**Carmen as Perennial Fusion: From Habanera to Hip-Hop**

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Bizet's opera *Carmen* depended on a fusion between high art and what he termed music of ‘ill repute’. As Carmen ascended the cultural ladder, it lost the taint of its hybrid origins: today's listeners hear the passages that first scandalized Parisian audiences simply as classical music. Thus, productions that fuse Carmen with the latest music of ill repute can claim greater fidelity to Bizet's vision than more worshipful renditions. This chapter examines films that rework the opera's tunes by means of still-scandalous forms of popular music, arguing that the ambivalence between high and low artistic styles which lies at the heart of the opera replays itself in Preminger’s *Carmen Jones*, Godard’s *Prénom Carmen* and one of the most recent versions, the MTV *Carmen: a Hip-hopera* (starring Beyoncé Knowles of the group Destiny’s Child).

Bizet, Georges: *Carmen*, reworkings of *Carmen: A Hip-hopera*  
Godard, Jean-Luc: *Prénom Carmen*  
Hammerstein, Oscar: *Carmen Jones*  
Hip-hop  
Preminger, Otto: *Carmen Jones*

‘I am German by conviction, heart and soul, but I sometimes get lost in artistic houses of ill repute’. With these words, Georges Bizet, the composer of the opera *Carmen*, confessed to his incurable addiction to slumming—an addiction that drew him on a regular basis to the red-light districts of Paris, to the night spots where he first encountered the music of Gypsies, to the cabarets where he first heard Sébastián Yradier’s Afro-Cuban song ‘El Arreglito’, which became Bizet’s most famous tune, the ‘Habanera’. Before Bizet latched onto Mérimée’s novella as a potential subject for an opera, he had managed to compartmentalize his two sides: he wrote symphonies and respectable music-dramas by day, indulged in his taste for brothels by night. The scandal—and also the genius—of *Carmen* lies in Bizet’s decision to bring those mutually exclusive worlds, his Jekyll-and-Hyde polarities, together on the stage of the Opéra-Comique. Opera hasn’t been the same since.

The last decade has witnessed a flood of films that translate into the terms of teenage, high-school culture stories from Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Whether, like *O* (Tim Blake Nelson, 2001), they attempt to retain the seriousness of their prototype or, like *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), they revel in the secularization of the update, such
movies always pride themselves on the slight naughtiness of their endeavours. So do the productions by Peter Sellars, who has set Mozart operas variously in the Trump Towers or the mean streets of Harlem or greasy-spoon diners.

We might be inclined to position the myriad film versions of Carmen among these, except that Carmen started off as a fusion between high and low forms of entertainment: a vade mecum extended by Bizet to accompany him (at least vicariously) into the seedy dives otherwise avoided by the middle-class patrons of operas. Consequently, the modern productions that strive worshipfully to replicate Bizet’s original, that fetishize the entire score as transcendent art, betray his original impulse much more profoundly than those that merrily inject into it whatever counts at the moment as sleazy. It actually proves difficult to compete with Bizet at this game. At best, productions can aspire to approach—though they never can match—his sublime degree of naughtiness. Indeed, most of them pull their punches instead of pushing through to their ultimate conclusions the transgressions, pleasures, and dilemmas posed so provocatively by Bizet already in 1875.

He paid the price, of course. To his first audiences and critics, Bizet had simply defiled the operatic stage. He died three months after the premiere at age 37, still in a state of disgrace with only his closest friends standing by him. Even his erstwhile mentor, Charles Gounod, viewed him with utter contempt after the scandal of Carmen. If the accolades of major representatives of German high culture such as Brahms and Nietzsche vindicated Bizet shortly after his death, it was in part because they tended to see French culture tout court as pure titillation: ‘Oh, those Parisians! What will they think of next?!’.

What crime precisely did Bizet commit? Before he wrote Carmen, Bizet’s double life—his split roles of respectable bourgeois composer and aficionado of disreputable night spots—was only a problem for his wife (later to serve as a model for Proust’s Duchesse de Guermantes). And a formidable problem it apparently was, for Geneviève Bizet and the Halévy family destroyed many of the letters and diary entries dating from the time Bizet was composing the opera. But as soon as Bizet proposed his project, it also became a problem for the management of the Opéra-Comique, which did everything it could to dissuade Bizet from his plans.

From the vantage point of the Opéra-Comique’s staff, the difficulty lay primarily in Bizet’s decision to write an opera based on Mérimée’s still-infamous novella, complete with the on-stage stabbing