

Carmen

Georges Bizet

Social Studies: Historical Settings for Opera

Students Will

- Read for information
- Research a civilization, landmarks, or literary work with which to set a story
- Write a brief setting and story as the basis for an opera

Copies for Each Student

- *Carmen* Synopsis
- **Georges Bizet, Composer**
- **Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, Librettists**
- Social Studies **Activity Worksheet**

Copy for Teacher

- **Social Studies Activity Worksheet**

Getting Ready

Prepare internet access for possible research for guided practice or group work. Gather pens, pencils and additional writing paper as needed for your group.

Introduction

Have your students read **Georges Bizet, Composer** and **Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, Librettists**. Give each student a copy of the Social Studies **Activity Worksheet** or display it on a screen. Give an overview of the assignment, and point out the information your students are expected to research and write about. To align with Texas TEKS, it is recommended that research topics be tailored according to grade level:

Grade 6: Societies of the contemporary world.

Grade 7: Texas history, from natural Texas to present.

Grade 8: United States history from the early colonial period through Reconstruction.

U.S. History Studies since 1877: U.S. History from Reconstruction to the present day.

World History Studies: Societies of ancient Greece, Rome, India, Persia, China, and Medieval to Renaissance Europe.

Guided/Independent Practice

Depending on your grade level, the ability of your students, and time constraints, you may choose to have students work as a whole class, in small groups, with a partner, or individually. Read the directions on the **Activity Worksheet**. Have students select topics and begin research. This can be done in class or as an outside assignment. Have students fill in their research information, characters, and write a short summary of their dramatic plot. Have students share their answers individually or by groups and tell why they chose their settings and story elements.

Evaluation

Have students present their ideas to the class for discussion and evaluation. The teacher may want to guide the discussion.

For Further Study

Students may want to do additional research on civilizations and landmarks in which to stage a drama or other related topics online or in their school library. Their findings can be shared with the class at the beginning of a later lesson.

TEKS: Social Studies

Grade 6

- (16) Culture. The student understands that all societies have basic institutions in common even though the characteristics of these institutions may differ. (A)
- (21) Social studies skills. The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (A)

Grade 7

- (21) Social studies skills. The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (A)

Grade 8

- (23) Culture. The student understands the relationships between and among people from various groups, including racial, ethnic, and religious groups, during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. (C)
- (29) Social studies skills. The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (A)

United States History Studies Since 1877

- (26) Culture. The student understands how people from various groups contribute to our national identity. (C)

United States History Studies Since 1877, continued

- (29) Social studies skills. The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology.

World History Studies

- (25) Culture. The student understands how the development of ideas has influenced institutions and societies. (A and B)
- (29) Social studies skills. The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (F)

TEKS: Language Arts

Grade 6

(12) Analyze characters, including their traits, motivations, conflicts, and relationships. (F).

Grade 7

(12) Analyze characters, including their traits, motivations, conflicts and relationships. (F).

Grade 8

(12) Analyze characters, including their traits, motivations, conflicts and relationships. (F).

English Language Arts and Reading, English I

(5) Analyze how authors develop complex yet believable characters in works of fiction through a range of literary devices, including character foils. (B).

English Language Arts and Reading, English II

(5) Analyze differences in the characters' moral dilemmas in works of fiction across different countries or cultures. B.

English Language Arts and Reading, English III

(5) Analyze the internal and external development of characters through a range of literary devices. (B)

English Language Arts and Reading, English III

(5) Analyze the internal and external development of characters through a range of literary devices. B.

English Language Arts and Reading, English IV

(5) Analyze the moral dilemmas and quandaries presented in works of fiction as revealed by the underlying motivations and behaviors of the characters. B.

Correlates: Language Arts, Drama

Gardner's Intelligences: Verbal-Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical

Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Synthesis, Evaluation

Bibliography

Warrack, John and West, Ewan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Opera*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

Freeman, John W., *Stories of the Great Operas*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1984.

Goulding, Phil G., *Ticket to the Opera*, Fawcett Columbine, 1996.

www.oxfordmusiconline.com

Carmen Synopsis

The opera is set in and near Seville, Spain around 1820.

Members of the military are serving as police in Seville. Several soldiers are standing around the guard house in the square. Micaëla, a simple, devoted country girl, arrives looking for Don José. He is a corporal in the army and her fiancé. Another soldier tells her that Don José will return soon. She leaves the square.

