

Dancing and Singing about Copyright

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Frank Evina was listening to the radio one day while driving, and “This Song” by former Beatle George Harrison came on. “This song has nothing tricky about it,” Harrison sang. “This song ain’t black or white and as far as I know / Don’t infringe on anyone’s copyright.” Harrison recorded the song in 1976 after losing a copyright infringement suit alleging that he had unconsciously misappropriated the musical essence of “He’s So Fine,” a 1962 song by the Chiffons, in his 1970 smash hit, “My Sweet Lord.”

Evina, known as the unofficial historian and archivist of the Copyright Office, was struck by the inclusion of “copyright” in Harrison’s lyrics and wondered whether any other copyrighted

musical compositions might have similar references. Evina, a senior information specialist in the Public Information Office, retired in 2007 with more than 37 years of service.

After digging in the card catalog and searching records on microfilm, Evina uncovered several compositions. “I found love songs from the 1940s and 1950s with lyrics about copyrighted love and kisses,” Evina said. “But there was only one composition with no lyrics citing copyright—‘The Copyright Schottische’ by William Dressler.” The composition was published by Firth, Pond, and Company and copyrighted on November 9, 1855.

Unfortunately, details about Dressler’s life are scarce, and it is not known why he used “copyright” in the name of his composition.

According to a *New York Times* obituary published on July 3, 1914, Dressler died at age 88 in New York City. He was born in Nottingham, England, and came to the United States in the early 1850s as a solo pianist and accompanist to Norwegian violinist Ole Bull. Dressler had earlier graduated from the Cologne Conservatory of Music and played with the Opera House of Weisbaden. In New York he taught, composed, and published music and played organ for churches.

The schottische is a social dance that originated in Europe in the 1840s, spread to the United States, and became popular between the 1850s and 1870s. In a 2009 master’s thesis for Rice University, Kendra Ann Wharton explains that the schottische draws on the waltz and the polka, “combining their steps with a lilting hop that is reminiscent of Scottish dancing.” She writes, however, that evidence suggests that the dance originated in a Germanic country, not Scotland.

To listen to “The Copyright Schottische,” go to www.copyright.gov/history/lore/2009/copyright-schottische.mp3. Carol Guglielmo, a registration specialist in the Performing Arts Division, recorded the composition on September 3 in the Coolidge Auditorium. ©

Carol Guglielmo performs “The Copyright Schottische.”

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