

Composers Commissioning

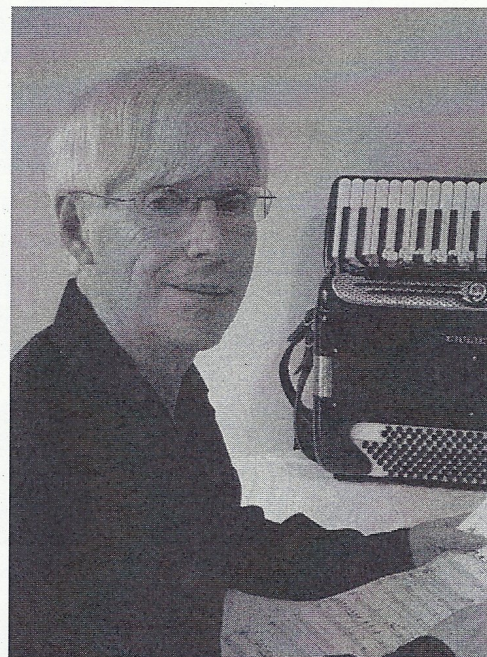
The Twenty-fourth Commissioned Work
of the American Accordionists' Association
Composers Commissioning Committee:

Paul Creston: Fantasy, for Accordion and
Orchestra or Solo Accordion

No. 15 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the A.A.A.

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As reported in the 2011 edition of the AAA Journal, Elsie Bennett successfully commissioned three works in 1964, Normand Lockwood's *Sonata Fantasy*, Nicolas Flagello's *Introduction and Scherzo*, and Paul Creston's *Fantasy*, for accordion and orchestra or, as specified by the composer, solo accordion. Having discussed the first two compositions in past issues of the Journal, we will now turn our attention to the third of four commissions Creston fulfilled for the AAA over a span of eleven years (the others being *Prelude and Dance*, 1957; *Concerto for Accordion and Orchestra*, 1958; and *Embryo Suite*, 1968, the last to be examined in a future article).

Surprisingly little correspondence between Elsie Bennett and Creston regarding the *Fantasy* appears in the vast number of letters and postcards between them preserved in Bennett's extensive and well ordered archive of AAA commissioned works; and scant mention of performances, both in solo form and with orchestra (including the 1967 world premiere with orchestra!), is to be found in the various accordion and musical publications of the time. The contract files, however, reveal that the invitation and contract to write a second composition for accordion and orchestra (the first being the *Concerto*, of course) is dated July 17, 1964. It is also not known when Creston completed the *Fantasy*, since there is no written

documentation of his delivering the score to Bennett; but he most certainly did so well within twelve months since a letter written a year later (July 11, 1965) by Bennett to Creston invites him, for a honorarium of \$100, to be the commentator on his previous two AAA commissions (*Prelude and Dance* and the *Concerto*) plus his new *Fantasy* at a seminar-workshop for students and professionals planned for May 22, 1966 at the Statler Hilton Hotel in New York City. In a second letter several months later (October 5, 1965), Bennett informed the composer that the renowned artist Daniel Desiderio would play excerpts of the *Prelude and Dance* and the *Concerto* for discussion of the works, but would perform the entire *Fantasy* as a complete piece, solo version, at that time. This, then, would serve as the official premiere of the composition. To accomplish this, Bennett wrote to the publisher, Mills Music, on October 22 to ask for a temporary copy of the score prior to its publication and release, which took place in 1966, and permission for Desiderio to perform it. She also sought to have the CIA accept *Fantasy* as the test piece for the Coupe Mondiale international competition in 1966, but wrote to the publisher in November that it was refused. It has yet to gain that distinction.

