

**Opera Western Reserve:  
*Carmen* at Stambaugh Auditorium (Nov. 11)**

by Robert Rollin



Opera Western Reserve's tradition of giving only one annual performance has always insured a substantial turnout. This year's crowd was as large and enthusiastic as ever for Georges Bizet's *Carmen* on Friday, November 11 at Youngstown's Stambaugh Auditorium.

Production Director David Vosburgh dedicated the performance to the memory of OWR board member Joseph Edwards, who passed away earlier this year. Joe was revered as former director of the Dana School of Music and dean of Youngstown State University's College of Fine and Performing Arts. A gifted clarinetist and an outstanding teacher and leader, his humanity encouraged his colleagues to function together harmoniously.

The overture immediately displayed the expert hand of conductor Susan Davenny Wyner, who ushered the small orchestra through a fine reading of its familiar themes. *Carmen* is full of gorgeous tunes, and Bizet's outstanding orchestration allowed the lead players to shine in their solos throughout the opera.

Vosburgh's production updated the setting to the era of the Spanish Civil War, and guest stage director Scott Skiba provided effective pacing, staging, and blocking.

The exemplary quality of the cast made the performance a breathtaking success. Mezzo-soprano Rhea Olivacce (Carmen) and tenor Matthew Vickers (Don José) brought their roles to life with exceptional singing and fine acting.

Olivacce sparkled with vivacious abandon in the famous *Habanera*, singing with vibrant color and accuracy of pitch. Her lovely presence and graceful movements onstage matched her refined voice. She was equally expressive when she sang and danced the *Seguidilla*.

In Act 2, Vickers shone in the *Flower Song*, Don José's declaration of love to Carmen. Later, when she urges him to return home with Micaela, he passionately sang the line, "nothing but death will separate me from Carmen," a powerful moment in the opera.

As the bullfighter Escamillo, baritone Luke Scott sang with an elegantly dark vocal color, maintaining clear diction and fine pitch in his *Toreador Song* appearances in Acts 2 and 4, embodying his character's pride and enthusiasm.

Soprano Kisma Jordan was nothing less than stunning as Micäela, Don José's hometown love. Perhaps the finest singer in the production, she negotiated the intricacies of her arias and ensembles with consummate technique and engaging interpretation. She accompanied her repeated vocal entreaties for Don José to remember his dying mother with eloquent gestures and movements.

Excellent supporting vocalists included Alexa Lokensgard and Shafica Kaleel, who sang Carmen's gypsy friends Frasquita and Mercédès with great gusto in Act 1. They returned in Act 2 to sparkle with Olivacce in *The Gypsy Song*.

Basses Jason Budd and Brian Keith Johnson were first-rate in their respective roles as Zuniga and Moralès. Budd, a local talent, has developed a national following for his mostly comedic roles. Johnson has graced many Northeast Ohio productions with his consistent talent. Giustino Carrano (El Dancaïro) was especially effective in the *Smuggler Quintet* with four fellow gypsies.

Barbara Luce's costumes were remarkable, particularly for the gypsy dancers. Though beautifully dressed, the dancers did not fully project the flavor that was needed. The choruses, directed by Jon Simsic, were consistently excellent.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 15, 2016.*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)