

Composers Commissioning

The Thirty-second Commissioned Work of the American Accordionists' Association Composers Commissioning Committee:

Paul Creston: *Embryo Suite*, Op. 96, and a Personal Appreciation of the Composer's Contribution to the Classical Accordion

No. 20 of an Ongoing Series on the Commissioned Works of the A A A

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2022 update and expansion of original version that appeared in the 2017 *AAA Festival Journal*

Note: the thirty-first commission, Alexander Tcherepnin's Tzigane, was discussed in the 2014 issue of the AAA Festival Journal.

Paul Creston: *Embryo Suite*, Op. 96

The *Embryo Suite* was the last of Creston's impressive accordion tetralogy, all commissioned by his good friend Elsie Bennett and the AAA over a span of eleven years, from 1957 through 1968. The first of these, *Prelude and Dance*, Op. 69 (commissioned in 1957 and published in 1958), was also the first of the AAA commissions, and like the last (curiously bearing the "retrograde inversion" opus number of 96), a solo. It is quite possibly the best known and loved of all the commissioned works to date, and undoubtedly the most frequently performed by advanced students and professional accordionists alike.

The two middle works, the Concerto, Op. 75 (the third AAA commission, 1958-60), and the Fantasy, Op. 85 (the twenty-fourth, 1964-66), were conceived for accordion and orchestra, though, as pointed out above, the composer indicated in the published score of the latter that it might also be performed just as a solo. Like the *Prelude and Dance*, it is equally probable that the Concerto holds the record for the most performances by an accordionist with an actual orchestra (including twice by this writer alone) of the seven AAA works for that combination commissioned up to the present.

One explanation for the popularity of the four Creston works is that they are all ebullient, lively, joyful, dance-like compositions, with jazzy syncopations, oftentimes bluesy or conversely pastel colored impressionistic harmonies, conventional melodic phrasing, and longstanding, familiar overall forms. Musicologists have pointed out (perhaps because of these traits) that Creston was among the most frequently performed American composers both abroad and in America during the 1940s and 1950s. However, they also observe that his post-romantic, though Americanized, genre of music waned in popularity with the ascendancy of the more abstract atonal and avant garde movements of the 1960s. It is thus ironic that the period in which he was commissioned by the AAA and represented the first of a group of recognized contemporary composers who were to validate the accordion as a proper vessel for original "classical" music coincided with a kind of peer devaluation of a



Work begins on *Prelude and Dance*: Left: Paul Creston and Elsie Bennett discussing Creston's first AAA commission, at Manhattan's St. Malachy's Church, where Creston served as organist for many years. March 1957. This is possibly the earliest photo of both of them together. Right: Creston, Carmen Carozza, and Bennett examining a draft of the work-in-progress, Bennett home, Brooklyn, August 1957. Elsie Bennett photo album.

whole school of once very famous and celebrated neo-classical and post-romantic composers. This group not only includes Creston but such world acclaimed luminaries as Copland, Hindemith, and Milhaud, to name just a few, who did not "evolve" into this new post-World War II generation of younger, often radical and experimental composers following in the footsteps of Schönberg and Webern.

While Creston blew into the accordion world like a whirlwind with his bombastic and technically daunting *Prelude and Dance* and Concerto, he left it with a very accessible and moderately easy-to-perform offering, the delightful and carefree *Embryo Suite*. The three-movement work is no less classic Creston, though, than its venerable predecessors, and is filled with the same catchy rhythms, shifts of accents, jazzy chords, and melodies often based on the various "Church modes," archaic predecessors to the major and minor scales that, among other traits, became the foundation of all music of the eighteenth century through, in many instances, the present. (Another noted twentieth-century composer who contributed two works to the AAA repertoire in the 1960s, Henry Cowell, turned almost exclusively to the modes for most of his works following a radical, highly experimental period in the 1920s.)

Bennett's contract to Creston, dated June 11, 1968, and mailed to the composer's home in White Plains, New York, stipulated that he was to write a solo that was not less than five minutes in length, in three movements, and at an "easy grade." It was to be completed and delivered to the AAA two months later, by August 15, at which time he would be paid \$250. If this was any indication of the country's economy during that decade, inflation must not have been rampant since Creston was contracted for the same amount eleven years earlier in 1957 for the *Prelude and Dance*!

