

Franz Waxman (1906-1967)
after Georges Bizet (1838-1875)
Carmen Fantaisie

'Fannie Hurst's MOST DYNAMIC CHAPTERS SURGE TO *Glowing LIFE!*' So said the trailer for the 1946 Warner Bros. movie adaptation of Fannie Hurst's novel *Humoresque*. The '*most vibrant LOVE STORY EVER TOLD*' (to quote again from the trailer), it was meant to dramatise the three-way tug of Paul Boray's love for music and the women in his life.

Around the time of the Great Depression, Paul (John Garfield), a kid from New York's East Side, determines to become a violinist despite financial disadvantages. He falls in love with Helen Wright (Joan Crawford), a rich socialite who becomes his patron. But Paul's mother disapproves of Paul's neglect of Gina, a girl his own age, and persuades the oft-married Helen that she would only be a bad influence on Paul.

At one stage Helen tries to see Paul, proclaiming good news (her divorce from Victor), but he will not disrupt his rehearsal. It is at this point in the plot that he is playing Waxman's fantasy on themes from Bizet's *Carmen*. 'THE MOST *GLORIOUS Music EVER WRITTEN!*' boasted the studio, but whether or not all of it was 'the most glorious', this was the period when classical music was part of American popular culture. Not only did the score contain Waxman's *Carmen-fantasy*, but Sarasate's as well, and there was even a reworking of the 'Liebestod' from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. The music could be thought to fulfil Hollywood's idea of romantic music, from its evocation of Bizet's femme-fatale Carmen to the idea of a *Tristanesque* 'love death'. 'Vibrant love story'? Certainly tragic: Helen ends the film by walking into the ocean, sparing Paul her romantic attention.

The music for the film was arranged and written by Franz Waxman, one of the numerous European émigrés in Hollywood whose late-romantic style suited films during the Golden Years. Waxman had been born in Königshütte and completed music studies in Dresden and Berlin. It was his success in arranging Holländer's music for *The Blue Angel* that led him to Los Angeles in 1934. There he scored films such as *The Bride of Frankenstein* and won Academy Awards two years running for *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *A Place in the Sun* (1951). In 1948, he founded the Los Angeles International Music Festival and gave important premieres of works by Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Vaughan Williams and Walton.

The idea of the 'fantasy' or 'paraphrase' on themes from another work is a phenomenon associated with virtuosos dating back to the 19th century. Liszt, Chopin and Thalberg, for example, demonstrated their technical brilliance in piano fantasies based on famous operas. Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) is, of course, one of the most popular operas of all time. Story-wise, its subject was appropriate to a film about the diverting power of love because in the opera the sergeant of the local barracks, Don José, is distracted to madness and murder by the allure of Carmen. Musically, even the regular audience would recognise their favourite moments – the habañera (Carmen's 'L'amour est un oiseau rebelle') say, or The March of the Toreadors, which opens Waxman's version.

But was John Garfield a musician of the order of Sarasate, Liszt or Chopin? No, the violin part was originally meant to be played by Jascha Heifitz, another of the great European émigrés to Hollywood (he did record it for vinyl), and was actually played by Isaac Stern. They are Stern's hands on the fingerboard in the film.

Waxman wrote a number of works outside of film that have come to be recognised in recent years, among them the oratorio, *Joshua*, and *The Song of Terezin*, a setting of poems by children interned at Theresienstadt concentration camp. But this *Carmen Fantaisie* (whether or not truly '*SWELLED TO Breathtaking INTENSITY BY Warner Bros.*') is still one of his most frequently-performed works on the concert platform.