

Bizet Carmen

The First Complete Recording



LINER NOTES

Georges Bizet (1838-1875) Carmen

The First Complete Recording
Featuring Emmy Destinn
(*Sung in German*)

Opera in four acts
Recorded in thirty-six parts
Libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy
Based on the novel by Prosper Mérimée

Don José - Karl Jörn
Escamillo - Hermann Bachmann
Le Dancaire - Julius Lieban
Le Remendado - Rudolf Krasa
Zuniga - Felix Dahn
Moralès - Felix Dahn
Carmen - Emmy Destinn
Carmen* - Otilie Metzger
Micaëla - Minnie Nast
Frasquita - Marie Dietrich
Mercédès - Grete Parbs

**CD 1, Tracks 15 and 17*

**Bruno Seidler-Winkler, conductor
Chorus of the Court Opera, Berlin
Grammophone Orchestra, Berlin**

This fascinating German language *Carmen* was recorded by the Gramophone and Typewriter Company in Berlin during the week of 14 October 1908. One of the first efforts to record a complete opera, it has always been known to collectors as “Destinn’s *Carmen*.” It’s as if the composer, Georges Bizet (1838–1875), was cast in the shadow of the brilliant Czech soprano, Emmy Destinn (1878–1930), along with the other members of the cast. Her unique voice and vivid, exuberant personality completely dominate the recording. This performance, of course, bears little resemblance to Bizet’s original opéra comique which, by definition, made its extensive use of spoken dialogue. But, from the beginning, *Carmen* traveled well, and the German language seems to sharpen the edge of the drama. While the harsh, somewhat throaty sounds lack the insinuating subtlety of the French, the opera sustains its intensity. In this performance Micaëla is sung by Minnie Nast (1874–1956); Don José by Karl Jörn (1873–1947); and Hermann Bachmann (1864–1937) is the stentorian Escamillo. In lesser roles are such notables as Marie Dietrich (1867–1940) as Frasquita, and Julius Lieban (1857–1940) as Le Dancaïre, Otilie Metzger (1878– 1943?) is the Carmen in a couple of Act 2 ensembles as Destinn was overseas when the scenes were re-recorded. Bruno Seidler–Winkler was the conductor.

Bizet’s early death, three months to the day after the 3 March 1875 premiere at the Paris Opéra-Comique, is often blamed on a broken heart caused by the initial failure of his opera. While this heightens the romanticism surrounding that tragedy, *Carmen* was a box office success from the beginning, being given 48 times during its first season. Although the critics were slow to adjust to a stark, realistic melodrama in the form of an opéra comique, the audience response was generally enthusiastic. Shortly after Bizet’s death, Ernest Guiraud (1837–1892) revised the opera, writing recitatives to replace the spoken dialogue, which allowed the opera to be more easily translated and transported. As early as October 1875, Guiraud’s revised version of *Carmen* was given in Vienna. This was followed by premieres throughout the world, including London (1878), St. Petersburg (1878), and New York (1879).

The first performance in Berlin was on 12 March 1880, with the lyric soprano Emilie Tagliana singing Carmen. She was soon replaced by Pauline Lucca, whom Lilli Lehmann described as a genius, stating... “Lucca’s Carmen was the only one for me. She was simple and great.” The following year, the American soprano, Minnie Hauk, who had earlier triumphed as Carmen in London, assumed the role in Berlin. *Carmen* did not really define itself as the property of mezzo–sopranos until well into the twentieth century. Lilli Lehmann, herself, sang the role in Berlin before making her 1885 debut at the Metropolitan Opera as a German Carmen. Emmy Destinn therefore already had a formidable precedent to follow in 1908.

Prior to the original French production, Bizet supposedly re-wrote the role of Carmen for the soprano Célestine Galli-Marié (Marie Roze is thought to have been Bizet’s first choice), a great dramatic artist with a limited vocal range who had also created Thomas’s Mignon in 1866. Significantly, both of these roles make few demands on a soprano’s upper register. After

attending Galli-Marié's London debut in 1886, the British critic, Hermann Klein commented: "What an interesting, finished interpretation her Carmen was... Her reading may be best described as a happy medium between the vulgar and the lady-like Carmens to whom we have been treated in turn." In the nineteenth century sopranos were not categorized so rigidly. Carmen, especially as a role for a singing actress, was performed by coloraturas and contraltos alike, and many failed in the attempt. The most notable failure was that of the great Adelina Patti.

