

Early Recordings of Songs from *Florodora*: Tell Me, Pretty Maiden ... Who Are You? — A Discographical Mystery

The hit London and Broadway show Florodora is one of the most famous theatrical productions of the early 1900s. Its lilting score came to epitomize turn of the century America for later generations. This article describes how the early American recording companies reacted to the score's enormous popularity, and the quantity and types of recordings made in 1901-1902, during the show's New York run. It also examines misconceptions surrounding one particular Columbia recording of the famous sextette from Florodora, "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden," which is widely believed to include the voices of actresses from the show, thereby representing one of the very earliest original cast recordings.

Just about one hundred years ago, on 11 November 1899, a musical comedy opened in London that was to become one of the most fabled hits in the history of the New York stage. *Florodora*, with music by Leslie Stuart and book by Owen Hall, was a smash success in London. Nevertheless there was much uncertainty about its chances in America, and its critical reception, when it opened at New York's Casino Theatre on 10 November 1900, was decidedly mixed. After a shaky start, it quickly gained momentum however, and went on to an amazing (for the period) 505 performances, followed by road companies and revivals that lasted for 20 years.

The setting was an island in the Philippines called "Florodora," famous for its Florodora flower and similarly-named perfume. As the play opens, the island is run by a wealthy American businessman named Cyrus W. Gilfain, who deviously gained control after the death of the previous owner, the father of the beautiful Dolores. Although now forced to work for Gilfain, the ever optimistic Dolores hopes that one day the land will be restored to her family, the rightful owners. Frank Abercoed, a young English lord traveling incognito, arrives on the island to become Gilfain's manager, and is immediately smitten with Dolores. Gilfain's six young clerks, meanwhile, have fallen in love with six English beauties (the "Florodora girls"), who have just arrived on the island with Gilfain's daughter, Angela, who is in turn betrothed to Capt. Donegal of the Life Guards.

Gilfain has other plans, however. He plots to marry Dolores himself, thus negating her claim to the island, and to marry his clerks off to the heads of the Florodora farms (all young island girls), in order to consolidate his control. This is to be accomplished through a complicated scheme in which Tweedlepunch, a traveling actor and charlatan in Gilfain's employ, reads the bumps on everyone's head and determines who is destined to marry whom. Tweedlepunch's pronouncements result in everyone breaking up, however, causing much distress. At the end of act one Frank announces that he must return to England, but tells Dolores he will return for her if she waits patiently, singing to her "The Shade of the Palm".

Act two opens at Abercoed Castle in Wales, Frank's ancestral home, which somehow has been taken over by Gilfain. In fact, all 26 characters seen on the island of Florodora now seem to have moved to Wales. A penniless noblewoman, Lady Holyrood, keeps up appearances while describing how to survive in society without money ("Tact"). Gilfain's clerks, having been discharged for failing to marry the island girls, court the objects of their affections, the six English beauties ("Tell Me, Pretty Maiden"). Captain Donegal revels in his profession, entertaining the invited lords and ladies in an elaborate production number called "I Want to Be a Military Man". For no particular reason, Angela sings a song called "Whistling".

Frank, trying to regain his ancestral home from Gilfain, is frustrated at every turn. He encounters Dolores, who is heartbroken that he never returned to the island as he said he would; she sings to him a thinly disguised story about a similar romance gone wrong ("Queen of the Philippine Islands"). Tweedlepunch then reveals himself to be a detective on the trail of the rightful heir to the Florodora fortune. Realizing that it is Dolores, he cooks up a preposterous scheme to scare Gilfain out of his wits with a wild ghost yarn. Gilfain, terrified, promptly gives Florodora back to Dolores and turns over the castle to Frank. In a triple happy ending, Frank marries Dolores, Gilfain marries the desperate Lady Holyrood, and Angela marries Captain Donegal. They all sing "The Island of Love".¹

The magic of *Florodora* was not in its plot, however, but in the lilting score, particularly two enormous hits, the booming ballad "The Shade of the Palm" and the famous double sextette, "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden". The latter was sung in the show not by the principals but by the six "English girls" and their beaux. "The women stood in a row across the stage, tapped the boards with their parasols, swished their skirts imperiously, and posed... the high point of the choreography came when the six women locked arms with the six men and they took a few steps in unison."² The jaunty song, which alternated back and forth between the men and the women, became a sensation, sweeping the country. It also had a considerable impact on the nascent recording industry, and left us many period recordings, including one "original cast" version that has been the subject of much misunderstanding.

The early popularity of the *Florodora* songs was through sheet music and public performance, as was the custom of the day. An item in the 5 January 1901 *Music Trade Review* reported on business at the Royal Music Company, which was responsible for orchestrations.

