

Composers Commissioning

The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Commissioned Works
of the American Accordionists' Association
Composers Commissioning Committee:
Elsie Bennett, Founder and Chair Emeritus
Robert Young McMahan, Chair

No. 9 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the A. A. A.

By Robert Young McMahan, DMA
By Robert Young McMahan, DMA
Classical Accordionist, Composer, Research Writer,
Prof. of Music Theory, Composition, and Accordion,
The College of New Jersey



For the seventeenth and eighteenth AAA commissioned works, Composers Commissioning Committee Chair Elsie Bennett returned to two previously assigned figures of note, Paul Pisk (1893-1990) and David Diamond (b. 1915). The reader may recall discussions in this series about both the men and their earlier compositions in the 2002 and 2004 issues of the AAA Festival Journal. The first commission of Paul Pisk was his solo *Salute to Juan*, and that of Diamond, *Night Music*, for accordion and string quartet. Pisk and Diamond were the first re-commissioned composers since Paul Creston (who ultimately wrote four works for the AAA, the first two of which were completed before the presently discussed pieces; see the 1998 and 1999 issues of the Journal) and Henry Cowell (two works, both also completed before the subjects of this article; see the 2000 and 2002 Journal issues).

The contract dates fall into the "golden age" of the CCC, the early 1960s, when multiple commissions were successfully carried out with some of the country's—and world's—most famous composers. In the AAA's continuing desire to commission more works for accordion with other instruments, Elsie Bennett persuaded Pisk to accept a November 10, 1961, contract initially stipulating a double concerto for two accordions and string orchestra (following the lead of the previous August contract with Louis Gordon for his *Aria, Scherzo, and Finale*, for accordion and string orchestra, and the earlier Diamond *Night Music*, both explored in the 2004 Journal). This was followed by two solos, however, in 1962: Diamond's *Sonatina* and

George Kleinsinger's *Prelude and Sarabande* (respective contract dates: January 15 and 18). Five commission contracts were sent out by Elsie Bennett in 1962, compared to three in 1961. However, of the total of eight contracts for the two years, two did not come to fruition. These were for Ullyses Kay (1917-95), the only other African American composer besides William Grant Still to be invited to write for the AAA, and Hollywood composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895-1968). The two remaining contracts for 1962 that were eventually realized were Ernst Krenek's *Toccata* and Robert Russell Bennett's *Psychiatry*, for accordion and string quartet.

Kay had once accepted a contract, in 1959, but returned it a month later, explaining that his present commitment to previously assigned commissions did not allow him sufficient time to carry it out. Undaunted, Ms Bennett commissioned him again two years later, on November 24, 1961, and he accepted the new offer with enthusiasm, even coming up with a tentative title, "Rondo Fantasie," for his piece-



Elsie M. Bennett
Founder and Chair
Emeritus
AAA Composers
Commissioning Committee

to-be. But he unfortunately proved unable yet again to find the time to realize this goal before the contract deadline of May 1, 1962. The matter was never pursued again. Highly respected post romanticist and film composer Castelnovo-Tedesco also accepted his contract (dated September 15, 1962), but his similar load of compositional duties, a half year's illness, and his ultimate death in 1968 prevented this project from ever being realized. He had at least written for the accordion once before, in combination with clarinet, guitar, violin, percussion, and narrator, in his incidental music to Robert Nathan's collection of poems entitled *Morning in Iowa* (1953). He was also Hollywood's most sought after film score mentor, having taught such notable composers in that medium as John Williams, Nelson Riddle, Henry Mancini, and accordionists/composers Dominic Fontiere and Jack Preisner.

Paul Pisk: *Adagio and Rondo Concertante*

Regrettably, Paul Pisk's second commission suffered in similar ways due to a number of mishaps that prevented it from being premiered near the time of its completion. To date, I can find no documentation of its having ever been performed, a situation that can and should be corrected soon. Pisk was Professor of Music at The University of Texas, in Austin, and Willard "Bill"

Palmer* and Bill Hughes, of the famous and groundbreaking classical accordion duo Palmer and Hughes, were on the music faculty of the University of Houston and had worked with the composer on his first AAA commission, *Salute to Juan*. For this reason, Elsie Bennett asked the elder of the two, Palmer (Hughes had been his student at one time), to talk to Pisk about composing a double concerto for two accordions and string orchestra. Pisk was favorable to the idea and accepted a commission contract on November 10, 1961. In their frequent correspondence, Bennett expressed concern to Palmer that a double concerto, being expensive to perform, would not likely get very many hearings, but it was important that the AAA commission as many forms of music for the accordion as possible. On the other hand, she was also somewhat disappointed that the work did not conform to the three-movement format of the classical and romantic era concerto, but followed a shorter slow introduction and fast second movement plan instead. Palmer assured her that, in many ways, this was a much better, less pretentious choice and that a more compact work would likely get more performances than would something as weighty and lengthy as a full concerto. For examples he cited Weber's *Konzertstück*, for piano and orchestra, and Saint-Saëns' *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*, for violin and orchestra, as

highly popular and frequently performed pieces.

