

# The Secret Life of Bizet

By JOSEPH SMITH

**W**e may not think of Georges Bizet as a pianist, but those musicians who heard him recognized that his gifts were of the highest order. When Bizet was still a student, he had the honor of meeting Liszt at a dinner party given by the composer Fromental Halévy. Liszt performed a difficult new and unpublished composition—one that, he maintained, could be played by only two pianists: himself and Von Bülow. Halévy, knowing Bizet's ready technique and quick ear, nudged him into playing a passage, which Bizet had picked up by ear on this single hearing. The astonished Liszt then placed the manuscript in front of the young man, and watched as Bizet read it through at first sight. Liszt had to eat his words and acknowledge that were indeed *three* who could play the piece, and he added, "The youngest is perhaps the boldest and the most brilliant." Nevertheless, Bizet was a brilliant pianist the public never, ever heard.

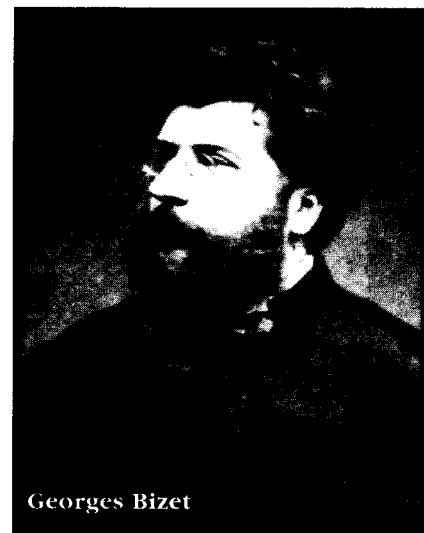
Bizet, of course, needed other sources of income than composing alone could provide. (Throughout the history of music, few composers have been able to support themselves entirely through composition—most have held some kind of "day job," at least for part of their career. Wolf was a critic, Fauré director of the Paris conservatory, Tchaikovsky taught, Ives and Borodin held jobs outside of music, and Schoenberg orchestrated operettas.) Performing as a pianist would seem to have been an obvious choice for Bizet. But he had a definite reason for shunning performance: he felt that if he were known as a pianist, it would create a prejudice against his operas. His fear was by no means irrational. In Bizet's time, many pianists were "composers" in the limited sense of composing vehicles for their own use. The very term "pianist-composer" thus tended to suggest an unoriginal and superficial compositional talent. Berlioz, in a highly appreciative review of Bizet's opera *The Pearl Fishers*, writes that Bizet must be now granted recognition as a composer *despite* his rare gifts as a pianist! (Berlioz himself didn't play the piano, and was proud of the fact.)

So, instead of playing the piano, Bizet spent his time arranging for it—doing hackwork for the publisher Choudens. Any opera, ballet, or concerto requires a piano "reduction" of the orchestral part, so that the work can be studied and rehearsed without orchestra. The process of reduction consists of deciding which orchestral lines and textures can be played with two hands, which omitted as less important, and what can be paraphrased so as to trick the ear into imagining the desired orchestra effect. (Bizet was a virtuoso at playing orchestral scores on the piano at first sight—the technique of "reducing" would have been second nature to him.) Some composers have preferred to execute this work themselves,

others to delegate it to some younger, less-established colleague—for instance, Moscheles made the reduction of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Berg that of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*. While most of Bizet's reductions are of works long forgotten, any pianist who accompanies the moody drinking song from Thomas's opera *Hamlet*, or Saint-Saëns's skitterish *Rondo Capriccioso* for violin is playing a piano part reduced by Bizet.

Nor were these reductions the only kind of arrangements required by a music publisher. Before the recording era, a wide variety of published music was geared to the amateur pianist who was not necessarily a brilliant player, but a reasonably good sight-reader. Operas appeared not only in "vocal" score with orchestra reduction, but also in editions for solo piano, with the vocal lines incorporated into the arrangement. Symphonic works were typically published in four-hand versions, and operas and ballets were as well. By means of these arrangements, the home pianist could become familiar with music before attending a performance, savor memories of a performance, and gain access to works not scheduled for performance.

Thus, the sad irony: from a great composer who was also a great pianist, we have an Everest of pages of piano arrangements, but barely any original piano compositions at all. He died at thirty-six, too soon for the posthumous success of his opera *Carmen* to liberate him financially. Two major works attest to his ability to compose music brilliantly engineered to the instrument: the piquant four-hand suite *Jeux d'enfants*, and the *Variations chromatiques de concert*, an imposing homage to Beethoven's 32 Variations. The present Caprice was one of a set of little pieces Bizet composed for the harmonium and transcribed for piano by the great pedagogue, Isidor Philipp. The piece exemplifies Bizet's rare ability to compose cheerful music in the minor mode—or rather poised between modes; think of the gypsy song or the children's marching chorus from *Carmen*. ■



Georges Bizet

See Bizet's Caprice on the following pages.

# CAPRICE

from *Trois Esquisses Musicales*

GEORGES BIZET  
(1838-1875)

**Allegretto**

The musical score is written for piano in 2/4 time. It consists of five systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system (measures 1-4) begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and a *legg.* (leggiero) marking. The bass line features fingerings such as 2 1 2, 1 2 1 3, 2 1 3, and 2 1 3. The second system (measures 5-8) starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a *ten.* (tension) marking. The third system (measures 9-12) features a *sf* (sforzando) dynamic, a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking, and a key signature change to one sharp (F#). The fourth system (measures 13-16) is marked *p* (piano). The fifth system (measures 17-20) begins with a *pp* dynamic and includes a *ten.* marking. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

25 *cantante*

*ten.* *Λ* *ten.* *Λ*

30

*ten.* *Λ* *ten.* *Λ* *cresc.* *ten.* *Λ* *sf* *1 5* *dim.*

35

*sf* *p* *dim.* *p* *tr#*

40

*ben cantante*

45

*p* *1* *2* *1* *2* *1* *3* *1* *2* *1*

*Ped.* *Ped.* *Ped.*

50

*pp*

*una corda*

55

60

*dim. e rall.*

*p a tempo*

*tre corde*

65

*tre corde*

70

*pp*

*una corda*

75

*dim. e rall.*

80

*a tempo*

*pp* *ten.* *ten.*

85

*p* *ten.* *ten.* *dim.*

90

*pp* *estinto e rall.*

una corda

95

*ppp* *estinto*

*Ped.*

*ppp*