Carmen; femme créatrice in Bizet's opera[1]

Edith Zack

.

It is common to find psychological concepts applied to the content of artworks, as though cultural themes must necessarily refer to aspects of the psyche. In fact, there has always been a confusion within Freudianism and Jungianism between the nature of the mind, which is presumably universal, and the symbols of art and culture, which are presumably contingent and historical. The great psychologists found their symbols in the unconscious, and saw them manifested especially in dreams. But cultural historians are bound to find their symbolisms in texts, which are artifacts located in space and time. A symbol found in nineteenth-century Europe may not have meant much to a Han-dynasty Chinese or a native American.

Jung, for example, defines his psychological archetypes as 'primordial types', 'images impressed upon the mind since of old" (Jung 1963: 24, 80). These images, as products of the 'subjective fantasy', function on a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and achievements but represents a universal system of symbols. In other words, the personal imaginative materials consist of mythological motifs, which find their expression in the individual's dreams, visions and fantasies. Mythological motifs are, first of all, the contents of the mythology of the individual "which turn into symbols of the personal unconscious" (Jacobi 1962: 92). Yet although derived from the personal unconscious, these images (the archetypal images)

[1] In *Musical Semiotics Revisited* ed. Eero Tarasti. Imatra and Helsinki: International Semiotics Institute, and the University of Helsinki, 2003: 349-363.

function on a deeper layer, which "does not derive from personal experience and achievement" but represents a universal system of symbols. Jung coins the term "collective unconscious" for this layer (Jung 1963: 24, 53). The "collective unconscious", according to Jung is "self-identical in all Western men and thus constitutes a psychic foundation, supernatural in its nature, that is present in every one of us" (ibid: 53). There is an apparent confusion, though, in this theory; in spite of the fact that the collective unconscious is Western-related, Jung himself believes that its content is not merely cultural, but universal (Jung 1963: 52); this means that most archetypes can be found everywhere and at all times, from primitive cultures, through Greek and Egyptian mythology to modern literature.

Nevertheless, archetypes may be expressed in symbols that are specific to a particular culture. Thus, I would say that Jung's theory of archetypes involves a system of signs that creates metaphoric structures in the human subconscious; although culturally dependent in their expression, they embody universal signification. Jung's system of signs reveals a pattern of psychic codes, which are thus natural features; whereas according to the cultural view, the significance of systems of signs relies on 'linguistic codes' which go through various transformations, throughout human culture. These codes are created in a certain time and place, and from that point on they reappear in different contexts. Their main characteristic is that of being 'connotative codes', to adopt a term of Eco's; each new manifestation is rooted, not in a feature of the psyche, but in a basic signification (Eco 1979: 55).

One of cultural models, which became a connotative code, is Carmen, the heroine of Georges Bizet's opera. Carmen belongs to a culturally defined group which used to be labeled as Romantic *femmes fatales*. This group contains heroines like Struass's Salome, Saint-Saëns's Dalilah, or Alban Berg's Lulu, who were conceived

by male creators, and are portrayed as unconfined by moral fetters and 'feminine' principles customary in a society of patriarchal values (Zack 1997: 163-164).

In other words, heroines like Carmen, Salome or Lulu who were portrayed as fatal to men, arose from a masculine style of thought, and were defined by new personal codes. These codes determined a free movement between the 'feminine' parts and other tendencies, which were considered, at the time, masculine, between beauty and eroticism on the one hand and a free-minded personality on the other. Indeed, Carmen and Salome are presented as irresistibly attractive, yet, at the same time they are also loyal to their personal desires, which do not suit the expectations of the society they live in. In other words, they are the embodiment of femininity in every way, but this does not stop them from acting like men, meaning, making their own choice in life, and taking responsibility for their actions.

In psychological terms this new image of Woman, which contradicted the patriarchal model of femininity, personified an important part of the male artist's anima; the female element in the male subconscious (Jung 1964: 78-79). The anima, according to Von Franz, one of Jung's students and scholars, is the "personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in the male's psyche", which appear in different guises and represent different stages of his personal development (Von Franz 1964: 186; Jung 1964: 23). One of the embodiments of the anima is the "Great Mother", the two sorts of motherhood, good and nurturing on the one hand and dark and threatening on the other, which became an important element in the process of individuation. The two mothers are juxtaposed shadows of each other; the good mother is the more conscious image, whereas her bad counterpart is being relegated to the subconscious (Neumann 1963: 79).

The two sorts of motherhood, which became an integral part of the male's process of individuation, constructed dialectic, which became extremely strong in European culture. It consisted of a witch like demon on one hand and a simple and saintly character on the other; Siren, Circe, Salome, Cleopatra or Lilith were contradicted by figures which echoed the Virgin. Often, according to Jung, the two sorts of motherhood were embodied as mistress and feminine ideal, and were thus projected upon real women (Jung 1964: 150). Yet, whether real or fictional, once the various images were integrated within the male creator's psyche a complete and mature *self* was reached.

Yet this sort of personification, of the anima, is not only a psychological matter; it is connected to social developments that affected artists of all spheres in the nineteenth century. In other words, in order to reach a complete and mature personality the bourgeois male had to come to terms with a new reality concerning gender roles in general and the role of women in particular. This, of course, is connected directly to social developments, which effected the balance of the patriarchal family towards the end of the century.

