

# The reception of *Herculanum* in the contemporary press

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How can the success of an opera in its own time be examined and studied? Quite simply, by working out the number of performances and the total amount of receipts generated, then by creating – and assessing – the most extensive dossier possible of the reviews which appeared in the contemporary press.

## HERCULANUM: FROM PLAYBILL TO BOX OFFICE

With regard to the number of performances, the *Journal de l'Opéra*, today held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, is fortunately at our disposal. Nevertheless, this needs to be analysed carefully, not overlooking the fact that the presence of an opera in the repertory might well result from reasons other than artistic ones, such as the departure of a director, those connected with the singers entrusted with the leading roles, the destruction of scenery (often as a result of fires), for political reasons or for all kinds of other possibilities. Examples which could be mentioned include *Tannhäuser* by Wagner (1861), or – why not also – the less well-known *La Nonne sanglante* by Gounod (1854): far from being unsuccessful in terms of audience levels, these two operas were withdrawn after three performances for *Tannhäuser*, and eleven for *La Nonne sanglante*; the average receipts for the two operas were respectively 8,890 and 6,140 francs (in comparison, the receipts for a performance of *Les Huguenots*

in 1859, typically ranged between 6,000 and 7,000 francs). How does *Herculanum* compare to other operas from that time? Below are listed the most-performed operas at the Académie Impériale de Musique from 1851-1870\*; between brackets is the date of the première for each:

First group (5 operas): 200 performances or more

- [1836] Giacomo Meyerbeer, *Les Huguenots* (285)
- [1840] Gaetano Donizetti, *La Favorite* (256)
- [1829] Gioachino Rossini, *Guillaume Tell* (246)
- [1831] Giacomo Meyerbeer, *Robert le Diable* (205)
- [1849] Giacomo Meyerbeer, *Le Prophète* (205)

Second group (5 operas): 100 performances or more

- [1865] Giacomo Meyerbeer, *L'Africaine* (199)
- [1857] Giuseppe Verdi, *Le Trouvère* (194)
- [1846] Gaetano Donizetti, *Lucie de Lammermoor* (179)
- [1828] Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, *La Muette de Portici* (150)
- [1835] Jacques-Fromental Halévy, *La Juive* (145)

Third group (9 operas): 50 performances or more

- [1828] Gioachino Rossini, *Le Comte Ory* (99)
- [1859] Charles Gounod, *Faust* (83)
- [1855] Giuseppe Verdi, *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (81)
- [1868] Ambroise Thomas, *Hamlet* (79)
- [1859] Félicien David, *Herculanum* (74)
- [1834] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Don Juan* (71)
- [1864] Auguste Mermet, *Roland à Roncevaux* (63)
- [1831] Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, *Le Philtre* (57)
- [1839] Marco Aurelio Marliani, *La Xacarilla* (57)

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\* The precise number of performances is sometimes difficult to verify: quite often, the presence in the *Journal de l'Opéra* may obscure an incomplete performance of the work.

*Herculanum* appears fifteenth out of the fifty operas performed across this span of 20 years. Of the twenty-five new works first performed during this time, and commissioned by the Opéra (and not premiered elsewhere), *Herculanum* is ranked fourth, after *L'Africaine* (199), *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (81) and *Hamlet* (79).

Across the thirty-three initial performances of *Herculanum*, the receipts for its performances Nos 5-21 never dropped below 9,000 francs, whilst the receipts for the fourteenth performance (April 25, 1859) were even the largest for the whole of 1859 (10,017 francs). By way of comparison, the most profitable operas for a single performance under the Second Empire were *L'Africaine* (14,000 francs) and *Faust* (15,000 francs).

What follows are the precise figures and the average receipts per group of performances of the initial run of *Herculanum*, and then its successive revivals:

- 33 performances (March 4 - July 25, 1859)
  - between 3,900 and 10,000 francs (8,286 francs)
- 6 revivals (July 5-23, 1859)
  - between 2,500 and 4,500 francs (3,287 francs)
- 6 revivals (January 6 - February 20, 1860)
  - between 6,600 and 9,300 francs (7,800 francs)
- 14 revivals (May 8 - November 13, 1861)
  - between 4,900 and 9,600 francs (7,129 francs)
- 5 revivals (October 17 - December 15, 1862)
  - between 5,500 and 8,500 francs (6,732 francs)
- 10 revivals (June 29 - November 6, 1868)
  - between 4,300 and 7,400 francs (5,612 francs)

Thus, an average receipt over the 74 performances of 7,200 francs per performance. Based on these figures, it becomes quite clear that *Herculanum* was a great success with audiences, as the opera house's cashbox reflects.



