

Composers Commissioning

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

José Serebrier: *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*,
for Accordion and Chamber Orchestra

No. 19 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the A A A

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*Note: the thirty-first commission, Alexander Tcherepnin's
Tzigane, was discussed in the 2014 issue of the
AAA Festival Journal.*



As may be recalled from the 2015 installment of this series, AAA Composers Commissioning Committee Chair Elsie Bennett was approached in early 1966 by the up and coming young Uruguayan conductor and composer José Serebrier who boldly proposed that he be commissioned by the AAA to compose both a solo piece and a concerto-like work for the accordion.* The outcomes were the intermediate level *Danza Ritual*, discussed in last year's issue of the *AAA Festival Journal*, and *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*, for Accordion and Chamber Orchestra, the subject of this article.

In 1970 an upbeat report on the already quickly escalating career of Serebrier appeared in the April issue of the *Music Journal*. Entitled "Serebrier from Uruguay: Composer to Watch," it was written by Carole Farley, the subject's admiring bride and now wife of almost fifty years as well as world acclaimed operatic soprano. Among Serebrier's many achievements she listed in the entry was mention of the world premiere of his "concerto" for accordion and orchestra by the "Colorado Philharmonic," indicating that it had happened sometime in early July 1969. This is the only published announcement of a

premier this writer has been able to find. Unfortunately, Farley did not provide the exact date, location, conductor, or accordionist in the article. Furthermore, in contacting both the composer and his wife recently, they, themselves, could not recall the details of the Colorado concert and were only aware of a later New York City premiere in 1981, to be discussed below. What follows may be of some interest to the reader in demonstrating the amount of sleuth work researchers often find themselves pursuing to get important information.



Micki Goodman (dancer and wife of William Schimmel, William Schimmel, Elsie Bennett and Otto Luening at New York premiere of Serebrier's *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*

continued

Composers Commissioning – José Serebrier

A little searching on the web soon revealed that the so-named Colorado Philharmonic Orchestra was a “pick up” or “reading” orchestra in a music camp setting for promising students from all over the country. It was



Carol Farley, wife of José Serebrier

located in Evergreen, a small city and resort area in the Rocky Mountains, not too far west of Denver. It grew larger and more prominent over the years and is known today as the National Repertory Orchestra, resettled in Breckenridge, yet further west in the mountains. According to the history given on its website,** the conductor at the time would have been the founder of the organization, cellist Walter Charles. Certain that more details could be provided by the NRO, the writer contacted its main office only to be informed that there were no records kept of concerts from its early days. Equally curious and frustrating to this end is that Elsie Bennett, viewed by all who knew her to be highly meticulous, persistent and tireless in sending out press releases and publishing announcements of and articles about new AAA commissions, apparently never knew of any performances of the *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*, since none appear in any of her writings. An exception, however, would be the already mentioned 1981 performance in New York, which she attended.

The writer suspected that the accordionist for the premier was one of the prominent Denver based classical artists of the time, such as Robert Davine or perhaps one of his students, particularly Bill Popp or Patricia Tregellas. When asked, however, Popp (the only surviving member of the three today) responded that he was not the soloist in question and that he did not know of the concert or who the soloist was. Further searches by the reference librarians of the Denver Central Library also turned up nothing, so the mystery lingered on until the writer contacted the Lakewood Public Library near Evergreen. Its research librarian, Briana Francis, looked through the summer 1969 files of the local newspaper, the *Canyon Courier*, and discovered an announcement of the ensemble's

upcoming concert for August 13 (a month later than the time period Farley gave in the *Music Journal*) with a list of the selections on the program and information about some of the featured performers. The concert was to take place in the Evergreen High School auditorium, the usual site for the CPO's programs. Accompanying the article was a photograph of one of the soloists, an accordion-wearing youth, Albert Schlisserman, described as a New York University undergraduate, member not only of the brass section of the CPO, but also those of the Adult Syracuse (New York) Orchestra and the National Orchestra Association, and, most pertinent to this writing, highly advanced accordionist. It was further reported that Albert was going to perform the Serebrier work on the concert. Oddly, however, there is no mention of this being a world premiere, and Schlisserman, himself, does not presently recall playing the work over such a long gulf of time (forty-seven years ago, to be exact!). In any event, August 1969 was a good month for Serebrier in Evergreen, since the same newspaper article indicated that another CPO concert to take place earlier, on August 8, was to feature a local saxophonist playing a solo in Serebrier's "Partita," doubtlessly referring to his Second Symphony, which bears that subtitle and includes alto saxophone in its instrumentation.

