



DISCOVERY

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# BIZET

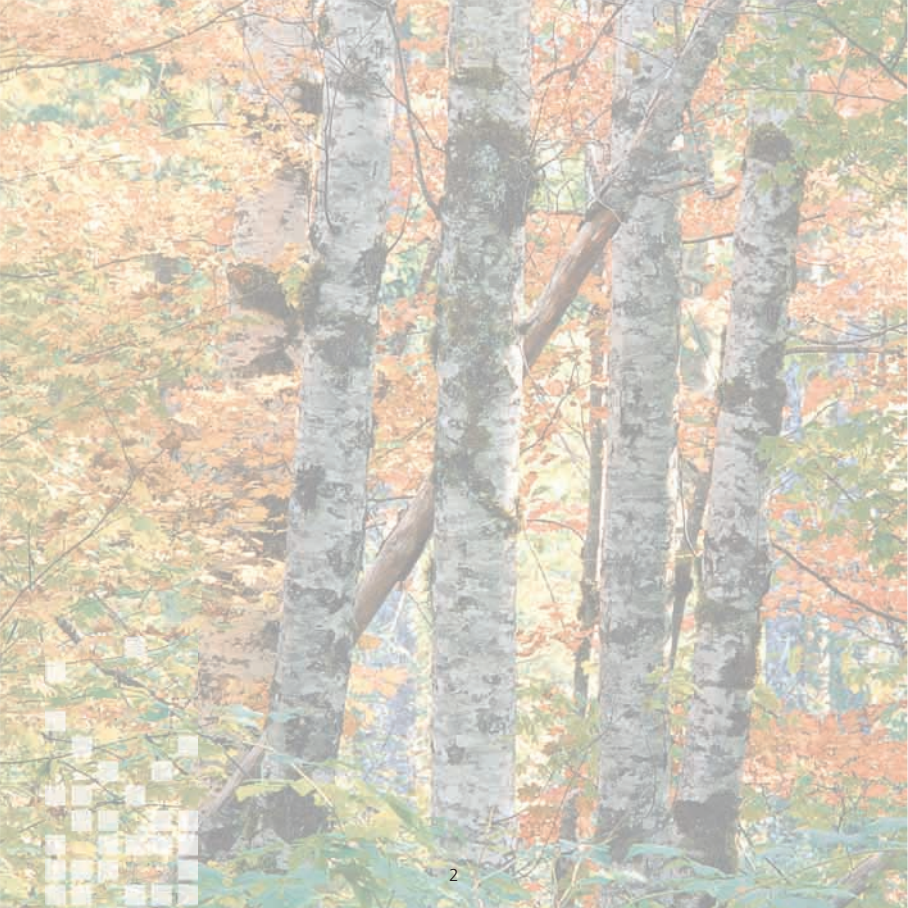
L'Arlésienne (Suite No. 1)

The Fair Maid of Perth Suite

Roma Symphony | Patrie Overture

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra • Lanchbery





GEORGES BIZET 1838-1875

**L'Arlésienne (Suite No. 1)**

[18'14]

<b>1</b>	Prélude	6'44
<b>2</b>	Menuet	3'22
<b>3</b>	Adagietto	3'29
<b>4</b>	Carillon	4'39

**La Jolie Fille de Perth (The Fair Maid of Perth) Suite**

[12'44]

<b>5</b>	Prélude – Aubade	4'30
<b>6</b>	Sérénade	1'51
<b>7</b>	Marche	3'06
<b>8</b>	Danse Bohémienne	3'17

**Roma Symphony**

[33'01]

<b>9</b>	Andante tranquillo	13'00
<b>10</b>	Allegro vivace	5'25
<b>11</b>	Andante molto	8'14
<b>12</b>	Allegro vivacissimo (Carnaval)	6'22

<b>13</b>	<b>Patrie (Fatherland) Overture, Op. 19</b>	13'01
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Total Playing Time 76'06

**Melbourne Symphony Orchestra**  
**John Lanchbery conductor**

Born in Paris to musical parents, Georges Bizet probably had the greatest musical success of his life before he gained his maturity and independence. A child prodigy, he learned to read music and language in parallel from his mother, the tuition beginning at age four (later, when Georges showed too much interest in literature, his parents hid his books so they would not distract from music). Bizet began studies at the Paris Conservatoire before he turned 11, and he astonished his tutors with his ability to read enormous orchestral scores at sight at the piano. His Prix de Rome at the age of 19 had been preceded by several operettas and his Symphony in C.

