SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1128

The Harold Wayne Collection – Volume 15

The French school of singing was typified by several unique characteristics. First and foremost was the great attention given to perfect diction; all the finest French singers paid particular attention to this. Great importance was also given to vocal agility, and while the trills and decorations of a Plançon are well known to most record collectors, even singers of lesser status, such as Belhomme, could almost match him in this respect.

Here we have examples by three of the most distinguished artists who recorded in the first decade of the present century.

Lean Escalaïs was unique in some ways, and these examples show him as an artist who could sing with delicacy when required. He is, of course, much at home projecting his blazing high C's in "Supplice infame" (Di quella pira), but he sings the aria from Boito's *Mefistofele* with beautifully modulated tone, and in all his work his diction is examplary. It is difficult to understand why the two unpublished titles included here were never issued, for they show an artistry and restraint not always to be found in his published records.

Félia Litvinne was born in 1860 in St. Petersburg, her father being Russian and her mother French-Canadian. She was brought up under the very strong French influence of her mother, and always regarded herself as being French at heart. She studied singing in Paris with Mme. Barthe-Banderali and Pauline Viardot, and was essentially an exponent of the French school. Her voice was a dramatic soprano of great range and power, but she also possessed a coloratura technique unusual in such a large voice. P. G. Hurst, writing of Litvinne, suggested that by the time she recorded her Odeon titles her voice was no longer a soprano, but more a mezzo-soprano and it is for that reason that she recorded 'Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix' and 'O mio Fernand'. He obviously had never heard her recordings of the two arias from *Il Trovatore*, made at the same time, which show her still at the height of her powers. Her unusually powerful lower register enabled her to sing many roles usually associated with lower voices, but she was particularly well known for her Isolde and continued to sing the role throughout her career. She was acclaimed as the legitimate successor to the legendary Mlle. Falcon, who had a short but brilliant career in the 1830s.

Litvinne's memoirs "Ma vie et mon art" contain the following moving lines: "Ma voix si belle si chaude n'est presque plus. J'ai fait quelques disques très beaux. Je dis toujours en touchant le gramophone, 'Ci-git Félia Litvinne'" (My voice, so beautiful so warm, hardly exists any more. I have made some very fine discs. I always say in touching the gramophone, 'Here lies Félia Litvinne' .) She taught singing in Paris after her retirement from the stage in 1916, and among her many successful pupils were Germaine Lubin and Nina Koshetz.

Victor Maurel always presents a problem to record collectors. His discs are of the very greatest historical importance, but there is no denying that the voice by 1903, when he made his first records, shows very obvious signs of wear although he was only fifty-five at the time. He taught singing and wrote books on vocal technique in which his 'bête noir' was the coup de glotte, which he insisted resulted in vocal ruin. It is rather amusing to recall that Manuel Garcia and Mathilde Marchesi, together with her daughter Blanche, all taught their pupils, including Melba, Calvé and Eames, to use the coup de glotte correctly and their voices lasted well into old age, whilst Maurel's was in decline by his mid-fifties. According to many contemporaries his voice was not particularly beautiful and could not compare with those of artists such as Renaud, Lassalle and Battistini, but he was a supreme operatic artist and all of his records, even in some rather inconsequential songs, show his superb diction and great gifts of interpretation and characterisation. It was Verdi who chose Maurel to create Iago and Falstaff, despite the availability of many great Italian baritones. He was indeed a unique genius and a master of his art.

1 *Il Trovatore* - 'O toi seul espoir' This is better known by its Italian title 'Ah, si ben mio.' Manrico pours out his love for Leonora in this beautiful air. Escalaïs gets little opportunity to display his exciting high notes and the performance is certainly not one of his best efforts. It is competent but by no means outstanding.

2 *Otello* - 'Tout m'abandonne' This excerpt from *Otello* includes the recitative and the aria, again better known as 'Ora e per sempre addio, sante memorie'. It suits Escalaïs well and gives him an opportunity to demonstrate his ability in highly dramatic music.

