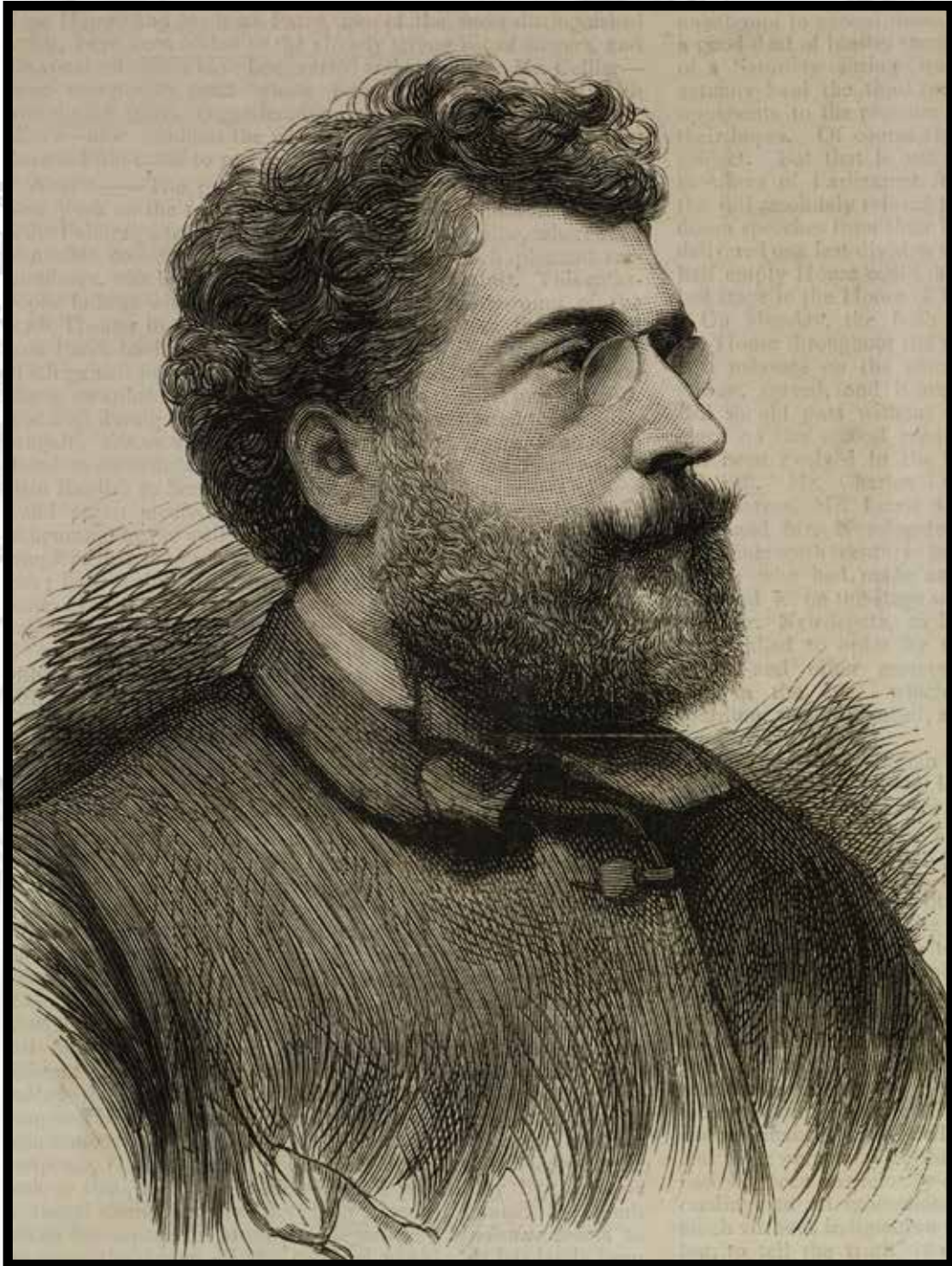


# GEORGES BIZET'S "FULL GAMUT OF MISERY"



Portrait of Georges Bizet (1838-1875). Getty Images, Dea / Biblioteca Ambrosiana /

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When Georges Bizet was 19 years old, he opined that he "would need to live through only a few experiences before [dying] to have run the full gamut of misery."<sup>1</sup> In little more than a decade and a half, he was dead, having succumbed to persistent ill health, the cause of which has never been determined.

