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Félicien David's Grand Opera *Herculanum* (1859): Rome, Early Christianity, Multiple Exoticisms, Great Tunes – and Satan

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The longstanding practice of building opera librettos on stories from classical antiquity (especially Greece and Rome, and, to a lesser extent, Egypt, Persia and Babylonia) waned in the early 1800s, as impresarios began to favour plots with more obvious current-day resonance (though sometimes set a few centuries in the past, to skirt objections from government censors and, in some lands, church authorities). Still, imaginative librettists and composers found ways of rejuvenating an ancient setting and producing an opera that spoke to the day's audiences instead of feeling stuffy or academic. One of the biggest successes in French serious opera of the 1850s was Félicien David's Herculanum*, set to a text primarily by the renowned playwright and poet Joseph Méry. Widely hailed, not least by composer-critics Hector Berlioz and Ernest Reyer, the work freshened the 'ancient Rome' conventions by locating the action far to the south, near what is today Naples, and by including, as the main characters, two powerful aristocrats from the Euphrates valley, and two young adepts of the nascent Christian movement – and a fifth character, Satan himself, come to wreak havoc in the world. All of this would seem a stewpot of a librettist's wild imaginings were it not for the quality and impressive variety of David's music – and the opportunities that libretto and music together give to imaginative performers, as has been demonstrated in the work's three major revivals beginning in 2014 (in Belgium/France, Ireland and Hungary).*

The present study explores a long-forgotten French grand opera, Félicien David's *Herculanum*, through a double lens. It seeks to appreciate what made the work so successful in its own day and what has helped it regain attention in the past decade. It also seeks to observe the ways in which *Herculanum* refreshed the longstanding tradition of 'ancient world' opera by melding the latter with something that was much less usual in the opera house: a libretto that dealt centrally with Christianity and with such potentially delicate or inflammatory topics as faith, theology and religious persecution (or its opposite: religious tolerance).

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I start with a glance at the composer. Though his name is still not widely familiar, many of his works have been revived and studied extensively in recent decades, including *Herculanum* (first modern performance and first recording: 2014). Next, I consider two trends that *Herculanum* combines: 'ancient world' operas (which have existed since the very beginnings of opera, c. 1600) and operas specifically about early Christians (of which *Herculanum* is an early and prominent instance). The remainder of the article looks at the work itself, exploring first Joseph Méry's remarkably accomplished libretto and his revealing (but rarely cited) preface to it, and then, in several sections, the tuneful, atmospheric and often powerful score that Méry's libretto inspired David to compose. *Herculanum*, now that the world has had a chance to get to know it in performances and recordings, turns out to be a major work in the repertory of French grand opera and one that merits the close attention that I give it here.

A Forgotten Composer and Work Revealed

The name of Félicien David was nearly forgotten to music history for about a century. In recent decades, though, an important life-and-works study was published by Dorothy V. Hagan (1985), and Richard Taruskin devoted several pages of his pathbreaking *Oxford History of Music* (2005) to David's influential 1844 concert work *Le désert*. (The latter is for tenor, men's chorus, orchestra and narrator; because of the mixture of spoken verses and orchestral passages, David dubbed the work an *ode-symphonie*.)[1] *Le désert* is now available in two excellent recorded performances; similarly fine recordings also now exist of *Christophe Colomb* (his second and last *ode-symphonie*), his three piano trios, the four string quartets, dozens of his remarkable songs and the most long-lived of his four comic operas, *Lalla-Roukh* (1862), an enchanting work based on a famous book by the Irish writer Thomas Moore. Indeed, by 2014, one French journalist was proudly calling this once-obscure French composer 'the revelation of the moment'.[2]

The enthusiasm for David has spread beyond France, not least thanks to two imaginative and very different stagings of *Lalla-Roukh*: one, by Opera Lafayette, in Washington DC and New York City in 2013 (which resulted in the widely praised recording just mentioned); the other at Wexford Festival Opera in October 2022 (in a production received with delight by the audience and by prominent opera critics).[3]

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[1] Dorothy V. Hagan, *Félicien David, 1810–1876: A Composer and a Cause* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985); Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Music*, 6 vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): vol. 3, 386–92.

[2] Raphaël de Gubernatis, 'Aux Bouffes du Nord, musique romantique et révélations', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 12 June 2014, www.nouvelobs.com/culture/20140612.OBS0373/aux-bouffes-du-nord-musique-romantique-et-revelations.html.

[3] See the reviews by Corinne da Fonseca-Wollheim in the *New York Times*, 3 February 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/02/04/arts/music/lalla-roukh-at-the-rose-theater.html; by Claire Seymour in *Opera Today*, October, 2022, https://operatoday.com/2022/10/felicien-davids-lalla-roukh-at-wexford-festival-opera-a-forgotten-gem/); by Robert Hugill on his own site, 31 October 2022, www.planethugill.com/2022/10/beyond-orientalism-orpha-phelans.html; and by George Hall in *The Stage* (24 Oct 2022) www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/lalla-roukh-national-opera-house-wexford-festival-review ('an absolute winner, its easy melodic flow accentuated by the composer's clever and unfailingly attractive orchestration. […It] sent the audience out into the night on an unmistakeable high').

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Even so, there was special anticipation for the recording – the first ever – of David's sole *grand opéra* (released in 2015).[4] The cast was headed by three major stars of the opera world: Véronique Gens, Karine Deshayes and Edgaras Montvidas, and the alert conductor was Hervé Niquet. *Herculanum* was composed for the Paris Opéra and was performed there no fewer than 74 times during the years 1859–68, to full houses and sustained enthusiasm. It was also staged in Brussels, Venice and St. Petersburg. But then it disappeared from sight, except for one aria: Lilia's stirring, hymnlike Credo (from Act III).[5]

Today's opera lovers had little idea what to expect. The libretto is set in the Roman-controlled town of Herculaneum (French: Herculanum; Italian: Ercolano) in 79 CE, and one of the five major characters is Satan, yet the work was written by a composer most often described as having a gift for melodic charm, piquant orchestration and the evocation of places and peoples distant from Europe, such as Arabia and colonial Brazil. Fortunately, two scholars who have written about the work provided encouraging descriptions. Dorothy Hagan, while admitting that the work is full of 'the stereotypes without which such an opera was unacceptable to its Parisian public', praises David's ability to create 'romantic, lyric scene[s]' that powerfully combine 'Italianate expression' with, as she put it, 'Saint-Simonian ecstasy'. (Hagan is referring to David's involvement, in his early years, with Saint-Simonism, a French early-socialist movement that emphasized the importance of solidarity across the borders of nation and social class.)[6] Alexandre Dratwicki, emphasizing other aspects, describes the work as 'an example of the "second wave" of a genre that had been developed in the 1830s and that, beginning in 1850, had begun to come under the influence of the new post-Donizettian Italian opera style, more particularly that of Verdi'. Dratwicki draws particular attention

[4] Félicien David, *Herculanum*, cond. Hervé Niquet, 2 CDs plus hardcover book: Palazzetto Bru Zane/Ediciones singulares ES1020. The release was the tenth in the Palazzetto's ongoing 'Opéra français/French opera' series. The book contains essays in French and a version of the libretto that matches the tightened edition on the recording. The essays are also given in English translations (some by Charles Johnston, others by Mary Pardoe, who also translated the libretto); I have translated all passages here afresh.

[5] Lilia's aria is a confession of faith in the Trinity; this made it an inviting item to extract, assign to a different vocal category, and employ for religious purposes. The renowned French bass Léon Rothier (1874–1961) recorded the Credo (without the choral part), making it the only excerpt of the work available before the near-complete recording (2014). Rothier's recording, probably made for broadcast on WQXR, sometime between 1938 and 1950, was released on LP: Edward J. Smith Golden Age of Opera EJS 140; other copies bear the label Celebrity Records. (I listened to a copy in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.) The score can easily be found in numerous libraries thanks to its inclusion in Max Spicker's *Celebrated Arias Selected from Operas by Old and Modern Composers*, 5 vols (New York: G. Schirmer, 1904 and later reprints), vol. 5 (bass). Spicker's five volumes are currently available – with the new main title *Operatic Anthology* and with the previous title as a subtitle – from Classical Vocal Reprints (Fayetteville, AK, 2012).

[6] Hagan, *Félicien David*, 160. Hagan proposes, plausibly (p. 156), that the scene between Satan and the slaves reflects an aspect of Saint-Simonian doctrine: namely its insistence that social reform be achieved peacefully, not through (as Satan proposes) mass violence by workers whom the privileged few have oppressed. The interaction of David's career with his political ideals is treated in Ralph P. Locke, *Music, Musicians, and the Saint-Simonians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). The latter is also available in French translation: *Les Saint-Simoniens et la musique*, trans. Malou and Philippe Haine (Liège: Éditions Pierre Mardaga, 1992).

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to the vocal writing for Olympia and her brother Nicanor, which is forthright and emphatic yet still florid in ways that relate it to Rossinian norms from several decades earlier. And, he adds, David's grand opera carries out this complex task of stylistic and formal coordination 'in a refined and easily comprehensible manner'.[7]

Multiple reviews of the CD recording, often favourable, were published in France and many other countries. Some of the reviewers raised questions about the opera's convoluted and implausible plot. (Tastes have greatly changed over the past 150 years!) But they readily dubbed David's music 'charming and tuneful', or declared that a number was 'lovely in its delicate melancholy', or welcomed a vocal line's 'coloratura escapades'. To be sure, several felt that David's music in *Herculanum* lacks dramatic intensity and psychological depth, a criticism that has long been applied equally to French grand operas by, say, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Halévy and Gounod. (Though not to two other works in that genre: Verdi's *Don Carlos* and Berlioz's *Les Troyens*.) One reviewer complained that the volcanic eruption that brings the opera to a devastating close is accompanied by music that is too brief and insufficiently vivid – at least for home listening, in the absence of all requisite stage effects.[8]

Alas, as with Meyerbeer's remarkable four French grand operas (*Robert le diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *Le prophète* and *L'Africaine*), many of these same critics tended to take for granted, instead of pointing out appreciatively, how imaginative the orchestral writing is, and how carefully suited the vocal parts are for each onstage character and for the two 'peoples' played by the chorus: early Christians (in Act II, scene 1) and pagan Romans and their vassals from other lands (in the rest of the work).[9]

In 1859, the music and theatre critics of Paris likewise made their own range of pronouncements about the work. Ernest Reyer (1823–1909) and Hector Berlioz wrote at length and, for the most part, supportively.[10] The other critics tended to

[7] 'dans un souci de distinction et de lisibilité'. Alexandre Dratwicki, '*Herculanum* à l'heure des mutations du grand opéra français', in the small book accompanying the Palazzetto Bru Zane recording, 26–29 (here 26).

[8] Charles T. Downey, praised Karine Deshayes's performance of the 'coloratura escapades' in Olympia's Act I aria 'Bois ce vin que l'amour donne'; see Robert Battey and Charles Downey, 'Exhuming an Operatic "Herculanum"', *Washington Post*, 18 December 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/cd-reviews-exhuming-an-operatic-herculanum/2015/12/17/98773cde-9de6-11e5-8728-1af6af208198_story.html. The other two phrases are from Paul Steinson's review in *Musicweb Inernational*, www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2015/Dec/David_Herculanum_ES1020.htm. The particular number praised by Steinson is the opening movement of the Act I duet between Olympia and Hélios ('Noble Hélios'), a passage admired also by Berlioz. See, further, the review by Hugo Shirley in *Gramophone*, www.gramophone.co.uk/review/david-herculanum. Claire Seymour's review, in *Opera Today*, was sympathetic but found David's music somewhat bland: www.operatoday.com/content/2016/11/_felicien_david.php. Pierre-René Serna (reviewing the concert performance in Versailles that followed immediately upon the recording sessions) liked only the fourth and final act; see www.concertclassic.com/article/herculanum-de-felicien-david-lopera-royal-de-versailles-travaux-dhercule-compte-rendu. But the Olympia (as he does not mention) was sick that evening, sang some of her role in half-voice or down an octave, and (as on the recording) omitted her Act III aria.

