

# The Washington Post

## An abridged version of 'Carmen' falls short on time and drama

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Bizet's "Carmen" is an epitome of grand opera, and a huge thing to put on. To offer it in concert, as the Washington Chorus did on Saturday afternoon, sends a loud if mixed signal. It was a big fanfare in the first season of a new music director, Christopher Bell, who was able to conduct it vividly (not every choral director could). It's also a popular piece, so one might assume it will sell tickets, although at 2 o'clock on a sunny spring afternoon, that was asking a lot.

Indeed, some of the performance's biggest challenges had to do with time constraints. To get "Carmen" down to 90 minutes, without intermission, one has to cut it to the bone. The audience had to make do without the entr'actes, much less the duet between Don Jose and Micaela. Since this was the chorus's performance, we had to get big choral moments in place of orchestral highlights, like the somewhat anodyne chorus at the beginning of the final act.

The chorus itself was, indeed, the highlight. It sounded vivid and warm, and free enough to play around, trying to inject some action into the inherently static concert proceedings under the direction of Andrea Dorf McGray, at least to the extent of interacting during the cigarette-factory scene, or creating the illusion of the offstage arena in the final act by turning their backs to the audience. The Children's Chorus of Washington added the kids' parts with a will. And the orchestra also sounded very fine: the Washington National Opera Orchestra, unified in familiar repertory.

But of course "Carmen" is all about the drama, and in an abridged concert version, bringing that across was a tall order. The five soloists were promising young singers, many of them familiar from WNO's Domingo-

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Cafritz program, with Aleks Romano warm- and strong-voiced, if sometimes a little careless about pitches, in the lead; Hunter Enoch as a solid Escamillo; and Chaz’men Williams-Ali slightly callow, but focusing at big moments and with a striking messa di voce, as Don Jose. Raquel Gonzáles sounded the most assured of all as Micaela, even if she only got the single aria in which to show her stuff.

To fit within the time limits, the opera needed a device: Don Jose’s mother, a character who is not onstage in the opera, was introduced as the narrator. This was a good idea but not entirely well-realized, although Marisa Arbona-Ruiz offered a rather wonderful if clichéd vision of the domineering Spanish mother: In her black dress with a red flower in her hair, she looked more like the archetypal Carmen than Romano did. But she had way, way too much dialogue. In a performance already so heavily shortened, I would rather have had one of the entr’actes than another four minutes of her commentary, particularly when she offered plot spoilers at pivotal moments, removing some of the suspense from the action at, for instance, Carmen’s death. And Dorf McGray could have done more to create electricity on stage between the singers rather than leaving it to this character to do most of the heavy lifting. As it was, the whole performance was at best a nice attempt, but rather than being entirely satisfying, it left one thinking about what might have been.

*Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly said the opera was abridged in response to the Kennedy Center’s time constraints. The abridged version was performed at the wish of the chorus’s new music director, Christopher Bell.*