

CHRISTOPHE COLOMB,
ODE-SYMPHONIE (1847)

Gunther Braam

The immediate success of the *ode-symphonie Le Désert* at its premiere at the Paris Conservatoire on 8 December 1844 made the name of Félicien David famous. The composer subsequently conducted the work in Lyon, Aix and Marseille early in 1845, then on a tour of Germany and Austria from May 1845 to February 1846, notably in Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, Baden-Baden, Frankfurt, Mannheim, Munich, Vienna and even Budapest. The musical fruit of this trip was the oratorio *Moïse au Sinaï*, performed at the Opéra de Paris on 21 March 1846, whose humiliating failure was described by the contemporary press. But David, far from lamenting his lot, did not waste a single instant before embarking on a new project – or, perhaps, completing an unfinished score. For, in fact, as early as 23 February 1845, *La France musicale* reported:

[David] has almost completed a new maritime ode-symphony which we will not hear until next winter.

This announcement came a year early, as is shown by a letter from David to the friend of his youth Sylvain Saint-Étienne (1807-80), written on 18 August 1846:

Dear Friend,

I leave tomorrow for Dieppe, to take sea baths which have been recommended by my doctor. This will also be of use to me for sketching the hurricane I need to write. The symphony has progressed very slowly since your departure, because of my illness; I still had a sort of physical and mental weakness.

I could do nothing. But for a few days now things have been going fairly efficiently. I have entirely completed the first part. In the second I still have the storm to do, and in the third the final chorus. I shall start writing out the score in Dieppe.

(Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Department of Music, l. a. David

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The ‘symphony’ David mentions here is his second *ode-symphonie*, *Christophe Colomb*. At that time the work still consisted of only three parts: the section that finally became the third part – *La Révolte* – was added later.

In her article ‘“Hymns of the Future”: Reading Félicien David’s *Christophe Colomb* (1847) as a Saint-Simonian Symphony’ (published in the *Journal of Musicological Research*, 2009), Annegret Fauser pointed out that David continued to propagate in his works certain socio-philosophical ideas to which he subscribed. If *Le Désert* had been the fruit of a trip to the Middle East and Egypt from April 1833 to June 1835, *Moïse* was conceived as an oratorio inspired by Saint-Simonian doctrine: the paternalistic figure of the protagonist guides the people, just as the leader of the Saint-Simonians – ‘Père’ Enfantin – guided his apostles. And although David changed genres with *Christophe Colomb* (from an oratorio with biblical subject matter to an *ode-symphonie* that is a free treatment of a historical event), he nevertheless continued to use broad Saint-Simonian metaphors: once again, it is a leader inspired by God (Père Enfantin) who guides his crew (his apostles) through multiple incidents to a new world (a new society).



As in *Le Désert*, *Christophe Colomb* gives a prominent place to a speaker – designated as ‘Historien’ in the printed libretto – whose declamatory verse provides the narrative framework for the evocation of situations and atmospheres, which are then illustrated by passages of purely instrumental music or by operatically styled interventions sung by the soloists, with or without chorus. The work is divided in four parts, of which a brief description follows.

FIRST PART: *THE DEPARTURE*

(684 bars)

As the Speaker explains, Christopher Columbus has guessed the existence of a new world; addressing his crew, he invites them to seek this new land; the sailors swear to devote their lives to him; one of them, Fernand, bids farewell to his fiancée Elvire; the cannon roars, giving the signal for departure; the families assembled at the harbour sing a prayer for the sailors, whose songs are heard echoing from afar as the ship disappears over the horizon.

SECOND PART: *A NIGHT IN THE TROPICS*

(809 bars)

A serene night on the ocean; a cabin boy sings a melancholic romance; the Spirits of the Ocean are heard, their voices mingling with those of the sailors; nostalgically, young Fernand asks his comrades to sing a Spanish song; Bacchic chorus; the Speaker announces a hurricane; the storm breaks; the sailors address their prayer to the Madonna; the storm dies down; the sailors resume their drinking song.

THIRD PART: *THE REVOLT*

(281 bars)

The Speaker describes the calm of the ocean; the ship is motionless, baking under the sun; the crew are in despair; the sailors believe they are under a divine punishment for which Columbus is solely responsible; they curse him; Columbus reminds them of the loyalty they promised him, and sings of the beauty of sea and sky; the crew threaten Columbus, but he tells them that the wind is rising and God will guide them to the new land, the scent of which is already miraculously brought to them by the breeze; the crew sings Columbus's glory: 'Forward!'