In sociological terms, thus, the binary structure of Woman was due to economic and ideological changes, which were a result of the Industrial Revolution and the process of urbanization that followed it (Davidoff, L'Esperance and Newby 1979: 157). The movement from peripheries into urban industrial areas caused a change in family structure. It displayed two elements that were essential in the design of the new image; the reduction of family size and the development of the cult of domesticity, which elevated the home to a sanctified dimension. As families moved into the towns and engaged with the urban industrial system, the productive household, which enabled every member (married or unmarried) to play an economic

role, changed. The supernumerary members – the unmarried women – were redundant and the family became much smaller; it "consisted solely of a husband and wife and their children" (Evans 1977: 24). As a result a cult of domesticity started to prosper in which a dichotomy of the feminine appeared; one was identified with the house and the other with the street.

Needles to say that "women of the streets" were identified with promiscuous life and prostitution and thus conveyed danger to the bourgeois male. Yet, paradoxically the more domestic life became idealized and sanctified, the more difficult it became to contain sexual passion within marriage (Davidoff, L'Esperance and Newby 1979: 157). Consequently the patriarchal male had to project his dreams and fantasies to women who were identified with promiscuous life, in spite of its danger.

As I have already suggested, one of the opera heroines who became over the years an epitome of the woman of the street is Carmen, the heroine of Prosper Merimée and Georges Bizets and his librettists, Meilhac and Halévy. Conceived by four bourgeois male creators Carmen became a symbol of promiscuity that was associated with low hygiene and street life. Her image, which contradicted the traditional feminine of patriarchy, conveyed danger to the decent Parisian family in the 1870s.

The fact that she is placed in a tobacco factory and portrayed as a smoker makes Carmen become associated with dirt, sexual availability and inferiority of class. Let us remember that smoking in nineteenth century Europe was associated with exoticism and sexual transgression, across boundaries of gender, race, nationality, and ethnicity and Class (Hutcheon 1996: 9, 179, 183, 193). Presenting her as a smoker

was a powerful way of suggesting Carmen's Otherness, her freedom of mind and strong physicality, to the audience of the opéra-comique.

It seemed almost natural that the managers of the opéra-comique were afraid of the response of the French audience to a protagonist like Carmen in the context of gypsies, thieves and murderers. And indeed, towards the end of the first performance, which took place in Paris on March the 3rd 1875, the response of the audience, to say the least, was not very encouraging. "The first act received enthusiastic applause; the second was applauded mildly; the third less, and the fourth not at all" (Bleiler 1970: 18). In fact, most of the audience already left (ibid. loc.). The press and its critics were especially cruel to Bize, says Bleiler. They denounced Carmen the streetcorner woman, ", the "true prostitute of the gutter", the sort of woman who can be found only in the lowest cabarets in Seville, whose pathological condition is "devoted without cessation to the burning of the flesh" (ibid: 19).

Clearly the French audience was not aware of Carmen's immense importance. Her image made possible an intellectual quest, which helped the male creators, and eventually their audiences, to understand how systems of representation and performance interact with the power-regime. In other words, "exoticizing" Carmen helped to deal with both sexual and racial Difference in manners of ideas, theory and practice.

Her eccentric world became one of the embodiments of the rêve espagnol, the French fantasy of Southern Spain in general and of sexual Otherness in particular. In her, Gothic Christianity and Arab tradition were combined (Hoffmeister 1990: 113), the ingredients of a far-away exotic country which was not actually so far away and which offered the European voyager the idealized surrounding of Roman ruins, Arab palaces and Renaissance castles (Hoffman 1961: 86-87). Within these surroundings

"natural emotions [which] had not been corrupted by the Occidental world" are introduced; "joyfulness, somberness, cruelty, vengeance and extreme jealousy" (Etzion 1993: 238-239).

Yet within these natural emotions a paradox is conveyed; in Mérimée's novel, in spite of being presented with her most natural feelings and outgoing behavior Carmen is deprived personal expression. Like in the case of other "exoticized" women, Carmen is unable to dispute her own role; she has to play by rules that are given to her by society (Edwards 1993: 50). Therefore, both the intelligent male writer (Merimée himself) and the savage narrator (Don José) who tells the story of their tragedy speak for Carmen. It is through them that we learn how Carmen dresses, what she thinks and who she is.

For Don José, who tells the story (in the first person) to the French narrator, she is the incarnation of the devil who by her seductive forces leads him to his downfall. The French narrator, in comparison, perceives her as a "no mean sorceress", because he is mostly interested in her anthropologically; thus, she remains a cultural phenomenon, the *femme espagnole*, rather than an erotic woman who threatens his well being.

In the literary source males speak for Carmen, but in Bizet's opera there is a reversal of roles between the writer and his feminine image. In other words, while the prior intention of the composer and his librettists was to dominate Carmen, it so happens that the evocation of her femininity is so powerful that the boundaries between creator and heroine blur. In Kristeva's terms, Carmen, then, becomes "actor and author [as if she] conceived the text of the [opera] as both practice [singer] and product [composer], process [actor] and effect [author]" (Kristeva 1980: 45; the square brackets are hers). In other words, Carmen overcomes her prior designation

and becomes the driving force of the work, the *voice* of the opera, an écriture féminine, a female voice in which the subjectivity of the male creator and the subjectivity of his female protagonist are reconciled.