*Every mail brings in a batch of orders for 'Florodora' orchestrations. It would seem that every band leader in the country is desirous of including this popular musical comedy in his repertoire, and in speaking of this, we must not forget T.B. Harms & Co., who publish the score. They are selling hundreds of the separate numbers and cannot fill orders for the full score. Florodora has certainly come to stay.*³

Numerous reports in the music trade press document the popularity of the *Florodora* songs in sheet music and public performance during the winter and spring of 1900-1901. Even *Music Trade Review*, which gave little coverage to T.B. Harms (presumably because Harms did not advertise in its pages), had to acknowledge the trend. Its editors were particularly struck by the fact that the songs had begun selling across the country even while the show was still playing only in New York. An item in May 1901 commented that, "to the sale of *Florodora* music there seems no ending, and considering that this successful work has not been heard outside New York this is phenomenal".⁴

This does not mean that the *Florodora* songs were necessarily the biggest sheet music hits of the day. Although they clearly sold well, ragtime, "coon songs," novelties and sentimental ballads dominated the sales counters. An interesting survey of 14 major music dealers around the country conducted by *Music Trade Review* in May 1901 found none of them citing selections from *Florodora* among their "six most popular songs of the season" (in sheet music sales). The most frequently cited titles were "Just Because She Made Dem Goo Goo Eyes," "When the Harvest Days are Over" and "I Can't Tell Why I Love You, But I Do."⁵

The Recordings

The first recordings of songs from the score were made in England, during the run of the show there. These include several by members of the English cast, recorded by Berliner in London in September and October, 1900.⁶ The earliest U.S. recordings appear to have been made in January 1901, about two months after the show opened in New York, and released in the spring. There may have been several reasons for this delay. First, as noted, there was much uncertainty as to whether the show would catch on with American audiences, and the record companies may have been waiting to ensure that it did.

Second, and more importantly, recordings were a very secondary means of music distribution at this time, compared to sheet music and live performance. Relatively few households – perhaps as little as 2% of the population – owned a phonograph in 1901.⁷ More people heard records, occasionally, at friends' homes or on coin-operated machines in the phonograph parlors that dotted America's large cities and resorts. There were no radio stations or popularity charts to promote recordings, and so recorded versions of new songs were seldom rushed out, as they would be in later years. They came later, after sheet music and vaudeville performances had established familiarity with the music.

Records lasted much longer than home or public performance, however, and reached far more places – into homes that had no piano, and small towns that never saw a traveling show. As phonograph ownership grew, reaching nearly 50% of U.S. homes by the 1920s, they brought many types of music to a wide spectrum of the American public.

In 1901, however, the U.S. recording industry was a small business. It was also in considerable turmoil, due to patent infringement suits raging between Edison, Columbia and Victor. Only five companies were operating nationally. Issuing cylinders were Edison, Columbia and the small Lambert company. The newer disc records, which probably constituted less than 20% of sales at this time, were being sold by Victor and Zonophone, with Columbia entering the disc field in the fall of 1901.⁸ Remarkably, these five labels produced 58 different *Florodora* recordings over the next two years, ranging from banjo and mandolin instrumentals to vocals by a six-person chorus.

Among the earliest were those made by Edison. These were fairly traditional in nature, with studio singers and orchestras taking the place of performers in the show. Although recording dates have not survived, the fact that the company began releasing these cylinders in March and April 1901 suggests that they were recorded no later than January.⁹ Edison's March releases included "The Barn Dance from *Florodora*" and "The *Florodora* March," both by the Peerless Orchestra; and "The Shade of the Palm" (which quickly became known as "In the Shade of the Palm") by Frank C. Stanley. The following month brought "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden" by Grace Spencer and Harry Macdonough, and "I Want to Be a Military Man" by Dan W. Quinn. A couple of months later the label offered "Tact," by Will F. Denny.

In later years Edison had a reputation for being a slow moving company, sometimes releasing song hits years after their popularity, but at this point it appears to have been rather nimble. This is consistent, interestingly, with the company's aggressiveness in the infant film industry, where it often pushed its new films into the marketplace faster and more widely than did the competition.¹⁰ Edison's "speed" was relative, however. By the time its first recordings were released, *Florodora* was already nearing the end of its first season. The songs themselves would have been widely known by that time.

It is also notable that Edison covered the score rather indiscriminately. "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden," which would become the biggest hit from the show, came out after several others, while the quickly recorded "Barn Dance" just as quickly disappeared. "Maiden," whose impact was largely due to its choral nature – a chorus of women singing to a chorus of men – was done as a simple duet. Although it is a pretty tune, this stripped the song of its novelty.

