

Composers Commissioning

The Fifteenth and Sixteenth Commissioned Works of the American Accordionists' Association Composers Commissioning Committee: Elsie Bennett, Founder and Chair

David Diamond: *Night Music for Accordion
and String Quartet*

Louis B. Gordon: *Aria, Scherzo, and Finale
for Accordion and Orchestra*

No. 8 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the A. A. A.

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As may be observed in the title above, the next two commissioned works in the AAA Composers Commissioning Committee chronology after those discussed in the last article of this series were written for accordion plus other instruments. At this point, in the early 1960s, the Committee was endeavoring to produce as many varied musical forms employing the accordion as possible, and now included chamber ensemble and large orchestral or band forms (though Paul Creston's Concerto for Accordion and Orchestra preceded these commissions). To accomplish this, Elsie Bennett succeeded in bringing two new



Elsie M. Bennett
Founder and Chair
AAA Composers
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composers onto the AAA scene, the famous and long established David Diamond and a young doctoral student at the Eastman School of Music, Louis B. Gordon.

David Diamond, now eighty-nine years old and living in his long-time home in Rochester, New York, is one of the surviving major composers of twentieth century American Music. A man of strong personal convictions, both musically and in general, he never embraced the

fashionable atonal music prevalent in the first three decades of the second half of the twentieth century (though some of his music in the 1960s uses twelve-tone themes in places), preferring to remain the essentially post-romantic/neoclassical composer he has always been across his long and prolific career. To date, he has composed four dramatic works, seven ballets, eleven symphonies (the seventh and eighth of which were premiered by the Philadelphia and New York Philharmonic Orchestras around the time he wrote *Night Music*), concerti, many songs and song cycles, a large and varied body of chamber music, and film and radio scores as well as incidental music. Perhaps his most well known and frequently performed work is *Rounds*, for String Orchestra (1944). From 1951 through 1965 (and hence during the period in which he composed *Night Music* as well as his two consequent AAA commissions, *Sonatina* and *Introduction and Dance*, both solos), Diamond lived almost exclusively in Florence, Italy, partly to avoid the difficulties visited upon many American artists of that time by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Most of his correspondence with Elsie Bennett was from there, though he occasionally came back to his Rochester home for increasingly longer periods of time to accept teaching positions at the State University of New York, Buffalo (1961, 1963; the period in which he wrote *Night Music* and *Sonatina*), the Manhattan School of Music (1966-67), and the Juilliard School of Music (1973-86; after his

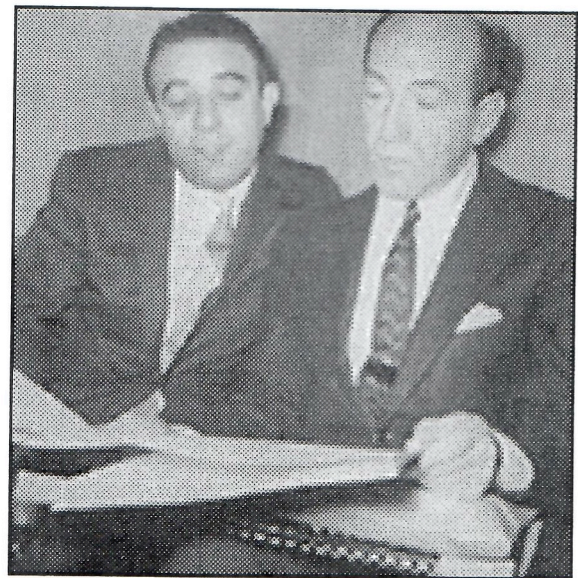
retirement, he continued to teach at Juilliard through 1997, stopping finally at age 82).

He and Elsie Bennett remained in close touch for all of that time. Their extensive correspondence in the early 1960s reveals many editing and publication problems that were not entirely ironed out until the publication of *Night Music* by Southern Music in 1964. Diamond, who claimed familiarity with the accordion before the AAA commissions, consulted with Carmen Carrozza at first, and many changes were made in the score. By accident however, the unaltered version was sent to Joseph Biviano, who was to premiere it with the Beaux Arts String Quartet, and who then struggled with what he regarded as various awkward left-hand and register switch changes in certain places. After the premiere, Biviano then submitted multiple suggestions for changes to the composer, many of which echoed Carrozza's concerns and most of which appear in the final published score. In the meantime, Diamond also consulted with an Italian accordionist of note (to whom he referred only by his last name, Conforti) who saw no performance difficulties in the left-hand part. Diamond endorsed making the piece as easily and naturally playable as possible, however, and sanctioned the

and the conformist public I find distasteful and futile. Here today, gone tomorrow is all it fosters." He further and more vociferously elaborated on this repugnance of interviews in a later letter, when Bennett asked for a private conference on the piece itself and gingerly attempted to get him to at least talk about the music: "I do not like any kind of exploitation publicity about myself; what you want to do with the music, by all means do. Of course I will meet with you and talk with you but please do not ask me about myself! Human egos sicken me. There is too much in this world to do for others, I cannot suffer the self-preoccupations of people when there is so much agony in this world of ours." As if to reinforce these feelings, he dedicated *Night Music* to Wallingford Riegger (who composed the



Pictured above: Elsie Bennett and David Diamond review "Night Music."



