

## The Ninth, Tenth and Eleventh Commissioned Works

of the American Accordionists' Association  
Composers Commissioning Committee:  
Elsie M. Bennett, Founder and Chair

**Henry Cowell: *Concerto Brevis***  
**Otto Luening: *Rondo***  
**Paul Pisk: *Salute to Juan***

No. 6 of an Ongoing Series on the Commissioned Works of the A. A. A.

By Robert Young McMahan, DMA  
Classical Accordionist, Composer, Research Writer,  
and Associate Professor of Music Theory, The College of New Jersey

In the unlikely event that the legendary persuasive powers of Elsie M. Bennett as Chair of the A.A.A. Composers Commissioning Committee were ever called into doubt, an examination of her now historic files of C. C. C. contracts and correspondence should swiftly refute it. This is particularly true of those for 1960, for they reveal that between February and December of that year she performed the remarkable feat of convincing seven major American composers that they should sign contracts to produce new works for the accordion, an instrument that still faced a long uphill battle to gain acceptance by the serious contemporary music world. Their names, resulting works, and dates of agreement were Henry Cowell, *Concerto Brevis*, for accordion and orchestra, February 4; Otto Luening, *Rondo*, June 23; Paul Pisk, *Salute to Juan*, October 28; Alexander Tcherepnin, *Partita*, November 1; Henry Brant, *Sky Forest*, for jazz accordion quartet, November 7; Elie Siegmeister, *Improvisation, Ballade, and Dance*, November 10; and David Diamond, *Night Music*, for accordion and string quartet, December 8. The first three of these will be discussed for this installment.

Henry Cowell (1897-1965) was no stranger to the A.A.A. since he had already composed a solo work, *Iridescent Rondo*, for the organization the previous year (the seventh A.A.A. commission; discussed in the 2000 issue of the A.A.A. Festival Souvenir Journal). In addition, he managed to produce yet another solo accordion piece, *Perpetual Rhythm* (not for the A.A.A., and, interestingly, following the same scheme of modes that he described in the inside cover of *Iridescent Rondo*) that same year. Always a busy and prolific composer, he had also completed his fourteenth symphony, *Characters*, for orchestra, and his thirteenth *Hymn and Fuguing Tune*, among other works, between the two A.A.A. commissions. As Paul Creston had done for his second A.A.A. commission, Cowell decided to take on the ambitious project of a concerto for his. This would be the second work for accordion and orchestra that the A.A.A. commissioned up to this point. However, unlike Creston's concerto, which was highly virtuosic and followed the traditional classical design of three move-

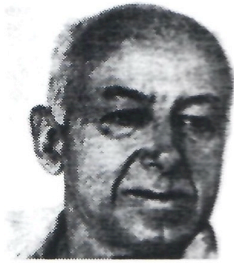
ments with a fast/ slow/fast tempo plan, Cowell's would be less technically demanding (though not to a great degree) and would be in five rather short movements, hence the title he chose, *Concerto Brevis*. Another distinction to be drawn between the two works has not to do with their musical forms, but rather with their premieres. While the Creston concerto received a critically acclaimed debut with Carmen Carrozza and conductor Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra soon after its completion, the *Concerto Brevis* would unfortunately



Pictured above: Carmen Carrozza, Paul Creston and Arthur Fiedler (October 1959)

have to wait twenty-five years after its publication (by Pietro Deiro Music, in 1962) and long after its composer's death for its first performance with orchestra. This was finally accomplished on October 4, 1987, by Guy Klucevsek, with the Temple University Orchestra, Luis Biava, conductor, and took place at the Port of History Museum, in Philadelphia, as part of the New Music America Festival. Brief, though favorable, mention was made of it the next day in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* by critic Lesley Valdes, who said that Klucevsek "made a strong case for the piece, which was written as a way to review Cowell's stylistic manner. Cowell used the accordion's color rather than projection to make his music." I know of no performances before or since then





Henry Cowell  
1897-1965

with orchestra, though it has probably been done a number of times with piano accompaniment, using the piano reduction of the orchestra part included in the Deiro publication.

