

Louis-Ferdinand Hérold  
and the Romantic  
*Opéra-Comique*



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By

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and Nicholas Lester Fuller

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Frontispiece. Louis-Ferdinand Hérold, after a drawing by Eugène Giraud. Lithograph by Louis Dupré.

*Do you regret the time when our old romances  
Spread their golden wings towards their enchanted world?*

Hérolf;... a dreamy and passionate genius, a talent forged of masculine understanding and feminine sensitivity, he draws on both North and South. Mozart and Weber formed him, but Rossini tempts and seduces him.  
(Henri Blaze de Bury)

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## INTRODUCTION

On the stage curtain at La Scala, a mid-19th century opera-goer would have read in golden letters the names of the greatest composers of Germany, Italy, and France: Mozart, Rossini and Louis Ferdinand Hérold. Mozart has held his place in the musical pantheon for more than two centuries. Rossini's standing has been secure since the post-war *bel canto* renaissance but today's educated music-goer will know Hérold, if at all, only for the brilliant overture to *Zampa* and the ballet *La Fille mal gardée*. Only three of his operatic works have been recorded: *Le Muletier* in 1968; a radio broadcast of *Zampa* nearly a decade ago, not commercially available; and several recordings of *Le Pré aux Clercs*. The most recent release of the latter (Palazzetto Bru Zane, November 2016) makes an overview of Hérold's work timely.

Hérold was a master of the *opéra-comique*, the quintessentially French genre that in this period mixed spoken dialogue with singing and sentiment with wit. Many of his works had long, sustained runs in Paris, and he was performed throughout Europe. He and fellow *opéra-comique* composers Adolphe Adam and D.F.E. Auber were particularly popular in Germany, and he was the first Frenchman to write an Italian opera in fifty years. Rossini himself refused to accept the cross of the Légion d'Honneur until it had been awarded to the Frenchman whose reputation as a great musician had crossed the Rhine and the Alps. Nineteenth-century French critics were unanimous about Hérold's greatness. Xavier Aubryet called him 'the poet of French music'. From the vantage point of 1906, Arthur Pougin considered him unquestionably the greatest French composer of the first half of the nineteenth century. Pierre Scudo wrote in 1856 that Hérold was the greatest musician France ever had, and the only French composer other than Grétry who could be called a genius. He united in a rare combination French wit and taste, Weber and the Germans' religious emotion, and Rossini's grace, brilliance and unquenchable brio. The claim for Hérold's genius was somewhat exaggerated. Berlioz, unpopular in his own lifetime and misunderstood for so long after, is a better candidate for genius and greatest French composer of the nineteenth century; Hérold's music seems comparatively light. Nevertheless, listening to *Zampa* or the *Le Pré aux clercs* reveals a charming, elegant and consistently tuneful

musician. A composer whose two best works held the stage until the end of the nineteenth century may well be able to please modern audiences. Since, however, many of his works have long since vanished, it is difficult properly to assess their quality; we must rely on the judgement of his contemporaries.

## THE LIFE OF HÉROLD

Louis-Joseph-Ferdinand Hérold (b. Paris, 28 Jan 1791; d. Thernes, nr Paris, 19 Jan 1833). His father, François-Joseph Hérold (a pupil of CPE Bach), a piano teacher and composer, did not want his son to pursue a musical career, and sent him to the school run by M. Hix where his aptitude for music was noticed by Fétis, then an assistant teacher there. After his father's death (1802) when Hérold was only 11, he began to study music seriously. In 1806 he entered the Paris Conservatory taking piano lessons with his godfather Louis Adam (and father of the composer Adolphe Adam) winning first prize for piano playing in 1810. He studied violin with Rodolphe Kreutzer. He studied harmony under Catel, and from 1811 composition under Méhul. In 1812 his cantata *Mademoiselle de la Vallière* won the Prix de Rome, sung at the prize-giving concert by the soprano Mme Branchu. (The MS is in the Conservatory Library with works composed during his three-year study in Rome.) After a year in Rome he went to Naples where he became pianist to Queen Caroline. Here at the Teatro del Fondo he produced his first opera *La gioventù di Enrico Quinto* (Landriani, after Hérold, after Duval; 6 Jan, 1815) with the tenor Manuel Garcia in the title role, which was well received. From Naples he went to Vienna. Here he heard operas by Weigl and Salieri, as well as Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Der Zauberflöte*. He also met Salieri, but was too shy to present a letter of introduction to Beethoven.

After a stay of a few months, he returned to Paris where he obtained a post as *maestro di cembalo* at the Théâtre Italien. In 1816 he was invited by Boieldieu to collaborate on the score of *Charles de France, ou Amour et Gloire, opéra d'occasion* (Rance, Théaulon & Darois; Opéra-Comique, 18 June 1816). Hérold wrote the second act which was well received. All the rest of his operas were produced at the Opéra-Comique.

