



Georges Bizet: Carmen

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This recording of excerpts from Carmen was made for broadcasting purposes by RIAS Berlin. The reasons for having it sung in German were threefold: it was common practice at the time to perform vocal music in the vernacular; as part of the 're-education' after the Nazi period it was important that culture could be understood easily and RIAS reached only people in Berlin and its surrounding area. It was never intended for commercial release. But also when Fricsay a few years later recorded a similar highlights disc for Deutsche Grammophon with other singers it was also sung in German. It was, during that period, the policy of the company, which was still mainly a Germany-oriented company. During a period of transition they used to set down two sets of recordings, one for the domestic market in German and one for an international market in the original language.

One might wonder why they didn't record the full opera when they spent so much effort on the production. Hearing the result it is even more to be deeply regretted, since this is from beginning to end a truly fascinating and engaging reading, first and foremost on behalf of the conductor. Hungarian-born Ferenc Fricsay had a comet-like career directly after the war. In the 1950s he was certainly one of the foremost conductors in Europe, highly regarded in a wide repertoire and possibly Deutsche Grammophon's premium conductor. Alas he contracted cancer and died in 1963, aged 48. In the field of opera he recorded several Mozart works: Die Entführung, Le nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni and Die Zauberflöte. His Fidelio is also a reading to place among the best, and I believe he could have made a Carmen to sweep the board with existing versions. The mono sound on this disc is a bit congested but clear and well-balanced and the clarity of Fricsay's conducting is superb. Extremely well rehearsed, the prelude is both punchy and elegant with lucid textures and rhythmic élan. It is here, and in the three entr'actes and the ballet sequence in act four that he shows what a fine conductor he was. The first entr'acte (tr. 5) is rather brisk but light and airy and translucent, the second (tr. 8) – the one with flute and harp in the opening – is also light with splendid playing from the wind soloists, but maybe the harp is a little too closely balanced. The third entr'acte (tr. 11) is shaped to perfection and the ballet music is a tour de force with a frenetic Farandole (tr. 12) and the Danse bohémienne a winner with its rousing accelerando.

But Carmen is much more than a few orchestral pieces and it is in the vocal numbers that a conductor reveals his dramatic, theatrical mettle; this is also where Fricsay triumphs. He chooses sensible tempos, never drags, keeping in mind that this was originally an Opéra Comique: a Singspiel with a lighter touch than through-composed operas. The fine duet with Micaëla and Don José in act one is so lovingly moulded and oh! how the strings glow! The gypsy song in act two is highly charged and he brings out the contrasts in the Card Scene in act three between the light-heartedness of Frasquita and Mercedes and the ominous darkness when Carmen enters.

The singing is a slightly mixed bag but in general it is up to standard. There is no Escamillo, but he wasn't in Mérimée's original story either. Frasquita and Mercedes are good and Elfriede Trötschel is a lovely Micaëla, singing with warmth and feeling. Rudolf Schock was a versatile singer. To many he was the leading operetta star of his time but he actually sang anything from Donizetti to Wagner – he was a better-than-average Walthar in Rudolf Kempe's Meistersinger – and his Don José has many virtues. He can be rather stiff and unrelenting at times and his actual tone is on the dry side but he has his lyrical moments where he caresses the phrases lovingly. In the second act confrontation with Carmen he is deeply involved and delivers a lyrical and restrained Flower Song with powerful climaxes –and he ends it softly! It's a pity that it wasn't cued separately; as it is it is in the middle of a track that lasts for 12 minutes. He is also moving in the final scene.

And what about Carmen? At the time of the recording Margarete Klose was close to fifty and had a long and distinguished career behind her, best known as a Wagner singer. In the Habanera there are signs of a certain hollowness of tone. This is typical of singers who have had a too one-sided diet of heavy Wagnerian meals, but she is nuanced and the Seguidilla is splendidly alluring. Elsewhere she has a tendency to chop up the musical line with a kind of Wagnerian declamation but it has to be admitted that in the Card Scene she is winning with her Walhalla intensity.

Not perhaps a disc for the general opera-lover who wants all the plums in good readings and modern sound but for admirers of Ferenc Fricssay it is a must. I believe many other collectors will find a lot to admire.