

Ninon Vallin

THE COMPLETE PATHÉ-ART LABEL RECORDINGS
(1927-1929)

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LINER NOTES

Record manufacturers have seldom been adventurous in the design of a label. For the vast majority, a label had only a utilitarian function: a place to identify the manufacturer by name or logo or both and the selection recorded. Even the color of the label--often extravagant in bright orange, yellow, powder blue, royal blue, blood red, pink, mauve, pea green, dark green, purple, brown and the ubiquitous black, and a half-dozen dyes difficult to describe (puce, murky grey, dirty burgundy?)--was used to indicate price categories, with or without a certain commercial "hype," and had very little if anything to do with aesthetics.

In the history of the phonograph, there have probably been only three manufacturers who came to the conclusion that the label of a record should be attractive for its own sake. The first of these was Fonotipia which in 1904 designed their labels using a large logo-like drawing of an ambidextrous angel with broad open wings holding a lyre in her left hand and a printing press in her right, the drawing occupying most of the upper half of the label. While certainly eye catching, the design and the coloring of the design had, in effect, all the glamor of Italian bank notes. The second was A.P.G.A. (Association Phonique des Grands Artistes) which in 1906 designed their labels with a large picture of the Paris Opéra and of an elegant lady sitting placidly somewhere in the middle of the Place de l'Opéra listening to her gramophone in the company of a naked cherub who leaned somewhat lasciviously over her right shoulder, her box of records spilled out on the pavement, the whole romantic scene occupying the upper third and two-thirds of the left side of the label. While A.P.G.A. used color to denote price categories (gold, brown, blue and red which ranged from 12 to 6 francs), the color of the price category was integrated into a general color-scheme: gold and pea-green, chestnut brown and tan, royal and powder blue, red and ecru.

From about 1905 to 1916 the Compagnie Générale des Machines Parlantes Pathé Frères (the official title of what is generally and more succinctly called Pathé) had ground out some of the world's homeliest records. This company, like Berliner, did not fancy "labels" but rather employed a group of house artists who engraved the record information into the central portion of the soft wax of the "master." For the commercial issue, these hand-written impressions were filled in with a crude cream-colored paste. In 1916 when the "etched label" was abandoned, the company introduced very plain paper labels, the color of which, as usual, indicated various price categories: gray 22 francs, yellow 17 francs, purple 15 francs, green 14 francs, white 13 francs, black (later brown) 12 francs, and blue 10 francs.

It was not until 1927 that Pathé decided--after 30 years of ugly or plain-jane labelling--to turn out a premium-priced record and to create labels for these records which would be truly outstanding. They called this series "Pathé-Art," and it consisted of two different sized recordings: 29 cm (selling for 25 francs) and 30.5 cm (selling for 35 francs). Although numbered in the same block (7100 et seq. for vocal artists, 5400 et seq. for instrumental), the 29 cm recordings had "orange and gold" labels and the 30.5 cm recordings "multicolor [with] orange border." Those were the terms used by Pathé themselves in describing their ware. Both were dazzling, in-your-face art-deco creations. The 29 cm was a rather chaotic and jazzy jumble of gold and orange design, while the 30.5 cm recording was in my opinion the more dramatic with the entire upper half of the label containing a flamboyant, stylized design in brilliant reds, oranges, yellows, and green, and the lower half in basic jet black with gold lettering.

While the series was inaugurated with great fanfare in October 1927, the new electric recording system from Western Electric utilized for these recordings was so technically poor that the first 17 records in the series were withdrawn almost immediately. Virtually none of them ever made their way into a general catalogue. The artists associated with these earliest of Pathé-Art vocal recordings were André Baugé, Miguel Villabella, André Goavec, Edmond Rambaud, José Beckmans and Ninon Vallin. The Art series, as a whole, was short-lived, reaching only number 7238 in 1930, when Pathé, totally discarding the numbering system first used in 1916, inaugurated yet another tight-block numbering system (90000, 91000, 92000, etc.) which, had it not been for the purchase of Pathé by EMI in 1932, would have once again placed the company in serious numbering problems. But just before Pathé abandoned the Art series altogether, they decided to gussy up some of their celebrity 25 cm recordings by creating a hitherto new "Art" label (although never advertised as such). This label was also an art-deco delight à la Kandinsky, the upper half in royal blue, steel grey and white in a bizarre array of triangles and wheels, the lower half in solid royal blue with gold lettering.

