

# Critical Allusion and Critical Assessment: Berlioz's and Reyer's Reviews of Bizet in the *Journal des débats*

Lesley A. Wright  
University of Hawai'i  
Email: [wright@hawaii.edu](mailto:wright@hawaii.edu)

*Respected as one of four 'feuilles de qualité' in nineteenth-century France, the Journal des débats politiques et littéraires published articles by some of the most talented writers/critics of its time. In 'feuilletons', large articles that ran across the bottom of the first and second pages, these authors gave perceptive critiques in high-quality prose and provided their readers with relief from the political news discussed on the page above. In January 1858 literary critic Hippolyte Rigault asserted that modern criticism communicated not just through forthright judgements but also through innuendo and nuance. A sophisticated readership could then be expected to take up the task of understanding the allusions and filling in the blanks. Like Rigault, Hector Berlioz (music critic of the Débats from 1835 to 1863) and Ernest Reyer (from 1866 to 1898) used both text and subtext to convey their assessments. This study, with the goal of examining how shades of approval and disapproval could be alluded to or directly revealed, traces how they wrote about their younger contemporary Georges Bizet in the years following Rigault's article.*

## Berlioz, Reyer and Critical Writing in the *Journal des débats*

In January 1858 Hippolyte Rigault wrote a 'feuilleton' for the *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* where he added his voice to an already heated, multi-newspaper discussion about what criticism should be and, in particular, how it should be expressed.<sup>1</sup> As it is unlikely that Georges Bizet read this article while he was making his way south to Rome after winning the Prix de Rome competition the previous summer, Berlioz and Reyer, both active critics in that decade, may well have paid attention to it.<sup>2</sup> Rigault maintains that in modern criticism the sword is unnecessary, for the pen is enough, if it is a good one, since the public interprets the allusions and fills in the blanks:

---

<sup>1</sup> In his study of the nineteenth-century French press, Claude Bellanger (*Histoire générale de la presse française*, vol. 3 (Paris: PUF, 1972): 316) classifies the *Journal des débats* as a 'feuille de qualité', along with *Le Temps*, *Le Gaulois* and *Le Figaro*. (Ange-) Hippolyte Rigault (1821–1858), also professor of rhetoric at the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand, began to write for the *Journal des débats* in 1853 where his column 'Revue de quinzaine', published in 1857–58, was much discussed.

<sup>2</sup> Hippolyte Rigault, 'Revue de quinzaine', *Journal des débats* (hereinafter *JD*), 21 January 1858.

In literature as in politics there has always been a sense of the *coterie*, surrenders of conscience, exchanges of services for fraternal reasons, praise given to be agreeable, attenuations and dissimulations of the truth. Contemporary criticism still has its abuses. . . . But if it has a gift that is its privilege, it is that of expressing its judgments in flexible forms. . . . It is of indicating its ideas with a finesse that allows perceptive readers to grasp the exact nuance of the opinion behind the moderation of the words. It is the art of contradicting without seeming to blame, of objecting instead of fighting, of making one reflect instead of giving offense. . . . This criticism has been refined in society, and it is not truth that suffers seriously from this. Truth always finds a way to do its part. Criticism has only to imply its meaning; the rest is worked out. The public undertakes the task of understanding the innuendos and filling in the blanks. There is a perfect understanding between criticism and [this public which] gives each word the meaning it should have.

De tout temps il y a eu dans la littérature, comme dans la politique, de l'esprit de coterie, des capitulations de conscience, des échanges de service par confraternité, des éloges de convenance, des atténuations et des déguisemens de la vérité. La critique contemporaine a toujours ses abus ... Mais si elle a un don qui soit son privilège, c'est celui d'exprimer ses jugemens sous des formes flexibles ... C'est celui d'indiquer sa pensée avec une finesse qui permet aux lecteurs clairvoyans de saisir la nuance exacte de l'opinion sous les ménagemens des mots. C'est l'art de contredire sans paraître blâmer, d'objecter au lieu de combattre, et de faire réfléchir au lieu d'offenser ... La critique a fait son éducation dans le monde, et ce n'est pas la vérité qui en souffre le plus. La vérité trouve toujours moyen de se faire sa part. La critique a beau ne parler qu'à demi-mot, le reste se devine. Le public se charge de comprendre les sous-entendus et de remplir les blancs. Il y a entre la critique et lui une entente parfaite ... [I]l donne à chaque mot le sens qu'il doit avoir.<sup>3</sup>

In his rebuttal, Jules Barbey d'Aureville railed that the *Débats* was printing cowardly criticism that buttressed the literary status quo.<sup>4</sup> But Rigault cleverly responded by reviewing his antagonist's novel, *La Vieille Maîtresse*, and with a largely polite analysis of its characterizations and plot, he trashes the publication:

As the reader is my witness, I have shown the most perfect moderation to this point. I did an analysis and held back from negative comments, considering that things pretty much speak for themselves. In particular, I quoted, perhaps too much ... My euphemisms were understood, my hesitations replaced, my lines of dots, translated.

Le lecteur m'est témoin que j'ai montré jusqu'ici la plus parfaite modération. J'ai fait une analyse et me suis abstenu de réflexions, estimant que les choses parlaient assez d'elle-mêmes. J'ai surtout cité, trop peut-être ... On a compris mes euphémismes, suppléé mes réticences, traduit mes lignes de points.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> With his attack article, 'Notre critique et la leur', *Le Réveil*, 2 January 1858, Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aureville (1808–1889) had rankled fellow journalists. A colourful figure and former dandy, later called the 'Connétable des Lettres', he became known for expressing forceful opinions. Replying to Barbey d'Aureville and to Adolphe Granier de Cassagnac (director of *Le Réveil*) before Rigault wrote his *feuilleton* were Edmond Texier, 'Revue hebdomadaire', *Le Siècle*, 10 January 1858; Léo Lespès, 'A M. Granier de Cassagnac' and 'Échos de Paris', *Le Figaro*, 10 January 1858; and Charles Monselet, 'Théâtre du Figaro, XIII. Quatre hommes et un caporal', *Le Figaro*, 14 January 1858.

<sup>4</sup> See Barbey d'Aureville, 'Les honnêtes gens du *Journal des Débats*', *Le Réveil*, 30 January 1858. Reprinted in Barbey d'Aureville, *Les Œuvres et les hommes: Journalistes et polémistes*, vol. 15 (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1895): 91–101.

<sup>5</sup> Rigault, 'Revue de quinzaine', *JD*, 6 February 1858.

Immediately after this, Rigault rewrites his criticism of the novel using scathing language, because Barbey d'Aureville had so vehemently expressed his contempt for 'evasive' criticism.

