

Composers Commissioning

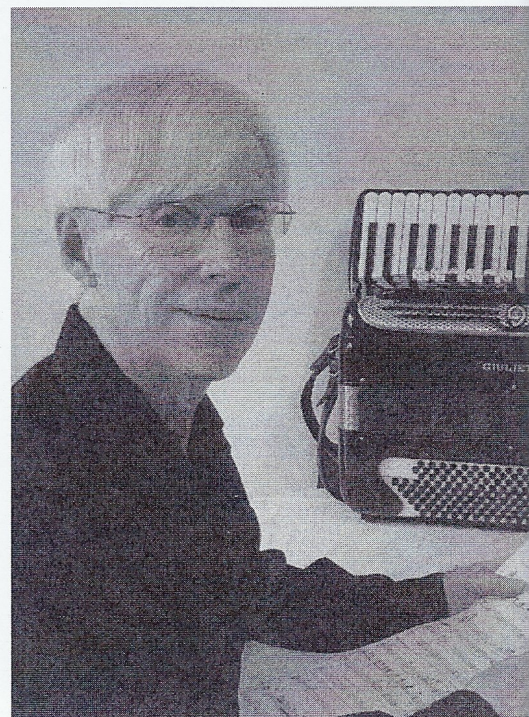
The Twenty-sixth, Twenty-seventh,
Twenty-eighth and Twenty-ninth
Commissioned Works
of the American Accordionists' Association
Composers Commissioning Committee:

Carlos Surinach: *Prelude of the Sea*
David Diamond: *Introduction and Dance*
José Serebrier: *Danza Ritual*
William Grant Still: *Lilt*

No. 18 of an Ongoing Series on the Commissioned
Works of the A.A.A.

By Robert Young McMahan, DMA

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Eight years after she commissioned the first composer under the auspices of the AAA Composers Commissioning Committee, Paul Creston, to write serious contemporary music for or including the accordion, and drafted twenty-four more commissions of eighteen equally world-renowned composers following that, Elsie Bennett, founding chair of the committee, set upon a new project, best described in her own words in a letter, dated November 10, 1965, to the already twice commissioned American composer David Diamond:

The newest project I am working on....is to commission some easier teaching pieces. The reason I thought of this idea is related to my own teaching experiences, and my experiences as judge in many accordion contests.

You see, the pieces we have commissioned thus far, are really only for a virtuoso, or an outstanding student who probably studied for six or more years. We don't have the opportunity to use the pieces too often. Also, our young students are brought up on complete tonality, and no dissonance whatsoever.

I brought my idea to the governing board of the AAA and they have agreed to it. I wouldn't dream of commissioning a person who hadn't already written a piece on commission and now understands the instrument.

Not only did Diamond agree to write a piece at the intermediate level, but also two other past AAA commissionees, Carlos Surinach and William Grant Still, accepted such commissions.* A fourth person who joined in this project, though having not written for the accordion before, was the noted South American conductor and composer José Serebrier, who actually volunteered to write for the AAA (about which more below).

The first to sign a contract to this effect was Surinach on March 24, 1965. The result was *Prelude of the Sea*, a charming, short, tri-partite piece in A/B/A form. Oddly, the composer offered no explanation for the programmatic title. Elsie Bennett paraphrased a musical description of the work given to her by Surinach, however, in an article she wrote for the winter 1966 edition of *Accordion Horizons*, entitled "A.A.A. Commissions: New Compositions", that included similar descriptions of four other new works as well:

[*Prelude of the Sea*] is in three-part song form, the first and third parts are exactly the same. [Surinach] desired to preserve the basic character of the accordion, therefore, he made the first and third sections song-like and lyrical, while the middle section affords the intermediate student the opportunity to display his showmanship and ability. It employs the Flamenco scale. [Surinach] originated this scale although it has its roots in the Spanish music so familiar to him.

continued

Composers Commissioning – Surinach, Diamond, Serebrier and Still

Bennett made the point of announcing that the Surinach piece would “make contemporary music available to the intermediate accordion student”. Given some of the mildly dissonant interplays between the traditional sounding melodies (particularly of the A section) and the mostly chordal left-hand accompaniments, the *Prelude* is truly a gentle introduction to contemporary music for the young novice.

