

# *Dialogues des Carmélites*

A Guide for Educators



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Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

# WHAT TO EXPECT FROM *DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES*

**“EVEN THE SMALLEST, MOST INSIGNIFICANT ACTIONS AND PEOPLE BEAR THE SIGNATURE of God,”** observes Blanche de la Force, the heroine of Francis Poulenc’s opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*. Yet even though Blanche understands that personal heroism is not limited by the scope of one’s importance, she is weighed down by timidity and anxieties—and in her search for holiness, she must endure torments worthy of the name she adopted as a Carmelite nun, Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ. Amid the increasingly severe restrictions imposed on clergy during the French Reign of Terror, her Carmelite convent faces a terrifying choice: capitulate to the demands of the mob, or face execution for defending their religious beliefs. Their prioress’s warning to Blanche becomes a prophetic comment on the manner of her final temptation: “Whoever enters Gethsemane will never leave. Are you convinced you have the courage to remain, till the end, a prisoner of that most holy Agony of Christ?”

Francis Poulenc, whose musical output spans World War I, the interwar years, World War II, and beyond, excelled at writing both light, frothy works of comic absurdity and weightier works of meditative religiosity. *Dialogues des Carmélites* falls squarely in the latter camp. But even though the opera presents a profound reflection on the nature of freedom, of refuge, and of sacrifice, its musical language features the same effortless, sensuous lyricism that threads through the whole of Poulenc’s vocal output.

This guide is intended to help your students appreciate *Dialogues des Carmélites* and its historical basis in the bloodiest days of the French Revolution. They will explore Poulenc’s musical style, studying how he depicts both the nuns’ anxiety in the face of unimaginable trials and the soaring ecstasy of their immovable faith. The resources on the following pages are designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of this final dress rehearsal performance, equipping students to respond to the opera with confidence, familiarity, and joy.

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## THE WORK:

### ***DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES***

An opera in three acts, sung in French  
Music and libretto by Francis Poulenc  
Adapted from the play by Georges Bernanos  
First performed January 26, 1957  
at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan

## PRODUCTION

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Conductor  
John Dexter, Production  
David Reppa, Set Designer  
Jane Greenwood, Costume Designer  
Gil Wechsler, Lighting Designer  
David Kneuss, Revival Stage Director

## STARRING

Isabel Leonard  
**BLANCHE DE LA FORCE**  
(mezzo-soprano)

Adrienne Pieczonka  
**MADAME LIDOINE** (soprano)

Karita Mattila  
**MADAME DE CROISSY** (contralto)

Erin Morley  
**SISTER CONSTANCE** (soprano)

Karen Cargill  
**MOTHER MARIE** (mezzo-soprano)

David Portillo  
**CHEVALIER DE LA FORCE** (tenor)

Jean-François Lapointe  
**MARQUIS DE LA FORCE** (baritone)

Production a gift of Francis Goelet

## ABOUT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE



Photo: Johnathan Tichler/  
Metropolitan Opera

The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world.

The Metropolitan Opera was founded in 1883, with its first opera house built on Broadway and 39th Street by a group of wealthy businessmen who wanted their own theater. In the company's early years, the management changed course several times, first performing everything in Italian (even *Carmen* and *Lohengrin*), then everything in German (even *Aida* and *Faust*), before finally settling into a policy of performing most works in their original language.

Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the opera house on 39th Street did not have adequate stage facilities. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September of 1966, was equipped with the finest technical facilities of the day.

Each season the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York. More than 800,000 people attend the performances in the opera house during the season, and millions more experience the Met through new media distribution initiatives and state-of-the-art technology.

This guide includes several sections with a variety of background material on *Dialogues des Carmélites*.

- **The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Dialogues des Carmélites***
- **A Timeline:** The historical context of the opera's story and composition
- **A Closer Look:** A brief article discussing the French Revolution and its portrayal in Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*
- **Guided Listening:** A series of musical excerpts from the opera with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses
- **Student Critique:** A performance activity highlighting specific aspects of this production, and topics for a wrap-up discussion following students' attendance
- **Further Resources:** Recommended print and online materials for those who wish to continue studying Poulenc's opera, its history, and its story
- **Glossary:** Common musical terms found in this guide and in the concert hall

The materials in this guide will focus on several aspects of *Dialogues des Carmélites*:

- The opera's historical basis in the French Revolution's Reign of Terror
- The characteristics of Poulenc's musical style
- Creative choices made by Metropolitan Opera artists for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Dialogues des Carmélites*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera. It includes materials for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds and seeks to encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.



Ken Howard/  
Metropolitan Opera

## SUMMARY

*Dialogues des Carmélites* tells the fictionalized history of sixteen martyred Carmelite nuns from Compiègne who were guillotined on July 17, 1794, during the French Revolution's Reign of Terror. In Poulenc's opera, the main character, Blanche de la Force, is the daughter of an aristocrat and a devout young woman who yearns to find respite from her anxieties. Seeking a space where she can pursue a heroic but holy life in her own way, she joins a convent. Yet the world soon intrudes—when the revolutionary government takes over all church-owned property and disbands any clerical orders who refuse to swear allegiance to the Republic over the Pope. In music of soaring lyricism and sacred piety, the opera beautifully presents a community of women who face a bloody, turbulent period of political crisis with humble self-sacrifice. And as for Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ, she feels blessed, for her trials have offered her an understanding of her Savior's suffering on the eve of his death.



Ken Howard/  
Metropolitan Opera

## THE SOURCE: AN ORIGINAL LIBRETTO BY FRANCIS POULENC, BASED ON THE PLAY BY GEORGES BERNANOS

The history of the Compiègne Carmelites forms a revered story of martyrdom in contemporary Roman Catholic hagiography. Their brutal deaths were first memorialized by the Carmelite nun Mother Marie of the Incarnation, who was away from Compiègne during her sisters' arrest, survived the French Revolution, and subsequently wrote a detailed memoir of their sufferings and deaths. Over a century later, the story was taken up by the German Catholic writer Gertrud von le Fort, who adapted it into a novella (*Die letzte am Schafott*, or "The Last Woman on the Scaffold") in 1931. The fictional character of Blanche de la Force, a transparently self-modeled heroine, is her addition. Subsequently, Raymond-Léopold Brückberger, a Dominican friar and hero of the French Résistance in World War II, developed von le Fort's story into the scenario for a film and hired the French Catholic novelist Georges Bernanos to write the dialogue. The planned film was never produced, but after Bernanos's death, his work was refashioned as a stage play. The title of Poulenc's opera *Dialogue des Carmélites* reflects this history: in French, the word "dialogues" means "screenplay," and the published title of Bernanos's work could thus be translated as "Screenplay for The Carmelites."