*HERCULANUM* IN THE CONTEMPORARY PRESS

Throughout the time of the Second Empire, the Paris Opéra experienced a veritable crisis with its repertory. Over the course of the decade following *Le Prophète* (1849), only a single première exceeded 50 performances: *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (1855) by Verdi. It was not until 1859 that each of the three principal opera houses would come up with a new success: *Herculanum* by David at the Opéra, *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* by Meyerbeer at the Opéra-Comique and *Faust* by Gounod at the Théâtre-Lyrique. The contemporary Parisian press was full of negative commentary about this lack of renewal of the repertory. In order to understand the resonances surrounding these three works – and especially for *Herculanum* – this anticipation for new composers, styles and forms needs to be borne in mind. Two totally different examples from across the spectrum of musical criticism can be mentioned here to serve as evidence: Benoît Jouvin in *Le Figaro* of March 10, 1859 ('[*Herculanum* and *Faust*] both represent – equally important – attempts at a musical renewal [...] David and Gounod are two great symphonists who, sooner or later, must get used to the opera house; [...] to this they will bring that which endorses, and makes lasting, a work of art: that is, an individual style'), and Joseph d'Ortigue in *Le Ménestrel* of March 13, 1859 ('[...] once again, it is indispensable to make changes in the repertory of our leading opera stage, by calling for, and by introducing to it, new men and new features.').

Any assessment of the reviews received by *Herculanum* needs first of all to take into consideration the music press which, albeit with fairly limited print runs and circulations, contained articles written by 'specialist' journalists (*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, *Le Ménestrel*, *La France musicale*, *L'Univers musical*), then make a selection from the mainstream press, with its much greater reach of the general public, and with musical columns equal – and even superior – in professional quality to that found in the specialist music press (*Journal des débats*, *Le Constitutionnel*, *Le Siècle*, *Le Figaro*, *La Presse*, *Revue des deux mondes*), and next consider the illustrated press (*L'Artiste*, *L'Illustration*, *Le Monde illustré*, *L'Univers illustré*)

as well as the illustrated satirical press (*Le Charivari*, *Journal amusant*, *La Gazette de Paris*). Indeed, an indication of success at the time of the July Monarchy was to be (or not to be) caricatured by Dantan *le Jeune*, Daumier or Traviès; this also applies to the Second Empire, the corresponding artists being Nadar, Carjat, Cham and Bertall.

The welcome received by *Herculanum* in the press at the time was, with the particular exception of the article by Léon Escudier in *La France musicale*, rather favourable. Méry's poem, the staging (above all the scenery) and the execution of the work were all unanimously praised from the first evening. And if, here and there, some doubts were raised about the ballets, the personal success of Emma Livry was always recognized. With five performances completed, *Le Ménestrel* from March 20, 1859 commented:

In short, the four leading roles in *Herculanum* are handled in a most remarkable manner; MM. Marié and Coulon add value in their secondary roles, and the entire orchestra (along with the chorus), this first-rate ensemble, ensures the success of this attractive piece.

The only downside to this was considered to be the Italian accent of M<sup>me</sup> Borghi-Mamo, as pointed out in the *Revue des deux mondes* (March 15, 1859), *L'Univers musical* (March 16, 1859) and *Le Ménestrel* (March 20, 1859). Furthermore, the journals were in agreement in finding that what occurred between Nicanor and Lilia in the second act bore too great a resemblance to the *Scene at the Cross* involving Bertram and Alice in *Robert le Diable*.

In order to shed light on the range and diversity of the critical voices, here, in chronological order, are their opinions concerning two individual pieces from the score highlighted at the première:

ACT I, SCENE 5: ROMANCE AND DUET, 'JE VEUX AIMER TOUJOURS'

¶ 'The melody of love which he sings is one of those of an Aeolian modal character which M. Félicien David excels in dashing off; an ethereal mix-

ture of Greek sweetness and of “Creole” nonchalance – in the same way that Daphnis sang when he was lulling Chloe to sleep in her hammock suspended between palm trees on a tropical island.’ (Paul de Saint-Victor, *La Presse*, March 6, 1859)

¶ ‘[...] his ravishing *Air de l’Extase* from the first act: “En te voyant ainsi par un mortel aimée / Les anges du ciel sont jaloux!” (Jacques-Léopold Heugel, *Le Ménestrel*, March 6, 1859)

¶ ‘[...] that lovely phrase, which caused a thrill of pleasure to run through the entire audience: “Dans ces jardins de fleurs, l’extase est embaumée, / L’ombre est tiède, le gazon doux... / En te voyant ainsi par un mortel aimée, / Les anges du ciel sont jaloux!” [...] these four lines, which have inspired Félicien David to one of his most delightful melodies.’ (Pier-Angelo Fiorentino, *Le Constitutionnel*, March 7, 1859)

¶ ‘[...] the *Air de l’Extase*, which finishes with a phrase of real inspiration.’ (Gustave Chadeuil, *Le Siècle*, March 9/10, 1859)

¶ ‘[...] one of the most beautiful inspirations of his opera, the romance which Roger sings in the first and in the second act.’ (Benoît Jouvin, *Le Figaro*, March 10, 1859)

¶ ‘There is much passion in the end of Hélios’ solo, and the whole of the duet is superbly treated.’ (Hector Berlioz, *Journal des débats*, March 12, 1859)