FOURTH PART: *THE NEW WORLD*

(720 bars)

The Speaker tells of the approach to the new land; the ship lands on the shore amid joyous transports. Change of perspective: there follow three tableaux representing the life of the indigenous peoples. First comes a purely instrumental 'Dance of Savages', then a 'Chorus of Savages', and finally the lullaby of an 'Indian Mother'. A second change of perspective: Columbus and his crew arrive (with a reprise of the

'Departure' music from Part One); Columbus makes a final address to the sailors: the new land is theirs, but it must not be forgotten that the 'proud islanders' are their brothers; final chorus full of admiration for Christopher Columbus, the 'immortal leader'.

The Speaker's text was initially written by Charles Chaubet (1802-66) and Sylvain Saint-Étienne, but it was extensively revised by Joseph Méry (1797-1866), the future librettist of Reyer (*Maître Wolfram* in 1854 and *Érostrate* in 1862) and of David's only *grand opéra*, *Herculanum* (1859), but above all of Verdi's *Don Carlos* (1867). It would appear that the libretto of *Christophe Colomb* was Méry's first big success in the genre of music for voice and orchestra. The autograph manuscript of the score, which is today in the Department of Music of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (shelf mark Ms. 1082), bears the following note at the top of page 6, written in pencil on two lines: 'Les vers biffés sont ceux de Sylvain St Étienne, les vers / conservés sont ceux de Méry.'^{*}



The musical forces used by David are not inordinately large. The work is scored for two flutes (also playing piccolos), two oboes (one also playing cor anglais), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, ophicleide, one pair of timpani, two percussionists playing triangle, castanets, tambourine, bass drum and cymbals, harp, and five-part string orchestra; in all, twenty-four instrumentalists in addition to the strings. In the third part, at the end of Columbus's speech intended to quell the revolt, the violins remove their mutes desk by desk (bars 174-184). For this effect, David enumerated six desks (from '1^{er} Pupitre senza sordini' to '6^e Pupitre senza sordini'). Hence, in 1847, he expected at least six desks, that is, twelve first violins, which implies a total of forty strings and an orchestra of sixty-four musicians in all. The *Journal des débats* of 10 March 1847 mentions, at the premiere, 'the hundred voices of the orchestra', a number corresponding approximately to the 200 'singers and instrumentalists' employed for the performances of *Christophe*

* The deleted lines are those of Sylvain Saint-Étienne; the lines retained are those of Méry.

Colomb in Bordeaux in June 1847, the 120 orchestral musicians and more than 120 choristers in Hamburg in February 1848, and the ‘250 exécuteurs d’élite’ in Paris in that same month in 1848.

Christophe Colomb, subtitled *La Découverte du Nouveau Monde*, was designated *ode-symphonie en quatre parties*. It received its premiere in the Salle du Conservatoire in Paris on Sunday 7 March 1847 at two p. m. The work was conducted by Alexandre Tilmant (1799-1878), at that time still conductor of the orchestra of the Théâtre-Italien. The chorus was prepared by Achille-Laurent Biche-Latour (born in 1816), who was later to be director of the theatres in Bordeaux. This was the cast:

Colomb	Wartel	tenor
Fernand	Barbot	tenor
Elvire	M ^{me} Sabatier	soprano
La Mère indienne	<i>idem</i>	<i>idem</i>
Un Mousse	le jeune Manson	treble
Un Matelot	Grignon fils	baritone
Récitant	Egmont (<i>de l’Opéra-Comique</i>)	

