

Sound Recording Reviews

Charles Panzéra: *Mélodies et airs*. EMI 2C 151-73.084,-73.085. Berlioz, Caplet, Chausson, Debussy, Duparc, Gounod, de Falla, Fauré, Hahn, Lully, Milhaud, Mozart, Ravel, Saint-Saëns, Schubert, Schumann, de Sévérac. With Magdeleine Panzéra-Baillet, piano (LP1) and Piero Coppola, orchestra (LP 2).

Charles Panzéra: *Mélodies françaises*. EMI CD 7 64254 2. Caplet, Chausson, Debussy, Duparc, Fauré, Hahn, Saint-Saëns, de Sévérac. With Magdeleine Panzéra-Baillet, piano, and Piero Coppola, orchestra.

Charles Panzéra Sings *Fauré, Duparc and Schumann*. Pearl CD 9919. With Magdeleine Panzéra-Baillet and Alfred Cortot.

The baritone Charles Panzéra (1896-1976) began his studies at the Paris Conservatoire and entered into professional life at the Opéra-Comique after serving in the Great War. He had volunteered for the French army and was twice wounded, but he recovered fully and was ready to trade the trenches for the stage. In 1922, Panzéra attracted the notice of Gabriel Fauré, who admired his singing and offered him the first performance of *L'horizon chimérique* (1921), which would be his last book of songs. Panzéra later spoke of this blessing on "the most unknown of singers" as "one of those unforeseen acts of grace that come with youth."¹ Fauré dedicated the work to him, and after the premiere at the Société Nationale came a prestigious concert of national homage to Fauré the following month that sealed Panzéra's fortunes. Though he had already sung a few secondary roles at the Opéra-Comique, including Albert in Massenet's *Werther*, he now advanced to the title role of his dreams: Pelléas, in which he made his most lasting theatrical impression. But the events of 1922 and Fauré's influence also seem to have confirmed him in his primary vocation as a recitalist and concert artist. Significantly, Panzéra and Magdeleine Baillet, his wife and accompanist, were summoned to the recording studios of La Voix de son Maître the following year. The first two songs the Panzéras committed to wax were Fauré's "Clair de lune" and Reynaldo Hahn's "D'une prison," (December 6, 1923) both of which are included in the EMI re-issues reviewed here.²

This was a significant beginning, for Panzéra's greatest legacy lies in this type of intimate song, the *mélodie*, and with scarcely less artistry, the *Lied*. Between the three recorded anthologies reviewed here, we have a good sampling of his repertoire: song and opera in three languages, French, German, and Spanish. The original recordings range from 1923 to 1938; Panzéra was in his prime between the wars. After 1940 he

all but ceased to record and ended his public career just before the advent of the long-playing record. In later life he devoted himself to pedagogical writings and taught at the Conservatoire. He died in 1976, one of the last singers claiming a direct link to the distant generation of Fauré and Duparc.

Panzéra's art, so deeply attuned to the needs of its repertoire, risks falling into oblivion, that is, vanishing under the more spectacular vocal blandishments of a Fischer-Dieskau or a José Van Dam. These re-issues of Panzéra's recordings might change all that. But such a reversal would be surprising, for as beautiful and engaging as his interpretations are, they will mostly remain the delight of connoisseurs. Panzéra's voice, even at its most ingenuous and open-hearted, hearkens back to a historical cultivation of song we no longer hear in our concert halls or conservatories, much less the stage. Singing Fauré or Duparc, Panzéra renders a kind of chamber music of the French language; his voice intones a union of music and word that does not lightly surrender its values to listeners long since inured to another style. Yet if we attune ourselves to them, these interpretations can also shock us with musical shadings and values we never have heard before.

The guiding idea behind Panzéra's interpretative style lies in a distinction he himself often made, that between pronunciation and articulation. He associated articulation with bad practice in acting and singing, the tendency to "fixate on the sonorous value of the consonants alone, brutalizing them under the shock of an undifferentiated hammering that at once suppresses, with the meaning of the phrase, all its musical expression."³ To be sure, textual intelligibility was indispensable for Panzéra. But he insisted that syllables "partake of the formation and continuation of a *singing line*; as they unfold they melt intimately into one another, each adapting its own color to the general sense of the text and subordinating itself to it."⁴ For Panzéra, no consonant is the same in one context as in another but rather a unique product of its vocal and poetic environment. Most important of all, the singer must remember that the privilege of interpreting the poem belongs to him or her as much as that of interpreting the music. "To express the meaning of the words we sing...this is only possible through oppositions of light and shade, through *pronunciation*, which strict and equal stress on each syllable, *articulation*, makes impossible to carry out."⁵ Pronunciation, understood as the kind of phonic modulation Panzéra describes, is the key to the refined beauty of his singing and allows us to put our finger on precisely the interpretative quality that has become all too scarce over the past fifty years, even in France. No less crucial is his refusal to venerate phonic clarity without its opposite, discretion or patina. These premises of Panzéra's art not only indicate why we should listen to him, but also suggest what, beyond the sheer beauty of his voice, composers like Fauré and Duparc so admired in him.

