The Works of Félicien David, Who Died 150 Years Ago, Are Now Revived on Stage, in Concerts, and on Recordings

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REVIEW-ARTICLE

Thirty-three years ago, I published in *JALS* a six-page report about recent recordings of the works of an important French contemporary of Franz Liszt, Félicien David (1810-76).[1] The year 2026 seems time for an update, given the number of new releases, many of them first recordings of a given work, that have appeared since then.[2]

It occurred to me that I might simply revise and expand my 1993 report, making many additions. But, for reasons of space, I decided that it would be better to pick up where that report left off, though, again, explaining (but more briefly) who this astonishingly influential composer is that most concertgoers and even professional musicians have still not heard about. I therefore encourage interested readers to consult the first report, since I do not discuss here most of the recordings that I reported on back then.[3]

Briefly, Félicien David was a widely discussed composer (and sometime conductor), best known for his *Le Désert*, several operas (one of which, *Lalla-Roukh*, received 400 performances at the Opéra-Comique), and songs. He also composed works in other genres (e.g., a brass nonet), most of which were published during his lifetime. Certain of his works were popular enough to be used by Carl Czerny, Friedrich Burgmüller, Henri Vieuxtemps, and others as the basis for potpourris, variation sets, and fantasies.

By 1950 or so, though, most of David's works were forgotten, except for one aria ("Charmant oiseau," from *La Perle du Brésil*) and a few songs, notably "Les Hirondelles." Then, with the long-playing record and the compact disc, the tide changed. My 1993 report summarized recent efforts at reclaiming a place for David through recordings by highly proficient and insightful performers (including soprano Joan Sutherland and baritone Udo

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[1] Ralph P. Locke, "Breezes from the Orient, Airs from the Paris Salon: Félicien David Now on Disc," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 33 (January-June 1993): 44-49. The article also contained the opening page of each of two of David's "Oriental" piano pieces from 1833: *L'Almée* (composed in Smyrna) and *Le Harem* (composed in Alexandria).

[2] For a basic introduction to the life and works of Félicien David, I continue to recommend the excellent book by Dorothy V. Hagan, *Félicien David 1810-76: A Composer and a Cause* (Syracuse, NY: University of Syracuse Press, 1985). Unfortunately, Hagan died before writing chapters on the songs, piano music, and chamber works. For these repertoires, the best current assessments are often those found in the booklets that come with CDs (though all too few of these, alas, are available online for the sake of those who are listening through streaming services). Indeed, this is true even for some of the works that Hagan discusses. See below about his Symphony no. 3 and *Christophe Colomb*.

[3] To reduce the number of footnotes, I sometimes offer a disc's catalogue number in the main text.

Reinemann). I also drew attention to important recent writings about him. By today, that list of scholars, books, and articles is far longer—too long to include here.[4]

The single most important of the pre-1993 spate of CD releases was the 1989 recorded premiere of David's widely influential hour-long *Le Désert* (1844), a work that David termed an *ode-symphonie* because it combines orchestra, tenor solos, and male chorus with spoken narration (hence the word "ode") in somewhat free but rhyming verse. Setting the spoken part aside, I might instead term *Le Désert* a secular oratorio, roughly analogous to, say, Felix Mendelssohn's *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*. But it could equally well be seen as an important link in a chain of works *with* spoken narration: works as varied as Beethoven's *The Ruins of Athens* (though that work was originally staged, with costumes, props, gestures, and group processions), Hector Berlioz's "monodrama" *Lélio, ou Le Retour à la vie*, César Franck's *Rédemption*, Igor Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, Aaron Copland's *A Lincoln Portrait*, Benjamin Britten's *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and Leonard Bernstein's Symphony no. 3 ("Kaddish").

Berlioz hailed *Le Désert* after its first performance in December 1844, and it was published and performed in numerous lands and in a variety of languages. Performances continued for a half-century or so. Copies of the piano-vocal score (and, more rarely, the full score) can still be found in numerous libraries around the world and, in scanned versions, at IMSLP and other sites.[5]

As a sign of the work's lingering "presence," we might note that a player-piano roll of *Le Désert* was made available for purchase ca. 1907-8, its label indicating that it was based on an existing arrangement for piano four-hands. And, in 1927, an excerpt from *Le Désert*—the dramatic sandstorm near the end of Part 1—showed up as background for a scene of a storm at sea (rather than in a dry wasteland!) in the Movietone soundtrack for the seminal early sound-film *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (directed by F. W. Murnau, 1927).[6]

Occasional performances began to occur in the 1970s (e.g., at the Butler University Romantic Festival, under Raymond Leppard). But it took until 1989 for *Le Désert* to get recorded and released to the music-loving public. The recording was made in Berlin, during a live concert, with an Italian conductor, an Italian tenor, and the men of Berlin's St. Hedwig's Cathedral choir, plus a good, if rather sober French narrator. That CD release, plus some others

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[4] See the bibliography, continuingly updated, at the end of the entry on David in *Grove Dictionary of Music* (www.OxfordMusicOnline.com).The entry itself is primarily the work of the renowned Berlioz authority Hugh Macdonald; Macdonald has kindly allowed me to supervise the work list and bibliography ever since the mid 1970s, when he was completing the entry for *The New Grove* (i.e., the sixth edition of *Grove*).

