

## The Commissioned Works of the American Accordionists' Association

Part 3. The Second, Third, and Fourth Commissions:

Wallingford Riegger (1885-1965):

*Cooper Square* (1958)

Paul Creston (1906-85):

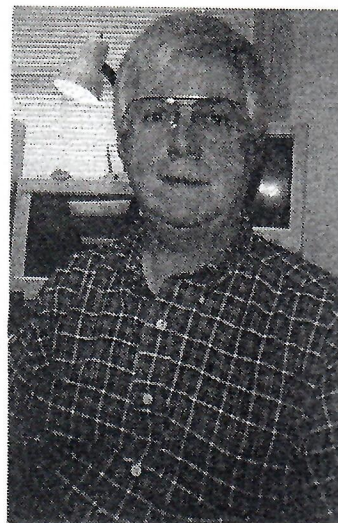
*Concerto for Accordion and Orchestra or Band* (1958)

Virgil Thomson (1896-1989):

*Lamentations* (1959)

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*This is the third article of a continuing series of articles by Dr. McMahan discussing the history and musical qualities of the commissioned works of the Composers Commissioning Committee of the A.A.A., which became active in 1957 under the determined leadership of Elsie M. Bennett. Ms. Bennett has remained its chair for its entire four decades of existence. Sources include correspondence from Ms. Bennett's personal archive, articles from various newspapers, journals, and accordion magazines, interviews between Dr. McMahan and Ms. Bennett, and Dr. McMahan's musical observations of the compositions.*

Following the first commission of the American Accordionists' Association Composers' Commissioning Committee in 1957, Paul Creston's landmark *Prelude and Dance*, the Committee Chairperson, Elsie Bennett, was soon able to obtain three more in close succession, and all within a year of each other: Wallingford Riegger's *Cooper Square* (contracted April 1958), Paul Creston's *Concerto for Accordion and Orchestra or Band* (contracted July 1958), and Virgil Thomson's *Lamentations* (contracted April 1959).

All three composers were greatly respected figures in America's formative period in modern music. Creston and Thomson were generally regarded as the more conservative of the three while Riegger had a somewhat more radical reputation, both musically and politically. He was one of America's earliest composers to utilize the more dissonant twelve-tone, atonal technique and is one of the so-called "American Five" (the other four are Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, who was eventually to accept two A.A.A. commissions, and John Becker). Politically, he was as

outspoken leftist who was required to "witness" on the infamous House Committee on Un-American Activities around the time he wrote *Cooper Square*. Interestingly, though, of the three pieces discussed, Thomson's is the most radical and dissonant while both the Creston and Riegger offerings are quite consonant and almost "popular" in style.

*Cooper Square* was first announced in an article by Elsie Bennett in the May 1959 issue of *Accordion and Guitar World* and the following description of the piece by the composer through Ms. Bennett was offered: "Cooper Square is a three-part song form {"A-B-A form"} in 2/4 time, written in the key of E-minor. Its first part features a tango-like rhythm {not typical of Riegger's style, but probably influenced by ethnic stereotypes of the instrument} utilizing conventional harmonic structure. Its second part, somewhat speeded up in tempo, is more dissonant without being duodecuple (twelve tone). The third part is a return to the beginning followed by a coda." The title was undoubtedly inspired by

the small triangle formed by the meeting of 4th and 5th Avenues, just a few blocks east of Washington Square, in lower mid-Manhattan, and surrounded by the buildings of the renowned Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. There is no published explanation by the composer for this appellation. It was published by Pietro Deiro/Momac Music in 1958 and Premiered, along with three other later A.A.A. commissions (Cowell's *Iridescent Rondo*, Robert Russell Bennett's *Four Nocturnes*, and Carlos Surinach's *Pavanne and Rondo*), by Carmen Carrozza in the twenty-seventh season concert of the National Association for Composers and Conductors, at Carnegie Hall, on November 21, 1959. New York Times critic John Briggs had brief, but very complimentary, things to say about each piece as well as both the instrument and performer. About the Riegger selection he simply stated that it was a "showy display piece for accordion." It was commercially recorded in the 1980's by William Schimmel in his *Finander/Atlantic LP Accordion Revisited*.

