

# Composers Commissioning

**The Nineteenth Commissioned Work  
of the American Accordionists' Association  
Composers Commissioning Committee:**

**George Kleinsinger: *Prelude and Sarabande***

**No. 10 of an Ongoing Series on the  
Commissioned Works of the A. A. A.**

**By Robert Young McMahan, DMA**  
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In 1962, Elsie Bennett was able to successfully commission, or in two cases, recommission, four of America's most celebrated composers, David Diamond (Sonatina), George Kleinsinger (Prelude and



Elsie M. Bennett, Founder and Chair Emeritus  
AAA Composers Commissioning Committee  
pictured above with George Kleinsinger

Sarabande), Ernst Krenek (Toccat<sup>o</sup>) and Robert Russell Bennett (Quintet for Accor<sup>o</sup>ion and String Quartet ["Psychiatry"]). As mentioned in the 2005 article of this series, she also commissioned the Hollywood film composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, who unfortunately died before he could realize the project. In this issue, we will concentrate on the second piece of 1962, having already discussed the first (Diamond's Sonatina) in the previous issue of the Journal: Kleinsinger's Prelude and Sarabande, for solo 120-bass piano accordion, contracted on January 18.

George Kleinsinger (born 1914 in San Bernardino, California, died 1982 in New York City) will always be remembered for his very popular "melodrama" for narrator and orchestra entitled Tubby the Tuba (1942), the story of a tuba that tired of being limited to "oom-pah-pah" parts in the orchestra (this should strike an empathetic chord among accordionists!) and that aspired to play soaring melodic lines. This work immediately won a permanent place in children's symphonic concerts and was even made into an animated cartoon by Paramount Pictures, earning the composer a nomination for an Oscar. Though known for his eccentric personality, Kleinsinger was no musical radical, preferring to write in an essentially tonal and highly melodic style. The Prelude and Sarabande proved to be no exception, as will be demonstrated below.

Notes in Elsie Bennett's archive report that she first met Kleinsinger on January 17, 1962, at his New York apartment not long before he moved into Manhattan's famous Chelsea Hotel (where the photo in this article

was taken), noted as the abode for many famous and equally eccentric composers and other artists, including another AAA commissionee, long-time resident Virgil Thomson. This was followed by another visit a month later, on February 14. At their first meeting Kleinsinger pledged to Bennett that he would have the piece completed by his birthday, on February 13, which he apparently succeeded in doing.

Kleinsinger was no stranger to the accordion, having used it in many of his movie and television scores, and once considering employing it as the sole accompanimental instrument for his chamber opera *Shinbone Alley* (he ended up using a jazz combo instead). He told Bennett that he was sympathetic towards "neglected" instruments and often featured them in his compositions. For example, in addition to *Tubby the Tuba*, he wrote another orchestral narration, this time for the piccolo (*Pee Wee, the Piccolo*) and a concerto for harmonica (*Street Corner Concerto for Harmonica*, commissioned by harmonicist John Sebastian in 1947). He admired the accordion for a number of reasons that Bennett recorded in her notes, and apparently in his own words, from their February meeting:

[I find the accordion to be] a fascinating instrument because of the inherent polytonal effects which can be done by the juxtaposition of harmonies presented in the right hand to conflict with the harmonies presented in the bass chord section. This also applies to passing dissonances which here acquire a very pleasing affect because of the ability of the accordion to sustain a pedal bass and pedal point.

As with so many composers, Kleinsinger's concept of the accordion was based largely on his near exclusive exposure to its sociological stereotypes, though he spoke of them to Bennett with admiration rather than condemnation, as do some composers and non-accordionist musicians:

The accordion has a wonderful ability to evoke a sort of lyric nostalgia of city life. That's why I've used it in films dealing with city life in Paris and New York. The sound is so strange and different that fortunately it cannot help evoking this nostalgia.

That having been said, however, the resulting composition used the instrument for its special timbres and idiomatic effects rather than evoking ethnic or popular styles.

