Félicien David: not satellite but star

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Jules Combarieu, in volume 3 of his *Histoire de la musique* (published posthumously in 1919), described Félicien David as the 'satellite' of a 'heavenly body of the first magnitude', namely Hector Berlioz. The demotion of David to a marginal role in music history was part of a larger process – in the early twentieth century – by which hundreds of capable and even inspired composers of the nineteenth century were categorized as either great or else forgettable. Music critics and historians, such as Combarieu, were important agents in this black-and-white sorting process. So were performers and concert organizers: David's works had already begun to disappear from the repertoire in the 1890s, some of them even earlier.

Félicien David deserved a better fate. As musicians and music lovers have been pleased to discover, now that many of the works are being revived and recorded, he composed in a wide range of genres, and often with a master's hand. His many instrumental works include symphonies, a brass nonet, piano trios, and string quartets and quintets. But his first and most lasting love was vocal music. His songs are among the most important and stylistically varied examples of the mid-nineteenth century French genres of *romance* and *mélodie* (for voice and piano). He composed two oratorios (*Moïse au Sinaï* and *L'Eden*). He created the *ode-symphonie*, a genre that alternated orchestral movements with choral-dominated ones as well as solo arias, all linked by a spoken narration in verse. And he completed no fewer than five full-length operas, four of

which – including *Herculanum* – reached performance in his lifetime in the major opera houses of Paris.

The centrality of vocal music in David's output was, in some ways, typical for a French composer of his day. Musical training tended to focus either on the development of instrumental virtuosity or else on two fields that were both primarily vocal: sacred music and opera. David was a competent pianist, but no virtuoso. Thus there are no keyboard fantasies from his pen on themes from operas by other composers, such as Henri Herz and others turned out in profusion. Instead, his earliest surviving compositions, revealingly, are some motets that he composed while serving, at age 19, as *maître de chapelle* at the cathedral in Aix-en-Provence (a city not far from his modest birthplace, Cadenet, in the Vaucluse region).

David moved from Aix to Paris, where he attended the Conservatoire for a year and a half. But he abandoned his studies there in late 1831 – at age 21 – to join the Saint-Simonians, an early socialist movement that was, at that time, attracting the attention of many observers, including Heine, George Sand, Berlioz, Liszt (who had been living in Paris since 1827), and Mendelssohn (during a 'grand tour' of Italy, France, and England).

The Saint-Simonians would later be described by generations of historians as representing a form of 'utopian' socialism, to differentiate their doctrines from the supposed 'scientific' socialism of Marx and Engels. The Saint-Simonian movement offered two qualities that must have been particularly attractive to the young David. For one thing, it was organized in a highly patriarchal manner. At first a triumvirate of Fathers made the primary decisions. Then, after a dramatic internal schism, a self-designated Supreme Father took charge: Barthélemy-Prosper Enfantin (known as Père Enfantin). David – who had been orphaned by the age of six and raised by an elder sister – remained devoted to Père Enfantin his whole life long, decades after the Saint-Simonian movement itself had gone into decline.

The other main attraction of the Saint-Simonian movement for David was that it preached a prophetic and apostolic role for creative and performing artists, a category understood broadly to include poets and essayists, actors and orators, composers and performing musicians. When, in late 1831, the French government, in an effort to suppress the Saint-Simonian movement, locked the doors of its lecture hall and halted publication of its newspaper, David was one of forty male disciples who set up a communal household in Enfantin's large home in Ménilmontant, on the outskirts of Paris (today part of the 20th arrondissement).

The disciples planted a vegetable garden so that they could be self-sufficient and demonstrate the nobility of physical labour. And they built an earthen platform upon which the movement's eloquent public speakers gave quasi-religious and propagandistic sermons, to which the public was invited twice a week. During the months that this Ménilmontant Retreat lasted, David formed a chorus consisting of selected apostles. He also composed message-laden songs and four-part hymns, which the chorus – and sometimes all forty apostles – sang during mealtimes and at the public outdoor preachings. Certain of the songs and choruses were tied to moments in the daily schedule: for example, the *Salut* – sung when Père Enfantin entered the dining hall or outdoor amphitheatre – and two attractive mealtime prayers (*Avant et après le repas*).

Over the course of the year 1832 and early 1833, the Saint-Simonians came under attack for supposed immoral views on human sexuality (they had written in favour of divorce and, at times, of free love), and Enfantin was eventually condemned to a year in prison. The Saint-Simonians shuttered the Ménilmontant Retreat, and David and a dozen or so fellow disciples traveled to Turkey and then onward to Egypt, where they lived for around two years. Among their several projects was a plan to establish Western-style schools for poor native Egyptian children. The Saint-Simonians also tried to persuade the khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, to cut a canal through the Isthmus of Suez. Their reasoning was that improved trade between nations would lessen international tensions and would perhaps even eliminate war. (The Suez Canal was eventually built

in the 1860s, under the auspices of several governments and large banks.) David, during his two years in the Middle East, transcribed tunes and dance rhythms that he heard. He incorporated some of these brief transcriptions in *Mélodies orientales*, a set of piano pieces that he published in 1836 upon his return to France. (These piano pieces were later reprinted in two sets: a larger one entitled *Brises d'Orient* and a shorter one entitled *Les Minarets*.)