After the surrealism and rambunctious comedy of his first opera, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* ("The Breasts of Tiresias"), Poulenc initially considered continuing in a similar vein for his second opera, with another text by the artistic gadfly Guillaume Apollinaire. But when La Scala offered him a commission for a new opera, the Italian publishing house Ricordi recommended Bernanos's story as a topic. Equally at home composing works of sacred reverence as those of charming absurdity, Poulenc embraced the idea. As was his habit, he prepared the libretto himself, successfully reducing Bernanos's expansive text of 60 scenes into a succinct opera of 12 scenes spread evenly across three acts.

## SYNOPSIS

### **ACT I:** *Paris, April 1789*

The first signs of the French Revolution are beginning to shake the country. The Marquis de la Force and his son, the Chevalier, are worried about Blanche, the Chevalier's fearful, nervous sister, whose carriage has been held up by a mob on her way home. When Blanche arrives, she makes light of the incident, but her anxiety is revealed when a servant's shadow frightens her as she leaves the room. Shaken, she returns to tell her father that she has made up her mind to become a nun.

Weeks later, at the Carmelite convent in Compiègne, Blanche is interviewed by Madame de Croissy, the aged and ailing prioress, who makes it clear to Blanche that the convent is a house of prayer, not a refuge. The prioress is touched by Blanche's resolve to embrace her new life.

Blanche and young Sister Constance discuss their fear of death, which Constance claims to have overcome. Blanche admits that she envies Constance's straightforward and easygoing nature. Constance shocks Blanche by telling her that she knows they will both die young and on the same day.

Madame de Croissy is lying on her deathbed, struggling to appear calm. She blesses Blanche and consigns her, as the youngest member of the order, to the care of the loyal Mother Marie. The prioress confesses her fear as she faces death, then she falls back lifeless.

### **ACT II**

That night in the chapel, Constance and Blanche keep vigil by the prioress's coffin. Blanche is overcome by fear and about to run off when Mother Marie appears. Realizing that Blanche is genuinely afraid, she tries to calm her.

Constance hopes that Mother Marie will be the new prioress. She tells Blanche that she wonders why a god-fearing person like Madame de Croissy had to die such an agonizing death. Perhaps, she says, people don't die for themselves but for others: someday, those who witnessed Madame de Croissy's death will be surprised by how easy death can be.

Madame Lidoine has been appointed the new prioress. In the chapter room, she addresses the convent, counseling patience and humility. A visitor is announced—it is the Chevalier, Blanche's brother, who is about to flee the country. He urges Blanche to leave the convent and return to their father. Blanche replies that her place is at the convent with her sisters.

In the sacristy, the chaplain, forbidden by the revolutionary government to perform his duties, celebrates his last mass. The nuns discuss the fear that has gripped the country, and Mother Marie wonders if self-sacrifice will be their destiny. Madame Lidoine reminds them that martyrs do not choose their own fate; rather, their fate is chosen for them by God. There is a knock at the door, and the sounds of an angry crowd can be heard outside. Two commissioners enter and tell the sisters they have been expelled from the convent. One of the commissioners, speaking quietly to Mother Marie, adds he will do what he can to help the nuns get away safely. One of the sisters gives Blanche a figurine of the Christ Child. But when revolutionary cries are heard outside, Blanche nervously drops the figure, breaking it. She is horrified by this omen.

### ACT III

In the devastated chapel, Mother Marie suggests that, while Madame Lidoine is absent, the sisters all take a vow of martyrdom, and she asks the sisters to vote unanimously to die together. Noting Blanche's reaction, the others suspect she will vote against it. When the secret ballot reveals one dissenter, however, Constance claims the ballot as her own and asks to reverse her vote so the vow can proceed. Blanche, as afraid to live as she is to die, runs away. The sisters are led from the convent.

Blanche is forced to work as a servant in the ransacked mansion here she grew up. Her brother has fled the country, and her father has been sent to the guillotine. Mother Marie arrives at the mansion and says she has come to take Blanche back to the sisters. On the streets, however, Blanche learns that it is too late: the nuns have already been arrested.

At the Conciergerie prison, Madame Lidoine joins the sisters in their vow of martyrdom. Constance says that she has dreamed of Blanche's return. A jailer enters and reads the death sentence. Madame Lidoine blesses the sisters. When Mother Marie learns from the chaplain that the nuns will die, she wants to join them, but the chaplain reminds her that it is for God to decide whether or not she will be a martyr.

A crowd has gathered on the Place de la Révolution. The Carmelites walk towards the guillotine, led by Madame Lidoine and singing the Salve Regina. One by one, with each stroke of the guillotine's blade, their voices are cut off, until only Constance is left standing. As she walks to the scaffold, she sees Blanche step up from the crowd, take up the chant, and follow her to her death.

#### VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

##### SOPRANO

the highest-pitched type of human voice, normally possessed only by women and boys

##### MEZZO-SOPRANO

the female voice whose range lies between the soprano and the contralto (Italian "mezzo"=middle, medium)

##### CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

##### TENOR

the highest naturally occurring voice type in adult males

##### BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

##### BASS

the lowest male voice

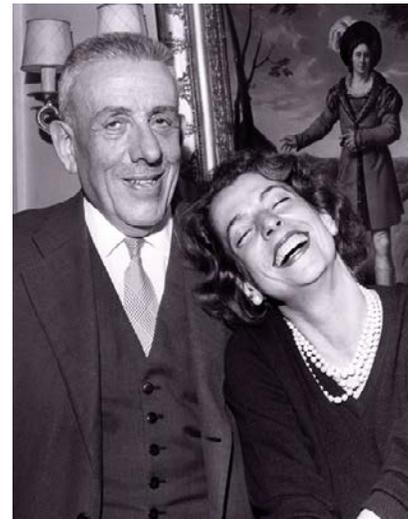
# WHO'S WHO IN *DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES*

