

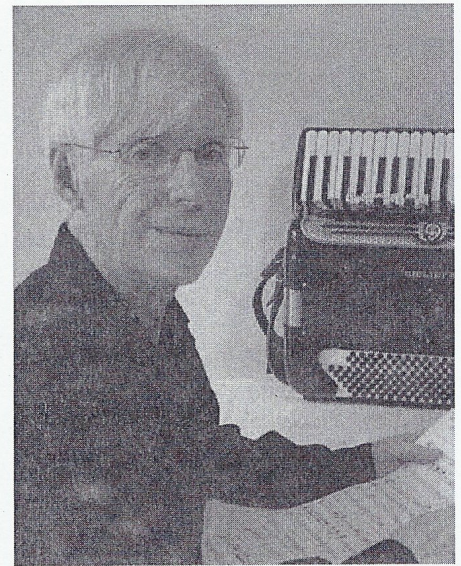
Composers Commissioning

The Thirty-fourth and Thirty-fifth Commissioned Works
of the American Accordionists' Association
Composers Commissioning Committee:

William Schimmel: *Fables*
John Franceschina: *Scaramouche*

No. 22 of an Ongoing Series on the
Commissioned Works of the AAA

Robert Young McMahan, DMA
Classical Accordionist, Composer, Research Writer,
Prof. of Music in Music Theory, Composition, and Accordion,
The College of New Jersey,
Chair, AAA Composers Commissioning Committee



As mentioned in my article in last year's Festival Journal, 1972 saw the beginning of AAA commissions of Baby Boomer composers, beginning with Joel Brickman's solo, *Prelude and Caprice*, the thirty-third commission since the Composers Commissioning Committee was established in the 1950s. Interestingly, the next four selected composers were also of that generation, beginning in 1974 with William Schimmel (*Fables*), and, continuing through 1976, John Franceschina (*Scaramouche*), William Schimmel again (*Variations in Search of a Theme*), Timothy Thompson (*Growth Cells, A Bagatelle*), and Karen Fremar (*Prelude and Allegro*, for accordion and synthesized tape), before an older, established figure, Lukas Foss, accepted the thirty-ninth commission, his *Curriculum Vitae*, also in 1976. As many readers will observe, three of the four were already established professional accordionists (Thompson being the exception) and rising composers in their own right. In addition, the four (plus Foss) were to receive later AAA commissions as well, all of which will be discussed in future issues of the AAA Festival Journal. This issue will concentrate on the first contributions of Schimmel and Franceschina.

William Schimmel: *Fables* (1974)

William Schimmel hardly needs an introduction to those in the accordion world likely to be reading this article. A native of Philadelphia, he studied accordion and composition with Jacob Neupauer at the Neupauer Conservatory of Music, after which he eventually graduated from the Juilliard School of Music with a Doctor of Musical Arts in composition. His teachers were a veritable who's who of twentieth century

American composers, including Elliott Carter, Vincent Persichetti, Roger Sessions, Hugo Weisgall, Luciano Berio, and Paul Creston. He performs music in many genres, has commissioned and premiered a myriad of new works, has written a number of books and articles, and has made numerous recordings and videos. He is also the subject of a number of scholarly dissertations, books and articles. He has received grants from the



William Schimmel showing Elsie Bennett his recently completed score of *Fables*; Bennett's home in Brooklyn, NY; dated by Bennett August 16, 1974

continued

American Music Center, Meet The Composer, 1-Park, two teaching fellowships from The Juilliard School, Two Rodgers and Hammerstein Scholarships from The Juilliard School and The Dr. Albert Szmarin Scholarship, also from Juilliard. Regarding the AAA, like many of the Boomers in the AAA commissions list, he has been a lifetime participant in the AAA, both as a youth in its competitions, and in later years, a frequently commissioned composer, and a member of the AAA Governing Board, where he holds one of two seats as Resident Artist and is the founder and producer of the now annual and 25-year-old AAA Master Class and Concert Series, held every year in late July at the Tenri Cultural Institute in New York City. Space does not permit more listings of Dr. Schimmel's vast and diverse accolades, but one may visit billschimmel.com for further information. Attention must now be paid to his first of four AAA commissions, *Fables*.