Like *Iridescent Rondo* and *Perpetual Rhythm*, the *Concerto Brevis* is highly modal and rhythmically straightforward throughout

and frequently uses rondo form (in the second, fourth, and fifth movements: A-B-A form is employed in the first and third movements). A device Cowell invented during his first and most radical period, in the second and third decades of the century, was briefly reincorporated into the first and third movements of the concerto. He termed it "tone cluster" and employed it at that time in several daring piano pieces of his in which the fist or forearm is used to strike all the adjacent keys in that area of space on the keyboard. The result is highly dissonant. In most other parts of the *Concerto Brevis*, however, Cowell uses less controversial twentieth-century harmony, such as parallel major and minor triads and some quartal harmony (chords built in intervals of the fourth rather than the traditional third of previous centuries). Another typical aspect in the concerto of what Cowell authorities call his third and final period (in which, as this work has already shown, he often combines the radical elements of his first period with the more conservative ones of his second period) is the use of the style of the Irish jig—a lively sextuple meter dance—to serve as a scherzo movement. This constitutes the fourth movement in the *Concerto Brevis* (though it is in rondo form rather than the usual tripartite scherzo-trio-returning scherzo format most commonly employed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music). One particularly strong, neoclassical nod to the past is a highly challenging cadenza that brings the frolicking final movement to an exciting close. But in the tradition of Mozart's and Beethoven's time, he indicates in the score at this point that the performer, if he so desires, may play a cadenza of his own making instead.

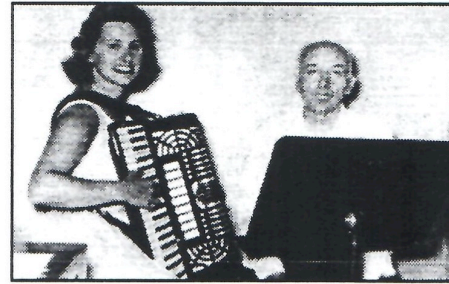


Otto Luening  
1900-1996

Approximately five months after this commission another illustrious American figure, Otto Luening (1900-96), agreed to write for the accordion. This may have taken less persuasive effort on the part of Ms. Bennett than it would have with Cowell or Pisk since Luening had been one of her professors at the Columbia Teacher's College and had, in fact, persuaded the A.A.A. to begin a commissioning committee in the

early 1950s (see the first article in this series in the 1997 issue of the A.A.A. Festival Souvenir Journal). Though

Elsie M. Bennett reviews *Concerto Brevis* with composer, Henry Cowell. (August 1959)



the Milwaukee-born composer, flutist, conductor, and educator was often rather conservative in his compositional style and had written for acoustic instruments for most of his long and varied life, he possessed an experimental and pragmatic nature which led him to become one of the pre-eminent pioneers in electronic music after World War II. By 1960, he had composed eleven electronic tape works, six of which were in collaboration with his noted Columbia University colleague Vladimir Ussachevsky, and was working on a sixth, seventh, and eighth (*Gargoyles*, for violin and tape, and with Ussachevsky, *Concerted Piece*, for orchestra and tape, and incidental electronic tape music to George Bernard Shaw's play *Back to Methuselah*) during that year. Nine more would follow through 1965. It would have been a great triumph for the accordion at that time if he had decided to write something for it with tape. However, he opted instead to create a flashy, etude-like, *moto perpetuo solo* based largely on the chromatic scale and supported by simple diatonic harmonies. It seems obvious that he had the old vaudevillian stereotype of the accordion novelty in mind. He used rondo form to construct his piece and simply gave that generic title to it (rather than some descriptive or programmatic title as Frosini, Cere, or Magnante might have done in their well known novelties).

*Rondo* was published by Pietro Deiro Music in 1962 and premiered that year by Carmen Carrozza in a recital at New York's Town Hall on Sunday afternoon, May 7. In addition to transcribed works of Bach, Chopin, and

Dr. McMahan is a classical accordionist, composer, research writer, and Associate Professor and Coordinator of Music Theory Studies at The College of New Jersey, where he will be offering a Bachelor of Music degree in Accordion, both in performance and music education areas, beginning in the 2003-04 academic year.