1. *Les Rosières* (Théaulon; 27 Jan 1817)
2. *La Clochette, ou Le Diable Page* (Théaulon; 18 Oct 1817)
3. *Le Premier venu* (Vial & Planard; 28 Sept 1818)
4. *Les Troqueurs* (Achille & Armand Dartois; 18 Feb 1819)
5. *L'Amour platonique*, 1 act (Auguste Rousseau)
6. *L'Auteur mort et vivans* (Planard; 18 Dec 1820)

The 1-act *Corinne au capitot* intended for the Opéra, was abandoned. But the flattering reception of *Charles de France* led to the successful production of his first popular success with *La Rosières* (1817) which had 44 performances. He began work on another project for the Opéra *La Lampe merveilleuse*, but since another work on the Aladdin story had already been commissioned, the work was transformed into *La Clochette, ou Le Diable Page* and produced at the Opéra-Comique later in the year.

These initial successes seem to falter over the next three years with none of his works achieving success. The failure of *L'Auteur mort et vivans* in 1820 caused him to distrust his natural talent, and imitate in several succeeding stage works the style then in vogue—that of Rossini. In 1821 the Théâtre Italien sent him to Italy to find new singers, especially a soprano and high bass. He was able to engage Giuditta Pasta and Filippo Galli. He also brought back the score of Rossini's *Mosè* which he prepared for production in 1822. He was already suffering from the tuberculosis that had killed his father, and was unable to attend the performance.

In the following year with his health temporarily restored, he achieved some success at the Opéra-Comique with *Les Muletier* (1823). During this period he brought out:

7. *Le Muletier* (Paul de Kock; 12 May 1823)
8. *Lasthénie* (de Chaillou; 8 Sept 1823)
9. *Vendôme en Espagne* (Mennechet & Empis; 5 Dec 1823) with Auber
10. *Le Roi René, ou La Provence au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Belle & Sewrin; 24 Aug 1824)
11. *Le Lapin blanc* 1 act (Mélesville & Carmouche; 21 May 1825)
12. *Le Dernier Jour de Missolonghi* 3 acts (Ozaneaux; Odéon, 10 Apr 1828)
13. *L'Illusion* 1 act (Saint-Georges & Ménessier; 18 July 1829)
14. *Émeline* (Planard; grand opera (28 Nov 1829)
15. *L'Auberge d'Auray* (Moreau & d'Epagny; 11 May 1830, with Carafa)
16. *Zampa* (Mélesville; 5 May 1831)
17. *La Marquise Brinvilliers* (Scribe & Castil Blaze; 31 Oct 1832) in collaboration with Auber, Batton, Berton, Blangini, Boieldieu, Carafa, Cherubini, and Paer
18. *Le Médecine sans médecin* (Scribe & Bayard; 15 Oct 1832)
19. *Le Pré aux clercs* (Planard, after Mérimée; 15 Dec 1832)
20. *Ludovic* (Saint-Georges; 16 May 1833) was completed by Halévy

He now made a modest debut at the Opéra with *Lasthénie* and collaborated with Auber on *Vendôme en Espagne* (1823). This was followed by *Le Roi René*, a *pièce d'occasion* (1824) to celebrate the birthday of King Louis XVIII in August and that of the new King Charles X in November 1826.

In the meantime Hérold was working on what would become one of his finest and most popular works. With the comic opera *Marie* (Planard; 12 Aug. 1826) Hérold returned to his true element, and won instant and brilliant success, the work attaining 100 performances in less than a year.

Hérold now left the Théâtre Italien in November 1826 to become principal singing coach at the Opéra. During the next three years he wrote several melodious and elegant ballets:

21. *Astolphe et Jaconde* 2 acts (Aumer; 29 Jan 1827)
22. *La Somnambule* 3 acts (Scribe & Aumer; 19 Sept 1827)
23. *Lydie* 1 act (Aumer; 2 July 1828)
24. *La Fille mal gardée* 2 acts (Dauberval & Aumer; 17 Nov 1828)
25. *La Belle au bois dormant* 4 acts (Scribe & Aumer; 27 Apr 1829)
26. *La Noce du village*, ballet-tableau 1 act (Palais de Tuileries; 11 Feb. 1830)

*La Somnambule* furnished Bellini with the subject of his popular opera.

On 18 July 1829 Hérold produced *L'Illusion*, a one-act opera full of charming numbers. *Émeline*, a grand opera (28 Nov 1829) was a failure. But his next opera *Zampa* (Mélesville; 5 May 1831) was sensationally successful and placed Hérold in the first rank of French composers. This was Hérold's most powerful work and received 56 performances within 15 months. The production was dogged by difficulties. Financial challenges and managerial changes meant that the theatre was obliged to close several times during this period. Jean-Baptiste Chollet, the tenor for whom Hérold composed the title role, moved to the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels for two seasons (making his debut there in this role), so that the opera could not be revived in Paris until 1835.

