



## ZAMECNIK

### Forgotten Composer of the “Silent” Era

*A nostalgic glimpse of the musician who did more than any other toward creating atmospheric settings for silent movies. His reward was oblivion.*

by Randy Sauls

Additional Research by Stu Green

In the early fifties, while I was investigating the possibilities of publishing organ instruction material, a saleslady in the Southern California Music Company suggested calling on a Mr. Walter Zamecnik. The name, because of its unusual flavor, somehow rang a bell! Upon entering his office and introducing myself I remarked that I had difficulty comprehending the name. Very courteously Walter not only pronounced it correctly (ZAM-ishnick), but spelled the name for me. Another bell clanged loudly as my memory envisioned myriad copies of organists' cue sheets, endless pages of

silent movie “mood music themes” — all credited to “J.S. Zamecnik.” Without even mentioning the purpose of my visit I blurted out that as a former theatre organist I recalled a name that could have been pronounced that way on many silent movie score cue sheets. If the picture accompanying this article could smile then readers, too, would see the reminiscent smile which came upon the face of Walter Zamecnik as he proudly said, “Yes, that was my Dad.”

John Stepan (Step-AHN) Zamecnik was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1874 to parents who had emigrated to this coun-

try from Bohemia, now Czechoslovakia. Eighteen years later, in 1892, the young man was sent to Prague Conservatory in the Capitol of Bohemia for five years of intensive study with famed Anton Dvorak, known more for his lilting *Humoresque* than for the *New World Symphony*.

Upon completing his studies in Prague, Zamecnik returned to America. His training had consisted of almost every phase of music a man with his prospects could use! He not only composed but conducted a full symphony orchestra as a portion of his requirements for gradua-

tion under Dvorak. He was familiar with every instrument in the orchestra or band and this qualified him well for the musical route which he was to pursue for his lifetime. In 1904 he married Mary Barbara Hodous, also a Cleveland resident. In 1905 a son, Edwin, arrived. Son Walter was born in 1907.

Even then our subject seemed to prefer being called "J.S." rather than by either of his "first" names. Incidentally ASCAP's Biographical Dictionary lists him erroneously as "J.C." This error is typical of the oblivion which surrounds Zamecnik only 20 years after his death.

Although he knew each instrument well his preference was for the violin and his first professional job was as Concert Master with the Pittsburgh Symphony under the direction of Victor Herbert who was later to hit the "big time" as America's top operetta composer.

Referring once again to the photo, one can see in the face of this man an expression of accomplishment. True, he was shy but he knew music. His skills and inspirations were put into practice when he returned home to Cleveland to become music director for a vaudeville theatre. Between 1910 and 1920 movies were not yet the principal attraction in entertainment meccas and there was an urgent need for light music to be organized in a professional, capable manner so that the various "acts" — singers, actors, dancers, acrobats, jugglers and clowns — would be molded gracefully, with the help of music, into an entertaining show. Without musical cohesion these shows could have been disasters, but this master of his craft not only composed original music for the regularly changing programs, but arranged for and conducted a rather large orchestra for that period, and did two performances a night! If the acts might seem a bit on the corny side by today's standards, the accompanying music was superb. It's interesting to note that the 1911 AFM Local directory lists no less than four Zamecniks making music in the Cleveland area, presumably all relatives of J.S.

After building our basic story from Randy Sauls' interviews with son Walter, we attempted to broaden the picture of the composer by contacting former colleagues and employers. Letters dispatched to his publisher, the Fox Music Co., brought no information. A letter to 20th Century Fox films, where J.S. "synch'd" so many silents with soundtracks, did raise a polite reply from the company's music department, saying that Mr. Zamecnik was not known or

## About The Author



RANDY SAULS

Randy Sauls is a genuine former theatre organist. A native of Mississippi, he made his entry on the theatre organ scene just as the "talkies" were strangling it. Realizing that there was no chance of scoring as a silent film accompanist, Randy became a "sing-along" organist, spotlight soloist and musical entertainer. During the early '30s Randy performed in theatres throughout the South, aided and abetted by an insidious sense of humor and timing. He now lives in southern California, dividing his time between teaching music in the public schools and running his very successful mail order organ study course ("When students want to skip a lesson they mail me a blank sheet of paper!"). Occasionally he accepts a concert engagement and wears himself to a frazzle polishing a technique that understandably may get rusty between gigs. His story about J.S. Zamecnik is a labor of love; it was two years in preparation.

remembered by any of the present crew. A letter to Local 4, the AFM Cleveland chapter, struck some pay dirt in the form of a reply from a retired colleague. Harry Walker, who refers to J.S., as "John," as he was known to fellow musicians in Cleveland, despite his preference for initials only.

"John was a quiet guy, not given to bragging or patting himself on the back. I think very few people knew he had studied with Dvorak."

