one is struck by the lack of depth of the stage in the design (plate 4). And again, this must be due to the manner in which such a scene could be realized at the Opéra-comique. The balcony is practical, with flats attached above (painted as trellises) and below (to depict balustrades). There is a drop behind the balcony, with cutouts for the windows. A second drop, probably from the theater stock, provided the sky background. The lantern was attached

# Acte 2<sup>ème</sup>



à l'extrême gauche, assis par terre, deux joueurs de guitare, un joueur de tambourin à basque, assis sur un petit banc. Entre l'arbre et la draperie, trois femmes assises sur des escabeaux, un officier debout, une femme assise à la gauche de la table, une autre assise derrière. Carmen devant la table, le lieutenant à sa gauche. Un officier debout derrière la table, au fond au milieu deux officiers.

Autour de la grande table, quatre ou cinq femmes. Abacécès, assise devant à la gauche, Frasquita dansant sur la table. Un officier devant la table. Deux danseuses au milieu du théâtre, dansant pendant la ritournelle.

Tableau très-animé; on boit, on fume; les officiers vont et viennent offrent à boire aux femmes et boivent eux mêmes.

Carmen commence ses couplets devant la petite table.

Figure 1: Position of performers at opening of act II according to livret de mise-en-scène, p. 12.

to a line from the flies. It is likely that a border, painted as a trellis similar to the flats above the balcony, was utilized for masking lighting instruments. The lack of depth in the design and the sets is confirmed by a contemporary newspaper report: "In the second act, the Opéra-comique produced its whole corps de ballet, which is composed of two pretty

dancers. . . [The] ballerinas have, however, solved the rather difficult problem of dancing in a space no larger than a pocket handkerchief."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Curtiss, *Bizet and His World*, p. 390, from a clipping in the Bizet scrapbooks preserved in the Département de manuscrits, F-Pn, n.a.f. 14352.

Entre aussitôt après, Escamillo ( toujours du jardin ) ayant au bras à sa gauche, Carmen. Ils descendent au milieu du théâtre. Le lieutenant, Frasquita et Mercedes entrent derrière eux et viennent à l'avant. scène jardin.

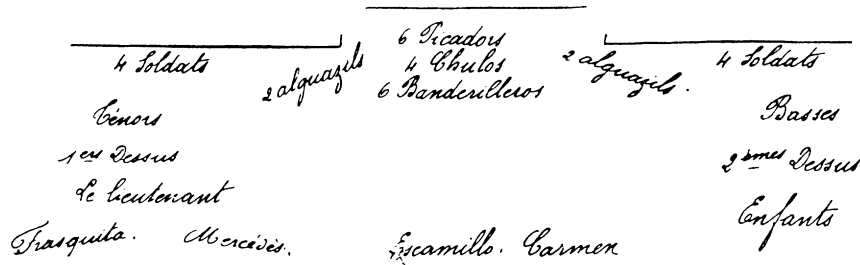


Figure 2: Plan for beginning of act IV according to *livret de mise-en-scène*, p. 24.

### ACT III

#### The libretto:

The curtain rises on some rocks . . . a scene picturesque and wild . . . total solitude and in the black of night (*L*, p. 447).

#### The staging manual:

Frasquita and Mercedes move downstage to the forestage toward the opening in the crowd a little to the right. They pull over three packs to sit on and to lay their cards on. Two Gypsies move alongside them. . . . Carmen, who has been watching the game of the other Gypsies a bit over her shoulder, comes to the left of the forestage, draws up a pack that is near the group of men and moves to the card layout (*M*, p. 19).

For this scene (plate 5), one backdrop was utilized to present the vista and the mountain peaks. A series of flats (*praticable en pente*) depicted the rock formations both right and left, with another series of flats further downstage.

### ACT IV

#### The libretto:

A plaza in Seville. At the back of the theater the walls of an old arena. The entrance to the ring is closed by a long awning. It is the day of a bullfight. Much movement in the plaza (*L*, p. 466).

