

## Coveted opera role difficult to perfect

### Micaëla in 'Carmen' requires purity, passion

By EMILY VOIGT  
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Désirée Dodson at July's Carmen Auditions

Eighty-some singers auditioned for the Opera Theatre of the Rockies' production of "Carmen" — most of them women. Among these hopeful divas, the fiercest competition was for one part.

And it wasn't Carmen.

Rather, Micaëla-wannabes — typically blond and doe-eyed — stood practicing their angelic expressions in the foyer of Shove Memorial Chapel at Colorado College, waiting to be called before a trio of casting directors.

Most people aren't familiar with the role of Micaëla, the virginal village girl who loses her love, Don José, to the famous sex-charged gypsy.

Carmen's foil, after all, has just one aria — a piercing plea for love over libido, which elicited rare applause at the opera's controversial 1875 premiere. The audience apparently welcomed the wholesome interlude in an otherwise coarse plot.

The next century would see "Carmen" become one of the most popular operas of all time — which is why Martile Rowland, the founder and artistic director of the Opera Theater of the Rockies, selected it to celebrate the company's 10th anniversary.

Now one of the most reputable opera companies in the state, the Opera Theatre of the Rockies stages one major production each year. "Carmen" will be held at the Pikes Peak Center in March.

For regional singers — few of whom are able to make a living from opera alone — a coveted role in the production represents more than a rare paid gig; it's a step toward the national scene, which Rowland inhabited for many years at the Metropolitan Opera.

Singers from every corner of Colorado drove to the Springs during the four days of auditions last month. Wannabe Carmens belted out the famous "Habanera" folk song, and Don Josés repeatedly fell head over heels.

But it was Micaëla's sweet, soaring aria that rang out most often — the singers clapping their hands to their chests and gazing up to the heavens, the picture of purity.

The character's popularity among singers has less to do with virtue than voice type. While the role of Carmen demands a sultry mezzo soprano, Micaëla is written for a lyric soprano — the most common breed of singer in the opera world, according to the judges.

"It's not an equal-opportunity-employment business," said Steven LaCosse, who is producing "Carmen." "The supply is greater, so the expectation has to be higher."

"It's a horrible thing. The poor women. It's not fair," said Rowland, a lyric soprano.

The judges agreed, however, that Micaëla is a role worth fighting for. Her character — too often dismissed as a bland goody-goody — lies at the complex, emotional heart of the opera.

"Carmen is sex, and Micaëla is passion," said Rowland, adding that it's impossible to be a passionate pushover.

"Most of the girls playing Micaëla think, 'I have to sing pretty,'" said James Allbritten, who will conduct the opera. "But you cannot be vanilla and get through that aria."

Allbritten pointed out that Micaëla treks through the dark, bandit-filled woods to attempt to rescue the faithless Don José from Carmen's wiles — and to deliver a kiss from his dying mother.

"She's actually more courageous than all of them," La-Cosse said. "Don José says to her, 'Leave me alone! I'm damned!' She sings, 'One word and I'll go, José: Your mother is ill and dying.'"

"If she sings that aria well — if she's really good and Carmen isn't careful — she can walk away with the opera," Allbritten said.

Meanwhile, outside Shove Memorial Chapel, Micaëlas who had yet to perform tied their shawls and adjusted their blush. Others stood recovering from recent auditions.

"You just shake and shake," said Judeth Shay Burns of Colorado Springs, a mainstay of the Opera Theatre of the Rockies. "I call it 'high-note head.' All that sound running through your little brain."

It's true that many of the Micaëlas hit their highest notes with glass-shattering clarity. But when eight final candidates returned for callbacks later that week, none was allowed to sing the aria too prettily.

"Don't get too precious with it!" cried Allbritten, as Shannon Kaye of Colorado Springs piped out the soaring crescendo.

“It’s not precious at all. This is your last-ditch effort. You’ve got to get this guy to come home with you.”

“Remember there’s a tremendous amount of strength about you, or you wouldn’t be out there wandering through the woods. You’d be at home in bed,” Allbritten told Sarah Stone of Denver, who unclasped her hands and clenched her fists.

When 27-year-old Désirée Dodson of Littleton took the stage in a black ball gown, she looked almost angelic.

Her voice was arresting; but Allbritten stopped her immediately.



Conductor Allbritten coaching Dodson

“I want you to snort like a pig,” he said.

“I’m sorry?” she said.

Dodson was exhausted; she’d been preparing relentlessly for the last few weeks. This role would be her professional debut. If she had misheard, and began making inexplicable barnyard noises . . .

But one of the judges called from the middle of the church: “Like a pig! We want you to snort like a pig!”

So Dodson did — at first tentatively and then as if she had been stuck with something sharp.

The idea was to find a less pristine and more nasal timbre. And when she began to sing again, her voice did sound somehow less virtuous.

“I say that nothing terrifies me,” she sang in French.

“I say, alas, that I take care of myself. But try as I might to be the brave girl, I’m dying of fright.”

She looked tired but determined — like a woman who had lost her love to a gypsy but was marching through the woods anyway to do right by his dying mother.

And in the end, she made it out of the woods OK. Dodson learned last week that she’ll play Micaëla.

“I’m so excited, I don’t even know where to begin,” she said.

Rehearsals won’t start until January, but she said she’ll take up French next week.

## **DETAILS**

The Opera Theatre of the Rockies will present the popular opera “Carmen” on March 1 at 7:30 p.m. and March 2 at 3 p.m. Tickets will available Sept. 1 through TicketsWest at 520-SHOW.