Although the role of Columbus is written in the bass clef for a high baritone voice, it was created by the (former?) tenor Pierre-François Wartel (1806-82), a principal at the Opéra. He had already created the roles of Francesco (Berlioz, *Benvenuto Cellini*, 1838), Nérarque (Donizetti, *Les Martyrs*, 1840), Don Gaspar (Donizetti, *La Favorite*, 1840) and Ottokar (Weber/Berlioz, *Le Freyschütz*, 1841). He also promoted the lieder of Schubert in Paris, in French. Joseph-Théodore-Désiré (known as Jules) Barbot (1824-96) was a principal tenor at the Opéra (where he made his debut in October 1847), then, from 1856, at the Opéra-Comique. Twelve years after *Christophe Colomb* – in 1859 – he created the title role of Gounod’s *Faust* at the Théâtre-Lyrique. Émilie Sabatier, née Bénazet, later known under her married name as Gaveaux-Sabatier (d. 1896), was well known and applauded in the salons as a singer of *romances*. *Christophe Colomb* was an opportunity for her to be heard in a lyric repertory that might lead to her tackling operatic roles on scene. The ‘jeune Manson’ mentioned in the articles of the time was ‘a very young child whose voice gave out because of his nerves and his lack of experience of the mission assigned to him in the presence of such an audience’ (*Le Ménestrel*, 14 March 1847). The small role of

the sailor was taken by 'Grignon fils', perhaps François-Hippolyte Grignon (1822-1880), a baritone whose debut at the Opéra was recorded in 1851 (Alphonse in *La Favorite*).



According to the reviews of the premiere, the audience encored six numbers: *Le Départ* (in the first part, bars 529-551) and, in the fourth part, the *Danse de sauvages*, the *Chœur de sauvages*, *La Mère indienne*, *L'Arrivée* and the concluding chorus. The critics agreed that the fourth part was the most successful section of the work. François-Henri-Joseph Blaze, known as Castil-Blaze (1784-1857), reported in *La France musicale* dated 14 March 1847 that 'almost all these numbers were repeated at the request of the audience, a little too prompt to ask for such a favour'. Gustave Hecquet (1803-65) was less diplomatic in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* of the same day when discussing this part, with his ironic use of a citation from La Fontaine:

*All the numbers of this fourth part were encored by the listeners, the greater part of whom, we must say, seemed motivated by the kindest of sentiments. All told, M. David has just obtained a resounding success due to the last numbers of his work, but which camaraderie has exaggerated somewhat. Il se faut entr'aider, c'est la loi de nature; * the gentlemen of the Saint-Simonian persuasion practise this sage precept with most edifying zeal.*

Although Hecquet hints at the organisation of a Saint-Simonian clique, neither he nor his fellow journalists mention the other presence of Saint-Simonism in the concert hall that day: the element developed in the score. For only the Saint-Simonians who still remembered the songs and choruses that David had composed for their meetings and celebrations in Ménilmontant fifteen years previously were in a position to recognise two numbers that the composer recycled for his *ode-symphonie: Le Nouveau Temple*, which became the Air and Chorus 'Amis fidèles!' (Part One, bars 151-226) and *Les Étoiles*, which became the Chorus of the Spirits of the Ocean (Part Two, bars 183-301), as Ralph

* We must help each other, it is the law of Nature (La Fontaine, 'L'Âne et le Chien', *Fables*, Book VIII, Fable 17).

P. Locke has pointed out in his book *Music, Musicians, and the Saint-Simonians* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

Two of the King's sons were present at the premiere of *Colomb*: the Duc d'Aumale (1822-97) and the Duc de Montpensier (1824-90), the latter with his wife, Louise-Fernande de Bourbon (1832-97), the work's dedicatee. Étienne-Jean Delécluze (1781-1863) wrote in the *Journal des débats* of 10 March 1847 that these two princes, 'who honoured this solemn occasion with their presence, mingled their applause with that of the public twenty times', and Pier Angelo Fiorentino (1806-64) added in *Le Constitutionnel* dated 15 March: 'We also knew that, had it not been for the intervention of a young prince, a zealous protector of artists, Christopher Columbus would never have landed in the small hall of the Conservatoire, a thousand times more inaccessible than the New World.'

