

Bizet – Carmen

Les toréadors and Habanera

Listening

Les Toreadors ►

Habanera ►

Context

Bizet (1838-1875) was a French composer. His most famous work is the music for the opera *Carmen*. We looked at opera when we studied Mozart and this is very similar – actors on stage singing with musical accompaniment. In *Carmen*, there is some spoken dialogue between the musical numbers.

The opera tells the story of Don José and his complications with love. The opera had its first performance in 1875 and received scandalous reviews – mainly because it has a tragic ending and the main character, Carmen, was not seen to be a virtuous character, but rather a rebellious one.

If you are looking to explore the idea of scandal in music further, do look at 'Riot at the Rite' which tells the story about the first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* – where the audience rioted at the first performance of the ballet. Check it out [here](#) ►. This could lead to a wider conversation with your class about how we, as humans, react to new art, or other things that aren't how we expected them to be.

Similar to Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, Bizet later created orchestral suites of extracts of the music from the opera. These were written just for orchestra without the singing. It is these versions we will hear in the concert.

Extracts from *Carmen* were played by the Philharmonia in their first ever *Orchestra Unwrapped* Concert in 2012.

Short 5-minute task: Class Percussion

Listen to 'Les toréadors' on the link above, using 0:00-0:32. Divide the class into two groups:

- Group 1: Triangle (finger clicks) [top line of score below, syncopated off beat rhythms]
- Group 2: Cymbals (hand claps) [bottom line of score below, accenting end of each 4 bar phrase]

Try to then play along with the opening with the groups playing each part. The score below might be helpful if you want to introduce pupils to musical notation.

If your class are enjoying this, consider changing groups around and then adding a third group to play the timpani part, which uses the notes A and E. Students could do this vocally or using instruments, or complete this using foot stamps.

Stretch and Challenge

- Allocate a conductor to keep the music in time

Support and Scaffold

- Start with the cymbals, using teacher modelling and the video to support.



Medium 20-minute task: Comparison Task

The two pieces from the opera might come from the same overall composition, but they sound very different. In this task, play the pieces to your class and ask them to note the similarities and differences between them.

You might decide to use a 30 second extract, or to use a longer segment.

Musical Element	Les Toréadors	Habanera
Tempo (Speed)	Fast and lively	Slow and smooth
Mood (Feeling)	Exciting, brave	Mysterious, cheeky
Rhythm	Strong marching beat	Steady, swaying rhythm
Instruments (Sound)	Lots of brass (like trumpets) and drums	Softer sounds with strings and woodwinds
Dynamics (Loud/Soft)	Loud and powerful	Gentle, with some louder bits
Melody (Tune)	Bold and catchy	Smooth and flowing – chromatic scales
Dance Style	Like a march or parade	Like a Spanish dance (Habanera)
Character Theme	For the bullfighters (toréadors)	For Carmen – the main character

Stretch and Challenge

- Try to encourage more able pupils to make direct comparisons using musical vocabulary to justify their responses – for example Les toréadors is loud (forte) while Habanera is quiet (piano).

Support and Scaffold

- Give direct options – ‘is the music loud or quiet?’ to break the task down further.

Longer 45-minute task: Composition Contrast

This task looks for pupils to compose a piece of music with a contrasting middle section, creating an A B A form. This is often called Ternary Form.

Part 1: Introduction & Warm-Up (10 minutes)

1. Explain ABA Form (3 minutes)

- a. A section = first musical idea
- b. B section = contrasting second idea (different mood, tempo, volume, or sound)
- c. A returns = repeat of the first idea
- d. Example: Sing *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, which is in ABA form

2. Warm-Up Activity (7 minutes)

- a. Call and response using voice and body percussion (e.g., clap-stomp-pat patterns).
- b. Quick game: "Echo Me" using voice dynamics (soft/loud, high/low, fast/slow).
- c. You could also use activities from the vocal warm up section of this resource.