¶ ‘What intoxication, what delirium, what ecstasy in the poetry and the music of this verse which I am happy to quote here: “Je veux aimer toujours” [...] I would add that both orchestra and melody are equally admirable.’ (Joseph d’Ortigue, *Le Ménestrel*, March 13, 1859)

¶ ‘Roger sings a new romance, gracious and distinguished, across which M<sup>me</sup> Borghi unfurls agreeable ornaments.’ (Léon Escudier, *La France musicale*, March 13, 1859)

¶ ‘[...] this scene of feasting and of delights, which the composer has portrayed admirably.’ (Paul Smith, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, March 13, 1859)

¶ ‘One cannot praise too highly also the elegiac gracefulness of this passage sung by Hélios towards the end of this seduction duet.’ (Paul Scudo, *Revue des deux mondes*, March 15, 1859)

¶ '[...] the duet finished off by the impassioned melody was so well executed by Roger.' (Julien Martin d'Angers, *L'Univers musical*, March 16, 1859)

¶ 'This *cantilena*, which returns on a number of occasions, is one of the work's major successes.' (Albert de Lasalle, *Le Monde illustré*, March 19, 1859)

ACT III, SCENE 2: CREDO 'JE CROIS AU DIEU'

¶ 'She responds to the insults of the queen and the threats of Satan with an act of faith of an exquisite devotion. This voice rising up from the catacombs, which isolates itself in order to pray in the midst of a clamouring people, this enthusiastic *Credo* which provokes her persecutors and which defies death, drove the audience into a state of bliss.' (Paul de Saint-Victor, *La Presse*, March 6, 1859)

¶ 'Concerning M<sup>me</sup> Gueymard-Lauteurs, nothing is more beautiful, more pure, nothing simpler or more gorgeous than her soprano tackling – in the range of the seraphim – the *Credo* from the third act.' (Benoît Jouvin, *Le Figaro*, March 10, 1859)

¶ 'Lilia's act of faith: "Je crois au Dieu, que tout le ciel révère" did not really impress me. Nonetheless at first hearing I found it better, as regards style, than the *Credo* of Donizetti's *Les Martyrs*: "Je crois en Dieu, seul maître de la terre". Generally speaking, phrases that use a fast tempo and are uniform in rhythm – as in *Les Martyrs* – are not really in keeping with the solemnity of the subject.' (Hector Berlioz, *Journal des débats*, March 12, 1859)

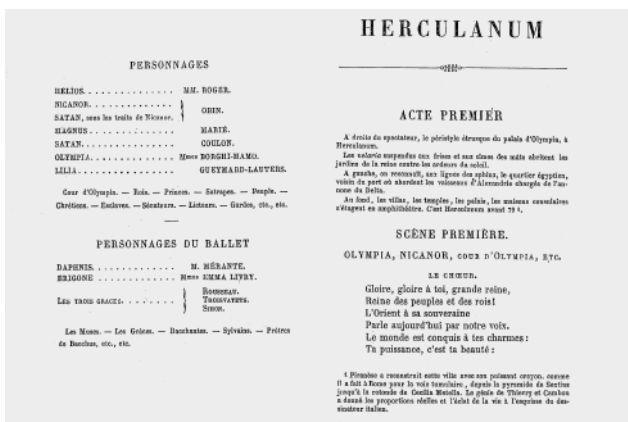
¶ 'This piece, which is called *Credo*, is in a broader style and one more appropriate to the scene's character. However, it fails to reflect the loftiness of the subject. Do you recall the *Credo* from *Les Martyrs* of Donizetti? Thank goodness! Now, that was religious, magnificent and moving!' (Léon Escudier, *La France musicale*, March 13, 1859)

¶ 'Lilia appears and delivers a *Credo* whose words are reminiscent of those of Polyucte in *Les Martyrs* by Donizetti, [...] but whose melody is distin-

guished by a nobler and more religious character.’ (Paul Smith, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, March 13, 1859)

¶ ‘This profession of faith, mimicking that of Corneille’s Pauline, has only drawn from the musician a morbid form of declamation without “lift”, and the confusing ensemble in which he frames it is not much better.’ (Paul Scudo, *Revue des deux mondes*, March 15, 1859)

¶ ‘[...] the splendidly inspired *Credo* from Lilia, portraying Christian fanaticism in its most colourful aspects.’ (Albert de Lasalle, *Le Monde illustré*, March 19, 1859)



The initial pages of the printed libretto of *Herculanum*. Gunther Braam Collection.

Les premières pages du livret imprimé d'*Herculanum*. Collection Gunther Braam.

The first review of *Herculanum* – and probably the one which was the most read – appeared in *La Presse* on Sunday March 6, 1859, two days after the première. Its author, Paul de Saint-Victor (the successor to Théophile Gautier in this role), makes great claims in his first sentence: ‘*Herculanum* was a complete success at the Opéra yesterday’; he goes on to say more with his second: ‘The quality of the score is uneven, but it does contain sections of a very rare beauty’; and he says it all in his conclusion:



It is undoubtedly not a masterpiece; it often falters at the height of the drama; its vocal forces lack in fullness, its rhythms in variety, its ensemble in internal agreement and in dramatic style; yet beauties in the work abound amongst the weaknesses, and each act contains at least one essential section, lively and outstanding, which ensures it all of success. It is sufficient to honour M. David's attempt and to support the enthusiastic welcome which he has received from the audience.