The perception of Bizet's text as écriture féminine, forms a basis for a new reading of the opera which contradicts the traditional masculine readings of this genre. The new reading confirms the status of Carmen as, what Abbate calls, "true hero[ine] and protagonist of the opera" (Abbate 1989: 110), who is the source of creativity and from whom the music comes. As such it mediates between text and identity, language and writing and between writing and criticism-knowledge.

Mediating between text and identity, Carmen's singing body transforms the femme fatale, who is spoken for, and who is an object that is the center of a male gaze spoken of, into *femme créatrice,* a subject who speaks and creates direct discourse with her audience. In her, masculine and feminine - substance and form, portrait and the person, subject and the "predetermined perception of what she might be" (Feldman 1999: 61, 66-67) – are reconciled.

The reconciliation of masculine and feminine produces two levels of text, in which a dynamic process of signification based on two phases of human experience, arises. The first level, which is the deeper layer of the narrative, and is connected directly with the unconscious, is *geno-text*; it is related to feminine intuition and human drives and repression. On the intellectual surface of the *geno-text* we find the *pheno-text*; "a final text aimed at communication" (Dame 1998: 237), which is associated with the paternal and the conscious. This level is based on syntactic order and logical connection within the representation of emotion and expression.

The two levels of text relate, according to Kristeva's view, to two sorts of experience. The first level, geno-text, relates to the semiotic, the very first experience

of mother/child bond, in which the first memories of sound and rhythm are constituted (Kristeva 1986: 472). Once the semiotic is constituted, it gives way to the symbolic manifestation that evokes father's time and is connected to logical connections of sign and syntax. In other words, the precondition of the symbolic is the semiotic. When the phases (the semiotic and the symbolic) are joined together, an articulated poetic narrative is produced, which gives its user total controls over its rules and metaphors.

Within the two levels of text, two types of temporality are conveyed, cyclical and historical. The deeper layer of the text, geno-text, which is associated with the feminine, occupies cyclical time and monumental time; the repetitive pattern of nature and human life, which has its roots in the collective memory of the archaic. Pheno-text, in comparison, which is associated with the masculine, subsists in linear time, the time of history and logical connections.

In Carmen's operatic écriture féminine, we, indeed, find these two levels of text which are presented within binary oppositions;, musical topics, which are considered masculine, appear alongside 'feminine' gestures, dance is contradicted by song, diatonicism is set against chromaticism, and wide-ranged melodies collaborate with repetitive patterns in the accompanying harmony.

Binary oppositions are not enough, though, to create an operatic écriture féminine; thus, it is important to note that Carmen's text, which consists of binary oppositions that contain masculine and feminine, is constructed within a direct speech. In other words, as fémme créatrice, and unlike other opera protagonists, who are not aware of the music that resounds around them, Carmen causes her listeners to be aware of her music, *as music,* and of its evocation and the variable musical responses (Abbate 1991: 117).

One of the very clear examples of these appears in the duet no. 17, between Carmen and José. In this duet Carmen intends to perform a number in José's honor; thus, she addresses him directly and declares her artistic intentions: "Je vais danser en votre honneur…Et vous verrez, seigneur, comment je sais moi-même accompagner ma danse" (I am going to dance in your honor, and you will see, sir, how I am able myself to accompany my dance). She is aware of the fact that in this number she will present her virtues, not only as performer, but as composer as well, and she makes sure that José is aware of her creative qualities.

Within the creative process musical topics are used in a telling manner; thus, musical symbols, which are male associated, are travestied. Carmen takes hold of two characteristically masculine topics and incorporates them in her dance, the "military fanfare" and the "noble horse" (Monelle 2000: 44-45; 63-65). The military fanfare, typically masculine, becomes the "orchestra" to which Carmen dances, as she tries to draw José away on a journey into the hills (Figure 1). The noble horse here is used as an organ of seduction, instead of symbolizing the nobility and male heroism of the soldier (Figure 2).

Figure 1: The military fanfare

Figure 2.22:

