

“Music Starts where words are powerless!”



Benjamin Ivry

Classical

**Germaine
Thyssens-Valentine
Plays Fauré**

*Fauré: Barcarolles,
Theme & Variations*

Testament 1215

Gabriel Fauré: 13 Nocturnes

Testament 1262

*Fauré: 4 Valses caprices,
6 Impromptus, 8 Pièces brèves*

Testament 1263

THE PIANO MUSIC of Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) is distinguished by a tender intimacy and delicate emotion that is all too rarely expressed by today's concert virtuosos. Performers accustomed to projecting knuckle-busting showpieces can be stumped by music where flash counts for little. Such past performers as Marcelle Meyer, Gaby Casadesus, and Albert Ferber were all paramount interpreters of Fauré, and their achievements have only slowly been reprinted on CD. Both Meyer and Casadesus were married to noted musicians, and Ferber spent most of his career as a teacher in London. But if their renown was a long time in coming, the possibility of historic reissues on CD still holds unexploited promise. Most recently, Testament has made the overdue decision to reprint three discs of excellent 1950's recordings by Germaine Thyssens-Valentin (1902-1987), long known to music lovers in France but more obscure elsewhere.

Perhaps not coincidentally, many of the finest performers of Fauré, with the exception of Albert Ferber, a Swiss pupil of Rachmaninov, were women. Because of the difficulties for women to maintain a career, they often performed for groups of friends — Meyer and Thyssens-Valentin were particularly renowned for this

type of entertaining in Parisian *soirées*. That said, many of the world's greatest male pianists are equally unknown to the rank and file because they devoted their energies to teaching — Spain's Frank Marshall and Cleveland's Arthur Loesser are two very noteworthy examples. Marshall made very few recordings, his most famous outing being the piano accompaniment for the Popular Songs of Manuel de Falla, with the mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervia, reprinted on Pearl Records.

Written up in this magazine recently, Loesser recorded more often, but only a slim selection of his artistry is available on Pearl (accompanying the fiddler Toscha Seidel) and in some live performances on Marston Records. Loesser's greatest performance, of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, remains out of print. Lacking a big record company with an advertising budget to drum the name of artist into the public's head, even the most sublime artist can be overlooked in his or her lifetime. A recording contract in classical music has become more than ever like some sort of perverted political career, where the elected ones are often very far from the brightest, or the best.

Yet the reappearance of these Thyssens-Valentin discs brings hope for many a neglected master, suggest-

ing that posterity may be fairer than the past and present in terms of justly evaluating talent and achievement. In Thyssens-Valentin's art — overlooked by the masses or not — something inherent in Fauré's music was captured, which in turn is brilliantly conveyed in the intimacy of listening to a CD at home for today's audiophiles, as opposed to sitting in a noisy, oversized concert hall straining to hear over other audience members' coughs and clanking jewelry.

Born in Holland, Thyssens-Valentin moved as a child with her family to Belgium to study music, and while still a child, was studying in Paris. While she eventually became as Parisian as anyone, her Dutch roots may have held an element of her success. Like many another Dutch musician — one thinks of the mastery of the Dutch baritone Bernard Kruysen in French classical songs — Thyssens-Valentin seems to have captured a softness of lyric approach, avoiding any inappropriate angularity or affectedness. She would surely have had more of a career, except she took 25 years off from public pursuits in order to raise five children. In a way, her trajectory is parallel to that of the American poet Marie Ponsot, recently discovered by the general public while in her eighties, who also took a 25-year hiatus from publishing her work in order to raise a family. Unfortunately, the physical demands of a pianistic career are such that it is not always wise to delay too late a return, and Thyssens-Valentin suffered a stroke at age 81 that effectively ended her career.

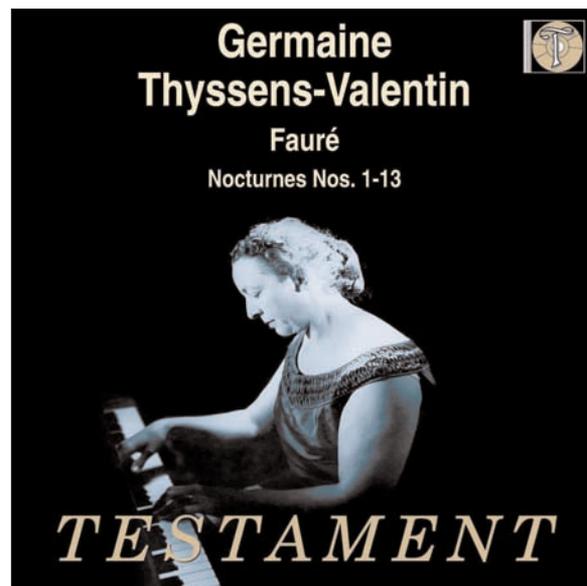
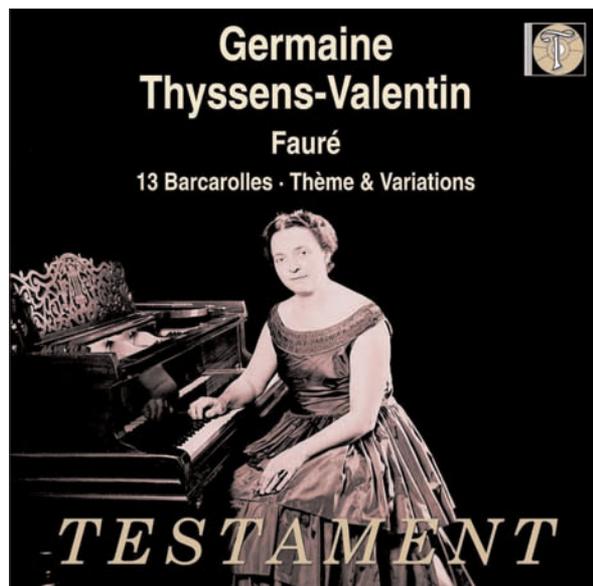
A pupil of the famed pedagogue Isidor Philipp, Jeanne-Marie Darré (another great and unjustly forgotten pianist who made superb recordings) and