The very first – and the most concise – review of the premiere came from the pen of Théophile Gautier:

Christophe Colomb. – *An immense success: half the numbers were encored; as a result the concert did not end until five o'clock. In the first part, The Departure was encored and enthusiastically applauded; it is very fine. In the second part, the audience asked for the Chorus of Sailors again [Gautier is mistaken here: it was at the dress rehearsal, as we learn from Fiorentino's article in Le Constitutionnel]. In the last part, all the numbers were requested again: the Greeting to the New Land (encored), the Dance of Savages (encored), the Chorus of Savages (encored), the Song of the Young Indian Mother (encored). M^{me} Sabatier, despite the clamour, had refused to repeat the last-named number; but when the orchestra continued with the following passage, the cries of 'bis' became so brusque, so furious, that it was imperative to obey them. M. le Duc de Montpensier applauded like an artist; M^{me} la Duchesse de Montpensier was there, but by her side one sought in vain M^{me} la Princesse de Joinville; that fair flower of the New World [Francisca de Bragança, Princesse de Joinville (1824-98) was the daughter of Dom Pedro I, Emperor of Brazil] was absent from the festivities. The choruses were performed with wonderful ensemble, with all these voices making but one voice. The imitation of the storm is astonishing; even more felicitous is the imitation of the quivering of the breezes as they play about the rigging; this effect is charming and entirely novel. The audience, concentrating totally on the music, did not at first heed the details of the poem; but these fine verses suddenly and*

violently wrenched it from its preoccupation, and it was for a moment unfaithful to Félicien David as it rapturously applauded Méry. This was at the depiction of the flat calm that precedes the revolt of the discouraged sailors. (La Presse, 8 March 1847)

In general, the reviews were positive. Delécluze wrote in the *Journal des débats*: 'It is a victory we have to proclaim, a resounding victory! The great days of *Le Désert* have returned.' Right from the first part, after the chorus of sailors, 'the cause of the new score was won, and the audience applause began, never to cease'. Of the fanfare that gives the signal for the departure, the same Delécluze remarked: 'At the explosion of this magnificent crescendo, the entire audience rose in a transport of enthusiasm; the number was encored and applauded as wildly as it deserved.' And he reports of the opening of the second part: 'That vague melody that floats from the oboes and the clarinet to the cellos, those dreamy notes on muted violins answered by the sighs of the flutes, that vaporous half-tone which envelops the orchestra are one more borrowing of music from painting: we do not listen, we look.' The cabin boy's song is evoked in these terms: 'This childish voice, which combines with the splendours of nature in so naïve and melancholic a fashion, this human side of the scene move us deeply; it is a touching episode, the conception of which does M. David honour.' And, in conclusion, he praises the beginning of the last part:

Far be it from us to claim to reproduce with our puny prose the effect of the number that opens this fourth part! Seek out, in your childhood memories, your most smiling spring mornings; recall the most delightful sunrises you have seen or dreamt of, and you will still be far below the beauties of this dawn, whose limpid, joyous rays M. Félicien David has poured out on his New World.

Hecquet's summary in the *Revue et Gazette musicale* is more mixed: 'M. David has just sought a third adventure. What has he found this time? – Brass, say some. – Gold, exclaim others, and they are the more numerous. All of them, in our view, are both right and wrong. Several parts of *Christophe Colomb* recall the most brilliant inspirations of *Le Désert*; others reek of *Moïse* a mile off.' Further on, Hecquet specifies that 'the fourth part of *Christophe Colomb* seemed to us much superior to the other three'.

Castil-Blaze, in *La France musicale*, lists the numbers he found most successful:

M. David has triumphed again: Christophe Colomb is a work worthy of the composer of Le Désert. [...] I hasten to indicate here the most remarkable numbers. [...] The signal for the departure, a brilliant and imposing symphonic fragment that we will meet again with pleasure in the fourth part, even if it is employed there as a signal of arrival. The barcarolle of the mysterious voices. The return of the breeze after the calm. The tableau of the land appearing before the navigators at daybreak. The original dance of the savages and the delightful chorus they sing after it; the song of the Indian woman rocking her child; this cantilena with its elegant monotone is relieved by an accompaniment in perfect taste, whose figuration changes in each of the three verses. There, to be sure, is a more than satisfactory total.

While *Le Ménestrel* enthused ‘Honour, then, to Félicien David, who has just established a permanent place among our more illustrious composers’, Paul Scudo (1806-64), the *bête noire* of both Berlioz and David, was distilling his venom in the *Revue des deux mondes* dated 1 April 1847:

M. F. David is not a great composer; he is an agreeable musician, a happily gifted nature, who one fine day, while rummaging through the intimate recollections of his unsettled life, found, as certain women of the elegant world do, the elements of an interesting story, a pretty novel that he related to the public with infinite charm and genuine talent. But can he write two of them?