[9] My own review (more extensive than the others) first appeared in *American Record Guide* 79/1 (2016): 92–5, then, updated, lightly expanded and posted (with Internet links), on *Opera Today*, www.operatoday.com/content/2016/03/felicien_david_.php.

[10] If Berlioz was envious of David's success, it hardly showed in the review. By contrast, a private letter that he wrote to his longtime friend Humbert Ferrand is dismissive of the work

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praise certain tuneful and touching solo moments, whether in an aria or a duet, but also often found faults. Scoffers objected that the chorus's ridicule of the priest Magnus at the end of Act I seemed like something out of a comic opera, or they found certain passages in the libretto or score too reminiscent of specific well-known works by previous composers. Indeed, the scene in which Lilia and Nicanor stand beside a large cross does clearly echo one in the last act of Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* (1831) between Alice (a likewise innocent yet determined soprano) and Bertram (a likewise devious, diabolical baritone). Unfortunately, most French opera critics in the middle of the nineteenth century were literary figures with almost no ability to discuss basic musical matters. It is not by chance that Reyer and Berlioz, the work's most emphatic supporters, were themselves highly accomplished composers. And their support for the work seems to have been sincere. Neither of them was, so far as we know, friendly with David, who tended to keep to himself.[11]

The small-format book that comes with the CD recording features an important essay (by Gunther Braam) that offers substantial excerpts from many of the opening-night reviews. The book also reprints, as a separate chapter, large excerpts from Berlioz's thoughtful and laudatory report.[12] But Reyer's, which was equally positive, seems to have escaped notice until now. It focuses, among other things, on David's attractive and memorable melodic lines.

> The fellow-feeling [*sympathie*] that David has always inspired in me leads me to rejoice all the more at the triumph he has won. Many people have long insisted on considering him solely a skilful composer of symphonic and other instrumental works. Well, any doubts that they may have had about his ability to handle a work for the stage have now surely vanished [after last night's premiere]. The melodies in *Herculanum* are so easy to recall – and I have stored so many of them in my own memory – that I could have filled the ten columns of this review with musical notation, were it possible for a review to be printed on five-lined manuscript paper! I would like to know the name of the publisher who might then seek to sue me for infringement of copyright – because there will certainly soon be a publisher for such a beautiful work.[13]

(and of Gounod's *Faust*) in ways that suggest his frustration that his own latest opera, *Les Troyens*, had not yet been accepted for performance at one of the city's leading theatres. Berlioz focuses on what he calls the 'colourlessness' in, presumably, David's orchestral writing in the work (28 April 1859, in Hector Berlioz, *Correspondance générale*, ed. Pierre Citron et al., 8 vols (Paris: Flammarion, 1972–2003): vol. 5, 678), whereas, in the review, he mentions some spots as dully coloured but others as vivid and fresh.

[11] Further, see Ralph P. Locke, 'How Reliable Are Nineteenth-Century Reviews of Concerts and Operas?: Félicien David's *Le Désert* and His Grand Opera *Herculanum*', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 19/2 (2022): 217–33 and 235 (corrigendum). Reyer and Saint-Saëns each published an admiring essay about David's achievements when the latter died: Ernest Reyer, *Notice sur Félicien David […] lue dans la séance [de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts] du 17 novembre 1877* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1877); Camille Saint-Saëns, *Harmonie et mélodie* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1895): 127–32, reprinted in Saint-Saëns, *Écrits sur la musique et les musiciens 1870–1921*, ed. Marie-Gabrielle Soret (Paris: Librarie philosophique J. Vrin, 2012): 169–70.

[12] Hector Berlioz, 'Compte rendu de la création', in the book accompanying the *Herculanum* recording, pp. 21–25 (trans. Mary Pardoe on pp. 67–71). The full text of Berlioz's discussion of the opera and its performance is available in the complete edition of Berlioz's *Critique musicale*, ed. Anne Bongrain, H. Robert Cohen, Marie-Hélène Coudroy-Saghai and Yves Gérard, 10 vols (Paris: Buchet/Chastel and Société française de musicologie, 1996–2020): vol. 9, 475–86.

[13] 'La sympathie qu'il [David] m'a toujours inspirée fait que je me réjouis doublement du triomphe qu'il a obtenu. Toutes les préventions que pouvaient avoir contre son aptitude

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Berlioz and Reyer were right. The work is a strong one, though of course also marked by the conventions of its age, and it has, rather suddenly, made a place for itself on the 'mattering map' of a new generation of performers, listeners and critics, not least through two equally skilful productions since the CD recording came out: namely, a staged version at Wexford Festival Opera (2016) and a concert rendering in Budapest (2021).[14] And the work deserves examination, in the context of the present special issue of this journal, as an intriguing instance of how a talented creative team renewed the longstanding tradition of 'ancient world' operas by combining that tradition with an element that was relatively new to the Parisian stage: early Christian history, seen as an instance in the long history of religious persecution.

Opera and the Ancient World, Opera and Religion

By 1859, ancient Rome was hardly a novel setting for an opera. From its very beginnings in the early 1600s, opera had often placed its plots in the worlds of ancient Greece or Rome. This brought a wide range of advantages. Those two civilizations, taken separately and together, were widely understood in Europe at the time (and eventually in the Americas) as being the fount of modern life and values. Greek democracy, Greek architecture, Greek philosophy and Greek tragic drama were regularly hailed as high achievements deserving of emulation, as were, for example, Roman engineering and Roman military organization.

In addition, ancient Greece and Rome seemed peculiarly appropriate antecedents to mid-nineteenth-century Europe because each of those two societies had been an expansive imperial power. Having an opera deal with, say, Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia or India or with the Romans' occupying army in North Africa could cause the work to resonate with a variety of more current-day (though unnamed) European developments and ventures. Those current developments and ventures could include political tensions, or even warfare, within the home country (such as between the contentious religio-political factions in British politics during Handel's era); hostilities between the home country and other European lands (such as between France and the Triple Alliance – England, Sweden and the Dutch Republic – in 1668, relevant to certain Lully operas); tensions – or, again, military engagements – with more distant lands,

dramatique ceux qui s'obstinaient à le considérer seulement comme un symphoniste habile, doivent avoir disparu aujourd'hui. Les mélodies d'*Herculanum* sont si faciles à retenir, et j'en ai retenu une telle quantité, que j'aurais pu en noircir les dix colonnes de ce feuilleton, si un feuilleton musical s'imprimait sur du papier à musique. Je voudrais bien savoir le nom de l'éditeur qui, dans ce cas là, aurait eu le droit de me faire un procès, car un éditeur ne peut manquer à une si belle œuvre'. Ernest Reyer, *Journal des débats*, 8 March 1859, at Nizam Peter Kettaneh's online site containing the critical writings of Reyer, https://ernestreyer.com/articles/courrier-de-paris-1859-03-08/. I translate freely, for the sake of clarity.

[14] The Bru Zane CD recording from Brussels and the Budapest video (not available commercially but available at YouTube.com) both use a version that omits Olympia's 'Viens blonde déesse' and the two substantial passages that follow it: a six-movement ballet (for a Faun and a Bacchante), and – particularly praised by Berlioz – a choral Bacchanale (with cries of 'Évoë!'). The excellent singers in the Budapest video include Aude Extrémo, Cyrille Dubois and Thomas Dolié. The conductor (somewhat more varied and intense than Niquet) is György Vashegyi.

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such as between the major European powers and the expansive Ottoman Turkish empire (echoed in Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*); or colonialist and imperialist efforts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as those of Britain in the Caribbean and in India (in numerous operas by, again, Handel or – much later – in Delibes's *Lakmé*) or those of Spain or Portugal in the Americas (in, say, Offenbach's *La Périchole*).

Religion, by contrast, was a topic that, at least until the late 1700s, the makers of opera generally steered clear of mentioning, no doubt for fear of censorship by church and state and because opera often relied on direct patronage, whether by the government or powerful aristocratic families. True, some operas did bring up the question of non-Christian religious customs, such as the Hindu practice of *satih*. For example, in the last act of Metastasio's libretto *Alessandro nell'Indie*, a funeral pyre is set up for the purpose of immolating an Indian leader's surviving wife, but the Western leader – Alexander the Great – is horrified and forbids the custom, thereby saving the life of the main female character, Queen Cleofide. The libretto became the basis of operas by over three dozen composers, including Handel and Hasse.[15] By contrast, allusions to Christian worship and belief were rare or non-existent in most operatic traditions before 1800. Indeed, numerous librettists, during opera's first two hundred years in various lands, made sure that characters, when under the stress of a powerful emotion, would cry out to 'the gods', in the plural (for example, 'grands dieux!', 'giusti dei!', or 'o Numi!'), rather than to 'God' in the singular and capitalized ('Dieu', 'Dio', and so forth), even if the plot were set in current- or recent-day Europe. Furthermore, plots drawn from the Bible (whether the Old or New Testament) or later religious tales (such as the lives of saints) were often banned entirely from the operatic stage, forcing them to find a different kind of home in the unstaged – or minimally staged – genres of the 'sacred drama' (a spoken work, usually with little or no music) and oratorio.[16]

The near-ban on representations of religion – and of religious persecution – in opera began to crumble during the decades around the year 1800 and increasingly throughout the nineteenth century – and quite notably (if not uniquely) in France. The French Revolution's severing of the longstanding ties between church and state led to an increasing tolerance of religious difference, largely ending the long-standing tensions between French Catholics and French Protestants and allowing Jews and other ethno-religious minorities full access to citizenship. Public discussions of religion now regularly included warnings against such things as parochial attitudes (that is: viewing one's own version of religion as uniquely correct), prejudice against minority religious and ethnic groups, and the misuses of religion by individuals in positions of power. These warnings were dramatized in French operas of the day, works that were often set back a few centuries but that clearly carried a message about state- or nation-based religion and its often high-handed representatives in the current day. Three such works were among the most

[15] See Ralph P. Locke, 'Alexander the Great and the Indian Rajah Puru: Exoticism in a Metastasio Libretto as Set by Hasse and by Handel', *Revue de musicologie* 102/2 (2016): 275–318.

[16] There were special exceptions, such as certain Lenten-season operas in Italy. See Robert C. Ketterer, 'Under Cover in Babylon: Rossini's Cyrus the Great for the Lenten Season' in the current issue of this journal. An earlier exception (in England) is *Theodora*, Handel's 1750 dramatic oratorio about a saint-like figure who was reportedly beheaded by the Romans in 304 CE during the Dioclesianic persecution.

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successful (both financially and artistically) of that time: Halévy's *La juive* (1835, set in Konstanz, in southwestern Germany, near the eastern border of Switzerland, in 1414), Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836, set in France in the year 1572) and that same composer's *Le prophète* (1849, set in sixteenth-century Dordrecht and Münster).[17]

Herculanum is notable for being a comparably successful work that combines the two trends that I have sketched above: that is, it engages explicitly with Christian history and doctrine and even portrays Christian worship onstage; *and* it engages with a truly distant past, specifically the Roman Empire in the year 79 CE.[18] The advantages were double. Bringing early Christianity onto the stage helped refresh the centuries-long practice of setting operas in ancient Greece or Rome. And placing a tale of Christians nearly two millennia in the past helped the opera evade the kinds of harsh criticism and official censorship that often awaited operas in which the events shown onstage were closer to the current day.