Saint-Victor was also the first to sing the praises of those responsible for the stage design: 'The stage scenery unreservedly demands admiration.' So as to emphasize the quality here, Saint-Victor offered up by way of comparison the names of Piranesi, Ingres, Delacroix and John Martin. Saint-Victor's stylistic suppleness is particularly flavoursome in his negative criticisms, such as in his description of the finale of the first act:

The outbursts of laughter added by the chorus exuded a sense of *opéra-comique*-esque cheerfulness, and decidedly not the stubbornness of a people standing up to anathema. One might claim them to be Parisian diners who have been sidetracked at Belshazzar's Feast.

Besides this, the article is also informative from the perspective of certain details concerning the performance: there is a rare description of Locusta ('a bronzed slave with hair similar to that of an Egyptian statue'), and about a number of theatrical effects ('the "floodlighting" for the cross at the moment when the proconsul is about to grasp hold of the virgin'; 'the burial mound opens up like a crater and Satan emerges from it in a burst of flames').



The first of the two articles published in *Le Ménestrel*, that of March 6, 1859, is yet more enthusiastic than the review in *La Presse* – which is hardly surprising: *Le Ménestrel*'s publishers, Heugel and Meissonnier, had

purchased the rights to David's work from Escudier in 1847. Even though this is only a preliminary article prior to a more involved assessment from Joseph d'Ortigue (this will appear in the journal's next issue), the author, Jacques-Léopold Heugel confesses:

Step by step, one will want to follow through the entire range of the orchestration which strikes the intellect directly at the same time as captivating both ear and heart. These were definitely our impressions from the first performance, and those of our neighbours.

He defends the work against the accusation of an 'absence of dramatic and scenic features' and states 'that Félicien David secures a significant and legitimate success; besides, that this success has been shared by his four leading performers: Roger, Obin, M<sup>mes</sup> Lauteurs-Gueymard, Borghimamo, and also M<sup>lle</sup> Emma Livry, who demonstrated the ballets in a most seductive manner'. In this commendation he also included the orchestra and choruses ('even those of the women'...).

The article by Vernes in *La France musicale* of March 6, 1859 was only the curtain-raiser for the 'demolition job' which would be perpetrated by Léon Escudier a week later. The review's tone was set from the outset:

All the Saint-Simonians of Paris were there. They applauded as with one voice and, if a halt hadn't been brought to their enthusiasm, they would have had repeated every piece in the score. This enthusiasm deceived no one.

Vernes classes the score as 'effective music, which does not trouble one for a single moment', and raises the question of why David 'is remaining [...] below his lustrous past'. He admits that the work has secured 'a very honourable success', but considers it to be 'an oratorio [rather] than an opera'.

The critic Pier-Angelo Fiorentino had been – in a way probably unique amongst his colleagues – an eyewitness at the age of six to an eruption of

Vesuvius. An entire column from the seven making up his article in *Le Constitutionnel* of March 7, 1859 is taken by this recollection ('I know my Vesuvius by heart'). And this as a preamble for imagining the opera's conclusion: 'Well, the tremendous scenery which I saw the other evening at the Opéra is yet more spectacular, more grim and more impressive than the reality'... Fiorentino identifies three pieces which were encored (see below in connection with *L'Univers musical*) and describes a 'score which abounds in tender melodies, in delicious orchestral sketches, and in three lovely pieces of a strong, lofty and dramatic inspiration', but he does not hide the fact that '[to him] the *divertissement* seemed protracted, inelegant and verging on the grotesque'.

For Gustave Chadeuil, from *Le Siècle* (the March 9/10, 1859 issue), this exaggeration of reality was excessive:

We repeat our observation about the pyrotechnic commotion. [...] It looked as though one was taking part in some great battle. This was realism gone too far. Keep the crackling flames, but water down the explosion, and you won't any more espy in the boxes so many pretty hands covering up so many delicate ears.

Chadeuil also provides several details about the preparatory arrangements: 'The rehearsals for *Herculanum* began on August 1, 1858, continuing without interruption, initially thrice weekly, thereafter every day, leading to a grand total of two hundred of them.' Having attended the final rehearsals, he shares a few secrets with his readers: 'An overture still was in existence, which had eventually been reduced to the dimensions of a simple introduction; the purpose being to focus the audience's attention rather than to spoil the score's main ideas at too early a stage. This introduction consists of the *andante* from the initial work.' The same procedure was employed for the final scene: 'The finale is perhaps a little short in length. Let us not blame the composer for this: this passage was more extended in the dress rehearsals. He was required to shorten it to avoid the performance being overlong. It would be a good idea to bring it back

in its entirety.’ A final example of his tactlessness related to the dancer Emma Livry who, he revealed, was ‘15 years of age’.

