

FÉLICIEN DAVID,
FROM ONE GENRE TO ANOTHER

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WORKS FOR VOICES AND ORCHESTRA

It was with the success of *Le Désert* that Félicien David established himself on the Parisian, and soon even the international musical scene. Although the work appealed initially for its orientalisising colours, commentators also underlined the presence of a speaker declaiming a poetic text over a discreet orchestral background. This theatrical element did not particularly surprise the audience of 1844, for the technique of melodrama was then frequent in Paris in theatres of varying degrees of ambition, the most famous being no less than the Comédie-Française. Confusion sometimes leads to *Moïse au Sināï* and *L'Éden* being described as further examples of this specific genre. They are in fact oratorios, neither of which unfortunately pleased Parisian taste. *Le Jugement dernier* is not an *ode-symphonie* either, nor does it come into the category of the cantata or the oratorio. This piece, which remained in manuscript for almost two centuries, is the apotheosis of the opera *Herculanum* (1859), a finale so demanding to perform that it was cut before the premiere. Constructed after the manner of the great Berliozian crescendos, it juxtaposes a chorus of the Elect with another of the Damned, thereby calling for vocal forces that few theatres had at their disposal. The narrative trajectory, clearly specified in the score, allows us to hear – since unfortunately we cannot see – the awakening of the dead, the trumpet calls of the Last Judgment, and the Damned falling sorrowfully into the abyss of Hell while the Elect hymn the glory of God. The cor anglais, so dear to Berlioz,

colours the moments of anguish and introspection, while the massed brass is handled with mastery in the collective passages. Among the refinements of the orchestration, one may note the use of the string sections (sometimes extensively subdivided) in their topmost register, notably in harmonics. The imperious theme on horns and trombones that follows the trumpets of the Judgment provides a link with *Herculanum*: at this point we recognise the motif of Magnus heard at the end of Act One of the opera. It takes on its full meaning here, since, having been associated in the opera with the threat of the fall of decadent Roman civilisation, it appears this time to symbolise apotheosis.

If the public showed little appetite for *Moïse au Sinai* and *L'Éden*, *Christophe Colomb* (1847) was a genuine vindication for David and put him back on the road to success. Initially planned in three parts, the work was expanded to four in the course of its composition. Indeed, the additional section, *La Révolte*, is the best passage in dramatic terms, and it is not implausible that David wished to demonstrate in it his full potential as a composer of opera. It was precisely the success of *Le Désert* and *Christophe Colomb* that opened the doors of the Théâtre-Lyrique to him. The result, premiered there in 1851, was *La Perle du Brésil*, which long remained famous for one of the heroine's coloratura arias. But the Overture – recorded in the present 'Portrait' – also deserves to enter the repertoire. It is a large-scale sonata form with slow introduction, which provides the opportunity to present the finest inspirations of the score in a musical montage more skilfully structured than the potpourri model frequent at the period. After a solemn march motif repeated several times, the woodwind announce a melody that the cellos will subsequently sing with fervour. Although the harmonic inflections that give David's orientalism its special tang are absent here, we can savour an ardent Romanticism that is immediately communicative. The extended Allegro that follows masterfully combines several lively themes, coloured in turn by the bottom register of the clarinets or the highest notes of the piccolo. In the tradition of Auber and Hérold, but with a sometimes Beethovenian sweep, David produced here one of his best orchestral movements, along with the overtures of *Le Saphir* and *Lalla-Roukh*.