Carmen Carrozza and David Diamond reviewing and editing "Night Music" to make the piece "as easily and naturally playable as possible."

At right, Joe Biviano and David Diamond. Joe premiered *Night Music* with the Beaux Arts String Quartet



Carrozza/Biviano changes.

A somewhat amusing sideline to this story is that Diamond would not grant Ms. Bennett the personal interview she asked of all commissioned composers for purposes of publicizing the latest works, stating in his correspondence with her, "I do not permit myself interviews or publicity involvements. This to avoid an aspect of present day public relations between the artist

second AAA commission; see the article in the 1999 *Festival Journal*), strongly reminding Ms. Bennett to not overlook that fact in her reporting, and admiringly referring to his late friend as "one of the few saintly people I knew [in] this infamous world."

As for describing the piece itself, Diamond had this to say in the earlier letter: "My music will speak for itself at any time if it is any good." He did eventually give a terse description of *Night Music* in the second letter: "The *Night Music* is in the form of a three-part elegy." He had written earlier to Bennett that it had originally been in four movements, but he was "not happy about the form" and that the four movements "made a cut-up structure rather than a placid, flowing one." He decided to "recast" the form and proclaimed that it was now a "one-movement work—much better this way—and [it] creates exactly the effect I want." The music nevertheless falls into three distinct sections, that may be described as an A/B/A1 overall form: an

Adagio of 94 measures, an Allegro moderato of only 27 measures, shortened further by switching from the predominance of quadruple meter, alternating with triple and sextuple meter near the middle, in the first section to duple meter in the present one, and a varied version of the Adagio that is only about one third the length of the original. The opening Adagio begins with a suave, flowing, chromatic, nine-bar motto in the solo accordion whose two phrases are divided between the right- and the left-hand manuals. The string quartet then enters without the accordion to complete a kind of double period phrase. After this, the opening four-bar motto phrase heard only in the accordion's right-hand part continues to be developed, mutated, and transposed in many ways between the accordion and the strings. The mood is generally placid and fluent, and the texture considerably contrapuntal. Much effort had to be made by Carrozza and Biviano in choosing register switches (a task Diamond willingly turned over to them) that would allow both good contrast between and blending with the accordion and the strings. The Allegro Moderato that follows breaks this mood only briefly before the quiet theme of the returning, truncated Adagio ultimately leads to the pianissimo final bars that are dominated by a brief accordion solo, bringing the listener full circle, at least by implication, back to the beginning premises of this ten-minute nocturne. Though the music is largely polytonal in its counterpoint and harmony, the closing accordion solo cadences on a peaceful E-flat-major chord with the strings.

The premiere performance took place at the Carnegie Recital Hall on May 3, 1962, along with quartets by Juan Crisostomo Arriaga, Vittorio Rieti, and Beethoven. Elsie Bennett attended the concert with composer Robert Russell Bennett (a two-time AAA commissionee), and reported in a letter to Diamond (who was in Italy at the time) that she and the other AAA Board members present were very pleased with the work and that it was very beautiful. Though referring to it as a "near-novelty," Raymond Ericson, of the *New York Times*, gave a description of it similar in some ways to that above as a "quietly flowing work" whose harmonies were "uncharacteristically sweet and poignant, with relatively mild dissonances arising from the constantly interweaving voices." He also rightfully stated that the composer "managed to blend the reedy tone of the accordion with that of the quartet part of the time, usually when the strings could envelop the accordion in their own sound. But when the latter was allowed to stand out, its bland tone failed to supply sufficient contrast." He qualified this remark, however, by saying that it was a "pretty, atmospheric work that should have some popularity," and that it was "nicely played by the string ensemble (Beaux-Arts Quartet) and Joseph Biviano."

Elsie Bennett quoted Biviano in the letter to Diamond saying that the Allegro was "so great that

everyone felt that they wanted to hear more of it, but it only lasted for 16 [actually 28] measures." Diamond replied to Bennett in a consequent letter that "no—the Allegro must be short; like the kind of strange agitation that comes over a beautiful night weather-wise, and metaphysico-wise (sic!). A passing change, -- something not to be captured or repeated. Tell Biviano this."

