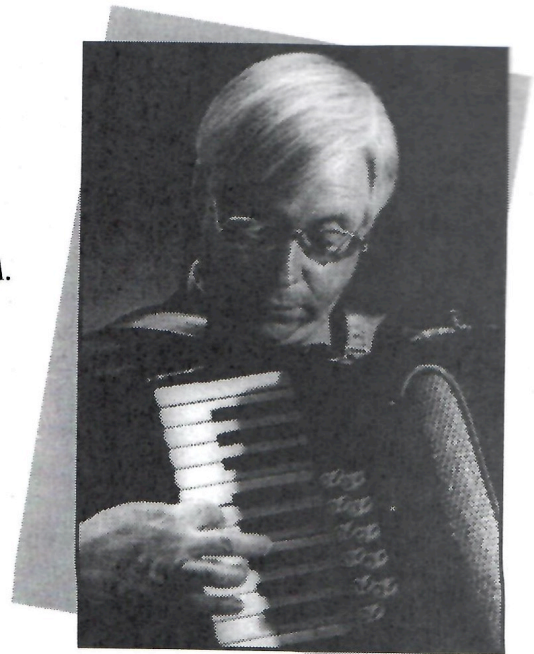


**The Eighth Commissioned Work**  
of the American Accordionists' Association  
Composers Commissioning Committee:

**William Grant Still: *Aria***

*No. 5 of an Ongoing Series on the Commissioned Works of the A. A. A.*

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As stated in the previous article of this series (in the 2000 edition of the Journal), 1959 rates second only to 1960 as the busiest year to date for the A.A.A. Composers Commissioning Committee. At that time, Chairperson Elsie Bennett managed to persuade five noted composers to accept contracts which resulted in the fourth through eighth commissioned works (in 1960 there were seven such commissions). The first four of these, Virgil Thomson's *Lamentations*, Carlos Surinach's *Pavana and Rondo*, Robert Russell Bennett's *Four Nocturnes*, and Henry Cowell's *Iridescent Rondo*, were discussed in the two most recent articles, leaving only the last for this installation: *Aria*, by one of America's most eminent African American composers, William Grant Still. Through this transaction, Ms. Bennett and the Still family became close friends. Fortunate outcomes of this relationship included a greater amount of correspondence between the two parties and more publicized writings by Ms. Bennett on both the composer and the work than was the usual case for other A.A.A. commissions. Therefore, more information than usual will likewise be imparted here, with concentration on only the one piece and composer rather than the customary three.

Born in 1895 to educated and musical parents, Still grew up under very favorable conditions in Little Rock, Arkansas (which, at that time, was a haven of racial tolerance and opportunity in an otherwise Jim Crow region of America). He was exposed to music through his grandmother's casual singing of hymns and spirituals around the house and his stepfather's love of stage music and the arts in general. He ultimately became skilled on the violin, cello, and oboe, matriculated in music at Wilberforce University and Oberlin College, studied composition with George Chadwick and Edgard Varèse, served as an arranger for George C. Handy, Artie Shaw, and Paul Whiteman, among many others, and an orchestrator for radio programs. His love of spirituals and the blues eventually pre-empted his modernist training from Varèse, and his hauntingly romantic music always exuded these qualities. His most famous

work is the Afro-American Symphony

(1930), but the pinnacle of his career was reached in the premiere of one of his eight operas, *Troubled Island*, in New York, in 1949.

Still has often been called the "*Dean of African-American Composers.*" This is partly because, as a black American, he experienced many firsts in the history of our country's music: the first to write a major orchestral work which was performed by a major American orchestra, to conduct a major symphony orchestra in the United States as well as in the deep South, to have an opera produced by a major American company, to have an opera televised over a national network (posthumously), and, yes, to write a classical work for accordion. Elsie Bennett invited him to do so sometime in 1959. This proved to be a favorable time to offer the commission to Still since he seemed to be in a lull between two very active periods. In 1958, for example, he had completed his third symphony and an opera, *Minette Fontaine*, among other works, and in 1960 he would produce *Patterns* and *The Peaceful Land*, both for orchestra, and his "*Lyric*" String Quartet. 1959, on the other hand, only saw a discarded piece for orchestra (*Legend*) and a song cycle (*From the Hearts of Women*).