In the best performances re-recorded on these albums, the constant negotiation between absolute transparency and purposeful shading sets the style apart; even the best French baritones of the next generations, Bernac, Singher and Souzay, only occasionally equal Panzéra's intelligent suppleness, and none surpasses it (though we may often prefer them for other reasons). We need an example. Listen (on either of the two EMI collections) to "Je me suis embarqué," the second song in *L'horizon chimérique*, recorded in 1924. This is plainly an awkward recording; Panzéra, at his fourth session, still seems ill at ease before the acoustical horn, and indeed, in a memoir excerpted on the EMI double album, Magdeleine Baillet makes it clear that the extreme tension and constraints of this recording environment could never be considered comfortable. Despite these conditions, Panzéra makes the peculiar ending of this song work in a

way no other singer has ever done. The magic lies in the “pronunciation,” in the pathos he summons up out of the timbral quality of each vowel. Fauré sets all but the last four syllables of the climactic phrase, “*O ma peine, ma peine, où vous ai-je laissée?*” (“My sorrow, my sorrow, where have I left you?”) to one note, an earth-bound C-sharp, and thus all but defies the singer to bring out the appropriately complex mixture of surprise and regret. It is in the interpreter’s hands to create the latent emotion. A conventional approach might put all the stress on “peine”: the two explosive *p*’s and, on repetition, the long central “*ei*.” With Panzéra, “peine” is certainly given fullness, and there is even an emphasis on the second *p*, but he draws our attention to “*ma*,” which instead of giving way, compels attention and is as fully sung as the longer note-values. What is more, the climax of the phrase is not on the long vowel but rather *the mute e* of the second “-*ne*,” incredibly pure and sustained. If we compare Souzay, we hear a vowel that is appropriately firm but too explicitly an “*eu*,” excessively nasal: “*pei-neuun*.” At the caesura, Panzéra takes an elective and audible breath: he almost never lets us hear him breathe, but here the emotional extreme calls for this barely audible gasp, a catch in the throat. Finally, the “*ai*” (of “*ai-je*”) is like a cry of remorse, yielding nothing in intensity to the first “peine.” Only with the dreaminess of the very last mute *e* do we feel relaxation. The whole effect is spectacular: each vowel in the line assumes an expressive persona, and the phonemic likeness of the hemistichs becomes musically evident (*O/mute-e, où/mute-e*). We cannot doubt the rightness of this approach, and above all the extraordinary emphasis on the mute vowel; in this Panzéra was following Fauré’s own advice, treating the mute *e* as a taut, fully sustained vowel. “It has the same right to be heard as all the other vowels,” Panzéra remembered Fauré telling him.⁶

Having tried to follow Panzéra along his own interpretative path, we might ask if we even have the ears for it. His performances faithfully mirror his consciousness that the music exists in both the poem and the piece — that a proper interpretation consists of constantly attuning the one to the other — but this approach will not necessarily stir immediate sympathies in late twentieth-century listeners. His musical and poetic scruples lead to a certain stylistic reticence, a homogeneity, that might, indeed, be mistaken for impassivity.