Victor also began covering *Florodora* in January, though not in as much depth as Edison.¹¹ Recording ledgers do exist for this company, and they show a studio orchestra ("Metropolitan Orchestra") recording a medley from the show on 10 January 1901. This was followed on 21 January by a banjo solo of "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden" by Vess L. Ossman, "The Banjo King". These were rushed out quickly, being announced in two supplements dated 1 February 1901, and may have been the first *Florodora* records on sale.¹² The 1 February date should not be taken too literally, however. It would have been difficult even for Victor to get a record made on 21 January into the market that fast. In fact, many of the records listed in these two flyers were not recorded until the second half of January, and most likely 1 February reflected the date orders were first taken.

Zonophone was close behind, offering orchestra and banjo (Ossman) versions of "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden," and an orchestra rendition of "The *Florodora* March" in the Spring. Columbia soon followed, its first release consisting of "*Florodora* March" and "Selections," both by Gilmore's Orchestra. Although exact dating of Columbia recordings during this period is difficult, these probably appeared sometime in the spring or early summer.¹³ They were followed by a much larger batch of cylinders, probably released later during the summer, including four vocal and instrumental versions of "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden" and one each of "In the Shade of the Palm," "I Want to Be a Military Man" and "Tact". As soon as the company began disc recording, in the late summer or early fall, all of these titles except "Tact" were recorded in that format as well, in no fewer than eleven disc versions (including six of "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden").

It is worth noting that most of these renditions were rearranged to fit the needs of the recording studio, rather than reflect the way the songs were presented on stage. There were renditions by bands, banjo players, trombone, cornet and clarinet soloists, and solo male vocalists accompanied by piano – because that is what recorded well. Not a single version by a female soloist was released. Band and orchestra arrangements using alternate titles were also popular. "*Florodora* March" was a stirring arrangement of "I Want to Be a Military Man," while "Barn Dance" was a medley of "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden" and "Tact".

In contrast, "Tact" and "Whistling" were performed in the show by female characters, "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden" by a mixed chorus, and "I Want to Be a Military Man" by a male character with chorus. All were, of course, accompanied by the theater orchestra. Recordings did not attempt to recreate the stage experience (in most cases), though they did preserve the melodies.

By the summer of 1901 there appear to have been at least twenty *Florodora* recordings available on cylinder and disc, eight of them versions of "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden"

(which was also in medleys). The large number of recordings suggests that by this time the popularity of the songs was well established, as was their longevity.

Record buyers and patrons of the then-prevalent “phonograph parlors,” where one could hear a tune for a penny on a coin-operated phonograph, could not get enough of them. An item in the 20 July *Music Trade Review* vividly described “That *Florodora* Craze”.

Yes, said the man who hands out pennies at the [Columbia] Graphophone Co.'s retail headquarters, I should say that Florodora was a craze. There have been more people in here by scores since we put 'Tell Me, Pretty Maiden' on the machine(s). We still get about twice as many pennies from that tune as from any other. There are people who come in here almost daily simply to hear that air. They have seen the whole show half a dozen times perhaps, but they still haven't had enough of the sextet, and there is a limit to paying \$2 simply to listen to one song (at the theater). Now they come here and enjoy a pretty fair rendition of the melody for one cent. Some of the habitués are so fond of the tune that they have it played five times. One fluffy-haired girl came in here one afternoon and spent ten cents in hearing the sextet ten times in succession.¹⁴

The continued popularity of *Florodora* brought additional recordings during the fall and winter, continuing even after the show ended its principal run on 25 January 1902. (A new production at the Winter Garden Theatre played for an additional 48 performances during early 1902.) By far the most recorded number overall, during the years 1901 and 1902, was “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” with 25 versions. “In the Shade of the Palm” had eight, “*Florodora* March,” seven, “I Want to Be a Military Man,” five, “Tact,” four, “Whistling,” two, and the “Barn Dance” arrangement, one. There were also five medleys. Two unissued recordings are noted in the Victor files – a vocal of “Queen of the Philippine Islands” (July 1901) and a piano solo of “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” (November 1901).

The popularity of the *Florodora* score was also reflected in parodies, several of which were recorded. Knockabout comedians Joe Weber and Lew Fields, who regularly burlesqued current hit plays, added an elaborate take-off on “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” to their revue *Fiddle-dee-dee* in December 1900, about a month after *Florodora* opened. Called “Tell Us Pretty Ladies,” it had Weber, Fields and a third man flirting with three young ladies. “The women feigned complete indifference as the men bowed, stumbled, argued, and tried to outdo each other with exaggerated shows of gentility.”¹⁵ The number was extremely well received, and helped make *Fiddle-dee-dee* the second biggest hit of the season (262 performances), after *Florodora* itself. Versions of the song by recording comedians Arthur Collins and Joe Natus appeared on four labels during late 1901 and early 1902, and there was an instrumental version (“Tell Us Pretty Ladies Schottische”) as well.

