

## FELICIEN DAVID'S *NONETTO EN UT MINEUR*: A NEW DISCOVERY AND NEW LIGHT ON THE EARLY USE OF VALVED INSTRUMENTS IN FRANCE

**Chris Larkin**

**I**n his admirable resume of Joseph Meifred's *Mithode pour le Cor Chromatique ou a Pistons*, which appeared in volume 4 of this Journal, Jeffrey Snedeker sums up contemporary thinking on this important document, from Birchard Coar, writing forty years ago, to present-day commentators.<sup>1</sup> Snedeker's view of Meifred's ideas, as published in 1840, is that Meifred was in favor of the two-valved instrument because adding a third valve only compounded the difficulties encountered with leaky, ill-fitting valves and that he was reluctant to completely abrogate the use of the hand, especially when playing leading tones.

Baines<sup>2</sup> throws light on the background to the development of the *cornet a pistons* in the decade 1830-1840 in three pertinent statements: (1) that Paris was a "leading center of horn playing and the seat of a comparatively new type of mass audience"; (2) that a "number of the younger horn-players (some still barely out of the Conservatoire, and no doubt, like students always, habitués of the premises of their favorite makers) were drawn by the new little valved instruments on which there were no traditions to inhibit them from exploring to the full the totally novel scope and facility of execution which the instruments offered, and to exploit them profitably at popular concerts"; and that (3) "the oldest among them was Duftene, for whom Musard wrote solos and variations for his Promenade Concerts from 1833 onwards."

In 1989 I unearthed in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, a composition that, in a significant way, gives the lie to Meifred's ideas and which certainly bears out all Baines' statements quoted above. This is the *Nonetto en Ut Mineur* by the French *orientaliste* and opera composer, Felicien-Cesar David (1810-1876). The work is substantial: lasting twenty minutes, it is cast in four movements, and is scored for two *comets a pistons* crooked in low 13 (first, second, and third movements), and low F (finale), four *tors a pistons* crooked in F throughout, two trombones, and ophicleide. This article attempts to sketch in a little of the composer's life and background, to describe the work, and to outline the circumstances of its composition in 1839 and its significance in the history of brass playing.

### **The Composer**

Felicien-Cesar David was born into a humble family at Cadenet in the Vaucluse on April 13th, 1810. He was the fifth child, and his mother died shortly after his birth. The boy's father was an amateur violinist of some talent and is said, in Azevedo's biography of the composer, to have been delighted with the four-year-old Felicien's response to his playing.<sup>3</sup> He died in 1815 and the family was then cared for by the eldest daughter.

In the spring of 1816 the principal oboist of the Paris Opera, Gamier, visited Cadenet and was told of the unusual musical talents of this village boy. He insisted upon meeting the lad and was impressed by his ability in aural tests and in singing. He recommended a musical education, perhaps a trifle impractically. However, the boy's chance came in the following year when the family moved to Aix and he was accepted as a chorister by the cathedral of St. Sauveur. In his early teens he composed hymns and motets for this choir and even attempted a string quartet after he had begun to study the violin. When his voice broke he quit the choir and entered the College of St. Louis, a Jesuit foundation. Here he was given the opportunity to study Latin, French literature, and a little of mathematics and science. After their expulsion from France in 1762 the Jesuits returned under the pro-Catholic restorationist, Charles X, who reigned from 1824 until the Revolution of 1830. By 1828 his government had been severely hemmed in by liberals and Orleanists and he was forced to *issue* an edict closing all Jesuit schools, including the one in Aix.

With his education thus peremptorily terminated, the young musician found employment as assistant conductor in the local theatre. The standard of music was so abysmal that he left after only six months and became a lawyer's clerk. Office work did not sustain his interest for long and he returned to St. Sauveur as *maitre tie chapelle*. Here he continued composing religious settings for his choir, but increasingly regretted his acute lack of formal musical training. A rich uncle offered to support him as a student in Paris with a meager monthly allowance of fifty francs. Accordingly he presented himself to Cherubini to be examined for entrance to the Conservatoire in the spring of 1830. The eminent Director is believed to have reduced the aspiring musician to tears of desolation, declaring him completely lacking in musical science. "This is not music! Your teacher was a saddled donkey!" he yelled at the unfortunate applicant.<sup>4</sup> Later in the interview he relented a little, commenting that a *Beatus vir* which David had brought was "passable" and that he might enter classes in counterpoint and fugue. His teachers were Fetis, Benoist, Reber, and Millault. The uncle's grant evaporated after a few months, after which young Felicien had to support himself by giving music lessons. In addition he kept costs down by moving in with his brother, Charles, a trombonist who later became a painter. David left the Conservatoire in 1831, having taken no honors.

