

Composers Commissioning

The Thirty-second Commissioned Work
of the American Accordionists' Association
Composers Commissioning Committee:

**Paul Creston: Embryo Suite, Op. 96, and a
Personal Appreciation of the Composer's
Contribution to the Classical Accordion**

**No. 20 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the A A A**

Robert Young McMahan, DMA

*Classical Accordionist, Composer, Research Writer,
Prof. of Music Theory, Composition, and Accordion,
The College of New Jersey,
Chair, AAA Composers Commissioning Committee*

**Note: the thirty-first commission, Alexander
Tcherepnin's Tzigane, was discussed in the 2014
issue of the AAA Festival Journal.**



Paul Creston: Embryo Suite, Op. 96

The *Embryo Suite* was the last of Creston's impressive accordion tetralogy, all commissioned by his good friend Elsie Bennett and the AAA over a span of eleven years, from 1957 through 1968. The first of these, *Prelude and Dance*, Op. 69 (commissioned in



Paul Creston and Elsie Bennett, discussing Creston's first AAA commission, *Prelude and Dance*. St. Malachy's Church, New York City, where Creston served as organist for many years. March 1957. This is probably the earliest photo of both of them together.

1957 and published in 1958), was also the first of the AAA commissions, and like the last (curiously bearing the "retrograde inversion" opus number of 96), a solo. It is more than likely the best known and loved of all the commissioned works to the present, and undoubtedly the most frequently performed, and by at least four generations of advanced students or professional accordionists to date. The two middle works, the Concerto, Op. 75 (the third AAA commission, 1958-60), and the Fantasy, Op. 85 (the twenty-fourth, 1964-66), were conceived for accordion and orchestra, though, as pointed out above, the composer indicated in the published score of the latter that it might also be performed just as a solo. Like the *Prelude and Dance*, it is equally probable that the Concerto holds the record for the most performances with an actual orchestra (including twice by this writer alone) of the seven AAA works for accordion and orchestra commissioned up to the present.

One explanation for the popularity of the four Creston works is that they are all ebullient, lively, joyful dance-like compositions, with jazzy syncopations, oftentimes bluesy or conversely pastel colored impressionistic harmonies, conventional melodic phrasing, and longstanding, familiar overall forms. Musicologists have pointed out (perhaps because of

continued



Creston, Carmen Carrozza, and Bennett, discussing a draft of the *Prelude and Dance*. August 1957.



Mort and Elsie Bennett and Louise and Paul Creston at the Crestons' home in White Plains, New York. August 1960. They had all become close friends over the years and enjoyed many social occasions, both formal and informal, together.

these traits) that Creston was the most frequently performed American composer both abroad and in America during the 1940s and 1950s. However, they also observe that his post-romantic, though Americanized, genre of music waned in popularity with the ascendancy of the more abstract atonal and avant garde movements of the 1960s. It is thus ironic that the period in which he was commissioned by the AAA and represented the first of a group of recognized contemporary composers who were to validate the accordion as a proper vessel for original “classical” music coincided with a kind of peer devaluation of a

whole school of once very famous and celebrated neo-classical and post romantic composers. This group not only includes Creston but such world acclaimed luminaries as Copland, Hindemith, and Milhaud, to name just a few, who did not “evolve” into this new post-World War II generation of younger, often radical and experimental composers following in the footsteps of Schönberg and Webern.

While Creston blew into the accordion world like a whirlwind with his bombastic and technically daunting *Prelude and Dance* and *Concerto*, he left it floating on a gentle breeze with a very accessible and moderately easy-to-perform offering, the delightful and carefree *Embryo Suite*. The three-movement work is no less classic Creston, though, than its venerable predecessors, and is filled with the same catchy rhythms, shifts of accents, jazzy chords, and melodies often favoring the Lydian mode (a major scale with a raised fourth note). The contract, dated June 11, 1968, and mailed to the composer’s home in White Plains, New York, stipulated that he was to write a solo not less than five minutes in length, in three movements, and at an “easy grade.” It was to be completed and delivered to the AAA two months later, by August 15, at which time he would be paid \$250. If this was any indication of the country’s economy during that decade, inflation must not have been rampant since Creston was contracted for the same amount eleven years earlier in 1957 for the *Prelude and Dance*! The *Embryo Suite* was published by Pietro Deiro in 1968. It is the last of a handful of short, easier pieces Elsie Bennett commissioned with the purpose of getting younger students to experience and play contemporary original music for their instrument as they progressed upwards toward the greater challenges presented by the majority of AAA commissioned works at the professional level. (See the 2015 Composers Commissioning article for more on this special group of pieces.)