“Tell Me, Dusky Maiden” was a parody by black songwriters Bob Cole, James W. Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson. It was interpolated into *The Sleeping Beauty and the Beast*, another London import, which opened in New York in November 1901. This song drew even more recording activity, with five versions by Collins & Natus, and three more by others.

Finally, a song called “Flora, I Am Your Adora” appeared on Zonophone in early 1902. Though I have not heard it, this is probably “Flora, I Am Your Adorer” written by Bryan and Robinson, which one source describes as a “comedy song about the husband of a *Florodora* (sextet) member, performed by Harry Bulger in the burlesque *The Sleeping Beauty and the Beast*.”¹⁶

Sales figures for specific releases are virtually non-existent for this early period, however cylinders presumably outsold the discs by a wide margin, since cylinder production overall was more than four times that of discs in 1901. Mass production of recordings did not begin until the winter of 1901-1902, for either cylinders (via molding) or discs (via multiple stampers), so sales in the first year would have been limited by technology.¹⁷ Incomplete production figures do survive for Victor, and they show 1901-1903 "press runs" commonly of no more than a few thousand discs. The largest reported are for Goddard's "In the Shade of the Palm" (Vic 780/3324), 3,911 copies; Spencer and Macdonough's duet "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden" (Vic 1362/3501), 3,711 copies; and Ossman's banjo solo of the latter tune (Vic 624/3049), 3,190 copies.¹⁸

It is obvious from the repeated remakes, as well as the steady stream of new recordings, that many of the *Florodora* titles were large and steady sellers on record. Even larger quantities of them would be sold during the years to come, as the industry grew exponentially.

The Mysterious Sextet Recording

The many recordings of songs from *Florodora* helped spread the show's fame not only during its original run, but for years thereafter. As noted, most of them were solos, duets or instrumental renditions, which could not do justice to the highlight of the show, the elaborate production number with a double sextet of men and women singing "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden". Due to the primitive technology of the day record companies rarely recorded more than two voices at a time, and a choral number such as this seemed out of the question.

However in early 1901 Columbia attempted an innovative version of the song using six voices, three men and three women, with piano accompaniment, to better represent the stage effect. This was quite a novelty, and it is probably the recording referred to by the arcade operator previously quoted. The popularity of this particular record is suggested by several facts. It was remade in cylinder and disc versions by Columbia many times,¹⁹ and remained in the catalog until 1910, long after most recordings from this early period had been deleted. Edison copied the idea with its own sextet cylinder in 1902.

An item in the November 1904 *Columbia Record* also attested to its vogue, perhaps with some exaggeration. This was a house organ dedicated to promoting the company's wares, and it usually concentrated on the latest releases. The mention of a record made more than three years earlier was unusual, but this one was evidently a "winner".

A Sextette That Was a Winner

Nothing rendered in mixed voices was ever more popular than the selection from Florodora known as 'Tell Me, Pretty Maiden.' This is in fact a double sextette and it is one of the brightest compositions that was ever sung on the stage. The graphophone reproduction of this exceedingly tuneful number is admirable. The demand for this particular record was so great, at one time, that it was seriously suggested that work on everything else should be suspended and the full record making plant of the factory be concentrated on 'Tell Me, Pretty Maiden' until the accumulation of orders for it could be filled.

After a most remarkable run this record is still in great demand - disc no. 647, cylinder no. 31604.

Despite these indications of popularity, copies of the Columbia sextette recording are relatively scarce today on either cylinder or disc. This would suggest that its greatest sales came early, on the easily broken wax cylinders, which have not survived as well as discs. Columbia made no mention at the time of who appeared on the recording. This was not unusual, as the company was not at the time promoting its artists. The song was the thing. Numerous modern references state that the men were studio artists Joe Belmont, Byron G. Harlan and Frank C. Stanley, while the women were three actual members of the *Florodora* cast.²⁰ None of these modern references give any source for the claim (shame on them!). In the course of compiling *The Columbia Master Book Discography* I determined to unearth the facts.

