CARMEN

BY GEORGES BIZET

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AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE

WRITTEN BY STU LEWIS OF THE LYRIC OPERA GUILD

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Sometimes the public gets it right. Not always, of course. Tell people of your love of opera, and sooner or later someone will respond by praising the talents of Charlotte Church and Josh Groban (Renée who? Luciano who?). Or they may tell you that they are opera fans because they own a Three Tenors CD or once attended a high school production of *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

But then there's *Carmen*, which not only has become one of the two or three most popular operas of all time (one link of the "ABC's of opera": *Aida*, *La bohème*, and *Carmen*) but actually deserves to be there. This popularity is especially remarkable in view of the hatchet job the critics tried to perform at the opera's opening.

Romantic legend tells us that the initial failure of *Carmen* caused Bizet to die of a broken heart. This is, of course, an exaggeration. Bizet suffered from chronic illnesses throughout much of his life, and his death three months after the premiere of *Carmen* was not completely unexpected. On the other hand, his depression over the opera's lack of success could have contributed to his declining health.

Given the fact that so many of this opera's melodies have become part of our popular culture (*The Bad News Bears* is just one example), it is hard to realize how radical and innovative *Carmen* really was at the time. Audiences were not used to seeing tragic heroes and heroines who came from the lower economic classes, and a tragic story featuring a female factory worker was virtually unheard of. Beyond this, audiences were not prepared for Bizet's radical innovations in the use of melody, which looked forward to the *verismo* era (we will say more of this later).

Though the French public reaction to *Carmen* was at best lukewarm, many of the leading composers of the day understood Bizet's unique genius. Among them were Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, and Wagner, who appreciated the fact that Bizet was a man with ideas about music.

What the French did not appreciate, the Austrians did. The Viennese production, which followed soon after the Paris premiere, was an unqualified success, and this great dramatic work has never been out of the repertoire since.

THE CHARACTERS

Moralès (baritone): A sergeant
(mo-RAH-less)

Micaëla (soprano): A seventeen-year-old country girl
(mee-ka-AY-lah)

Don José (tenor): A sergeant
(don joe-ZAY)

Carmen (mezzo-soprano): A gypsy
(car-MEN)

Zuniga (bass): A lieutenant and Don José's commanding officer.
(zoo-nee-GAH)

Frasquita (soprano): A gypsy
(fras-KEY-tah)

Mercédès (soprano): A gypsy
(mer-se-DAYS)

Dancaïre (tenor): A gypsy smuggler
(dan-KAY-ro)

Remendado (tenor): A gypsy smuggler
(ray-men-DA-doh)

Escamillo (baritone): A bullfighter
(es-ka-MEE-yoh)

Gypsies, a guide, a vendor, townspeople, an innkeeper, soldiers, etc.

OVERTURE

The overture opens with a brisk Spanish-sounding melody, accentuated with loud clashing cymbals, and crashing chords that seem to suggest a culture that is out of control. Interspersed in this section is the now famous "Toreador Song." Suddenly the mood changes, and an ominous melody is heard over some tremolo string notes. This is the "fate theme," which will reappear several times during the opera.

ACT I: A public square in Seville

Without a pause, the curtain opens on a group of townspeople, along with a regiment of soldiers, who sing blissfully about their lack of anything meaningful to do. To the sound of seductive music, Micaëla, a pretty young country girl, enters. She tells the soldiers that she is looking for Don José, and they reply that he will be on duty shortly. They flirt with her, but she rebuffs them, echoing their music, and she replies that she will return later when Don José will be there.

A marching tune is heard, and Don José's unit enters to take their turn on guard duty. A group of children march behind them, imitating their soldier heroes, and their admiration provides an ironic contrast to what we see of the soldiers' actual behavior. Along with the townspeople, the soldiers eagerly await break time at the local factory, when the female workers will come out for a breath of fresh air and a smoke (scandalous behavior for women at that time). Don José expresses his lack of interest in that type of woman. The men are especially anxious to see Carmen, and when she arrives, they all proposition her.