Méry and David's opera pits the Roman authorities – including the officials controlling its eastern provinces (in what are today Turkey and Syria: that is, the northwesterly regions of former Babylonia) – against the early supporters of Christianity. With a well-informed and artfully phrased libretto written primarily by the poet Joseph Méry (plus some late tweaking by Térence Hadot, a friend of the composer), the work demonstrates the resonance that a savvy librettist at that time could generate by mixing elements from Roman history and Classical mythology (for example, references to Venus) with repeated evocations of the spiritual power and political powerlessness of the nascent Christian movement. Among other things, the prominent emphasis on Christian belief and practice in *Herculanum* comprises a clear attempt at – as the editors of this special issue put it – reinvigorating an ancient Roman setting at a time when interest in such topics was waning.

The three recent revivals of *Herculanum* have helped reveal the imaginative ways in which this important work plays with the mixed legacies of ancient Rome and early Christianity. The result, we can now appreciate, mingles the grandiose and the intimate, the statuesque and the sensuously seductive, and it can delight and fascinate an opera-house audience or at-home listeners even a century and a half later. *Herculanum* may not be psychologically sophisticated (in the manner of, say, *La traviata*, *Lohengrin*, *Carmen*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, or

[17] On the reasons that composers and librettists transposed present-day concerns to an earlier era or distant locale, see Ralph P. Locke, 'The Exotic in Nineteenth-Century French Opera', *Nineteenth-Century Music* 45/2 (2021): 93–118 (part 1: 'Locales and Peoples') and 45/3 (2022): 185–203 (part 2: 'Plots, Characters, and Musical Devices'). A shorter French version appeared as two chapters in Hervé Lacombe, ed., *Histoire de l'opéra français*, 3 vols (Paris: Fayard, 2020–22): 949–55, 955–63. In the *Nineteenth-Century Music* version, an editing error resulted in Konstanz being located in south*eastern* Germany.

[18] Another important work that was performed in Paris and that, like *Herculanum*, involved Christianity in its early years was Donizetti's *Les martyrs* (1840). Most other such instances came about some decades later, including some dealing with Nero. See Gesine Manuwald, *Nero in Opera: Librettos as Transformations of Ancient Sources* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013). Other late nineteenth-century instances of 'early Christian vs. pagan' operas include Massenet's *Hérodiade* and *Thaïs*. On dance works that dealt with the ancient world, see Samuel N. Dorf, *Performing Antiquity: Ancient Greek Music and Dance from Paris to Delphi, 1890–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). See also the discussion of *Thaïs* and other Massenet works in Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and, for broader social and cultural contexts, Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

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Wozzeck), but it is one of the most appealing and best-crafted serious French operas of its era and fully rewards the close examination that, until now, it has largely been denied.

Méry's Evocative Preface

The preface to the libretto plunges us directly into the tensions between Rome and early Christianity. This, like the libretto itself, was written by Joseph Méry (1797–1866), a poet and short-story writer who had contributed librettos (alone or in collaboration) to three 1855 stage works by Offenbach and who would attain a place in the annals of opera for co-writing, with Camille du Locle, the text for Verdi's *Don Carlos* (first performed in 1867, a year after Méry's death).[19] More crucially in the present context, his *mystère* entitled *L'Éden* (1844) had been set as an oratorio by David in 1848, and he had provided most of the text for the second of David's two *odes-symphonies*, entitled *Christophe Colomb* (1847).[20]

Berlioz quoted about half of Méry's preface in his largely admiring review (in the *Journal des débats*) of the opera's first performance, but the preface has never been reprinted or translated in full. I therefore give it here, in the appendix, with basic explanatory annotations. One thing that Méry takes for granted is that the reader knows about the rediscovery of the ruins of Herculaneum; this rediscovery began in 1709 (in a town named Resina, built on melted volcanic ash that had hardened into rock) and continued through much of the eighteenth century, causing the site to be included in many a Grand Tour. But, as he neglects to point out, the ruins were more deeply buried than those of Pompeii and thus remained (and remain today) largely hidden from view. The decision to set an opera in Herculaneum thus provided very limited data for a librettist and the set-design team, but also left them freer to include elements having nothing to do with the locale: in this case, two central characters from the Euphrates valley (part of what the French broadly called 'l'Orient' – 'the East'), as well as supernatural elements (Satan, and the miraculous vision that he summons up in Act II in hopes of driving Lilia into his arms and putting her under his power).

Méry's preface is given in its entirety in the appendix to the present article. In it, Méry unleashes a lava-flow of erudite allusions to names from ancient Rome. But the preface must have been a powerful stimulus to audience members who read even just bits of it when perusing the printed libretto. (Librettos were available for sale before opera performances, and people often brought a copy with them into the theatre and could read it there since theatre lights were in those days not yet dimmed.) Berlioz made a point of calling Méry, in his laudatory review of the libretto and the score, 'one of the best Latinists among today's writers, and one of those most deeply versed in a knowledge of Roman antiquity'.[21] This

[19] In the Budapest video the subtitles are in Hungarian. Verdi's early opera *La battaglia di Legnano* (Rome, 1849) is freely based on Méry's play *La Bataille de Toulouse, ou un Amour espagnol* (1836).

[20] The first libretto for *Christophe Colomb*, the one that David used when composing, was by his literarily inept friend (and first biographer) Sylvain Saint-Étienne. Méry was brought in to replace it with better-crafted words. See Annegret Fauser, '"Hymns of the Future": Reading Félicien David's *Christophe Colomb* (1847) as a Saint-Simonian Symphony', *Journal of Musicological Research* 28/1 (2009): 1–29.

[21] Berlioz, *Critique musicale*, vol. 9, 482: 'l'un des écrivains de notre temps les plus latinistes, les plus versés dans la connaissance de l'antiquité romaine'. There are probably many

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is high praise from a man who knew by heart most of Virgil's *Aeneid* in Latin and who had recently finished the main compositional work on *Les Troyens*, a massive five-act opera based on that epic poem. (*Les Troyens* would not reach the stage until 1863, in a version that omitted its first two acts.)

Indeed, Méry's images of grandeur and imperial sway marked the sets and costumes of *Herculanum*, which reviewers assured their readers were among the most elaborate and (at least seemingly) authentic that had ever been seen on the stage of the Opéra. The net result was crucial to the impact made by the various characters. The Roman ruling class and its vassal princes and princesses from abroad – notably Nicanor and his sister Olympia – matched the scenery in the ostentatious apparel that they wore and (to judge by the libretto and the music) in the confidence and spontaneity with which they moved and expressed themselves. The oppressed Christians, in stark contrast, wore simple linen gowns and were obliged to comport themselves, again and again, in postures of modesty, piety, supplication and fear. More precisely: the chorus of Christians is present only in the opening of Act II. In the bulk of the opera, Lilia and Hélios are thus the only Christians, vulnerable in a sea of pagans. Queen Olympia (in Act III) ridicules Hélios's people as ascetic desert-dwellers who eat dry bread under palm trees, but this image backfires on her, since it can evoke the Jews' forty years of wandering or, equally well, David's own *Le désert*, in which brave members of a caravan face sandstorms and critique the soft life of city-dwellers who enjoy the safety of solid, tomb-like houses.[22]

One should also notice the historical details that Méry omits from his preface. He does not mention the slave revolt led by Spartacus and others (73–71 BCE), even though it occurred in this very region (starting in Capua, north of what is today Naples, and continuing in an encampment near Vesuvius itself) and is explicitly evoked by Nicanor in Act IV, scene (*tableau*) 1, when he urges the slaves to rise up against their masters. Even more basically, Méry does not mention a single individual Christian. Perhaps this was his way of admitting that the Christian characters that we are about to meet in his and David's opera are invented by him. Indeed, he describes the entire work as *légendaire* and at most implies that Olympia is somehow analogous to Zenobia, the renowned queen of Syria who, with Roman support, extended her realm westward to include Egypt; her dates were approximately 240–274 CE.[23] As for Olympia's brother Nicanor, Méry most likely borrowed that name from 2 Maccabees; there, Nicanor is a Syrian-Seleucid Greek general sent by king Antiochus Epiphanes to subdue the Jewish population of Judea, and he is described as 'thrice accursed', a phrase that the opera's baritone role fully deserves.[24] Olympia displays many traits typical of the eastern queens

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subtle historical allusions in the libretto yet to be discovered. Olympia's taunt to Hélios about whether he would rather starve under the green dome of the palm trees (see below) may have been spurred by the description of the Essenes by Pliny the Elder: they 'observe celibacy and live without money and with only palm trees as companions' ('omni venere abdicata, sine pecunia, socia palmarum'), *Historia naturalis*, bk. 5, sect. xv, para. 73. Pliny's text was available in French translation from 1826 onward, but Méry could apparently read Latin well.

[22] Hagan, *Felicien David*, 67–86; also Ralph P. Locke, 'The French Symphony: David, Gounod, and Bizet to Saint-Saëns, Franck, and Their Followers', in *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony*, ed. D. Kern Holoman (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997): 163–94.

[23] Zenobia reigned in Palmyra (the site semi-destroyed by members of ISIS in 2015), though Méry, perhaps speaking broadly, places her near the Euphrates.

[24] 2 Macc. 8:34. Antiochus ruled from Antioch, today Antakya in southern Turkey, near the border with Syria.

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and sorceresses from early generations of opera. (For example, she has access to magic potions.) But Nicanor is an even more distasteful type of distant foreigner: he becomes positively smarmy in the end of Act IV when he comments that, if Hélios leaves Olympia (who, we recall, is Nicanor's sister) and returns to the Christian virgin Lilia, he is 'walk[ing] away from pleasures barely tasted' ('abandonne / des plaisirs à peine goûtés!'). More generally, then, Olympia and Nicanor, though endowed with power by Rome, are the latest in a long series of portrayals of exotic and corrupt members of the ruling class, and carry resonances of, for example, Belshazzar (in the Book of Daniel) and the 'whore of Babylon' (in the Book of Revelation, a passage quoted by the Christian preacher Magnus in Act I).

That Olympia and Nicanor come from a distant land – one ruled earlier by, indeed, Babylonia – was perhaps a nod to a widely read English novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, which features characters from Rome, Greece and Egypt.[25] By contrast, the characters in, for example, Andrea Leone Tottola's libretto for Giovanni Pacini's *L'ultimo giorno di Pompeii* (1825), an opera about the same basic event – the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE – consist entirely of Romans. Méry seems to have been one of the first to realize what advantages could be had by merging Roman decadence (for example, the empty display of wealth, built upon slave labour) with, as it was understood, eastern voluptuousness and manipulativeness.

The librettist, and the directors of the Opéra, may have also felt that bringing exotic ethnicity into the heart of the Roman Empire would give the composer Félicien David a chance to strut his stuff, given the latter's success up to that point with works set in distant lands, especially in *Le désert*, *Christophe Colomb* (1847), *La perle du Brésil* (1851), and certain songs and descriptive piano pieces (including his remarkable song *Tristesse de l'odalisque*, to a heartbreaking text by Théophile Gautier).[26] The resulting opera libretto worked out well, freshening the Roman Empire setting with new colours and qualities (such as invocations of the supernatural), and giving ample scope to David's abilities and predilections.

The Opera's Plot: A Christian Minority Oppressed by Roman Rulers from the East

The opera's plot, adumbrated in Méry's unusually learned if chronologically confused preface, deserves a more extensive summary phrased in terms of the opera's central and enlivening tension between ancient Rome and early Christianity.[27] In

[25] The Bulwer-Lytton novel became the basis of a much-performed Italian opera, *Jone, ossia l'ultimo giorno di Pompei* (La Scala, 1858) by Errico Petrella and also of an opera by Victorin de Joncières, *Les derniers jours de Pompéi* (Théâtre-Lyrique, 1869). Two other immensely popular novels about Roman persecution of early Christians came later (and, like the Bulwer-Lytton, were much adapted for films and such): Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero* (1896, in Polish but soon translated).