Part 2: Composition Task (25 minutes)

Step 1: Get into groups (2 minutes)

- Divide the class into small groups (3–5 pupils).
- Each group collects 2–3 different types of sound-makers (pupils can use their voices, body percussion and classroom instruments, if available)

Step 2: Create Section A (7 minutes)

- Students create a short pattern (4–8 beats) using any combination of:
 - Body percussion
 - Instrument rhythm or melody
 - Simple vocal chant (e.g., “We like to play!” or invented syllables)
- Encourage steady pulse and repetition.
- Practice and refine as a loop.

Step 3: Create Section B (the contrast) (7 minutes)

- Must sound different to A in at least two ways (teacher supports ideas):
 - Change in tempo (faster/slower)
 - Change in dynamics (louder/quieter)
 - Change in instrumentation (e.g., no voice, only percussion)
 - Change in mood (e.g., playful → mysterious)
- Create a new 4–8 beat idea.

Step 4: Rehearse Full ABA Structure (5 minutes)

- A → B → A
- Decide how to move between sections (e.g., short pause, signal).
- Practice the full structure smoothly with group roles clear.

Step 5: Optional Extras (4 minutes)

- Groups can add a movement or visual element.
- Assign a conductor or leader to cue sections.
- Consider making small changes to the second repeated A section. These are called musical developments and are used by many composers.

Part 3: Sharing & Reflection (10 minutes)

Group Performances (6 minutes)

- Each group performs their ABA composition for the class.

Class Feedback & Discussion (4 minutes)

- After each performance, ask:
 - “How were A and B different?”
 - “What instruments or sounds stood out?”
 - “Did it feel like a complete piece?”

Stretch and Challenge

- More able students could add a C section (ABACA) creating a rondo form
- To add even more challenge, ask students to make small changes to the repeated A sections to keep the listener interested.

Support and Scaffold

- Start with modelling ideas – e.g. A section using claps and stamps, B section using finger clicks.
- Use repetition of ideas rather than needing to create ideas from scratch.
- Instead of an open ended task, give specific choices e.g. ‘would you like to use a drum or tambourine?’

Listening Guide

Timings based on the video link at the top of this section

Les Toréadors - Rondo Form

Timings	Musical features to listen out for
0:00-0:34	A section Lively, major key, 4 bar phrases, trills, exciting. The section is repeated.
0:35-0:51	B section Quieter, more reflective, use of flute melody, minor key. This section is not repeated.
0:52-1:07	A section A repeat of the opening A section but this time it is only played once.
1:08-1:56	C section A lyrical new melody in the strings over a short accompaniment (played staccato). The melody is repeated louder and an octave higher.
1:57-end	A section This section is repeated again, but is only played once. There are a few new bars of music at the end to act as a coda and finish the piece off.

Les Toréadors - Rondo Form

Timings	Musical features to listen out for
4:44-5:51	A section Minor key, Habanera rhythm (dotted crotchet, quaver, 2 crotchets [1 (2) and 3 4]), chromatic melodies, use of pizzicato strings and glissando (slides)
5:52-6:19	B section Moves more to a major key, lyrical, flowing, more smooth (legato), contrasts with A section in the melody even though the accompaniment stays the same. Some dramatic changes in tempo.
6:20-7:00	A section Repeats the opening with some additional ornamentation and in a major key, not a minor key like the opening.

Links to other subjects

This piece can link well to these other areas of the school curriculum:

Subject	Links
English	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students could create a character profile for Carmen or the toreador, Escamillo. You might ask them to write a diary entry for either character to develop their descriptive writing.
Geography and MFL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Understand more about Spanish and Cuban traditions – the Habanera is a Cuban dance rhythm, and <i>Carmen</i> is set in Seville in Spain. This could involve locating both on a map and discussing the traditions of the different countries.
PE/Dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Choreograph simple movements to the habanera rhythm and contrast this to the faster ‘Les toréadors’ piece. How might the dance movements change?
PSHE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Carmen’s message in the opera can be seen as an expression of freedom, acting on your emotions and making choices. Music often allows for feelings and emotions to be expressed.