Character			Voice Type	The Lowdown
Blanche de la Force	A pious young woman	BLONSH duh la FORCE	mezzo-soprano	Possessed of a deep faith but beset by dread and anxiety, Blanche is consumed by her desire for both holiness and a refuge from fear.
Sister Constance	A young novice (a nun who hasn't yet taken final vows)	con-STAHNS	soprano	Sister Constance finds equal joy in her chores and her dream that she and Blanche will die together.
Madame de Croissy	The prioress of the convent	mah-DAHM duh krwah-SEE	contralto	The prioress is responsible for the physical and spiritual well-being of all the Carmelite nuns, but she worries most about Blanche.
Mother ("Mère") Marie of the Incarnation	The assistant prioress	mehr mah-REE	mezzo-soprano	The beloved assistant to Madame de Croissy, Mother Marie accepts her deathbed charge to take care of Blanche.
Madame Lidoine	The new prioress	mah-DAHM lee-DWAN	soprano	Installed after Madame de Croissy's death, the new prioress offers faith and stability in a time of deep turbulence.
Marquis de la Force	Blanche's father, an aristocrat in Compiègne	mar-KEE duh la FORCE	baritone	Remembering how his wife died in childbirth, Blanche's father hopes to protect his daughter from harm.
Chevalier de la Force	Son of the Marquis	shuh-VAHL-yay duh la FORCE	tenor	The Chevalier understands Blanche's fear, and when the political environment deteriorates, he tries to convince her to escape with him.
Sisters of the Carmelite convent			sopranos, mezzo sopranos, contraltos	The sisters are unified in their decision to die as martyrs.

- **1562** In Ávila, Spain, the holy woman Teresa of Ávila founds a community of Carmelite nuns committed to a life of poverty, continual prayer, cloistering, charity, and solitude. The Carmelite convent later established in Compiègne, France, adheres to this strict rule. Such nuns are known as “Discalced Carmelites” because they wear sandals instead of shoes and stockings; the word “discalced” is derived from the Latin word for “without shoes.”
  
- **1794** Sixteen members of the Carmelite convent in Compiègne are executed by guillotine at the Place de la Révolution in Paris (now the Place de la Concorde).
  
- **1836** Mother Marie of the Incarnation, a surviving member of the Compiègne Carmelite order, dies. She leaves behind a sheaf of manuscripts detailing the events around the expulsion, arrest, and death of her former Carmelite sisters.
  
- **1899** Francis Poulenc is born on January 7 into a wealthy family with roots in the Occitanie and Paris. His mother, who comes from a family of artists, begins piano lessons for her son when he is five years old.
  
- **1906** Pope Pius X formally beatifies the martyrs of Compiègne, which is a preliminary step towards canonization.
  
- **1914** The First World War disrupts Poulenc’s plans to attend the Conservatoire, and he instead continues his piano and composition studies with Ricardo Viñes, a close friend and advocate of Debussy and Ravel. Through Viñes, he meets many prominent composers, including Erik Satie, Georges Auric, and Manuel de Falla.
  
- **1917** Poulenc enters the Parisian avant-garde musical scene with the premiere of his work *Rhapsodie nègre* at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier. Igor Stravinsky is in attendance and, impressed by Poulenc’s talent, helps the young composer get his works published.
  

A group of Satie’s admirers—including Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre, and Louis Durey—designate themselves “Les Nouveaux Jeunes” (“The New Young Ones”) and band together to perform concerts of new music. Philosophically, they reject all foreign musical influences and aim to capture the sound of everyday life, including machines, the circus, and the music hall. Three years later, in 1920, a reviewer designates them “Les Six” (“The six”), a pithier moniker and the name by which the group will go down in history.

  
- **1924** Poulenc receives a commission from Sergey Diaghilev, the trendsetting impresario of the Ballets Russes. The result is the ballet *Les Biches*, which playfully marries Stravinsky-inspired neoclassicism with ragtime and Russian romanticism. It premieres at the Salle Garnier in Monte Carlo on January 6 and is Poulenc’s first major success.



**Poulenc with the soprano Denise Duval, who sang the role of Blanche de la Force in the French premiere of *Dialogue des Carmélites*.**

*Source: operanews.com*

— **1931** Baroness Gertrud von le Fort, a German essayist and writer of fiction, writes a novella based on the story of the *Compiègne* martyrs titled *Die Letzte am Schafott*. The aristocratic character of Blanche de la Force is entirely fictional, but other characters come directly from the historical record: Marie-Françoise Gabrielle de Croissy (the previous prioress), Madeleine-Claudine Ledoine (the prioress), Françoise-Geneviève Philippe (Mother Marie of the Incarnation), and Marie-Geneviève Meunier (Sister Constance).

— **1936** After a visit to the town of Rocamadour in the Occitanie, a popular site of pilgrimage and home to a famous Black Madonna statue at Notre Dame de Rocamadour, Poulenc is reawakened to the Catholic faith of his childhood. This trip thus inspires his first works in a spiritual vein, *Litanies à la vierge noire*; serious, sacred works will form a significant portion of Poulenc's compositions for the rest of his life.

— **1947** Poulenc's first opera, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* ("The Breasts of Tiresias"), premieres at the Paris Opéra-Comique on June 3. Based on a surrealist play by Guillaume Apollinaire written forty years earlier, Poulenc's music revels in the absurdity of the text, with delightful tongue-in-cheek parodies of recent French composers.

Georges Bernanos, a Catholic writer whose novels explore the interior conflict between good and evil in human salvation, is hired to produce the dialogue for a film based on *Die Letzte am Schafott*. Suffering through the final stages of terminal cancer, Bernanos focuses his screenplay on the emotional experience of knowing that one's death is near. The film does not materialize, but after Bernanos's death, his work is adapted into a stage play.

— **1952** In May, the stage-play adaptation of Bernanos's *Dialogues des Carmélites* is performed at the Théâtre Hébertot in Paris, marking the work's French premiere. Around the same time, Francis Poulenc receives a commission from Milan's Teatro alla Scala to compose a new opera. With the recommendation of the Ricordi publishing house, Poulenc settles on Bernanos's story of the Compiègne Carmelites as his source.

— **1953-1955** Poulenc suffers one of the darkest periods of his life, enduring the illness and death (from lung cancer) of his lover, Lucien Roubert. Nevertheless, he continues working on the new opera.

