

Félicien David: the revealer of musical exoticism in the Romantic Era

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Abstract: *This paper argues about one of the features which distinguish 19th century Romantic art: exoticism. Unknown cultures, distant places, different peoples, all these were considered exotic and fascinated the European public. The Orient was perceived as an exotic world, the study of its cultures became widespread, works of art representing the East were created – this approach to the East is one of the meanings of the term Orientalism. The magic of the East captured the artists, writers and musician, among them Félicien David, the French composer who, after travelling to the Orient and spending two years in Egypt would return to France with the sound of the desert imprinted in his soul and merge the music of the East with the traditional European compositional techniques, creating a new language to express exoticism through music, his masterpiece: „Le Désert”.*

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1. Introduction

In his work *Romanticism* the British art historian Hugh Honour argues about the impact and consequences the philosophical ideas of the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution of 1789 had on the the human thoughts and emotions. Beginning with the 1790's life and art are viewed from a different angle: this is „*the new school, which in the absence of a more suitable name, might as well be referred to as Romanticism*”, writes Hugh Honour quoting the German historian Friedrich Bouterwek (Honour 1983, 23). „*Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling*”, as Baudelaire believed (Honour 1983, 9), a way of feeling distinguished by the belief that each being is unique (this feeling of artistic unicity might be one of the explanations as to why some of the artists refused to name themselves using this term), by emotional integrity and the superiority of feelings over the rational mind.

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A definition which dates back to 1755 describes *the romantic* (from an aesthetic point of view) as in Honour (1983, 23): „*something that resembles fairy-tales or knight-tales; exotic... improbable; false... fantastic; surrounded by wild scenery*”, features which characterize the artistic masterpieces considered today as belonging to the Romanticism. On realizing that reality does not mirror his highest ideals, nor does it offer the proper setting for these to manifest, the romantic hero seeks refuge in a fantastic world where everything becomes possible (the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann offer a great example in this sense), or in nature, which either reflects the soul of the artist, or offers a contrasting picture for his feelings. „*Music is the mysterious essence of nature expressed through sound (...) a manifold world, full of magical apparitions surrounds me in a circle of flame... from this chaos a work of art must be born (...)*”, believes E.T.A. Hoffmann (Constantinescu 1979, 87).

2. Exoticism and musical exoticism

Beginning with the 17th century, due to expeditions to the faraway Eastern lands, pilgrimages and later voyages with a commercial purpose, the Orient becomes more approachable for Europeans. The Oriental culture has influenced European art from as early as the 15th century, the Western artists striving to represent, reproduce, immitate or incorporate elements of Oriental art into their creations. Art history uses the term *Orientalism* to define Western works of art with Oriental themes, creations which immitate or depict Eastern cultures, but this term will gradually begin to refer to the cultural aspects of imperialism, to the creation and maintenance of an unequal relationship between a more powerful culture and the one that is dominated. In his work *Orientalism* Edward W. Said argues that one of the meanings of Orientalism is the following: „*a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient*” (Said 2003, 3). Said talks about a stereotyped view on the Orient.

Representations of the Orient in 19th century works of art will be one of the distinguishing features of Romantic art: an art which is *exotic, surrounded by wild scenery*. *Exoticism* characterizes the works of art with an Oriental theme and it became a trend in European art, especially during the Romanticism to represent or describe peoples, customs and scenes from foreign lands, preceived as *exotic*, different and unusual. By representing what is perceived to be remote from the West the Romantic artist may seek shelter in an imaginary world, but he can also strive to represent what is unacceptable for the contemporary society (nude female figures, violent scenes etc.). Thus, Orientalist art becomes a way of dominating the East by placing unwanted behaviour in a different space than the West.

French musicologist Hervé Lacombe believes that a clear distinction should

be made between exoticism and Orientalism (Lacombe 2001, 179). Exoticism may refer to a world full of colour, that is different from the Western world, a place represented through visual means in staged works (operas, plays). For the 19th century the Orient embraced Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, the North African coast, but also Spain, because of the Moorish Muslim conquest and rule, as well as Venice due to its connections with Constantinople.

In one of his articles on musical exoticism, Ralph P. Locke presents several definitions for the term *exoticism*: „... a combination of procedures that evoke cultural and geographical Otherness...(by) use of meaning-units that seem... borrowed from a foreign artistic language”, as music theorist Jean-Pierre Bartoli states (Locke 2007, 482), while musical exoticism „is the process of evoking in or through music – whether the latter is 'exotic sounding' or not – a place, a people, or social milieu that is not entirely imaginary and that differs profoundly from the 'home' country or culture...” (Locke 2007, 483).