[26] As noted, the two had already collaborated twice, directly or indirectly.

[27] Méry conflates Rome's third-century persecutions of Christians (under Diocletian, and involving Queen Zenobia, who reigned from Palmyra) with those of the first century (under Nero, Titus, and others). He attributes too readily to various ancient writers the explanation that Vesuvius exploded to punish those who had persecuted Christians. He also implies that the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 78 CE, whereas this occurred in 70 CE.

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the following, I also offer occasional hints about David's musical treatment, to be explored more fully later.[28]

> Act I: Nicanor and Olympia are a brother-sister pair from near the River Euphrates (most likely in what is today southern Turkey or northern Syria). We find them living near the heavily Greek-influenced city Neápolis (the future Napoli/Naples) on the southwest coast of the Italian peninsula. Olympia resides in an impressive palace in Herculanum (modern Ercolano), a seaside resort favoured at the time by wealthy and influential Romans and located close to Mt Vesuvius. These two aristocrats from 'the East' (more specifically, from the ancient Near East, or what we would call the Middle East today) have been granted vassal status by Rome in exchange for promises to extirpate, in any way they can, the nascent Christian movement. Nicanor has been promoted to proconsul, and Olympia has been named, by Rome, queen of her home region, though she seems to be living semi-permanently in luxurious Herculanum. (I will use the French name of the town, to make clear that I am referring to an operatic fantasy-locale, not the city as it is understood by archaeologists and historians today.)
>
> Proconsul Nicanor and Queen Olympia set their sights on a loving pair who are intending to marry: Lilia and Hélios.[29] We are given no background about Lilia. Hélios, a Greek prince, has given up a life of leisure and power and has accepted instead the modest, frugal existence of a Christian adept. Lilia, Hélios and the other local Christians live and worship on a desolate plain near Herculanum.
>
> Act I begins with kings and princes coming to pay tribute to Queen Olympia. Hélios and Lilia are brought before her, as a crowd clamours for the two Christians to be put to death. The beleaguered pair plead their case, and Proconsul Nicanor and Queen Olympia are struck, briefly, by the sincerity of the couple's faith in God and by their love for each other.[30]
>
> Nicanor, regaining his composure, welcomes the crowd's proposal, but Olympia wants to toy with this handsome young man. She spares the two Christian lovers, sends Lilia away, and plies Hélios with a magic potion, after singing a 'Chanson de la coupe' ('Goblet Song'), beginning 'Bois ce vin que l'amour donne' ('Drink this wine offered by Love'). As Hélios drinks, a passage of orchestral music (almost a miniature symphonic poem) evokes the seeping of the powerful liquid into his nervous system. Reverting to his original proclivities as a Greek (non-Christian) prince, he yields to the power of the drug and sings ecstatically of the sensual glories of Olympia and her realm.[31] He repeats this tune, with the queen now entwining her vocal line around his, presumably a symbol of their imminent physical conjoining. She has servants lead Hélios offstage to await her.

[28] The following plot summary expands upon and incorporates some phrases from the one in the Bru Zane CD/book, 54–56 (unattributed; trans. Mary Pardoe, 102–4).

[29] Perhaps the couple intended to remain celibate even in marriage: Hélios, when pressed by Olympia to drink the wine, offers a toast to 'innocent love' – 'Je bois à de chastes amours!'

[30] The opera at one point was intended to bear the title *La foi et l'amour*; also, at another, *Le dernier amour*, referring to the fact that all of earthly existence was to come to an end in the original final scene (which ended up being removed).

[31] There is a hint of this early on: when the queen is alone with Hélios (and Lilia), Hélios cannot resist offering the aside: 'Qu'elle est belle!' ('How beautiful she is!').

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The earth now quakes, and a Christian prophet named Magnus warns, in images derived from the Book of Revelation, of imminent punishment by a spirit of evil that will rise out of the earth. Olympia taunts the man: 'Ouvre l'abîme! / Je veux le voir, / le dieu du crime, / l'archange noir!' ('Open the abyss wide! I want to see him, this god of sin, this black archangel!'). Further underground rumbling causes fear in Nicanor and the chorus. Reddish fumes begin to rise on the horizon, leading Nicanor briefly to predict that Vesuvius may soon erupt. But Olympia and, then joining her, Nicanor launch an energetic finale to the act, urging the crowd to laugh at Magnus ('Écoutons et rions!'), in music that – as critics pointed out – is full of Offenbach-like jauntiness. The chorus happily joins in, while the holy man lobs at them fresh images of the grim fate that awaits those who refuse to repent: 'L'air glacé / a passé / sur vos têtes' ('an icy wind has passed over your heads').

Act II: In a pointed contrast to the splendid settings of the other three acts, Act II takes place in a 'wild, deserted spot' in the valley between Herculanum and Mt. Vesuvius. The modest members of the persecuted Christian sect worship at a cross that they have erected upon a rock not far from some toppled columns. This visual juxtaposition forms a transparent symbol of the triumphant rise of the new, world-conquering religion and the impending downfall of pagan Rome. The Christians (a chorus without soloists, hence signifying a quasi-egalitarian congregation) pray to God in music of great simplicity and modesty. Nicanor enters and has his guards drive away 'this rebel band' ('cette troupe rebelle'). He speaks one lie after another to Lilia: he loves her, wants her to join him in his palace, and will adorn her with all the beauties of the East. He even claims to have adopted her Christian beliefs. She points to the poverty in which true Christians are forced to dwell and to the cross, which now (miraculously) glows in the darkness on the nearby hill.

Nicanor, who clearly has no taste for an ascetic lifestyle, admits that he was lying to please her.[32] He tries to overwhelm Lilia physically, and she retorts that she relies upon God for protection. Nicanor declares: 'Your God does not exist!' He is immediately struck dead by lightning, and Lilia faints, while the orchestra (in a second mini-symphonic poem) evokes, first, his demise, then powerful emanations coming from below the ground. Satan arises before our eyes and announces his delight at causing human beings to suffer and his current aim: to cause Lilia to experience jealousy.

When the Christian maiden returns to consciousness, Satan shows her, magically, a vision of Hélios (Figure 1), smitten, at the feet of Olympia and repeating his love song from Act I, now cushioned by slow chords from an unseen chorus (SSTTBB), humming dreamily.[33] Lilia is not so much jealous as horrified. Satan snatches the dead proconsul's cape and declares his intent henceforth to impersonate Nicanor. His precise words are 'Et maintenant le proconsul c'est moi', likely evoking the tyrannical motto long associated with Louis XIV: 'L'état c'est moi'.

Act III is set entirely in the queen's garden, with a view of the temple of Hercules and, further in the distance, Neápolis and the bay. In the centre, a victory column for Titus evokes the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple. (Audience members in 1859 surely knew about the similarly purposed Arch of Titus in the

[32] This anticipates Carmen's lies to Don José about being of Basque origin like him (toward the end of Act I in Bizet's *Carmen*, 1875). Carmen, like Nicanor, quickly admits, when pressed on the matter, that she was lying.

[33] Earlier operas with wordless choruses include Auber's *Haydée* (1848, supporting a solo voice, as here) and Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1851; Paris, 1857, as a quasi-orchestral 'storm' effect).

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Fig. 1 The moment in Act II in which Satan shows Lilia, by means of a 'magical image', her beloved Hélios singing a love song to Olympia, whom the Romans have installed as queen over her native lands near the Euphrates River. Front-page illustration in *L'Univers illustré*, no. 45, 26 March 1859; Gallica.bnf.fr, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Roman Forum, with its bas-relief of Roman soldiers carrying off the Temple's massive menorah and other sacred implements.) Hélios and Olympia are now a couple, and their union is celebrated by a second grand aria for her, this time in honour of the love-goddess Venus, and an extended ballet divertissement. Lilia appears and reminds Hélios of his vows to her and to God. Olympia confronts the Greek prince with a choice: he must agree to reign with her or else Lilia will be put to death. The Christian maiden boldly declares her allegiance to God – indeed, to the Trinity – in a canticle-like aria ('Je crois au Dieu que tout le Ciel révère') that would take on a life of its own, separate from the opera.[34]

Satan enters, disguised as Nicanor. Lilia, who engaged with Satan in the previous act, cries out 'C'est Satan!' Her warning goes unnoticed. Satan/Nicanor persuades Olympia that Lilia will suffer more if she witnesses Hélios's marriage to the queen and his rejection of the Christians' God. In a powerful ensemble, Lilia tries to

[34] See n. 5, above.

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persuade her beloved to resist temptation, Olympia and Satan/Nicanor each urge him to welcome it, and the frazzled man vents his despair at all the push-and-pull, finally crying out, 'Par pitié! Laissez-moi!' ('For pity's sake! let me be!').[35]

Satan/Nicanor now declares that Hélios has already broken his vow to Lilia. Hélios, fearing that he is no longer worthy of his true beloved and hoping that he can at least save her life, agrees to wed Olympia. Satan declares victory ('L'enfer l'emporte' – 'Hell has prevailed'), and Lilia cries out in despair that Hélios will now no longer go to Heaven.

Act IV is in two scenes, each with its own elaborate stage set. The first takes place in the atrium of Olympia's palace, highly decorated 'with all the riches that Etruscan imagination can supply'. Satan gathers the slaves of the region, calls them 'sons of Spartacus' (the leader of the famous slave rebellion in Rome, 73–71 BC), and assures them that the gods will support them if they rise against their masters and, he implies, pillage the opulent mansions. (They happily endorse the plan: 'Cette terre féconde / nous paiera nos travaux / et nos maux' – 'This fertile land will repay us for all our [past] labours and sufferings'.) In an impressive cabaletta-like movement, Satan assures the slaves that 'Ce peuple est à l'agonie / et demain il sera mort!' ('This people [the Romans and their vassals] is already in its death throes / and tomorrow it will be no more!'). The slaves agree to grab what they can: 'À nous ces lieux / aimés des dieux! … / C'est notre tour' ('These places beloved of the gods are [now] ours! … It is our turn').

In the second and concluding scene of Act IV, Vesuvius has begun exploding, nearby buildings are cracking, and a scorching superheated flow (scientists today describe it as 'pyroclastic') is entering the valleys. Hélios has escaped to high ground, namely the terrace of Olympia's palace. He is baffled that he has not yet been swallowed up like so many others, and he worries that Lilia has perished in the wide-spreading catastrophe. When she appears, he thanks God, a surprising invocation that causes her to react with scorn. After he expresses deep remorse, Lilia forgives him and they agree to face together whatever fate has in store for them. They join in an impressive cabaletta in which they declare their intention to be forever united in Heaven.

More buildings collapse, Olympia enters distraught, and Magnus declares that God's vengeance has now arrived. Satan (perhaps casting off Nicanor's cloak) now explains to the queen that her brother died, and he reveals his identity: 'Je suis ce dieu du crime / que ce matin tu voulais voir' ('I am the god of sin, whom this morn you wished to see'). Satan tells Olympia that her reign is at an end. She calls upon Heaven (perhaps recognizing God's power?) to create a suitably royal grave by burying all of Herculanum with her. Lilia and Hélios cry out, 'C'est le ciel! c'est la vie!' ('This is Heaven! this is life!'), and any buildings that were still standing now fall into heaps. When the air clears, the scene is one of endless desolation, with Vesuvius still belching fire and smoke.

The opera thus ends very quickly, with the death of everyone on stage (except perhaps Satan, though the stage directions at the end of the libretto do not mention him). This drastic foreshortening did not upset critics at the time. They were presumably accustomed to it from other operas of the period. For example,

[35] In the Bru Zane recording this line was mistakenly assigned to Lilia. (The score is laid out confusingly, but the published libretto makes clear that Hélios was here to sing these crucial bars.) The phrase, correctly assigned to Hélios at the Wexford and Budapest performances, makes clear how irreconcilable are the pressures that are being put on him.