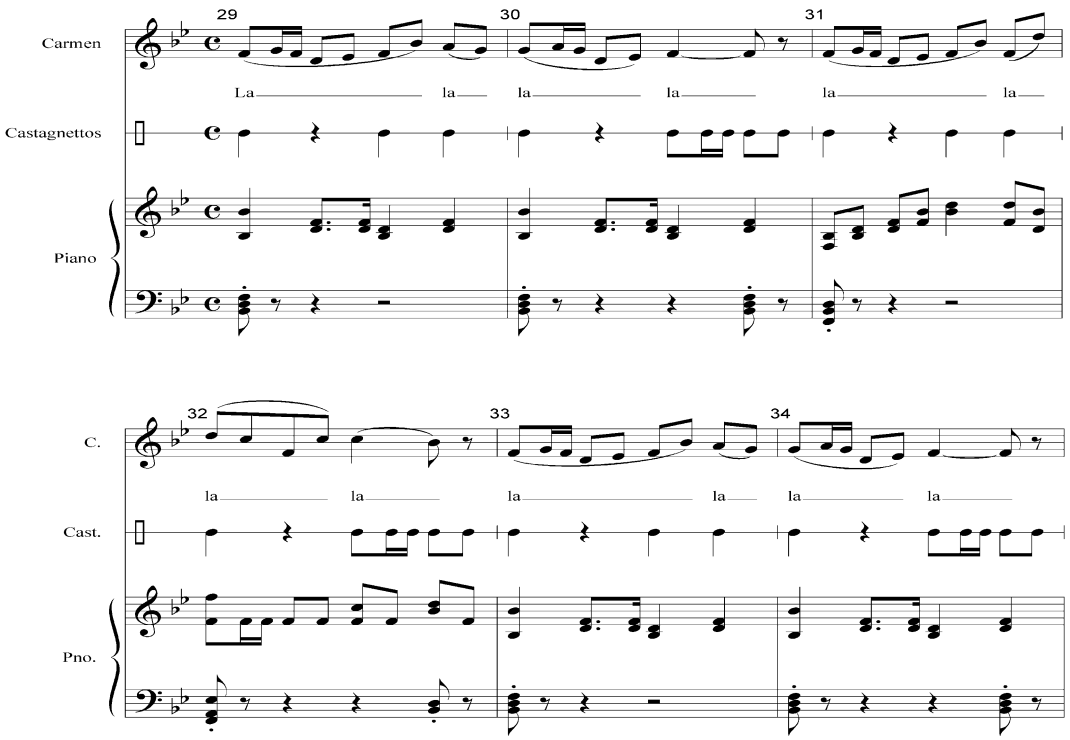
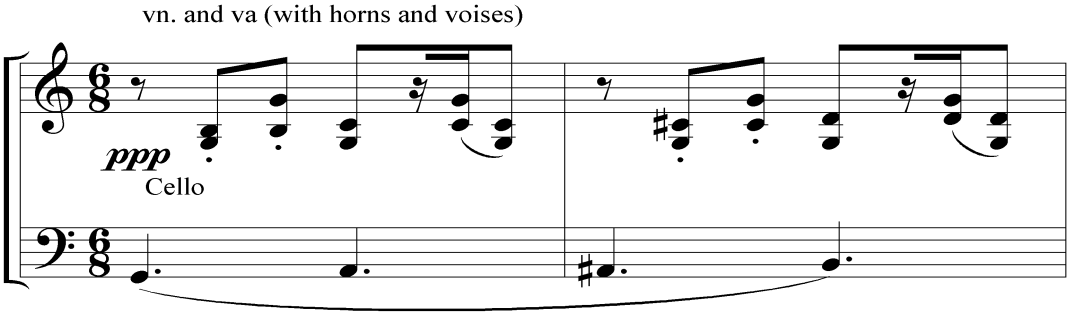


Figure 2: Galloping figurations

Figure 2.21: Galloping figurations



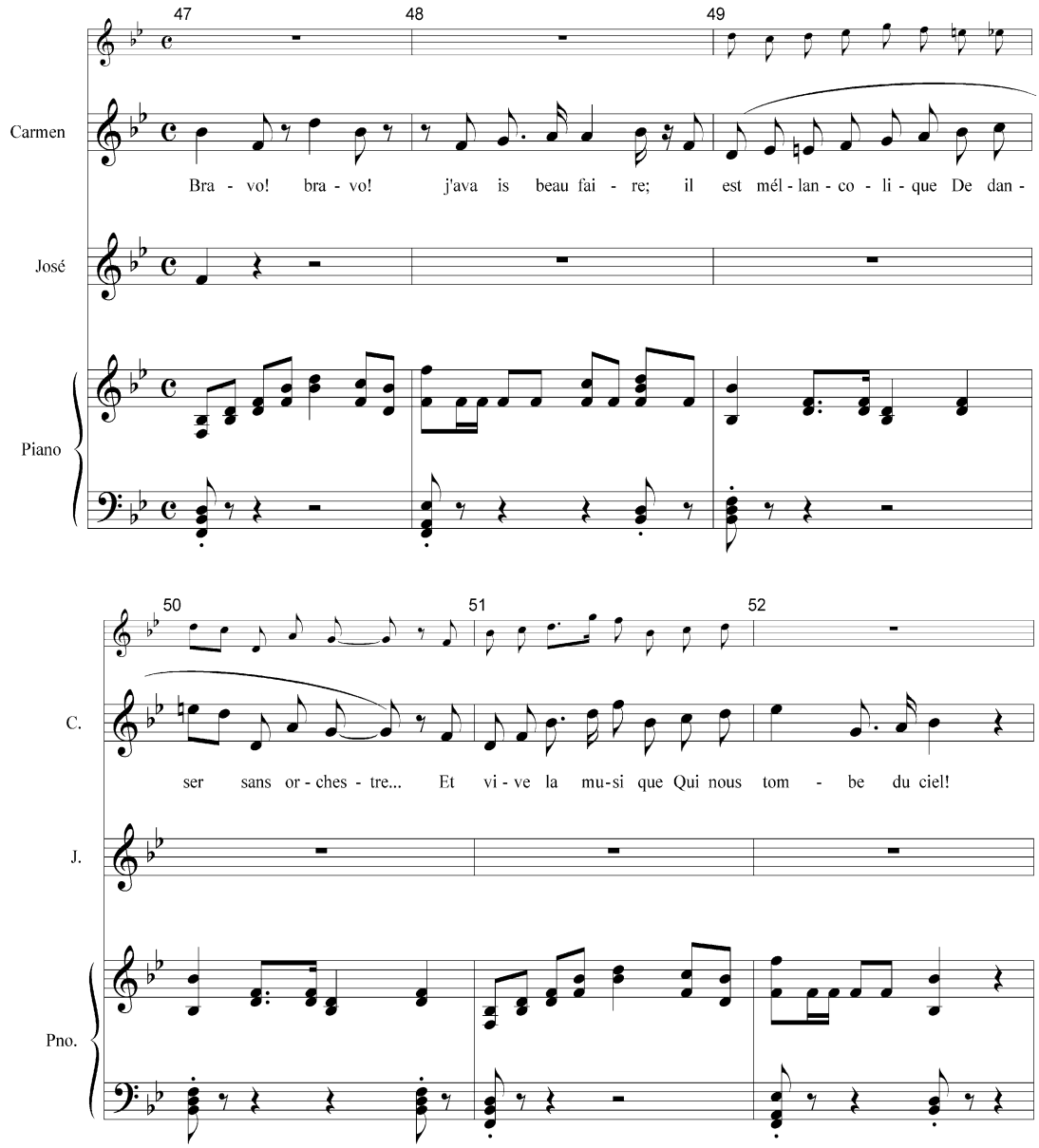
When the military fanfare of the bugles sounds, Carmen, a professional performer, synchronizes immediately with it as if it was her prior intention (Figure 3). But, though synchronized with the trumpet call, the lyrics convey her irony: “Bravo! j’avais beau faire...Il est mélancolique de danser sans orchestre, et vive la musique qui nous tombe du ciel!”. In other words: “I have tried my best to