Many of the soldiers and other men are gathering to see the girls who work in the cigarette factory emerge for a break. When Carmen appears in the group, she is clearly the center of attention. Carmen is a gypsy girl, who sings of fleeting, changing love. She flirts with Don José, the only soldier nearby who is not staring and flirting with her. Once she has Don José's attention, she uses all her charm to keep it. She throws a red flower from the bodice of her dress at him before returning to work.

Micaëla finds Don José to deliver both a letter and a kiss from his mother. Seeing Micaëla makes Don José think of his mother and wonder how he could have been distracted by a woman like Carmen. Micaëla leaves him alone to read the letter. His mother has advised him to marry Micaëla. Don José agrees to do so.

Before Micaëla returns, there is a commotion in the cigarette factory. Carmen has argued with another girl inside the factory and attacked her with a knife. She refuses to answer any questions. Carmen is arrested, and Don José is left alone to guard her. Carmen continues to influence Don José and tells him that he will let her escape because he loves her. She convinces him that he will be her love, and that he must let her go. She tells him of an inn where she will wait for him to join her. When he is to lead Carmen to jail, Don José allows her to escape. Don José is thrown in jail for helping her.

ACT TWO

Two months later, Carmen and her friends are at an inn socializing with officers of the military. She passes the time while waiting for Don José, as she promised him. Escamillo, a famous bullfighter, arrives to an adoring crowd at the inn. He notices Carmen, and immediately has his own intentions of winning her love. Carmen tries to ignore him, even though she is attracted to him.

As the inn closes, Carmen tells her friends that she cannot join their latest plans for smuggling, as she is in love. When Don José appears, her friends urge her to get him to join in their plans. Don José explains that he has been in jail for the past two months. When he hears the bugle call of the military, Carmen ridicules him for being so obedient. She accuses him of not really caring about her. He denies being indifferent, showing Carmen the dried flower that she threw at him. It is now dried, but kept by Don José as a precious memento. Carmen continues to try to convince Don José to leave the army and stay with her and her friends. One of the local officers arrives to see Carmen himself, and finds Don José. The officer orders Don José back to the barracks, but Don José refuses. He is now a deserter, and must flee while Carmen and her gypsy friends playfully distract the officer, singing of their free existence.

Carmen
Synopsis Continued

ACT THREE

In the mountains, Don José and Carmen are with the band of smugglers. Don José looks to the valley where his mother lives, and regrets betraying his family and his mother's expectations. Carmen sees Don José's regret and tells him he might as well leave. She accuses him of not truly loving her. Carmen's indifference makes his temper flare, and Carmen realizes that he could be dangerous. Carmen reads tarot cards with her friends, repeatedly turning up the death card for herself and for Don José. Don José takes up guard duty for the evening, and the women leave him.

Micaëla wanders in, having found the smuggler's hideout. She is looking for Don José, hoping to win him back and bring him home. As she is calling out to Don José, he spots an intruder and fires a warning shot. The intruder turns out to be Escamillo, looking for Carmen. Micaëla hides as the two men face off, both realizing that they are competing for Carmen. Don José challenges Escamillo to a duel. They fight, but Carmen intervenes in time to prevent Don José from hurting Escamillo. The smugglers allow Escamillo to leave, and he invites them all to his next bullfight.

Micaëla is found in her hiding place, and Don José assures the band that she is not a spy. Micaëla pleads with Don José to come to see his mother, who is sick and possibly dying. At first he refuses to leave. Carmen tells him to go. He vows to return.

ACT FOUR

In a square outside the bullring, the crowd waits to see the parade of bullfighters. The procession includes Escamillo. He is hailed as the hero of the day. He sees Carmen and pulls her aside. The two sing of their love for each other. Escamillo continues into the bullring. Carmen's friends warn her that they have seen Don José nearby. Now wanted for desertion, he is hunting for Carmen while staying out of sight of the authorities. Carmen insists that she is not afraid of him and will talk to him if he shows up.

Don José arrives and tries one last time to plead with Carmen to be his love. He has sacrificed everything for her. Carmen, however, tells him that there is nothing left between them. She is distracted by the cheers from the bullring for Escamillo. When she hears the crowd declare Escamillo's victory, she tries to enter the bullring. Don José blocks her way. Carmen shouts that he should either let her go or kill her. She throws away a ring he once gave her. In a jealous rage, Don José stabs Carmen then falls to his knees beside her body. As the cheering crowd leaves the bullring, they are met with the horrific sight of Don José crying over Carmen.

Our Composer, Georges Bizet

Georges Bizet was born in Paris, France on October 25, 1838. His father was a voice teacher. His mother was an accomplished pianist, who taught Georges to play. Her brother was also a well-known musician and teacher.

