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Monday, 11 September 2017

## From curiosity to charm: a portrait of Felicien David

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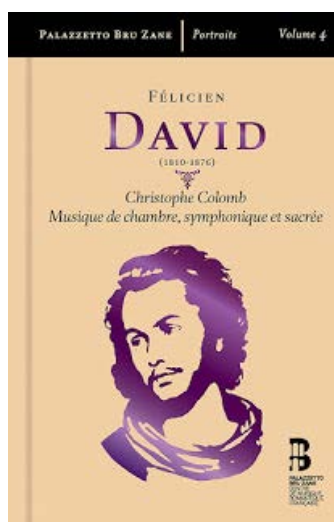
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Felicien David - A Portrait; Francois-Xavier Roth, Les Siecles, Herve Niquet, Brussels Philharmonic, Flemish Chamber Choir, Cyrille Dubois, Tristan Raes; Palazetto Bru Zane / Ediciones Singulares  
Reviewed by Robert Hugill on Sep 07 2017  
Star rating: 4.0

### Wide-ranging portrait of Felicien David including his symphonic ode *Christophe Colombe*

The composer Felicien David had a long and fairly successful career as a composer in 19th century France, but like many his name is now almost only a note in the record books. Things seems to be changing, his symphonic ode *Le Desert* was released in 2015 (see [my review](#)) whilst his opera *Herculanum* was performed at the Wexford Festival last year. Now [Palazetto Bru Zane](#) and [Ediciones Singulares](#) are filling in further gaps by releasing a three CD set which aims to widen our knowledge of David's music. [Francois-Xavier Roth](#) conducts [Les Siecles](#), the [Flemish Radio Choir](#), [Chantal Santon-Jeffery](#) (soprano), [Julien Behr](#) (tenor), [Josef Wagner](#) (baritone) and [Jean-Marie Winling](#) (speaker) in David's second symphonic ode, *Christophe Colombe*, [Herve Niquet](#) conducts the [Brussels Philharmonic](#) in the overture to *La Perle du Bresil*, *Le Jugement Dernier*, and *Symphony No 3* (with the Flemish Radio Choir) , and

[Niquet](#) conducts the Flemish Radio Choir and [Francois Saint-Yves](#) (organ) in *Six Motets*, [Cyrille Dubois](#) (tenor) and [Tristan Raes](#) (piano) perform a selection of melodies, [Pascal Monlong](#) (violin), [Pauline Buet](#) (cello), [David Violi](#) (piano) perform *Trio No. 1*, and [Jonas Vitaud](#) (piano) performs a selection of piano music.

The largest work, by far, on the disc is the symphonic ode, *Christophe Colombe*. This is for soloists, speaker and orchestra and is very much a follow up for *Le Desert*; Felicien David was very much in the vanguard (along with Berlioz) of experiments with

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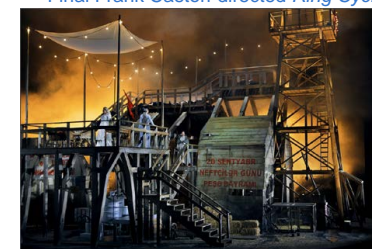
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symphonic form. In fact, the symphonic ode was more popular than we realise; most of the works have dropped out of circulation except for Berlioz's experiments (*La Damnation de Faust*, *Romeo et Juliette* and *Lelio*) but the admirable book which accompanies the Cd set includes a list of 13 works in the symphonic ode category performed between 1844 and 1850!

*Christopher Colombe* is in four movements, *The Departure*, *A Night in the Tropics*, *The Revolt* and *The New World*, presenting not so much a narrative as a series of snapshots. The soloists play various characters, Columbus himself, a sailor Fernand and his beloved Elvire to whom he has to say goodbye, along with other sailors and even a female Indian. But it is in the more descriptive passages where David seems to be at his strongest. The narrative sections seem rather stuck in 'characteristic music' mode, whereas in the orchestral descriptions we hear a real voice, aided by the highly poetic narrative spoken by Jean-Marie Winling.