3 *Polyeucte* - 'Source delicieuse The label of the original record attributes this piece to Donizetti. In fact it is by Gounod and was first performed at the Paris Opera in 1878. It is sung most expressively and with some lovely piano phrases which make it clear that he was more than just a 'top note merchant'.

4 *Il Trovatore* - 'Supplice infame' This is of course the famous 'Di quella pira'. Manrico fears for the safety of his mother and vows to avenge her. Escalaïs revels in this highly-charged dramatic music, and the top C, which is not in the score, but is now a 'must' for any tenor who can deliver the goods, is splendidly given.

5 'Hérodiade' - 'Adieu donc vains objets' Here John the Baptist, facing death, says farewell to the world and commends himself to the loving care of God. Why this record was never published must remain a mystery. It is beautifully recorded and splendidly sung, with deep involvement by Escalaïs, superb diction, and ringing high notes.

6 *Mefistofele* - 'De ces champs, de ces bois' Here the aged Faust is dwelling on the beauty of the countryside which fills his soul with gentle delight. Our tenor shows that he can sing softly with lovely tone and phrasing. Again I cannot understand why this title was never issued, for it is one of his most desirable records.

7 *Cavalleria Rusticana* - 'Voi lo sapete O Mamma' Most of Litvinne's operatic recordings are sung in French, but here she uses the original Italian text. Santuzza tells Mamma Lucia that she has been seduced by Turiddu who now rejects her. The

singing is beautifully controlled, but dramatically involved, and the voice is exceptionally well recorded for 1905.
8 *Lohengrin* - 'Le rêve d'Elsa' Elsa describes a dream in which a knight in shining armour appeared to her and vowed to be her champion. Litvinne's singing is an object lesson in controlled legato with a tone of lovely soft radiance. Normally I loathe Wagner sung in French, but with such a delicious performance I am completely won over.
9 *Aïda* - I sacri numi' This is the second part of the the big aria generally known as 'Ritorna vincitor', but here given in French. Aïda in her distress is torn between her love for Radames, and her devotion to her father and her native country. She begs the gods to help her in this predicament. Litvinne again sings with classical purity of line entirely devoid of any tremolo.
10 *L'Africaine* - 'Sur mes genoux' Selika, a slave, but formerly an Indian queen, nurses the sleeping Vasco da Gama with whom she is in love. The lovely air which requires a good command of coloratura technique is beautifully sung with an agility unusual in a dramatic soprano.
11 *Samson et Delila* - 'Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix' Litvinne sings only one verse of the famous aria in which Delilah summons up all her seductive charm to seduce Samson. It is well sung, and there is no sign of a break between the middle and chest registers, but here she sounds rather uninvolved.
12 *La Favorite* - 'O mon Fernand' In this aria Leonora expresses her misgivings. She has been the king's mistress but now loves a young novice, Fernand. She is afraid that if she tells him of her past he will reject her. Litvinne sings the famous solo with rich tone and broad phrasing.
13 *Il Trovatore* - 'La nuit calme et seraine' Any suggestion that Litvinne's voice had deepened before she made these Odeons is quickly dispelled on listening to this record. She sings the aria, usually known by its Italian title as 'Tacea la notte', with consummate ease, as Leonora tells her companion Inez that she has fallen in love with the troubador who serenades her every evening.
14 *Carmen* - 'Habanera' In a way this is a disappointment. Litvinne sings the music beautifully but one feels that she is altogether too polite, and is more at home portraying characters of greater dignity. When she sings 'Si je t'aime prends garde a toi' (and if I love you beware!) she sounds rather unconvincing.
15 *Il Trovatore* - 'Brise d'amour' This aria ('D'amor sulltali rosee' in Italian) is sung to Manrico by Leonora beneath his prison wall as she tries to comfort him in his cell. It is a superb version showing Litvinne at the very height of her powers. The massive phrasing, and the steady flow of lovely tone, make this one of the soprano’s greatest contributions to the gramophone.
16 *L'Africaine* - 'Sur mes genoux' This is almost identical with track 10. Why she chose to re-record it is difficult to understand, but possibly the voice is a little more forward in this version.
17 *Le Cid* - 'Pleurez mes yeux' Here Chimène expresses her unhappiness. She loves Rodrigue, the Cid, but recoils in horror at the thought that he murdered her father. This again is a very fine version and the recorded sound is vastly superior to her early G & T discs of the same solo.