The resulting work, entitled "Embryo Suite," was published by Pietro Deiro Music in 1968. It is the last of a handful of short, easier pieces Elsie Bennett commissioned with the

purpose of encouraging younger students to play and experience contemporary original music for their instrument as they progressed toward more advanced levels and the greater challenges presented by the majority of AAA commissioned repertoire. (See the 2015 Composers Commissioning article for more on this special group of pieces.)

Perhaps the first thing to arouse curiosity about this piece is its title. Beyond the common biological pre-natal definition of the word is its application to things in general, described in one dictionary source as “something in the early stages that shows potential for development.” By analogy, then, it may be suggested that since the commission essentially called for a “learning piece,” the title likely suggests that it is for young accordion students whose technical progress on their instrument is in its “embryonic” stage—not at the beginning level, but also not yet at an advanced or final point of full development. The only other probable application of the title would be a notion that it would have something to do with the way the music itself unfolds—perhaps the development of a melodic or rhythmic motif or harmonic pattern introduced in the first movement that undergoes all kinds of vicissitudes throughout it and the remaining movements. Examination of the score, however, does not support this suggestion. All three movements are strongly contrasted in tempo, meter, and motivic material, not to mention ethos. Even their generic titles—“Entrada” (meaning “introduction”), “Sarabande,” and “Rondino,” throwbacks to the Baroque era, suggest strong contrasts in character.

As may be suspected by the titles alone, the *Embryo Suite* is “neoclassical” in design despite the usual modern and lush Crestonian harmonies, shifting rhythms, and, in the first movement, consistent 5/4 time signature. The overall tempo scheme of the three movements follows the classic plan of fast/slow/fast.



Game of accordion musical chairs? Elsie Bennett and Paul Creston taking turns trying out and working on final draft of the *Embryo Suite*. August 13, 1968. Bennett home. Elsie Bennett photo album.

Harkening back to the age from which the titles of the movements come, opening sections named “Introduction” or the like were normally slow and stately, as may be encountered in the first segment of the so-called “French overtures” of Lully and others in the time of Louis XIV, or the beginnings of otherwise lively first movements of eighteenth century symphonies, so frequent in those of Haydn; or, if they are free-standing separate movements, usually titled “Prelude” or the equivalent in another language (e.g., the rarely encountered “Entrada,” Creston’s choice here) of multi-movement Baroque suites for

harpsichord or orchestra, their tempi may be either slow or fast, depending upon the composer's whim. Creston decided to take the middle road in his bouncy, jolly *Entrada*, marking it "Maestoso," but setting the metronome rate at the snappy, jaunting pace of quarter note equals ca. 112 beats per minute.

Given that the *Entrada* is the first movement of a short set of three pieces tailored for the budding young musician, whose limited scope of listening experiences may not yet encompass concert works in the new musical trends of our times, one might playfully suggest that Creston's title was intended to have a double meaning; for in one dictionary reference, a secondary non-musical definition of the word is "an expedition or journey into unexplored territory." A certainty, however, is that another possible speculation, namely that Creston might have inferred through the title that his music was now moving in some radical new direction, is out of the question. Though Creston's style is certainly unique, this composition does not reflect any revolutionary upheavals in his longstanding musical language, which remained steadfastly the same in all his acknowledged works throughout his entire career.

Creston once briefly described his compositional procedures in an interview with Elsie Bennett that survives on a scrap of paper in her archive (now preserved in the World of Accordions Museum):

I consider my music to be pantonal. This is a free tonality in which all keys are related, and freely go from one to another. This gives a feeling of tonality [being in a key], but the performer doesn't stay in the one key for very long, although he does have cadences [key-defining temporary stopping points] with each key as he is in it."

The frequent change of tonal centers is perhaps more clearly evident in the *Entrada* than in any of the other accordion works of Creston. The 32-measure movement falls into three large divisions of more-or-less equal portions, beginning with the rambunctious first of two principal melodic themes.