The painter Justus introduced young David to the Saint-Simonian fraternity at this time, and he joined the society in December, 1831. Claude-Henri de Rouvroy Saint-Simon was an impoverished aristocrat who had remained in France throughout the Revolution and the Reign of Terror, buying up nationalized land on borrowed money. Repaying his debts after the Terror, with the devalued franc, secured him a fortune. He studied science at the Ecole Polytechnique and began to expound his philosophical ideals, which were both Christian and socialist. He advocated the recruitment of science, agronomy, and politics to the service of alleviating poverty; he also recommended celibacy, and preached against militarism, contending that the money thus saved should go to the poor. He died in 1825 and the growing circle of his followers, headed by Bazard and the bankers Rodrigues and Enfantin, spread his "gospel." The Revolution of 1830 gave the Saint-Simonists new opportunities and they proclaimed "common ownership of wealth, no rights of inheritance,

and the vote for women." Before very long the pragmatic Bazard quit the Society, carrying with him most of its strongest supporters, while Enfantin established a more colorful brotherhood at his estate near Ménilmontant. The movement frittered away much of its financial resources, producing a daily free-sheet and mounting a series of glittering *salons* at which David, now the Society's official composer, was allowed to flex his compositional muscles. Many distinguished French men of science and letters, together with such occasional foreign visitors as Heine and Liszt, graced their *soirees*. At Ménilmontant, a forty-strong choir was formed and David composed many hymns and chants for it. At the end of 1832, however, a nervous government proscribed the organization, imprisoning Enfantin. David and twelve others set course to Egypt from Marseilles on March 22, 1833. Their lofty aim was to find a "freewoman," a Holy Mother, for their new "Messiah." To our late-20th-century minds this is a fantastic notion, but the Christian-socialist ideals of the Saint-Simonians bear not a little resemblance, in their passion, to those of today's evangelical Christians.

David was to remain faithful to Saint-Simonism for the rest of his life—he never married, for example—but the immediate impact of this new faith on his career was the chance exposure to the music of the Levant which this expedition afforded him. Eleven years later, during an early performance of the work that was to bring him worldwide fame and recognition, his symphonic ode *Le Desert*, a group of Arab sheikhs, guests of the government who were present in the Salle Ventadour, reportedly burst into frenzied recognition and applause when they heard the composer's skillful introduction of the muezzin's chant *El salaam alek! Aleikum el salaam*.<sup>15</sup>

In 1833 David and his companions traveled through Constantinople, Smyrna, Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Alexandria, to Cairo, the composer all the while noting down and storing for future use his impressions of both the physical and the musical world in which he moved. He was to remain in Cairo for nearly two years, but he eventually decided to return to Europe when a vicious outbreak of plague enveloped Egypt in 1835.

#### The Musicians

During his stay in the Middle East, David produced some pieces for brass "on Arab themes." In 1836, a year after his return to Paris, his *Melodies orientales* for piano were published. In each of the succeeding years he composed a symphony; one in F Major in 1837 and one in E Major in 1838. Two nonets for brass appeared in 1839, one in F Major and the surviving work in C Minor. In 1843, in collaboration with Joseph Forestier, he wrote a *Fantaisie concertante sur "Sans amour" de F. Masini* for cornet and piano.

The question arises as to why David decided to compose the nonets, since hardly any other concert works for brass ensemble on this scale exist from this period. The answer has several strands, all of them speculative. The first strand concerns friendship. Forestier, a hand-horn player turned cornetist, must have been a contemporary or near-contemporary of David at the Conservatoire. He took second prize in Dauprat's hand-horn class in 1833 and first prize a year later, and as has been seen, collaborated with David in 1843 on the

composition of the *Fantasie concertante*.<sup>6</sup> He soon changed, as did several other horn players at this time, to the newly fashionable *cornet-a-pistons*. He wrote a notable *Méthode pour le cornet-a-pistons* in the year of his graduation, to which Dauprat contributed a foreword.