Dr. Schimmel received his first invitation to write a work for the AAA from the Composers Commissioning Committee Chair and founder, Elsie Bennett, in the form of a contract dated August 5, 1974, which, considering its strong similarity to the one Franceschina received that June, was considerably standardized for the time. In both instances, the conditions were that it be for "an unaccompanied accordion solo of not less than 6 minutes or more than 8 minutes" and must be written for "both the stradella and the Free Bass Systems." (sic) Furthermore, the work "can be any nature of your choosing, but should be of high caliber to show off all the possibilities of the instrument and the technique and musicianship of the performer." Both composers were also offered the standard AAA reimbursement for a solo in a range between \$150 and \$250, depending upon the notoriety of the composer, with half paid up front and the rest upon receipt of the score. Schimmel's deadline was September 1, 1974, less than a month away. Publication appears to have been delayed for at least two years, however, for its first of two printings, by Ars Nova, and even four years if one goes by the 1978 copyright date of the second one, by Ernest Deffner Music.

Schimmel described the work in an article he wrote entitled "Schimmel on his 'Fables'" for the periodical *Accordion Arts*, edited by California accordionist James Nightingale (v. 2, no. 1, first half 1976), quoted here in full:

Fables was written in the Summer of 1974 as a commission from the AAA. Its purpose was to be

a solo piece playable on any system accordion. I found this a good challenge and accepted it. The work was to be about six to eight minutes in length (competition test piece length), and was to deal with various aspects of accordion musics both traditional and exploratory.

My concepts in the construction of *Fables* are the following: time manipulation and time distortion. In other words, to create the feeling of a considerable time span in a few short minutes—seven and a half to be exact. The process is quite simple. The music always returns to a focal point which is always slightly altered to create the illusion of a new section, which, in reality, it isn't. As a result, constant development yet similarity are always simultaneously creating, once again, time manipulation and time distortion.

Fables consists of short fragments, each complete in itself yet making up a homogeneous whole. As they reappear they are in a new context—expressing a new point of view. Any reference to rondo or variation form is to be considered purely nostalgic. Imagine going on a journey or pilgrimage and upon returning once again, finding things very much the same yet quite different. This, because it is a new person experiencing the old things.

The fragments are titled: Cosmic Tune (to be interpreted in the folk style of the performer's nationality), Eternal Fall, Cosmic Tune Again, Almond Clusters, Of Ageing and Youth, Chicago Rhonda-vu, Possible Mission, Cluster Clouds, and Cosmic Tune Once More. The work is dedicated to the memory of Henry Cowell in keeping with the Bicentennial Spirit. It is published by Ars Nova Publications, San Diego, CA.

Much of the last two paragraphs also appear on the inside cover of the Deffner publication.

Dr. Schimmel informed me that he gave the premiere performance of *Fables* as an encore played in conjunction with another of his pieces, *Parousia*, on a solo recital he organized entitled "An Accordion for Our Time" that was produced by the acclaimed composer, scholar, author, and impresario Eric Salzman through his Quog Musical Theater. The program consisted entirely of premieres of new works

for accordion by Schimmel, Stuart Isakoff, William Komaiko, Eric Koper, Andrew Thomas, Eric Salzman, and Timothy Thompson (who was soon to be another AAA commissioned composer of that period) and took place at the Washington Square United Methodist Church, in New York, on March 29, 1975. Schimmel also recalls that another noted AAA commissioned composer, and friend of Timothy Thompson, George Kleinsinger, was in the audience in the company of Elsie Bennett.