Benoît Jouvin in *Le Figaro* of March 10, 1859, extensively relates the story of the genesis of both libretto and score: as collaborators he mentions MM. Gabriel, Mirecourt, Azevedo and Méry. He systematically lists the highlights of the première:

As a learned musical colourist, Félicien David was concerned to come up with different tones for portraying Hélios and Lilia, Olympia and Nicanor, Satan and the prophet Magnus. The verses of the affianced Christians, in the first act: ‘Dans une retraite profonde’, etc; the choral introduction of the second act: ‘Seuls dans la nuit’, etc. The lively movement of Lilia, in the middle of the feasting in the third act: ‘Je crois au Dieu que tout le ciel révère!’ contrasts sharply with the beguiling pagan march of the procession; the *brindisi* and the finale of the first act as well as the entire third act, in which Oriental rhythms combine with Italian sensuality.

In Jouvin’s opinion, the music is capable of ‘drawing out two different languages – for Lilia, the Christian virgin, and for Olympia, the crowned courtesan.’ Further on, Jouvin says: ‘I will mention, amongst the sections destined to become popular, the verses [...] “Bois ce vin que l’amour donne” [...] However, the worthiest section in *Herculanum*, I think, is the first act finale.’ At the end of his article, Jouvin scoffs a little at the piece written by his colleague Fiorentino in *Le Constitutionnel*. It is no surprise that, unlike Fiorentino, he refers to David’s *airs de danse* as ‘masterpieces’. In the same issue of *Le Figaro* is to be found a letter – authentic? – addressed to its editorial board, in which a provincial music lover (‘deputy mayor of a cantonal capital’) recounts how he had become the victim of a mix-up between the composer David and the head of the *claque* at the Opéra of the same name. The author of the letter reveals the number of 500 ‘hired applauders’ on the evening of the première.



By 1859, Hector Berlioz was barely writing much music anymore and it was more through his writings that he would have been known to the general public. Accordingly, *Le Figaro* of March 13, 1859 offered some extracts from his recent book called *Les Grotesques de la musique*. (On February 20 and 27, 1859 the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* had already published some passages from it.) However, the Parisian musical elite was well aware – the conclusion of the review of *Herculanum* by Paul Scudo is proof of it – that since 1858, Berlioz had had lying in a drawer, but ready to be staged, *Les Troyens*, a *grand opéra* in five acts, a work designed for the Opéra – by its subject, the singers required, the choral forces necessary; and the ostentation of the staging. Naturally, Berlioz should have been alarmed at seeing – with *Herculanum* – the inclusion on the Opéra stage of a *drame lyrique* with a classical theme, involving the story of two opposed cultures clashing with each other, conjuring up all the pomp, the massed choral forces and the court *divertissements* of a pagan queen, not to mention the staging of natural cataclysms, as well as the destruction of an entire city. On closer inspection, he was probably a little relieved to find that the differences between *Herculanum* and *Les Troyens* were more numerous than their similarities (setting aside a few lines glorifying the queen, which could have been used for Dido as much as for Olympia). Even still, he would have been surprised to read – in Saint-Victor's review of *Herculanum* in *La Presse* – the description of the vision given by Satan to Lilia depicting Hélios at the feet of Olympia, 'in the languishing attitude of the *Dido* by Guérin': Berlioz had been inspired by this same painting (today kept in the Musée du Louvre) for his stage directions relating to No 35 of his own *Troyens* (*Récitatif et Quintette*: 'Tout conspire à vaincre mes remords'), in precisely the way that he had described in a letter to his sister Adèle on March 12, 1857!

Berlioz's report in the *Journal des débats* of March 12, 1859 – the first one related the plot, the second comments on the score and the performance (half of the article appears elsewhere in this book-CD) emits the palpable sense of relief of an individual who had almost brought himself under control: no caustic humour, rather a plain assessment

which is lavish in compliments regarding particular sections of the score, with only two or three ‘expert’ remarks concerning some more technical matters.

On the same day, March 12, 1859, *L’Illustration* devoted a full page to the appearance of the opera’s final scene. A review by Gustave Hécquet was to be found overleaf. He directly questioned the logic of the opera’s plot – an issue handled in a more understated manner in the other articles (other than, perhaps, in a few gently sardonic remarks from Paul Smith and Berlioz). Regarding Satan’s first appearance, at the end of the second act, Hécquet notes:

Satan catches sight of the proconsul’s embroidered cape, which the thunderclaps have omitted to set on fire. Picking it up, he sings: ‘Je prends cette dépouille échappée à la tombe, / Et maintenant, le proconsul, c’est moi.’ Why does he assume the figure of Nicanor? I can’t tell you. This is of absolutely no benefit to him in the other acts. The authors, who are, of course, ‘philosophers’, have wanted to show that Satan is much less powerful than we think: he would never have overcome the problem of disguising himself as a proconsul if he had not found this cape.