However different the opinions were, there is one curious view that achieved unanimity among the reviewers in the press, namely that the third part of *Christophe Colomb – La Révolte* – was a failure. The subject of a rebellion quelled by a brave and bold captain had, in the opinion of knowledgeable writers, been magisterially treated once and for all by Spontini in his opera *Fernand Cortez* (1809). When one listens to David’s revolt scene today, this verdict seems genuinely surprising. It is almost as if the critics had come to an agreement before writing up their articles. *Le Ménestrel* and *Le Constitutionnel* also put forward

another explanation to justify their unfavourable impression. Here is an anthology of the relevant passages:

The scene of the revolt, in particular, represents [...] a regrettable vacuum, which memories of Spontini's Fernand Cortez made us feel all the more keenly.
(Étienne-Jean Delécluze, *Journal des débats*, 10 March 1847)

The third part, The Revolt, seems to us entirely to miss its mark. One has compared M. David's piece with M. Spontini's admirable scene in Fernand Cortez, and one has given preference to the latter. It was unnecessary to point this out, but even if M. Spontini had never written Fernand Cortez, in our opinion M. David's number would have been no less of a failure. For that is what it is, in the absolute, and without any comparison.
(Gustave Hecquet, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 14 March 1847)

The music of the third part [...] seemed to us lack energy, movement and the dramatic qualities required in a situation of this kind, although his poets have nothing to reproach themselves with here: far from it. It is true that Wartel, to whom the character of Christopher Columbus was assigned, was suddenly affected by a touch of hoarseness that completely wrecked the fine effects the singer had produced at the dress rehearsal on the previous evening.
([probably Jules Louvy], *Le Ménestrel*, 14 March 1847)

The scene of the revolt is a total failure; whether from modesty or incapacity, the composer seems to have given up at a moment of capital importance. The admirable finale of Fernand Cortez came to everyone's mind. To make matters worse, while rehearsing the previous evening, the artist cast in the role of Colomb (M. Wartel) had contracted a common cold in our icebox of a Conservatoire, which is not heated at any time of the year, for fear of showing disrespect to the shades of Mozart and Beethoven.
(Pier Angelo Fiorentino, *Le Constitutionnel*, 15 March 1847)

There is but one opinion on the extreme weakness of the third part, even though this contains the only truly dramatic situation in this strange composition. [...] There is no need to remind oneself of how Spontini treated a more or less similar scene in his Fernand Cortez to find M. F. David's music deplorably mediocre.
(Paul Scudo, *Revue des deux mondes*, 1 April 1847)

Fortunately, we are freed from such comparisons today and can listen to *La Révolte* with ears unsullied by recollection.



The titles *Danse de sauvages* and *Chœur de sauvages* testify to an ambiguous vision of non-European cultures, mingling fascination and contempt. It is therefore particularly interesting to observe how this supposedly ‘exotic’ music was judged in 1847. In the press quotations that follow, we have also included *La Mère indienne*, the *romance* that closes this triptych of life in ‘the Indies’ as David imagined it. One question remains unanswered: whether the mother only *sings* of a dead child or whether the child she *cradles* is actually dead, whence our addition of ‘[sic]’ in the texts by Delécluze and Fiorentino.

The Dance of the Savages is unquestionably one of the most piquant ballet movements known to us: written in the minor key, as all primitive music must be, and in a fast and very rhythmic two-four time, it offers an exquisite blend of naïveté, bizarreness and refinement; the clarinets especially have quite stunningly unexpected and original entries. The chorus that follows on from the dance exudes the voluptuous laxity that Columbus found in this childlike people; perhaps its elegance is even too civilised. The audience applauded most eagerly of all a piccolo refrain which recurs several times on a note that the chorus repeats pianissimo: this refrain has the rare merit of containing much more than it promises; each time it reappears, it pirouettes onto a bold modulation and slips away with charming agility to the ending we were expecting. The song of the Indian mother at the tomb [sic] of her child restored to us the oriental style and the floating cadences that ensured the success of the Hymn to Night, one of the most mellow inspirations of Le Désert, to which the equivocal voice of M. Béfort [the singer at the premiere of Le Désert in 1844] brought such unique charm. The Indian elegy lost nothing from being sung by M^{me} Sabatier, who, above all, invested a searching emotion in the touching refrain:

Dors en paix, mon enfant,

Au doux chant de ta mère.