SYMPHONIES

It must nevertheless be acknowledged that David's career in the purely symphonic genres was not of the easiest. Indeed, his first two symphonies never enjoyed the honours of publication and are still stored in manuscript (difficult to decipher) in the cartons of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The Symphony no.3 in E flat major (Moderato – Andante con moto – Scherzo – Finale. Moderato) has been luckier: it did achieve publication, and has been reissued by the Palazzetto Bru Zane on the occasion of the present recording. This work, which continues the vein of composers such as Méhul and Onslow, is contemporary with the symphonies of Reber and was soon to be followed by those of Gounod, Bizet, Godard and – above all – Gouvy, who composed some ten. If it deserves to be restored to posterity today, one can understand why it may have disappointed a section of the public at the time: its eclectic inspiration is a motley assembly of influences as contrasted as Mendelssohnian rhythm, Beethovenian concepts, the naïve grace of Haydn and the rhythmic impetus of contemporary ballet music. The first movement, which begins like Mendelssohn's *Italian* Symphony, swirls around a single motif in 6/8 time, whose swaying gait permits amusing rhythmic games. The second theme, which is derived from the first, does not languish amid 'Romantic' lyricism. The slow movement, like those of Reber in particular, is a sort of meditative rhapsody that never overindulges in pathos. The appearance of its second motif is the only place where the technique of orchestration typical of David's 'orientalist' side is noticeable, especially in its use of the nostalgic sonority of the oboes. The Scherzo initially surprises the listener with an emphatic *Adagio maestoso* opening, played *fortissimo* by the tutti. Then, like some heroic cavalcade, the ensuing *Quasi presto* does not pause in its headlong dash until reaching its goal. It was a fine stroke of orchestral daring to invent this frenetic motif played by all the instruments, which yet avoids heaviness. The clarinet theme that follows this first idea contributes a bucolic colouring that the entry of the horns, soon afterwards, almost transforms into a joyful hunting scene. Like the two movements that precede it, the Finale has a highly theatrical opening. This time, the surprise is total when, after a few bars, a solo clarinet makes way for a folklike motif with rustic accents, recalling those that David sometimes conceived for

the finales of his string quartets. For the fervent champions of Beethoven, this was doubtless an inspiration unworthy of the 'Germanic' genre of the symphony. But today's listeners need not deny themselves the pleasure of following with amusement the inventive trajectory David imposes on his melodic idea.



MUSIC FOR PIANO

In the domain of chamber music, David was less prolific than, for example, Boëly and Onslow before him. All the same, he produced a corpus of great interest, from which a number of works were already revived a few years ago, namely the four string quartets (the last of which is unfinished), the three piano trios, some of the quintets with double bass entitled *Les Quatre Saisons*, and a wide-ranging anthology of *mélodies*. The present CD-book continues this process of rediscovery, first of all with a selection of piano pieces interspersing excerpts from the *Mélodies orientales* with isolated pieces written for the salons of the period.

By gradually equipping their residences with a piano in the first part of the nineteenth century, the French bourgeoisie seemed to have reproduced the model of the aristocratic elites. They encouraged their children to learn the rudiments of keyboard playing, which were thought, notably, to give young ladies added value on the marriage market. Alongside *romances* for voice and piano, the demand for new solo keyboard works – which guaranteed the modernity of the salon where they were played – was met by an ever-increasing offer, dynamised by the flourishing music publishing industry. In addition to the revenues they earned from sales of their works, composers saw in these pianistic 'genre pieces' of varying degrees of difficulty a way of introducing themselves to a wide public. When David wanted to make a name for himself in Paris after his return from Egypt (1835), his first step was to publish a set of piano pieces in which he aimed to 'sing of the Orient' without having recourse to exotic musical formulas. Although these *Mélodies orientales* of 1836 did not meet with immediate success, the reissue of the first books in the set (1-6) in 1845, under the title *Brises d'Orient*, benefited from the new-found fame of the composer of *Le Désert*. Once his reputation was established,

David did not turn his back on this repertory and continued to produce occasional pieces, mostly in waltz time, among them *Doux Souvenir* (1856) and *Allegretto agitato* (1864). At the centre of the bourgeois salon, the piano was a means of travelling to and discovering lands one could only dream of, as filtered through the imagination of the composers of the day: David depicted Egypt, just as Liszt hymned the delights of a magical Italy or the rustic attractions of his native Hungary, and Chopin his yearning for the Poland he had abandoned.



SONGS

Opera, *romance*, piano piece: in the nineteenth century, when one looks beyond the instrumental medium, aesthetic frontiers between the genres prove somewhat porous, to say the least. Félicien David composed piano pieces like *Le Soir* (Evening) which assume the character of ‘songs without words’. At the head of *Larmes et Regrets* (Tears and regrets), he indicates that ‘the melody [*le chant*] must be played broadly and with great expression’. Sources of inspiration and the moods are common to the vocal and instrumental domain, the salon and the opera house: reveries often tinged with melancholy (*Le Soir* is subtitled ‘*Rêverie pour piano*’), seascapes, exoticism evoked by the title or the poem more than by the music. For example, the *romance Éoline*, if it were to be orchestrated, could easily pass for a highly effective *opéra-comique* aria. Its piano accompaniment seems to cry out to be rewritten for strings, while its modest dimensions would not interrupt the stage action for long. *Le Ramier* belongs to the same vocal stereotype, though more cheerful in character.