Perhaps the first thing to arouse curiosity about this work is its title. Beyond the common biological definition of the word as the in-between stage of early life following fertilization and preceding fetal development in the womb, is its application to things in general, described in one dictionary source as “something in the early stages that shows potential for development.” By analogy, then, it may be suggested that since the commission essentially called for a “learning piece,” the title likely suggests that it is for young accordion students whose technical progress on their instrument is in its “embryonic” stage—not at the beginning level, but also not yet at an advanced or final point of full development. The only other probable

continued

application of the title would be a notion that it would have something to do with the way the music itself unfolds—perhaps the development of a melodic or rhythmic motif or harmonic pattern introduced in the first movement that undergoes all kinds of vicissitudes throughout it and the remaining movements. Examination of the score, however, does not support this suggestion. All three movements are strongly contrasted in tempo, meter, and motivic material, not to mention ethos. Even their generic titles—“Entrada” (meaning “introduction”), “Sarabande,” and “Rondino”, throwbacks to the Baroque era, suggest strong contrasts in character.

As may be suspected by the titles alone, the *Embryo Suite* is “neoclassical” in design despite the usual modern and lush Crestonian harmonies, shifting rhythms, and, in the first movement, consistent 5/4 time signature. The overall tempo scheme of the three movements follows the classic plan of fast/slow/fast.

Harkening back to the age from which the titles of the movements come, opening sections named “Introduction” or the like were normally slow and stately, as may be encountered in the first division of the so-called “French Overtures” of Lully and others in the time of Louis XIV, or the beginnings of otherwise lively first movements of eighteenth century symphonies, so frequent in those of Haydn; or, if they are free-standing separate movements, usually titled “Prelude” or the equivalent in another language (e.g., the rarely used “Entrada,” Creston’s choice here) of multi-movement Baroque suites for harpsichord or orchestra, their tempi may be either slow or fast, depending upon the composer’s whim. Creston decided to take the middle road in his bouncy, jolly *Entrada*, marking it “Maestoso,” but setting the metronome rate at the snappy, jaunting pace of quarter note equals ca. 112 beats per minute. Given that this is the first movement of a short set of three pieces tailored for the budding young musician, whose limited scope of listening experiences may not yet encompass concert works in the new musical trends of our times, one might playfully suggest that Creston’s title was intended to have a double meaning; for in one dictionary reference, a secondary non-musical definition of the word is “an expedition or journey into unexplored territory.” A certainty, however, is that another possible speculation that Creston might have inferred through the title that his music was now moving in some radical new direction is out of the question. Though Creston’s style is certainly unique, this composition does not reflect any revolutionary upheavals of his longstanding musical language, which remained steadfastly the same in all his



The Crestons and Bennetts, August 1966. Possibly at the Bennetts’ home and Bennett Music School, on Empire Blvd., Brooklyn.

acknowledged works throughout his entire career.

Creston once briefly described his compositional procedures in an interview with Elsie Bennett that survives on a scrap of paper in her archive (now preserved in the World of Accordions Museum):

I consider my music to be pantonal. This is a free tonality in which all keys are related, and freely go from one to another. This gives a feeling of tonality [being in a key], but the performer doesn’t stay in the one key for very long, although he does have cadences [key-defining temporary stopping points] with each key as he is in it.”

The frequent change of tonal centers is perhaps more clearly evident in the *Entrada* than in any of the other accordion works of Creston. The 32-measure movement falls into three large divisions of more-or-less equal portions, beginning with the rambunctious first of two principal melodic themes. The first two segments clearly establish the tonal center of G major at their outset, but the third and final segment begins in the dominant key of D (the reverse of what would normally happen in conventional tonal music of the past) before the more traditional return to the home key of G at the end. During each segment, however, the music meanders to different keys at an average of two measures each, often by means of the time honored method of modulation via melodic sequence. For example in the first segment of twelve measures, the key goes through five changes from the beginning tonic key of G major: C major, A minor, D major (the “proper” classic dominant relationship to the initial home key of G for the entrance of the second principal theme, a rather martial, dotted rhythm melody), C major, and B major, before an upward moving melodic sequence serves as a transition back to the tonic key of G and the main theme for the second segment. Throughout the

continued

movement, as in all of Creston’s music, the sense of key is attractively blurred by unstable seventh, ninth, augmented, and other unexpected chordal types and the frequent chromatic alteration of major and minor scale sources for the melodic line into modes, particularly the Aeolian (same as the natural minor scale), Lydian, and Mixolydian (major scale with lowered seventh note) forms.

