

**The Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Commissioned Works
of the American Accordionists' Association Composers
Commissioning Committee:**

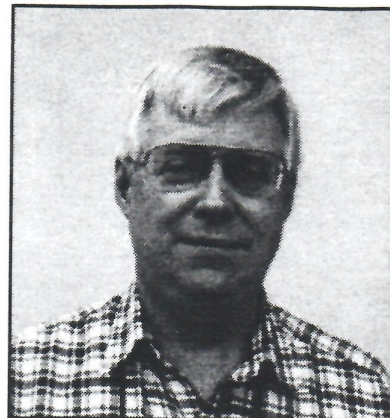
Carlos Surinach: *Pavana and Rondo*

Robert Russell Bennett: *Four Nocturnes*

Henry Cowell: *Iridescent Rondo*

No. 4 of an Ongoing Series on the Commissioned Works of the AAA

By: Dr. Robert Young McMahan



1959 was the second busiest year to date (1960 being the first) for the A.A.A. Composers Commissioning Committee. In that third active year of the Committee's history, Chairperson Elsie Bennett successfully offered five contracts to that many of America's leading composers: Virgil Thomson (whose *Lamentations* was explored in the previous issue), Carlos Surinach, Robert Russell Bennett, Henry Cowell, and William Grant Still. The middle three composers and their accordion works will be discussed in this article.

The acclaimed Spanish composer Carlos Surinach was born in Barcelona in 1915. He was educated in the Conservatory there and later in Germany. In 1951, after an active conducting career throughout Europe, he emigrated to the United States and settled in New York. He became a citizen during the year of his A.A.A. commission. Principally noted for his ballets, he was between commissions for Martha Graham's renowned New York dance company (*Embattled Garden*, 1958, and *Acrobats of God*, 1960) when he signed his AAA contract on June 11, 1959. In the January 1960 issue of *Accordion and Guitar World*, Ms. Bennett reported that Surinach had accepted the commission with much enthusiasm, stating that the accordion has "so many colors and resources" and is "easier to use your imagination when writing for it." He also declared that he intended to "write this number accordionistically" and further complimented the instrument, saying that it "has much more dynamics than the organ because it has more nerve and drive, and is more human . . . [and] can produce accents in a way that the organ cannot, and it seems to have the animal pulse." The resulting piece was *Pavana and Rondo*. Typical of Surinach's style and cultural background, it is decidedly of Spanish flavor, utilizes the "Flamenco Scale" (C-sharp, D, E, F, G, A-flat, B-flat, B, as stated in the article) at times, and is only mildly dissonant. As its generic title implies, the piece falls into two major sections: 1. *Pavana*, marked *Larghetto*, and 2. *Rondo*, marked *Allegro*. The *Pavana*

is entirely in 3/8 time with much use of bellows shake, mainly for strong accented melodic emphasis rather than the rapid tremolo normally associated with this device. It bears a sharply chiseled melodic line that one can imagine as an accompaniment to a heavily stomped-out Spanish dance. The *Rondo* is somewhat less severe, with a flowing line mostly in 9/8 time, though often interrupted by striking moments of hemiola (abrupt metrical shifts between 3/4 and 6/8 or 9/8 time, again, typically Spanish). *Pavana and Rondo* was published by Capri Music Corporation (with Alfred Music holding sole selling rights) in 1959.

Missouri-born Robert Russell Bennett (1894-1981; no relationship to Elsie Bennett) is most remembered for his masterly orchestrations of an impressive majority of major Broadway musicals by such stellar American icons as Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, and Irving Berlin, and for bringing that aspect of musical craft to a level of high status in his profession. His own compositions reflect the influence of Broadway as well. His *Four Nocturnes* for accordion (the sixth A.A.A. commission) is no exception. The correspondence between Ms. Bennett and the composer (which, interestingly, goes back to 1953) reveals that he began and completed this commission sometime between December 1958 and June 1959. There is no contract date because he generously refused pay for this service and hence signed no contract. The correspondence also reveals that they were already discussing a second commission, to be for accordion and string quartet, which, in fact, did eventually transpire (*Psychiatry*, 1962, the twenty-second commission). Following Ms. Bennett's adding fingering to the manuscript, the *Four Nocturnes* was published by Chappell shortly after he reported to her that he had finished his "*Commemorative Symphony Based on Stephen Foster*" (letter of June 23, 1959). More momentous surrounding accomplishments of the composer at that time, however, were his orchestrations of *Flower Drum Song* (1958), *The Sound of Music* (1959),

and *Camelot* (1960).