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Halévy's *La juive* and Verdi's *Il trovatore* both end with a horrifying death, moments before the curtain falls. This was not Méry and David's original plan: they intended a subsequent scene portraying the Last Judgement, in which the population of Herculanum (or of the entire world, it seems) would be divided into saints and sinners and go off to enjoy or bewail their respective eternal fate. The scene was excised before the first performance.[36]

Characterization and Musical Style: Ancient or Exotic?

The elaborate set-up that Méry provided in his preface might lead us today to expect a work rich in what during the nineteenth century was called *couleur locale*, a phrase that could refer not just to place – that is: ethnic and cultural traits of a region – but also to time period. Yet there is nothing in David's music to suggest that the Roman characters and their vassals from the Middle East (Olympia and Nicanor) lived in the year 79 CE. Quite the contrary, the processional marches and the choruses of praise for the rulers, near the openings of Acts I and III, sound very much like other mid-century operatic numbers that represent the grandeur and might of some much more recent European ruler. This in itself might be seen as an invitation to the audience to consider the nefarious Olympia and Nicanor as symbolizing not so much the ancient 'Orient' as individuals in positions of power 'here' and 'now'.

Indeed, quite notably, those two characters are not exoticized in the music that they themselves sing. Olympia's Act I drinking song is in polonaise rhythm, to emphasize the grand, festive mood. (Berlioz found the number strikingly 'original', though he didn't say in what way.)[37] As for the Greek prince Hélios, one prominent drama critic (Paul de Saint-Victor) exercised his creativity in finding something 'Aeolian' or, continuing even more dubiously, a mixture of 'Greek smoothness [*suavité*]' and 'Creole nonchalance' in Hélios's ecstatic outburst of love for Olympia after the love potion takes effect.[38]

Similarly, most of the Act III ballet is not at all exotic in style. The main danced divertissement, which follows Olympia's 'Viens blonde déesse', is a six-movement

[36] The music survives and has been recorded, under the title *Le dernier jugement*, in a 3-CD album that also contains David's *Christophe Colomb*, and a selection of his chamber, symphonic and sacred works: Palazzetto Bru Zane ES 1028. This is the fourth volume in the Bru Zane series of composer 'portraits'. See my review in *American Record Guide* 80/6 (2017): 100–03; revised and uploaded to the *Boston Musical Intelligencer*, www.classical-scene.com/2019/01/19/felicien-david-revived-digitally/.

[37] Polonaise rhythm had often been used for operatic cabalettas, regardless of whether the character who sings is Polish or not (e.g., the Spanish-born Manrico's 'Di quella pira' in *Il trovatore*). A famous polonaise-style aria in French opera is from a bit later: Philine's 'Je suis Titania' from Ambroise Thomas's *Mignon* (1866). Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between a polonaise-style cabaletta and a bolero-style one.

[38] Paul de Saint-Victor, review in *La presse*, 6 March 1859, quoted in Gunther Braam, 'La réception de *Herculanum* dans la presse contemporaine', in the book accompanying the Palazzetto Bru Zane recording, 31–51 (here 35). Hélios's solo here is almost entirely in G major, with a one-bar excursion to E minor; perhaps the critic intended an analogy between the tune's gentleness and the image of a breeze (when it effortlessly activates the strings of an Aeolian harp). Saint-Victor continues his 'Creole' image with yet another association relating to a foreign land: 'This is the kind of thing that Daphnis would sing while rocking Chloe in a hammock that is stretched between palm trees on a tropical island'.

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pas de deux for 'the Faun and the Bacchante' [a female follower of Bacchus, god of wine], evoking characters from Roman mythology but in no way sounding any different from hundreds of ballet tunes of the period. (Berlioz admired one movement, featuring piccolos, pizzicato violins and a lyrical counter-melody in the cellos.)[39] Olympia's aria is preceded by a shorter 'Pas des muses' (Dance of the Muses), which does convey a distinctive sense of Otherness, sounding like a mazurka or perhaps a highly countrified Ländler or Bohemian dance: it is in 6/8 in A minor, with recurring syncopations and – in the contrasting episode in A major – with a recurring raised fourth degree.[40] Why the Greek Muses should sound Germano-Slavic is, today, anybody's guess. Perhaps David meant the music to sound somewhat folklike. (French hurdy-gurdies in the countryside, like certain Polish mazurkas, sometimes use a raised fourth.) Or was he thinking of the (medieval, actually – not ancient) Lydian mode? Whatever the intent, the result is one of the best and most intriguing dance movements by a French composer of the time.

By contrast to the ballet (aside from this Lydian moment), the chorus of early Christians is pointedly given music that sounds quite unlike what was currently normative in the theatres or the salons. At the beginning of Act II, we encounter the Christian community for the first time. They are praying at a cross that they have erected in the wilderness as a place where they might recall 'the tombs of their ancestors' (perhaps located very nearby). They sing two choral numbers in immediate succession. The first, in pure chordal homophony, reflects the fact that they are entering the spot in a slow procession, taking care not to be heard. Méry built the sense of quiet footsteps into the verses: every line (except the first) is in three syllables, presumably suggesting that the chorus move one small step forward at the end of each line, exactly as David sets it. (I italicize each syllable that coincides with an elongated beat and apparently coincides with a footstep.)

Seuls,
Dans la *nuit*,
Et sans *bruit*,
Avan*çons*,
Évi*tons*
Avec *soin*
Tout té*moin*,
Nous chré*tiens*,
Sans sou*tiens*.[41]

Alone, by dark of night, and making no noise, let us step forward, taking care to avoid being witnessed, we Christians, with nobody to help us.

---

[39] The movements are marked Maestoso, Allegretto, Andantino, Allegro (the movement that Berlioz enjoyed), Premier Écho (Moderato), Deuxième Écho (Poco allegretto) and Final (Allegro).

[40] The dance's contrasting episode may perhaps have influenced Mahler, in his famous song 'Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht?' (*Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, 1892, orchestral version 1902). All the other numbers in the Act III ballet sequence, alas, were excised from the work's one recording and, correspondingly, for the concert performance given in Budapest (which used the Bru Zane performing version). But they can be easily consulted in the score, which was published at the time and is available at imslp.org and other online sites.

[41] The libretto, somewhat confusingly, prints 'Seuls, dans la nuit' as one line, but David knew what to do with it musically.

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The music, in G minor, is marked by a recurrent dactylic rhythm (essentially: crotchet quaver quaver) reminiscent of the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony (the famed Allegretto).[42] The singing begins pianissimo, rises briefly at one moment of fear, and then subsides. These same Christians then, apparently having reached the large cross, join in an unaccompanied canticle in F major that Berlioz rightly praised for its 'felicitous' contrast of phrases for the women and brief chordal statements (pianissimo) by the men confirming cadential arrivals in I, iii, V and finally I again. The aural separation of women and men in this second choral movement surely was meant to suggest a certain emphasis on celibacy among the Christian adepts, quite different from the possessive yearnings of Olympia for the handsome Hélios and – as the audience is about to witness – Nicanor's manipulative praise of Lilia's physical beauty (and his then grabbing her by the arm).

But, as I have demonstrated in various of my previous publications, exoticism in an opera need not rely upon exotic musical features.[43] If a character or group/people is represented – through the sung words, onstage action, and sets and costumes – as being different from Us (that is: different, in some basic way, from the work's original audience), then the composer can feel free to engage all variety of *normal* musical materials to signal that difference, that Otherness, to his or her listeners. (For example, the role of an exotic temptress may be written for a deep-toned mezzo-soprano voice, historically associated with female sensuality; and an exotic male ruler may be portrayed as intemperate and punitive through stentorian pronouncements typical of authority figures generally and/or through devices regularly used for indicating anger and threats, such as stormy rushing scales and emphatic diminished-seventh chords.) This leads us, finally, to discuss the opera's main characters and some specific aspects of their words, actions, arias, duets and larger ensembles.

A Roman Opera without Romans

One of the most surprising features of *Herculanum* is that, though set entirely in the south of Italy – a region formerly controlled by Greeks but, in the year 79, part of the Roman empire – the opera has no characters who are identifiably Roman (apart from the chorus, when it represents the collective inhabitants of the town's fancy palazzos). Rather, it pits two innocent young Christian adepts from Europe against two rather worldly and selfish individuals who have come from some (former) Babylonian-controlled land and who have been raised to unaccustomed power by the Roman authorities. This naturally invites a double question: which of the characters were meant to be perceived as exotic, and in what way. The question can best be answered by drawing attention to the traits that are sketched for the various characters in Méry's libretto and further emphasized (or concretized) by the musical features that David chose to apply. It pays to remember that, in the late 1850s, the composer was at the height of his powers (which he would retain at least as far as the aforementioned *Lalla-Roukh*, 1862).

[42] More precisely, each syllable is cut short by a rest to indicate the singers' fear and cautiousness.

[43] See Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Locke, *The Exotic in Music from the Renaissance to Mozart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Locke, 'The Exotic in Nineteenth-Century French Opera'.

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Olympia is a coloratura mezzo, a category that, though familiar from Rossini operas, took on increasingly exotic and *femme fatale* qualities in French operas, notably in *Samson et Dalila*, an opera that Saint-Saëns started composing in the late 1850s. (Because of the persistent institutional nervousness about putting biblical characters and stories on stage, *Samson* would not reach performance anywhere until 1877 in Weimar, translated into German; it finally reached Paris in 1890.) Olympia even emits a remark of triumph, toward the end of Act I, that could have been put in Dalila's mouth: 'Le désir enfin brûle son coeur … / Il m'appartient, il est à nous!' ('Desire [for me] is finally burning in his heart … / He belongs to me, he is ours!').

Olympia is a conniving sensualist. She is acting on behalf of the Roman authorities to subvert the Christians any way that she can: by her physical beauty, by her singing voice (her big Act I and Act III arias are both explicit 'diegetic' numbers, namely a call to drink and a hymn to Venus), and by the wonders of her realm, which is filled with lovely vegetation, symbolic of her own physical ripeness.[44] Like the sorceresses – often associated with 'the East' – in many early operas set in ancient days (for example, Armida, queen of Damascus; or Medea, from Colchis, which is now a part of Georgia), she has supernatural powers, namely access to love potions. And David rose to the occasion, as Berlioz observed: 'The chromatic figure in the muted violins, as Hélios feels the love potion taking effect, is vividly appropriate'.[45]

Olympia's self-possession and willingness to display her beauty are understood as being marks of her political power and also of her eastern-ness. Presumably she was highborn in her homeland, and accustomed to being feted and adored. The beauty that makes her so desirable is represented as much by her powers of vocal display as by her bejewelled finery. This is evident in her Act I drinking aria, in which she invites Hélios to imbibe with her: this is perhaps the most extroverted number in the whole work, and one of the flashiest. Berlioz found it 'exceptionally well written for the voice of Madame [Adelaide] Borghi-Mamo', 'enormously effective', and, from first note to last, marked by great 'originality' (high praise from one of the century's most original composers).[46] The coloratura is even more luxuriant in Olympia's much-praised 'Hymne à Vénus' in Act III: 'Ô, viens blonde déesse'. The aria ends with four successive 'bounces' from a low D to a trilled middle D, and then one last scalar ascent to a high A (the approximate equivalent, for a mezzo, of a soprano's high C). Audience members may well have thought of a previous exotic female, the native Brazilian woman Zora in David's *La perle du Brésil*, when hearing similar bounces (a crotchet on the downbeat, followed by a minim, in 3/4 metre) at the end of the middle section of Olympia's aforementioned first-act drinking aria: there they occur on the second syllable of her emblematic word 'plaisir'; and in Zora's 'Charmant oiseau' they had occurred on the emotionally rather similar word 'joyeux'.