The accompaniments of this melody are transformed with each verse and vary their figures with inexhaustible richness: one should especially mention a delightful effect with cor anglais and cello, most felicitously wedded to the voice in these lines:

L'hirondelle légère,
 Effleurant la bruyère,
 Baise ton front charmant;
 [...]
 Pauvre fleur éphémère,
 Tu passas sur la terre
 Comme un souffle de vent ...

Thus this romance, like all the numbers in the fourth part, was honoured with an encore. I saw a moment when the audience was about to invade the orchestra with the impetuosity of a spring tide to force M^{me} Sabatier to resign herself to a homage that her modesty hesitated to accept.

(Étienne-Jean Delécluze, *Journal des débats*, 10 March 1847)

The *Savage Dance* is very piquant, full of ingenious and refined details, and marvellously orchestrated. We set less store by the Chorus of Savages, which assuredly has nothing savage about it; its sonority is dazzling, but the theme is banal and the rhythm vulgar. Let us leave this chorus to one side and speak of the romance that follows it. There is not much to this, if one is thinking in terms of quantity alone. Three verses of five short lines, where not a word is repeated! A single phrase! But one may say of that phrase what was said of the sonnet of olden days, that it was worth a long poem when it was flawless. What naïveté, what distinction, what grace, what tenderness, what ravishing charm in this song of a few bars! And what a delicious accompaniment! What elegance and what contrapuntal skill in the second melody which, in the last two verses, takes up its place under the vocal part, and which is stated by the cor anglais and the cello in turn! This Song of the Indian Mother is truly a small masterpiece, and there can be no composer who would not have been happy to hit upon an inspiration of this calibre.

(Gustave Hecquet, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 14 March 1847)

The chorus of the savages is not unrelated in rhythm and motif to the chorus 'Jeunes fillettes' from *Les Deux Journées*. The barbarians who sing it have already made great advances in civilisation.*

(Castil-Blaze, *La France musicale*, 14 March 1847)

* This observation is accurate, particularly as concerns the rhythm; it was probably a subconscious memory on David's part. The reference is to Cherubini's opera *Les Deux Journées ou Le Porteur d'eau* (1800).

This melancholic lullaby, like the song of the savages, was encored by audience acclamation. To be sure, for a chorus of savages, M. Félicien David has been inspired by very melodious phrases, just as, for an Indian mother, M^{me} Sabatier is a white and charming Parisian, who has pearls of great purity and radiance in her voice. But, in the end, all of that is overridden by an original melody and a strange and piquant style that ensure its success. ([probably Jules Louvy,] *Le Ménestrel*, 14 March 1847)

The following number is an Allegretto in A minor, a dance of savages of astonishing colour and verve. It would have been difficult to arrange the rhythms with greater ingenuity and to blend the timbres in such a way as to produce a more piquant and more original effect. The drum strokes on the offbeat, the muted violins, the flutes and oboes skipping in thirds, and finally the clever and graceful disposition of the orchestra give this dance a form and a cachet that cannot be described. The chorus of savages has an even more capricious melody and a lively rhythm. The chirping of the piccolo, standing out from homophonic vocal harmonies sung pianissimo, made the keenest and most delicious impression on the audience. The song of the Indian Mother weeping over her dead child [sic], rocked by the branches of a flowering tree, a simple and touching melody, was presented and encored with great charm by M^{me} Sabatier, the warbler of the salons and the concert halls. (Pier Angelo Fiorentino, *Le Constitutionnel*, 15 March 1847)



Seven weeks after the premiere, on 28 April 1847, *Christophe Colomb* was given at court by royal command and in the King's presence. His second *ode-symphonie* brought Félicien David the distinction of being made Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur on 1 May of the same year. The news was published in *Le Ménestrel* of 25 April and the King himself announced the appointment to David after the concert given at court. Here is a full account (with an amusing anecdote) of this performance at the Tuileries Palace:

