

Composers Commissioning

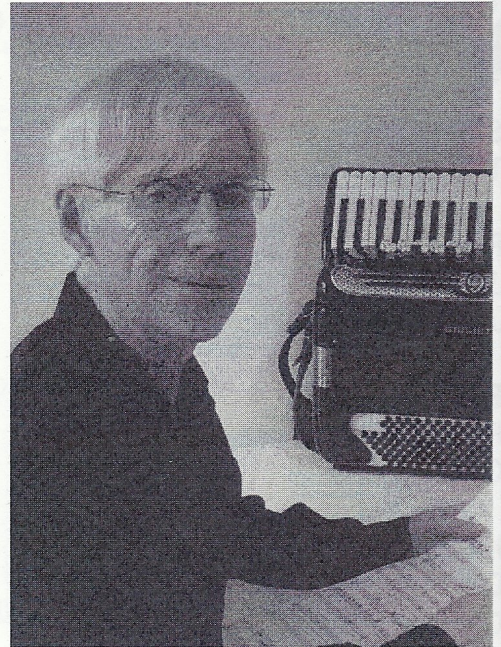
The Twenty-fifth and Thirty-first
Commissioned Works
of the American Accordionists' Association
Composers Commissioning Committee:

Alexander Tcherepnin:
Invention and Tzigane

No. 17 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the A.A.A.

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Note: For this installation of the series I am going to break somewhat with my custom of presenting the AAA commissioned works in strict chronological order of their contract dates due to the rather unusual conditions of Alexander Tcherepnin's final two works for the AAA, *Invention* and *Tzigane*.

It is interesting that, unlike the first AAA commission for accordion by Alexander Tcherepnin, *Partita*, there is no known publicity of or article on his second, *Invention*, or his third, *Tzigane*, in the accordion periodicals of the time, nor is there recorded any official premiere of either. They are, however, listed, along with *Partita*, among the composer's works in the major musical reference resource *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, thus at least making them known to the music world at large.

Partita was the twelfth AAA commission, and was published in 1962, two years after its contract date.* Similarly, a March 1965 letter from the Elsie Bennett authorized the composer to write a second, shorter solo (which he was to eventually entitle *Invention*), but it did not appear in print until late 1968. The delay in publishing, as well as publicizing *Invention* may be due in part to the heavy load of other commissions assigned to this acclaimed and much sought after composer, as well as a busy piano concertizing schedule (often involving his playing his own works), and, as Bennett expressed to him in a letter, a period of disabling mourning through which she was going since the death of her husband, Mortimer, in

December 1966.

Yet another possible obstacle to getting under way with *Invention* is a third contract Bennett offered Tcherepnin, dated March 25, 1965, a day after that for *Invention*. He signed and returned both contracts to Bennett by mail in May of that year. For the larger project he was to compose "a Rhapsody or any other short form for orchestra and solo accordion, not less than 7 minutes in duration," to be completed and submitted by December 1, 1966, and for which he was then to receive \$1,000. This was not to be, however. In his letter of condolence to Bennett a month after her husband's passing, he explained that he would be too busy that year to begin the *Capriccio*, as he was now calling it, or, for that matter, the "solo piece" (again, what was to be *Invention*), the contract of which carried an even earlier deadline of June 1966 (hence already passed). This was mainly due to a tour of performances he was giving throughout Europe of his fifth piano concerto and an upcoming recording date in Paris of the same with RCA Victor, all of which would fully occupy him up through early September. 1966 also saw the publication of his *Harpsichord Suite, Op. 100*, *Sonata da Chiesa, Op. 101*, for solo viola da

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gamba and chamber orchestra, and *Mass, Op. 102*, for three female voices.** In addition, he had recently had his sixth piano concerto, *Op. 99*, published the previous year. Though these works were certainly composed earlier than late 1965 and 1966, time would likely have had to be given to editing the works for publication and consulting with publishers, thus putting yet more pressure on the composer in 1966. He therefore understandably expressed doubt to Bennett that he could turn out works of quality during the scant three months the fall would permit. Bennett consequently waived the deadlines for both assignments, but the larger of the two apparently never got off the ground despite this extension. The other did succeed, however, though at least two and a half years past the original contractual deadline of June 1966, as mentioned earlier. During these years (1965-68) Bennett found time to commission five other composers and both publish and publicize their new works: *Prelude of the Sea*, by Carlos Surinach; *Introduction and Dance*, by David Diamond; *Danza Ritual and Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*, for Accordion, Strings, Brass, and Percussion, by Jose Serebrier; and *Lilt*, by William Grant Still. (All but Serebrier were “repeaters” who had been previously commissioned by the AAA; these later

contributions will be discussed in future articles in this series.)

