

# Composers Commissioning

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## **The Twenty-first Commissioned Work of the American Accordionists' Association Composers Commissioning Committee:**

**Robert Russell Bennett:**

### **Quintet for Accordion and String Quartet (Psychiatry)**

**No. 12 of an Ongoing Series on the  
Commissioned Works of the A. A. A.**

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As the reader may recall from an earlier article in this series, Robert Russell Bennett, an American Composer who will probably always be remembered more for his brilliant orchestrations of Broadway musicals than for his post-romantic original compositions, was first commissioned by the A. A. A. to write his delightful solo suite, *Four Nocturnes*, in 1959. A prosperous and generous-hearted person, he did this gratis for our organization. The *Nocturnes* were premiered by Carmen Carrozza on a program sponsored by the Association for American Composers and Conductors at Carnegie Hall in its twenty-seventh season on November 21 of that year. This was the sixth commission of the A. A. A. Composers Commissioning Committee in its then five-year history (though the first commission did not occur until 1957 with Paul Creston's *Prelude and Dance*). Three years later Bennett would take on a second, more ambitious project for the committee in the form of its twenty-first commission.

It was typical of the committee's chair, the late Elsie Bennett (no relation to the composer), to keep in close contact with all her past commissioned composers, writing to them frequently and sending them birthday cards and holiday gifts. Many of them became close, warm friends and often dedicated their accordion pieces to her. Robert Russell Bennett was no exception to this rule. Elsie offered him the commission in a contract dated September 15, 1962. He gladly accepted the commission from her, this time deciding to write for accordion and string quartet, a combination inspired, he wrote her, by David

Diamond's recently commissioned *Night Music*, for that same instrumental combination. This time around he did accept pay for his work, the usual A. A. A. sum of \$250. (Today, of course, a composer of Bennett's stature would require at least an extra zero to be added to that figure, and only for a short solo at best.) Nonetheless, he used much of that money to pay his copyists prior to its first performance and publication by Chappell. The piece was completed by mid-November.

The quintet is programmatic and carries the subtitle "Psychiatry". There is no mention in any of the articles on the piece or in the correspondence between the two Bennetts as to what prompted the composer to apply this extra-musical element. In a letter to Elsie, however, he made it clear that the work was to be titled in all performances as "Quintet for Accordion and String Quartet ("Psychiatry")", thus de-emphasizing the programmatic element. He did not want the humorous titles of it and each of its movements to be the main focus of the composition, thus potentially distracting the listener from the intrinsic value of the music itself. This is a true danger to all programmatic music and often gives concern to composers. Hector Berlioz, for example, decided that the detailed program of his most famous work, *Symphonie fantastique*, should not be distributed to the audience at consequent performances after its debut, insisting that the music should stand on its own without its special story line. (An exception was to be made, however, when it was on the same program as its programmatic sequel *Lélio*.)



As she always did with the commissioned composers, Elsie requested an analysis of the Quintet from Bennett that she could use in her intended articles in accordion and other musical publications. Bennett responded with just a brief paragraph: "As to an analysis of the quartet [sic], there isn't much necessary beyond the titles, except that the listener should be warned that it is a serious work in spite of its very unserious moments. One might include a short description of the scherzo (Crazy Mixed Up Kid) by making a list of the many tunes that are being played together in what I have called chicken yard counterpoint." From this sketchy description, one is still left wondering just why he chose the psychological theme. What can be surmised, however, is that all of the descriptive verbal captions in the work seem to poke fun at the process of psychoanalysis rather than taking it seriously, thus possibly revealing a kind of bemused skepticism towards the science on the part of the composer.

A more thorough account of the Quintet was given by the late and celebrated Danish accordionist Mogens Ellegaard, who taught accordion for a short while at the Turtle Bay Music School in New York City. When he had to return to Denmark, Mario Tacca took over his students and was therefore in residence at the school. Soon thereafter, his teacher, Carmen Carrozza, encouraged him to give a second New York performance following his own New York debut of the work at Carnegie Recital Hall a few months earlier. Tacca also decided to play the *Four Nocturnes* on the program as well. Four string players on the faculty had recently formed the Colby String Quartet and agreed to play the Quintet with Tacca. Ellegaard, who had not yet left New York, attended the concert, and reviewed it for the April 1964 issue of *The Music Journal* (vol. 22, no. 4). Declaring that *Psychiatry* was "much more successful than [Bennett's] piece for solo accordion [the *Nocturnes*]," he continued, "Each of the four movements was exciting, refreshing, fascinating. Several humorous touches throughout the entire work sustained interest—even without the funny but perhaps not so dignified 'psycho-titles' which accompany the traditional music titles of each movement. The composer shows a never failing sense of sonority, tonal balance, and contrast. Particularly effective were many passages of sustained notes or long melodic lines in the accordion, against string pizzicati . . . succeeded by passages of legato strings, interrupted by dynamic staccato explosions in the accordion. The expressive, sometimes nostalgic tone of the accordion was utilized in dramatic recitativo passages, and the composer always avoided those sore spots in the left hand—exploiting, instead, the rhythmical, percussive-like, dynamic and sustained qualities of the instrument." Ellegaard finished with yet another declaration of praise for *Psychiatry*, saying that it was "without any doubt one of the most successful

