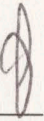


Chapter 9



German-American Music in Wisconsin

Program 9 Performances

1. Fred Kaulitz, "Herr Schmidt."
2. Howie Bowe, "Little German Ball."
3. Ray Dorschner and the Rainbow Valley Dutchmen, "Putzig Polka."
4. Ray Dorschner, "Village Blacksmith Waltz."
5. Jerry Schneider, "Tante Anna."
6. Syl Groeschl, "Ve Get So Soon Oldt."
7. Heinie and His Grenadiers, "Schuhplattler."
8. Andy Justmann, "Das Kufstein Lied."
9. Harry Kosek and the Red River Boys, "By the Rivers of Babylon."

German Sundays

In 1839 Old Lutheran dissenters settled Friestadt in present-day Ozaukee County, Wisconsin, and a contingent soon established Lebanon in what was to become Dodge County. These German-speaking immigrants from Pomerania and Brandenburg were fleeing the ecclesiastical edicts of the Prussian king, William III. Throughout the nineteenth century, other ethnic Germans—whether Catholics, Protestants, or free thinkers, whether from Baltic Sea states like Mecklenburg or from alpine Bavaria, whether urban intellectuals or stolid farmers—settled Wisconsin (Rippley 1985). They dominated the state's eastern region and were so widespread elsewhere that in the 1980 Wisconsin census more than half of the state's residents claimed some German descent.

Music was integral to Wisconsin's German cultural experience from the outset. By the 1840s, Friestadt's settlers had established a band that has, with a few interruptions, persisted to the present. Not surprisingly, the Friestadt band was associated with the Trinity Lutheran Church, although it relied on the brass and reed "band" instruments of military association that had become widespread through Europe by the early nineteenth century. Besides liturgical pieces, musicians played overtures, marches, and dance tunes. They were most active in the summer, playing for church picnics, weddings, and parades. The group altered its name to the Victory Band during World War II, but reasserted its German-American identity in the mid-1960s by becoming the Friestadt Alte Kameraden (Suelflow 1954; Hilgendorf 1985 I).

Whether Lutheran or Catholic, the German penchant for balancing sacred and secular music, for combining beer with church picnics, and for going to church on Sunday morning and to the beer garden in the afternoon differed sharply from the customs of Protestant Yankee neighbors. In nineteenth-century Sheboygan, where Germans slightly outnumbered New Englanders, the latter were known to take "their pleasures moderately, and one might almost say, solemnly." Sunday amusements were anathema.

It is small wonder that the Yankees were horrified and shocked at some of the gay and carefree customs, especially beer-drinking, dancing, card-playing, and Sunday amusements. Wherever Germans gathered together there was music, song, and general jollification. It was mainly they who patronized the saloons, beer gardens, and dance halls. They introduced dances like the waltz and polka . . . which the Yankees denounced as wicked. (Buchen 1944:226)

The efforts of Yankee politicians to close taverns were thwarted, and Sunday remains a day of social music and dance throughout Wisconsin.

Parlor Singers and Polka Bands

Bands of the sort that played for Friestadt dances were once extremely common in Wisconsin and remain in tiny but heavily German communities like Lebanon, Kiel, and Plymouth. They were, however, merely a large, public, and formalized manifestation of a bent toward social music that found more frequent outlet in small, private, informal gatherings. Rose Schuster Taylor's reminiscences of the 1870s mention numerous musical occasions in rural Dane County. The family sang German songs at bedtime; they sang and played on the porch during summer evenings; and weddings demanded music both at the event and during a charivari that preceded it. Rose's siblings hummed through combs, while her father, Peter Schuster, played the flute and what is mentioned simply as a horn. Instrumental variety was lent to frequent house parties with their neighbors and cousins, the Tiedemans, as three brothers played accordion, fiddle, and Jew's harp.

The Schuster-Tiedeman repertoire was decidedly German and included alpine yodeling. But Peter Schuster, who had worked in New York State as a young man, sang boatman's songs from the Erie Canal, and the family also favored "Negro songs," doubtless acquired from some touring blackface minstrel troupe. Their dances similarly favored such old-world round dances as the waltz, the schottische, the polka, and the galop, but they were not averse to the quadrille and the Virginia reel (Taylor 1944-46).