Another strand of the answer is Philippe Musard (1793-1859). This conductor, showman, and composer of popular dance music was the French Johann Strauss. He ran the 19th-century equivalent of the Boston Pops Orchestra, and his *Concerts Musard* were phenomenally successful—creating the "new *mass* audience" mentioned by Anthony Baines? Musard had studied both horn and violin before taking lessons in composition from Reicha. In 1833 he inaugurated the world's first Promenade Concerts in the Rue St. Honor, for which he used a large orchestra of some ninety players. A typical Musard "Prom" program might have included works by Beethoven, Mozart, Rossini, Auber, Mehul, and Meyerbeer, interspersed with quadrilles, polkas, and galops of his own. Carse says that "a most important and popular element in all the early Promenade Concerts were the solos played by star performers on the then new *cornet-a-pistons* and on the fairly new ophicleide."<sup>8</sup> Pougin observed that a Musard orchestrational trait, employed in the vast orchestras which he assembled for the famous Opera Balls, was to give melody lines to trombones, ophicleides, and comets, in addition to the more usual violins and flutes.<sup>9</sup>

It was Musard who gave the first performance of David's F-Major Nonet, in 1839. David was no doubt familiar with Musard's orchestrations using the new valved instruments and probably knew personally many of the musicians who played for Musard. An *Agenda Musical oa Indicateur des Amateurs, Artistes et Commerçants en Musique* for both 1836 and 1837 is to be found in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. For Musard's concerts, *the Agenda* lists:

1836	Trompettes	Muller <i>Pere</i> Muller <i>fill</i>
	Trombones	Dieppo Benard Simon Germann
	Trompettes-a-pistons	Dufrene Forestier Vandomber Musard (Alfred)
	Cors	Urbin Hermans Croquet Vandonberg

In 1837 Dieppo is replaced by an unnamed person, Vandomber is dropped, and Croquet replaced by Bailly. The ophicleidists Caussin and Peters are also listed. Riviere states that Musard had as his brass players, "Dufrene and Forestier the cornets; Dieppo, Simon and Vobaron the trombones."<sup>10</sup> Donatien Urbin (1809-1857) was a contemporary (and possibly friend) of David at the Conservatoire.<sup>11</sup> He took First Prize in hand-horn in Dauprat's class of 1830 and was principal horn for both the *Concerts Musard* and the *Concerts Valentino* until 1841, when he joined the orchestra of the Opera. Meifred's first class in valve-horn was given at the Conservatoire in 1833; I think it reasonable to assume that Urbin may have been one of Meifred's first "postgraduate" students. Certainly he went on to publish his own *Méthode de cor k trots pistons oie rylindres* in 1854. Dufrene had been Musard's solo cornetist since 1833. Dieppo was the solo trombonist in Berlioz's *Symphonie Funebre et Triomphale* in 1840. Forestier was the same cornetist who collaborated with David several years later on the *Fantaisie concertante sur "Sans Amour."* Caussin, the ophicleidist, travelled with both Musard and Jullien on their tours of England and was the co-author, with Berr, of a *Méthode complete d'Ophicleide* published in 1837.

These extraordinary musicians, with their new valved instruments, must have motivated David to write brass music. Paris had the world's first established conservatory of music, and its Conservatoire already had a long tradition of superb brass players. These players were probably the best in the world at that time, and some of them were contemporaries and perhaps friends of the composer. Musard had created a climate for the enjoyment of popular concerts, in which instrumental virtuosity was esteemed and novelties were always needed. David had returned from an exotic trip of two years duration to the Middle East, and by the late 1830s he was enjoying some success with his music. His First Symphony had been given at the more serious-minded *Concerts Valentino*. He had already tried his hand at writing for brass with the Arab pieces. Might we suppose that these nonets were suggested by his friends and/or contemporaries, Forestier and Urbin?

### The Music

Although two of the composer's most important French biographers, Saint-Etienne and Azevedo, list the "pieces on Arab themes," Azevedo says that they were never performed publicly and had nothing to do with the nonets.<sup>12</sup> In any event, we shall never know, because both the "Arab pieces" and the first nonet (in F Major) are now lost. In the four intervening years David began to gain recognition. Azevedo states that "in 1839 the Nonet for brass in F Major was played three or four times at the *Concerts Musard*, where it was well received. This work, which required first-class virtuosi such as M. Joseph Forestier, who then played in the Rue Vivienne orchestra, could not expect the same circulation as if it were for ordinary players."<sup>13</sup> The year of composition of the C-Minor Nonet, also 1839, is confirmed by David in his own catalogue, prepared in 1853. He confuses matters a little by stating that *both* nonets were performed at the *Concerts Valentino*. Assuming that Azevedo is right about Musard doing the F-Major Nonet, it may be that Musard gave the one in C Minor also, or perhaps David was right about *one* of the two, and the C Minor was given by Musard's