Vallin made three recordings in this first offering (7108, 7109, 7115), all published in a December 1927 supplement in both lateral- and vertical-cut versions. All three of these recordings appear to have survived in one or two copies in vertical-cut version only. They were apparently deleted before the publication of Pathé's next general catalogue. It is curious, then, that in a Belgian Pathé catalogue of 1928 both 7115 and 7143 (Madama Butterfly and Louise) were listed as available. This double listing must have been a printing or more likely an editing error, since I doubt whether the Belgian public was ever presented the task of choosing between a poor and a reasonably good recording of the same selections. Also, it must be noted that sometime after 1929, Pathé reduced their 30.5 cm recordings to 30 cm, bringing them finally in line with all other recording companies in France. Some recordings therefore can be found in both sizes. The whole venture, as with most of what Pathé did, was yet another example of what Marc Monneraye has called a study in entropy.

After her three Art series recordings for Pathé, Vallin in early 1928 began a series of recordings for Odeon. She promptly returned to Pathé later in 1928 and made 12 recordings in the Art series, repeating the six titles from the 1927 session. These recordings were published from October 1928 to February 1929. In late 1928 she again returned to Odeon; and in 1929 once again returned to Pathé and made seven more recordings in the Art series which were published in the early months of 1930.

Her trips back and forth between the Pathé and the Odeon recording studios, playing one company off against the other, were very much, as we shall learn, a calculated game to get what repertory she wanted to record.

Ninon Vallin was born Eugénie Vallin at Montalieu-Vercieu, a small town about 30 miles east of Lyon, on 7 September 1886. She was a pupil of the Lyon Conservatory of Music. As such, she would not easily have been accepted into the Parisian "national houses" (the Opéra and Opéra Comique) until she had proven herself before Parisian audiences. She made her Paris debut (as far as can be documented) on 2 April 1911 at the prestigious Concerts Colonne singing Debussy's *La Demoiselle élue*. A year and a half later, on 14 October 1912, she made her debut at the Paris Opéra Comique as Micaëla and remained intermittently with that house until at least the mid 1930s by which time, through her operatic and concert performances as well as her many recordings, she had become a virtual household name in France. She appeared at Milan's La Scala in 1917. Her career in South America--mainly Argentina--was extensive but in North America very limited. The only opera performance discovered thus far took place at the San Francisco Opera on 30 November 1934 in *Faust* with Pinza, Crooks and Bonelli, a 30-minute segment of which was broadcast coast-to-coast via NBC. Her prodigious recording career began in 1913 and ended in 1956. She died in Lyon on 22 November 1961, two months past her 75th birthday.

I heard Vallin only once in early 1949 in a concert performance at the Châtelet (the very house in which she had made her Paris debut) in Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* with André Pernet and Georges Jouatte. Although the voice was a bit dusty around the edges, it soared out through the vast spaces of this many thousand-seat Victorian auditorium with a purity and beauty of tone and without any of the occasional acidulousness one hears on her recordings. Having heard her hundreds of times on recordings, I was totally unprepared to hear a voice much sweeter in tone and greater in breadth. In truth, hers was a voice, as that of so many others, which was often so ill served by close miking in the confines of a recording studio.

I met her once under the most extraordinary of circumstances. From mid September to mid October 1950, Harold Barnes and I decided to take a vacation in Spain. On a very dispirited return train trip to Paris, Barnes suggested that we write to Vallin and--"invite her to tea." When we got back to Paris, Barnes did exactly that and, even more astonishing than our bravado, Vallin accepted. She arrived one Sunday afternoon huffing and puffing (we were then temporarily ensconced in a tiny fifth-floor walk-up apartment and she had put on a bit of weight) and we spent several hours together.

I was as ill prepared to meet the real Ninon Vallin in person as I had been to hear the real Ninon Vallin in the concert hall. Because of her lyric, restrained--one might almost say patrician--performances, I had expected a demure and perhaps somewhat retiring person. She was a rather short, stout woman, not at all "fashionably" dressed, with an energetic and rather unladylike hand shake. Although sociable and charming, she was in fact very assertive, frank and sometimes shockingly outspoken. She had a large sense of humor and would laugh loudly, but she could also be quite bitter, dark and acerbic. In short, hers was a very volatile personality with wide mood swings.

