

IN MEMORIAM FÉLICIEN DAVID

Camille Saint-Saëns

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The tomb has barely closed on Félicien David, and music owes a tear to his memory. It is still too early to judge his output; glorified by some, vilified by others, its status is not yet definitively established; but one may already study the nature of David's talent, while reserving judgment for the future, since it would be premature to do otherwise.

Félicien David's manner is highly individual, and disconcerts the critic by its irregularities. Were his studies really incomplete, as some commentators have averred? One might think so, given certain faults that might sometimes give the impression that we have before our eyes the music of an amateur; but how is one then to explain that refinement of touch he so often displayed, that delicacy of colouring, that deep-seated charm that is to be found only in the masters, that elegance of style that suddenly stands revealed? This is not how the ignorant write. One might believe rather in bouts of physical weakness, in intermittent illness.

The career of David was a difficult one. Perhaps he did not have the necessary strength for the struggle; perhaps he needed to be borne along by a trend. The success of *Le Désert*, which he had long awaited in obscurity, must have been a powerful encouragement for its composer; but the composer had had the imprudence to call his work a 'Symphonic Ode'; as a result, he passed into the camp of the symphonists and was designated as suspect. *Le Désert* is anything but a symphony: it is sung from beginning to end, melody flows abundantly therein, and the symphony appears there only in the form of ravishing dance tunes; all of

this is marvellously orchestrated, but that does not constitute the accoutrements of a symphony. To be a symphonist, one must succeed in purely instrumental music, and there, despite the efforts of his friends, David failed. Theatre managers therefore had no reason to be wary of him; but the word 'symphony' produced on them the effect of seeing the words 'Mene-Mene-Tekel-Upharsin' written on the wall. Seven years went by between the triumphant appearance of *Le Désert* and that of *La Perle du Brésil* at the Théâtre-Lyrique, and eight years separate *La Perle du Brésil* from *Herculanum*.

David therefore takes his place, with Berlioz, in the martyrology of the symphonists; but Berlioz was genuinely a symphonist; he was the subject of violent polemics. David was a symphonist in name only, and the success of *Le Désert* had had the rare good fortune of being contested by no one. David was martyred unjustly.

Every artist has a key quality that gives his works their principal character. David possessed that rarest of qualities: naïveté. It was to this quality that he owed the surprise success he encountered with *Le Désert* and *Lalla-Roukh*. The public does not expect this; it is prepared for everything, for great effects, small effects, piquant melodies, sweeping, passionate phrases, noisy orchestrations, delicate and distinguished harmonies; it is defenceless against a soul that opens up and says quite simply what it has to say. Such naïveté is not in Auber, in Rossini, in Weber, in Mozart, or in Beethoven; it is to be found only in Haydn.

A curious thing: in the way he handles the orchestra, David comes close to Haydn. His procedure consists in treating each instrument, not only according to its character, but according to its manner and its habits. This is not how things are generally done.

Another link: both men succeeded in the descriptive genre. The great successes of Haydn are *The Creation* and *The Seasons*; the great successes of David are *Le Désert* and *Christophe Colomb*.

The analogy ends there. David had only naïveté and colour; Haydn had naïveté and colour, and power, and the long-term view, and the skill to write a fugal chorus as easily as a song, and the inexhaustible fecundity of the genius. He took to its ultimate limits the art of development, which Félicien David lacked.

