

# Composers Commissioning

**The Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth  
Commissioned Works  
of the American Accordionists' Association  
Composers Commissioning Committee:  
Elsie Bennett, Founder and Chair**

**Alexander Tcherepnin: *Partita*  
Henry Brant: *Sky Forrest*  
Elie Siegmeister: *Improvisation, Ballade, and Dance***

No. 7 of an Ongoing Series on the  
Commissioned Works of the A. A. A.

**By Robert Young McMahan, DMA**  
Classical Accordionist, Composer, Research Writer,  
Assoc. Prof. of Music Theory, Composition, and Accordion,  
The College of New Jersey, and  
Member of the AAA Composers Commissioning Committee



The previous article in this series indicated that 1960 was a banner year for numbers of successful contracts issued by Elsie Bennett to noted American composers. There were seven in all, including Henry Cowell, Otto Luening, Paul Pisk, Alexander Tcherepnin, Henry Brant, Elie Siegmeister, and David Diamond. The works of the first three listed were discussed then, so we will now concentrate on the next three: Tcherepnin's *Partita*, Brant's *Sky Forest*, and Siegmeister's *Improvisation, Ballade, and Dance*. The contracts are dated November 1, 7, and 10 respectively. The first two compositions were published by



Elsie M. Bennett  
Founder and Chair  
AAA Composers  
Commissioning Committee

O. Pagani in 1962 and the third by Sam Fox in 1962.

I still have vivid memories of the imposingly tall, slender presence of Alexander Tcherepnin seated near the back of the gathering of performers, teachers, and students at an A.A.A. workshop on commissioned works in a hotel suite near New York City's Washington Square on May 16, 1965, at which pianist and Catholic University music professor Robert

Dumm analyzed and discussed and Carmen Carrozza performed Nicholas Flagello's *Introduction and Scherzo* (actually a world premiere), Robert Russell Bennett's *Four Nocturnes*, and Tcherepnin's *Partita*. Tcherepnin's pronounced Russian features, heavy yet gentle accent, and elegant, but unpretentious, manner reminded me of an affable and quite unmenacing Bela Lugosi. When Mr. Dumm had finished his commentary on the *Partita*, he asked the composer if he had anything to add, to which he modestly replied that Dumm had found more in the piece than he himself was aware of and relayed his compliments. The son of the prominent Russian composer, conductor, and teacher Nikolay Tcherepnin and the father of yet a third generation of composers, Serge and Ivan, Alexander was born just at the turn of the twentieth century and maintained a strongly Russian style in his music throughout his long and varied career, turning only to more modern twelve-tone and "pointalistic" (ala Anton Webern) idioms in the last years of his career, in New York. The works he will no doubt be most remembered for are his Baguettes, Op. 5 (1922), for piano, *Divertimento* (1955-7), for orchestra, the *Fourth Symphony* (1956-7), and the *Symphonic Prayer* (1959).

During October 1960, Tcherepnin received a letter from Elsie Bennett inviting him to compose a piece for accordion, which he readily accepted with enthusiasm. The accordion would not represent his first creative or personal contact with the free-reed family of instruments, for in 1953 he had composed a



Alexander Tcherepnin  
1899-1977

music history from the time of his migration to America from Paris in 1948 to his retirement in 1964 and relocation to New York City. Mort became his accordion advisor in the composing of the piece, which he entitled Partita (following the general baroque-era plan of a work in several short movements in contrasting styles, character, and tempi). He also dedicated the piece to his accordionist collaborator and his spouse ("To my dear friends Mort and Cressida", as it appears in the score). Another notable accordionist and teacher, Frank Gaviani, did the final editing of Partita prior to its publication two years later.

In a letter to Elsie Bennett dated May 15, 1961, Tcherepnin had the following to say about the accordion, quoted at length in Ms. Bennett's article on the composer and work in the November/December issue of the A. A. A. Monthly Bulletin (some of Tcherepnin's incorrect English [his original tongue was Russian] has been corrected below):

The Twentieth Century brought a formidable technical progress [to] practically all the known musical instruments. The advantage of the composer is to make use of this technical progress and his duty is to compose music for instruments that have been neglected by the composers of the past, that are representing a new media of expression and are in need [of] repertoire. Among the instruments that have achieved a high standard of perfection and . . . is one . . . of the most popular musical instruments of the world is the accordion.

