

Two Examples of Czech-Americans' Influence in American Popular Musical Culture in the Early Twentieth-Century: Bohumir Kryl and J.S. Zamecnik

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There are many peoples from all corners of the earth who have helped to shape popular music in America. Two Czech-American figures, one born in Bohemia, the other in America, while at the height of their careers contributed their talents to America's popular musical culture and entertainment.

During the time of the "Golden Age of Bands 1865-1915," (a period when nearly every town had a band), one of the greatest figures was the cornet virtuoso and bandleader Bohumir Kryl, a Czech born in Hořice near Hradec Králové. At the age of ten he began the study of the violin. "When Kryl was eleven years of age, he ran away with the circus where he became a tumbler, also doubling on the high trapeze. He started practicing on the cornet while travelling with the circus and was good enough in a few weeks to play in street parades. In 1889, at the age of fourteen, he sailed for America, working his way by playing both violin and cornet in the ship's orchestra."¹

Before Kryl became known to audiences throughout America as a cornet soloist, he had a career as a professional sculptor. He worked on both the study in the home of General Lew Wallace in Crawfordsville, Indiana and on the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Indianapolis, Indiana. From an article dated July 11, 1907 we can learn of Kryl's activities before he became associated with the most famous American bandsman, John Philip Sousa.

"Sculptor Who Worked for Gen. Wallace is Now Band Master at Fairbank."

Those who have had the pleasure of a visit to the study of the late Gen. Lew Wallace will recall the statue of Ben-Hur which occupies a prominent place there and also other busts and ornaments in stone and plaster. It is of interest to know that the designer of those is now a band master and directing the music at the well known Indianapolis resort called Fairbank. His name is Bohumir Kryl, and he is a Bohemian by birth, born in Prague on the Moldau, thirty-two years ago.² 'I came to the United States when fourteen years old,' said Mr. Kryl, 'and settled at Chicago, where I studied sculpture under H. R. Saunders, the English sculptor, and music under different teachers. I came to Indianapolis four years later and worked under Mr. Saunders on the groups placed on the Soldiers' Monument. During this time I went over to Crawfordsville and worked on busts and ornaments that were placed in Gen. Lew Wallace's studio. Some of these were figures representing characters in the 'Prince of India' and in 'Ben-Hur'. A statue of Ben-Hur was the largest figure I made at that time. Though I liked

¹ Glenn Bridges, *Pioneers in Brass*. (Detroit: Sherwood Publications, 1965), 54.

² Other sources indicate he was born in Hořice

sculpture and had a measure of success in it, I never thought as much of it as I did of music and I gave it up altogether. Sousa, when here, heard me play on the cornet and engaged me at once. I made a tour with him and have continued in music as my chosen profession ever since.’³

Today the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ monument in Indianapolis and General Wallace’s study in Crawfordsville where Kryl is credited with creating the frieze may be visited. The statue of Ben-Hur referred to in the article is apparently lost, but the figures representing Ben-Hur and the Prince of India on the exterior of the building are in a very good state of preservation.⁴

To continue the story about Kryl’s association with the band of John Philip Sousa:

In 1894, Sousa's band came to Indianapolis for two concerts. Following the afternoon concert, Kryl took his cornet and went to Musician's Hall, where Sousa's musicians were having lunch. He was interested in taking a lesson from Albert Bode, who was then first chair cornetist in Sousa's band, as Mr. Clarke had left to rejoin the reorganized Gilmore band.

As was usually the case when a young fellow came to a traveling band, he was considered an amateur, or just a plain rube, particularly so if he wanted to take lessons from the star performer, in this instance Al Bode. Kryl was a persistent young man, not about to give up too easily. He was finally introduced to Mr. Bode. The two men retired to the locker room, where Bode asked Kryl to play something. Kryl started in playing parts from solos which he knew. Outside the musicians were waiting to have their usual fun, when someone said: "My God, that can't be Bode playing, he never played like that in his life!