Here it is useful to consider the three operatic pieces included on the EMI album in LP format (and not, unfortunately, on compact disc). In the “*Sérénade de Mephistophélès*” from Berlioz’s *Damnation de Faust* Panzéra gives us one of his most delightful performances, glowing with readiness and charm.⁷ Yet it represents an idea of operatic presentation and a style of singing that, to our ears, is by no means obviously dramatic. Today, José Van Dam, by a dozen details in his delivery, projects a far more openly diabolical voice; Panzéra refuses to sacrifice the warmth and continuity of his vocal line to an emphatic portamento, a sly phrase, or tumultuous break. He thinks of the *serenade* first of all (a genre of persuasive song) and attunes himself to its graces. Only with the raucous bark at the end of each stanza does he let loose all his mischief to remind us how ribald the whole thing really is. His devil, minus the dapper merriment, really sings no differently than his fisherman in Fauré’s “*Chanson du pêcheur*,” which is to say he offers the full, suave presence of his voice and body. And here one might notice both the fiend and the fisherman betray the vocal lineage of a noble *bel canto*, an Italianate song tempered by French linguistic sensibilities. This wholly unaffected, traditional style may be heard again in Leporello’s catalog aria from *Don Giovanni* (“*Chère Madame*”). This is one of the most acoustically successful of his recordings with orchestra, and it earned Panzéra the Grand Prix du Disque in

1934. The splendid radiance of his voice is fully in evidence with the great crescendo in the middle section. In "Il faut passer" from Lully's *Alceste*, Panzéra proves that he was not lacking skill in characterization: his Charon is august, as befits the oarsman of Hades, but also smilingly wicked, a bit full of himself.

In a long excerpt from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act III, scene 1, we hear an utterly different characterization (EMI LP). Panzéra, paired with the dulcet and admirable Yvonne Brothier, creates a naïve, almost adolescent Pelléas. He is a lover, by turns amazed and ardent, but never frenzied. This naïveté seems to be a specifically personal quality Panzéra brought to the role, and we hear it again in other interpretations (re-issued on both the EMI recordings). The "Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maisons," written by Debussy during the war, has an inherent emotional stickiness, but Panzéra sings it without the slightest simpering; he finds the voice of child-like innocence, now small and afraid, now angry and urgent. The second of Debussy's three *Ballades de Villon* and two songs by Reynaldo Hahn, "D'une prison" and "Cimetière de campagne," also succeed under the spell of this delicate innocence. Simplicity is imperative in singing Hahn's songs, which demand an informality and nonchalance not to be confused with laxness. Hahn, himself a singer and a friend of Panzéra's, probably approved of these sweet, unpretentious performances; admirers of Hahn's style will like them too.

Panzéra's most central repertorial accomplishment is represented in all three of these collections: the songs of Henri Duparc. Panzéra repeatedly recorded this small but sterling book between 1923 and 1937. The earlier discs were issued "sous le patronage de l'auteur" — for as we may remember with some astonishment, Duparc lived until 1933. Though wretchedly and permanently robbed of his compositional gifts by an illness that struck him in 1885, Duparc, late in life, was pleased to discover this young singer, whose interpretations he applauded. Panzéra was perfectly suited by vocal timbre, taste, and temperament to Duparc's music. "The ideal," Duparc himself told Panzéra, "is not the voice that shows the greatest power through its volume, but what I call the violin-voice, the voice that gives a maximum of intensity by dint of flawless diction."⁸ (Only a French composer would think of diction in relation to the sound of a speechless instrument!)

The 1934 recording of "La vie antérieure" with Magdeleine Panzéra-Baillet as the piano is probably the best single performance of this song ever pressed. The gentle ascent for "le soir" is full of sudden amazement; the great climax, "C'est là, c'est là que j'ai vécu," is thrilling. Both EMI and Pearl re-recorded the same performance for compact disc, but Pearl's transfer, here as in other instances, is preferable. In the orchestral version of this same song (1933, Pearl), the voice is more physically remote, yet the musical culmination at "C'est là" and the whole final third of the song are perhaps even more opulent. In "L'invitation au voyage" (1935, Pearl and EMI CDs), the Panzéras achieve a perfect ensemble, as they almost invariably do, and anyone who has played Duparc's songs will recognize Magdeleine Panzéra-Baillet as pianist of the first water. The singer, for his part, makes this "Invitation," with its voluptuous, arching phrases, especially irresistible through the legato style Duparc desired. The "violin-voice" is realized in part through consonants subtly "patinated to one's liking," alighting from the vowels and respecting Baudelaire's poetic language through shading as well as distinctness.⁹ Panzéra's command of the grand, ultraromantic manner in Duparc's more turbulent songs, "Le manoir de Rosemonde" and "La vague et la cloche," is no less riveting. In the former (1937, EMI CD), accompanied with dynamic and rhythmic verve, Panzéra is appropriately biting, yet noble. The poem by Robert de

Bonnières is dangerous and would lend itself to buffoonery, but Panzéra gives us a Byronic knight-errant, not a ham. There is a wonderful change of tone for the final tercets, but this contrast is somehow created without breaking the song in two, as so often happens. Panzéra makes a late entrance on the word "Pars," but this is scarcely a distraction. In "La vague et la cloche," the central transitional section shows off the singer's lowest register, here invested with its darkest gleams to propel us hypnotically into the poet's second nightmare, the scene in the bell-tower. Over the clanging ostinato, Panzéra renders the spectacular power of Duparc's prosody to perfection. The performance with orchestra (1931, EMI LP) is far superior to the one with piano (1937, EMI CD).

