

Vincent Persichetti • Choral Works
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VINCENT PERSICHETTI: THREE CHORALWORKS
by Walter Simmons

•Vincent Persichetti died August 14, 1987•

For the past three decades the name of Vincent Persichetti has come to signify musicianship of a comprehensiveness virtually unmatched among American composers. His influence reaches young pianists nurtured on his Sonatinas and *Little Piano Book*, school musicians who first experience serious contemporary music through his works for band (among them *Pageant*, New World Records 80211-2), church choirs who turn to his *Hymns and Responses for the Church Year* as an inexhaustible resource, young composers who have attended his spell-binding lecturerecitals or who find his classic textbook *Twentieth Century Harmony* indispensable, and soloists and conductors for whom his sonatas, concertos, and symphonies stand among the masterworks of American music. Persichetti represents an attitude that encourages healthy creative participation at all levels of sophistication and shuns dogmas that revere one school of composition at the expense of others.

Persichetti was born on June 6, 1915, in Philadelphia. At the age of five he was enrolled in the Combs Conservatory, where he learned to play the piano, organ, and double bass. He also studied theory and composition under Russell King Miller, who became his most influential teacher. In his teens Persichetti memorized the scores to be performed at weekly concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra and then attended the concerts to compare his inner perceptions against the actual sounds. Before graduating from high school he had performed a good deal on radio, in churches, and in recitals. Composition was an integral part of his musical activity from the start, as was exposure to other arts. Persichetti attended art school during his adolescence, and sculpture continues to be an important creative outlet for him.

On graduating from the Combs Conservatory with a Bachelor of Music degree in 1936, Persichetti became head of its theory and composition departments. He also continued studying—piano with Olga Samaroff and composition with Paul Nordoff at the Philadelphia Conservatory (Master of Music 1941; Doctor of Music 1945) and conducting with Fritz Reiner at the Curtis Institute. From 1932 to 1948 he served as organist and choirmaster at Philadelphia's Arch Street Presbyterian Church, where he performed organ versions of excerpts from the dozens of complex modern scores he was studying. In 1941 the Philadelphia Conservatory appointed Persichetti to head the theory and composition departments, and in 1947 William Schuman invited him to join the Juilliard faculty as well. He became chairman of the Juilliard composition department in 1963 and of the Literature and Materials department in 1970.

Throughout his active teaching career Persichetti has continued to compose prodigiously, producing a body of works now numbering more than 150, including nine symphonies,

four string quartets, twelve piano sonatas, and assorted pieces for almost every instrument and ensemble. Through his vast output—and through his writings and lectures as well—Persichetti has argued eloquently on behalf of an amalgamation of virtually all musical materials and techniques, past and present, into a fluent working vocabulary, or "common practice," capable of a full spectrum of expression. In Persichetti's music this has entailed a broad stylistic palette, extending from extreme diatonic simplicity to complex, densely contrapuntal atonality. This range has not evolved according to a chronological sequence, which has bewildered many who have tried to infer a conventional pattern of development from casual exposure to his music. Rather, Persichetti has defined two temperamental elements that have been present in his work from the beginning: a "gracious" or amiable spirit and a "gritty" or abrasive one. These two elements underlie his entire output, to one degree or another, in a variety of stylistic guises, depending on the requirements of the piece itself. The essential Persichetti dictum, stated at both the beginning and the end of his *Twentieth Century Harmony*, "Any tone can succeed any other tone... depending upon the skill and the soul of the composer, might be paraphrased to describe his own output: 'Any work can succeed any other work....'"

Persichetti's wide range of expression has made it difficult for some listeners to discern a personal profile or unifying character in his music. With greater familiarity, however, a clearly recognizable personality emerges, characterized by a pervasive geniality of spirit in full control of whatever dynamic conflicts may be at work within the music. Following the lineage of Mozart and Mendelssohn, Persichetti seems to exult in the childlike joy of pure musical creativity. He is fond of pandiatonic, quartal, and polytonal harmony, lucid textures, and playful, vital rhythms. Absent are bombast, sentimentality, or Romantic self-involvement, even in works marked by agitation and conflict. Although Persichetti has often worked with large structures, he is inclined toward sparse gestures and epigrammatic forms—indeed, many of his large works are built up on diminutive concepts.