And the end of the opera, according to Hécquet, is brought to a close in this way: ‘Everyone dies, and that includes Magnus, who returns specifically for the purpose.’

With the three first performances now completed, Joseph d’Ortigue published his impressions in *Le Ménestrel* of March 13, 1859. From the introduction (probably written by Heugel), one can read: ‘The real audience [...] has demonstrated its feelings. The box office has been completely overrun.’ D’Ortigue becomes enthusiastic: ‘Félicien David has a style; it is him. [...] His success is brilliant.’ He sums up:

The composer has written two dazzling female roles, one for M<sup>me</sup> Borghi-Mamo, the other for M<sup>me</sup> Lauters. Roger sings and declaims his role in an exemplary fashion. Obin’s attractive voice expands outstandingly in

the role of Nicanor. Finally, Marié and Coulon supply characterful colours for the roles of magician and Satan. The orchestra is magnificent. Except for in one scene in the first act, when they went a bit flat – owing to their distance from the orchestra – the singing of the chorus has been excellent, and it cannot fail to claim a good share of the success of *Herculanum*.



Even from the distance of more than a century and a half, the article by Léon Escudier in *La France musicale* of March 13, 1859, comes over as being strongly marked by both arrogance and partiality. His tone exudes a bitterness worthy of a jilted lover. It is worth returning to the question of the Escudier brothers having bought the rights of David's *odesymphonie Le Désert* from the composer immediately after the work's première in December 1844. The contract also covered full rights to all forthcoming compositions from the composer (!); and this for the derisory sum of 1,200 francs. Even if the conditions of this contract were to be later adjusted in David's favour, the composer would throughout his life continue, in financial matters, to be the pawn of his Saint-Simonian 'friends' or of his publishers; furthermore, he would be the subject of disputes involving his different 'advisors', disputes which on many occasions led to appearances in the *Gazette des tribunaux*. The delicate nature of the unsteady relationship between David and the Escudier brothers was an open secret for the subscribers of *La France musicale* (the promotional vehicle of the publishing house run by the Escudiers). After *Le Désert*, no issue of *La France musicale* appeared without noisy publicity for each new performance of the work. And it is true to say that David, just like the Escudiers, profited from this joint activity. But after the complete failure of his oratorio *Moïse* (1846), far from providing their 'asset' with support, the publishers abruptly fell silent: even though the new work was announced in their magazine with as much flair as possible, not even the tiniest review of the concert was published afterwards, despite an article having been promised. At the time of the première of *Christophe Colomb* (1847), in

the same year as the sale of *Le Désert* to the publishers Heugel-Meissonier, the critical style had become plain and understated once more, but 14 years after *Le Désert*, the review of *Herculanum* bore sad testimony to a decidedly frosty relationship.

To begin with, Escudier makes his point that *Le Désert* continues to be David's best score. Although it is true that the same epithets as used by Léon Escudier – in describing David's character and that of his music (such as for example 'charming fantasist', 'variable', 'descriptive poet', 'landscape painter', 'daydreamer') can be found in articles from other writers, he is the only one to reproach David for a doubly hurtful incapability: '[...] he neither senses the human passions nor does he know how to replicate them', and later on rubbing it in further: 'Once again, he possesses neither the passionate temperament, nor a feeling for important human concerns [...] he merely comes up with effeminate accents.' Only four pieces – one in each act (called by Escudier 'some sweet daisies') – find favour with him, but he immediately puts them into perspective as to their artistic significance: the finale of the first act: 'This is, believe us, the best piece, a scene of drunkenness; it is very well-handled, but it would be better placed in an *opéra-comique*'; the repeat of Hélios' aria at the end of the second act: 'There was a well-demonstrated sense of conflict here, which created a sizable musical impact. M. Félicien David only sees the side of wishing to please: he stops for a moment to pluck a daisy and he forgets the drama'; in the third act, the *Credo* of Lilia: 'Here is an attractive situation, which should have provided the composer with the opportunity of a magnificent ensemble piece. [...] M. Félicien David has settled for making M<sup>me</sup> Lauters sing a second version of the *Noël* by Ad.[olphe] Adam'; lastly, in the fourth act, with the final duet: 'The *cabaletta* [...] without being original, is possessed of a certain animation; its success derives from one boldly thrown out note.' Léon Escudier also peppers his article with more or less direct accusations of plagiarism, mentioning works by Halévy, Méhul, Donizetti, Verdi, Rossini, Bellini, Meyerbeer and Adam, from which David allegedly drew his inspiration; on three occasions, Escudier adds, in order to reinforce his statement: 'This



can be verified.’ The remainder of the article is overflowing with a contemptuous terseness.



Although the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* was a music journal, the article signed by Paul Smith (the pseudonym of Édouard Monnais) on March 13, 1859, provides little commentary of a musical nature. The contents of the libretto are, on the other hand, finely analysed. Here is his conclusion: ‘From the very first evening, an unanimous sense of endorsement has greeted the work [...] We shall not tell him [David] that his score is of equal merit to those great works contained in the old and modern repertory of our Opéra; however, we believe that an honourable place is reserved for his work alongside these immense scores, albeit one of more modest proportions.’ Smith’s helpful advice for the reader was: ‘Go there, see it, and admire it!’

