PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Georges Bizet
Born October 25, 1838, Paris, France.
Died June 3, 1875, Bougival, near Paris, France.

Suite No. 2 from L'arlézienne

Bizet composed incidental music for Alphonse Daudet's play L'arlézienne in 1872. Bizet drew a four-movement concert suite from the score, and in 1879, four years after the composer's death, Ernest Guiraud compiled a second suite of four selections, which is performed at these concerts. The orchestra consists of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, alto saxophone, four horns, two trumpets and two cornets, three trombones, timpani, tambourine, bass drum, cymbals, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately eighteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of music from Bizet's L'arlézienne (the Suite no. 1) were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 28 and 29, 1894, with Theodore Thomas conducting. The Orchestra's first performances of the Suite no. 2 were given at Orchestra Hall on November 29 and 30, 1912, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances of this suite were given on November 25, 27, and 28, 1987, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting. The Orchestra first performed music from L'arlézienne at the Ravinia Festival on July 8, 1941, with Sir Thomas Beecham conducting, and most recently on June 21, 1997, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

The Chicago Symphony recorded both suites from L'arlézienne in 1967 under Jean Martinon for RCA. Under Frederick Stock, the Orchestra recorded the Farandole from the Second Suite in 1916 for Columbia. A 1965 performance of the Farandole conducted by Jean Martinon is included in From the Archives, vol. 12: A Tribute to Jean Martinon.

Georges Bizet was a remarkable young talent. He was admitted to the Paris Conservatory two weeks before his tenth birthday and won the first of many prizes only six months later. (Over the years, he was given prizes—several of them first place awards—in solfeggio, piano, organ, and fugue; his piano playing, in particular, won the praise of Liszt and Berlioz.) Bizet began to study counterpoint with Pierre Zimmerman, a distinguished teacher near retirement age, whose main contribution to his student's development may have been his frequent absences from the classroom, when his substitute was Charles Gounod, then on the verge of international fame. (Gounod was married to Zimmerman's daughter Anna.) Gounod quickly recognized Bizet's exceptional gifts and asked him to assist with various musical projects.

Despite his abundant talent, Bizet did not find his true calling until the 1860s. The Pearl Fishers, which premiered in 1863, was not a success with the public or the critics (except for the invariably perceptive Berlioz), but it is the work of a born opera composer, overflowing with the promise that would ultimately be fulfilled in his final work, Carmen. It was Léon Carvalho, who commissioned The Pearl Fishers, who suggested Bizet's next theatrical venture as composer of incidental music for Alphonse Daudet's play L'arlézienne, a melodrama about the young peasant Fédéri's love for a girl from Arles, the lovely, sun-dappled town in Provence. (Since the title character doesn't actually appear in the play, L'arlézienne eventually became a French tag for someone who fails to show up.) The drama proved to have little staying power—in 1897, when it was produced on Broadway, the New York Times said, "One must be interested beforehand in Provence and its people to care much for the play." Even today, after Peter
Mayle has turned Provence into a go-to destination, Daudet's play holds little appeal. But Bizet's music, as excerpted in two popular suites, is a concert hall favorite.

Writing for a conventional pit band, Bizet supplied twenty-seven musical numbers, ranging from bits of background music of just a few measures to big instrumental showpieces that served as preludes and entr'actes. The production ran for only twenty-one performances and played to dispiriting, largely empty houses. "It was a glittering flop with the loveliest music in the world," Daudet is supposed to have said sometime after the premiere. Bizet too clearly thought highly of his score, and immediately after the theatrical run, he excerpted four numbers and rescored them for full orchestra. The new suite quickly became a hit in the concert hall.

Bizet died in the summer of 1875, on the night of the thirty-third performance of his new opera Carmen. (He had fallen ill soon after the premiere, which had a lukewarm reception; the night he died, the Carmen, Célestine Galli-Marié, is said to have been so overcome with premonition in the scene where she reads death in the cards that she fainted while leaving the stage.) Four years later, Ernest Guiraud, a friend of Bizet and the composer of the recitatives that were added to Carmen for the Vienna production in 1875, put together a second suite of music from L'arlesienne. As a composer, Guiraud paled next to Bizet—"I am trying to liven him up a bit," Bizet once said, complaining that Guiraud's approach to music was "a little soft, a little apathetic." But he understood Bizet's genius perfectly, and his suite of excerpts from L'arlesienne is a fitting companion to Bizet's own set.

Guiraud begins with the lovely Pastorale that sets the early morning scene for act 2 (the fully awakened middle section was originally a chorus of off-stage revelers in the play). The Intermezzo, based on a Provencal folksong, is the music that divides the two scenes of act 2. The minuet that follows isn't from L'arlesienne at all; perhaps jealous that Bizet had already taken the best music for his own orchestral suite, Guiraud turned to Bizet's La jolie fille de Perth, an opera written ten years earlier, for this charming dance. The final, brilliant Farandole is a dance from act 3 of L'arlesienne, here magnificently expanded and embellished with the addition of "The March of the Three Kings," a regional folk tune Bizet had originally used in another number. Like Guiraud's version of Carmen, which reigned for decades in opera houses, this suite from L'arlesienne is Bizet filtered through Guiraud's admiring eyes. As an introduction to Bizet's genius for color and melody, and as a sample of his born sense for atmosphere and theatrical flair, it is as irresistible as anything the master himself gave us.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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