Liszt and the Luening selection, the program included four other A.A.A. works that Carrozza had premiered earlier in New York: Creston's Prelude and Dance, Wallingford Riegger's Cooper Square, Carlos Surinach's Pavana and Rondo, and Robert Russell Bennett's Four Nocturnes (for my discussions of these, see the second, third, and fourth articles in this series in the 1998, 1999, and 2000 issues of the A.A.A. Festival Souvenir Journal). Two very positive reviews of both Carrozza's performance and the original works were written by John Gruen, of the New York Herald Tribune, and Howard Klein, of the New York Times. Regarding the premiered work of the day, Gruen described it as a "joyful and expertly turned out study in the use of chromatic scales, that was never burdened by redundancy or coyness," while Klein was more terse, simply stating that it was "neatly handled" by Carrozza and "well turned out" by the composer. The piece definitely is "joyful," though it could just as easily be labeled "whimsical," "humorous," "frolicsome," "rambunctious," "misbehaving," or "clownish." It has a certain fresh and innocent quality about it that, if it were somehow transformed into a motion picture, might be designated as a G-rated farcical comedy. In the 1980s, William Schimmel gave a very exciting and suitably boisterous rendering of Rondo on his LP album *Accordion Revisited* (Finnander label, no. 90234-1) that is well worth hearing.

Rondo is cleanly divided into twelve clearly delineated



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ed contrasting or returning thematic sections which may be charted as follows: 1) Introduction; 2) A; 3) A1 (all in the key of C major; A1 throws the earlier heard right-hand part, consisting mostly of rising and falling chromatic scale passages in rapid sixteenth notes pitted against higher sustained countermelody notes, off by one beat with the left hand's stereotypically accordionistic "oom-pah" bass accompaniment, creating a humorously amateurish, fumbling effect); 4) B (in F-major; contrasted with A by casting the chromatic scale sixteenth-note motif of the Introduction and A

into the bass against short, sporadic, punctuated chords in the right-hand part); 5) and 6) exact return of the Introduction and A (in C-major); 7) C (in F-major; typified by downward tumbling arpeggios in the beginning); 8) brief transitional section, loosely based on the Introduction's trill-like, sixteenth-note motif and leading to 9) A2 (in C-major and truncated, using varied material from the second half of A); 10) B2 (in F-major, also truncated and highly altered from its original B state); 11) A3 (in C major; much truncated from the original A), leading directly to 12) Coda (marked "Grandioso"; beginning in F-major and ending in C-major; a comically grand-eloquent, chordal climax to the piece). As can be seen, only two principal key areas dominate the piece: the tonic (C-major) and the subdominant (F-major). The lack of clear dominant key areas (which would be in G-major) deliberately creates



Paul Pisk  
1893-1990

an ambiguity at times as to whether the piece is in C-major (though it is favorably weighted against F-major, since the piece begins and ends in C-major) or F-major (with C-major therefore suggesting the dominant chord in the key). This is particularly noticeable in the Coda, which serves to throw the listener off somewhat concern-

ing the tonality, as did the A1 section throw him/her off rhythmically, further suggesting the earlier mentioned comical amateurish effect. For all these reasons, Luening's clever and mischievous little gem for accordion was far from being in fashion with the prevailing, less frivolous atonal avant garde movements of its day (true also of the other two works explored in this article). But from the present, less biased distance of three decades since its creation, it might be viewed as a far more unique contribution to contemporary music than it was then, possibly being an almost surrealistic experiment in rhythm and latter-day tonality as well as a kind of parody or burlesque of a once popular form of entertainment music.

Paul Pisk's Salute to Juan has a more serious demeanor, though it also takes shape through a frequent incarnation of accordion music, this time the tango. It is therefore similar to two of its A.A.A. commissioned predecessors possessing Hispanic qualities as well, Riegger's Cooper Square (also essentially a tango) and

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*To hear live performances of A.A.A. commissioned works on a regular basis, the reader is strongly encouraged to attend the annual three-day A.A.A. Master Classes and Concert Series, which is produced and hosted by Dr. William Schimmel and takes place every July or August at the Tenri Cultural Institute, in New York City. It is now in its eighth consecutive year. Since its beginning in 1995, Drs Schimmel and McMahan have performed over a third of the fifty commissioned works there. For this summer's event, occurring on August 23, 24, and 25, two early commissions, Kleinsinger's Prelude and Sarabande and Virgil Thomson's Lamentations, will be performed by Dr. McMahan and Eero Richmond respectively. See the ad and reservation form elsewhere in this issue for details regarding this and the many other varied and fascinating activities taking place during this year's program.*