Carmen's response is the famous "Habanera," in which she expresses her desire to remain free as a bird. This melody, based on a Cuban folk tune arranged by a Spanish composer, is part of Bizet's local color music, and it helps establish Carmen not only as an assertive woman but as a force of nature. Suddenly, time seems to stand still as she notices Don José, and we hear the "fate theme" in

the orchestra. Something bad is going to happen, but the characters don't know it. Carmen throws a flower at José, and he picks it up as she leaves, while her coworkers mockingly echo the "Habanera."

Micaëla enters, and Don José quickly hides the flower. In contrast to the music we have heard from Carmen, the duet which follows is definitely French in style, and it provides the first example of the free-flowing, conversational style of music with which Bizet was experimenting, one melody blending into the next. Micaëla has come to tell Don José that his mother has forgiven the misdeeds which caused him to leave home; more importantly, she has playfully asked Micaëla to deliver a kiss for her son, which she does. Don José overlooks the implied eroticism of the moment and takes it as a kiss from his mother. Micaëla leaves, and Don José resolves to obey his mother's wishes and marry Micaëla someday.

Offstage, a fight has broken out in the factory, and Don José is called upon to investigate. It turns out that Carmen has attacked one of her co-workers, but when she is questioned she defiantly sings "tra-la-la" and refuses to answer. Zuniga, the commanding officer, leaves her in Don José's custody as he goes to get a warrant for her arrest. Alone with Don José, Carmen sings the "Seguidilla," to the sort of seductive gypsy melody we have come to associate with this character. Having noticed that Don José has kept her flower, she tells him that if he helps her escape he can join her at Lillas Pastia's tavern. Secretly, he unties her hands. As he leads her off to prison, she frees her hands, shoves him to the ground, and escapes. Zuniga, however, sees through the ruse, and he arrests Don José as the curtain falls.

ACT II: Lillas Pastia's tavern

After a brief entr'acte (music between acts) based on an actual Spanish folk melody, the curtain opens on Lillas Pastia's tavern. Carmen leads Mercédès, Frasquita and the other gypsies in a lively song and dance praising the gypsy life style. Zuniga has been courting Carmen, but she rebuffs him because she is waiting for Don José.

A number of patrons arrive, and among them is Escamillo, the bullfighter who is Spain's top star athlete. In the braggadocio style we would associate with today's athletes, he sings his famous "Toreador Song," describing the challenges of his profession and the rewards – primarily his ability to pick up women. At the conclusion of the aria, Mercédès, Frasquita, and Carmen all join the refrain on the word "amour," with Carmen getting the last word a seductive octave lower, suggesting that while she loves Don José, she is already thinking about her next affair. The music assigned Escamillo has none of the subtlety of the music sung by the other characters, and Bizet at one point referred to it as "trash." But Bizet apparently wrote more brilliantly than he realized, for though this may not be great music, the straightforward melody is perfect in its depiction of this one-dimensional character.

Escamillo leaves, followed by his fans and Zuniga, who accepts Carmen's rebuff for the moment. The gypsies are now alone. In a lively quintet, the two leaders of a gypsy smuggling ring, Dancairo and Remendado, describe their next venture to the three women and explain that the women's sex appeal would help them provide the diversionary action that they need to carry out their plans. Mercédès and Frasquita are agreeable, but Carmen is determined to wait at the inn for her lover, Don José. This number, with its rapid back-and-forth dialogue, provides the one comic scene in the opera, and the style of music seems to have been of the type familiar to audiences of the Opéra-Comique, where Carmen had its premiere.

Don José enters, singing a folk tune. Carmen greets him and dances for him to a seductive gypsy melody. Ironically, the bugles from his regiment create a counter-melody to hers, and Don José tells her that he must return to his post. Carmen cannot understand his dedication to duty and accuses him of not truly loving her. Her phrase "taratara" that sarcastically describes his slavish devotion contrasts sharply with her "tra-la-las," which symbolize her freedom. In response, Don José sings the lyrical "Flower Song." He tells her

of his month in prison and shows her that he has kept her flower throughout his ordeal. Unlike the music we have heard from Carmen, this is a free-flowing melody, with no repetition of musical phrases.

