



# The Choral Art in the Opera *Carmen*: Analysis of Emotions with Affinity to the People and Exploration of Expressive Tension

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**Abstract:** Choral performance is one of the essential forms of expression in opera, using multi-voice polyphonic styles to lay the groundwork for the plot and enhance the emotional and dramatic expression. In the opera *Carmen*, Georges Bizet frequently employs choral passages to bridge scenes, integrating choral performances with the movements of actors on stage in a rare form of presentation. This fusion of choral art and character development vividly portrays the lifestyle of 19th-century society, endowing the opera with a strong character of emotions with affinity to the people and greater dramatic expressive tension. This paper explores the choral art in Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*, focusing on its unique contributions to emotions with affinity to the people and the expressive tension. By analyzing the elements of affinity to the people embedded in the choral melodies, harmonies, and rhythms, the paper examines how the choral passages reflect the living conditions and emotional demands of the lower classes in 19th-century French society. Furthermore, it discusses how the chorus skillfully highlights and reveals the character traits and fates of the main characters, thereby enhancing the opera's artistic impact and social critique.

**Keywords:** the opera *Carmen*; chorus; affinity to the people

## 1. Introduction

The opera *Carmen* was completed in the autumn of 1874 by the French composer Georges Bizet, based on Prosper Mérimée's novel of the same name. The story revolves around the complex love affair between a beautiful and passionate Gypsy girl, *Carmen*, and a soldier, Don Jose. Don Jose, a young and handsome corporal, falls in love with the cigarette factory worker *Carmen*, even at the cost of abandoning his simple and kind-hearted fiancée, Micaëla. *Carmen*, caught in a brawl, is arrested, but Don Jose defies orders and frees her, leading to his imprisonment. Upon his release, Don Jose reluctantly joins *Carmen*'s smuggling group, but *Carmen*'s affections shift to the bullfighter Escamillo. In the end, a furious Don Jose stabs *Carmen* outside the bullring. The opera's focus on characters like female workers and common soldiers, and its depiction of their emotions and spirits, align with characteristics of affinity to the people in that time. However, the opera faced a disastrous reception at its premiere. Bizet's decision to bring Gypsies, cigarette factory workers, and smugglers to the stage was unacceptable to contemporary audiences. The advanced artistic vision of the composer led to public indifference and harsh criticism from reviewers, and Bizet passed away three months later with regret. However, over time, *Carmen* gained recognition and became one of the most frequently performed operas globally.

The era in which the opera was created, the 19th century in Europe, was marked by the waves of the Industrial Revolution and the Scientific Revolution, leading to an awakening of social consciousness and an unprecedented cultural flourishing. This period also witnessed the rise of the Romantic art movement, which emphasized individual emotions and rejected rationalism and utilitarianism, to some extent reflecting dissatisfaction with existing social frameworks and the pursuit of an ideal world. The story of *Carmen*, a Gypsy girl who defies traditional moral constraints and passionately pursues free love, is a vivid embodiment of the Romantic spirit in the social and cultural context. Besides the arias sung by the main characters, which showcase strong individual characteristics, the choral performances by citizens, soldiers, and female workers also echo the diverse aspects and complex realities of 19th-century European society, making *Carmen* a timeless masterpiece that continues to resonate deeply with audiences.

## 2. Interpretation of Elements of Affinity to the People in the Melodies, Harmonies, and Rhythms of the Chorus

In the artistic creation of the opera *Carmen*, Georges Bizet showcases his unique creative vision and stylistic development in the field of music, particularly evident in the core musical elements such as melody design, harmonic construction, and rhythmic arrangement. Although the central theme of the work revolves around a tragic love story, Bizet skillfully

employs vibrant, contrasting melodies to cloak the entire opera in a fervent emotional garment, highlighting the protagonist *Carmen*'s fearless pursuit of love. Notably, the choral melodies in *Carmen* extensively draw from the rich heritage of Spanish folk music, which not only imbues the opera with a strong Spanish cultural flavor but also deeply reflects the Gypsy community's free-spirited and passionate life philosophy. This endows the opera with artistic qualities that are closer to the lives of the people and full of vitality. Specifically, in the first act, when the soldiers change shifts, a group of children joyfully mimics the soldiers, joining the ranks with a chorus that goes, "Here we come, following the soldiers on duty, playing the loud trumpet, da da da da..." This chorus, accompanied by the children's excited whistling, features a lively 2/4 rhythm and a bright D minor melody, painting a picture of innocent playfulness and reflecting the children's curiosity and admiration for the soldiers' lives. Although this chorus does not directly incorporate specific elements of Spanish music, it captures the essence of the Spanish musical style — an amalgamation of exuberance, passion, and a unique blend of fatalism and melancholy. This chorus not only serves as a microcosmic reflection of the social landscape of the time but also lays the emotional and atmospheric groundwork for the unfolding of *Carmen*'s tragic fate.