— **1957** *Dialogues des Carmélites* premieres at Milan's Teatro alla Scala on January 26. It is performed in Italian—even though it will soon become the best-known French-language opera of the second half of the twentieth century. Five months later, it is performed in Paris in French.

— **1959** Poulenc's third and final opera, *La Voix Humaine* ("The Human Voice"), premieres at the Paris Opéra-Comique on February 6. With a text by Jean Cocteau, this 40-minute opera for solo soprano depicts one side of an abandoned lover's telephone conversation, finding expressive inspiration in the lover's nostalgia, jealousy, self-delusion, and depression.

— **1963** Poulenc dies suddenly on January 30 in his Paris apartment of a heart attack.



A French postage stamp from 1974 bearing Poulenc's portrait.

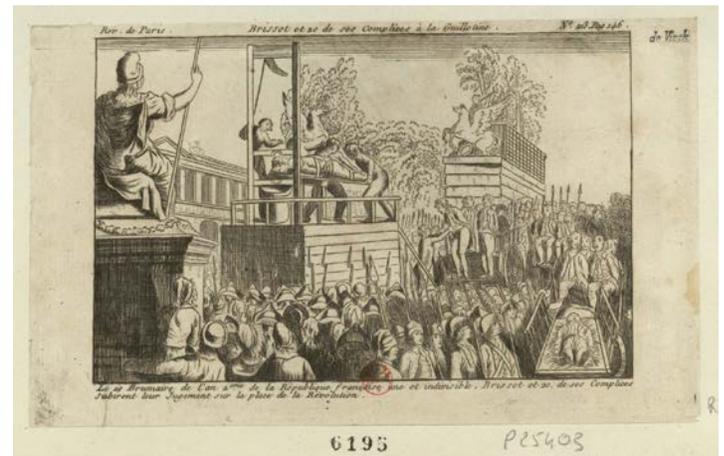
## REVOLUTION, RELIGION, AND RESISTANCE

*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*: This famous rallying cry lists only three of the exalted qualities that we associate with the French Revolution. If we add to this the dissolution of monarchical rule, the abolition of the feudal system, the establishment of a republic, the promotion of Enlightenment-era ideas about the inherent rights of all people, and even the development of one of the first documents of universal civil rights (the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*), then we may be tempted to view the French Revolution as merely a stop on humanity's inexorable path towards progress and the precursor of today's liberal democratic system.

Without a doubt, the French Revolution effected a political, economic, and cultural sea change not only in France but also across the globe. But it also roiled Europe with decades of war and sponsored the severe persecution of its perceived enemies. Over the course of the so-called "Reign of Terror," some 300,000 suspects were arrested; 17,000 were found guilty and executed at the guillotine, while as many as 10,000 more died in prison or were killed without trial. And while today we view the ability to practice one's religion without interference as a foundational human right, such was decidedly not the case during the French Revolution. While Enlightenment philosophy had merely fostered a distrust of "superstition," during the French Revolution, the Church itself came under direct attack.

In 1789, in response to a severe financial crisis, the new National Assembly voted to take over all property belonging to the Church—at the time, around ten percent of all land in France. Later that year, the Assembly prohibited monastic vows and subsequently abolished all religious orders. In the summer of 1790, the Assembly passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which aimed to reorganize the Church under the Assembly's purview. Priests and bishops were to be elected rather than ordained and installed by the Pope, and all clergy were required to swear allegiance to the French constitution (and by extension, support its reorganization of the Church). Any clergy who refused could be labeled traitors to the revolution.

As France's political turmoil broadened through wars with Austria and Prussia, the new French government sought to suppress objectors—including the clergy—through more stringent means. The Law of Suspects of 1793 ordered the arrest of suspected "enemies." After passage of the *Loi de la Grande Terreur* ("The Law of the Great Terror"), the accused were no longer allowed defense counsel or witnesses at the Revolutionary Tribunal, a court in which there were only two possible verdicts: acquittal or death. These circumstances combined to create an untenable situation for many members of the clergy. Their personal beliefs prohibited them from obeying a law aimed at their own destruction and negating their obedience to their Pope. But the alternate was risking imprisonment and a quick dispatch to the guillotine.



**A cartoon from a French newspaper. The caption reads "On October 31, 1793, Brissot and 20 of his accomplices faced justice at the Place de la Révolution." Jacques-Pierre Brissot was a revolutionary leader who was convicted of espionage and executed at the height of the Reign of Terror.**

**Source: *Bibliothèque nationale de France: Gallica Online Catalogue***

The Guided Listening Activities are designed to introduce students to a selection of memorable moments from the opera. They include information on what is happening dramatically, a description of the musical style, and a roadmap of musical features to listen for. Guided Listening Activities can be used by students and teachers of varying levels of musical experience.

## IN PREPARATION

For this activity, teachers will need access to a recording of *Dialogues des Carmélites* and the libretto.

## "JE VOIS QU'IL N'Y A HEUREUSEMENT RIEN DE GRAVE"

As the opera begins, the Marquis de la Force and his son, the Chevalier, are distressed by Blanche's delay returning home. There are protesters roving the streets, and they fear for her safety. When Blanche returns, she insists that she is fine—just a little tired from her prayers at the convent. Soon, however, she is heard exclaiming in fright, terrified by a shadow on the wall. She returns to speak to her father.

What to listen for:

- The use of "unaccompanied recitative" for spoken dialogue
- The soaring lyricism associated with Blanche's faith
- The introduction of a motif (a rising minor third) that Poulenc will use throughout the opera