Happily, it was not difficult to find current



Albert Schlisserman

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information on Schlisserman and to contact him. Today, he is a practicing ophthalmologist in the Buffalo area and trumpeter for the nearby Amherst Symphony Orchestra. His biography on the symphony's webpage reveals an extensive and distinguished musical career paralleling his thirty-five-year medical practice.*** His duo-instrumental background is easily explained in that his father was a Juilliard graduate who studied trumpet with the great William Vacchiano and his mother studied accordion with the no less great Pietro Deiro, Sr. While at NYU, he gained the distinction of playing accordion in the Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof* and took up accordion lessons with Joseph Biviano. Following graduation he soon joined the US Army Strolling Strings in Washington DC (thus being one of AAA Board member Manny Bobenreith's predecessors in that role), took science courses at George Washington University, and, upon leaving the Service, enrolled in medical school in Buffalo. As if to be the perfect coming together of parts of a mysterious puzzle, initiated by the coincidence of the subject of this years CCC article, Dr. Schlisserman, given that he resides in the Buffalo area and the AAA Festival is taking place there this year, has consented to add to the festivities by playing two duets by his teacher, Biviano, and Biviano's close associate and fellow founder of the AAA, Gene Van Hallen, with the writer in one of the Festival concerts.

As indicated above, the only other live performance for which the writer has found printed evidence since the rather obscure debut in Colorado occurred twelve years later, on December 6, 1981, at Christ and St. Stephen's Church in New York City as part of the second season of concerts by the then fledgling North-South Consonance. Established only a year earlier by conductor/composer Max Lifchitz, the organization was and still is dedicated to performing new music by composers of all the Americas. It quickly became one of the highest regarded performance organizations in the contemporary music community and continues to thrive to this day. This particular program certainly lived up to its title, "Music by American and Latin American Composers," offering a good balance of representation from both hemispheres. The featured accordionist was William Schimmel, who had been a close friend of Lifchitz since 1966 when they first met as students at Juilliard. In addition to performing the *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*, Schimmel played four other AAA commissioned works, all solos: Henry Cowell's *Iridescent Rondo*, Otto Luening's *Rondo*, Wallingford Riegger's *Cooper Square*, and Carlos Surinach's *Pavana and Rondo*. The last two of these employ Latin rhythms, as does, of course, the Serebrier selection, thus



José Serebrier and Elsie Bennett at New York premiere of Serebrier's *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*, Christ and St. Stephen's Church, New York, December 6, 1981

displaying a good hemispheric balance on the part of the accordion offerings alone within the larger one of the whole concert (of which there were thirteen works in all). Regarding the Luening piece, Schimmel arranged it for accordion and orchestra for the concert, much to the delight of the composer who was in attendance along with Mr. and Mrs. Serebrier and Elsie Bennett. Schimmel fondly recalls rehearsing the Serebrier work first at the composer's New York apartment, with Lifchitz playing the orchestral part on the piano, and then once more with the chamber orchestra at the church shortly before the concert the next day. In the years that followed, Schimmel was to play many works, some of them commissioned, many of them his own, for North/South Consonance. Both he and Lifchitz recall that Serebrier was very happy with both the piece and the performance and assured the accordionist that he would include it in one of his own programs in the future. Serebrier also mentioned to the writer recently that many have told him that the *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile* is a favorite among his works.

Possibly because of the Latin leaning of the program and the fact that Lifchitz was originally from Mexico, Juan Arturo Brennan, New York reporter at the time for the Mexico City based newspaper *Uno Más Uno* (and recognized today as a noted composer, photographer, cinematographer, and television producer), was drawn to the event and stood as the sole critic in attendance. Though Brennan gave an overall favorable review of the program nine days later and proclaimed the accordion works to be the most interesting of all the selections, he made no mention, curiously, of the Serebrier offering. Lifchitz believes that if he had, the editor may have

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arbitrarily cut it due to lack of printing space (which happens all too often, unfortunately).

