

## A COLUMBIA COUNTY COMPOSER: OTTO P. IKELER

W. M. Baillie

At the turn of the last century an enterprising Columbia County farm boy:

- Published over 200 of his songs, hymns and musical compositions
- Headed a five-member family combo that, among them, played over twenty different instruments
- Helped introduce local residents to rag-time and swing rhythms
- Taught music and ranged widely as a “commercial traveler” selling sheet music—most of it his own creative work.

This prolific musician and composer was **Otto Porter Ikeler**. He was born at Rohrsburg, PA in February 1870 and was raised in Greenwood Township, Columbia County, the son of prosperous farmers William P. and Savilla Goho Ikeler. Their farm was along the Austin Trail, overlooking Little Green Creek about one-half mile northwest of Rohrsburg. The family’s cozy farmhouse, which is still standing, nurtured a half-dozen children as well as boarders and servants.

Otto attended local schools in Greenwood Valley and then at age seventeen went on to Bloomsburg Normal School, where he was in the Preparatory program as a music student for one year, 1887-1888. His grades in such subjects as Arithmetic, Rhetoric, and Spelling were only average; on the other hand, it seems that he excelled in his music studies, although the grade book doesn’t record music grades. After a year, he went on to study at the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, founded in 1867. When Otto enrolled in 1888 the Conservatory was becoming the leading music school in the country, with many of its faculty among the principal musicians of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

With this valuable music training, Otto returned home to Rohrsburg and set up as a music teacher, traveling each week in a wide circuit to his students’ homes for instruction in piano, voice, and various instruments. This was during the Gay Nineties – before movies, radio or TV – when rural families provided most of their own evening entertainment. Growing affluence meant that most rural families had the means and interest to buy a piano or other instruments, learn music and enjoy family songfests and musicales. Roving music teachers and singing-masters were in demand.

As a Boston-trained music teacher Otto took the title of Professor, which did not at that time imply college-level teaching. In the minutes of the Rohrsburg Literary Society, of which he was a founding member in 1898, this title often precedes his name. He regularly entertained the Society’s bimonthly meetings. On January 29, 1899, for example, “By special request Prof. Ikeler gave an Instrumental Solo and also gave a vocal solo entitled Just Tell them that you saw me.” Again, on March 4<sup>th</sup> “Prof. Ikeler sang a pretty, patriotic, solo entitled ‘The Wreck of the Maine’ [the blowing-up of the battleship USS Maine in Havana harbor a year earlier had provoked an overflowing of patriotism], and also ‘But the Cat Came Back’.” Some of these songs may be his own compositions.

Otto helped organize “THE IKELERS” family combo shown in the photo; Otto is believed to be second from the right, and the others are probably siblings and/or cousins. Their impressive array of instruments included strings (bass fiddle, violin, banjo, guitar), brasses (cornet, Eb horn, euphonium), a clarinet, and a variety of others (xylophone, zither, autoharp, timbrels). Otto himself probably played quite a few of these instruments, and as a professional musician he was the “leading light” of the group.

Otto’s claim to fame, though, is not as a performer but as a composer, with over two hundred pieces to his credit. We don’t have a complete list of his output, but we know he took himself seriously as a music-writer and numbered his compositions. He sold his printed music door-to-door and by mail order from his home at Rohrsburg and, after 1909, at Bloomsburg.

Otto’s compositions can be classified generally into three types:

- Hymns and church service music (his obituary says that his compositions were “mostly hymns”)
- Sentimental pop songs
- Piano music: marches, ragtime, etc.

His secular publications were handsomely printed in folio sheet-music format (9” X 13” or larger) with color artwork on the covers. He himself was the publisher; the cover artist and the printer remain unidentified.

Otto’s tunes and lyrics were chiefly in the sentimental mode of his time, aiming to tug at the listener’s heartstrings. Most songs hark back to the style and themes of earlier American song-writers such as Steven Foster. Some other songs, however, and his piano music, were in the then-latest dance modes such as ragtime and two-step.

By today’s standards, Otto’s lyrics are short on poeticism and heavy on sentimentality about family and religion. An example is his sentimental song about family relations titled “A Mother’s Heart” (1902), celebrating the virtues of a mother:

Have you ever watch’d a mother,  
As she labors ev’ry day;  
Toiling for her little fam’ly  
As she wears her life away?

**REFRAIN.**

If we knew, if we knew,  
If a mother’s heart we knew;  
O, how many trials and troubles,  
If a mother’s heart we knew.

The last two of the song’s five verses imagine family scenes full of pathos:

Maybe papa has departed,  
To some foreign land so fair;

Leaving mamma broken hearted  
And the children in despair.