The Sarabande faithfully follows the dance form so often used as the second movement in Baroque harpsichord suites: slow tempo, triple meter (in this instance, 3/4 time), somber mood created by the plodding tempo and the minor key, and an incessant syncopated short/long rhythmic pattern in the left-hand accompaniment, adding to the funereal effect. The melody is more often than not either in the tonic key of A minor or the dominant one of E minor. This is a traditional key relationship, but, in true Creston fashion, the scales on which the theme is based toggle between the Aeolian and Dorian modes (the latter being a natural minor scale with a raised 6th scale degree), which add to the somewhat melancholy effect.

Miniature echos of Creston’s virtuosic rondo that ends his groundbreaking accordion concerto are felt in the Rondino that brings the *Embryo Suite* to a similarly spirited and cheerful conclusion. Essentially in the key of A (as was the rondo in the Concerto), a fast fingered right hand line driven by either rhythmically stomping solid chords or ongoing “omm-pah” bass rhythm flies through at least two strongly defined themes that result in a traditional rondo form. The form itself may be diagrammed as A/B/A/B1 (plus conceivably C)/A /coda. As is typical, unusual key changes, such as the unrelated keys of G and E flat in the B themes, and modal touches abound throughout.

As intimated above, the *Embryo Suite* is an ideal introduction to modern music for the serious intermediate level student, but it is also of high enough musical caliber and interest to warrant inclusion in professional programs, as does happen occasionally. The earliest such example of the latter this writer could find in print was by Linda Soley Reed as part of the Contemporary Music Festival at Bridgeport University on March 2, 1975. This could have been the work’s official premiere.

One final claim that might be made for the *Embryo Suite* is that either of its outer movements could serve as an excellent encore selection in a recital—fast, brief, and merry.

Postscript and Creston’s Legacy to the Accordion World

The eleven years (1957-68) during which Creston produced his four accordion works constitute as busy a “mid-career” period as can be claimed for practically any composer in history. Creston was fifty-one when he wrote the *Prelude and Dance* and had just turned 62 when he completed the *Embryo Suite*. Including the four compositions for accordion, he turned out over forty works, practically all of which were commissions from various musical as well as media organizations, during this, his middle-aged years. They include nine works for orchestra, two for concert band, a violin concerto, a harp solo, a concertino for piano and woodwind quintet, seven for piano, four for organ, three for voice, four for choir, and several for television or film, one of which (his score for a documentary on the poet William Carlos Williams) won for him an Emmy Award.*



Elsie Bennett and Paul Creston taking turns examining and playing parts of the draft of the *Embryo Suite*. August and October, 1968. Pianist/organist/composer Creston picked up the accordion while composing the four AAA commissions and gained considerable mastery of it over the years.

In addition to this active creative life, he gave an extra lifetime’s worth of service to the musical profession and community in general as president of the National Association for American Composers and Conductors (“ASCAP,” 1956-60), a director of ASCAP (1960-68), and as organist at the famous St. Malachy Roman Catholic Church in New York (1934-67). He also found time to teach both privately and at schools to which he was invited as a guest composer. Among the many distinguished composers who sought him out as their mentor in their younger years were John Corigliano and the AAA’s own William Schimmel. Finally, Creston, already the author of numerous published articles on various aspects of music, took time to write a seminal volume based on his long time study and observation of western European rhythm, *Principles of Rhythm*, which was published in 1964. This was followed in the early 1970s by three other important publications, *Creative Harmony*, *Music and Mass Media*, and *A Composer’s Creed*, and, at the end of that decade, a continuation of his study of rhythm culminated in his second and final book on the subject, *Rational Metric Notation*.

Shortly after the publication of the *Embryo Suite*, Creston not only bid farewell to the accordion, but also

his native New York, accepting a tenured position as a professor of music and composer in residence at Central Washington State College (now University), in Ellensburg, Washington. He retired to the warmer climes of Poway, California, near San Diego, in 1975 where he died in 1985. Though spending the last seventeen years of his life on the far opposite side of the continent, he and his wife Louise kept in close contact to



continued



Mary Tokarski

Concert Accordionist

Available for

Workshops – Master Classes – Coaching Sessions

“An Accordion! What Is That?” - A child-friendly early-reader
(iBook available - www.accordionbee.com)

Author – Karen Malan-Urbe, Illustrator – Joan Geller Grauman,
Narrator & Accordionist – Mary Tokarski (CD included)

15 Maplewood Lane, Northford, CT 06472

Telephone: 203-484-5095 www.accordions.com/mary

email: mary.tokarski@comcast.net

Congratulations to Nathan Chapeton

AAA Representative to the Coupe Mondiale

Masters Division

Osimo, Italy – September 2017



Also NOW available: Lessons on Skype! Go to mary.tokarski2 – see you there.

the end with their dear friend in Brooklyn, Elsie Bennett, as may be seen in the large volume of correspondence between them, not to mention numerous home photographs of the Crestons with the Bennett family on their many social and informal outings, preserved in the Bennett archive. But in death they did come home to rest along with numerous other celebrated American composers in Fernwood Cemetery, Hartsdale, New York, the state that not only birthed and nurtured them, but, through Creston, Bennett, and the AAA, one might argue the contemporary classical accordion as well.

