Bronisław Mirski - *Polish Music* *Director*

of the Silent Film Era¹

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ABSTRACT

Bronisław Mirski (b. 1887 as Moszkowicz in Żyrardów near Warsaw, Poland – d. 1927 in El Paso, Texas) belongs to the substantial group of Polish émigré artists of Jewish origin. A violinist and conductor educated in Europe, he permanently settled in the United States at the end of 1914 under the name of Nek Mirsky and soon began working as a music director in movie theatres. He was in charge of the musical settings for elaborate artistic programmes composed of silent films as well as music and stage attractions. His first widely acclaimed shows were presented at the Metropolitan Theatre of Harry M. Crandall's chain in Washington, D.C. Based primarily on the American press of 1921-23, this article discusses Mirski's work methods and his involvement in improving the quality of live musical accompaniment for silent films. The work that he continued till the end of his life places him among the foremost musicians of the silent film era.

Key words: American cinema, silent film, film music, photoplay music, Bronisław Mirski, Nek Mirsky

The very different fates of Polish émigré musicians can well be illustrated by the example of Bronisław Mirski (birth name Moszkowicz), known overseas as Nek (Nicholas, Nick) Mirsky, though his family called him Bronek till the end of his life². Born on 21 September 1887 in Żyrardów into a family of Polonised Jews, he spent his youth mainly in Warsaw, where he took up music and law studies, interrupted by compulsory military service. The reasons for his emigration were mainly political. He left Europe for good in December 1914, while the Great War was already underway. He had deserted from the army and reached New York on board of a British transatlantic vessel as head of the ship's orchestra. Like most persons fleeing the war and the deepening crisis in Europe, Mirski was looking for better living conditions and hoping to find a satisfying job as a musician³. Among his contemporaries, Poles of Jewish descent who also settled in the US (though a bit later), were violinist Paweł Kochoński and pianist Arthur Rubinstein.

² His assumed American name Nek probably comes from the diminutive of his Polish first name Bro-Nek, while Nicholas and Nick are the English versions of his middle name – Mikołaj. On deserting the Russian army in Odessa, Bronek came into possession of documents in the name of Mirski (Мирски), which he assumed upon his arrival in America.

³ For more on the emigration of Polish composers to the United States, cf. M. Trochimczyk, 'Exiles or Emigrants. Polish Composers in America', in A. Mazurkiewicz (ed.), *East Central Europe in Exile Volume 1: Transatlantic Migrations*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, pp. 93–125.

Despite the hard beginnings in a foreign country on another continent, Mirski soon assimilated to the US society, learned the language, married an American, and after six years – obtained a citizenship. In a relatively short time, he also attained a stable professional status. As music director of movie theatres throughout the country, he was in charge of the musical settings for elaborate artistic programmes made up of silent films accompanied by live music as well as other stage attractions. This position, which Mirski held till the end of his life, involved working as a violinist and conductor, as well as arranger and composer. In his last years he was associated with Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, which was later transformed into today's Paramount Pictures, and was gaining monopoly in the market at that time. A chronic throat and lung disease, finally diagnosed as tuberculosis, led to Mirski's premature death in 1927. Aged less than 40, he passed away several months before the premiere of Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer*, which proved a breakthrough in the history of talking pictures.

Mirski is the only known Polish émigré musician who pursued a professional career in the silent film industry. Though in the US press he presented himself as a pupil of Ignacy Jan Paderewski (already residing in that country), and claimed he had learned the violin from the highly regarded Czech teacher Otakar Ševčík, he never made much success as a soloist. Mirski originally gave performances as a chamber musician, leader of a salon ensemble called Salon Orchestra Polonia, and earned some money as a violin teacher. However, he eventually found his proper place as a conductor of movie theatre orchestras. His professional activity coincides with the heyday of the silent film industry in the United States. Between 1915 and 1927, the movie theatre won an independent status as an institution, technology made it possible to shoot feature-length films, the system of movie stardom was born, and Hollywood earned the renown which it still enjoys today. Though the 1930s and 40s are referred to as 'the Golden Age of Hollywood', the golden age of silent movies had preceded it in the 1920s.

MIRSKI AS MUSIC DIRECTOR OF MOVIE THEATRES

Music nowadays is 40% of the performance when your picture is good, but it is fully 90% when the picture is poor. The above, however, does not apply to just any music. Pictures require music of their own, and that's where I come in. Comprehension of dramatic

values and climaxes, long experience, enormous orchestral library, enable me to portray musically every conceivable atmosphere, every mood, every human emotion, as depicted on the screen. It is my ambition to do this successfully and to translate it eventually into dollars and cents at the box office window⁴.

This is how Bronisław Mirski advertised his skills in *The Billboard* in 1921, when he was looking for a position as music director of movie theatres. From the very start, he showed great care for the appropriate selection of music and its strict synchronisation with the image. He was a regular music column reader, member of music societies, liked to give interviews, and sometimes published his own texts. The successive stages of his career in the USA are well documented in the trade press, which presented him as a pioneer of the movement for better-quality film music. Every time he changed his job and moved to another city which looked for a music director with such skills and experience as he represented, local critics extolled his musical achievements.