show you the significance of authentic dance and music; but if the army bugle call means more to you than my dance, then three cheers for the music which dropped from the sky at this sacred moment of authenticity. In fact, I can use some of it for the orchestration of my dance" (see Figure 3 below).

Although she is ironic about José being attached to his duty, and in spite of her being bothered by the military call which might take José away from her, Carmen remains the *femme créatrice*, who is aware of every musical sign that surrounds her, and has total control over the musical text. Thus, as the trumpet call comes in she moves freely between the two musical topics which represent two different worlds; the dance, which is associated with the feminine, on the one hand, and the military fanfare that is related to masculinity on the other.

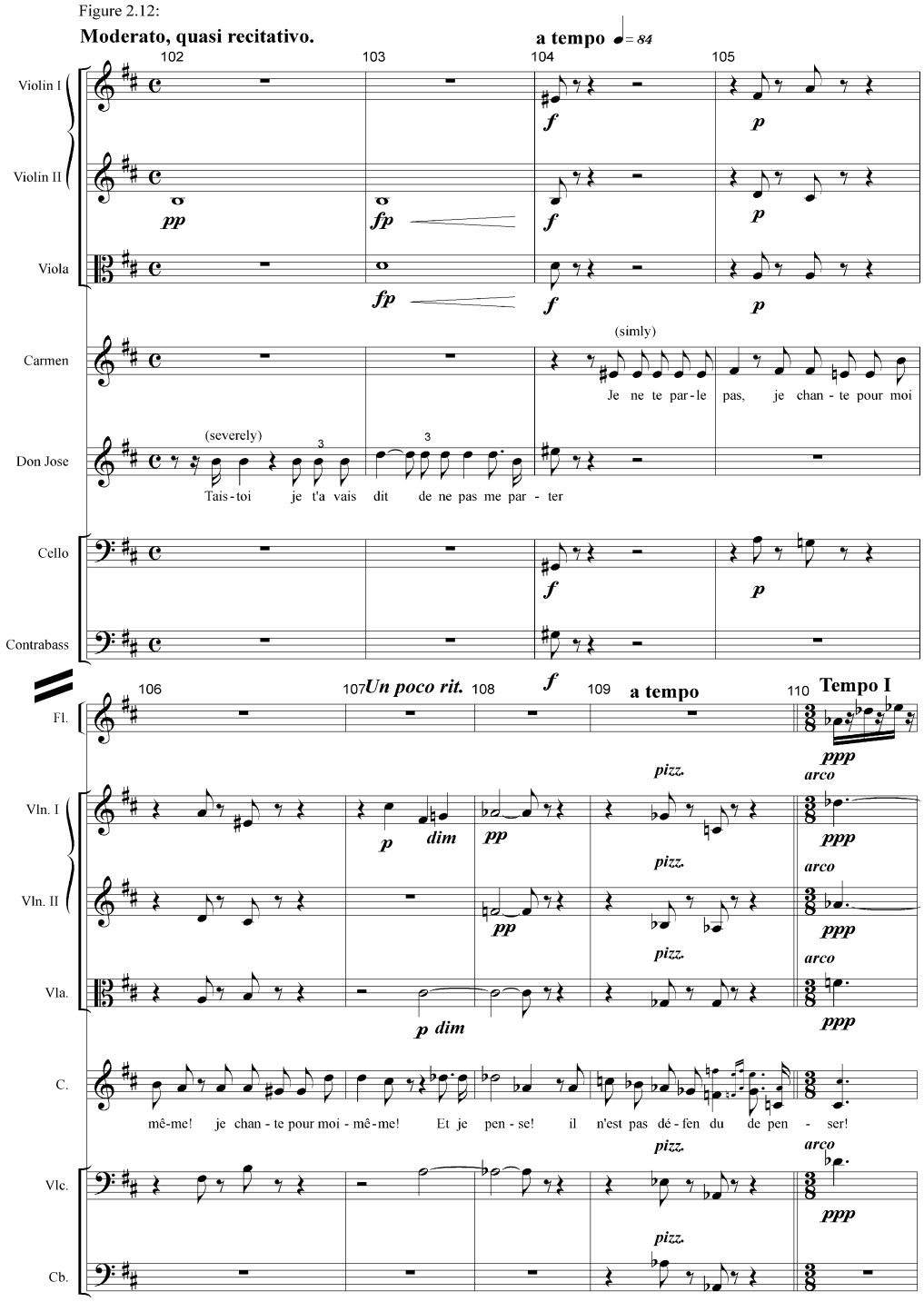
Figure 3: Military fanfare synchronized into Carmen's dance

