

The Record Company Société Ultraphone Française

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Introduction

Nowadays, the French Ultraphone record company is known primarily for the very first published recordings of the famous Quintette du Hot Club de France featuring Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grapelly in 1935. Ultraphone was one of the smaller French record companies and existed only for a relatively short time, i.e. from 1931 to 1939. Nevertheless, Ultraphone Française and its diverse and ambitious recording repertoire made a significant contribution to the history of French sound recording. Besides Django Reinhardt, other famous jazz musicians and orchestras recorded for Ultraphone such as Bill Coleman, André Ekyan, Alix Combelle and Grégor and his Grégorians. Furthermore, the Ultraphone catalogue listed recordings by the famous artist and author Jean Cocteau.

Until now, only little has been known or published about the Ultraphone Française record company. This is due to its brief existence, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to the difficulties in finding primary sources and documents about the company. This article is the result of a three-year research endeavour and provides an initial overall view of the origin and activities of this record company. The main sources used in this research were the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), the Archives de Paris (AdP), the Technisches Museum Berlin and the internet.

Because the Ultraphone Française record company was founded by Deutsche Ultraphon AG, a German record company, and Société Nobel Française, a French chemical company, it would be helpful to initially present brief descriptions of the histories of these two companies.

Deutsche Ultraphon AG

The Deutsche Ultraphon AG (DUAG) company was founded in 1925 by Heinrich J. Küchenmeister (1893-1971), a German inventor and businessman, and was intended to exploit one of Küchenmeister's main inventions, i.e. a gramophone with two tone arms [1]. The new gramophone failed to achieve the desired success and Küchenmeister extended his activities to other fields of the sound industry, such as radio, sound film and record production. For that purpose and with the help of Dutch investors, Küchenmeister created a holding company named N.V. Küchenmeister's Internationale Ultraphoon Maatschappij (Intraphoon) in 1928. The record business was set up by DUAG which started production of the new "Ultraphon" records in August/September 1929. The new business

segment was successfully completed in November 1929 by merging it with the German record company Orchestrola Vocalian AG which held the record labels Orchestrola, Clausophon and Adler [2].

In 1929, there were many risks and uncertainties inherent in creating a new record company. The German record market was already dominated by three large companies: Deutsche Grammophon AG, Electrola GmbH and Carl Lindström AG. Besides many others, this meant that major artists were already under contract. Furthermore, after reaching its zenith in 1928, record sales quickly plummeted, triggered by the beginning economic crisis.

Nevertheless, Ultraphon record production started off with high ambitions. On a publicity record issued for the launch of the new "Ultraphon" record label, a speaker declared: "Based on ultra-modern technology, relying on the collaboration of prominent music artists and orchestras with international reputations, Ultraphon production will become a cutting-edge reference in the record business. A diverse and high-quality repertoire will be available soon." As incredible as that announcement may have sounded, Ultraphon remained true to its word.



Fig. 1. An Advertisement from the Orchestrola Supplement December 1930 with a listing of companies in the Küchenmeister Holding (Source: Michael E. Gunrem)

They employed a new sound recording technology that was superior to the systems in use at that time by the established record companies. Ultraphon's young recording manager, Herbert Grenzebach (1897-1992), strove to achieve an ambitious repertoire ranging from popular and dance music to classical and opera music. He also promoted his own stars, e.g. the tenor Joseph Schmidt [3]. But the high quality of the recordings and the records was not sufficient to sustain a stable and prosperous company. Ultraphon's record business was in financial difficulties right from the start. In addition, Küchenmeister's holding became more and more diverse and economically fragile until it ultimately collapsed in 1931. Deutsche Ultraphon AG went bankrupt and suspended payments on 27 July 1931. During the following months, record production and distribution were maintained by its former daughter company Clausophon GmbH until Telefunken AG took over the Ultraphon business in March 1932 [2]. Deutsche Ultraphon AG had built up a network of distributors for their records in other European countries [4] and established two subsidiaries for record production in Czechoslovakia [5] and in France.

