

# The Record Company Société Ultraphone Française

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## Introduction

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

Until now, only little was known or was published about the company Ultraphone Française. This is due to its short existence and to the difficulties to find primary sources and documents about the company. This article is the result of a three years research and gives a first general view on the origin and the activities of this record company. The main sources for this research were the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), the Archives de Paris (AdP), the Technisches Museum Berlin and the internet.

Because the company Ultraphone Française was founded by the German record company Deutsche Ultraphon AG and the French chemical company Société Nobel Française it would be useful to give at first short descriptions of the histories of these two companies.

## Deutsche Ultraphon AG

The company Deutsche Ultraphon AG (DUAG) was founded in 1925 by the German inventor and businessman Heinrich J. Küchenmeister (1893-1971) and was intended to exploit one of Küchenmeister's main inventions which was a gramophone with two tone arms [1]. The new gramophone became not a real success and Küchenmeister extended his activities to other fields of the sound industry, like radio, sound film and record production. For that purpose, in 1928 Küchenmeister created with the help of Dutch investors the holding company N.V. Küchenmeister's Internationale Ultraphoon Maatschappij (Intraphoon). The setup of the record business was done by the DUAG which started the production of the new "Ultraphon" records in August/September 1929. The establishment of the new business section was completed in November

1929 by the merger with the German record company Orchestrola Vocalian AG which held the record labels Orchestrola, Clausophon and Adler [2].

In 1929, the creation of a new record company was associated with many risks and uncertainties. The record market in Germany was already occupied by three big companies, Deutsche Grammophon AG, Electrola AG and Carl Lindström AG. Besides others, this meant that major artists were already under contract. Furthermore, after reaching its height in 1928 the record sales started very fast to decline due to the beginning economic crisis.

Nevertheless, the Ultraphon record production started with high ambitions. On a publicity record that was issued for the launch of the new record label "Ultraphon", a speaker declared: "Based on most modern technology, relying on the collaboration of prominent world known artists and orchestras with international reputation, the 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 declaration may have sounded, but the Ultraphon company kept its word. They used



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



a new sound recording technology that was superior to the techniques used by the established record companies. Ultraphon's young recording manager Herbert Grenzebach (1897-1992) realised an ambitious repertoire going from popular and dance music to classical and opera music and he developed his own stars, e.g. the tenor Joseph Schmidt [3]. But the high quality of the recordings and the records was not sufficient to establish a stable and prosperous company. From the start, Ultraphon's record business was in financial difficulties. Additionally, Küchenmeister's holding became more and more diverse and economically fragile and finally collapsed in 1931. The Deutsche Ultraphon AG went bankrupt and ceased payment on the 27 July 1931. In the following months, the record production and distribution were kept going by its former daughter company Clausophon GmbH until the Telefunken AG took over the Ultraphon business in March 1932 [2].

The Deutsche Ultraphon AG had built up a net of distributors for their records in other European countries [4] and established two subsidiaries for record production in Czechoslovakia [5] and in France.

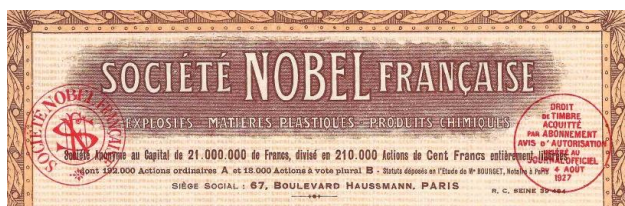


Fig. 2. Part of a document of the Société Nobel Française (Source: <http://www.amis-de-paulilles.fr>)

### Société Nobel Française

Alfred Nobel (1833-1896) was not only the inventor of the dynamite. He was also a businessman who founded several companies to commercialize his invention and the chemical side products which were related to its production. Especially in France, he established several companies and production sites under the holding Société Centrale de Dynamite which was founded in 1887 [6,7]. A major part of this holding became 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.

