

# BLURRED LINES

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

## TIMELINKS

1873-74

### BIZET

Selections from *Carmen*

Paul Verlaine wounds fellow French poet, friend, and lover Arthur Rimbaud with pistol

1904

### DEBUSSY

*Danses sacrée et profane*

Ravel's *Shéhérazade* premieres in Paris

1928

### RAVEL

*Bolero*

Mickey Mouse appears in Disney's "Steamboat Willie"

1954

### VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Tuba Concerto in F minor

President Eisenhower announces detonation of first hydrogen bomb

Attention, guys of a certain age: Stop thinking about Bo Derek. Just stop it right now.

Say what you will about *10*, Blake Edwards's 1979 sex comedy starring Derek and Dudley Moore. For the most part, it has pretty much slipped from our collective memory. But it is also one of the few times that (relatively) contemporary pop culture and classical music have shared a moment—and a rather intimate one at that. And that was thanks to today's featured piece, Ravel's *Bolero*. Dial the movie up on Netflix if you have to.

*10* was not the first time the bold sensuality of *Bolero* had been remarked upon, and that is a quality evident in another of this weekend's pieces, selections from Bizet's *Carmen*. The former came from the world of ballet, the latter from opera. Both were controversial at first but soon won coveted places in classical music's essential canon.

The other two works on today's program feature instruments that are not often given the solo spotlight. In the case of Debussy's *Sacred and Profane Dances*, it is the harp, while Vaughan Williams sheds some light on the orchestra's low end with his Tuba Concerto.

## GEORGES BIZET

Selections from *Carmen*

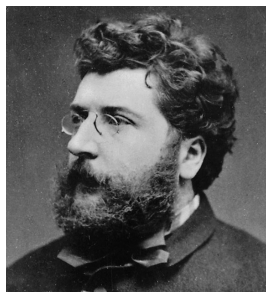
**BOLD AND BRAZEN** One of the boldest, most shocking, and—eventually—most successful operas of all time, Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, premiered in Paris on March 3, 1875. But during its initial run at the Opéra-Comique, it was mostly a failure, playing to half-empty houses and drawing critical jeers for what parochial audiences saw as low subject matter and its brazen displays of onstage sensuality and even murder.

Not everyone recoiled from Bizet's daring display of passion and true-to-life drama. Tchaikovsky saw the production in Paris and called it "one of those few works which are destined to reflect in the highest degree the musical aspirations of an entire epoch." Brahms was also a fan, and reportedly saw it 20 times. Nietzsche, meanwhile, offered the characteristically caustic comment that *Carmen* should be used as an antidote to the poison of Wagner's operas.

All of that is fine, but it did Bizet himself no good. By the time the opera was produced in Vienna, where it became a hit, and then throughout the rest of Europe and even America, Bizet was dead, succumbing to a heart attack on June 3, 1875. His was an especially cruel death in that with *Carmen*, Bizet had only just come into the full flower of his genius, and that its perceived rejection by the public spurred on his depression and ill health. Had he survived until the Vienna production, things might have turned out differently.

But *Carmen* was an understandably tough sell, at least at first. Its heroine is also its villain—a seductress whose raw beauty, street smarts, and dangerous allure prove irresistible in ways that polite society might not be so quick to admit. Verdi's *La traviata* also concerns a woman of questionable morals, it has often been pointed out, but Violetta Valéry is redeemed at the end and dies in a more respectable fashion—of tuberculosis. *Carmen*'s realism, meanwhile—including the protagonist's onstage murder—was simply too much to take.

What is harder to fathom, however, is the criticism from Bizet's time that the opera's music



### **Born**

October 25, 1838, in Paris

### **Died**

June 3, 1875, Bougival, near Paris

### **First Performance**

March 3, 1875, *Carmen* was conducted by Adolphe Deloffre, in Paris

### **STL Symphony Premiere**

November 13, 1914, Max Zach conducting *Carmen* excerpts featuring soprano Marie Sundelius

### **Most Recent STL Symphony Performance**

May 20, 2011, Ward Stare conducting Suite No. 1

### **Scoring**

2 flutes  
2 piccolos  
2 oboes  
English horn  
2 clarinets  
2 bassoons  
4 horns  
2 trumpets  
3 trombones  
tuba  
timpani  
percussion  
harp  
strings

### **Performance Time**

approximately 28 minutes

**Born**

August 22, 1862, in  
St. Germain-en-Laye

**Died**

March 25, 1918, in Paris

**First Performance**

November 6, 1904, in Paris,  
with soloist Lucille Wurmser-  
Delcourt, Édouard Colonne  
conducting

**STL Symphony Premiere**

October 10, 1981, Frances  
Tietov was soloist, with  
Leonard Slatkin conducting

**Most Recent STL Symphony  
Performance**

October 21, 1981, in Hannibal,  
Missouri, with Frances Tietov,  
Catherine Comet conducting

**Scoring**

solo harp  
strings

**Performance Time**

approximately 9 minutes

was tuneless and unmemorable. In fact, it is perhaps packed with more memorable melodies than any other opera. Indeed, the genius of *Carmen* is not merely contained in its brave subject matter and lifelike presentation, but also in its multifaceted music and orchestrations that fully flesh out the opera's characters, setting, and mood. It is a major reason why the misguided reception that spurred on the tragedy of Bizet's sad end turned into a timeless artistic triumph.

