

Herculanum in a time of change in French *grand opéra*

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M. Félicien David has forfeited nothing by waiting; success has rewarded him for his patience and for his hard work. From the first performance on, a unanimous level of approval has greeted the work, in which he has undoubtedly been the leading labourer.

(Paul Smith, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, March 13, 1859)

In a good many ways, *Herculanum* openly continues the spirit of the French *grand opéra* as enshrined by Meyerbeer. It brings together French and Italian styles, but always with an eye to directness and comprehensibility. Even so, the work also serves as an example of the ‘second wave’ of the genre elaborated in the 1830s and which, after 1850, came under the influence of the new post-Donizettian Italian opera, and especially of Verdi. At its première, a coloratura contralto from the Théâtre-Italien – Adélaïde Borghi-Mamo (1826-1901) – was considered to have brought an especial enhancement to the score. The first interpreter also of the demanding role of Mélusine in Halévy’s *La Magicienne* (1858) and who – some months earlier – performed as Léonor for the revival of Donizetti’s *La Favorite* in 1856, Borghi-Mamo maintained a presence at the Paris Opéra for close to five consecutive years. There, she notably took part in *La Reine de Chypre* by Halévy (Catarina) in 1858, as well as assuming the role of Fidès from *Le Prophète* by Meyerbeer in 1856. Her greatest achievement, nonetheless, was considered to be her appearance as Azucena in the French version – *Le Trouvère* – of Verdi’s *La Traviata*

(1857). Despite this string of brilliant triumphs, backstage rivalries led to her contract at the Opéra not being renewed. Just after the première of *Herculanum* in 1859, she returned to the Théâtre-Italien, where she was entrusted with the title role in *Margherita la mendicante*, by Gaetano Braga. She then left France for Italy, where her career only came to an end in 1875. The role of Olympia in *Herculanum* expanded for her the bravura passages and extended over a complete Rossinian contralto tessitura.

More Verdian in character as far as its vocal style, the baritone-bass of Nicanor (and then of Satan, after the ‘reincarnation’ scene) shows the side of the deep Italian baritones typical from the second half of the century. These would have been powerful and centred voices, capable of reaching up to fierce high notes as well as descending deep down (such as the held F in the second act duet, whilst the ground is shaking alarmingly), and invariably introduced into especially conflictive dramatic situations (such as the exclamation, ‘Ton Dieu n’existe pas’ in the extended duet with Lilia). However, as opposed to that of his sister Olympia, the character of Nicanor utters neither temptation nor menace by means of his vocal style; the insolent audacity of this role is accounted for solely by the force of the full-toned sound.

On the other hand, the roles of Hélios (tenor) and Lilia (soprano) are the worthy heirs to a French vocal style whose origin is to be found in Gluck rather than in Meyerbeer. For them is provided the great declamation of a text laden with pathos, nobility and emotion. As such, the *Credo* from the third act, sung by Lilia whilst in the middle of a menacing Roman throng, hits its target even in the opinion of the exacting Berlioz, who unambiguously preferred it to the similar scene in Donizetti’s *Les Martyrs*. The unanimously considered lyrical centrepiece of *Herculanum* comes with Lilia and Hélios’ Act IV duet, when the two Christians become reconciled to each other just before marching off to their deaths. Whilst this duet is complex in structure, it progresses in an effective manner: *tempo d’attacca* with Hélios’ recitative and Lilia’s entrance, first *arioso* from Hélios (‘Oui j’ai mérité l’anathème’), recitative, *cantabile*, *tempo di mezzo* infused with unearthly colours (with the entry of the harps), followed by

the *cabaletta*. The scene dovetails directly into the final catastrophe represented by the eruption. If one still senses a compliance with the Meyerbeerian style in the *cantabile* ‘Ange du ciel’ (the last act of *Les Huguenots* comes to mind), the wonderfully-constructed pardon from Lilia, shot through with celestial ‘crackling’ from the harp, provides the work with a magnificent highpoint, and begins the most notable *cabaletta* ‘à la française’ (without vocalise) in the opera. The librettist knew precisely how to find the right words for a moving absolution:

LILIA, *aside*

O God, deign with me to grant him

the forgiveness that he requests.

Let heavenly grace descend upon him.

O God, tell me to forgive!

(stretching out her hands over Hélios, kneeling before her)

Before God, to whom on this day of wrath

I offer up a fervent prayer,

though you broke my heart and violated

the sanctity of my love, which is yours in full measure,

since you repent in your final hour,

Hélios, be forgiven!

HÉLIOS

Ah, heavenly grace touches me:

ecstasy of the chosen one!

Ah, I can tell, yes: through her mouth,

it is God, God who forgives me!

LILIA

Hélios, your impious love

excluded you from the angered heavens,

but you make amends through your remorse.

Come and love me in eternity.

Félicien David's orchestral writing, which had become so elegant and polished in his 'exotic' pieces in the period 1840-1850, such as with the *ode-symphonique Le Désert*, emerges now in its full richness, whatever Berlioz may have said (about this, the latter reproached David for a lacklustre uniformity): the alternation of the grandiose (the solemn march in honour of Olympia at the beginning of Act I), and of the intimate (the seduction duet between Hélios and Olympia) is instrumented – and above all varied – deftly, and at many points the recitatives explore surprising harmonies, heightening the interest and effect of the words uttered. For example, at the point where Hélios has become intoxicated by the potion forced on him (musical echoes of which are recalled at the beginning of Act III), use is made of the light and filmy sonority of divided strings, muted and in the upper region of their tessitura. However, the composer's pursuit of specific sounds is best appreciated – score in hand – by observing the details: the harp arpeggios in the opening chorus, the different ways in which the brass instruments combine for the arrival of the prophet Magnus in the finale of Act I, the wind accompaniment for the *Credo* or even the bass clarinets' 'pedal notes' in the *cabaletta* for the Act IV duet.

In the pursuit of sophistication, the choral writing is not to be outdone, at times extending itself to up to eight real parts. There is a feeling that David had, at a much earlier stage, composed plenty of Saint-Simonian *a cappella* choruses which had reinforced both his style and his technique. The role occupied by the choral singers fits perfectly the conventions demanded by French *grand opéra*. They add beauty to the group tableaux (the entry of Olympia in all her splendour in Act I, or the luxurious feasts in Act II), they aggressively stand up to the main characters (the denunciation of the Christians ['Du sang! Faites justice!'] in Act I, or in the *Credo* in Act III), and they compound the terror of the final catastrophe ('Malheur! Malheur!'). If the librettist declined to suggest a voluptuous female chorus surrounding Olympia – which would have been easy enough in Act II – he instead transformed the aria of Satan in Act IV into a huge male conspiracy between Hell and the slaves serving the Roman people.

Undoubtedly, this is one of the most expanded scenes for bass in the whole of the French operatic repertory.

Finally, in keeping with both *Robert le Diable* and *Zampa*, *Herculanum* follows the fantastical vein (the reincarnation of Satan in the body of Nicanor), but with an exceptionally theatrical sense of colour changes: that of the religious and mystical supernatural, for purposes of evangelization – literally – of the masses.



Set for the Vision at the end of Act II.
L'Univers illustré. Gunther Braam Collection.

Décor de la Vision à la fin de l'acte II.
L'Univers illustré. Collection Gunther Braam.