The opening section, “Cosmic Tune” (Andante molto), sets the mood in some ways for the whole composition. It first appears as a full, one-page piece, hymn-like in texture and solemnity. Its early phrases move between the related keys of D major and B minor before becoming tonally freer. Its two later incarnations (“Cosmic Tune Again” and “Cosmic Tune Once More”) between the second and fourth sections and at the end respectively, are far shorter but easily identifiable melodically, and serve in a way to “bring us home” or perhaps remind us of “where we came from” (hence the composer’s invitation to “interpret” them in the “folk style” of his/her “nationality” and thus take some liberty with these sections). The other sections are quite different from the Cosmic Tune theme and from each other, often featuring syncopated rhythms, changing meters, fast tempi and finger work, occasional modern harmonies, and a considerably high level of virtuosity and rhythmic prowess in general. Though the harmony is often rather free, the sense in most movements is of a strong tonal centering, evidenced in the continuous and rapid B minor arpeggios in “Eternal Fall” and the two-sharp key signature; the marching and unrelenting left-hand E/B dyad pedal point rhythms in “Of Ageing and Youth” versus the lively triplets constituting much of the right-hand theme; and the similarly endless tromping left-hand ostinato accompaniment of parallel perfect fifths in “Possible Mission,” setting the stage for the right-hand theme in 10/8 meter whose rhythms constantly shift between two groupings of three eighth notes and two of two eighth notes. Despite the strong sense of traditional tonality of all the movements, concessions to modern dissonances result from occasional polychords, particularly noticeable in “Chicago Rhonda-vu,” and the tone clusters in “Almond Clusters,” accomplished by applying the right-hand fist on the white keys within approximate boundaries of direction up and down in the score against the rather fragmented melody in the left-hand part.

This is highly entertaining and “accessible” modern work well within the technique of the advanced accordion student on either the stradella or free bass system; and, unlike many AAA works now out of print and that the writer is presently trying to track down so that they may once again be available to the accordion community, *Fables* is still purchasable through Ernest Deffner Music, at www.accordions.com/dffnm/solo. (The same can be said for Franceschina’s *Scaramouche*, to be discussed next.) Shortly after its creation and premiere, *Fables* and a later AAA Schimmel commissioned solo, *The Spring Street Ritual*, were included among the required repertoire for accordion majors at the conservatory in Madrid. One may also hear a performance of *Fables* by Nerea Rodriguez Nunez recorded in 2011 on Youtube. Schimmel himself also recorded the piece along with many other works for Finnadar Records in a 1984 LP album titled “*Accordion Revisited*,” which includes Salzman’s *Accord* (which was premiered at the 1975 New York concert mentioned above) as well as four other AAA commissioned works discussed in previous installments of this series, Luening’s *Rondo*, Riegger’s *Cooper Square*, Cowell’s *Iridescent Rondo*, and Surinach’s *Pavana and Rondo*.

A highly prolific composer, Schimmel is presently tied with Paul Creston in holding the record for the most AAA commissions, four in number, to date. The remaining three Schimmel works to be discussed in future installments of this series are the aforementioned *Variations in Search of a Theme* (1976), *The Spring Street Ritual* (1979), and *Remembering a Legend: Charles Magnante* (1987). Happily, the last two of these are also still available through Ernest Deffner Music. The four Creston commissions preceded those of Schimmel and Franceschina and have already been discussed in previous installments of this series (AAA Festival Journals 1998, 2012, and 2017).

John Franceschina: *Scaramouche*

An accordion prodigy of AAA Governing Board member Sam Falcetti, John Franceschina, like William Schimmel, has had a long and brilliant career though it moved in decidedly different directions from those of his colleague and most other esteemed accordionists. Though an outstanding accordionist in his youth, Franceschina’s interests soon turned more to the literary and theatrical worlds, as might first be observed in his education, which, though it includes a certificate in composition from Hartt College (where

Mr. Falcetti received his music education as well), was followed by a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Master of Fine Arts in Playwriting from The Catholic University of America, in Washington DC. Following was a succession of academic posts, beginning with the position of instructor of arranging and counterpoint at Hartt College of Music, and continuing with more diverse roles at Florida State University, Syracuse University, and the Pennsylvania State University. He is currently composer-in-residence for Accordion Ensemble Opus 2 in the Netherlands for which he composed *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (a triptych including 3 tonal poems: *Pellucidar*, *Zanni*, and *Antinous*); *Houtebeen* (a cantata for accordion orchestra, string orchestra, and male chorus); *Carnival* (a concerto grosso for accordion orchestra and wind ensemble); and *Scenes from Tarzan and the Apes* (an opera) that received its world premiere on May 19, 2019. Among his other compositions for the accordion are three concertos for solo accordion and orchestra, one of which was commissioned by the AAA in 1987, a mass for vocal soloist, mini choir, and accordion orchestra, written for and introduced by the Springfield Accordion Orchestra under the direction of Sam Falcetti, and a second AAA commissioned solo, *For Elsie*, for the celebration of Elsie Bennett's eightieth birthday in 2004.

