

"Carmen."

By ADRIAN BOULT.

"Carmen," though perhaps one of the most loved operas in the repertoire of England, France and Germany, is also perhaps the least understood. It tells of a terrible tragedy, yet we always think of it as a merry and delightful work. We are taught to think of it as characteristically Spanish, and yet I will venture to say that there is very little in it that, on examination, can be found to answer this description. Carmen herself has nothing in common with the Spanish women, who are, as a rule, virtuous and conscientious—I had almost said industrious—and it would not be untrue to use this word if one bears in mind the fact that the climate of Spain makes industry, in our northern sense of the word, almost impossible. Industry in Spain means to go steadily on working slowly and making very little fuss about it, the result being that the Spaniard conveys the impression that he is doing nothing, but a pretty fair day's work appears when one examines the result.

Carmen is not a Spaniard, and was never intended to be. She is a gipsy, and anyone who has ever mixed with this fascinating race of wanderers can tell us that, in contrast to the Jews, they assimilate very little of the characteristics of the race in whose land they move. The real Spanish character in "Carmen" is Micaëla, and we all know how opera goers look upon Micaëla's solos as the dull moments of the opera (in spite of their great musical beauty), unless they are in the hands of an artist of remarkable power. Don José is perhaps one of the least characteristic of the bigger rôles in opera. He always strikes me as a second rate sort of person who might belong to any nation at any period, and who is quite unworthy to take his place as the principal man in one of the greatest operas we know. The smaller characters play a strong part but, except for Escamillo, all are gipsies or are typical soldiers.

And what can be said about the music—every moment of it alive with gaiety, passion, mystery or some other strong characteristic—fascinating it is, every bar of it, but never really Spanish. If one were to remove the two or three numbers in which characteristic Andalusian dance rhythms are employed, and then show the work to an accomplished musician (if such could be found) who did not already know it, I am convinced he would unhesitatingly pronounce it to be unmistakably French.

One cannot speak of "Carmen" without thinking of the tragedy of its composition. Poor Bizet rightly thought it his masterpiece, but it was not understood, and some years later, when the message of its first successful performance was brought to its suffering and poverty stricken composer, he was found to be dead.