

THE “FATALITY” MOTIF – A DEFINING ELEMENT IN THE MUSICAL DRAMATURGY OF THE OPERA *CARMEN* BY GEORGES BIZET

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SUMMARY. The subject of this study deals with the presence of the “fatality” motif in the musical dramaturgy of Bizet’s opera *Carmen*. A musical portrait of the main character, it defines from the very beginning her tragic destiny. The present analytical approach identifies all the insertions of this musical motif along the development of the dramatic plot, in an intrinsic relationship with the text.

Keywords: Bizet, *Carmen*, opera, fatality, musical dramaturgy

The opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet is one of the most famous titles in the universal lyrical repertoire.

Composed in 1874, this four-act opera has as librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, the source of inspiration being the eponymous short story by Prosper Mérimée. The original score was conceived with spoken dialogues inserted between the musical numbers/scenes; the recitatives being later composed by Ernest Guiraud.

It premiered on March 3, 1875, at the *Opéra Comique* in Paris and the performance was a failure, the work being criticized primarily for the subject itself, with characters from the “proletarian” world (gypsies, smugglers, workers in a tobacco factory, the bullfighter), but especially for the audacity to treat the feelings of the main characters with the most intense seriousness. The tragic end - the killing of the heroine on stage was also inconceivable. The bourgeois audience was shocked by this “attack” against morality, common sense, and the conventions regarding the classical repertoire of the *Opéra Comique*. The reviews - most of them, were hostile.

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Bizet died three months later, at the age of 37, of a heart attack, without being able to enjoy the huge subsequent celebrity of his masterpiece. He was, though, admired by great personalities of the time such as Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Nietzsche, and Richard Strauss for his masterpiece. We quote Nietzsche:

„I listened yesterday - will you believe me? - for the twelfth time Bizet's masterpiece. How perfect this work manages to make us! [...] Here we are, in all respects, in a different climate. Another sensuality, another serenity is expressed here. It's cheerful music. But not French or German merriment. Its joy is African. Fate is constantly hovering, happiness is short, sudden, without restraint. I envy Bizet for daring to assume such sensitivity which has never found its equivalent in the language of civilized Europe.”²

The literary model of the character Carmen presents her as a beautiful *gitana* (gypsy), seductive and depraved, harsh, ironic, unscrupulous, a liar and a thief, accomplice in illegal business and even murder if the situation requires it, a charming female demon, a real “witch”.

In Bizet's version, Carmen is a mixture of hedonism and fatalism, a sensual, fascinating, direct being, with an obvious sentimental availability, but within the limits of her own will, with total freedom of decision, regardless of the consequences. Freedom is the supreme value of her existence. Hence, the tragic fate of the heroine who, beyond any reasoning, moral duty, pleas, or social conveniences, will consider only her own will³.

Carmen's role involves not so much special vocal qualities or a *mezzo* vocal timbre (in fact, the role was first performed by soprano Celestine Galli Marié), but a great ability and expressiveness, ease, vocal-interpretive and choreographic intelligence.

In the musical dramaturgy of this work there is a distinct musical motif, associated with the character of Carmen, placing her, from the very beginning, under the sign of tragic destiny. Its presence specifies, whether subtly or explicitly, the subsequent evolution of the Carmen-Don José relationship towards the inevitable outcome - the death of the heroine. It is present in the overture (Prelude) and in the key points of the action, but also in the subsidiary, in a subtle, allusive plan, in metamorphosed forms from a tonal, rhythmic, or metric point of view, as well as register, dynamic, orchestration, tempo and ethos.

² Friederich Nietzsche, *Cazul Wagner (The Case of Wagner)*, pg. 36.

³ *Et surtout la chose enivrante, la liberté!* (And most of all the intoxicating thing, freedom!) (Act III); *„Libre elle est née et libre elle moura!”* (Free was she born and in freedom she will die!) (act IV).

We called this musical motif “the motif of fatality.”

The subject of the present study is a brief analysis of the “motif of fatality”, inserted by Bizet with the intuition of a genius during the dramatic plot.

PRÉLUDE. *Andante moderato*, *D minor*, *3/4*, *fortissimo*, unison of the cello, trumpet, bassoon, and clarinet.

