

## HERCULANUM Press

### Joys of Excavation: The Grand Opera "Herculanum"

The idea of Johannes Müller and Philine Rinnert is as simple as it is brilliant: When Félicien David's Grand Opera "Herculaneum" premiered in 1859 it owed much to the enthusiasm about the excavations at Vesuvius. So why not turn the rediscovery of that forgotten opera into an archaeological expedition? The fact that David's opera can't completely be reconstructed is clear already by the start of the performance in Sophiensäle [...], when the staff list of the Paris Opéra in 1859 is being read: Even the bravest theatre director would surrender to the amount of hairdressers, stage cavalry and stablemen. Müller and Rinnert rather present fragments – of the original music, stage designs, but also of the opera's context and reception: In this successful series of operatic exercises the wild dramaturgical researches become part of the show. David's music is arranged for only eight musicians, but is in no way ruined: a small sound of a triangle can evoke the shadow of a massive and striking choral finale. And then, suddenly, in the simple beauty of a love duet, an arrow that was shot over a hundred years ago hits the listener straight into the heart. (Carsten Niemann, Tagesspiegel, 16.11.2013)

The plot of the opera is just a motivic surface for the deep excavations of "Herculanum". Underneath the production deals with – among other things – the mechanisms of the Grand Opéra itself: The parameters of this theatre spectacle are repeatedly isolated and taken under the microscope, to be finally recombined in various arrangements. To deconstruct the cliché of the genre it is kept at a distance. Interwoven into the dramatic events are meta-narratives and documents: excerpts from reviews, geological articles, reflections on theatre history, the never ending staff list of the Paris opera, which gives an idea of the spectacular stage magic. This eruption of different materials, the digging and searching on stage, develops a remarkable energy – you just have to sort those materials yourself. (David Vicia, unruheimberrang.net, 18.11.2013)

"Je ne crois pas qu'on ait rien fait à l'Opéra de plus magnifique que la mise en scène d'Herculanum." (Hector Berlioz, Journal de débats, 12.3.1859)