Like Rigault and other literary figures of that time, Berlioz and Reyer were masterful writers who made use of allusion, maintained control of tone and structure, and deployed numerous other tools of language to communicate with their readers.<sup>6</sup> For example, Berlioz had learned from the theatre critic of the *Débats*, Jules Janin, how plot analysis could destroy a work before anything was said about the music and eventually 'to perfect what he called the *feuilleton du silence*, a comic fantasia that blatantly avoids saying anything about the work in question – but thereby says it all'.<sup>7</sup> Omission was particularly useful for critics. Ever since Castil-Blaze, music critic for the *Débats* from 1820 to 1832, it had become customary to comment only on pieces that succeeded or were worthy of interest, leaving the readers to grasp the significance of the gaps.<sup>8</sup> Such a strategy allowed for politeness towards the well-placed and kindness toward friends.<sup>9</sup> Neither Reyer nor Berlioz would have wished to sacrifice their careers 'on the altar of absolute frankness',<sup>10</sup> nor would they have wanted to renounce their aesthetic principles, but both knew how to use irony, polite euphemisms, flat tone, diminutive adjectives, alliteration and so on to get their points across.<sup>11</sup> In a memorable simile Berlioz described what he probably expected and sometimes hoped would happen: 'the truth seeps out between my lines, just as under the extraordinary strain of the hydraulic press, water seeps out through the iron of the machine' (*la vérité suinte à travers mes lignes, comme, dans les efforts extraordinaires de la presse hydraulique, l'eau suinte à travers le fer de l'instrument*).<sup>12</sup> And though he never wrote a theoretical text

<sup>6</sup> On Berlioz's language and the influence of Chateaubriand, see Sylvie Douche, 'Berlioz critique et juge des Requiem de Cherubini et de Mozart', in *Berlioz, homme de lettres*, ed. Georges Zaragoza (Dijon: Éditions du Murmure, 2006): 93–7. On Reyer's language and literary friends, and the influence of Théophile Gautier, see Émile Henriot, Preface to Ernest Reyer, *Quarante ans de musique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1909): ii, xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Kolb, 'Hector Berlioz', in *European Writers*, vol. 6, ed. Jacques Barzun (New York: Scribner's, 1985): 785.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Reibel, *L'Écriture de la critique musicale au temps de Berlioz* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005): 226–7.

<sup>9</sup> Reyer's young friend Henriot (in Reyer, *Quarante ans de musique*, v) asserts that if politeness or friendship compelled Reyer to mask his opinion, he preferred to keep quiet. On the conflicts of interest that resulted when journalists were also librettists, composers or theatre administrators, see Emmanuel Reibel, 'Carrières entre presse et opéra au XIXe siècle: du mélange des genres au conflit d'intérêts', *Médias 19* [on line], Publications, Olivier Bara and Marie-Eve Thérénty, eds, *Presse et opéra aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles, Nouveaux protocoles de la critique à Paris et en province*, posted: 28/02/2018, <http://www.medias19.org/index.php?id=23962>.

<sup>10</sup> Gérard Condé, 'Berlioz critique', in *Berlioz écrivain*, Béatrice Didier, Cécile Reynaud, Peter Bloom, et al. (Paris: Association pour la diffusion de la pensée française, 2001): 59.

<sup>11</sup> In 'La Critique musicale: Castil-Blaze et Berlioz', in *Le Livre du centenaire du 'Journal des débats'* (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et Cie, 1889): 437, Reyer mentions irony as one of Berlioz's most important tools. Adolphe Jullien, who shared duties for music criticism with Reyer from 1893 and filled the position from 1898 to 1928, mentions his two predecessors' use of irony, circumlocutions, manoeuvrings, and double meanings in his biographies of them: *Hector Berlioz. Sa vie et ses œuvres* (Paris: Librairie de l'art, 1888): 335–51, which was dedicated to Reyer, and *Ernest Reyer* (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1909): 91–110.

<sup>12</sup> For this frequently cited passage see, for example, André Hallays, 'Hector Berlioz: Critique musical', *La Revue de Paris* 10 (1 April 1903): 581.

on criticism, it is possible to extract ironically expressed 'lessons' from his articles that give hints to readers on how best to decode the counter-discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Reyer, too, had mastered the 'art of the most skilful and wittiest innuendo in the world'.<sup>14</sup> He uses the first person more frequently than Berlioz in the reviews considered here, writing what was called 'personal criticism': 'I owe the public my opinion and not that of others' (*je dois au public mon opinion et non celle des autres*).<sup>15</sup> In fact, the opening word of his first *feuilleton* for the *Débats* is 'Je',<sup>16</sup> and, before speaking about *Mignon* in that essay from 1866, he articulates principles that guide his criticism: a willingness to recognize 'the beautiful' wherever it is truly present and an openness to what is appealing in 'the pretty' (a lesser category);<sup>17</sup> a trust in his readers' competence and an anticipation that they will be open to his instruction and willing to move beyond a natural preference for what is pretty, facile and trivial; and finally, a hope that his readers will not be put off by a single encounter with a new and demanding work (admitting his own fallibility for having misjudged *Le Prophète* the first time he heard it). He does not mention allusion, innuendo or subtext, but this self-introduction to his readers cultivates a sincere tone that is easy to trust. Sincerity is also an element of his assessments of Bizet, who was his friend.<sup>18</sup>

### Berlioz, Reyer and Bizet

Both Berlioz and Reyer knew Bizet before they wrote articles about him. A member of the music section at the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Berlioz may have met him during the Prix de Rome competitions of 1856 and 1857 and seems to have spoken with him about his own time in Rome.<sup>19</sup> When the younger composer returned to Paris, they moved in the same circles. And Berlioz turned to Bizet in May 1863 to help prepare the soloists for a Strasbourg performance of *L'Enfance du Christ* that June.<sup>20</sup> The two composers respected one another, and Bizet attended Berlioz's

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Reibel, 'Les feuillets de Berlioz: une leçon de critique?', in *Berlioz: Homme de lettres*, ed. Georges Zaragoza (Dijon: Éditions du Murmure, 2006): 61–74.

<sup>14</sup> Henri de Curzon, *Ernest Reyer: sa vie et ses œuvres (1823–1909)* (Paris: Perrin, 1924): 187 ('l'art du sous-entendu le plus adroit et le plus spirituel du monde').

<sup>15</sup> Henriot (in Reyer, *Quarante ans de musique*: xi) gives the date 13 September 1859 for this quote and notes that in his criticism Reyer gladly used 'je' and spoke of himself. Henriot finds this preferable to the hypocrisy of 'so-called impersonal judgement' (i.e., third person). On the use of first, second and third person, see also Katherine Kolb, 'Rhetoric and Reason in French Music Criticism of the 1830s', in *Music in Paris in the Eighteen-Thirties*, ed. Peter Bloom (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1987): 537–51.

<sup>16</sup> Reyer, 'Opéra-Comique', *JD*, 2 December 1866. Reyer donated his personal collection of *feuillets* to the Paris Opéra library (F-Po, RES 2542 [1–3]).

<sup>17</sup> Reyer, 'Opéra-Comique' ('je sais reconnaître le beau partout où il est réellement ... ; l'amour du beau ne m'empêche point de convenir que le joli est aimable').

<sup>18</sup> See 'Reyer's Literary Style', in Elizabeth Jean Lamberton, *The Critical Writings of Ernest Reyer* (PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1988): 90–99.

<sup>19</sup> See Hervé Lacombe, 'Georges Bizet', in *Dictionnaire Berlioz*, ed. Pierre Citron and Cécile Reynaud, with Jean-Pierre Bartoli and Peter Bloom (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> See Hector Berlioz, Letter 2729 (27 May 1863), *Correspondance générale*, vol. 6, 1859–63, ed. Hugh Macdonald and François Lesure (Paris: Flammarion, 1995). At this time Bizet was also composing *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, commissioned by early April for rehearsals beginning in August. Macdonald (in *Bizet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 73) suggests that

funeral, but the relationship was a professional one.<sup>21</sup> Reyer and Bizet were much closer. The two had become friends in 1862 when Bizet took over rehearsals of *Érostrate* while Reyer finished this score in preparation for its Baden-Baden premiere on 21 August. In his reviews Reyer often refers to Bizet as 'my young friend', and thus signals his readers that his criticism might be muted or indirect.<sup>22</sup> In a brief notice published the day after his friend's death on 3 June 1875, however, he writes straight from the heart: 'We loved him, all his friends loved him, and as the effervescence of his early youth calmed down, his qualities seemed all the more brilliant, serious and appealing. I write these lines under the influence of the deepest grief, and can only think at this moment of the excellent friend I have lost' (Nous l'aimions, tous ses amis l'aimaient, et à mesure que se calmait chez lui l'effervescence de la première jeunesse, ses qualités apparaissaient plus brillantes, plus sérieuses et plus sympathiques. Je trace ces lignes sous l'impression du plus profond chagrin, et je ne puis penser en cet instant qu'à l'excellent ami que j'ai perdu).<sup>23</sup>