He then wrote *L'Auberge d'Auray* (1830, with Carafa); *La Marquise Brinvilliers* (1832) in collaboration with no other composers. He also produced *Le Médecine sans médecin* (1832).

Hérold's last and finest work, published in his lifetime, *Le Pré aux clercs*, had its first performance at the Opéra-Comique on 15 December 1832, elicited unparalleled approval from the audience, who, at the final curtain,

continually called for the composer. He was so gravely ill that he could not appear (Planard, after Mérimée; 15 Dec 1832).

Hérold died of consumption five weeks later, shortly before his 42<sup>nd</sup> birthday. At the Opéra-Comique *Le Pré aux clercs* continued a triumphant course. On the occasion of the composer's centenary in January 1892 the opera received its 1482<sup>nd</sup> performance, preceded by the first act of *Zampa*.

His unfinished opera *Ludovic* (Saint-Georges) was completed by Halévy and produced posthumously at the Opéra-Comique in 16 May 1833. Hérold's piano music, comprising 55 opus numbers, consists of sonatas, caprices, rondos, divertissements, fantasias, variations and potpourris.



# PERSPECTIVES ON HÉROLD AND THE RISE OF THE ROMANTIC *OPÉRA-COMIQUE*

## 1) Adolphe Adam (1857)<sup>1</sup>

Adolphe Adam, *Souvenirs d'un musicien*, Michel Lévy frères, 1857, pp. 27–38

### HÉROLD

A year has passed since a premature death took from music lovers a composer who delighted them, from the Opéra-Comique one of its firmest pillars, and from France one of her glories. On 19 January 1833, Hérold ceased to live, bequeathing to us as his final legacy the happiest, if not the greatest, of his works: *Le Pré aux Clercs*, which the public applauded over a hundred times and will continue to hear with a pleasure all the more vivid for being tinged with regret—especially as the number of his works remaining in the repertoire is small.

Let us try, in a brief notice, to make known to our readers the life and works of this talented musician, whose loss was doubly painful to us: as artist and as friend.

Jean-Louis-Ferdinand Hérold was born in Paris in 1790. His father, German by birth, was a piano teacher of some repute; he left only one published musical work, engraved in Paris. He died of a chest ailment, leaving a widow of modest means, though not destitute, and a very young son. The young Hérold — the idol of his mother, who, though young and beautiful, steadfastly refused remarriage in order to devote her life to her son—was the object of much care from all his father's friends. M. Adam, his godfather, transferred to the child all the affection he had had for Hérold senior, his compatriot and colleague; Kreutzer too wished to teach him, and it was under these two great masters that the young Hérold learned piano and violin. He studied at Monsieur Hix's school. It is rather curious that from this institution, where the curriculum was certainly not musical, four winners of the Institut prize for composition would emerge: Chélard, Hérold, Hippolyte de Font-Michel, and myself, A. Adam.

Hérold then entered the Conservatoire in M. Adam's class and soon won first prize in piano. To compete, he performed a sonata of his own composition—the only time this has occurred. He was scarcely more than sixteen. Had he pursued that path, he would have become a most distinguished pianist: his ease and clarity of execution were remarkable, and although he had long since ceased to practice, one finds in his piano works passages of extreme elegance, showing how well he knew the instrument's capabilities. But such glory did not suffice; he aspired to be a composer.

He studied under Méhul and competed for the Prix de Rome. The scene to be set was that in which Louis XIV attempts to abduct Madame de La Vallière from the convent where she has retired. Contestants had three weeks to compose their music. Six days into his retreat, Hérold's mother visited him at the Institut, and found him playing ball in the courtyard—his task already finished. No matter how people insisted, he would not stay a day longer.

"I was locked up long enough in boarding school," he said. "Now I want to breathe fresh air."

He won first prize, sharing it with M. Cazot.

One of the greatest privileges of the Prix de Rome was that it spared one from conscription, which at that time was decimating French families so cruelly—though many now pretend to regret its passing. Hérold, not yet twenty, thus avoided carrying a musket on the frozen banks of the Neva thanks to his success. He left for Rome, but stayed only briefly; he soon moved to Naples. M. Adam, who in Paris had taught the children of the king of Naples, secured for Hérold the post of piano teacher to the young princesses. With this royal support, he staged an opera in Naples titled *La Gioventù d' Enrico V*. The success was enormous. As I have never seen a note of the score, I cannot say the success was due solely to the music; likely, the then-fashionable preference for all things French helped.

Still, it was an honour for such a young musician to have a debut work staged with success in the capital of such a musical country as the Kingdom of Italy. But this fine title of 'Frenchman', which served him so well, nearly proved fatal when the upheavals that shook Europe began. Forced to hide and flee, he escaped on foot through great peril to Germany—only to be driven thence again by our mounting defeats.