Since the Still family was then living in Los Angeles, New York-based Carmen Carrozza, who usually served as an advisor for commissionees, as well as performer for their resulting pieces' premieres, suggested to Ms. Bennett that she ask Myron Floren, who was active at that time in Hollywood on the immensely popular Lawrence Welk television show, to assist Still. Floren agreed to do this and wrote to Ms. Bennett on January 11, 1960, that he had just consulted with the composer. Apparently, Still had already completed the piece before Floren arrived at his home, for the accordionist reported that Still's musician wife, Verna Arvey, "played the *Aria* on the piano first and then we began working from the beginning and I would play each

phrase with different switches until he heard the sound that he had had in mind in writing the piece."

Still also wrote to Ms. Bennett about Floren's visit, and enthusiastically sang his praises of the accordion. This Christmas Eve, 1959, letter was partially quoted in an article by Ms. Bennett on the commission in the February 1961 issue of *Accordion and Guitar World*: "My association with Mr. Floren made me realize what the instrument can accomplish in the way of virtuosity and in sustained and flowing melodies. One can no longer speak simply of 'the sound' of an accordion, because of the variety of its tonal effects. After hearing some of the striking and appealing things that can be done on it, I would say that it not only has many resources, but it could very well be used with marked effectiveness in the orchestra. I am interested enough to want to again write for the accordion, and I am sure that as other composers listen to and study the instrument carefully, they, too, will share my enthusiasm for it." Still did, in fact, write another piece, *Lilt*, for the A.A.A. several years later, to be discussed in a future issue. In the ensuing years, *Aria* would serve as the test piece a number of times in A.A.A. competitions. It is also one of the most frequently performed pieces of the A.A.A. commissions, probably owing to both its accessible romantic and expressively melodious nature and its reasonable technical demands. Concerning the latter, however, *Aria* is not as easy as it first appears on the page. Though its required finger work is easily rivaled by the heavy virtuosic requirements of such other A.A.A. commissions as the Creston Concerto and Krenek Toccata, the writer has played few pieces that make as high a demand on the performer's expressive abilities and expose performance mistakes so clearly!

The world premiere of *Aria* took place on Sunday afternoon, May 15, 1960, as part of the Sano Accordion Symphony concert at Town Hall. Participating artists were Eugene Ettore, conductor of the accordion orchestra, guest artist Myron Floren, who, as planned, performed *Aria* as well as Robert Russell Bennett's *Four Nocturnes* (another A.A.A. commission which was pre-

miered a year before; see previous article in this series), and Judy Procida, who served as narrator for a musical novelty tribute by Ettore (with words by his student Rosemarie Gerber [now Cavanaugh]) to Floren entitled *Hey! Myron*. The rest of the program consisted of accordion orchestra transcriptions of such works as Moussorgsky's *A Night on Bald Mountain*, Donizetti's overture to *Don Pasquale*, and the finale of Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony*. Francis D. Perkins, of the New York Herald Tribune, gave a favorable review, saying that the two original works (the Still and Bennett pieces) possessed "melodic appeal and variety of mood," and that they "revealed their composers' understanding of the accordion's requirements and resources." So grateful was the A.A.A. for this delightful little piece that Mr. Still was honored on June 25, 1962, at the Annual A.A.A. Dinner Dance, at the Commodore Hotel in New York. Unable to attend, he sent his good friend, composer Kay Swift (perhaps most acclaimed for her 1930 Broadway hit, *Fine and Dandy*), to receive a special plaque for him.

Concerning the music itself, in an undated letter from Still to Ms. Bennett which must have been received sometime during early 1960 the composer describes the form of his piece as a rondo which breaks down into the following eight subdivisions:

1. Theme I / 2. Theme II (extended by development) / 3. Theme I / 4. Here a codetta takes the place of a transition / 5. Theme II (strongly contrasted and extended by development) / 6. Retransition / 7. Theme I / 8. Coda.

Years later, in 1968, Still gave another description of *Aria* in a letter to Ms. Bennett. He wrote in the third person so that she could more fluently include it in a future article of hers about him. In this instance, the title is explained as well. (As it turned out, the quotation was never used.)

The composer's love for opera led him to write a broad, soaring melody reminiscent of operatic music. This appears at the beginning and end of *Aria*--, the sections separated by a Scherzo-like movement demanding nimble fingers and a clear sense of rhythm. The piece

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employs many of the unique resources typical of the accordion as an instrument.

