

Composers Commissioning

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

Ernst Krenek: *Toccata*

**No. 11 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the A. A. A.**

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We return once again, as we have in the previous two articles of this series, to the productive year of 1962, in which Elsie Bennett was able to commission four world famous composers, David Diamond (*Sonatina*), George Kleinsinger (*Prelude and Sarabande*), Ernst Krenek (*Toccata*), and Robert Russell Bennett (*Quintet for Accordion and String Quartet ["Psychiatry"]*). The first two of these were discussed in the 2005 and 2006 issues of the *Journal*. Now we turn to the third commissioned composer of that period, Ernst Krenek (1900-92).

Krenek was born with the twentieth century in Austria and fell only nine years short of seeing the next. He is one of the most prolific, varied, and respected composers of our time. Though of Czech ancestry (original name: Křienek), he preferred that his name be pronounced as that of a German, dropping the diacritic mark on the "r". Like the similarly long-lived Igor Stravinsky (who died at 89 rather than Krenek's 91), his music went through several significant style changes. Not surprisingly, his earliest acknowledged works are in a post romantic idiom (as were those of Stravinsky and Schönberg), probably due in part to his first noted teacher, Franz Schreker, and the fact that the bloom of the late nineteenth century had not yet begun to significantly fade during his youth. He soon came under the influence of Schönberg's atonality only to abruptly abandon it when he visited Paris and was enthralled by the more conservative neoclassicism of Stravinsky and members of *Les six*, especially Poulenc and Milhaud. The French preoccupation with jazz was no doubt also partly responsible for Krenek's opera

(more a musical, actually) *Jonny spielt auf* (*Johnny Strikes Up*, 1926), which was his greatest success in terms of number of performances and box office receipts. This Weil-like, jazzy theatre piece was so popular that during the Third Reich, Hitler tried unsuccessfully to suppress it (due in part to its biracial theme). It was so popular, in fact, that a brand of cigarettes, still sold today in Austria, was named after it ("Johnny"). He then oddly relapsed to a neo-Romantic style similar to the music of Franz Schubert (the song cycle *Reisebuch aus den österreichischen Alpen* serves as a noted example), before just as abruptly adapting Schönberg's twelve-tone technique before the decade of the 1920s came to an end (the opera *Karl V* (1931-33), which uses the technique throughout, is a famous example). This is probably largely due to his befriending Schönberg's two great disciples Alban Berg and Anton Webern around this time. Though he was not afraid to vary his style in the ensuing decades, he became one of the noted masters of atonality and serial technique of the the twentieth century. Even in his fifties and sixties, he was striking out in new directions of music, trying his hand at electronic and aleatoric modes while still maintaining a high level of highly organized serial technique in other works.

Like Stravinsky, Schönberg, Bartok, and Hindemith, Krenek found himself in dangerous circumstances under the siege of Hitler's regime and decided to come to America in the late 1930s. He became a U. S. citizen in 1945. After living in different locations where he taught at a number of colleges, he

settled once and for all in the Los Angeles area with his third wife, composer Gladys Nordstrom, in 1950. It would be twelve years before his path would converge with the AAA and the accordion.

The Toccata was commissioned by A. A. A. Composers Commissioning Committee Chair Elsie Bennett in a letter to Krenek dated April 4, 1962. He accepted the offer and mailed the signed contract to Bennett on April 30. They met to discuss further plans nine days later in New York at the New School where the composer was conducting a rehearsal for the premiere performance of his *Quaestio Temporis*. According to the composer's final manuscript copy (in the Bennett archive), it was completed that December at his home in Tulunga, California (near Los Angeles; he eventually moved to Palm Springs, where he wrote his second accordion piece). Two years later it was published in New York by the now defunct O. Pagani and Brothers, then one of the two prominent accordion music publishers in the United States. It constitutes the first atonal work in the collection and was greatly welcomed by those accordionists who knew of Krenek's importance to the contemporary music scene. Curiously, it never received any known or documented A. A. A. official world debut, unlike most of its predecessors, which were usually premiered by Carmen Carrozza in New York and often even received brief reviews in the *New York Times* or *Herald Tribune*. It is known, however, that a year after its publication the winner of the 1965 Confederation Internationale des Accordionistes World Competition, Beverly Roberts (now Beverly Roberts Cumow, member of the A. A. A. Governing Board), gave a reading of it in an A. A. A.-sponsored workshop, with Virgil Thomson as lecturer, at the Statler Hilton Hotel, in New York, on September 12, 1965. (Her teacher, Carmen Carrozza, also participated, performing A. A. A. commissioned works by Virgil Thomson and Paul Pisk.)