Back in Paris, he published a few piano pieces, already marked with the originality that would characterise all his work. He also performed publicly as a pianist at several concerts, including at the Odéon, then home to the Théâtre-Italien. He had all but given up hope of ever becoming a theatrical composer when, for the marriage of the Duc de Berry, a writer, M. Théaulon, submitted a celebratory piece entitled *Charles de France* to the Opéra-Comique. The music was entrusted to Boïeldieu, who took the young Hérold as collaborator.

What good fortune for a young composer to begin under the auspices of such a collaborator! The music had great success. Everyone remembers the lovely romance ‘Chevaliers de la fidélité’ from Boïeldieu’s act. Hérold’s contribution was also noted, and M. Théaulon gave him the libretto of *Les Rosières*. That score showed great freshness of ideas, though the orchestration was rather thin.

Hérold’s second work was *La Clochette*. This music, written in extreme haste, was perhaps inferior to *Les Rosières*; nevertheless, it already showed considerable progress in orchestration. The overture was especially praised, as was the charming air ‘Me voilà’, which became popular, along with a well-crafted chorus of Kalenders in the third act.

Hérold then produced *Le Premier venu*, in three acts. It was a jolly comedy by M. Vial adapted into an opera. The overly familiar plot led to few performances, though the music deserved better. It was far superior to *La Clochette*, even though musically harder to handle. The melodies were more firmly and clearly drawn. A trio in Act II, the “trio of sleepers,” is still cited as an excellent dramatic ensemble.

Then came *Les Troqueurs*, a short piece of piquant music with two or three witty airs, notably ‘Rien ne me semble aussi joli qu’un mari’, and a canon trio whose structure he would reprise in the excellent trio of Act II in *Le Pré aux Clercs*.

*L’Auteur mort et vivant* is perhaps Hérold’s weakest work; there is nothing worthy of him in the score, and it had only modest success. *Le Muletier*, Hérold’s next work, on the other hand, is one of the finest one-act works in the theatre. Everything deserves mention, from the energetic overture, with a fandango theme handled brilliantly, to the final chorus. The original piece where the staccato horns imitate a heartbeat has been copied on every stage.

Yet *Le Muletier* met with initial resistance. The public, then stern on matters of morality, found the play too risqué. Only after twenty performances did they forgive the indecency in favour of the music. Hérold was unable to sell the score, and had to pay for its engraving himself. It has since reached over a hundred performances.

The one-act *Lasthénie*, performed at the Académie Royale de Musique, fared worse. The musical revolution had not yet occurred; the *urlò francese* still reigned, and the composer struggled with the vocal demands of the available stars. The melodies are mostly uninspired, though there is a pleasant little duet for two female voices and an effective canon.

*Le Lapin blanc* was a complete flop at the Opéra-Comique. The story was that of *Tony*, later a great success at the Théâtre des Variétés. The overture was recycled for *Ludovic*.

Hérold also collaborated with Auber on a two-act opera, *Vendôme en Espagne*, staged at the Académie royale de musique to celebrate the Spanish campaign. It was as short-lived as the military reputation of the Duc d'Angoulême who inspired it; nothing of it remains.

After a long period of writing only one-act pieces, Hérold planned to make a grand return from the minor setbacks he had suffered. The result was *Marie*.

The success was not as decisive as one might expect from such a delightful score. The Opéra-Comique director, a capable man, recognised the work's merit. Despite weak box office returns, he persisted with performances, and eventually the public came to appreciate a music they had nearly dismissed.

Shortly afterwards, Hérold wrote music for a drama at the Odéon, *Le Siège de Missolonghi*; its overture has endured thanks to a delightful motif that became widely popular.

*L'Illusion* is a one-act drama whose plot is too tight for musical development; the highlight is a well-crafted finale featuring a charming waltz.

*Emmeline*, in three acts, was not successful. Though it contained some pretty themes, the music failed to please.

But with *Zampa*, Hérold was instantly ranked among the greats. Few works are more esteemed by connoisseurs: the finale is outstanding in both music and staging. *Zampa* was a huge hit in Germany, where it is rightly seen as Hérold's masterpiece. In France, however, *Le Pré aux Clercs* is preferred—and rightly so. *Zampa* is serious, suiting the more sombre German imagination; *Le Pré aux Clercs*'s simpler but more appealing melodies are more to French taste.

I mention only in passing *La Médecine sans médecin*, a trivial piece with music of little consequence.

Then at last came *Le Pré aux Clercs*, which I need not describe—everyone knows it by heart.

We must also add to the list of Hérold's works *L'Auberge d'Auray* (with Caraffa), the finale of Act III of *La Marquise de Brinvilliers*, and the music for the ballets *Astolphe et Joconde*, *La Somnambule*, *Lydie*, and *La Belle au bois dormant*. In this genre, Hérold had no equal. All future ballet composers will aim to match him; none will surpass him. Add to this a large number of piano pieces, many of which were quite successful.