Similar to Escudier, but less malicious, Paul Scudo in the *Revue des deux mondes* of March 15, 1859, also invokes the image of Félicien David as ‘a composer who has been misled as to the real strengths of his talent’.

Indeed, it is through the charm of certain somewhat indistinct melodies, through poignant songs and happy combinations of voices, through a harmony more sophisticated than it is varied, and through a general smoothness which encourages the eyelids to droop, that the new score by M. Félicien David is commended; however, the stress on powerful passions, the elevated and sustained style which he should have had in order to bring to light the contrasts of character and of situation there to be considered, especially at the end of the third act; the lofty art of dramatic developments and the powerful colouring from the choice of instrumentation – all of this is no more to be found in the score of *Herculanum* than in the other compositions of this charming composer.

A bit further on, Scudo goes on to say: ‘His orchestra is constantly murmuring, humming and only exuding gentle harmonies in the lower part of its range.’ And yet, the journalist was able to find enough in the way of interesting ‘notable parts in the new work’ to construct a list: ‘the chorus from the first act and the march which announces the arrival of the tributary princes, the “plaintive” song of the two Christians, some passages from the seduction duet between the queen and Hélios, and the *stretta* of the finale; in the second act, a chorus sung by the proscribed Christians, and the duet between Nicanor and Lilia; in the following act, the *Hymn to Venus* sung by the queen Olympia, and the chorus of the Bacchantes; in the fourth act, the bass aria of Nicanor [Satan] with the chorus of demons [slaves], and the substantial duet between the two affianced Christians.’ He sums up in this way: ‘It is to M. Royer [the director of the Opéra] that the public indeed owes its ability to applaud the charming pieces of the score of *Herculanum*, which, without being a masterpiece, will find its honourable place in the so-little varied repertory of the Opéra.’

The article from Julien Martin d’Angers which appeared in *L’Univers musical* of March 16, 1859 is interesting in a number of ways. Firstly, the encores. Although other journalists make mention of individual pieces which were called to be repeated at the première (Heugel: ‘everybody called for, and overused, the encore’; Vernes: ‘the three pieces requested for repeating are precisely those which are the least remarkable from the score’; Jouvin: ‘the pieces which were called on to be encored at the performance were those which she [Olympia] sang’; Escudier: “a *brindisi* in D major [...] enjoyed much success, it was even required to be repeated”), with the exception of Fiorentino, they barely identified them. According to Martin (and as confirmed by Fiorentino) the following encores were asked for:

Act I: ‘Tout est soumis à ma puissance’ and ‘Bois ce vin, que l’amour donne’

Act II: ‘Du traître qui me tente’

Act III: ‘Viens, ô blonde déesse’

Act IV: ‘Viens ! La mort, qui nous purifie’

Furthermore, *L'Univers musical* is the only journal from our selection to name and render justice to the merits of 'the skilful conductor', Narcisse Girard. And finally, Martin d'Angers was in a small company of only three writers (Berlioz and Scudo, the others) to draw his readers' attention to certain questions relating to instrumentation and orchestration.

On March 19, 1859, one week after its rival *L'Illustration*, the weekly *Le Monde illustré* provided a full-page illustration of the scenery of the fourth act of *Herculanum*. Unfortunately, its caption is doubly inaccurate: firstly, it is not of Herculaneum 'at the moment of its destruction', but of the scene involving the pardon granted by Lilia to Hélios *before* the destruction (despite the fact that one column – on the right – is clearly starting to collapse); secondly, the final act is the *fourth* and not the fifth. In the same issue of this journal, a letter from Méry accompanying this illustration is included, as well as the review of the première by Albert de Lasalle, who wrongly calls – albeit with reason – the role of Olympia 'Imperia'.

The short column dedicated to *Herculanum* by Théophile Deschamps in *Le Monde dramatique* of March 24, 1859 carries a new piece of information: this is the only journal to name one of the dancers other than that of Emma Livry:

In the dance of the Grâces, we observed M<sup>lle</sup> Rousseau. The disciplined charm of her dancing, the delicacy of her movements, bear witness to the fact that she is being taught superbly, and we are promised a further brilliant star in our ballet heaven.

The third and final visual image from a scene of *Herculanum* in a Parisian illustrated journal was published in *L'Univers illustré* on March 26, 1859, on its cover page. This depicts the moment of Lilia's vision, as summoned up by Satan (at the end of the second act), representing Hélios at Olympia's feet. Overleaf, the journalist Gérôme gives details – in connection with *Herculanum*'s success – of the black market in tickets, where resell prices were yielding 'a fair return of 400 to 500 per cent')...