Whether or not this constitutes the first official public unveiling of the Toccata, I do know for certain at which performance Krenek, himself, first heard his piece: my own! During the 1966-67 term at the Peabody Institute, Krenek held a chair as visiting professor of composition. I was in my third undergraduate year there as a composition student of Stefan Grové and, like many other fellow students, was eager to play something by the composer at the weekly composition seminars, which Krenek attended. Sometime during the spring semester I was permitted to perform Toccata for the gathering. My colleagues, most of whom were practically hostile to the idea that the accordion could ever play serious music successfully, were astounded at what this piece proved the instrument could do. One particularly strong disbeliever experienced a sudden epiphany, exclaiming that it was the best of all the Krenek works he had heard that year. (To this day it has the same effect on hard-line accordion skeptics, especially composers and

professional musicians, for whom I have played it). Krenek was extremely pleased as well, stating that it had turned out even better than he had expected. It was then that I realized he had never before heard Toccata performed, even though it was already five years old. I was very grateful to have found this out after I had performed it for the maestro rather than before! Decades later I was happily surprised to find a mention of this seminar and my performance in a letter to Elsie Bennett dated December 23 (though he could not recollect my name at the time). I was further gratified when, before the end of the school year, he asked me to record it for him in the Peabody studio. In 1975, he included the recording on an Orion LP of his works (Orion ORS 75204).

The Toccata is divided into four movements that are played without pause: *Andante*, *Allegro moderato*, *Adagio*, and *Allegro*. Following the *Allegro*, there is a



Elsie Bennett with Ernst Krenek reviewing Toccata score (1963)

brief Maestoso coda reminiscent of the declamatory opening of the first movement. At Bennett's request, Krenek supplied the following description of the piece in a letter to her that was published in part a year later in *Accordion Horizons*:

The piece consists of four sections to be played continuously. A forceful prelude with massive chords and vigorous runs, alternating with quiet passages (as in parentheses), is followed by a somewhat march-like section [the *Allegro moderato*], setting off a melodic line in various tone colors against a chordal staccato accompaniment. The third section [*Adagio*] is lyrical in character. It rises from gentle, mysteriously floating sounds to a powerful climax. The last section [*Allegro*] is a brief scherzo, making special use of the rapid changes of chords possible on the accordion. The piece concludes with the massive sounds of the opening [the *Maestoso* coda].

From beginning to end, it is clear that Krenek had made a thorough study of the instrument. As was Bennett's custom with all the commissioned composers, she sent him various scores of previous A. A. A. works and assigned a professional accordionist to him as an advisor and experimenter. In this instance, the artist/consultant was Oakley Yale (1916-90), who lived on the other side of Los Angeles, in Inglewood. From all of this exploration Krenek expressed the following views in the above letter of January 22, 1963:

In July 2007, Dr. McMahan performed *Toccata* as well as another A. A. A. commissioned work, *Prelude and Caprice* (1972), by Joel Brickman, and a new work of his own entitled *Magic Box* at the eleventh annual Master Class and Concert series at the Tenri Institute in New York. For a more detailed account and analysis of *Toccata*, see Dr. McMahan's article "Idiomatic use of the Accordion in Atonal Music: A Study of *Toccata* by Ernst Krenek, and a Work by the Writer," in the U. K. journal *Musical Performance* (2001; Vol. 3, Parts 2-4, pp. 45-68). The entire issue was dedicated to the accordion in all its facets.

Comments: No specifically new devices, such as twelve-tone or serial techniques, mainly because of the limitation of the left hand [referring to the stradella system] to a few chordal patterns. But these very limitations suggest harmonic combinations of which one would not easily think without being driven to them. This makes the accordion interesting to a composer who does not wish to stick to the conventions of tonality. On the other hand, if he does not want to produce so-called "polytonality," he must resist the temptation of simply piling chords of different keys on top of each other, which is another challenge. Finally, the various octave doublings in the several registers of the instrument offer interesting possibilities for distributing depth and perspective throughout the design. I enjoyed all these



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aspects, especially since I had not been aware of them before becoming a little better acquainted with the accordion.

