

The Accordion and the Italian-Americans: *A Representation and Appreciation*

"The Accordion as an Icon of Italian American Culture,"
A Program of Scholarly Papers and Performances at CUNY

by Robert Young McMahan, D.M.A.

The Graduate Center of the City University of New York hosted a highly significant event for both the accordion and academic worlds on March 23 by offering an afternoon of scholarly presentations and an evening concert. The theme of both programs was, as the title implies, the important relationship between the accordion and the Italian-American community, particularly during the first half of the Twentieth Century. Sponsors included The Graduate Center-based Center for the Study of Free-Reed Instruments and Queens College's John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (also part of the CUNY system).

Allan Atlas, distinguished professor of music at the Graduate Center, recent founder of both The Center for the Study of Free Reed Instruments and the Free Reed Journal, concertinist, and organizer of this event, moderated the afternoon readings. After the first presentation, he invited onto the stage the honored guest for the occasion, Count Guido Roberto Deiro, son of Guido Deiro and nephew of Pietro Deiro, who came from his home in Las Vegas, Nevada, for the occasion. Ct. Deiro (titled as such by his father's and uncle's native community in northern Italy) gave a brief and moving memoir of

his father and said that he was sure that both he and brother Pietro were there that day. He recalled Guido Sr's daily practicing during which he played his pieces straight through, without stopping to work on hard spots, as if he were "playing for two thousand people." Ct. Deiro has generously given all of his father's memorabilia, which include such invaluable items as scores, recordings, programs, and news clippings, to the Center for the Study of Free Reed Instruments. The materials have already proven to be invaluable to the work of one of the speakers, Peter Muir.

Peter Muir is a Ph.D. candidate in Music at The Graduate Center who is working on a dissertation on the early development of the blues. He is also an internationally recognized jazz pianist, specializing in the performance of early jazz forms, such as the rag and the blues. He recently took up the accordion and now plays it professionally as well. For all these reasons, plus a long-time fascination with both the accordion and early American popular music, he was drawn to the Deiro brothers. His research revealed that, beginning with their arrival in America in 1908, they were the leading popularizers of the accordion here

through their long histories on the vaudeville stage (up through the Great Depression), their total of 260 known sides of recordings for Columbia and Victor Records, and their widely varied repertoire of popular, ethnic, and classical music. Finding the brothers to be highly popular and profitable, the two recording companies diversified their markets beyond the usual general distribution to include some fifteen ethnic ones, reprinting many of the record labels in the appropriate language for each target community. This proved to be very successful financially. The German American buying public turned out to be the largest of these groups, with the Italian Americans ranking second. But the latter bought more records than their Teutonic counterparts, and thus probably had a greater impact as consumers on the establishment of the accordion in America. Mr. Muir's research will be published as an article in the upcoming issue of Free Reed Journal (Vol. 3).

William Schimmel gave a thoroughly informative history of the Excelsior Accordion, which had at one time been the most prestigious name in the industry. His typically dynamic and dramatic manner of presentation bordered on the the--

Afternoon papers:

Peter Muir: "The Deiro

Recordings: Italo-American
Issues, 1910-1933'

William Schimmel: "Excelsior!

The Best and Nothing but the
Best"

James J. Periconi: "Vergogna e

Risorgimento: The Secret
Life of an Italian American
Accordionist"

Evening concert:

Robert McMahan, accordion:

Pietro Deiro: *Beautiful Days*

*Waltz, Concerto in E-minor,
for Accordion and Orchestra
(solo version), first movement
(Allegro non troppo)*

Paul Creston: *Concerto for*

Accordion and Orchestra,
third movement (Presto; solo
arrangement)

Charles Magnante: *Green Light:*

A Descriptive Novelty

Henry Doktorski, accordion:

Guido Deiro: *My Florence
Waltz, Egypt: Fantasia*
Pietro Frosini: *Rag in D-
minor, Omaggio a Pietro,
Florette, Rhapsody No. 2*

Peter Muir, piano:

Guido Deiro: *Deiro Rag*

William Schimmel, accordion ("A
Charles Magnante Workshop
Reenacted"):