The composer continues, by briefly describing his new piece:

The sound of [the] accordion guided me while I was composing the Partita: I have tried to express my musical thoughts in terms and in sounds of the accordion. The Partita is in four contrasting movements. The first movement—Animato—is meant as an overture. The second—Moderato—is of lyrical character. The third—

concerto for harmonica and orchestra and was a close friend of Chicago accordionist and active Accordion Teachers' Guild officer Mort Harold and his wife Cressida. He came to know the couple through Cressida, who had been a student in one of his classes at DePaul University, where he taught composition, analysis, and

Cadenza—[is] a sort of Recitativ [and] Dialogue between the high and low-voiced registers. The Fourth (Finale) starts [with] a short introductory Maestoso leading into an animated Finale (Allegro Risoluto).

The Partita is extremely Russian and folk-like in flavor, and though possessing much polychordal dissonance and sudden unexpected moments of rhythmic syncopation, is really quite traditionally tonal in effect. The first movement begins abruptly with an aggressive upward vaulting melody initially dominated by tonic C-major chord arpeggios supported by a relentless, churning, sixteenth-note left-hand ostinato accompaniment of four different pitches. This bigger-than-life, yet rather short-lived, A-B-A1 formatted movement is followed by the strongly contrasted, morose "Moderato grave", whose plaintive, moaning melody in octaves gives way soon to a more playful second section, that, despite its rather capricious rhythms, has a sense of resignation as well. The two thematic ideas alternate with each other once more before the third movement, which Tcherepnin referred to above as a "recitativ", presents its mere six lines of nervous, repeated-note motives that lead to the fourth movement without pause. With its strong, stomping themes, changing meters, dissonant major second left-hand accompanimental dyads, and exaggerated crescendi on sustained chords (unique to the accordion among keyboard instruments), the closing statement Maestoso is as powerful and "Russian" as the first movement. It ultimately gives way to a frenzy of right- and left-hand sixteenth notes that catapult it to a glorious, climatic coda reminiscent of the opening bars of the Animato.

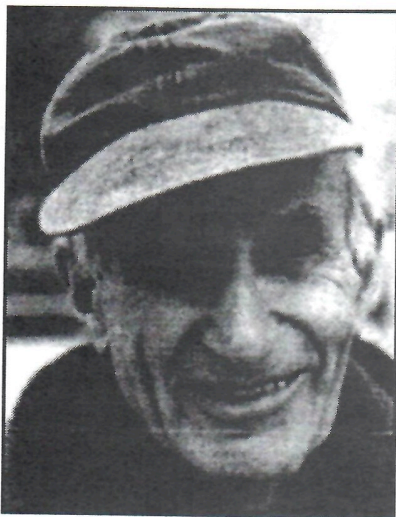
Partita was premiered by Patricia Treggellas in a recital she gave at Carnegie Recital Hall on Sunday, September 16, 1962. Recently returned from studying accordion abroad at the Stadt Musikschule in Trossingen, Germany (home of Hohner accordions and harmonicas), her program consisted entirely of original works for accordion that included not only the world premiere of Partita, but the New York premieres of Colorado composers Cecil Effinger's Nocturne and Ted Zarlengo's Suite, for Accordion, Cello, and Piano, and Trossingen-based composer Ernest-Lothar von Knorr's Sonata in C. The performance and new works were

*Dr. McMahan is a classical accordionist, specializing in contemporary original works for or including the accordion, composer, musical researcher/writer, and Associate Professor of Music at The College of New Jersey, where he serves as Coordinator of Music Theory Studies. He has recorded on the CRS and Orion labels, and will soon release a CD of contemporary works on the Cambria label.*

well received by Francis D. Perkins, of the New York Herald Tribune, who wrote that the Partita proved to be "melodically pleasing and lively." He unfortunately attributed its commissioning to the American Guild of Organists rather than the A. A. A. Tcherepnin eventually accepted two other commissions from the A. A. A. that resulted in *Invention* and *Tzigane* (commissioned in 1965 and 1967 respectively). Both will be discussed in future articles of this series.