Bizet suffered throughout his life from the scorn of critics, early closures of his operatic seasons, and on occasion total disasters in the reception of his works. Now considered his finest work and one of the most popular operas in the repertoire, *Carmen* caused an outrage amongst its early audiences, and utter humiliation for the composer. He was widely misunderstood during his time, with his talent appreciated only by a select and educated minority. Alone among his operas, *La Jolie Fille de Perth* received a favourable response from the critics, but Bizet's only two popular successes within his lifetime were the orchestral overture *Patrie* and the first suite from *L'Arlésienne*. A brilliant and memorable melodist, Bizet's reputation now rests mainly on his music for theatre. The development of realistic plot, characterisation and acting for *Carmen* was highly influential on the verismo composers in Italy, including Leoncavallo, Mascagni and Puccini.

Bizet was much less at home with standard orchestral forms; he commented once, in response to the suggestion by his friend Camille Saint-Saëns that if they were not welcomed in the theatre they should return to the concert hall, "That's all very well for you. I am not made for the symphony; I need the theatre, I can do nothing without it." This is not, however, strictly true, a point proven by the genius and precocity of his Symphony in C, of which Antoine Golea states: "The perfection of its form and treatment is indeed that of an excellent pupil ... but its transparency, its lightness, its rhythm, its melodic inspiration place its creator in the lineage of Mozart and Schubert."

Bizet underwent two personal crises which resulted in dramatic changes to his compositional style, and both periods are marked by many aborted works. The first crisis, beginning in 1858, took the form of severe self-doubting, resulting in self-conscious composing which lacked his former spontaneity. His disappointment at not having been awarded the Rodrigues Prize was ineffectively masked behind the many excuses he gave his mother, ending with "Because of these reasons I have not had to console myself for a defeat which is not a defeat, and which has not been publicised."

In this early crisis was lost the brilliant and natural young composer of the Symphony in C, and he struggled for a decade to overcome the affectedness which began to deface his work, and to find confidence in his own musical expression, rather than simply mimicking the work of his teacher, Gounod.

In a crisis ten years later, probably as a result of a severe attack of quinsy (the chronic ulceration of the throat which eventually killed him), he sought desperately for a guiding ethos, and found his attitude to his composing taking a dramatic turn, "a change so radical that I cannot risk my new manner without preparing myself several months in advance." His earlier self-conscious approach only surfaced on rare occasions after 1868, but it can be glimpsed here, in the enforced patriotism of more militaristic sections of the 'ouverture dramatique', *Patrie*.

The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 impacted on the frivolity and gaiety of Bizet's earlier work. The war, in which Paris had been besieged, and France sorely defeated, led to widespread financial problems, with a particular impact on young composers. Conductor of the Concert Populaire, and a great supporter of contemporary French music, Jules Pasdeloup had fought bravely with the National Guard, and resumed his subscription series during the siege. Pasdeloup commissioned three new works for his season in 1874, seeking works from Bizet, Massenet and Guiraud.

It was to the war that Bizet looked for his inspiration. Bizet had wanted to join the military defence, but his responsibility to his fragile and emotionally unstable wife kept him within the Parisian boundaries throughout the siege. No overt mention is made of the war in the score, but its title, 'Fatherland', and its obvious patriotic overtones, place it within the spirit of the times. Charles Pigot, Bizet's first biographer, suggests that Bizet had in mind the French defeat when he wrote the music, but not wishing to pour fresh salt on the wounds, he substituted for France "the mighty shade of Poland in her death agony, always conquered but always resurgent, whose ineffaceable memory and sacred name live forever in the hearts of her scattered children". But Poland is not mentioned in the score, so the source of Pigot's suggestion remains a mystery. Bizet dedicated *Patrie* to his compatriot Jules Massenet, who exultantly described to him the "salvoes of applause" with which it was welcomed at its premiere performance.