Surinach's flamenco-like Pavana and Rondo (both discussed in earlier articles in this series, as mentioned above). Pisk (1893-1990) was born in Vienna where he studied composition with Arnold Schönberg, the founder of atonal and serial technique and one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century. After teaching in many significant institutions in Austria and establishing a reputation as a fundamentally atonal composer, he migrated to America in 1936. Subsequently, he taught at the University of the Redlands (in California), the University of Texas, Austin (where he was situated when he was commissioned by the A.A.A. in October 1960), and Washington University (in St. Louis). An article in the June 1961 issue of *Accordion and Guitar World* indicated that the accordion work had been completed and would be published by the Alfred Music Company (which it was that year). A photograph accompanied the article showing Pisk, Bill Palmer, of the celebrated Palmer and Hughes accordion duet team (also at the University of Texas where they headed one of the few accordion departments in the nation at that time, and no doubt initiated the move to commission Pisk), and a Palmer student, Lynlee Barry Hatch, who was reported in the caption as "run[ning] through Salute to Juan." The official premiere of the piece, though, took place two years later in yet another Carrozza Town Hall recital, on April 28, 1963. Three other recent A.A.A. commissions were premiered on that program as well, Tcherenpin's *Partita*, Siegmeyer's *Improvisation, Ballade, and Dance*, and Kleinsinger's *Prelude and Sarabande* (which I will perform this August in the A. A. A. Master Class and Concert series, produced by William Schimmel, at the Tenri Institute in New York City). Also performed that day were three earlier, previously premiered commissioned pieces, Surinach's *Pavana and Rondo*, Bennett's *Four Nocturnes*, and Cowell's *Iridescent Rondo*. A brief review of the recital was given by Robert Jacobson in the June issue of *Musical America* which praised Carrozza's playing and two of the premiered selections, Eugene Ettore's *Agitato* (not a commissioned work) and Tcherenpin's *Partita*. Regrettably, no special mention was made of Pisk's contribution and no New York newspaper critics were apparently in attendance.

A very succinct description of *Salute to Juan* is given by the composer through the above mentioned *Accordion and Guitar World* article: "The first and third sections have Tango rhythm, the middle part is agitated and fast like the Andalusian Jota [and moves from the characteristic duple meter of the tango to 6/8 time for the Jota]. This portion is also used for the brilliant ending [a coda]." When I performed this work for the A. A. A. Master Class and Concert Series and in my workshop at the Cleveland Festival last summer, I found the outer sections to be very consistently similar to each other in their perturbed, polytonal mood and style. This includes the way the stormy introduction, in the full

Elsie Bennett pictured in June of 1960 with Professor Otto Luening who was one of her professors at Columbia. Again Elsie is pictured below with Otto Luening in May of 1985 at an AAA Open Meeting



"Accordion" shift, leads directly into the tango constituting the first theme, which is dominated by the essentially non-contrasting "Violin" and "Mussette" registers (as indicated in the score). The middle "Jota" section, using at times the darker "Organ" register switch, does offer some relief from the intensity of the outer portions of the piece, and moves along at a slightly faster and more flowing clip. But for the most part, this is a work of unrelieved, aggressive energy that imparts a far more serious mood than do the stylistically related Cooper Square and *Pavana and Rondo*.

Given its popular tango motif and mild polytonal harmonic language, as compared to the greater dissonant atonal structures normally employed by this composer, it would appear that Pisk, possibly like Luening, viewed the accordion in a stereotypical way. In any event, because of its strong and familiar Latin rhythms, we can once again say, as we did for the other two compositions featured in this article, that *Salute to Juan* would not have been in vogue in the advanced contemporary music circles of the 1960s as it might be today. Concerning the title, I have it on good authority, although the evidence is not printed in any source known to me, that "Juan" refers not to a person, but rather to the city of San Juan, capital of Puerto Rico, a place that apparently had great appeal to the composer. This may help to further explain why he turned away from his more usual compositional language to one more endemic to a popular musical form and instrument closely associated with that part of the world.

The next three works commissioned in 1960, Tcherenpin's *Partita*, Brant's *Sky Forest*, and Siegmeyer's *Improvisations, Ballade, and Dance*, will be examined in the 2003 edition of the *Journal*.

*Dr. Robert Young McMahan*