In addition to his executive talents, Mirsky has an admirable gift for interpretation. His beat is crisp and incisive, his control over his players absolute. When he steps [sic!] from the podium and handed his baton to an associate, the same high quality of playing continued⁵.

Most movie theatres that he worked for changed their programme every week, and regular shows alternated with so-called *De Luxe* ones, which included additional stage, film and music attractions. Mirski supervised the entire programme and took decisions with regard to set designs and lighting. He was responsible not only for preparing music for feature-length films, but also for selecting the concert overture, editing and musically illustrating the newsreel, compiling or delegating the task of compiling music for comedies and other short films, inviting guest artists and planning their performances in the interludes, as well as consulting the repertoire with the local organist.

The feature film was at the core of each programme, and largely defined its shape and structure. Press articles and advertisements have made it possible to identify more than 230 films for which Mirski compiled music over the dozen or so years of his work. Approximately 108 of them have been preserved to our times (in parts or as a whole); as many as 122 have been lost without a trace. The majority were US productions, documented in detail in a database resulting from a report on the state

of preservation of American silent feature movies made in 1912-1929⁶. Mirski prepared music for films by such directors as David Wark Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, King Vidor, Victor Fleming, Frank Borzage, Charles Chaplin, and Ernst Lubitsch. Many of them later successfully continued their careers as directors of sound films, winning multiple Academy Awards, popularly known as the Oscars. Seven of the identified titles are foreign movies imported from Europe: German productions featuring Pola Negri (mostly directed by Lubitsch), another German film by Dimitri Buchowetzki (starring Emil Jannings), and two British movies.

Mirski knew the silent films created by the above-listed directors nearly by heart. He selected suitable music to accompany them, scene after scene, sequence after sequence. He then conducted the thus formed compilations for seven successive days, up to several times a day. The immense effort required from a movie theatre music director is almost unimaginable. Each theatre orchestra had different performing forces, a somewhat different collection of music, and catered for different audience tastes. This makes it even harder to accept that so little of Mirski's work and its effects survives nowadays. The press very rarely commented on the music accompanying the films. Adverts for the movie theatres mostly promoted the films by printing the names of well-known filmmakers and actors, a short summary of the plot, the overture composer's name and title, as well as brief information concerning other elements of the programme (titles of the comedies and other shorts, names of guest artists, etc.). Film announcements and reviews sometimes mention the existence of a "special music score" arranged by the conductor, but we do not know what compositions it was made up of. Mirski himself explained:

Features are comparatively simple with the stories running true to certain rules, with star types, with synopsis, continuity sheet, music cue sheet, etc., available beforehand⁷.

While compiling music for specific movies, Mirski certainly made use of the officially published cue sheets, which indicated what pieces of music could be used as accompaniment for the given film fragment. They listed the title, composer, publisher, date of publication,

⁴ N. Mirsky, 'Wishes Position as Musical Director in a Moving Picture Theatre', *The Billboard*, 12 March 1921, p. 51.

⁵ M.J. Rosenfield Jr., 'After the Show: Mirsky', *Dallas Morning News*, 26 July 1925, p. 7 (2).

⁶ American Silent Feature Film Database from the report 'The Survival of American Silent Feature Films: 1912-1929', <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ahas/html/silentfilms/silentfilms-home.html> (accessed 1 December 2020).

⁷ N. Mirsky, 'How Music Helps Presentation of Pictures', *Exhibitor's Trade Review*, 28 February 1925, pp. 14-15.

duration of the fragment, as well as (though not always) – a few opening bars of the melody. Whenever such a cue sheet called for the use of works which could not be found in the local movie theatre's library, it was the music director's task to replace them with other suitable compositions. Such cues, however, were not available for every film, and they did not always reach the cinema on time. Mirski commented on this in his own text printed in 1919, when he was head of the Avenue Theater's amateur orchestra in DuBois.

For the last three days we played *Salome* with Theda Bara. On the screen we have "Musical Score by M. Rubinstein," but since I did not get the score, I had to make the setting myself⁸.

Further on Mirski discussed in detail his strategy of preparing musical settings for films, and explained his choice of strongly dramatic, Oriental-style music in the minor keys to match Bara's film version of the tragic Biblical tale of *Salome*, granddaughter of Herod the Great. He decided to use works by such composers as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Semyon Barmotin, Edvard Grieg, Arthur Rubinstein, Jean-Jacques Goldman, and Léo Delibes. For the passionate and diabolical final scene, he selected *The Scotch Poem* by Edward MacDowell. The version of the piece published in 1916 by Ross Jungnickel in New York has been preserved in Bronek's private music collection, which is the key source for the study of the music he incorporated into his settings.