Cleveland was a lively musical town in the early days of the century. One theatre, the Hippodrome, is indicative. It was the largest house between Chicago and New York. Even in 1919 it was equipped with a stage elevator and a stage tank which could accommodate diving horses! The pit was large enough to accommodate a full symphony orchestra. Harry Walker recalls Cleveland vaudeville conductors Herman Biringer, Al Green, the Spitalny brothers, Henry Pfitzenmayer and the legendary Max Faetkenheuer, under whom Walker played. He recalls that in the early '20s, J.S. was playing piano in a theatre orchestra while teaching and composing privately. In addition to the cavernous Hippodrome, there were several Cleveland burlesque and movie houses which employed orchestras of twenty-five men.

Harry Walker remembers that Zamecnik was already known locally for his film music: "The 'situation compositions' of J.S. were in demand for the silent movies."

There were other Zamecnik colleagues and fellow musicians we tried to contact,

in Cleveland but only Harry Walker replied. All are in their 80's and 90's and perhaps their powers of recollection have faded. So, it may be stated that in his home town, the composer who did so much to enhance silent films musically, has been almost forgotten.

But what about the organist? Yes, they had organists. At the Hippodrome was a name familiar to many theatre organ buffs, organist Henry Murtagh! Others, too, who trod the boards may be remembered today, among them, song belter Sophie Tucker, the Eddie Foy Family, tap dancer Pat Rooney, Sr. and many other names not so fortunate in withstanding the erosion of time! All this, mind you, was even *before* Jack Benny!

Randy Sauls continues.

With J.S. building a reputation as a practical composer, it is understandable that Sam Fox Music Publishers, then located in Cleveland, would seek him out and become his publisher. This became a lifetime contract and soon there appeared on the market the Sam Fox Photoplay Edition for Organists and Pianists, by J.S. Zamecnik.

As movies became popular there was a growing demand for theatre organs. Full orchestras to cue silent movies were unwieldy except in the hands of a truly capable conductor with equally qualified sidemen! A theatre organ with one performer was far more attractive to the management, especially from the budget's eye view. Soon there were a great many more organs than there were organists capable of playing them. The early piano and drum accompaniment to

movies soon squared itself out of the picture and the pianist became an "organist." Usually one-footed, lacking in originality and often light of talent, but lucky enough to be there at the time when an organist was needed, he multiplied rapidly.

This does not in any way imply that all organists were in this category but this just happened to be a grand reverse of unemployment! Anybody could get a job as a theatre organist if he could hold a key down. Theatre managers were notoriously tone-deaf. To many of them a rhythmic chorus of *All By Myself* was fine for train wrecks, impending disaster or dirty work at the crossroads.

But these fortunate "would-be" film accompanists, who hadn't had the advantage of a trained background, needed help and this is where J.S. Zamecnik proved his worth. His music pictured storms, battles, chases and love scenes — the music the aspiring film accompanist needed so desperately.

When asked how he would describe his father's musical aims, Walter stated that his father's only ambition seemed to be to help the aspiring film accompanist learn and understand more about music. This is why his more than 1500 compositions of thematic "mood music" were designed chiefly for the limited musician. Yet the quality of the music is fine enough even for a skilled artist to use as a source on which to elaborate in creating the musical settings for the silent dramas of yesterdays' silver screens. J.S. never had the urge to write a symphony. He wanted to write for those who needed his expert musical projection in a more simplified form.

During one of Walter Zamecnik's visits to my studio I played some "J.S. music" to see if he'd recognize it. I had several volumes of the Sam Fox Photoplay Editions on the rack and selected a few random themes, without any effort toward form or continuity. Walter is not a musician although he has been active for years in music sales. But when I played musical fragments from J.S. compositions while imagining a silent movie was in progress, I surprised myself many times by realizing that I was sounding perhaps like one of Rosa Rio's magnificent accompaniments to a soap opera. Occasionally I could hear a George Wright phrase and once or twice I glimpsed Eddie Dunstedter and "Little Organ-Annie" Leaf peeking through the Tibias! There's no doubt about it; this man left his mark on the theatre organists he helped to create!

Walter listened quietly while I made discoveries. I knew that he hadn't heard any of his father's music for many years. When I asked him if anything I was playing sounded familiar, he replied, "I couldn't tell you anything about it — except I know my dad wrote it."

Once I asked Walter if his father was ever a "real temperamental artist" as so many composers are reputed to be. Here is his verbatim reply "Dad always worked at home in his studio using a piano, and while working he was not to be disturbed. I have heard him fondle a simple phrase for an entire afternoon before he could make the minute changes which satisfied his musical intentions."

