

## *From Frosini to Foss: A Half Century of Contemporary Music for the Accordion*

between panelists and audience followed each presentation.

Also preceding the concert was an expression of gratitude by Prof. Atlas to Guest of Honor Sandra Deiro Cattani, daughter of the late Pietro ("Lee") Deiro, Jr., who recently donated her father's papers to the CUNY Center for the Study of Free Reed Instruments; and a brief speech of appreciation by AAA President Linda Soley Reed to AAA Composers Commissioning Committee Chair Emeritus, and senior-most member of the AAA Governing Board, Elsie Bennett, for her six decades of service to the AAA and her outstanding work in persuading so many famous composers to write for the accordion. Flowers were presented to her from the stage. It was particularly exciting to have present in the same hall this grand dame of the accordion world and one of America's most famous composers, Lukas Foss, a long-time friend of Ms. Bennett, who has commissioned him twice to write works for the AAA over a twenty-nine-year span.

This was an especially good weekend for the accordion in New York City, for the next afternoon and evening, Prof. Semionov gave a workshop and special recital of his and other composers' works for the accordion at the Greenwich House School of Music. The program was shared with the K Trio, which performed several very entertaining works as well.

The next CUNY concert, which will take place on Friday evening, December 9, 2005, promises to be equally exciting. Most of the same artists from the March program will participate, plus accordionist Lenny Feldmann, William Schimmel, and the winner of the Carrozza Scholarship Award at the 2005 AAA Festival in Dearborn. Carmen Carrozza will also perform if he is available at that time. Already slated for the program are several AAA commissioned works: two jazzy pieces, *Sky Forrest*, for four accordions, by Henry Brant, and *Accordion Samba*, a "cross-over piece" for accordion, bassoon, cello, and scat singer, by Gary Friedman, plus *Rondo*, by Otto Luening, *Sonata Fantasia*, by Normand Lockwood, and *Improvisation, Ballade, and Dance*, by Elie Siegmeister. Other selections for the evening will be *Silenzio*, for violin, cello, and accordion, by noted Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina, *Concerto Grunge*, for melodica, vocalist, accordion, and interactive video, by William Schimmel, various works by accordion pioneers Pietro Deiro, Pietro Frosini, Eugene Ettore, and others, and my own *Symbiosis*, for guitar and accordion (James Day, guitar). As always, a panel discussion of composers present will take place before the concert.

Registration fliers will be sent to AAA members as the date approaches. Why not brighten the final days of autumn by attending this truly unique evening

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## *Elsie Bennett Retires as Chair of the AAA Composers' Commissioning Committee and is Appointed Chair Emeritus*

*By Robert Young McMahan*

A bastion of the AAA and the longest resident member of its Governing Board, Elsie Bennett, recently announced her retirement from her half-century's distinguished service as Chair of the Composers Commissioning Committee, which she founded in 1953.

A native of Detroit, Ms. Bennett came to New York as a young bride in the mid 1940s. She had majored in music at Wayne University in her home state, but decided to finish her bachelor's degree requirements at Columbia University once she and her groom, the late Mortimer Bennett, settled into their Brooklyn home and future music studio. By 1945 she graduated from Wayne and soon thereafter pursued her master's degree at Columbia Teachers' College. There she was permitted to use the accordion as her major instrumental emphasis, provided she could find a good teacher. The teacher turned out to be the great Joseph Biviano. With that condition more than adequately

met, she set about fulfilling a second and far more challenging quest: finding original classical literature for the accordion. But there was little yet written for this still young instrument beyond a handful of ensemble works that included it in the instrumentation, such as in Virgil Thomson's unusual opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* and Paul Hindemith's *Kammermusik Nr. 1*. In the end, the College music department permitted her to play transcriptions of non-accordion works by masters of the past for her final qualifying recital.