rival." We can be fairly sure that many of the players, in any case, would have been the same. We know, for example, that Donatien Urbin, the principal horn, played for both series of concerts. The picture is made even more unclear when we read in an editor's note to Berlioz' letters that in 1845—that is, the year after the colossal success of *Le Desert*—he performed for the first time the first and last movements of David's Nonetto.<sup>15</sup> If indeed Valentino gave the C Minor Nonet in 1839 or 1840, then perhaps only the two middle movements were performed. An oddity in the autograph score(s) may or may not serve to corroborate this: the first movement is scored on eighteen systems on pages longer (36.5 cm) than they are wide (26.5 cm) with both trombone parts written out in full, whereas the second (Valle), third (Scherzo), and fourth (Finale) movements are all scored on sixteen-staff paper which is wider (36.5 cm) than it is long (28 cm), and with the trombone parts sharing a staff. Only the first, third, and fourth movements bear David's signature, though all are in his hand. Lacking the originals and their bindings, one cannot be certain, but it is perfectly possible that each movement was bound separately, and therefore was easily performed separately, as Berlioz asserted. The fact that Berlioz conducted is also significant, in that this is certainly not music for a chamber ensemble; rather it is *concertante* music which must be conducted.

The first movement is marked *Allegro agitato* and begins martially (Example 1), but soon settles into the melody (Example 2) passed between cornets, first horn, and ophicleide, accompanied by off-beats. David's praxis almost immediately outstrips Meifred because by measure 92 he has already taken the fourth horn down to a pedal a note unobtainable on a two-valve instrument. Similarly, in the passage leading into the lovely *Andantino* coda to this movement, he employs a pedal G for the fourth horn at the bottom of the register. In measures 166-169 he leads back into a recapitulation of the opening martial theme by taking the entire ensemble, beginning with ophicleide and second trombone, through a four-octave rising chromatic scale (Example 3), all of which proves that the fourth horn player certainly did possess a three-valved instrument, even if his colleagues did not!

The second movement is a lilting *valse* in the manner of the *Symphonic Fantastique* (Example 4), though without the melodic inspiration of Berlioz's masterpiece. The third movement is a *fastscherzo* in 3/8 time (Example 5), where the horns carry a relentless burden of off-beats. The *Final [sic]* is a conventional 2/4 *Allegretto* in C Major, cast in hunting style (Example 6).

The sheer flexibility of David's music indicates to me that, for Musard's virtuoso players at least, Meifred's inhibitions concerning the third valve and his recommendations concerning the use of the hand with the new valved horn had been abandoned even before his *Mithode* went into print. This was a time of swift and intense technological change in brass instruments. An examination of David's score demonstrates that the most up-to-date players of the *cornet-a-pistons* and the *cor-a-pistons* were already using their valves in the same way we use them today. Although he changes crooks from B $\flat$  to F for the cornets in the finale, he leaves his four horns crooked in F, with a key signature of two flats, throughout the work. Apparently Meifred's conservative approach to the use of valves, combining their use with older techniques, was not employed by all the players of his time.

ie o it's.to

OM OM INDI

Fan Ems ram-----  
/Mi WWI M: IMI= ONMAM, ION+ MOM

PRIN11=1

.....

The image shows a musical score snippet with several layers of text and musical notation. At the top, there are lyrics "ie o it's.to" and some rhythmic markings. Below that, there are more lyrics "OM OM INDI" and "Fan Ems ram-----" with a note that "/Mi WWI M: IMI= ONMAM, ION+ MOM". A large "PRIN11=1" is written in a stylized font, with "....." underneath it. The musical notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a 3/4 time signature. The notes are mostly quarter and eighth notes.

**Example 1**  
David, Nonet in C Minor, mvt. 1



**Example 2**  
mvt. 1

Musical score for Example 3, mvt. 1. The score is written for a brass section and includes the following parts: 1st Cornet in B $\flat$ , 2nd Cornet in B $\flat$ , 1st Cor in F, 2nd Cor in F, 3rd Cor in F, 4th Cor in F, 1st Trombone, 2nd Trombone, and Ophicleide. The music is in 3/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns and dynamics, including accents and fortissimo markings.

Example 3  
mvt. 1

Musical score for Example 4, mvt. 2. The score is for the 1st Cornet in B $\flat$  and is written in 3/4 time. The music consists of a single melodic line with various rhythmic values and articulations.