The factory in Villetaneuse produced at first mainly celluloid that was based on nitrocellulose which was also used in the manufacturing of dynamite. Later, other plastic materials were added like Sicalith which was a hardened casein and polyvinyl acetate which was one of the first entirely synthetic

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

### Foundation of the Société Ultraphone Française

The negotiations between Küchenmeister's Intraphoon and the Société Nobel Française (SNF) for the foundation of the new record company began at the end of 1930 [8]. The representative of Intraphoon was the German businessman Julius Joseph-Maria Westrick who lived in Paris since the end of the First World War. Westrick represented in the 1920s and 30s different German companies in France and played later an illustrious role in the French-German relations during the German occupation of France in the Second World War (see special chapter). At the end of the negotiations a contract between Intraphoon and the Société Nobel Française was signed on the 5 December 1930. The main statements of the contract were [8]:

- Both parties engage to establish the company Société Ultraphone Française (SUF)
- SNF engages to build a record manufacturing plant with the help of the Deutsche Ultraphon AG (DUAG) which will take the position of a sister company of SUF
- The pressing plant should have a capacity of 10,000 records per day. SNF will manufacture records exclusively for SUF
- SUF orders per month at least (sic!):  
1<sup>st</sup> year 500,000 records  
2<sup>nd</sup> year 1 million records  
3<sup>rd</sup> year 2 million records

(The numbers which are given here come from a summarizing copy of the contract and might be not correct, at least for the period of one month.)

- Intraphoon contributes to the SUF
  - technical and commercial support by DUAG
  - expertise and patents for recordings
  - expertise and connections in the sound film industry
- SNF contributes to the SUF
  - technical support, expertise and patents, e.g. for record production

- contributions of SNF's laboratories and personnel
- The capital of the SUF will be 3 million francs in 6000 shares of 500 francs (3000 shares class A and 3000 shares class B). Intrapphoon and SNF will get for their contributions 1800 and 1200 shares of class B, respectively.

The foundation of the Société Ultraphone Française was accomplished during two sessions of the inaugural General Assembly on the 9 and 20 January 1931 in Paris, 67, boulevard Haussmann [9]. The nominated Executive Board had 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 Intrapphoon

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 Régnauld, 16, quai du Louvre, Paris



Fig.3. Building of 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 the SUF was 1, rue du Général Foy (Figure 3). The company's capital was determined and distributed as it was stated in the first contract between Intrapphoon and SNF. It was reported to the General Assembly that the 3000 shares of class A had been signed by 10 private persons and two companies.

For signing, each shareholder had to pay at first only a quarter of the whole value. Each board member was obliged to take at least 20 shares. This was the case for Le Play, Jurien de la Gravière, Forestier, Ephraim, Klaus and van Beveren. Régnauld and Westrick took each 200 shares. The greatest individual shareholder was the French businessman Alfred Southeim with 500 shares. A further private businessman Jean Schrimpf took 10 shares. The main part of the shares class A was split between the mother company of SNF the Société Générale Dynamite with 930 and Intrapphoon with 1040 shares.



Fig.4. 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 quite 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 known and influential of the three brothers was Ludger Westrick (1894-1990) [10]. He was also a lawyer who worked for several German companies. From 1939 to 1945 he was General Director of the state-owned holding Vereinigte Industrie-Unternehmen AG (VIAG). In this position he became like his brother Gerhard member of the *Wehrwirtschaftsführer* circle. After the war Ludger Westrick became a politician within the CDU party and served from 1951 to 1966 under the minister of economics and the later Federal Chancellor Ludwig Erhardt as secretary and as 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 French 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 represented several German companies, e.g. the construction company Hochtief AG. He had good contacts via his brother Gerhard to the entourage of the Nazi German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, especially to Otto Abetz (1903-1958). Abetz was like Westrick an ardent Francophile and was commissioned by the Nazi Foreign Ministry to the development of the cultural and political French-German relationship [10]. In 1935 he founded with the help of Westrick the Comité France-Allemagne (1935-1939) in Paris. After the French-German armistice in June 1940 Otto Abetz was appointed as unofficial German Ambassador in occupied France. Julius Westrick served as a *Legationsrat* to the embassy and helped Abetz to secure French collaboration. In this respect, he was a leading figure in the foundation and management of the *Légion des volontaires français contre le bolchévisme* (LVF, 1941-1944) which recruited French volunteers to fight at the

Eastern Front [11]. Westrick also still worked for French industrial companies, e.g. the 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 at his German home in Ellhofen in May 1945 and was brought back to France [14]. After two years imprisonment and judicial inquiry he was released with a *Non-Lieu* 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 the commercial development. This starts with finding information about the people that were responsible for the management of 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 really did the daily management. In the literature related to the first recordings of Django Reinhardt a director of Ultraphone with the name of Raoul or Jean Caldairou [16,17] is mentioned. His correct name should be Albert Caldairou which is documented in the protocol of the General Assembly of the dissolution of the company in 1939 [18].