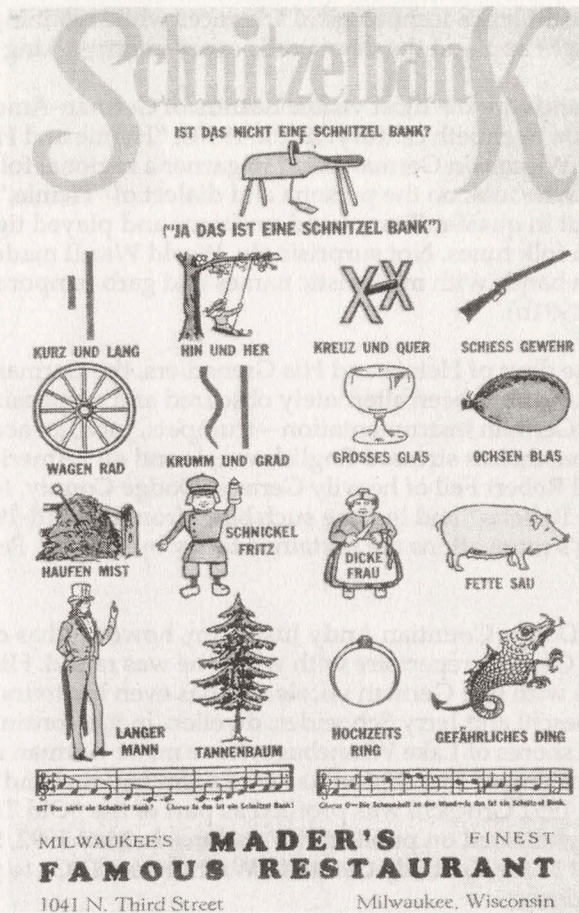
Comic dialect songs, with their similar juxtaposition of several cultural systems, were another indication of an evolving German-American identity. Songs like Whoopee John's "Elsie Shuetzenheim," Howie Bowe's "Little German Ball," and Syl Groeschl's "Ve Get So Soon Oldt (und Ve Get So Late Schmart)"—performed by second-, third-, and fourth-generation German Americans—have their roots in the "Dutchified" English of immigrants. While clearly enjoyed by German-Americans for the gentle fun they poke at the customs and foibles of newcomers, these songs were also accessible to native speakers of English—indeed some may have been composed for "stage Dutch" theatrical performers.

Helene Stratman-Thomas recorded several such dialect songs from non-Germans during fieldwork in Wisconsin in the 1940s (Bohlman 1979:374-379). In "Oh Yah, Ain't Dat Been Fine," a German courting couple, "Katryn" and "Scharlie," discuss their future.

Now when we get married won't we put on style?
We'll chump on a streetcar and ride all the while.
We've got plenty of sauerkraut always on hand,
And live chust as good as der king of der land.

(Peters 1977:148)

Both Anglo-Americans and German Americans might chuckle at the fractured English and the talismanic invocation of sauerkraut. Both might appreciate the



The noted German formula song
"Schnitzelbank" (Shaving bench) depicted on
a postcard from a Milwaukee restaurant,
1950s Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection



The Jolly Alpine Boys at the Golden Zither restaurant, Milwaukee, 1964
Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

ability to embrace technological advances while retaining inherited traditions. Both might applaud the democratic every-citizen-a-king sentiments.

Polka bands are the most visible bearers of German-American musical tradition in the late twentieth century. In the 1930s, "Heinie and His Grenadiers" became the first Wisconsin German band to garner a regional following. Led by Jack Bundy, who took on the persona and dialect of "Heinie," the Grenadiers were fitted out in quasi-military band uniforms and played tight arrangements of old German folk tunes. Not surprisingly, World War II made the existence of overtly German bands with militaristic names and garb temporarily unacceptable (Leary 1991b).

Since the days of Heinie and His Grenadiers, the German identity of Wisconsin polka bands has been alternately obscured and emphasized. Some bands with overtly German instrumentation—trumpets, tuba, an accordion or concertina—have nonetheless stressed English vocals and an "American" polka sound. Bernard Robert Feil of heavily German Dodge County, for example, became "Bernie Roberts" and led one such band from the mid-1940s through the 1960s. Roberts's innovations are sustained today by the Don Peachey Orchestra (March 1991).

Fellow Dodge Countian Andy Justmann, however, has carried on parts of the overtly German repertoire with which he was raised. His polka band entertains dancers with fine German vocals and has even led tours to the European *heimat*. Syl Groeschl and Jerry Schneider, dwellers in Wisconsin's Deutschland on the eastern shores of Lake Winnebago, have made German music their trademark. Their adherence to tradition has won them national and international recognition. In 1991 Groeschl was profiled as part of the "Old Traditions/New Sounds" series syndicated on public radio stations. In May 1992, Schneider's band was brought to the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., to play at a fete for German unification.