- (00:00) The excerpt begins with the Marquis expressing his relief that Blanche is fine. Listen carefully and you might notice something is missing: the orchestra! This is an example of "unaccompanied recitative," and it makes his dialogue sound as close to normal speech as possible in the context of operatic recitative. When Blanche replies that the Marquis has always been an indulgent father, the strings enter, tracking her line in a chromatic descent. The unaccompanied recitative returns as the Marquis notes they can now forget Blanche's "little incident."
- (00:25) After the conversational style of the opening, Blanche proceeds in a much more lyrical vein as she pronounces her core belief that "even the smallest, most insignificant actions and people bear the signature of God." The throbbing repeated notes in the orchestra evoke a beating heart, underscoring her powerful emotions and deep faith.
- (01:02) Blanche asks her father for permission to enter the convent of Carmel. Both Blanche's lyrical melody and the throbbing repeated notes continue.
- (01:31) The Marquis admits he should have foreseen this request: Blanche has always expressed extreme devotion. The plodding orchestral accompaniment gets louder; now, it sounds like heavy footsteps, evoking both the weight of Blanche's decision and the fear this decision inspires in her father. The Marquis completes his comment in unaccompanied recitative, noting that Blanche has always been deeply anxious and cautioning her against shutting herself off from the world because of it.
- (02:08) Blanche replies that she does not despise the world—but she also knows she cannot survive in it. Against a sharply dissonant chord held in the woodwinds, she confesses that she cannot stand the world's noise, speed, and agitation. Blanche closes with a plangent, descending chromatic line: If only she could control her nerves, she says, everyone could see what she is capable of and how strong she could truly be.
- (02:41) The Marquis appeals to Blanche's conscience and asks whether she will be up for this sacred vocation. A dissonant chord in the low brass (at 02:57) punctuates his comment.
- (03:01) Blanche looks forward to a time when she will find a cure for her torment. Her melody begins plaintively, but it gains strength as she affirms her belief that God is guiding her life.
- (03:41) Note the rising minor third in the lowest instruments (and later the timpani), transposed several times in this passage. Poulenc will return to this motif over the course of the opera. Here, he weaves it into in the musical texture as Blanche acknowledges that she may not have the strength to see her task to its close.
- (04:13) "May God restore me to grace!" Blanche begs, marking the emotional high point of the scene. The number ends in quietude, with a repeating figure, developed from a rising minor third, that recalls the opera's crucial minor-third motif.

## "MONSIEUR JAVELINOT"

The whole of the fourth scene of Act I is occupied with the death of Madame de Croissy, the prioress of the convent. As one commentator has noted, it may form the "most protracted and realistic" death scene in all of opera. Here, death is not aestheticized or made easy. Instead, the prioress groans, begs for medicine, hallucinates, and experiences a crisis of faith.

What to listen for:

- How Madame de Croissy's music reflects the emotions, fears, and torments she experiences as she nears death
- The use of groans, cries, and other non-musical sounds that make the scene more realistic

- (00:00) As Madame de Croissy groans in agony, the orchestra sets the tone for the scene with a throbbing pedal tone in the harp. At (00:07), the strings enter with a densely harmonized, laboriously styled melodic line.
- (00:15) Madame de Croissy begs the doctor, Monsieur Javelinot, for a dose of medicine. Her melody sits close to the top of her range, which forces the performer to work hard as she sings. Thus, the music vividly demonstrates the prioress's pain—despite her attempts to appear gracious. The ostinato-pedal in the harp throbs like a heartbeat underneath her music.
- (00:29) The doctor responds that her body cannot bear another dose. His music is agitated and jagged, and it contrasts sharply with the Madame de Croissy's music—as though he and the prioress are in different realms of consciousness.
- (01:02) In a line of unaccompanied recitative, Madame de Croissy begs Mother Marie to convince the doctor to give her more medicine. In a sudden outburst, she declares that any medicine will do—it doesn't matter what it is. The orchestra underpins her music with rough syncopation. She then shifts gears once again, embarking on a sinuous melody as she says she couldn't possibly speak to her nuns in her current state.
- (01:37) Mother Marie attempts to reassure Madame de Croissy: she shouldn't worry about what the nuns will think of her; she should only concern herself with God. Mother Marie's music is conciliatory, and it ends on the first dissonance-free cadence of the number.
- (01:58) The prioress responds with violence: "Who am I to concern myself with Him? Let Him concern himself with me first!" The orchestra underscores the violence and fury of her pronouncement with sharply accented interjections and tremolos.
- (02:09) Mother Marie's horror at this sacrilege is clear, and as she exclaims that the prioress is delirious, her vocal line reaches up to the B $\flat$  above the staff. She gives instructions to another nun in attendance to shut the window to shield the other sisters from the scene. An orchestral ostinato throbs underneath her music. Mother Marie enjoins her colleague to fall on her knees and pray, but Madame de Croissy can only groan in agony.

## "SALVE REGINA"

This "Salve Regina" forms the entirety of the opera's final scene. As the Carmelite nuns process through the bloodthirsty crowd to the scaffold, they sing the "Salve Regina," a famous Marian antiphon (i.e., a prayer in praise of the Virgin Mary). This hymn was sung by religious orders at the close of Compline (the service at the end of the day before bed) between Trinity Sunday and the start of Advent, a period of time that includes July, when the historical Compiègne Carmelites were killed. The crowd looks on as, one by one, the nuns' voices are silenced.

What to listen for:

- The sixteen interjections of the guillotine
- The unremitting use of the minor-third motif
- The gradually shrinking size of the ensemble

- (00:00) The orchestra sets the tone for the scene, with the minor-third motif now transformed into an unrelenting rhythmic ostinato. The woodwinds enter at (00:08) with a plaintive melody, and the watching crowd occasionally interjects with sounds of wordless horror, singing with closed lips or on neutral syllables.
- (00:47) The nuns sing the opening line of the "Salve Regina" in unison: "Hail, holy Queen, mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope." Listen carefully to the shape of their melody: the text is set syllabically (i.e., one syllable per note), and the motion of the melody is mostly step-wise. Poulenc's score also indicates that the nuns should sing without any crescendo. All of these musical attributes are meant to evoke Gregorian chant, an ancient form of sacred singing.
- (01:23) As the nuns finish their first line, we hear the first slice of the guillotine's blade. A brief silence follows, after which the nuns repeat the text, now transposed up a minor third. The dynamic level is *fortissimo*. In the midst of this stanza, the slice of the blade is heard a second time.
- (01:57) The nuns repeat the opening lines of the hymn for a third time, now with even greater force, an effect aided by the melody's high tessitura. Ask your students to listen for the third slice of the guillotine...
- (02:27) "To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears," the nuns sing, as the guillotine's blade falls again and again.
- (03:25) Suddenly, the music's texture changes: the harp becomes more prominent, and the dynamics become quieter. The listener can no longer avoid the fact that there are fewer and fewer nuns singing. "Turn then, O most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us," the remaining nuns beg.
- (03:55) With only five of the group now left alive, the nuns stop singing monophonically and instead begin singing in rich homophonic chords. "And after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus," they intone, as their number is reduced further and further.
- (04:30) Only Sister Constance and Mother Jeanne remain for the beginning of the next line of text: "O merciful! O loving! O sweet Virgin Mary!" By the end of the line, only Constance remains. She breaks off in the midst of her line as she sees Blanche emerge from the crowd.
- (05:08) The unrelenting rhythmic ostinato ceases, and the strings play a brief but lush melody as Blanche takes her place at Constance's side in the line to the scaffold.
- (05:23) Constance, her face suffused with joy, continues singing the final line of the "Salve Regina." "O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary!" she sings, until her voice is suddenly cut off by the guillotine's blade.
- (05:49) Blanche takes up the song, proclaiming the closing doxology of the hymn: "Veni Creator Spiritus," a solemn invocation of the Holy Spirit. "Now to the Father and the Son, who rose from death, be glory given, with Thou, O Holy Comforter, forever and ever." Her peaceful lines soar above a shimmering orchestral accompaniment before the blade falls one last time.

## IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the *My Highs & Lows* reproducible handout found in the back of this guide.

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1d

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

## ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPONSE IN ATTENDING THE FINAL DRESS REHEARSAL

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. Performance activities help students analyze different aspects of the experience and engage critically with the performance. They will consider the creative choices that have been made for the particular production they are watching and examine different aspects of the performance.

The Student Critique activity incorporates a reproducible sheet. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. The activity directs attention to details of the production that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The activity sheet is called *My Highs & Lows*. It serves to guide students toward a consistent set of objective observations, as well as to help them articulate their own opinions. It is designed to enrich the students' understanding of the art form as a whole. The ratings system encourages students to express their critique: use these ratings to spark discussions that require careful, critical thinking.

The *My Highs & Lows* handout can be found at the back of this guide.

## FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Start the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did students like? What didn't they like? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently? The discussion offers an opportunity for students to think through and articulate both the notes on their *My Highs & Lows* sheet and their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production—in short, to see themselves as *Dialogues des Carmélites* experts.

The final scene of Poulenc's opera portrays the dichotomy between the Carmelites' swift, brutal execution and their calm acceptance of their deaths, as they walk one-by-one to the scaffold while singing the "Salve Regina." The calculated, cold-blooded murder of sixteen defenseless women is certainly disturbing. Yet the nuns see their martyrdom as a gift from God. To help your students respond to and understand the opera's story and the real-life historical events it depicts, you may wish to ask the following questions:

- What choices were available to the nuns as they faced persecution for their way of life?
- What might have been the outcome if they had chosen differently? What might they have gained? What would they have given up?
- In the opera, Blanche de la Force spends much time longing for refuge. What sort of refuge is provided for her? What does she learn about the nature of the Carmelite life?
- What is the significance of the heroine's chosen name, Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ?
- At the end of Act II, we see an angry mob invade the cloister and order the nuns' expulsion. One participant confesses that he disagrees with what is going on but is merely "howling with the pack." What do students think is the responsibility of witnesses to injustice? How might a bystander fight against wrongdoing?

To conclude the discussion, remind students that *Dialogue des Carmélites* was written when World War II was a very recent memory and many people had direct experience of persecution, collaboration, and resistance. Does Poulenc's opera reflect any of these notions? How? And is religious persecution a thing of the past, or does it still continue today?

Finally, remember that opera is a multimedia art form: Any and all aspects of the performance your students have just seen, including the act of seeing it live, are important factors contributing to the overall experience. Ask them for any final thoughts and impressions. What did they find most memorable?

### IN PRINT

Davidson, Ian. *The French Revolution: From Enlightenment to Tyranny*. New York: Pegasus, 2018.

*Davidson's book presents the major events of the French Revolution and demonstrates how its repercussions are still felt today.*

Giroud, Vincent. *French Opera: A Short History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

*An exhaustive survey of French Opera from its origins through Messiaen. Chapter 10 explores the crisis of the art form in France after the First World War and provides a helpful context for understanding the conditions surrounding Poulenc's three operas.*

von le Fort, Gertrude. *Song at the Scaffold*. Translated by Olga Marx. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011.

*Song at the Scaffold is the English translation of von le Fort's Die Letzte am Schafott, the novelization of the story of the Compiègne Carmelite martyrs.*

### ONLINE

Monteverdichor Würzburg. "Francis Poulenc: Stabat Mater"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quemnTLY3fE>

*A complete performance of Poulenc's sacred masterpiece for soprano, mixed chorus, and orchestra.*

The Royal Opera House. "Simon Rattle on Dialogues des Carmélites"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nL8zm7d9MA>

*A brief interview with conductor Sir Simon Rattle about his impressions of the opera, made to accompany the Royal Opera House's performance of Robert Carsen's production.*

Prokop, Henry, dir. *Dialogues des Carmélites*. 1984.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYq614xqnll>

*The final scene from a television movie based on Georges Bernanos's screenplay.*

### act/scene

Acts and scenes are ways of categorizing sections of operas. An act is a large-scale division of an opera, and each opera will typically include from two to five acts. Acts can be subdivided into scenes, which are often differentiated by a change in setting or characters.

### adagio

Literally “at ease,” adagio is a tempo marking that indicates a slow speed. An adagio tempo marking indicates that the performer should play in a slow and leisurely style.

### allegro

Italian for “cheerful” or “joyful,” allegro is the most common tempo marking in Western music, indicating a moderately fast to quick speed.

### aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. For example, the earliest arias in opera consist of music sung with different stanzas of text (strophic arias). Another type of aria, the da capo aria, became common by the eighteenth century and features the return of the opening music and text after a contrasting middle section. Nineteenth-century Italian arias often feature a two-part form that showcases an intensification of emotion from the first section (the cantabile) to the second section (the cabaletta).

### articulation

The smoothness or hardness with which a note is begun and ended. Articulation is a way of indicating the degree to which each note connects to the next, and can be seen while watching the bow of a stringed instrument player. A note can be attacked sharply and made short, or it can flow smoothly into the next note.

### baritone

Literally “deep sounding,” a baritone is what a typical male voice sounds like—the term refers to a male singer with a low but not extremely low vocal range. A baritone will sing notes that are higher than those sung by a bass and lower than those sung by a tenor. Uncommon until the nineteenth century, baritone roles have grown in popularity in opera since the works of Verdi, who often reserved the voice type for villains.