The lithograph (plate 6) depicts the entrance of Escamillo from the left to the arena; Carmen is with Frasquita and Mercedes at right center. The staging manual gives an approximate illustration of a ground plan (fig. 2) for this act, which confirms the authen-

ticity of the design (*M*, p. 24). This scene would have been the simplest to construct: a large cutout drop for the entrance to the arena, and a large painted flat (or a small drop) upstage of the drop illustrating the crowd within.<sup>18</sup>

The third piece of evidence is a full-page reproduction of scenes from the *Carmen* premiere, which appeared in the popular Parisian weekly *l'Illustration* on 13 March 1875 (plate 7), along with a review of the first performance. The artist, Auguste Lamy, is the same as that of the Choudens prints.<sup>19</sup> The center of the illustration provides a complete reproduction of the second act in the tavern of Lilas Pastia; it is virtually identical with the scene found in plate 4. The upper portion of the illustration represents specific moments during the course of act I; the lower portion represents three vignettes from act II and a fourth that depicts Don José fatally

<sup>18</sup>The times required for the changes of scenery between each act were carefully noted in the *livret de bord* during the final rehearsals and the premiere:

Act	25 February	27 February	1 March	3 March
I → II	37'	39'	33'	34'
II → III	29'	28'	42'	31'
III → IV	26'	30'	33'	26'

<sup>19</sup>[Pierre-] Auguste Lamy (1827–after 1880) created thirty reproductions of theater stagings for *l'Illustration* between 1866 and 1875, beginning with *Fior d'Alza*, through the last, *Carmen*. He also created over twenty other posters for the theater and opera.



Plate 7: Vignettes from *l'Illustration* by Auguste Lamy.



# CARMEN

Opéra-Comique en quatre actes

H. MEILHAC et L. HALÉVY.

MUSIQUE de GEORGES BIZET

Plate 8: Poster by Leray for the first performance.

stabbing Carmen. A comparison of plate 3 with plate 7 clearly shows that the vignette depicting Carmen and Don José at the upper left corner of the page closely parallels that of the lithograph.

In the lower left corner, Carmen is depicted reading the tarot cards; this is also represented in the original design. How faithful were these vignettes to the original designs? In his pioneer-

ing work, *Gravures musicales dans l'Illustration*, H. Robert Cohen comments:

One must keep in mind that *l'Illustration* was a newsmagazine—in terms of present-day comparisons perhaps a cross between *L'Express* or . . . *Life* magazine. And the primary function of *l'Illustration*, like its present-day counterparts, was to chronicle the news, both visually and textually.<sup>20</sup>

The final piece of evidence is provided by the poster (*affiche*) for the first performances of the opera (plate 8). This depicts the final scene of the opera—the moment that Don José holds the lifeless body of Carmen in front of the entrance to the arena with Escamillo and his admirers. The design of the entrance to the arena corresponds almost exactly with the Choudens lithograph. Copies of the poster are located in **F-Po** and the Choudens archives,<sup>21</sup> and it has been published many times.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>H. Robert Cohen, *Les Gravures musicales dans l'Illustration 1843–1899* (Quebec, 1982), I, lxiii.

<sup>21</sup>**F-Po**, cataloged as *Af. Tit. II*. The poster was designed by Prudent Leray. Cf. Nicole Wild, *Les Arts de spectacle en France: affiches illustrées (1850–1950)* (Paris, 1976), p. 164.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Winton Dean, "Bizet, Georges," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1980), vol. 2, p. 759; and Mina Curtiss, "Bizet," *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Kassel, 1959), vol. 1, table lxvii, no. 2. Both the *MGG* and Wolff erroneously identify the poster as the title page in the piano-vocal score of the opera.

Although biographers and other commentators have assumed that the first production of *Carmen* was of poor quality, there is no evidence to prove this. The severe pressures and constraints of time, limited stage space, adequate rehearsals and money were, and still are, important factors in creating a new opera. Nonetheless, the Choudens lithographs and the available documents supporting them give a far more accurate picture of the scenic designs and methods of production for the first performances of *Carmen*.