[44] 'Diegetic' is a term borrowed from film criticism. A diegetic number in an opera is one that the character or characters is or are *singing*, such as a lullaby or drinking song. Most operatic exchanges are understood as heightened renderings of lines that a character is *speaking* (or, in a soliloquy, thinking).

[45] Berlioz, *Critique musicale*, vol. 9, 483: 'Le dessin chromatique des violons avec sourdines, au moment où Hélios ressent l'influence du philtre amoureux, fait image'.

[46] Berlioz, *Critique musicale*, vol. 9, 483: 'C'est par son originalité … que se fait remarquer le passage 'Bois ce vin que l'amour donne', et le morceau tout entier qui le suit, supérieurement écrit pour la voix de Mme Borghi-Mamo, est d'un grand effet'.

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Nicanor, Olympia's scheming brother, is a sometimes stentorian, sometimes wheedling bass-baritone, close kin to Robert's diabolical father Bertram in Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable*. His role, like that of Olympia, is studded with coloratura, most extensively in the first tableau of Act IV, when he – or, more accurately, Satan posing as him – urges the slave population of Herculanum (male chorus) to rebel against their masters and mistresses.[47] Consistent with the distorted ethics that drive Satan, the coloratura is somewhat bizarre, including four bars entirely in dotted quavers and semiquavers (on the second syllable of '[mar-]chons!'). His part also includes some striking downward leaps to unusually low notes, including a creepy low G (over a diminished-seventh harmony in that same scene with the chorus of slaves).[48]

As for the galop-like music in the *stretta* (to use Italian terminology) with which the onstage Romans and easterners end Act I, and perhaps especially its tarantella-like coda, some critics at the time found it insufficiently dignified for the Opéra, perhaps especially the shift, on the part of the chorus, from fear to laughter (at the warnings from the one onstage Christian: the prophet Magnus).[49] But, in fact, the passage quite appropriately skewers Olympia, Nicanor and their followers, showing that they prefer a life of sensual pleasure and that they disdain the warnings being announced to them by a man who takes seriously the precepts that God has laid down for living a good and moral life. Berlioz felt that the *stretta* grows and grows appropriately – from the moment when the people break out in (rhythmicized) laughter – and ends with real punch.[50]

By contrast to the demonstrative coloratura of Olympia and Nicanor, Lilia's and Hélios's roles are written in an almost purely syllabic manner, thus etching in note values those characters' basic simplicity and honesty – traits that help us accept that Hélios will eventually return to his rightful Christian beloved, once he is no longer under the influence of the love potion. (The events explicitly take place over the course of a single day.) The role of Hélios is similar in manner and technique to two – namely the title character in *Robert le diable* and Raoul in *Les Huguenots* – that Meyerbeer wrote for Adolphe Nourrit, a singer renowned for his confident vocalizing and excellent skills as an actor. Lilia is, by contrast to the coloratura-launching Olympia, a pure lyric soprano and is perfectly paired in that regard with Hélios. (Their names are similar in sound, hence tend to get set to similar identical rhythms, and have the added advantage of referring to

[47] The slaves in this scene are all male; but the aristocrats in the palaces are of course female as well as male, and Olympia is their chief representative. The coloratura passages for Satan-as-Nicanor were apparently beyond the ability of the singer on the Bru Zane recording; instead, he sings them as a kind of 'la la la', which has a curious and haunting effect, even if not one that the score specifically endorses.

[48] In Act II, when Nicanor feels the ground trembling under his feet, he emits an even lower note: F (on 'sous mes *pas*').

[49] Paul de Saint-Victor, review, in Braam, 'La réception de *Herculanum*', 45. The stretta is the (normally) quick, highly rhythmical final section of a trio or larger ensemble, analogous to the cabaletta of an aria or a duet. Sometimes these were called, in French, *strette* and *cabalette*. David may have used a tarantella rhythm in part because, in recent centuries, dances of that type were common throughout southern Italy, including in the Naples area.

[50] 'Le final, à partir du moment ou le peuple éclate de rire, prend des proportions de plus en plus larges, et l'accelerando de la coda le termine avec chaleur'; *Critique musicale*, vol. 9, 183.

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elements in nature: the lily and the sun.)[51] Thus, oddly, the two Christians, though representing a religion that arose in the eastern Mediterranean, are more normative – more European – than the two representatives of Roman power, who hail from the distant land that had once been known as Babylonia until its conquest by Greece and then by Rome.

Magnus, the Christian priest whose sole assignment in the opera is to denounce the aristocrats in the ends of Acts I and IV, is ethnically unmarked. He was apparently born nearby, as Olympia dubs him 'this Italian clown' ('ce bouffon d'Italie'), a phrase that also reminds us that her own realm, by contrast, lies far eastward. Magnus's denunciation of Olympia and her court in Act I ends with sung recitation of phrases from the Book of Revelation.[52] This music (setting dozens of words in a row to a single pitch and then concluding each statement with a short cadential figure) is closely allied to chant formulas that have been used across the centuries in Catholic liturgy (for example, for psalms). Thus, it most likely sounded very familiar, not at all foreign, to most audience members.

A Christian Opera Focusing Heavily on Satan

The role that Satan plays in this work is crucial to the work's treatment of the pagan vs. Christian binarism. An opera about ancient Rome in the older, eighteenth-century style would have had no Satan in it. The very existence of Satan in the plot – and indeed on the stage – further emphasizes that the opera is viewing Rome through a Christian lens (Satan, manipulatively, assures the slaves in Act IV that the Roman gods – 'les dieux' – will support them if they pillage the nearby palaces).[53] Satan thus forms the evil counterpart of Magnus, the upstanding leader of the Christians. The two roles are, significantly, both written for a bass-baritone, thereby stressing their polar opposition, and the two cast members return at the same moment toward the end of Act IV as a kind of double-nemesis. Also, each is, at times, accompanied by a brass ensemble, evocative of power and authority.[54]

Satan is not just a representative of evil: he is, as in the Bible, a superhuman, semi-divine being. He first appears on stage toward the end of Act II, just after Nicanor, having denied the existence of God, is struck dead by lightning. It seems that somehow God's act of striking Nicanor dead has opened a fissure in the universe, or in the surface of the earth, allowing Satan to crawl out of his underground abode and wreak his wonted mischief. Or perhaps this was a broader act of divine retribution: after all, Magnus declared in Act I that, as a result of the debauchery of the 'harlot of Babylon' and the 'kings of the earth […] an angel […] came down from Heaven holding in his hand the key to the

[51] My point is that the Christians here are being aligned with nature rather than with the elaborate artifices of city-dwelling and empire-building. But there may also be Christian echoes here: the pure white lily has long been associated with the Virgin Mary; Jesus's face 'shone like the sun' in Matt. 17:2.

[52] Magnus's words here are freely based on Rev. 17:1–18 and 9:1–28.

[53] 'Voici l'heure! Frappez! / Les dieux sont avec nous!'

[54] Magnus gets supported by brass in his opening address to the assembled throng in Act I; Satan is similarly supported when *he* first appears and declares his evil intentions in the middle of Act II. In Magnus's case, the brass may perhaps be evoking a church organ.

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abyss, and, having opened it, he unleashed the devil, whom the Son of God had held in bonds'.[55]

When Act II ends, Satan, as noted earlier, dons the cape of the dead Nicanor, after which he pretends (successfully) to be Nicanor until shortly before the end of the opera. This switch of identities raises an interesting question that, I believe, has never been raised in the (admittedly few) writings about this opera: who is to sing the role of Nicanor disguised as Satan in Acts III and IV? This is of course a crucial question, given that the two are figures of power in, respectively, Roman government and Christian theology. The original printed libretto and the early reviews state that Louis-Henri Obin sang the role of Nicanor and that of Satan-when-disguised-as-Nicanor, and that Théodore Coulon sang Satan (presumably when *not* disguised – that is, only in the end of Act II or possibly also at the very end of the opera, when Satan re-enters and reveals himself).[56] Later productions seem to have simplified the matter, giving the role to a single singer.[57]

The most likely explanation is that, in the first run of performances, Coulon played Satan from the latter's first appearance in the middle of Act II through to the end of the act (when he dons Nicanor's cape and the curtain falls), and that this was considered necessary since Nicanor's dead body was still visible on stage. In Acts III and IV, the role was assumed by the singer of the role of Nicanor, since Satan now bears his traits (or at least wears his cloak, perhaps hooded to make his face harder to see). One review of the first production specifically praised Coulon for generously appearing in a role that was 'épisodique': that is, Coulon appeared in just one scene.[58] But Nicanor and Satan are never alive on stage at the same time. Thus, for later performances, stage directors must have come up with ways to enable a single singer to encompass both roles in their entirety, such as by having Nicanor's dead body be replaced (under cover of darkness) by a mannikin. Or perhaps replaced by a supernumerary dressed as Nicanor, while the singer of the role of Nicanor quickly changed into the costume for Satan. A third possibility: maybe the singer was already wearing the Satan costume, under his cape as Nicanor.[59]

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[55] 'Un ange m'apparut et me dit: "Je te montrerai la condamnation de la courtisane de Babylone, avec qui les rois de la terre se sont abreuvés du vin de la débauche […] Et je vis un ange qui descendait du ciel, tenant dans sa main la clef de l'abîme; et, l'ayant ouvert, il délia le démon que le fils de Dieu tenait enchainé'.

[56] Louis-Henri Obin (1820–1895) would be Verdi's first King Philip in *Don Carlos* (1867). Théodore-Joseph Coulon (1822–1874) had taken the secondary role of Béthune in the premiere of Verdi's *Les vêpres siciliennes* (1855). The separate publication of Satan's *couplets* in Act IV ('Allez, dans la nuit profonde') states that the number was sung by Obin. (He is still in disguise as Nicanor: the slaves call out to him by that name.)

[57] This simplification in the casting was carried out in the Bru Zane recording (and the performance by the same forces at the Versailles opera house) as well as at the staged performances at Wexford Festival Opera and in the concert performance in Budapest.

[58] See Ernest Reyer's review, now online at https://ernestreyer.com/articles/courrier-de-paris-1859-03-08/. Joseph d'Ortigue, similarly, praises Coulon for handling well a supporting role (in Braam, 'La réception de *Herculanum*', 44); if Coulon had sung Satan-as-Nicanor in Acts III and IV, the role would have been more extensive than what Obin had done in Act I and the beginning of Act II.

[59] A similar switch may have been made in Saint-Saëns's *La princesse jaune* (1872), when Léna provides the voice of the painted Japanese princess (that is, a character being imagined by the drug-addled artist Kornélis) while we still see Léna (or, as I propose, a supernumerary) sewing in the (semi-darkened) back of the room. Theatrical sophistication of this sort

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Bringing the Ingredients, and the Characters, Together

There is a danger, when talking about a forgotten opera, that one will separate out its various strands and judge each of them on its own merits. This is certainly a trap into which some already ill-intentioned critics fell when reporting on the work's opening night in 1859. But, with the advantage of hindsight, and the published full score and good recordings to consult, we can now draw attention to moments in which the various elements come together with a powerfully engaging effect. (True, we have to imagine the costumes, sets and staging, but the book that comes with the Palazzetto Bru Zane recording reproduces a number of illustrations from the period.)[60]

The orchestral preludes and postludes in the work are particularly varied and distinctive in character. Often they do not simply anticipate or repeat material from one or another musical number; rather, they alter or develop it, juxtapose one such excerpt with another, or even superimpose one upon another. This is true, for example, of the Introductions to the four acts and the aforementioned orchestral music underlying Hélios's drinking of the love potion (middle of Act I). One particularly imaginative orchestral response to a moment in the text comes near the beginning of Act IV: Hélios's yearning cries for 'Lilia!' – on a rising fifth, followed by a second fifth a half-step higher – are immediately countered by chromatic sobs in the English horn, clarinets and horns, indicating both the terrible silence that is meeting him and his fear that his beloved has perished. Important melodies also recur in fresh dramatic situations and are adapted accordingly, as when (in Act II) Satan allows Lilia to view, magically, Hélios extolling Olympia in song, or when (in Act III) Lilia and the English horn remind Hélios of the love he once avowed for Lilia and for God.