3. A future composer: Félicien David

During the 19th and early 20th century the French colonial empire ruled over states in Africa and Asia. At the dawn of the 19th century Napoleon's campaigns in Egypt and Syria, although unsuccessful in the end, contributed to the creation of a new view on the Orient and a growing interest in the study of Egyptian culture. The political and military events are closely observed by the French artists, musicians and writers who express their sympathy and support through their works.

In the preface to his poetry volume *Les Orientales*, published in 1829, Victor Hugo writes about the fascination the Orient had begun to inspire: „On s'occupe aujourd'hui, et ce résultat est dû à mille causes qui toutes ont amené un progrès, on s'occupe beaucoup plus de l'Orient qu'on ne l'a jamais fait. Les études orientales n'ont jamais été poussées si avant. (...) Les couleurs orientales sont venues comme d'elles-mêmes empreindre toutes ses pensées, toutes ses rêveries; et ses rêveries et ses pensées se sont trouvées tour à tour, et presque sans l'avoir voulu, hébraïques, turques, grecques, persanes, arabes, espagnoles même, car l'Espagne c'est encore l'Orient; l'Espagne est à demi africaine, l'Afrique est à demi asiatique.” (Hugo 1832, 13-14)

The colours of the Orient that Hugo describes will eventually envelope the composer Félicien David, an extraordinarily significant figure of the French music, „the true spokesman of faraway places”, the first to reveal the French public the fascinating Orient (Lacombe 2001, 198). David was born in Cadenet on the 13th of April 1810, a withdrawn and introspective child growing up to become an adult who finds his peace in solitude and contemplation. Orphaned at the age of 6, David began his musical studies at the Church of Saint-Sauveur in Aix-en-Provence and later studied literature at the Saint-Louis Jesuit college. He obtained a position in the

orchestra of the theater of Aix, and later was given the opportunity to become *maître de chapelle* at Saint-Sauveur, but David never relinquished his dream of improving his musical education in Paris.

In 1830 Félicien David is accepted as a student at the Conservatoire de Paris, whose director was at that time Luigi Cherubini. He studied counterpoint under the guidance of François-Joseph Fétis and organ at the class of François Benoist. Life in Paris was not free from hardships or worries, which had a great effect on the composer who, in one of his letters to a friend, wrote that poverty causes the death of inspiration (Brancour 1900, 6). This is the emotional state in which David found himself in 1831, the year when, by no mistake, the ideas of a movement named *Saint-Simonianism* (in French: *saint-simonisme*) were presented to him. He becomes a member and will compose numerous works for the ceremonies of the movement, most of these of mystical significance.

3.1. Saint-Simonianism and the Voyage to the Orient

The French political and social movement named *Saint-Simonianism* was founded in 1823 by Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon, and the ideology of the movement had a powerful impact on the 19th century society. Inequality, egoism, the lack of tolerance, poverty, wars, feudalism, all these belonged to the old world, while the count of Saint-Simon suggested that a radical change should be made in society. He firmly believed that industrialization and the progress of science can have a great influence in this transformation. The Saint-Simonians shared a dream about a society in which the most competent members (scientists, artists, philosophers, engineers etc.) have a common goal and that is to create a better world in which peace, prosperity, freedom and equality rule. The importance given to art and artistic creations in the ideology of the movement attracted numerous writers and musicians, of whom the following can be mentioned: the historian and writer Léon Halévy and the composers Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, Félicien David, of whom only the latter is associated with the name of the movement.

Following the death of Saint-Simon in 1825 the movement continued to exist through the propagation of its ideology, but gradually a religious faction was formed around the person of Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin, whose goal was a radical reform of society. Enfantin supported the building of the Suez canal, a project which he considered a symbol of the mystical union between the East and the West.

The religious community founded by Enfantin was banned by the authorities in 1832 and some of the members, Félicien David among them, set out on a journey towards the North of Africa and the Middle East. On the 15th of December 1832 the group left Paris travelling through Lyon to Marseille and on the 22th of March 1833 they embarked on a ship that would travel to Constantinople. The final destination was Egypt, the promised land for the members of the Saint-Simonianism movement,

a precious light in the middle of the darkest ignorance, a land that must regain the prosperity it enjoyed during the reign of the pharaohs.