The opening and closing sections, as well as the middle one, are loyal to F as the tonal center and frequent point of repose in the music. The outer sections, marked *moderato*, and indeed identical to each other as stated above, are purely in the key of F major in the melody (and perhaps, in its indicated *forte* dynamic, more flamboyant than “song-like”), with no pitch departures from its traditional scale of F-G-A-B-flat-C-D-E-F. However, the left hand part presents some dissonant harmonic foils to this diatonic melody and at times rather difficult fingering combinations between the single-note and chordal buttons for the intermediate student. The middle *Allegretto* section is in constant sixteenth-note motion, sporadically interrupted by brief halts on single eighth notes, suggesting the Spanish style. As the description above indicates, Surinach invented scales for the melodic lines suggestive of the Flamenco scale but not by any means identical to it. Regarding these scales, the following may be of interest to readers with music theory background. The traditional Flamenco scale consists essentially of two four-note groups (termed “tetrachords” in music

theoretical language) made up of a half step, augmented 2nd (equaling three half steps), and another half step. The two tetrachords are separated by a whole step (equaling two half steps). If built on F, then, the notes would be F-G-flat-A B-flat-C-D-flat- E- F. Instead, Surinach created and applied two “octatonic” (eight-note) scales, both lacking augmented seconds for this melody: F-G-A-B-flat (the first tetrachord of the F-major scale)-C-D-flat-E-flat-E(F); and later on in the section, F-G-flat-A-flat-A-B-C-D-E(F). In the middle part of the section there seems to be a reorientation to another created octatonic scale on A that matches the “textbook” version of the octatonic scale; i.e., alternating half and whole steps: A-B-flat-C-D-flat-E-flat-E-F-sharp-G-(A). Undergirding this nervous melodic line is a constant oom-pah line in the left-hand part in which the fundamental buttons repeatedly play a kind of “ground bass” pattern of D-flat, E-flat, F, and G in ascending and descending order, eventually breaking into more random order, and finally just the tonic-dominant notes of F and C. The fundamental basses are the “oom” while the “pahs” are alternating F-major and E-flat 7th chordal buttons, until the ending when the steady F-C fundamental-button pattern occurs, combined with the traditional tonic F-major and dominant C7 chords.

Prelude of the Sea was published by Alfred Music in 1965 and appears in the listing of works by the composer in the biographical entry for him in *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (as did Diamond’s *Introduction and Dance* and Still’s *Lilt* in the *Groves* entries for these composers).**

A year later, David Diamond agreed to write his *Introduction and Dance* in response to a formal letter of invitation by Elsie Bennett dated March 17, 1966. It was for the princely sum of \$150! (Another zero might need to be added to that amount today.) Bennett had expected Diamond to have the piece well under way by the spring, and inquired in a note to him in May if he had finished it yet or could be assisted in any way (with scores of other accordion pieces, the loan of an accordion, etc.); but this was a busy period for Diamond. From 1965 to 1967 he taught at the Manhattan School of Music, and was busy finishing his ninth string quartet and beginning the tenth. Also, during those two years he was the recipient of several awards, among them the Rheta Sosland Chamber Music prize for his String Quartet No. 8, the Stravinsky ASCAP award, and election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

In the fall, however, a postcard commemorating the Belgian Waffle House in the 1964 New York World’s Fair and postmarked November 21, 1966 (two years after the event), was sent by Diamond to Bennett



Elsie Bennett and Carlos Surinach,
Bennett Home, Brooklyn, NY, July 1, 1965

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carrying the message that the piece was completed. Another mailing the next month from Diamond on stationery from New York's Hotel Iroquois (the composer's abode at the time), dated December 1, was sent to Bennett with the manuscript ready for publication. In the letter, Diamond gave her permission to change any of his register indications, or to add any elsewhere in the score that she saw fit. He also suggested that the right-hand oboe switch might serve as well as the violin one with which he opens the piece and that the penultimate measure at the end might work well with bellows shake (which does not appear in that measure, for musically good reason, in the final Southern Music publication of the score the next year).