She was the delightful comedian when asked about her professional "debut." She replied that she had been engaged as understudy to Rose Féart for the world premiere of Debussy's *Le Martyre de St-Sébastien* at the Th. du Châtelet. Rehearsals apparently went well until the morning of the dress rehearsal when the director informed Féart that she would have to sing her role from a catwalk high above the stage. Vallin added with a little grin, "As you know Féart suffered from... un certain embonpoint." The diva, informed for the first time of these directions, looked at the ladder-like contraption which would have led her up onto the catwalk, and said, 'You want me to climb that and sing up there? Never!' " After much cajoling by the director and, later, arguing, Féart left the house in high dudgeon. Vallin sang the dress rehearsal, attended mostly by critics, and the first public performance on 22 May 1911 under the young Désiré Inghelbrecht, head of chorus, and the conducting of André Caplet. One of the reviews stated (Vallin reported with a sly shrug) that Mlle. Féart hadn't sounded so good in years; Stoullig in the *Annales du Théâtre et de la Musique*, 1911 (pg. 391), wrote, "Nor let us not forget Mlle Rose Féart, invisible singer, with the divinely pure voice..." Vallin added, "You can well imagine that after the reviews, Féart at the very next performance climbed 'that' and sang up 'there.' " Vallin's participation in that part of the performance however went completely unheralded and Féart took all credit for the "divinely pure voice." Parenthetically it must be added that Vallin had quite obviously forgotten her performance with the Colonne Orchestra on 2 April 1911 in Debussy's *La Demoiselle élue*, her earliest performance in Paris that I have been able to trace. Stoullig in the *Annales* for 1911 wrote: "...Mlle Sanderson [obviously not Sybil who had been dead for some eight years] and Vallin were justifiably applauded."

It is also of considerable interest that the liner notes to Guy Dumazert's LP tribute to Vallin "Quarante-Cinq Ans de Carrière Lyrique" (Vega C30X341) contain a holograph letter from Valentine Hugo to Vallin in which Hugo states that the first time she ever heard Vallin's voice was in the "Martyre de Saint Sébastien le 22 mai 1911 au Théâtre du Châtelet. Vous étiez dans le programme: 'la Voix de la Vierge Erigone, Mlle Vallin'." It becomes now fairly clear that critics in their reviews tend to write history. Since Féart walked out a few hours prior to the dress rehearsal, the night traditionally when critics were invited, the theater administration had no time to change or modify program notes. (One actually wonders, from the severely reduced cast of the so-called "premiere" printed in Stoullig, whether the critics actually had any printed program notes at all.) What becomes clear, however, from Hugo's letter is that Vallin's name did appear in the program notes for the first public performance, as *La Vierge Erigone* but not as replacement for the *Vox Coelestis*.

When she was asked how she was able to record such oddities (in France) as *Norma*, *Mefistofele*, *Frauenliebe und-Leben*, Richard Strauss songs, etc., she launched into a long bitter tirade against the recording industry. "I always had to bargain with them. 'If you let me record X, I'll record Y for you; the sales for Y will surely compensate any financial loss you suffer from X'." All told, her recordings for Odeon are more interesting than those for Pathé. Switching back and forth between the two companies, as evidenced by her flitting from Pathé to Odeon and back again, was also part of her bargaining stratagem. But even though between the two companies she made a large number of interesting records, she still remained frustrated. She said with great regret that she had wanted to record more Spanish music which was a special passion of hers and, above all, excerpts from Respighi's *Marie l'Egyptienne* (Maria l'Egiziaca) which she had recently created in France.

Further bitterness ensued when, in late 1930 or very early 1931, she signed a contract with Columbia to record a complete Werther. The Werther was recorded in February and March 1931. During the recording sessions of Werther, she and Georges Thill had a very serious falling out. When, in 1935, she began recording what was anticipated as a complete Louise, the relationship between her and Thill worsened to the point that, in utter fury, she walked out of the recording sessions, leaving Columbia with an incomplete and disjointed set of recordings. In order to salvage the project, Columbia called in Bernadette Delprat to record some of Louise's music in the finale of the opera. The work was issued in 1936 as an "abridged" Louise. Vallin, when asked, refused to state what caused the rupture between her and Thill; she would only reply by referring to the tenor as "ridiculous," "a big baby and a bad colleague."

