

# CARMEN

THE OPERA



## WHY DO WE LOVE CARMEN?

**J**une 3, 1875, was an especially dark day for opera. George Bizet, only 36 years old, died, and his masterpiece, *Carmen*, had just received its first performance exactly three months earlier. This appalling event is sobering to contemplate; given the astounding success of *Carmen*, what might he have achieved had he lived a normal lifespan? We will never know, but *Carmen* has become one of the best known and most frequently produced operas in the world. Angered and dispirited by the public's uncomprehending reception, Bizet died without knowing how successful *Carmen* would become.

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# No two Carmens alike – yet never two more likeable

When *Carmen* opens in two weeks, it will run 11 times — the highest number for a single production in Florida Grand Opera's history. And with a role as heady as the title character's, even half as many performances can wilt an experienced singer.

Non-regular opera attendees may not realize that opera singers don't use microphones or electronic amplification. When sitting in the back row of the balcony, you hear their live voice, loud enough yet still beautiful, over a full live orchestra. Opera singers are often thought of as vocal athletes — and just like an NFL football player that needs a week between games to rest, singers with lead roles need time to rest their voices between performances.

FGO has thus hired two mezzo-sopranos to play the femme fatale in alternating performances. Although Rinat Shaham and Kathryn Friest will perform the same songs with the same music and direction, they will each bring their own style and character to *Carmen* — and they will each undoubtedly attract some admirers.

Israeli-born Shaham, an accomplished concert and opera artist, has sung *Carmen* to critical acclaim three times in the recent past. When she debuted in the role at the 2004 Glyndebourne Festival in England, critics wrote that she "took hold of the title role and never let it go."

Shaham said that, no matter how many times she sings *Carmen*, she never tires of the wild and wily character.

"I find new and exciting things every time I sing



Rinat Shaham and Kathryn Friest.

the role, even within the same production, on a different night," she said. "It all depends on the production, on the moment and how my partners and I react to each other."

Described as having the perfect "dark good looks" for *Carmen*, Shaham also brings a touch of her cultural heritage to the character.

"My *Carmen* has a lot of me in it — it has a lot of Israeli 'chutzpa,' which is a daring and fearless spirit. I am not shy about giving my *Carmen* all the sexiness, humor and even gentleness that it needs," she said, and she's ready to demonstrate that in Miami.

Friest, a frequent New York City Opera performer, is new to the *Carmen* role. However, having already portrayed Mercédès (one of *Carmen*'s friends) three times, she's had enough exposure to the piece to have acquired a working understanding of *Carmen*'s character.

"Mercédès is usually a *Carmen* in training," said Friest, who appeared as a "note-perfect" Nicklausse, according to the *Sun-Sentinel*, in the Palm Beach Opera's 2003 *Les contes d'Hoffman*. So during her appearances as Mercedes, Friest took notes — and she's now ready to take the floor. She said she's developed a few opinions about *Carmen* as an individual that will influence her portrayal.

"Some people think *Carmen* is simply a 'free spirit' whose different cultural perspective, which reflects a general lack of the Judeo-Christian ethic, causes her to be misunderstood," said Friest. "That may be true, but there's plenty of evidence that she's also not a very kind person. It will be interesting to see where that takes me once I make contact with the other actors."

Friest, who has also sung at Carnegie Hall and with many major city symphonies, said she's excited about adding a "fleshy" character like *Carmen* to her repertoire. To prepare for the role, she has been taking French, castanet and flamenco dancing lessons.

"I'm never sure who I am as a character until my tenor talks to me," she said, but she set about perfecting the technical aspects of the character as much as possible in advance so she could concentrate on honing her emotional and theatrical "voice" and style during rehearsals. In essence, *Carmen* has "talked" to Friest — and the singer is poised to reply.

— Christine Lyall, Florida Grand Opera



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# Two 'good girls' for one opera

When Micaëla, the straightlaced foil to the seductive Carmen in Bizet's opera, enters the stage, one thought often enters people's minds: "Here comes the 'good girl!'"

"Every soprano has, I think, a secret envy of Carmen, for she has so many layers and flavors," said soprano Sandra López, one of two singers who will portray the more righteous Micaëla in the Florida Grand Opera's *Carmen*. The other Micaëla will be Christina Pier, the 2003 Grand Finals Winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

"Some people see Micaëla as weak," said López, "but I think she's



Christina Pier

strong. She stands up for what she believes is right, and she represents what is pure in our lives. She reminds us that life is about choices.