Bode finally appeared in the hall to say ‘that boy wants to take lessons from me, but "Hell" I can't teach him anything, he's better than I am.’ We understand Kryl did take a few lessons from Mr. Bode, especially coached in band routine, after joining Sousa's band. He studied a few years later with Mr. A. F. Weldon in Chicago.⁵

Kryl played with Sousa's band throughout the nineties, leaving the band during the summer of 1898. He played with T. P. Brooke's Band during the seasons of 1899 and 1900. In 1901, Kryl was special soloist with the Duss Band of New York. In 1902, Kryl joined Innes’ Band as cornet soloist and assistant conductor. He claimed to have played some 600 solos during that year. He remained with Innes’ Band until 1906, when he organized his own concert band.⁶

Kryl was a showman and a shrewd businessman and was even called by some who knew him well the “robber baron of the music field.” Through his live performances, recordings and

³ *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Journal*, 11 July 1907.

⁴ Author’s observation during a visit to the Wallace study in June 2003.

⁵ Bridges, 54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

self promotion, he was certainly became a personality that loomed large. The following quote is from some promotional material distributed by the C.G. Conn Company:

Mr. Kryl first became prominent as a soloist of Sousa's Band. That was a great many years ago. He later became associated with Mr. Innes and was a soloist and assistant director of this band for several seasons. He then organized his own band and achieved such success that if he were not remarkably well balanced in all respects he would have been justified in losing his mental equilibrium, but he still wears the same sized hat that he did when he was a modest Cornet player, doing regular professional business before he joined Sousa's Band. By the way, that hat, surmounting his flaxen hued chrysanthemum shaped coiffure has done not a little to make Kryl famous.

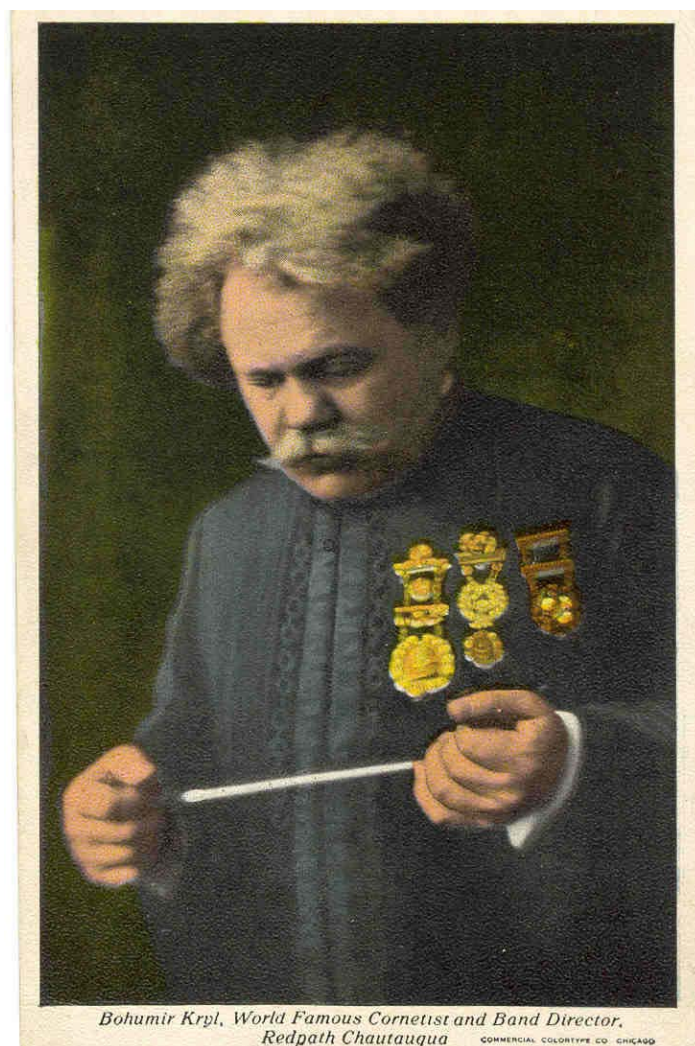


Fig 1. Postcard: Bohumir Kryl, Famous Cornetist and Band Director
Redpath Chautauqua

He is one of the greatest living exponents of the wonderful resources of Conn Cornets that exists, and there is nothing that gives him greater satisfaction or more genuine pleasure than to see the Conn instruments used by the members of his band. He sets them a fine example, and while he does not wish to persuade a man against his will, it does not take him long to prove to anybody who expresses a doubt just how much more can be done on a Conn Cornet than any other in existence.⁷

Even more laudatory comments and comparisons from newspaper reviews were made available by the Conn Company in their promotional material.⁸

“Kryl A Musical Wonder”: About Kryl there is no question – even without his wonderful mass of tangled flaxen hair he would be a musical wonder. He is both an artist and magician. Caruso of the golden voice might almost envy Kryl his artificial golden throat, for Kryl sings through his cornet with a rich, clean-cut tone that carries no suggestion of metal with it – Los Angeles Examiner, May 16.