After Hérold's death, an opera titled *Ludovic* was performed; Hérold had sketched some of the pieces, including the rondeau 'Je vends des scapulaires'. The rest of the score was composed by Halévy, whose work there shows great talent, notably the Act I quartet and Act II trio.

Hérold was naturally cheerful, though he became somewhat melancholic toward the end of his life. He dreamed of returning to Italy—a dream that death cut short. Although when he wrote his first works music scores sold poorly, he lived so frugally that by the time he married, eight years before his death, he had accumulated a respectable sum. This is all the more notable because, like most of the composers of our time, he received no government patronage. He worked long as accompanist at the Théâtre Italien, then as vocal director at the Opéra. He clung to that post and was heartbroken when financial cuts forced the administration to remove him. He fought hard to regain it—and when he succeeded, it was a true holiday for him.

He often composed while walking, and the Champs-Élysées were his study. How many who barely knew him were offended when he passed without seeming to notice them, humming as he went! Witty as he was, he sometimes made sharp remarks that wounded some feelings; but he had a fundamentally kind nature. He was slow to open up, but deeply loyal to

real friends. He was fair to his colleagues and never envious. Although Auber had begun much later and was much more successful, Hérold readily acknowledged his rival's merits and admitted that Auber's music had qualities his own lacked. I will not attempt a comparison between these two great talents. Hérold's career, alas, is complete; Auber's still unfolds in triumph. One could perhaps sum them up thus: Auber has more directness; Hérold had more originality.

Hérold died on 19 January 1833, at four in the morning, at the same age and of the same illness as his father. He had lately complained of chest pain, and seemed to sense his end. He rehearsed *Le Pré aux Clercs* with exceptional zeal. Only musicians know how exhausting that is. By the première, he was spent. When the audience called for him at the curtain, they were told he was too ill to appear—news many thought an excuse. Alas, it was all too true.

He returned home with a raging fever, likely brought on by overwork and the emotional strain of what was the greatest—and perhaps the only truly great—theatrical triumph of his life. The next day, he learned that a singer's illness had halted the run. It was a fatal blow. The Opéra generously offered a replacement, one of its best singers, but Hérold had to exert himself again to teach her the part and rehearse. That finished him. He appeared once or twice more at the theatre, weak and wan, then, at the end of December, took to bed—and never rose again.

He left a young widow, three children (including a son), and a grieving mother who had devoted her life to him and could not imagine surviving him. She is often seen wandering near the Opéra-Comique, studying the posters to see if they are performing any of her son's works. When she sees his beloved name, she begins to cry, and returns sadly to her solitary home—only to return the next day and weep again in the same place. That is her whole life. Her happiness was Hérold; her only consolation, his glory.

## 2) Xavier Aubryet (1860)<sup>2</sup>

Xavier Aubryet, *Les jugements nouveaux : Philosophie de quelques oeuvres*, Paris : Librairie Nouvelle, 1860, pp. 133–59

### THE POET OF FRENCH MUSIC: HÉROLD

#### PART ONE

##### I.

In one of the most provincial streets of the city once called Les Thernes, now known as Paris, knock at the hospitable great door that fronts a tree-shaded wall: upon entering, you will see a modest two-storey house facing a large garden, where the sky seems to breathe of release. It was there that Hérold passed away.

One usually begins a man's biography with that hopeful phrase: *he was born*; the first words of this one must be: *he died* — for Hérold did not live. It is less his life than his death we are about to recount, and the swan song eclipses the memories of all but the final day. What strikes one first, when the name of Hérold is spoken in admiration, is the staggering abruptness with which such a richly endowed being vanished. The nation, like an inconsolable mother, may eternally mourn such sons: what newborn could ever make her set aside her mourning clothes?

“No one is indispensable,” said a wise man who perhaps felt dispensable himself. We, on the contrary, say: some losses are irreparable. Hérold was swept into the grave like those ships laden with treasure that sink mid-ocean; no diver may recover these riches — they now belong only to the deep! The glory of the composer of *Zampa* was growing visibly day by day, but death, a grim Joshua, denied this sun its zenith; it had cast only a portion of its brilliance.

So it is with a kind of sacred pilgrimage to the place he inhabited that we wish to begin this painful epitaph. We sought to find again the footprints of that immortal shadow. It was along those garden paths — where the bees still draw nectar from the same flowers — that Hérold would walk with his young wife, now lost in reverie, as if listening intently to his soul, now overflowing with endless conversation. Those lilacs that still greet the spring have often seen him shift from giddy joy to dejection, for Hérold was like a morning in which dark clouds seem to say to the laughing sun: “He who laughs last, laughs best.”