### Berlioz on Bizet

Berlioz first reviewed Bizet in January 1863 and there speaks briefly of a single orchestral movement, the Scherzo, using positive adjectives like 'piquant', 'charming', 'well-conceived' and 'well-orchestrated' to announce the work's success.<sup>24</sup> He is even warmer, however, about Bizet the pianist: 'M. Bizet is one of the greatest sightreaders of an orchestral score and best accompanists I know' (M. Bizet est l'un des plus grands déchiffreurs de partitions et des premiers accompagnateurs que je connaisse).<sup>25</sup> The next autumn, in his last *feuilleton*, he reviews Bizet's debut work, *Les Pêcheurs de perles*.<sup>26</sup> Though Berlioz uses the third person almost exclusively here, he starts off by capturing the reader's interest with the first-person plural and a short sentence: 'We are in India' (Nous sommes dans l'Inde). Amusedly, he plays with plosives in the second sentence: 'Une peuplade de pêcheurs de perles imagine de se donner un chef'. Berlioz never names Zurga, the 'strapping lad' (robuste gaillard) the pearlfishers select as their chief. He also

---

Bizet may also have continued working with Berlioz past June in rehearsing *Les Troyens à Carthage* despite the pressing demands of his own opera.

<sup>21</sup> The *Journal des débats* did not review Bizet's competition-winning *opéra bouffe*, *Le Docteur Miracle*, in April 1857, but Étienne-Jean Delécluze (1781–1863), a painter and art critic, mentions his Prix de Rome cantatas in his 1856 and 1857 reports on the annual public meeting of the Académie des Beaux-Arts.

<sup>22</sup> All the *Débats* reviews are available at Gallica ([gallica.bnf.fr](http://gallica.bnf.fr)). The related search engine and user interface at 'RetroNews: Le site de presse de la BnF' ([www.retronews.fr](http://www.retronews.fr)) has been an essential tool in pulling up comments in the press that might easily have escaped notice. The annotated multi-volume edition of Berlioz's music criticism, *La Critique musicale*, edited by H. Robert Cohen, Yves Gérard, Anne Bongrain and Marie-Hélène Coudroy-Saghai (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1996–) is nearing completion. And Nizam Kettaneh is in the process of preparing and posting annotated texts of Reyer's criticism at [www.ernestreyer.com](http://www.ernestreyer.com).

<sup>23</sup> Reyer, [Untitled], *JD*, 4 June 1875.

<sup>24</sup> At the Institut, Berlioz would also have encountered this work, one of the yearly submissions required of Rome prize winners.

<sup>25</sup> Berlioz, 'Théâtre de l'Opéra', *JD*, 26 January 1863.

<sup>26</sup> Berlioz, 'Théâtre-Lyrique', *JD*, 8 October 1863. Premiere Théâtre-Lyrique, Paris, 30 September, 18 performances.

states that Léila witnesses the reunion of the two friends and recognizes Nadir's voice. (Berlioz is in error on this point: Léila actually enters after that scene is over.) He describes the role of the priestess in such a way that it must have been clear to his readers that Spontini's *La Vestale* was a model for this convention-ridden story. To spice up the prose, he inserts passages of faux-dialogue: 'Nadir, newly arrived, . . . examines the young girl who, furtively lifting a corner of her veil, lets her face be glimpsed. Nadir recognizes her. "Oh heavens! it is really he"! "O heavens! it is really she"! (Nadir, le nouveau venu, . . . examine la jeune fille qui, levant furtivement un coin de son voile, laisse entrevoir son visage. Nadir la reconnaît. «O ciel! c'est bien lui! – O ciel! c'est bien elle!») Then Berlioz uses initial sounds to emphasize the plot's extensive pre-history: 'Les deux jeunes gens se sont aimés autrefois ailleurs'. Other critics sneered at a shopworn device that is also part of the pre-history – 'the famous good deed that is never wasted . . . which is the salvation of *opéra comique* victims'.<sup>27</sup> Years earlier Zurga had given Léila a necklace to show his gratitude to her for saving his life. It will conveniently allow 'the chief' to overcome his jealousy of Nadir's relationship with Léila, repay his debt to her, and let the lovers go free. Berlioz wraps the plot up more quickly than in the libretto itself, by rewriting and compressing the action in the Act 2 finale with that in Act 3. He may simply have been entertaining his readers by doing so, but, as an experienced librettist, he might also have been criticizing the plot twists at this point in the libretto. If so, it should be noted he believed that (in Katharine Ellis's words) 'no composer could make up for the deficiencies in a weak libretto if he faithfully followed its dramatic implications (as [Berlioz] believed any opera composer should)'.<sup>28</sup> This bravura recitation of the plot was clearly penned by a true man of the theatre,<sup>29</sup> but given his alterations it seems possible that Berlioz did not find the libretto, and therefore the evening, completely successful.

The plot summary takes about half the review, a normal ratio, and Berlioz then turns to the music where he begins with warm compliments: 'The score of this opera has achieved a genuine success; it contains a considerable number of beautiful pieces that are expressive, full of fire and richly coloured' (La partition de cet opéra a obtenu un véritable succès, elle contient un nombre considérable de beaux morceaux expressifs, pleins de feu et d'un riche coloris). After these strong adjectives, however, most of the other adjectives are simply good.<sup>30</sup> He directly mentions most of the pieces in Act 1 – and Berlioz may have preferred that act, as a number of other critics did. The introduction is 'full of verve'. The now celebrated

<sup>27</sup> M.[arie] Escudier, 'Théâtre-Lyrique Impérial. *Les Pêcheurs de perles*', *La France musicale* (4 October 1863) ('ce fameux bienfait qui n'est jamais perdu . . . qui est la providence des victimes d'opéra comique'). In Georges Bizet, *Les Pêcheurs de perles: Dossier de presse parisienne* (1863), ed. Hervé Lacombe (Heilbronn, Germany: Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1996): 86.

<sup>28</sup> Katharine Ellis, 'The Criticism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz*, ed. Peter Bloom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 161.

<sup>29</sup> Reibel, *L'Écriture de la critique musicale au temps de Berlioz*: 348.

<sup>30</sup> Murphy has identified two categories of praise in Berlioz's writings; see *Hector Berlioz and the Development of French Music Criticism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988): 53–5. For the more enthusiastic category, he uses such words as 'genius', 'majestic', 'original', 'forceful', 'vigorous' and 'imaginative'. The second is more restrained, with set phrases like 'melodic charm' and 'distinguished harmony' as well nouns or adjectives like 'taste', 'grace', 'clear', 'vivacious' and 'delicate'. 'Pretty' was a cue that Berlioz did not particularly admire a piece and the use of other words in this second category of praise may disguise Berlioz's lack of response to the music.