Maybe little ones are buried,  
In the cemet'ry so deep;  
Mamma with a bunch of flowers  
Goes down to the graves to weep.

In a similar sentimental vein is his 1925 song "Mamma, Would I Be An Angel?" The cover shows a rosy-cheeked, winsome little girl kneeling by her bed for evening prayers, looking up in wide-eyed innocence. The lyrics represent the musings of the fatherless child aloud to her mother:

Mamma, I am sad and lonely  
Since my papa went away,  
I don't care for my nice playthings,  
I would put them all away;  
I've been thinking of the Bible,  
And of what you said to me.

**REFRAIN.**

Mamma would I be an angel  
'Way up yonder in the sky?  
Will they give to me a pair of wings  
And with the angels fly?

Ikeler's composition "Ana Wana (Indian Love-Song)" (1921) anticipated by just a few years the wildly popular song by Oscar Hammerstein titled "Indian Love Call." Ikeler's lyrics concern a Pocahontas-like story of an Indian princess "Way out West" who saves a white captive from death at the stake by pleading with "the chief of all the tribes around." The musical setting evokes popular ideas of Amerindian dances, with the piano representing "Music of the Timton, Drums and Rattles."

Ikeler's most popular song composition seems to have been "Eva's Dream," which draws on the widely-read novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, or rather, on one of the popular stage enactments of that novel. The song represents a conversation between a small girl and her "papa" about Little Eva's romantic notions of heaven:

A little girl with golden curl  
Once climbed her papa's knee,  
And begged him for a story  
Just to pass the time you see  
About a play written they say  
by Mrs. H. B. Stowe,  
Of slavery days, in other ways,  
Uncle Tom's Cabin show.

"Pray, tell me, papa, did you meet  
That charming little miss  
With eyes of blue, and heart so true  
And hair too sweet to kiss?"  
"Yes, yes, my child," he said, "I've met  
That charming little queen  
Who talks about a home above  
Ever her golden dream."

**REFRAIN.**

Singing in the angel choir  
In heaven's city so fair  
All the lovely saints were there  
Knowing no sorrow or care.  
Uncle Tom he came, she told  
This seemed her principal theme  
And angels played on harps of gold  
This was sweet Eva's dream.

At last she said, "Papa, I wish  
That I could see that show,  
And talk with Little Eva  
And with Uncle Tom you know  
I'd have so many things to say  
About the home above,  
The same as did poor Uncle Tom,  
One whom sweet Eva loved.

Pray, tell me, papa, is it true  
That Little Eva died,  
And left so many loving friends  
Thus weeping by her side?"  
"No, no, my child, it is not true  
Although it seems much so  
'Tis just the play that runs that way  
Uncle Tom's Cabin show."

In these lyrics the child-speaker is blissfully unaware of the novel's setting amidst Southern slavery. The song represents not only the sentimentality but the not-so-subtle racism of its time. Similarly, the titles of some of Ikeler's published pieces reflect the casual biases of the era: "Nest o' Piccaninnies," "Mooney Coons" and "Black Clutch." The musical scores of these pieces, however, show the vigor, syncopated rhythms, and carefree style associated with "daring" new music from New Orleans and St. Louis. Ikeler introduced early African-American jazz rhythms to rural white Pennsylvanians.

Another of his songs, “In the Coal-Mines Far Away” (1901), evidences Otto’s awareness of the awful conditions in the region’s coal mines. The cover’s three inset photos evoke the dreariness of coal-region life, particularly with the huge coal-breaker looming ominously behind a miner and his wife and in the photo of a miner’s family at the door of their hovel. The song’s lyrics tell of “a great and sad disaster” when miners were trapped by a cave-in and died; the refrain represents the wife of one of the lost men telling her children:

I’ve come to tell you of your papa,  
Who has perished in the coal-mines far away.

The song offers a romantic heavenly vision grounded in an all-too-earthly picture of the dangerous life of the region’s miners.

Although Otto was in some respects a musical modernist for his era, he descended from a long-time Greenwood Valley family. His great-grandfather, Andrew Ikeler, was one of three brothers, sons of a German immigrant in Belvidere, New Jersey, who came to the Valley in 1804. Andrew Ikeler bought land from the Lancaster Land Company, acquiring over 1000 acres in Greenwood and Mount Pleasant Townships. He became a well-known Justice of the Peace and was a Colonel in the county militia; he led a contingent of troops in the War of 1812. Ikeler’s Hill in Mount Pleasant Township is named for one of his sons. Otto was descended from Andrew’s son Johnson H. Ikeler (1815-1889) and his wife Mariah Lemon (1815-1887).