On March 27, 1859, *L'Artiste* published a portrait of David by Vidal produced in 1858 and engraved by Metzmacher. The article accompanying it was published some days later, in the issue of April 10, 1859, where Xavier Aubryet offered his appreciation of the three new operas by Gounod, David and Meyerbeer. Without being cynical, Aubryet barely takes his subject seriously by indulging in aquatic metaphors to describe David's music ('wishy-washy orchestration', 'soft and flooded', 'like gentle and lukewarm water, with sunlight playing on brilliant furrows [of waves]'); ultimately, it is paradoxical to read David being described as 'a musical Narcissus enamoured of himself' by a journalist who, above all, demonstrated himself to be an excellent Narcissus, proud of his conceit of basing an entire column devoted to a new opera around marine comparisons.



#### THE SATIRICAL PRESS

One of the oldest and most popular satirical journals, *La Charivari*, paid tribute to *Herculanum* in one of its March 1859 issues. Under the title *Herculanum, ou les inconvéniens de la boisson* [... or the drawbacks to drinking], thirteen *vignettes* (probably designed by Cham) are reproduced, caricaturing the principal singers. The bantering takes alcohol as its subject: 'Final tableau. The town is so drunken that nothing is capable of standing upright. Even the houses have lost their vertical composure.'

*La Gazette de Paris* was a sister publication to *Le Figaro*. In the issue dated March 26, 1859, twenty-four satirical illustrations on *Herculanum* were reproduced, designs and text by Bertall. The illustrations faithfully render the appearance of the great height of Obin (Nicanor), and of Emma Livry (ballet), but also the stoutness of Roger (Hélios) and of M<sup>me</sup> Gueymard-Lauters (Lilia), as well as the prominent nose and protruding chin of M<sup>me</sup> Borghi-Mamo. Even the non-singing role of the slave Locusta, who brings on the magical concoction in the first act, and who

is otherwise only mentioned in the report of *La Presse* and by Berlioz, is there depicted. In three images the long recitatives of the prophet Magnus – sung on a single note for 49, then 27 and 37 syllables – are ridiculed. The image of Félicien David, torn into four pieces, in the very first illustration, was probably inspired by the remark in the review by Paul de Saint-Victor in *La Presse* of March 6: ‘Four or five authors have been harnessed for this unfortunate libretto and have “quartered” it, to say the least.’

The same day, another satirical cartoon of David, this time by Nadar and Édouard Riou, illustrated the front cover of the *Journal amusant* of March 26, 1859. There are no Roman features recalling *Herculanum* in this engraving, which shows David rather as a Native Indian from the Americas in front of palm trees and under a sky streaked with a flight of birds; allusions to *Christophe Colomb* and *La Perle du Brésil*, as well as *Le Désert* and – perhaps also – to his song *Les Hirondelles*. The sole reference to *Herculanum* in the accompanying text consists of an extract from Jouvin’s article in *Le Figaro* (March 10, 1859) about David and Gounod, the symphonists getting used to operas.

In the issue of April 16, 1859, the *Journal amusant* shows, in its review of the first quarter of 1859 ‘as seen by Nadar’ a new caricature of David and of Méry in miniature. It was not until June 11, 1859 that a full scale review of the new work was included in the *Journal amusant*, with thirteen illustrations by Marcelin. Like Bertall had done in *La Gazette de Paris* two months previously, he made fun of the physical appearance of the singers and of M<sup>lle</sup> Livry (who he compares to an ibis), and also of the recitation of Magnus on the same note (‘An Alexandrine line of 75 feet!’).

In 1868 the work was revived at the Académie Impériale de Musique in Paris and in its July 17, 1868 issue the journal *La Vie parisienne* devoted an entire page to this event.

The short note on *Herculanum* in *L’Univers, Union catholique* of March 7, 1859 is a good example of blatant anti-Semitism in all the remarkable idiocy which, by its very nature, it possesses. In his customary article, the writer, by the name of Venet – who has still not yet seen the work

(‘there’s going to be a ceremony at the Opéra’), recounts the views offered by critics present ‘at the final rehearsals’: ‘If we are to credit it, this opera is made up of perfectly wonderful music coupled with balanced and sweet-sounding poetry.’ However, Venet has some doubts, since “to scale the heights where powerful melodic breaths dwell [...] which stir up deep emotions in souls, one must be possessed of Christian blood, totally. M. Félicien David does not possess this. It might be that he surpasses in this respect his two coreligionists MM. Halévy and Meyerbeer; he is still well behind Donizetti, even behind M. Auber.’ As a response, Charles-André David, painter, godfather and brother of Félicien, had a letter placed in *L’Univers* of March 12, 1859, in which, employing Venet’s own vocabulary, he supplied corrections, maintaining that Félicien was very much of ‘Christian blood’. Here is the end of the introductory note to this letter from David *frère*, written by the journalist Barbier:

M. Félicien David is not an Israelite. Good! We rejoice with even less discomfort given that M. Venet expressed not a shadow of criticism against the new musical work, which was not even yet performed when he wrote his article.

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Sketch for the costume for one of the group of satraps.  
Paris Opéra Library and Museum.

Esquisse de costume pour un groupe de satrapes.  
Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra de Paris.

