

Composers Commissioning

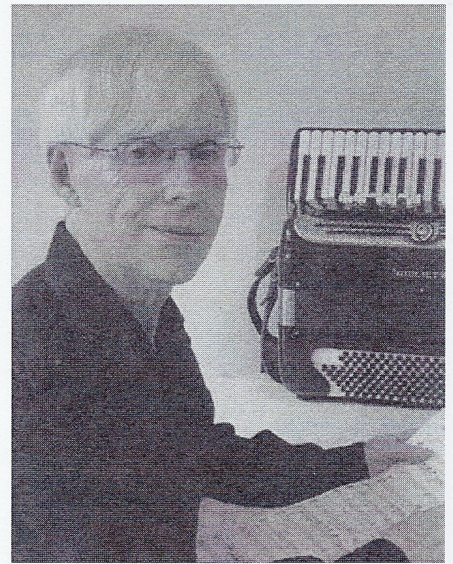
**The Thirty-third Commissioned Work
of the American Accordionists' Association
Composers Commissioning Committee:**

Joel Ira Brickman: Prelude and Caprice

**No. 21 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the AAA**

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With the total number of AAA commissioned works standing presently at sixty-one, the subject of this article puts us a little past the halfway mark of the many composers and their contributions to the accordion world we have been discussing in chronological order of their commissions since this series began in the 1997 edition of the annual *AAA Festival Journal*. It also marks the beginning of the commissioning of a considerable number of composers from the Baby Boomer generation. The first such commission took place in 1972, when most of the Boomers were completing their college degrees and beginning their professional lives. The composer was Joel Ira Brickman, who was born in 1946 and was indeed in the early stage of his professional career, teaching some composition at his soon-to-be Master's degree alma mater, the Manhattan School of Music, and soon thereafter at the no longer extant Marymount College in Tarrytown, and then, for many years to follow, instrumental music in various elementary, junior or middle, and senior high schools in northern New Jersey. Other boomer composers were to follow Brickman between the 1970s and the present and are all still with us (despite our now Social Security-drawing, senior citizen status!): Roger Davidson, John Franceschina, Karen Fremar, José Halac, Guy Klucevsek, Joseph Natoli, William Schimmel, Dave Soldier, Timothy Thompson, and myself. Five of us are accordionists ourselves as well as conservatory- or university-trained professional composers. Brickman, though not an accordionist (his main instrument is oboe), also holds BM and MM degrees in Composition from the Manhattan School of Music.

On April 11, 1972, AAA Composers Commissioning Committee Chair and founder Elsie Bennett sent a letter of commission to Brickman, assigning a solo to be completed "hopefully" by June 1. Despite this very short allotment of time, Brickman managed to produce a seven-and-a-half-minute virtuosic piece he titled "Prelude and Caprice." Also moving almost as quickly, Bennett promptly submitted the work to the congress of the Confederation International des Accordeonistes, which met in Caracas, Venezuela that year, for consideration to serve as the test piece at the 1973 Coupe Mondiale, to take place in Vichy, France, in September of that year. The congress approved the selection, and copies, published then by Pietro Deiro Music, were sent to all contestants. A second distinction for this 29-year-old composer's first and only accordion piece was that he made two arrangements of it, one for standard stradella bass and the other for the increasingly popular free bass. This was the first of a number of consequent AAA commissions to accommodate the two left-hand systems. The composer was to later comment in a press release he wrote for Bennett, that he enjoyed writing for the instrument and was impressed by its unique features and special effects: "I am greatly impressed with the accordion's ability to provide polytonal and polychordal sonorities. Its many registration stops also provide superbly effective contrasts. I hope to have done the instrument its due justice in my usage of several of its functions. I believe that other composers of my generation should investigate the overlooked virtues of the accordion. I am grateful for this opportunity." Indeed, he was grateful, as a brief note of thanks dated just a few days after he submitted his manuscript to

