

Performance Annotation: Analysis of Maria Callas' Interpretive Vocal Ornamentation in George Bizet's Aria Habanera

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Abstract: The aria Habanera from Georges Bizet's opera Carmen showcases Carmen's sensual and free characterization through its distinctive melody and rhythm. Although this work has been widely researched, specific studies of vocal ornamentation are rare. Ornamentation plays a crucial role in enriching interpretation while balancing artistic freedom with fidelity to the score. This study asks: how can Maria Callas's interpretive ornamentation serve as a reference for performing the Habanera? The methods used include transcriptions of vocal ornamentation by Maria Callas, Elina Garanča, and Teresa Berganza, followed by interpretive analysis to understand artistic expression and intent. A comparative analysis is conducted to assess its suitability to the score and its expressive impact on characterization. The result is a singer's note framework that can be utilized by singers and vocal educators, as well as a contribution to the musicological study of interpretive ornamentation in French opera.

Keywords: vocal ornamentation, interpretation, Bizet, Callas, Habanera

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation for classical music and the opera genre, reflected in the increasing frequency of classical repertoire being revived on various stages and digital platforms, as well as the increasing exposure of opera singers globally. Opera is a theatrical work that combines drama, music, singing, and sometimes dance, with music being the primary element, characterized by complex vocal techniques and formal structures (Grout, 2003).

Opera demands a high level of technical and expressive mastery from its singers. Opera singers are not simply vocal technicians; they are interpreters of text, emotion, and dramatic intent through the medium of the singing voice (Miller, 1996). In classical opera, vocal technique is not only a means of producing a beautiful and powerful voice, but also a primary medium for conveying the character, emotion, and meaning of a role. One opera that stands out for its use of vocal technique is Carmen (1875), a famous opera by French composer Georges Bizet. It contains the iconic aria, Habanera, performed by the main

female character, Carmen. This aria, with its captivating rhythmic and melodic rhythms, serves as a musical representation of Carmen's sensual, free, and alluring character. Habanera is an example of an aria that is very open to various forms of vocal interpretation, particularly through the use of ornamentation.

Maria Callas, one of the most popular sopranos of the 20th century, is widely known for her dramatic interpretations and expressive vocal technique. Callas is one of the most iconic and influential opera singers in the history of classical music. Renowned for her extraordinary technical and expressive abilities, Callas is often considered a perfect example of combining vocal power with a deep dramatic understanding. The main strength of Maria Callas' interpretation lies in her ability to build a relationship between musical structure and dramatic expression, resulting in a presentation of an aria that is not only technically accurate but also emotionally meaningful (Prasetyo, 2016). Furthermore, Callas' interpretation of this aria has become an important reference for many opera singers, thanks to her ability to balance artistic freedom with fidelity to the composer's intended musical and dramatic structure.

The selection of Callas provides an opportunity to analyze how vocal ornamentation techniques can enrich characterization in opera, while exploring the challenges singers face in interpreting classical works rich in expression and nuance. This paper also provides a comparative analysis of interpretations by Elīna Garanča and Teresa Berganza as references and examines how each singer interprets the character of Carmen, whether through richer or more structured ornamentation techniques, and their impact on the dramatic and musical development of the performance.

Although numerous studies have been conducted on Georges Bizet's opera Carmen, most research focuses on general musical aspects, such as analysis of the compositional structure, dramatic themes, and historical setting of the work. Some studies also focus on the characterization of Carmen as a female figure in cultural studies or feminism, but few specifically highlight the vocal approach in singing the Habanera aria, especially from the perspective of vocal technique ornamentation. On the other hand, research on vocal technique in opera tends to be generic or focuses on the bel canto tradition, without delving in detail into how ornamentation techniques are applied in works outside the Italian sphere, such as French opera. This indicates a gap in the literature discussing the relationship between vocal ornamentation, character expression, and singer interpretation in the Habanera context.