Effective and pleasing though they can be, however, adaptations of piano, violin, and orchestral music from another time do not a new instrument's



reputation make. It needs to have music written for it in the contemporary musical languages of the day and that features its unique sounds and special idiomatic effects. Otherwise, it remains a kind of novel and passing curiosity whose sole perceived capability is to somewhat apologetically imitate other instruments in a kind of tongue-in-cheek seriousness, implying that it possesses no real merits of its own. This dearth of original serious repertoire for accordion began to seriously concern Elsie, so she sought advice from one of her professors at Columbia, renowned composer and soon-to-be pioneer in electronic music, Otto Luening. He told her that the problem would not be remedied until composers of quality and importance were commissioned to write for the accordion. Already an active and important member of the AAA Governing Board by the early 1950s, she invited Luening to speak about this issue at an upcoming meeting in early 1953. This he willingly did, and though meeting some resistance to the idea, he persuaded the Board to begin a commissioning committee. Elsie was immediately appointed its chair. The next fifty-two years in which the founder served as chair of the committee made history for the advancement of the accordion in contemporary music. The list of the thirty composers who have produced a total of fifty-two compositions to date reads like a who's who of many of America's most celebrated figures in music, although a number of them are lesser known but highly respected university composers and/or accordionist/composers as well. Too numerous to list here, they and all their works appear together elsewhere in the Journal.

It must be added that Ms. Bennett has always been the consummate archivist who has faithfully kept a well organized file of correspondence, publicity releases, musical periodicals (to which she contributed numerous articles and announcements regarding the commissioned works), and numerous photographs of her and all the composers involved. This constitutes an invaluable research source of the history of the accordion's progress in the field of contemporary music and is also of great interest to the American musical scene in general. Plans are being made to

contribute her papers to the Library of Congress eventually so that they will be perpetually preserved and available to all scholars.

On a personal note, many of the luminaries she commissioned became life-long friends (particularly Paul Creston and William Grant Still and their families) and a large number of them dedicated their works to her. To all of us on the AAA Board, and to countless others in the AAA and accordion world in general, she is simply our much revered and loved Elsie, always on top of everything that is happening around her, always snapping pictures of everyone at every conceivable accordion event and mailing every subject in her pictures prints the next week, checking out every current event taking place in music and boldly tracking down famous composers whom she does not think twice about asking to write for the accordion, attending two and three Broadway shows and/or concerts each week and tracking down the stars and famous artists backstage for autographs and, of course, snapshots (her archives of such memorabilia is as vast and well organized as that of her accordion materials), and, most important, never being anyone else other than her own honest and generous natured self to everybody.

Last year Ms. Bennett celebrated her eighty-sixth birthday by inviting family and friends, including many from the AAA, to a lavish banquet she arranged to take place at a well-known restaurant in Coney Island. One of the guests there, AAA Executive Secretary Maddalena Belfiore, announced that the Board had commissioned accordionist/composer John Franceschina to write a piece in her honor. Entitled *For Elsie* (a play on words of the title of Beethoven's famous little piano piece, *For Elise*), it will be premiered by Peter Soave at the 2005 AAA Festival in Dearborn, where Ms Bennett will be present and most deservedly acclaimed by all present.

It must be wonderfully satisfying to look back on a life well lived and so completely eventful and fulfilling. I once asked Elsie if she would ever close her school down, sell her home in Brooklyn, and retire to a quiet little cottage somewhere in the country. After instantly waving off such a notion, she replied, "I love my life." She's staying with us, and that's as we would all have it. When Elsie sent in her letter to the Board early this year announcing her intention to retire from the committee, its members unanimously voted to name her CCC Chair Emeritus. This is especially good news to her successor, who will greatly profit from all her experience and wisdom. She will continue to serve on the Board and maintain her fifty-year-old music school in Brooklyn, and we are all terribly glad about it.

***Viva Elsie!***



Left, Elsie with AAA Past President, Faithe Deffner. Above, Maddalena Belfiore, Exec. Secretary and Dr. Salvatore Febbraio presented Elsie with a bouquet. Many of Elsie's AAA friends contributed to the writing of a composition in her honor. The piece will be entitled *For Elsie* and will be written by John Franceschina.