

- 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

had never sung in an opera house before. She did have substantial musical training as a youth, including piano lessons, and could read an orchestral score. However, her singing career had been as a vaudeville artist, paired with her sister Carmela.

Ponselle said that, for her, singing “just came naturally”.⁴ This was an understatement, to say the least. How else could a twenty-one year old soprano with no experience tackle not only the Met’s *La Forza* premiere, but *Oberon*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, the world premiere of Joseph Briel’s *The Legend* and the Verdi *Requiem*, all in her first season? Late in his life, conductor Tullio Serafin said that throughout his long career he had worked with many outstanding singers. But, he had known only three “vocal miracles” - Enrico Caruso, Titta Ruffo and Rosa Ponselle.

Although the Pearl set was issued two years ago, it has not been previously reviewed in the *ARSC Journal*, and it makes a logical companion to the Romophone collections. Together they encompass nearly all of Ponselle’s issued recordings prior to the onset of the Great Depression, and Victor’s subsequent curbing of classical recording activities. Furthermore, there is continuity in the technical preparation, since transfers for all three sets were done by Ward Marston. Pearl has concentrated on Ponselle’s first acoustical recordings, made for American Columbia between 1918 and 1924. It is most unfortunate that Ponselle’s first contract was with Columbia, since it prevented her partnership on records with Caruso, an exclusive Victor artist. No one expected Caruso to be near the end of his career, but he would die in three years, two years prior to Ponselle’s first contract with Victor.

Ponselle had wanted a Victor contract, “if only to be able to sing with Caruso”. In her autobiography, Ponselle cited two reasons why she was contracted to Columbia. Her coach and accompanist, Romano Romani, was Columbia’s house conductor, and had a “vested interest” in signing her. Ponselle never held Romani responsible for her Columbia contract, however, and the two remained close friends until his untimely death in 1958. She placed primary blame on her manager, William Thorner. Ponselle described Thorner as a “selfish manager,” and claims that Thorner had received an “under-the-table payoff” from Columbia for arranging her contract. Rumors of the kickback had circulated in the recording industry at that time, and Ponselle documents them. She was finally able to dismiss Thorner in 1928, after winning a four-year court battle in which he had claimed contractual rights to remain her manager, despite the fact that their written contract had expired in 1922 (during this time, Thorner had also been involved in a two-way lawsuit with Amelita Galli-Curci).⁵

The Ponselle Columbians are, nonetheless, an extremely valuable group of recordings. Ponselle possessed a true dramatic soprano voice, of virtually unrivalled power and beauty. She had known only one soprano whose voice was more voluminous than her own - Kirsten Flagstad.⁶ Like Flagstad, the source of that power was tremendous natural equipment combined with unfailing control of the breath. It was her superb breath control which allowed her to cover a mature Verdi orchestra in one phrase, and float a delicate pianissimo in the next, all without effort. What her Columbians reveal, is that she was in full command of these virtues in her early twenties. The first of the two *La Forza* excerpts was made only two weeks after her Met debut, and shows her to be a mature vocalist, with natural musical and dramatic instincts.

Victor generally confined Ponselle to roles which were part of her performing repertoire. Columbia featured her in repertoire she would never sing on stage, and in many instances they offer a tantalizing glimpse of what might have been. Ponselle never sang a Puccini opera, but the Columbia selections from *Tosca*, *Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly* reveal her vocal and dramatic capabilities ideally suited to

these roles. The role of Leonora in Verdi's *Il Trovatore* was nearly as closely identified with Ponselle as its namesake in *La Forza del Destino*. Again, the Columbias supplement gaps missing in her Victor recordings. Her only *Trovatore* selection for Victor was the 1928 "Miserere" with Giovanni Martinelli. Columbia captured her in "Tacea la notte placida," "D'amore sull'ali rosee," and one of the finest Verdi duets on record, "Mira d'acerbe lagrime" with baritone Riccardo Stracciari. The cabaletta in her 1922 "Tacea la notte placida" reveals her unique dramatic coloratura which would later make Norma one of the triumphs of her career.

