



G. Bizet: Carmen

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Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2008.03.23)

Recorded in Berlin, 3-29 September 1951, this Carmen that selects from all four acts (sung in German in the translation by Julius Hopp) benefits from the strong directorial presence of Ferenc Fricsay (1914-1963), the Hungarian conductor of many parts, whose familiarity with Mozart and Bartok permitted him to achieve lightness and drama in his Teutonic rendering of Bizet's timeless sojourn into destructive passions. For his Carmen, Fricsay chose Margaret Klose (1902-1968), a Wagnerian helden-mezzo with a darkly lyrical timbre to her voice. His Don Jose is the thirty-six-year old Rudolf Schock, known more for his operetta characterizations than for his straight dramatic roles. Given the guttural quality of their German, it comes as a swarthy, aerial surprise the lightness in Carmen's seguidilla and duet with a lithe flute obbligato.

Fricsay opens with a quickly brisk Prelude, faster than Bizet's marking. Moving the trumpets and side drums gradually closer during Carmen's duet with Don Jose, Fricsay increases the tension between love and duty. The fate motif thuds out prior to tenor Schock's lovely rendering of the Flower Aria. The purely orchestral entr'actes float like ballet music, as we who know Fricsay's Tchaikovsky well appreciate. The trio among Carmen, Frasquita, and Mercedes, their gypsy song, has the harp and flutes in zither-like syncopation, a miracle of frenzied, eddying sound that explodes with sensuality. A Mendelssohnian ether suffuses the Terzetto from Act III, the light soprano of Elfriede Troetschel (1913-1958) of the Berlin State Opera ascendant. Micaela's aria among the smugglers brings strong resonance to her recitative; then, the French horn and string announce her piercing cantilena of stunning clarity.

Act IV begins with a visceral Farandole (from L'Arlesienne), the typical Fricsay intensities forefront in the flute, tambourine, and sliding strings, rivaling Beecham at every note. The Chorus follows in the Pastorale, a graduated Andantino of singularly (Venetian) beauty. The Danse bohémienne--again from L'Arlesienne--has the harp, winds, triangle, pizzicato strings, and trumpets in poignant, whirling harmony, a marvelous blend for 1951 sonics. The last scene hearkens to both the Prelude and the Fate motif, Carmen and Don Jose in fatal, tympany-accompanied admissions rife with figures from Tristan. The bullfight calls behind Schock's desperate passion underlines his confrontation with Don Jose's personal Minotaur. Originally meant only for local transmission to the Berlin sector of a divided Germany, this fine series of excerpts transcends its "political" intentions with a performance of enduring, aesthetic understanding. Heartily recommended.