Pisk wrote to Bennett in late February 1962 that the draft for the piece was finished and that he had sent the accordion parts to Palmer for editing and adding registration. By now he had added two oboe and horn parts to the score, thus officially elevating the status of the accompanying string ensemble to that of orchestra. It was at this point that the project hit a snag. Palmer felt the accordion parts were more difficult and labor intensive than the piece merited, and, with the composer's qualified permission, proceeded to simplify them somewhat, in the hope that an easier version would encourage more performances in the future. This meant that much more work would have to be done in the editing than originally anticipated. To complicate things further, this endeavor had to be halted by Palmer for about six months due to a troublesome convalescence from ear surgery, and Hughes was unable to be of help due to surgery of his own around the same time. After



Willard (Bill) Palmer and Paul Pisk review the score with Bill Palmer's student, Lynlee Barry Hatch.

this, both men's duties intensified at the University to the point that the editing had to be laid aside for an indefinite period of time. By September 1967 (five years past the contractual deadline of June 1962!), the score was still untouched, and Bennett had to reluctantly ask Palmer to send it to her so that she could have Joseph Biviano and Eugene Ettore finish the job. In the end, it appears from viewing the manuscript that little or no actual editing of the accordion parts was done by them either. In addition, Palmer and Hughes were supposed to have originally premiered the piece, especially since they had initiated the commission and consulted frequently with the composer, who had dedicated the work to them; and Joan Sommers, Professor of Accordion at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, expressed interest in having it performed at her school as well. But nothing ever came of either plan, and the piece remains unheard to this day. Palmer did arrange for it to be published by Alfred Music, which also published the highly popular and still widely used Palmer/Hughes accordion teaching method. The full score is available in manuscript form as a rental from Alfred. Palmer was right in observing that the accordion parts were challenging, but they are far from impossible to master and are significantly less difficult than several of the other AAA commissioned works (especially Paul Creston's accordion concerto) that have enjoyed frequent performances.

As for the music itself, Elsie Bennett requested a brief description and formal outline of the composition from Pisk, as was her custom with all the commissioned composers, so that she could include it in her press releases and publicity articles on it. Pisk complied with this very practical and succinct account:

The Adagio and Rondo Concertante . . . is written for two solo accordions, treated equally as virtuoso instruments and an accompanying orchestra which also takes part in the thematic content of the piece. The two movements belong together, not only in key and mood but also through motivic relations. The Adagio begins after two bars' orchestral introduction with a melodious main theme in G-minor. The melody here is, as it is throughout the whole work, distributed between the two accordions. In the second phrase they imitate each other contrapuntally. The middle section is more dramatic; here rich figuration is used to accompany the melodies. In the center, a solemn, chordal section is placed after which the previous material is repeated in slightly different order. The Adagio ends with the first theme in the major key. The fast Rondo begins with a dance-like, gay tune which is played by the orchestra, then by the soloists. It dominates the whole movement and appears four times in different shapes and keys. In between are two contrasting ideas, the one with chords and scale figures, the second in quiet, expressive melodic character. Also, these two themes reappear. At the end, a coda is added in which both soloists are able to display their technical skill. The end is gay and brilliant.

Dr. McMahan is a classical accordionist, specializing in contemporary original works for or including the accordion, composer, musical researcher/writer, and Professor of Music at The College of New Jersey, where he serves as Coordinator of Music Theory Studies, Composition, and the recently introduced Accordion major. He has recorded on the CRS and Orion labels, and will soon release a CD of contemporary works for the accordion.

The Adagio is highly romantic in nature, with many occurrences of embellishing diminished seventh and Neapolitan sixth chords giving it an almost nineteenth century flavor at times. The rhythm is very conventional, as well, usually in a flowing, lilting sextuple or triple meter. The texture is richly contrapuntal and natural, showing the influence of his teacher, Arnold Schönberg, himself not only one of the greatest and most influential composers of the twentieth century, but one of the most highly revered and sought after teachers of theory and composition as well. One of Schönberg's unusual strengths was his ability to impart solid compositional skill and artistry to his students' writing without necessarily imposing his atonal and twelve-tone serial techniques on their personal musical styles. He was more interested in producing superior musicians than disciples and always respected their individuality. Thus such students as Pisk and the Hollywood composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold could retain their preferred post-romantic and neoclassical musical languages and still learn from the great master. The texture of the Rondo is simpler than that of the Adagio, but somewhat freer harmonically, allowing considerably more chromatic chordal combinations and added tertian structures (usually in the form of freely applied seventh chords of different sorts) at times. As the composer says, the tonality is still in G, but with frequent transpositions to other keys with the returning themes in the rondo scheme. The three alternating themes Pisk describes fall into an eight-section form with coda: A / B / A / C / A / B / C / A / Coda. The principal theme (A) is a simple, playful, "sing-songy" theme in 6/8 time. The fifth through eighth sections (A / B / C / A) present the now considerably altered themes in truncated form, adding to the intensity of the drive to the exciting, climatic coda.