*Patrie* was highly successful and well received by its first audience in 1874, but has suffered more recently from extremely pejorative attacks. Bizet certainly wasn't his strongest in absolute music, and

the militaristic effects are not enough to bless the overture with a sense of a well-developed programme. But there is much of value in this overture. The main theme of the work is taken from the March in Act V of *Don Rodrigue*, an unfinished opera on which Bizet worked in 1873. The pomposity of the brass fanfares with snare drums and *tremolando* strings is diluted by the sheer beauty of the cello and viola themes (*andante molto, piano mais sonore*) which owe so much of their origin to Bizet's genius as a vocal composer, and the whimsical subsequent section for woodwind, harp and muted strings which gives the feeling of having inadvertently strayed into the wrong work.

The *Roma* Symphony is another of Bizet's orchestral progeny which has borne the brunt of excessive criticism. The work was close to the composer's heart – called 'my symphony' in preference to his Symphony in C – and underwent a series of incarnations over a period of 11 years. Plans were begun for an Italian symphony in 1860, when the 22-year-old left Rome to return to Paris. On the journey he wrote to his ailing mother of a proposal where "Venice will be my *andante*, Rome my first movement, Florence my scherzo and Naples my finale."

The scherzo was the first movement to be written, and was submitted as part of his third *envoi de Rome* to the authorities administering his Prix de Rome pension. He had intended to produce a symphony but never managed to, and the submission was a year over due – probably owing to the illness and subsequent death of his beloved mother – but the assessment was nonetheless praising. The third *envoi* was first performed under Pásdeloup in 1863, but the scherzo received an angry reaction from the crowds, which may explain its omission from the first performance of *Roma*.

The 1869 performance by Pásdeloup of what is now *Roma* thus showcased a three-movement work, by then entitled (apparently a hurried attempt to disarm critics and public alike) *Fantaisie symphonique – Souvenirs de Rome*, with movement titles: 'Une chasse dans la Forêt d'Ostie', 'Une Procession' and 'Carnaval à Rome'.

Bizet had intended the first movement to be a Theme and Variations, a less demanding formal structure than the traditional Sonata form, but he disposed of the variations in 1868, and described to Edmond Galabert his replacement movement: "I think that the first movement will be good! It's the old theme, preceded by an important calm introduction which returns in the middle of the agitation and ends the piece in complete tranquillity. It does not at all resemble any known first

movements – it's novel and I can count on a good effect – the part you knew is now of secondary interest! – it's strange to have sought this for two years."

The third movement gives a remarkable foretaste of the *Adagietto* from *L'Arlésienne*, both being scored for strings in four parts, but the inclusion of the theme (woodwind and harp arpeggios) which is later heard in the finale gives considerable contrast. The main theme of the *Andante* is quoted directly from a song, 'Le Doubt', which was published posthumously in *16 Mélodies*. Thus the movement shows no obvious connection to either Italy or to the title 'Une Procession'.

Only the finale owes anything in its composition to programme music, and it alone retained its descriptive title of 'Carnaval' in the 1880 Choudens publication of the work. The movement is constructed around four melodies – the first, played by high woodwinds, is suggestive of the famous quintet from *Carmen*, the second an Italian melody, the third based on a simple but effective 2/4 rhythmic ostinato, and the fourth a restatement of the theme from the *Andante*. It is the combination and juxtaposition of these multifarious themes which highlights the carnival atmosphere of the finale, achieved so simply but with a brilliant result.

The work was on the whole well received, but was almost totally ignored by the papers. The major flaw of the work, according to Winton Dean, is that it "falls between two stools: it is not sufficiently explicit for programme music, and too loosely constructed for an abstract symphony."

In the same year that *Roma* was first performed, Bizet married Geneviève Halévy (daughter of his former teacher, Fromental Halévy), a marriage that until recently was thought to be blissful. On the contrary, however, Geneviève had inherited her mother's unstable temperament (made worse in the extreme on the rare occasion that she was near her mother); she was a frail and sickly woman, and a grave responsibility for her concerned husband. Their only child, Jacques, was born three years after the marriage, in 1872, but he also inherited the family curse, and committed suicide at the age of fifty.