Challenges arise when modern singers perform works from the past, such as the Habanera aria. The lack of historical documentation and the absence of direct direction from the composer make interpretation highly subjective. Bizet often implicitly wrote ornamentation into his scores, leaving freedom to the singer. This has given rise to a debate between artistic freedom and fidelity to the original style. Therefore, this study is important because it fills this gap. Its usefulness lies in providing an analytical framework and singer's notes that can be used by researchers, singers, and vocal educators in developing more authentic and expressive training and performance methods through Maria Callas' interpretive ornamentation. The singer's notes serve as a crucial guide that helps

singers adapt ornamentation techniques to the character and musical context, allowing space for personal expression while maintaining fidelity to the composer's style and message. Furthermore, the results of this study have the potential to encourage further exploration of other works in the operatic repertoire, both in terms of performance and the study of vocal aesthetics, thereby enriching musicological studies and ongoing performance practice.

To support the analysis of Maria Callas's vocal interpretative ornamentation in her performance of the Habanera aria from Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*, a review of relevant literature is necessary. The first is an article entitled "Georges Bizet in the Service of the Opera: More than "Just" a Composer?" by Irina S. Zakharbekova (2024). This journal article reveals another side of Georges Bizet that is rarely discussed: his contributions as an editor, arranger, and assistant in opera productions, in addition to being a composer. "...Bizet could observe the opera 'kitchen' from the inside and thus avail himself of the opportunity to prepare the ingredients for his own musical and theatrical masterpieces." This article provides in-depth insight into French musical and theatrical life in the second half of the 19th century, as well as the influence of other composers' styles on Bizet's works.

Carlo Cenciarelli's article, "The Limits of Operatic Deadness," (2016) examines the phenomenon of a posthumous duet between soprano Angela Gheorghiu and a recording of Maria Callas in the aria Habanera. Cenciarelli explores how technology enables collaboration between a living singer and a recording of a deceased singer. The "deadness" and repetition in the aria are demonstrated by repeated rhythmic and melodic patterns, which can create a sense of "mechanism" or even "death." However, it is precisely through this repetition that the singer is given the space to "reanimate" the work. This article provides a theoretical basis for the presence of "dead" voices in live performance, helping to interpret Callas's ornamentation in a context across time and technology.

"Callas and the Hologram" by João Pedro Cachopo (2022) examines the performance of Callas in *Concert*, a multimedia concert that used hologram and laser technology to "bring back" the legendary soprano Maria Callas on stage, nearly five decades after her death. In this performance, a digitally manipulated hologram of Callas performed alongside a live orchestra. "How can one celebrate the singularity of an artist through a medium that depends on repetition, simulation, and standardization?" Cachopo criticized the attempt to recreate such an interpretation without allowing for the spontaneity that was at the heart of Callas's genius.

Carmen Abroad: Bizet's Opera on the Global Stage, edited by Richard Langham Smith and Clair Rowden (2020), explores how the work has evolved and adapted in various cultural contexts around the world. "The issue at stake was the kind of music such characters should sing if they were truly Spanish, and the most common answer was folk- or flamenco-inspired musical numbers in line with the broader impact of costumbrismo (the realistic representation of everyday life and folklore)." Interpretive ornamentation in the opera *Carmen* is considered a form of micro-localization, as in Russia, there is a tendency to add dramatic

intensity and dark timbres typical of Slavic traditions, influencing how cadenzas or rubatos are formed. In Spain, flamenco is sometimes inserted into the singing or accompaniment, resulting in more rhythmic and aggressive ornamentation.

“Maria Callas, the Greatest Opera Singer, with Personality Disorder - Borderline Histrionic Perverse, a Diva Monster” by Michael Fitzgerald (2024) analyzes Callas’s personal life, showing that she did not simply add ornamentation for the sake of style, but made it a tool for extreme emotional expression, which was in line with her intense, dramatic, and fluctuating personality pattern.

Methodology

To examine vocal interpretive ornamentation, the author used the transcription method to analyze the vocal ornamentation used by Maria Callas, Elīna Garanča, and Teresa Berganza in their performances of the Habanera aria. To analyze the transcription results, an interpretive analysis was used, focusing on understanding the meaning, expression, and artistic intent behind a musical work or performance, including how musical elements are used to convey the musician's emotion, style, and identity. Furthermore, to compare the interpretive ornamentation used by the three singers, a comparative analysis method was used, comparing aspects of interpretive ornamentation, including dramatic expression and compatibility with the score, to examine the influence of vocal technique on the characterization of Carmen in the Habanera aria.