Transcriptions by Magnante:

Ludwig van Beethoven:

"Moonlight Sonata"

Franz Liszt: *Liebestraum*

Carl Maria von Weber:

Konzertstück

Gaetano Lama: *Tic-toc Polka*

Original Magnante works:

Waltz Allegro

Accordion Boogie

Accordiana

William Schimmel:

Remembering A Legend:

*Charles Magnante [an
A.A.A. Commission]*



Above left to right: Allan Atlas, James J. Periconi, Dr. William Schimmel and Peter Muir.

atrical and was highly entertaining and often very humorous. Stories abounded regarding the rise and fall of the Excelsior Company and the many important artists who played, and sometimes abandoned, its product. There were many amusing anecdotes. For example, both Charles Magnante and Joseph Biviano left Excelsior for La Tosca when the former replaced them with younger, more handsome models in its magazine ads.

James J. Periconi, ironically the only participant of Italian descent, is a lawyer in the New York area, a member of the Board of Directors of the Italian American Writers Association, co-author of the IAWA Bibliography of the Italian American Book, and co-proprietor of Round Hill Books, which specializes in used and out-of-print Italian and Italian American books. He gave both an amusing and touching account of his youthful shame in being both an accordion student and an Italian American. He downplayed his musical and ethnic past throughout much of his adulthood until his father passed on. At that point he began to re-examine his life and heritage. The results of this middle-aged soul searching were that he resumed playing the accordion, this time loving it and losing all misgivings about being a practitioner of that instrument, and found that he was now also proud of being Italian American. One of his statements regarding the accordion was both beautiful and haunting and certainly not what he would have said as a child trying to live down his accordion lessons: "There is something terribly warm and engaging and close and connected and unpretentious about the instrument and the musical impulses it releases in people."

As can be seen in the program above,

the evening concert consisted of mostly original compositions, both "serious" and "light," by pioneering accordionist/composers Guido and Pietro Deiro, Pietro Frosini, and Charles Magnante. Also represented were works by such non-accordionists as Paul Creston, also an Italian American whose name was originally Giuseppe Guttovoggio, and who was the first composer commissioned by the A. A. A., and Lama (Tic-Toc Polka), along with Magnante transcriptions of well-known favorites by Beethoven, Liszt, and Weber. All four performers (the accordionists of whom are no doubt well-known enough to our readers to need no introduction here) supplemented the writer's program notes with extra comments about the music they were about to play. Dr. Schimmel framed his performances within an abbreviated reenactment of a Magnante workshop, in which he affectionately reminisced about the great accordionists' many endearing eccentricities. For example, after he welcomed everyone to a workshop, Magnante would "warm up" with a lengthy and greatly altered version of Beethoven's "Moonlight" sonata in which he would go back and forth repeating many isolated measures while singing parts of them as he played. Dr. Schimmel performed a re-enactment of this procedure very effectively. Also recalled was that at some point in the event Magnante would send everyone out of the room except the teachers present. Dr. Schimmel confessed that, even though still a student, he would purchase a "teacher's ticket" and thus get in to "spy" on the "secret" messages the master was about to divulge to the higher initiates. All he ever admonished them to do, though, was to make sure all of their students faithfully practiced their "scales,

exercises, and Hanon." But, of course, it really meant something if "Charlie" (which he invited everyone to call him) said it.

All present thought the program was a great success. It is the first of hopefully many such free-reed-based annual events to take place through the auspices of the CUNY Graduate Center and the Center for the Study of Free-Reed Instruments. Next year, the topic will be the concertina. Look for details in the upcoming issue of Free Reed Journal and the CUNY web page on this event as well as upcoming events sponsored by the American Accordionists' Association.

Dr. McMahan's unabridged version of his program notes for this occasion follows.