[5] In recent years, *Le Désert* has been republished by MusikProduktion Hoeflich: order numbers SKU 1683 (full score) and 1683b (piano-vocal). The brief new preface, by David Gilbert, is also available online (in English and German) at https://repertoire-explorer.musikmph.de/product/david-felicien/.

[6] The parts for men's chorus are removed, but, in the context of the visuals, the performance, by the Roxy Symphony Orchestra, is gripping. Murnau's film used music and sound effects, but the spoken dialogue was still conveyed in the manner of silent films, through printed "intertitles." I thank Philip Carli for drawing my attention to the piano roll and to the amazing *Sunrise*.

(notably the *Mélodies orientales / Brises d'Orient* pieces for solo piano) led me to write for *JALS* that survey of all the recordings that were then available.[7]

Since 1993, there has, of course, been a surge of releases of works by many nineteenth-century composers, no doubt reflecting listener desire for greater variety of repertory than what orchestras and other performers have been tending to offer. I suspect that the rebarbative nature of many post-1900 compositions —say, most of those by Arnold Schoenberg or Pierre Boulez— has likewise sent listeners fleeing for comfort, and fascination, into music of earlier centuries.

Some of the composers who are now being rediscovered were once widely renowned, such as Joachim Raff, who had been Liszt's assistant in the 1850s and then developed a career as an independent composer, selling works to major publishers. Other composers never achieved full recognition in their day, and their merit is being revealed for the first time (e.g., Marie Jaëll, who served as a kind of secretary to Liszt in the 1880s, and whom he allowed to compose the final measures of the *Mephisto Waltz* no. 3).[8] Félicien David, surprising though this may be today, belongs in the first category, having had, years after *Le Désert*, a success at the Paris Opéra with his *Herculanum* in 1859 and, as mentioned, an even more durable one at the Opéra-Comique with *Lalla-Roukh* in 1865.

The haul of recordings of David's works this time around includes, among other things, a second (and nicely contrasting) recording of *Le Désert* as well as recordings of David's second (and last) *ode-symphonie*, *Christophe Colomb*, and his operas *Herculanum* and *Lalla-Roukh*. Plus, first recordings (mostly) of works for orchestra, piano solo, chamber ensemble, solo singer with piano, and chorus with organ. I will save to the end David's single most-recorded musical number, the opera aria "Charmant oiseau," from his (otherwise still-unrecorded) 1851 opera *La Perle du Brésil*.

Le Désert and *Christophe Colomb*

The second recording of *Le Désert* came in 2015 from conductor Laurence Equilbey, her Accentus Chamber Choir, and the Orchestre de chambre de Paris, plus two splendid and stylish tenors: Cyrille Dubois and (at the beginning of his now-remarkable career, centered in France) the American-born Zachary Wilder. The recording won an award from the Académie Charles Cros for best "rediscovery" of a work from the past, and it also made a case for the coherence of David's music by including a second CD in which the work is performed non-stop, without narration. This double recording can be confusing, at least on Spotify, where the twenty-four

[7] In 2009, the Berlin recording of *Le Désert* (Capriccio 10379) was rereleased on its own (Capriccio 5017), without the second piece (Szymanowski's *Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin*) that followed it on the original release.

[8] On Raff's operas, see my "Three 'Closet' Operas by Joachim Raff, and Some Thoughts on Public Musicology," forthcoming in *Sound Studies Review* (in a festschrift for Diana Hallman). The Raff revival, presaged by Mark Thomas's valiant website (https://www.raff.org/), is spearheaded by the tireless Volker Tosta and his publication firm, Nordstern. As for Marie Jaëll, I reviewed a three-CD "Portrait" of her works (from the Palazetto Bru Zane) in *JALS* 72 (2021): 89-91.

tracks do not clearly indicate that tracks 1-12 are the version without narrator and 13-24 are with him.[9]

The importance of *Le Désert* for the history of music has been emphasized in recent decades by such writers as Richard Taruskin and Robert Laudon.[10] The fact that two rather different recordings are now widely available helps make audible the impact that this work had on, among others, Charles Gounod, Georges Bizet, Camille Saint-Saëns, Giuseppi Verdi, Jules Massenet, and several of the Russian Five. Equilbey's recording has the advantage of showing how the work sounds when performed with singers who are mostly native French-speakers. Alas, the narrator on this occasion (Jean-Marie Winling) is, to my taste, too reticent, speaking the text in a normal tone of voice into a microphone, rather than declaiming as one must do, to some extent, from a concert-hall stage. He does convey a range of emotional tones, from confiding to regretful, but any sense of grandeur, terror, or majesty is repeatedly undercut.[11]

David's other ode-symphonie, *Christophe Colomb: ou, La Découverte du Nouveau Monde* (Christopher Columbus, or the Discovery of the New World), performed to wide acclaim in 1847, received its first recording in 2014, released in 2017 in a three-CD "Portrait" of diverse works by David, from the Center for French Romantic Music (whose editorial offices are located at the Palazzetto Bru Zane, in Venice).[12] The three CDs come with a smallish hardcover book containing informative essays and sung and spoken texts, all in French and English.