The other struggle (a major and enduring one at that) which Vallin waged was over the matter of royalties. The battle over royalties (won in the U.S. by Caruso, Gluck, Tetrizzini and others who extracted magnanimous royalties from the Victor Talking Machine Co. and came away with hundreds of thousands of dollars) had been raging in France since at least May 1906 when ten artists (Agustarello Affre, Charlotte Agussol, André Gresse, Jean Noté, Alice Verlet, Henri Weber, along with the great music hall artists Bergeret, Dranem, Mayol and Polin) withdrew from commercial recording and founded their own company A.P.G.A. (Association Phonique des Grands Artistes). They wrote in their manifesto (published in the November 1908 catalogue--the only catalogue that has surfaced to date):

For a number of years we have been making a fortune for various phonograph and gramophone companies by furnishing them performances which, reproduced on thousands of discs and cylinders, have been sold throughout the entire world.

What part of the enormous profits produced by the sale of these recordings benefits the artist, the author of the record?

Although a royalty is paid to the editor and to the company for each disc and cylinder sold, nothing is paid to the artist beyond his fee. The artist however has furnished the most essential element: his voice.

This noble enterprise, founded in 1906, floundered in 1910 when Jean Périer and several other artists successfully sued the company for fraud.

The battle over artists' royalties was still being waged in France nearly 40 years later. In 1944 Vallin, utterly worn down and frustrated by the intransigence of the French recording industry, decided firmly that she would make no more recordings until and unless she were paid a royalty.

She is alleged to have made a batch of recordings for the Pacific label in 1947 (apparently made and/or issued only in Australia!). One can only presume that Pacific met her royalty demands, as did the manufacturers of her four LP recordings made in the late 1950s.

While Vallin's recordings on the Pathé-Art label consist of fairly standard repertoire, the rarity of this premium-priced label should awaken all Vallin fans. Six of the recordings on this CD set are known to exist in only one or two published copies; and another six are unique in Vallin's lengthy discography of well over 400 single sides plus four complete or abridged operas: Don Giovanni: Air de Zerline, "Panis angelicus" (Franck), "Voici le Noël" (Tiersot), "L'Invitation au voyage" (Duparc) and the duet with Sibille from Le Roi d'Ys.

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TRACK LISTING

CD 1 (74:54)

1. **LA BOHÈME: On m'appelle Mimi {Mi chiamano Mimi}** (Puccini) [3:38]
1927; (N200912) 7108 (29 cm)
 2. **LA BOHÈME: Les adieux de Mimi {Donde lieta usci}** (Puccini) [2:55]
1927; (N200913) 7108 (29 cm)
 3. **CARMEN: Habanera** (Bizet) [2:42]
1927; (N200914) 7109 (29 cm)
 4. **CARMEN: Séguédille** (Bizet) [1:57]
1927; (N200915) 7109 (29 cm)
 5. **MADAMA BUTTERFLY: Sur la mer calmée {Un bel di vedremo}** (Puccini) [3:18]
1927; (N200929) 7115 (29 cm)
 6. **LOUISE: Depuis le jour** (Charpentier) [3:13]
1927; (N200930) 7115 (29 cm)
 7. **LA BOHÈME: On m'appelle Mimi {Mi chiamano Mimi}** (Puccini) [3:33]
1928; (201270) x7145 (29 cm)
 8. **LA BOHÈME: Les adieux de Mimi {Donde lieta usci}** (Puccini) [2:55]
1928; (201271) x7145, x7156 (29 cm)
 9. **MADAMA BUTTERFLY: Sur la mer calmée {Un bel di vedremo}** (Puccini) [3:14]
1928; (201272) x7143, x7156 (29 cm)
 10. **LOUISE: Depuis le jour** (Charpentier) [3:33]
1928; (201273) x7143 (29 cm)
 11. **THAÏS: Scène du miroir** (Massenet) [5:53]
1928; (201274/5) x7144, (29 cm)
- Siete Canciones Populares Españolas** (de Falla)
12. **El paño moruno** [1:09]
1929; (202443) x3460 (25 cm)
 13. **Seguidilla murciana** [1:08]
1928; (201276) x7146 (29 cm)
 14. **Asturiana** [1:58]
1929; (202443) x3460 (25 cm)
 15. **Jota** [3:00]
1928; (201277) x7146 (29 cm)
 16. **Nana** [1:12]
1928; (201276) x7146 (29 cm)
 17. **Canción** [1:04]
1929; (202442) x3460 (25 cm)
 18. **Polo** [1:24]
1929; (202442) x3460 (25 cm)
 19. **Le Nil** (Leroux) [3:32]
1928; (201282) x7149 (29 cm)