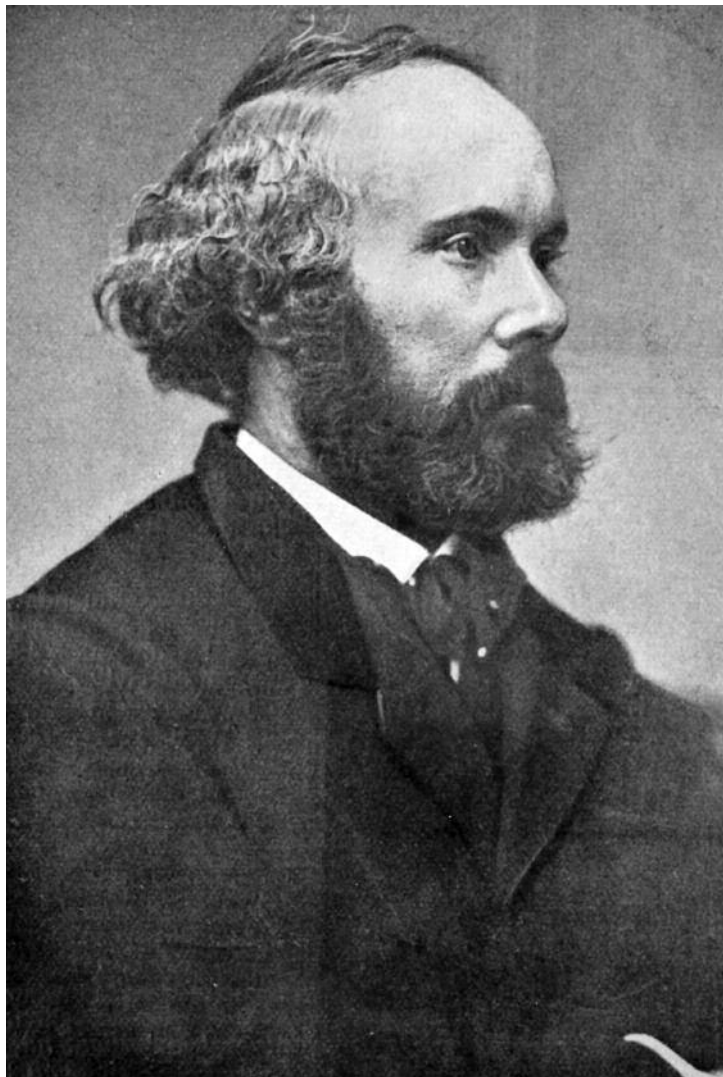
What made David so valuable, at a given moment in time, is that he was the dawn of something. Before him, nothing existed outside

the opera house. There was Berlioz, it is true; but Berlioz was too rugged; he frightened the public; his time had not yet come, he was destined to enjoy genuine success only after his death. Incomprehensible to the common herd, he had no influence on them. *Le Désert* had the good fortune to show the public a new path, without overtaxing its capacities, while being at the same time a feast for refined spirits. Auber felt the blow fall, and his witticism on this subject has remained famous. We hasten to add, however, that David is hugely inferior to Auber. There is between David and Auber the distance between instinct and intelligence. Auber had studied a great deal and was in full command of his trade as a composer; he had, in his youth, copied out the ninety-seven quartets of Haydn in his own hand in order to analyse them more deeply. He lacked none of the resources of the art: hence some of his works, light though they are, such as *Le Domino noir* and *Actéon*, have the solidity of enamel: this is indestructible frivolousness.

David's works, much more elevated in their ideals, inspired by nature, are watercolours that pale in the rays of the sun. If the inspiration flags, there is nothing left: the style itself becomes banal; from the paradise of Mahomet we tumble abruptly down to the rue Saint-Denis. It is to be hoped that we will hear *Le Désert* worthily executed this coming winter, and that for many years no winter will go by when we do not hear it. The future will say whether it is a masterpiece; certainly it is a charming, seductive work, which everyone hears with pleasure. There is no reason to let it sink into oblivion.

David was a sincere artist; he never sought easy success and did not waste his talent: he lived as a poor man and his memory has a right to respect.

So now there is a place vacant at the Institut. Who will fill it? The talk is of M. Reyer, M. Gautier or M. Boulanger. M. Reyer has written *La Statue*, which is a work of the greatest interest; M. Gautier has taught a class in musical aesthetics at the Conservatoire; M. Boulanger has produced three harmless little works in one act that enjoyed some success. You will see that it is M. Boulanger who will be appointed.



Félicien David in the 1860s.
(Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection)

Félicien David dans les années 1860.
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