When he was only nine years old, Georges was admitted to the Paris Conservatory of Music. Students were never admitted until age 10. Bizet so impressed a member of the faculty with his musical skills that the age rule was waived for him. At the conservatory, Bizet developed into a brilliant pianist and composer. He wrote his first one act opera and his first symphony while he was still a student. In 1857, Georges entered a musical competition for a one-act opera sponsored by the composer Jacques Offenbach. The libretto was also the product of a competition for librettists, won by Ludovic Halévy and Léon Battu. The opera was titled *Le Docteur Miracle*, and Bizet's score won him a tie for first place. His *Le Docteur Miracle* was presented on stage, alternating with the other winner's setting of the same opera.

Later in the same year, Georges won the prestigious music scholarship of the *Prix de Rome*. With the scholarship, Bizet was to study in Rome for the next two years, one year in Germany, and two years in Paris. While in Rome, his musical talents developed as he studied. He wrote operas and composed symphonies during this time. He also read a wide variety of literature, including works by Prosper Mérimée.

When Bizet left Rome in July of 1860, he continued to tour Italy. In September, Bizet learned that his mother was ill. He returned to Paris, cutting short his planned studies abroad. His mother died a year later.

Bizet continued to compose over the next few years, but great success as a composer always seemed just out of reach. He made his living arranging other composers' music and giving lessons. His piano skills were exceptional enough to warrant a career performing, but Bizet's heart was set on composing. He continued writing music, especially operas. Many works were abandoned before they were completed. Some works were rejected and never performed. Other works made it to the stage, but met with little popular success.

Bizet also faced a unique problem in French Opera at the time. The audiences loved the works of Offenbach. When other composers mounted an opera, it had to be much like an Offenbach opera—but not too much like an Offenbach opera, or it was ridiculed by the public and critics alike. Finding that very small margin for success was nearly impossible.

On June 3, 1869 Bizet married Genevieve Halévy, the daughter of his late teacher, Fromenthal Halévy and cousin of Ludovic Halévy. In July 1870, Bizet joined the French National Guard. This interrupted his work for a time. By the end of January 1871, Bizet and his wife had to flee Paris. They left for several months to escape the violence in the city.

After returning to Paris, Bizet became a member of the Paris Conservatory's examination committees. He also worked on his own music, but had no outstanding successes. In 1872 he was approached with an offer to compose an opera for the Opéra-Comique in Paris. The subject was not specified, but the librettists had been selected for him—Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. Bizet had not collaborated with Halévy since *Le Docteur Miracle*. Halévy had been working successfully with Offenbach for several years.

Bizet was able to select the story himself, and he chose *Carmen*, a short novel by Prosper Mérimée. He began working on the music in 1873. Work was suspended for a time when the opera management raised objections to the subject matter. They felt it was not appropriate for a theater that featured wholesome family entertainment. By 1874 he had resumed work on the score, after one of the opera's co-managers resigned.

The story of Carmen and Don José was already powerful. Bizet adapted Merimée's story by adding the character of Micaëla and expanding the character of Escamillo. Micaëla brought innocence and purity to balance the questionable morals of Carmen. Escamillo provided direct competition with Don José for Carmen's affection and completed the love triangle that would bring about the tragic ending.

Our Composer, Georges Bizet *continued*

Further objections by management and musicians were largely overcome with the influence of the principal artists, Paul Léhrie and Célestine Galli-Marié. They threatened to back out of the project when management tried to pressure Bizet into making major changes to the story. They also convinced Bizet to make enough subtle changes to alleviate some of the concerns of the theater management. Objections by the musicians and extras of the cast were largely ignored, and they had to adapt to the story material and difficult music.

Galli-Marié had not been the first choice to sing the role of Carmen. Another soprano had been favored by the librettists, but was rejected by the theater management and Bizet himself. Marie Roze was engaged to play the role, but backed out when she learned her character would die on stage. This was simply not done in the opera world at the time. Galli-Marié took on the part after a lengthy negotiation. It is believed that much of Bizet's editing of the soprano's music was to make it fit Galli-Marié's somewhat limited vocal range.

Taking care of all these issues delayed the premiere until March 3rd of 1875. The opera ran for 48 performances over more than three months. The reaction by the audience on opening night was cold. The opera showed women openly smoking. The lead female character was of questionable character and used men for her own purposes, then cast them aside. Worst of all, the opera portrayed a violent death openly on stage. It was certainly not the family fare the audience was expecting. It broke many of the unwritten rules for opera of the time.