There, in that little room whose shutters remain closed, lies dormant the composer's piano — a humble little instrument that had the honour of helping him achieve such great things. I do not know what fragrance of genius still clings to its cherished panels, but the moaning of the wind heard through that room sounds like a funeral prayer.

Though the house stands empty, the temple is not wholly deserted. Hérold left behind a charming family, for whom his memory is sacred. He who knew so well both love and tears could not have been more beloved, nor more deeply mourned. And now, as if to put our meagre courage to shame, Hérold's mother — one of those centenarian women of distinction whom God seems to preserve to remind us of a vanished century — says to us in her gentle voice: "Let us talk about my son."

## II

Hérold was of Franco-German origin; and indeed, does one not sense that he must have been baptized with the waters of the Rhine, our very own Weber? The instinct for music ran doubly in his blood: his father, a distinguished pianist and pupil of Bach, never even considered placing a pen or tool in those young fingers, so clearly made to race across the keyboard — it would have been to hide the weapons of Achilles.

Like Pascal, who covered doors and tables with geometric figures, Hérold blackened the first sheet of blank paper he found with musical notes. — It is not the fathers but the mothers who possess the master's eye. Madame Hérold, before her husband, caught her son in the very act of composing. She acted wisely: taking that first crude draft, she brought it to Grétry. Grétry read attentively through the scribbled page, illustrated with little figures, then returned this naive bundle of G-clefs, Cs, and Fs to the mother, saying: "It is full of mistakes — and that is precisely why he must go on." With such a pass in hand, Hérold's parents had no hesitation in allowing their son to follow his path.

Hérold received a literary education as brilliant as his musical one; he would have become a writer, had not his star made him a composer from birth, for the pen obeyed him as a master. There remains, as a curious witness of this secondary vocation, nearly four manuscript volumes filled with sensations, judgments, and studies, all fired by the same spirit and whipped with the same verve that, transposed to the lyrical stage, made of Hérold a musical Diderot — the Diderot of *Ceci n'est pas un conte*.



Hérold's life opened on a sombre note: his father died of the same dreadful illness that would one day grant him such a brief reprieve. Becoming his mother's support (a solemn duty he would carry out throughout his life), Hérold sanctified his labour and redoubled his ardour. His talent seemed to mature with his experience; he developed that strict sense of order which, under such conditions, becomes a virtue. A gentle reversal of the parable: the frugal child fattens the calf to nourish his mother.

He entered the Conservatoire in 1806, in the class of Adam — father of the composer of *Le Chalet* — and won the first prize for piano in 1810 by performing a sonata which was also his first composition worthy of the name. His other teachers were Catel, and then Méhul, who made him his favourite pupil. It was Méhul — himself a disciple of Gluck — who planted in that young mind the seed from which *Zampa* would one day spring.

Six or eight months later, Hérold competed at the Institut and won the first Grand Prix in musical composition. His neighbour in the lodgings was Cazot, later a famous pianist whose name would today perplex the archaeologists. Hérold pretended he could find no inspiration; one morning, Cazot heard him gathering up his papers. "You are giving up?" he asked, with a voice tinged with concern — and concealed pleasure. "No — I have finished," replied Hérold, showing him the completed cantata. *Mademoiselle de la Vallière* — that was the title of this thesis for his musical degree.

Hérold departed as a *pensionnaire* of the government, sending several works from Italy to the Institute, all of which Méhul praised in highly favourable reports. We follow with growing interest the admiration of this illustrious master for the young man he saw as his artistic heir.

But Hérold had not yet reached the true heart of the land of melody; he would only truly possess Italy — long the object of his dreams — once he had embraced not just Venice or Rome upon the cheek, but Naples upon the lips. Then a musical paradise, Naples became his destination as soon as his novitiate was complete.

A charming letter survives from Giuseppe Cafara, a ninety-seven-year-old artist retired near Évreux, giving us rare details about Hérold's first steps in Neapolitan society.

The former director of the Conservatorio della Pietà, Monsieur Langlé — grandfather of the composer of *Murillo* — had just died, far from the

pupils he adored. It was a universal mourning. But, as M. Cafara wittily put it, “every spiritual sorrow expresses itself in sixteenth notes, and so we resolved to hold a Requiem Mass entirely composed of his works. In those days, music circulated slowly and poorly; we had to collect scores from all over.” Yet the finest sheaf was missing: a delightful aria from the opera *Corysandre*, which seemed to have vanished forever.

### III

The faithful Cafara resolved to offer a suitable reward to whichever of his pupils could recover the missing gem. The next day, a stranger appeared before him:

“I am,” he said, “a winner of the Prix de Rome. I am travelling through Italy to undertake and to learn. Yesterday, as usual, I attended your class, and here is the aria you requested.”

“Is it engraved?” interrupted Cafara.