Carmen continues to entice him to stay, suggesting that he would enjoy life as a gypsy. Zuniga enters, still in pursuit of Carmen, and he orders Don José to return to the barracks. Impulsively, Don José refuses, drawing his sword. The confrontation between the two men is short-lived, as the gypsies come to Don José's rescue. Don José realizes that he now has no choice but to join the gypsy band, and the gypsies welcome him to his new, free life.

ACT III, SCENE 1: An encampment in the mountains

Outside of the city, a pastoral melody featuring the harp and flute suggests a peaceful outdoor setting, though the events to follow will be anything but peaceful. The curtain opens on the band of gypsies, who sing of the pleasures of their smuggling trade to a march-like tune. The peacefulness of this scene is interrupted by the entrance of Don José and Carmen, who are quarreling. Don José tells her that he is feeling guilty about betraying his mother's wishes, as we hear the melody associated with her in his first-act duet with Micaëla. Nevertheless, he tells Carmen that he will never let her leave him, and she asks if he plans to kill her (the "fate theme" is heard in the orchestra). Don José goes off to rest.

Frasquita and Mercédès decide to pass the time by dealing some cards to tell their fortunes. Mercédès sees a handsome young lover in her future, while the more practical Frasquita envisions a rich old man who will die and leave her a wealthy widow. Carmen deals herself a hand, and she is frightened to learn that, no matter how many times she re-deals, the cards are predicting death for both her and Don José. In a solemn aria she reflects on humankind's inability to escape its fate. As she concludes, the other two women reprise their playful tune as an ironic counterpoint to Carmen's solemn melody.

Dancairo and Remendado enter and announce a plan for the gypsies to sneak into town to peddle their contraband, using the women as a diversion (as they explained in the previous act). Don José is left behind to guard the camp.

Out of Don José's sight, Micaëla enters, led by a mountain guide. In a beautiful aria (which has become a favorite recital piece for many sopranos), she tells how she has conquered her fears to search for Don José. She prays to God for protection, an act that clearly associates her with the value system that Don José has left behind.

Next to enter is Escamillo, and not seeing who it is, Don José fires a shot. Not knowing Don José's identity, Escamillo explains that he has come looking for Carmen, and that he is confident that her affair with the military deserter must be over by now. Don José challenges him to a knife fight, but Carmen enters just in time to save Escamillo's life. Issuing an invitation to everyone – especially Carmen – to attend his next appearance in the bullfighting ring, he exits to the accompaniment of his second-act aria; only here, the tone is less strident and more romantic.

Micaëla, who has been hiding, is discovered. Echoing the Act One music that described Don José's mother, she asks him to return home (this device – reprising snatches of melody to recall earlier events – was a favorite device of the Italian *verismo* composers but was not used much prior to this opera). Don José, however, is still obsessed with Carmen, and again we hear the fate theme. Finally, Micaëla tells Don José the real reason for her visit: his mother is dying and has asked to see her son one more time. He agrees to leave, but he warns Carmen that they will meet again. Offstage, we hear Escamillo singing his "Toreador Song" as the curtain falls.

ACT IV, SCENE 2: Outside the bullring

The final act of this opera begins with no hint of the tragedy that will ensue. The scene looks like a 19th century version

of a tailgate party, as a crowd anxiously anticipates the day's bullfight. A group of gypsies dance to entertain the onlookers. As the various ranks of bullfighters arrive, the chorus greets them with the melody that opened the overture, and Escamillo is greeted by the tune of his own song. He greets Carmen, and the two sing a love duet. Escamillo enters the arena. Mercédès and Frasquita approach Carmen and warn her that Don José has escaped arrest and may be looking for her, but she ignores their warnings.

Carmen is left alone on stage, and Don José approaches her. The extended dialogue, moving seamlessly from one melody to another as the music follows the dialogue, is one of the greatest dramatic duets in all of opera. The confrontation is driven by a sense of fate. Carmen greets Don José with the words "*C'est toi*?" " ("Is it you?"), as if she has been waiting for this meeting, and on a number of occasions she refers to herself in the third person, as if she is no longer involved in the scene. Don José begs Carmen to run away with him, to start a new life together, but she informs him that she no longer loves him. He continues to beg and implore her, insisting that he loves her more than ever. Finally, she takes off the ring he had given her and flings it at him, shouting "*Tiens*" (This means "take it," but no English translation could capture the contempt expressed in this nasal French word). Having earlier said that his love could save the two of them, Don José now shouts "damnée" and stabs her to death. Bizet's audience would certainly have been aware of Gounod's *Faust*, in which Méphistophélès uses a single word – "jugée" – to announce the heroine's damnation. Here, unlike the situation in *Faust* there is no choir of angels proclaiming her salvation – only the crowd in the bull ring, with biting irony, cheering the bull fight, unaware of the tragedy unfolding outside. This ironic contrast of moods was a technique that was to be employed in later years in *verismo* operas, most notably in *I Pagliacci*.