[A.A.A.] commissions to this date."

The writer will now further examine *Psychiatry*.

The tempo markings of the first movement are *Recitativo*, con brio, followed forty-nine bars of 3/4 time later by a sprightly *Allegro* in 2/4 time. The *Allegro* is quite lengthy, too, lasting 139 measures. The accordion does indeed "sing" a lengthy line somewhat suggestive of the meandering nature of opera recitative (those moments of rapid fire delivery of text by the vocalist prior to the more melodic and rhythmic arias that follow). The strings either supply harmonic punctuation or, more often, similarly flowing lines in counterpoint with the accordion. The *Allegro* is more frenetic and "troubled," and is carried mainly by the strings, with well-placed incursions by the accordion. Bennett wisely used the violin and musette right-hand stops throughout this movement and often in the other three, to create a good



Robert Russell Bennett and Elsie Bennett at the National Association for American Composers and Conductors concert, Carnegie Recital Hall, November 10, 1963, at which Carmen Carrozza and the Phoenix String Quartet gave the New York premiere of the Quintet".

timbral blend with the strings. The melodic and harmonic language is unusually chromatic and dissonant for Bennett, perhaps emphasizing the Freudian, expressionistic world of Schönberg's dodecaphonic music (with which he is not usually associated). Even so, there are many glimmers of tonal writing, including the occasional use of the mild pentatonic scale. Furthermore, the rhythm is quite conventional. The title of the movement is "Trying to find oneself." Curiously, it does not appear in the score at the head of the movement but rather underneath the final three bars of the *Allegro*, as if to be an afterthought or commentary on what was just heard rather than an initial "indoctrination". Titles, if



they can be called that, of the subsequent movements also appear at their ends rather than their beginnings. Given their rather inconspicuous and almost parenthetical placement in the music, then, one might question whether they should be listed at all in a concert program or recording or even if they should have existed in the first place.

The second movement, *Andante e mesto*, and “post-titled” “not loved and wanted”, is in a brief A-B-A form. It opens with a moping muted viola solo suggesting the key of F minor. It is soon joined by the rest of the quartet and the accordion, supplying a wobbly ostinato figure consisting of alternating eighth note pairs and triplets. Gradually, each of the other instruments makes its voice heard with similar themes to that of the viola until a rather climatic solo by the accordion defines the middle section. Before long, however, the ensemble sinks back into the brooding motifs of the movement’s beginning, allowing one more slight “outburst” of the accordion before all come to a rather unsettled resolution on an A-flat major chord.

The third movement, *Allegro*, carries the terminal caption “crazy, mixed up kid.” It is the humorous scherzo that features the “chicken yard counterpoint” Bennett refers to above. It is, in fact, what fifteenth century composers called a *quodlibet*. Psychologically, it may intend to depict a kind of “free association” of unrelated items via the many different melodies, thus suggesting a delusional and confused mind. Following Bennett’s suggestion to “make a list” of the well known tunes incorporated into this freely dissonant, contrapuntal stew, this writer recognizes such disparate melodies as “Joy to the World,” “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “Dixie,” “Hail to the Chief,” “Rally Around the Flag,” and countless others whose titles he cannot recall. Perhaps this is an unconscious salute to Charles Ives, who was fond of quoting familiar marches, hymns, popular parlor songs, college sports fight songs, and the like in most of his music. Except for a few exposed moments, the accordion is an equal partner with the strings throughout.

The final movement, marked *Vivo*, casts doubt upon the effectiveness of psychoanalysis in its closing title.