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[9] Also, the three "parts" of the work are given different names in the two versions: the narratorless version, for example, calls the opening tracks "L'Entrée au désert," whereas the version with narrator uses the phrase "Première partie." On Spotify, the conductor of *Christophe Colomb* is erroneously given as Hervé Niquet.

[10] Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music*, 6 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3:386-92. Robert Tallant Laudon's *The Dramatic Symphony: Issues and Explorations from Berlioz to Liszt* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2012) offers a long-needed account of *Le Désert* in the context of how other composers (including, notably, Berlioz in *Roméo et Juliette*) attempted to bring characters and concrete drama action into the symphonic realm, through the use of vocal soloists and chorus and/or by means of a written program. See also three of my own writings: "The French Symphony: David, Gounod, and Bizet to Saint-Saëns, Franck, and Their Followers," in D. Kern Holoman, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 163-94 (in which I erroneously stated that the work's spoken text is unrhymed); "Leaving *alla turca* Behind: The Middle East in Opera and Other Musical Genres, 1800-50," in Michael Christoforidis and Ramón Sobrino, eds., *Musical Exoticism: The Mediterranean and Beyond in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024), 3-23; and "How Reliable Are Nineteenth-Century Reviews of Concerts and Operas?: Félicien David's *Le Désert* and His Grand Opera *Herculanum*." *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 19, no. 2 (August 2022—Special Issue: French Criticism, ed. James Sobaskie): 217-33 and 235 (corrigendum). DOI: https:// doi/org/10.1017/S1479409820000488. The corrigendum (two sentences) is DOI: https://doi.org/ 10.1017 /S1479409822000337.

[11] Naïve CD 5405. My detailed review appeared in *American Record Guide* 78, no. 4 (July /August 2015): 96-97; updated and posted (with various Internet links) at https://operatoday.com/2015/11/ a_prize-winning_rediscovery_from_1840s_paris_and_1830s_egypt/.

[12] *Félicien David: Christophe Colomb, Musique de chambre, symphonique et sacrée* (Bru Zane/ Ediciones singulares ES 1028, 2017). This is volume 4 in the Bru Zane series of composer "portraits." I published a detailed review of the set (and the works in it) in *American Record Guide*, 80, no. 6 (November/December 2017): 100-03; revised and uploaded to the *Boston Musical Intelligencer*: https://www.classical-scene.com/2019/01/19/felicien-david-revived-digitally/. For more information on David, see the Center's site, such as this page on recordings: https://bru-zane.com/fr/dischi/?f_com-

Figure 1: Félicien David: a memorial illustration to the recently deceased composer, apparently published in *La Chronique musicale* (1876). Specifically named are his two *odes-symphonies* and his three best-known operas. The reader was expected to intuit that the birds are a reference to his best-known song, *Les Hirondelles*.



positore= 297; and this one leading to scholarly essays and nineteenth-century caricatures: https://www.bruzanemediabase.com/en/search?keys=felicien%20david.

Christophe Colomb is, in some ways, closer to opera than is *Le Désert*. For one thing, several characters are given names (including of course, the title character, Christopher Columbus). And the four parts of the work are frankly labeled "acts." The spoken narration is more detailed and plot-driven than in *Le Désert*, less purely atmospheric. Alas, though admirably performed on the recording, *Christophe Colomb* proves to be less consistently inspired than its predecessor. Still, one can appreciate the many descriptive details that, critics report, thrilled audiences at the time. For example, when the sea becomes becalmed (for lack of wind), the sailors' sighs and despairs are suggested by a repeated descending chromatic figure in the orchestra alone. (This leads to a brief mutiny by the sailors, quickly quelled by the valiant leader. The latter role is capably handled by Austrian bass-baritone Josef Wagner.) The orchestra alone, again, limns events, such as its quick figurations when the wind begins to return, setting the sails to flutter and fill. Among the most effective passages are several in the final Act depicting—sympathetically, if naively—the indigenous peoples of the West Indies that Columbus and his sailors were encountering.[13]

The work closes with a happy ending that mythologizes Columbus, Spain, and, by extension, Europe and Europeans. A "choeur général" (full chorus) praises the "genius" of the leader who has now created an "eternal empire"—presumably one that involves peaceful submission by the local population. It is not made clear if the men and women of the chorus in this final number are supposed to be representing all of Spain, or Spain plus the island natives, or the entire world. (*Christophe Colomb*, we should remember, was intended to be performed without costumes, much like traditional oratorios.)[14] However one thinks of it, though, there can be no doubt about the fact that the work ends in pure colonialist fantasy. Yet, by 1847, any astute observer would have noticed various uprisings by the inhabitants of Europe's overseas possessions, including the American Revolution of 1775-83 (though that one was severely compromised by the issue of chattel slavery) and, in purer form, the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 against the French overlords.