What possessed a considerable representation of the "Baby Boomer" generation to forsake Elvis, Fabian, Jerry Lee Lewis, and many of the other hep icons of its era for one of the decidedly less fashionable symbols of the bygone radio and Vaudeville days of their parents and grandparents--the accordion? Why did chills of excitement run through me one day in the late Fifties when, at the age of fourteen and still a fledgling student of accordion, I discovered old 78's by Guido and Pietro Deiro in the attic of my aunt's farmhouse near, of all places, Concord, North Carolina? I have no clear answer to these perplexing questions. And, in my own case, as with many other accordion-playing teenagers in the 1960s, ethnicity cannot always be the reason: I descended from a typically American Scotch-Irish/English ancestry which arrived in this country just before the Revolutionary War (constituting anything but a German, French, or Italian "ethnic"-type heritage). Yet the lists of young contestants for the annual national competitions sponsored by the American Accordionists' Association and the Accordion Teachers' Guild run on for pages in the souvenir journals of those events throughout that decade and much of the next one; and the names therein reveal a wide diversity of European-American, and some Asian-American, heritages.

All this having been said, however, the three accordionists whose names keep emerging, with great justification, as the major pioneering figures in the history of that instrument's development and popularity are Italian or Italian-American:

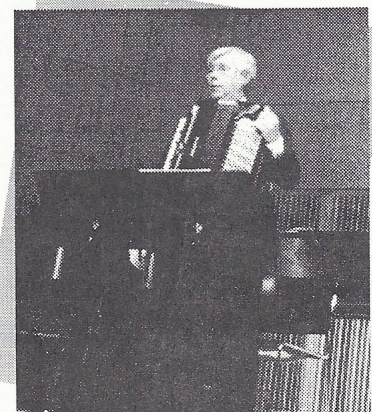
Pietro Frosini, Pietro Deiro, and Charles Magnante. First, and foremost, of course, all three excelled as performers, who were widely heard via the stage, broadcast studios, and commercial recordings, and played at a level comparable to the noted concert artists of their day on older, more established instruments--for example, Magnante was often called the "Paderewski and Heifitz of the accordion" by his admiring non-accordionist professional peers and musical commentators. To assure yet greater possibilities of virtuosic and expressive achievements on their instrument (which had, for all practical purposes, been evolving from its early, primitive prototypes only since about the 1820s), each man advanced the technological aspects of the accordion in various crucially important ways. To help the progress of the next generation of accordionists, they wrote method books, graded music series, and, particularly in the case of Magnante, frequent articles on performance techniques in the accordion magazines, which started appearing by the 1930s. Finally, they became skilled composers, and significantly increased the accordion's literature on all musical fronts, but most notably through popular novelties (usually fast fingered, flashy "show-stoppers" devised for the Vaudeville stage), pleasant waltzes and other similar types of accordion serenades, and, especially for Frosini and Deiro, occasional "classical" works in the forms of rhapsodies, concertos, and the like, in nineteenth-century style. They also published many transcriptions of popular concert works for orchestra (especially programmatic works) or soloist and orchestra (most often violin and piano concerti), drawing usually from the nineteenth century repertoire, but including an occasional Baroque organ work (Magnante's transcription of the Toccata in D Minor, attributed to Bach, probably being the most well known and frequently performed).

The eldest of the three was Pietro Frosini, who was born Pietro Giuffrida, in Catania, Sicily, in 1885. His father, Michael Angelo Giuffrida, an accomplished accordionist who is credited with having originated the concept of bellows technique (as important to expressive and dynamic accordion performance as is bowing to the string family), began giving instruction to his son by the time he was six years old. Pietro showed much talent and promise and was consequently