Marguerite Long, Thyssens-Valentin conveys Fauré's sinuous melodies with full-hearted tone, but avoid some of the meatiness of other acclaimed performers of Fauré like Arthur Rubinstein. Thyssens-Valentin made many, many more recordings than these three, and it is to be sincerely hoped that other publishers of historical material will jump on the bandwagon to reissue these admirable items. They are in direct sound, entirely acceptable for the audiophile if a little closely miked at times. Unlike the "snap-crackle-pop" of an earlier generation of Fauré recordings by masters like Alfred Cortot, there are almost no concessions to be made in terms of sound quality, especially considering the

supreme artistic quality on display here. The artistry of Thyssens-Valentin is of a kind that survives naturally through the generations. Her grandson is Benoît Rolland, a much-admired maker of instrumental bows; since 2001 his business has been in the Boston neighborhood of Charlestown. His website is www.rolland-bows.com.

Rolland began piano lessons with his grandmother at age four. Several times a week during his whole childhood, he would visit his grandmother's town house for lessons. By age seven he was also playing violin, and made his concert debut at age 15. Rolland states, "Firstly, it is probable that my grandmother would have been quite well known to the concert-going public in France and Europe had she devoted herself entirely to her career. In her youth, she was already noted for her extraordinary musical sensitivity, her outstanding finger technique and her great professionalism. Her iron will and ambition helped her to surmount every obstacle."





Benoît Rolland, grandson of Germaine Thyssens-Valentin.

Rolland explains that while his grandmother did retire from her career for two decades, she did not give up the piano entirely during that time: "She didn't stop practicing the piano for 20 years, but slowed down. She certainly would not have been able to begin her career again with such a degree of professionalism had she not maintained her pianistic level. But as often happens with great artists, she was single-minded, with a certain abruptness that sometimes worked against her. People were wary of her frank way of speaking, and her temper. She never hesitated to say what she thought of whoever disagreed with her, whether it was her friends, family, or groups of highly reputed colleagues. One can easily understand how this can disturb and hinder the advance of fame in any field, including her own."

Still, Rolland says admiringly, "She was able to confront the prejudices against women performers through her talent, which put her among the musical elite of her era." Thyssens-Valentin actually was far more than a Fauré specialist, often playing works by Beethoven, Mozart, Bach (her favorite), Schumann, Scarlatti, Chopin, Couperin, Debussy, Fauré, Déodat de Séverac, and Ravel. With the modern composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) who often came to her musical salons, she had an unhappy experience quite typical of Messiaen, who has bizarrely been seen as some kind of saintly character by generations of disciples, despite massive evidence to the contrary. Thyssens-Valentin knew Messiaen quite well and respected his music deeply, and rehearsed his "Petites Liturgies" for six months for a planned concert.

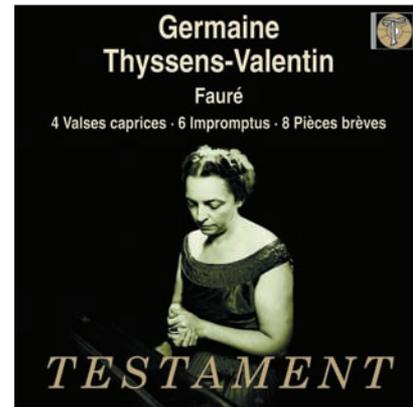
Then after six months of practice for eight to 10 hours per day, which included finger-stretching exercises several times per day, Messiaen withdrew permission for her to play the work in public. Why did Messiaen behave in this way, when he was famous for his obse-

quious praise of any and every musician who performed his works? Turns out that the work in question was dedicated to Messiaen's wife, Yvonne Loriod, who was to become its exclusive interpreter for many years. Sadly, Thyssens-Valentin was upset for several months by this disappointment, which unhappily sent her into a period of depression.

Thyssens-Valentin usually had happier experiences playing French composers, whom she favored toward the end of her career. She felt that these composers expressed a certain temperament, and particularly admired the inventive spirit of the French modernists. Her recordings included not just Fauré but also Mozart concertos, according to Rolland, and Schumann's "Carnaval" and "Papillons." She did, however, truly love Fauré, which is evident in her performances. Rolland recalls how "using the composer's works, she would offer her views on interpretation, explaining that all the nuances, stylistic elements, and musical atmosphere from the largest-scaled ones to the most subtle, were more inherent in Fauré than in any other composer." In her teaching, she stressed that the piano is "more a singing instrument than an instrument whose strings are hammered, and jotted down her own fingerings on musical scores in order to link sounds and reduce the need for pedaling, as much as possible. She played with this in mind, and it must be said that playing Fauré with as little pedal as possible is quite a feat!" Indeed, a majority of pianists, even those who lived in Fauré's time, err by offering a soupy, echoing mass of sound, thinking that the imprecise sound of the pedaled note is a form of impressionism. Thyssens-Valentin's comparative clarity is part of the magic of her recordings, and its immediate appeal to audiophiles.

Thyssens-Valentin's gift for "extreme simplicity and intimacy," according to Rolland, led her to prefer performances of Mozart concertos with pared-down ensembles, of the kind which have become fashionable today. She would play Bach keyboard concertos with tiny ensembles, and without any pedal whatsoever, with results that Rolland recalls as "highly colored sonorities and the finest intimate effect."

All told, Thyssens-Valentin enjoyed quoting Debussy to the telling effect that "music starts where words are powerless."



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