The scene between Satan and the slaves (the 'sons of Spartacus'), not least some of its orchestral commentary, may remind listeners of diabolical moments in Weber's *Der Freischütz* (the 'night birds' squawking in the Wolf's Glen Scene) or Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust* (specifically, the several apparitions that threaten Faust during his horseback ride to Hell). Audiences at the time might have likened it more to the scene for Bertram and the spirits of hell in Act II of Meyerbeer's aforementioned *Robert le diable*, a work that was much better known in France than either *Der Freischütz* or *La damnation*.

The Christian religious element is well caught by the composer in Lilia's brave aria at the court of Olympia, 'Je crois au Dieu que tout le Ciel révère'. The tune's solid squareness likens it to a hymn and helps us feel Lilia's bravery and commitment. One critic at the time, Léon Escudier (better known as a music publisher in Paris, and co-owner of the journal *La France musicale*), claimed to find a resemblance between the melody and that of Adolphe Adam's 'O Holy Night' ('Minuit, chrétiens', composed 12 years earlier), implying – unfairly – that David had quasi-plagiarized.[61] The resemblance is actually fleeting. More to the point

was easily available in Paris, and of course was central to a theatrical genre that would soon become a major presence in the Parisian theatre world: the fairytale extravaganza (or *féerie*). See Tommaso Sabbatini, 'Music, the Market, and the Marvelous: Parisian Féerie and the Emergence of Mass Culture, 1864–1900' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2020).

[60] More illustrations can be found at gallica.fr and at www.bruzanemediabase.com/fre/OEuvres/Herculanum-Mery-Hadot-David.

[61] Escudier was ill-disposed toward David because the latter had earlier sued him, and won, for cheating him financially as publisher of *Le désert*. Further, see Locke, 'How Reliable Are Nineteenth-Century Reviews of Concerts and Operas?'

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is that Lilia's hymn, after its first strophe, goes on to be treated in a powerfully operatic manner, as the crowd of pagans curses this isolated, defenceless woman in almost machine-gun-like quick repeated notes while she adamantly continues her profession of faith.[62]

The moments that most effectively embody the work's tension between Christian morality and the multiple dangers of Eastern-pagan sensuality, Roman power and satanic scheming (themes I have discussed above) are not the solos, as effective as they are and as highly praised (and indeed often encored) as they were, but the duet for Lilia and Nicanor (in the middle of Act II) and the duet for Lilia and Hélios (near the beginning of Act IV), and the broadly laid-out ensemble finales of Acts I and III. Here David had plentiful models of musico-dramatic structure that he could adapt, not least from operas of Donizetti and Verdi.

Each of those two duets is laid out in multiple movements (an opening one, a more lyrical, self-enclosed one, a transitional one and a concluding up-tempo *stretta*), a pattern that Rossini had codified in serious operas such as *Tancredi* (1813), *Semiramide* (1823) and *Le siège de Corinthe* (1826). But the vocal lines are heartier and more thrusting than Rossini's tend to be, relying on full-volume singing in the upper register, such as one encounters in Edgardo's outburst in the second-act finale of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1838), 'Maledetto sia l'istante'.[63]

In spite of this heavy reliance on Italian models, the work does not come across as a pale copy, in large part because of David's imaginative and varied orchestration and also his often-subtle manipulation of melodic material and phrase structure. Though Reyer said in his review that he carried entire melodies in his head from having heard them on opening night, he may have been referring mainly to their opening phrases.[64] There is hardly a single melody in the work that returns to its opening phrase at the end, in the manner of so many AABA (or, using prime marks, AA′BA″) tunes of the Italians. David's most self-enclosed melodies often move from one kind of material to another and close with a third, in a way that is meaningless to reduce to capital letters (for example, AA′BC) because the materials actually have linkages and contrasts that it would take a separate study to demonstrate (something more like AA′A″A‴), creating a sense of forward movement and development that matches the complex emotions that a given character is feeling at the time and also reflecting the sonic and emotional weight of specific words and syllables.

Harmony is an effective tool in this process. In the first movement of the Act II duet with Nicanor (the movement that Italians at the time sometimes called the *tempo d'attacco*), Lilia's opening melody begins with a closed eight-bar period (two four-bar phrases) in A-flat major, each phrase ending placidly in the tonic,

[62] In the mid-1800s, inventors in many lands designed and patented rapid-firing automatic weapons, but the first such weapons to achieve wide use was the Gatling gun of the 1860s, a few years after this opera. The menacing effect of the crowd's quick repeated notes can be sensed visually as well as aurally in a video excerpt (with the same performers that made the Palazzetto recording) at https://youtu.be/EUCyk3P7Kyc.

[63] See, for example, Hélios's desperate plea to Lilia when they first meet again in the second *tableau* of Act IV (piano-vocal score, pp. 321–2: 'Oui, j'ai mérité l'anathème'), over a jerkily pulsing figure in the cellos and basses.

[64] Similarly, Reyer may not have noticed, consciously, the subtle differences in text declamation between Hélios's 'Dans une retraite profonde' (in Act I) and Lilia's immediately following restatement to *nearly* the same tune, reflecting the specific words that she is singing.

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reflecting her pious statements about praying on behalf of Olympia, Nicanor and her beloved Hélios. But it continues with two further phrases that deepen the mood: first modulating to the relative minor, on words in which Lilia describes herself as weak and living in isolation from the world ('Faible et dans l'ombre retirée, / que pouvez-vous craindre de moi?'), and then returning to the tonic major as she asserts her desire to live unnoticed, devoted to her love and her faith ('Ah! laissez-moi vivre ignorée, / avec mon amour et ma foi').[65] But the third phrase (the one in F minor) incorporates a five-note descending motive (with a dotted rhythm in it) that had been heard in the second A section, not in the first, and that will then dominate the fourth and concluding phrase. The process feels almost inevitable once it is over, yet it was in no way predictable.

Even more remarkable is the passage in Lilia's Act IV duet with Hélios in which she agrees to forgive him: an 11-bar phrase that is utterly coherent and connected, each phrase growing out of and responding to the previous one in ways that defy simple explanation. The key is the extreme one of G-flat major, often used at the time in situations invoking passionate love; and the orchestration features sextuplets in two harps, suiting Lilia's prayer for Hélios to receive heavenly pardon.[66]

Other cases of melodies that continue in unpredictable but, finally, gratifying ways include Olympia's 'Suis-la, suis-la donc' in the Act III finale, built entirely of four-bar phrases until the final phrase, which expands into five bars to allow the singer to emphasize the queen's sarcastic taunt to Hélios (while rising to a C in her powerful high-middle register), namely that, if he rejects her, he can perfectly well enjoy a grim life, eating air and praying under the palm trees ('Et vivre d'air et de prière / Sous le dôme vert des palmiers!').[67] And, in regard to that same Act III finale, Berlioz – so fond of rhythmic complexities – expressed particular delight at the offbeat accents in the coda, sung out emphatically by everybody on stage.[68]

These kinds of compositional subtleties testify to David's familiarity with the works of the Austrian and German composers he so admired (he particularly mentioned Beethoven and Weber in early letters) and with the current reigning masterpieces of French opera, notably those by Meyerbeer.[69] We might recall that he had, by this point, composed symphonies, quartets and piano trios that were influenced by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, (arguably) Schubert and other composers from across

[65] This passage is on pp. 151–2 of the piano-vocal score (Paris: Heugel, 1859).

[66] See Hugh Macdonald's seminal article on musical works (e.g., opera arias) using this key and some sort of compound meter: 'G-flat Major, 9/8', *Nineteenth*-Century Music 11/3 (1988): 221–37. Macdonald focuses specifically on pieces in 9/8, rather than the 4/4 (notated as a C) – with sextuplets in the two harps – that is used here.

[67] Piano-vocal score, pp. 257–8. Then there are the moments when an important tune is restated in a new setting: the aforementioned return of 'Dans une retraite profonde' in the English horn, against broken phrases from Lilia (Act III), or the aforementioned magical scene in Act II when Hélios is seen singing his serenade to Olympia but now with wordless choral accompaniment to emphasize that this is a dreamy apparition.

[68] Berlioz, *Critique musicale*, vol. 9, 484. Berlioz had not seen a score and so described it as an accent on the second beat of a 4/4 bar. The passage is notated in 2/4; the syncopated pattern is thus quaver-crotchet-quaver.

[69] On David's admiration for Beethoven's Ninth and for Weber's *Der Freischütz* (performed in Paris as *Robin des bois*) and *Euryanthe*, see his letter of 12 August 1831, partially quoted in Locke, *Music and the Saint-Simonians*, 85, and in Hagan, *Félicien David*, 28. Two examples, among many, of Meyerbeer's remarkable ability to create fluid melodic structures are found in *Robert le diable*: Isabelle's 'En vain j'espère' (in Act II) and her 'Robert, Robert, toi que j'aime' (Act IV).

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the Rhine, and had even gotten most of these performed and published. To tell a story of largely distinct national styles in mid-nineteenth-century European music (French vs. German vs. Italian) is to deny the basic reality of cross-cultural admiration and mutual influence: 'cultural transfer', as it is called by historians today.

The layout and flow of the Lilia–Nicanor duet (Act II) likewise demonstrates David's (and Méry's) having absorbed the effective methods of scene-construction that had been more or less codified by Rossini and then further developed in recent years by, most notably, Donizetti and Verdi.[70] It begins with what is, effectively, a typical *tempo d'attacco*, done as a 'similar' movement, with Nicanor repeating, for the most part, Lilia's melody (discussed above) but in the dominant, and with two energetic leaps to a high C in the final phrase. After he promises her the 'treasures' of 'the Orient', to a tune that Lilia bluntly ignores, she launches what is, structurally, the *cantabile* (second main movement) of the duet, but in an emphatic, Donizettian manner full of wide leaps up and down. Nicanor attempts to reply, in the parallel minor, with his most outrageous lie (that, to prove his love for her, he has become a Christian), and then they battle out the matter in simultaneous singing, ending in Lilia's major mode. After what scholars today would call a short *tempo di mezzo*, Nicanor now is the one to launch the cabaletta, but it is the 'dissimilar' type pioneered by Donizetti and used extensively by Verdi: Nicanor here uses again the emphatic style of the second movement, made menacing by being in the minor (F), but Lilia responds in the parallel major and with a much more conjunct melodic line, to words begging God for a miracle or else for death. And the duet comes to a highly theatrical conclusion as Nicanor 'seizes Lilia' (according to the printed libretto and the piano-vocal score), then cries out 'Your God does not exist'.[71] The ground shakes and the ray of light on the cross turns red (according to a stage direction in the orchestral score). Lilia comments, in a tone of 'exaltation': 'God replies to your blasphemy with a wondrous sign' ('A ton blasphème Dieu réponds par un prodige'). The Lilia-Hélios duet in Act IV is, if anything, even more consistent in musical quality and dramatic force.[72]

As for the finales to Acts I and III, they testify to David's growth as a composer and his increasing ability to match music to single characters or groups of characters in a way analogous to, yet distinct from, what Verdi achieved in, for example, the famous quartet from the last act of *Rigoletto*. We have already seen this in the concluding *stretta* of the Act I finale that Berlioz so praised.