“No — I transcribed it from memory during the night. In fact, if you would like to revisit *Corysandre*, I know the entire opera by heart.”

With that, the stranger sat down at the piano and played the score — from the first note to the last — with astonishing accuracy and joy. Stunned, Cafara asked his name.

It was Hérold.

They received him as a fellow artist, and entrusted him with arranging certain sections of the funeral Mass, which was performed with great pomp. Thus Hérold was welcomed into the musical fraternity of Naples and formed connections with some of the city’s finest families. His piano lessons became highly sought-after. The salons opened their doors to him — and even the royal court, where he became instructor to the daughters of Prince Murat. Fortune was smiling on him, and like a true hero, he sent half that smile back to his mother in France.

Yet the composer chafed under the role of performer. — To be merely an instrument when one knows oneself to be a soul — such resignation is impossible. One morning, at the fashionable Café Peracco where he took his daily coffee, Hérold was suddenly nowhere to be found. Friends rushed to his lodgings — he had vanished without a word, departed for Sorrento. At first they assumed it was a day’s outing. In truth, it was an outright escape.

Fifteen days passed. Hérold was as elusive as the aria from *Corysandre*. Two of his friends, Cattachi and a French officer named Ribert, set out to find him. After a search lasting from Thursday to Sunday, they finally tracked down the elusive pianist in a fisherman's cottage, where he was completing his first opera, *Gioventù d' Enrico Quinto* — never engraved.

The two hunters triumphantly brought back their quarry, and the Teatro del Fondo hastened to put the work onstage. Public curiosity sped along the rehearsals, and the ink on the manuscript was scarcely dry when the posters announced the premiere.

Hérold later described his emotions that day with charming sincerity: the boxes were filled with dazzling finery; all eyes were on the *maestro*, who, in the Italian custom, conducted from the podium. The opera began. Applause soon followed — first *pianissimo*, then *con furore*. Hérold, highly strung, lost his composure and wept like a child.

“Poltroun!” cried the soprano between two cadenzas.

“I proved the contrary eight days ago,” retorted Hérold — who had recently performed feats of bravery to win the *prima donna's* respect — and the entire audience burst into laughter.

Then came the royal court. “At least,” thought Hérold, “they won't dare hiss me now.” He recovered his courage. In the third act, he had inserted the *Corysandre* aria — a tribute to his first success. As soon as he began it, the whole theatre understood — and broke into thunderous applause. He had to take a bow. They dragged him onto the stage. Alas — how poignant that he would also be dragged forward on the night *Le Pré aux Clercs* was so fervently encored.

“Come,” he said, entering the wings, pale-faced, “my compatriot brings me luck!”

Hérold was now the fashion, and might perhaps have become *Heroldo* or *Heroldi* had the events of 1814 not forced his return to France by way of Germany. Naples had been the first milestone in his development; Vienna would be the second — and his extended stay there would notably modify his sensibilities. Naples had Italianised him temporarily; Vienna would Germanise him permanently. When he returned to his native soil, he brought with him a trace of Beethoven's earth clinging to his shoes.

## IV

It was Boïeldieu who introduced Hérold to the Parisian public. Tasked with composing an *opéra de circonstance* for the wedding of the Duc de Berry, Boïeldieu boldly chose the young and untested composer of *Gioventù d' Enrico Quinto* as his collaborator. Hérold wrote the second act of *Charles de France* in a way that gave Boïeldieu no cause to regret his generous impulse.

Without realising it, Hérold had allied himself with a man who — though less naturally gifted — would undergo a more curious artistic evolution than his own. Hérold had only to mature gradually. The author of *Ma Tante Aurore*, later the creator of *La Dame Blanche*, made a sudden leap from senescence to adolescence. His talent, initially marked by the crow's-foot wrinkles of age, eventually bore not a line — he was born in the parchment of an old man and died in the skin of a youth.

*Les Rosières*, a comic opera in three acts with a libretto by Théaulon, was Hérold's first significant work — the first to which critics paid real attention. Tired of scores that smelt of mildew and mothballs, the old performers welcomed this fresh music, which seemed to air out their orchestra pit. In those musically grey and drab days, they inhaled with delight the first spring of a new talent.

*La Clochette* marked a clear leap forward in Hérold's development; this three-act opera revealed the birth of his musical virility. Half of it has remained famous, and the Théâtre Lyrique was, so it is said, considering a revival. The aria 'Me voilà! me voilà!' alone would disarm anyone left cold by Azolin's passionate cavatina. The orchestration gained in substance and inventiveness.

A touching anecdote is connected with the premiere of *La Clochette*. Méhul, on his deathbed, asked each evening for news of every act. One might have sworn that he waited to die until he had received confirmation of its success. When doubt was no longer possible, Méhul exhaled — with a kind of relief — the final breath that death had granted him on loan for a few last hours. The hand of a worthy successor — the adoptive son of his heart — closed his eyes from afar.

