

TRIBUTE TO CHESTER Z. BRONSON (1857-1923)

By Charles Conrad, WJU #1525

Little is known of the early life of Chester Zebina Bronson, who was born in Trowbridge Township, MI on March 13, 1857 and went by "C.Z." most of his life. A 1924 article in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* relates that he began his musical studies with his father William Zebina Bronson, who was a flutist with the orchestra of the Boston Theater. He then studied with Eustach Strasser, the principal clarinet of that ensemble and later of the Boston Symphony in the 1880s.

C. Z. Bronson was first employed as a musician at the age of 17 by the Fletcher & Primrose Minstrels of New York, touring with them for a few seasons in the 1870s. It is likely that he was associated with the Al G. Field Minstrels, as his obituary mentions that he joined the New York Elks Lodge with Field.

He relocated to Baltimore to continue his clarinet studies with Charles Warner at the Peabody Institute (now the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University) and played in the orchestra of the Monumental Theater. He returned to New York and was employed in the orchestra of the Eighth Avenue Theater. While in New York, Bronson studied with Mr. Stoeckhe, solo cornetist of the famous Patrick S. Gilmore Band. As he is not known to have played cornet, one assumes that he was studying conducting.

Several sources mention that Bronson played clarinet with the Gilmore Band, and while this would seem to be a logical step in his career, no definitive proof has been located. He played for some time with another famous New York concert band, that of Ellis Brooks, and he was a charter member of the National League of Musicians, a union based in New York. Bronson's earliest known circus experience was as solo clarinetist with James Robinson's band with the 1883 Barnum & London Circus.

Bronson was known in Kalamazoo as a performer by the early 1880s, playing in the Wurzburg Band, an ensemble that also counted among its members trombonist Frank Holton, who would establish one of the most important manufacturing companies of musical instruments. Bronson was also associated with Holton in a blacksmithing shop that the two owned. This band was later renamed Wurzburg & Bronson's Band, and performed at Reed's Lake near Grand Rapids. He likely performed extensively in his home area during the off-season of the touring ensembles, as did most touring musicians of the time.



The first known musical trade journal mention of Bronson was in 1884, when he played clarinet in the Sells Brothers Circus Band under William Merrick. He was listed as a member of the Wallace Circus Band in the June 25, 1892 *New York Clipper*, and he played Eb clarinet in John Philip Sousa's Band during the 1893 season when that ensemble was building its reputation throughout the nation. [Bierley – The Incredible Band of JPS]

The April 1, 1893 *New York Clipper* mentions that he was the assistant conductor of the Great Wallace Circus band, and that he was appointed to lead the ensemble in the temporary absence of William Goetze. It is also known that he traveled with the Savage Opera Company, but no firm dates of that association have been determined.

He spent most of 1894 and 1895 in Kalamazoo, and he is known to have tried to form an orchestra in Kalamazoo as early as 1894. That attempt was unsuccessful, but Bronson would repeat the effort on several occasions and would succeed some three decades later. In 1896 he was leading his own concert band in Kalamazoo, playing at resorts and private engagements in the local area.

Bronson joined the Great Wallace Circus for the 1897 season as solo clarinet, leader of the second parade band, and assistant director to William F. Goetze. When Goetze died suddenly in November, Bronson became the bandmaster for the last few weeks of the season. He returned in 1898 and stayed with the show through the 1905 season. His 1899 Great Wallace Show Band was a 22-piece ensemble with an instrumentation of flute, Eb clarinet, 4 Bb clarinets, alto clarinet (the only appearance found of this instrument in a circus band), saxophone, 2 french horns, 3 cornets, 3 trombones, 2 baritones, 2 tubas, and 2 drummers.

Several noteworthy musicians were members of the 1897 Great Wallace band, including euphonium soloist Charles Sanglear, who was also a composer of some renown, contributing several marches to the circus and concert band repertoire. Bronson's assistant conductor was Don E. Wilson, who played calliope and bass drum, and who would be a circus bandmaster in the 1920s. Others were Henry De Armitt, one of the leading turn of the century solo cornetists, and William Ulrich, who played Eb clarinet and served as band librarian. Ulrich would also be clarinet soloist with the Wallace Band for several seasons. There was an 8-piece concert orchestra led by french horn player and violinist J. E.

Marsh, and an 8-piece side show band under bandmaster P. J. Jenkins.

In 1900, Bronson was the director of a 22-piece band with instrumentation that included piccolo, Eb clarinet, 6 Bb clarinets, 4 cornets, 3 french horns, 2 trombones, euphonium, 2 tubas, and 2 drummers. Emma Meloy was featured as a "ballad singer," and Maud Haywood as cornet soloist. The side show band and orchestra were now led by W. L. Schwab and Frank Herron, respectively. The 1901 Great Wallace Band kept the same instrumentation and still included standout performers Sanglear, De Armitt, Ulrich, and Wilson. Other significant musicians included a future music department chairman at Indiana University, horn player V. E. Dillard, and cornetist Roy Smith, who would become a well-known bandmaster a decade later.