David's 'Oriental' (i.e., Middle Eastern) piano pieces made little echo at the time. But his first *ode-symphonie*, entitled *Le Désert*, was performed in 1844 to great acclaim in Paris and, soon thereafter, in numerous cities throughout Europe and the Americas. This work, which presents the adventures of a caravan moving through an unnamed desert in the Arab world, included several movements that were based on 'Oriental tunes' that David had collected in 1833-35. Most notable was the 'Chant du muezzin' (Song of the Muezzin), which preserves with some accuracy not only the tune but also the Arabic words of this emblematic element in Islamic worship.

Several major dramatic works by David followed, most of them evoking some exotic locale. His second *ode-symphonie*, entitled *Christophe Colomb* (Christopher Colombus; 1847), includes a portrayal of life among the natives of a Caribbean island. And the first of his operas, an *opéra-comique* entitled *La Perle du Brésil* (The Pearl of Brazil; 1851), contains an exquisite soprano aria in praise of a (supposed) Brazilian bird, the 'mysoli'. In 1862, David would return to this exotic manner in one of his strongest works, the *opéra-lyrique* entitled *Lalla-Roukh*, based upon a much-loved tale by the Irish poet Thomas Moore.

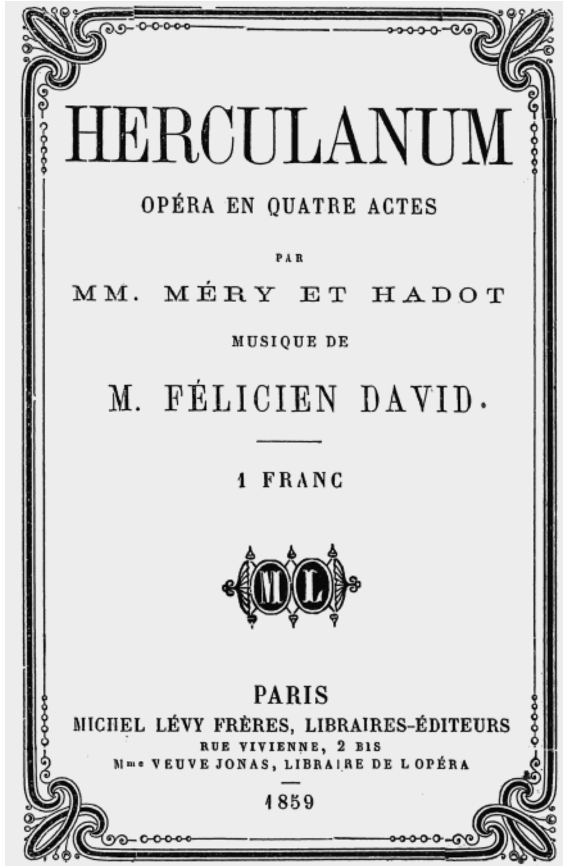
Herculanum, David's only *grand opéra*, likewise indulges in exoticism. The work takes place in the year 79 AD, in Herculaneum, which was a major city in the ancient Roman Empire (and located near Naples). The work focuses on a brother-sister couple born by the banks of the Euphrates

(which flows through southern Turkey, Syria, and Iraq into the Persian Gulf). These two 'Orientals', Nicanor and Olympia, have come to the Italian peninsula so that Olympia can be feted as Rome's designated queen of her home territory. Olympia and Nicanor – who has been named a Roman proconsul – are shown as pleasure-obsessed pagans (they are a mezzo and a bass-baritone, respectively), in striking contrast to the opera's main soprano and tenor, Lilia and Hélios, who are upright members of the early Christian religion and who receive moral advice from a priestly figure named Magnus.

The original production lavished great expense on the sets and costumes for this work. Special care was taken to make the garden of Olympia's pleasure-palace – in Acts I and III – exert a seduction over the eyes of the audience that was as intense, and effective, as the one that this sorceress-queen exerts over the heart of Hélios. A magic potion enables Olympia to do her unholy work on the unsuspecting young Christian man. The potion's effect, along with Olympia's persuasiveness, was made plausible to the audience by David's remarkably effective music for the queen's drinking song in Act I – 'Bois ce vin que l'amour donne' (Drink this wine which Love is offering you) – and also by the engaging and rhythmically quirky ballet numbers in Act III for the women in her court (who are presumably from her native Eastern land). The frequent bright and contrasting colours of David's orchestration likewise convey a sense of magic and voluptuousness in scenes dominated by the intensely desirous Olympia. This galvanic charmer – with her 'glance that tortures and caresses' (as Hélios moans) – is one in a long line of operatic seductresses from the Mediterranean and the Middle East (e.g., the title character – and Syrian sorceress – in Lully's *Armide*, 1686) and in many ways anticipates the dangerous and intensely exotic title character of Bizet's *Carmen* (1875).

The present recording of *Herculanum* reveals David as no mere reflecting moon but rather a notable star in the musical heavens of mid-nineteenth-century France. We can enjoy the sparkling and varied colours of light that this star emits, without feeling the need to measure that glow

against that of his contemporaries, such as Berlioz, Auber, Gounod, Meyerbeer, and the young Bizet. David's music is marked by a high level of skill and inventiveness, and welcome touches of originality.


HERCULANUM

OPÉRA EN QUATRE ACTES

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