



AMICA International Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association Honor Roll

(Charles) Rudolf Friml (1879 -- 1972)

Pianist, composer; born in Prague, Austria-Hungary (now the Czech Republic). He studied under Dvorák at the Prague Conservatory and as a pianist and composer he settled in the U.S.A. in 1906 (becoming a citizen in 1925). His completion of *The Firefly* (1912) for Victor Herbert initiated his long series of highly successful Broadway operettas (1912--34) containing such standards as "Indian Love Song" from *Rose Marie* (1924), "Some Day" from *The Vagabond King* (1925), and "The Donkey Serenade" from the film version of *The Firefly* (1937). He also contributed to the *Ziegfeld Follies* (1921--25). After settling in Hollywood (1934) he scored numerous films, and at age 92 he became an original member of the Songwriter's Hall of Fame.



Composer Rudolf Friml, above, with his wife, Kay Ling, at the piano in their Richmond District home in 1967. Right, a postal employee cancels Mrs. Friml's own version of a stamp to commemorate 100-year anniversary of her late famed husband

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Music man: His time has come again

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By Lynn Ludlow
Examiner Staff Writer

Kay Ling Friml, who wanted to mail some letters, paused for a moment to predict a change in America's musical tastes.

"I think people are ready," she said, "to listen to some songs with music."

Rudolf Friml, who lived here during the melancholy years when operettas gave way to what he called "crooning **and drums**," **would have been** 100 years old Friday.

As postal worker Jerry Smith stamped postmarks by hand on 100 letters imprinted with Friml's picture, his **widow said the** Post Office had politely refused to issue a commemorative stamp.

Although Friml composed "Rose Marie" and 32 other light operas performed on Broadway for another generation, he died in 1972 at the age of 92. And the Post Office said that 10 years must go by.

But his widow said a more important form of commemoration is planned next spring, when "The Vagabond King" will be revived during the Spring Opera season sponsored by **the** San Francisco Opera Association.

Last year it was performed by the Houston Opera with such box office success that perhaps a new era of the operetta is about to begin.

"I like a full-blooded libretto with a luscious melody, rousing choruses and romantic passion," Friml once told an interviewer.

He also said, "I am so full of music that if I don't sit down and let some of it flow, I think I would burst from the pressure."

He didn't like 20th-century trends in serious music - and he despised rock and roll.

He said "Hello, Dolly" was typical of the downfall of the musical comedy in the years after he said goodbye to Broadway.

"A terrible score," he said. "If I had written that music, they would have thrown me out of the theater."

When he saw "My Fair Lady," he walked out.

Born Dec. 7, 1879, in Prague (before Bohemia became Czechoslovakia), he was the son of a zither-playing baker. He began to play the piano at the age of 4, studied at the conservatory and came to the United States in 1901 as accompanist to violinist Jan Kubelik. He returned in 1906 as a concert pianist - and he decided to stay.

In 1911, Friml was hired by Arthur Hammerstein to compose the score for a new operetta, "The Firefly," as a vehicle for a star of the day, Emma Trentini.

The librettist was Otto Harbach, an English teacher from Walla Walla who was lured from the classrooms of Columbia University to the bright lights of Broadway.

With "Sympathy" and other song hits in the show, Friml became one of the leading composers of the day along with Sigmund Romberg, Victor Herbert, Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern.

In 1924, after a succession of other operettas. Friml and Harbach teamed up again for "Rose Marie." It brought to songbooks of America such classics as "Indian Love Call," "The Door of My Dreams" and "Totem Tom-Tom."

The latter tune is known to millions of television viewers as the jingle for Hamm's beer: "From the land of sky blue waters...." Friml didn't like it - but it brought him \$19,000 every year.

Music historian David Ewen says Friml's melodies are "tunes instantly sucked through the ear into the memory." Berlin once told him, "Rudy, you can shake music out of your sleeve."

The tunes included "Donkey Serenade," which Friml said he figured out while dozing in a movie house in 1922. It was added to the score of "The Firefly."

The operettas came, one after another, in days when stages appeared permanently set in scenes from middle

European castles: "Katinka," "The Bird of Paradise," "The Squaw Man," "High Jinks," "You're in Love," "The Peasant Girl."

The wives arrived and went, one after another. Mathilde divorced Friml and sued Trentini for \$100,000 for "alienation of affection"; then Friml married Blanche Better, star of "Katinka" And she hired detectives when he took too warm an interest in Elsie Lawson, star of "Tumble In," who became his third wife.

The composer came to Hollywood in 1932 after Broadway audiences began to regard his operettas as Viennese schmaltz.

In 1950, Friml became an adopted San Franciscan. He bought a home on 48th Avenue across from Sutro Park. He gave occasional concerts and told reporters that he began each day standing on his head "to reactivate the blood."

In 1952, he married Kay Ling, his secretary for the previous 14 years. He was 67; she was 39. They also maintained homes in Hollywood and Palm Springs, traveling throughout the world.

"He always walked through Golden Gate Park when we lived here," she said. "Every day."

They moved permanently to Hollywood in 1967 as his health began to fail.

Memorabilia from the composer's life are on display at the San Francisco Public Library, where Friends of the Library sponsored a concert of his songs last week.

"It was so lovely," said Kay Ling Friml. "You know, Irving Berlin always said it was a cycle. He told Rudy, 'They'll all come looking for us again.'"