“Kryl The Eccentric”: Kryl is a wonder – an instrumental freak. He played a lot of things on the cornet – began, as you’ll see, by the book-programme, ‘Kryl’s King Carnival,’ but the people wouldn’t let him go at that – had to keep on, winding up with a sky-scraping note of a minute duration in ‘Killarney,’ the ever popular.

In triple-tonguing, in attainment of very high notes and in terrific colorature work, Kryl is probably unexcelled in the world. When he had shown off high notes, the people were startled at a tremendous low tone coming from somewhere – down, down, down it went, all the time coming, as you finally knew, from Kryl’s magical cornet, until the notes would have registered bass on the scale, absolutely of deep trombone character. How Kryl effects these notes he himself does not know – they are a startling quality to anyone understanding the nature and limitations of a brass instrument. – Los Angeles Daily Times, May 16.

A certain model of Conn cornet called the “Conn-queror” was popularly known among musicians of the time as the “Kryl Model,” while never actually advertised as such. A letter by Theodore J. Vincentz of Newark, New Jersey to the Conn Company dated April 2, 1904 states: “Dear Sir: I hope you will pardon me for my seeming tardiness in informing you of my opinion of the Kryl Model Cornet, No. 62716, you made for me....I think I have won over more than one ‘doubting Thomas’ and feel certain that you will get several orders in the near future.”⁹

⁷ “Mr. Bohumir Kryl: The Bohemian Cornet Virtuoso and bandmaster and His Friend, Mr. Jaroslav Kocian, The Bohemian Violin Virtuoso, Fellow Countryman, Fellow Musician and Fellow Business Associate.” *C.G. Conn’s Famous New Invention Cornets*. Elkhart, IN: C.G. Conn, Inc., Ca. 1914.

⁸ *C.G. Conn’s Truth*. Elkhart, IN: C.G. Conn, Inc., May 1904, 13.

⁹ Theodore J. Vincentz, *C.G. Conn’s Truth*. Elkhart, IN: C.G. Conn, Inc., May 1904, 13.

In addition to performing many times throughout the country with various bands, Kryl was able to keep in contact with his countrymen by performing on tours with his two daughters, Josephine on the violin, and Marie on the piano. The following review from the *Bon Homme Independent* published in Tabor, South Dakota (Tabor, at the time being the closest thing to a “Little Bohemia” in South Dakota) reads:

A very large crowd had attended the grand concert given by Bohumir Kryl and his Company last Thursday evening in the Society Hall. Every member of the musical quartet was a finished artist. What appealed most to the audience was the violin solos of Josephine Kryl, the 14-years old daughter of Mr. Kryl. She has the expression and fullness of tone of a true artist and it seems that despite her age she can be placed side by side with the first class violinist of the day. Her technique was also delightful. As for Mr. Kryl, who is considered the greatest living cornetist, we can only say that the violin-like notes and his magnificent triple tonguing must be heard to be appreciated.¹⁰

Later, in November of the same year, Kryl returned to Tabor with Josephine, this time bringing his wife and daughter Marie.

The attendance at the Kryl concert given here last Sunday evening was a very large crowd and the music appreciated by all. Mr. Kryl, no doubt, justly deserves the honor of being one of the best cornet virtuosos in the country. His daughter Josephine has made remarkable advancement in violin playing since last heard here in March for she played with precision and feeling. Her tone had more depth and roundness and the young Miss can easily pass as an artist despite her age. The younger girl Marie however surprised all with her masterly playing at the piano. It is hard to believe that such a force is hidden in the small hands of a mere child; and she played no easy music either. Think of a child scarcely above 13 years of age rendering a Liszt rhapsody or something as difficult, and playing it with the touch and force of a matured artist. Mr. Kryl informed us that next spring the young Misses will go to Europe to continue studies for three years under masters of national repute and promised to visit Tabor after that period. Mr. and Mrs. Kryl and their daughter were the guests of Father Bouska while here. The committee thanks all who attend the concert.¹¹

Indeed, seven years later we find that at least Josephine studied in Europe and her sister Marie was also doing well. Josephine had studied with the famous violinist Ysaye and Marie had appeared at least a six times with the Chicago Symphony under the direction of Fredrick Stock.¹²

During the First World War Kryl had a position in the Army that was very similar to what John Philip Sousa had in the Navy. Sousa was the director of a large Navy band at the Naval

¹⁰ *Bon Homme County Independent*, 9 March 1911.