tenor/baritone duet is described as ‘well carried out’ (*bien conduit*), ‘in a sober and simple style’ (*d’un style sobre et simple*); Berlioz diplomatically fails to mention the cabaletta. He finds ‘much to praise’ (*beaucoup à louer*) in Nadir’s aria, accompanied by violoncellos and English horn. Several times he balances negative comments with positive ones. And so, while the Act 1 chorus greeting Léïla’s arrival is ‘ordinary’, the next one is ‘majestic and with remarkable harmonic pomp’ (*majestueux et avec une pompe harmonique remarquable*). He finds that Léïla’s aria on the mountain is accompanied by a chorus with a ‘rhythm that we don’t dare use these days’ (*rythme qu’on n’ose plus écrire aujourd’hui*),<sup>31</sup> but compliments the ‘pretty’ offstage chorus at the opening of Act 2 and Léïla’s graceful aria with French horn. He credits the Act 2 duo for Léïla and Nadir with having dramatic sections, but finds octave doubling somewhat overused. Berlioz mentions effective orchestration several times, including a use of three wind instruments that is ‘stunningly original’ (*d’une ravissante originalité*). In the third act, he observes that the chief’s aria has ‘character’ and Léïla’s prayer is ‘touching’, although ‘it would be [more touching] without the vocalises, which, in my opinion, spoil the end’ (*elle serait davantage sans les vocalises, qui, à mon sens, en déparent la fin*). Except for the first sentence, this is one of the few appearances of the first person; but while using the third person, Berlioz gives more compliments than criticisms. He also passes over the finales of the second and third acts, as well as most of the ensembles.<sup>32</sup>

### More on Berlioz’s Last Review

Although critics in 1863 generally approved of Bizet’s lyrical and exotic numbers, they also played the usual game of identifying the influence of others on the young composer. Berlioz does not do this, which implies his respect for the work’s originality and Bizet’s potential. Many took direct aim at the libretto, but Berlioz only alludes to its deficiencies. Instead of joining the chorus of complaints about ‘noisy orchestration’, Berlioz emphasizes the effectiveness of specific moments. Others called the score overly ambitious and judged the dramatic intensity of certain important scenes more appropriate to grand opera; Berlioz does neither. In fact, his last review for the *Journal des débats* has often been read as warm, discriminating and positive. David Cairns, for example, sees it as ‘an encouraging notice’.<sup>33</sup> Kern Holoman, on the other hand, finds it to be a ‘routine piece with a touch of humor’ and then cites from the paragraph that follows the musical discussion: ‘M. Bizet, laureate of the Institut, made the trip to Rome and came back without having forgotten music’.<sup>34</sup> Once again Berlioz gives glowing praise to Bizet’s skill as an ‘incomparable score reader’. And Holoman points to a ‘barb’ at the end of the

<sup>31</sup> Berlioz may be letting Bizet know that he recognizes this as reworked material from *Don Procopio*, one of Bizet’s Rome compositions, but he refrains from mentioning other self-borrowing that he might well have noticed, too. See list of self-borrowings in Hugh Macdonald, *Bizet Thematic Catalogue*.

<sup>32</sup> Rémy Stricker, *Georges Bizet* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005): 85. For Bizet’s later assessment of his score see Edmond Galabert, Introduction, in Georges Bizet, *Lettres à un ami* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1909): 42–3.

<sup>33</sup> David Cairns, *Berlioz: Servitude and Greatness, 1832–1869*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 2000): 701.

<sup>34</sup> Kern Holoman, *Berlioz* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989): 568.

same paragraph: 'The score of the *Pearlfishers* bestows the highest of honors on M. Bizet, whom we shall be forced to accept as a composer, despite his unusual talent in score reading'.<sup>35</sup> Although this statement can be read in more than one way, it closes a paragraph that seems to have been written principally to thank Count Colonna-Walewski, the *Ministre d'État et des Beaux-Arts*, for his parting gift of a 100,000 franc subsidy for the *Théâtre-Lyrique* and (not coincidentally) to compliment this theatre's director, Léon Carvalho, for immediately presenting the full-length debut work of a *Prix de Rome* winner. (At that time, the *Théâtre-Lyrique* was also rehearsing the Carthaginian acts of Berlioz's *Les Troyens* for the 4 November premiere.)

Most scholars have focused on the compliments in Berlioz's review, but it is also revealing to pay attention to the details of his plot summary, omissions in his discussion of the music, some bland critical remarks, and the use and placement of mildly positive adjectives. Piecing these clues together, Berlioz's readers may well have understood that while Bizet's score displayed undeniable talent, the evening's entertainment had some limitations. In this last *feuilleton* of his career, the scintillating vitality so characteristic of Berlioz's earlier writings seems to be missing, too, but perhaps he was just worn out by the rehearsals for *Les Troyens*.<sup>36</sup>

### Reyer on Bizet before *Carmen*

By the time *La Jolie Fille de Perth* reached the stage in December 1867, Reyer had been music critic at the *Débats* for a little more than a year. Before the premiere he had likely been contacted by Carvalho, who continued as director of the *Théâtre-Lyrique* and was trying to arrange good press for *La Jolie Fille* to attract the public and help reverse the mounting financial problems of his theatre.<sup>37</sup> This reception was indeed more positive overall than it had been for *Les Pêcheurs de perles*; and despite a few complaints of Wagner's influence, most praised the clearer structure, limited use of mass effects, abundant melody and nuanced orchestration.

Reyer's article begins with analysis of the libretto and leads the reader through an excruciatingly detailed plot summary and two long citations from the source (Sir Walter Scott's novel), purportedly because he owed it to the librettist to recount the storyline accurately in every detail, and likely because he also wished to hammer home the point that this convoluted libretto bears little relationship to its literary source. In addition, he justifies his emphasis by claiming the plot's complexity demonstrates the need for critics to receive opera libretti in advance of the premiere, just as they did for ballets. In this way he fills eight of the eleven and a half columns devoted to *La Jolie Fille*. It seems probable, too, that Reyer's intention may have been to signal quietly to his readers that the tortuous action contains too many improbable twists and turns.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Holoman, *Berlioz*, 568–9.

<sup>36</sup> Bizet attended these rehearsals of *Les Troyens* and reported on them enthusiastically to Reyer. See Ernest Reyer, 'Revue musicale. Georges Bizet', *JD*, 13 June 1875 (obituary).

<sup>37</sup> See Pierre Berton, 'Georges Bizet', in *Souvenirs de la vie de théâtre* (Paris: Pierre Lafitte, 1913): 228, and Hervé Lacombe, *Georges Bizet: Naissance d'une identité créatrice* (Paris: Fayard, 2000): 398.

<sup>38</sup> Reyer, 'Théâtre-Lyrique', *JD*, 6 January 1868. Premiere *Théâtre-Lyrique*, Paris, 26 December 1867, 18 performances. Reyer undoubtedly knew the author, for Jules Henry



Before discussing the music, Reyer describes how active his 'young colleague' (jeune confrère) has been as a composer and transcriber in the four years since *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, and then admits that despite his respect for Bizet's knowledge of his craft, he finds in this work the flaws typical of youth – eclecticism and concessions to both the public and the virtuosity of certain artists. Nevertheless, in Act 1 he calls attention to numerous pieces: a refined and beautifully orchestrated prelude, vigorous opening chorus, melodious recitative, charming duet, graceful trio, 'remarkable' quartet and ingenious elements in the finale. He skips over Mab's entrance piece, however, and directly criticizes Catherine's virtuoso polonaise, 'bristling with trills, vocalises and other ornaments, for which, as M. Bizet knows full well, I don't have much appetite' (hérisée de trilles, de vocalises et autres ornements pour lesquelles, M. Bizet le sait bien, je n'ai pas un goût très prononcé). Like many of his colleagues in the press, he rates the second act 'indisputably' stronger than the other three and, though he ignores the Duke's drinking song, he writes positively about the opening chorus, Mab's couplets, the distinctive gypsy dance, the second part of Smith's serenade, and Ralph's maudlin air where he finds 'dramatic skill and feeling worthy of the highest praise' (science et un sentiment dramatiques dignes des plus grands éloges). Of the 13 numbers in Acts 3 and 4, however, Reyer comments on only the seduction menuet/duet in Act 3 and two choruses in Act 4, thus implying that the work trails off in effectiveness. He omits not only Catherine's virtuoso ballade/mad scene in the last act but also the third and fourth act finales. Saying that he knows how arid score analysis can be for the reader, he evades commenting further on the music by suggesting that his readers add the published score to their libraries and read it so that 'they can be convinced of the sincerity of my praise and at the same time fill in the gaps in my review' (ils pourront se convaincre de la sincérité de mes éloges et combler en même temps les lacunes de mon compte-rendu). (Of course, the 'intelligent' publisher Choudens was also Reyer's publisher.) And so, with an over-extensive plot analysis, two paragraphs acknowledging more than a dozen musical numbers, and a detour to the published score, Reyer fills the space allotted for his review but limits comments on the music to just two columns. In this way he leaves clues that allude to weaknesses he had noticed.