Also in 1872, Bizet was commissioned to write incidental music for a performance of Daudet's *L'Arlésienne*. Léon Carvalho, baritone and opera manager, had hoped to use the play to revive the outmoded *mélodrame* genre, but the experiment backfired, with few reputable critics putting in appearances at performances. Bizet wrote the 27 pieces which make up the full score in rapid

succession, unhindered by the small orchestral forces which, due to financial constraints, were all that he had at his disposal. *L'Arlésienne* was substituted at the last minute as the opening billing for the season – the originally intended opening play had been banned – and with little publicity, Daudet's play and Bizet's music met with unsympathetic audiences. The play closed after only 21 performances, due to poor attendance.

After the unhappy life of the incidental music, which had been criticised as boring and "Wagnerian", Bizet immediately set about the orchestration of four of the movements into a concert suite for large symphony orchestra. The Suite No. 1 was first performed under Padeloup in November of the same year, one of the few occasions in Bizet's life when he was met with immediate, substantial and deserving success.

The story of *L'Arlésienne* deals with a peasant man Frédéric, his passion for a woman from the town of Arles, and his devastation at her attachment to the disreputable character Mitifio. Frédéric is eventually coerced into marriage with Vivette, a girl from his own village, but an inopportune meeting with Mitifio on the eve of his wedding leaves the lover Frédéric to take his own life. The tragedy is enough to bring sense to Frédéric's simpleton brother, 'L'innocent', and thus by losing one son the mother gains another.

In 1866, whilst working on *Roma*, and also undertaking an enormous amount of bit-work for his publishers, Bizet signed a contract with Carvalho to write an opera based on Walter Scott's novel *The Fair Maid of Perth*. The librettists, J.H. Vernoy Saint-Georges and Jules Adenis, delivered a libretto unparalleled in its incompetence, and bearing little resemblance to the original novel other than the title, translated as *La Jolie Fille de Perth*. Bizet, on receipt of this hackwork, confided in his friend Galabert: "My *Fille de Perth* is not much like the novel. The play is full of unexpected developments but the characters lack definition. I will, hopefully, make up for this defect. And some of the lines ... well, there's work to be done. I don't use texts to compose; if I did, I wouldn't find a note!"

The production was delayed a full year before its first performance. The Théâtre Lyrique was in financial difficulties, and Carvalho was only using works which could ensure him a strong audience response. Bizet also found himself in trouble with the sopranos – the leading lady, Christine Nilsson, withdrew from her contract, and Bizet's choice of replacement, Jane Devries, angered the rest of the

syndicate, who were more interested in using Madame Carvalho. In the meantime Georges had joyfully announced his engagement to his future wife, stating that the life of parties and mistresses had come to a close, and that the good in him had overcome the wicked, only to then have the engagement unceremoniously broken off by Geneviève's family.

*La Jolie Fille de Perth* was finally performed on 26 December 1867, and alone amongst his works was a success with the press. *La Ménestral* singled out the second act as "a masterpiece from beginning to end", but Johannes Weber's justifiable criticisms in *Le Temps* led Bizet to respond with admittance of his errors, and a renunciation of any association with "the school of *flonflons*, trills and falsehoods."

At the age of 37, Bizet was finally beaten by the throat complaint which had tormented him throughout his life. He died on 3 June 1875, his wedding anniversary, at exactly the moment that the 31st performance of his greatest work, *Carmen*, concluded. Galli-Marie, his leading lady, overcome by an intense foreboding, fainted that night on leaving the stage.

More than 60 years later Reynaldo Hahn, a French composer born a year after Bizet's death, gave the following epithet: "Bizet has conquered the universe. He has conquered not only by his talent, but also by the sympathy, the warmth, the profoundly human quality of that talent. His soul showed through in his music – that sensitive, loyal, generous soul; that spontaneous, kind, uncomplicated character that all those who knew Bizet enjoyed praising."

Judith Martyn-Ellis

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