Bizet's imaginative use of harmony is another hallmark of his compositional style. He skillfully employs changes in harmonic color to express the emotions of different scenes and characters. Before *Carmen*'s entrance, there is a chorus of female factory workers as they finish their shift. The young women slowly walk onto the stage, smoking cigarettes with a touch of flirtation and arrogance. The men sing, "The bell rings, and here we are; waiting, waiting; we will follow you, oh brunette cigarette girl..." This chorus adopts a deep, lingering harmonic style, expressing the coquettish charm of the female workers and the men's admiration for them. The use of harmony in this chorus conveys the authentic texture of the ordinary people's lives of that era, allowing the audience to sense the resilience and beauty of the factory girls, despite their lower social standing, as well as the complex and subtle emotional entanglements between them and the surrounding world. In contrast, the chorus accompanying the bullfighter's entrance in the second act utilizes powerful chord progressions, imbuing the harmonic color with strength and majesty. This change in harmonic color not only enhances the drama of the music but also brings the work closer to the people's lives and emotions.

The rhythm design in *Carmen* is characterized by sharp contrasts. In scenes depicting joy and excitement, such as the bullfighter's entrance and the cheering of the audience, Bizet employs fast and vigorous rhythms. On the other hand, in the scene portraying the Gypsies smuggling goods, the smugglers' chorus "Listen, listen, comrades; the wealth is calling us; be careful, the path beneath your feet; don't make a wrong step..." uses orchestral instruments to create a continuous sense of tension and conflict. Subtle pauses and accents are employed to emphasize the smugglers' alertness. This rhythmic contrast not only heightens the dramatic nature of the music but also aligns the work more closely with the people's lives and emotions.

### 3. Reflections of People's Living Conditions and Emotional Appeals in the Chorus

In the grand narrative of the opera *Carmen*, the choral sections play a crucial role, reflecting the complexities of people's living conditions and emotional worlds. They not only enhance the dramatic tension of the work but also provide a profound analysis of the real-life conditions and psychological needs of the lower classes in 19th-century European society. These choral passages, through meticulously arranged vocal parts, skillfully integrate voices from various social strata — such as factory workers, soldiers, and civilians — to create vivid and detailed social vignettes. At the beginning of the opera, the soldiers' chorus, "People come and go, on the square, bustling and lively; what an interesting crowd!" serves not only as a direct depiction of the scene but also as an artistic representation of the diverse and multi-layered social conditions in Europe at the time. The soldiers' song reveals a detached observation of daily commotion while subtly commenting on the variety of social experiences. The intertwined voices in the chorus capture every detail of the square — ranging from the elegance of upper-class gentlemen and ladies leisurely strolling to the bustling market ambiance of street vendors, and even the hidden figures of beggars and thieves. This juxtaposition of social classes profoundly reflects the complexity and inequality of the societal structure of the time. This chorus is not only a visual description of the crowd's movement but also reveals the differences in living conditions, emotional interactions, and potential conflicts between social strata, offering a deep analysis and emotional resonance of 19th-century European society. Through this artistic form, Bizet not only presents the colorful aspects of people's lives but also touches upon the struggles, hopes, and frustrations of the lower classes, providing a window into the human condition and societal realities of that era. Furthermore, the chorus during the factory workers' brawl, "It's *Carmen*, no, no, it's not her," highlights the bold and self-assertive character of the cigarette girls, emphasizing *Carmen*'s stubbornness and fierceness. This depiction underscores the vibrant and sometimes harsh realities faced by these women.

At the same time, the chorus part of *Carmen* highlights the people's deep desire and unremitting pursuit of freedom in people's emotional appeal. In the 19th century, Romanticism swept across Europe, and the free-spirited Romantic sentiment