### Bizet's legacy<sup>1</sup>

Bizet was born Alexander César Léopold Bizet in Paris on October 25, 1838, though baptized Georges Bizet on March 4, 1840. He was an only child, raised in "a state of cultivated poverty."<sup>1</sup> His mother, an accomplished pianist, died at the age of 45 of a prolonged illness of unknown etiology. His father, who lived to be 76-years-old, was a hair-dresser/wig-maker turned singing teacher.

By the age of four years, Bizet was mastering the piano. At age 10, he entered the prestigious Paris Conservatoire, and within a year won first prize in *solfege* (sightreading), and then in piano, organ, and fugues. At age 19 years, in response to having won the coveted Prix de Rome, he wrote three pieces (*Don Procopio*, *Vasco de Gama*, and a Scherzo), which established him as one of the most promising young composers of the era. Unfortunately, thereafter, much of his time was

taken up by what historians called hack composition work—piano transcriptions, orchestrations, conducting rehearsals, and teaching up to 16 hours a day. Nevertheless, during the 17 years left to him, Bizet composed four operas, including *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, *La Jolie Fille de Perth*, *Djmileh*, and his masterpiece, *Carmen*. He also wrote incidental music for *L'Arlesienne*, a play by Alphonse Daudet, which was a flop, even though the music was adored.

Although *Carmen* proved to be one of the most produced operas of all time, Bizet's other works pale by comparison, begging the question: Was he a one-hit wonder? He was in the thick of all that was going on in the musical world of Paris at the time, with the admiration of opera producers and devoted friends including Ambroise Thomas, Camille Saint-Saëns, Jules Massenet and Jacques Offenbach. Yet, he had only the one (enormously) popular work.

### Untimely death

Bizet published only 37 pieces of music during his lifetime because he died so young at 36-years of age. However, other contemporary composers who died young were much more prolific. Franz Schubert, for example, died at the age of 31 years with 1,500 works to his credit, including seven symphonies and 14 stage works. Mendelssohn by the time of his death at age 38 years had produced six operas, five symphonies, and 13 string symphonies. And by the age of 36 years, contemporaries such as Brahms had published 146 pieces, including three symphonies, and two concerti; Verdi 14 operas; and Wagner 16 symphonic works and 12 operas.

### Years of illness

Perhaps Bizet's well-documented poor health was to blame for his limited legacy. He was never a well man. His health problems began in his mid-teens with a first attack of "quinsy" (inflammation of the throat), which recurred thereafter nearly every spring or early summer. When he was 20 years old, he had an especially severe attack, complicated by an "ulceration in his throat,"<sup>1</sup> difficulty swallowing and weight loss. He was treated with



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Part of the Paris Conservatoire, where Bizet studied from 1848 to 1857. Alamy

leeches applied to his throat, a gargle of unknown composition, and advised to have his tonsils removed.

When he was 23 years old, Bizet began experiencing paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnea in the form of a recurrent dream in which he felt as if he were being suffocated by his mother pressing her hand over his heart. He was also having intermittent palpitations and could not climb five flights of stairs without pausing to catch his breath.

Bizet had recurrences of severe quinsy at age 27 years and again at age 30 years, before succumbing to the disorder. In some cases, the recurrences were accompanied by what his biographers called "muscular rheumatism,"<sup>1</sup> which they did not characterize further.

Bizet smoked a pipe and cigars, drank wine, sometimes to excess, and was an avid swimmer. He patronized bordellos as a youth and had two mistresses, one of whom bore him a son. That son lived to be 77 years old. When Bizet was 31 years old, he married a neurotic woman 11 years his junior. They had one child, a son, who committed suicide at the age of 50.

Bizet was a plump, vigorous man with light brown hair and a reddish-brown beard. He had blue-gray eyes and a pink complexion that gave the appearance of robust health, even as he was dying of the mysterious disorder that had plagued him for more than two decades.

In March of his 36th year, Bizet had an attack of quinsy, which proved to be his last. He had recovered rapidly from previous attacks, but this time, abscesses in his throat were accompanied by one at the root of his tongue. After a few days, the inflammation in his throat seemed to subside, however, his muscular rheumatism increased in intensity. A month later, he began



Poster from Carmen's premiere. Alamy

complaining of fits of suffocation, and not being able to hear anything in his left ear.<sup>1</sup>

Concerned that the city air was poisoning him, Bizet left Paris for the countryside. For a brief period, he had fewer rheumatic pains and was able to breathe more freely. Feeling much improved, he went for a long swim in the Seine River. Shortly thereafter, he developed a high fever and pain so severe that he was unable to move either his arms or his legs.