In addition to his compositions for accordion, Franceschina has written a concerto for saxophone and wind ensemble, a symphonic overture commissioned by Philippe Entremont and the New Orleans Symphony Orchestra, several operas, musical theatre scores, and over a hundred incidental scores for theatre plays and films. He has also been composer-in-residence at the Asolo State Theatre in Sarasota, Florida (1976-1993), and musical director/composer at the National Theatre Company, Arena Stage (Washington, DC), the Mark Taper Forum (Los Angeles), Geva Theatre (Rochester, NY), the Pittsburgh Public Playhouse, Syracuse Stage, Cleveland Playhouse, Coconut Grove Playhouse (Miami), Center Stage (Baltimore), Olney Theatre, and the Moscow Art Theatre. Finally, he is the author of over a dozen books, including Duke Ellington's Music for the Theatre, Music Theory through Musical Theatre, and Incidental and Dance Music in the American Theatre.

The circumstances under which Franceschina's first AAA commission took place were quite new for Elsie Bennett compared to those of the previous thirty-three she had made over the preceding seventeen years, as



John Franceschina and Elsie Bennett, AAA National Contest, Marriott Hotel, Chicago, dated by Bennett July 1974

her letter of June 7, 1974, to him will illustrate. After mentioning that Falcetti had highly recommended him to her, she wrote

It is not my usual procedure to make an offer to a composer upon recommendation. I usually like to meet with the composer to explain the accordion and have a good interview. [However,] I feel that since we are parted by many miles, and time is of the essence, I will offer you this commission by mail.

Attached to her note was a contract that was, as pointed out above, identical in form and remuneration to the one she would send to Schimmel that August, but with a deadline of August 1, barely eight weeks away. In addition, she indicated that the piece would possibly serve as the required test piece for the 1975 Coupe Mondiale. To this end, she insisted that the composer consult with Maddalena Belfiore as soon as possible to be briefed on what was expected by the CIA for such a contest project, and that he would then next have to consult with Carmen Carrozza, as was the custom of all commissioned composers, so that the maestro could examine and play through the piece for any further suggestions prior to publication.

continued

Franceschina was indeed “parted by many miles” from Bennett at the time since he was not in his Chicopee Falls, MA, home, but rather lodging much further away in Warsaw, Indiana, where he was serving as associate musical director of a musical entitled *Best Foot Forward* (music and lyrics by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blaine) at the town’s summer stock theater Wagon Wheel Playhouse (now the Wagon Wheel Center for the Arts). In any event, the piece was completed on time, and possibly as early as July since he apparently found the time to visit Elsie Bennett at the 1974 AAA Festival held at the Marriott Hotel in Chicago that summer (see photo). In addition, it was ultimately approved by the CIA to be used as a test piece in the 1975 Coupe Mondiale in Helsinki.

Regarding a premiere of *Scaramouche*, or at least early performances of it as well as its CIA history, I will let the composer’s own recollections I received in recent email exchanges with him hold forth here:

I believe Magnante was actually the first to do a reading of the piece prior to the Coupe Mondiale. I first performed it in public at an actors' benefit concert in Warsaw Indiana soon after I composed it. The concert involved many on the faculty of Carnegie Mellon University as well as some of the graduates who were involved with the revered and rather outstanding summer stock theatre called "Wagon Wheel." The first private performance of the piece occurred at Notre Dame University in late July--I was in residence there orchestrating a new Broadway-bound musical that I had conducted in Washington DC the previous April, for a summer tryout in (of all places) Peoria! (Not untypically, the show never made it out of Illinois.)