For many of the multitude of promising baby boomer accordionists who came of age during the 1960s, Creston’s first two accordion works served as very important introductions to twentieth-century music and a wake-up call that a new instrument like the accordion required its own timely original music to be validated in the classical music community. The respect of one’s peers in a profession is always necessary for survival of a new idea (or, in this case, instrument). Many of these young adults went on to learn more about contemporary music and styles beyond that of Creston and became important proponents as both concert artists and, in many cases, composers of the “New Music.” The baby boomers were the first among many American families to go to college. Many of the accordionists in that generation decided to pursue degrees in Music Education, Music Theory and/or Composition, and even accordion in the handful of institutions of higher learning in the United States where skeptical music faculties could now finally be persuaded to accept the instrument on the basis of its rapidly expanding original repertoire by recognized composers and young, eager virtuosi who were performing it. Among those who earned doctoral degrees in music is the 1975 AAA US Champion, Monica Slomski. She had performed Creston’s *Fantasia* with the Bridgeport Civic Orchestra, Harry Valante, Conductor, in the same program as Linda Soley Reed had played the *Embryo Suite* in 1975 and came to know Creston personally. Her liking of his music and interest in his remarkable career were no doubt the reasons why she decided to choose him as the subject of her dissertation for the DMA in Music Theory at the

University of Missouri in Kansas City. Following his death, she was quite instrumental in persuading the family to donate his papers to UMKC (also famous for its long standing accordion degree founded by Professor Emeritus Joan Cochran Sommers in 1961) and published the authoritative biography and exhaustive bibliography on Creston, *Paul Creston: A Bio-bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1994). Yet another example of the powerful impact Creston had on a whole generation of accordionists (not to mention an indispensable source for this article or any other research on Creston!).

*It is somewhat amusing to observe that the generic title “*Prelude and Dance*” was not limited to the single accordion solo, but was given by Creston to five other of his works, one for orchestra (Op. 25, 1941), two solos for piano (Op. 29, nos. 1, 2, 1942), one for concert band (Op. 76, 1959, composed almost immediately after the AAA commission; a standard and highly popular work performed to this day by bands everywhere), and a duet for two pianos (Op. 120, 1982).

Dr. McMahan, cellist Cecylia Barczyk, and violinist Emmanuel Borowsky will perform Lukas Foss’s second AAA commissioned work, *Triologue*, in the Friday night concert of the 2017 AAA Festival in Princeton, NJ. This will be the first performance since Dr. McMahan, cellist Madeleine Shapiro, and violinist Airi Yoshioka premiered the work with the late composer present in the second AAA concert of contemporary works for or including accordion at the City University of New York Graduate Center, New York City, on March 11, 2005. That performance may also be heard on the recently issued CD recording of AAA commissioned works available on sale at this festival. Dr. McMahan, Ms. Barczyk, and Mr. Borowsky will also be performing the world premiere of Dr. McMahan’s most recent composition, *Romp 5*, for violin, cello, and accordion, at this year’s AAA Master Class and Concert Series at Tenri Institute, New York City, during the weekend of July 28. Two movements of another new work, *Etudes*, by Dave Soldier, a previously commissioned composer by the AAA, will also be premiered there by Dr. William Schimmel, Dr. McMahan, and bassoonist Devon Tipp. ■



THE AMERICAN ACCORDIONISTS' ASSOCIATION

presents The Red Lantern Accordionist

MASTER CLASS & CONCERT SERIES - July 28, 29 and 30, 2017

Dr. William Schimmel, Moderator and Curator

Tenri Cultural Institute • 43A 13th Street • (between 5th and 6th Avenue) • New York, NY
Master Classes at 3:00 p.m. - Ending at 5:00 p.m. • Concerts at 7:00 p.m. Ending at 9:00 p.m.
\$25 per Master Class – \$30 per Concert; \$50 per day (includes Master Class & Concert)
\$135 per entire weekend

For Reservations and Information - 212-876-0827

Accordionbill@gmail.com