Finally, the "fate theme" is repeated three times in the orchestra as people begin to emerge from the arena. Don José surrenders to the authorities, proclaiming his undying love for the woman he has just killed, as the curtain falls.

As has been the case with most musical geniuses, George Bizet's musical gifts were discovered at an early age. Born into a Parisian musical family October 25, 1838, he found himself enrolled in the Conservatoire, Paris' leading school of music, at age nine. At age fourteen, he began his studies with the man who was to be his most influential teacher, the renowned opera composer Fromental Halevy, who is best remembered today for his opera *La Juive*. Several years after Halevy's death, Bizet's life was to intersect with Halevy's family in two significant ways: Bizet's marriage to his teacher's daughter, and his collaboration with Halevy's nephew Ludovic on *Carmen*.

In other countries, the great composers were dispersed throughout the country; however, French opera, like French culture, was concentrated in Paris. As such, Bizet had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of several of France's leading composers, including Charles Gounod, composer of *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette*, who was to have a major influence on Bizet's music. He also had the opportunity to interact with the Italian expatriate Rossini, and he later established a friendship with Jules Massenet.

In 1857 Bizet won the prestigious Prix de Rome, which afforded him the opportunity to study in Italy for three years. It was at this time that the chronic throat ailment that eventually took his life first manifested itself. Upon his return to France he immersed himself in composing, but much of it was menial work, such as preparing transcriptions of other people's music. A couple of his pre-Carmen operas are occasionally performed today: *La Jolie Fille de Perth*, based on a novel by Sir Walter Scott, and *Les pêcheurs de perles*, best remembered for the first-act duet "Au fond du temple saint," considered by many to be the greatest tenor-baritone duet ever penned. *Les pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*) was recently performed with great success at the Lyric Opera, but many people still consider Bizet to be a one-hit wonder.

In 1873, Bizet began work on *Carmen* for the Opéra-Comique. He was excited about the prospect of working with one of the most successful libretto-writing teams of his day, Meilhac and Halevy (he had collaborated with the latter previously on one of his early works). While Camille de Locle, one of the directors of the Comique, was an enthusiastic supporter, his co-director, Adolphe de Leuven, was appalled, and his reported dialogue with Halevy could itself be the basis for a comic opera: "Carmen? Isn't she killed by her lover – and that background of thieves, gypsies, cigarmakers! At the Opéra-Comique, a family theater." Halevy assured him that there would be several familiar character types, such as in innocent young woman and comic gypsy types. And the death scene would be "sneaked in at the end of a very lively, very brilliant act, played in bright sunlight on a holiday with triumphal processions, ballets, and joyous fanfares." Nevertheless, de Leuven (who eventually was to leave the Comique due to his displeasure with this opera) reiterated, "Don't make her die. I beg of you, child, don't."

(This may seem comical now, but about sixty-five years ago Rodgers and Hammerstein encountered similar resistance when they had a character die near the end of *Oklahoma!*; remember, at that time Broadway musicals were still called "musical comedies.")

As mentioned earlier, opening night was a disaster, as the critics were unable to appreciate Bizet's original approach to dramatic narrative. While *Carmen* was to enjoy a moderate run in Paris, Bizet's various ailments soon got the best of him, and he died May 30, 1875, never to realize even a hint of the vast popularity he was to receive posthumously.

Though Prosper Merimee (1803-1970) was a fairly successful novelist and playwright, he is best remembered today for his short story *Carmen*, which was the source of Bizet's opera of the same name. He frequently set his stories in exotic settings, while distancing himself from his subject matter with a sense of ironic detachment. The narrator of *Carmen*, for example, exhibits attitudes toward gypsies which today we would brand as dangerously racist. A number of his plays were adapted for the operatic stage, but even in their own day these operas met with little success and they remain only a footnote in the history of opera, though one of his stories indirectly influenced Verdi's *La forza del destino*.

