

## Joseph Canteloube's *Chants d'Auvergne*

A survey by Ralph Moore

Between 1923 and 1930, Joseph Canteloube assembled and arranged either for orchestra or piano twenty-two of these songs divided into four series or groups; a fifth group of eight songs appeared in 1955, two years before Canteloube's death. They are sung in Occitan (French: langue d'Oc), a Romance language which to the modern eye and ear appears to be an amalgam of French and Spanish, and indeed its closest modern relative is Catalan.

Despite his taking what some see as liberties with the music, Canteloube's labours proceeded from the conviction that "peasant songs often rise to the level of purest art in terms of feeling and expression, if not in form." There is, I suppose, a danger of performing these charming folk songs in too arch, languorous, and sophisticated a manner, as they are meant to reflect the loves and lives of peasants and sheep-farmers, and to be redolent of the volcanic Auvergnat landscape, with its lakes, tracks and meadows, so some might consider a lush, big-band sound hardly appropriate and a touch of rough rusticity apt. Canteloube's modern arrangements of these old songs made no pretence of authenticity, but he often captures the spirit of country instruments – the musette or cabrette (bagpipes), the galoubet (reed pipe or Pan Pipes), the hurdy-gurdy - by inviting modern woodwind to imitate them deliberately coarsely and employing traditional country-dance rhythms. Nonetheless, that orchestration and Canteloube's harmonies are often extraordinarily dense and complex, so the simple melodies are often swathed in velvet. Moods range from the melancholy to the playful to the celebratory and even bawdy, but the most famous song by far, included in countless anthologies under a wide variety of arrangements, is, of course the serene, haunting "Bailèro", so evocative of sunny, upland pastures, where a young girl serenades her lover across a stream.

The songs have traditionally been sung by a soprano and there is only one recital below by a true mezzo-soprano, which is that by Frederica von Stade - but she always had a good upper extension and, in any case, I love the combination of warmth and delicacy in her sound.

There really isn't that much variation in conductors' approaches beyond deciding whether they go all out for the sumptuous soupiness Canteloube's elaborate orchestration seems to urge or to adopt a spikier, chirper manner – but the emotional and stylistic range of the songs themselves indicate that it is desirable in a successful recording to embrace both modes.

Listening to all thirty at one sitting might lead to pastoral indigestion and I suspect that most collectors will be content with a selection of the best songs as it is generally accepted that they are not all of equal quality and a reduced number hardly compromises the listener's enjoyment. However, if you are a someone for whom completeness is a major criterion, five singers here have recorded all thirty songs presented on two CDs - and with four of those you have the option of buying just a single disc of selections; the other singers have made single discs of excerpts from the collection ranging between Anna Moffo's seven songs – almost too few to merit inclusion but they are very good – and Victoria de los Ángeles almost complete and well-filled disc of twenty-four.

I consider fourteen singers below which I think covers the major releases; all are studio recordings and all but the first two are in stereo or digital sound.

### **The Recordings:**

#### **Madeleine Grey (sop), 1930, Cascavelle; Pearl (single CD excerpts) (mono)**

Orchestra (anon.)/Élie Cohen

Madeleine Grey made the first recording of eleven songs selected from the first three series, accompanied by an unnamed ensemble conducted by Élie Cohen, otherwise best known for his

*Carmen* and *Werther* with Georges Thill. Grey had a very clean "straight" voice, boyish and unsentimental in manner, and her direct approach to these songs emerges surprisingly well recorded for such an early date. She often sings out in a disarmingly open manner rather than artily caressing phrases, so the songs seem sharper, more direct and homespun than in more luxurious accounts. Its age makes it recommendable only to buffs rather than the general collector but it is certainly interesting to hear how this music was performed ninety years ago and it stands up well, even if our tastes have since changed.

**Lucie Daullène (sop), 1950 Decca Eloquence, (single CD excerpts) (mono)**

Joseph Canteloube (piano)

I [reviewed](#) this last year and was, to say the least, less than enthusiastic about it. The weirdness of Lucie Daullène baby-doll voicelet almost robs me of words adequate to express my surprise and revulsion. This "First CD release on Decca" should be its last; it should never have seen the light of day as it is an affront to the art of singing. Apparently, the legend was promulgated that the singer was fifteen years old when she recorded these fourteen songs with the inexplicable approval and still deft accompaniment of the elderly composer; in fact, as the notes make clear, she was nearer nineteen. Her diction and musicality are remarkable but in purely vocal terms, the result is either a peculiarity or an abomination depending on the severity with which you apply the strictures which govern proper vocal technique; singing in a Minnie Mouse falsetto squeak under extreme constriction is not, as far as I am concerned, a legitimate or indeed pleasing soprano sound and to talk as if it were is absurd. I readily acknowledge that chansons do not require the same heft and amplitude of voice as opera but the principles of good, classical voice production are the same and they are flouted here. It is no surprise to learn that Daullène made only one more classical album then moved into another genre; for example, her voice was famously used to dub Snow White in the French release of the Disney cartoon film.