Other artistic summits include "Chanson triste," full of nuances, with exquisitely soft high notes (1931, EMI LP and Pearl CD; 1935, EMI CD), an unforgettable, heartfelt "Soupir" (1935, on the EMI and Pearl CDs), and "Extase" (1937, EMI CD). Panzéra seems to have recorded Duparc's "Sérénade florentine" twice, in 1924 (and not 1926, as printed on the jacket) and 1937; though neither rendition is completely satisfying, the youthful tenderness of the first recording makes it more attractive (EMI has transferred the early version to LP, the late one to CD).

In Fauré's "Les berceaux" (Pearl), the equal resonance of long and short notes yields a beautiful, homogeneous line that at first may strike us as emotionally uncolored, but when we attend to the words and Panzéra's phrasing, we find his full intensity and melancholy. The French critic Roland Barthes, who studied with Panzéra in the late thirties and deeply admired him, observed that "all of Panzéra's art ... was in the letters, not in the bellows (simple technical feature: you never heard him *breathe* but only divide up the phrase)."¹⁰ We can perceive this kind of masterful seamlessness in "Les berceaux" or in Fauré's "J'allais par des chemins perfides," but of course, as Barthes forgot, this technique is itself an "art of the bellows," and one of the finest. Yet Barthes' general impression of the style was correct. A knowing, tacit division is what makes the parenthetical declaration "Mon amour" on the second page of Duparc's "Chanson triste" sound so eloquent, sweet and natural. The same hidden art traverses the long lines of Fauré's "Adieu" and Gounod's "Le soir." One does occasionally hear a breath from Panzéra, but it usually serves a special expressive purpose.

Ostensibly, the two main attractions of the Pearl release would be Schumann's *Dichterliebe* and Fauré's *La bonne chanson*. But these two jewels turn out to be flawed. This does not mean they are not lovable, but we need to be aware of their eccentricities.

The Panzéras' recording of *La bonne chanson* dates from 1936 and apparently was the first to be made of the whole cycle. More than any other nineteenth-century cycle of songs, Fauré's joyful masterpiece depends upon the contrapuntal interweaving of voice and accompaniment. Unfortunately, the original engineers placed the piano so far from the voice as to create an acute imbalance. Not quite calamitous, at least for a listener who already knows this music, the constant want of the piano's sonorous support is impossible to ignore. This acoustic blunder is all the more deplorable because Magdeleine Panzéra-Baillot's playing is excellent; she deserved to be heard as an equal partner. The sonic ambience of the recording made that impossible, so while the piano plainly sounds as if it were at least in the same building as Panzéra, it vibrates out of an undefined corner of the larger, vocal space. This boxy sound is genuinely miserable in loud passages, notably in the third and sixth songs.

La bonne chanson was written for a soprano and first performed by a tenor: Panzéra uses transpositions for medium voice (a half-step, a step, or a minor third down), and some will inevitably miss the brilliance of a high voice in this cycle. What is

more, Panzéra is simply not at his best here. The first, fifth, seventh and ninth songs all contain incorrect entrances and rhythms, and while not fatal, they are distracting; it is surprising that the discriminating Panzéra let them pass. In many places he also fails to follow dynamic markings, which for once Fauré was careful to indicate — the composer intended this work to be full of spirited contrasts. If in the first two songs Panzéra's dynamic changes, intentional or accidental, are attractive and expressively justifiable, the same cannot be said of his errors in the fifth and eighth songs. On the positive side, the way Panzéra precisely sustains the long tones in "Une Sainte dans son auréole" is admirable. "La lune blanche" does not give the impression of a thoroughly thought-out performance, but the octave fall for "aimée" and the difficult, hushed ending are both perfect. In the fourth song, Panzéra does not seem to overthrow the natural sobriety of his voice enough to express the joy which finally emerges. But lack of contrast does not mar the songs that follow. Indeed, the "golden sunshine" at the end of "Avant que tu ne t'en ailles" is surpassingly radiant, ranking Panzéra's as the best performance of this song ever recorded. The fifth and final songs are far less persuasive. Throughout, Panzéra is unusually faithful to Fauré's metronome markings, and the speed of the first and third songs will surprise some listeners.