For the 1922-23 season, after a thirty-year absence from its repertoire, the Metropolitan Opera revived Rossini's *Guglielmo Tell* with Ponselle in the role of Mathilde. Her only recording of music from *Tell* was for Columbia, "Selva opaca" made in 1923. Ponselle named this as her favorite of the Columbia recordings.⁷ The duets made with her sister Carmela consist primarily of light repertoire from their vaudeville days.

Pearl does not claim completeness in their Columbia collection. Four known recordings are not included. Three of these are published recordings, including Ponselle's first "Suicidio" from *La Gioconda*, made on January 14, 1920 along with "Whispering Hope" and "Abide With Me", recorded in 1919. The latter is a duet with mezzo-soprano Barbara Hawthorne. Pearl has filled the two CDs to the limit - there are nearly 79 minutes of music on each disc. Marston mentions the missing published material in his notes, expressing hope that they might be included in a future Ponselle issue. Also missing is a rare unpublished recording made on April 13, 1918 of "Pace, pace mio Dio" from *La Forza del Destino*. This recording was intended strictly as a test of the recording equipment's compatibility with Ponselle's voice, and is without orchestral accompaniment. That recording, accompanied at the piano by Romani, previously appeared on LP, OASI 621.⁸

Marston mentions one problematic situation concerning playback speeds of the Columbia recordings. With one exception, all of the Columbias pitch correctly with playback speeds between 80 and 82 rpm. Yet "D'amore sull'ali rosee" from *Il Trovatore* plays at score pitch (F minor) at 86 rpm. Since Ponselle claims to have never transposed anything from *Il Trovatore*, he deferred to her recollection and transferred the recording at 86 rpm. She did not make any other recordings on December 10, 1918 so it is not possible to compare the speeds of other recordings made that day. This reviewer agrees with Marston's decision, despite his own reservations.

The two Romophone collections contain every Victor recording Ponselle made between 1923 and 1929, including all of the unpublished material known to exist. Alternate takes of many issued recordings provide interesting comparisons. Victor captured Ponselle in fully mature vocal and dramatic characterizations of her greatest roles, including arias from *La Forza*, *Aida*, *Ernani*, *La Gioconda* and *La Vestale*. Like Caruso, Martinelli and other singers with powerful dramatic voices, the acoustical recording process captured Ponselle surprisingly well. Her electrical recordings convey the brilliance of her timber to a greater degree, but the essence of the Ponselle voice comes through with remarkable immediacy on the Victor acoustics.

Tenor Giovanni Martinelli was Ponselle's most frequent partner at the Met. They appeared together over one hundred times during her nineteen seasons. Martinelli was a superb artist in his own right, and, if one laments the absence of any Ponselle/Caruso collaborations on record, her recordings with Martinelli document the finest soprano/tenor combination heard in the Italian repertoire between the two World Wars. Ponselle was an extremely self-critical artist, and she expressed reserva-

tions about most of these recordings in her autobiography, primarily over matters of balance between the two singers.⁹ Hearing these recordings over many years, this writer has felt only gratitude for their existence.

Martinelli's clarion dramatic tenor was a wonderful complement to Ponselle's dark vocal timber. Their first appearance together in the Victor studios was in February 1924, where they recorded the Nile Scene and Tomb Scene from *Aida*, an opera central to both their repertoires. Ponselle wrote that neither singer was satisfied with these recordings, and did not approve them for commercial release. Fortunately, they received some distribution in England, and good copies have survived. It is important to remember that, on the primitive acoustical Victrolas of 1924 these recordings could not have conveyed the same impression that they offer on modern electronic playback equipment. Had Ponselle and Martinelli heard these recordings as listeners can hear them today, they might have been far less critical.