The collection of music prints kept at the University of Pittsburgh and known as the 'Mirsky Collection' comprises c. 3,500 pieces of music which made up the conductor's private music library⁹. These include both the overtures he conducted as part of movie theatre programmes and the works to be selected for compilations employed as musical settings for short and feature-length films. The works are grouped in the original catalogue by genre or category, such as marches and two steps, foxtrots, waltzes, overtures, suites, song medleys, excerpts from musicals, operas and ballets, pieces specially written for films (called 'photoplay music'), incidental music, as well as standard classical repertoire arranged for a salon orchestra. Various notes found in different prints from the collection make it possible to analyse

the ways in which Mirski organised the music material accompanying the movies. His approach was very pragmatic, based on detailed calculations concerning synchronisation of image and music, but it also resulted from sound knowledge of viewer psychology, as evident from his statement made in 1923:

"At the beginning of motion pictures the theatrical managers realized that it was necessary to kill the silence," said Mr. Mirsky. "They introduced music and believed that the pleasant sounds would help the patrons to enjoy the program. Now my idea is just the opposite. I believe that to have the audience enjoy the picture they should be made unconscious that there is any music there."¹⁰

Such an approach called for music so well suited to the film that it would form an 'inaudible' layer, allowing the audience to focus on the plot¹¹. Mirski furthermore claimed that:

Catering to the ear must have lines drawn where it would interfere with the picture, which MUST be first at all times. And it works, since the human being cannot use any of his two senses together. That is he can look and listen at the same time, but he cannot see and hear. Once you become engrossed in the picture you hear only subconsciously. Once you begin to 'listen,' you still 'look,' but you don't 'see.' Try it out on your loud speaker¹².

With a library of standard illustrative music at hand, Mirski was able to organise his film scores in ways which matched the tastes of the spectators. One of his main observations concerned the audience's musical preferences:

The average movie audience like variety. But it must be always tunes. Be it dramatic, or tragic, light or heavy, classic or jazz – it must be melodious to untrained ear¹³.

Though Mirski was not as well known as some other conductors of the silent film era, especially those associated with New York, he scored considerable successes on the local level. He gained his experience in small cities and towns where professional musicians were in short supply. Despite this, the effects of his work earned him praise in the press. At Toledo's Hippodrome he played in a trio with a cello and piano; at Punxsutawney's

⁸ 'Meeting Musician Mirsky of DuBois, Pennsylvania', *Motion Picture News*, 12 July 1919, p. 585.

⁹ For a detailed description of the collection, see: C.E. Peña, 'Photoplay Music from the Mirsky Collection at the University of Pittsburgh', *Notes*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2014, pp. 398–412.

¹⁰ 'Making Music for the Movies', *Boston Globe*, 25 November 1923, p. 51.

¹¹ The concept of the 'inaudibility' of film music is strongly present in film studies and psychology studies on film music. For example, see: C. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, London, British Film Institute, 1987.

¹² Mirsky, 'How Music Helps...', p. 14.

¹³ Mirsky, p. 14.

Jefferson, the Avenue theatre in DuBois, and Broadway in Richmond, he directed orchestras mostly made up of amateur musicians. He owed his first 'serious' position to his participation in the First National Conference of the Association of Motion Picture and Musical Interest held in January 1921 in New York¹⁴, where he had the opportunity to meet the industry's most important figures, including S.M. Berg (the then editor of the music section in *Exhibitor's Herald*), Ernst Luz (representing Marcus Loew Circuit), G. Schirmer (president of New York's G. Schirmer, Inc.), Max Winkler (president of New York's Belwin, Inc.), Hugo Riesenfeld (conductor of the Rivoli, Rialto and Criterion theatres in New York), Samuel 'Roxy' Rothafel (head of the Capitol theatre in New York), and Ernő Rapée (conductor in the same theatre)¹⁵. Another of this conference's participants, Harry Milton Crandall, owner of Washington's popular movie theatre chain, was soon to become Mirski's employer. It was in the US capital that Nek had the chance to spread his wings as a conductor and music director, and this strengthened his conviction that he had been made for this profession.

MIRSKI'S WORK AT CRANDALL THEATRES IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mirski spent the years 1921-23 in the capital of the United States, already as a rightful US citizen¹⁶. In May 1921 he took up the post of music director at the Knickerbocker Theatre, which belonged to Harry Crandall's chain. This was the city's largest and most modern movie theatre, designed by young Reginald W. Geare in the Neoclassical style. Situated outside the business district, it opened in October 1917 and seated 1700 people¹⁷. At that theatre, Nek directed a

Figure 1. N. Mirskey's portrait. 'Orchestra Leaders in Motion Picture Theaters', *The Sunday Star*, Washington, D.C., 10 June 1923, p. 5 (3)

35-piece orchestra, enlarged on his arrival. He soon won recognition and acclaim in the local press. Apart from conducting, his duties as music director included also compiling the scores for each film, which was quite a challenge, considering the fact that the programme changed every two days. As early as June 1921, *The Washington Post* announced:

Last week's trade journals, devoted to the interests of motion picture makers and exhibitors, carried glowing tributes to the skill of Bronisław N. Mirskey, new musical director at Crandall's Knickerbocker theater, who works under the severe strain of having to score four pictures a week as opposed to the one which constitutes the problem of the director in a house where a single feature runs for a week or more. Mr. Mirskey previews every film screened at the Knickerbocker and devises his own orchestral setting¹⁸.