The first two segments (measures 1-13 and 14-23 respectively) clearly establish the tonal center of G major at their outsets, but the comparatively shorter third and final segment begins in the dominant key of D (the reverse of what would normally happen in conventional tonal music of the past) before the more traditional return to the home key of G in the last four measures.

During each segment, however, the music meanders through different keys at an average of two measures each, often by means of the time-honored methods of modulation via melodic phrase sequence or common pivotal harmonies shared by both keys.

Throughout the movement, as in all of Creston's music, the sense of key is attractively blurred by unstable seventh, ninth, eleventh, and other unexpected chordal types and the frequent chromatic alteration of major and minor scale sources for the melodic line into modes, particularly the Aeolian (same as the natural minor scale), Lydian (major scale with

a raised fourth note), and Mixolydian (major scale with lowered seventh note) forms.

A glance at just the first page of the *Entrada* easily represents most of Creston's melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic language found in virtually all of his works (all items marked on the score excerpt below):

1. Key scheme: In the first segment of twelve measures, the key scheme goes through five changes from the beginning tonic key of G-major: C-major (measure 2 through beginning of measure 3 where it begins to modulate to A minor); A-minor (end of measure 3 to first three beats of measure 4); D-major (the "proper" classic dominant key relationship to the initial home key of G; last two beats of measure 4 through measure 8 and, including the entrance of the second principal theme, a rather martial, dotted rhythm melody starting untraditionally, though common with Creston, on a weak beat, in this case, beat 2, of measure 7), C major (abruptly via phrase modulation, measure 9), and, beyond the excerpt shown below, a descending stepwise melodic and harmonic sequence of major keys every three to four beats each through to the downbeat of measure 12, of B, A, G, and F-sharp, before an upward moving melodic sequence serves as a transition back to the tonic key of G and the main theme for the second segment at measure 14.
2. Melodic themes cast in chromatically altered major and minor scales: accidentals converting major and minor scales into their historic predecessors, the so-called "Church modes." In this excerpt, the "Lydian" mode is well represented in Theme 2 (beginning at measure 7, second beat). The major scale may be converted to the Lydian mode by simply raising its fourth note one chromatic half step. Measures 7 and 8 are in D major, and measure 9 shifts suddenly to the key of C major. The D-major scale is D E F# G A B C#. It becomes "D-major/Lydian," however, if the fourth note is raised a chromatic half step: D E F# G# A B C#. Likewise, the C-major scale, which has no flats or sharps, will become C D E F# G A B. This single pitch change will greatly affect the melody and harmony of any musical passage, as it did in this excerpt. The two themes return in varied and either expanded or contracted lengths in the final two sections of the movement.
3. Special 7th, 9th, and 11th chords, built on any of the four types of triads (major, minor, diminished, or augmented) appear often on practically any page of a Creston score, and on nearly any scale degree, as typically happens in popular music, jazz, or Debussyian "impressionism." These may use the regular notes of the scale or freely added chromatic notes outside of the key (again like jazz or the blues). Random examples of some of these unusual chord types in this excerpt are C-major 7 (C E G B), measure 2, beats 4, 5; D major 7 (D F# A C#), measure 6, beats 1, 2; G major 7 (G B D F#), measure 8, beats 2, 4; D major 9 (D F# A C E), measures 1 and 6, beat 3; A major 9, measure 5, beat 1; G major 9 (G B D F A), measure 3, beats 1, 2; C major 11 (C E G B D F#), measure 5, beats 4, 5; G major/minor 9 (G B D F[E#] Ab[G#]), measure 6, beats 4, 5.
4. Though Creston's application of meter and rhythm to his always clever, often

syncopated melodic lines was far from radical, he enjoyed fitting downbeats into positions in the measure where one might expect a weaker part of the line to occur; or forcing a line that would seem to be in one meter (such as 4/4) into a framework of more or less beats of the chosen time signature (such as 2/4 or 5/4, as in this movement), thus throwing the beat off temporarily. An example of this practice was mentioned in no. 1 above in which the second theme began forcefully on the second rather than the stronger first beat of what was already a “peg-legged” 5/4 metrical format. In fact, when the same theme returns in the second major segment of the movement, as described above, at measure 20, it does so on the strong first beat, as one would normally expect it to do. (Creston’s fascination and preoccupation with rhythm is described below.)