The remaining two composers present strong contrasts to their Russian-born peer, both in personality and musical leanings, as do their A. A. A.-commissioned offerings.

Born in Montreal in 1913, Henry Brant is the only surviving composer of the three discussed here. He is most noted for his many "spacial" works in which the musicians are posted in various places not only on the stage, but backstage and often throughout the concert hall in general (influenced, in part, by one of his idols, the highly experimental Charles Ives, whose famous work *The Unanswered Question* stations instruments both on and off stage). The son of a violinist, Brant was a very precocious youngster who by the age of nine was constantly experimenting with creating new instruments and putting on "concerts" for his friends and family. It



Henry Brant  
b. 1913

is not surprising, then, that he was drawn to such daring composers of his day as Ives and Carl Ruggles, and unusual instruments like the accordion in his later professional life. He has not only written for mixed instrumental ensembles but enjoys combining instruments of the same kind (such as members of the flute family) for individual

works, and sometimes tampering with their mechanisms for special effects. One such work of significance here is his *Sky Forest*, subtitled *Jazz Fugue*, for accordion quartet, and the thirteenth A. A. A. commission.

Brant was no stranger to the accordion, having included it on an equal basis with flute, violin, cello, and piano eleven years earlier in his 1949 work *All Souls Carnival* (Bill Costa was the accordionist for the premiere performance). Since the time of his A. A. A. commission, he has included it in at least four other such chamber works, including *Revenge before Breakfast* (1982), *Pathways to Security* (1990), *Homeless People* (1993), and *Trajectory* (featuring a silent film and two

accordions, 1994). These works include either small or large combinations of instruments from all the orchestral families, as well as voices in some, and constitute a major contribution to accordion contemporary literature by one of the most innovative and celebrated composers of the last half of the twentieth century. In a spring 1961 interview with Elsie Bennett Brant gave his description of the accordion:

The accordion's tone-quality appears to me to be situated midway between the nasal orchestral woodwinds (oboe, English horn, bassoon) and the reed-stops of the pipe-organ with a larger total range than any one of the orchestral double-reeds, and more flexibility than the pipe-organ reed-stops.

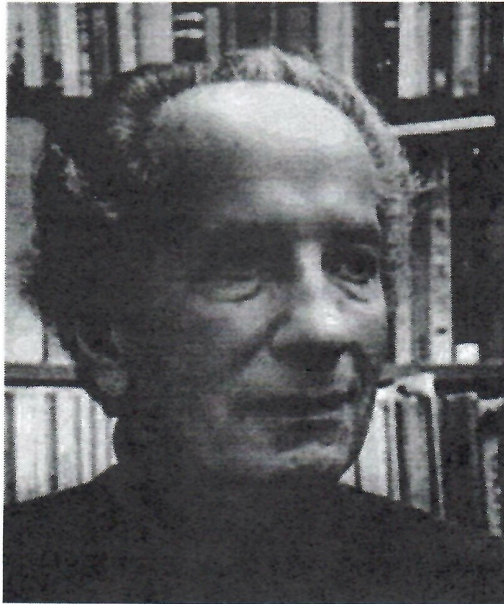
As to why this normally dissonant (though admittedly often stylistically eclectic) composer turned to the jazz idiom, and, yet more unusual, the baroque fugal form, was explained to Ms. Bennett in the same interview:

Jazz style, in its rhythmic and melodic configurations, seems quite a natural form of American music speech. ...When jazz soloists meet to improvise together, the result, in the ensemble passages, tends to be contrapuntal rather than harmonic, because each player is contributing a highly individual single line. At such moments a kind of contrapuntal chamber music comes into being. It is this kind of counterpoint, arising out of jazz linear materials, which is suggested in my fugue for accordions.

The piece turned out to be in a kind of bluesy style at what the composer indicated at the beginning to be a "medium jazz tempo." The first rather strutting but also stuttering fugal subject occurs in the left-hand part of the first accordion and is only imitated in one other part, the fourth accordion, while the other two parts offer rhythmic punctuation with chords. Along the way, at least two other equally chromatic and rhythmically synopated melodic subjects saunter in, with the texture often breaking down to only two parts: melody with chordal accompaniment. These three subjects make occasional clear return statements (and, at other times, rather disguised, intervallically altered ones), and, as the tension and texture builds from the middle of the piece to the end, they occur more frequently in all four parts in quick moments of stretto imitation. Though regular tertian chords occur throughout the piece as a kind of homophonic accompaniment to the main thematic lines, dissonance beyond that normally associated with jazz is allowed to occur freely.