Although the Parisian press in 1872 gave *Djamileh*, Bizet's one-act opéra-comique, unusually serious consideration, their consensus was strongly negative. Most reviewers criticized the score as pretentious, blemished by excessive chromaticism and dissonance (decried as Wagner's influence), and marred by an extended and dramatic final duo more appropriate to grand opera. Many also disapproved of Louis Gallet's libretto, which centred on the poetic depiction of human emotions rather than making use of the usual plot-driven strategies. In contrast to his journalist colleagues, Reyer considered *Djamileh* an original and important work. His review downplays its flaws and lauds the 'poetic inventions of a questing spirit, who, knowing where his pen is taking him, is not afraid to go too far sometimes' (poétiques inventions d'un esprit chercheur qui, sachant où va sa plume, ne craint pas d'aller quelquefois trop loin).<sup>39</sup> Reyer understood that the usual Opéra-Comique public was unlikely to appreciate *Djamileh's* complexity and novelty,

---

Vernoy de Saint-Georges was not only a prolific librettist and playwright but also president of the powerful Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques for most of the 1860s.

<sup>39</sup> Reyer, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 31 May 1872. Première Opéra-Comique, Paris, 22 May 1872, 11 performances.

but his interest lay in reaching out to his own readers. And so, near the beginning of his review, where straightforward plot analysis would normally take place, he quotes Louis Gallet's opening 12 verses for Haroun, the lead male character, and then expounds at length about the poetic exoticism and ingratiating charm of Bizet's music in the introductory number:

These pretty verses inspired the musician to write a delectable cantilena, framed by a distant chorus, a chorus of boatmen on the Nile, of the most poetic and most charming effect. This is true Eastern music, at least as it is understood by those who have been in the country itself and have brought back memories of it.

Ces jolis vers ont inspiré au musicien une délicieuse cantilène encadrée dans un chœur lointain, un chœur de bateliers sur le Nil, de l'effet le plus poétique, le plus charmant. Voilà la vraie musique orientale, telle que l'ont comprise du moins ceux qui, étant allés dans le pays même, en ont rapporté des souvenirs.

To convey how powerful this experience was for him he spends close to three of the nine-and-a-half columns in his review describing how this music awakens the imagination and memories of his earlier travels (he had lived in Algeria for ten years as a young man) and creates poetry that speaks better to Parisians than real Oriental music itself. Reyer also admits that Bizet's ideas have been nourished by others (here Wagner (specifically a whiff of *Die Meistersinger*), Gounod and Schumann) and that *Djamileh* is imperfect. He downplays these quibbles, however, and turns to the first person to underline his faith in Bizet's potential:

But my friend Bizet is not one of those who never stumbles; he has, to sustain him in his audacities as in his failures, a thorough knowledge of the secrets of his art, a skill, an assurance that only two or three among the younger [generation] have to the same degree as he. And, to my mind, he continues to be the leader of the young school.

Mais mon ami Bizet n'est pas de ceux qui trébuchent jamais; il a, pour le soutenir dans ses hardiesses comme dans ses défaillances, une connaissance approfondie des secrets de l'art, une habileté, une sûreté de main que deux ou trois tout au plus parmi les jeunes possèdent au même degré que lui. Et encore me paraît-il tenir la tête de la jeune école.

Again using the first person, he praises this new stage in Bizet's career and urges him to be proud of a work that has been admired by the few musicians who judge without prejudice: 'Let us praise this well-placed ambition as it should be' (Louons comme il convient cette ambition bien placée). The review contains little about the slight plot, and there are only brief comments, largely positive, on the individual numbers that follow the magical introduction. Reyer excuses the inclusion of Splendiano because of genre conventions and acknowledges that this comic servant's couplets revert to older opéra-comique practices. He also sees the final duo as overly developed and finds Djamileh's Ghazel a bit rich in modulations for an Arab song. He tactfully ignores the disastrous casting of a voiceless high society beauty in the title role. He points out that the plot's conclusion, where Haroun declares his passionate love for his former slave Djamileh, does not seem credible, although he admits the librettist had little choice here since the literary source (Alfred de Musset's well-known 'conte oriental' *Namouna*) imposed this ending. Reyer indirectly justifies the improbable ending in another way, by entertaining his readers with a two-column digression that recounts (and amusedly spoofs)

the plot of an opéra-comique planned by Joseph Méry (or was it invented by Reyer?),<sup>40</sup> where intense feelings motivate another abrupt, implausible, inconclusive and socially unconventional denouement. Here Angélique, a new mother and neglected young wife of social standing, is sitting pensively in her boudoir when a young Swede whom she has recently met at a ball arrives and declares his passionate love. She orders him to leave. A tear forms on the suppliant's eyelid, and in a convenient plot twist, the handkerchief he uses to wipe it away reveals a crown because he is actually a baron. Angélique hesitates no longer but summons a servant and calmly tells him to take away her baby in the cradle next to her, while the young man hides behind a screen. The curtain falls, and the audience wonders what will happen next. After an orchestral interlude with Spanish tunes and clacking castanets, the curtain rises again on an outdoor scene peopled with bandits armed with shot-guns, a bearded monk who is a bandit in disguise, a young girl and a captain. The audience gradually realizes it is not the second act, but the second drama.

After building his case for the originality and importance of Bizet's work through an article filled with striking details as well as entertaining and extended digressions, Reyer addresses his readers directly, since he hopes that, convinced by his words, they will head to the theatre. And in the unconventional closing paragraph, he finally comments on the overture as well: 'The overture is not long; it is ingeniously put together, sufficiently melodic, and you will listen to it with pleasure, for I am guessing that you will go hear *Djamileh* (L'ouverture n'est pas longue; elle est ingénieusement faite, suffisamment mélodique, et vous l'écouteriez avec plaisir car je suppose bien que vous irez entendre *Djamileh*).'<sup>41</sup> Not surprisingly Bizet was elated by this review.<sup>42</sup>

A few months later, Reyer wholeheartedly salutes Bizet's incidental music for Alphonse Daudet's *L'Arlésienne*.<sup>43</sup> Most Parisian critics roundly condemned Daudet's play for straying too far from standard plot devices (indeed, the principal female character never appears) and for focusing instead on the characters' psychological conflicts.<sup>44</sup> Some also found Bizet's music intrusive and/or insignificant, but several music critics, like Victorin de Joncières (*La Liberté*) and Johannès Weber (*Le Temps*), among others, judged the score both poetic and refined, and grumbled that the audience paid little attention to it. Reyer once again supports a work that would not stay long in the theatre, but this time he saw no need to excuse flaws or the influence of other composers. He begins with an extended, four-and-a-half column plea for a new Théâtre-Lyrique and wonders whether it would be reborn under Carvalho (who was now directing the Théâtre du Vaudeville) despite the tiny size of the theatre. He commends the 26 musicians in the pit and compliments Bizet on using a piano to reinforce the small group.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Méry (1797–1866) was a prolific author who wrote the libretti for Reyer's one-act opéra-comique *Maitre Wolfram* and, with Émilien Pacini (1811–1898), for his two-act opera, *Érostrate* (1862).