Persichetti's choral music plays an important role in his output. The *Hymns and Responses for the Church Year*, Op. 68, provide thematic source material on which Persichetti has drawn for many subsequent works. The use of self-quotation—musical inventories, cross-references, and indexes—as a compositional device suggests an archival intellectual bent consistent with the eclecticism so deeply rooted in his nature. This same attitude is reflected in the selection of texts for the *Hymns and Responses*, from the Bible through Shakespeare and Milton to Louis Untermeyer and Conrad Aiken. Persichetti's comprehensive world view is probably epitomized in *The Creation*, Op. 111, for soloists, chorus, and orchestra, which the composer regards as his *chef-d'oeuvre*. It is more than an hour in duration, and its text has more than fifty sources—mythological, scientific, poetic, and Biblical—ranging from Altai to Zuñi.

Persichetti describes himself as a Judaic-Vedic-Christian, for whom all religious sources are suitable for musical interpretation. Yet when he is composing a work with particular sectarian associations, he totally assumes that spiritual outlook. His *Mass*, Op. 84, composed in 1960 for the Collegiate Chorale, may be viewed in this light. In many ways it is an orthodox cappella Mass, its Renaissance heritage reflected in its use of a

Gregorian chant as the unifying theme, and in its reliance on imitative counterpoint as its chief developmental technique. The Phrygian implications of the Gregorian theme give the work a generally dark color and the extensive use of quartal harmony produces a coolness of mood. A general tone of detached introspection is maintained until the final *Agnus Dei*, an ardent plea for peace.

The terse economy of means characteristic of haiku is compatible with Persichetti's aesthetic. He was moved to compose his *Winter Cantata*, Op. 97, in 1964 after his daughter gave him a collection of haiku, *A Net of Fireflies*. (This collection also provided the words for his song cycle *A Net of Fireflies*, Op. 115.) *Winter Cantata* is scored for women's chorus, flute, and marimba and consists of twelve short movements. Without any overt musical references, the work is Japanese in spirit, largely as a result of its own delicate, highly concentrated gestures. The coolness of the flute and the brittleness of the marimba evoke the winter moods and images of the poems. The main unifying musical motifs are a chord based on the first five steps of the Phrygian mode, which appears at the outset of the work, and a minor-seventh arpeggiation, which increases in importance as the work proceeds. There are also subtle motivic links that connect each movement to the next. Within the overall unity of mood and subject matter there is great contrast and variety in gesture and articulation. The Epilogue, a compositional tour de force characteristic of Persichetti, consists of word groups and associated musical motifs drawn in sequence from all the preceding movements and woven into a coherent poetic and musical entity, an appropriate "index" to the entire work.

Persichetti composed *Love*, a setting for women's voices of a portion of the Book of Corinthians, as a surprise for his wife Dorothea in celebration of their thirtieth wedding anniversary on June 3, 1971. On that day he presented her with the score and with a recording that had been prepared for the occasion under the direction of Tamara Brooks, who shares the work's dedication. An interesting musical feature of this short piece is the use of the tritone—traditionally associated with discord and discontent—as a basic concord or tonic structure.

WALTER SIMMONS is a musicologist and critic who specializes in contemporary music. He is a contributor to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and many other publications, director of music projects for Educational Audio Visual, Inc., and a faculty member of the Thomas J. Watson Research Center (IBM)

Winter Cantata (Cantata No.2)

(Text Material from *NET OF FIREFLIES*, translated by Harold Stewart, reprinted by special permission from the Charles E. Tuttle Co, Inc. of Rutland, Vermont, and Tokyo, Japan.)

1 A Copper Pheasant

A copper pheasant wakes with shrill-edged cry:
The silver crescent cuts the chilly sky.

Kikaku

2 Winter's First Drizzle

Winter's first drizzle falls,
The air is raw,
That shivering monkey needs a cape of straw.

Bashô

3 Winter Seclusion

Winter seclusion:
on the window pane,
The silver fern of frost has grown again

Hô-ô

4 The Woodcutter

Within the wintry grove,
my axe-head fell
And bit the bark how
startling was its smell!

Buson

5 Gentlest Fall of Snow

Ah! the first,
the gentlest fall of snow:
Enough to make the jonquil leaves bend low.

Bashô

6 One Umbrella

One umbrella,
as snowy dusk draws on,
Has come;
one umbrella has come,
and passes by;
and now is gone

Yaha

7 Of Crimson Ice

The rime has frozen overnight
to gems of crimson ice along the buckwheat stems.