The *Christophe Colomb* of M. Félicien David was performed on Wednesday evening at the court theatre in the presence of the King, the royal family, Queen Cristina [of Spain], the diplomatic corps and a large number of guests. The composer himself conducted the orchestra. After the concert, the King

summoned him to congratulate him on the beauties of his work. His Majesty deigned to announce to him that he had that very morning signed the decree appointing him Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur: 'It is as if I were attaching the cross to your buttonhole myself', the King added graciously. M. Félicien David also received the congratulations of the princesses and the royal family. (*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 2 May 1847)

The new work of Félicien David had moreover just caused a veritable sensation at court; Queen Cristina [of Spain] and the Duchesse de Montpensier, above all, had felt their love for their nation exalted by the songs of Christophe Colomb. A small semi-dramatic incident left its mark on the first part of this royal concert. At the moment when the delightful voice of M^{me} Sabatier was about to sing her Farewell Duet with the tenor Barbot, a magnificent angora cat, pursued through the wings by clumsy firemen, rushed onto the stage, causing general consternation – and came to a halt on the exquisite arm of the singer, which it scratched mercilessly. But with the courage M^{me} Sabatier had already shown three months ago during the riots in Laval, Rennes and Nantes, her voice was only slightly affected, and she sang her little duetto without interruption, dabbing with her handkerchief the drops of carmine that escaped from her wound. We do not know if the graceful singer was included in the promotions of 1 May as a result of this new act of vocal heroism. (*Le Ménestrel*, 9 May 1847)

In Paris, the work was performed eight times in 1847, then on many subsequent occasions until David's death in 1876. It was also given in a number of cities elsewhere in France (including Bordeaux as early as June 1847, Beauvais, Le Havre, Lyon, Marseille, Rennes, Rouen and St-Étienne) and abroad (Baden-Baden, Brussels, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Munich, but also in Quebec Province). The first performance in Germany took place on 2 September 1847, in Baden-Baden, but it was in Hamburg, on 5 February 1848, that the work was given for the first time in a German capital. This performance gave rise to an intriguing artistic incident, since the singer cast in the role of Columbus, M. Clément, caught cold and was replaced by Mademoiselle Michalesi, a contralto! One might also mention another curiosity that crops up in the first long article in German on the work, published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of Leipzig (numbers dated 26 May and 2 June 1847): this was written by Dr F. S. Bamberg, the review's Paris

correspondent, whose translation of the titles confused 'La Mère indienne' with 'La Mer indienne' (the Indian Ocean) ...

Another incidental point of interest is the fact that it is quite possible that the young Bizet sang in the chorus of one of the Parisian performances of 1855: traces of his familiarity with the work may be found in his own *ode-symphonie Vasco de Gama*, completed in 1860.

On 28 January 1849, the fourth part of the ode was performed on its own in a concert of the Société du Conservatoire in Paris, under the direction of Narcisse Girard. This was the first time that Hector Berlioz heard at least an excerpt from *Colomb*. Having been away travelling in Russia and Prussia to conduct *La Damnation de Faust* from 14 February until the end of June 1847, he had missed the work's premiere and the seven Parisian performances that had followed. He did not fail to add his voice to those of earlier commentators:

The fourth part of Félicien David's Christophe Colomb featured on the programme after the Beethoven symphony. It is a fine piece in which we meet once more the colouration of Le Désert and that profound feeling for nature, of which it must be admitted that many masters, even among the most illustrious, have been radically devoid. The tableau of the calm sea was necessarily bound to resemble that of the desert somewhat; it is sketched out in superior fashion. Nothing could be more delightful, after this, than the myriad sounds, at first indistinct, soon more precise, that the breeze from the land seems to convey to the navigator; the young woman's song possesses an original and naïve grace; but the arrival, the cries of joy of this forlorn crew catching sight of the new world, the salvoes of cannon fire, the fracas of the landing, all of this is magisterially done, and worthily crowned by a splendid, ardent final chorus. Perhaps this work overuses simplicity, and too frequently employs similar rhythms played at the same time by all sections of the orchestra, which makes the instrumental mass seem less varied in texture than in fact it is. But this defect is a quality from the viewpoint of the public, which, in matters of harmony, is incapable of becoming aware, without a certain intellectual effort, of the multiplication of two by two, and of assuring itself that this does positively produce the number four. Félicien David, in adopting this approach, has ensured that his music will always be understood and enjoyed at a first hearing.