Results and Discussion

The Habanera aria from Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen* is one of the most iconic works in the world opera repertoire. This is due not only to its seductive melodic beauty, but also to its unique rhythmic structure and potential for expressive vocal interpretation. Furthermore, the Habanera is seen as central to Carmen's character construction, as it serves not only as a musical introduction but also as a statement of Carmen's social, cultural, and symbolic identity, which has been continually reinterpreted across time and space in operatic history (Wilks, 2025).

According to Brown (1999), in performing a vocal interpretation of an aria, there are limitations that need to be considered so as not to lose its character. Melodically, the interpretation must remain consistent with the composer's style, avoid drastic changes to the main theme, keep the ornamentation and cadenza as developments rather than replacements, and avoid melodic movements that are not in accordance with the style of the time. The rhythm of the cadenza may be freer, but it must blend with the tempo and structure of the previous phrases and reflect the style of the time, such as the Lombardic rhythm of the Baroque or the smooth rubato typical of the Romantics. Harmonically, improvisation should be based on basic harmony and should not include modulations or foreign chords that conflict with the composer's style. A cadenza ideally leads back to the dominant chord and resolves to the tonic chord (especially in a da capo aria or *accompagnato recitativo*). Texture should also be considered, so that ornamentation does not clash with the orchestral density. In an aria with minimal accompaniment such as a *recitativo*, there should be more room for

improvisation. In terms of timbre and dynamics, interpretation should support the character and emotions of the character, for example, avoiding an overly grandiose cadenza in a quiet scene, and adapting dynamics as musical expression, not just a display of vocal power. Finally, any form of improvisation should not disrupt the formal structure of the aria, but should still support the overall form of the composition.

Maria Callas is known as a singer with a dramatic and nuanced interpretive approach to operatic roles, including Carmen. In her version of the Habanera, Callas uses ornamentation as a primary expressive tool to enhance Carmen's seductive, free, and enigmatic character. Based on a recording of one of Maria Callas's performances in Hamburg in 1962, the author transcribes her vocal interpretive ornamentation as follows.

(to express wildness) (teasing)

est un oi-seau re - bel - le que nul ne peut ap - pri - voi

[Source: Jessy, 2025]

Figure 1. Maria Callas Vocal Ornamentation 1

mour! L'a-mour est mour! L'a-mour est en - fant de Bo - heme; il n'a ja -

[Source: Jessy, 2025]

Figure 2. Maria Callas Vocal Ornamentation 2

melisma

mais, ja-mais con-nu de loi. Si tu - ne - m'ai-mes pas, je

[Source: Jessy, 2025]

Figure 3. Maria Callas Vocal Ornamentation 3

Si tu ne m'ai - mes pas, si tu ne m'aimes pas , je

[Source: Jessy, 2025]

Figure 4. Maria Callas Vocal Ornamentation 4

t'ai - me; mais si je t'ai-me, si je

[Source: Jessy, 2025]

Figure 5. Maria Callas Vocal Ornamentation 5

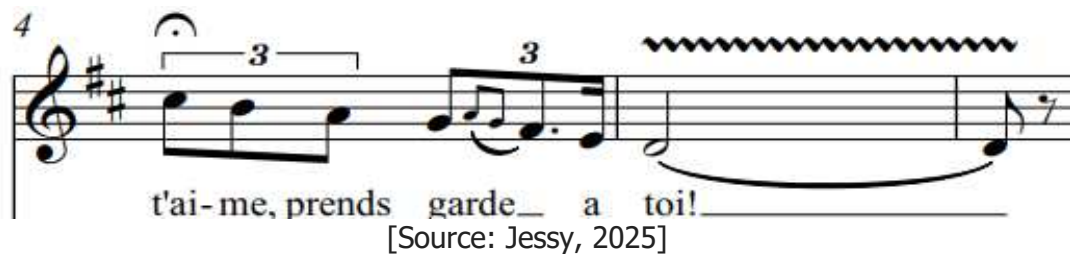


Figure 6. Maria Callas Vocal Ornamentation 6

From the transcription above, here are some key points from Maria Callas's analysis of interpretive ornamentation.

1. Rubato and Rhythmic Flexibility

Callas frequently used rubato subtly in melismatic phrases to add dramatic emphasis. Terminologically, rubato is understood as the expressive, non-metrically binding freedom of tempo management, allowing for emotional emphasis in certain phrases without losing musical continuity (Prier, 2011). Rubato is a technique of flexibly slowing or speeding up the tempo to enhance emotional expression and interpretive freedom in the music. This emphasizes the independence of Carmen's character and makes the phrases feel more lively and less mechanical.