The career of a music teacher and self-published composer is rarely lucrative, but Otto Ikeler seems to have prospered. In 1909 he bought for \$3500 a fairly-new double house on Bloomsburg’s fashionable Fifth Street. There he lived the rest of his life, at first with his brother Raymond’s family and then on the other side of the two-family home with his father and mother.

A few months before he died on January 13, 1938, Otto gave the double house and another house he owned (on Third Street in Bloomsburg) to his younger brother William. In his will written 16 November 1937 Otto bequeathed: \$100 to a friend; proceeds from his music to First (now Wesley) Methodist Church of Bloomsburg; and everything else to his brother William H. Ikeler. The estate was inventoried at nearly \$16,000—without any real estate—with much of that value in six home mortgages (Otto had been lending money like a banker so his friends could buy homes). Among his personal goods, his “music” was valued at just \$5; we may doubt whether his bequest to his church ever produced much income for First Methodist.

Otto was remembered in Bloomsburg as a somewhat comical figure. The late Jay Fritz Sr. used to tell of visiting a home in Bloomsburg in which Ikeler was also a guest. Otto launched into a song on the piano in the parlor—“You didn’t need to twist Ikeler’s arm to get him to play.” Ikeler played a ditty called “My Dickie Bird,” and Mr. Fritz was “not particularly impressed.”

Today Otto Ikeler is barely remembered and his music is little known. He did have a moment in the spotlight, though, when one of his compositions was featured during Bloomsburg’s Bicentennial celebrations. Ikeler’s “Bloomsburg Centennial March and Two-Step,” written for piano and published in 1902, was arranged for concert band by Terry Oxley of

Bloomsburg University, who directed the premiere performance of the piece at the PMEA District 4 High School Band festival in Bloomsburg (January, 2002).

### **Some Ikeler Compositions:**

#### **A. Secular Songs**

- 1901 Eva's Dream
  - McKinley's Funeral March
  - In The Coal-Mines Far Away
- 1902 A Mother's Heart
- 1903 A Mother's Soldier Boy
- 1904 Papa, Won't You Try?
- 1906 Little News Girl
  - Tramp Musician
- 1911 Black Bead (An Indian Fable) Opus 37
  - Red Deer (An Indian Fable) Op. 38
- 1921 Ana Wana (Indian Love-Song) Op. 42
- 1923? Dickie Bird Op. 44, #108
- 1926 Would I Meet My Playmate? Op. 47, #113

#### **B. Piano Pieces**

- 1901 Ferns and Flowers
  - Black Clutch (A Cakewalk)
  - Mooney Coons (A Cakewalk)
- 1902 Bloomsburg Centennial March & Two-Step
- 1907 Heavenly Harps
- 1925? Fawn-Foot Op. 44, #112

#### **C. Church Music**

- 1898 No More Good-Bye
- 1933 Babe of Bethlehem

SOURCES: An obituary for Otto Ikeler in *The Morning Press* (Jan. 14, 1938); the Beers *Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties* (1915), 2: 958; CCH&GS Bound MS 93; Columbia County Deeds 82:296, 86:50, 114: 528-31 and others; Columbia County Wills 12:444 and 17:575; Ava Dennen Hower, *A History of Ikeler Hill* (rev. edn., 2004), 28-32; and U.S. censuses for Greenwood Township and Bloomsburg. Special thanks to Society member Donna Ikeler Laubach (a distant relative of the composer) for the loan of music and the use of photographs, and to member Mark Fritz for the story of Jay Fritz's encounter with Ikeler.

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#### **FOLLOWUP: OTTO P. IKELER**

The ink was not yet dry on last issue's article about local musician/composer Otto P. Ikeler before the Society obtained more of Ikeler's music through a generous donation (our thanks to the donor, Jeanne Hartzell). This was a collection of piano pieces for first- to third-year piano students, published at Boston in 1894 in a handsome thin book bound in blue cloth gold-stamped

with the collection title, **Golden Thoughts**. The book contains 35 short pieces in various dance tempos (waltz, polka, schottische, etc.), each with proper fingering indicated. The frontispiece includes the portrait and signature of Otto Ikeler.

This collection was published when Otto was only twenty-two years old; the book was set out in an expensive format by a well-known Boston music publisher. Probably the pieces, or some of them, were composed for course requirements while Otto was studying at the Conservatory in Boston. The music is lively and, given its purpose for early piano instruction, surprisingly listenable and entertaining. In any case, the book represents a signal achievement for a young man from rural Pennsylvania. It is an indication of Otto's early talent and energy as a musician.

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