Two days later, the muscular inflammation diminished to the point that he was able to move a little more easily. However, a heart attack so excruciatingly painful supervened, causing Bizet to think he was going to die. Within a few hours the pain lessened and he was able to rest quietly. His physician applied a blistering agent over the heart, declaring that the crisis was over, though Bizet's fever remained high.

An hour later, Bizet had another heart attack, as violent and as agonizing as the first. He lost consciousness and a short time later was dead. Traces of pus and blood were present on Bizet's neck at the time of his death.

### **“A cardiac complication of articular rheumatism”**

Bizet’s physician gave “a cardiac complication of articular rheumatism” as the cause of death.<sup>2</sup> If by “cardiac complication of articular rheumatism,” the physician meant what today would be called “a complication of rheumatic heart disease,” no diagnosis fits the character and the course of the composer’s chronic illness and death better.

Bizet’s recurrent attacks of quinsy were almost certainly episodes of group A streptococcal pharyngitis, which have long been recognized as triggers of attacks of acute rheumatic fever. Moreover, Bizet’s paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnea, palpitations, dyspnea on exertion and muscular rheumatism, represent two major Jones Criteria for the diagnosis of Acute Rheumatic Fever.

Acute rheumatic fever is no longer a nationally notifiable disease in the United States, after having declined steadily during the late 20th century for unclear reasons to just 0.04-0.06 cases per 1,000 children.<sup>3</sup> However, the disorder continues to be a problem in low and middle income countries, and was common in Europe during Bizet’s lifetime.

Although death of a child due to rheumatic fever is usually the consequence of active carditis, in the adult, mechanical failure of the heart due to atrial fibrillation, embolic episodes or bacterial endocarditis is more often the cause. Nevertheless, carditis (frequently accompanied by pericarditis) does occur in adults and can mimic an acute myocardial infarction.<sup>4</sup> Bizet could have died as a result of any of these complications. Given his high fever and excruciating chest pain, rheumatic carditis, possibly accompanied by pericarditis, was the most likely cause of his death. His recurrent palpitations also raise the possibility of atrial fibrillation with a rapid ventricular response due to mitral stenosis as his terminal event.

If Bizet had rheumatic carditis at the time of his death, his long swim in the Seine River may have hastened his demise. In experimental models, forced exercise substantially increases mortality in animals with carditis. Interestingly, swimming has been the form of exercise used in such models.<sup>5</sup>

A widely held past belief in the United States and England used to be that children with red hair were especially prone to rheumatic fever.<sup>6</sup> As an adult, Bizet’s hair was



Église de la Sainte-Trinité, Paris, where Bizet's funeral service was held June 5, 1875. Alamy

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light brown and his beard was reddish-brown. The color of his hair as a child is not known. If, indeed, he had red hair as a child, while of historical interest, its association with a heightened susceptibility to rheumatic fever has not been substantiated.

The etiology of Bizet's left-sided deafness and the traces of pus and blood present on his neck at the time of his death also need to be explained. His physician suspected that a tumor or abscess was responsible.<sup>1</sup> A more likely explanation is that Bizet's enlarged, inflamed tonsils were obstructing his left Eustachian tube, causing otitis media, which ruptured through the tympanic membrane into the external auditory canal and onto his neck.

### Unfinished work

Other composers, Beethoven for example, produced myriad masterpieces while beset by illnesses as persistent and debilitating as Bizet's. If Bizet's modest output was not due to his poor health, perhaps he simply was too much of a perfectionist. He left sketches for at least 17 operas that were never completed. Moreover, in a letter to his friend, the painter Emile Diaz, he all but admitted his preoccupation with perfection. He wrote, "I start lots of things with enthusiasm and get discouraged at the end when I see that I have not done what I set out to do!"<sup>6</sup>

By age 10 years, Bizet was performing at the level of a highly trained adult in a cognitively demanding domain, thereby satisfying the definition of a child prodigy.<sup>7</sup> His gift was a blessing, but also a burden. Like many prodigies he would have been prone to fear of failure, procrastination, impossibly high standards and an inability to handle emotional turmoil.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these played a role in limiting his productivity, possibly even more than his chronic illness and early death.

Whatever the reason for Bizet's modest output as a composer, his protracted illness wreaked havoc on his quality of life. Although its etiology can never be known for certain, the illness' character and course point to recurrent episodes of acute rheumatic fever culminating in a fatal case of rheumatic carditis.

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### Acknowledgment

This case discussion was originally presented in an open forum sponsored by the University of Maryland School of Medicine and the VA Maryland Healthcare System as part of a continuing series of historical clinico-pathological conferences.

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