On the other hand, the libretto for Bizet's opera was written by a team that enjoyed considerable success in writing for the musical stage: Henri Meilhac (1831-1897) and Ludovic Halevy (1834-1908), the latter being the cousin of Bizet's wife. Historians credit Meilhac with the greater wit and Halevy with the greater command of stagecraft. Besides this opera, which was hardly typical of their work, they are principally remembered for their collaborations with Jacques Offenbach, most notably on *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *La Belle Hélène*, and *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*. They were largely responsible for the development of the opéra comique as a unique art form distinct from French grand opera.

One reason that *Carmen* failed to catch on during its premiere run was that its musical style was not suited to conservative French taste. In this opera, Bizet was experimenting with a new musical language, one which looked forward to the Italian *verismo* style that was to dominate opera a few decades later in the works of Puccini, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and others.

Mention "melody," and most people think of a musical structure that musicologists call "strophic" – second verse same as the first, or some variation of it. Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, most operas were based on this type of melody. Owing largely to the influence of Richard Wagner, however (a composer whose theoretical writings about music were as significant as the music itself), composers in the late nineteenth century began to develop forms of musical expression that were more expressive of human speech.

Wagner's music and influence were not appreciated by the French critics, and one of the criticisms leveled against Bizet was that his music was too "Wagnerian." These critics, however, failed to observe the significant differences between the two composers. For one thing, Wagner elevated the importance of the orchestra to where it frequently was more important than the singers, whereas, in *Carmen*, the vocal lines are predominant. More significantly, Wagner frequently had his characters sing in a declamatory style with no regular rhythm. (Verdi, though denying direct influence, also frequently used this style of expression.)

Bizet, on the other hand, used a fascinating combination of strophic and non-strophic music. Carmen's gypsy melodies, Escamillo's "Toreador Song," and Micaëla's third-act aria, as well as some of the other gypsy music, all depict characters. The one character who develops during the opera, Don José, is identified by non-strophic music in his one solo aria, the "Flower Song," which achieves a remarkable sense of unity despite the fact that it never repeats a melodic phrase. Bizet's greatest innovations can be seen in

the duets in the first and last acts, in which there is a continuous flow of melody without a sense of formal musical structure. It was this approach to melody that was to become the prevalent form of musical expression in the operas of Puccini and his successors.

Another important aspect of Bizet's music in *Carmen* is the use of exoticism, or "local color," the inclusion of melodies that suggest the locale in which the opera is set. Four years earlier Verdi had written some Eastern-sounding music to evoke the Egyptian setting of *Aida*, but this technique was relatively new at the time. The opening section of the overture and most of the music associated with Carmen and her fellow gypsies is exotic in this sense, transporting us to an alien culture. In the years that followed, such local color became almost expected, though it should be noted that most composers have chosen to use only a smattering of local-color music to set the mood. One of the best known examples is the middle-eastern "Bacchanale" in Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*. Puccini made extensive use of this technique in *Madama Butterfly*, *Girl of the Golden West*, and *Turandot*, evoking Japanese, American, and Chinese music, respectively. Though only a portion of the music in *Carmen* reflects its Spanish locale, Bizet was so successful in using it that many people think of this work as a Spanish opera rather than a French one.

Think of French opera, and thanks to Gaston LeRoux and later Andrew Lloyd Webber, one immediately thinks of the Paris opera house that was known simply as the Opéra, the home of the French Grand Opera. Featuring huge, elaborate sets and costumes and including lengthy ballet numbers, these works are rarely performed today. The Opéra was so tied to the conventions of grand opera, in fact, that works of foreign composers had to be revised, and not merely translated, for the Paris stage. Among other things, there was a mandatory ballet. Some of Verdi's operas, for example, exist in two different versions, and it is the Italian versions which are generally performed today.