<sup>41</sup> The next month (19 June 1872) Reyer would give supportive, in-depth coverage (eight columns) to *La Princesse jaune*, a one-act opéra-comique by Saint-Saëns, using more conventional structure and prose.

<sup>42</sup> Mina Curtiss, *Bizet and his World* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1958): 325.

<sup>43</sup> Reyer, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 10 October 1872. Premiere Théâtre du Vaudeville, Paris, 30 September 1872, 19 performances.

<sup>44</sup> Reyer's colleague at the *Débats*, Janin, was silent about *L'Arlésienne* while it was on the stage, but did remark, after the production had ended, that he had seen 'ce drame insensé du Vaudeville' ('La Semaine dramatique', *JD*, 28 October 1872).

Then an incomplete, sympathetic and brief plot analysis gives way to a relatively technical discussion of the 'Marche de Turenne', the farandole and Bizet's contrapuntal skill, followed by a concise description of the Provençal galoubet and tambourin. Reyer makes no effort to veil his admiration and calls the score a 'true delight for a musician' (vrai régal pour un musicien); of its 24 numbers he lists a dozen 'that a master would sign. And whoever that master might be, I really think he would willingly sign all the rest' (qu'un maître signerait. Et quel que fût ce maître-là je crois bien qu'il signerait tout aussi volontiers le reste).<sup>45</sup> With these words Reyer makes it clear that he was not adhering to the common practice of cherry-picking a few pieces to praise while passing silently over those that were ordinary or deficient. In fact, Reyer follows with an exhortation to young musicians to go to the theatre and hear how much a composer little older than they could achieve (Allez entendre *L'Arlésienne*, jeunes musiciens). And finally, he returns to the denouement of the plot and also recounts several episodes he found charming. The next month he hails the suite from *L'Arlésienne* as 'one of the most exquisite and finely crafted works of this young composer' (une des oeuvres les plus exquis et les plus finement travaillées de ce jeune compositeur).<sup>46</sup> To underline his sincere and openly expressed approval he predicts as well that Bizet will soon be not just a leader of his generation but one of the masters of French music.

### Reyer on the *Carmen* premiere

In these three positive reviews of 1872, Reyer leaves only a few blanks for his readers to fill in,<sup>47</sup> but his article on the *Carmen* premiere is evasive.<sup>48</sup> Because the *Débats* did not publish his *feuilleton* until 14 March,<sup>49</sup> Reyer would have had the opportunity to read dozens of other critics; some were scathingly negative, a few were highly supportive, but most restricted themselves to cool or tepid praise.<sup>50</sup> Using a strategy that had also served him when he reviewed *La Jolie Fille de Perth*, he chooses to focus most of his prose (five columns) on the libretto and its literary source, stressing that this is an expurgated version of a story everyone already

<sup>45</sup> Although Reyer specifies 24 numbers, there are actually 27, some of them extremely brief. See the critical edition of *L'Arlésienne*, ed. Hervé Lacombe (Paris: Choudens, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Reyer, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 17 November 1872.

<sup>47</sup> Reyer also made brief but positive comments on the collection *Vingt mélodies* (*JD*, 25 January 1874) and the overture *Patrie* (*JD*, 15 March 1874).

<sup>48</sup> See Winton Dean, *Bizet* (London: Dent, 1975): 119–20, Hervé Lacombe, *Bizet* (Paris: Fayard, 2000): 687–8 and others.

<sup>49</sup> Reyer, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 14 March 1875, Première Opéra-Comique, Paris, 3 March 1875, 48 performances in 1875–76. For more on the travels of Bizet's masterpiece during its first 70 years see 'A *Carmen* abroad – The When and Where of *Carmen* Performances, 1875–1945', [www.carmenabroad.org/](http://www.carmenabroad.org/).

<sup>50</sup> See the Introduction and 35 reviews in *Georges Bizet 'Carmen': Dossier de presse parisienne* (1875), ed. Lesley Wright (Weinsberg: Lucie-Galland, 2001). Parts of this publication are reproduced as FMC Collection 15, at 'France: Musiques, Cultures, 1789–1914', [www.fmc.ac.uk](http://www.fmc.ac.uk). For the early performance history of *Carmen*, see Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz, *Carmen and the Staging of Spain: Recasting Bizet's Opera in the Belle Époque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

knew and including two extended quotes from Mérimée's novella.<sup>51</sup> When he finally turns to the music, Reyer dispenses with it in less than three columns. He notes that Bizet has deliberately changed direction since *Djamileh* and in this way alludes to what he perceives as a lack of refinement in *Carmen*:

'After *Djamileh* M. Bizet set about reflecting on the difficulty of making the public appreciate the delicacies of a refined, distinguished work with a certain poetic flavour. And following these reflections he wrote the score of *Carmen*. This preamble ... releases us from the need to set up the slightest comparison between *Carmen* and *Djamileh*.

M. Bizet, après *Djamileh*, s'est mis à réfléchir sur la difficulté de faire apprécier par le public les délicatesses d'une œuvre fine, distinguée et ayant une certaine saveur poétique. Et à la suite de ces réflexions il a écrit la partition de *Carmen*. Ce préambule ... nous dispense d'établir la moindre comparaison entre *Carmen* et *Djamileh*).

He defends his friend, however, against charges of plagiarism, which surfaced elsewhere in the press, by noting that clacking castanets all sound alike. And although he calls the Cuban-derived Habanera 'charming' and its accompaniment 'ingenious', he writes more warmly of Bizet's unparalleled mastery of refined harmonies and pretty timbres. Then, he lets the public's response speak for him, so that they can be responsible for the large number of tactful omissions:

Must I now do a detailed analysis of *Carmen's* score? I know the reader does not have much taste for analyses of this sort, which require the use of technical terms. I prefer to name the pieces the public welcomed particularly warmly

Faut-il maintenant faire une analyse détaillée de la partition de *Carmen*? Le lecteur, je le sais, n'a pas pour ces sortes d'analyses, qui nécessitent l'emploi de termes techniques, un goût excessif. J'aime mieux citer les morceaux que le public a particulièrement bien accueillis.

The audience had encored the Habanera at the premiere, and Reyer finds positive adjectives (ranging from bland to enthusiastic) for most of the other pieces 'the public' welcomed. In Act 1 the 'very pretty' cigarette chorus and 'excellent passages' in the Carmen/Don José duet are also singled out. For Act 2 the review mentions the 'delicious' clarinet and bassoon dialogue in the entr'acte, the 'admirably written' little quintet, and the 'truly remarkable' duet, but the Toreador song is simply well sung by Jacques Bouhy. The review points to the smugglers' march and Micaëla's air in Act 3 but without adjectives. This is true as well for the march of the picadors and Escamillo's arietta that open Act 4, while in the grand final scene 'striking' and 'dramatic' fanfares contrast with Carmen's death. Reyer never utters the word success; he never utters the word failure. He scarcely refers to Célestine Galli-Marié or her committed and realistic performance of the title character. And so, Reyer's discomfort seeps out between the lines of his prose, even if the final sentence has since been interpreted as prescient – 'But Carmen is not dead, and at the Opéra-Comique we have seen many others that have

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Lamberton explains Reyer's emphasis on the toned-down libretto as his attempt to answer the negative reviews that were frightening off the public from buying tickets; see *The Critical Writings of Ernest Reyer*, 426–7.