Figure 2.23:



By bringing the two different topics together and making them function equally in the musical narrative, Carmen, becomes the author, whereas José remains mere function. She creates a heterogeneous text which is constructed musically on “sameness within otherness” (Feldman 1999: 61). It is here, then, that her subjectivity as sexual and racial Other, merges with the predetermined perception of the gypsy, as viewed by her male creators.

Figure 4: Carmen's enharmonic modulation into José's key of Love



Another example of Carmen's virtuosity as *femme créatrice* who is in total control over the musical narrative, appears at the end of her Seguidilla, the

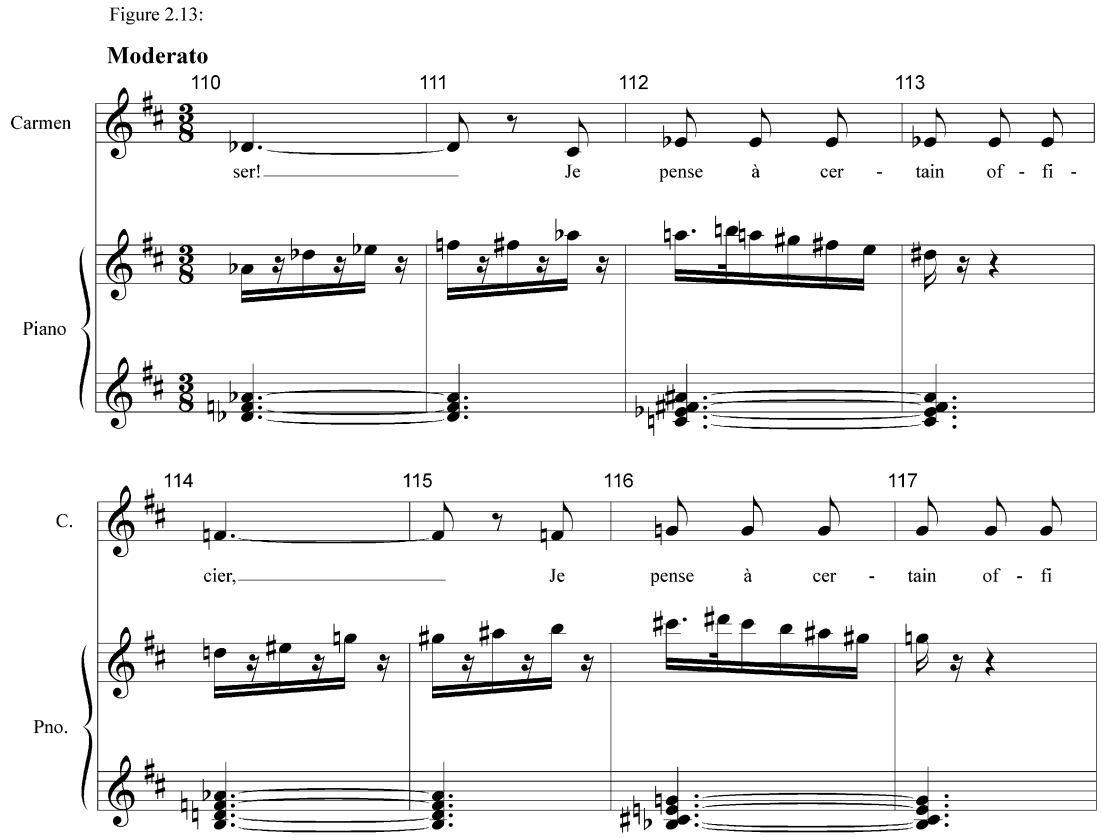
Dyonisian dance which presents the pleasure of dance and wine. As Carmen finishes to perform her Seguidilla, the atmosphere changes and the music becomes "quasi recitativeo". José comes in (in tempo moderato) and orders Carmen to stop talking to him; the threatening tremolandi on B in the violins and violas convey his confusion. Carmen tells him, in return, that she is not talking to him at all, in fact she is just singing for her own pleasure: "Je ne te parle pas", she says, "je chante pour moi-même".