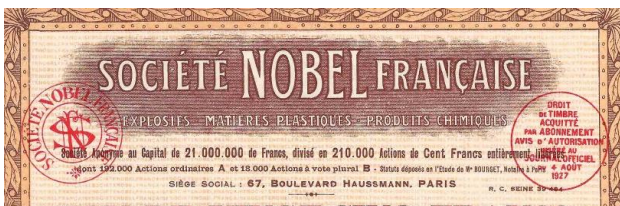


Fig. 2. Part of a document of the Société Nobel Française (Source: <http://www.amis-de-paulilles.fr>)

Société Nobel Française

Alfred Nobel (1833-1896) was not only the inventor of dynamite. He was also a businessman who founded several companies to commercialize his invention as well as the chemical by-products related to its production. Especially in France, he established several companies and production facilities under the holding Société Centrale de Dynamite which was founded in 1887 [6,7]. A major part of this holding was the Société Nobel Française which was created as a result of different mergers in 1927. The Société Nobel Française had seven production sites in France where they produced explosives, chemicals, celluloid and other plastic materials. One site was located at Villetaneuse (Vert Galant) in the north of Paris.

Initially, the factory in Villetaneuse produced predominantly celluloid that was based on nitrocellulose which was also used to manufacture dynamite. Later, other plastic materials were added such as Sicalith which was a hardened casein and polyvinyl acetate which was one of the first entirely

synthetic polymers [7]. In 1929, the beginning economic crisis forced Société Nobel Française to reorganize and concentrate its production activities. In this process, Villetaneuse lost a large part of its production and had to find alternatives. One of these alternatives was the production of records. Some record pressing plants already existed in the neighbourhood of the Villetaneuse factory, and Société Nobel Française held some patents relating to the pressing of records on plastic material. Searching for a partner in the record business, Société Nobel Française encountered Küchenmeister's Intraphoon holding including Deutsche Ultraphon AG.

Foundation of Société Ultraphone Française

The negotiations between Küchenmeister's Intraphoon and Société Nobel Française (SNF) relating to founding the new record company began at the end of 1930 [8]. The representative of Intraphoon was the German businessman Julius Joseph-Maria Westrick who had lived in Paris since the end of the First World War. In the 1920s and 30s, Westrick acted as a representative for various German companies in France and later played an eminent role in Franco-German relations during the German occupation of France in the Second World War (see special chapter). Once the negotiations had been completed, a contract was signed between Intraphoon and Société Nobel Française on 5 December 1930. The main conditions of the contract were as follows [8]:

- Both parties shall work to establish the company Société Ultraphone Française (SUF).
- SNF shall agree to build a record manufacturing plant with the help of Deutsche Ultraphon AG (DUAG). DUAG shall take the position of a sister company of SUF.
- The pressing plant shall have a capacity of 10,000 records per day. SNF shall manufacture records exclusively for SUF.
- SUF shall order per month at least (sic!):

| | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1 st year | 500,000 records |
| 2 nd year | 1 million records |
| 3 rd year | 2 million records |

(The figures cited here come from a summarizing copy of the contract and might be not accurate, at least for the period of one month.)

- Intraphoon shall contribute to SUF
 - technical and commercial support by DUAG
 - expertise and patents for recordings
 - expertise in and connections to the sound film industry
- SNF shall contribute to SUF
 - technical support, expertise and patents, e.g. for record production
 - contributions from SNF's laboratories and personnel

- The SUF capital shall be 3 million francs in 6000 shares of 500 francs (3000 class A shares and 3000 class B shares). Intraphoon and SNF shall receive for their contributions 1800 and 1200 class B shares, respectively.