The source is, in fact, a 1947 interview with Joe Belmont conducted in New York City by historian Jim Walsh, and reported by Walsh in a 1948 article. In the article Walsh wrote, in passing, "a very rare record that certainly would be worth having was 'Tell Me, Pretty Maiden,' made for Columbia by Belmont, Harlan, Frank C. Stanley and the three original *Florodora* girls".²¹

That brief statement is the sum total of our knowledge of who is on the Columbia sextet recording. Is it credible? Walsh is now deceased, but he was accompanied that day by a teenaged record enthusiast named Quentin Riggs. In 1996 I asked Riggs about the incident and he responded, "I remember very well meeting Joe Belmont in September 1947. I'm sure that's where Jim Walsh got the story of the *Florodora* girls singing with Belmont, Harlan and Stanley on a Columbia record of the sextet. Belmont did not say whether it was a disc or a cylinder. Belmont was one of the nicest people I have ever met. He was friendly, sincere, and modest. He had a sharp mind and a clear memory. I think he was credible. I believe what Belmont said..."²²

The names of the women were not given. The original members of the sextet were Margaret Walker, Marjorie Relyea, Daisy Greene, Vaughn Texsmith, Marie L. Wilson and Agnes Wayburn.²³ Of course only three female voices were on the record and, according to one source, more than 70 women rotated through the chorus during the original Broadway run.²⁴ It could be almost anybody.

Why would Columbia use actresses at all, especially if it was not going to bill them? It may have been a simple matter of expediency. Recording was an arduous undertaking at the time, with continuous re-recording necessary to fulfill demand, at least until mass duplication techniques were introduced. Columbia had a cadre of male studio singers available, however recordings by females were still relatively uncommon, and it may have been difficult to pull together a trio of female "phonograph singers" on an ongoing basis. There simply were not very many of them in the business. There were plenty of actresses rotating through the *Florodora* chorus down the street, however, and they were obviously familiar with the material.

Based on Walsh's statement (or second-hand reports of it), various Columbia recordings of the sextet have been cited and even reissued in recent years, billed as an original cast recording. *The Complete Entertainment Discography* cites matrix 647, take 6, issued on Columbia disc 647 and cylinder 31604, and Marconi 0376 (which is obviously impossible, since discs and cylinders were different recordings). Two reissues, a Pearl CD and a Metropolitan Opera CD, use 10-inch disc take 6 (from the Marconi). A reissue on an Opal LP/CD claims to be from a disc, but is actually from an unidentified take of the cylinder. Most of these are listed as by the "Florodora Girls," although as we have seen Columbia never labeled either cylinders or discs that way.



Fig. 1 Columbia 647 label.

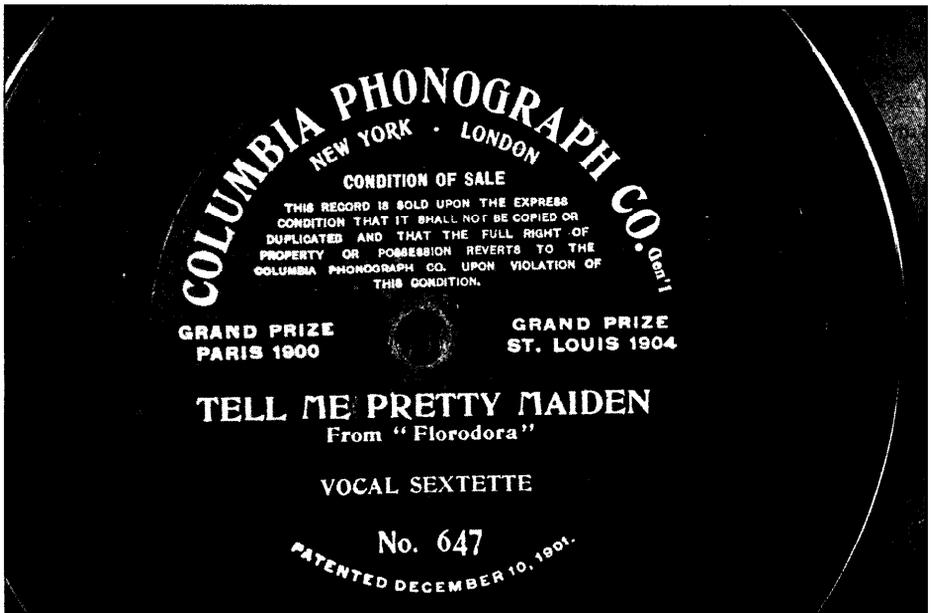


Fig. 2 May 1911 Victor supplement announcement of "Gems from Florodora".

This is where the problems begin.

As noted, Columbia cylinder 31604 was first recorded in the late spring or early summer of 1901, but the disc is from a later period – probably around January, 1902. Since *Florodora* closed on 25 January 1902, only early takes of the cylinder or disc would presumably have been made by original cast members. I have been successful in locating a number of takes of each. The female voices do sound different on them. On the earlier takes noted below, the females are not particularly forward and are relatively unmannered, possibly not entirely at home in front of a recording horn. These I have indicated as “unmannered”. The female voices on later takes, on the other hand, are stronger, deeper and quite mannered, with exaggerated phrasing such as “...all myynne alooone...”, and “I must love someone, really”. This type of strong projection, enunciation and phrasing is characteristic of “phonograph singers,” and is heard elsewhere in the voices of such period recording artists as Grace Spencer and Corrine Morgan. They are indicated “mannered”.