The motif of “fatality” has a deeply contrasting character to the exuberant music that precedes it in the first two sections of the Prelude. It resonates, as Susan McClary says, with the conventional musical semiotics of evil.⁴ It is built on the pivot of an enlarged second, supported harmonically by the *D minor* chord on the *tremolo* of the strings. Strikes on the timpani (+ harp, horn, cello, double bass), on beats 2, 3 amplify the sombre, dramatic effect.

E.g. 1



ACT I

The first entry of the character Carmen is punctuated by the motif of “fatality”, but the ethos is completely different: fast tempo, exuberant character (*Allegro moderato*, *6/8*, acute register, semiquavers, *fortissimo*). Its entrance is preceded by the Soldiers’ Choir: “*Mais nous ne voyons pas la Carmencita! [...] La voilà! Voilà la Carmencita!*” (*But we don’t see la Carmencita! [...] Here she is! Here she is la Carmencita!*). There are nine motivational insertions for violins, then a timbre dialogue between violins and woodwinds (clarinet/ bassoon/ flute).

⁴ Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet. CARMEN*, Cambridge UP, 1992, p. 111.

E.g. 2

The young men's choir: "*Carmen, sur tes pas nous nous pressons tous! / Carmen sois gentille et moins répons-nous!*" (*Carmen, in your footsteps we all hurry in! / Carmen be kind and answer us at least!*) - two short motivic insertions in flute, repeated in the descending octave.⁵

E.g. 3

⁵ Repeating the motiv of "fatality" in descending octaves is a process of musical development frequently used by Bizet (see ex. 4,5,7,8,10).

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All these motivic inserts appear as musical sparks before or between the declamatory sentences of the choir.

At the end of Carmen's recitative, "*Quand je vous aimerais? [...] Mais pas aujourd'hui!*" (*When will I love thee? [...] Oh, but not today!*), the motif appears twice, in flute, in an extreme nuance – *pianissimo*, in semiquavers and an acute register.

E.g. 4



After the "Habanera", the replies of the men's choir are again marked by the "fatality" motif.

"Carmen, sur tes pas nous nous pressons tous! Carmen sois gentille et moins reponds-nous! Répond-nous!" (*Carmen, in your footsteps we all hurry in! / Carmen be kind and answer us at least! Answer us!*)

E.g. 5



The moment of the prophetic choice: Carmen chooses Don José as her boyfriend (*Andante moderato, E minor, 3/4, bass register, cello /viola/ clarinet unison*).

The spell, the challenge is materialized from a musical point of view through a continuous *crescendo*, from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* of the "fatality" motif. It is a large orchestral section (24 measures), in which the theme from the Prélude returns. The first sentence consists of three motifs, the second - of three motifs, the third - of four ascending sequential motifs. Continuous tension, accumulation - *stringendo*, culminates with a last chord, short, in *forte*, emphasizing the throwing of the "enchanted" flower, seal of relentless destiny.

E.g. 6

Andante moderato. ($\text{♩} = 58$)

f *dim.* *p*
très expressif.

p *pp*

f

Andantino quasi Allegretto, A minor, 3/4. The orchestral music section which concludes this scene successively brings back the motif of “fatality” on the flute, flute/clarinet (unison) clarinet, clarinet/bassoon (unison), cello. The last three motifs appear in *stretto*.

E.g. 7

p *sempre*

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In the following recitative, Don José exclaims: “*Quel regard! Quelle effronterie!*” (*What a look! What braveness!*), referring to Carmen’s provocative attitude. The violins mark these words with a short, allusive commentary, in descending cascades of demisemiquavers of the “fatality” motif. The dynamics - *descrecendo*.

E.g. 8



Andante moderato, 3/4, piano espressivo.

The “fatality” motif has a lyrical character, anticipating the words of Don José: “*Le parfum en est fort et la fleur est jolie!*” (*Her perfume is strong and her flower is pretty!*)

E.g. 9



In the duet Don José - Micaëla, the motif of “fatality” reappears as an expression of an inexplicable fear, a shudder of gloomy presentiment: “*Qui sait de quel demon j’allais être la proie!*” (*Who knows what demon I am going to be prey to!*). There are three successive identical motifs on the flute, violins, violas, anticipating and punctuating Don José’s words.

E.g. 10



The scene of Carmen's arrest and the order for Don José to take her to prison ends with two repeated insertions of the "fatality" motif, in an extreme nuance - *pppp* on flute and clarinet (A minor, 2/4).

