

# The Mystery of the Phantom Composer

After 14 years of research and detective work, music instructor Stephen Erickson immortalizes a long-lost pianist and composer.



*Albert Pieczonka (1828-1912), famous for his "Tarantella in A Minor," was virtually unknown until music instructor Stephen Erickson began to research the composer 14 years ago. This photo of Pieczonka, who was buried in an unmarked grave, was taken about 1880, shortly after he arrived in New York City from London, where he taught music to the children of the Prince of Wales.*

Since 1879, the flashy "Tarantella in A Minor" by Albert Pieczonka has been a worldwide piano student favorite because of its brilliant effect and technical ease. But virtually no one knows anything about the man responsible for composing such an extraordinary piece.

Except for Stephen Erickson. A music teacher at Salve Regina since 1985, Erickson has spent the last 14 years researching the elusive composer's life. Last year, he published his findings in the 2008 summer issue of *Keyboard Companion* magazine with an article titled, "Music in America: A New Nineteenth Century Composer."

That article established Erickson as the leading expert on Pieczonka (pronounced pyeh-CHUN-kah), and landed him an invitation to contribute a biographical entry on the composer in the soon-to-be-released second edition of the *Grove Dictionary of American Music*. Now, thanks to Erickson, music lovers everywhere can finally learn about the composer whose life was a complete mystery for more than a century.





One of the many photos Stephen Erickson discovered was this picture of Albert Pieczonka with his wife Nancy (top, center) and their daughters Helene (left), Alice, Kate, Eva, Emily and Fanny. Together, they formed the Kempa Ladies' Orchestra, which toured throughout the United States in the late 1880s and was quite popular in its day.

***“I was determined to solve this mystery for my students and correct a historical oversight.”***

– Stephen Erickson  
Instructor of Music

## The search begins

A piano teacher at Salve Regina for the past 25 years, Erickson taught the “Tarantella in A Minor” to his students, who enjoyed learning it so much that they persistently requested more of Pieczonka’s works. However, when Erickson tried to gather more compositions, he discovered that they were seemingly non-existent. It soon became evident that a biographical history of the composer was unattainable as well.

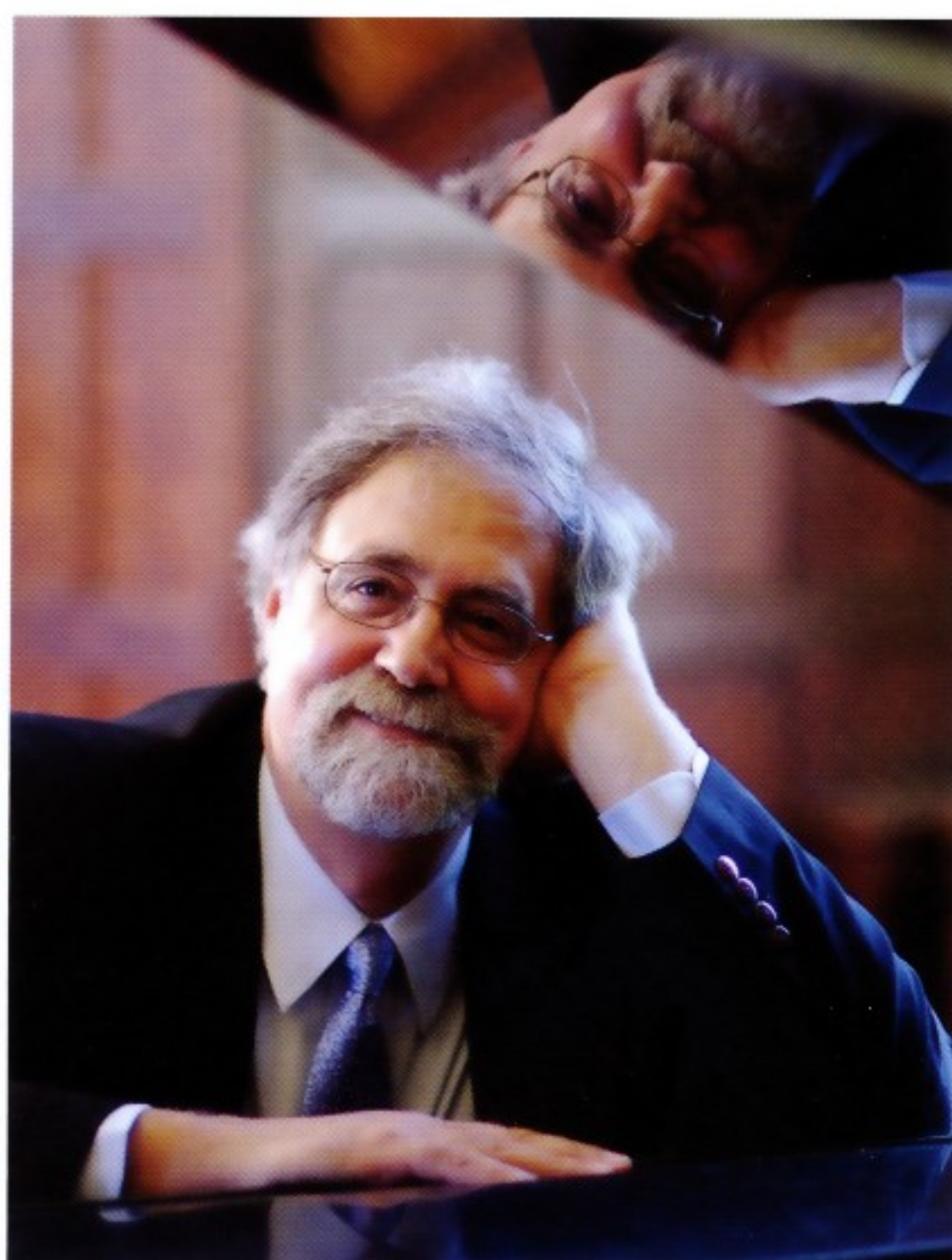
“The search quickly became frustrating,” Erickson said. “Two reference texts listed the titles of most of Pieczonka’s compositions, but I could not find copies of these pieces. In addition, neither book contained any biographical information on Pieczonka. It was as if he had never lived. I started to believe that ‘Pieczonka’ was actually a pseudonym.”