Night Music has enjoyed many consequent performances since the premiere, featuring such accordionists as Mogens Ellegard, Patricia Tregellas, Bill Palmer, Joan Cochran, Charles Camilleri, Don Balestrieri, and Anthony Galla-Rini. Most recently, the present AAA President, Dr. Carmelo Pino, has recorded the work for the Albany label with the Potomac String Quartet in Washington, DC. It will be part of a large CD collection of Diamond's eleven string quartets (composed between 1936 and 1968, including his Concerto for String Quartet and Orchestra, with *Night Music* falling between the fifth and sixth quartets [1960 and 1962 respectively]). The quintet will be added as a special bonus. The composer did ultimately get to hear all of his accordion works performed at one time or another, as confirmed in a 1993 postcard to Bennett: "I've heard some very good performances of all the accordion pieces over the years."

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

Interestingly, the next AAA commission had connections in Rochester, New York, as well, in that the composer, Louis B. Gordon, was completing his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Composition there in 1961 at the famed Eastman School of Music. To the best of Carmen Carrozza's memory, the young composer was working on a special ensemble project that year and decided to do something heretofore never done at Eastman, namely to write an orchestral or band piece featuring accordion. Dr. Gordon was a native of Beaumont, Texas, where he was born in 1926, and played frequent popular music jobs on piano in his youth. At some point he came to work with accordionist Bill Palmer, of the famous Palmer and Hughes duet team, and professor of accordion at the University of Houston, and gained considerable knowledge of and interest in the accordion. While at Eastman, he apparently entertained the hope that Frederick Fennell,

conductor of the renowned Eastman Wind Ensemble, might perform his new work, eventually entitled *Aria, Scherzo, and Finale*, in Houston, where a spring (1962)



Carmen Carrozza and the late Eugene Ettore presented Dr. Lewis Gordon with a plaque for "important contributions to the growing serious repertoire for accordion."

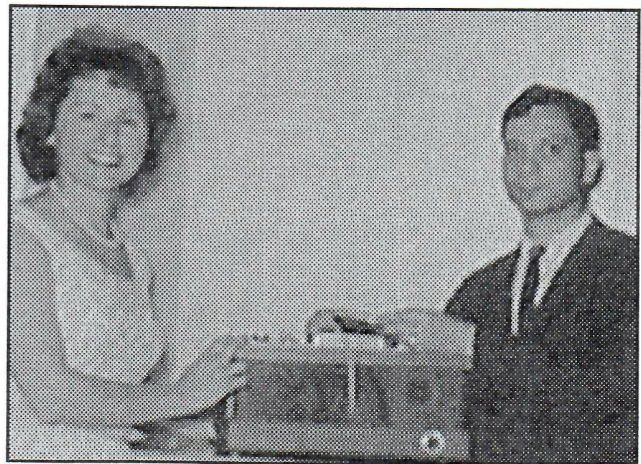
concert for the ensemble was scheduled. Elsie Bennett, who had recently commissioned Gordon to compose the piece (for accordion and orchestra or band), wrote to Palmer for Gordon asking if Palmer would be willing to play the accordion part if the piece were included in the program. The plan apparently never materialized, but Carrozza did premier it with the Civic Orchestra, rather than band, in a three-day recital/symposium at Eastman in early April, 1962.

In the fall of that year, Gordon accepted a teaching position at Fairleigh Dickinson University, in Madison, New Jersey, where he remained until his retirement in 1992. On October 18, 1964, Carrozza performed the work again, this time at the University, with the Tercentenary Chamber Orchestra (founded and conducted by Gordon and made up of Fairleigh Dickinson students and community professionals). Though there were no critics present, the work and performance were mentioned in an article by Richard F. Shepard on contemporary music for the accordion in the November 29, 1964, edition of the *New York Times* (Section 2, p. 1, "Composers Try to Upgrade the Accordion"). Both artist and composer recall that the two performances were very successful. On November 28, 1964, the AAA honored Dr. Gordon, along with four other commissioned composers of note, Henry Brant, Paul Pisk, Alexander Tcherepnin, and Otto Luening, at a special dinner at the Statler Hilton Hotel, in New York City. All were presented with plaques by Carmen Carrozza and Eugene Ettore, citing their important contributions to the growing serious repertoire for accordion.