Parisians, however, had a number of alternatives. There were numerous venues for operetta, where works of Jacques Offenbach and his musical offspring held sway, and there was a Theatre Italienne (for the performance of Italian opera). For a while there was the Théâtre Lyrique, where more intimate musical dramas could be staged, though this house was out of business by the time *Carmen* was composed. More important than these, however, was the Opéra-Comique, where *Carmen* had its premiere.

The label "Comique" is actually misleading, since in French the words comedie and comique do not necessarily have the same connotation as their English equivalents. Rather, they refer to drama in general, signifying the greater emphasis on story as opposed to the spectacle of the Opéra. Whereas works performed at the Opéra consisted of continuous music, the Comique interspersed spoken dialogue between musical scenes. (At one point, this distinction was written into the government charters of the two theatres.) In some ways, these operas could be compared to the German singspiel, such as Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* or *The Magic Flute*. *Carmen*, with its relative lack of spectacle and its focus on members of the lower economic classes, was definitely not material for the Opéra. Incidentally, when *Carmen* was first performed outside of France, after Bizet's death, recitatives

composed by Ernest Guirard were added to bring it into conformity with what non-Parisian audiences regarded as opera. It is only in recent years that opera companies have begun to perform the work as Bizet intended. It is in this form that you will experience the work in this Lyric Opera production.

So, in the final analysis, what are we to make of Carmen and the opera which bears her name? Those critics who take a historical approach generally approach *Carmen* as a morality play, with the hero, Don José, trapped between one woman who appeals to his higher nature and another who appeals to his more basic instincts. They point to the librettists' statements concerning the addition of Micaëla, who was not in the original story, to provide a symbol of goodness on the stage. They also point out that the character of Don José in the source material was much less sensitive and actually considered the life of a bandit to be a reasonable alternative to the military.

The opera, however, is named "Carmen," and not "Don José." Though she may have less actual time on stage than does Don José, it is her personality that drives the action.

To see the dichotomy between Micaëla and Carmen as "good girl/bad girl" denies the complexity of the characters. It would be more accurate to say that the contrast is between a woman who lives within the boundaries of mainstream society and one who because of an accident of birth must function outside of that society. Bizet and his librettists are not passing judgment on the gypsies, whose principal violation of the law is smuggling, a relatively victimless crime.

Some critics have argued that in being forced to choose between Micaëla and Carmen, Don José must choose between a life of routine and a life of passion. However, from the reaction that she gets from the soldiers when she first appears on the scene, it is clear that Micaëla is quite a beauty herself. And a woman who is not afraid to venture into the mountains to find the man she loves and to personally confront her adversary (if she only wanted to get a message to him, she could have sent a messenger) would hardly seem to offer a man only a life of dull domesticity. From the way that he reacts to her playful kiss in the first act, it appears that the problem lies within Don José, as he cannot be attracted to a woman whom he

identifies with his mother.

Though Don José clearly makes the wrong choice, Carmen herself is not an inherently bad person. For one thing, she is one of the few working girls in the standard operatic repertoire. And in her own way, she genuinely loves Don José. For her, love is a passion of the moment, not a life-long commitment. She seems to pick Don José out of the crowd because she sees in him a kindred spirit, and she is genuinely surprised by his adherence to bourgeois values, the ultimate cause of their breakup.

The way in which we see Carmen herself may depend to a great extent on the singer who portrays her. Maria Ewing, for example, plays her as a sullen woman driven by a sense of fate. Rene Crespin, another prominent Carmen, also focused on her dark side: "All people who look joyful have a dark shadow. I loved to be able to laugh onstage, I loved the lightness of the beginning, but underneath…" For her, Carmen is a female Don Giovanni, "sexually hungry but never satisfied." Risë Stevens, the one singer most strongly associated with the role, added "She is highly sexually motivated. She loves men, not one man." Denyce Graves, a more recent Carmen, focuses more on her sense of joy. "She enjoys her physicality, but it's wrong to play her as a hootchy-mama." For her, the character is about "freedom and love. She is the most honest character I play."

Critic Steven Blier comments that "Today, Carmen asks us to consider what a strong woman does with her freedom." Perhaps it was fear of this type of woman that so scandalized the Parisian audiences who first experienced this opera, but I suspect that Bizet, whose own marriage was far from blissful, was as much in love with his heroine as audiences have been for the past 130 years.

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