Bennett proudly announced the upcoming seminar/workshop in at least two prominent

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accordion periodicals, the March 1966 edition of *Accordion and Guitar World* (vol. 30, no. 5; “Fourth AAA Workshop Features Creston”) and the spring 1966 edition of *Accordion Horizons* (vol. 2, no. 3; “AAA Accordion Workshop Features Paul Creston and Daniel Desiderio”). Though Desiderio is heralded as the performer-to-be in both articles, the writer was perplexed to see in a third entry in the summer edition of *Accordion Horizons* (vol. 2, no. 4; “Creston Accordion Workshop Terrific Success”), that, in reporting on the then already past May event, William Schimmel, rather than Desiderio, was the guest performer. A photograph of Creston, Bennett, and Schimmel at the hotel furthermore accompanied the writing. In a recent conversation with Dr. Schimmel regarding this switch in performers, he explained that about a week before the engagement, Desiderio was unable to attend due to some unexpected matter that arose. In what must have been a panicked moment for her, Bennett contacted Schimmel’s teacher, Dr. Jacob Neupauer, asking if his then nineteen-year-old student would be willing to learn and play the *Fantasy*, in addition to performing the *Prelude and Dance* (already in his repertoire and that of most of the rest of us competing in the AAA competitions of that time) for the seminar/workshop. He was also asked to play segments of the *Concerto* to illustrate various points made by the composer in his presentation. This writer and anyone else who has played the *Fantasy* can attest to the fact that learning this piece in a single week was a Herculean task, for it is every bit as difficult and challenging as the highly virtuosic *Concerto*, though mercifully shorter in length. All went well and Schimmel gained the mantle of being the youngest-yet accordionist to premiere a major AAA commissioned solo. In recounting this heady experience to the writer, he fondly recalled that Mr. and Mrs. Creston and Mr. and Mrs. Bennett took him out for dinner at Bruno’s Pen and Pencil Steak House afterwards and that he “felt like a million dollars.” He also added that he had already been studying composition with Creston at his home in Hartsdale, New York, and moved to New York City soon thereafter to begin his degree work in Composition at Juilliard. Creston was very pleased with his performances at the Statler Hilton and



Paul Creston, William Schimmel, Elsie Bennett, following the fourth AAA seminar/workshop presentation of commissioned works and premiere of the solo version of the *Fantasy*, at the Statler-Hilton Hotel, New York City, May 22, 1966.

complimented him publicly. Curiously, Schimmel performed all of these works not on his own accordion, but that of Creston (a Sano with the composer’s name on it), who, as a pianist and acclaimed organist, took up the instrument for a while and became quite proficient in playing it. This largely explains why Creston’s AAA commissioned works are so well suited to the virtuosic demands and expressive qualities of the accordion and utilize its idiomatic features so well.

It would be another year before the official premiere of the *Fantasy* with orchestra would take place. That was accomplished in Pierson Hall at the University of Missouri in Kansas City on Friday evening, March 24, 1967, by another young student of approximately the same age as Schimmel, Betty Jo Stubblefield (now Betty Jo Simon). Stubblefield was a sophomore and accordion major in the burgeoning accordion division established by the noted classical accordion artist and trailblazing proponent of new contemporary classical music for accordion, Joan

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Betty Jo Stubblefield (now Simon) around the time of her premiere of the *Fantasy* with orchestra, 1967.

Cochran, in the Conservatory of Music at the University of Missouri Kansas City. The concert, entitled “Concerto-Aria Concert”, was an annual event in the Conservatory in which top students were selected by faculty from different instrumental and vocal areas. The *Fantasy* was performed by Stubblefield and the University Orchestra (consisting of UMKC students as well) immediately after the intermission. Regarding this young artist, she, like many others of us who are still active “senior citizen” American accordionists, had already garnered numerous awards (nineteen, according to one local newspaper) in the advanced levels of regional and national competitions, and had made the first playoff of the AAA National Championship Competition the previous year. A few months after the Creston premiere performance she played in a four-month USO tour in Iceland, Greenland, Newfoundland, and Labrador. She remains highly active as an accordionist to this day, playing in regional, national, and international venues, as may be observed in her website, www.bettyjosimon.com, and various Google references.