There are no records or correspondence in the Bennett archive that reveal the compositional process or goals of *Invention*. Only two documents exist regarding the piece. The first is the aforementioned letter of “authorization” (rather than the usual AAA official contract form), dated March 24, 1965, by Bennett, to Tcherepnin to compose an “unaccompanied accordion solo of not less than 3 minutes in length of any nature of your choosing”, and for which he was to be paid \$125, \$50 of which was to serve as an advance on royalties to be paid by the publisher (stipulated to be O. Pagani). The second appears over a gulf of three and a half years. Dated November 19, 1968, it is again from Bennett to Tcherepnin informing him that Carmen Carrozza had supplied fingering for the left hand part of *Invention* (the first time the title was mentioned in the correspondence) and that the manuscript was in the hands of the printers for publication by O. Pagani, which would hopefully take place by early December. It may be safely assumed that the assistance supplied by the materials regarding composing for the accordion Bennett sent to Tcherepnin when he wrote *Partita* in the early 1960s, as well as Carrozza’s test playing of the first draft and making necessary suggestions and changes with the composer at that time, buoyed Tcherepnin when he wrote the final two commissions later on. Nevertheless, he did ask Bennett in his correspondence with her about the ill-fated *Capriccio* to coach him in writing for accordion with orchestra when he could find the time to commence with that project; and, in another letter, Bennett offered to assist him in writing at the elementary level (about which more is written below).

The production of *Tzigane* generated considerably more correspondence than did *Invention*. The earliest hint of this piece being commissioned may be found in a note of Bennett’s to herself, dated June 15, 1966, and indicating that she had sent copies to Tcherepnin of the earlier AAA solo by George Kleinsinger, *Prelude and Sarabande*, and the just-published *Prelude of the Sea* (the contract for which bears the same date as



Alexander Tcherepnin with wife Lee Hsien Ming and Elsie Bennett at a Brooklyn Music Teachers Guild event, May 7, 1965, shortly after being commissioned to write *Invention* and *Capriccio* and two years before the commission for *Tzigane*.

From the Elsie Bennett archive.

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that for the never realized *Capriccio* of our subject), by Surinach. They were clearly examples of modern works aimed at the intermediate rather than advanced accordion student. Whatever elements may have been technically challenging in them at that level were balanced by their relatively short durations. Bennett was advised by noteworthy accordion teachers of the time that there was a need for such commissions occasionally to help students broaden their repertoire from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century transcriptions to twentieth-century original works during their intermediary stages of development on their instrument. These two offerings would serve as good models for Tcherepnin to achieve this goal and write easier, shorter pieces than his more difficult and lengthy *Partita* that preceded them. In fact, except for Serebrier's *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*, all of the current pieces of the other composers just mentioned were commissioned with that express purpose in mind and succeeded in carrying it out. Furthermore, these works fulfilled another purpose in both state and national AAA competitions: test pieces for intermediate level divisions (as did the more difficult, lengthier commissions for the advanced divisions). Also, accordion adjudicators sometimes complained that the longer test pieces (such as Creston's *Prelude and Dance* and Flagello's *Introduction and Scherzo*) took too much time in the highly enrolled contest categories of those burgeoning years of the accordion and shorter ones would be welcome.

Whether or not *Tzigane* was intended to fulfill this need is conjectural for a couple of reasons to be explained below. The contract for *Tzigane* was issued on July 14, 1967, and was apparently retroactive to the actual composition of the piece, reading as follows: "The [AAA] hereby agrees to pay you [Tcherepnin] the sum of \$51 as payment in full for the piece 'TZIGANE'[sic] which we have just received. (\$50.00 of this \$51.00 will be an advance on royalties to be paid by Pietro Deiro Publishers.)" Tcherepnin, always business minded, penciled in the addendum "that will be 10% of the selling price." The contract was in compliance with a proposal by Bennett in a letter accompanying the contract in which the conditions would be that 1) the piece would be published by Deiro; 2) the composer would accept a \$50 advance on royalties up front; 3) he would allow the AAA to take credit for commissioning this pre-existing piece and "make it legal" via a one-dollar fee to him to show

it was commissioned.