Mirski coped so well in his new post that after three months (as of 1 August 1921) he was promoted to the position of music director in Harry Crandall's most important Washington venue, the Metropolitan Theatre, situated in the very centre of the business district and a frequent venue for the Washington premieres of new

¹⁴ I.M. McHenry, 'The American Concert Field: First National Conference', *The Billboard*, 5 February 1921, pp. 24–25.

¹⁵ The full list of members who signed up for the association during the conference was published in the *Motion Picture News* magazine. 'Members of the Association of Motion Pictures and Musical Interest', *Motion Picture News*, 19 February 1921, p. 1502.

¹⁶ Bronisław N. Mirskey received his US citizenship on 7 July 1921 in Clearfield, PA.

¹⁷ More about Knickerbocker Theatre's history: K. Boese, 'Lost Washington: The Knickerbocker Theater', *Washington Kaleidoscope: past, present, and culture*, [website], 7 July 2009, <https://dckaleidoscope.wordpress.com/2009/07/07/lost-washington-the-knickerbocker-theater/> (accessed 1 December 2020).

¹⁸ *The Washington Post*, 26 June 1921, p. 47.

films¹⁹. This three-storey edifice, boasting a Neo-Georgian façade and elegant classical décor, was likewise designed by Reginald W. Geare, had 1400 seats, and had opened in 1917. It was at that theatre that the Washington premiere of the already mentioned *Jazz Singer* was held ten years later, marking the end of the silent film era. The Metropolitan was thoroughly overhauled several times in its history before it disappeared from the cityscape for good in 1968²⁰.

Mirski oversaw the complete musical setting of each programme, later presented in a similar form in six other theatres of Crandall's chain. The show invariably started with an orchestral overture, and included, in varying combinations, solo and chamber music numbers (such as preludes, interludes, and operatic prologues to films), as well as comedies and other short films (mostly dedicated to landscapes and nature), newsreels and other news services (such as Pathé News, Topics of the Day, Metropolitan World Survey, Literary Digest's "Fun from the Press"), and the feature film as its main element. From press adverts we learn that the orchestra usually performed the overture, as well as the feature film and newsreel live accompaniment, while the comedies received a jazz setting normally played by a duo consisting of the local organist and pianist. The other elements of the programme were performed by soloists and chamber ensembles.

Mirski's music programmes enjoyed great audience acclaim, and frequently earned him standing ovation²¹. Demand was so high that he agreed to play three overtures a day, thus increasing the number of *De Luxe* shows from two to three²². Mirski had tremendous intuition with regard to selecting the music to be synchronised with the film image. He aptly selected, compiled and

arranged excerpts from operas, musicals, and suites, as well as the then popular jazz and traditional melodies. *The Washington Post* commented:

With the development of the motion picture, Mr. Mirsky displayed a remarkable gift of synchronization. His scores at the Metropolitan have been models of perfect timing of the orchestral number to the pictured scene²³.

The music that accompanied the films had a profound impact on their reception. High standards of the music programmes translated into booking office success. Other movie theatre owners therefore followed Harry Crandall's example and began to invest in well-educated musicians:

All, or nearly all, the leading photoplay houses have engaged conductors of ability, and some claim to have excelled the others in their musical programs, for in addition to the musical accompaniment, innovations have brought instrumental and vocal solos of high order. [...] Crandall's Metropolitan has evinced his faith in its fine musical aggregation to the extent of specially advertising the merits of its conductor and solo players. Under N. Mirsky, its conductor, it is claimed the Metropolitan orchestra has attained the dignity of a symphony organization. Mr. Mirsky is said to be a graduate of the Warsaw Conservatory and to have had wide experience both as a soloist and as conductor of symphony orchestras, with special talent for synchronising his musical arrangements to time with the action of the picture for which they are played²⁴.

Apart from Mirski himself, the press also praised the 30-strong orchestra he conducted, which consisted of excellent soloists. The orchestra's reputation owed much to Harry Crandall's extensive publicity campaign. In *The Washington Times* and other local dailies he regularly printed materials dedicated to this ensemble:

Washington's Finest Orchestra is the appraisal placed by the music-loving public of the Capital upon the newly organized Symphony Orchestra of thirty solo artists at Crandall's Metropolitan Theater. In individual and ensemble finish and genuine musicianship this splendid organization stands supreme. Rich in instrumentation, including in its playing personnel honor graduates of the foremost conservatories of Europe as well as America, this versatile and highly artistic orchestra, under the leadership of a Bachelor of Music of the Warsaw Conservatory (Poland), daily offers overtures, solo numbers and musical interpretation of pictured drama not approached in quality by any organization in Washington, other than the Metropolitan Symphony, N. Mirsky, Conductor²⁵.