Bronson was one of the few bandleaders who played clarinet while directing, quite a feat since the clarinet requires both hands at all times, unlike the cornet. The C. G. Conn Musical Instrument Company issued advertisements featuring the band, and when the circus visited Conn's home in Elkhart, IN in June, a special concert was performed. The use of so many woodwind instruments makes a strong statement as to the importance of the center ring concert for this entourage, as well as reflecting Bronson's strong grounding in classical music.

A 1902 *Conn's Musical Truth* article lavishes praise on Bronson and also gives some detailed information concerning his ideas of performance:

Mr. C. Z. Bronson, the director of the new famous band of Wallace's Circus, is one of the few really great Eb clarinet players of America, while the laurels he has won as bandmaster of Wallace's Circus are highly creditable to him and profitable to the show. He has an excellent band, splendidly equipped for the most part with Wonder instruments. Mr. Bronson being a clarinet player, naturally devotes much attention to the reed section of the band. He insists that his men shall use instruments with correct intonation, and for circus work the greatest possible volume is often desirable. He has, for the past year, used the Improved System Wonder Clarinet, but during his visit to the factory in June, he became enamored of the Perfected System Wonder Clarinet, and for the balance of the season will put it to the severe test of circus service, the hardest known to the musical profession."

The woodwind section was further diversified in 1903, and the band included piccolo, oboe, bassoon, 2 Eb clarinets, 8 Bb clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, 4 french horns, 3 cornets, 2 trumpets, 4 trombones, double-bell euphonium, 3 tubas, and 3 drummers. Bronson's experience with the Sousa Band likely influenced his choice of instrumentation, as John Philip Sousa generally used a two-to-one ratio of woodwinds to brass. Sousa also preferred the use of both trumpets and cornets.

The 1904 Great Wallace Show Herald announced - *"For lovers of music we have provided Prof. C. Z. Bronson's*

Grand Symphony Band of 44 pieces," and followed with an emphatic if not exactly accurate claim, *"The program rendered during the performance is sparkling and lively, such as best suits the humor of the auditors. Prof. Bronson gives a concert of one hour's duration before the opening of the show, playing the masterpieces of those masters of music, Donizetti, Rossini, Wagner, Beethoven, Myerbeer (sic.), Gounod, and Dellini (sic.) You can hear no such music as this in this country outside of its greatest cities, except at this show."*

Bronson left the Great Wallace Show at the end of the 1905 season and made a second unsuccessful attempt to establish a Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra. He also toured with the Bronson Concert Band in that year in which Bert Moore (who also had a significant circus career) was the euphonium soloist. Bronson directed the Carl Hagenbeck Circus and Show Company Band for the next two seasons. His wife joined the company as Wardrobe Superintendent, an important job that entailed the supervision of 89 workers. The route book summarized the season as 168 two-show days, 16 one-show days, 4 cancellations, and 135 parades. The 1906 program lists the arrangers of the center ring concert selections, an almost unheard-of detail for circus programs. The publicity mentioned that the band would be placed so as to be heard throughout the auxiliary tents.

Historian Charles Duble remembered that the band used C. L. Barnhouse's *Iowa March* for the grand entry. Interestingly enough, several of Bronson's top musicians from previous years were reunited in this band. Charles Sanglear was the assistant director as well as euphonium soloist. Other soloists included clarinetist William Ulrich, trumpeter Fred Koehler, and Arthur Cullen on trombone. The program was:

Afternoon Program

1. March, "Walk-Away" C. L. Barnhouse
2. Overture Fantasia, "Triumphale" A. Rubenstein, Op. (This is considered one of the greatest fantastic Overtures ever composed. The arrangement by J. B. Kindig, while not being overly burdened with technical difficulties, is very rich in effectiveness and coloring.)
3. *Silver Heels*, (New) Neil Morat
4. Trumpet Solo, Selected Fred Koehler
5. Moorish Suite, "The Courts of Granada" R. Chapi Arr. by G. Pintado -- a. Introduction and march to the Tournament
b. Meditation c. Serenata d. Finale (One of the greatest successes of the Gilmore Band. Played more than 1000 times by this celebrated organization.)
6. *Silence and Fun*, (A Ragtime Essence) Mullen

Evening Program

1. March, "Our Merchant Marine" G. E. Holmes
2. Overture, "Merry Wives of Windsor" Nicolai
(This overture is known to all music lovers. The opera is taken from Shakespeare's comedy, and the musical composition is admirable, the amusing character of Sir John Falstaff being depicted cleverly, while the merry wives and

their jealous spouses will be immediately recognized in the jubilant notes that ring out from first to last in the overture. To one conversant with the comedy, Nicolai's music is a revelation of the possibilities of sounds in expressing human emotions.)

