

# The First New York Flute Club Composition Competition

## The Birth of the Burton Sonatina

by Nancy Toff

In August 1947, the New York Flute Club announced that it would offer a “Prize Composition Contest” for a “major work” for flute and piano. The prize was \$100 and publication by a leading publishing house. The deadline was short: January 15, 1948, just four months later.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently the tight deadline did not daunt composers: “well over a hundred” entries came in, according to board member Laurence Taylor.<sup>2</sup> The works were submitted anonymously, and no records of the submissions survive. The judges were Frederick Wilkins, John Wummer, and Arthur Lora.<sup>3</sup>

On December 31, 1948, the *New York Times* reported that the winning work was the Sonatina for flute and piano by Eldin Burton, identified (two-thirds correctly) as “composer, clarinetist and pianist of this city.” The work would be published in January 1949 by Carl Fischer and premiered on January 30 at the Flute Club.

Thomas Eldin Burton was born on October 6, 1913 in Fitzgerald, Georgia. He graduated in 1930 from Fitzgerald High School and in 1938 from the Atlanta Conservatory of Music, where he received a degree in piano and composition. He was named director of the Georgia Conservatory and Music

Center in Atlanta in 1940, then came to New York in 1943 to attend the Juilliard Graduate School, graduating in May 1946 with honors in composition. His composition teacher was Bernard Wagenaar, who in 1938 had written a triple concerto for flute, harp, and cello that was premiered by Georges Barrère, Carlos Salzedo, Horace Britt, and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

One of Burton’s friends at Juilliard was Samuel Baron, who was then a student of Arthur Lora (Baron had begun his Juilliard studies with Barrère, who had died in 1944). The received wisdom is that Baron heard a piece he’d written for piano and suggested he adapt it for flute. We don’t know whether that was because of the Flute Club contest or, more likely, somewhat earlier, but in any case Burton dedicated the work to Baron. Presumably Baron tried it out with him, and perhaps gave a student performance, but there is no record of a public performance at that time either in the Juilliard archives or in the press.

The premiere of the Sonatina took place at the Flute Club concert on January 30, 1949, at the City Center chamber music hall, and was played by Arthur Lora, flute, and Leonid Hambro, piano. There the award was officially presented to Burton.

The piece rapidly established itself in the repertoire, both at the Flute Club and elsewhere. In September 1949, Baron and Burton performed the work at the Yaddo artists’ colony in Saratoga Springs. They played it again in June 1951 on a program of the Composers Group of New York in Carnegie Recital Hall. Francis Perkins of the *Herald Tribune* reported the piece to be “melodically outspoken and instrumentally idiomatic, with skilful [sic] use of occasionally retrospective musical ideas.”<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile the piece had already had its second hearing at the Flute Club: on April 29, 1951, the Club hosted a chamber music recital by three “young artists”: James Pellerite (b. 1926, at the time a member of the Indianapolis Symphony), Andrew Lolya (b. 1930), and Donald Peck (b. 1930, then a student of Kincaid at Curtis). It was Peck who had the honor of playing the Burton Sonatina with the composer at the piano.

John Wummer added the Sonatina to his repertoire in 1950. In January, he and Burton played it at the National Association of American Composers and Conductors, at Times Hall. The *Herald Tribune* critic, Jay S. Harrison, damned the work with faint praise: “Mr. Burton’s flute sonata is, in technique, a warm example of present-day impressionism,

## The Second NYFC Composition Competition

by Kaoru Hinata, NYFC Flute Composition Competition Coordinator

When I was asked to join the board of the Flute Club in 2012, the first conversation I had with Wendy Stern, the incoming president, was to suggest reviving the composition competition. I had noticed “Winner of the NY Flute Club Composition Contest” mentioned on the cover of the Burton Sonatina when I first learned the piece in school, and was intrigued by the idea that a piece could owe its prominence in the flute literature to a competition. Discovering and championing works that people will love and want to play is a worthwhile endeavor and a legacy for the Club that could potentially outlast us all.

There are so many composers I wish had written something for the flute—why isn’t there a Ravel piece for flute and orchestra? Or a Brahms sonata or a piece by Alban Berg or a Stravinsky concerto for us? We are lucky to have a Nielsen concerto, which was inspired by a flutist friend of the composer, and Messiaen’s *Le Merle Noir*, which was commissioned by the Paris Conservatoire for

its juries. Often, an artist will inspire or ask a composer to write something—we would not have a Liebermann Sonata without Paula Robison, or a Copland Duo without a commission from William Kincaid’s students and friends.

We have such deep and visceral connections to music we love, and we connect with each other by sharing these pieces, through performance, or through teaching them to our students. How amazing that often this music exists simply because of the request of a friend, or because a chance inspiration made a composer write for flute and not for some other instrument. The New York Flute Club is holding its second composition competition in the hope we might give talented composers a little push to imagine something for flute, or to give a new piece a launch to be heard and embraced by many flute players.

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# NYFC Flute Composition Competition (2014-15)

The New York Flute Club is pleased to announce our Flute Composition Competition for the 2014-15 season, the second ever. The first contest, held in 1948, was won by Eldin Burton for his *Sonatina*, which is now part of our standard repertoire. In reviving the competition, we are seeking to encourage compositions for flute and to bring exciting new compositions to the flute community by recognizing outstanding new works.