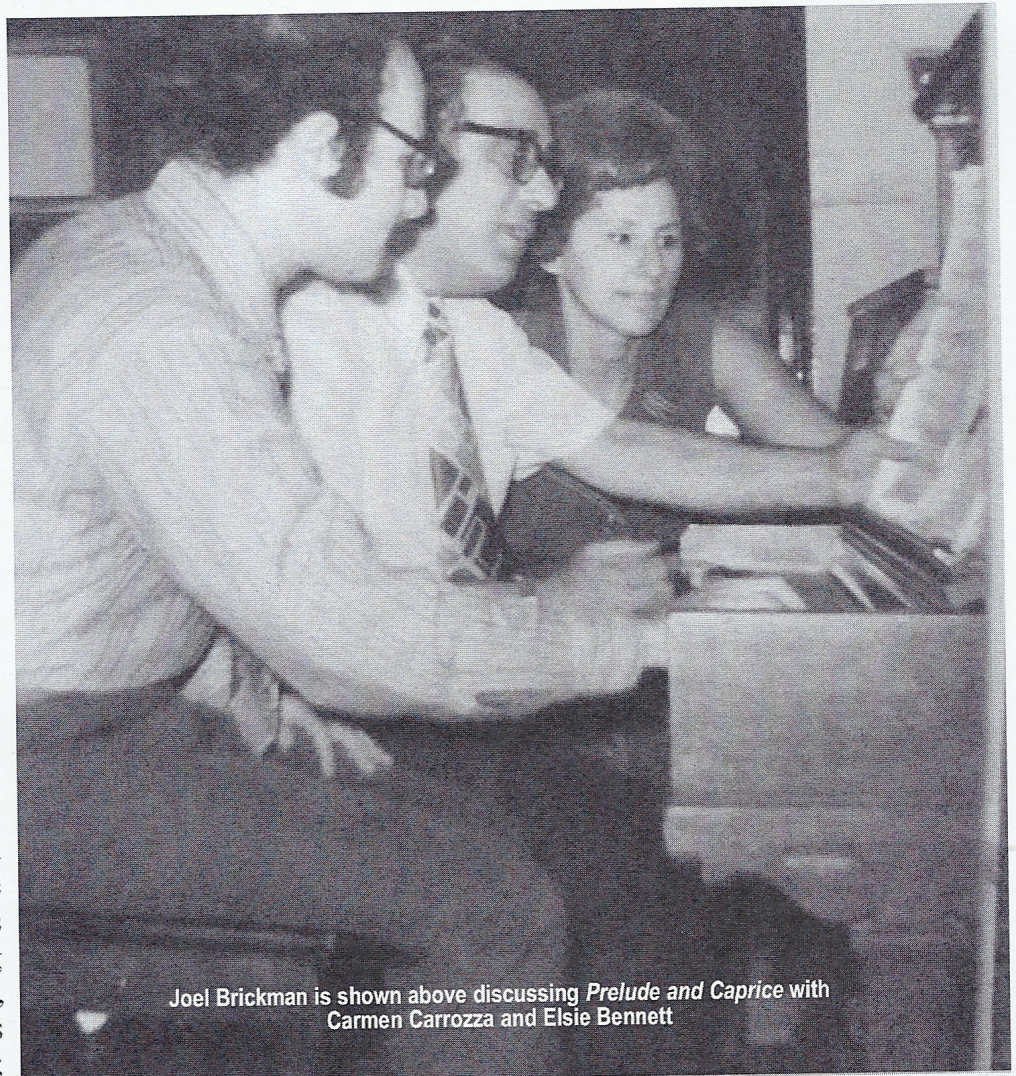
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Bennett can attest: "I am sending to you this belated note to express my sincere appreciation for my recent commission. I had great pleasure and gained a most valuable education in its composition. It is very benevolent of you to take interest in my music and, in turn, to encourage my writing for the accordion. Here's contemplating more music for same in the future." As had been true of many other Bennett commissionees, Brickman dedicated his piece to her.

Brickman also gave both brief and more detailed descriptions of his piece in a couple of undated memos, intended for press release, to Bennett.