The image shows a musical score for measures 1-9 of a piece titled "Entrada". The tempo is marked "Maestoso" with a quarter note equal to approximately 112 (♩ = c. 112). The score is written for piano and bass. The key signature is G major (one sharp). The time signature is 2/4. The score is divided into five systems, each with a measure number (1, 2, 4, 6, 8) on the left. The piano part (top staff) features two main themes: "Theme 1" (measures 1-3) and "Theme 2" (measures 6-7). The bass part (bottom staff) provides harmonic support with various chords and textures. Annotations in red indicate the two principal thematic elements. Annotations in blue indicate key changes and modal influences: "GM:" (G major), "CM Lydian:", "Am:", "DM:", "DM Lydian:", and "CM Lydian:". Annotations in green indicate special extended tertian harmonies: "DM9", "CM7", "GM9", "AM9", "C11", "DM7", "DM9", and "GMm9". The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and fingering numbers.

Measures 1-9 of *Entrada*, indicating the two principal thematic elements of the movement (in red), key changes and their modal influences (in blue), and special extended tertian harmonies (in green).

The *Sarabande* faithfully follows the dance form so often used as the second movement in Baroque harpsichord suites: slow tempo, triple meter (in this instance, 3/4 time), somber mood created by the plodding tempo and the minor key, and an incessant syncopated short/long rhythmic pattern in the left-hand accompaniment, adding to the funereal effect. The melody is more often than not either in the tonic key of A minor or the dominant one of E minor. This is a traditional key relationship, but, in true Creston fashion, the scale upon which the theme is based is the Dorian mode (a natural minor scale with a raised 6th scale degree, which adds to the somewhat melancholy effect:

A Dorian: A B C D E F# G
 E Dorian: E F# G A B C# D

The following excerpt (measures 1 through 15) will serve to illustrate some of these characteristics:

Introduction

Moderato ♩ = c. 72

Main Theme, Phrase 1

Phrase 2

Phrase 3

Staying close to the pitch and rhythmic patterns established in the first phrase of the main theme, Creston adds two more sections of similar length with transitional passages

connecting them in dramatic ways. The second section essentially transposes the beginning section's first phrase a fifth higher (thus in the E Dorian range) and then moves in new directions with higher drama. Culminating on a high, expurgative A-minor cadence point, the opening left-hand introductory dirge re-emerges, ushering in the third and final segment, a near exact repeat of the first, only an octave higher and using the brighter "Violin" register in place of the soft, smoother "Clarinet" choice assigned before. Eventually settling down on a final cadential, four-measure tonic A, the left-hand dirge that opened the previous two sections in the left hand returns yet a third time to bring the movement to a solemn end.

Miniature echoes of Creston's virtuosic rondo that ends his groundbreaking accordion concerto are felt in the *Rondino* that brings the *Embryo Suite* to a similarly spirited and cheerful conclusion. Essentially in the key of A (as was the rondo in the Concerto), a fast-fingered right-hand line driven by either rhythmically stomping solid chords or an ongoing "omm-pah" bass rhythm flies through four strongly defined themes that result in a traditional rondo form. The form itself may be diagramed as follows:

Section	A	B	A ¹	C	D	A ²	Coda
Measures	1-14	15-32	33-45	46-70	71-87	88-107	108-116
Initial Key and/or Mode	A major	C major Lydian	G major	F major	D major Lydian	A major	A major

As is typical of Creston's self-declared pantonal leanings, key and/or modal changes tend to happen on the average of every two to four measures. Also, several measures at the ends of most sections serve as gradual transitions to the next themes and keys/modes.