In the 1840s, the *romance* gradually metamorphosed into the *mélodie*. Although David remained faithful to the ideal of simplicity advocated by Rousseau, and very often retained the strophic form whose musical repetitions generate a quasi-hypnotic sensation, he was already ploughing the furrow in which Berlioz and Gounod were to sow their seeds. Hence the setting of Lamartine’s poem *Le Jour des morts* considerably exceeds the customary dimensions of the *romance* and may be compared to the great Schubert lieder, which Paris was then getting to know in French translation, without having to blush in their company. One may

underline its dramatisation of the poem, the emancipation of the piano part, and the heightening of expression by means of harmony and vocal contrasts. The *romance* also offered David the opportunity to explore further the orientalisising vein that had brought him such success. If this source of inspiration is obvious in *L'Égyptienne*, with its highly characteristic rhythms, it emerges more subtly in the splendid *Tristesse de l'Odalisque*. One last approach that the composer did not disdain was the social or political dimension to which the song repertory can also lend itself: the surge of collective solidarity in *Cri de charité* or patriotic stimulation in *Le Rhin allemand* (on a text by Alfred de Musset). The latter was regularly reissued at the end of the nineteenth century (with a chorus part that has been omitted in the present recording).



CHAMBER MUSIC

To illustrate David's chamber works, we have chosen the Piano Trio no.1 in E flat major, published in 1857. This was, for the composer, the year of the piano trio: he published three in a row with the firm of Meissonnier fils. The First Trio is dedicated to the pianist Joséphine Martin, who created the work with MM. Gros and Lebouc; she was, like Alkan and Marmontel, a pupil of Zimmerman at the Conservatoire. This three-movement trio (Allegro moderato – Molto adagio – Finale. Allegretto) is notable for its luminous character and its melodic prodigality. Over repeated chords, the first theme of the Allegro moderato is stated on the violin and reprised on the cello. After a transition for the piano, the second theme appears: the two stringed instruments combine in a rising motif. The development provides contrast with its more anxious character. In the recapitulation, an inflection of the first theme to the minor enables the second theme to return in the tonic. The Molto adagio begins with a theme marked 'Dolce e espressivo', presented by the violin over piano arpeggios. The cello then joins in, and the two stringed instruments share an effusive melody while the piano figuration grows livelier. Then a grief-stricken song pours forth on the cello and is taken up by the violin over impressive piano runs. The return of the first section is followed by a coda of great delicacy. The Finale, marked 'Allegretto', is in sonata form; the first theme pirouettes while the

second sings – the piano’s role is essentially that of an accompanist. The coda is indisputably one of the finest moments in the score, with its quivering textures, fantastical in the Romantic sense of the term, combining a reminder of the theme in the high treble of the keyboard with trills and sustained notes on mysterious harmonies.



MOTETS

Aside from the oratorios *L'Éden* and *Moïse au Sinäi*, David barely touched on the religious repertory, perhaps through lack of conviction, or more likely because its economic prospects were not the most advantageous. We know little about the six motets ‘with organ’ (one of which is in fact *a cappella*) published in Paris by Sylvain Saint-Étienne under the title *6 Motets religieux à plusieurs voix avec accompagnement d'orgue ou harmonium*. A copyright registration [*dépôt légal*] stamp indicates the year of 1853, but we know that they were composed in 1829-30 at the choir school of Saint-Sauveur Cathedral in Aix and published only after David enjoyed repeated successes following the premiere of *Le Désert*. The six motets are, successively: *Angelis suis* (mixed chorus), *Sub tuum* (three-part mixed chorus, with the female voices in unison), *O salutaris* (three-part male chorus *a cappella*), *Pie Jesu* (mixed chorus), and *Omnes gentes* and *Coeli enarrant* (both for four-part male chorus). They were not intended to be sung as a single unit, which is why the present complete recording has rearranged them in a different order and linked the pieces with organ improvisations in the style of the nineteenth century, as the Conservatoire professors Benoist and his successor Franck taught their pupils to do. The vocal style is principally homorhythmic, with counterpoint reduced to brief imitations, in order to place the pieces within the reach of even relatively unskilled choral societies. David’s talent nevertheless enables him to vary the tone-colours and textures, thus completing this recorded portrait by reminding us that he was very active in the domain of choral music, mostly within the framework of his Saint-Simonian commune at Ménilmontant between 1830 and 1833.

LE JOUR DES MORTS

Méditation pour voix de Basse.



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Paroles de Lamartine,

Musique de

FÉLICIEN DAVID

Prix: 5 f

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Title page of David's song *Le Jour des morts*.
(Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection)

Page de titre de la mélodie *Le Jour des morts*.
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