Ms. Bennett suggested in a letter to Brant that he include a fifth part for bass accordion since that instrument is frequently employed in accordion ensembles, and she had to report to him at a later time that the A. A. A. Board was not pleased with the fact that each part was for the right hand only and therefore did not realize the full contrapuntal and sound potential of the instrument. In the end, though, Brant never added a bass

accordion part, and kept each of the existing four parts to one hand. His only compromise revision was to allow parts to sometimes be played with the right hand and at other times with the left. This aside, however, *Sky Forest* turned out to be a very appealing, yet quite contemporary sounding, concoction that certainly deserves more performances than it has received over the years. Its New York premiere took place on Friday afternoon, February 21, 1964, at the Donnell Library, a mid-town branch of the New York City Public Library System that has remained particularly active in the arts. The artists were Robert Conti, Kathleen Black, Janice Simon, and Joseph Soprani. Eight other A. A. A. com-



Elie Siegmeister  
1909-1991

missioned works were performed on the program as well: Cowell's *Iridescent Rondo*, Kleinsinger's *Prelude and Sarabande* (both performed by Conti), Siegmeister's *Improvisation, Ballad and Dance* (performed by Black), Bennett's *Four Nocturnes*, Diamond's *Sonatina*, Luening's *Rondo* (all three performed by Soprani), Still's *Aria*, and Creston's *Prelude and Dance* (both performed by Simon). The concert was broadcast over the WNYC radio station as a feature of the Municipal Broadcasting System's twenty-fifth American Music Festival.

Of the same generation as Brant, the New York-born Elie Siegmeister (1909-91), proved also to be a highly precocious child. He graduated from Columbia at age eighteen and then studied composition with Wallingford Riegger (also an A. A. A. commissionee; see my 1999 A. A. A. Festival Souvenir Journal article) before going to Paris where he continued to advance his knowledge and skills for the next four years under the tutelage of the great master teacher Nadier Boulanger. The greater part of Siegmeister's works carries programmatic titles reflecting American culture or political issues, especial-

ly those of equal rights and, later in his career, pacifism (he was strongly opposed to America's involvement in the Viet Nam conflict). His eight operas are also heavily American and often civic minded. During the Depression he joined the left-leaning Composers' Collective of New York under the pseudonym "L. E. Swift" with the intention of writing songs suitable for the common worker to sing. (Given all these activist involvements, then, it should not be surprising that he was subpoenaed by Senator Joseph McCarthy to appear as a "witness" in front of the dreaded House Committee on Un-American Activities ["HUAC"] in the 1950s.) Partly as a result of this penchant for Americana, most of his output reveals strong influences of jazz and blues while not holding back on dissonance when he feels it is called for. His accordion piece is no exception to these tendencies, as its title might infer.

Like so many other composers approached by the A. A. A., Siegmeister was at first unsure of whether anything of substance could be written for the accordion. In an interview with Elsie Bennett not long after the composition of the piece, he confessed that he approached the writing of his first work for the accordion with a "certain hesitation, based on unfamiliarity with the instrument and a too conventional idea of its capabilities." But after hearing the "extraordinary delicacy and variety of sounds drawn from the accordion by the distinguished Carmen Carrozza," he resolved "to meet the challenge of finding a way to write for the instrument that would be interesting and personal." He went on to say that after "several experiments," he "realized that one can find the poetry of the accordion in pure, dream-like moods and wildness in earthy, bacchanalian rhythms."