"The first page of the Prelude exposes all the material to be used throughout. It runs in free development containing many lyrical themes that are later to be developed and exposed in the Caprice. The Caprice is very quick and gay, as opposed to the slow, brooding quality of the Prelude." To this, Bennett added "Mr. Brickman's work is definitively a virtuoso piece; but not conceived simply for that reason. It makes an energetic exploration of the expansive possibilities available with the accordion."

In the second memo, Brickman went into more detail: "My Prelude and Caprice endeavors to afford a solo accordionist with an opportunity to interpret two highly contrasting moods within a comparatively short duration. It opens with a forcible cadenza-like passage built upon a short tone row. The row then takes varied shapes. It is segmented, inverted, juxtaposed, etc. The resultant moods created with it also vary greatly. At times the initial idea is abandoned allowing for related lyrical themes to offset the Prelude's intensity. After the essential statements subside, another cadenza-like section, utilizing the right hand solely extends into the contradictory Caprice. This is in the fashion of a scherzo, but designed in a free-rondo form. It makes much use of disguised material from the Prelude; but instead of the original pomposity, here is a surge of



Joel Brickman is shown above discussing *Prelude and Caprice* with Carmen Carrozza and Elsie Bennett

gaiety and choreography. The coda is a culmination of as many previously announced themes as possible. The primary theme in the Prelude is noticeably elaborated. The overall texture of the Prelude and Caprice is in a freely chromatic and extended harmonic stylization."

The "row" Brickman refers to is not suggestive of the 12-tone serial technique created by Arnold Schönberg, but is rather a kind of melodic motif that will undergo the permutations he refers to (segmentation, inversion, etc.), only slightly reflecting some of the techniques of composition used in, but by no means limited to, the 12-tone school. It appears to be all of the notes in the right-hand part of the Prelude's first measure: A-flat, G, A, F, G-flat, A-flat, D-flat, E-flat, A-flat, C, D. The fact that the A-flat occurs three times also refutes the possibility of thinking of the passage as a presentation of an atonal serial row (in which no single pitch is allowed to recur). Brickman also makes wide use of the polychords he mentioned in his admiration of the accordion's unique

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features quoted above, pitting standard stradella bass fixed major, minor, major-minor seventh, and diminished chord buttons against contrasting and sometimes conflicting standard chords in the right hand keyboard, thus allowing varying levels of consonance and dissonance to occur.

There is no formal documentation of how or when Brickman and Bennett first met, but I had suspected that an earlier commissioned composer and one of Brickman’s composition mentors at the Manhattan School of Music, Nicholas Flagello, may have recommended him to her. (Flagello composed his *Introduction and Scherzo* for the AAA in 1964, eight years before Brickman’s piece. It was the twenty-third AAA commission at that point. See my article on this work in the 2011 edition of the AAA Festival Journal.) However, I was recently able to locate and contact Brickman, who presently lives in Paramus, New Jersey. He informed me that, though Flagello had recommended his young student for a position to teach composition extension courses in the Manhattan School of Music and that another prominent faculty member, also one of Brickman’s composition teachers, Ludmila Ulehla, recommended him for the position at Marymount, where he taught various music courses as well as clarinet and oboe for a few years, neither had anything to do with the commission, as was also true of another illustrious AAA commissionee with whom Brickman had studied during his undergraduate years at MSM, David Diamond. Flagello did mention his AAA commission once to Brickman, however, unlike Diamond, who never did so regarding his three accordion contributions to the AAA (two solos, *Introduction and Dance* and *Sonatina*; and *Night Music*, for accordion and string quartet; see my articles on them in the 2015, 2005, and 2004 issues of the AAA Festival Journal respectively). Instead, it was the result of a near unbelievable coincidence. While vacationing in the Catskills region at the Hotel Brickman (no relationship

to the composer) in scenic South Fallsburg, New York, he met by sheer chance Elsie Bennett, also lodging there. In their conversations he was excited to hear that she was to be joined shortly by Paul Creston, a composer Brickman greatly admired, and was further thrilled by Bennett’s invitation to meet him upon his arrival. During this time Bennett must have been convinced enough by the young composer’s credentials to offer him a commission virtually on the spot. This was highly unusual for Bennett, who usually pursued composers of fame or those of considerable note that she knew well and whose music she had heard, and then doggedly convinced to write for the accordion. She must therefore have seen something special in this young man that prompted her to take such a “gamble.” In any case, the result proved to be on fortune’s side and thus a testimony to the instincts of this great lady.