As the precocious child of wealthy parents who were patrons of the arts, Emmy Destinn showed early gifts for music, drama and literature. Before beginning her vocal studies she became a reluctant pianist who could read anything at sight, as well as a violin virtuoso after studying in the advanced classes of Ferdinand Lachner. She studied acting at Prague's National Theater, composed music and wrote poems, plays and novels. Destinn was known as a "quick study". In addition to her musical gifts she was a linguist, speaking German, Italian, French and English fluently, all in addition to her native Czech. This education helped her learn roles in several languages.

Born in Prague as Emilie Pavlina Venceslava Kittlová, she took the name of her teacher, Maria von Dreger Loewe-Destinn, for the stage. After inexplicably suffering rejections at auditions in Prague and Dresden, Destinn made a sensational debut as Santuzza at Berlin's Kroll Theater in 1898. She was immediately signed to a five-year contract by the Berlin Court Opera. She remained in Berlin until 1908, singing a vast repertoire while on a very demanding schedule. Carmen was among her early roles along with Mignon, Elizabeth in *Tannhäuser*, Valentine, Sélíka, and Agathe. Later she sang in numerous premieres of soon-to-be-forgotten operas such as Leoncavallo's *Der Roland von Berlin*. Her roles spanned a wide range, from Wagner's Eva, Elsa and Senta to Mozart's Pamina and Donna Anna, Verdi's Aida, Gounod's Marguerite, Strauss's Salome, Puccini's Butterfly and even Charpentier's Louise.

By 1901 she was invited to sing Senta in the Bayreuth premiere of *Der Fliegende Holländer*. She appeared in London the following year for a series of Wagner concerts conducted by Hans Richter. In 1904, she made her debut at Covent Garden as Donna Anna. Her other roles that season were Aida, as well as Santuzza and Nedda both of which she sang on the same evening. She first co-starred with Enrico Caruso on these occasions. The following year she had phenomenal success as Cio-Cio-San in the London premiere of *Madama Butterfly*. Destinn regularly appeared in London until 1914, returning in 1919 after the war.

Destinn actually signed a contract with the Metropolitan Opera in 1903, but her contract in Berlin prevented her appearing until 1908. Her debut was on opening night, 16 November 1908, as Aida when, incidentally, Arturo Toscanini also made his Met debut. Richard Aldrich wrote of her performance in *The New York Times*, "Mme. Destinn... has a voice of great power, body, and vibrant quality, dramatic in expression, flexible, and wholly subservient to her intentions, which are those of a singer of keen musical feeling and intelligence." She was used primarily in dramatic soprano roles and never given the opportunity to sing Carmen at the Met.

During her first season it was sung by Maria Gay, who specialized in the role, and afterwards, Geraldine Farrar claimed it as her own. But Destinn was held in high regard, assuming major roles on five opening nights. The world premiere of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* took place on 10 December 1910 at the Met, with Destinn in the title role of Minnie. Caruso and Amato were her co-stars. Most of Destinn's Met roles were in Italian opera. She made occasional appearances in Wagner and Mozart, and there were a few successful performances as Lisa in Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, and Marie in Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*. Destinn later complained that the Met did not offer her enough opportunity to show her versatility. With time out during the war, Destinn's Met career extended until 1920.

In 1916, Destinn left \$100,000 in concert bookings behind when she impulsively returned to Bohemia to join her lover, the baritone Dinh Gilly, who had been interned as an alien. A fervent patriot who was sympathetic to the resistance, Destinn's passport was seized and she was confined to her summer residence in South Bohemia. Destinn's life was filled with numerous romances. Artur Rubinstein wrote of a youthful one-night affair in Berlin in which Destinn revealed a brightly colored Boa Constrictor tattoo down her leg, from thigh to ankle. A 1979 Czech film, "Divine Emma", attempted to deal with the mythological character of her life. She was the essence of the passionate bohemian, which must have added credibility to her Carmen.

As the war drew to a close, Destinn was allowed to sing at Prague's National Theatre. Afterwards, as Emma Destinova, she toured with the Czech Quartet, violinist Jaroslav Kocian, and a chorus, presenting an exclusively Czech repertoire. Destinn briefly picked up her operatic career in London and New York, but now seemed to prefer the concert stage where she could satisfy her nationalistic feelings as to repertoire. After marriage to a Czech air force officer, she formally retired from public life in 1923, but continued to make occasional appearances in Czechoslovakia. In 1927, she appeared in Berlin, and gave her final concert in London on 16 October, 1928, at the age of fifty.