In the *Dichterliebe*, the balance of voice and piano is excellent, and if the piano overwhelms once or twice in passing, that seems due to Cortot's enthusiasm, not the engineers. The problems with this recording are purely artistic. First of all, Cortot has many interesting ideas about Schumann's pianistic textures. The eloquence and subtle voicing of the final postlude, or the magical coda of "Am leuchtenden Sommermorgen," capture his Schumann at its best. But whatever Cortot is doing in this recording, he is only sporadically accompanying Panzéra. To enter into the spirit of chamber music (accompanied song deserves to be considered chamber music on a par with the sonata or quartet) requires more care than this. Cortot refuses to play a slow measure in meter; he goes his own way on upbeats; every arpeggio that is slow and quiet slackens. This narcissism is more objectionable than the wrong notes of which he is always correctly if not justly accused. Yet Cortot is an admirable partner in the faster songs, and there is a superb rapport in the thirteenth and fourteenth songs which makes us wish it were present elsewhere. The best of the partnership seems to lie toward the second half of the cycle, from the seventh to the fourteenth song.

Panzéras molds words and music with great sympathy, candor, and even, where appropriate, lightness. He strokes his German like a well-worn banister; this intentional smoothness (as, for example, in "Das ist ein Flöten und Geigen") is charming. But in "Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen" Panzéra makes his consonants work hard for expressive reasons and finds just the right tone of mocking exasperation. "Ich grolle nicht" is surprising; Panzéra sings it with a feeling of romantic self-pity that sets it apart from conventional interpretations; perhaps he was thinking of the deep irony of Heine's utterance. Unfortunately, here Panzéra seems to be performing to another accompanist, one with a better sense of forward impulse. Although he breaks through Cortot's brewing mists quite deliberately from time to time elsewhere, the disparities in interpretation rob us of considerable musical pleasure. The deepest crisis of co-ordination comes with Schumann's glorious "Im Rhein," wherein Cortot wavers incompetently between 6/8 and the notated 2/2. He never quite figures out where to put his eighth notes, and consequently wrecks Panzéra's reading. With the last two songs in the cycle, we must admit that neither musician is at his best. Panzéra's tone becomes strained; one wonders if he was forced to record too much in one day. In the loudest section of "Die alten, bösen Lieder," he violates his own counsel by articulating: brutal-

izing his text. This vociferation, preceded by a false entrance in measure 31, is further muddled by Cortot's worst mistake, a forgotten bass octave whose delay ruins Panzéra's next entrance (m. 37). Only the quiet closing phrases for voice and Cortot's postlude restore a high level of artistry.

Which of these three recordings to buy? The acoustic preferences seem clear. All of them are acceptable, but the transfers on Pearl plainly rank first, the older EMI recording second, and the EMI compact disc last. Colin Attwell's transfers for Pearl are consistently the most vibrant and seem to interfere least with the original sound. Identical performances on each of the three recordings allow us to make exact comparisons. For instance, defects apparently inherent to the matrix of Fauré's "Chanson du pêcheur" (1937) are less noticeable on Pearl than on EMI, while Pearl at the same time provides greater clarity and presence in the treble. Surface noise from the original discs is equally evident across the three issues, but Pearl has created the illusion of a more transparent middle range and even managed to keep the loudest moments of "La vie antérieure," "Chanson triste," and "Le temps des lilas" free of instances of distortion. In contrast, EMI attempts no remedy at all on the LP, and on the CD, worse, an attempt comes at the price of masking purely musical sound as well. The general dullness on EMI's CD is forgivable, but why were Duparc's "Élégie" and "L'Invitation au voyage" cut off in mid-resonance? Pearl's transfer of the same matrix of "L'Invitation," sustained into silence, leaves the responsible parties with no alibi.¹¹

In terms of programmatic offerings and quality of performances, the choices are more complicated. But in truth, there are only two choices. The two-record set, released around 1987, is increasingly rare. My own copy was purchased at the Princeton Record Exchange about two years ago; in any event, if you see this marvelous album, buy it. It includes excellent liner notes and ranges most widely over Panzéra's repertoire, including performances of songs by Schubert and Schumann which have not even been mentioned here. Of the two compact discs (whose programs are different enough to merit owning both), Pearl has the best performances of Duparc, while EMI has the virtue of offering a complete set (save "Le galop") of the 1935 and 1937 sessions devoted to that composer. In spite of the acoustical drawbacks of the EMI disc, Panzéra's "Manoir de Rosemonde" alone is worth the price of admission. This disc, like the double album, has been released in EMI's "Références" series and produced with the same cover. However, despite the extensive duplication, it is important to remember that all of the performances of Duparc's songs, along with Fauré's "Chanson du pêcheur," differ from the ones issued earlier.