From the meticulous craftsmanship indicated one would naturally wonder at the quality of his prolific output. Considering the more than 1500 compositions he did, Sam Fox Publishers decided that the credibility of his having composed such an enormous output hinted that he should use some nom-de-plumes. He eventually wound up with twenty one aliases. For his Hawaiian-type compositions he was called "Iane Kawelo." If the number happened to have a Parisian flavor his name was "Jules Reynard" or "Paul Dupont" and for a lovelorn *Out of the Dusk To You*, which became a popular favorite in the '20s, he used the name "Dorothy Lee!" How these assumed names were selected is lost in history, but they sound as though this sensitive man conceived them himself. Invariably, the nom-de-plumes sound as though they should be the names of the songs' composers!

In the middle '20s there were rumors of an impending development in the film industry — talking movies. This also meant that musical accompaniments could be recorded when the film was made. The center of these developments was Hollywood and with a little urging from the Fox Music Co., which was associated with the Fox Film Co. in Hollywood, J.S. moved his family to "Tinseltown" where he could work out of the Fox studios. That was in 1924, when Zamecnik was 50 years of age.

Three years later, the "talkie" revolution hit Hollywood hard, catching all film makers with a large backlog of unreleased silent films. With many first run theatres already equipped with synchronized sound equipment, the industry decided to enhance its remaining silent films with synchronized soundtracks containing sound effects and musical scores. This decision proved a death knell to live theatre music.

Had the backlog been allowed to remain silent, there would have been perhaps three more years of transition time for the switchover from silent to all-talking films. As it turned out, theatre musicians faced wholesale and immediate unemployment starting in 1927, due to the introduction of the "synchronized" silent movie.

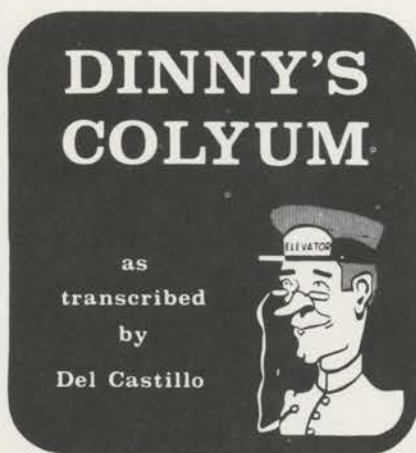
"Sound movies" were a letdown to Zamecnik. It is rather ironic that in early pre-talkie "sound" days Dvorak's prolific student, much to his personal distaste, wrote music for the recorded soundtracks of countless "synchronized" silent movies. J.S. was in favor of musicians playing "in person" rather than of a recorded soundtrack. Yet he had no choice but to "synch" silent films. Among the silent movies which received this sort of "aid" were *Wings* starring Clara Bow, Richard Arlen, Buddy Rogers and Gary Cooper; *Abie's Irish Rose* with Charlie Murray and George Sidney; *Fazil*, starring Ramon Novarro who sang the still remembered *Neapolitan Nights* on the sound rack, and *Wedding March* with the German actor, Eric von Stroheim, as well as *Redskin* starring Richard Dix. Sam Fox Publications, upon learning that I was preparing this article on their long ago composer very kindly sent me a copy of the original sheet music with *Redskin's* Richard Dix in glowing color on the cover. This is a prized possession.

A large number of Zamecnik's film compositions survive, at least on paper. Some bits and pieces of J.S.'s music are being donated to the ATOS archives at Elon College. I have quite a number of items given to me by Walter Zamecnik which I have agreed to pass along for posterity. It would be wonderful if someone republished some of this material — but who'd buy it?

Still, I'd trade a few Jesse Crawford "Roll Glissandos" for a chance to hear someone with the ability of Billy Nalle take a few pages of the material and "have a go" at it. If he could be primed with narrated dramatic material I can imagine what he, in his way, would do with these thematics to improvise around. There were, and still are, many others who could "swing it" but I just happened to think of him when I was playing selections from J.S. Zamecnik's PHOTOPLAY EDITION, then allowing imagination to take over as I improvised on the Zamecnik themes to "cue" a fantasy silent film. Dramatic moments were conjured by such titles as *Shadowed* (Mystery, Horror, Gloomy Scenes); *Premonition* (Tragic Development, Grue-

some Story, Hallucination, Despair); *Hurry* (For general use); *In a Canoe* (Serenade); *Fury* (Violence, Confusion, Disaster); *Redemption* (Powerful Climax!, Great Love, Religious Theme); *The Confession* (Sorrowful Emotion); *Conspiracy* (Intrigue, Evil Purpose); *The Verdict* (Tragic, Dramatic Situation); *Dramatic Tension* (Sorrow, Deep Emotion, Tragic Situation); *Furioso* (Great Confusion, Riot Scene); *Simplicity*, by "Dorothy Lee"; *Treacherous Knave* (Villain Theme, Ruffians, Smugglers, Conspiracy); *The Furious Mob* (Great Disturbance, Riot, Mob Scene); *Evil Plotter* (Conspiracy, Impending Danger)!!... Shall we go on?