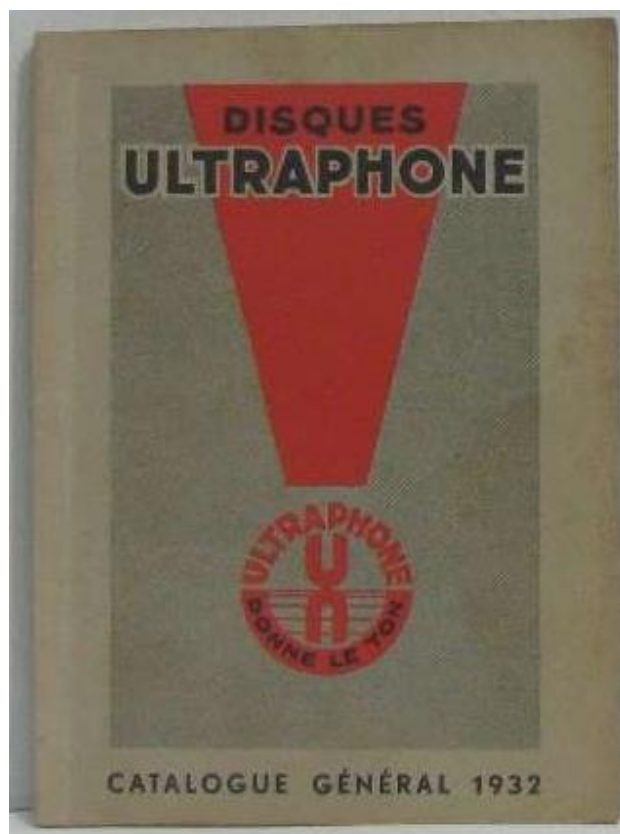


Fig. 6. Ultraphone catalogue 1932 (Source: Internet)



Fig. 7. Foto from the 11<sup>th</sup> Salon de la Musique, Radio-Phono-Cinéma in Paris in May 1933 from the magazine "Machines Parlantes" (June 1933, Source: BnF)

Some information on the beginning of the company can be found in publications about the French record company Vogue (1947-1987) which took over the production site of Ultraphone at Villetaneuse [19,20]. These publications talk about Charles Doll who worked as an electrician and maintenance foreman at the Nobel factory at Villetaneuse. He was an Alsatian and grew up in Switzerland. When the German Ultraphon engineers arrived to install the new record pressing equipment and to teach the French workers, Charles Doll became their interpreter and got also a formation in the fabrication of records. Finally, he became responsible of the whole record production. Charles Doll worked for Ultraphone until the closing of the factory in 1939 and restarted the record production for Vogue at the same site in 1956.

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

Further on, in 1934 a profound reorganisation of the SUF was undertaken including a change of the principal office from 67, boulevard Haussmann to 48, rue de la Bienfaisance.

The reorganisation was decided on a General Assembly on 12 July 1934 and consisted mainly in the convergence of all shares class A and B to the same rights [21]. At that moment, the main shareholders were the SNF which held all 3000

shares class B and its mother company Société Générale Dynamite. Pierre Le Play was still the President of the Executive Board.

After this event no further information on the company's development could yet be found except an interview that was published by the journal "Radio Magazine" on 5 January 1936 and which was given by a representative of SUF but who wanted to keep his anonymity (!?). The anonymous Ultraphone manager talked about the present difficulties in the business. He explained that there would be less recordings and therefore no new publications in January 1936. He also mentions an important aspect of the French record market. France was at that time still mainly a rural country and there were less possibilities to go simply to a music shop and to buy a record. That is why Ultraphone launched an own mail order business. But this was only one of the last tries to rescue the company. Despite all efforts, at best the business stagnated, and the record production was continued at least still the middle of 1938.