### Baroque

A designation for music and art produced roughly between the years 1600 and 1750. In music history, the beginning of the Baroque period coincides with the invention of opera as a genre, and its end coincides with the death of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. Originally, the word “baroque” was a term for oddly shaped pearls; it was first applied to music in the 1730s by critics who preferred a simpler, less-ornamented style and thus found the intricate counterpoint of seventeenth-century music to be reminiscent of these bizarre natural gems.

## bass

The lowest sounding line in music. Bass also refers to the lowest singing range for the male voice. Opera composers often choose a bass voice to sing one of two opposite types of roles: comic characters or dramatic and serious characters. For example, Mozart and Rossini wrote comic parts for bass voice, using musical repetition and low register for comic effect. Wagner and Mozart wrote serious parts for bass voice, focusing on the gravity that a low register can contribute to the overall musical texture.

## bel canto

Referring to the Italian vocal style of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bel canto singing emphasizes lyricism and ornamentation in order to showcase the beauty of the singer's voice. Its focus on lyrical embellishment directly contrasts with a contemporary Germanic focus on a weighty, dramatic style. Bel canto singing is most closely associated with the music of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti.

## cadenza

An ornamented musical elaboration played in a free style by a soloist to display his or her virtuosity. Cadenzas are typically improvised—that is, created by a performer on the spot—though they can also be written out in advance. They most frequently occur near the end of a piece, at a point of harmonic tension when the piece is about to conclude.

## chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers are typically from a particular group of people who play a certain role on stage—soldiers, peasants, prisoners, and so on. Choruses may offer a moral, comment on the plot, or participate in the dramatic action.

## Classical

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1750 to 1830, bordered by the earlier Baroque period and the later Romantic period. Contrasting with the ornamentation common to the preceding Baroque period, Classical music is characterized by simple and elegant melodies, regular harmonic accompaniment, and contrasts between melodic themes. The composers most closely associated with the Classical period include Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

## coloratura

A rapid and elaborate ornamentation by a solo singer, particularly common in operas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Requiring vocal agility and a wide and high range, coloratura showcases the virtuosity of a singer by featuring repeating melodic figures, rapid scales, trills, and other embellishments.

## conductor

The person who directs the orchestra, setting the tempo, giving interpretive directions to the musicians, and generally holding all the musical elements of a performance together. The conductor typically stands in front of the players and uses a baton to communicate the meter and tempo; their non-baton hand indicates dynamics, phrasing, and articulation to the musicians. The gestures of a conductor can thus be likened to a non-verbal language that the musicians understand.

## contralto

A deep female voice, with a vocal range that extends lower than that of a mezzo-soprano. Contraltos are known for having a very wide range and for the power and depth of sound with which they can sing. As is the case for roles for basses, many of the earliest roles in opera for contraltos are comic roles, though nineteenth-century composers also wrote dramatic roles for female singers with a lower range.

## crescendo

A gradual raising of volume in music achieved by increasing the dynamic level. When music crescendos, the performers begin at a softer dynamic level and become incrementally louder. One of the most famous types of crescendos in opera, the Rossini crescendo, includes an increase in volume together with repeating melodic and rhythmic phrases, higher instrumental registers, and the gradual addition of instruments in order to create a particularly dramatic effect.

## diminuendo

A gradual lowering of volume in music achieved by decreasing the dynamic level. During a diminuendo, the performers begin at a louder dynamic level and become incrementally softer.

## dynamics

A musical trait pertaining to loudness and softness. During the eighteenth century, composers began indicating their desired intensity of volume in music by writing words such as *piano* (soft) and *forte* (loud) into the musical score. Dynamics encompass a spectrum from *pianissimo* (very soft) to *piano* (soft) to *mezzo piano* (moderately soft), all the way up to *fortissimo* (very loud). Music can shift to another dynamic level either suddenly or gradually, through a crescendo or diminuendo.

## ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

## finale

The last portion of an act, a finale consists of several musical sections that accompany escalating dramatic tension. Finales frequently consist of multiple ensembles with different numbers of characters. When it occurs at the end of an early act in the opera, a finale may create a messy situation—and the resolution of this situation will only happen in subsequent acts. One type of finale common in comic operas, a chain finale, features characters entering or exiting from the stage to create unexpected combinations of characters, in turn increasing the opera's dramatic tension.

## forte

Meaning “loud” or “strong” in Italian, forte is a dynamic level in music that indicates a loud volume. Adding the suffix “-issimo” to a word serves as an intensifier—since forte means “loud,” fortissimo means “very loud.”

## harmony

The simultaneous sounding of pitches to produce chords, and the relationship between different chords as they succeed one another. Throughout much of Western music, systems of rules govern these progressions to help create our sense of musical tension, expectation, and conclusion. Tonal harmony is based on progressions of chords in relationship to a tonic (or home) key. In the 19th century, as composers sought novel sounds to reflect the originality of their invention, they began to employ chords and progressions of greater dissonance and greater distance from the home key. As such dissonances moved beyond mere sound effects into the musical structure itself, the traditional theory of tonal harmony began to become insufficient as a way to understand and describe musical structure.

## intermission

A break between acts of an opera. At the beginning of an intermission, the curtain will fall (that is, close) on stage, and the lights in the auditorium, called the house lights, will become brighter. Intermissions provide audiences with a chance to walk around, talk with one another, and reflect on what they have seen and what could happen next. The break in the performance may also correspond with a change of time or scene in the story of the opera—the next act may take place hours or months later, or be set in a different location. Usually lights will dim and a bell may sound to indicate that the intermission is drawing to a close and the opera is about to resume.

## legato

A type of articulation in which a melody is played without any spaces or gaps between the notes, thereby creating a smooth line. In contrast, a passage that is played “staccato” features notes played in a separated manner.

## Leitmotif

From a German term meaning “leading motive,” a Leitmotif is a recurring musical idea, or motive, that represents a particular person, object, idea, emotion, or place. This musical idea is usually a few seconds in length and can occur in the music’s melody, harmony, or rhythm—or a combination of the three. Leitmotifs are most closely associated with the operas of Richard Wagner, where they are used repeatedly throughout the opera to provide unity; they also appear (although less frequently) in the operas of other composers, including Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Strauss.

## libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early eighteenth century, a composer would frequently set music to a pre-existing libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Richard Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

## maestro

A title of respect used to address a conductor.

## melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

## mezzo-soprano

A female voice with a range between that of a contralto and soprano. A mezzo-soprano's voice is slightly deeper than that of a soprano, so mezzo-sopranos are often cast in supporting roles as older women, including nurses, confidantes, or maids.