In June of 1926, a year after Victor's conversion to the electrical recording process, Ponselle and Martinelli remade the Tomb Scene. Though Ponselle was still dissatisfied with the balance, Martinelli persuaded her to approve the recording for release. In a telephone conversation she quotes him as saying "Look, Rosa, it's great singing and the public will accept the balance problem". Ponselle later conceded that Martinelli's judgement had been correct.¹⁰ This version not only has the benefit of superior recorded sound, it is also complete with chorus, and mezzo-soprano Elsie Baker in the role of Amneris. In the 1924 acoustic version, the passages for Amneris and the chorus were cut. One regrets that the Nile Scene was not recorded again at the same time. In 1929, when Victor finally recorded this scene electrically, it was with Elisabeth Rethberg and Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, a superb account in its own right.

Perhaps her finest collaboration with Martinelli is the Final Scene from *La Forza del Destino*, recorded on January 18, 1928 and featuring Ezio Pinza in the role of Padre Guardiano. Two takes were made and both are included by Romophone. Although the published second take offers better balances, it is also more carefully controlled. There is greater spontaneity in the unpublished version. The Martinelli collaborations included here are a reminder that a CD edition of his complete commercial recordings is long overdue. His 1939 excerpts from *Otello* and *Simon Boccanegra* are available on Pearl, CD-9914, in fine transfers by Mark Obert-Thorn. But, most of his Victor and Edison recordings made between 1912 and 1929 have not appeared on CD in acceptable transfers, and many are unavailable in any form. Perhaps Pearl or Romophone can be persuaded to produce a definitive Martinelli edition.

Among Ponselle's favorite Victor recordings were the acoustics of "Ave Maria" and "Salce, Salce" (Willow Song) from *Otello*. Unfortunately, *Otello* was not in the Metropolitan's repertoire at any time during Ponselle's tenure. The Met's last performance of the opera was Leo Slezak's final appearance in that house, on January 31, 1913.¹¹ Ponselle was most anxious to sing Desdemona for the Met revival during the 1937/38 season, in which Martinelli assumed the title role. For a variety of reasons, however, she never returned to the Met after her last appearance as *Carmen* in the spring of 1937. The circumstances surrounding Ponselle's premature retirement are too complex to document here. They are discussed at length in her autobiography.¹²

The Romophone series concludes with Ponselle's last pre-Depression recordings, "Casta diva" and "Mira, o Norma" from Bellini's *Norma*. The 1927 Met revival for Ponselle was their first production of this opera in thirty-six years. In "Mira, o Norma", Ponselle is joined by her stage colleague Marion Telva in the role of Adalgisa. The ease with which Ponselle negotiated her substantial voice through Bellini's diffi-

cult coloratura passages remains a wonder to this day.

In 1939 Ponselle returned to the Victor studios to make six more recordings. With her operatic career now over, Ponselle concentrated on song literature. Romano Romani accompanied her in what would be his only appearance with her on the Victor label. Three of these recordings, Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Nightingale and the Rose," Charles' "When I Have Sung My Songs," and "A l'aimé" by de Fontenailles, have appeared on the Rosa Ponselle CD in The RCA Victor Vocal Series, 7810-2-RG, with transfers by Ward Marston. The remaining items, Schubert's "Ave Maria," Tosti's "Su tu le voulais," and Arenski's "On the Wings of a Dream," remain unavailable in acceptable transfers at present.

Ward Marston's technical work is outstanding in all of these reissues. The Columbia originals are often noisy, and they lack the presence of the Victor acoustics. Marston notes that later re-pressings were much quieter, and were used for all but two selections. His transfers are remarkably quiet, with vocal presence rivalling the Victors. As this review was nearing completion, Marston told this writer that he is preparing a third Ponselle reissue for Romophone. It will contain the four remaining Columbias, including the unpublished *La Forza* test, the six 1939 Victors, as well as some broadcast material. When released, all of Ponselle's surviving 78s will be available on Compact Disc, in the best sound ever heard from these recordings. Ponselle reissues are self-recommending to admirers of her art, but the technical quality and completeness of this series will make it the definitive collection of her 78 rpm recordings. *Reviewed by Gary A. Galo.*