3. Medley of Popular Songs, "*Rossiter's Sunny Songs*"

Arr. by H. L. Alford

4. Euphonium Solo, Selected Chas. Sanglear

5. Mosaic, from Walter Jacobs House, "My Dusky Rose" and "Dixie Rube" by T. S. Allen

6. Serenata Mexican, *Mi Rosirene* C. L. Barnhouse

Bronson evidently spent 1908 touring with his concert band from Kalamazoo, as it is mentioned in a testimonial in the Frank Holton Company circular *Harmony Hints*. Bronson returned to the circus in 1909 as bandmaster of the Norris & Rowe Circus Band, playing Eb clarinet and directing a 16-piece ensemble consisting of piccolo, Eb clarinet, 4 Bb clarinets, 3 cornets, 2 altos, trombone, baritone, 2 tubas, and 2 drummers. The great tuba player Walter P. English (WJU Hall of Fame 1984) was a member of his band. The 8-piece side show band was led by Alonza Turner.

Bronson's association with Norris & Rowe lasted only one season, and in 1910 he was again touring with his concert band, now "C. Z. Bronson and His American Band of Kalamazoo." During the 1911-1912 school year, he was listed as the woodwinds instructor for the Kalamazoo Academy of Musical Arts. In March 1914, he once again attempted to start a Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra, performing a "Grand Concert" at the New State Armory, and continuing with regular Sunday afternoon concerts at the Masonic temple. He took the ensemble on a summer tour on the Lincoln Chautauqua circuit, but interest lagged shortly thereafter, and the orchestra was inactive for several years.

In 1916, one source, a pamphlet entitled *Band Masters with Circus and Seasons 1841 through 1958*, credits Bronson as bandmaster with the Markle's World Largest River Shows. The reliability of this pamphlet is reasonably good, but there are numerous mistakes, and no other corroboration has been located. He served as the bandmaster for the Cole Brothers Circus in 1917, and an ad appeared for replacement musicians due to the World War I draft. This was a problem common to all musical organizations at that time.

In 1918 Bronson became the bandmaster for the Coop & Lent Circus, one of the first motorized shows in America. It was owned by B. L. Wallace, one of the partners long associated with the Great Wallace and Hagenbeck-Wallace shows. The prospectus for the show listed 1.5 and 3.5 ton trucks would be used and would pull no trailers. Moving a show of this size with trucks was a major undertaking in 1918, as the roads were not yet paved in many areas. This proved to be the show's undoing, and it closed in August. The 1921 B. L. Wallace Greater Shows listed a "Professor Bronson" as bandmaster in 1921, and one source lists his

first name as Charles. It is likely it was C. Z., but he had quite a busy year. Also in 1921, Bronson formed a new band in Kalamazoo, a 25-piece ensemble called the American Legion Band. It was staffed mostly from returning veterans of World War I, many of whom had played in Europe in the American Expeditionary Force bands. These returning bandsmen had a significant national impact, serving as the backbone of many concert bands in cities throughout America. Many were also among the first large generation of American school band directors, as school bands were gradually replacing the ubiquitous town ensembles of the previous forty years.

The third time that Bronson attempted to form a Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra finally proved to be the charm. In 1921, backed by a tireless organizer and promoter, Leta Snow, he was appointed the first conductor of an ensemble that has flourished ever since. Bronson stipulated that he would accept no compensation for his services, and he provided much of the music from his extensive personal library. The first concert of the KSO was December 4, 1921 at the Masonic temple; Bronson's first selection was Massenet's overture *Phedre* and the highlight work was Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*.

Glenn Aumond, critic for the *Kalamazoo Gazette* was an eloquent supporter:

"C. Z. Bronson will conduct. This musician's name has always stood for the best in the musical interests of the city. Sincerity is his middle name. Mr. Bronson will conduct in a manner satisfactory to both the members of his band, and to the public at large. There will be results forthcoming."

"A symphonic orchestra means more to a community than is at first seen on the surface. It is not a means of diversion alone, although as such it is a delight. It will reach the great mass as an educator as no other means could do. Orchestral literature is rich with good things, things good for both the heart and brain. The youth of the community, the student body, those who are the men and women of tomorrow, will profit by it, for if this fine art is to endure, we will need audiences for the future. . . . Nothing could be of more vital interest to Kalamazoo along the art line. It takes us out of the provincial atmosphere and puts us among that people that are doing things."

The first season consisted of five concerts, and Aumond wrote that the growth of the ensemble was impressive during the first years. The second season was increased to include seven performances, and the success of the ensemble seemed to be genuine. Bronson and Mrs. Snow were given credit for hiring women much more frequently than was the custom in orchestras of the time. Bronson's health began a slow but steady decline due to Parkinson's Disease shortly after the orchestra was formed. He conducted his last concert in December 1924, and he died September 26, 1926 in his home in Kalamazoo. Bronson was buried in Riverside Cemetery after a funeral service conducted by the Elks.