He described the first movement, *Improvisation* (curiously so named, for it does not seem like one), as utilizing "widely-spaced, organ-like sonorities." It is comprised of a slow, quiet, modal melody with constantly shifting meters of 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 5/8, and 7/8 and accompanied for the most part by only a second line in the left hand. The resulting effect is almost like that of a modern plainchant or religious intonation. In fact, it repeats, with very little variation, in a rather ritualistic way two times (at the lower fifth and then the octave) as if it were a setting of the brief tripartite, A-B-A textual form of the *Kyrie* or *Agnus Dei* from the Roman Catholic Mass (though this is surely far from what the composer had in mind). Following this cryptic opening, the second movement, *Ballad*, begins as tranquilly and slowly as the first, but gives the impression of a kind of bluesy, or maybe even Broadway-like, lullaby in its strangely syncopated tenderness. Siegmeister said of this movement that it is "wordless (but very un-Mendelssohnian [referring doubtlessly to the Leipzig composer's piano work *Songs Without Words*]) song, in free rhythm, and with harmonies that wander in and out of the tonality established by the melody. It is as though

the right hand and the left hand were not quite on speaking terms, but finally decided to come together." By gradual stages, however, the lullaby "wakes up" from its metrically shifting, almost pentatonic D-major state into a vivacious, more strongly accented middle section (in B-flat major), only to be calmed before long and returned to its opening restful condition (perhaps like a slumbering Sunday dawn on the "Great White Way" after a big night on the town). The closing Dance is, in the composer's words, a "lustful, exuberant cycle of rhythmic adventures, which requires a driving, irresistible energy from the performer" (as indeed it does!). It unleashes the pent up energies of the previous two movements through a strongly punctuated, intoxicated flood of notes and catchy syncopations (not unlike the basic rhythmic patterns of its predecessors). After a less aggressive middle section marked "Playfully," and possessing a certain dance-like catchiness somewhat reminiscent of segments of Leonard Bernstein's West Side Story, the opening section returns with all its boundless energy as it mounts an unbroken charge to the end of its short and quickly extinguished life.

As with so many previous A. A. A. commissioned works, Carmen Carrozza holds the distinction of having premiered Siegmeister's accordion offering at his Town Hall recital of April 28, 1963.

To conclude, the following comments about the accordion by Henry Brant in a letter to Elsie Bennett, dated February 17, 1964, simply cannot be left out of this article. Of all the good things many of the commissioned composers had to say to Ms. Bennett about the classical accordion over the past half century, Brant's views on it, regarding both its future and the place it might have had in eras before it was invented or had reached a high level of development are, in my opinion, right on the mark and should be extremely heartening to all accordionists seeking a place for their instrument in the serious contemporary music world:

Undoubtedly, the accordion is one of the instruments of the future. I should think that it would lend itself readily to new tunings, with 14, 19, 27 or even more tones to the octave ["microtonal" tunings]. Perhaps we shall one day see accordions built with a totally flexible tuning mechanism that can be preset in any way by the player.

Personally, I feel that the accordion might also have been an important instrument of the past, if musicians of the 18th and 19th centuries could have heard it played as it is played today. I can imagine Bach playing his continuo improvisations on the accordion, Mozart writing an accordion concerto with orchestra, and Brahms planning a quintet for accordion and strings.

It is a little late for any of this, but it is not too late for the A. A. A. to bring the accordion to the attention of the ablest people now composing music, especially the controversial people. In the long run it is these controversial composers, in Europe as well as in the United States, who are likely to have the strongest influence on what kind of music will be written in the future.

The next three A.A.A. commissioned works were David Diamond's Night Music, for accordion and string quartet (1960), Louis Gordon's Aria, Scherzo, and Finale, for accordion and chamber orchestra or band (1961-62), and Paul Pisk's Adagio and Rondo Concertante, for two accordions and orchestra (1961). They will be discussed in the 2004 issue of this journal.

**Dr. McMahan will be performing two A.A.A. commissioned works, among others, at this year's A.A.A. Master Class and Concert Series at the Tenri Institute, in New York City: Rondo, by Otto Luening, and Iridescent Rondo, by Henry Cowell. See ad and application form in this issue.**



Elsie Bennett, Chairman of Composers Commissioning, is pictured at a recent AAA Board Meeting at the Beatrice Inn in New York City with Robert McMahan and Carmen Carrozza.

Elsie was successful in obtaining a new commissioned work for AAA by Lukas Foss entitled Triologue, for Violin, Cello and Accordion. The work hopefully will be premiered at the CUNY concert on October 10th, "The 'Other' Accordion: the Contemporary Music Scene." The concert will be held at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in Manhattan at 7:30 p.m. For information, please contact the AAA Office.