Scant little was mentioned in any publication about *Introduction and Dance*. The only comment of any substance at all about it appears in an article by Bennett entitled "David Diamond and the AAA" in the Fall 1968 issue of *Accordion Horizons*. After giving full descriptions of Diamond's previous two AAA commissions, a brief paragraph observes that *Introduction and Dance* "anticipates its lively main theme in a short, meditative opening section, and is distinguished by the spare rhythmic style, sometimes syncopated, for which Mr. Diamond is well known". Indeed, the beginning section, Adagio, is short enough to be termed an "Introduction" in the score rather than a full-fledged prelude. It, like the longer Allegretto to follow, is largely based on a composer-created seven-note scale on A whose first five notes reflect the key of A major and last three A minor (using only the natural minor form): A-B-C-sharp-D-E-F-G. Changing meters, mostly in the first four measures (5/4 to 3/4 to 4/4 to 3/4) add a moderate sense of erratic downbeats, thus creating the "syncopation" mentioned in the Bennett article. The left-hand part consists of sustained chordal-only buttons on three



David Diamond, at Iroquois Hotel apartment, New York, January 26, 1966.
Photo by Elsie Bennett

consecutive harmonies, A minor, F major, and E major. The last chord is the "dominant" harmonic function in the key of A, thus giving the effect of incompleteness (what theorists call the "half cadence") and hence "things to come" at the end of the section. What "comes", of course, is the Allegretto section. It, too, starts with the same curious A scale that began the Introduction, but this time in eighth notes instead of quarter notes and at a faster tempo. Also, the meter remains in a steady 3/4 time, having the effect of a lilting waltz. The melody is punctuated by occasional oom-pah-pah basses that are frequently interrupted by brief "bass solos" and chordal-only buttons. The main motif of the upward sweeping A scale undergoes some metamorphosis and partial transpositions throughout as well. The final result of all these ingredients is a delightful little gem of a piece that, though musically simple in nature and non-virtuosic (except to the intermediate student!), deserves a place on a professional recital program, at least as an encore.

The next commissioned work occurred under very unusual circumstances for the AAA Composers Commissioning Committee. At the outset of 1966 Elsie Bennett received a curious letter in the mail dated January 3 from José Serebrier, serving at the time as the associate conductor to Leopold Stokowski, famed director of the American Symphony Orchestra, stating that he "had been interested for some time in obtaining a commission from your [Bennett's] association to write a short concerto for accordion and orchestra, or perhaps a solo work".

Serebrier was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, to Russian and Polish parents. He graduated from the Municipal School of Music in Montevideo at fifteen, having studied violin, solfège, and Latin American folklore. He next studied counterpoint, fugue, composition and conducting with Guido Santórsola, and



Jose Serebrier and Leopold Stokowski, ca. late 1960s, around the time Serebrier was commissioned by the AAA.

piano with his teacher's wife, Sarah Bourdillon Santórsola. He was soon awarded a United States State Department Fellowship to study composition at the Curtis Institute of Music with Vittorio Giannini. He continued this pursuit later on with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood and studied conducting with Pierre Monteux. His first symphony, written at the age of 17, was premiered by Stokowski as the last minute substitute for Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony, which proved still unplayable at the time. Serebrier's New York conducting debut with the American Symphony Orchestra was at Carnegie Hall in 1965. At the time, Ives' Fourth Symphony had been considered so difficult that it was performed using three conductors at its premiere in 1965, almost 50 years after its composition. Stokowski, Serebrier, and a third conductor performed it this way. A few years later Serebrier conducted it alone and made his recording debut with the work, much to high critical acclaim. This is the point his already illustrious career had reached at the age of 28 when he sought an accordion commission from the AAA. (Now in his late 70s, he continues to be an internationally acclaimed and highly active conductor and composer.)

Bennett and Serebrier met on March 9, two months after she had received his first letter and discussed ideas for his composing a concerto. Eager to get started with this project, Serebrier immediately wrote a letter (on American Symphony stationery) to Bennett and posted it that afternoon. In it he expressed how much he enjoyed their meeting and how fascinated he was with all the aspects of the accordion she had shown him then. He also obsequiously added that he felt the AAA was extremely fortunate to have such an "imaginative" and "creative" person as Elsie. To this he added another request:

I was also thinking that you might want to commission me, at the same time, for a small work of intermediate difficulty, like the one Surinach did for you. This way, with the added income, I would be able to devote more time to the entire project.