The first break of the journey was Istanbul, where the special clothing worn by the group was remarked by the sultan himself. Here is a short presentation of the garments worn by the Saint-Simonians: blue tunic (the colour of faith); red vest (the colour of labour), which can only be fastened at the back, so the one who wished to undress needed a helping hand (a symbol of solidarity and brotherhood); white plastron (the colour of love), on which the name of its owner was written; pleated white trousers secured with a belt, symbol of the journey every disciple must be prepared for; necklace with symbolic signs (Brancour 1900, 20).

The journey led the composer to Smyrna, Jerusalem, Jaffa, Alexandria and finally to Cairo, where he spent two years before an outbreak of plague in 1835 forced him to leave the city. David travelled through the desert towards Syria, then Beirut, eventually embarking on a ship that would bring him back to the port of Marseille.

4. The return to Paris – revealing a new world of Sonorities

After his return to Paris David published a collection of 22 Orient inspired melodies for piano named *Mémoires Orientales* (1836), but sadly the works did not arouse the curiosity of the Parisian public. The title of this collection is significant, for the music of the Oriental peoples David had contact with lacked harmonic embellishment, it was a simple and delicate music, most often performed in unison. These exotic themes are embellished by the composer who presents them to the European public using an exquisite harmonic language, which makes this faraway music more accessible for the Occidental ear. The first of these melodies bears the title *Une promenade sur le Nil*, and its melody of Arab inspiration will later be used by the composer in the „ode-symphonie” which brought him fame, *Le Désert* (this melody becomes *La rêverie du soir*, in the second part of the work).

During his solitary retreat in Igny, between 1838 – 1842, he composed 24 string quintets (*Les Quatre Saisons*), piano and vocal works and a symphony (in F major). The latter was received with great enthusiasm by the Parisian public, which determined David to return to the City of Light. Here he composed a second symphony, in Eb major, but the true triumph was to come only in 1844 with the work *Le Désert*, an „ode-symphonie” in three parts for tenor solo, male chorus, orchestra and speaker, each orchestral movement being introduced by a recitation.

The triumph of this work is due to the visionary ideas of Félicien David, but also to the general interest of the 19th century public for all that represented the Orient. The magical world of the East stirred the imagination of the artists, it embodied a new and different world, the sensual and the mysterious, the image of the Orient often being associated with the image of the woman. As early as the 17th

century the image of the Oriental woman, viewed as living an oppressed life, dominated by a tyrannical, violent man (a stereotype image of the Orient frequent in European art), is presented alongside the image of a feminine Orient, placed under foreign domination and imploring the help of the West to be set free, to return to its prosperity (Harrigan 2008, 170). The unification of the two continents, Europe and Asia, under the supremacy of an ideal ruler is coveted and expected (Harrigan 2008, 165 -166).

During the 17th century the numerous expeditions and voyages of missionaries, merchants or simple travellers, awaken the interest of the European society for the foreign civilizations encountered by these people. A new literary genre is cultivated, the *récit de voyage*, works which describe either real or imaginary journeys to faraway lands, written with the purpose of answering the curiosity of the European public, but also to educate the society concerning these exotic cultures. In 1811 Chateaubriand publishes his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (Itinerary from Paris to Jerusalem), in which he describes his journey to Jerusalem, and in 1842 Gérard de Nerval writes about his journey from Cairo to Beirut in the work *Voyage en Orient* (Voyage to the Orient), also including in this book Oriental tales, such as those about King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

The paintings of Eugène Delacroix represent tragic or violent scenes, such as *Le Mort de Sardanapale* (The Death of Sardanapalus – 1827) and even scenes from the harem. The French painter was one of the few Westerners who were given permission to enter a harem, a fact that enabled him to create truthful representations. The painters and writers strive for accurate descriptions of these exotic civilizations and their works abound with picturesque details.

Operatic works with an Oriental subject, such as Boieldieu's *Le calife de Bagdad* (1800) or Mehul's *Joseph en Égypte* (1807) wish to be viewed upon as journeys to the Orient, but the music of these and other similar works still lacks the musical elements to remind the hearer of the East. The Orient is represented rather visually, through the action unfolding on stage, with the aid of decorations and costumes. The work of Félicien David, *Le Désert* opens the way to a new world: „*Ceci dit, Félicien David n'en demeure pas moins le créateur, ou si l'on préfère, le révélateur d'une sensation nouvelle. Dans le monde des sonorités il fit entrer des formes et des colorations inédites, il mêla, aux notions pittoresques, aux légendes, aux contes féeriques, par lesquels les peintres et les poètes avaient établi et entretenu nos idées sur la nature et l'art de l'Orient, cet inexprimable frisson de l'infini qu'à la musique seule il appartient de faire passer dans nos âmes*” (Brancour 1900, 46).