Surprisingly, Elsie Bennett never did publish an article on the work in the usual accordion publications, but did contribute a short piece on it to the December 1962 issue of *The Music Trades* magazine. In her March 1965 press release describing a special dinner ceremony that had taken place recently at the Statler Hilton Hotel in New York to honor five AAA commissionees, Henry Brant, Alexander Tcherepnin, Louis Gordon, Otto Luening, and Pisk (described in the previous article in the 2004 *Journal*), and announcing the completion of the

Adagio and Rondo Concertante, she quoted Pisk, who, upon receiving an honorary plaque, stated that the award "should really be shared with me by the AAA, since it is through their generosity that various present-day composers have been inspired to contribute to original literature for the accordion. I am happy that I could take part in it. My hope is that this commissioned music be widely used and that it will open new avenues for contemporary music." Hopefully, the work he never lived to hear performed will be "widely used" in the not-too-distant future. This is a significant project that has been suspended for over four decades and impatiently awaits resumption.

David Diamond: *Sonatina*

Following the successful completion of his *Night Music*, for accordion and string quartet, Elsie Bennett next asked David Diamond in a letter of September 15, 1962, to write a solo piece. Diamond, living in Florence, Italy, at the time, replied within a week that it would be his pleasure to do this. Always reticent about his music and personal career, he refused to give any but the slightest descriptions of either of his AAA commissions when he had completed them and Bennett requested information on them for publicity. All he would say about *Night Music*, for example, had to do mainly with the title. The quintet was dedicated to the memory of his recently deceased friend and fellow composer (as well as earlier AAA commissionee) Wallingford Riegger (see the second article in this series, which discusses Riegger's *Cooper Square*, in the 1999 issue of the *Journal*). Riegger had always liked to take long walks in New York in the evenings, and Diamond would often accompany his friend in this recreation, engaging him in interesting conversation, as he explains in some notes he dictated to Bennett in an interview (not always in complete sentence form):

Free three-part form. Slow fast slow [movement tempo scheme]. Create an atmosphere of quality of night which WR always liked in walking....Could be considered a nocturne. While it gives off [the] quality of 1961, I wanted to capture the quality of the past as well, like Mozart in his *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. Basically, it is a nocturne which has the quality of an elegy. The cello pizzicato in fast section has the function of the bass player in a jazz combo.

As can be seen, there is no description of the form of each movement or the harmonic and contrapuntal structures in prominent use. He was no less restrained in discussing his new accordion solo, to which he gave the generic eighteenth-century title *Sonatina*. Only a few words can be found on it, and this only in a May 1963 letter to Bennett:

Now about the *Sonatina*. I am expressly making it simple because I want it available to non-professionals, too. I will soon be sending it to you...I should prefer an editing job from Mr. Biviano and he will be credited with

the editing: that is, I want his registrations, fingerings, etc. I have tried some unusual harmonic combinations, and in order to keep them he may want to re-indicate the left-hand notation. All this let him do without changing the sound of my notes (the pitches). It is in three movements. I think you will like it.

Diamond sent the completed manuscript to Elsie Bennett on June 1, 1963, well within the contractual deadline (despite his busily working on five other compositions during the 1962-63 period, the most time consuming of which was *This Sacred Ground*, based on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, for baritone, children's chorus, adult chorus, and orchestra). *Sonatina* was subsequently published by Southern Music in 1966. Joseph Soprani gave the premiere performance on a late Friday afternoon concert made up exclusively of AAA commissioned works at the Donnell Library, in New York City, on February 21, 1964. The event was broadcast on WNYC-AM and FM as part of the Municipal Broadcasting System's twenty-fifth American Music Festival. Three other accordionists, Robert Conti, Kathy Black, and Janice Simon, also performed, playing Henry Cowell's *Iridescent Rondo*, Kleinsinger's *Prelude and Sarabande*, Elie Siegmeister's *Improvisation, Ballad, and Dance*, Robert Russell Bennett's *Four Nocturnes*, Otto Luening's *Rondo*, William Grant Still's *Aria*, Paul Creston's *Prelude and Dance*, and the New York premiere of Henry Brant's *Sky Forest* ** (an accordion quartet). Bennett was very pleased with the concert and that Diamond was present to hear his new piece; but she was equally disappointed that this historic event was not taped as the radio station had promised beforehand. Diamond had lived most of the time in his Florence residence until 1965 due to the repressive atmosphere created for him and many other people in the arts by the McCarthy era Un-American Activities Committee, but was in America at this time due to his accepting the Slee



Elsie Bennett and David Diamond

Professorship for the spring 1963 semester at the State University of New York in Buffalo. He returned to Florence shortly after the Donnell Library concert.