An earlier post sent on July 4 by Tcherepnin to Bennett contained a copy of *Tzigane* and a note that suggested that Bennett may have requested an intermediate level piece from him, already knew that *Tzigane* existed, and wished to examine it, perhaps to see if it fit her description of what she wanted:

"According to your suggestion, I am joining herewith the photostat reproduction of the *Tzigane*, that I have edited according to your indications. I realize that it is not a piece for beginners, rather a concert piece. So even if you feel that it is worthy for publication and find a publisher for it, I expect to do the beginner piece sometime during the fall before starting the composition of the *Capriccio*."

From this statement it is clear that *Tzigane* was offered simply as a piece he wrote that might find a place in the accordion repertoire but not necessarily be aimed at either the intermediate or beginning student. In fact, it is quite virtuosic, if short. Actually, *Invention*, though challenging in places, is quite similar in difficulty and length to the intermediate level works contributed by those mentioned above, and would certainly join their ranks comfortably. Also, it appears as if Bennett was not seeking another intermediate level "test piece" for competitions at this point after all, but rather something truly for the beginner. Therefore, Tcherepnin's offer to compose a "beginner piece" seems to be taken up by Bennett in a letter she sent Tcherepnin a half year later on January 4, 1968:

"I was thinking about your solo piece...and I want to remind you that the piece should be very easy. I had hoped we could use it in the early teaching grades. It is hard enough to be a composer, and inspiration is important, but it is really difficult to compose something easy but interesting. It is also very difficult to make the piece modern and at the same time easy, and especially hard to write the piece as it doesn't sound like our old fashioned music in a tonality and at the same time easy. You have a very hard job on your hands. . . . I really am good at one thing—that is knowing if it is easy or not. I have learned the hard way, through about 30 years of teaching..."

As with the *Capriccio*, however, there is no evidence that Tcherepnin ever found the time in his

busy schedule to write such a piece, and no contract was ever formally offered to him to do so.

The titles of all three of Tcherepnin's accordion solos are generic and denote a musical form and/or style of music. "*Partita*" is derived from the baroque era and generally consists of an introduction or prelude followed by a variety of short movements in varying tempi and character usually following popular dance forms of the times, such as the sarabande, courante, allemande, gigue, minuet, and others. The six Bach *Partitas* for harpsichord, composed in the 1720s, constitute famous examples of such a form. (The *Partita* certainly did fall into several movements, but did not follow the dance traditions of Bach's day.) The title of the "invention" stems from Italian contrapuntal improvisations in the seventeenth century which led to what were typically short one-movement pieces with special and novel devices, such as imitative counterpoint, extensive development of clever motifs, and a variety of moods. Again, Bach's 2-part and 3-part *Inventions* for harpsichord are famous examples, although many composers, including the writer, have applied the title to such short, experimental pieces since then, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (See my *Three Inventions for Clarinet and Accordion* on Youtube, for example). "*Tzigane*" is derived from the Hungarian *cigány*, which entered English via French. It is a general term referring to gypsy or gypsy-like music suggestive of eastern European ethnic styles. This usually translates into lively tempi with much bravura and featuring melodies built on odd scales (i.e., not built on the major and minor scales of Western European tradition). Ravel's rhapsodic *Tzigane*, for violin and piano, is perhaps the most well-known work of this title from the twentieth century.

Most of the Bach *Inventions* resemble the form of the fugue and thus carry a single thematic idea (called the "subject") from an opening "exposition" of two-part or three-part imitative counterpoint through a series of developmental episodes, modulating in a rhythmically flowing, unbroken manner through various related keys to a climatic ending that often gives one final, dramatic

restatement of the subject. By contrast, Tcherepnin's *Invention*, though dressed in modern chromatic lines of counterpoint with occasional dissonant clashes between parts at the outset, tends to fall into distinctly contrasting motivic sections that do not resemble the baroque style. Contrasts of tempi, with many expressive moments of *accelerando* and *ritardando* abound and there are three contrasting motifs that occur in exchange with each other in its various sections. The overall form might be roughly described as a kind of five-part rondo with coda that divides into the following sections: A (marked "Slowly" ♩ = 48; measures 1-11); B ("Slightly faster", measures 12-19), B1 ("Return to ♩ = 63"; measures 20-22); C ("Slowing down gradually", measures 23-26), a dramatic, somewhat dissonant set of descending chords that lead to what is a vague return of the A section ("Slowly, as at the beginning ♩ = 48", measures 27-35) that cadences on a sustained diminished 7th chord with an additional dissonating pitch that introduces the final section, D, marked as a "Cadenza" (♩ = 92; measures 36-45). The cadenza consists of many rapid, upward moving scales of unusual combinations of half and whole steps that eventually shift direction and crash down to three dramatic whole-note chords, after which the piece ends with two slow and quiet measures ("Very slow ♩ = 40") reminiscent of a motif from section A and