Whether or not other significant performances have taken place since (or before) 1981, the composer/conductor recorded it on the Naxos label in 2003, thirty-four years after its debut and twenty-two years after the New York concert. Yi Yao was the accordionist with the composer conducting the Toulouse National Chamber Orchestra.***** Serebrier wrote in the liner notes of the recording the only account this writer has seen of his experience with the AAA, Bennett, or the commissioning of the piece:

I received a commission from the American Accordionists' Association to write a work for accordion and chamber orchestra, the *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile* (1966). The instrument was entirely foreign to me, but Elsie Bennett, long-time president of the organization, and the brains behind their massive commissioning series, lent me an accordion, which I studied for weeks. It was a great challenge, because the chords provided by the buttons on the left side of the instrument were ready-set, giving the composer very little freedom for tonal imagination and variety. The instrument has since then been improved, and composers today do not have that problem. I gave the commission organization a bonus, a piece for solo accordion [*Danza Ritual*; see below], which I wrote at the same time.

It is interesting to note that he, like several other AAA commissioned composers, expressed his initial dismay of certain limitations of the standard stradella left-hand system of the accordion but was now aware of what he thought was the later development of free bass "improvements" for the instrument. Actually, both prominent free-bass systems, the "quint" and "bassetti," were already around and being played by many of the younger artists in 1966, as a majority of those reading this article are likely aware.

The contract between Serebrier and the AAA is dated March 17, 1966, and indeed calls for both a solo work (which resulted in the *Danza Ritual* discussed in the 2015 AAA Festival Journal installment of this series) and "a work for Solo Accordion and Orchestra" that "will include treble fingering." The deadline for both compositions was December 1 of the year, at which time the composer would be paid the agreed upon sum of \$300. The AAA furthermore claimed the right of first performance and recording for two years after the delivery of the scores, but, as has just been indicated, neither apparently happened within that period. Peer International Corporation published the score in 1974 and still holds the rights. One may purchase the



Conductor/composer Max Lifschitz, founder and director of North/South consonance.

accordion sheet music with the piano arrangement of the orchestral score from Peer for practice and rehearsal purposes, but the full orchestral score is available by rental only, as is typical of most published large ensemble music.

The composition is a delicate, clearly textured work of lovely melodic lines thinly but beautifully orchestrated for chamber string orchestra with the addition of two horns, trumpet, bass trombone, and a percussion section consisting of suspended cymbal, tam tam, tenor drum, and bass drum for the *Passacaglia* and strings only for the *Perpetuum Mobile* movement that immediately follows. The accordion is prominently used throughout the work, but is more thematically blended with the ensemble in the *Passacaglia* than in the *Perpetuum Mobile*, where it carries the main theme more as the soloist would in a concerto.

The title of the composition is a generic one. That of the first movement harkens back to the Baroque era and the seventeenth century. The Spanish word "passacaglia" literally translates to "street dance." Formally speaking, however, it is defined as a piece with a constantly repeating theme in the bass (technically referred to as a "ground bass") that is usually four to eight measures in length and commonly in a minor key and triple meter. In the parts and instruments or voices above the ground bass one may hear variations on the theme playing against it or entirely different melodic lines that render the ground bass a less noticeable, though obsessively repetitive, accompaniment. A famous example of the former application is Johann Sebastian Bach's spectacular *Passacaglia* in C Minor, for organ (ca. 1706-13), and of the latter, Dido's haunting lament ("When I am laid in earth") near the end of Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* (ca. 1684-88). Some of these ground bass traits appear in Serebrier's contemporary offering while others do not. His bass line (played pizzicato by the low strings) is