20. **SADKO: Chant hindou** (Rimsky-Korsakov) [3:36]
1928; (201283) x7149 (29 cm)

21. **CARMEN: Habanera** (Bizet) [2:38]
1928; (201284) x7147 (29 cm)

22. **CARMEN: Séguedille** (Bizet) [1:51]
1928; (201285) x7147 (29 cm)

23. **CARMEN: Les tringles des sistres** (Bizet) [3:07]
1928; (201286) x7148 (29 cm)

24. **CARMEN: Air des cartes** (Bizet) [3:06]
1928; (201287) x7148 (29 cm)

25. **MANON: Voyons, Manon** (Massenet) [3:56]
1928; (201429) x7166 (30 cm and 30.5 cm)

26. **MANON: Allons! il le faut... Adieu, notre petite table** (Massenet) [3:47]
1928; (201430) x7166 (30 cm and 30.5 cm)

CD 1: All recordings made in Paris by the Compagnie Générale des Machines Parlantes
Pathé Frères

Tracks 1-11, 21-26 with orchestra

Tracks 12-18 with Godfroy Andolfi, piano

Tracks 19-20 with violin and piano

Languages: Tracks 12-18 in Spanish, all other Tracks are in French

Pathé x3460--not part of the Pathé-Art series and recorded in late 1929--has been used
in conjunction with x7146 to complete the set of de Falla's Siete Canciones Populares
Españolas.

CD 2 (76:12)

1. **MANON: Je suis encore tout étourdie** (Massenet) [3:39]
1928; (201431) x7165 (30 cm and 30.5 cm)

2. **MANON: A nous les amours** (Massenet) [2:31]
1928; (201432) x7165 (30 cm and 30.5 cm)

3. **TOSCA: Prière de Tosca {Vissi d'arte}** (Puccini) [3:24]
1928; (201439) x7168 (30.5 cm)

4. **TOSCA: Notre doux nid {No, Mario mio}** (Puccini) [4:06]
1928; (201440) x7168 (30.5 cm)

5. **LE NOZZE DI FIGARO: Récit et air de Suzanne {Deh vieni non tardar}** (Mozart) [4:16]
1928; (201441) x7167 (30.5 cm)

6. **DON GIOVANNI: Air de Zerline {Batti, batti}** (Mozart) [3:45]
1928; (201442) x7167 (30.5 cm)

7. **MANON: Duo de la rencontre** (Massenet) [8:42]
with Miguel Villabella, tenor
1929; (202423/4) x7225 (30 cm)

8. **Panis angelicus** (Franck) [3:57]
1929; (202438) x7226 (30 cm)

9. **Voici le Noël** (arr. Tiersot) [3:53]

1929; (202439) x7226 (30 cm)

10. **LES CONTES D'HOFFMANN: Elle a fui, la tourterelle** (Offenbach) [4:07]

1929; (202466) x7227 (30 cm)

11. **MANON: Je marche sur tous les chemins** (Massenet) [3:48]

1929; (202467) x7227 (30 cm)

12. **FAUST: Ballade du roi de Thulé** (Gounod) [4:39]

1929; (202462) x7228 (30 cm)

13. **FAUST: Air des bijoux** (Gounod) [3:49]

1929; (202463) x7228 (30 cm)

14. **THAÏS: Scène du miroir** (Massenet) [6:22]

1929; (202464/5) x7229 (30 cm)

15. **L'Invitation au voyage** (Duparc) [3:52]

1929; (202476) x7230 (30 cm)

16. **Chanson triste** (Duparc) [3:10]

1929; (202477) x7230 (30 cm)

17. **LE ROI D'YS: Margared, ô ma soeur... En silence pourquoi souffrir** (Lalo) [6:50]

with Madeleine Sibille, soprano

1929; (250021/2) x7233 (30 cm)

CD 2: All recordings made in Paris by the Compagnie Générale des Machines Parlantes
Pathé Frères

Tracks 1-7, 10-14, 17 with orchestra

Tracks 8-9 with M. Vadon, organ

Tracks 15-16 with violin and piano

Languages: Track 8 in Latin, all other Tracks are in French

Producers: Victor Girard, Scott Kessler and Ward Marston

Audio Conservation: Ward Marston