recovered from [such a reaction]’ (Mais *Carmen* n’est pas morte, et à l’Opéra-Comique on en a vu bien d’autres qui sont revenues d’aussi loin). For an imperfect youthful work like *La Jolie Fille de Perth*, Reyer’s review had drawn attention to 14 of its 25 numbers, while for *Carmen* this drops to just ten of 27. A few days later Reyer stresses that after reading the recently published score, he truly appreciates Bizet’s ‘professional skill’ (travail scientifique) and the ‘exquisite’ details and refined harmonies that abound there.<sup>52</sup> He does not, however, recommend that his readers rush out and purchase it, and at the end of his paragraph about the score he compliments Bizet in the negative: ‘there are no weaknesses in M. Bizet’s work’ (il n’y a pas de faiblesses dans l’œuvre de M. Bizet). He then spends more than half of his column praising Jules Pasdeloup, the dedicatee of *Carmen*. In the obituary he wrote three months later, Reyer devotes eight columns to his friend’s genius, potential and achievements. He uses two of those columns to cite from his earlier reviews of *L’Arlésienne* and the suite, but he scarcely mentions *Carmen* at all.<sup>53</sup>

### Reyer’s Later Reviews of *Carmen*

In the following years Reyer writes several more times about *Carmen*, and these later articles gradually fill in the eloquent blanks in his original review. The process begins when the Opéra-Comique brings *Carmen* back in November 1875. Reyer opens his coverage of the event by referring to the great bereavement caused by Bizet’s death just a few months earlier, the sadness in the hall, and the close attention all those in attendance paid to the details of the complex score; however, he ‘admits’ that Bizet’s ‘choice of melody is not always very original, very distinguished’ (choix de mélodie n’est pas toujours très original, très distingué) and also hears some reminiscences in the seguidilles and songs. He balances this against praise for Bizet’s orchestration and artistic skill and comments that the score improves by being read and listened to. This time he speaks of the warm and emotional response from the audience to most of the numbers. And now he finds Galli-Marié artistic and intelligent, ‘the lynchpin of the piece and the soul of the score’ (le pivot de la pièce et l’âme de la partition).<sup>54</sup>

Eight years later, when *Carmen* returned to the Opéra-Comique after achieving worldwide success, Reyer expresses himself with an honesty that is a refreshing departure from the approach taken by many other Parisian critics who, like him, had failed to extol *Carmen* after its premiere.<sup>55</sup> Similar to his colleagues, he criticizes Carvalho’s under-rehearsed production and blames him for the chill that developed in the hall that April evening.<sup>56</sup> While many of Bizet’s partisans found Adèle Isaac’s beautifully sung interpretation of *Carmen* altogether too bourgeois and demure, Reyer clearly appreciated it, praising the ‘perfection’ of her talent and style and her ‘superb’ voice. Referring to Galli-Marié, he remarks equivocally

<sup>52</sup> Reyer, [untitled], *JD*, 17 March 1875.

<sup>53</sup> Reyer, ‘Revue musicale’, *JD*, 13 June 1875.

<sup>54</sup> Reyer, ‘Revue musicale’, *JD*, 21 November 1875.

<sup>55</sup> See a discussion of the Parisian critics’ strategies to maintain their authority with readers despite their response in 1875 in Lesley A. Wright, ‘Rewriting a Reception: Thoughts on *Carmen* in Paris, 1883’, *Journal of Musicological Research* 28/4 (2009): 282–94.

<sup>56</sup> Carvalho directed the Opéra-Comique from 1876 to 1887 and again from 1891 to 1897. See Lesley Wright, ‘Carvalho and the Opéra-Comique: *l’art de se hâter lentement*’, in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris 1830–1914*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009): 99–126.

on her 'distinctive', 'pronounced' interpretation and elsewhere in his article disparages singers who have 'the habit of singing with one hand on the hip while boldly making eyes at the public' (l'habitude de chanter le poing sur la hanche en lançant de terribles œillades au public). He also openly confesses what he had veiled in 1875 – he had not been *Carmen's* warm partisan, despite recognizing the work's merit: 'I regretted being truly unable to find in it a strong enough expression of the doctrines the young musician professed' (je regrettais de n'y point trouver à un assez haut degré l'affirmation des doctrines que le jeune musicien professait).<sup>57</sup> He explains his earlier reticence by saying that he felt Bizet, after reflecting on the reasons for *Djamileh's* failure, had taken a step backwards toward older genre traditions and that the result was a Spanish-inflected *opéra-comique* written for the public. 'I cannot reverse my judgment and say that it is in this work that the culmination of Bizet's genius should be found' (Je ne puis pas me déjuger et dire que c'est dans cette œuvre-là qu'il faut voir le point culminant du génie de Bizet). Nonetheless, when he sums up his reaction this time, Reyher now openly campaigns for *Carmen's* permanent inclusion in the Opéra-Comique's repertory, and, in the first person, gives his readers a long string of highly positive nouns, while still allowing 'some musicians' to prefer *L'Arlésienne*:

I tell you there is such verve, such melodic abundance, such youth, such grace, such freshness, and such talent ... as well as such perfect affinity between the libretto and the score that I have no doubt that *Carmen* will one day be counted among the Opéra-Comique's greatest successes, greatest and most deserving. But *L'Arlésienne* will always be, for some musicians, Bizet's masterpiece.

Je vous le dis, il y a une telle verve, une telle abondance mélodique, tant de jeunesse, tant de grâce, tant de fraîcheur et tant de talent ... une si parfaite affinité entre le poème et la partition qu'il est hors de doute pour moi que *Carmen* ne compte un jour parmi les plus grand succès de l'Opéra-Comique, les plus grands et les plus mérités. Mais *L'Arlésienne* restera toujours, pour quelques musiciens, le chef-d'oeuvre de Bizet.

In autumn 1883, when Galli-Marié came back to Paris to play *Carmen*, the press hailed her performance as the true embodiment of the title character. Though Reyher gives barely more than two columns to the event, he opens by stating, in the third person, that *Carmen* grows on the listener: 'The more one hears this pretty score of *Carmen*, the more one appreciates it, the more one loves it' (Plus on entend cette jolie partition de *Carmen*, plus on l'apprécie, plus on l'aime).<sup>58</sup> The 'true delight' (vrai régal) for him is still to read the score itself in Bizet's piano-vocal reduction. He cannot quite let go of his appreciation for the 'faultless purity' of Adèle Isaac's style and her 'beautiful' voice; again, his wording hints that Galli-Marié – who 'plays the role with a frenzied verve, with inimitable gestures and with the most beautiful eyes in the world' (joue ce rôle avec un verve endiablée, avec des gestes inimitables et avec les plus beaux yeux du monde) – is not his ideal *Carmen*. He then turns to a device that had served him before: he asks his readers to decide which performer is the real *Carmen*. Reyher does not conceal his 'patriotic' joy, however, that Paris has finally granted an immense, if conspicuously belated, success to his friend's 'masterpiece' – after cities like

<sup>57</sup> Reyher, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 29 April 1883.

<sup>58</sup> Reyher, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 10 November 1883.

Vienna, Madrid, London, New York, Havana and even Buffalo. He remarks ironically, 'We beat out Beijing' (Nous avons devancé Pékin).