## opera buffa

A term applied to Italian comic operas from the mid-eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. The plot of an opera buffa often features scenes and characters from everyday life and addresses a light or sentimental subject, concluding with a happy ending.

## opera seria

An eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Italian opera employing a noble and serious style. The plot of an opera seria often upholds morality by presenting conflicting emotions such as love versus duty, or by modeling enlightened rulers.

## operetta

Featuring spoken dialogue, songs, and dances, an operetta is a short theatrical piece. Shorter in duration than operas, operettas typically feature light subject matter, spoken dialogue, and melodies composed in a popular style. Most popular from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the genre is the precursor of the American musical.

## ornamentation

An embellishment to the melody, rhythm, or harmony of music, intended to make a melody more expressive or ornate. Ornamentation can be either indicated through symbols written into the music or improvised by the performer.

## overture

An instrumental piece that occurs before the first act as an introduction to an opera. After the conductor enters the orchestra pit and takes a bow, the music for the overture begins. Most overtures are a few minutes in duration, and set the mood for the opera—even featuring musical themes that will occur later in the opera.

## piano

Abbreviated *p* in a musical score, piano indicates a soft dynamic level. Musicians may achieve a piano sound by using less bow, less air, or less force. In opera, soft music will often correspond with emotions of sadness or moments in the plot when a character is reflecting on a course of action or emotional state. Pianissimo is “very soft,” and can be so quiet that an audience may need to listen carefully in order to discern its melody and harmony.

## pitch

The quality of a musical sound corresponding to its perceived highness or lowness. Scientifically, pitch can be measured as the number of vibrations (or repetitions) of a sound wave per second, which is called its frequency. A sound with a low frequency, like a bass drum, will sound low and have a low pitch, while a sound with a high frequency, like a siren, will sound high.

## prima donna

Meaning “first lady” in Italian, the prima donna is the leading female role in an opera. The term may apply to the role or to the singer herself, who usually sings in the soprano register and is the star of the show. Since the nineteenth century, the term has also been applied to a singer of any gender with a self-centered and demanding personality.

## recitative

A type of vocal writing between speech and song that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to move rapidly through a large amount of text. Recitative may be accompanied either by keyboard or by the whole orchestra.

## rhythm

Rhythm refers to the way music unfolds over time; it is a series of durations in a range from long to short. Along with pitch, it is a basic and indispensable parameter of music. Rhythm is perceived in relation to an underlying beat and within the context of a meter. Western musical notation indicates to the performer the exact duration of each note or rest.

## Romantic

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1830 to 1900. Beginning in literature and later adopted by composers, romanticism reflected a newfound focus on individuality, nature, and emotional extremes. Music from the Romantic period often explores music’s redemptive power, focusing on the sublimity of nature, love, and the mysterious. Romantic composers revised standard musical forms, devised new musical forms, and added more expressive harmonies to their works to convey the originality of their musical vision.

## score

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that unite to constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

## Singspiel

Literally “sung play,” a Singspiel is an opera with spoken dialogue. Singspiels are typically in German and are from the Classical or early Romantic eras. The plot of a Singspiel is usually comic in nature, and its music may include songs, choruses, and instrumental numbers that are separated by spoken dialogue.

## solo

A piece, musical passage, or line for a lone singer or other performer, with or without instrumental accompaniment. The most common type of solo in opera is the aria, which is composed for a single voice with orchestral accompaniment.

## soprano

The highest singing range for the female voice. Roles composed for soprano singers are typically among the leading roles in the opera and require soprano singers to show off their virtuosic flexibility and range.

## tempo

Literally “time” in Italian, tempo refers to the speed of a piece of music. Tempo is indicated in a score by a variety of conventional (often Italian) words—such as *allegro*, *adagio*, *vivace*, *moderato*, *grave*, and many more—that not only provide direction on the composer’s desired rate of speed, but also carry associations of gesture and character. For instance, *vivace* indicates not only a brisk speed but also a lively spirit. Additional tempo markings may indicate when a composer asks for a section of music to be sped up (such as “*accelerando*”) or slowed down (such as “*rallentando*”).

## tenor

The highest natural male vocal range. By the nineteenth century, the tenor had become the most common vocal range for male leading roles in operas. Tenor roles often feature high-pitched notes for male voice in order to showcase the singer’s range and power. A related voice type is the countertenor, with a range above that of a tenor and similar to that of a contralto.

## theme/motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motif (or motive) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

## timbre

Pronounced TAM-bruh, a French word that means “sound color.” It refers to the complex combination of characteristics that give each instrument or voice its unique sound. Just as we can recognize each other by the differences in our speaking voices, operatic singing voices are distinguishable by their unique timbres. Listeners can also identify orchestral instruments by their timbre without being able to see them. The creative combination of different instrumental timbres is one of the artistic aspects of orchestration.

## trill

A rapid alternation between two pitches that are adjacent to one another. Trills are a type of ornamentation, serving to embellish the melodic line, and appear regularly within coloratura passages. Trills also may appear near the end of a piece in order to prolong the musical tension before the music concludes.

## verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: the poor, the lower-class, and the criminal. Musically, verismo operas react against the forced ornamentation of the *bel canto* style and instead emphasize a more natural setting of the text to music. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic first developed within the realm of literature.

# DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES: MY HIGHS & LOWS

May 1, 2019

Conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin

Reviewed by \_\_\_\_\_

THE STARS:	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
Isabel Leonard as Blanche de la Force	*****	
Erin Morley as Sister Constance	*****	
Karita Mattila as Madame de Croissy	*****	
Karen Cargill as Mother Marie	*****	
Adrienne Pieczonka as Madame Lidoine	*****	
David Portillo as the Chevalier de la Force	*****	
Jean-François Lapointe as the Marquis de la Force	*****	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
At the home of the Marquis de la Force			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The prioress interviews Blanche			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Life in the convent			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The prioress's death			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Blanche leaves the vigil in terror			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Sister Constance reflects on death			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
The new prioress			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The sisters sing an Ave Maria			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The Chevalier visits Blanche			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The sisters learn of their forced expulsion			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A vow of martyrdom			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Mother Marie visits Blanche in hiding			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
At the Conciergerie prison			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Salve Regina at the guillotine			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5