Anybody interested in getting to know this work would do well to read Gunther Braam's detailed remarks about it in the accompanying book, as well as Annegret Fauser's revealing study of how the libretto, by a childhood friend of the composer, Sylvain Saint-Étienne, got rewritten by the experienced poet and librettist Joseph Méry, who would go on to write the much-praised libretto for *Herculanum* and to co-write the even stronger one for Verdi's *Don Carlos* (based, of course, on a renowned tragedy by Friedrich Schiller).[15]

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[13] Michael Pisani discusses the orchestral "Danse de sauvages: air de ballet" in the context of other portrayals of Native Americans in his *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[14] Similarly, in a Handel oratorio based on a story from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), or in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, the chorus sometimes represents Israelites and sometimes Israel's enemies (Philistines, say, or Canaanites), and yet other times conveys abstract judgment or moral-religious commentary.

[15] Annegret Fauser, "Hymns of the Future: Reading Félicien David's *Christophe Colomb* as a Saint-Simonian Symphony," *Journal of Musicological Research* 28, no. 1 (January 2009): 1-29.

Fortunately, the performance is full of color, lyricism, and, at crucial moments, drama. The period-instrument orchestra Les Siècles plays alertly under its founding conductor François-Xavier Roth. The clarion tenor Julien Behr takes two roles with great security and artistry (the young sailor Fernand, i.e., Fernando, and the nameless Cabin Boy). The narrator, Jean-Marie Winling, seems a bit more engaged here (sometimes using a more "public" voice) than he was in *Le Désert*.

David composed four symphonies between 1827 and 1849, and at least two of them, including no. 3 in E-flat major (1846), were performed and published at the time, then sank into oblivion. We can finally hear no. 3 in that same 2017 Bru Zane three-CD set and appreciate its many colorful and imaginative details, well described in the accompanying small book by musicologist Alexandre Dratwicki. Still, to my mind, the work feels at times more dutiful than inspired, like good student work. Clearly David tended to be at his most imaginative when responding to a poetic text and/or stage action.

Herculanum and *Lalla-Roukh*

Speaking of which, David composed five major operas (after an early one, now lost). *La Perle du Brésil* (1851) still lacks a full recording, but its expansive and colorful overture is included in the three-CD Bru Zane set, conducted effectively by Hervé Niquet.[16] David's sole grand opera, *Herculanum* (1859), was one of the few new grand operas by any French-born composer to obtain great success in the 1850s and 1860s, racking up no fewer than seventy-four performances in five seasons (1859-62 and 1868). It probably would have been revived yet more, had the sets (and perhaps costumes) not been destroyed in a major fire in 1873 along with those of other important operas. *Herculanum* also traveled a bit, getting staged in a few other European cities and published not only in French but also in Italian (as *Ercolano*).

Then it vanished until 2014, when it reappeared, "in concert," in Brussels and Versailles (skillfully conducted by Hervé Niquet). A recording was made shortly beforehand and released by the Center for French Romantic Music (Palazetto Bru Zane).[17] The singers were mostly first-

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[16] *Félicien David: Christophe Colomb, Musique de chambre, symphonique et sacrée* (Bru Zane/Ediciones singulares ES 1028, 2017). This recording is volume 4 in the Bru Zane series of composer "portraits." I reviewed the set (and the various works themselves) in detail in *American Record Guide*, 80, no. 6 (November/December 2017): 100-03; revised and uploaded to the *Boston Musical Intelligencer*: https://www.classical-scene.com/2019/01/19/felicien-david-revived-digitally/.

[17] Ediciones Singulares/Bru Zane 1020. My review in *American Record Guide* 79, no. 1 (January/February 2016): 92-95, was republished, in expanded form, at: http://www.operatoday.com/content/2016/03/felicien_david_.php. Further, see two of my articles, the first being the aforementioned "How Reliable Are Nineteenth-Century Reviews of Concerts and Operas?"; the second, entirely devoted to *Herculanum*, is "Félicien David's Grand Opera *Herculanum* (1859): Rome, Early Christianity, Multiple Exoticisms, Great Tunes—and Satan," in a special issue: "Opera and Ancient Sources in the Nineteenth Century," ed. Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Robert C. Ketterer, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 21 (2024): 234-63—available open-access; no password or subscription required): https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/nineteenth-century-music-review/article/felicien-davids-

rate, including Véronique Gens in the central role of Lilia. It was fortunate that the mezzo, Karine Deshayes—as the Roman queen, Olympia—was still in good health when the recording was made. By the time of the Versailles performance, she was suffering from a cold and (as reviews report) had to sing parts of the role an octave lower.

Alas, the recording omits the second of Olympia's two splendid arias: we go straight from Olympia's recitative near the beginning of Act 2 into the work's primary ballet sequence, and the latter is reduced to a single dance that is shy of three minutes in length.