"I like Micaëla," continued López.

"She is there to tell us there must be a balance in our lives."

López, a graduate of the Lindemann Young Artists Development Program at the Metropolitan Opera and a concert soloist with Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli, has successfully sung the role of Micaëla three other times. Pier, a 2002-03 Young Artist with FGO and a Resident Artist last season (she was Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte*), will sing it for her first time.

For López, singing in Miami will be especially poignant. Although she was born in New York, her father is Cuban and her mother is Ecuadorian, and she moved to Miami — where most of her father's family lives — when she was a teenager. Having graduated from high school here then having attended the University of Miami, López considers the city her home. When she goes on stage, she will stand before a sizeable contingent of local fans.

"I am very excited about that," she said. "My family members and friends all know that I am an opera singer, but this will be the first time that (many of them) will see me in action." And because of their strong Hispanic background, members of her family should be able to identify, to some extent, with Micaëla.

"My family originally came from northern Spain, and Micaëla comes from northern Spain," López explained. "Those areas of Spain are

very religious, very Catholic, and the communities tend to be very close-knit. I can relate to that aspect of the Spanish culture because of my upbringing."

For Pier, singing Micaëla will bring a refreshing change to her repertoire.

"I'm accustomed to singing Mozart," said Pier. "I'm really looking forward to singing Bizet because his music allows for more freedom of emotional expression. There's something about Mozart that feels more emotionally guarded. The Mozart ladies I have sung have been noble, so they have been trained to be

more reserved.

"Micaëla is more of a common girl," Pier continued. "Her emotions seem more accessible and truthful." Pier therefore feels she can throw herself into Micaëla's arias and explore the young woman's convictions on a deeper level.

"I've enjoyed the process of getting to know Micaëla," said Pier. "And the music is so exquisite, it's hard not to bring a lot of passion to it." Micaëla couldn't have said it better herself.

—Christine Lyall  
Florida Grand Opera



Sandra López with Andrea Bocelli



The Chorus has gained a reputation for the ability to portray the dramatic subtleties of the opera's plot.

## The Chorus of *Carmen*

*Carmen* offers one of the greatest challenges to choruses in the operatic repertoire because of the sheer extent of their participation in the opera. Many of the most beautiful musical moments in the score are written for the Chorus. It is particularly demanding for the ladies, who have the responsibility of seducing the audience with the sensuality of the 'Cigarette Girls Chorus' and moments later take their breath away with the impassioned flailings of the 'Fight Chorus.'

This production will feature the largest number of choristers onstage for any production this season, and the group has been working for months to capture the intricacies of the French language and Bizet's timeless score. Based on the level of excellence audiences have come to expect from their work, the Chorus will make sure *Carmen* is a night to remember in the theater.

Since the appointment of Douglas Kinney Frost as Chorus Master, the Florida Grand Opera Chorus has received international critical acclaim for its contribution to FGO productions. The Chorus has consistently received outstanding reviews and audience praise for an increasingly high level of artistic excellence.

The Chorus has gained a reputation for their engaging vocal sound and the ability to portray the dramatic subtleties of the opera's plot. Choruses in opera represent the onstage community's sensitivity to the lead singer's foibles, and the FGO Chorus is able to portray

these dramatic intricacies of an opera score with exacting musical style.

The FGO Chorus is a close-knit community of South Florida's finest vocal talent. Many of the singers are leading soloists in other Miami and Fort Lauderdale performing arts groups, and some have left the group to pursue solo careers in opera with other companies.

The extraordinary diversity that makes South Florida unique is truly represented within the membership of the Chorus. Participants embody a broad range of nationalities and social backgrounds, with a significant number of singers coming from the Hispanic community. For most members of the Chorus, this work compliments more full-time employment; a wide variety of occupations are represented by the membership, from physicians to bartenders to marine scientists.

Entrance into the Chorus is based on highly competitive auditions, as 97 percent of the Chorus returns from year to year. Typically, 10-15 people compete for each open position in the group. Chorus Master Kinney Frost and Stewart Robertson, FGO's Music Director, cast each opera to align the demands of each score to the strengths of every chorister.

—Justin Moss, Managing Director  
for Marketing and Communication  
for Florida Grand Opera