Of course, every contestant at the Coupe Mondiale had to perform it in the top category; I subsequently learned that the piece was very popular in Russia where, among accordion students, I became very well-known. The latest, or I should say, most recent, performance of the work is by Antoine Geisen of the Netherlands who performs it on a button accordion, which he tells me, makes it easier (in many cases) to play. I know that Anthony Falcetti [Sam Falcetti's son] has played the piece at various

junctures of his career, as did Danny Dobeck, and the brilliant virtuoso Peter Soave.

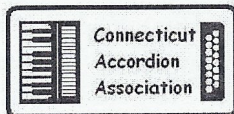
Regarding the work itself, Franceschina offered a brief description for Bennett to use in her press release:

The work is a sonata in one movement and explores the melodic and virtuosic potential of the solo accordion. Stylistically, *Scaramouche* is pan-modal with soaring melodic lines and exiting rhythmical figures. It gives the accordion artist every possibility of letting the instrument sing through a myriad of register and dynamic changes and reinforces the composer’s belief that the accordion is, in fact, a melodic instrument. Contrapuntal in texture, *Scaramouche* places a distinct emphasis on the left hand of the accordion and coaxes it into dramatic interplay with the right. The melodies of the piece have a jazzy, almost bluesy quality and thus lend the work a truly American flavor. The title is borrowed from the *Scaramouche* character of the commedia dell’arte (that braggart soldier who always pretended [to be] more than he ought to be), and defines the anapest as the chief rhythmical pattern of the composition.

The work does, indeed, follow the classic sonata formula developed in Haydn’s and Mozart’s time to a large degree, as is immediately obvious in the first section of this modern adaptation of the form. Known as the “exposition,” which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries usually presented at least two, and often three main melodic ideas, with the first two themes bridged by a key-changing transitional section, this twentieth-century adaptation, with its modern harmony and counterpoint dismisses those outdated principles, though still offering similar contrasts in other ways between principal thematic ideas. As the composer mentions in his description, the left hand often carries the main melodic idea. This is certainly true of the first of two distinct themes in his exposition in which the principle rhythmic motif is immediately presented in the left hand part of this movement in 4/4 time: eighth rest, followed by a bold upward sweep of three eighth notes, C-F-B flat, in consecutive intervals of the fourth (which in Mozart’s time would have likely been in thirds, suggesting traditional chords formed by those intervals) which will go through many

transpositions and rhythmic variations throughout the piece. This assertive figure, indeed following the anapestic rhythmic formula encountered through the ages in poetry and music alike, and suggesting the bullish though somewhat eccentrically comic personality of the arrogant, strong-headed *Scaramouche* stereotype, dominates the contrapuntal interplay between right and left hands throughout the entire work, but is especially the incessant identifying feature of theme 1, which persists for 52 of the 203 measures of the work before the more lyrical, song-like second theme arrives, this time occupying the right hand treble part and taking the listener to the end of the exposition at measure 73. In terms of twentieth century harmony, the first-theme motif described above sets the harmonic tendency of the whole piece, which largely follows the structure of chords built in intervals of the fourth rather than the third. The former is referred to as “quartal” or “quintal” harmony, as opposed to pre-twentieth century “tertian” harmony (harmony built in 3rds) that evolved over the previous 600 years in western European music. To return to the eighteenth century sonata model, following the exposition, a large middle section, termed by music scholars the

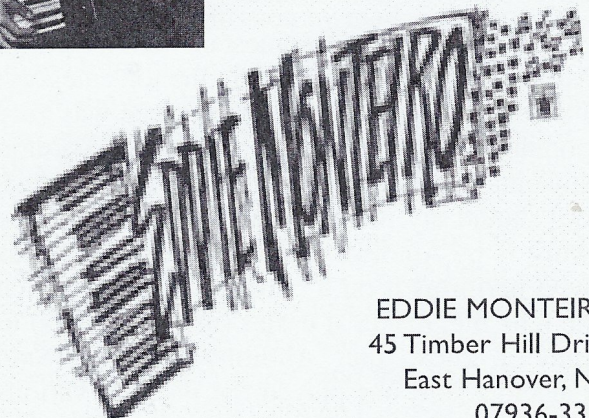
“development,” would follow the exposition which would in turn put one or more of the latter’s original themes through many vicissitudes, including new juxtapositions with each other, variations in rhythm, and key changes, to name just a few choices—a real harmonic and contrapuntal “adventure”—before moving into a return of the original themes in their more normal forms, and now all in the original beginning key. Oftentimes the composer would then follow the recapitulation with a usually brief but exciting concluding “add-on,” called the “coda” to more conclusively bring the movement to a convincing end. Franceschina does all of these things in his piece, but again in twentieth century harmony and rhythm. A very exhilarating development section, with rapid scale passages and a strong presence of the theme 1 motif and syncopated variants of the same whirls through 47 measures, mostly in the prominent 4/4 meter of the piece (though at times the composer will interject triple, and quintuple-beat measures, both in this section and elsewhere—yet another common practice of the last and present centuries). This subtly leads into the recapitulation, a truncated and considerably altered version of the exposition and its two themes, at