The enharmonic modulation, which follows her declaration of singing for her own pleasure only, is meant to reassure José that Carmen dwells in remote keys, far away from his own tonality. Carmen's enharmonic modulation is clearly one of her techniques to catch José off guard. First she reassures him that she is totally engaged in the pleasure of singing for herself, in remote tonal areas which do not relate to his. But then, at the most unexpected moment, Carmen gets as close to José as possible. She modulates through a diminished seventh of her Seguidilla tonality, B minor (see Figure 4 above, bar 103), which resolves into D major and finally leads the orchestra to modulate into D flat major (see Figure 4, bars 108-109), the key of José's bourgeois fantasy Eros.

Once she gets into his tonal area, Carmen moves even closer. She tells José that she thinks of a certain officer ("Je pense à certain officier"), as the harmony goes into a chain of diminished chords which create a fall of minor seconds in the bass (D flat-C-B-B flat-A)(Figure 5)that definitely reminds us of her chromatic line in the Habanera. At this point, as before, Carmen uses the musical signs of feminine Otherness, which are strange to José's musical world; yet being aware of the music that surrounds her she knows that chromaticism will not convince José. Thus, suddenly, her slippery mood changes, as she moves into

a lyric love melody in tempo Moderato (see Figure 6 below). "She pivots into the mode of lyric urgency", says Susan McClary (McClary 1991: 88), a style which is much more familiar to José and the bourgeois audience.

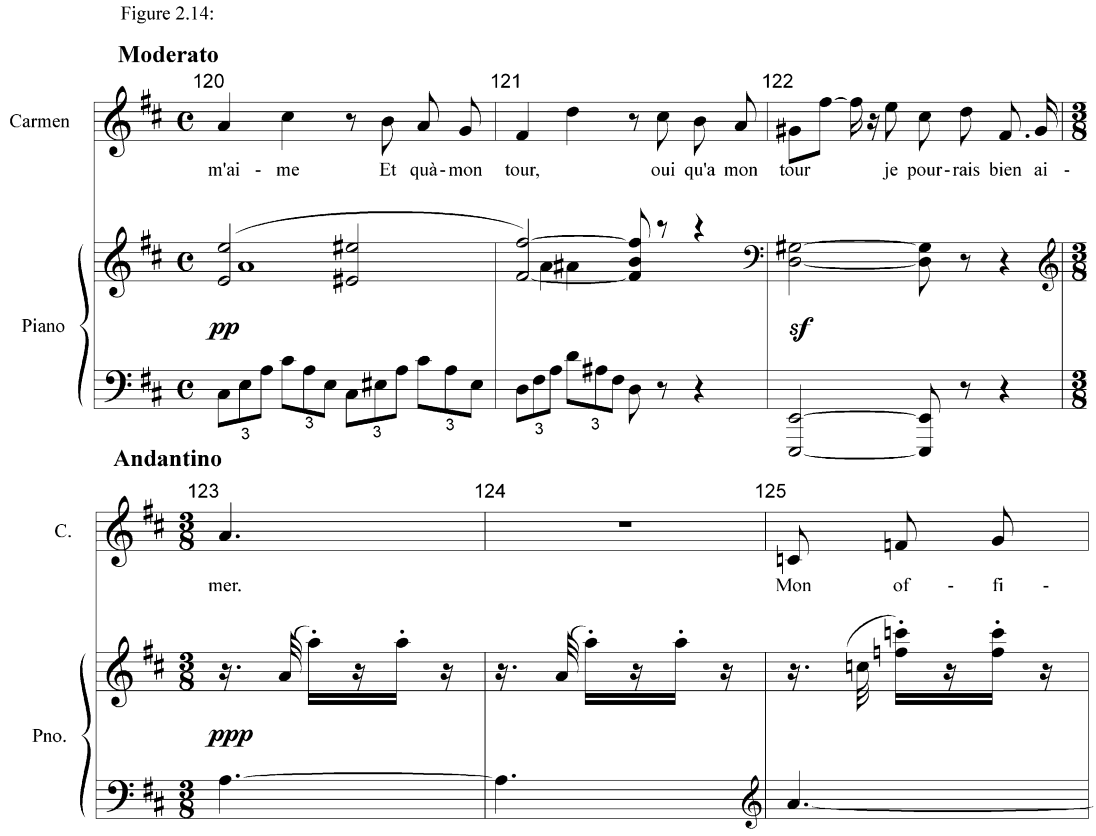
Figure 5: Carmen's chain of diminished chords which creates a fall of minor seconds



The juxtaposition of "lyric urgency" with the half-step formula in the harmony creates a metaphor of their contradictory worlds and integrates two levels of text. The level of geno-text - of subconscious knowledge, which is conveyed by slippery chromaticism - on the one hand, and the level of pheno-text, which brings into being a coherent text with José's lyrical style. Carmen's chromaticism signifies, *prima facie*, her elusiveness, yet at the same time hints at a deeper layer of meaning, the level of painful knowledge of forthcoming death. Yet, Carmen's final text is "aimed at

communication", as Dame expresses it; thus, she manages to combine her style with José's lyrical wide-ranged melody, which is bound to the conventions opéra-comique. Indeed, Carmen's linguistic virtuosity is so persuasive that José is immediately drawn into it and for the first time since he has met her he bursts out, eagerly saying her name.

