



**The 2008 DVD release of Bizet's Carmen featuring Jonas Kaufmann (recorded at the Royal Opera House in 2007, released 2008) is highly acclaimed for its, "darkly passionate" interpretation, with Kaufmann praised as a "spectacular" Don José.**

**Conducted by Antonio Pappano and staged by Francesca Zambello, it is considered to be a "grand-opera" production with excellent, "superb singing and well-acted performances".**

Georges Bizet (1838–1875) was a French composer who showed remarkable talent from a young age. He entered the Paris Conservatoire at just nine years old and quickly gained recognition for his musical abilities. Before *Carmen*, Bizet composed several operas, though many were either unfinished or unsuccessful. Some of his earlier works include *Les pêcheurs de perles* (1863) and *La jolie fille de Perth* (1867).

In the early 1870s, Bizet was commissioned by the Paris Opéra-Comique, a theatre known for producing light, family-friendly works. Management hoped Bizet would compose something in the same vein, however, Bizet, seeking a bold and dramatic subject, chose to adapt Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella *Carmen*: a dark tale of love, obsession and murder. This decision was controversial, as the Opéra-Comique typically staged works with moral and uplifting themes, and *Carmen* featured a strong-willed, rebellious heroine, and a tragic ending.

### **Key Aspects of the 2008 Royal Opera House DVD (Kaufmann/Pappano):**

**Performance:** Jonas Kaufmann's Don José is described as, "superb," featuring, "spectacular form" and, "magnificent" vocal technique.

**Production:** The production is a, "vivid and vibrant" staging by Francesca Zambello, known for a, "traditional" and, "spectacular" feel with elaborate scenes.

**Cast:** Anna Caterina Antonacci provides a, "darkly passionate" Carmen, praised for her, "staggering" and, "sensual" performance.

**Conductor:** Antonio Pappano conducts the Royal Opera House orchestra in a highly reviewed musical performance.

**Overall Reception:** Customer reviews on platforms like Amazon UK rate it highly, generally highlighting it as a, "stunning production".

## **Synopsis:**

### **ACT I**

*A square in Seville, with a guardhouse and cigarette factory*

Micaela looks for Don José, but he will not be there till the guard is changed. Urchins mock the soldiers at the changing of the guard. The girls from the cigarette factory mingle with the soldiers, but Carmen remains aloof: she can only love one who flees, not one who loves her. Since Don José is ignoring her, she flings a flower in his face and runs off.

He hides it inside his tunic as Micaela returns, bringing a letter from his mother and a kiss, which he returns.

There is a disturbance in the factory, Carmen has stabbed another girl and Zuniga orders Don José to take her to prison, but she bewitches him into letting her escape.

### **ACT II**

*The tavern of Lillas Pastia*

Carmen rejects the advances of Zuniga. She is waiting for Don José, who is about to be released from prison (he had been demoted and imprisoned for letting her escape). She also seems unimpressed by the toreador Escamillo, who makes advances to her.

As all leave except Carmen and her gypsy friends, Zuniga promises to return, despite her discouragement. She refuses to join the smugglers because she is in love. Hearing Don José's voice, she tells the others to leave. He is jealous when he learns that she has danced for the officers, so she dances for him, but is interrupted by the bugle sounding the retreat. When Don José insists that he must return to barracks she accuses him of not loving her. He produces the faded flower, telling her it has stayed with him through his imprisonment.

If he loves her, she says, he will follow her to the mountains, but he is still resolved to leave. He is still there when Zuniga returns and disobeys Zuniga's order to leave. They come to blows and are separated by the smugglers. Don José now has no choice but to desert and join the smugglers.

### **ACT III**

*A pass high in the mountains*

The smugglers make camp. Don José regrets his present way of life, particularly as Carmen is disenchanted with him. As Mercédès and Frasquita lightheartedly tell their fortunes, Carmen consults the cards and reads her death in them.

Don José is left on guard as the girls go down to beguile the customs officers while the men take the goods through. Micaela has come in search of Don José. She hides. Escamillo has come in search of Carmen and is discovered by Don José. They fight, and only the return of the smugglers saves Escamillo, as Carmen restrains Don José.

Micaela is discovered. She has brought Don José a message from his dying mother and Carmen scornfully tells him to go. He swears that he will return.

### **ACT IV**

*Outside the bullring in Seville*

Escamillo arrives for the bullfight, accompanied by Carmen. Warned by her friends that Don José is looking for her, she refuses to beware, but waits outside to confront him. As she continues to resist his entreaties and threats, he kills her as the crowd acclaim the victorious Escamillo. Having killed his beloved Carmen, Don José surrenders to the law.

## Jonas Kaufmann: The All-Purpose Voice



Jonas Kaufmann was born in Munich, in 1969. He started his musical studies as a piano student while still a small child. He began vocal training at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Munich when he was 20, singing small roles at the Bavarian State Opera at the same time. He ran into vocal problems as a young singer, but had the good fortune to make friends with an American baritone, Michael Rhodes, who showed him a proper way to sing, and Kaufmann responded quickly and successfully to Rhodes' suggestions. His professional debut was in 1994 in Saarbrücken, and he was very soon invited to sing throughout Germany. International debuts followed in quick succession, and a major career soon blossomed for him. Because he is so well known and actively singing, there is no need to speak much of his career, since such information is easily obtained. In this case, we may go directly to a discussion of the artistry.

The most amazing thing about this popular and successful tenor is that he sings an extraordinarily wide repertoire, from Mozart to Wagner, and all the bread and butter spinto roles in between! This is most unusual, and made possible to a large extent by his vocal technique, which is essentially Italian. In the past, German trained tenors were often accused of throaty and muscular singing, a phenomenon almost certainly related to the German language. Most operas performed in Germany are performed in German, and that has implications for vocal production. Kaufmann, on the other hand, sings in a dark and covered way reminiscent of Domingo, and—even more—Giuseppe Giacomini. Kaufmann is basically a spinto tenor, and this has opened the whole range of popular Italian operas to him. Other German singers have managed the Mozart/Wagner leap, but fewer have, in the process, shone in the Verdi/Puccini middle. Here is an example of Kaufmann in a very light and lyrical piece from *Così Fan Tutte*, a repertoire more characteristically inhabited by lyric and leggiero tenors:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXEjZqYhgQQ>

This is absolutely impeccable singing! It is beautiful, the line is there, the Italian is perfect, and the performance, as I see and hear it, is flawless. Yes, the voice is darker than one usually expects in this aria, but so what? I have always contended that sub-categories of voice genres are ultimately a bit silly. How about "tenor." It works for me!

As I say, the Mozart singer who can also sing Wagner is a known phenomenon in Germany, but here is what is much more unusual, and the main thing that marks Kaufmann as almost unique; his ability to sing the Verdi repertoire in Italian. This video, of "**La donna è mobile**," is unfortunately somewhat out of synch, vocally, so bear with it please. It is worth it to hear the singing:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mjgo7c3IW4>

I honestly think that is nothing short of spectacular. To me it sounds essentially like Domingo, Corelli, or Carreras in his youth. It is a quintessential Italian spinto sound, and a remarkably good one at that. It is solid, it is convincing, and it is consistent all the way up to the B natural. The best and simplest way I can describe the Kaufmann phenomenon is that he is a great German tenor who sings like an Italian! And boy, does that ever cover a mile of territory in terms of repertoire!