sent to the local Municipal Conservatory of Fine Arts, and then the Milan Conservatory of Music. He majored in piano and cornet. Many outstanding musicians I have known, or known of, were serious and advanced students of the accordion in their youths. But later on they switched to a more "valid" instrument before going on to a conservatory or university to pursue a more "serious" and "accepted" major that would assure them more successful and less conflicted careers. It appears that Frosini was headed in that direction as well. By the age of seventeen he held the position of first cornet in the British Naval Band, in the Malta Islands. But a serious bout with malarial fever permanently destroyed his embouchure. He then returned to what is reported to have been his main musical love, the accordion. Soon a talent scout heard him and signed him up in the Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit. By 1905 he made his home in Fresno, California (though all three of our subjects eventually ended up in the New York City area). He quickly became a very popular headliner and held the claim of being the first accordionist to appear on the American Vaudeville stage. Other sources cite at least two more Frosini firsts: he was the first to make commercial recordings for the Edison and Victor Talking Machine Companies, in 1908; and, around the time he began a successful career in radio in the 1930s, he was apparently the first accordionist to appear at Radio City, in New York. In addition, he once gave a command performance for King George V, of England. He began to compose for the accordion in 1908, and was publishing his compositions by 1914. Some of the more well known titles from his approximately two hundred works are Hot Fingers, Olive Blossoms, Accordionmania, Spaghetti Tangle, Silver Moon Waltz, Variations on "The Carnival of Venice," three Rhapsodies, and the piece for which he is most remembered and is most often heard in performance, The Jolly Cabellero (an exciting paso doble). In his last years, he began work on a method book, which concentrated on the subject of his father's, and now his, area of particular expertise: bellows technique, or more specifically, the bellows shake. Too ill to finish it prior to his death in 1951, he bequeathed its completion to his star student, Maddalena Belfiore, one of the major accordionists of the "third generation" of artists and a long-time active officer and past presi-

dent of the American Accordionists' Association. Mr. Doktorski has closely studied the music and life of Frosini and will be playing works representative of all his different modes of composition.

The Deiro family of Salto, Italy, brought two major accordion pioneers into the world, Guido and Pietro, born in 1886 and 1888 respectively. Unlike Frosini's father, that of the Deiro brothers was not a musician, but rather a grocer who was apparently somewhat annoyed by young Pietro's obsession with a toy accordion he endlessly played day after day. Guido no doubt gave him little more peace since he was just as industrious in playing a "real" accordion his uncle had given him. Neither son was to follow in his father's footsteps, as he had intended. Instead, they struck out to seek their musical fortunes in Germany as soon as they were able to travel alone, and tried to support themselves by playing popular tunes in cafes and beer gardens. Though the father had eventually purchased a larger instrument for Pietro and he was able to play operatic arias on it, his lack of formal musical training (he only played by ear) compelled him to seek employment by day in the coal mines. Guido had a rough start in his career as well, having soon to return to Italy for mandatory military service. The brothers were eventually able to migrate to America, settling on the West Coast where, like Frosini, they eventually found work in Vaudeville. Also like Frosini, they became great successes on the stage and in recording and radio work, as well as prolific composers. Pietro, who eventually received musical training while living for a while with an uncle in Cle Elum,



Dr. Robert Young McMahan

Washington, often used his first name alone in his recordings and stage appearances (under the agency of Keith-Orpheum), and became a particularly loved figure. He was eventually dubbed by adoring fans and students as the "Daddy of the Accordion." This is partly because his mechanical tinkering with his instrument eventually led him to make many important improvements on the accordion, in collaboration with various manufacturers. Not the least of these was his introduction of and improvements on the "piano accordion," in which a forty-one-key piano keyboard replaces the old button format of the right-hand manual (still widely used, however, and possessing its own special advantages). Though this idea had taken shape as early as 1865 by the Viennese accordion makers Philipp de Pons and Johann Forster, it was Deiro who popularized and improved it in America. It remains to this day the standard choice of instrument in this country and many parts of Europe. Pietro was eventually to found, with his son, Pietro, Jr., a highly successful accordion publishing company in New York, which was responsible for making available to an increasing population of accordionists and students the mushrooming quantities of accordion repertoire and method books needed for the ongoing success of this newest of twentieth-century instruments. Both Guido and Pietro left us at mid-century, dying in 1951 and 1954. It will be my pleasure to play a movement from Pietro's Concerto in E Minor and his Beautiful Days waltz on today's program.