It seemed Hérold's star had at last broken free of the clouds — only for fresh mists to gather and veil it again. By ill luck, the operatic subjects assigned to him were increasingly unmusical. First came *Le Premier Venu*, a frigid comedy by Vial; then *Les Troqueurs* by Vadé. His *Amour platonique*

was withdrawn after the dress rehearsal, and *L'Auteur mort et vivant* met with no success.

Hérold lost heart. It was only after three years of silence that he again dared step before the footlights with *Le Muletier*. A hundred performances have not exhausted the popularity of this charming little masterpiece — which still earns applause to this day. What a stroke of genius, that moment when the syncopated horns imitate the heartbeat — calm in the sleeping companions, agitated in the guilty one feigning slumber. Is it not the miracle of circulation itself passing through the symphony? What warmth of colour, set against the bawdy background of Paul de Kock! One might picture a passionate *torero* in full battle costume, forced to eat pancakes in a country inn.

*Le Muletier* was followed by two occasional pieces worth only a mention: *Vendôme en Espagne* and *Le Roi René*. These commissioned works live only as long as fireworks — the time it takes for a single rocket to burst. I know of few exceptions that have attained immortality; perhaps only *Il viaggio a Reims*, which by divine caprice has become *Le Comte Ory*.

Until then, the composer who most directly influenced Hérold had been Rossini. “He is the god!” Hérold would cry in ecstasy while playing that sparkling music at the piano. When *Moïse* was introduced at the Opéra, Hérold — then chorus master — could express his admiration only by flinging his arms around Levasseur, the mighty interpreter of that forerunner of *Guillaume Tell*. At the time, the moonlit delicacies of German music could not compare, in Hérold’s eyes, with that brilliant daylight. He was still deep in the fervour of his Italian faith. It was he, naturally, who was sent to Italy to recruit singers. We owe to Hérold the arrival of Rubini and Madame Pasta.

Around this period, M. Leborgne, the able chief copyist at the Opéra, returned from Germany with engraved copies of *Der Freischütz* and *Fidelio*. Hérold was among the first to decipher these works — and one of them in particular would work a deep transformation on his talent. For Rossini, he had felt a cerebral love; for *Der Freischütz*, it was a love of the heart. A major gathering was held at Hérold’s home: the students of the Conservatoire performed this ethereal music, infused with the purest spirit of German genius. That evening marked Hérold’s final conversion to the musical religion of Germany. He had already whispered his credo in *Lasthénie*, a one-act opera previously staged at the Opéra. But he did not burn what he had once adored. He served two gods — one intimate, the

other external — and under this dual allegiance, tempered by the French instinct, he led up from *Marie* to *Zampa* and *Le Pré-aux-Clercs*, his two most distinct and equally worthy works. There, at last, Hérold became fully himself — and took his rightful place.

I must insert here, for the record, five or six ballets that Hérold arranged more than composed. One must recall the prevailing principle of ballet at the time: it was to be an elegant potpourri. And none better than Hérold knew how to thread these bouquets — he supplied the string more often than the flowers. Yet even in this field of mere craft, there are moments that yield to art: *La Somnambule* includes several fine musical passages that bear the master's signature.

Since we have just touched on Hérold's lesser works, let us not forget — in settling accounts with posterity — a delightful selection of piano music, which plays in his dramatic output the same role as sketches in a painter's oeuvre. Fashion has deserted Hérold's concertante music; it may one day return.

Yet *Marie* — that *Chute des feuilles* by a musical Millevoye — was not immediately followed by *Zampa*. In the interval, Hérold composed the overture and choruses for a drama staged at the Odéon, *Le Siège de Missolonghi* — a superb musical fragment that seems a preliminary sketch for *Zampa*, and ought to be revived. Then came *L'Illusion*, a gem that has languished in neglect through sheer oversight; and *Emeline*, a companion piece to *Marie*, a weak work that two delightful arias could not save.

We now approach *Zampa*, Hérold's *Guillaume Tell*, just as *Le Pré-aux-Clercs* would be his *Barbiere di Siviglia*. *Zampa* did not trigger the explosion of enthusiasm that alone would have done justice to its revitalising music. The public, long wed to a decrepit Muse with a shaky voice and a trembling chin, remained indifferent before this bold, virginal Muse of golden tone and youthful allure.

It has been said that the same audience, a little later, threw away its crutches and found its legs again to run after this masterpiece — but that flatters too much our national imagination. France accepts poetry only with great effort; and the numbers do not lie. *Zampa* received only 250 performances in Paris, while *Le Pré-aux-Clercs*, no more deserving, approaches its 800<sup>th</sup>.

An idea is to genius what prey is to a lion — both reach it in a single bound. Hérold capped the end of *Zampa* with a surge of inspiration. In one