Congratulations
to the
**Connecticut
Accordion Association**
on their 15th Anniversary



**We are proud to be an
affiliated
organization of the
American Accordionists'
Association**



EDDIE MONTEIRO
45 Timber Hill Drive
East Hanover, N.J.
07936-3314

Tel: (973) 386-0051
Mobile: (973) 964-3793
e-mail: chordean.changes@gmail.com

measure 122, and what may be heard as an extended and very exciting coda finish in which the theme 1 motive is even more assertive than before and more frequently “escapes” into the treble.

To conclude, *Scaramouche* is a highly attractive work which novice listeners to modern music should find very appealing and fun, even on first hearing. The composer exhibited a highly developed command of contrapuntal and harmonic skill and the truly conscious aural awareness and musical sense so necessary to make a complex work such as this communicate well to the audience. I found this to be especially true when I performed it myself in one of several concerts of contemporary original music for or including accordion I produced through the AAA at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) between 2003 and 2005. The composer was present, and I regret that it was the only time we have had the opportunity, brief though it was, to meet in person.

As a footnote to the above, a second contract, dated June 16, 1975, for a second solo by Franceschina mysteriously exists in the Bennett files. As correspondence between composer and commissioner reveals at that time, funds were not available for any more commissions that year, and the composer was offering to write the piece for free. This has happened a number of other times with other composers over the history of the Composers Commissioning Committee, and to legalize such transactions the AAA has had to create a contract offering the nominal fee of \$1 to complete the agreement. Bennett and Franceschina signed the contracts, but for some reason, the solo never made the official list of AAA commissions nor became available to the public in any other way. In fact, the only known copy resides in the John Franceschina Papers in the library of the University of California Riverside, where he has archived all of his musical and theatrical papers and works in order for them to be available to researchers. Once again in the composer’s own words, this is how he believed the overlooked commission, which was entitled “County Fair,” came about:

The commission for “County Fair,” the second piece, was probably due to Faithe Deffner who published it. At the time, I was working for Faithe at her office in Mineola [NY, former location of the Titano accordion office] and like the old studio system in films, I got a weekly stipend whether it was for doing editorial work on her various publications, or writing an accordion solo, or an accordion

orchestra piece for Joan Cochran Sommers and her group at the University of Missouri Kansas City. I wrote a *Passacaglia and Fugue* for her group which Faithe published and Joan premiered and which subsequently has been played fairly consistently nowadays in Europe. Don't know why it's so popular. Back in the 1970s, due to their associations with Titano [accordions], Faithe and Sam Falcetti were very close friends, I think. He may have suggested to her to have me compose “County Fair.”

Be that as it may, John Franceschina has contributed three important works to the AAA. Of these, his first, *Scaramouche*, should especially continue to be a popular and accessible choice for concert accordionists well into the future, as is equally true of Schimmel’s *Fables*. Both are true classics of the genre and deserve to be performed in perpetuity.

Grateful thanks to William Schimmel and John Franceschina for their willingness to be interviewed and consulted for this writing.

Best wishes to the AAA
from the
**Washington Metropolitan
Accordion Society**

Peter DiGiovanni, President/Music Director
Robert Ford, Vice President
Mara Cherkarsky, Secretary/Treasurer



www.washingtonaccordions.org
peter@musicisforever.com