19 'Many Film Attractions in Washington Theaters', *The Washington Post*, 1 August 1921, p. 12.

20 More about Metropolitan Theatre's history: K. Boese, 'Lost Washington: The Metropolitan', *Washington Kaleidoscope: past, present, and culture*, [website], 4 June 2009, <https://dckaleidoscope.wordpress.com/2009/06/04/lost-washington-the-metropolitan/> (accessed 1 December 2020).

21 'Ovation for Mirsky', *The Washington Herald*, 18 September 1921, p. 23 (4).

22 "So persistent has become the demand that N. Mirsky, conductor of the symphony orchestra at Crandall's Metropolitan Theater, finally has been forced to accede to the view that the house policy of two overtures a day should be changed to three. The concert overtures are played at 2:45, 7:30 and 9:30 p.m., daily except Sunday, when the first rendition is at 3 [...]" *The Washington Post*, 14 August 1921, p. 2.

23 'Many Soloists at Metropolitan Orchestra', *The Washington Post*, 11 September 1921, p. 2.

24 'Amusement: The Theater', *The Sunday Star, Washington, D.C.*, 18 September 1921, p. 1 (3).

25 *The Washington Times*, 11 September 1921, p. 16.

The newly organized Symphony Orchestra at Crandall's Metropolitan, N. Mirskey, conductor.

Figure 2. The newly organized Symphony Orchestra at Crandall's Metropolitan, N. Mirskey, conductor. 'Many Soloists at Metropolitan Orchestra', *The Washington Post*, 11 September 1921, p. 2

Crandall's press adverts for his movie theatre orchestra constituted a precedent, commented on by an editor of the *Variety* weekly, among others:

Harry Crandall, owner of the Metropolitan and other picture houses here, is heavily featuring his symphony orchestra at the Metropolitan in all advertising matter. The musical critics review their program in the musical sections weekly. Mr. Crandall runs two display ads on Sunday, a large one for his orchestra and a much smaller one for the picture attraction²⁶.

Several talented musicians played in the orchestra under Mirski's tenure²⁷. The posts of concertmaster and deputy conductor were held by Alexander Podnos, graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, and later by Samson Noble, previously associated with New York's Rivoli and Rialto theatres, whose music director was Hugo Riesenfeld. George E. Benedict, deputy concertmaster, was "a violinist of perfect technic, splendid tone and thorough schooling in the foremost European schools of composition". Violist Joseph Rosner also held the position of the orchestra's librarian. Cellist Tino V. Mens had graduated from the Conservatorium der Musik in Leipzig. H. Denham, principal double-bassist, "was a player with a wonderful ability to produce pure organ tones (sic!)" Flutist V. de Militia had completed his studies at the Naples Conservatory of Music. Principal clarinetist N. Li Calzi was "recognised as one of the

most gifted artists in the country on his instrument", while his worthy deputy was T. Di. Prospero, 2nd clarinet. Oboist Emil Spitzer was a Vienna Conservatory graduate. Bassoonist A. Machner "had wide experience with the country's foremost symphonies".

Particularly abounding in talented musicians was the brass section: principal horn Ph. Corino, principal trumpet S. Li Calzi, and trombonist V. Squeo. According to a reviewer of *The Washington Times*, "[t]he incidental solo work of this trio of artists has had a pronounced influence upon the rapidity with which the Metropolitan Symphony has risen to its present position of pre-eminence among the Capital's musical organisations." The percussionist was J.W. Jehlem, "rated among the few drummers and tympanists in the country who are equally skillful in the playing of intricate scores and improvising effects to enliven the popular quick-steps". Harpist Viola Taubert Abrams, graduate of the New York College of Music, frequently played solos. She had previously performed as a soloist in the Russian Symphony Orchestra of New York under Modest Altschuler. The post of pianist was occupied at first by Carl Hinnant, who was later replaced by Ernest Harrison, graduate of Lincoln University School of Music, previously for several seasons – an accompanist to violinist Elias Breeskin. Organist Milton Davis was a master of the three-manual instrument.

After two years of work with this orchestra, in late February 1923, Mirski demanded that the piano be removed and 1st and 2nd violins as well as violas reinforced, so that the orchestra could produce a properly rich orchestral sound which the piano was not quite

²⁶ H. Meakin, 'Washington', *Variety*, 23 September 1921, p. 41.