Herculanum ends with the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and the resulting destruction of Herculaneum (and neighboring Pompeii) in the year 79 C.E. But David composed a fourteen-minute postlude for two mixed choruses and orchestra, in which the world ends, and the souls of the blessed and the damned go off to their respective rewards. It got shorn from the opera during the final rehearsals and ended up gaining its own identity as a short concert work, *Le Jugement dernier*, for two choruses and orchestra. We can now hear it on the three-CD "Portrait" set, sung and played with spirit by the same chorus and orchestra (under, again, Hervé Niquet) that had recorded the opera itself. In this case, David's inspiration seems not up to the task—at least for those of us who cherish the immensely more effective "last judgment" movements (to the "Dies irae" text) in the Requiems by Berlioz and Verdi.

The success of Niquet's *Herculanum* recording led to further performances: a fully staged one in 2016 at Ireland's Wexford Festival Opera (some video excerpts are on YouTube) and an in-concert version in the world-renowned Müpa auditorium in Budapest (viewable in its entirety—sometimes—on YouTube, with Hungarian subtitles). Whereas the Wexford production (fully staged) used a more complete version of the score, the Budapest recording, perhaps for convenience, used the same cuts that were made on Niquet's recording. Particularly notable in the Budapest cast (which is energetically conducted by György Vashegyi) are Cyrille Dubois as the Greek-turned-Christian Hélios and a vivid Aude Extrémo as the imperious Queen Olympia.

David's biggest operatic success came with the opéra-comique *Lalla-Roukh* (1862), a work with spoken dialogue and mingling comic and more dramatic moments. The work received an excellent recording, though stripped of all spoken dialogue, from the Washington, D.C.-based Opéra Lafayette orchestra (using period instruments), under the orchestra's long-time conductor Ryan Brown.

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grand-opera-herculanum-1859-rome-early-christianity-multiple-exoticisms-great-tunes-and-satan /1D043C3F730D32E5335A8EC5081A596D?utm_source=SFMC&utm_medium=email &utm content=Article&utm_campaign=New%20Cambridge%20Alert%20-%20Issues&WT.mc_id=New%20Cambridge%20Alert%20-%20Issues; also https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409823000216.

Figure 2: Satirical retelling of the plot of *Herculanum*, headed "*Herculanum*, or The Unfortunate Results of Drinking," a reference to the magic potion Olympia (whom the Romans have installed as queen of a region equivalent to what is today Syria or Iraq) gives the Greek prince Hélios to cause him to abandon his Christian beloved, Lilia. Even the smallest details contain an element of friendly spoof, such as saying that the music was by "Messieurs Félicien and David" (because his last name looks like it could be a first name).



The recording was made in 2013, in conjunction with staged performances in New York City and Washington that, imaginatively, incorporated dancing not by ballet dancers pretending to be South Asian but an actual South Asian dance troupe from the Washington/Maryland area. I was present at the performance in Lincoln Center's Rose Theater and still recall vividly the effect made at the end of the first act, when all the characters move to their respective hiding places, leaving David's orchestral music and some offstage singing to make its full magical effect. The main roles on the recording (as in person) are taken by native French-speakers (including soprano Marianne Fiset, who was born near Québec City, and tenor Emiliano Gonzalez-Toro, who was born in Switzerland to Chilean parents and is now a major star of the early-music scene). The singers convey vividly the varied emotions of these fairy-tale characters, and the Opera Lafayette chorus adds charm and depth in its several important appearances.[18]

Solo-Piano Works

Paris in the nineteenth century was a hotbed of virtuoso pianism, a trend to which David did not contribute. But he did compose many character pieces suitable for pianists of more modest abilities. He composed twenty-two pieces while living in Turkey and Egypt (as a member of the early socialist movement known as the Saint-Simonians) and published them in 1836, once he and the others were back in Paris. These *Mélodies orientales* were republished in 1845-46 by Escudier (and by Schott in Germany) as *Brises d'Orient* (and the last three pieces were given a separate collective title: *Les Minarets*). More precisely, the first of the *Mélodies orientales*, "Une Promenade sur le Nil," was omitted from some printings of *Brises d'Orient*. David had reused its main tune as the luscious tenor solo "Rêverie du soir" in *Le Désert*, and the publisher may not have wanted to be accused of charging money for stale goods (even though the piece contains much other material and has its own identity). As a result, "Une Promenade sur le Nil" was apparently unknown to pianist Daniel Blumenthal and is not included in his fine recording of the other twenty-one pieces (Marco Polo 8.223376).