It is odd that there was no mention of this significant event for the accordion in any of the known accordion publications and other music trade journals, such as *Musical America* and *Music Journal*, to which Elsie Bennett often submitted articles about the latest commissioned works and their performances. Equally unfortunate was the lack of a music critic at the concert, and hence a consequent review despite announcements of the

Fantasy's debut and mention of the accordionist prior to the occasion in two local newspapers, *The Suburban* and *The Kansas City Star*. Presently, the writer is aware of only two other performances of the work with orchestra since then, both of which are listed in 1975 AAA and 1979 ATG National Championship winner Monica Slomski's DMA dissertation, *Paul Creston: A Bio-bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1994): accordionist Patricia Costagliola, with the Municipal Arts Orchestra, Julius Grossman, conductor, Brooklyn, New York, August 14, 1974; and Slomski, herself, with the Bridgeport Civic Orchestra, Harrison Valante, conductor, Bridgeport, Connecticut, March 1975 (exact date not given).

The music of Paul Creston enjoyed its greatest popularity and frequency of performance in the 1940s and 1950s, a period during which he was the most in-demand American composer in Europe and that ended with the first two accordion works, *Prelude and Dance* and the *Concerto*. By the 1960s, however, “neoclassical” music of his sort was supplanted in importance by the more abstract, expressionistic offerings of the atonal school, represented by such composers as Milton Babbitt, Ernst Krenek (an AAA commissionee), Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luciano Berio (who did write one work for accordion), Pierre Boulez, George Crumb, and many other younger mid-century figures. Now middle aged, Creston was deemed out of date by his younger peers for his somewhat jazzy syncopated rhythms, extended tertian harmonic structures, and prominent melodic lines, often built on modal and whole-tone scales. Such traits were by mid-century considered to be over-farmed innovations of an earlier time and past generation. This did not, however, slow down the flow of music coming from this amazingly prolific composer. In or around the year 1964, when he composed the *Fantasy*, he found the time to also produce four piano solos, three songs with piano, one song for soprano and tenor with eleven instruments, and an orchestral score, *The Invasion of Sicily*, for the last installment of a seven-episode television series, *The Twentieth Century* (1958-64). In that year he also began writing a monumental set of ten books on rhythmic studies for piano, *Rhythmicon*, (1964-77) and completed a second book, *Principles of Rhythm*, a subject in

which he was a recognized and respected authority. In addition to all this activity, he remained in his long-time position as organist at St. Malachy's Church in New York, served as a director of ASCAP, and was in high demand as both a guest composer and teacher in various venues (including the AAA Seminar/Workshop discussed above).

The *Fantasy* is a tightly composed one-movement, multi-sectioned work lasting just seven minutes, if played up to its demanding tempi. The orchestration consists of the usual complement of woodwinds, brass, timpani, percussion, and strings. The published copy by Mills Music available for sale (the orchestral parts and score being available only by rental, as is usual for orchestral works) includes the accordion part and a piano reduction of the orchestration by the composer, thus allowing accordion and piano performances if desired. (The *Concerto* allowed the same. The writer has performed it twice with piano with good results.) A perusal of the accordion/piano score reveals that the accordion plays continually with the exception of

The AAA is, under the direction of Beverly Roberts Curnow, in the process of creating a CD series of the commissioned works, performed by various artists. Among the recordings will be a performance of the *Fantasy* by Monica Slomski recorded live at the University of Bridgeport Contemporary Composer Festival honoring Paul Creston March, 1975. We anticipate the recording to be completed for the AAA 75th Anniversary in 2013.

only five bars close to the middle point, and that the left-hand part is more often than not duplicated in the orchestra. Only in the opening Maestoso section does the accordion have several measures of extended solo playing. Otherwise, except for a few intermittent exposed moments here and there, the accordion is in constant company with the orchestra

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to the very end. (This is true of the last movement of the Concerto as well, making it, too, a very acceptable solo.) For all these reasons, the Fantasy can be played with quite satisfying results in any of three ways: as a solo (supported by the publisher on the front cover, which bears the statement “May be played solo”), a duet with the piano reduction of the orchestration, or with orchestra. Needless to say, the solo rendering is that which is heard most often. In fact, the writer recently performed it as a solo in the 2011 AAA Master Class and Concert Series.