²⁷ The quotes about the musicians in the following two paragraphs come from the article: 'Orchestra is Composed of Music Masters', *The Washington Times*, 18 September 1921, p. 7.

capable of imitating²⁸. *The Washington Times* made these interesting observations concerning the ensemble's manner of playing:

Few laymen stop to consider that an orchestra is assembled to create, through the medium of melody and harmonics, the same effects that are achieved by actors on the stage or upon the screen. In the string basses and among the bass woodwinds are the tragedians, the deep-toned enunciators of all that is sinister and tragic; the first clarinet is known among all schooled orchestra men as "the prima donna of the orchestra;" the bassoon, as "the comedian," and so on. It is in the skillful selection and balance of these choirs that the conductor finds his most difficult task²⁹.

Mirski first led the 30-piece Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra on 31 July 1921, starting the programme with Vincenzo Bellini's overture to *Norma*. The highlight of the day was Wesley Ruggles' film *Over the Wire* (1921), unfortunately not preserved to our day. The audience were also able to watch Larry Semon's comedy *The Bakery*, a newsreel by the French company Pathé News, a set of news based on the influential US weekly *Literary Digest*, as well as *Topics of the Day*.

The overture was, musically speaking, one of the main elements of each programme. It opened the show and introduced the appropriate atmosphere. The concert overtures performed by the Metropolitan's orchestra included actual opera and operetta overtures, but also excerpts from musicals, suites, popular songs and traditional tunes, frequently in Mirski's own arrangements. For instance, the overture to *Polly of the Follies* (1922), starring Norma Talmadge, was titled *Metropolitan Echoes* by Mirski, and comprised arrangements of the then most fashionable songs, ballads and dances, such as, among others, *Good Times*, *Say it with Music*, *Dardanella*, *End of a Perfect Day*, *Swanee River Moon*, *Yoo-hoo*, *Kalua*, *Little Grey Home*, *Blue Danube Blues*, *Blue Law Blues*, *My Man*, and *Auld Lang Syne*. Another movie starring the same actress, *The Eternal Flame* (1922) directed by Frank Lloyd, was accompanied by Mirski's compilation of pieces by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Joseph Haydn, Léo Delibes, Henry Hadley, Richard Wagner, Luigi Boccherini, and others.

Most popular among the overtures conducted by Mirski at the Metropolitan Theatre was Mayhew M. Lake's *The Evolution of Dixie* (performed in four different programmes), Charles J. Roberts' *Old Folks at Home and in Foreign Lands* and Victor Herbert's *Sweethearts*

(both used thrice), Lucius Hosmer's *Northern Rhapsody* and *Southern Rhapsody*, Ambroise Thomas's *Raymond*, Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, Jacques Offenbach's *Orpheus*, and Gioacchino Rossini's *William Tell* (all used twice). The remaining overtures were usually presented to the audience once only, which guaranteed the freshness and attractiveness of the repertoire. Some performances (for instance, of Franz von Suppe's *Poet and Peasant* and Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*) were accompanied by specially designed light effects, confirmed by notes in the surviving music scores.

Such effects may also have accompanied the numbers played by soloists and chamber ensembles, which performed not exclusively on the stage, but also from other spots in the theatre, thus introducing interesting spatial effects. For instance, on 2 October 1921 Mirski made his Washington debut as a soloist³⁰, playing an arrangement of Stanisław Silesu's *Un peu d'Amour – A Little Love, A Little Kiss* for a quartet comprising Nek Mirskey (violin), Viola Taubert Abrams (harp), Tino Mens (cello), and V. De Millita (flute). The composition opened with a flute solo, followed by the solo violin leading the melody with a subtle harp and cello accompaniment. The first trio was performed on one side of the proscenium and accompanied by special light effects, while the second section featured a surprise, since Mirski played it standing in an acoustically well-suited spot in the theatre's circle³¹. This arrangement was specially prepared as an introduction to the lost comedy *Dangerous Curve Ahead* (1921). The entire show commenced with Jacques Offenbach's *Orpheus* overture, featuring solos by clarinetist Li Calzi, cellist Tino Menz, oboist Emil Spitzer, and violinist Alexander Podnos. Another attraction of that evening was the short comedy *I Do* starring Harold Lloyd, accompanied in jazz style by a duo called The Monarchs of Melodious Jazz, consisting of Milton Davis (three-manual pipe organ) and Carl Hinnant (piano). This was the first arrangement of this kind presented at the Metropolitan theatre, and it was greeted very favourably by the audience³².

Of key significance to many of the programmes was the specially prepared film prologue, usually operatic in character. For instance, tenor Alfredo Gonzales Padin

²⁸ 'Filmograms', *The Sunday Star*, Washington, D.C., 25 February 1923, p. 3.

²⁹ 'Orchestra is Composed of...', p. 7.

³⁰ 'Music in Movies: Conductor-Soloist at "Metropolitan"', *The Washington Times*, 2 October 1921, p. 33.

³¹ 'Metropolitan – "Dangerous Curve Ahead"', *The Washington Times*, 3 October 1921, p. 12.