**CLAUDE DEBUSSY**

*Dances sacrée et profane*

**19TH-CENTURY TECHNO GEEKS** Music progresses, at least in some lines of historical thinking, thanks mostly to innovative ideas set forth by composers. At some point, one or more of these artists tire of the restrictive forms placed upon them, and they break free, moving music ever forward. Or so the story goes.

But sometimes there are other factors at play—technology, for example, or in the case at hand, the invention of a new kind of instrument; or more correctly, a variation on an established one.

In 1897, the venerable Parisian instrument maker Pleyel and Wolff commissioned Gustav Lyon to design a chromatic harp. In layman's terms, the chromatic harp expanded on the standard pedal harp by adding extra strings that allowed a harpist to play a greater range of notes.

Seeking to develop a market for its new instruments, Pleyel and Wolff attempted to convince conservatories to offer courses in the chromatic harp. The company also commissioned Claude Debussy—famed for his groundbreaking *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and for the more recent opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*—to compose a work that placed the instrument at its center.

A revolutionary composer and a potentially revolutionary instrument? It seemed like a revolutionary match. Debussy, after all, was no stranger to controversy and seemed to enjoy getting a rise out of anyone with a more staid sense of musical decorum.

That the match did not come off entirely as planned was not the fault of the composer. The chromatic harp turned out to be too cumbersome in a variety of ways. It was hard to tune and keep in tune, difficult to play, and simply not as resonant as a standard harp. Without much fanfare, it was quickly abandoned.

**A THIN LINE BETWEEN SACRED AND PROFANE** Debussy's *Dances sacrée et profane*, the work composed for the commission, remains in use, and no sacrifice is made in hearing the work played on a modern concert harp. The piece was composed while Debussy's life was in turmoil—he abandoned his wife for another woman, which led to his wife attempting suicide—while professionally he was consumed with creating his orchestral masterpiece *La Mer*. The *Dances* is composed in two parts, obviously, the “sacred” and the “profane.” The latter is not meant to convey obscenity, but rather a devotion to nature and other worldly concerns in contrast to the spiritual realm addressed in the former.

Interestingly, the two dances do not contrast that much—read into that what you will. But given Debussy's unconventional ideas about harmony and tonality, the harp proves to be a particularly effective instrument, creating rich textures both in synch and in contrast with the string orchestra. Debussy recoiled from the term “impressionism” being placed upon his music, but it is appropriately applied here.

An interesting aside, given that Maurice Ravel is also featured on this program: After Pleyel and Wolff commissioned Debussy's piece, Érard, the well-established maker of harps and pianos, commissioned Ravel to write a piece for its harp. The result was Ravel's 1905 work, *Introduction and Allegro*.

## **RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS**

Tuba Concerto in F minor

**TUBA JUBILEE** Ralph Vaughan Williams was one of the greatest English composers of the 20th century, but his work was deeply traditional, and no one would mistake him for being among the musical mavericks of his age.

Yet, late into his years, after such triumphs as his great symphonies, *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, *The Lark Ascending*, and other works, Vaughan Williams became unusually playful in some of his compositions, featuring instruments not often spotlighted in orchestral performances; among them harmonica, vibraphone, flugelhorn, saxophone, and tuba.

Tuba?

Indeed, introduced into orchestras barely a century before, the tuba is a sometimes overlooked and sadly underappreciated instrument. Or it was, until Vaughan Williams wrote his Tuba Concerto in F minor, in 1954. The London Symphony Orchestra [LSO]—at the time planning for its Golden Jubilee concert—asked Vaughan Williams if he had a new work that it could perform for the occasion. This is what he offered, and the LSO accepted, knowing it had in its ensemble an exceptional tubist.

**CONVENTIONAL/UNCONVENTIONAL** The piece proceeds in three conventional movements. What is decidedly unconventional about the concerto,

**Born**

October 12, 1872, in  
Gloucestershire, England

**Died**

August 26, 1958, in London

**First Performance**

June 13, 1954, Philip Catelinet  
was soloist, with Sir John  
Barbirolli conducting  
the London Symphony  
Orchestra

**STL Symphony Premiere**

September 25, 1987, Gene  
Pokorny was soloist, with  
Leonard Slatkin conducting  
the only previous  
performance

**Scoring**

solo tuba  
2 flutes  
piccolo  
oboe  
2 clarinets  
bassoon  
2 horns  
2 trumpets  
2 trombones  
timpani  
percussion  
strings

**Performance Time**

approximately 12 minutes

however—beyond its simple existence—is the respect Vaughan Williams accords an instrument more often associated with bombast and low comedy. Some of the early reviews, perhaps lazily toeing the stereotypical line about the instrument, characterized the concerto as exhibiting those qualities.

But nothing could be further from the truth. What is perhaps most remarkable about the piece is its almost complete avoidance of the tuba's rumble and roar. Instead, the concerto brings to light its oft-overlooked sonorous and lyrical capabilities.

Vaughan Williams did not achieve this on his own. The LSO's principal tubist, Philip Catelinet, took on the challenge of playing the concerto, and worked through the piece with the composer himself. The concerto demanded a virtuosic performance as well as physical stamina. However light and playful the music plays, a tuba is still a heavy thing.

But the effort is worth it. Vaughan Williams's Tuba Concerto expanded the possibilities of not only the instrument, but the classical repertoire as well.