4.1. *Le Désert*

The memory of his voyage to the East, but also his sensitivity and extraordinary intuition, lead David to the creation of a work in which his genius and remarkable

inspiration are thoroughly dispalyed. During his stay in Egypt, inspired by a poem written by one of his companions he composed *Hymne de la Nuit*, a work that eventually became the starting point for a masterpiece bearing the name *Le Désert*.

The French composer believed that the purpose of art is to purify and educate society, thus for the creation of this new work it was necessary for him to collaborate with a poet who would share these ideas. Auguste Coline, member of the Saint-Simonianism movemenet in Marseille embodied the ideal man to materialize David's innovative vision. The composer believed it was necessary for his work to be introduced by an explanation addressed to the public, but he did not wish to use sung recitatives. Instead, for this purpose he chose the simple and pure form of the declamation: a recitation preceedes some of the movements of the work, each verse presenting the story which is about to unfold. Coline's text mirrors David's ideas of a fine and beautiful art in a marevellous manner and illustrates the contrast between the freedom of a life lived in the desert and the dull, hollow life of the city.

The work is structured into three parts, the movements within these baring evocative titles: *Allah! Allah!*, *Marche de la caravane*, *La tempête au désert*; *La caravane reprend sa marche*, *Hymne à la nuit*, *Fantaisie arabe*; *Danse des Almées*, *La liberté au désert*, *La rêverie du soir*, *Le lever du soleil*, *Chant du muezzin*, *Le départ de la caravane*.

The desert is the infinity itself, musically represented by the orchestra, the music is the decorations and the scenery, the sound draws the vague contours of the feelings and apparitions that fill this vast space. The work begins with the note *c*, sustained and prolonged by the orchestra during 36 measures, this is the primary vibration which gives birth to everything. Delicate musical lines are gently woven above this sustained note, lines that closely follow the declamation of the text evoking the story of a caravan travelling through the desert. Not only the titles of the movements illustrate the fascinating image of an exotic world, but also their sonority. The Arab inspired themes of movements like *Fantaisie arabe*, *Danse des Almées* or *Chant du muezzin* musically represent the Orient and offer a truthful picture to the listener. The Arab music that inspired the composer were most probably tunes he became acquainted with during his stay in Egypt. *Le Désert* is much admired by Hector Berlioz, who calls David „a great composer” and considers the exotic sounding fragments „pearls of the Orient” (Brancour 1900, 59 - 60).

The exoticism in the music of David is emphasized by the use of ornamental motifs, similar to those in *Chant du muezzin* and also by the use of certain timbres. In the visual representation of exoticism colour is perhaps the most important factor, this colour is musically represented by the timbre of certain instruments, mainly wind and percussion instruments. In *Fantaisie arabe*, for example, David uses the tambourine and the piccolo in order to create the desired effect and to paint a faithful sonorous image of the Orient.

5. Conclusions

19th century French music is rich in creations, especially stage works, that strive to illustrate exotic places. Although at first exoticism is mainly represented through the subject of the work or through the elements of the staging, gradually it will be expressed through the musical colours or timbres used. Composers became aware of the fact that the traditional European musical system could not recreate sonorously the exotical worlds they wished to musically depict. It was necessary for this system to be enriched with elements that could help recreate the character of Oriental music and the Orient itself.

Félicien David can be considered the innovator of the French musical exoticism of the 19th century, his Oriental themed works among which the ode-symphonie *Le Désert* or the operas *Perle du Brésil* (1851) and *Lalla Roukh* (1862) are special because of their accurate depiction of reality and their sensual character. In these works the composer makes use of sonorities, rhythmic patterns and timbres unmet and unheard before. His operas mark the development of a new style in the creation of operas, the *opéra lyrique*, in which intimate feelings were expressed, the inner world of the characters was revealed (Lacombe 2001, 248).

David is the first composer to present the unusual sonorities of Arab music expressed through traditional European compositional techniques. His works are a harmonious union between poetry, an expression that is sensitive and emotional in style and the revealing music he wrote.

6. References

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