¹¹ *Bon Homme County Independent*, November 1911.

¹² Frank R. Seltzer, “Famous Bandmasters in Brief.” *Jacob’s Orchestra Monthly*, December 1918, 16-18.

Station Great Lakes in Great Lakes, Illinois near Chicago. According to another one of C.G. Conn's publications, Kryl was the "Bandmaster of all the Military Camp Bands in the county."

Kryl composed at least two works, "King Carneval" and "Josephine Waltz", which were both published by Carl Fischer in 1909¹³

"Among the many cities visited by the Kryl forces are Louisville, Kansas City, Cincinnati, Detroit, Denver, New York, Washington, Omaha, Chicago, Los Angeles, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh."¹⁴ At one time Kryl's own band was an important attraction of the Chautauqua system and in particular was featured on the Redpath-Chicago Chautauqua managed by W.V. Harrison.

Certainly Mr. Kryl was a superstar of the "Golden Age of Bands" period and he once stated, "he had played over 12,000 solos in his lifetime and had traveled over 1,000,000 miles." In addition he made at least thirty-eight different recordings of solos or duets for Edison, Victor and Zonophone recording companies.¹⁵

J.S. Zamecnik and his "Wings"

Another Czech-American musical personality who had nation-wide recognition in early twentieth century America was J. S. Zamecnik. Unlike Bohumir Kryl, who mostly performed live in front of an audience, Mr. Zamecnik's most important work was heard in conjunction with a relatively new art and entertainment form, the motion picture.

The fact that Mr. Zamecnik was a well-known name among musicians throughout America can be confirmed by this quote:

Mr. J.S. Zamecnik, who is regarded as one of the foremost band and orchestra arrangers in America, and for the past several years has done all the instrumental arranging for the Sam Fox Publishing Company of Cleveland, OH, has more strongly cemented his long connection with this house by signing a new contract which binds him exclusively to their service for a long term of years to come. Mr. Zamecnik had been musical editor on the staff of the Sam Fox Company since 1914, and in that capacity is known to every band and orchestra man in the country.¹⁶

Mr. Zamecnik's early career can be best outlined by this quote from the October 1919 edition of *Jacob's Orchestra Monthly*:

Perhaps a brief word regarding the career and personality of Mr. Zamecnik may be of interest to the readers of the *Jacobs'* magazine. He was born in 1872 at Cleveland, Ohio,

¹³ Rehrig, *The Heritage Encyclopedia of Band Music*. (Westerville, OH: Integrity Press, 1991), 426.

¹⁴ Frank R. Seltzer, "Famous Bandmasters in Brief." *Jacob's Orchestra Monthly*, December 1918, 16.

¹⁵ Bridges, 55-56.

¹⁶"Do Your Best," *Jacob's Orchestra Monthly*, October 1919, 26.

and as a youth disclosed a natural talent for music and composition. After studying under several teachers in this country he went to Europe in 1893, entering the Prague Conservatory in the city of that name in Bohemia, where he was a pupil of Anton Dvorak and a classmate of Jan Kubelik. Returning to America, he became a member of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra then under Victor Herbert. In 1907 he was appointed composer-director of the Cleveland Hippodrome Theatre, collaborating with William J. Wilson and R. H. Burnside in the production of musical spectacular successes and light operas. He next associated himself with the Sam Fox Company, composer and concern moving together to the great goal of success, and now binds himself to this concern exclusively.¹⁷

Regarding Dvořák, “The famous composer attempted to convince Zamecnik and his other American students that instead of composing ‘poor imitations of European music,’ they should produce works which used native American folk songs...”¹⁸

Mr. Zamecnik is of primary interest historically for his involvement with the early motion picture industry, and is credited with writing the first music specifically for film.

