

**GIUSEPPE GUTTOVEGGIO  
(PAUL CRESTON)  
(1906-1985)**

*This month's essay deals with one of the most performed American composers of the 1940s and 1950s. Several of his works have become staples of the repertoire for symphonic winds. His Zanoni (1946), Celebration Overture (1954), and Prelude and Dance (1959), have been, and still are, on several lists for state performance contests for concert bands across the United States. In addition to his compositional work, he was also a notable conductor, teacher, and scholar.*

Giuseppe Guttovoggio (Paul Creston) was born in New York City on October 10, 1906 to poor Sicilian immigrant parents. His father, Gaspare Guttovoggio (1879-1964), was born in Prizzi, part of the Metropolitan City of Palermo; he was a housepainter after immigrating to the United States. His mother, Carmela Collura Guttovoggio (1882-1947) was also born in Prizzi. He had one older brother, Carlo Guttovoggio (1903-1986) who was also born in Prizzi. (Carlo later changed his name to Charles Guttveg). The three Guttovoggios emigrated from Sicily to the United States in 1905, a year before Giuseppe was born.



While he was at DeWitt Clinton High School, Giuseppe performed in a school play, *The Fan*, and his friends nicknamed him “Cress” after the character he played. He liked the nickname so much that after he left high school, he lengthened it to “Creston” which became his professional surname. He adopted the name “Paul” simply because it appealed to him.

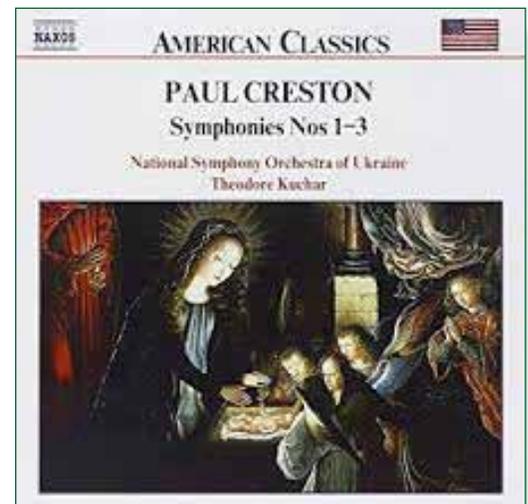
Because of his family's poverty, he was forced to leave high school after two years in order to work at various jobs to help support his family. Among his early jobs, he spent several years as a theater organist for silent movies. Not much else is known of his boyhood life. We do know that he was entirely self-taught, except for early piano and organ lessons which taught him only the keyboard basics. He taught himself music theory, composition, literature, and philosophy during whatever free time he could muster. He also educated himself, during his off-working hours, practicing on a \$10 piano and studying the scores of the masters: Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Chopin, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, and especially Johann Sebastian Bach. To fuel these nocturnal educational marathons, usually after 11 pm, Creston bypassed coffee drinking altogether and took to smoking ground coffee beans in his pipe, which gave him the “caffeine high” he needed to keep going into the early hours of each day.



In 1934, he became organist at St. Malachy's Church on West 48th Street in New York City (*left*), a position he held until 1967. This position gave him the opportunity and the financial wherewithal to develop his musical creative talents, and to perform his compositions in the relatively low-key surroundings of a church. (There is also a distinctive religious sensibility to much of his music, which is evident in such works as his *Symphony No. 3 (The Three Mysteries)* (1950) and the orchestral meditation *Corinthians: XIII*, (1963), both of which use themes from Gregorian chant).

Critical recognition of his abilities came late to Creston, considering that he only began to devote his compositional talent starting in 1932, with the composition of his first published work, *Five Dances for Piano*. When the accolades and honors did come, they were many and impressive. Henry Cowell, who was a similarly accomplished self-taught musician and one of the most innovative American composers of the 20th century, performed much of Creston's early work. This gave him notoriety and led to a 1938 Guggenheim Fellowship. He leapt into the forefront of American music when his 1940 composition, *Symphony No. 1*, received the 1943 annual award from the New York Music Critics' Circle. Following this award, he began to receive international recognition as the symphony was performed by several orchestras around the world, and won first place in the Paris International Commission in 1952.

Creston's music was championed by a number of important conductors. Arturo Toscanini was an early supporter of his work and conducted many of Creston's compositions over the years. (He presented the premiere of his *Two Choric Dances* for woodwinds, piano, percussion and strings in 1938, commenting, "I love them without reserve"). In addition, Eugene Ormandy and Leopold Stokowski also conducted many of Creston's works. But few conductors were as committed to Creston's music as much as Howard Mitchell, longtime conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington, DC.