Bizet's peers, however, were very supportive. Composers Claude Debussy, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Pyotr Tchaikovsky, praised the opera. The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche saw it more than twenty times. He proclaimed *Carmen* was one of the masterpieces of operatic literature.

Bizet was never to know just how successful *Carmen* would become. He died of a throat infection at the age of 36 on June 3, 1875. It was his sixth wedding anniversary, exactly three months after *Carmen*'s premiere. He was buried in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

Only a few of Bizet's completed works have survived. Many were given away or lost. *Le Docteur Miracle* was lost for nearly a hundred years before being found in a library at the Paris Conservatory. Bizet is mainly known today for his three surviving full operas.

Carmen alone would be an amazing legacy for any composer. It has been hailed as a work of utter brilliance. It opened the door for composers like Puccini to stage the operas he did—now that some of the major rules of opera had been broken. It has been one of the top three performed operas for over a century and an integral part of the opera repertoire.

Our Librettists: Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy

Henri Meilhac (Librettist) (February 21, 1831 - July 6, 1897) As a young man in Paris, Meilhac began writing imaginative articles for newspapers and vaudeville shows. His vibrant writing style soon made him quite popular. In 1860, he met Ludovic Halévy on the steps outside a theater. Halévy had just lost his writing partner for a big project and offered Meilhac the job. They began writing scripts for plays and opera libretti together with much success. They continued their collaboration for twenty years. Although they wrote more than a dozen libretti for the composer Jacques Offenbach, their most famous work is the libretto for Georges Bizet's *Carmen*. Meilhac also wrote the libretto for another famous opera, Jules Massenet's *Manon*, with a writer named Philippe Gille in 1884. Composer Johann Strauss used Halévy and Meilhac's play, *Le Réveillon*, as the basis for his famous operetta, *Die Fledermaus*. In 1888, Meilhac he was elected to the Académie française. Henri Meilhac died in Paris in 1897.

Ludovic Halévy (Librettist) (January 1, 1834 – May 7, 1908) Halévy was an author and playwright who born in Paris. His father, Léon Halévy (1802–1883), was a civil servant and a writer who never really achieved much success with his work. His uncle, Fromental Halévy, was an opera composer. As a young boy, Halévy spent a lot of time at the theater and playing in the parts of Paris that would later become the settings for most of his stories. After graduating from school, he worked for the French government but still continued to write plays and comic operas. In 1865 he resigned from his job and began writing full time. By this time, he had begun collaborating with Henri Meilhac. Their working relationship lasted twenty years and resulted in numerous successful plays and opera librettos. In 1882, their partnership came to an end. Halévy was given the cross of commander of the Legion of Honor and became a member of the Académie française in 1884. Ludovic Halévy died in the spring of 1908 in Paris, France.

***Carmen* Social Studies Activity**

The creative genius of Georges Bizet, Henri Meilhac, and Ludovic Halévy created *Carmen* based on a novel by Prosper Mérimée. The characters and main plot could possibly be set in any time period in any society on earth. A beautiful, seductive woman, a handsome soldier, a famous hero with mass appeal—all could be reinterpreted to other settings and eras you have studied. Or maybe a different story is in order. After all, the human animal is the same in all cultures and all times in history.

You will plan a new opera of your own. Select a time period, society, or culture that you may have previously read about in social studies. You may plan your characters and their story. You might also select a famous work of literature to present. Be sure to select a place for the action to happen. It may be a real place, like the acropolis in Athens, the Forbidden City of China, Machu Picchu in Peru, the Alamo, or even the civil War South. You will need to do a little research on your topics, obtain information and possibly images, write out your idea, and present your plan to the class.

Your Plan

Your plan for a new dramatic opera should contain the following:

1. What era, civilization, or society would be the basis for your opera?
2. What characters would you use? Names are not necessary, but tell us who these people are.
3. What place would be the setting? Would you use a landmark that still exists, or something generic, like a Native American village in Texas?
4. Briefly tell the story you would like to portray. What is the main conflict or problem of the story?
5. Tell why you chose the time and place that you selected, and share your research on the topic, either from the library or web.

All of this information can be as brief or as detailed as your teacher requests. The basic facts would probably fit on a single sheet of notebook paper. You may use the planning form below. Your research may yield much more information.

Name _____ Date _____

***Carmen* Social Studies: Planning Your Opera
Activity Worksheet**

1. What era, civilization, or society would be the basis for your opera?

2. Briefly tell about two or three main characters in your opera.

3. What place would be the setting? _____

4. What is the main conflict or problem of the story? _____

5. Tell why you chose the time and place that you selected, and share your research on the topic, either from the library or web.
