

Herculanum in David's output

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Félicien David is in music a landscape artist who uses warm colours. His outlines [...] are so sharp, so well delineated, that every element is high-lighted, brought out, standing bright and in relief.

(Joseph d'Ortigue, *Le Ménestrel*, 6 March 1859)

Félicien David's *ode-symphonie*, *Le Désert*, premièred at the Théâtre-Italien in December 1844, took Paris by storm, making him almost overnight into one of the most popular composers of his time. The revival of the work in the capital in 1845 proved such a phenomenal success that by a decade later it had been staged all over France. However, in a country in which a composer's merit was still largely dependent on his operatic output (election as a member of the Institut de France, for instance, was out of the question unless the candidate had operas under his belt), David's recognition remained incomplete. After spending the late 1840s on an oratorio, *Moïse au Sinaï* (1846), a second *ode-symphonie*, *Christophe Colomb* (1847), then another oratorio (a *mystère*), *L'Eden* (1848), Félicien David ventured in the 1850s to write for the stage. *La Perle du Brésil*, an *opéra-comique* recalling *Le Désert* in its use of local colour, was presented in 1851 at the Opéra-National (soon to become the Théâtre-Lyrique). Then, staged this time at the prestigious Paris Opéra, came his only *grand opéra*, *Herculanum*, for which he received financial help from his fellow Saint-Simonians, who even opened a subscription in order to free him from the cares of having to earn his daily bread. Although *Herculanum*

has little to do with the Saint-Simonian ideology, David's triumph on one of Europe's foremost stages was to have positive repercussions for the movement as a whole.

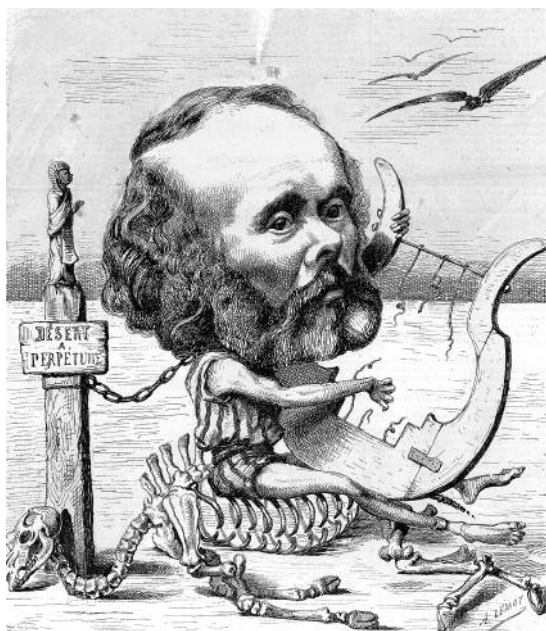
Premièred at the Paris Opéra on 4 March 1859, *Herculanum* was one of the last productions of the first period of French *grand opéra*, in line with the earlier major compositions of Rossini, Halévy, Auber and Meyerbeer, and showing signs of the influence of Verdi (whose *Vêpres siciliennes* had been premièred at the Opéra in June 1855). Like Halévy's *La Magicienne* (1858), and in keeping with the political orientations of Napoleon III, the libretto of *Herculanum* speaks out clearly in favour of Christianity. The eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, burying Herculaneum, Pompeii and Stabiae, is presented as the result of the decadence of the ancient civilisations and the persecution of the early Christians. The libretto, by Joseph Méry and Térrence Hadot, favours the spectacular, and the magnificence of the costumes, props, sets, machinery and dances prompted Berlioz to write (*Journal des débats*, 12 March 1859):

I believe that there has been nothing more magnificent at the Opéra than the staging of *Herculanum*. One is dazzled by the splendour of the costumes and the ancient weaponry; some of the sets are wonderful, and the one for the final tableau, calling to mind Martin's famous painting *The Fall of Niniveh*, is a masterpiece.

Journalists were impressed by the sheer scale of David's score and the solemnity of a style far removed from the symphonic exoticism that was supposedly characteristic of the author of *Le Désert*. Many parts of the opera were acclaimed: the seduction scene in Act I, Act II with its echoes of Schubert, the Act III *airs de ballet* and, above all, the vast duet for Lilia and Hélios in the final act. The public was even more openly enthusiastic than the press and *Herculanum* received sixty-four performances between 1859 and 1862, and a further ten in 1868. Without matching the triumphs of Meyerbeer, whose works for the Paris Opéra received almost three thousand performances between 1831 and 1914, David's *Herculanum*

was a much greater success than the early operas of either Gounod or Berlioz (Gounod's *Sapho* received nineteen performances between 1851 and 1858, and Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* just seven in 1838 and 1839).

Herculanum was the only work David composed for the Paris Opéra. Afterwards he turned to *opéra-comique* with *Lalla-Roukh* (1862), *Le Saphir* (1865) and *La Captive* (completed in 1864, but not performed at the Opéra-Comique until 1883). He finally obtained the official recognition to which he aspired when he was made an Officier de la Légion d'honneur in 1862 and then succeeded Berlioz as member of the Institut de France in 1869.



Cartoon of Félicien David making reference to the success of his ode-symphonie, *Le Désert*. Gunther Braam Collection.

Caricature de Félicien David en référence au succès de son ode-symphonie *Le Désert*. Collection Gunther Braam.