When publishing news releases of new AAA works, it was common practice for Elsie Bennett to ask for a brief description of them from their composers, discussing such elements as form, key structure (when present), tempi, rhythmic traits, harmony, and the like; but, alas, no such documentation from the composer appears in either the Creston/Bennett correspondence or any publication. Thus the writer will offer his own observations alone.

A superficial glance at the score and its tempo markings will give the impression that the Fantasy is divided into two major segments, the first marked Maestoso (quarter note equals 58 on the metronome), in 3/4 time, and lasting for only 18 measures; and the second and far longer portion of the work, marked Allegretto (dotted quarter equals 69 at first), enduring for 198 measures and beginning in 6/8 time (though the editor of the publication or possibly the composer himself neglected to supply the new key signature). The Maestoso section supplies a loud (double forte) and declamatory introduction to the whole, similar to the opening of the first movement of the *Concerto*. By contrast the lengthy Allegretto section offers many changes in mood, thematic material, and meter. Its first part presents a gently flowing pianissimo melody in 6/8 meter, as already mentioned, with much two-part counterpoint going in the right hand while the left hand and orchestra plot a rhythmically steady left-hand walking line for the most part. This ultimately leads to transitional material where, at the end, and for only a brief moment of five measures, the accordion has its one and only break from playing in the entire piece and the orchestra gently moves into a second theme, in a soft dynamic yet again, but in 4/4 time at the slower metronomic marking of quarter note equals 72. The new melody consists largely of eighth-note triplets vying with sets of four eighth notes.

Intensity once again builds towards the end of this section and, after a dramatic mini-cadenza of two measures for accordion alone, leads into what might be conceived of as a rondo encapsulated within the larger segment. The main theme is a faster (quarter note equals 132) and quite jaunty melody in 3/4 time whose opening pitch content might subliminally remind one of the beginning of the children’s tune “London Bridge is Falling Down”. But Crestonian syncopations and through-composed rhythmic and melodic developments quickly dash this impression and proceed to hurl the material through two returns of the main “London Bridge” idea, separated by contrasting melodic sections. This all ultimately climaxes with what may be perceived of as a thrilling eight-bar coda, quite like the concluding bars of the final rondo movement of the *Concerto*. Never once is the accordionist allowed to lose concentration throughout this “rondo” or, for that matter, the entire Allegretto section. Hazardous technical challenges lurk around every corner at oftentimes reckless speeds, given the intricate counterpoint and small note values that prevail. Nevertheless, the composer was very familiar with the piano/stradella accordion and knew just how far he could push the virtuoso accordionist. This he did magnificently in both the *Fantasy* and the *Concerto*.

The writer wishes to thank Dr. William Schimmel, Betty Jo Simon, and Dr. Monica Slomski for their invaluable assistance in the gathering of information for this installment.

Dr. McMahan will be performing one of the recent AAA commissioned works, *Canto XVIII*, by Samuel Adler, in addition to his Romp III, for accordion and piano (with Dr. Joanna Chao, pianist), *Sonata Valtaro*, for accordion and piano (Dr. Schimmel, piano), and transcriptions of Italian opera arias with soprano Joy Bechtler at the eighteenth annual Master Class and Concert Series, Tenri Institute, New York City, across the weekend of July 27-29, 2012.

The *Fantasy* will be performed by the AAA Festival Orchestra at the 2013 AAA 75th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee Concert, Joan Sommers, conductor and arranger; Mary Tokarski, soloist.