Samplings of the first appearances of each theme appear below:

A Theme:

Allegro $\text{♩} = 120 - 132$

The musical score for Theme A is presented in two systems. The first system shows the right hand with a melodic line starting on G4 and moving up to A4, and the left hand with a bass line starting on G2 and moving up to A2. The second system continues the melodic and bass lines. The score includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'M', and fingering numbers like 5, 2, 7, 1, 3, 5, 8.

B Theme:

B Theme , measure 15

dim. *p* M

GM:

7 M M 7

FM Lydian:

7 M 7 M 7

EM:

DM:

C Theme (with some rhythmic borrowing from Theme B)

C Theme, Measure 46

Rhythmic motif a -----

7 M B. S.

Rhythmic motif b (from Theme B)

7 M *cresc.*

In addition to this active creative life, he gave an extra lifetime's worth of service to the musical profession and community in general as president of the National Association for American Composers and Conductors ("ASCAP," 1956-60), a director of ASCAP (1960-68), and as organist at the famous St. Malachy Roman Catholic Church in New York (1934-67). He also found time to teach both privately and at schools to which he was invited as a guest composer. Among the many distinguished composers who sought Creston out as their mentor in their younger years were John Corigliano and accordionist William Schimmel.

Finally, Creston, already the author of numerous published articles on various aspects of music, took time to write a seminal volume based on his long-time study and observation of western European rhythm, *Principles of Rhythm*, which was published in 1964. This was followed in the early 1970s by three other important publications, *Creative Harmony*, *Music and Mass Media*, and *A Composer's Creed*; and, at the end of that decade, a continuation of his study of rhythm culminated in his second and final book on the subject, *Rational Metric Notation*.

Shortly after the publication of the *Embryo Suite*, Creston not only bade farewell to the accordion, but also his native New York, accepting a tenured position as a professor of music and composer-in-residence at Central Washington State College (now University), in Ellensburg, Washington. He retired to the warmer climes of Poway, California, near San Diego, in 1975 where he died in 1985.

Though spending the last seventeen years of his life on the far opposite side of the continent, he and his wife Louise kept in close contact to the end with their dear friend in Brooklyn, Elsie Bennett, as may be seen in the large volume of correspondence between them, not to mention numerous home photographs of the Crestons with the Bennett family on their many social and informal outings, preserved in the Bennett archive. But in death they did come home to rest along with numerous other celebrated American composers in Fernwood Cemetery, Hartsdale, New York, the state that not only birthed and nurtured them, but, through Creston, Bennett, and the AAA, one might argue the contemporary classical accordion as well.

For many of the multitude of promising baby boomer accordionists who came of age during the 1960s, Creston's first two accordion works served as very important introductions to twentieth-century music and a wake-up call that a new instrument like the accordion required its own timely original music if it were to be validated at all in the classical music community. The respect of one's peers in a profession is always necessary for survival of a new idea (or, in this case, instrument).

Largely because of this quest for timely classical accordion repertoire, many young accordionists went on to learn more about contemporary music and styles beyond that of Creston and became important proponents as both concert artists and, in many cases, composers of the "New Music."