As a matter of fact, the first music written strictly for motion picture presentation was composed by J.S. Zamecnik. This occurred in 1913 and its publication marked a new era in musical composition. The success of this music was instantaneous and Zamecnik soon became a leading authority on motion picture music. That is a position he has held to this day, for he has always kept abreast of the requirements of this field and has generally been a jump ahead.¹⁹

Zamecnik achieved something of a worldwide reputation among theater musicians during the silent movie era.

The picture theaters all over the world are continually searching for new music adapted to picture requirements. This music is none too easy to find, for the composer who can write melodies may not necessarily knit them together in the form desired by the motion picture conductor. Besides melody, he must have a distinct feeling for drama and the ability to set down his music to reflect this. Mr. Zamecnik has done this so successfully that no motion picture theater library is considered complete without a very generous selection of his compositions. Go to Paris and see a picture and the chances are much in favor of your hearing a Zamecnik number in the score. Go to London, Berlin, Melbourne or Moscow, and the same thing is likely to happen. In other words, Zamecnik's music is played internationally and is relied upon by motion picture conductors the world over to heighten the effect of their film presentations. This is the man who was selected to make the

¹⁷ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁸ Norman Smith, *March Music Notes*. (Lake Charles, LA: Program Note Press, 1986), 464.

¹⁹ Gordon Whyte, "J.S. Zamecnik," *The Metronome*, 1 September 1927, 41.

musical score for "Wings," as big a picture as has been turned out by Famous Players-Lasky in their history. In fact, it is the opinion of some critics that it is the biggest.²⁰

The film "Wings" does go on to become the first Academy Award winner (1927-1928) for best picture.

Naturally, for such a picture a musical score of the highest quality was demanded and the selection of Mr. Zamecnik to make it is a tribute indeed to the estimation he is held in by motion picture authorities. His work on two other big Paramount pictures made him the logical choice for this bigger task, as all who saw "The Rough Riders" and "Old Ironsides" will agree. For these pictures, Mr. Zamecnik wrote the themes and much of the incidental music. Of particular beauty was the love theme for Esther Ralston in "Old Ironsides" called "Your Love Is All," which was universally conceded to be most effective.

Rodney Sauer, who along with the Mont-Alto Orchestra, had begun to perform Zamecnik's music again and writes that:

Zamecnik retired not long after the arrival of talkies- - according to his sons, he did not care for sound movies, where instead of glorious live orchestral music in the theater, audiences heard low-fidelity recordings played behind dialog and sound effects. Zamecnik's silent film cues were reused in many lower-budget sound films and newsreels throughout the 1930s. Zamecnik died in 1953 in Los Angeles. He is credited with nearly 2000 compositions. During his lifetime, his music was played in hundreds or thousands of film theaters every night for almost 15 years. His influence on musical development, and on the musical tastes of America, has been almost completely ignored.²¹

Another important composition by J.S. Zamecnik was the march played for Movie Tone newsreels. "Although most newsreel viewers knew neither the march title nor the composer's name, millions learned to recognize the sound of opening measures of "World Events March" and waited in suspense for the Movie Tone News."²²

In addition to writing music under his own name Zamecnik was published under the following pseudonyms: Lionel Baxter, Robert L. Creighton, J Hathaway, Kathryn Hawthorne, Roberta Hudson, Ted Josh, Ione Kawelo, Dorothy Lee, J. Edgar Lowell, Fredrick Van Norman, Jules Reynard, and Grant Wellesley.²³

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rodney Sauer, *Mont Alto Composer Profile: J.S. Zamecnik (1872-1953)*. <<http://mont-alto.com/photoplaymusic/zamecnik/zamecnik.html>> (23 June 2003).

²² Norman Smith, *March Music Notes*. (Lake Charles, LA: Program Note Press, 1986), 464.

²³ William H. Rehrig. *The Heritage Encyclopedia of Band Music*. (Westerville, OH: Integrity Press, 1991), 841.

Rodney Sauer of The Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra has collected more information about Mr. Zamecnik's work for silent films and together with the orchestra has recorded some of Mr. Zamecnik's music and it is available on CD. You are invited to visit their website at <http://www.mont-alto.com/>

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