2. Appoggiatura and Grace Notes

In music theory, appoggiatura is understood as an ornamentation that has a structural and expressive function because it emphasizes the target note and creates affective tension, while acciaccatura functions more as a momentary decorative element that does not alter the main rhythmic structure (Prier, 2011). He adds appoggiatura to several important target notes at the end of phrases, especially before modulation. This enhances the emotional tension and gives a distinctive color to each repetition of the thematic phrase "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle." Appoggiatura and grace notes (acciaccatura) are two types of musical ornamentation that differ in duration and expression. Appoggiatura falls on the strong beat, taking up some of the duration of the main note, and provides strong emotional emphasis. Conversely, grace notes are played as quickly as possible before the beat, without taking up significant duration, and function as quick, lighter, decorative embellishments.

3. Dynamic Shading

Callas's vocal dynamics are not static. She plays with volume within a single phrase, ranging from pianissimo to mezzo-forte to create a play of emotions. For example, soft tones are used to convey attraction and mystery, while explosive sounds emphasize the character's strength and freedom. For example, in the phrase: "Love is a wild bird that cannot be tamed." She begins this phrase with a soft piano, as if conveying a philosophy of love with a mysterious and seductive touch. When she reaches the word "rebelle," she often raises the dynamics and applies dramatic emphasis to highlight the wild nature of love. In "Nul ne peut apprivoiser," Callas often relaxes the dynamics back to pianissimo, creating a contrast that illustrates the impossibility of subduing love.

4. Ornamentative Variation in Repetition

In repeating the main theme, Callas didn't sing it literally. She added a small improvisation in the form of a short mordent or trill, which gives a spontaneous yet elegant impression. A trill is an ornamentation consisting of a rapid, repeated alternation between the main tone and the note above it for the duration of the note, while a mordent is a brief ornament consisting of a single rapid alternation between the main tone and the note above (upper mordent) or below it (lower mordent), then returning to the main tone.

5. Characterization Through Timbre and Tone Color

Callas's timbre is highly expressive, dark yet sharp, used to create Carmen's duality as a strong yet seductive woman, enhanced by her ornamental yet restrained vocal articulation. This is evident when she sings the phrase "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle." In this section, Callas uses a warm yet seductive timbre, with a dark and finely textured timbre to create a mysterious and sensual impression, reflecting Carmen's free and unpredictable nature. As she reaches the section "il n'a jamais, jamais connu de loi," Callas's timbre becomes brighter and sharper, emphasizing the character's assertive and rebellious attitude. The dynamics of these timbre changes are not only an individual artistic choice but also reflect technical principles in mezzo-soprano vocal production that directly influence the perception of expression and dramatic character in operatic performances (Hou et al., 2024).

Maria Callas, known for her expressive and dramatic style, enriched the Habanera with various ornamental techniques such as long trills, dramatic portamento, and a fairly liberal use of rubato. One of the main components of Carmen's image is the scale of her inner impulses (Alekseevna, 2025). At the beginning of the aria, for example, in the phrase "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle," Callas adds an expressive trill at the end of the word "rebelle," creating a wild and unpredictable effect that enhances Carmen's character. Furthermore, portamento is used prominently when connecting certain phrases, creating a strong sense of seduction. Rubato is applied throughout the various sections, with the flexibility of tempo enhancing the dramatic tension.



(Source: YouTube)

Figure 7. *Maria Callas Live: Bizet's Carmen Habanera, Hamburg 1962.*

According to Michael Fitzgerald's (2024) analysis, Callas exhibited symptoms of borderline and histrionic personality disorder, characterized by emotional instability, an intense need for recognition, and dramatic tendencies. These traits are evident in her often extreme vocal ornamentation: fluctuating rubato, abrupt dynamics, and expressively extended phrases. Ornamentation is no longer merely a technical flourish, but a deeply personal expression of the inner self, a "psychological signature" that bridges the world on stage and the singer's internal conflicts. Compared to the more emotionally and musically restrained Elina Garanča, it is clear that ornamentation can reflect not only style but also an individual's psychological structure.



