

The Accordion and the Polka in Polish-American Ethnic Music

by Roy S. Czernikowski

The Polish Heritage Society of Rochester, in conjunction with the Rochester Museum and Science Center, the Rochester Sister Cities Program, and several other organizations are planning a sequence of events in 2005 that will focus on Polish-American ethnic music and instruments. There will be special emphasis on the polka and the accordion. In preparing for these events, members of the planning committee have been investigating something of the backgrounds of these cornerstones of Polish-American culture.

Dr. Ellen Koskoff, Professor of Ethnomusicology at the Eastman School of Music, has edited the massive third volume of the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music (music of the United States and Canada) and has graciously provided the author with assistance and pointers to other interesting references on the subjects. The objective of this brief article is to provide a little background in preparation for next year's PHSR activities and to whet the appetite of the reader to learn more about the subjects in that encyclopedia. (It is available in the Brighton Memorial Library. Another reference, Polka Happiness by Charles Keil and Angeliki V. Keil book is available as a used book through Amazon.com.)

“The instruments native to Eastern Europe and the Balkans have a fascination for most Americans. Russian balalaika ensembles have attracted audiences beyond the ethnic community. The Croation-Serbian *tambura* has been popularized by the Popovich Brothers' Yugoslavian Tamburitza Orchestra, founded in 1925. The Greek *bouzouki*, the balalaika, the *tambura* – all make distinctive ethnic statements; however, the accordion, of Viennese origin, is the panethnic instrument common to many of the ensembles of Central and Eastern Europe, and in the polka bands it becomes the principal one.” [Kearns 529]

The sound production of an accordion is based upon a free vibrating reed. The history of the free vibrating reed instrument dates back to about 3000 B.C. in China during the reign of the legendary “Yellow Emperor” Huang Ti. Huang is reported to have sent the scholar Ling Lun to the western mountain regions of the domain to find a way to reproduce the song of the phoenix bird. Ling returned with the cheng (or sheng) which was shaped to resemble the phoenix. It consisted of between 13 and 24 bamboo pipes, a small gourd acting as a resonator box and wind chamber, and a mouthpiece. Other free vibrating reed instruments were developed in ancient Egypt and Greece. [Zanchini]

The first accordion in the form currently recognized made its appearance in 1822 when “a German instrument maker named Christian Freidrich Buschmann (1775-1832) put some expanding bellows onto a small portable keyboard, with free vibrating reeds inside the instrument itself. He dubbed it the hand-aeoline, and helped spread its fame in 1828 by leaving Berlin and touring with it.” [Zanchini]

“Of all the dance forms played by European Americans, perhaps the most pervasive is the polka, and it may be the most representative form of ethnic music in America.” [Rahkonen 826]

Little seems to be known about the polka before it became the rage in Paris and London during the spring of 1844. Charles Keil asserts that the polka was probably a Czech idea about how Polish women dance, and taken to Paris by traveling entertainers and dancing teachers. It was not only popular in dance halls with the working people but also rather quickly taken into polite society as a fad. It was further disseminated as an international fashion. However, there seems to be no evidence that the polka was ever popular in Poland. Keil hypothesizes that the Polish aristocracy may have resented the stereotype, and Polish peasants “probably had no time to be amused by any possible resemblance to their own regional dance traditions.” [Keil 19] Janice Kleeman, in her doctoral thesis research, found little evidence of 19th century folk polkas in Poland. “The Poles certainly did not think of it as ‘identity music’ or ‘our national dance’; quite to the contrary, they encountered it only once in a while as an internationally popular dance in cosmopolitan centers.” [Keil 19] Keil further writes that “the general picture of the Polish-American polka’s emergence and crystallization as something made in America.”

“The nineteenth-century urban salon polka had three or more purely instrumental sections, assigned to various keys and often with contrasting instrumentation and texture. This style rarely had song texts. The rural style, whether based on a song, *krakowiak*, or polka melody, usually had only two sections, both instrumental or alternating instrumental and vocal. These two sections were either two different melodies or a single vocal melody rendered instrumentally with considerable melodic elaboration.” [Kearns 895]

There have been two coexisting Central European polka traditions since the 1830s: a rural folk tradition and an urban salon tradition. These two traditions were brought to the United States by immigrants. A similar pair of traditions has continued to exist in the United States: the urban ‘Eastern’ style and a revitalized and reconstructed rural ‘Chicago’ style (Kleeman 1982:33). [Kearns 892]

“The classic Eastern-style band was a large ensemble with a variety of instruments, playing technically precise, well-rehearsed variations with a continuous shuffling of lead instrumental combinations during performance. By the late 1950s, most Eastern style bands had reduced their size and increased their amplification.” [Kearns 893]

“During the 1950s, a revived rural style in Chicago began to challenge the popularity of the Eastern urban style. Chicago bands played at slower tempos, with fewer sections a fewer key changes and with a greater influence from Polish folk song and *krakowiak* rhythms. The Chicago style became associated with a more improvisatory, informal quality of the melody, with irregular phrasing and syncopations (Kleeman 1982:96). The instrumentation was simpler and less arranged than that of the Eastern urban bands. The general feeling was of greater enthusiasm and emotionality, with an abandonment of complex arrangements and less reliance on notated music (Keil 1992:46). By the late 1950s, Chicago-style polka was changing the sound polka in the East.” [Kearns 894]

The references cite Polish American music in wedding traditions, the influence of Dixieland, vaudeville, swing, jazz, and Broadway musicals on Polish American music making. They also mention changes in instrumentation over time as amplification and these decidedly American influences impacted the Polish American music scene. The band leaders and musicians of the early to mid 20th century also shaped the popular polka concepts in this country. There is a wealth of interesting information in even the few references listed below.

References:

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Charles Keil, Polka Happiness, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992

Janice Ellen Kleeman, “The Origins and Stylistic Development of Polish American Polka Music.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley 1982.