The A.A.A. did not let its first commissionee, Paul Creston, rest for very long, for by 1958 he was once again brought into service, this time to write a major composition for accordion and orchestra (also available in band transcription and piano reduction). The Concerto is one of the most virtuosic works in the stradella accordion repertoire and consists of the traditional three movements, following the usual fast / slow / fast tempo scheme. Typical of all Creston's music, it is an attractive and highly assessable blend of jazzy syncopations, free tertian chord structures, and modal scale sources (particularly the Lydian mode, which is like a major scale with a raised fourth degree), with moments of translucent Debussyian "impressionism." Both its publication (by Ricordi) and premiere took place in 1960. Once again, Carmen Carrozza was to do the honors, this time with the Boston Pops Orches-

tra, Arthur Fiedler conducting. Present at the May 10 event was critic Harold Rogers, of the *Christian Science Monitor*, who gave as good a description of the Concerto as any: "That {Creston} turned out an entertaining piece there is no doubt. Mr. Creston enjoys the use of syncopation; again and again he developed captivating rhythms for the orchestra while the solo instrument sang a haunting melody on its own. The opening Allegro maestoso alternated digital acrobatics with sustained, singing melodies.

"The Andante pastoral derived much of its harmonies and moods from the impressionists. There were the whole-tone progressions and certain progressions of the chords. The mood was bucolic-tranquil, contemplative, aspiring.

"*The finale, Rondo presto, returned to a display of speed that kept Mr. Carrozza's right hand flying up and down the keyboard.*"

Creston was no stranger to unorthodox instruments, for in the early 1940's he had written a *Concertino for Marimba and Orchestra* and a saxophone concerto, both of which get fairly frequent performances and, like the *Accordion Concerto*, remain important standard concert repertoire for those instruments. The *Accordion Concerto* has had a fair number of performances since its premiere as well. For example, at least three A.A.A. Board members (Patricia Tragellas, Peter Soave, and the writer), alone have performed it with orchestra at various times. Many others have played the last movement as an unaccompanied solo with great success as well as the entire work accompanied by the piano or orchestral reduction by the composer which appears with the Ricordi publication. Regrettably, it still awaits a commercial recording.

Virgil Thomson had had a long association with the accordion before he wrote *Lamentations*. In fact, the work for which he is possibly most celebrated, his highly abstract, though thor-

oughly tonal, opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (on a text by Gertrude Stein; premiered in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1934), uses the accordion in its orchestration almost as constantly as does Robert Ades's recent opera *Powder Her Face* (the American premiere took place last year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, with William Schimmel on accordion). In strong contrast to the bright, major-key quality of *Four Saints*, however, *Lamentations* opens and ends with violent, dissonant, clashing polychords, played fortissimo with the full master shifts of both manuals wide open. This tension is hardly relieved by intervening sections utilizing parallel minor seconds and a left-hand solo played entirely on the diminished seventh chord bass row. This kind of writing seems to find support in an article on the work by Elsie Bennett in the November 1959 issue of *Accordion and Guitar World*, in which Thomson is quoted as speaking admirably of the accordion's "terrific accents" and "the way it can snarl." He goes on to describe the piece, highlighting certain other idiomatic elements of the instrument: "Lamentations might be said to be in three-part form, although it doesn't adhere strictly to form. Actually, there are a theme, three variations, and a re-statement of the first part. It could be called an accordion 'etude' ... It is a utilization of the structure of the accordion itself to produce a maximum dissonance content ..(B)y contrasting the left and right hands, we

have produced a harmonic richness .... When writing double harmonies it's always better if each hand's harmonies are recognizable.... It's quite exciting ... that there is all of this dissonance going on but you can hear it as separate recognizable chords."

*Lamentations* was published by Santee Music Press in 1960 and premiered by Carmen Carrozza in a recital he gave for the Chicago Arts Club on February 11, 1961. Unfortunately the event received no reviews. Carrozza played it on two later occasions in the year, however, in New York, at N.A.A.C.C. concert at Carnegie Hall, on April 17, and the composer's sixty-fifth birthday concert at Town Hall, on December 18. Brief mention was made of the piece by Paul Lang in the *New York Herald Tribune* ("*Lamentations*) sounded like ersatz organ music, but Carmen Carrozza is a real virtuoso on the belly organ") and Harold Schoenberg in the *New York Times* (" ... Carmen Carrozza produced piercing harmonies").

1959 was a very busy and fruitful year for the Composers' Commissioning Committee, for not only did Virgil Thomson accept the A.A.A.'s invitation to add to the accordion's serious repertoire, but so did three other equally luminous figures: Robert Russell Bennett, Carlos Surinach, and Henry Cowell. Their contributions will be discussed in the next A.A.A. Souvenir Journal.

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