Finally, the dissolution of the company was decided at an extraordinary General Assembly on 31 Mai 1939 [18]. The chairman of the meeting was Albert Caldaïrou who was at that time President of the SUF's Executive Board. The present representatives of the two biggest shareholders were E. Frick and R. Marquezy. The protocol does not mention who they represented. Altogether, five shareholders who held 4515 shares of the 6000 were present. The assembly decided to dissolve the company on the same day. Albert Caldaïrou was appointed as liquidator. The tangible and intangible business assets of the SUF including trademarks, matrices, records and production equipment were then put on an auction for 500,000 Francs on the 14 June 1939 (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. Advertisement from the journal "Paris Soir", 10 June 1939 (Source: BnF)

### The Ultraphone Recordings

The collaboration with the German Ultraphon allowed the publication of a first Ultraphone catalogue supplement already in March 1931. These first records naturally contained recordings of classical and popular music which were made in



Berlin. But soon, with the help of German technicians, the French Ultraphone could make their own recordings.

At least in 1934, the recording studio was situated at 13, avenue du Maine in Paris, Montparnasse. This building was a former organ factory. Charles Delaunay described it in his Django Reinhardt biography like 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. Postcard with advertisement for the Ultraphone recordings of the Quintette du Hot Club de France (Source: Internet)



Fig. 10. Building of the Ultraphone recording studio at 13, avenue du Maine in Paris (Source: meilleursagents.com)

The recording equipment and the technicians came from the German Ultraphon. And it seems that a technical collaboration between the French Ultraphone and the German Telefunkenplatte GmbH was still maintained after Telefunken took over the record business from the German Ultraphon. The discographies of Django Reinhardt mention the two German recording engineers Willy Kühn and H. Schuller for the recording sessions of the Quintette du Hot Club de France in 1934 and 1935 [23]. Ultraphone also still published on its records recordings which were made by Telefunken. Later the distribution of Telefunken records in France was done by the company Les Spécialistes Sonores which had the same address as the SUF in 1937/1938.



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

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



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

Charles Delaunay [22] and Paul Vernon [23] and they are often retold by other authors. Therefore, it is not necessary to repeat this story here again. But it is worth to mention an interesting aspect of the recording activities of the Hot Club de France and Ultraphone which is told by Charles Delaunay in an unpublished manuscript [25].

Charles Delaunay, the President of the Hot Club de France, and his secretary Pierre Nourry were very active to get French record companies to record jazz music with French jazz musicians and foreign artists who stayed in France. After their first success with the Quintette of Django Reinhardt, they wanted to continue the collaboration with Ultraphone and even thought of creating with them a new jazz label. But Ultraphone due to its fragile financial situation was not able to follow this way. Finally, Charles Delaunay realised his dream in collaboration with Pathé-Marconi by creating with "Swing" one of the first pure jazz labels in 1937. In an unpublished manuscript about the history of the "Swing" label Charles Delaunays 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

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 catalogue of Ultraphone. For want of records and catalogue material it is not possible to give a complete overview of the Ultraphone repertoire. But, like the already established French record companies, Ultraphone tried to offer a most diverse repertoire. The main part consisted of popular and classical music. A lot of the classical music recordings came from the German Ultraphon and later from Telefunken. There were also niche products like language records, voice recordings and others.



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



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

### Ultraphone Labels

"Ultraphone" was the main record label of the SUF. Besides this, there were other labels which were created by SUF or on which recordings from SUF were published. There is only few information about these labels that can be found in the literature including the internet. Therefore, only some of the labels can be shortly mentioned here. The main source for this compilation was the publication of Henri Chamoux "Dépôts des Marques Phonographiques Françaises de 1893 à 1940" [26]. A speciality of Ultraphone were flexible records. The picture record type (Figure 15) was probably introduced in 1933. Later in 1934, also black flexible records were 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**

Fernand Warms, 24, rue Boileau, Montrouge (Seine), 7 November 1934



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

### **Summary and Outlook**

In this article, it was tried to summarize all the information on the history of the French record company Société Ultraphone Française (SUF) that has been found so far. Further research is necessary to get a more comprehensive picture of the financial and economic development of the company. One of the main sources for this research should be still the Archives de Paris (AdP) which contain more documents about the SUF and the Société Nobel Française. What should be also worth to undertake is a study of the Ultraphone discography and its artistic and social aspects which should go far beyond the Django Reinhardt story.



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

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

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