Example 4  
mvt. 2





Example 5  
mvt. 3

Example 6  
mvt. 4

There is no question that David's music was admired in his day. On December 15, 1844, Berlioz wrote in *the Journal des Debats*, "If music were not to be abandoned to public charity, there would be somewhere in Europe a lyric pantheon exclusively dedicated to the performance of monumental mas terworks....If we were an art-minded people, if we adored

the beautiful, if this pantheon existed in Paris we would have seen it last Sunday, illuminated up to the rafters, for a great composer has appeared, for a masterwork has been unveiled. The composer's name is Felicien David; the masterwork is entitled *Le Desert*.<sup>16</sup> The work is well worth acquaintance.<sup>17</sup>

David continued to exploit the oriental vein. Two operas, *La Perle du Bresil* (1851) and *Herculanum* (1859) were modest successes, but another, *Lalla Roukh*, based on Thomas Moore's Kashmiri love-poem, is reputed to be a masterpiece. David spent his last years as an officer of the Legion of Honor, with a prize of 20,000 francs awarded by the Academie des Beaux Arts. He lodged with the widow of the writer Tyrtee Tastet, some of whose poems he had set. He died in 1876, and one assumes that his manuscripts were disposed of by Madame Tastet. The majority, including the Nonet in C Minor, found their way into the library of the Conservatoire. Apart from the Conservatoire's library stamp, the music also bears the stamp of Charles Malherbe, the noted musicologist and archivist. Scrawled faintly across the first pages of the first and second movements respectively are the words a *vendre* (for sale), perhaps indicating that Malherbe had to purchase the manuscript. In any event, brass players owe him a huge debt of gratitude for having preserved a work with such significance for their art.

David's *Nonetto en Ut Mineur* not only throws a fascinating spotlight on the musical fashions and manners of its day; it also illustrates the level to which valved-brass technique had risen in the twelve years since the instruments had been introduced to France. It is a major discovery and a worthy addition to the repertoire for brass ensembles.

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*David's Nonet in C Minor was given its first modern performance since Berlioz' in 1845 when the author conducted it in a Henry Wood Promenade Concert given by the London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble in the Royal Albert Hall London, August 31, 1991. A recording by these artists, using modern instruments except for the ophicleide, is available on the Hyperion label (CDA66470)—reviewed in the HBS Newsletter, no. 4. A critical edition by the author is available from London Gabrieli Brass Edition, P.O. Box 1825, London N20 9NU, U.K.*

## NOTES

1. Jeffrey Snedeker, "Joseph Meifred's Methode pour le Cor Chromatique ois a Pistons," *Historic Brass Society Journal* 4 (1992): 87-105. Birchard Coar, *A Critical Study of the Nineteenth Century Horn Virtuosi in France* (DeKalb, IL, 1952).

2. Anthony Baines, *Brass Instruments, Their History and Development* (London, 1976).

3. Alexis Azevedo, *Felicien David• coup d'oeil sur sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris, 1863); cited in Peter Gradenwitz, "Felicien David and French Romantic Orientalism," *Musical Quarterly* (1976).

4. Various sources have attempted to render Cherubini's bad French. The comment was reported by Azevedo (*Daviel* p. 34) as "Que ce n'est pas de la mousique! Que votre maitre est oun ane bate" [*sic*].
5. Theophile Gautier reporting on this performance according to Octave Fouque in his *Histoire du Theatre Ventadour, 1829-1879* (Paris, 1881), pp. 89-99. Cited in Gradenwitz, "David."
6. Coar, *Horn Virtuosi*, p. 160.
7. Baines, *Brass Instruments*, p. 227.
8. Anthony Carse, *The Lift offullien*, (Cambridge, 1951), p. 5.
9. Pougin, quoted in Fetis, *Biographie Universelle*.
10. Jules Riviere, *My Musical Life and Recollections*, (London, 1893).
11. Coar, *Horn Virtuosi*, p. 157.
12. S. Saint-Etienne, *Biographic de Felicien David* (Marseilles, 1845). Azevedo, *David*.
13. *Ibid.*
14. By 1838 *the Concerts Musard* had moved to the Hall in the Rue Vivienne and Valentino's concerts now took place in Musard's old venue in the Rue St. Honore—probably another reason for David's confusion when he came to make a catalogue of his works in 1853.
15. Hector Berlioz, *Corresporidance en frale*, vol. 3, 1842-1850 (Paris, 1978), letter to Louis Jourdan (p. 235), dated 15 March 1845. The performance took place on 6 April in the *Cirque Olympique*. In another letter Jourdan after the performance, dated 21 April (p. 243), Berlioz says that "*Unless I am mistaken* the separate parts of David's *Nonetto* had been copied into a Full Score by one of the players, M. Urbin." And later, "I don't think that you will want for publishers and that Escudier would give you a decent price for this beautiful piece. Richaut, moreover, would be eager to get it. Thank you for David's letter, which gave me great pleasure."
16. Cited in Gradenwitz, "David."
17. A modern recording is available on the Capriccio label.

*Chris Larkin has held the position of fourth horn in the BBC Symphony Orchestra, London, for the past fourteen years. He joined the London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble in 1973, and launched London Gabrieli Brass Edition in 1992.*