The free-bass ("bassetti") accordion, with its four or so octaves of chromatically ordered single notes in the left-hand manual, and so often used for the highly contrapuntal contemporary works from the 1970s onward, was a relatively new improvement over the instrument's old "stradella," or "120-bass," system in the 1960s and was not then played by most of the established artists in America. In fact, only a few advanced students in the country had taken it up at that point. Thus, Krenek was only given guidance in the latter format, as was true of all the A. A. A. composers before him and quite a few afterwards. Often berated for its limitation of having merely one octave of single notes, which can only be extended a few octaves via register switches, and its prefixed chordal buttons of major, minor, major-minor 7th, and fully diminished 7th chords, all in their circle-of-fifths arrangement, the stradella system apparently proved a welcome challenge to Krenek, who embraced it fully and used it in ways that no other keyboard instrument could duplicate (including the free bass accordion). Particularly effective are the many occurrences of polychords, which can so easily be produced literally at the touch of a few buttons simultaneously. These are especially noticeable throughout the first movement, where crashing left-hand dissonances are created against lengthy, declamatory, falling and then rising sixteenth-note right-hand passages. For example, in the first measure, a deep single-note D is sounded and sustained through a two-

For the 2008 Master Class and Concert Series at Tenri Institute, Dr. McMahan will perform two AAA commissioned works, Robert Baksa's Sonata for accordion and an abridged version of Henry Cowell's Concerto Brevis, with Dr. Schimmel playing the orchestral part on piano. He will also premiere three songs of his for soprano and accordion on texts by Walt Whitman.

button polychord consisting of C-diminished 7th and D-minor. Thus, three fingers have easily caused a dissonant simultaneity of six separate pitches (C, D, E-flat, F, G-flat, A). A similar, though more dissonant, left-hand formation follows in the consequent phrase of this opening period in measures 4 through 6, the result of combining the G-flat-major and D-flat major-minor seventh chord buttons. It is therefore easy to see how all twelve tones could be produced by only using four chord buttons, though Krenek never avails himself of that opportunity in this piece, as he alludes to in his statement above. In the third movement, a lovely, luminous effect results from similar two-button left-hand polychords in the middle/high "tenor" register, which serve as accompaniment to the very expressive, languishing,

right-hand violinistic lines heard therein. In other places, Krenek gives a more melodic role to the chord buttons. This is especially true in the second movement, where two principle themes coexist between the two manuals: a stiff, militant, mostly staccato one, in regular eighth-note/eighth rest values, initially in the left hand, and played almost exclusively on single chord buttons; and a flowing line (which is more properly the main theme) dominated by eighth-note triplets, starting in the right hand, with phrases overlapping the left-hand units in uneven lengths. The two elements make for a very clever, well crafted counterpoint, colored by the high, meshed sound of the melodically-used staccato left-hand chord buttons. The two principal ideas are frequently exchanged between the manuals, returning between other materials in somewhat disguised form later on to form a subtle rondo-like form.

In the closing "scherzo" movement, as Krenek calls it, the initial quippy, brief, right-hand phrases, formed mostly of a variety of non-tonal or non-tertian four-note sets in sixteenth notes, sound antiphonally with equally short-lived left-hand responses consisting of single-chord buttons which use all four available stradella chord qualities in a variety of chromatic successions (such as F-sharp minor to F-sharp major to G-sharp minor in the second measure). These often add up to eight or nine different pitches of the twelve-tone gamut and come across more as rapid blurs of chromatic color than separate tertian structures. This section eventually gives way to more legato right-hand phrases that are accompanied in hemiola fashion by lengthy left-hand ostinato figures cast in rapid staccato eighth-note triplets and, again, using alternating chord buttons of all four qualities. Such full chords, so agilely executed at this tempo (quarter note equals 108, as marked in the score), cannot be successfully duplicated in one hand on the piano or free-bass accordion without sounding clumsy or weighted down.