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Alexander Tcherepnin and Elsie Bennett at her Brooklyn, NY, home, February 4, 1968, several months before the publication of *Invention* and *Tzigane*. From the Elsie Bennett archive.

stopping on a hollow sounding D chord, minus its third. Despite its near-atonal chromaticism and contrapuntal dissonances, there is a subtle Russian flavor in the music reflecting the composer's heritage. Another interesting feature of this piece is that it only uses the left-hand chordal buttons once, three measures from the end, where three massive, dissonant polychords require multiple pitches in both hands. Therefore, the piece may be played equally well on either the stradella system (for which it was conceived) or either of the two prevalent free bass systems (including the chordal button measure where the left-hand chordal buttons can easily be duplicated by four-finger figurations).

While there is no known commentary by Tcherepnin or Bennett on either *Invention* or *Tzigane* in any of the accordion periodicals of the time or the surviving correspondence between composer and commissioner, there does exist an interview between them appearing on the back cover of the published Pietro Deiro Publications score of *Tzigane* that briefly explains the composer's inspiration to write a "gypsy" piece and describes the general form and character of the work:

Interview with Alexander Tcherepnin

"30 years to realize this ambition," says the author Alexander Tcherepnin when interviewed by Mrs. Elsie Bennett of the American Accordionists' Association.

It was at the Roumanian Pavilion in the [1939] World Exposition in New York City that I [Tcherepnin] was impressed by the music of a performer playing the popular Roumanian recorder. The character of the music remained with me and it was only now with *Tzigane* that I have been able to cultivate the sounds and thoughts of the time.

None of the themes used in *Tzigane* are folk themes yet the Roumanian gypsy character persists. Its grandioso type introduction of an improvising nature leads to a fire-like gypsy dance which becomes the climax of the piece.

Since my first composition for accordion, I felt a great urge to further explore the possibilities of this instrument. All of this led to this sincere effort *Tzigane*, dedicated to you [Elsie Bennett] for your persistent efforts in acquiring new music for the accordion.

[signed] Alexander Tcherepnin

The gypsy flavor of the opening slow section ("Sostenuto ♩ = 84"), in which the meter frequently shifts between 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, and 6/4, is largely attained by passionate, bravura melodic lines that frequently break into rapid, flamboyant thirty-second-note runs using eastern European-type scales made up of conventional Western half- and whole-steps mixed with slightly wider augmented seconds (also prevalent in the music of the Mid-eastern cultures further south). This exotic effect is occasionally punctuated with strongly accented, dissonant polychords and fortified with long sustained notes in the bass (though all the real action is carried by the right hand in this section). This long, thirty-nine-measure prelude finally climbs upward to the lively "gypsy dance" section ("Animato ♩ = 142"), which begins quietly at first but grabs our attention by the highly dissonant, accented dyads in minor 2nds that open it. This fevered eighty-three-measure romp persists to the end in a steady 2/4 meter, driven by whirling sixteenth notes in the right hand and an incessant oom-pah accompaniment in the left hand. All ends abruptly with four massive, staccato polychords, the last of which is based on A, the "key" in which the movement began.

Both *Invention* and *Tzigane* hold their own quite successfully with the more extensive, varied, well known, and frequently performed *Partita* and deserve equal status with it. It is hoped that our young and upcoming artists will give this delightful trilogy of contrasting works its proper due in future programs and recordings.

*See the 2003 AAA Festival Journal article in this series regarding both the composer and his creation of *Partita* for the AAA and for a background to the present article.

**For some reason, Tcherepnin never gave opus numbers to his three accordion pieces, as well as a few other works for other instruments. See "Alexander Tcherepnin: A Generic Catalogue of Works," by Lily Chou, at http://www.tcherepnin.com/alex/comps_alex.htm#misc, on the Tcherepnin Society webpage.

Dr. McMahan's workshop entitled "Scales, Your Favorite Subject!" is scheduled for Friday, July 11th at 9:00 a.m. in the Sleepy Hollow Room located on the main level in the conference center of the Double Tree (Tarrytown).