Figure 6: Carmen's "lyric urgency"



For most operagoers, nowadays, Carmen's name is still associated with the archetypal femme fatale; a male idea that became over the years a *topos*. And indeed, this Andalusian gypsy perfectly summarizes a cultural theme that became dominant in the narratives of nineteenth century male creators. But Carmen is the typical example of misperception in her own time. She transcends the negative connotations of the

promiscuous black-eyed gypsy, who performs cabaret numbers, and turns into the singing and dancing body of the opera. As such she constitutes a new operatic vocabulary in which the male oriented perception of racial and sexual Otherness, and the representation of an authentic female subjectivity within a new conception of Difference are reconciled.

Carmen is, thus, one of the significant models of the modern opera heroine; who help us peruse an intellectual quest, revealing the interaction of gender with systems of representation and performance. Understanding her function and signification in Paris of the 1870s , therefore, contributes not merely to our understanding how gender worked in the past, but also helps us to understand (analogically) how it works now.

References

Abbate, Carolyn (1991) _____ *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

_____ (1989) Electra's Voice: Music and Language in Strauss's Opera. In Derick Puffet (ed.) *Richard Strauss: Electra*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 107-128.

Bleiler, Ellen H. (Translator and Introducer)(1970) *Carmen by Georges Bizet*. New York: Dover.

Dame, Joke (1998)_____Voices Within Voice: Geno-text and Pheno-text in Berio's Sequenza III. In Adam Krims (ed.) *Music/Ideology: Resisting the Aesthetics.* Canada: G+B Arts International.

Davidoff, Leonore, Jean L'esperance and Howard Newby (1979) Landscape with Figures: Home and Community in English Society. In Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, (eds.) *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 139-176.

Eco, Umberto (1979) *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Edwards, Geoffrey (1993) Carmen's Transfiguration from Merimee to Bizet: Beyond the Image of the Femme Fatale. *Nottingham French Studies*, 32/2, 1993, pp. 48-54.

Etzion, Judith (1993) The Spanish Fandango-From Eighteenth-Century 'Lasciviousness' to Nineteenth-Century Exoticism. *Anuario Musical*, 48, pp. 229-250.

Evans, Richard J. (1977) *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movemets in* E*urope, America and Australia 1840-1920*. New York: Barnes and Noble.

Feldman, Yael (1999) *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women's* Fiction. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hoffmann, Léon F. (1961) *Romantique Espagne: L'image de L'Espagne en France entre 1800 et 1850.* New Jersey: Université de Princeton.

Hoffmeister, Gerhart (1990) Exoticism: Granada's Alahambra in European Romanticism. In Gerhart Hoffmeister (ed.) *European Romanticism: Literary* C*ross-Currents, Modes and Models*. Detroit: Wayne University Press, pp. 113-126.

Hutcheon Linda and Michael Hutcheon (1996) *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Jacobi, Jolanda (1962) *The Psychology of C.G. Jung*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. London: Routledge and Kegan.

Jung, Carl G. (1963) *The Integration of the Personality*. Ninth edition. London: Routledge and Kegan.

_____(1964) *Man and His Symbols* .New York: Dell Publishing .

Krims, Adam (ed.) (1998) *Music/Ideology: Resisting the Aesthetics*. Canada: G+B Arts International.

Kristeva, Julia (1980) _____*Desire in Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

_____ (1986) Women's Time. In Toril Moi (ed.) T*he Kristeva Reader.*

Translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 471-484. Originally published in *Cahiers de Recherche de Sciences des Textes et Documents*, 5, 1979, pp.5-19.

McClary, Susan (1991) *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Monelle, Raymond (2000) *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Neumann, Erich (1954) *The Origins and History of Consciousness*. Translated by R.C. Hull. Forward by C.G. Jung. New York: Harper.

_____(1963) *The Great Mother*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Von Franz, Marie L. (1964) Science and the Unconscious. In Carl G. Jung and M.L. Von Franz, Joseph L. Henderson, Jolanda Jacobi, Aniela Jaffé (eds.) *Man and His Symbols* . London: Aldus Books, pp. 376-387.

Zack, Edith (1997) The Model of the Femme Fatale in Nineteenth Century Culture. In Maciej Jablonski and Jan Steszewski (eds.) *Interdisciplinary Studies in Musicology: Report from the Third Interdisciplinary Conference*. Poznan 1997, pp. 163-173.

_____(1998) Psychological Archetypes and Cultural Models; The Femme Fatale in Opera. In Adrian Gimate-Welsh (ed.*) La Semiotica: Interseccion Entre la Naturaleza y la Cultura.* CD ROM. Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. MUSICAL II.pdf., 8 pp.