The soprano, Florence Easton, who joined the Berlin Opera in 1907, stated that Destinn was the greatest soprano she had ever heard... "She always threw her whole self into whatever she did. And that voice; it was fascinating, thrilling, compelling. I have never heard anyone else sing the Nile Scene in *Aida* as she could. Her "O patria mia" just took your breath away." Richard Strauss, who had directed her on many occasions in Berlin and unsuccessfully requested her for the premieres of *Salome* and *Ariadne*, was taken on a tour of Prague in 1910. When Destinn's house was pointed out to him, he removed his hat and gestured like a true believer before an icon.

While Destinn must have seemed larger than life, like a force of nature, she was actually a small, round dark-haired woman with regular features. While not physically imposing, she made up for it with extraordinary energy and drive. With her exceptional musicality and highly developed acting skills she could dominate a performance. The recording presented here was made shortly before she left Berlin to join the Metropolitan Opera, she

was then 30 years old and had been performing professionally for only a decade. Destinn was in her prime, and her voice leaps out of the grooves with youthful vitality.

From the first notes of the “Habanera” Destinn’s gleaming, silvery voice is immediately projected forward, clearly differentiating itself from the other singers’. While she sounds at ease in German, her voice has a slightly acidic tinge that we more readily associate with Eastern European singers. Her “Habanera” is more outgoing and robust than usual, lacking the sly, insinuating sensuality of a Calvé or Supervia. But after she had been taken into custody, her voice takes on color. Her teasing Tra-la-la-las ooze sensuality, and the “Seguidilla” is marvelous. Contrasting with the cautious Jörn, Destinn plays freely with the rhythm, relishing every word and ending on a brilliant high B that just springs into space. By the end of the first act Destinn has exerted a magnetic power that must have been irresistible on stage.

Jörn is well-intentioned but has great difficulty with Don José’s lyrical moments, even attempting an extremely awkward messa di voce at the end of the “Flower Song”. But when José’s life starts falling apart, the agitation seems to free Jörn’s voice and it begins to ring out powerfully. Destinn is fully into her part at all times: one never senses any self-consciousness. The shifts in mood during Act 3 bring changes in her vocal color; in the “Card Scene” with the excellent Marie Dietrich and Grete Parbs, Destinn’s tones fall into the chest and assume a darker timbre as the cards predict her fate.

The Act 4 Finale finds both Destinn and Jörn rising to the challenge, building an intense veristic climax to the opera. Jörn is in his element here—a sob in his throat, his anguished, metallic voice cutting through the orchestra. The drama plays itself out as Destinn interpolates brilliant top notes, but at no point does she exaggerate or distort the music. Both singers contribute high voltage performances to the thrilling conclusion.

While a performance of *Carmen* in German is a little like listening to an operatic version of *The Blue Angel* (minus Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings), this recording has the virtue of giving us the opportunity to hear one of the greatest singers of the “golden age” in a complete recording.

Destinn creates a remarkable characterization; while bursting with a sensuous feeling for life, her *Carmen* was not over-complicated. Compared as a singing actress with Gemma Bellincioni, it was Destinn who had *the voice*: it could explode like fireworks or envelop Don José in its velvety warmth. There is something about this extrovert artist that compels a listener to pay close attention; she is just so human and appealing. Perhaps too impulsively emotional in real life to sustain a lengthy career, Emmy Destinn “physically” communicates her greatness in this recording with her human vitality.

The lovely Micaëla, Minnie Nast, was born and educated in Karlsruhe, Germany, and made her debut in Aachen in 1897. One year later she joined the Dresden Royal Opera where she remained until retirement in 1919. She is best remembered for her performance as Sophie in the world premiere of *Der Rosenkavalier* at Dresden on 26 January 1911.

A powerful Don José, Karl Jörn was born in Riga, Latvia, and studied in Berlin. After his debut at Freiburg in 1896 he became a member of the Zurich Opera in 1898–99 and the Hamburg Opera in 1899–1902. Jörn then joined the Berlin Court Opera and remained there until 1908 when, like Destinn, he came to the Metropolitan Opera. He sang there until retiring in 1914 and chose to remain in the United States, becoming an American citizen. Jörn taught for several years in Denver until Johanna Gadski asked him to join her American tour with the German Opera Company in 1928 when he sang Tristan to her Isolde.

The sturdy and voluminous Escamillo, Hermann Bachmann was born in Kottbus, Germany and made his debut in 1890 with the Halle Opera. He remained with this company until 1894, then singing at Nürnberg until 1897. He had sung Wotan in the 1896 Bayreuth Ring Cycle and became a member of the Berlin Court Opera in 1897 where he remained until 1917.

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