18 *Otello* - 'Era la notte' Iago tells Otello that he was sleeping next to Cassio, who was talking in his sleep and addressing Desdemona with words of love. Maurel's recording is of the very greatest historical importance, since he was chosen by Verdi to create the role of Iago. He was obviously past his prime when he recorded this famous solo and when he sings in full voice the tone is very unsteady, but when he uses a mezza voce to imitate Cassio's voice the control is much more secure. As an interpretation it is superb.

19 'Marechiare' (Tosti) It seems probable that a number of songs which Maurel recorded featured in his concert programmes. He maintains the rhythm well here but the voice sounds too dark and sombre as recorded, and it is certainly not one of his best records.

20 *Don Giovanni* - 'Serenata' Maurel was famous for his Don Giovanni, and I imagine when he was accompanied by an orchestra in the opera house he would have paid more attention to the accompaniment in the Serenade. Here the pianist has to change tempi repeatedly each time the singer enters and the result is a curiously uneven performance. It sounds very under-rehearsed.

21 'Le rondel de l'adieu' (de Lara) Maurel's immaculate diction and his style are typical of the French school at its best. He makes the most of this charming song which starts with the words, 'Partir, c'est mourir un peu' (To part is to die a little).

22 'Mandolinata' (Paladilhe) This is another pleasant trifle and may well have been one of his favourite encores. His great personality and light-hearted approach make this an attractive record.

23 'Ninon' (Tosti) This is my favourite among Maurel's non-operatic titles. The song suits his voice admirably, and he makes every word significant with meaning. The heart of the song is summed up in the following words, "Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie . . . toi qui n'as pas d'amour' (Ninon, Ninon, what do you make of life . . . you who have no love).

24 Falstaff - 'Quand'ero paggio' This is my favourite among Maurel's operatic discs. He sings the little aria with tremendous verve, as he recalls that he was a slim youth when he was a page of the Duke of Norfolk. This is, of course, another creator's record. The aria is so short that he repeats it, first in Italian and then in French, in response to the enthusiastic shouts of the studio staff who demand a 'bis' (encore).

25 'A year ago' (d'Hardelot) I suppose Maurel learned this rather maudlin ballad in English for his British and American audiences. It describes how Pierette and Pierrot met at a ball, but sadly had to part later. Maurel's English diction is very good and I am prepared to say that this second-rate song shows Maurel in excellent voice better in this record of 1907 than in any of his 1905 ones - and what he does with this slight material is quite magical. It is worth repeated hearing and study as an object lesson in interpretation.

26 'Au temps du grand Roi' (Tosti) Most of the remarks I have made about the previous record apply equally to this one, which is sung in French. Maurel makes the most of the material, which he transforms into something quite charming by his great art.

John Freestone

Dr. Wayne writes: The two most extraordinary items on this disc are, of course the Escalaïs unpublished titles. They were preserved in Turin by a descendent of one of the Milan recordists and both came to me in 1967. Litvinne's Paris Fonotipias are rare, but not nearly so rare as the Cornuberts, Davids and Gailhards, not to mention the Kinens and Adinis. We are intending, incidentally, to produce the 'Paris!' set soon. Her Odeons of Samson/Favorite and Cid/Africaine were findable, but the Trovatore double sided disc, especially in this condition, is a major rarity. Tristan I never found and indeed neither did Robert Bauer.

Maurel's Fonotipia matrices were extensively reissued in the 30s. However, originals are a different case altogether. The rarest, in my experience, is 'A year ago' and the 'Au temps du grand roi'/'Rondel de l'adieu' coupling.

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