Creston was fiercely independent by nature and developed his own musical style free of any particular school of thought or influence of a master teacher. He declared that “the composer must be completely free to decide whether he wants to go back to original, simple forms or to go ahead with new forms.” At a time when music was turning atonal and rhythm was chancy, Creston clung to, and was often criticized for, his commitment to melodic themes and regular meters that comprised a strong rhythmic sense. His works constitute perhaps the most consistent

embodiment of the affirmative, lyrical, melodic strain that dominated American music in the 1930s and for a time afterward. He wrote in an accessible, conservative style that incorporated song and dance idioms. He himself gave the best description when his Fourth Symphony (1951) was introduced by the National Symphony Orchestra in 1952. He said that it followed classical lines, with “no unusual philosophic basis and no programmatic inspiration,” and that “it was cast in the conventional four movements, with the emphasis on gaiety and brilliance.” (However, this traditional posture placed his compositions in disfavor by the 1960s).

Creston composed in a variety of forms; his catalogue includes six symphonies, 15 concerti (including some for neglected instruments like the marimba, the saxophone, the trombone, and the accordion), and numerous orchestral, chamber, choral, secular and sacred vocal works, and TV and film scores. He also demonstrated a particular affinity for the poetry of Walt Whitman, which inspired five major scores between 1934 and 1972.

To his musical activities, Creston added teaching duties as well. For a short period of time in the late 1950s, he taught music theory at Swarthmore College. Later, he taught music theory at the New York College of Music in Manhattan (1963-1967). Having spent most of his life in his native New York City, in 1968 he moved to Ellensburg, Washington to serve as Resident Composer and Professor of Music at Central Washington State College (now University) from 1968-1975. During his teaching career, some of his notable students were: composers Irwin Swack, John Corigliano, Elliott Schwartz, Frank Felice, and Charles Roland Berry; accordionist/composer William Schimmel; and jazz musicians Rusty Dedrick and Charlie Queener.

He also published several scholarly books on music appreciation and theory; among them are the important theoretical works on rhythm theory *Principles of Rhythm* (1964) and *Rational Metric Notation: the Mathematical Basis of Meters, Symbols, and Note-Values* (1979). He also published a ten-volume series of 123 instructional piano works collectively titled *Rhythmicon* (1977).



Following his retirement from academia, he moved to San Diego in 1975. He died at the National Health Care Home in Poway, a city in San Diego County, on August 24, 1985 at the age of 78. He had had surgery earlier that year for the removal of a malignant tumor. He is buried in a mausoleum at Ferncliff Cemetery and Mausoleum, Hartsdale, Westchester County, New York.

**PERSONAL LIFE**

Creston married Louise Gotto (1903-1989) in 1927. She was a dancer and choreographer in the early 1930s, and an original member of the Martha Graham dance group. They remained together until his death. They had two sons, Joel and Timothy, and five grandchildren.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:*

*Coffman, Nathan. "Program Notes: Paul Creston's Concertino for Marimba & Orchestra." Portland Youth Philharmonic Program, February 5, 2018;*

*Crutchfield, Will. "Paul Creston, 78, Composer and Romantic Stylist, Dead." New York Times obituary, August 26, 1985, Section D, Page 11;*

*Encyclopedia Britannica website;*

*Find a Grave website;*

*Folkart, Burt A. "Paul Creston, Renowned Classical Composer, Dies."*

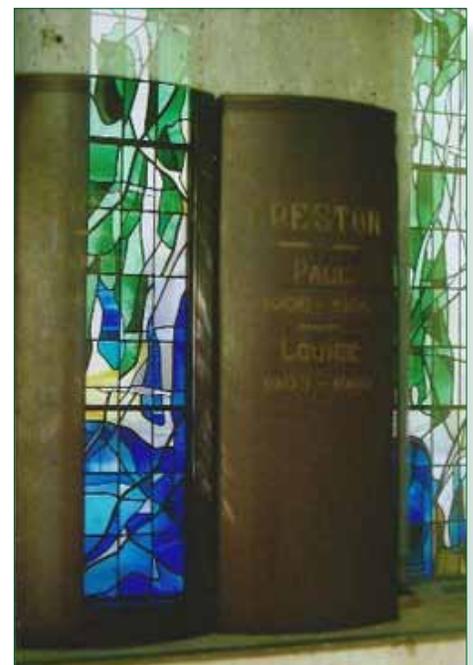
*Los Angeles Times obituary, August 27, 1985;*

*Satola, Mark. "Paul Creston Biography." Allmusic website;*

*Slomski, Monica J. Paul Creston: a Bio-bibliography. Westport, Conn.:*

*Greenwood Press, 1994;*

*and Wikipedia website.*



[Ferncliff Cemetery and Mausoleum  
Hartsdale, Westchester County, New York](#)