

Félicien David (1810-1876): Overview of writings

Félicien David never wrote articles, reviews, or books, nor texts for his own musical works. Indeed, all witnesses confirm that he was, in person, a man of few words: taciturn and even shy, not seeking public attention.

Nonetheless, he was well aware of the power of words. The many choral pieces that he composed for the Saint-Simonian movement (a “Utopian socialist” movement that flourished in the 1820s-30s) have texts that, though written by others, surely reflected his social views.

Equally valuable is the preface to the collection of 22 piano pieces that he composed during his two-year stay, with some other Saint-Simonian adepts, in the Middle East (mainly Ottoman Turkey and Egypt), 1833-35. The preface explains his intent to adapt various “airs nationaux” to suit Western taste by means of Western harmony (and he might have added: standard types of keyboard figuration and formal principles). Again, the wording may have been concocted, or at least tweaked, by others (such as the publisher, Pacini).

The most extensive body of verbal documents by David (and now clearly attributable entirely to him) consists of letters. Perhaps a hundred or more survive, mainly in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Département de la musique). The ones from his early years—before he achieved fame with *Le désert* in 1844—are sometimes long and heartfelt, commenting on musical works that he admires (such as Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and Weber’s *Euryanthe*) and venting his despair about finding a place for himself in the musical world of Paris. Later letters tend to be brief and practical, often relating to ticket requests for an upcoming concert or operatic performance.

David was granted honors and sinecures in his later years, such as being named music librarian of the Conservatoire (after the previous holder of the position, Berlioz, died). One position with somewhat more substance was his appointment to evaluate the Galin-Paris-Chevé singing school and its method. He may or may not have written the published report, but the positive judgment that it offers surely reflected 1) his own happy training as a young chorister in Aix-en-Provence, 2) his productive experiences as composer of (and vocal soloist in) choral pieces for the male members of the Saint-Simonian movement to sing (1831-33), and, of course, 3) his gratification at the success of several works that contain major passages for or with chorus (including *Le Désert* and his one grand opéra, *Herculanum*, 1859).

David’s literary leanings and preferences are surely evident in the texts of his musical works. And these leanings are tied up with his more general political and aesthetic principles, including a respect for people from the lower classes, for

animals, and for the beauties and power of the natural world. He defended his song “Le Bédouin,” about a Bedouin riding a camel, by saying that “one must have ridden this noble beast” (“il faut avoir pratiqué ce noble animal”) to understand the song. He surely collaborated hand-in-hand with one of his fellow Saint-Simonians, Auguste Colin, in creating the basic “plot” of his first *ode-symphonie*, *Le Désert*, as also with his childhood friend Sylvain Saint-Etienne, in laying out David’s second and last *ode-symphonie*, *Christophe Colomb* (1847). Colin and Saint-Etienne must have based their respective libretto (in each case a combination of verses to be sung and verses to be declaimed by a *récitant*) upon a sequence of musical and textual “events” that David had laid out for them. Thus, the final result, in each case, was shaped at a basic level by David’s musical but also literary predilections.

David collaborated three times with the noted poet and playwright Joseph Méry: Méry reworked heavily, or often simply replaced, Saint-Etienne’s verses for *Christophe Colomb* (see Fauser 2009); David’s *mystère* entitled *L’Éden* (1848) was set to a text by Méry; and Méry wrote the bulk of the much-praised libretto for the aforementioned *Herculanum*, a work constructed to end with a passage that David had already composed, showing the Last Judgment. That scene got removed, in part to keep the opera from becoming too long, and David’s friend Térrence Hadot was brought in to make late adjustments in the libretto, adjustments that enabled the work to be staged and indeed become a notable box-office success. David then released the scene as a separate work for two choruses and orchestra, under the title *Le Jugement dernier*.

More generally, many of David’s works use texts written in whole or part by a writer-friend (such as Tyrtée Tastet). The renowned poet Théophile Gautier wrote poetic texts directly for David to set as *mélodies* for voice and piano. (Gautier then sometimes reworked the poems before publishing them himself as purely literary works.) The net result is a body of vocal works (songs, choral pieces, operas, short oratorios, and *odes-symphonies*) that is at once typical of its era—but also filtered through the composer’s own distinctive literary sensibilities and aesthetic preferences.

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For further information:

Letters are published entire or in significant excerpts in J.-G. Prod’homme, “Félicien David d’après sa correspondance inédite et celle de ses amis (1832-1864),” *Mercure musical et S.I.M.* 3 (1907): 105-25, 229-75, and in Prod’homme, ed., “Correspondance inédite de Félicien David et du Père Enfantin (1845),” *Mercure de France* (1 May 1910): 67-86.

Others letters (including ones not published in the above) are in Ralph P. Locke, *Music, Musicians, and the Saint-Simonians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); the original French wordings can be found in the French translation of that book: *Les Saint-Simoniens et la Musique*, trans. Malou and Philippe Haine (Liège:

Mardaga, 1992). The French version can be read open-access here (once one subscribes, for free, to Internet Archive): <https://archive.org/details/lessaintsimonien0000lock/page/8/mode/2up>.

The report by David and others on the Galin-Paris-Chevé method was published as a booklet: *École Galin-Paris-Chevé : visite d'inspection (sur invitation publique) par une délégation du comité de patronage à l'École primaire communale, rue des Mathurins, 10, le 20 février 1861, procès-verbal* [signé Félicien David, F.A. Gevaert, Edmond Membrée] (n.p., n.d., [1861]).

Fausser, Annegret. "Hymns of the Future": Reading Félicien David's *Christophe Colomb* (1847) as a Saint-Simonian Symphony," *Journal of Musicological Research* 29 (2009), no. 1: 1-29.

Hagan, Dorothy Veinus. *Félicien David, 1810-1876: A Composer and a Cause*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1985.

Also, see the entry on David by Hugh Macdonald and Ralph P. Locke, in *Grove Dictionary of Music* (www.oxfordmusiconline.com).

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