Société Ultraphone Française was founded during two sessions of the inaugural General Assembly on 9 and 20 January 1931 in Paris, 67, boulevard Haussmann [9]. The Executive Board was established with the following members:

Representatives of Société Nobel Française

Pierre Le Play, 67, boulevard Haussmann, Paris (President)

Pierre Jurien de la Gravière, 105, avenue Henri-Martin, Paris

Claude Forestier, 9, rue Freycinet, Paris

Representatives of Intraphoon

Julius Joseph-Maria Westrick, 1, rue du Général Foy, Paris

Herbert Ephraim, Mauerstrasse 43, Berlin

Jacques Charles Klaus, Mauerstrasse 43, Berlin

Willems E. van Beveren, Shaftsbury Avenue 40, London

Others

Georges Régnault, 16, quai du Louvre, Paris



Fig.3. The building that housed the first principal office of the SUF, 1, rue du Général Foy in Paris (Source: E. Pigorsch)

The address of the first principal office of SUF was 1, rue du Général Foy (Figure 3). The company's capital was determined and distributed as was stated in the first contract between Intraphoon and SNF. It was reported to the General Assembly that the 3000 class A shares had been signed by 10 private persons and two companies. In order to sign, each prospective shareholder had to initially pay only a quarter of his entire share value. Furthermore, it had been decided that each board

member was obligated to purchase at least 20 shares. This is what Le Play, Jurien de la Gravière, Forestier, Ephraim, Klaus and van Beveren eventually did. Régnault and Westrick each purchased 200 shares. The largest individual shareholder was the French businessman Alfred Southeim with 500 shares. Another private businessman named Jean Schrimpf purchased 10 shares. Most of the class A shares were split between the mother company of SNF, i.e. the Société Générale Dynamite, and Intraphoon, who purchased 930 and 1040 shares, respectively.



Fig.4. An advertisement from Phono-Radio-Magazine (1931) (Source: BnF)

Julius Joseph-Maria Westrick (1887-1955)

Julius Joseph-Maria Westrick was the second of three brothers. All three played a rather important role in German economics and politics before, during and after World War II. Gerhard Alois Westrick (1889-1957) was a lawyer and businessman who represented several major US companies in Germany, including the telecommunication concern ITT [10]. Like his brothers, he was well-connected with the Nazi regime. He was given the title *Wehrwirtschaftsführer* and was thought to have done intelligence work during his trips abroad, e.g. during his travel to the United States in 1940.

The most well-known and influential of the three brothers was Ludger Westrick (1894-1990) [10]. He also was a lawyer who worked for several German companies. From 1939 to 1945, he was the General

Director of the state-owned holding Vereinigte Industrie-Unternehmen AG (VIAG). In this position he, like his brother Gerhard, became a member of the *Wehrwirtschaftsführer* circle. After the war, Ludger Westrick became a politician in the CDU party and served from 1951 to 1966 under the Minister of Economics and later Federal Chancellor Ludwig Erhardt as a State Secretary and Federal Minister for Special Affairs.



Fig. 5. Julius Westrick (right) after a Mass held in memory of LVF legionnaires who died during fighting at the Eastern Front (1 December 1943, Source: [12])

Julius Westrick (1887-1955) was an engineer who served as a pilot in the First World War. He was shot down by the Frenchman Pierre Constantini with whom he kept relations, especially during the German occupation in the following war [11,12]. After the war, Westrick stayed or returned to France and acted as a representative for several German companies, e.g. the construction company Hochtief AG. Through his brother Gerhard, he enjoyed good contacts with the entourage of the Nazi German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, especially with Otto Abetz (1903-1958). Abetz, like Westrick, was an ardent Francophile and was commissioned by the Nazi Foreign Ministry to develop political and cultural Franco-German relationships [10]. In 1935, with Westrick's help, he founded the Comité France-Allemagne (1935-1939) in Paris. After the French-German armistice in June 1940, Otto Abetz was appointed the unofficial German Ambassador in occupied France. Julius Westrick served as a *Legationsrat* to the embassy and helped Abetz secure French collaboration. In this respect, he was a leading figure in founding and managing the *Légion des volontaires français contre le bolchévisme* (LVF, 1941-1944) which recruited French volunteers to fight on the Eastern Front [11]. Westrick also continued to work for French industrial companies, e.g. Société Nobel Française, and helped them in their negotiations with the German occupants [13].