Though Mr. Bennett was very appreciative of accordion information materials sent to him in 1957 by Ms. Bennett, he revealed in a 1953 letter to her (from which she quotes in her feature article on him and the commission in the February 1960 issue of *Accordion and Guitar World*) that he had been using the accordion "a great deal, in small combinations" all his life. Like Surinach, he made comparisons between it and the organ, saying it was more "flexible" than the organ and that "you can get a sforzando on [it] on one note," unlike on the organ. The four movements are given the following tempo designations: 1. Moderato alla serenata, 2. Un piu blu, 3. Lento e pianissimo, and 4. Allegro. The first movement is almost like a sensuous Chopin Nocturne in its beginning moderato section. A second section, though, marked poco scherzando, swings in the tradition of the "Great White Way." The second movement, also swings, but in a more relaxed, "bluesy" manner (as its tempo marking suggests), featuring a lazy dotted-note figure surrounding single returning pitches. The third movement is essentially a minor key sarabande, in a stately triple meter and is highly ornamented by many thirty-second note passages. The closing movement is a mischievous rondo in D minor, dominated by fast moving harmonic fourths. Despite a rawdy second section, again in the tradition of Broadway, and a third idea that could easily have served as a theme for a 1950s television Western series, the quiet, fleeting quality of the main returning theme is distantly reminiscent of the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's incidental music to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. All four movements do somehow manage to come off as sultry, nocturnal pieces even though they are frequently, and very cleverly, invaded by the glitter and, at times, brassiness, of American popular musical theater.

Of the three composers discussed here, Henry Cowell (1897-1965) is the only one with a radical background. This highly prolific, stylistically pragmatic, California-born figure, is ranked with four other first-generation American avant-garde composers now known collectively as the "American Five." They were Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Wallingford Riegger (who the reader will recall was also commissioned by the

AAA), and John Becker. All flourished in the first half of the twentieth century and were the first to draw worldwide attention to America's first truly modernist musical movement. Cowell is particularly noted for his many startling experiments with the piano around the end of World War I into the 1920s. These include the invention of the "tone cluster" (dissonant chords created with the palm of the hand or the forearm) and playing inside the piano through plucking, strumming, striking with various objects, and sliding across the strings. By 1936, however, his interests turned to increasingly more traditional practices, so that by the time he accepted his AAA commission (contract dated July 14, 1959), he had long been using very regular rhythms and fairly traditional melodic lines and harmonies, often in a folk-like style. In fact his resulting *Iridescent Rondo* for accordion is built on the old Church modes and freely applied triads, devices that had become out of date decades earlier. (A later AAA commission, his *Concerto Brevis*, for accordion and orchestra, was to use this musical language as well.) Many baby-boomer era accordionists, pursuing degrees in composition and theory in various music schools and departments shortly after that time, and writing in the then fashionable atonal tradition of Schönberg and his followers, had greatly wished that Cowell had made his contribution to their instrument in the 1920s instead of then. They would have to wait until 1962, when Ernst Krenek wrote his excellent *Toccata* for the AAA, (the twentieth commission), to witness the first atonal work to come out of the Committee's efforts.

