

# Accordion music makes big comeback, despite musings

BY PAT MURPHY  
STAFF WRITER

If ever a musical instrument could be the butt of a joke, it would be the accordion.

In a recent Sunday edition of The Chicago Tribune, a cartoon featured an accordion player surrounded by flames with the caption, "Everybody in Hell plays the accordion."

"I think I saw that cartoon," said Troy resident Linda Czerniak, who plays the accordion as well as the piano. "I've seen a lot of accordion jokes. Some are kind of cute. Others aren't so funny."

Ken Peterson of Clarkston has heard them too. "I take them in stride," he said. "And I know a few: What do you call an accordion player with a pager? An optimist."

Art Peruchietti of Farmington Hills also has heard accordion jokes. For the most part, he said, they're harmless. "But some are demeaning," said the retired purchasing agent for the Ford Motor Co.

For the most part, Czerniak, Peterson and Peruchietti pay little, if any, attention to the jokes. They're too busy enjoying — and promoting — accordion music.

They're part of the Michigan Accordion Society which has more than 125 members in the metro area. They gather once a month, usually in Rochester Hills, to share their passion for the instrument.

At the December meeting, for example, the 60 or so members spent an hour tending to business matters, like hosting Russian virtuoso Alexander Dimitriev, whose world tour will include a stop in Oakland County.

But they also took some time to just listen, as members — professional and otherwise —

played their favorite songs, and not the "Beer Barrel Polka" or "Lady of Spain."

After a generation of near obscurity, accordion music is definitely back, according to Peter Soave, vice president of the society and, incidentally, holder of several gold medals for international competition and, according to some, possibly the world's best accordion player.

"When rock and roll came into vogue, it wasn't hip to show your ethnic roots," said Soave, who last month toured part of France playing the concert accordion. "But that's changing, and accordion music is making a big comeback."

Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel and Barry Manilow include accordions in their repertoires and the music has turned up in movies like "Lone Star" and "Tin Cup."

"Big-name musicians help, but even without them the accordion has an intrinsic quality that puts it in a class by itself, according to Jerry Grijak, a member of the society who is also a senior vice president at Smith Barney in Troy.

"It's happy music," he said, the kind of music that makes people smile and tap their feet. As for any jokes, Grijak pays little heed. "I take them with a grain of salt."

The accordion society doesn't worry about the music somebody else might not like. Its members just enjoy the diverse music that can be traced through so many ethnic backgrounds.

The accordion has always been popular in most western countries, according to Steve Stolaruk, president of the society as well as Star-Batt, Inc., in Rochester Hills. His personal favorite is "Pearls of Crystal,"

which is popular around the world.

"The accordion brings back so many memories," said Ken Peterson, who spent 34 years with the Internal Revenue Service before retiring. "I grew up in a Finnish area of Michigan, and that was the musical instrument."

Vicki Robasin of Troy remembers growing up with accordion music. "My dad, Gus Zoppi, was born and raised in a small Italian town called Castelfidardo," she said. "He looked on the accordion like we look on the automobile, a source of pleasure and income."

Gus Zoppi is now deceased, but Robasin and her husband Richard still operate a music store in Sterling Heights bearing his name. She too has noticed a resurgence interest in the accordion.

"It's not like the 1950s," she said, "when my father might have 60 students learning the accordion. But people are definitely taking another look at accordions."

One indication of that renewed interest, according to Linda Czerniak, is the access to information about accordions — and accordion players — on the Internet. "We (the Michigan society) can be in touch with accordions players in Texas, Louisiana and other parts of the world," she said.

The state society has its own website address at: <http://members.aol.com/LindaCzk>.

One perplexing problem for Czerniak, Robasin and others in the society is the apparent lack of interest in accordions by the younger generation. It's a nagging concern, they acknowledge, because no resurgence can be that deep if younger people

aren't involved.

Czerniak's son Jeff, for example, plays the piano. But he has little, if any, interest in the accordion.

"I've got too many other things going," said the Athens High School freshman. "One of those interests is computers. Jeff designed the webpage for the society's website."

Robasin said the lack of interest on the part of young people may be linked to the Lawrence Welk era when his bubbly champagne music charmed older generations, but possibly turned off their kids and grandkids.

"That's definitely a problem," said Robasin, for whom the concern hits home. Her three daughters enjoy music, especially the piano and the flute. But only one plays the accordion, she said.

"Maybe it's because they've seen me play the piano more than the accordion," Robasin said.

Rinaldo DiCesne, who plays professionally at Bristonis in Auburn Hills, believes the accordion's versatility assures it a permanent place in the music world. Depending on the type, as well as the skill level — accordions can sound like a piano, a banjo or even a bagpipe, he said.

Like others in the accordion society, DiCesne is encouraged about the resurgence in popularity. "But as far as I'm concerned," he said, "accordions have always been wonderful."

Persons interested in contacting the Michigan Accordion Society can call Steve Stolaruk at Star-Batt, Inc., (810) 853-1500.



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMEYER

Accordion aspirations: Rochester resident Al Duz was one of three accordion players who performed during the monthly Michigan Accordion Society meeting recently held in Rochester Hills. The 125-member group meets to discuss business and listen to tunes.

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