Kleinsinger took on the commission with much enthusiasm, stating that he thought the idea of commissioning serious works for the accordion was wonderful and that he looked forward to learning more about its "mechanics" and "complexities" in composing it than his use of it in his film scores had required of him in the past. The result was a delightful, expressive, and harmonically rich little gem that was easy enough for any professional or even moderately advanced student to

learn to play within the approximate time the composer took to write it: a month or less.

The baroque-like title, *Prelude and Sarabande*, is direct enough in describing the larger bipartite form of the work: a somber, plodding opening section (the prelude) of fourteen bars in common meter (4/4 time), marked "lento," that leads attacca into the second major, and much longer, portion of the piece, the *Sarabande* proper. The *Sarabande* follows the baroque era formula of a slow, stately court dance in triple meter (often putting emphasis on the second beat of each measure, though that does not happen in Kleinsinger's rendering). Two-section pieces with such generic titles as this were very common in the lute literature of the transitional period from the Renaissance into the Baroque (nearing the beginning of the seventeenth century). The *Sarabande* also became one of the common dance forms employed in what was normally a four-movement suite for harpsichord or orchestra in which all the movements were cast in common court dance styles. The order of the formula was usually *Allemande* (a complex, rather fast, German dance), *Sarabande*, *Courante* (a lively French dance alternating between sextuple and triple meter), and the lively *Gigue* (an Irish jig, usually in compound duple meter). Oftentimes, additional "optional" dance style movements, such as the *Minuet*, the *Passapied*, or the *Gavotte*, were inserted as well. The *Bach English and French Suites* for harpsichord would serve as good examples of this principle. Such titles, and modern versions of them, are quite common in the instrumental works of more conservative, "neoclassical" twentieth century composers like Kleinsinger. This may be easily observed even in the list of commissioned works for the AAA. Examples include *Creston's Prelude and Dance*, *Brickman's Prelude and Caprice*, *Diamond's Introduction and Dance*, *Flagello's Introduction and Scherzo*, and others.

The *Prelude* opens with a two-measure left-hand motive of five mixed plain and polychordal harmonies that stop on a G-major chord, vaguely suggesting that it is the tonal center and perhaps in the mixolydian mode (based on a G-major scale with the F-sharp lowered to F-natural). This idea returns in varied ways several times in the movement, with the original chord sequence once again exposed alone at the end. Though this remains an important and noticeable element throughout the movement, the main theme appears in the right hand beginning in the third measure. It is initially pensive and somewhat tense, but flowers forth in a more passionate mood near the middle of the movement where the tonality seems to turn to C mixolydian (based on a C-major scale with its seventh note, B, lowered to B-flat), if only briefly. All is quieted, however, by the ritualistic return of the opening bass motive at the end. A two-measure, right-hand link then quietly and smoothly leads directly into the *Sarabande*.

The Sarabande is in a more lilting tempo (marked "Andante con moto"), but cannot go forward at too fast a pace lest it lose its dignified status as that dance type. The halting nature of the Sarabande is well maintained in the repetitive left-hand accompaniment of two-quarter-note oom-pahs followed by a quarter rest in each measure. This figure pervades almost all of the movement and serves as a stabilizing element. Another factor that prevents the natural flowing character of Kleinsinger's elegant line from lapsing into a uniform flood of unbroken quarter and eighth notes is a tendency to start many measures with a half note rather than steady quarter or eighth values. Unlike the Prelude, the Sarabande is essentially in the minor key, suggesting the Aeolian mode (the same as the unaltered pure or natural minor scale) built on A. In much of the movement the right hand is kept busy supplying the song-like, rather melancholy theme accompanied by an active counterpoint which pushes the music forward. The tension between these two elements on one manual supported by the above mentioned stable bass patterns in the other manual creates a very lovely and graceful effect and definitely confirms the composer's technical compliments to the accordion quoted above as being an instrument capable of interesting polytonal textures and flowing dissonances against sustained pitches.