After the war, Julius Westrick was arrested by the French army in his German home in Ellhofen in May 1945 and brought back to France [14]. After two years of judicial inquiry and imprisonment, he was released as a result of a *Non-Lieu* (a decision to dismiss the proceedings) but had to stay in France until 1951.

Management and Economic Development of the Company

It is very difficult to find any information about the beginning of the company, its management and its commercial development. This starts with gathering information about the persons responsible for managing the company, the recordings and the record production. The records of the Chambre du Commerce de Paris mention Julius Westrick as the first Director of Ultraphone [15]. But it is unlikely that he was actually involved in the daily management. An Ultraphone director named Raoul or Jean Caldairou is mentioned in the literature related to the first recordings of Django Reinhardt [16,17]. His correct name is Albert Caldairou which is documented in the protocol of the General Assembly session when the company was dissolved in 1939 [18].

Some information on the beginnings of the company can be found in publications about the French record company Vogue (1947-1987) which took over the Ultraphone production site at Villeteuse [19,20]. These publications mention a Charles Doll

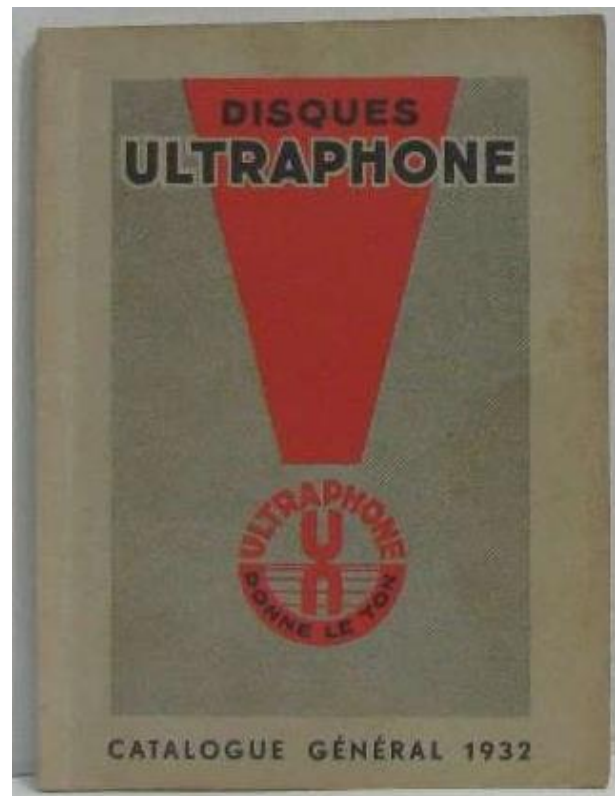


Fig. 6. The Ultraphone catalogue 1932 (Source: Internet)



Fig. 7. A photo from the 11th Salon de la Musique, Radio-Phono-Cinéma in Paris in May 1933 taken from the magazine "Machines Parlantes" (June 1933, Source: BnF)

who worked as an electrician and maintenance foreman at the Nobel factory in Villeteuse. He was an Alsatian who grew up in Switzerland. When the German Ultraphon engineers arrived to install the new record pressing equipment and to instruct the French workers, Charles Doll functioned as their interpreter and also gathered information relating to the manufacture of records. Ultimately, he became responsible for the entire record production. Charles Doll worked for Ultraphone until the factory closed in 1939 and restarted the record production for Vogue at the same site in 1956.

As was the case with German Ultraphon, the social and economic environment was not favourable for the launch of Ultraphone Française. From the very beginning, the company was in financial difficulties that were accelerated by the breakdown of the main shareholder Intraphoon and the bankruptcy of DUAG soon after SUF's formation. Apparently, the 1040 class A shares held by Intraphoon were never paid in full. Finally, in June 1932, these shares were put on the market under the management of Julius Westrick.

Furthermore, a radical reorganisation of SUF was undertaken in 1934 including a change of the principal office from 67, boulevard Haussmann to 48, rue de la Bienfaisance. The decision to reorganize was taken at a General Assembly meeting held on 12 July 1934 and consisted mainly in the convergence of all class A and B shares to the same rights [21]. At that moment, the main shareholders were SNF, which held all 3000 class B shares, and its mother company Société Générale Dynamite. Pierre Le Play was still President of the Executive Board.