It may be correct to proclaim that Frosini and the Deiro brothers are the prime representatives of the first generation of truly important and ground moving accordionists. If that is true, then Charles Magnante is quite possibly the giant figure of the second generation, which inherited the far more established and stable accordion world which its forebearers had created out of sheer love, imaginative inventiveness, and near blind faith. Magnante was born in New York in 1905, reflecting a rather classic Italian immigrant pattern for that time: to be among the first born children in America of old country parents. This is analogous, in a way, to the arrival of the accordion here, with Frosini and the Deiros being the immigrant accordion "parents." Magnante's story would make a good filmstrip of the "boy from the streets of New York makes good" sort. He began



AAA Board Members Attend CUNY Event

Left to right: Elsie M. Bennett, Eero Richmond, Faithe Deffner (past president of AAA) and Frank Busso (1st Vice President).

studying accordion at age nine and progressed so quickly that he was earning a living in his early teens, playing in dance halls, theaters, and other such public places in the New York area. A highly applauded engagement at the New York Elk's Club when he was sixteen prompted several agents to offer him lucrative Vaudeville contracts. Not feeling quite up to such a challenge yet, though, he turned them down and remained in New York for further study. He was to stay in his native city for the rest of his career, setting new standards of accordion virtuosity and expressiveness, and giving the accordion some more firsts: the first to play accordion with a symphony orchestra (as part of the instrumentation in Frank Harling's Jazz Concerto; Erno Rapee, conductor); and the first to perform at Carnegie Hall. His career set the pattern for many accordionists of his and the next two generations: a mixture of popular and classical music performance, recording, radio, and television studio work, and composing and arranging. Concerning the studio work, he was greatly respected not only as a spellbinding artist but also as a highly innovative and intuitive, though unofficial, sound engineer who did much to advance the accordion's fidelity and idiomatic qualities in electronics. Many of us Baby Boomers (which I will regard as the fourth generation of accordionists) were bowled over by his astounding LPs of Italian, French, and Polka music on the Grand Award label. In these he pulled out all the stops, displaying great technique and musicality, wonderful mixed ensemble work, and, in the case of the polka album, advanced multi-track

recording techniques of a most mesmerizing quality, recalling the similar earlier recording advances of Les Paul and Mary Ford. His Accordiana album was also a classic of the 1950s, mixing arrangements of popular music with Magnante originals (such as his most famous novelty, Accordiana), and classical transcriptions (most notably his adaptation of the earlier mentioned Bach Toccata in D Minor). Missing from the above list, however, is teaching, which Magnante preferred not to do on a regular basis. This was in quite strong contrast to Frosini and Pietro Deiro, who mentored many of the great third generation accordionists, such as Maddalena Belfiore, Daniel Desiderio, Carmen Carrozza, Frank Gaviani, and many, many others, who, in turn, established busy accordion studios themselves, much to the benefit of the present generations. Instead, Magnante gave hundreds of wonderful, informative, and inspiring workshops across America throughout his career, which had a profound effect upon students everywhere. Those students included William Schimmel and myself. Dr. Schimmel has since given his own workshops, which are in many ways, patterned after the Magnante model. He will do that very thing today, and will include some of the works and arrangements by Magnante. I, too, will make a small tribute to Magnante's legacy by playing his popular novelty, Green Light. Finally, it must be mentioned here that Frosini, Pietro Deiro, and Magnante were among the twelve seminal accordionists of their day who founded the all important American Accordionists' Association in 1938. Three others in this group were

of Italian ancestry, as well, and constitute major forces in the accordion world: Anthony Galla-Rini, Charles Nunzio, and Joseph Biviano, the first two of whom are happily still with us and constitute the only surviving founders. In his retirement years Magnante moved from New York City to Tarrytown, New York, where he died in 1986. He is an accordion legend who is sharply missed, particularly by members of my generation, who found him to be a great inspiration and, through his relationships with us in his workshops and as an A. A. A. adjudicator, a first-rate human being.