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His bass line (played pizzicato by the low strings) is slow, in triple meter, and initially in a clear B-flat minor key. The line appears to last for the classic eight bars before the expected repetition follows. However, upon that recurrence Serebrier subtly alters the intervals (but not the steady, persistent, “hypnotic” quarter-note rhythm) and shifts it into other rather distant key centers throughout the movement, the most noticeable of which are B minor and A minor. Against this deliberately exposed and emphasized bass line is a haunting counter melody of Latin nature and suave rhythm that the accordion either shares or alternates with the upper strings at different times. Occasional sparse and very tasteful touches of color supplied by the brass and percussion instruments beautifully enhance the effect of the theme at just the right moments. As a final touch, modest tension between the bass and the main melodic lines of the soloist and other instruments is created by freely permitted moments of incidental dissonance. The effect is quite sensual and somewhat mysterious, with a hint of gentle foreboding due largely to the persistent presence of the faux ground bass. After five minutes and 104 measures, the rather melancholy Passacaglia comes to a peaceful end on a nonetheless subconsciously

pensive sounding G minor chord (as opposed to the more conventionally expected return to the opening or “tonic” key, being B-flat minor in this instance). The livelier *Perpetuum Mobile* follows attacca (without pause).

The term “perpetual motion” is often used to describe fiery, virtuosic, rapid moving pieces, even if it is not the actual title of the work. For example, Rimsky-Korsakov’s popular “Flight of the Bumble Bee” is normally classified as a “moto perpetuo” despite its title. On the other hand, Paganini’s equally famous and often performed Moto Perpetuo, Op. 11, for solo violin, bears that generic title as do many other works of composers since his time. Moto perpetuo pieces are normally instrumental rather than vocal and bear rapid tempi and themes that tend to maintain a constant, unbroken rhythm allowing few, if any, moments for a “breath.” This is largely true of the accordion part of Serebrier’s *Perpetuum Mobile*. The 3/4 time signature of the Passacaglia is cleverly converted into 3/8 for the *Perpetuum Mobile*, with the quarter note beat of the first time signature equaling the dotted quarter value (equaling in turn the three eighth notes’ worth in each

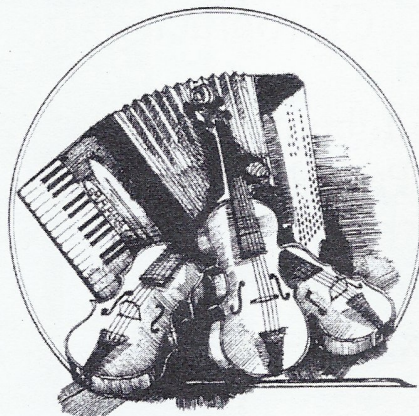
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measure) of the entire measure of the new, thus increasing the tempo significantly by that means alone. In other words, all three beats in the new 3/8 meter equal what was only one beat in the preceding 3/4 one. In addition, the first two measures of the ground bass in the Passacaglia, consisting of quarter notes B-flat, D-flat, F to A, C, F, which constitute the broken triads of B-flat minor (tonic function) and F major (dominant function) respectively, carry over into the second movement as one note per measure, but at approximately the same rate of speed as a single measure in 3/4 due to the quarter note metrical conversion to the full measure dotted eighth note equivalency in the new time signature of 3/8. This six-note fragment from the original ground bass repeats continuously as what may now be technically renamed a basso ostinato (due to its brevity when compared to the traditionally longer ground bass) in the accordion's left hand part, now sounding in unison with the heretofore independent lower pizzicato string parts that initiated the Passacaglia. This obsessive pattern persists for 66 of the 262 measures (counting sections that are marked for immediate repetition) comprising the movement and accompanies the main theme in the accordion's right hand part, an unbroken stream of rapid sixteenth notes in a variety of mostly ascending and descending scale patterns and fragments. Eventually, this gradually

predictable activity fragments into new melodic motives that are more chordal in nature along with dissonant trills and wild descending glissandi. Occasional rhythmic "bumps in the road" where the measures momentarily shift in and out of surprise metrical changes of 4/16, 3/16, and 1/4 add drama and a further suggestion of Latin rhythms and unexpected built-in accents. A prolonged final flight from this point finally careens to a sudden end, marked by a fatal downward glissando in the accordion to a low unison A with the orchestra.