Perhaps more important than any of the idiomatic traits of Toccata discussed above is Krenek's excellent and insightful use of timbral color via the registral shifts available in both manuals of the accordion. Oakley Yale was probably of important assistance here in that he doubtlessly demonstrated these sounds for the composer. Krenek's choices of stops throughout the Toccata could not have been more perfect and were indispensable to its beauty and musical effectiveness. The bombastic opening is appropriately set for the full master shifts in both manuals. But before the movement is over, he has employed in the right hand the mellow, muted sound of the "Clarinet" stop, the dark, rich "Bassoon" register, the somewhat raspy, but delicate effect of the "Oboe", and the bright, piercing "Piccolo" register. Similar changes in octaves and timber take place in the frequent left-hand changing of switches, too. About as many such registral changes are employed in the remaining movements as well. Particularly striking are the beginning of the

Allegro moderato, whose right-hand theme begins with the unexpected dark sound of the "Bassoon" register; the beautiful timbral contrasts between the various long, expressive right-hand lines of the Adagio, due to the employment of the luminous "Violin" switch in one passage, and the rich sound of "Bassoon" in the other, with all of these supported by a lovely, translucent, high left-hand register; and the almost whispering use of the "Clarinet" stop at the outset of the Allegro, offset at the end of the movement by the electronic-, sine-tone-like effect of the highest, single-reed switches ("Piccolo" in the right hand) of both manuals propelling a rising sixteenth-note rush into the stratosphere in deliciously dissonant two-part counterpoint. In sum, Krenek's Toccata is one of the finest examples of highly imaginative and organic use of accordion registration in the literature, and accounts for an enormous amount of the work's (and the instrument's) convincing success

In 1976 Krenek wrote yet another solo for accordion, entitled Acco-Music, commissioned this time by the Accordion Teachers Guild (A. T. G.). I felt honored that he asked me to be his advisor for this work. This I did via many letters back and forth with him. The correspondence is preserved in his papers at the University of California, San Diego. Acco-Music was published the next year by Ars Nova and further edited by Californian Donald Balestrieri. Both it and Toccata are presently available through Ernest Deffner Music. Joseph Macerollo recorded it several years later (LP; "Interaccordionista"; Melbourne SMLP 4034; a recent CD recording by Alfred Melichar is also available on the Extraplatte label, LC 8202; EX 252 095-2). In the meantime, I urged the maestro to write yet a third piece which would be a chamber work for accordion and other mixed instruments. He was interested in the proposition, but, alas, being extremely busy with long lists of commissions ahead of him, this never came to be.

The Fourth Contemporary Accordion Music Concert

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Friday, October 10, 2008

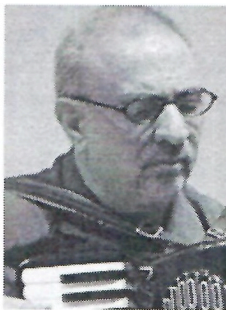
7:30 p.m., with Panel Discussion at 6:30 p.m.

Robert Young McMahan, Producer/Moderator

The program is entitled "*Vintage Classical Accordion: A Sampler of Neo-Romantic and Neoclassical Works for or Including Accordion, with a Few Surprises*" and will explore vintage concert pieces familiar to all accordionists from the Vaudeville days of the Deiros, Frosini, and others (including an infrequently heard work in modern atonal style by Pietro Deiro), both recent and older 20th century "neoclassical" or "neo-romantic" works by Robert Russell Bennett, Samuel Adler, William Grant Still, and Todor Vasilev Gerov (a piece for accordion and piano), and at least two more modern works by William Schimmel (multi media, with dancer), and Robert McMahan (a piece for violin, piano, and accordion). Panel members will include honored guest and world acclaimed composer Dr. Samuel Adler (whose Canto XVIII, for accordion, was recently commissioned by the AAA and will receive its free bass version world premiere on the program), Dr. William Schimmel, Dr. McMahan, Mary Tokarski, and Dessie Vassileva Vaughan (pianist and daughter of Gerov).

Participating artists are accordionists Beverly Roberts Curnow, Robert McMahan, William Schimmel, and Mary Tokarski; dancer/choreographer Micki Goodman; violinist Ruotao Mao; and pianists Tomoko Kanamaru and Dessie Vassileva Vaughan.

Information: Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York (5th Avenue and 34th Street, across from the Empire State Building). Contact AAA office at 516-746-3100 or 203-335-2045. E-mail: aaa1938@aol.com. Visit our website at www.ameraccord.com for additional information.



Dr. William Schimmel



Tomoko Kanamaru,
Pianist



Samuel Adler, Beverly Roberts and
Dr. Robert Young McMahan



Mary Tokarski and
Dessie Vaughan