In her article on Cowell in the January 1961 issue of *Accordion and Guitar World*, announcing the publication of *Iridescent Rondo*, Ms. Bennett recalled that she had been in touch with the composer all the way back to 1952. At first he was somewhat discouraged by the fixed chord buttons of the 120-bass left-hand system, but after he saw that such a limitation did not stop Riegger, Creston, Surinach, and Thomson from tackling the instrument for the AAA, he decided to accept a commission. He declared that he liked the accordion tone "principally as a solo instrument, as it is one in which the dynamics can be controlled," and that the "number will be lyrical, not too modern, and not too convention-

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al. *It will have contrasting rhythms.*" The work turned out to be an eleven-part rondo in various modes: "A theme, Dorian mode on C (repeated), B theme, Lydian mode on E flat, A theme, Dorian mode on C, C theme, Mixolydian mode on F, A theme, Ionian mode (same as major scale) on F, D theme, Aeolian mode on D, Atheme, Dorian mode on A, B theme, Lydian mode on D, C theme, Dorian mode on A, D theme, Aeolian mode on D, A theme, Dorian mode on C," as Cowell described it in his introductory page to the published version. In that introduction he also explained the piece's title: "*Old modes, transposed and adapted to modern use, give an iridescent play of color to the various sections of the Rondo.*" In the Accordion and Guitar World article, he further described it as follows: "*I hope and think it is something that requires virtuosity, but not a new kind of technique. It is a show-off piece which runs along between allegretto and presto.*" The main A theme presents a kind of urgent moto perpetuo motif of sustained dotted eighth and sixteenth-note figures accompanied by fast moving sixteenth notes, and in 4/4 time. The contrasting themes (B, C, and D) are mostly in 6/8 time, sounding very much like Irish jigs (a favorite style of this composer, who was very interested in and proud of his Irish ancestry). The all-over effect is almost like that of a vaudevillian accordion novelty (in fact, Cowell had heard Pietro Deiro on the stage many times in his younger days). The Iridescent Rondo was published by Pietro Deiro Publications and Momac Music Company in 1960.

All three pieces, along with Riegger's *Cooper Square*,* were premiered by Carmen Carrozza at

Baksa Commission Premiered

A new commission by the American Accordionists' Association was premiered by Eero Richmond at an Inoue Chamber Ensemble concert at merkin Concert Hall (NYC) on May 31, 2000. The new work, *Accordion Sonata*, was composed by Robert Baksa. Born in 1938, Robert Baksa is an American composer who has written a great number of solo and chamber works in a highly inventive, but musically accessible style. Audience response to the new sonata was quite enthusiastic. For further information on works commissioned by the American Accordionists' Association and on the AAA Commissioning Program itself, contact Elsie M. Bennett, Chair of the Composers' Commissioning Committee, c/o AAA.

Carnegie Hall on November 21, 1959, as part of the twenty-seventh season of the National Association for American Composers and Conductors. New York Times critic John Briggs reported the next day that "Mr. Cowell's *Iridescent Rondo* made quaint, delightful and very effective use of modality, . . . and Mr. Bennett's *Four Nocturnes* employed a sprightly jazz idiom, Mr. Surinach's *Pavanna and Rondo* was a big scale work that would be extremely effective in transcription for pipe organ [the very opposite of what Surinach said about the accordion and the organ above!]." Two of the works, *Pavana and Rondo* and *Iridescent Rondo*, were recorded by William Schimmel on his 1980s LP *Accordion Revisited* (Finnander/Atlantic label).

Dr. McMahan is a classical accordionist, specializing in contemporary original works for or including the accordion, composer, musical researcher/writer, and Associate Professor of Music at The College of New Jersey, where he serves as Coordinator of Music Theory Studies. He has recorded on the CRS and Orion labels, and will soon release a CD of contemporary works on the Cambria label.

*In my last article I stated that the reason for Riegger entitling his accordion piece *Cooper Square* was uncertain. I stand corrected. In an article by Ms. Bennett in the February 1961 issue of *The School Musician*, she reported that Riegger chose this name in honor of the Five-Spot Cafe, located on New York's Cooper Square. It was a popular gathering spot for New York composers who often gave informal performances there of their new works, Riegger included.

NOTE: Those wishing to hear many of the AAA commissioned works are encouraged to attend the AAA Accordion Master Class and Concert Series, Dr. William Schimmel, Director and Moderator, which occurs in New York every summer. Every year since 1995, many of these works have been performed by Drs. McMahan and Schimmel. This year's event (August 25-27) will include Krenek's *Toccata* and Surinach's *Prelude of the Sea*. See announcement and application form elsewhere in this issue.