Recordings of the *Florodora* Sextet on Columbia
[Physical Copies Inspected]

Cylinders

<u>Take</u>	<u>Description*</u>	<u>Annc'd**</u>	<u>Approx. Date Mfd.</u>	<u>Female Singers</u>
-?	Brown wax (5")	? – A	1901	unmannered
-5	Molded Brown wax	FCS? – B	1902	unmannered
-13	Black wax	FCS – B	'02-'03	mannered
-14	Black wax	FCS – B	'02-'03	mannered

Discs Label

7" - 6?	unknown	none		unmannered
10" - 2	Columbia Disc Record (II.A.2)	FCS – C	'02-'03	unmannered
10" - 5	Columbia Disc Record (III.A.2)	FCS – B	'04-'05	unmannered
10" - 6	Company Phonograph Co. (III.B.2a)	FCS – B	'05-'06	mannered

* Earliest style seen with each take. The code numbers for the discs indicate label styles illustrated in Sherman and Nauck, *Note the Notes*. All of the cylinders and most of the discs are announced and so must predate mid-1904, when announcements were discontinued. Also none of the cylinders bear titles, a practice which began in early 1904.

** FCS means announced by Frank C. Stanley. The announcements text is “Sextet from *Florodora*, “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden”” (or vice-versa), followed by:

- A: “sung for the Columbia Phonograph Company” (early wording)
- B: “Columbia Record” (later wording)
- C: no company mentioned.

Obviously takes might be held for later release, as seems to have been the case with some of the discs, all of which seem to have been recorded no later than mid 1904. However the general progression shows that the mannered “studio singers” appear on takes apparently made well after the show closed, on both cylinder and disc.

It is my hypothesis, therefore, that on cylinder only the earlier brown wax examples may be by phonographically untrained singers from *Florodora*, while the black wax releases (takes 13 and 14) were made later by Columbia studio singers. On disc, ten inch takes two and five may contain singers from the show, but the more common take six does not. (The take on the seven-inch is difficult to read, and may be take one.)

The cut on the Opal CD sounds as if it might be from one of the early cylinders that could feature actresses from the show. Ironically, though, the 10-inch take 6 version of this famous recording that is most frequently cited and reissued is evidently a take that does *not* contain the voices of original cast members.

One other fact is worth considering. The previously cited article in the November 1904 *Columbia Record* mentioned that the singers appearing on the then-current version of Columbia 31604 could also be heard on Columbia 31607, the sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor* (“What from vengeance yet restrains me...”). It would be odd for showgirls from *Florodora* to be used on such a selection, suggesting that by this time “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” had been remade by studio regulars.

Epilogue

It is not the purpose of this article to trace the entire history of *Florodora* or its recordings. Nevertheless it is useful to summarize the show’s later history, and the profound impact it had. It became an icon of its era, frequently revived, perfectly evoking the charm of *fin de siècle* America for a nostalgic public.

After the show finally closed in 1902 road companies criss-crossed America. A 1911 article noted that “its enduring popularity can be judged by the fact that more than eleven years after its production, it is still being presented throughout the country”.²⁵ A new production was mounted in New York in 1905. Another, presented in 1920 by the Shuberts, brought a whole new wave of popularity. Still another was staged in New York in 1936.

There were also popular *Florodora* [*sic*] dolls, dishes and other souvenirs. (The name of the show was increasingly misspelled “Floradora” in later years.)

Several early films contained references to the show.²⁶ In 1930 Marion Davies starred in *The Florodora Girl* (MGM), a major production built around the legend that all of the original girls in the sextet had married millionaires. Other early sound features with *Florodora* sequences included *My Man* (Warner Bros., 1928), in which Fannie Brice sang “I Was a *Florodora* Baby” (about the one who *didn’t* marry a millionaire!); *Show of Shows* (Warner Bros., 1929); and *It’s a Great Life* (MGM, 1929), in which the Duncan Sisters crooned “Tell Me, Painted Oil Can”.

The 1936 revival spurred another round of interest. An ASCAP reference book indicates that “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” received an impressive 1,895 plays on radio during 1937, and there seem to have been several complete renditions of the principal score on radio that year.²⁷ “In the Shade of the Palm,” “I Want to Be a Military Man,” “Queen of the Philippine Islands” and “Tact” all received between 50 and 90 plays each. The much greater total for “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” attests to its continuing popularity as an independent number.