We are seeking works for flute and piano, between 8 and 15 minutes in duration. The difficulty of the work is at the discretion of the composer, but high artistic goals should be balanced with realistic instrumental demands.

Submissions will be adjudicated anonymously in two rounds, and the finalists' compositions will be presented at the New York Flute Fair in March/April of 2015 in NYC. The Flute Club will select distinguished artists to perform the works and feature them in recital. The performances will be recorded and featured on the Flute Club's website and YouTube channel so that the entire flute community can discover and enjoy them.

Three prizes will be awarded:  
First prize: \$1,500  
Second prize: \$1,000  
Third prize: \$500

Entry fee: \$35

Deadline: September 15, 2014

More info and application at  
[www.nyfluteclub.org](http://www.nyfluteclub.org)  
(Concerts, Events & More).

with themes langorous and happy-go-lucky by turn. They do not tarry long, however, since they have nothing important to say.”<sup>5</sup>

In October, Wummer and Burton played the *Sonatina* in a concert for the Yonkers (NY) Philharmonic Society. And in December, there was a full concert of Burton's works at Carl Fischer Hall (later known as CAMI), again with Wummer's participation. The *Herald Tribune* critic, the composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks, was not impressed.

“Mr. Burton's work,” she wrote, “does not inspire one with too much confidence in him as a composer; the pieces are reasonably well put together, but the strange mixture of styles, the absence of any esthetic stability whatsoever, gives a scrappy form and an upsetting collage reminiscent of idioms from Wagner, through Debussy to Eric Coates and Chaminade. If the composer could once make up his mind concerning his own preferences among these, and work from there, the result might be more satisfactory.”<sup>6</sup>

Wummer played the *Sonatina* again with Burton in 1955, in a concert for the Composers Group of New York City. He reprised the work in April 1963 in Carnegie Recital Hall, on a program of the “Published Chamber Music of Eldin Burton,” again with the composer at the keyboard, and at the Flute Club in February 1964, with pianist Joseph

Wolman.

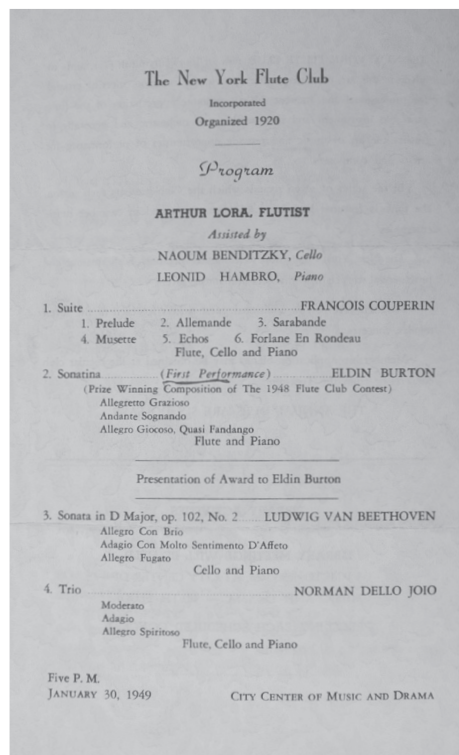
He also recorded it with Burton for Classic Editions (CE 1006), sometime in the early 1950s, along with Burton's *Sonatina* for violin and piano, *Fiddlestick!*, also for violin and piano, and *Quintet* for piano and strings. The *Sonatina* has since been recorded by numerous other artists and is regularly played on recital programs.

The piece has proved the critics wrong, as it has attained staple, if not warhorse, status. Flutists can be grateful to Sam Baron, for encouraging the young Eldin Burton to write for flute, to the NYFC judges, for their good taste. Little is known of Burton's subsequent career; he wrote a flute concerto (1964), available for rental from Carl Fischer, and ultimately retired to Sarasota, Florida, where he died in March 1981.

As for the Flute Club contest, I was told by Arthur Lora that the response was so overwhelming that the club declined to undertake a competition again. Laurence Taylor's version was slightly different; he wrote in 1951, “The Club is already looking forward to another Prize Contest, but not until the treasurer announces that the treasury can stand it.”<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, the state of the exchequer is no longer in question, and we look forward to finding a worthy successor to the Burton *Sonatina* as we celebrate our 95th anniversary next season.

**Nancy Toff** is archivist of the New York Flute Club and the author, most recently, of *The Flute Book, third edition* (Oxford University Press, 2012). She is eager to hear from members with copies of NYFC programs and publicity materials from the 1940s and '50s.



1. “Flute Club Prize,” *New York Herald Tribune*, August 17, 1947.
2. Laurence Taylor, “Flutists All,” *Music Journal*, November 1, 1951, p. 40.
3. Leonardo De Lorenzo, *My Complete Story of the Flute* (1951; rpt., Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1992), p. 288.
4. F.D.P. [Francis D. Perkins], “New Works Are Given by Composers Group,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 13, 1951.
5. J.S.H. [Jay S. Harrison], “Composers and Conductors,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 23, 1950.
6. P. G.H. [Peggy Glanville-Hicks], “Eldin Burton,” *New York Herald Tribune*, December 4, 1951.
7. Taylor, “Flutists All,” p. 40.