After this event, it became virtually impossible to obtain any additional information about the

development of the company except for an interview published in the journal "Radio Magazine" on 5 January 1936. This interview was given by a SUF representative who wished to preserve his anonymity (!?). The anonymous Ultraphone manager spoke about the current difficulties in the business at that time. He explained that there would be fewer recordings and hence no new publications in January 1936. He also mentioned an important aspect of the French record market. France was at that time still largely a rural country and there were fewer possibilities to simply walk into a music shop and buy a record. That is why Ultraphone launched its own mail order business. But this was only one of the final attempts to rescue the company. Despite all the efforts, the business stagnated at best, although record production did continue at least until mid-1938.

Finally, a decision to dissolve the company was taken at an extraordinary General Assembly meeting that took place on 31 Mai 1939 [18]. The chairman of the meeting was Albert Caldairou who was at that time President of SUF's Executive Board. The representatives of the two largest shareholders at that time were E. Frick and R. Marquezy. The minutes of the meeting do not mention whom they represented. Altogether, five shareholders holding 4515 of the 6000 shares were present at the meeting. The assembly decided to dissolve the company on the same day. Albert Caldairou was appointed liquidator. The tangible and intangible business assets of SUF including trademarks, matrices, records and production equipment were then auctioned off for 500,000 Francs on 14 June 1939 (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. An advertisement from the newspaper "Paris Soir", 10 June 1939 (Source: BnF)

The Ultraphone Recordings

Collaboration with German Ultraphon made it possible to publish the first Ultraphone catalogue supplement as early as March 1931. These early records naturally contained recordings of classical and popular music which were made in Berlin. But soon, with the help of German technicians, French Ultraphone was able to make its own recordings.

The recording studio was situated at 13, avenue du Maine in Paris, Montparnasse, at least in 1934. This building was a former organ factory. Charles Delaunay described it in his Django Reinhardt biography as a “big wooden building. Cluttered with benches, decoration and props, the place resembled more a provincial music hall backstage than a recording studio [22]”.



Fig. 9. A postcard with an advertisement for the Ultraphone recordings of the Quintette du Hot Club de France (Source: Internet)



Fig. 10. The building that housed the Ultraphone recording studio at 13, avenue du Maine in Paris (Source: meilleursagents.com)

The recording equipment and the technicians came from German Ultraphon. And it seems that technical collaboration between French Ultraphone and German Telefunkenplatte GmbH was continued even after Telefunken took over the record business from German Ultraphon. The discographies of Django Reinhardt mention the two Germans Willy Kühn and H. Schuller who were the recording engineers during the recording sessions of the Quintette du Hot Club de France in 1934 and 1935 [23]. Ultraphone still continued to publish on its records recordings made by Telefunken. Later, Telefunken records were distributed in France by the company Les Spécialistes Sonores which resided at the same address as SUF in 1937/1938.



Fig. 11. An advertisement from the magazine “Disques Supplément” (March 1938, Source: BnF)



Fig. 12. An Ultraphone record with a German Telefunken recording by the Adalbert Lutter Orchestra (1933) (Source: E. Pigorsch)

The recordings of the Quintette du Hot Club de France are the most famous and the best documented French Ultraphone recordings. The details of these recording sessions can be found in the publications of Hugues Panassié [24], Charles Delaunay [22] and Paul Vernon [23] and are often

retold by other authors. It is therefore unnecessary to repeat this story yet again. However, it is worth mentioning an interesting aspect of the recording activities of the Hot Club de France and Ultraphone which was related by Charles Delaunay in an unpublished manuscript [25].