By the post-World War II era the *Florodora* years were becoming pretty distant (and their denizens dying off), and the show became more of a historical artifact. Nevertheless early television viewers were treated to regular vocal harmonizing by “The Florodora Girls” on *The Gay Nineties Revue* (ABC, 1948), hosted by old timer Joe Howard.²⁸ And I am told that on an early episode of *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951), Lucy gets into a spat with her friend Ethel and blurts out, “you’re so old you must have been one of the original *Florodora* girls!”

Recordings of songs from *Florodora* – particularly the sextet – continued to be issued for many years. Between 1903-1910 there were at least half a dozen on Victor alone, along with remakes of earlier titles.²⁹ In 1911, shortly after the inauguration of the popular Victor Light Opera Company series (in which a chorus reprised the scores of hit musicals), the label issued “Gems from *Florodora*” on Victor 31817 (later 35451). This remained in the catalog until 1927. Columbia quickly followed suit with the Columbia Light Opera Company doing “Vocal Gems from *Florodora*” on A5326. Re-recorded in 1920 on A6158, it remained in the catalog until 1926.

The 1920 revival brought new versions of *Florodora* songs (or medleys) on Edison, Pathé and Brunswick. The Rega Dance Orchestra offered a fox trot version of “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” on Okeh 4120 (1920). In 1931 the Sam Lanin Orchestra included a catchy little dance version of the same song as an “extra” on Hit-of-the-Week 1156. There were also recordings on Decca in the late 1930s (three versions are listed in the 1941 Decca catalog). No doubt there were others as well.

In later years, as noted, *Florodora* passed from the realm of nostalgia into that of historical icon. Due to a happy accident, the master for the 1901 Ossman recording of “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” (with its stentorian introduction, “played by Vess L. Ossman, the banjo king!”) has survived to the present day in the Victor vaults. It was reissued in 1954 on a special vinyl disc jockey pressing, in commemoration of National Banjo Week (where it was billed as “the first RCA Victor record ever released,” which is obviously wrong). A later take of the same number by Ossman, recorded in 1902, appears on another 1950s pressing made as a promotional release for the Huber News. In the 1980s LPs and later CDs began to appear reissuing certain of the original *Florodora* recordings (see Discography beginning on Page 65). While these emphasized the English cast recordings, the Columbia sextet is also now available on CD – even if in the wrong version!

Conclusions

A number of general observations may be made.

Despite the show’s popularity, there was a considerable delay between its New York opening (10 November 1900) and the availability of the first recordings. The first discs were announced on 1 February 1901, but it is likely they became available, along with the first cylinders, in the spring of that year. *Florodora* recordings do not seem to have been widely available until the summer of 1901, but they were quite popular then, witness the testimony of the arcade operator.

Performance styles were changed to fit the needs of the recording studio, rather than reflect the way the songs were sung on stage. Bands, banjos, trombones, clarinets, mandolins and solo male vocals predominated, even for songs performed in the show by a female character (“Tact,” “Whistling”) or chorus (“Tell Me, Pretty Maiden”). Retitled band and orchestra arrangements of songs from the show (“*Florodora* March,” “Barn Dance”)

were also popular. One very notable exception to this rule was the Columbia sextet recording of mid 1901, which recreated the stage effect by having a trio of men sing to a trio of women. The effect was enhanced, apparently, by having actual actresses from the show take the women's parts.

Once recordings of the score began to be issued they came in a small flood, with 58 discrete *Florodora* recordings traced from 1901-1902 alone. Many more were issued in later years, spreading the show's hit tunes far and wide, and ensuring that they became an integral part of the American musical landscape.

Florodora was clearly a historic show. The recordings associated with it deserve no less careful attention from scholars than do its other artifacts. In particular, one hopes that these recordings are preserved, and that bold statements about "original cast recordings" and "best sellers" receive more careful documentation than they have in the past.