The *Sonatina* approximates in movement scheme, length, and form the eighteenth-century model prevalent in the keyboard works of such masters and contemporaries of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven as Clementi and Kuhlau. The first movement (Allegro moderato) is similar in tempo and design to "sonata allegro" or "first movement" form of the classical sonata first movement, in which there is an exposition of two or three different themes with key changes, a middle section called the development, in which motivic materials from the exposition are presented in varied ways and often go through many changes of key, and the recapitulation, wherein the materials of the exposition return in much the same way as originally heard, but with the original themes now all cast in the opening key. In Diamond's updated version of this well-worn pattern, however, the harmony is freely chromatic and dissonant, in his typical polytonal style, and one melodic motif, rather than several, dominates the entire movement. It consists of a group of three descending eighth notes landing on a longer sustained value. The regularity of consecutive four-bar phrases make it difficult to discover a second contrasting theme and uncertain as to where a possible development section might begin. The recapitulation is rather literally taken from the beginning of the exposition, but lasts for only a few bars at the very end before it transforms itself into a climatic codetta. Nonetheless, the spirited, tightly organized melodic activity and brevity of the movement captures the brisk, terse character of the lively and vivacious first movements of the Clementi sonatinas from an earlier age.

The second movement (Andante) is in the accustomed slow tempo found in most of its eighteenth century predecessors. The mood is relaxed and flowing with long, unbroken phrases and occasional moments of imitative counterpoint. At least three times the music makes dramatic crescendos as the melodic line climbs to high climatic points. The ending is nevertheless tranquil and cadences on a jazzy C-major seventh chord that concludes a phrase made up mostly of harmonies built of perfect fourths and seconds ("quartal/secundal" harmony) rather than the usual thirds (traditional "tertian" harmony).

The finale (Allegro, ben ritmato) is similar in form to the first movement, but is hard driving in both an urgent and cheerful way throughout, with much shifting and strongly accented syncopation that often deliberately throws the listener's ear into amused confusion regarding where the perceived downbeat of the measure is at any given time. Similar to the first movement, the last concludes with a dashing and dramatically altered return of its opening theme.

Diamond succeeds very well in his intention to create a piece that is technically and expressively within the means of both professionals and advanced amateurs.

***Past AAA President Faith Deffner has written a thorough account of and deeply touching and well deserved tribute to the late Bill Hughes and his invaluable legacy to the concert and pedagogical accordion world which may be read at www.accordions.com/index/art/willard.shtml.**

****Sky Forest will have another New York performance soon, this time played by Beverly Roberts Curnow, Rita Weinbuch Davidson, Lenny Feldmann, and myself at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York on December 9 of this year. See separate article on the CUNY concerts.**

Diamond's *Sonatina* was most recently performed by Beverly Roberts Curnow on March 10, 2005, as part of the concert "From Frosini to Foss" at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. It, along with Diamond's Introduction and Dance, will be performed again by Dr. McMahan on August 28 as part of the eleventh annual AAA Master Class and Concert Series at the Tenri Institute, New York City, in which, among other things, Diamond's accordion music will be discussed at length (see ad elsewhere in the Journal). Other AAA commissioned works not mentioned above that are slated for performance at either this or the upcoming December 9 CUNY concert are Louis Gordon's *Aria, Scherzo, and Finale*, with the composer playing the orchestral reduction on the piano, Gary William Friedman's *Accordion Samba*, for accordion, cello, bassoon, and scat singer, Elie Siegmeister's *Improvisation, Ballade, and Dance*, Otto Luening's *Rondo*, and Normand Lockwood's *Sonata Fantasy*.

While many serious accordion students can quite readily master the *Sonatina*, it is a mature enough work to fit into any professional performer's recital program as well. This was certainly the aim of Mozart in many of his sonatas, though the Clementi and Kuhlau sonatinas were more suitable for the developing intermediate or early advanced student. Accordion students experiencing their first taste of contemporary concert music should therefore find *Sonatina* to be a very accessible and enjoyable addition to their repertoire. As if to prepare accordion students for the level of difficulty required of the *Sonatina*, Diamond accepted a third and final AAA commission four years later that required him to write a comparatively easier solo suitable for the intermediate level student. The result was *Introduction and Dance*, which will be explored in a future article.

Editor's note: We regret to announce that on the day after this article was received, David Diamond passed away at the age of 89 in his Rochester, New York, home.