It is a pity that Canteloube, who, despite being a curator of songs, seems to have had little or no appreciation or understanding of voice, and should have been so convinced by the appropriateness of his protégée's voice to his arrangements that he insisted on her participation, as the songs themselves are a valuable and represent an attractive repository of French cultural heritage.

**Anna Moffo (sop), 1964, RCA (single CD excerpts)**

American Symphony Orchestra/Leopold Stokowski

The offering of only seven songs means that I can hardly recommend this as anything other than a supplement but it is a famous recording for good reason. There is a unique appeal to Moffo's plaintive, shimmering soprano; she is especially good at suggesting yearning, but joining the orchestra for the prolonged high B flats concluding "L'antouèno" and "Passo pel prat" is either exciting or unnecessarily vulgar, depending upon your taste. That apart, Stokowski's accompaniment is hardly self-effacing but neither is it bombastic, just sparkling and energised, sounding like Respighi. The oboe and tambourine in "Malouros qu'ò uno fenno" are suitably rustic. The lighter songs, like "L'aïo dè rotso", are breezy and winsome, while "Baïlèro" is steady, silky and swooning. The sound is acceptable, if obviously not up to the best of modern recordings.

**Netania Davrath (sop), late 1950's/early 1960's, Vanguard (2 CDs complete or single CD excerpts)**

Orchestra (anon.)/Pierre de la Roche

I have the issue of this recording with the portrait of Netania Davrath on the cover, although this double CD has been issued in many guises - just be careful that you don't buy the single CD if you want the complete set. Having said that, the single highlight disc from either Vanguard or Alto is treasurable - just not comprehensive.

This has long been the most "authentic" and recommendable collection for those who want to avoid the operatic "Grande Dame" approach to these songs. That is not to say that Davrath completely eschews vibrato or has a less attractive voice than is customary, but the vibrato is quick and light and she has a neat, innocent, sometimes deliberately naïve, tone and is unafraid to drop the formal manner to underline the pathos or absurdity of a song. Her voice has the characteristics of a soubrette entirely within the French tradition without any of the unfortunate attendant shrillness or archness which can sometimes afflict such singers. Her manner is complemented by a deliberately folksy-sounding orchestra, with winds which honk and rasp and strings which deliberately whine and swoon.

Her diction is a marvel; it is a truism and a platitude to remark upon her fabled linguistic prowess (fluent in eight languages etc.) but it's a lovely irony that the most French version of these songs is by a Jewish, Soviet-born émigrée to Israel who studied in Germany and Italy. I don't know if her Occitan dialect is authentic but I wouldn't mind betting it's impeccable and she rolls her r's beguilingly. She seems to be in complete command of the dialect and I can hear on the second disc that her modern French is...well, so French. If you speak some yourself, you don't really need the libretto so usefully provided but obviously the Auvergne French is another matter.

This does not necessarily displace classic accounts by such as Frederica von Stade or Kiri Te Kanawa, but this is where I'd direct anyone who wants to understand and feel the spirit of these charming songs.

**Victoria de los Ángeles (sop), 1968 EMI (single CD excerpts)**

Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux/Jean-Pierre Jacquillat

There are 24 songs here and it is one of EMI's "Great Recordings of the Century" series. There are, for reasons I do not understand, also releases with only twenty songs and a timing of just over an hour instead of over seventy minutes.

De los Ángeles' manner is very characterful and individual; she is unafraid to break into a more "peasant-voiced" style with a tear or a smile in her tone and she has a rich timbre in the lower regions of her voice. She is not always totally steady and she swoops a bit, but that is more a function of her characterisation than any vocal failings, I think. However, I really don't like the droopy, whiny voices she assumes for "La pastoura als camps"; the sound is nasal and unattractive – nor is her sound in the famous "Baïlèro" especially smooth or attractive, although I like the way she uses dynamics,

Along with Jill Gomez's account, this is the recording which has introduced many listeners to this music and loyalty to it is understandable but I don't personally warm to her voice or manner as much as many older punters, finding her just a little arch and overdone where more restraint and attention to line would serve the music better - but I acknowledge the charm and variety on display here.