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[18] Naxos 8.660338-39. The booklet notes, including an extensive essay by myself on the music and an excellent plot summary by Nizam Ketanneh, is available online at https://www.naxos.com /MainSite/BlurbsReviews/?itemcode=8.66033839&catnum=660338&filetype=AboutThisRecording&language=English. On the genesis of the work, see Roberto Scoccimarro, "Otherness, Self-affirmation, and Self-denial in the Opéras-comiques of Félicien David *Lalla Roukh* and *La Captive*," in Christoforidis and Sobrino, *Musical Exoticism*, 161-94. The magnificent soprano Véronique Gens sings the heroine's "Sous le feuillage sombre" on her *Visions* CD, released in 2017, with the Munich Radio Symphony, conducted by Hervé Niquet (Alpha 279). Other excerpts from *Lalla-Roukh* that have been recorded in earlier eras include the tenor aria "Ma maîtresse a quitté la tente" (Albert Vaguet, rereleased on vinyl in 1980: Rubini GV546) and an unidentified excerpt (perhaps the same aria) by tenor Birger Schücker, recorded in 1889 (information from https://www.discogs.com/release/ 5450443-Various-Gramophone-1899-The-First-Gramophone-Recordings-In-Sweden).

Fortunately, the work has now been recorded by pianist Jessica Nardon, though this is only available through streaming, not as a physical CD.[19] Nardon also plays seven other of the *Mélodies orientales* and gives the first-ever recording of David's "Marine" (Sea Piece), which is one of the three *Esquisses symphoniques* (works more modest in their technical demands than the adjective "symphonic" would suggest).

"Une Promenade sur le Nil" (A Stroll along the Nile) is fascinating in part because it contains descriptive rubrics pointing out certain of its programmatic features: "Le départ" (setting off on a walk), "Les rameurs" (the rowers of the Nile's traditional flat-bottomed boats), "Le tarabouka" (the darabukka drum), and "Air arabe" (Arab tune).[20] The whole composition is reproduced, and its significance well discussed, in the recent anthology of *Descriptive Piano Fantasias [of the Long Nineteenth Century]*, edited by Halina Goldberg and Jonathan Bellman.[21]

The Bru Zane three-CD collection referred to earlier contains three of the *Mélodies orientales/Brises d'Orient* pieces, plus three piano works recorded for the first time: "Le Soir," "Doux souvenir," and "Allegretto agitato," all played by Jonas Vitaud. His performances of the "Oriental" pieces provide a more straightforward and period-aware alternative to the grander, more personalized, and sometimes more sentimental readings by Daniel Blumenthal mentioned above.

Chamber Music

Paris and other French cities also saw a thriving practice of chamber-music performance in the home and in public halls. We are lucky now to have recordings of all four of David's string quartets (three plus the one surviving movement of an unfinished fourth) and all three of his piano trios, in fine performances, some of them on period instruments by such renowned performers as cellist Christophe Coin.[22] A second recording of Piano Trio no. 1, on modern

[19] See https://open.spotify.com/artist/4ANDassLiIbstD83GpBSf8.

[20] In some editions of *Brises d'Orient*, "Une Promenade sur le Nil" is included; "Les rameurs" is there reworded "Les bateliers" (boatsmen).

[21] Halina Goldberg and Jonathan Bellman, eds., *Descriptive Piano Fantasias* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2021), reviewed by Philip Carli, *Music Library Association Notes* 81, no. 1 (September 2024): 198-202.

[22] String Quartets nos. 1, 2, and 4 (unfinished) are played by the Quatuor Cambini-Paris on Naïve-Ambroisie AM 206. (No. 1 was the only quartet that David published in his lifetime.) The second movement of Quartet no. 1 (Scherzo: Allegretto) is tossed off with playful portamentos by the Mandelring Quartet (a modern-instrument group) on a disc of short pieces and encores entitled *Pennies from Heaven: Encores / Bis / Zugaben* (Audite 97786). String Quartet no. 3 is on Laborie (LC12), performed by Quatuor Mosaïques. The latter CD carries the title *Le Souvenir* and includes the Piano Trio no. 1 in E-flat major, performed by violinist Andrés Gabetta, cellist Christophe Coin, and pianist Jean-Jacques Dünki. In addition, the CD offers two pieces for piano solo ("Pensée" and "L'Absence"), two pieces for cello and piano ("Le Souvenir" and "Le Caprice"), and nineteenth-century salon arrangements of moments from three of David's larger works: *Le Désert*, *Herculanum*, and *Lalla-Roukh*. The arrangements are by Henri Vieuxtemps, Pierre Musard, and Sebastian Lee. A set of program notes fuller than the one given in the booklet was formerly available online (http://www.fondationlaborie.com/index.php/en/label-

instruments, is included in the Bru Zane three-CD set, excellently performed by violinist Pascal Monlong, cellist Pauline Buet, and pianist David Violi. The sole recording of Piano Trios 2 and 3 is a fine one by Hungarian performers on modern instruments: violinist Eszter Perényi, cellist Tibor Párkányi, and pianist Ilona Prunyi.[23] All three trios are well written for the instruments and somewhat redolent of Schubert and Mendelssohn, with occasional dramatic moments that remind us that David, during his student years at the Paris Conservatoire, wrote to his friend Sylvain Saint-Étienne of the wonders of works he was hearing for the first time by Beethoven (Symphony no. 9) and Weber (*Euryanthe*).