Even more impressive is the Act III finale. In its remarkable second movement, Olympia, Nicanor and Lilia struggle over Hélios, each urgently informing him what he should now do ('Parle, réponds, décide!'). A propulsive figure, grimly orchestrated for bassoons and strings in unison, keeps modulating from key to key, leading the beleaguered man to cry out: 'Quelle nuit que ce jour!' ('How fearsomely dark is this day!') and, finally to implore them all: 'Par pitié! laissez-moi!'

[70] For a discussion of the absorption of Rossinian multi-movement duet structures into French grand opera see, among others, Steven Huebner, 'Italianate Duets in Meyerbeer's *grands opéras*', *Journal of Musicological Research* 8/3–4 (1989): 203–58.

[71] The orchestral score reads, instead, 's'étendant les bras à Lilia' ('reaching out for Lilia with both arms'), which could be viewed as less threatening – or as more so.

[72] It contains Lilia's prayer to God (discussed earlier), begging pardon for Hélios; the cabaletta is remarkably stirring, as can be seen in a video excerpt from the concert performance that followed the Brussels studio sessions: https://youtu.be/EUCyk3P7Kyc.

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('For pity's sake, let me be!').[73] This brings Lilia to lament the situation that Hélios has created, in broken phrases while the English horn – frequently associated in the nineteenth century with the exotic – repeats the melody of the declaration that Hélios and then Lilia had made to Olympia and Nicanor in Act I.[74] The tension between Christian virtue and pagan (and Satanic) manipulation – or, speaking more generally, the struggle between two irreconcilable forces, each seeking to enlist the support of one valued, beleaguered individual – has never been better expressed than in this four-minute stretch of music. Or six minutes, if one starts with Olympia's powerful, sardonic 'Suis-la, suis-la donc, si tu l'aimes' ('Go, follow that woman, if you love her'), discussed earlier.

The Act III finale concludes with a powerful ensemble movement in which Hélios declares his love for Olympia (in order to save the life of Lilia); Satan sings, gloatingly, 'Gloire à moi'; and everyone on stage and in the pit joins in the highly syncopated coda that (as mentioned) so delighted Berlioz. Hearing this whole act-finale, after its having gone unperformed for a century and a half helps listeners today understand why in 1867 David was granted a massive financial prize (20,000 francs) for this opera and his subsequent one (*Lalla-Roukh*) by the Académie des Beaux-arts and, two years later, was elected unanimously to replace Berlioz as a member of that same Académie, a 'section' of the distinguished Institut de France.

* * *

Herculanum, which relies on fire and heavy ash for its dramatic final minutes, itself became a victim of fire in 1873 when the imposing sets – and presumably the lavish costumes – were destroyed by the massive conflagration that consumed the Opéra's theatre (the Salle Le Peletier). As a result, the work would thereafter have been too expensive to revive, a fate it shared with some other highly worthy operas in the company's repertory.

But *Herculanum* has been brought back to life again in our own day (indeed three times, with entirely different casts, orchestras and conductors). The unexpected return of this remarkable work helps remind us of the many vital creations that once held the musical and theatre-going world enthralled in Paris and in other major European cities, and shows how a savvy creative team was able to knit together in new ways and with great dramatic and musical vitality historical and legendary accounts about the widespread Roman Empire and its struggle with early Christianity.

[73] This climactic phrase is erroneously sung by Lilia on the Bru Zane recording, because of a misleading error of layout in the published orchestral and piano-vocal scores. It was correctly taken by Hélios and to great effect, in the two later productions (Wexford and Budapest).

[74] The English horn is given a prominent countermelody in Lilia's Act I statement of the very tune under discussion. Its higher cousin, the oboe, wails mournfully in the orchestral interlude in the middle of Act II (after Nicanor is struck dead and Lilia faints).

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Appendix: Méry's Preface to the Published Libretto (1859)

L'action se passe en 79, sous le règne de Titus, un an après la prise et la devastation de Jérusalem.

Les légendes citées par des écrivains du troisième et du quatrième siècle, Diogène Laërce, Denis d'Alexandrie et Ammien-Marcellin, attribuent l'éruption du Vesuve et la destruction d'Herculanum, de Pompeia et de Stabia aux impiétés païennes commises dans Jérusalem, et aux persécutions recommencés contre les chrétiens en Orient, dans la presqu'île de Corinthe et dans la grande Grèce, surtout à Naples et en Sicile.

Domitien, successeur et frère de Titus, déjà sur les marches du trône, après les règnes si courts de Vespasien et de son fils, continuait les mauvais jours de Caligula, de Claude, de Néron et de Galba. Il n'en fallut pas advantage pour exciter l'imagination des légendaires. Le Vésuve fut regardé comme un vengeur; il incendiait des villes maudites, où les contempteurs de l'arche sainte et les persécuteurs des chrétiens s'établissaient dans de voluptueuses residences, en oubliant les fétides exhalaisons du carnage, au milieu des roses de Paestum et des parfums de l'Arabie heureuse, selon les conseils de leur voisine Sybaris.

Parthénope, ou Naples, était à cette époque la ville la plus frequentée par les étrangers de toutes les nations. Chaque peuple retrouvait à

The action takes place in the year 79 [AD], during the reign of [the emperor] Titus, one year after Jerusalem was captured and laid waste [by Roman troops].

Legends reported by third- and fourth-century writers – Diogenes Laertius, [Saint] Dionysius of Alexandria and Ammianus Marcellinus – attribute the eruption of Vesuvius and the destruction of Herculaneum, Pompeii and Stabia to the pagan sacrileges committed in Jerusalem [for example, the pillaging of the Holy Temple] and to the renewed persecution of the Christians in the Orient, on the peninsula of Corinth and in greater Greece, and especially in Naples [then: Neápolis, the former Parthenope] and in Sicily.

Shortly after taking the throne, Domitian, Titus's brother and successor (after the very brief reigns of Vespasian and his son [Titus]), continued the evil ways of Caligula, Claudius, Nero and Galba. Little more was needed to spark the imagination of the myth-makers. Mt. Vesuvius was seen as an avenger: it set fire to accursed cities, where the disparagers of the Holy Ark and the persecutors of the Christians built splendid residences for themselves and ignored the fetid smells of carnage by surrounding themselves with roses from Paestum and perfumes from Arabia Felix [that is, southern Arabia: what is today Yemen], as they were advised to do by [the pleasure-loving inhabitants of] nearby Sybaris.[1]

Parthenope, or Naples, was at this time the city [and region] more visited than any other by foreigners from far and wide. Visitors found in

[1] The city of Sybaris (today Sibaris), on the Gulf of Taranto at the southern end of the Italian peninsula, was known in the Greek-speaking world for the self-indulgence of its inhabitants, hence the eventual adjective 'sybaritic'.

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Herculanum et à Pompeia ses habitudes, ses temples et l'image de ses dieux: Vitruve y étalait tous ses ordres d'architecture; l'atrium corinthien y mêlait ses élégances à la simplicité grave du style de Paestum, et les nautonniers d'Egypte, reconnaissables à la voile privilégiée dite *supparum*, saluaient, en traversant le golfe de Baïa, les sphynx du Nil, alignés devant les temples napolitains d'Isis et de Sérapis. L'élément chrétien et civilisateur descendait de Corinthe à Naples et luttait contre le paganisme et la barbarie, représentés par tous les peuples du monde connu.

Après la conquête de la Judée, Rome songea bientôt à secourir ses prêtres et ses dieux menacés, à Damas, en Syrie et sur les bords de l'Euphrate, par le christianisme naissant. Selon les traditions de cet Orient qui a donné le suprême pouvoir à tant de reines, entre autres Sémiramis, Cléopâtre, Zénobie, une reine dévouée à la religion de l'Olympe, vint recevoir l'investiture et la pourpre à Naples. Elle devait ensuite repartir pour l'Euphrate avec la mission d'arrêter les progrès du christianisme, en faisant des martyrs par la violence ou des apostats par la séduction. C'est l'Olympia de cet ouvrage légendaire. Son frère Nicanor, prince d'Orient, transfuge rallié aux Romains et ayant trouvé le prix de sa defection dans le proconsulat de la Grande Grèce, secondait toutes les vengeances exercées par Olympia contre les novateurs. Si un néophyte chrétien de haute naissance et d'un rang élevé tombait alors des mains d'un délateur aux mains d'un proconsul ou d'un préfet du prétoire, on employait tous les moyens possible pour le ramener à la religion charnelle du Plaisir; car la chute éclatante d'un chrétien illustre devait entrainer beaucoup d'apostasies subalternes et donner des loisirs aux bourreaux, qui se lassaient enfin de leur métier, après un demi-siècle de persecution.

Herculaneum and Pompeii their own customs and temples, and images of their own gods. There, Vitruvius displayed his various architectural 'orders'; there the elegance of the Corinthian atrium combined with the stern simplicity of the Paestum style; there, boats from Egypt, recognizable by their special sail called the *supparum*, greeted – as they crossed the Gulf of Baia – sphinxes from the Nile, positioned in front of the Neapolitan temples of Isis and Serapis. The Christian, civilizing impulse travelled from Corinth to Naples and did battle against paganism and barbarianism, such as were found among all peoples of the known world.

After securing control of Judaea, Rome soon decided to protect its priests and its gods, who were threatened by the rise of Christianity in Damascus, in Syria, and on the banks of the Euphrates. In accordance with the tradition of that Oriental region – which placed the reins of supreme power in the hands of a number of queens (among them Semiramis and Cleopatra) – a new queen, Zenobia, devout in her adherence to the religion of [the gods of] Olympus, came to be crowned in Naples, where she donned the purple robes of majesty. She was then obliged to return to the Euphrates with the mission of halting the progress of Christianity, making martyrs through violence or apostates through seduction. This is the Olympia of the present legendary [that is, fictional] work. Her brother Nicanor, a prince from the Orient and a convert who has sided with the Romans and who has been repaid for his defection by being named proconsul of Greater Greece, supported all the acts of vengeance committed by Olympia against the supporters of the new religion. If a Christian neophyte of high birth and station was reported by an informer and was to fall into the hands of a proconsul or a tribunal prefect, no efforts were spared to draw him into the carnal religion of Pleasure. They were aware that the well-publicized fall of an illustrious Christian could lead to many further apostasies among lesser figures and thus provide a welcome break to the executioners, who were finally tiring of their work after a half-century of persecution [of the Christians].

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L'oeuvre lyrique d'*Herculanum* a donc été composée avec ces légends, ces traditions, ces faits historiques, ces documents, qui, par leur date, s'associent à la plus grande catastrophe de l'ère chrétienne, à la déstruction de trois villes englouties sous un déluge de feu, dans le plus beau pays du monde.

The opera *Herculanum* has thus been composed from these legends, traditions, historical facts, and documents, which date from the era of the greatest catastrophe of the Christian era: the destruction of three cities under a deluge of molten lava – and in the most beautiful country of the world.[2]

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[2] Joseph Méry and Térence Hadot, *Herculanum: Opéra en quatre actes* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1859), preface, [5]–7. The version of the preface reproduced and translated (by Mary Pardoe) in the small book that accompanies the Bru Zane recording is missing two large passages, since it is simply the version that Berlioz adapted at the outset of his review of the first performance. And the important, summative last paragraph is mistakenly presented (in both the French and English versions) as if it were part of Berlioz's own comments. The error was first made in Berlioz's review itself; the typesetter must have misunderstood Berlioz's handwritten indications about that sentence. The error is faithfully perpetuated in the online version of the review at the Berlioz site established by Michel Austin and Monir Tayeb: www.hberlioz.com/feuilletons/debats590312.htm, and in the complete edition of Berlioz's *Critique musicale*, vol. 9, 475–86. It is corrected here for the first time.