Many of Panzéra's performances are still available only in their original 78 rpm format or on a few old microgroove transfers. We have much to look forward to. It would be more than worthwhile to hear his other recordings of Fauré, especially the whole of *L'Horizon chimérique*, which he recorded twice around 1936. Other enticements include two arias from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, Gluck's "Plaintes d'Orfeo," and Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte*. In the meantime, if Panzéra's hidden, poetic art is a delight to the initiated but no boon to his broader reputation, a few listeners and singers will be able to discover these beautiful recordings, learn from them, and relish them. *Reviewed by Carlo Caballero*

Endnotes

1. Charles Panzéra, *L'art de chanter* (Paris: Editions Littéraires de France, 1945), pp. 110-11.
2. For dates and descriptions of matrices, I rely where possible on Alan Kelly, *His Master's Voice / La Voix de son maître: The*

- French Catalogue ... 1898 to 1929* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), otherwise on John R. Bennett and Eric Hughes, *The International Red Label Catalogue of 'DB' & 'DA' His Master's Voice Recordings, 1924-1956* (Essex: The Oakwood Press, n.d.). The dates on liner notes for two of the three recordings here reviewed are not always accurate, the exception being the compact disc from EMI.
3. Panzéra, *L'art de chanter*, p.73
 4. *Ibid.*, p.76. Emphasis mine.
 5. *Ibid.*, p.74
 6. Charles Panzéra, *50 mélodies françaises: Leçons de style et d'interprétation* (Brussels: Schott; New York: C. F. Peters, 1964), p. 121.
 7. This performance comes from a recording with Piero Coppola conducting the Padeloup orchestra which won the Grand Prix du Disque in 1931. Pearl has just re-issued the whole of the original recording (which is not quite the complete work), as "Piero Coppola conducts Berlioz: *La Damnation de Faust*" (CD 9080).
 8. Quoted in Panzéra, *50 mélodies*, p.29.
 9. See *ibid.*, p.32.
 10. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" (1972) in *Image, Music, Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 183; see also *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), pp. 271-72; and "Music, Voice, Language," pp. 278-85. Between 1972 and his death in 1980, Barthes never stopped declaring his love for Panzéra's voice and thus brought him, at least in name, to the attention of writers and academics who would probably never have heard of him otherwise.
 11. Listeners who are especially keen on the Schumann, and on Cortot too, should note that Biddulph has re-issued the same *Dichterliebe* (Biddulph LHW005, "Cortot Plays Schumann," vol. 3). The transfer by Ward Marston is even more vivid than Colin Attwell's - which is to say, an incredible achievement.

Rosa Ponselle: *The Columbia Acoustic Recordings*,¹ Rec. 1918-1924. Pearl CDS 9964 (2CDs).

Rosa Ponselle: *The Victor Recordings, 1923-1925*.² Romophone 81006-2 (2 CDs).

Rosa Ponselle: *The Victor Recordings, 1926-1929*.³ Romophone 81007-2 (2 CDs).

The career of soprano Rosa Ponselle is one of the most remarkable of any opera singer in the twentieth century, and many rightfully regard her as the finest singer America has ever produced. The circumstances surrounding Ponselle's operatic debut defied convention. She was born in an era when singers typically underwent years of vocal training before setting foot on an operatic stage, and even those with extraordinary vocal equipment often waited many seasons before undertaking the most demanding repertoire. In the United States, audiences and managements alike were prejudiced against American singers. An American singer could have a major career at the Metropolitan Opera, but only after European training and critical acceptance in European houses. Geraldine Farrar and Lillian Nordica are cases in point.

Rosa Ponselle made her operatic debut at the age of twenty-one in a role generally unthinkable for such a young singer - Leonora in Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*. She sang opposite Enrico Caruso, and although this opera was already a half-century old, the production was the Metropolitan's first. Ponselle not only lacked the European training of her American predecessors, she had virtually no formal vocal training and