[Source: Jessy, 2025]

Figure 8. Ornaments interpretatif vokal Elina Garanča 1



[Source: Jessy, 2025]

Figure 9. Ornaments interpretatif vokal Elina Garanča 2



[Source : YouTube]

Figure 10. Carmen: "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" (Elina Garanča)

Meanwhile, Elina Garanča takes a more controlled and elegant approach. She uses less ornamentation, but it is very subtle and precise. Garanča uses short trills on important words such as "bohême", as well as a very subtle portamento that is almost inaudible. The dynamics of her voice are tightly controlled, using the messa di voce technique on emotional phrases such as "jet'aime". Garanča displays extraordinary vocal control, with consistent vocal beauty throughout the aria without losing the sensuality of Carmen's character.

and seductive feel of the dance. From the explanation, it can be summarized as follows.

Table 1. Analysis of the use of ornamentation and its musical and dramatic effects.

Singer	Ornamentation Analysis	Musical Effect	Dramatic Effect
Maria Callas	Free and expressive ornamentation: long trills, large rubato.	Increases emotional tension, creating an expressive "explosion."	Showing Carmen as a wild, dominant, passionate character.
Elīna Garanča	Minimal, elegant, clean ornamentation.	Provides a sensual yet controlled feel, technically beautiful.	Carmen is portrayed as more mysterious, more elegant, a little more refined.
Teresa Berganza	Simple ornamentation, strict rhythm control.	Makes the Habanera feel light and natural, maintaining the flow of the dance.	Carmen feels playful, mischievous, not too heavy or dark.

Analysis of the use of ornamentation shows that each singer not only added vocal embellishments to enhance the melody but also to deepen the dramatic expression of Carmen's character. In Maria Callas's work, ornamentation serves as a tool to highlight Carmen's wild, passionate, and manipulative character. Her bold use of rubato and extreme dynamic shifts create the feel of Callas's interpretation as an uncontrollable explosion of emotion, in keeping with the image of Carmen as a free woman who refuses to be subject to rules. Callas did not hesitate to take considerable artistic liberties with the score to create greater dramatic impact.

In Elīna Garanča, ornamentation serves to maintain Carmen's sensuality within graceful aesthetic boundaries. The ornamentation techniques employed are subtle and almost imperceptible, yet the musical effect is nonetheless powerful. Garanča chooses to let Bizet's melodic structure dominate, while expression emerges from the gradually changing dynamics of the voice and precise breath control. With this approach, Garanča presents Carmen as a captivating figure with a cool and mysterious beauty.

Teresa Berganza, on the other hand, uses ornamentation to emphasize Carmen's playful and relaxed side. By maintaining the basic Habanera rhythm almost uninterrupted, she creates a lighter, more fluid atmosphere. The ornamentation is not intended to add emotional explosions, but rather to sweeten the phrases and maintain the naturalness of the singing. This gives Berganza's interpretation a very natural feel, like Carmen dancing casually while flirting with the men around her.

A comparison between these three singers reveals fundamental differences in their approaches to technique and expression. In terms of expressiveness, Maria Callas is clearly the most expressive of the three. Callas's rich

ornamentation and rhythmic freedom provide a highly theatrical and emotional interpretation. Callas manages to bring Carmen to life not just as an operatic character, but almost as a living being on stage.

On the other hand, Teresa Berganza demonstrates the utmost devotion to the score. She strictly adheres to the rhythmic structure of the habanera, avoids drastic tempo changes, and limits ornamentation to minor flourishes that do not alter the basic melody. This demonstrates a high level of respect for Bizet's musical text and demonstrates that dramatic expression can be achieved without sacrificing the integrity of the score.

Elīna Garanča, in many ways, occupies a middle ground. She strikes a balance between personal expression and respect for the score. Her ornamentation embellishes the music without overwhelming the structure, and her emotional expression emerges more through nuances of sound than drastic shifts in tempo or dynamics. This makes Garanča an exemplar of a modern singer who prioritizes flawless technique while maintaining character.

In terms of vocal technique, Maria Callas relied on her dramatic power to command attention, sometimes at the expense of technical accuracy. Elīna Garanča displayed near-perfect vocal technique, with every note controlled and every phrase meticulously planned. Teresa Berganza displayed a natural technique, with clean articulation and a light use of vibrato to add color to the musical phrases.