J.S. Zamecnik died at the age of 81 on June 13, 1953 and is buried in Inglewood, Calif. His wife Mary, lived to 87 years and is buried beside him. Although J.S. Zamecnik is gone his music and the influence it fostered are very much alive in generations of musicians, song writers, orchestrators and the dwindling number of theatre organists who remember those wonderful days when the name Zamecnik helped pave the way to a playing career. Only the name has been forgotten. □



I got to thinkin back to how long I been a professional riter and by gum it was fifty years ago come next November. I used to keep a kind of a little scrapbook after I started my Colyum for Mr. Jacobs magazines called the *Orchestral Monthly*, which Mr. Jacobs called *The Elevator Shaft* on account I was runnin the elevator for him after he permoted me from Janitor. So I got to readin them first colyums I rit for him, and by gum I rite better now than I did then, but of course that was the first time I took to trying to rite somethin to put into print and when I look back on the stuff I rote it looks

to me I was tryin to show off how much I knew which I guess is somethin that happens to a lot of riters when they start out.

I guess I was only a young punk, and the very first colyum I rote I tried to show off how much I knew about Geo. Bernard Shaw and how he was agin censorship in the movies, on account he says it was immoral to stop people from doin things people think are immoral bacuse a lot of things people think is moral today was immoral yestiday and a lot of things that is immoral today will be moral by next week. And this is what Mr. Shaw said fifty years ago, and look what has happened since to show he was rite. What is in movies today and the langwitch they use and the words they say and what they do nobody would of thought ten years ago they could do without goin to jail for.

So then in this peace I rote in 1924 I told about how in Pennsylvania they couldn't show any guns in the ads, and how in Boston they couldnt show any fites on Sundays, and how the movies they got Mr. Will Hays to keep the movies clean and how he got a Committee of Public Relations to help him out and they would make out a report to him on what the movies was showin that was rong, and it even got so the Boy Scouts they made them change the name of Kit Carson in *The Covered Wagon*, because it showed him gettin soused.

To get back to Mr. Shaw, he didnt think much of the movies anyway, and accordin to my colyum he says that they are full of the stoopidest errors of judgment with overdone and foolish repeat strokes of expression (whatever that means), hidius makeups, close ups an angels face couldnt bear, hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on speshul effects that any good perducer could of made cheap, over exposed faces in front of under exposed backgrounds, and long lists of everybody hired in the fillum, who developed it, and who fixed it and who dried it and who fixed the stars hair. That's what Mr. Shaw said, so I guess you couldnt scarcely call him a movie fan. If he was still alive today he would most likely throw a fit or have apoplexy if he could see what they put on the screen today. So it's just as well for him he died back in 1950 before any of this wild stuff begun.

So then I got to thumbin thru my old colyums and I got quite a kick out

of some of the things I put in that I have forgot about cince. Like how the copyrite owners of Hansel and Gretel won a soot from the publishers of Bambilina swipin a tune out of the opery, and like the opery *Tosca* nailed the riters of *Avalon* the same way. And then like they had political scandals back in 1924, too, and they was oil scandals just like today. And then in 1925 they was a big fuss over Irvin Berlin gettin married to a Noo York society girl name of Ellen Mackay, and that was nearly fifty years ago. And of course they had to publish a popular song about it, and it was named *When A Kid Who Came From The East Side Found A Sweet Society Rose*. The pop song riters is always doin things like that. When the Eytalian tenor Caruso died they published a song called *They Needed A songbird In Heaven So God Took Garuso Away*. And how about *There's A Vacant Chair For Will Rogers In Every Home Tonight*.

Them songwriters they aint happy unless they got somethin to cry about. Like when Pres. Roosevelt died the title was *Our President Was Called Away To Heaven*, and then of course they was *The Kidnapped Baby* about the Lindbergh case. Or maybe you would perfer *I Lost My Love In The Ohio Flood*. Or if you want a real good cry, how about *From Prison To Mother's Grave*. Every time they is a headline tragedy the song writers get to work with *The Kidnapping Of Peggy McGrath* or *We Buried Her Benath The Willow*. Oh well, I spose maybe if I was a songriter instead of a riter I would be in the dumps too.

I come across a parygraf I rote in 1925 that says it pretty good. What I said was - One thing I like about this Colyum of mine is that I can jest Be Myself. I can jest say it the way I talk, and I dont have to worry none about dressin the Langwitch up in any *Tony High Hat*. You know the trouble with most of these here riters is they get so Partikilar about usin elygant English that they get so's they can't even remember what theyre ritin about. Frinstance, a feller willl get to usin a bunch of big words you never heard of, so's you'll have to look em up in a Dictionary and say What a lot he must know to use them words like that. And the chances are he had to look a lot of em up his own self before he could use em. But of course you never think of that. □