LES PÊCHEURS DE PERLES
by Georges Bizet

SYNOPSIS

Act I
Ceylon prior to the British occupation.
Each year a community of fishermen settles on the same beach for ritual fishing. Stern Zurga is picked out as leader. He welcomes Nadir, a young and brave hunter who is back home after a long journey. The two men are bound by an old friendship and an oath: both in love with a priestess while on a trip to Kandy, they swore to renounce a forbidden love and save their friendship. There appears the new priestess who comes to protect the fishermen. She is greeted by the people and Zurga has her promise to remain veiled and chaste with the finest pearl or death as a reward. Mysterious Leila swears yet trembles upon recognizing Nadir. He too heard her and blames himself for having followed the young woman since they met in Kandy. Leila is led to the holy rock by the priest Nourabad. In the evening the people’s invocations and Leila’s prayer can be heard. She listens to Nadir’s voice join hers with delight.

Act II
As Nourabad is about to leave Leila for her first night on the rock, she tells him of her first act of valor when as a child she sheltered a fugitive from his assailants and was given a necklace by him. Nadir appears as soon as she is left alone. They spend some time together despite the interdict. A storm arises as if the heavens reprobated them. Nourabad surprises Nadir. The alarmed populace sets upon Nadir and Leila denounced by Nourabad. Zurga intervenes and wants to favor their escape but on recognizing Leila unveiled by Nourabad, he condemns them to death.