The Prelude and Sarabande was premiered a little over a year after its completion by Carmen Carrozza on April 28, 1963, at the second of his historic Town Hall recitals in New York City. As has been mentioned in

*Dr. McMahan will be performing two AAA commissioned pieces, Invention, by Alexander Tcherepnin, and Scaramouche, by John Franceschina, and premiering a new work of his for French horn and accordion in the evening concerts of the 2006 AAA Master Class and Concert Series at the Tenri Institute, in New York City, July 28-30. See ad in the Journal.*

previous articles in this series, Carrozza premiered two other AAA commissioned works on the program, Improvisation, Ballade, and Dance, by Elie Siegmeister, and Salute to Juan, by Paul Pisk. Regrettably, there were no New York newspaper critics present at this event even though it was announced that Sunday in the New York Times and briefly reviewed in the June issue of Musical America. Another noteworthy performance took place a year later on February 21, 1964, at yet another frequently mentioned concert in this series, that of the Donnell Library. This time the artist was Robert Conti. More recently, I had the pleasure of performing the piece in 2004 at the AAA-sponsored Master Class and Concert Series, organized and moderated by William Schimmel, at the Tenri Institute, in New York. It was very warmly received by the audience, as I am certain it has been at all its other performances.

## *Elsie Bennett: A Personal Remembrance*

Robert Young McMahan

When have I not heard the name Elsie Bennett? From the time of my earliest teenage awakenings to the fact that the accordion, as with all new instruments, needed its own original contemporary works in order to be validated in the classical field, I read her publicity articles and saw photographs of her with famous composers in the accordion periodicals of the 1960s and 1970s. I even glimpsed her in person a few times when I attended and competed in the massive AAA contests of those exciting decades in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Washington.

My association with the AAA effectively went into a long hibernation when I outgrew the competitions by the mid 1970s, though I continued to perform and compose new works for or including the accordion in my ongoing professional life. Then I took a position at The College of New Jersey in 1991 and found myself geographically much closer to the nerve center of the AAA. But it was an article I was writing on the accordion works of William Grant Still that prompted me to try and contact her. The late composer's daughter Judy, who was a dear friend of Elsie's through her commissioning her father for the AAA, asked that I prepare a paper for his upcoming centennial celebration at the University of Arkansas,



Elsie Bennett and Robert McMahan at her Brooklyn home and the Bennett School of Music, Brooklyn, August 2004. Photo in the writer's collection

where his papers are housed. I needed to see what correspondence Elsie might have saved between herself and Still. I was hoping that she would still be active in the AAA and her committee, since I estimated that she would probably be in her 70s by then (1992) and possibly retired from these endeavors. I was also hoping that she would have an extensive archive of contracts, correspondence, photographs, and other memorabilia of her four decades of experiences with these composers. I wrote to her, heard back from her immediately, and we arranged to meet on a Wednesday afternoon at the Edison Hotel lobby in New York. This was where she had lunch every week before going to a Broadway play, musical, or concert matinee. This particular week she was going to see a revival of the classic comedy *Arsenic and Old Lace*, starring Jean Stapleton (of *All In the Family* fame). As soon as we rendezvoused, she had a hotel clerk photograph us in the lobby. It was then that I discovered that she a thoroughgoing documenter and archivist in all of her activities, including meetings with new people in her life. In addition to her ever present camera, she had a bag with folders in them of the Still correspondence I had requested. Thank God! Elsie was a fellow compulsive and pack rat! She had indeed meticulously preserved and carefully organized and filed all of her now historic Composers Commissioning Committee materials and kept them in her Brooklyn music school that occupied the basement level of her Empire Boulevard row house and sometimes overflowed into the first floor dining room and front parlor.

Following lunch, we went straight to a local photocopier and duplicated the materials for my use. I then walked her to the theatre where she pointed out Stapleton at an elevator at the other end of the lobby. I then saw that she applied the same fearless trait of tracking down famous composers to write for the accordion to famous thespians and movie and TV stars as well, somehow persuading them to be photographed with her after their shows. Stapleton was no exception. As with the commissioned music materials, she had a carefully filed and organized collection of these snapshots with the stars.