In style, it is tricky to pinpoint David's music, you can hear clear influences of Berlioz but without the really distinctiveness of Berlioz's orchestration and musical imagination, and there are also hints of Gounod too.

The overture to the opera comique *La Perle du Bresil* is an attractive pot-pourri of vaguely exotic tunes (the work was his first opera). It would definitely make an attractive concert opener. I am less sure about *Le Jugement Dernier* which was written as the final apocalypse of the opera *Herculanum* but cut before its premiere. It is undoubtedly grand, and striking in its way with some lovely moments but never quite reaches the climax of the last Judgement that you expect.

It is Mendelssohn whose music seems to come to mind when listening to David's *Symphony No. 3*. In four movements, it is a correct work, yet full of charm. An amiable first movement, leads to a gentle second, and the perky scherzo leads to an even perkier final movement which suggests an overture to an opera comique.

The second disc concludes with a group of works which show Felicien David in entirely different mode, six motets. These are, mainly, for choir and organ (though one is unaccompanied) but the organ seems to support rather than add an independent voice. David does seem to bring a nice ear to this music, it is far more than academically correct, and some of the motets would be worth investigating by modern day choirs (though some are somewhat long for modern services). We get a variety of textures and moods, and both *Pie Jesu* and *Omenes gentes* seem striking.

The third disc opens with one of the highlights of the whole set, a group of seven melodies performed by Cyrille Dubois (tenor) and Tristan Raes (piano); *La ramier*, *Eoline*, *Cri di charite*, *Tristesse de l'Odalisque*, *L'Egyptienne*, *Le Jour des morts*, *Le Rhin allemand*. Dubois has a lovely lyric tenor voice and sings the songs with great beauty of phrase and care for the words. David's songs elicit great melodic charm and lyric beauty, and in the strophic ones there is always a strong sense of narrative running through. But, it has to be said, that some of the strophic ones are quite long, and need careful attention to the texts to get the best from them. But other songs are more complex, *Cri di charite* has a sense of dramatic recitative and a fluidity of structure, whilst *Le Jour des morts* is sombre with hints of the East in the piano. Throughout Raes provides highly characterful piano accompaniment.

The *Trio No. 1* is performed by Pascal Monlong (violin), Pauline Buet (cello), David Violi (piano). It is a charming piece, with a lovely singing quality to the instrumental writing and a nice interaction between the players. This sense of melodic charm continues into the selection of piano music, gracefully performed by Jonas Vitaud.

The fact that he had real experience of the East means that we perhaps expect more of David's music than we should. Though he treats exotic subjects, his music is firmly of its time and any references to exotic music are carefully woven into David's own style. What this set does do is to place his music firmly into context, giving us something of the broad sweep of his musical interest. And the performances on the disc are admirable, allowing the melodic charm of the slighter works to come out whilst relishing the quirky drama and poetics of the larger ones like *Christophe Colombe*.



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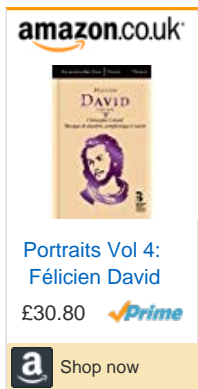
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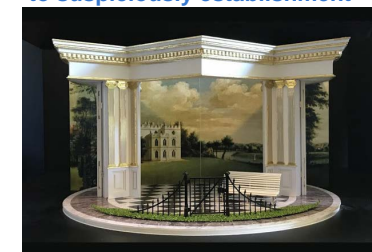


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Posted by Robert Hugill at 9/11/2017 07:58:00 am



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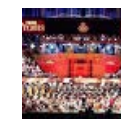
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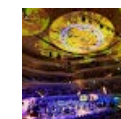
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