This angling on his part proved successful, for the AAA Board approved it at their next meeting, as indicated in a letter of March 15 to the composer. The fee would be \$300 for both pieces (which Bennett mentioned was more than the members had intended to pay at first). Furthermore, the Board stipulated that Serebrier would have to write the intermediate solo first. Bennett explained that there were reasons for this, despite her stated conviction, relayed to Diamond in the quotation above, that one should first write a virtuosic piece before composing an intermediate level one: if he wrote the solo first he would have a better understanding of the accordion when he tackled the more difficult task

of writing a professional-level concerto for the instrument;** and AAA affiliated accordion associations in the various states were preparing for local competitions, various divisions of which required test pieces. If his solo was good and appropriate enough for one or the other of the lower divisions, he might profit well from sales of his piece to the many involved contestants. Serebrier's agreement with these conditions was soon followed by a contract from the AAA, dated March 17. The due date in the contract for both pieces was December 1 of the year, but a very hectic concert tour for the composer, plus work on at least one new composition (*Star Wagon*, for chamber orchestra) and the untimely death of Elsie's husband, Mort, on December 6, delayed the submission and processing of the music until at least the end of January 1967, if not around June 21, when Bennett next met with Serebrier.

There are no known articles by Bennett or anyone else regarding Serebrier's solo piece, which he titled *Danza Ritual*, with the subtitle *Toccata* in parenthesis. There is only brief mention of its recent publication by O. Pagani in the September 1968 issue of *The Music Journal* (under "Books and Music"). Whether it is truly at the intermediate level may be held up to debate, since it is a *moto perpetuo* with the tempo marking "Molto allegro (as fast as possible)" and consists of incessant sixteenth notes in the right-hand part, with frequent hard-to-finger repeated notes. Where the repeated-note passages occur, it may be better executed via bellow shake, though that is not indicated in the score. Black keys are often employed due to a prevalent use of the whole-tone scale (example from the opening phrase: D-flat-E-flat-F-G-A-[B, not appearing in that phrase]). Many other runs involve equally difficult, widely spaced arpeggiated chords, including the augmented triad (a harmonic by-product of the whole tone scale), with difficult crossings under of the thumb. Nonetheless, this is an electrifying work in a steady, hard-pushed 2/4 meter employing the robust master shifts in both right- and left-hand parts and with interesting left-hand bass solos in sustained quarter and half-note values that act as melodically unifying elements against the constantly flighty right-hand onslaught of sixteenth notes. In addition, a somewhat Spanish or Latin American flavor may be detected at times by chordal and oom-pah interjections of alternating D major and D-flat major bass rhythms in the left hand, the latter of which suggests the frequent use of the Neapolitan 6th chord (a major chord built on the chromatically lowered second note of the major or minor scale) of that culture. Though there are two repeating sections in the middle of the piece and a partial return at the end of the opening repeated-note theme on the whole-tone scale before an active sixteenth-note coda ensues in both hands, there is

no distinct sense of clear melodic form, thus giving the impression of a fast-fingered etude or so-called “through composed” genre. Some interesting 20th century devices in the nineteen-bar coda are the left-hand sixteenth-note broken chords in fourths (so-called “quartal harmony”) accompanying dissonant trills in the right hand, and the descending right-hand glissando in the penultimate measure down to a final “tone cluster” cadence point (which the composer instructs the performer in the score to play with “full fist”) against a quartal chord (E, A, D) in the bass.

Whether *Danza Ritual* ever became a test piece for either the state or national AAA competitive divisions is unknown to this writer, given the lack of AAA contest sources at his disposal that might indicate such.

Elsie Bennett had formed lasting friendships with practically all of the composers she commissioned, but perhaps none closer than those with Paul Creston and William Grant Still. When she decided to commission this set of intermediate level pieces, Still was certainly going to be on her list (as was Creston to be later on when he composed his *Embryo Suite*)* not only due to his friendship but the “accessible” quality of his tonal/modal and often blues-leaning style of composition. His earlier *Aria*, though having its moments of technical challenge and requiring a mature sense of expression on the part of the performer, was not among the most difficult of the commissioned works for sure (and certainly not as hard as the Serebrier piece).