³² 'An Organ Innovation', *The Washington Post*, 2 October 1921, p. 2.

re-enacted the opening scene of the movie *Serenade* (1921) in his operatic prologue titled *Spanish Serenade*. Eight actors-singers featured in the prologue to *Oliver Twist* (1922, starring Jackie Coogan in the title role), whereas mezzo-soprano Flora McGill Keefer sang *Little Grey Home in the West* as a prelude to *The Old Nest* (1921), and baritone Fred East performed *The Sunshine of Your Smile* by way of an atmospheric introduction to the movie *Scrap Iron* (1921). Another point of interest was 10-year-old violinist Milton Schwartz's³³ appearance in the purely instrumental interlude for *My Boy* (1921) featuring child star Jackie Coogan. The interlude included *Liebesfreud* (the first of Fritz Kreisler's *Old Viennese Dances*) and František Drdla's *Souvenir*.

During the less than two years of his employment at the Metropolitan theatre, Mirski compiled musical settings for 81 films, which in each case were the highlights of the programme. These included as many as three German films starring Pola Negri, increasingly popular in the United States. *Gypsy Blood* (*Carmen*, 1918), a film drama based on Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen*, was preceded by excerpts from Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*, an atmospheric prelude composed of Gypsy melodies, interpreted by violinist Alexander Podnos, pianist Ernest Harrison, and the symphony orchestra. The film *One Arabian Night* (*Sumurun*, 1920), based on Friedrich Freksa's pantomime *Sumurun*, was introduced by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral suite *Scheherazade*, and the operatic prologue *Arabian Nights*, drawing on the *One Thousand and One Nights*, performed by baritone Joseph Mondell, soprano May Fox, and tenor Herbert Allen. The now lost *Vendetta* (1919) was accompanied by the overture to Antônio Carlos Gomes' opera *Il Guarany*.

Of the US film productions presented at the Metropolitan in that period, 37 survive to our day, while 41 titles are considered lost. The period press only provides some few fragmentary clues as to the

³³ Milton Schwartz (1909-2003) was a violinist with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington from 1930 to 1981. Early in his career, he served as concertmaster of an orchestra that provided accompaniment to silent films at the Earle Theatre in Washington, D.C. For more information, see: E. Robinson, 'The Humble Beginnings of the National Symphony Orchestra', *Boundary Stones*, [website], 25 September 2017, <https://blogs.weta.org/boundarystones/2017/09/25/humble-beginnings-national-symphony-orchestra> (accessed 1 December 2020); T. Page, 'Violinist Milton Schwartz, the NSO's First String', *The Washington Post*, 6 February 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2003/02/06/violinist-milton-schwartz-the-nsos-first-string/9a5f54f4-fd19-4865-b3eb-dc54f472232b/> (accessed 1 December 2020).

Figure 3. Metropolitan Theatre Advertisement. *The Sunday Star*, Washington, D.C., 14 August 1921, p. 2

music that accompanied those films. For instance, the accompaniment for the 1921 drama based on the 1908 Broadway production *Salvation Nell* consisted of thematically related melodies selected by Mirski, such as, among others, *The Rosary*, the prelude to Wagner's *Lohengrin*, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, and *Lead, Kindly Light*—that last one sung by the soprano from backstage. The same programme also included the harpist Viola Taubert Abrams' first ever Metropolitan solo (she played Angelo Francis Pinto's *The Soul's Awakening* at the side of the proscenium), while the overture was Charles J. Roberts's *Old Folks at Country and in Foreign Lands*, an arrangement of an original melody by Stephen Collins Foster performed in the style of traditional songs from France, Scotland, Spain, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Hungary.

One of the best documented musical settings was the one which accompanied the two-hour US-Italian historical movie *Nero* (1922), directed by J. Gordon Edwards. Because of its length, the film was the only cinematic element of the programme. It presented three simultaneously unfolding plot lines accompanied by a total of 109 musical numbers, which included: Jules Massenet's *Cleopatra*, selections from Léo Delibes' ballet *La Source* and *March and Procession of Bacchus*, Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*, and Henry Hadley's *Azora*. The scene of the great fire of Rome was accompanied by the overture to Luigi Mancinelli's opera *Cleopatra* and the *Robespierre* overture by Henry Litolf. As accompaniment for the lighter scenes, Mirski chose fragments of Alexander Borodin's opera *Prince Igor* and Félix Fourdrain's lyrical drama *Madame Roland*.

Since Mirski was extremely successful as music director of the Metropolitan Theatre, he planned to settle with his wife in Washington for a longer time. Early in 1922 he wrote in a letter to his mother:

I have a good post here and will probably stay here for a long time, or even settle here for good, since Washington is a delightful city and the US capital. I enclose a press cutting which shows my orchestra in the theatre and the orchestra in which my wife is pounding away on the clavichord. Our company has 7 (seven) theatres in Washington; I conduct in the largest one but I am the music director of all the seven.