(*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 4 February 1849)

Twenty years later, on 11 September 1869, David conducted the work for the last time in person, at Baden-Baden.



Today, 170 years after the creation of *Christophe Colomb*, there is still a persistent received idea that Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* constituted a work *sui generis* and was thought to be unique in its time on account of the variety of its forms. In point of fact, a whole series of works of a new type, midway between the symphony and the concert opera, emerged in the years between 1840 and 1850. So much may be seen from this non-exhaustive list:

- 🎻 8 December 1844: *Le Désert* – Félicien David (Conservatoire)
- 🎻 4 January 1846: *Ruth* – César Franck (Conservatoire)
- 🎻 4 March 1846: *L'Ermite ou La Tentation* – Jean-Marie Josse (Opéra-Comique)
- 🎻 21 March 1846: *Moïse au Sinaï* – Félicien David (Opéra)
- 🎻 6 December 1846: *La Damnation de Faust* – Hector Berlioz (Opéra-Comique)
- 🎻 7 March 1847: *Christophe Colomb* – Félicien David (Conservatoire)
- 🎻 21 March 1847: *Manfred* – Louis Lacombe (Conservatoire)
- 🎻 6 April 1847: *La Chasse royale* and *Jeanne [d'Arc]* – Émile Douay (Théâtre-Italien)
- 🎻 2 May 1847: *Marguerite et Faust* – Henri Cohen (Conservatoire)
- 🎻 25 August 1848: *L'Éden* – Félicien David (Opéra)
- 🎻 26 March 1850: *Arva ou Les Hongrois* – Louis Lacombe (Conservatoire)
- 🎻 5 April 1850: *Le Sélam* – Ernest Reyer (Théâtre-Italien)
- 🎻 14 April 1850: *La Rédemption* – Giulio Alary (Théâtre-Italien)

Here is a commentary on this new development:

It is at the Conservatoire [...] that Christophe Colomb will be presented today. [...] We have already said that several works by M. Douay and the Manfred of Louis Lacombe would follow hard on the heels of Christophe Colomb, and now Beethoven's Ruins of Athens preceded this avalanche of symphonies. [...] As to the idea of having what has been called a descriptive poem recited during the performance, it did not seem very felicitous. The

Ruins of Athens does not belong at all to this musical genre, which has only existed for a few years, and is called melologue by Berlioz and ode-symphony by Félicien David.

(*Le Ménestrel*, 7 March 1847)

And the subject of Christopher Columbus was apparently among the most esteemed:

The opéra-comique is our national genre, it is said, and so you will observe that musically civilised peoples leave us to enjoy it all on our own. Are there not countries where plague and leprosy are national? Servitude, fertile in miseries, has always corrupted morals. Do not be surprised to see new bastards being engendered, such as the ode-symphony, the tragedy with choruses, the drama curiously interspersed with turlurettes on the oboes and brrrrr on the violins, Fausts, Harolds, Noah's Arks, Deserts, Sinais, Maccabees and Christopher Columbuses; a whole family of Christopher Columbuses is going to march past our ears; you know one already, you are promised three more.

(*La France musicale*, 14 March 1847)

Castil-Blaze, the author of the exordium just quoted (from his review of the premiere of *Colomb*), indicates one of the reasons for this development, at least in France: in order to make a successful career, a French composer had to contrive to get his music played on the great operatic stages. And in order to prove his dramatic capacities to theatre managers, what other means were there – if one were not invited to compose an act or two, or a ballet, for either the Opéra or the Opéra-Comique – than to write symphonic works with voices in various situations, for a constellation of soloists and a substantial chorus? Apart from its illustration of the Saint-Simonian philosophy, *Christophe Colomb* acted as a good reference for David's abilities in composing for the stage: the duet for Fernand and Elvire, the treatment of the hurricane and the scenes with chorus, especially in Part Three, are proof of that. It was not without cause that Fiorentino wrote: 'When Félicien David composes an opera (and I am astonished that no one has so far entrusted him with a libretto), we shall see if he is capable of depicting the sentiments and the passions of the drama.' Seen in this light, *La Perle du Brésil* – David's first opera, given at the Théâtre-

Lyrique in 1851 – appears as the absolutely logical consequence of the success of *Christophe Colomb*.

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