**Frederica von Stade (mezzo-sop), 1982 & 1985, Sony/CBS/Newton (vols. 1 & 2 complete or single CD excerpts)**

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/Antonio de Almeida

Frederica von Stade recorded all the songs; the first 21 were issued on a single album which won a *Grand Prix du Disque* in 1982 and the remaining nine were recorded in the second session three years later. She presents them in a different order from that in which Canteloube published them, which is of little consequence, I think.

There is a special pleasure to be found in the bite of Flicka's lower register and the plangency of her middle voice; hers is one of those voices, like Janet Baker's, which – for me, at least – instantly prompts a little frisson of recognition because it is so personal and communicative. She is a sensitive narrator, with the vocal heft to ride the dense orchestration but her quiet singing is especially moving. Antonio de Almeida's conducting in the slow songs is admittedly indulgent - but he is not alone in that and, as

with Jeffrey Tate's direction for Kiri Te Kanawa, I do not mind the extra time allotted to such a beautiful, golden voice, allowing it to luxuriate in the long melodic lines. The engineering aids and abets that approach; the sound is rich yet detailed. To paraphrase the observation made by the eminent critic J. B. Steane, some accounts inhabit open, sunlit fields, whereas this one lives in dappled, woodland shade.

**Jill Gomez (sop), 1982 EMI/CfP (single CD excerpts)**

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra/Vernon Handley

Jill Gomez made a speciality of these songs and her recording of seventeen of them has for many years been a standard, reference version, especially for British punters. She displays great artistry in her delivery of this music but some might find her voice rather light and over-brilliant to convey the atmosphere of the lazy, sun-kissed South and I am less enthused by her timbre in "Baïlèro", where her soprano turns thin and edgy – and if the jewel of the collection doesn't satisfy completely, that puts the recording out of court.

**Kiri Te Kanawa (sop), 1983-84 Decca (2 CDs complete or single CD excerpts)**

English Chamber Orchestra/Jeffrey Tate

Kiri Te Kanawa's languidly beautiful way with these songs, with lush accompaniments by Jeffrey Tate and the excellent ECO, is assuredly not the only way to perform them, but this sumptuous recital has its place alongside earthier versions.

On the single CD issue, you get only the first three of the five series of songs here, being sixteen songs, but you can also find the complete double album. The songs are very varied and by no means without liveliness, despite Kiri's gentler manner – her soft singing is a dream. You hear this lovely singer in her absolute prime, her voice caressing these songs in the sweetest fashion and certainly injecting them with feeling where necessary, as in the operatically tragic "La delassaïdo" ("The Forsaken Shepherdess"). There is a special pleasure in Kiri's lush soprano singing "Baïlèro" e-e-ever so slowly; this is the "voice, voice and more voice" version.

**Arleen Augér (sop), 1988 Virgin Classics (single CD excerpts)**

English Chamber Orchestra/Yan Pascal Tortellier

Arleen Augér provides beautifully sung, if slightly bland, accounts of sixteen songs. Her soprano is smooth and secure but lacks the darker undertones required to do justice to the sadder songs - her forte is the cheerful, skipping ones. There is nothing especially distinctive or memorable about her singing here but nor is it in any sense objectionable. She seems completely at home with the text

There is also some lovely, bucolic-sounding playing from the ECO under Tortellier, including some especially apt woodwind with a nice rasping edge. The sound quality is excellent although I am not sure about the wisdom of distancing her voice for some songs, presumably done to enhance the dreamy effect. Despite its many virtues, I struggle to recommend this over more individual recordings.

**Patricia Rozario (sop), 1989 Carlton Classics (single CD excerpts)**

Philharmonia Orchestra/Sir John Pritchard

Patricia Rozario has a lovely, round timbre, very slightly compromised by a somewhat too broad vibrato which loosens when she applies volume and a certain lumpiness or clumsiness breaks her line. There is also an element of swooping which makes her sound too mature. Nonetheless, the voluptuousness of her voice is happily complemented by the shamelessly indulgent conducting and playing of Pritchard and a grand orchestra. My other concern is the lack of variety from both singer and orchestra; as a result, one song sounds too much like another and these performances do not sound particularly

idiomatic or engaging to my ears. Other singers bring greater diversity and colour to the songs. Finally, there are only thirteen songs lasting a mere three-quarters of an hour here and you can get better value on a single disc elsewhere.