Particularly appealing are twenty-four one-movement pieces for string quintet (i.e., quartet plus double-bass), originally composed by David for some notable string players in Paris, including the renowned cellist Auguste Franchomme. (Franchomme is best known today for having co-written two pieces for cello and piano with Chopin, who also dedicated to him the great Cello Sonata, op. 65.) The set was published under the title *Les Quatre Saisons* (The Four Seasons) and offers six pieces for each of the four seasons. One of the pieces (no. 6 of the "Autumn" series) carries the descriptive title "La Pompe," having been inspired by the creaking sound of a water pump—from outside an open window—that had annoyed the players at a previous rehearsal. The only recording, featuring Christophe Coin and other notable period-instrument performers, was released as Laborie LC11 (a two-CD set) and contains twelve of the twenty-four pieces. Like some of the other recordings mentioned here, it is no longer available from most record dealers, but copies (used or even still unopened) can be found online, and the tracks are all available on YouTube or other streaming services.

Songs with Piano (and with Orchestra)

Songs—mostly strophic *romances*—were the way in which David first made his name known, in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Some of his songs used published poems by renowned authors (e.g., Lamartine). Others used poems written for him by friends, including one famed poet, Théophile Gautier. Gautier sometimes tweaked the texts when publishing them later. But, at least in this case, his alterations can be sung to David's music perfectly well and should be considered for performance purposes (and incorporated as options into future scores).[24] Occasionally David sets a text as a kind of dramatic *scena*, as if testing his operatic muscles in a more modest genre, as in the ten-minute-long "Le Jour des morts" (Lamartine).

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laborie/laborie-classique/item/254-f%C3%A9licien-david-le-souvenir or www.fondationlaborie.com/images/stories/notesdeprogramme) but is currently inaccessible. Vieuxtemps gave his adaptation of "Rêverie du soir" the name "La Nuit" and composed it for viola and piano. Coin's recording of it uses a cello version by Carl Schuberth.

[23] Marco Polo 8.223492 (released 1993). The helpful booklet essay can be read online at https://www.naxos.com/MainSite/BlurbsReviews/?itemcode=8.223492&catnum=223492&filetype=AboutThisRecording&language=English.

[24] See the different wordings at https://www.lieder.net/lieder/diff.html?TextId1=5961&TextId2=5954.

Fortunately, we now have a wonderful CD of eighteen of David's best songs, expertly sung (with good French diction) by Greek baritone Tassis Christoyannis, accompanied by pianist Thanassis Apostolopoulos (Bru Zane/Aparté AP086).[25] A private CD of David songs (some of the same ones, others not available any other way) was released by the skillful light tenor Artavasd Sargsyan early in his career, with an insightful pianist (Paul Montag); I hope that they will at some point release the recording to the world, or re-record the same repertoire, if they were for some reason unhappy with their first try.[26] Another light tenor, Cyrille Dubois, re-appears in the three-CD "Portrait" set, singing seven David songs, all but one previously unavailable. (And more remain: I am still waiting for someone to do "Sultan Mahmoud.") People interested in the political ramifications of song will be fascinated by "Le Rhin allemand," to a poem by Alfred de Musset written as a riposte to Nikolaus Becker's bellicose "Der deutsche Rhein (Patriotisches Lied)." The latter text, widely disseminated, was set to music by Robert Schumann, among others.

David also created orchestral accompaniments for some of his published songs to include on orchestral concerts that he or others conducted (much as Berlioz did with the songs of *Les Nuits d'été*). Few of these orchestrated versions seem to have survived. Perhaps appropriately orchestrated versions could be created today to help provide repertoire for singers appearing with an orchestra, analogous to, say, the orchestrated versions of Schubert songs made by Berlioz, Liszt, Offenbach, Brahms, and others.[27]

Six Latin motets (five with organ, one *a cappella*) are included in the three-CD "Portrait" set mentioned earlier. They show David's skill at choral writing, well-honed during his years as a chorister and assistant conductor at the cathedral in Aix-en-Provence. (Indeed, the motets were composed back then, and only got published in 1853, once he had made his name and fame.) The numerous characterful choral passages in his operas testify to David's choral artistry even more persuasively.

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[25] See my review of the Christoyannis recording, in *American Record Guide* 77, no. 5 (September/ October 2014): 82-83; updated and republished at OperaToday.com: http://www.operatoday.com/ content/2015/11/flicien_david_s.php.

[26] *Félicien David: Mélodies*: Passavant Music PAS 113251.

[27] Tenor Cyrille Dubois sings, exquisitely, David's "La Vengeance des fleurs"—another previously unrecorded song—with an orchestral accompaniment on his album *So poétique* (with the first word italicized to emphasize that it is in English: "*So* poétique"): Alpha 1214. Robert J. Stove, in his review, praised that song as "the most unexpected revival" on a disc also offering better-known composers, such as Gounod and Fauré: "[David's "La Vengeance des fleurs" is] full of Berliozian chord progressions that seem artless but are perfectly judged, with a high-C for the singer thrown in near the end." "From Belgium [i.e., Record Companies There] with Love," in the Australian magazine *Quadrant* (July-August 2026): 95.