Charles Delaunay, President of the Hot Club de France, and his secretary Pierre Nourry were very active in persuading French record companies to record jazz music with French jazz musicians and foreign artists living in France. After their initial success with the Quintette of Django Reinhardt, they wished to continue the collaboration with Ultraphone and even thought of creating with them a jazz record label. But Ultraphone, due to its fragile financial situation, was unable to go down the same path. Finally, Charles Delaunay achieved his dream in collaboration with Pathé-Marconi by creating "Swing", one of the first pure jazz record labels in 1937. In an unpublished manuscript about the history of the "Swing" label, Charles Delaunay says: "L'indifférence que témoignaient les marques de disques à l'égard de la musique de jazz nous avons incité depuis longtemps à créer une marque de disques spécialisée dans cette musique.

Nous savions par l'expérience Ultraphone et par la vente des disques du Quintette que, sans passer des chiffres considérables, les disques de ce genre se vendraient suffisamment pour rendre viable une telle entreprise.

Pierre Nourry avait déjà essayé, après l'Anthologie de Jazz français et les divers enregistrements faits pour Ultraphone avec Bill Coleman, Joe Turner et



Fig. 13. An Ultraphone record with a recording by Jean Cocteau presenting one of his own poems (recorded 1934, published 1936) (Source: E. Pigorsch)

Big Boy Goodie de décider cette firme à créer une marque de ce genre. Mais Ultraphone était financièrement en difficulté, et cette initiative devait finalement ne revenir [25]."

The jazz recordings were only a small part of the Ultraphone catalogue. Due to a lack of records and catalogue material, it is not possible to provide a complete overview of the Ultraphone repertoire. But, like the already established French record companies, Ultraphone tried to offer a very diverse repertoire. Most of it consisted of popular and classical music. Many of the classical music recordings came from German Ultraphon and later from Telefunken. There were also niche products like language records, voice recordings and others.



Fig. 14. An advertisement from Phono-Radio-Magazine (September 1934) (Source: BnF)

Ultraphone Labels

"Ultraphone" was the chief SUF record label. In addition, there were other labels which were either created by SUF or under which SUF recordings were published. The literature, including the internet, provides only scant information about these labels. Hence, only some of the labels can be mentioned briefly here. The main source for this compilation was a publication by Henri Chamoux entitled "Dépôts des Marques Phonographiques Françaises de 1893 à 1940"[26]. One Ultraphone speciality was flexible records. The picture record type (Figure 15) was probably introduced in 1933. Later in 1934, black flexible records were also issued (Figure 14).

Elysée, Esculape, Superior, Ultravox

Société Ultraphone Française, 48, rue de la Bienfaisance, Paris, 30 November 1934

Samaritaine

Société Cognacq et Cie (Magasins « A la Samaritaine »), 75, rue de Rivoli, Paris

Orfé, Phonorfé

Editions Phonedibel S.A., 10, avenue Stéphane Mallarmé, Paris, 18 October 1933

Le Parnasse

Société anonyme françaises de Nouvelles Galeries Réunis, 66, rue des Archives, Paris, 13 July 1932

Edisonor

Férend Warmes, 24, rue Boileau, Montrouge (Seine), 7 November 1934



Fig. 15. An Ultraphone flexible record of the picture record type (1933) (Source: Auction catalogue Phonopassion 2004)

Summary and Outlook

In this article, an attempt has been made to collect and summarize all the information that is currently available on the history of the French record company Société Ultraphone Française (SUF). Further research is necessary to provide a more comprehensive picture of the financial and economic development of the company. One of the main sources for this research should still be the Archives de Paris (AdP) which contain additional documents about SUF and the Société Nobel Française. It might also be worth undertaking a study of the Ultraphone discography including its artistic and social aspects which is likely to far surpass the Django Reinhardt story.



Fig. 16. An Orfé flexible record with a German Ultraphon recording from 1931 (1933) (Source: Internet)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their help in my research: Michael E. Gunrem (La Ferté-Milon, France), Rainer Künzler (Germany) and the late Frans Jansen (The Netherlands) as well as the staff of the Archives de Paris (AdP), the Technisches Museum Berlin and the Département de l'Audiovisuel of the BnF, in particular Lionel Michaux. I am also grateful to Bryant McEwen (Munich) for correcting and editing my English writing.



Fig. 17. A Samaritaine record with a French Ultraphone recording (1931) (Source: E. Pigorsch)

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