Like Diamond, Gordon tended to be a tonal composer who preferred to write "accessible" music for the public rather than subscribe to the more abstract atonal language prevalent in the 1960s (unlike his

classmate and friend at Eastman and my composition mentor at the Peabody Conservatory, the late Robert Hall Lewis). *Aria, Scherzo, and Finale* was no exception to this rule. The composer very aptly described the work through Bennett's April 6, 1962, press release and the November 1964 issue of *Accordion and Guitar World* as follows: "The *Aria* movement explores the lyrical features of the accordion's violin and clarinet registration. The *Scherzo* and *Finale* movements, the technical agility of the accordionist is put to test, as is the polychordal potential inherent in the instrument's button system. This composition is tonal, and is more demanding rhythmically than in its other musical aspects. It also explores the possibilities of 3/4 versus 6/8 time to an interesting extent." An intriguing aspect of the work is that the accordion part is not particularly difficult for a seasoned professional specializing in contemporary music nor does the orchestral part present any daunting challenges for either the players or the conductor. This was no doubt deliberate on the part of the composer, who wished to create a piece that was easily rehearsed and performed. A peculiar note appears around measure 183 of the original score, stating that certain orchestral parts are "optional if soloist not an accordionist." Obviously, Dr. Gordon wished the work to be so accessible that a non-accordionist keyboard artist could play the solo part (which is considerably difficult in the right-hand part at this point in the music) in a pinch. The optional orchestral parts double the notes of the accordion's left-hand part. This further suggests that the latter could possibly be forfeited elsewhere in the piece if, say, a pianist, who would not be familiar with the left-hand button format, were to tackle it. *Aria, Scherzo, and Finale* was published by Pietro Deiro Publications in 1962.

Dr. Gordon remains active as a composer in his retirement from teaching, having recently fulfilled commissions in the eastern middle states region for the



Elsie Bennett and Dr. Lewis Gordon

New Philharmonic Orchestra, Hanover Wind Symphony, University of Delaware Wind Ensemble, and the Colonial Symphony. In addition, he has every right to be exceedingly proud of his very musical and artistic family. His wife Anita is a career pianist who made her concert debut at Carnegie Hall in 1968, has recorded for CRI and Musical Heritage, and has for some time coached and performed in the Gabriel Chamber Ensemble at the Vermont Music and Art Center at Lyndon College. Their two sons, Alan and Joshua, are active in the arts as well. Joshua is a highly sought after cellist, presently with the Lydian String Quartet, in residence at Brandeis University, and Alan is a writer, composer, lyricist, and actor who has five published novels to his credit, the most recent of which is *An Antic Disposition* (St. Martin's Press). He is also currently affiliated with the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop. He has written such hits as "Happy Together" and "She'd Rather Be with Me" and been involved with such films as *Scary Movie II* and *Heart Like a Wheel*, television shows *Suddenly Susan*, *The Simpsons*, and *Ally McBeal*, and many commercials.

In the 2005 edition of the *Journal* we will discuss the next three commissioned works, Paul Pisk's *Adagio and Rondo Concertante*, for two accordions and orchestra (1961), David Diamond's *Sonatina* (1962), and George Kleinsinger's *Prelude and Sarabande* (1962).

The following AAA commissioned works will be performed in 2004 and 2005: Jose Serebrier's *Danza Ritual*, performed by Dr. McMahan, and *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*, for Accordion, Strings, Brass and Percussion, performed by Dr. McMahan on accordion and William Schimmel playing the orchestral reduction on piano, and "cover versions" of Alexander Tcherepnin's *Partita* and Dr. Schimmel's *Spring Street Ritual*, performed by Kamala Sankram and Benjamin Ickies respectively, all at the Tenth Annual Master Class and Concert Series, Tenri Institute, New York City, August 27-29, Dr. Schimmel, producer and moderator; David Diamond's *Sonatina*, performed by Beverly Roberts Curnow, John Franceschina's *For Elsie* (world premiere; dedicated to Elsie Bennett for her 85th birthday), performed by Kevin Friedrich, and Lukas Foss's *Trilogue*, for accordion, violin, and cello (world premiere), performed by Dr. McMahan, accordion, Airi Yoshioka, violin, and Madeleine Shapiro, cello, at a concert entitled "From Frosini to Foss: a Half Century of Contemporary Music for Accordion." The Graduate Center, City University of New York, March 11, 2005, Dr. McMahan, producer and moderator. See separate articles and announcements about these Tenri and CUNY concerts in this issue of the *Journal*.



Elsie M. Bennett, Chairman of Composers Commissioning Committee, recently celebrated her 85th birthday with family and friends at Gargiulo's Restaurant in Brooklyn.

Elsie is pictured here with AAA Past President, Faltse Dettner.



Below, Maddalena Belliore, Executive Secretary and Dr. Salvatore Febbraio, AAA 2nd Vice President, presented Elsie with a bouquet. In addition, 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. The piece will be premiered at the AAA Concert "From Frosini to Foss: a Half Century of Contemporary Music for Accordion" which will be held on March 11, 2005 at the Graduate Center of CUNY in NYC.