The Unkillable Aria with Flute: "Charmant oiseau"

Separate mention should be made of some recent recordings of David's most famous (then and now) piece, "Charmant oiseau" (Thou charming bird), an aria with obbligato flute from *La Perle du Brésil*. This aria is sometimes listed as "Couplets du mysoli." (The "mysoli" is a supposed Brazilian bird. The word seems to have been invented by the opera's two librettists.) Recordings pop up every five or ten years: I heartily recommend Sumi Jo's on her 1994 all-French CD release, entitled *Carnival* (with the English Chamber Orchestra splendidly led by Richard Bonynge, with the renowned flutist William Bennett), Decca 440679-2; the recording is also included in *The Art of Sumi Jo*, Decca 458 927-2. A YouTube concert video made in 1995 in South Korea (under Franz Welser-Möst) catches her in a voice somewhat fresher than a later one (identifiable by, among other things, her bright red dress) that is sometimes also available on YouTube.

Other recordings of "Charmant oiseau" have been released by Karen Smith Emerson (with flutist William Wittig and pianist Martin Katz) and by Elizabeth Vidal, with the Orchestra of the Meiningen Opera (Meininger Hofkapelle, conducted by Hans Rotman).[28] Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), the aria, though made painfully memorable by the inept soprano Florence Foster Jenkins (1868-1944), in a 1940s-era recording that never ceases to be re-released (one can find it easily online), was not among the items chosen for Meryl Streep to sing in the 2016 movie about Jenkins's unique, deluded, and finally tragic performing career. Streep, like Jenkins, would have made excellent mincemeat of it.

Works Still Unrecorded

Despite all this, there remain pieces by David that have still not been tried out in modern performance, much less recorded. We have not heard his two shortish oratorios *Moïse au Sinaï* (1846) and *L'Éden* (1848; Adam and Eve sing but, as in Haydn's *The Creation*, are fully clothed) nor his first performed opera, the 1851 *La Perle du Brésil* (which, to judge by the score,

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[28] Respectively: *Songs of the Nightingale*, Centaur 2232; *The Art of the Coloratura (Airs d'opéra français--French Opera Arias)*, Classic Talent DOM 291077. Vidal made a separate recording with flutist Philippe Bernhold and pianist Susan Manoff (on *Romances et chants d'oiseaux*, Auvidis Valois V4707). I should mention that a live performance occurs on the opera-based comedy album (or comedy-based opera recital) entitled *Stand[-]Up Opera*, featuring soprano B. J. Ward (Summit 255, with flutist Gregory Jefferson and pianist Michel Sushel). YouTube and other streaming services bring us an ongoing flow of older recordings of the aria, by Amelita Galli-Curci, Luisa Tetrazzini, Renée Doria, Mado Robin, and others, and video versions with Roberta Peters and a young Colette Boky. One can also sometimes (such things come and go) hear Solange Renaux—recorded in the 1930s?—singing, from *Lalla-Roukh*, the arietta of Lalla-Roukh's confidante Mirza, "Si vous ne savez plus charmer." And in 1975 Huguette Tourangeau recorded two songs ("Tristesse de l'odalisque" and "Reviens, reviens"—the latter to a text by Théophile Gautier better known through Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*), later released on Gala GL 100.533 (two CDs).

contains much lively and colorful music, beyond the overture and "Charmant oiseau"). His last two operas, *Le Saphir* (1865, freely based on Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*) and *La Captive* (a late example of a harem opera) survive only with piano accompaniment.[29] Alexandre Dratwicki made a chamber-music orchestration of *Le Saphir* that got performed once but not recorded.

Also, a set of twelve *Mélodies* for violin (or cello) and piano exists, in which the violin part is full of valuable fingerings by the great nineteenth-century violinist Jules Armingaud and the equivalent cello part was "revised" by Auguste Franchomme. A selection of these *Mélodies* enchanted the audience (as I can still recall) when played in July 1976 at a narrated outdoor concert-plus-slideshow in the composer's hometown of Cadenet celebrating the centenary of his death.

To conclude, there is only one way to find out which works of a "minor master" (or, for that matter, which forgotten works of a *major* master!) are of special value and deserve to be brought back from oblivion: get them tried out by skillful performers and then recorded. The recording should preferably appear not only on streaming services and as a digital download but also on a physical CD, where an informative booklet can also be provided. And the booklet should be made available digitally, for people who listen through a streaming service.

It is remarkable that so many works by Félicien David have reentered musical life, after a lapse of a century or more and through sensitive and style-aware performances and recordings in far-flung locations. All of this serves as a reminder of the extensive treasures from the era of Liszt, Berlioz, Schumann, and others that remain to be explored, at a moment when concertgoers and listeners at home (and on the road) seem to be looking at times for new experiences—even "old-new" ones.

[29] *La Captive* was withdrawn during rehearsals. It did not get performed and published until 1883, seven years after the composer's death. It has apparently not been performed since then. Further, see Scoccimarro, "Otherness."