**Marvis Martin (sop), 1992 Denon (single CD excerpts) NB: chamber orchestra version**

Orchestre d'Auvergne/Jean-Jacques Kantorow

As ever with these surveys, I encounter a surprise, and it is Marvis Martin who provides it this time. She has a lovely, lyric soprano which is light and flexible but with a hint of that smoky mezzo timbre we hear in von Stade's voice. There is also an attractive flicker in her warm tone and she does not sound too mature; her creamy timbre frequently reminds me of a combination of Martina Arroyo and Kiri Te Kanawa. She sings the text most expressively and encompasses the charm of the humorous songs without sounding arch. The gentle, concluding bars of "Brezairola" are magical, exhibiting superb control.

The difference from other versions resides in French composer Jean-Guy Bailly's judicious reduction and re-arrangement of the orchestration to a – still admittedly quite large - chamber-music scale, which sounds more intimate and less grandiose. Kantorow provides sensitive, characterful direction to bring out its folksy nature, with nasal oboe tones, pungent pizzicato and deep, resonant strings which also soar higher to achieve a keening quality; I think it works very well. The Japanese engineering is impeccable.

**Dawn Upshaw (sop), 1993-96 Erato (2 CDs complete)**

Orchestre de l'Opéra de Lyon/ Kent Nagano

I am not a fan of Dawn Upshaw's soprano, as I find that it almost invariably has an edge and an obtrusive vibrato; furthermore, she often sings in a droopy, winsome manner. That is the case here: her singing is too often squawky and plaintive, but if you like her sound more than I, you will appreciate her artistry, as she characterises vividly. Her interpretation is aided by luscious accompaniments from Nagano and a very broad, resonant acoustic which cocoons the listener in lush, digital sound – but also reveals clearly the conductor's constant grunting. As I often say, when it comes to taste in voices, go to YouTube and try before you buy, but I want more balm to the ear with a warmer, fuller voice, devoid of the harshness I hear in Upshaw's tone which makes me actively dislike it.

**María Bayo (sop), 1997 Audiodis Valois (single CD excerpts)**

Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife/Víctor Pablo Pérez

Bayo has an appealingly pure, boyish tone in the middle of her voice but, paradoxically, as it ascends it acquires something of a mawkish, "little-girl" quality, rather like Upshaw. She also has a rather pronounced vibrato which intensifies as she holds a note and she tends to do too much sliding into notes, expressive devices which can become wearisome on repetition. Her singing is open and confident but there is no great variety of tone or expression; she sings straight through the seventeen songs here. Her diction is very good and I very much like Pedroso's alternately dreamy and propulsive accompaniment. The sound is perhaps the best of all those reviewed here, allowing the listener to hear all the various and varied strands in Canteloube's dense orchestration – there is some lovely solo instrumental work. This recital has received greater approbation than I am inclined to award it, so sample her on YouTube to see if you share my reaction. I would not make it a first choice.

**Véronique Gens (sop), 2004, Naxos (vols 1 & 2, 2 CDs complete)**

Orchestra National de Lille - Région Nord/Pas de Calais/Jean-Claude Casadesus (vol. 1)/Serge Baudo (vol. 2)

These two volumes are available as entirely separate CDs rather than in a double package.

There are people who go into ecstasies over this recording and Gens' voice in general. Personally, I just do not get it; I find her pleasant and undistinguished, with none of the individuality of timbre or expression I hear in versions by Te Kanawa, von Stade or Davrath.

Obviously she has a complete command of the dialect and mood but she is comparatively thin-voiced, with an underlying scratchy, breathy tone – not a pure, fluting sound, which is especially apparent in the most famous song – so to my ears it lacks body and warmth. "Baïlèro" is particularly disappointing in this regard; singing wispily in less than mezza-voce does the luxuriance of the melodic line no favours. I suppose she is charming and whimsical enough in the jolly songs but there are other, deeper emotions which need more voice.

As with virtually every recording here, the conducting and orchestral accompaniment are excellent, as is the sound, but...

**Recommendations:**

Apart from, ironically, the recording made by the composer himself, none of the recordings above is wholly unsatisfactory; all provide pleasure to a greater or lesser degree. Your choice will depend upon how tolerant or desirous you are of "lush" versus more straightforward interpretations. In the end, I think that despite the presence of many perkier songs, it is "Baïlèro" which must set the predominant tone; for a clearer-headed account, turn to Davrath and Martin. For me, the latter, in particular, provides a winning combination of sparer orchestration with a rich voice but ultimately my loyalties remain with von Stade, as there is a special luminosity to her recording, even if Te Kanawa runs her very close. I would not part with any of the four here:

**Selections:**

First choice: Frederica von Stade

Second choices: Marvis Martin; Kiri Te Kanawa.

**Complete:**

First choice: Netania Davrath

**Ralph Moore**