Before long, Elsie recommended me to the AAA Board as a new member whose main function would be to serve with her on the Composers Commissioning Committee. Little did I know that in some ten years I would be her appointed successor (one of the last recommendations she made to the Board before her declining health prevented her from coming any longer). She also added me to her list of commissionees for two works of mine, *Incantations*, for cello and accordion, and *Apparitions*, for flute/alt, piccolo and accordion. During those special years of my association with Elsie from the 1990s to her passing she and I frequently met at her house to go through her priceless archives and usually before every Board meeting, usually at the Beatrice Inn (recently closed) in Greenwich Village. During those years when commissions were becoming extremely expensive and AAA funds were declining, she nonetheless managed to commission a few more significant composers. These included Gary Friedman, Lukas Foss (for a second AAA

work), and Robert Baksa. I was happy to have a hand in helping persuade Foss to compose his very fine *Triologue*, for violin, cello, and accordion and in premiering both that work and Friedman's *Accordion Samba* at the two concerts at CUNY in 2005; but it was



First meeting with Elsie. Edison Hotel, New York City, August 1992  
Photo from Elsie Bennett Archive

Elsie who talked them into it, and at more modest rates than they were accustomed to.

Elsie often came off as an ordinary Brooklyn housewife who claimed little knowledge of contemporary music. On the other hand, though she was warm and generous inside, she often displayed a business-like, poker-faced, matter-of-fact exterior and knew who was who among America's important musical figures. She had a sharp mind, an impressive memory, and never overlooked any detail in the process of convincing, contracting, and holding to agreements her chosen composer "targets." She was also quite fearless in seeking them out and approaching them either by letter or impromptu personal appearances after concerts they would attend that included their music (she even came close to tackling the ever elusive Stravinsky once before a New York cab came to his rescue). Whether her subject was world renowned or of more local prominence, her simple, non-confrontational, but persistent, countenance seemed to always charm them into writing for an instrument about which they knew very little in the field of classical music. I think she succeeded in many instances where anyone else would have failed. Some of these great figures in American music even became close friends of hers (particularly Paul Creston and William Grant Still). All others that I met always spoke warmly and lovingly of her and a number of them dedicated their commissions to her. What an act to follow!

In a year of awful losses to the accordion world, and specifically to the AAA (see their remembrances elsewhere in the *Journal*), Elsie's absence is still impossible for me to imagine. She was the oldest and

longest surviving member of the AAA Board, having served as an officer of every rank at one time or another, and, as she often pointed out with a kind of motherly pride at meetings, was responsible for persuading and recommending a large portion of present Board members to join. She bravely established the Composers Commissioning Committee as a young woman recently graduated from Columbia at a time when no one outside of accordionists themselves regarded the accordion as an instrument worthy of its own classical repertoire. With the aid of several of the AAA's finest accordionists, but most significantly, Carmen Carrozza, she worked with her commissioned composers to make their pieces as natural and idiomatic to the accordion as possible. Today, a half century later, there are hundreds of such concert works in

up-to-date contemporary styles written by prominent and famous composers all over the world. Many of the more recent compositions have incorporated the accordion without requiring the nudge of a commission, which is a very good sign. Perhaps the most important seed to this great flowering of accordion literature today, be it voluntary or commission-induced, is the one Elsie planted so long ago in the AAA in the form of the Composers Commissioning Committee. It was by far her singularly most important contribution to the accordion world, and one that will always be remembered and appreciated. I miss her and thank her posthumously for all she taught me (probably unknowingly) during my informal apprenticeship with her.

Friday • July 14 • 10:00 a.m.

Buses leave for Niagara Falls and Sightseeing • Massed band performance at 11:00 a.m.

\$20.00 per person

Optional: "**Maid of the Mist Cruise**"

Adults – \$11.00 • Children 6-12 – \$6.75 • Children 5 and under – free

Meet in the Lobby of the Adams Mark Hotel

*Best wishes to all the contestants who are competing in this AAA Festival*

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*Thanks to the AAA members and others who have so willingly worked to make these festivals possible*

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*In respectful and loving memory of all the marvelous artists whose love of the accordion and devotion to the instrument for many decades in composing, arranging, teaching, directing bands and performing have brought untold pleasure and satisfaction to millions of people*

*~ and ~*

*A special thank you and tribute to those who continue to carry on this wonderful tradition.*

*In loving memory of Worman Rush*