Several months ago we bought our own house, which will be completely paid off in 3 to 4 years. We have 7 (seven) rooms, but only three of them are furnished. Even this is too much for us, since I spend all days and evenings in the theatre and have an awful lot of work. I try to drop in to our home for dinner once a week, but I mostly dine in a restaurant since going home and back again is too time-consuming, even though I have my own car and driving home from the theatre takes me just around 15 minutes³⁴.

The couple's plans were thwarted by one of the greatest construction disasters in Washington's history³⁵. In the night of 27/28 January 1922, a record snowfall caused the collapse of the roof of the Knickerbocker Theatre, where Mirski had embarked on his career in the US capital. 133 people were wounded, 99 dead, including Mirski's 26-year-old wife Genevieve, who played the keyboard

instrument during the spectacle held there³⁶. Another casualty was Mirski's successor as conductor at the Knickerbocker, Ernesto Natiello. Nek never remarried and had no children. He suffered a mental, physical and financial breakdown forcing him to take a two-week leave, prolonged due to the renovation of Crandall's theatres³⁷. His first appearance after a nearly month-long break was met with enormous acclaim. *The Washington Post* reported that the performance of Mayhew Lake's overture *The Evolution of Dixie* drew such thunderous applause as no other theatre orchestra had ever received in Washington³⁸. The musicians were called to stand up several times in succession, and Mirski himself received several rose bouquets. He stayed in the US capital for more than a year longer, awaiting the arrival in that country of one of his sisters, Celina. He conducted the orchestra most likely for the last time during the screening of *The Bright Shawl* (1923), shown at the Metropolitan for two weeks starting on 27 April. As of 10 June 1923, he was replaced as the orchestra's conductor by Daniel Breeskin³⁹.

MIRSKI'S FURTHER WORK AND LEGACY

In the autumn Mirski took up a temporary post in New York as a collaborator of Hugo Riesenfeld, music director at the Rivoli, Rialto, and Criterion theatres operated by Famous Players-Lasky Corporation⁴⁰. *Boston Daily Globe* wrote that Mirski caused a sensation in Riesenfeld's theatres due to his original ways of selecting music for films⁴¹. In later year he was sent to conduct in new cinemas taken over by Paramount and transformed into the so-called *De Luxe Theatres*. His main task was to organise and train orchestras whose high standards would match the prestigious status of this new type of institution. He thus worked successively at Boston's Fenway Theatre, the Palace Theatre in Dallas, and the Newman Theatre in

34 Bronisław Mirski's letter to Regina Orzegowska, Washington, D.C., 16 January 1922, Family Archive.

35 For more information, see: K. Ambrose, *The Knickerbocker Snowstorm. Images of America*, Charleston, SC, Arcadia Publishing, 2013; 'Blizzard of 1922: Knickerbocker Theater Disaster', [website], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h62ec3llgno> (accessed 1 December 2020).

36 'Deaths in the Profession', *The Billboard*, 11 February 1922, p. 102.

37 'Mirsky Conducts Again', *The Washington Post*, 19 March 1922, p. 56.

38 'Tribute to Orchestra', *The Washington Post*, 26 March 1922, p. 4.

39 'Music in Washington', *The Sunday Star*, Washington, D.C., 8 July 1923, p. 4.

40 'Musical Director', *The Sunday Herald*, Boston, MA, 18 November 1923, p. 4D.

41 'Music for the Movies', *The Boston Daily Globe*, 25 November 1923, p. 51.

Kansas City. His lung disease got worse every month, and led to a virtually complete loss of voice, which shattered his dreams of permanent employment on the West Coast. The three-month tour as music director of the *Publix Unit Show*, presented in movie theatres operated by Paramount Pictures – Publix Theatres Corporation throughout the United States, proved to be his last professional challenge and a crowning point of his many years' career in Adolf Zukor's Famous Players-Lasky. It was an effort for which he was to pay the highest price. Confined soon afterwards to the Homana sanatorium in El Paso, Texas, he died there on 19 February 1927.

Mirski was a unique figure in that he was one of the few movie theatre orchestra conductors to have left behind a private collection of music prints complete with handwritten performance guidelines⁴². The 'Mirsky Collection' belongs to those invaluable sources which allow us to reconstruct the musical practices from the heyday of the silent film era⁴³. The live music, though in a way separate from the image, laid the foundations for the highly developed audiovisual art forms universally known to us nowadays. The source materials for Mirski's work and life are complemented by the artist's family archive preserved in Poland, which includes his private and official correspondence, documents, press cuttings, handbills, and photographs⁴⁴. All these materials make it possible better to understand and more fully to reconstruct the image of an age which, though it only ended less than a century ago, has extremely quickly fallen into oblivion. The artists active in the silent film period are now dead, but the memory of their achievements may and should live on. This paper gives testimony to that lost world and commemorates a Pole who left his mark in the history of the US film industry.

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⁴³ A comparative analysis of materials from the 'Mirsky Collection' and original cue sheets has enabled the author to reconstruct Mirski's score for the film *A Kiss for Cinderella* (1925) by Herbert Brenon (to be published).

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