But Erickson didn’t give up. Instead, he became even more intrigued. “I was determined to solve this mystery for my students and correct a historical oversight,” he said.

So determined was Erickson that what started out as a simple research project soon became an all-consuming passion.

“Placing Pieczonka at the height of the Romantic Era, with the probability that he personally knew Liszt, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms and Wagner, was unbelievably enticing for me,” Erickson said. “I was hooked.”

Peter Davis, chairman of the department of music, recalls that



Stephen Erickson, a piano teacher at Salve Regina for nearly 25 years, is considered the world’s leading expert on the composer Albert Pieczonka.





*As a performer, Albert Pieczonka specialized in the music of Beethoven, whom he resembled. According to one account, a young student declared – upon seeing a bust of Beethoven, “Look! It’s Mr. Pieczonka!”*

Erickson had already started his research when Ukrainian pianist Vladimir Zaitsev performed on campus in the Noon Concert Series about 10 years ago.

“Mr. Zaitsev featured the ‘Tarantella in A Minor’ in his program,” Davis said. “Knowing about Stephen’s interest in this composer, I approached Mr. Zaitsev to ask him if he knew anything about Pieczonka. His reply was that the composer, to his knowledge, was probably Polish, but he knew nothing else. He added that he felt some scholarly investigation into Pieczonka’s life and career was certainly relevant and overdue.”

Inspired to continue his investigation, Erickson learned that Pieczonka was a highly regarded pianist during his lifetime. Most famous for his “Tarantella in A Minor,” he often performed the piece in recitals across the United States, along with the very difficult concert repertoire of Chopin, Liszt and Weber.

“I couldn’t understand how the ‘Tarantella’ could be as popular today as it was 100 years ago, only to have its composer vanish without a trace,” Erickson said. “Pieczonka was actually quite well-known in his day, yet none of the contemporary music dictionaries had any biographical information on him, not even his life dates. That started my quest to solve one of the enduring mysteries of piano literature.”

## Turning up clues

At first, Erickson focused his research on Eastern Europe, following the clue offered by Pieczonka’s Slavic name.

Since it was likely that Pieczonka had lived in London for a time, Erickson was advised by librarians at the British Museum to search the city’s cemeteries for clues. Ultimately taking a more practical path, Erickson directed his search to New York City. Not only was it a popular haven for composers and musicians, but it was also where many of Pieczonka’s works had been published.

Much to his surprise, Erickson discovered that the April 14, 1912 edition of *The New York Times*, which boasted the imminent arrival of the ill-fated Titanic, also contained a short obituary for professor Albert Pieczonka, who had died at the age of 84 two days before. Though brief, the write-up revealed that Pieczonka was actually a New Yorker.

“In trying to unravel the mystery of who Albert Pieczonka was, I had uncovered a new 19th-century composer in America,” Erickson wrote in *Keyboard Companion*. “Pieczonka’s career in the United States – composing, performing, and teaching – would turn out to be a significant part of his life’s work.”

On the morning of April 15, 1912, the sinking of the Titanic and the devastating loss of 1,500 lives consumed the *Times*’ headlines. (Coincidentally, Erickson’s great-uncle was on the Titanic and had miraculously survived the sinking.)