A practical disadvantage of music for large ensembles is the high expense of production. This is further complicated by the reluctance of established musical organizations to include contemporary works on their programs due to their patrons' unfortunate difficulty understanding and accepting new music. Perhaps for these reasons, at least in part, Serebrier indicated in his score that the *Perpetuum Mobile* could be successfully performed either as a solo or a duet with the piano reduction part provided in the published score (which the writer had the pleasure of doing once with William Schimmel playing the piano accompaniment at one of the AAA Master Class and Concert Series programs). Regarding the solo option, the left-hand part doubles the rather sparse orchestral accompaniment to such a large degree in this movement that a solo performance would



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Composers Commissioning – José Serebrier

not be lacking in essential pitch and rhythmic materials and would therefore be quite acceptable. However, the accordion part in the first movement is too intertwined with and dependent upon the thematic and rhythmic elements of the orchestra to stand alone as a solo, although it, too, could be appealingly performed if accompanied by the orchestral piano reduction. Similarly, the final movement of Paul Creston's concerto for accordion and orchestra stands alone as an excellent solo, and is often played that way by this writer and others; but the first and second movements would never succeed in this way for the same reasons stated above for Serebrier's *Passacaglia*. Nevertheless, the entire concerto has been performed quite effectively by the writer a number of times with the published score's piano reduction of the orchestral part taken by an accompanist. Another example of the solo option sanctioned by the composer in print in the published score is Creston's *Fantasy* for accordion and orchestra. In fact, it is performed as a solo far more often than with piano or orchestra. (Recently it experienced yet another transformation when Mary Tokarski performed it with the AAA Festival Accordion Orchestra at the 2014 AAA Festival in New York City.) Of course, the originally intended form of all these works is always preferable to the solo and piano-accompanied renderings, but the latter are better than nothing, and certainly more affordable. One need look no further than Franz Liszt's piano arrangements and frequent performances of the Beethoven symphonies in remote parts of Europe during the nineteenth century to see that such practices are not a new idea.

Whether the *Passacaglia* and *Mobile Perpetuum* is played with orchestra or piano, or partially as a solo, it deserves many revivals. As a solo for the second movement it would certainly serve very well as a test piece in future AAA competitions.

Notes:

*Since the writing of the 2015 article, however, another earlier letter from Serebrier to Bennett expressing the wish to be commissioned by the AAA was discovered in the Bennett archive. It is dated May

11, 1962, and was mailed from the Utica College of Syracuse University, in Utica, New York, where the impressive twenty-three-year-old was serving as conductor of the Utica Symphony. Enclosed with the letter was a "brief curriculum vita" of five pages listing startling accomplishments in his brief career up to that point. He also offered to send copies of his compositions published by Southern Music for Bennett's perusal. Bennett courteously replied that funds and time were not available at the moment for a new commission, but that she would contact him "as soon as an opening for another new composer presents itself." That action and the commission did eventually take place shortly following Serebrier's second letter to Bennett in 1969 after Serebrier moved to New York to serve as assistant conductor to Stokowski, as reported in the 2015 article.

**<http://www.nromusic.com/about-the-nro/our-history/>

***http://www.amherstsymphony.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=88:albert-schlisserman-md&catid=9:brass-section

****"Serebrier; Symphony No. 3," Naxos, cat. no. 8.559183

The writer wishes to thank Max Lifchitz, William Schimmel, José Serebrier, Briana Francis (Lakewood branch of the Jefferson County, Colorado, Public Library system), Martin Leuthauser (Denver Public Library), and Kathleen Clabby (National Repertory Orchestra) for their invaluable assistance and sharing of information for this article.

Dr. McMahan and Dr. William Schimmel will perform the AAA commissioned work Sontag in Serejevo, by Dave Soldier, at the twenty-first AAA Master Class and Concert Series, Tenri Institute, New York City, July 29-31. Dr. McMahan will also premier at these concerts a new composition of his, Three Whims, for bassoon and accordion, Devon Yasamune Toyotomi, bassoonist, as well as new works by Elizabeth Brown (for Theremin and accordion) and Devon Yasamune Toyotomi (for bassoon and accordion).

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