

# The Quest to Build a Contemporary Serious Repertoire for the Accordion

## *A Brief History of the A.A.A. Composers Commissioning Committee*

by

Dr. Robert Young McMahan

The American Accordionists' Association was founded in 1938 by twelve of the truly first accordion virtuosi in history. Significantly representing the first generation of these pioneers was Pietro Deiro (1888-1954), who, like his contemporary and fellow A.A.A. founder, Pietro Frosini, had left Italy for America where he introduced the accordion for the first time on the vaudeville stage. He also collaborated with accordion manufacturers to refine the instrument to concert quality (beyond its numerous primitive nineteenth century ethnic prototypes) and create the familiar piano accordion of today. Important second generation co-founders were Charles Magnante, Joseph Biviano, and the only two surviving members today, Charles Nunzio and Anthony Gallarini. All were successful in radio and recording studio work and had also given frequent recitals and workshops which included transcriptions of past masters' works and original classical compositions, usually in nineteenth century style, which they had written for their instrument. The stated goals of the A.A.A. included engaging "in activities for the advancement of the accordion, without pecuniary profit," to "hold competitions and to promote the study and improvements of the accordion," and, important to this discussion, "to publish literature to be of service to accordionists." Regarding the last point, however, nothing is specifically said about building an actual original literature for the instrument. A then outsider to the organization was to eventually address that all-important issue.

In the mid-1940s a young, newly married college girl from Detroit, Elsie Bennett (nee Blum), arrived with her groom, Mortimer Bennett, at his family's original home, Brooklyn, New York. Elsie had been studying the accordion for some time and was in the midst of pursuing a degree in music theory at Wayne University when they moved to Brooklyn. To finish the degree she elected to take courses in orchestration and composition at Columbia University, with the intention of transferring the credits to her would-be alma mater, from which she finally did graduate in 1945. Her composition teacher at Columbia was the already distinguished American compos-

er, and one of the eventual pioneers of electronic music, Otto Luening. When she decided to pursue a Master's Degree at the Columbia Teachers' College, she requested that the accordion be accepted as her major instrumental emphasis. This was allowed, and Columbia assigned her the task of finding a good teacher. She approached Charles Magnante, who, not liking to teach, recommended Joseph Biviano. He consented to this arrangement and was consequently appointed as the official accordion instructor of that school.

Ms. Bennett's required degree recital had to represent all major musical style periods, including the twentieth century. She had no difficulty selecting literature from the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods, since by this time, accordionists had published and performed many transcriptions of works by such masters as Bach, Mozart, and Mendelssohn. Deiro's accordion concertos were also firmly representative of Romantic era music, though they were composed during this century. But the twentieth century was virtually devoid of any significant solo compositions by acclaimed, non-accordionist composers. She discovered a number of ensemble works which included accordion, such as Paul Hindemith's *Kammermusik Nr. 1* and Virgil Thomson's curious opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, as well as in the tavern scene in Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*. But for a solo recital, she had very little to go on in 1946. Nevertheless, she was able to give

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and composer,  
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review the  
newly  
commissioned  
"Accordion  
Samba."



the recital and received her master of Arts degree in that year.

To combat this dearth of original works for the accordion in the future, Luening suggested to his student that composers needed to be commissioned and paid to write for such an unfamiliar instrument if it were ever to gain a prestigious original repertoire. By 1953 Ms. Bennett was deeply involved as an official in the A.A.A. (the result of Biviano's and Deiro's invitation to her to join the organization around the time of her graduation from Columbia). That April she invited Luening to address an open meeting about this very issue. His eloquent and convincing pleas for commissioning works (extensively described and quoted in "Otto Luening Addresses A.A.A. at Open Meeting," *American Accordionists' Association News* 4, n. 2 (April 1953): 3,6) resulted in that organization's establishment of the Composer's Commissioning Committee, with Ms. Bennett as the chair, a position she continues to energetically hold today, forty-four years later! During that time she has shown incredible pluck, determination, and courage in pursuing many of the most celebrated composers of our century to write for an instrument which requires tremendous powers of persuasion to "sell" to the always skeptical classical music community as a valid medium beyond its ethnic and popular stereotypes.

The first contract is dated March 10, 1957, and was awarded to Paul Creston, whose ebullient *Prelude and Dance*, Op. 69, was published by Pietro Deiro in 1958, and premiered by Carmen Carozza in Carnegie Hall, May 18, 1958. Compositions which followed in rapid succession, were, in 1958, Wallingford Riegger's *Cooper Square*, Op. 70, and Creston's Concerto for Accordion and Orchestra, Op. 75 (one of the instrument's major and most virtuosically challenging works); and, in 1959, Virgil Thomson's *Lamentations*, Carlos Surinach's *Pavana and Rondo*, Robert Russell Bennett's *Four Nocturnes*, Henry Cowell's, *Iridescent Rondo*, and William Grant Still's *Aria*. All of these pieces were published, had successful premieres (usually by Carozza) in New York, Boston, or Chicago, in such places as New York's Town Hall and Carnegie Hall, Boston's Symphony Hall, and the Arts Club of Chicago, and received generally positive reviews, particularly in the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, and *Christian Science Monitor*.

Other famous composers who have accepted A.A.A. commissions over the ensuing years include Henry Brant, David Diamond, Lukas Foss, Ernst Krenek, George Kleinsinger, Paul Pisk, Elie Siegmeister, Jose Serebrier, Alexander Tcherepnin, and most recently, Gary William Friedman. Unfortunately, at least as many figures of this rank opted not to write for accordion. Those who Ms. Bennett's files reveal turned down commissions by either saying no at personal interviews or by not returning signed contracts include Marc Blitzstein, William Schuman, Darius Milhaud, Paul Hindemith, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Carlos Chavez, Douglas Moore, Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, Samuel Barber, Vittorio Giannini, Vincent Persichetti, Gian-Carlo Menotti and Luigi Dallapiccola. But it should be understood that not all composers like all instruments, and even if they do, they do not always have the time to pursue every offer made to them, particularly when it involves the unusual. Be that as it may, the number of successfully carried out A.A.A. commissions hovers around fifty at this point.

Since the 1950s, similar organizations to the A.A.A., such as the Accordion Teachers' Guild and various European groups, in addition to individual performers, have also commissioned or had works voluntarily written for them by famous, near famous, and sometimes unknown but worthy composers (particularly among the baby boomer generation) in all forms -- solo, concerto, chamber, etc. -- so that today the repertoire stands at well over five-hundred compositions and is constantly growing.\* It can be claimed, nevertheless, that Ms. Bennett and the A.A.A. were at the forefront of this effort.

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\*For a full international list of original works for or including accordion as of 1980, see Joseph Macerollo (accordion instructor, Royal Conservatory, Toronto), *Accordion Resource Manual* (Canada: Avondale Press, 1980).