In a feature article on Still in the November 1963 issue of *The Music Journal* we find him still saying good things about the accordion: “. . . I know this instrument has wonderful possibilities and there are always fine accordionists who would like to see more music composed specifically for their instrument.”

Elsie Bennett and the AAA eventually followed up on this notion personally for Still by asking him to write another accordion solo. The expressed goal of this commission, as stated in a letter from Bennett to the composer dated February 21, 1965, was “to write a simple piece that could be used for teaching purposes.” The contract was sent to Still the following summer, on July 5, 1966, and the resulting piece, indeed easier technically, but, typically, not expressively, was entitled *Lilt*.

An article in the Fall 1968 *Accordion Horizons* magazine announced the publication of *Lilt* by Pietro Deiro Publications and the fact that it had been chosen as a test piece for both the AAA Eastern Cup and New York State regional competitions that year. In addition, Still is quoted as describing his new piece as a “jaunty, good-humored little tune with an easy, infectious rhythm.” As simple and delightful sounding as the piece is, however, its form and key scheme are rather

complicated (as was true, also, of *Aria*). The following synopsis will demonstrate this.

A section, measures 1-60:

Introduction, mm. 1-8; introductory melody in A dorian mode (A-B-C-D-E-F-sharp-G). Almost seems to be the main theme until

Main Theme 1 follows it in mm. 8-24, now in A Aeolian mode (A-B-C-D-E-F-G), which comes across more as a pentatonic scale, however, in that it never uses the B and F (thus A-C-D-E-G).

Main Theme 2 then follows in mm. 25-36, back in A Dorian mode, but with dramatic, faster rhythm, which ultimately descends to its end via the E Aeolian mode (E-F-sharp-G-A-B-C-D), cadencing on an E minor seventh chord that leads back to

Theme 1 in its original form, but with a different ending (E major-minor seventh chord) that leads directly to

Section B, mm. 61-68:

Theme 3, mm. 69-76: Enter a squeaky little carefree tune using the piccolo register. It is in A major, but mostly leaves out steps D and G-sharp, thus rendering it more of a pentatonic scale (A-B-C-sharp-E-F-sharp) once again.

Theme 4, mm. 69-76, abruptly follows in a dramatic, choppy, C-sharp Phrygian mode (C-sharp-D-E-F-sharp-G-sharp-A-B), but is once again given pentatonic treatment by avoiding D and F-sharp.

Theme 3 returns, mm. 77-86, in A again, but now extended, ending on a climatic and sustained E-eleventh chord (the dominant chord of both A major and A minor) that ushers in the return of

Section A, also extended and considerably varied with a dramatic ending on the single note of the tonic note A.

The general form, then, breaks down into what is commonly called “rondo” form, in which two or more melodic themes alternate with each other (abacdcaba order of themes in the case of *Lilt*). This often happens within a larger tripartite ABA format. *Lilt* is an excellent example of this format, as demonstrated in this table:

Composers Commissioning – Surinach, Diamond, Serebrier and Still

Larger tripartite form	Section A	Section B	Section A returning but modified
Rondo within larger tripartite form	Themes 1, 2, 1 (a, b, a)	Themes 3, 4, 3 (c, d, c)	Themes 1, 2, 1 (a, b, a)

To summarize, *Lilt* is similar to *Aria* in its form, its serene, gentle lyricism, and its essentially tonal key schemes (A minor / A major / A minor with Still's usual modal and pentatonic leanings), and follows a similar rondo plan, framed within larger A/B/A sections. And, as may be expected for a student level composition, it is melodically, harmonically, and formally simpler and more "popular" in nature than was its lengthier and more serious predecessor.

Curiously, if one is to go by the chronological listing of works in the book *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music*, edited by Robert Bartlett Haas, both accordion pieces were written in times of seeming inactivity for the composer. It appears that *Lilt* was the only work completed in 1966; and *Aria*, along with the orchestral tone poem *Patterns* and the "Lyric" string quartet, all purportedly completed near or during 1960, followed the Third Symphony and the opera *Minette Fontaine* by a year, with nothing showing for the bulk of 1959. The years between 1960 and 1966 are furiously busy, however, with at least sixteen works listed in the chronology, including the opera *Highway 1, U. S. A.*, the orchestral works *Los Alnados De Espana*, *Preludes*, and *Threnody: In Memory of Jan Sibelius*, and the Folk Suites, Nos. 1 through 4, for various chamber ensembles.