Dr. McMahan will be performing the most recent AAA commissioned work, *Canto XVIII*, by Samuel Adler, on Saturday evening, July 25, at the Tenri Institute, in New York City, as part of the three-day 2009 A. A. A. Master Class and Concert Series. He will also perform Ronald Roxbury’s *Four Preludes* and a new accordion/piano duet by William Schimmel (with the composer playing piano) on that Friday evening, and premiering a new work of his own, *Three Inventions*, for Clarinet and Accordion (with George Balog, clarinetist), on the Sunday evening concert of that weekend.

“Well adjusted—to what?” The music is a frenetic *moto perpetuo* in which rushing scalar runs emerge from constant sixteenth-note ostinati and occasional hard pumping oom-pah basses or sharply attacked dissonant polychords. The accordion is featured more as the main instrument than in the previous movements, although at the midpoint it gives way to a rhythmically erratic melody that enters in various mutations from the cello upward through all the other instruments. The stumbling, halting quality of this theme might be interpreted as a lack of assuredness on the part of the “patient”, thus validating the verbal caption. Following one more similarly dramatic rush from the bottom instruments to the top ones and a wild *tutti* romp of some length, a lonely accordion solo, marked *con passione*, and a few measures later, “sweet and sad”, meekly descends from the heights to what seems to be the depths of despair, and to a humbling *pianissimo* dynamic. It cadences on a long sustained hollow perfect fourth dyad of A-sharp and D-sharp which is shortly dissonated by pizzicato C-major chords in the strings.

The Quintet was premiered in the composer’s hometown of Kansas City, Missouri, by accordionist Joan Cochran (presently Joan Cochran Sommers) and the prestigious Mid-America String Quartet. Known and respected far and wide in the accordion world, Sommers won the A. A. A. National Championship two years running, in 1955 and 1956. Two years prior to performing this work she established the highly successful accordion department at the University of Missouri- Kansas City Music Conservatory. It was there on Sunday afternoon, April 21, 1963, that the performance took place. The composer was present and very pleased with both the piece and the musicians. Audience reaction was very positive as well. Also present was a critic, Sandor Kallai, from the *Kansas City Times*, who had favorable things to say about the performers and the quintet, but with some concerns about the latter. He felt the work drew too much from twentieth century devices for the third movement, perhaps feeling that it stood out too much, stylistically speaking, from the rest of the work, and that the accordion did not blend very well with the strings (in contradiction to the views of the music professors present at the concert, as reported by Elsie Bennett). The composer addressed these views in a thank-you note to Cochran and the quartet: “I was sorry that the critic on the *Kansas City Times* objected to the balance between the accordion and the quartet which, as it happens, was precisely what I was hoping for, and in those places where the accordion was part of a 3 or 4-part harmony I didn’t see how the balance could have been improved.” As for Kallai’s complaint about the eccentric third movement, of which he wrote, among other things, that its programmatic intent was too “obvious,” perhaps owing to the overt craziness of the “chicken yard counterpoint” mentioned above, Bennett remarked, “As



far as I'm concerned it would be quite acceptable if it were more obvious."

Two more momentous performances, both by accordionists who are on the present A. A. A. Governing Board, and to which reference has already been made above, followed in short order. The first was at Carnegie Recital Hall on November 10, 1963, during the first concert of the National Association for American Composers and Conductors series. Carmen Carrozza performed with the Phoenix String Quartet. Though no critic was present, Elsie Bennett, who was there with the composer and his wife, observed that many in the audience felt that the quintet was the most novel and unique composition on the entire program and that many

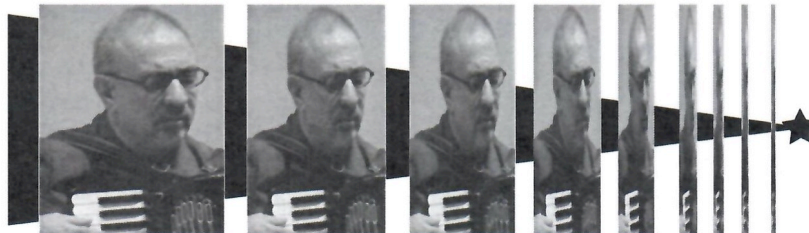
bravos were shouted during the applause. The concert was simultaneously broadcast on New York City's classical music station WNYC. The second performance was at the Turtle Bay Music School concert (also mentioned above) on January 25, 1964. Sadly, no performances since that time are known to have taken place, nor have any commercial recordings of *Psychiatry* yet been produced. These situations need to be corrected, for, in this writer's opinion, Ellegaard was justified in his praise for the Quintet. It is indeed a fine work that is very different in style from anything Bennett had done before and should therefore be of interest not only to the accordion community, but also to the classical music audience and music scholars in general.



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