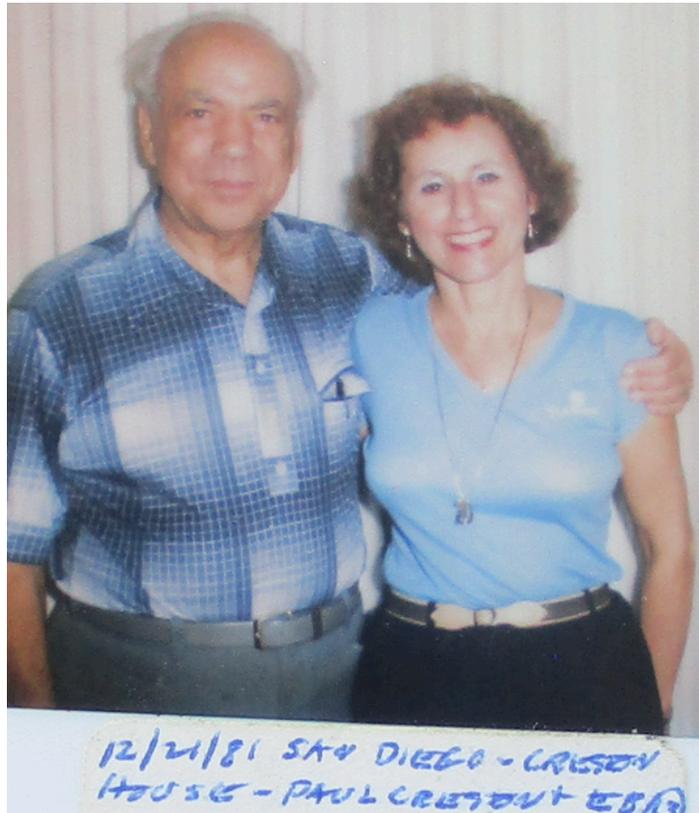


Mort and Elsie Bennett and Paul and Louise Creston, at the Crestons' home in White Plains, New York, August, 1960. The two families had become close friends over the years and enjoyed many formal and informal get-togethers. Sadly, the foursome was reduced by one in 1966 with Mort's passing at the all-too-early age of 49. Elsie Bennett photo album.

The baby boomers were the first among many American families to go to college. Many of the accordionists in that generation decided to pursue degrees in Music Education, Music Theory and/or Composition, and even accordion in the handful of institutions of higher learning in the United States where skeptical music faculties could now finally be persuaded to accept the instrument on the basis of its rapidly expanding original repertoire by recognized composers and young, eager virtuosi who were performing it.

Among those who earned doctoral degrees in music is the 1975 AAA US Champion Monica Slomski. She had performed Creston's *Fantasia* with the Bridgeport Civic Orchestra, Harry Valante, Conductor, in the same program as Linda Soley Reed had played the *Embryo Suite* in 1975 and came to know Creston personally. Her liking of his music and interest in his remarkable career were no doubt the reasons why she decided to choose him as the subject of her dissertation for the DMA in Music Theory at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. Following Creston's death, Slomski was quite instrumental in persuading the family to donate his papers to UMKC (also famous for its long-standing accordion degree founded by Professor Emeritus Joan Cochran Sommers in 1961) and published the authoritative biography and exhaustive bibliography on Creston, *Paul Creston: A Bio-bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1994). Yet another example of the powerful impact Creston had on a whole generation of accordionists (not to mention an indispensable source for this article or any other research on Creston!).

*It is somewhat amusing to observe that the generic title "Prelude and Dance" was not limited to the single accordion solo, but was given by Creston to five other of his works, one for orchestra (Op. 25, 1941), two solos for piano (Op. 29, nos. 1, 2, 1942), one for concert band (Op. 76, 1959, composed almost immediately after the AAA commission; a standard and highly popular work performed to this day by bands everywhere), and a duet for two pianos (Op. 120, 1982).



Paul Creston in retirement and Elsie Bennett at the composer's Poway, California home, near San Diego. December 21, 1981. Elsie Bennett photo album.

To hear a performance of the *Embryo Suite*, go to the video link accompanying its listing on the AAA Commissioned Works home page, <http://ameraccord.com/aaacommissions.php>.

Dr. McMahan, cellist Cecylia Barczyk, and violinist Emmanuel Borowsky performed Lukas Foss's second AAA commissioned work, *Triologue*, in the Friday night concert of the 2017 AAA Festival in Princeton, NJ. This was the first performance since McMahan, cellist Madeleine Shapiro, and violinist Airi Yoshioka premiered the work, at which the composer was present, in the second AAA concert series of contemporary works for or including accordion at the City University of New York Graduate Center, New York City, on March 11, 2005. McMahan, Barczyk, and Borowsky also performed the world premiere of McMahan's then most recent composition, *Romp 5*, for violin, cello, and accordion, at the 23rd annual AAA Master Class and Concert Series at Tenri Institute, New York City, during the weekend of July 28, 2017. Two movements of another new work, *Etudes*, by Dave Soldier, a previously commissioned composer by the AAA, were also premiered there by William Schimmel, McMahan, and bassoonist Devon Tipp.