Elsie Bennett & William Grant Still,
at Still home, Los Angeles, February 21, 1968

What is more remarkable is that, to the best of the writer's knowledge, William Grant Still is the only published African American composer to have written for the accordion to date. A former classmate of the writer's at the Peabody Institute, the late Ronald Roxbury (an African American who grew up in Salisbury, Maryland), wrote an excellent and highly idiomatic set of four atonal *Preludes* at about the same time Still's *Lilt* was published. The writer had the pleasure of premiering that composition at Peabody not long after its creation.

A few years later, Roxbury had promised to write two works for William Schimmel, a concerto for accordion and strings and a duet for accordion and guitar, but they never materialized before Roxbury's untimely death in 1986. Finally, the distinguished African American composer Ulysses Kay (1917-95) accepted a contract from the AAA, dated November 24, 1961, which he



Ulysses Kay and Elsie Bennett,
New York, April 22, 1959.

regrettably soon returned to Ms. Bennett, explaining that he had tried but felt that he could not succeed in writing something fitting for the instrument.

Be that as it may, the accordion world should feel very privileged to possess these two little gems, *Aria* and *Lilt*, by Still which show every evidence of having been written from the heart and with the same effort and enthusiasm that he had put into his more celebrated major works. They are, in the writer's opinion, thoroughly good Still, and a delight to perform.

In closing, there is no record of an official premiere of any of these four student-level compositions, nor any

continued

mention of assistance in their creation from professional accordionists, such as Carmen Carrozza, Joseph Biviano, and others, who did so in the past. There is no doubt that Elsie Bennett would have been available for help, of course. She probably had members of the AAA Board inspect the finished manuscripts as well, though no evidence of this appears in her AAA correspondence. All four composers' larger, virtuosic works did have official premieres, however. Carrozza premiered Surinach's *Pavana* and *Rondo* at Carnegie Hall, where also Joseph Biviano and the Beau-Arts String Quartet premiered Diamond's *Night Music*, Joseph Soprani premiered Diamond's *Sonatina* at the Donnell Library in New York, Myron Floren premiered Still's *Aria* at New York's Town Hall, and Serebrier's *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile* was premiered by an unknown accordionist with the Colorado Philharmonic Orchestra, a youth ensemble created and led by conductor Walter Charles that eventually evolved into the present day National Repertoire Orchestra (about which more in the 2016 AAA Festival Journal article).

*The previous AAA works were Surinach's *Pavana and Rondo* (5th commission, commissioned in 1959),

Still's *Aria* (8th commission, 1959), and Diamond's *Night Music*, for Accordion and String Quartet (15th commission, 1960) and *Sonatina* (18th commission, 1962). See earlier articles in this series on these works in the following previous issues of the AAA Festival Journal: 2000 (Surinach), 2001 (Still's *Aria*), 2004 (Diamond's *Night Music*), and 2005 (Diamond's *Sonatina*).

**Serebrier did go on to write the concerto, which he entitled *Passacaglia and Perpetuum Mobile*, for strings, brass, and percussion. It, along with Creston's *Embryo Suite* will be discussed in the next installment of this series in the 2016 AAA Festival Journal.

Still's *Lilt* was recently performed by Dr. McMahan in the 2014 AAA Master Class and Concert Series at Tenri Institute, in New York City, last summer. He has also recorded it along with other AAA commissioned works for the recent AAA-produced CD of AAA commissioned works, on sale during the AAA Festival this year. The recording includes performances of other AAA artists playing other commissioned works as well.

Staten Island Music School

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FRANK BUSSO, Director

Faith Deffner Accordion Competition 2015

**Wednesday, July 8 • 4:00 p.m.
Stevenson Room
Draw for Position**

**Thursday, July 9 • 8:30 a.m.
Commonwealth A & B
Rehearsal with Percussion**

**Thursday, July 9 • 1:00 p.m.
Commonwealth A & B
Herricks Road (required)**

**Friday, July 10 • 10:00 a.m.
Commonwealth A & B
Classical Program
Divertimento (required)**

**Friday, July 10 • 2:00 p.m.
Commonwealth A & B
Entertainment Program**