To clarify the differences in vocal technique and expression approaches in performing the Habanera, the following table compares the interpretations of Maria Callas, Elīna Garanča, and Teresa Berganza. This table lists key aspects such as the level of expressivity, adherence to the score, and the focus of each singer's vocal technique.

Table 2. Comparison of techniques between singers.

Aspect	Maria Callas	Elīna Garanča	Teresa Berganza
Expressiveness	Highly expressive, theatrical.	Moderate, sensual without being excessive.	Light, natural, playful.
Adherence to the Score	Relatively free from the original score, with lots of improvisation.	Fairly faithful, with a little subtle improvisation.	Very disciplined, with only a little improvisation.
Technical Focus	Focus on emotion and climax.	Focus on the beauty of the sound and control.	Focus on rhythm and natural character.

In the context of singer's notes, there are several important guidelines for adding vocal ornamentation to the Habanera aria. First, the singer must understand Carmen's fundamental character: a free, charming, and unpredictable woman. Ornamentation should be used to emphasize this character, not simply to showcase vocal technique. Second, it is important to maintain the structure of the habanera as a sensual, slow dance. Excessive

ornamentation or drastic tempo changes can disrupt the dance's feel, so the singer must be careful to maintain a consistent basic rhythm.

Third, ornamentation should be used to emphasize key emotional moments in the aria, such as when Carmen speaks of wild and uncontrollable love. Techniques such as trills, portamento, and messa di voce can help enhance these emotional expressions. However, their use must be selective and controlled, so as not to overshadow the main musical message.

Fourth, singers should consider their chosen interpretative style. If they wish to highlight Carmen's wild and passionate side, a Maria Callas-style ornamentation approach could be adopted, with its free use of rubato and extreme dynamics. If they desire a more elegant and mysterious Carmen, subtle ornamentation techniques like those of Elīna Garanča are more appropriate. If they prefer a light and playful Carmen, Teresa Berganza's ornamentation style is ideal.

Fifth, singers need to develop a sensitivity to subtle changes in dynamics, timbre, and articulation. In the Habanera, it is often not the large changes that bring a performance to life, but rather the small nuances conveyed through subtle techniques. The ability to play with the dynamics of the voice in micro-scale, softening the portamento, or extending the vibrato at the right moment can make a huge difference in the quality of an interpretation.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that ornamentation in the Habanera must always be rooted in a deep understanding of the musical and dramatic text. Carmen is more than just a character in an opera; she is a symbol of freedom, sensuality, and rebellion. Singers who are able to use ornamentation to portray these qualities without losing the integrity of Bizet's music will deliver a Habanera performance that is not only beautiful but also authentic and moving.

By comparing three major interpretations by Maria Callas, Elīna Garanča, and Teresa Berganza, we learn that there is no single "right way" to ornament this aria. Each approach offers new insights into the character of Carmen and enriches the world's operatic interpretation heritage. This study also demonstrates the importance of balancing interpretative freedom and respect for the score in the art of opera singing. Today's singers can learn from these three divas to create interpretations of the Habanera that are fresh, personal, and rooted in a rich musical tradition.

Conclusion

In discussing the vocal ornamentation techniques used by Maria Callas, Elīna Garanča, and Teresa Berganza in Habanera, we can see significant differences in how they express the character of Carmen. Maria Callas uses free and expressive ornamentation, with the application of large rubato and long trills that add emotional tension and create expressive "explosions" that suit Carmen's wild, domineering, and passionate character. On the other hand, Elīna Garanča prefers minimal ornamentation that is elegant and clean, giving a more restrained and mysterious sensual feel, while Teresa Berganza uses simple ornamentation and tight rhythmic control to portray Carmen as a light and natural figure.

Current and future singers can draw inspiration from the three interpretive references of Maria Callas, Elīna Garanča, and Teresa Berganza as singer's notes in singing the Habanera, adjusting vocal ornamentation and expression according to the characteristics they wish to highlight, whether wild and passionate, restrained sensuality, or light playfulness, while still maintaining the integrity of Bizet's music. The author suggests that future research could further explore the influence of cultural and historical context on singers' ornamentation choices, as well as how developments in modern vocal techniques may influence the way contemporary singers interpret classical works.

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