became the ideological backdrop of the time. The Gypsies, represented by *Carmen*, epitomize this longing for freedom and romanticism. When *Carmen* and her smuggler companions persuade Don Jose to abandon his soldier's position and join the smuggling group, the smugglers sing, "You will find how wonderful the life of wandering is; nowhere is home, and will is the only law." This chorus, with its passionate melody and resounding rhythm, directly expresses a fervent longing for an unrestrained lifestyle, revealing the desire for individual freedom beyond traditional societal frameworks and reflecting the people's understanding and relentless pursuit of freedom. Additionally, the opera *Carmen* deeply engages with the theme of romantic love. *Carmen*, as the embodiment of love, revolves around a dedicated pursuit of free love and ultimate sacrifice. Therefore, the choral sections intentionally emphasize the theme of love. For instance, in the first act, the factory workers' chorus, "Rise to the Sky's Smoke," sings, "We will follow you, oh brunette cigarette girl; listen to the whispers of love; look, look, how bold and flirtatious; with a cigar between our lips, our gaze follows the smoke as it rises to the clouds; pleasure rises in our minds, and joy fills our souls; the secrets of love are like light smoke, and the passion and vows are also like light smoke." This chorus uses deep, expressive music combined with straightforward and passionate lyrics to metaphorically express the people's deep longing for genuine and fearless love. It also reflects the inner desire for love's freedom, direct expression, and emotional intensity, setting the emotional tone for the subsequent complex emotional entanglements between *Carmen* and Don Jose.

#### 4. The Chorus's Role in Highlighting and Revealing the Main Characters' Traits and Destinies

In *Carmen*, the choral sections not only depict the living conditions and emotional appeals of various social strata but also play a critical role in highlighting and revealing the characteristics and fates of the main characters. The chorus serves to underscore the essence of the protagonists, offering a deeper understanding of their traits and the overall thematic concerns of the opera. *Carmen* is the central figure of the opera, and the choral sections subtly enhance her character development and fate throughout the narrative. For instance, in the first act, *Carmen*'s entrance and her immediate attraction to Don Jose are marked by her solo aria, the "Habanera," which declares, "Love is a rebellious bird that nobody can tame; and it's all in vain to call it if it chooses to refuse." This classic aria vividly presents *Carmen*'s lively, playful, and free-spirited nature. The chorus that follows — "Love, that wandering child, forever flying free in the sky; if you don't love me, I'll love you; beware if you fall in love with me!" — reinforces *Carmen*'s bold pursuit of love and freedom, mirroring her attitude towards relationships and life. This chorus not only echoes *Carmen*'s understanding and pursuit of love but also reflects the broader societal longing for personal freedom and the purity of romantic ideals. Furthermore, the choral scene involving *Carmen*'s brawl with the cigarette factory worker reveals *Carmen*'s assertive and untamed personality. As the cigarette girls sing accusatory choruses, it highlights *Carmen*'s influence and strong presence within the lower social strata. The energetic and forceful nature of these choral segments, while reflecting *Carmen*'s character traits, also foreshadows the tragic undertones of her fate. The contrast between the lively, vibrant melodies and the underlying ominous tones, particularly as *Carmen* walks towards Don Jose with a rose in her chest, hints at the tragic destiny that awaits her.

For Don Jose, the choral sections provide significant insight into his character development. At the beginning of the first act, the soldiers' chorus, with its peaceful depiction of the bustling square, symbolizes Jose's orderly life in the army and his straightforward, honest nature. However, as the soldiers change shifts and the playful children's chorus disrupts the scene with their excitement, it reflects the gradual disruption of Jose's stable life as he becomes enchanted by *Carmen*. The chorus "Cross the mountains and the plains with us; you will find how wonderful the life of wandering is" expresses a longing for freedom while also hinting at the uncertainties of Jose's future. This chorus underscores Jose's internal conflict between his sense of duty and the allure of a freer, more uncertain life with *Carmen*.

Overall, the choral segments in *Carmen* not only enhance the portrayal of the main characters but also resonate with the audience on an emotional level. By uniting various social groups in song, such as the soldiers, factory workers, and civilians, the chorus draws the audience into the narrative, allowing them to share in the characters' joys and sorrows. This collective musical expression deepens the audience's engagement with the characters' fates, illustrating the commonalities between the protagonists and the broader populace.

#### 5. Conclusion

In *Carmen*, the choral art is not only a vital vehicle for musical expression but also a crucial element in analyzing the emotional depth and dramatic tension of the opera. Georges Bizet's masterful use of melodic design, rich harmonic construction, and vivid rhythmic contrasts integrates the chorus seamlessly into the narrative, transforming it into a vivid portrayal of the lives and emotional demands of the lower-class people in 19th-century France. The choral sections not only recreate

the multifaceted social landscape of the time but also weave together various character voices to convey the profound yearning and relentless pursuit of freedom, love, and a better life. The chorus in *Carmen* drives the plot forward and profoundly reveals the characters' traits and destinies. Through the choral enhancement of characters such as *Carmen* and Don Jose, their personalities and fates are portrayed in a more nuanced and rich manner, allowing the audience to deeply experience the characters' internal struggles, conflicts, and choices. Additionally, the chorus amplifies the social critique of the opera, offering a thorough analysis of societal realities and prompting deep reflections on human nature, freedom, and love.

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