Act III
As the storm wanes, Zurga meditates, repents and decides to spare the woman he loved and his friend. Leila is granted a last meeting with her judge. She begs for Nadir’s life but when she reveals her love for the hunter, Zurga becomes furious with jealousy.
When Nourabad comes to take Leila to her death, she gives her necklace to a fisherman. Zurga grabs it and follows her hurriedly. Meanwhile, Nadir is expecting his execution surrounded by fishermen drunk with sacred libations. Leila and Nadir are to be slain at dawn. Together at last, they await death in ecstasy. There is a glow that is not dawn but a fire devastating the camp lit by Zurga, whose life was saved by Leila. The fire enables the lovers to flee amid the confusion.
In the 19th century pearls were synonymous with scarcity. It was then impossible to cultivate them. Prized for their irregularities, harvesting them was highly dangerous and their importation into Europe quite expensive. Just like the mother-of-pearl, *Les Pêcheurs de perles* is a rough and scarce work that survived numerous hazards. In 1863, it was the first major work by a 24-year old composer the public had just discovered: on January 11th Georges Bizet received the accolade from Jules Pasdeloup who conducted the Scherzo at his Concerts. While working on a grand opera, *Ivan IV* (never to be completed), Bizet had already written short operatic pieces - *Le Docteur Miracle, Don Procopio, La Guzla de l’Emir* - but as pointed out by Berlioz and Saint-Saëns, starting a career was harsh under the Second Empire: Paris prevailed over provincial towns, opera over the other genres, state-subsidized institutions over secondary companies, compliance with conventions over innovation.  But Bizet starts out as a new dynamic institution flourishes: the Théâtre-Lyrique. Since the funding of this company is conditional on the beginning of a young Prix de Rome winner, Bizet is commissioned with *Les Pêcheurs de perles* in April 1863, not as an act of approval but rather as a work in three tableaux. His education and temperament make him accept the libretto and comply with a tight deadline. He writes the score within three months (drawing on his previous works) and agrees to transform an opéra comique on a Mexican subject scheduled in June into a continuous opera set in Ceylon which he completes in late August. While the librettists Michel Carré and Eugène Cormon tend to neglect their contribution - offset by their notoriety - Bizet benefits from a staging polished by the director Léon Carvalho, a remarkable orchestra conducted by Louis Deloffre and renowned soloists: the soprano Léontine de Maësen makes her Paris debut, the tenor François Morini is already known for his Faust and the baritone Jean-Vital Ismaël for his Rigoletto. While the Paris Opera sits on its laurels, the Italian repertoire triumphs and the Opéra Comique endeavors to cope with the success of Offenbach’s Bouffes-Parisiens, the Théâtre-Lyrique is witness to the most exciting premieres between 1851 and 1870, from Gounod’s Faust in 1859 to French renditions of Mozart’s operas and Berlioz’s *Les Troyens* in 1863. Carvalho thus deserves to be the dedicatee of *Les Pêcheurs de perles*. The Théâtre-Lyrique also enables Bizet to tackle a novel and mixed genre that pertains to opera for musical continuity and to opera comique for its intimist treatment of topics drawn from literature. Searching for his identity with advice from Gounod and encouragement from Berlioz and Saint-Saëns, Bizet is watched by his juniors Chabrier and Massenet. He is fully aware of the challenge of the commission: the place of an individual talent in a centralized musical world subject to the straitjacket of official wards, specifications and academic models.  The libretto of *Les Pêcheurs de perles* is devoid of novelty. Duty and love collide without subtlety – which the primitiveness of the tribe of fishermen tied up to its traditions seems to account for. As in a number of similar dramas such as La Vestale by Spontini and Bellini’s Norma, the protagonists, albeit well-balanced, are crudely portrayed: generous Leila and impetuous Nadir face intransigent Zurga. Lastly, the denouement is overlooked: Cormon and Carré, who already wrote the libretto of Maillart’s *Les Pêcheurs de Catane* in 1860, did not take the young Bizet
seriously. However, the equilibrium and attractiveness of the opera stem from his score. With the participation of the soloists, the orchestra unfolds all the potential of the text. The three main scenes with duets become peaks of dramatic intensity due to the breadth of the characters. Bizet shows his ability to endow the drama with a powerful poetry of memories and dream. His art is exotic without being so, capable of producing a sonic space that suggests remoteness without calling to mind, much less recreating, a real country. Bizet, who only knows Paris and Rome, is totally ignorant of Ceylon or Mexico. Likewise, what the librettists know of the British colony is based solely on what they read in Octave Sachot’s *L’île de Ceylan et ses curiosités naturelles* published in 1863, resulting in a superficial scenario. In 1860s Paris, only Félicien David, the pioneer of musical Orientalism, has begun to combine travel and music. The East provides literature and the pictorial arts with subjects while Pierre Loti is only 13 years old and the Suez Canal not yet completed. The premiere of *Les Pêcheurs de perles* on 30 September 1863 was a great success due to a mobilization by the young generation. Music critics took the beginner seriously but preferred to stress cross-influences from David, Gounod, Berlioz, Weber, Rossini and Verdi rather than praise Bizet’s gift for melody and his personal art of the picturesque. The eloquence of his orchestra even prompted reviewers to accuse him of Wagnerism (synonymous with sonic abuse) when it rested exclusively on his talent and his perfect assimilation of French tradition. Following the brilliant premiere, the theater’s box office receipts decreased steadily so that the opera was withdrawn on November 24th after 18 performances.

It was succeeded by Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* and La *Perle du Brésil* by Félicien David, who better met the criteria regarding musical exoticism. 18 performances; what would be a fine number in 2012 was a poor one in 1863 in the repertory’s logic in which a work not performed season after season deserved oblivion. Bizet never requested his early opera to be revived and died twelve years later. After the posthumous triumph of *Carmen* during its second production at the Opéra Comique in 1883, the Parisian institutions exhumed *Les Pêcheurs de perles* and for lack of a complete edition supervised by Bizet, they adapted it to their needs. The work was sung in Italian at the Théâtre Italien in 1889 and produced abroad as such. It entered the Opéra Comique repertoire in 1893 under the wise directorship of Carvalho but as a revised version intended for the great Emma Calvé. Foreign revivals followed each other in Russian, Danish, Croatian, Polish until the New York acclaim of 1916. The 1932 production established the work in our house: the 100th performance was given in 1936. A third production was staged in 1938 on Bizet’s centennial and a fourth in 1956 by Vanni-Marcoux that ran until its 565th performance in 1971. In 1991 the Opéra Comique staged twelve representations (featuring Leontina Vaduva) of the original version reconstructed thanks to Michel Poupet and Hervé Lacombe, which has prevailed ever since. This fragile masterpiece, which almost disappeared, is the first major expression of the Salle Favart’s most emblematic genius.