



Society : Maidenhead Operatic Society  
Production : **CARMEN THE MUSICAL**  
Date : Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2011  
Venue : Desborough Suite  
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14

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## Report

At the age of thirteen I was taken to see my first opera, "*Carmen*", sung in English at Covent Garden in London. The production was magnificent and I instantly fell in love with the passionate, sumptuous music. Having enjoyed my first experience, I have since watched countless live productions of the opera all over the country as well as *Carmen Jones*, an updated version.

I was totally unaware that the opera had been converted into a musical in 1990 by David Badger and Bobbie Field, keeping all of George Bizet's wonderful music but replacing recitative with spoken dialogue.

So I was looking forward to this production of "*CARMEN THE MUSICAL*" by Maidenhead Operatic Society at the Desborough Suite.

This production was superbly sung by all of those on stage, whether chorus or principal roles. The excellent 12 piece orchestra was delightfully conducted by the musical director, Howard Faulkes. All of the well known pieces were there and were sung exceptionally well.

The movement was well co-ordinated with some enjoyable flamenco dances that added to the scenes. I felt that there needed to be more chemistry between the Don José and Carmen and some of the scenes required more understanding as the dialogue was lost. However, the overall impression was of a talented, well rehearsed performance by an excellent group of singers.

**CARMEN** (Liz Couper-Johnston) Liz has a wonderful singing voice of such clarity and tone. *The Habanera*, *Defiance* and *The Enticement* were all particularly memorable. The range of Spanish dresses, dark hair and complexion helped to portray a realistic Mediterranean appearance and helped establish the gypsy character. Add in some castanets and a flamenco dance or two, and the character looked suitably of Spanish gypsy origin! I would have liked to have seen more interaction with Don José during earlier scenes to make his 'conversion' a little more believable. The change was all too quick.

**MICAELA** (Cat Thompson) Cat played the nervous Micaela very well, offering a suitable contrast to the raucous Carmen. Her solo numbers were beautifully sung and enjoyed both "*Memories*" and "*Air*".

**DON JOSE** (William Branston) William has lovely singing voice that seemed to hit every note perfectly. I heard every word that was said or sung, such was the clearness of his diction. The character of Don Jose is complex, on the one hand he is dedicated soldier and devoted to his child hood sweetheart Micaela, but becomes captivated by Carmen's advances. William played the lovelorn well but I would have liked to have seen more of contrast at the beginning and more obvious transformation into falling to Carmen's desires.

**ESCAMILLO** (James Couper-Johnston) James looked very much the champion bull fighter, and again, sung wonderfully well, especially the well-known *Toreador's song*. The mannerisms of the bull

fighter were very well defined but played too often and perhaps needed some more subtle variations. However, this was a fine and credible performance.

**MERCEDES** (Sarah Barnes) A wonderful singer, Sarah produced an enjoyable performance as the gypsy friend to Carmen. I would like to have seen a little more characterisation, particularly in Act 2 in the Gypsy encampment.

**FRASQUITA** (Cathy Brookes) Cathy singing was beautifully delivered. I particularly enjoyed her characterisation of Carmen's gypsy fiend, especially in the Tavern and Mountain scenes as her facial expressions and mannerisms looked very natural.

**MORALES** (James Evans) I noted in the programme, James professed that he has a love for singing and it showed with a fine portrayal as the corporal of the guards.

**LILLAS PASTIA** (Ian Cameron) A lovely characterisation as the Innkeeper and produced some good moments of humour.

**ZUNIGA** (Graham Johnstone) Graham produced a worthy performance as the Lieutenant of the Dragoons with notable scene with Carmen in the Inn.

**DANCAIRO** (Jonathan Heard) & **REMANDADO** (Chris Denton) as the smugglers looked their parts and there were some lovely scenes for them to show the characterisation.

**Stage management & crew** – the stage was simply set with the few changes quickly and efficiently executed.

**Set** – The set was simply but imaginatively laid out, using tables and blocks covered with cloths giving a Mediterranean feel. Behind one of the tables, hidden from view, was a light that aided creating atmosphere. At the back was a raised platform that was used with great effect for entrances and exits. Relevant items were brought on which helped define the location.

**Choreographer (Christine Holley)** – The use of flamenco dances gave this production an authentic Spanish feel. The dances, although not strenuous, were artistically pleasing and very well rehearsed.

**Director (Lou Millard)** The show had clear ideas and the cast seemed to know what was expected of them. Entrances and exits were on the whole well executed and I thought all the entrances through the auditorium were very effective, particularly the beginning of Act 2 scene 1 and the toreadors entrances in Act 2 scene 2.

**Musical direction (Howard Faulks)** – There were excellent performance from all soloists and chorus alike. This production clearly had strong musical vision that worked superbly. I enjoyed everyone's singing and the orchestra blended excellently with vocalists to produce a memorable performance.

**Lighting design & operation** There were several lighting effects during this production, ranging from changes of colour on the cyclorama and various spots. On the whole these were expertly cued and added interest to the show although there was an unusual effect at the back of the stage at one point, as if the working lights appeared for a second. However, this was efficiently and swiftly rectified and did not impede on the overall effect of the production.

**Sound design & operation** The sound of the orchestra with the singers was pleasantly mixed to produce an enjoyable audio performance. Every word was heard, whether spoken or sung.

**Costumes** Some of the dresses were wonderfully authentic Spanish, offering the flamenco dances swirling hems! The soldiers and cigar workers were suitably attired and the toreadors were also authentically dressed.

**Makeup** The make-up was aptly applied but I could not help wondering why Carmen was more tanned than anyone else - either she needed to be less or the other gypsies more.

**Front of house** I was very warmly welcomed and found all the front of house friendly and helpful.

**Programme** The twenty page programme with a colour cover and black and white inserts. There are very clear cast photographs and interesting biographies of the principals and production team. A brief synopsis and some notes on the music from the musical director added additional interest. A list of musical numbers, cast list and orchestra list in the centre pages also helped.

I enjoyed my visit to Seville and re-acquainting my love for Bizet's music and look forward to seeing MOS next production in the New Year.

**Gordon Bird**