Endnotes

1. **Bellini:** *Norma*: Casta Diva (Dec. 11, 1919); **Verdi:** *Ernani*: Ernani, involami (June 9, 1922); *I Vespri Siciliani*: Merce, dilette amiche (Nov. 4, 1919); *Il Trovatore*: Tacea la notte placida (Nov. 16, 1922); D'amore sull'ali rosee (Dec. 10, 1918); Mira d'acerbe lagrime (w/Riccardo Stracciari, baritone, Dec. 30, 1920); *La Forza del Destino*: La vergine degl'angeli (Dec. 2, 1918); Pace, pace mio Dio (July 5, 1920); *Aida*: Ritorna vincitor (Sept. 19, 1920); O patria mia (Nov. 29, 1918); O terra addio (w/Charles Hackett, tenor, Jan 14, 1920); *Otello*: Ave Maria (June 6, 1922); **Mascagni:** *Cavalleria Rusticana*: Voi lo sapete (Jan. 9, 1919); **Leoncavallo:** *I Pagliacci*: Qual fiamma avea nel guardo (Jan. 11, 1924); **di Capua:** Maria, Mari! (July 26, 1920); O sole mio (w/Carmela Ponselle, mezzo-soprano, Sept. 9, 1921); **Tosti:** Good-bye (Dec. 2, 1918); **Rimsky-Korsakov:** *Sadko*: Song of India (Dec. 30, 1920); **Offenbach:** *The Tales of Hoffman*: Barcarolle (w/C. Ponselle, Dec. 9, 1919); **J. Strauss, Jr.:** Blue Danube Waltz (Sept. 17, 1921); **Rossini:** *Guglielmo Tell*: Selva opaca (Feb. 1, 1923); **Halévy:** *La Juive*: Il va venir (Jan. 11, 1924); **Meyerbeer:** *L'Africana*: In grembo a me (Feb. 1, 1923); **Wagner:** *Lohengrin*: Einsam in trüben Tagen (Sept. 21, 1923); **Ponchielli:** *La Gioconda*: Suicidio! (Oct. 11, 1923); **Puccini:** *Manon Lescaut*: In quella trine morbide (2 versions - Sept. 9, 1921 & Sept. 19, 1923); *La Bohème*: Si, mi chiamano Mimi (Feb. 13, 1923); *Tosca*: Vissi d'arte (Jan. 7, 1919); *Madama Butterfly*: Un bel di (Jan. 9, 1919); Lohr: Rose of My Heart (April 13, 1922); Where My Caravan Has Rested (w/C. Ponselle, June 13, 1922); *Traditional*: Comin' Thro' the Rye (w/C. Ponselle, Dec. 9, 1919); **Starr:** Little Alabama Coon (April 13, 1922); **Foster:** Old Folks at Home (Feb. 15, 1921); Home, Sweet Home (Feb. 16, 1921); **Herbert:** *Mlle. Modeste*: Kiss Me Again (July 26, 1920); **Novello:** Keep the Home Fires Burning (Feb. 15, 1919); **Vanderpool:** Values (Jan. 10, 1920); **Manna-Zucca:** Rachem (Jan. 8, 1921); **Wallace:** Maritana: Scenes that are brightest (Sept. 9, 1921)