“Did the collective shock of that horrific catastrophe overshadow Pieczonka’s life and plunge him into an obscurity that deepened over the years?” Erickson asked. “Perhaps if a longer article had appeared in an important paper like the *Times*, the details of Pieczonka’s life would have been remembered, or at least more easily researched.”

## Solving the mystery

Now able to pinpoint the composer’s whereabouts during the latter part of his life, Erickson launched a genealogical search to find Pieczonka’s descendants in the United States. Luckily, the search led him to the family’s historian. Pieczonka’s family would provide much detail and many leads about this once-mysterious composer’s life and musical career, including rare vintage photos.

“Chess tournaments and summer swimming at the New Jersey shore were some of the highlights of Pieczonka’s activities – the simple pleasures of 19th-century living,” Erickson said. “Finally seeing photographs of Albert from his early 20s to his 80s helped me piece together a more complete portrait of this fascinating musician.”

Pieczonka was born in East Prussia. A lover of music as a youth, he later became a successful composer, performer and teacher. He was also the leader of his family’s ensemble novelty act, The Kempa Ladies’ Orchestra, which included his wife and six daughters.

“By forming The Kempa Ladies’ Orchestra, Pieczonka could support his large family of eight and carve out a niche for continued financial success,” Erickson said.



Grade: IV

## Tarantella

A. Pieczonka

**Presto**

***“Steve’s publication in Grove is very prestigious. Grove is the standard of excellence, the No. 1 encyclopedia of music.”***

– Dr. Thomas Day  
Professor of Music

“Some concert tours included daily performances – and some were held twice a day. The venues ranged from concert halls and opera houses to Dime Museums and benefits.”

Recently Erickson discovered that the Kempa Ladies’ Orchestra had performed in Providence, R.I. – at the former Providence Opera House – twice in 1883.

“For a long time, Pieczonka seemed so far away in time and location,” Erickson said. “Discovering the proximity of these performances to my home has strengthened my connection to him and his family.”

According to Erickson, the details of Pieczonka’s personal life reveal the hardships of the times. As the 19th century came to a close, many infections were incurable, and Pieczonka lost his only son and two daughters, who died in their early 20s.

With no effective treatment for breast cancer, another daughter was struck down at 49. After the advent of the horseless carriage, two other daughters were run over and killed by moving vehicles. His youngest daughter, the most talented of all the children, died as a result of morphine addiction.

Pieczonka, who once taught music to the children of the Prince of Wales, was buried in New York City in an unmarked pauper’s grave. But Erickson is determined to give the composer the final respect he is due.

In the preface to his article in *Keyboard Companion*, Erickson writes: “My search for Albert Pieczonka has revealed some exciting discoveries. Albert’s life dates are now known, his musical output has been augmented to 52 known works, and the details of his colorful life and family open a window to this fascinating period in history.”

But Erickson says his search is far from over. “Many loose ends and family mysteries of Pieczonka’s life have yet to be solved,” he said. “Once these remaining mysteries are solved, I would really like to write a more extended piece on Pieczonka.”

Erickson has also created a Web site for the composer – [www.albertpieczonka.org](http://www.albertpieczonka.org) – which includes many photos of Pieczonka and his interesting family, as well as an article based on a surprise discovery in his research: “Did Pieczonka inspire the college fight song, ‘On Wisconsin?’”

Still a work in progress, his Web site will also include analyses of Pieczonka’s existing works, along with more biographical articles. Future projects will involve republishing some of Pieczonka’s long out-of-print works for piano and publishing his “Grande Sonata Infernale,” now only in manuscript form, for the first time.

“Countless pianists, piano instructors and students will find information on this composer extremely useful,” Davis said, noting that Erickson’s dedication as a scholar also extends to his teaching. “Stephen is an extremely dedicated teacher, who has a great deal of passion for piano performance. His students’ success is very important to him.”

One of those students is music major Benjamin Healy ’09, who studied with Erickson for four years.

“Mr. Erickson is an incredible educator and musician,” Healy said. “His knowledge and love for the piano, music history and life are very inspiring. I am very thankful to have met and studied with him.”

Erickson’s colleagues also think highly of his accomplishments. “Steve’s publication in Grove is very prestigious,” said Dr. Thomas Day, professor of music. “Grove is the standard of excellence, the No. 1 encyclopedia of music. An entry in Grove means the editors have decided that Steve’s research is significant.”

Modest about his contribution to music history, Erickson is simply content to have given Pieczonka the recognition he deserves. “For the first time in 181 years, the details of Albert Pieczonka’s life will finally be entered into a reference text, which was my goal from the beginning,” he said.

– Mary Brinsco ’11