### Reyer on the Posthumous Revivals of Bizet's Other Works

In the 1880s *Carmen's* enormous success helped bring back *L'Arlésienne*,<sup>59</sup> *Les Pêcheurs de perles* and even *La Jolie Fille de Perth*. Tired of waiting for a long-delayed staging of *Les Pêcheurs* at the Opéra-Comique, Reyer was apparently the only Parisian critic to attend and review the Monte Carlo production of February 1889.<sup>60</sup> Like Berlioz before him, he recognizes flaws in the libretto. Still, so many years after the premiere and Bizet's death, he feels free simply to speak his mind: 'I have never much understood the drama on which Georges Bizet wrote his first score. And it seems hardly more intelligible today' (Je n'ai jamais compris grande chose au drame sur lequel Georges Bizet écrivit sa première partition. Et il ne me semble guère plus intelligible aujourd'hui). Like Berlioz, he finds more to praise in the first act. And though in 1863 Berlioz had been only mildly positive about the tenor/baritone duet ('Au fond du temple saint') and in 1889 the Monte Carlo audience's reaction was much the same, Reyer predicts a warmer reception in Paris and asserts: 'Bizet has never written anything more exquisite than this duet, the true pearl of the score' (Bizet n'a jamais écrit de plus exquis que ce duo, la véritable perle de la partition). Of course, by now the cabaletta had been cut and replaced with a dramatically illogical but musically appealing joint restatement of the central tune of the duet. To express genuine admiration and quite possibly to lobby for a Parisian revival, Reyer emphasizes that *Les Pêcheurs* clearly affirms the youthful Bizet's remarkable mastery and imagination: 'The whole score ... bears witness to a deftness, an elegant gift for writing that are extraordinary in a young composer scarcely out of school, and his inspiration, even when it leans a bit too much toward Italian formulas, never lapses into vulgarity (Toute la partition ... témoigne d'une habileté, d'une élégance de plume vraiment extraordinaires chez un jeune compositeur à peine sorti de l'école, et l'inspiration, même quand elle incline un peu trop vers les formules italiennes, ne tombe jamais dans la vulgarité). The next year Reyer could once again comment on the revival of a work from Bizet's early career, for Henry Verdhurt decided to draw attention to the opening of his new Théâtre-Lyrique (at the Eden-Théâtre) with the first French production of *Samson et Dalila* and then the first Parisian revival of *La Jolie Fille de*

<sup>59</sup> On the Odéon production of May 1885, just short of the tenth anniversary of Bizet's death, see Peter Lamothe, *Theater Music in France, 1864–1914*, (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2008): 68–90. In 1885 Reyer does not critique *L'Arlésienne* again but points to *Carmen's* success abroad, which had led to its revival in Paris and 300 performances at the Opéra-Comique, and hopes for a similar fate for *L'Arlésienne* (see 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 24 May 1885).

<sup>60</sup> Reyer, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 3 March 1889 (report from Monaco, 27 February). More than a month later, on 20 April 1889, Edoardo Sonzogno used *I Pescatori di perle* to open his short opera season during the 1889 Exposition universelle at the Salle de la Gaîté in Paris. Reyer, who was absent from Paris, later writes that he regretted missing Emma Calvé's performance as Léïla. The public was apparently cold toward Bizet's opera, even after the first-act duet; for this he blames the libretto, which he thinks the Italian language must have rendered completely incomprehensible (see 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 2 June 1889). In April 1893, Reyer's colleague Adolphe Jullien reviewed Carvalho's revival of *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, which the director had premiered 30 years earlier.



*Perth*. In contrast to their generous reception more than 20 years earlier, critics now judged the Franco-Italian style of Bizet's score passé, and, despite recognizing the charm of certain numbers, declined to find in it a forgotten masterpiece. One of the few who had also reviewed *La Jolie Fille* at its 1867 premiere, Reyer covers this 1890 performance in just one column, and there openly admits what he alluded to in 1868: that this is 'a charming work, but a work that is quite uneven, where the author's rare, distinctive style and imagination are not yet asserted' (une œuvre charmante, mais une œuvre fort inégale où l'auteur ne s'affirme pas encore avec les rare qualités de style et d'imagination).<sup>61</sup> For the revival he completely ignores the libretto, but he praises nine of the same pieces he had singled out in 1868; now, however, he finds the Verdian Act 3 finale dramatically effective. The generally flat tone of this brief notice implies that he is dubious about the opera's staying power in the repertory. To close, Reyer downplays the significance of this early score and turns to two other works he considers crucial to Bizet's posthumous reputation. This time he places *Carmen* first, ahead of *L'Arlésienne*: 'But what does the success of *La Jolie Fille de Perth* matter for Bizet's fame? A statue will be erected tomorrow for the author of *Carmen* and *L'Arlésienne*' (Mais qu'importe à la gloire de Bizet le succès de la *Jolie fille de Perth*. C'est à l'auteur de *Carmen* et de *L'Arlésienne* qu'on élèvera une statue demain).<sup>62</sup>

### Epilogue

The two great composer/critics of the *Journal des débats*, Berlioz and Reyer, both recognized Bizet's enormous talent, and, using the finely crafted language expected from those who wrote for this respectable literary paper, critiqued his works for close to three decades, stating their opinions sometimes directly and sometimes less so. They knew that their readers would be able to fill in the blanks. Rigault's provocative article of 1858 acknowledges how important the public was in decoding this subtle but effective form of communication and even anticipates that later readers would misinterpret the part that was written:

Put together the judgments that criticism prints with what the intelligent public adds, and you will have the real assessment ... In a hundred years, when, of this dialogue between criticism and the public, the public's role will have completely disappeared; when only half of the endeavour remains – the printed part, ... which is by necessity the more flattering of the two – posterity will go into ecstasy over our optimism and Christian charity ... The twentieth century will believe that the nineteenth was the age of admiration, and that the writers, like the gods of Olympus, spent their lives breathing in the odour of incense and drinking nectar poured by the cup-bearers of laudatory criticism. I wish that the impossible would happen and that, instead of dying tomorrow, this puny article could reach our great nephews and whisper in their ears that the nineteenth century was not the dupe of anything or anyone, and that there is not one of our gilded statues whose feet of clay are not clearly

<sup>61</sup> Reyer, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 9 November 1890.

<sup>62</sup> Reyer, 'Revue musicale', *JD*, 9 November 1890. A fund-raising campaign to commission and erect a Bizet monument had recently begun. Though earlier plans called for Alexandre Falguière's marble statue to be placed in the Parc Monceau, the Bizet monument would eventually be installed in the Opéra-Comique (Salle Bizet).

visible to us. They are covered with a veil because of politeness, but with a transparent veil, and the experienced public knows exactly where to direct its excellent eyesight.<sup>63</sup>

Combinez les jugemens que la critique imprime avec ce que le public intelligent ajoute, et vous aurez ... l'appréciation vraie. Dans cent ans, quand, de ce dialogue entre la critique et le public, tout le rôle du public aura disparu, quand il ne restera plus que la moitié de l'œuvre, la partie imprimée, ... comme c'est nécessairement le plus flatteur des deux, la postérité s'extasiera sur notre optimisme et sur notre charité chrétienne ... Le vingtième siècle croira que le dix-neuvième a été l'âge de l'admiration, et que les écrivains, comme des dieux de l'Olympe, ont passé leur vie à respirer l'odeur des cassolettes et à boire le nectar versé par les échansons de la critique laudative. Je voudrais que par impossible, au lieu de mourir demain, ce chétif feuilleton pût arriver à nos petits-neveux et leur dire à l'oreille que le dix-neuvième siècle n'a été dupe de rien ni même de personne, et qu'il n'est pas une seule de nos statues dorées dont nous n'apercevions distinctement le pied d'argile. On le couvre d'un voile, parce qu'on est poli, mais d'un voile transparent, et le public averti sait où il doit porter ses excellens yeux.

Given the sophistication of their critical writings, Berlioz and Reyer would likely have agreed.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Rigault, 'Revue de quinzaine', *JD*, 21 January 1858.

<sup>64</sup> I would like to thank Ralph Locke for his valuable suggestions and comments on this text. And thanks are due as well to Peter Bloom for his discerning remarks on an earlier draft.