Carmen: "Où me conduirez-vous?" (Where will you take me?)

E.g. 11



ACT II

The only moment in act II in which the motif of "fatality" is present is the solo of the English horn from the orchestral introduction of Don José's aria, "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée" (*The flower you have thrown me*). (*Andante*, 3/4, D flat major, expressive *piano*). There are three descending sequences, which reiterate the theme of the Prélude.

E.g. 12



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ACT III

Don José – Carmen recitative. The moment of brutal sincerity. Carmen tells Don José to leave. Don José's reaction "*Partir? Nous separer...*" (*To leave? To part from you...*), is supported by two successive sequential motifs, on cello.

E.g. 13



The "Cards" scene. Carmen recitative: „*Carreau! Pique! [...] La mort! J'ai bien lu, moi d'abord, ensuite lui. Pur tous les deux, la mort!*". (*Tile! Pike! [...] Death! I read it well, me first, then him. For both, it is death!*). The fatality motif anticipates, in a succession of three descending sequences, Carmen's first reaction to the sight of the playing cards: "Tile! Pike" Bizet's indication is *Presque parlé, pianissimo*. The second sequence of three motifs is one third higher, in the same extreme nuance - *pianissimo*. (*Andante quasi Allegreto, 6/8, flute*). This is, from a dramatic point of view, the moment of the blow of destiny: the cards show her the symbol of death: "*La mort!*" (*Death!*). Death is imminent, violent, inevitable. The aria that follows this monologue is a musical-dramatic confession of her belief in the occult power of cards.

E.g. 14





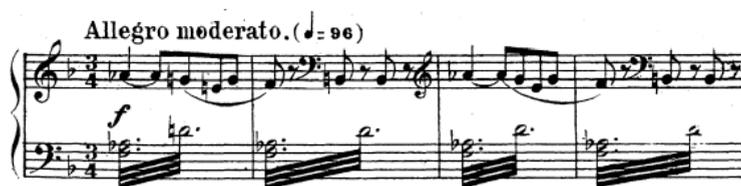
At the end of the Tercet (Frasquita/Mercedes/Carmen), the fatality motif returns, as a subtle musical reminder of the destiny that pursues her. (F major, 2/4, *descrescendo*, unison of cello/ double bass).

E.g. 15



The finale of act III. (*Allegro molto moderato*, $\frac{3}{4}$, *forte*, unison in Flute/ Oboe/ Clarinet/ Bassoon). Don José recitative „Sois contente! Je pars, mais... nous nous reverrons!“ (Be happy! I am leaving, but we will meet again!) The last syllable of Don José’s reply is violently punctuated, as a threat, by the intervention of the “fatality” motif. It is repeated, identical.

E.g. 16



ACT IV. The final scene

The conflict between Carmen and Don José reaches its climax. His intention to persuade her, with pleas and humility to return to their love is useless. The jealousy provoked by Carmen’s cold indifference, by her new love for the Toreador, even hatred, defiance, ostentatiously foretell the imminence of murder. The scene is intensely dramatic. José’s declamatory

monologue, supported by the *tremolo* of the strings, is punctuated by brutal interventions, in *fortissimo*, of the motif of "fatality", like dagger blows, at each end of the sentence.

Don José: „Ainsi, le salut de mon âme je l'aurais perdu pour que toi/ Pour que tu t'en ailles, infâme, entre ses bras rire de moi!/ Non, par le sang, tu n'iras pas, Carmen! / C'est moi que tu suivras!"(Thus I have lost my soul for you/For you to leave, you wicked, and mock me in his arms!/ Not on my blod, you won't, thou shall not leave, Carmen!/ You'll follow me instead!)

E.g. 17

The "fatality" motif, supported harmoniously by a major chord, in *fortissimo*, confirms, like a *catharsis*, the fulfilment of destiny (*Andante moderato*, 3/4, unison in Violins/ Flute/ Oboe/ Clarinet).

Don José: „*Vous pouvez m'arrêter... C'est moi qui l'a tuée!*” (You can arrest me now... I am the one who killed her!).

E.g. 18



The brief analysis of the motif of “fatality” was the result of the study and the joy of going through the score both from the perspective of the accompanying pianist and that of the musicologist. The topic of “Carmen” remains open for future approaches of other relevant aspects of musical dramaturgy.

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