While practically all the accordionists mentioned above, as well as other important figures such as Eugene Ettore, John Gart, and Frederick Tedesco, were fine composers who contributed much to their instrument's repertoire and pedagogical materials over the years, their classical offerings were, for the most part, stylistically out of date and not in keeping with the modern techniques of twentieth century music. They were accordionists first and composers only second, and consequently made no impact on the contemporary music scene. By the early 1950s, it was becoming increasingly evident that, in order for the accordion to gain recognition as a serious concert instrument, it needed to attract important contemporary composers to write for it. In the United States, one of the youngest members on the Board of the American Accordionists' Association, Elsie Bennett, was among those who found a way to bring this about. One of her former professors at Columbia University, the renowned composer and electronic music pioneer, Otto Luening, suggested to her that the A. A. A. establish a commissioning committee. This suggestion was followed and Ms. Bennett was appointed the chair, a position she has held for over forty years. To date, she has been responsible for obtaining fifty commissions, most of which are by famous American composers, such as Ernst Krenek, Virgil Thomson, Otto Luening, Robert Russell Bennett, Henry Brant, Wallingford Riegger, Lukas Foss, Carlos Surinach, and many, many others. During the last half of the century many other contemporary composers have also discovered the accordion. The original classical repertoire for or including the instrument now hovers around a thousand works.

Interestingly, the first A. A. A. commissionee was an Italian American who was born to immigrant parents in New York two years after Magnante: Paul Creston (originally Giuseppe Guttovoggio; 1907-85). The outcome of this commission was given the typically Crestonian title *Prelude and Dance*, Op. 69. The *Prelude and Dance* was contracted on March 10, 1957, and published by Pietro Deiro Music the following year. It was premiered at Carnegie Hall on May 18, 1958, as part of a large joint concert featuring a who's who of virtuoso accordionists of the day, Andy Arcari, Carmen Carrozza, Tony Dannon, Daniel Desiderio, Angelo Di Pippo, Carl Eimer, Myron Floren, Anthony Galla-Rini, and Charles Magnante. Carrozza played the *Prelude and Dance* and was destined to premiere many consequent A. A. A. commissions over the next decade.

At the time, the composer was completing his twenty-third year as organist at St. Malachy's Church, in New York, serving as president of the National Association for American Composers and Conductors, and could list among his numerous works five symphonies (of six), the first of two violin concerti, a Requiem and Missa Solemnis, a marimba concertino as well as several works for saxophone, including a concerto for alto saxophone (both certainly constituting an encouraging sign for one seeking another unorthodox instrumental commission), and numerous band and orchestra pieces. Although composers of Creston's conservative, tonal, "neoclassical" leanings were going out of vogue in contemporary music circles during the late 1950s, in favor of post-World War II atonal and avant garde figures (such as Ernst Krenek and Lukas Foss, two of the later A. A. A. commissionees mentioned above), his music had nonetheless been highly acclaimed and widely performed, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, he had been a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the prestigious New York Music Critics' Circle Award. All discussion of trends aside, however, Creston's writing was extremely individualistic,

highly skilled and inventive, and to most concertgoers, very enjoyable as compared to many other more fashionable composers of the day. In general, his style is more often than not highly energetic and, with its heavily accented syncopations, almost jazzy (similar to, but not at all mistakable for, Gershwin), while at other times it hovers between dramatic post-romantic and delicate impressionistic moods. It always makes substantial virtuosic demands on its soloists.

Creston eventually accepted three more assignments from the A. A. A. through 1968, including today's selection: *The Concerto for Accordion and Orchestra*, Op. 75, was the third A. A. A. commission (following Wallingford Riegger's *Cooper Square*, in 1958). The contract in Elsie Bennett's archive is dated July 11, 1958, and Creston fulfilled his obligation by early 1959. The concerto was published by Ricordi in 1960, which was also the year Carmen Carrozza premiered it, with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra, in Boston, on May 10, 1960. I will be playing the third movement, a lively, virtuosic rondo, which exudes every aspect of Creston's ebullient style.

All three of us performing and speaking today hope that you will find this cross-section of accordion culture interesting and enjoyable. Although we are not of Italian descent, we are eternally grateful for the magnificent and invaluable, as well as indispensable, contributions of the Italian-American community to our beloved instrument.

Robert Young McMahan



Above, Elsie Bennett, Peter Muir and Sandra [Deiro] Cattani were photographed after the Symposium.