Aria may thus be more readily heard as a large A/B/A1 form rather than a rondo. This is because Still's earlier designated items 1 through 4 (comprising the "Broad, soaring melody" to which he refers directly above) seem to be all of one fabric, owing to the slow but rather rubato tempo and a fairly faithful adherence to the Aeolian mode (the unaltered A-minor key) in the main double period portion of the principal theme; item 5 (the "Scherzo-like movement" mentioned in the second quotation above) is in a sprightly, faster tempo, and a considerably chromaticized but clear F-major key, and presents a strong contrast to what came before despite its disguised derivation from the earlier "Theme II"; and, following the section 6 blues-like, slow retransition, a truncated, but nonetheless lengthy, return of the opening section's main theme and, very importantly, slow tempo and A-minor tonality, prior to the dramatic coda. The "unique resources typical of the accordion" which Still employs are modest, but effectively idiomatic. These include tasteful uses of the "clarinet," "oboe," and "musette" right-hand switches in particular, a brief three-measure employment of bellows shake in the "Scherzo," and most importantly, a highly expressive, singing, violinistic melodic line, especially in the outlying slow sections, dependent on sensitive bellows-controlled nuances possible only on the accordion among the keyboard instruments.

The mood of the entire work is very peaceful and poetically fragile, with characteristically Stillian touches of modal, pentatonic, and quartel writing moderately imposed upon an otherwise frankly tonal and post-romantic style. There is also a melancholy, and almost resigned and tragic, quality to the music. Still was a gentle and kind man by nature, and his music often had this quiet, understated, but highly expressive, "bluesy" quality (though it can have surprising, but very natural, outbreaks of intense emotion at times, as happens in the coda of Aria). But there may be another reason for Aria's bittersweet quality. Still's daughter, Judy, long-time promoter of her father's music and head of William Grant Still Music stated in a 1995 letter to the writer that in the 1960s her father was "tired, discouraged and less optimistic, so that his music had a wistful, lyrical

quality." It has been well documented that the discouragement he experienced was that of being somewhat disregarded in the post-World War II world of contemporary music because he was not writing in the then fashionable and more dissonant, expressionistic atonal style which he had rejected decades earlier after having studied with Varèse. In fact, many of the more romantic or "neoclassical" composers who had thrived during the first half of the century, and who often accepted commissions from the A. A. A. later on, were going through similarly lonely periods in their careers. Happily, though, a more balanced view of works in various styles emerging from the second half of the Twentieth Century is being taken from the safe distance of the fledgling new Millennium, and the less radical music of that era is beginning to receive more serious attention. Accordingly, by the time of Still's one hundredth anniversary festival, in 1995, at the University of Arkansas, where most of his papers are preserved, and where the writer was invited to give a performance/lecture on the two accordion pieces, his music was already beginning to enjoy a posthumous revival. Today, one will find specially marked bins of his music in most record and large book stores (which is more than one can say about many other deserving American contemporary composers). In his largely American-based subject matter (such as the blues, spirituals, African-American issues and poetry, etc.) and his oftentimes pastoral mood of expression, he is, in the writer's opinion, a kind of latter-day, African-American Aaron Copland who is finally receiving the acclaim he was denied during much of his career. This bodes especially well for many of the A. A. A. commissioned works which as recently as a decade ago were not taken seriously in academic musical circles because of their similar "conservatism."

Aria and Still's later accordion composition, Lilt, are two little masterpieces for accordion that obviously reflect the composer's very best efforts to not only write good music, but to write imaginatively and idiomatically for the accordion as well. Students at the intermediate or early advanced levels who are looking for a challenge in musical expression and a gentle introduction into the varied world of Twentieth Century concert music should give them a try.

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*Aria will be performed and discussed, along with other works, by Dr. McMahan in his workshop during the Festival and will also appear in his upcoming CD recording of contemporary music for accordion.*

*For a fuller account of Aria, as well as similar examinations of Lilt and the only other known serious work for accordion by an African-American composer, Ronald Roxbury, see Dr. McMahan's article "Serious Works for Accordion by African-American Composers: Aria and Lilt by William Grant Still, and Four Preludes, by Ronald Roxbury," in Free Reed Journal, Vol. 1, 1999 (Pendragon Press; published by the Center for Study of Free-Reed Instruments, Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Prof. Allan Atlas, Curator and Editor of the journal).*

*Three A. A. A. commissioned works will be performed by Drs. McMahan and William Schimmel at this year's A.A.A. Accordion Master Class and Concert Series, July 27-29: Curriculum Vitae, by Lukas Foss, Salute to Juan, by Paul Pisk, and Partita, by Alexander Tcherepnin. See ad and application form in this issue.*