2. **Verdi:** *Aida:* O patria mia (Dec. 5, 1923); Ritorna vincitor (2 takes - Dec. 5 & 11, 1923); Pur tu riveggo...La tra foreste 11 vergine ("Nile Scene"; w/Giovanni Martinelli, tenor, Feb. 7, 1924); La fatal pietra ("Tomb Scene"; w/Martinelli, 2 takes - Feb. 8, 1924); O terra addio (w/Martinelli, Feb. 8, 1924); *Ernani:* Ernani, involami (2 takes - Dec. 5, 1923 & Jan. 23, 1924); *La Forza del Destino:* Pace, pace, mio Dio (3 takes - Dec. 11, 1923 & Jan. 23, 1924). *Otello:* Pinagea cantando nell'erma landa (Jan. 23, 1924); Ave maria (Jan. 23, 1924); **Scott:** Lullaby (Feb. 8, 1924); **Brahms:** Wiegenlied (Feb. 8, 1924); **Shelley:** Love's Sorrow (April 11, 1924); **Tosti:** Good-bye (2 takes - April 11, 1924); Serenade (2 takes - April 12, 1924); **Monro-Higgins:** My Lovely Celia (April 11, 1924); **De Curtis:** Carmè (April 11, 1924); **Di Capua:** Maria, Mari! (April 11, 1924); **Ponchielli:** *La Gioconda:* Suicidio! (2 takes - Jan. 14, 1925); **Meyerbeer:** *L'Africana:* In grembo a me (2 takes - Jan. 14, 1925); **Hewett:** The Little Old Garden (June 1, 1925); **Bland:** Carry me Back to Old Virginny (June 2, 1925); A Perfect Day (June 3, 1925); **Foster:** My Old Kentucky Home (June 2, 1925); Old Folks at Home (2 takes - June 4, 1925); **Bishop:** Home Sweet Home (June 3, 1925); **Dupont:** La Rosita (June 4, 1925); **Nevin:** The Rosary (June 5, 1925); **Di Chiara:** La Spagnola (June 5, 1925); **Silberta:** Beloved (June 5, 1925)
3. **Verdi:** *Aida:* La fatal pietra...O terra addio (w/Martinelli, May 17, 1926); Ritorna vincitor (2 takes - May 20, 1926 & Jan 18, 1928); O patria mia (May 20, 1926); *Ernani:* Ernani, involami (2 takes - June 16, 1927 & Jan. 17, 1928); *La Forza del Destino:* Pace, pace, mio Dio (2 takes - Jan. 17, 1928); Io muoi!...Non imprecare, umiliati (2 takes - Jan. 18, 1928); La vergine degli angeli (w/Ezio Pinza, bass, Jan. 23, 1928); *Il Trovatore:* Miserere (2 takes - w/Martinelli, Jan. 23, 1928); **Spontini:** *La Vestale:* Tu che invoco (May 18, 1926); O nume tutelar (2 takes - May 18, 1926); **Bellini:** *Norma:* Sedziose voci...Casta diva...Ah! bello a me ritorna (Jan. 30, 1929 & Dec. 31, 1928); Mira, o Norma (w/Marion Telva, contralto, Jan. 30, 1929); **Tosti:** 'A vucchella (May 18, 1926); Luna d'estate (May 18, 1926); Serenade (June 2, 1927); Good-bye (June 13, 1927); **Massenet:** Élégie (2 takes - May 19, 1926); **Bach-Gounod:** Ave Maria (May 19, 1926); **Schubert:** Ständchen (w/C. Ponselle - June 19, 1926); **Kahn:** Ave Maria (June 16, 1927); **Dvorak:** Songs My Mother Taught Me (Jan. 17, 1928); **Rubinstein:** Since I First Met Thee (Jan. 17, 1928)
4. Hines, Jerome. *Great Singers on Great Singing.* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984)
5. Ponselle, Rosa and James A. Drake. *Ponselle - A Singers Life.* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1982)
- 6 & 7. Ponselle and Drake.
8. Park, Bill. "Discography" in *Ponselle - A Singer's Life.* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1982)
- 9 & 10. Ponselle and Drake.
11. Seltsam, William. *Metropolitan Opera Annals.* New York: H. Wilson & Company, 1947)
12. Ponselle and Drake.

Vienna State Opera "Live" Edition, 1933-1944 - Excerpts.¹ Koch Schwann 3-1450-2.

This single disc sampler contains highlights from an incredibly ambitious project by Koch International. Between 1933 and 1944 Vienna State Opera sound engineer Hermann May made a substantial number of recordings during live performances, capturing some of the most important singers and conductors of that era. The recordings were made with a single microphone fed to a non-professional disc recording apparatus. The recording medium seems to have depended on availability, and consisted of sheets coated with wax, gelatine or similar materials. Recording time was limit-