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Endnotes

1. Plot as described on Catholic University of America, "Music Theater Research Project" website. Quite a few other songs are sung, of course. Only those relevant to the following discussion are noted.
2. Armond Fields and L. Marc Fields, *From the Bowery to Broadway: Lew Fields and the Roots of American Popular Theater* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p.164.
3. *Music Trade Review*, 5 January 1901, p.41.
4. *Music Trade Review*, 25 May 1901, p.27. Other references can be found in the issues of 9 March 1901 and 23 March 1901.
5. *Music Trade Review*, 4 May 1901, pp.38-39; 11 May 11 1901, pp.27-28; 18 May 1901, p.57.
6. The greatest detail on these recordings can be found in Brian Rust and Rex Bunnett, *London Musical Shows on Record, 1897-1976* (General Gramophone Publications, Ltd., 1977). They are also listed in Jack Raymond, *Show Music on Record*, New Revised Edition (Washington, DC: self published, 1998), and in Robert Seeley and Rex Bunnett, *London Musical Shows on Record, 1889-1989* (General Gramophone Publications, Ltd., 1989). The latter is a revised version of the Rust-Bunnett book, but although the jacket claims it is more "user friendly" it omits much of the recording detail found in the earlier edition.
7. Author's estimate. The sale of phonographs to individuals did not start until the mid 1890s (before that they were leased, in small numbers, mostly to businesses), and did not gain momentum until the introduction of low-priced spring driven machines by Columbia and Edison in 1896-1897. Total shipments of phonographs in 1899, according to the *U.S. Census of Manufactures*, was 151,403. Extrapolating from this figure I estimate that 500-600,000 phonographs had been manufactured in the U.S. by the end of 1900; deducting early, obsolete models, those sold to businesses (including phonograph arcades), and shipments overseas, perhaps 400,000 were in use in homes. With less than 20 million households in the U.S. at the time, this would work out to 2% of U.S. homes.

8. Tim Brooks, *The Columbia Master Book Discography, Volume I, U.S. Matrix Series 1 through 4999, with a History of the Columbia Phonograph Company to 1934* (Greenwood Press, 1999), pp.3,14.
9. Three months seems to have been a typical time between recording and release for cylinders. However, Edison could move more quickly than that, as evidenced by the parody "Tell Me Dusky Maiden," which was introduced in a show that opened on 4 November 1901, and released in January 1902. Of course, Edison might have recorded the selection before the show opened.
10. See discussion in Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (University of California Press, 1990), p.360. Edison was in intense competition with Biograph at the time.
11. According to Michael Sherman, *The Collector's Guide to Victor Records* (Monarch Record Enterprises, 1992), Eldridge R. Johnson had begun selling discs in the fall of 1900 on the Improved Gram-o-phone and then Improved labels, but by December 1900 had already switched to the label name Victor. Ten-inch discs were called Victor Monarch (later, simply Monarch).
12. "New List of Victor Gram-o-phone Records" (7-inch) and "New List of Monarch Gram-o-phone 10-Inch Records," both published by Eldridge R. Johnson and dated 1 February 1901. The contents of both were listed and discussed by Jim Walsh in *Hobbies* magazine, February and March 1968.
13. Dates based on an analysis of release numbers, and a report that Columbia had at least one of its sextet recordings (numbered between 31569 and 31604) in use by July (see below). A Columbia cylinder dating chart compiled by Kenneth Lorenz in the 1970s suggests release dates two to three months later, but Lorenz gave no sources and his work in other areas is suspect.
14. *Music Trade Review*, 20 July 1901, p.33.
15. Fields and Fields, p.164.
16. Barbara Cohen-Stratynier, ed., *Popular Music, 1900-1919* (Gale Research, Inc., 1988), p.94.
17. The introduction of multiple disc stampers is well described in Ted Fagan and William R. Moran, *The Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings: Pre-Matrix Series* (Greenwood Press, 1983), p.xviii. "Gold molding" (as both Edison and Columbia called it), allowing mass duplication of cylinders, was also introduced during the winter of 1901-1902.
18. Fagan and Moran.
19. Brooks, *The Columbia Master Book Discography*, Volume I, p.137 (for disc versions). Cylinder versions have been seen with take numbers as high as take 14.
20. See for example Brian Rust and Allen Debus, *The Complete Entertainment Discography*, Second Edition (Da Capo Press, 1989), p.322; Raymond, p.60; Whitburn, p.162; Tim Gracyk, *The Encyclopedia of Popular American Recording Pioneers: 1895-1925* (Granite Bay, CA: self published, 1999), p.38; Dwight Blocker Bowers, notes to "Music from the New York Stage, Volume One" (Pearl GEMM CDS 9050-2).
21. Ulysses (Jim) Walsh, "Joe Belmont, the Human Bird," *Hobbies*, March 1948, p.36.
22. Letter to the author from Quentin Riggs, 23 August 1996.
23. Burns Mantle, *The Best Plays of 1899-1909* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1944), p.379.
24. Catholic University of America, "Music Theater Research Project".

25. "New Victor Records" (supplement), May 1911, p.4.
26. Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.273-274.
27. American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, *Program Listings, 1937*. This thick volume lists the number of plays received by each ASCAP song on surveyed radio stations during the year, for royalty purposes.
28. Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present*, Sixth Edition (Ballantine Books, 1995), p.388.
29. Fagan and Moran.