

Symphony in C

- i. **Allegro vivo**
- ii. **Adagio**
- iii. **Scherzo: Allegro vivace**
- iv. **Allegro vivace**

Were it not for his untimely death at the age of 36, Georges Bizet (1838-1875) might have gone on to be one of France's foremost composers in the second half of the twentieth century. Instead, he is known for his opera *Carmen*, written in the last year of his life, and a handful of other works.

Bizet's precocious talent was noticed from an early age and he was enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire at the tender age of nine, where he studied under Charles Gounod. The young Bizet was blessed with an exceptional memory and was entrusted by Gounod with making keyboard reductions of his two symphonies. Having immersed himself in his teacher's work, Bizet soon turned his attention to his own symphony – the Symphony in C was begun four days after Bizet turned 17, and was completed within a month.

No composer could graduate from the Paris Conservatoire without a 'classical' symphony under his belt, which is how symphonies by the sixteen-year-old Saint-Saëns (1852) and seventeen-year-old Bizet (1855) came to be written. But by the 1850s the symphony had come to be seen as an outdated form – usurped by the programmatic genres pioneered by Liszt and Wagner, it was now a mere graduation exercise to demonstrate formal expertise.

This may be one of the reasons why Bizet showed no desire to hear the Symphony – it was never performed during his lifetime and wasn't premièred until 1935. Bizet may also have felt that there were too many echoes of his teacher in the Symphony in C; the influences of Haydn and Rossini can be heard but above all Gounod, who clearly had a big influence on Bizet in his formative years. Nevertheless, the young Bizet undoubtedly finds his voice in this Symphony and it sits alongside Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Mozart's Symphony No. 25 in G minor as the product of a seventeen-year-old genius.

The didactic title and standard four-movement structure betray the originality of Bizet's Symphony in C. The first movement is an ebullient *Allegro vivo* – a lyrical oboe melody soaring above the orchestra provides brief respite from the bustling energy of Bizet's string writing. An understated, chordal introduction opens the second movement which makes way for a nostalgia-infused cantilena. There is a quasi-fugal section in the middle of the movement, but it is the beautiful lyricism of this *Adagio* which marks this as a precursor to the operatic writing for which Bizet would become so well-known. The third movement is a robust scherzo with an accompanying trio which carries rustic undertones; it is Beethovenian in its rhythmic vitality but also has bucolic, Mendelssohn-style melodies. The final

movement is a frenetic *Allegro vivace* which draws to a close an ingenious Symphony which recalls the vibrancy of early Mozart but which looks forward to the lyricism of Bizet's operas and the brilliant energy of *Carmen*.