It was probably quite clear to Bennett that Brickman’s career was taking off quite auspiciously at that time on several fronts. This included a highly positive review in the *New York Times* by the renowned critic Raymond Ericson of a January 14, 1972 concert at the Manhattan School of Music of Brickman’s master’s degree thesis, a half hour long work for orchestra, soprano, and piano set to a poem by Muriel Rukeyser entitled “A Thousand Nights.” The work also won a composition contest in the school. These successes along with the AAA commission and its ultimate acceptance as the test piece for both the 1973 AAA national competition and 1973 Coupe Mondiale, not to mention the conferring of a Master’s degree from the prestigious Manhattan School of Music, certainly rendered 1972 a momentous year in this burgeoning composer’s life and bode well for his future.

Now in his early 70s, with a full and varied career of teaching behind him, Brickman continues to compose and is particularly proud of a number of his works that have been performed in New Jersey during the past couple of decades, including *Concert Overture*:

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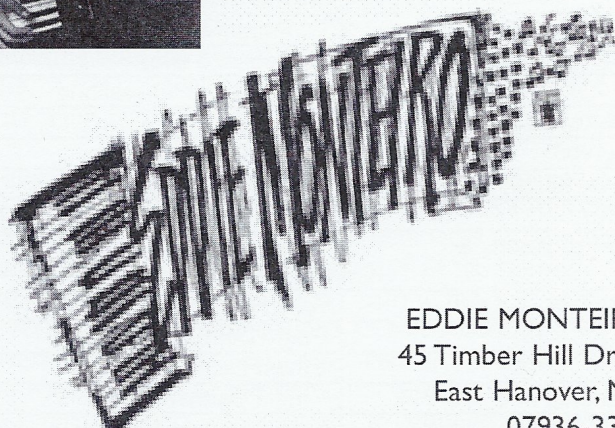
Composers Commissioning – Joel Brickman's *Prelude and Caprice*

Prelude and Dithyramb, that was premiered by the Ridgewood Symphony Orchestra, John Lochner, conductor; *Suite*, for woodwind ensemble; and settings for voice and orchestra of poems by E. E. Cummings, that was performed by the Ridgewood Chamber Orchestra, Walter Engel, conductor.

There is no record of a formal premiere of the *Prelude and Caprice*. This is possibly due to the fact that so many contestants in both the AAA and Coupe Mondiale performed it so soon after its creation. A single photo, dated June 21, 1972, in Bennett's large album of commissioned composers shows her, Brickman, and Carmen Carrozza at her living room piano in Brooklyn going over the score. This was the usual custom with new commissions by non-accordionist composers. However, Carrozza himself never played the piece in any of his famous groundbreaking concerts of new AAA commissioned works in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere. (In all fairness, the greater number of these concerts took place before the 1970s and the writing of Brickman's accordion composition.) Nevertheless, I imagine that a

number of other classical accordionists have since included it in their repertoire over the years. Offhand, I do know of two for sure: the present AAA President, Mary Tokarski and myself. I had the pleasure of performing it several years ago in one of the annual AAA Master Class and Concert Series at the Tenri Institute in New York. I heartily encourage and challenge our young and upcoming AAA contestants to consider including the *Prelude and Caprice* in their future repertoire as well.

Dr. McMahan will be performing one of the AAA commissioned works, *Prelude and Sarabande* (1963), by George Kleinsinger, at this year's AAA Master Class and Concert Series which will be held at the Tenri Cultural Institute, 43-A West 13th Street, NYC, July 27, 28 and 29. He will also be premiering two new works there, his own *Three Tweets*, for clarinet, accordion, and piano (2018), and *Objects Viewed in a New Light*, (2018), for accordion solo, by Daniel Galow, a recent graduate at The College of New Jersey, where he studied composition with Prof. McMahan. ■



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