Rankô

8 The Branch is Black

The branch is black and bare again;
a crow shook down its coverlet of powdered snow.

Hô-ô

9 Fallen Leaves

The winter's fitful gusts, as they expire,

Bring enough fallen leaves to build a fire.

Ryôkon

10 So Deep

So deep, the heavy snow since yesterday,

Its drifts remain

Sweep, sweep as you may.

Lzembô

11 The Wind's Whetstone

Through jagged cedars rips the winter blast,

honed cragged ledges as it passed.

Bashô

12 Epilogue

A copper pheasant...

winter's drizzle falls...

seclusion...

within the wintry grove...

Ah! the first, the gentlest fall of snow...

one umbrella...

the rime has frozen...

a crow shook down its coverlet to build a fire ...

so deep...

through jagged cedars...

as it passed.

Misc.

Mass

13 Kyrie

Kyrie eleison

Christe eleison.

Kyrie eleison

14 Gloria

Gloria in excelsis Deo,

Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.

Laudamus te.

Benedicimus te.

Adoramus te. Glorificamus te.

Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam

Domine Deus.

Rex coelestis,

Deus Pater omnipotens.

Domine Fili unigenite

Jesu Christe.
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.
Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram.
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.
Quoniam tu solus sanctus
Tuo solus Dominus
Tu solus Altissimus, Jesu Christe.
Cum Sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

15 Credo

Credo in unum Deum,
Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae,
visibilium omnium et invisibilium.
Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum Filium Dei
unigenitum et ex
Patre natum ante omnia saecula, Deum de Deo
lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero.
Genitum, non factum,
consubstantialem Patri: per quem omnia facta sunt.
Qui propter nos homines,
et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis.
Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine:
Et homo factus est.
Crucifixus etiam pro nobis:
sub Pontio Pilato passus, et sepultus est.
Et resurrexit tertia die secundum Scripturas et ascendit, in caelum:
sedet ad dexteram Patris,
Et iterum
venturus est cum gloria judicare vivos et mortuos:
cujus regni non erit finis.
Et in Spiritum Sanctum, Dominum, et vivificantem:
qui ex Patre Filioque procedit
Qui cum Patre et Filis simul adoratur,
et conglorificatur:
qui locutus est per Prophetas.
Et unam, sanctam, catholicam, et apostolicam Ecclesiam.
Confiteor unum baptisma in remissionem peccatorum.
Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum.
Et vitam venturi saeculi.
Amen.

16 Sanctus

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,
Dominus Deus Sabaoth
Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.

Hosanna, in excelsis
Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.
Hosanna in excelsis

17 Agnus Dei

Agnus Dei,
qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei,
qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei,
qui tollis peccata mundi,
dona nobis pacem

18 LOVE

Love,
love is patient,
love is kind,
love is not boastful;
love is not arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way.

Love is not irritable, resentful;
it does not rejoice at wrong,
but love rejoices in the right.

Love bears all things,
love believes,
love hopes,
love endures all things.

Love never ends.

(from *I Corinthians: 13,4-8*)

Vincent Persichetti, Tamara Brooks

Photo: K. M. Carpenter

MENDELSSOHN CLUB OF PHILADELPHIA has been a major choral force since 1874. Among its premieres have been the first American performance of Mahler's *Symphony No. 8* and Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 13*. In 1980, as part of its continuing commitment to the music of the twentieth century, Mendelssohn Club presented a full concert of the works of Vincent Persichetti in honor of the composer's 65th birthday. Recordings with The Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy have included

Mendelssohn's *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*, Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* and Holst's *The Planets*. In addition to its own regular concert series, Mendelssohn Club has performed with the Opera Orchestra of New York, The Philadelphia Orchestra and the Atlanta and Pittsburgh symphonies.

TAMARA BROOKS, Music Director of Mendelssohn Club, is also founder and Music Director of Sequenza, a professional chamber ensemble, and conductor of the orchestra of The New School of Music. A champion of contemporary music, Brooks has been active in the commissioning and performance of choral and orchestral works of this century. She has given concerts in the United States and Europe, and her performances have been recorded and broadcast by British, Cypriot, Dutch, French, Greek, and American national radio and television stations.

EDWARD A. SCHULTZ, flutist, is an active recitalist and performer of chamber music in the Philadelphia area. He is also principal flutist of the Pennsylvania Orchestra and a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music.

JAMES EARL BARNES is a freelance percussionist in both New York and Philadelphia. He is founder of the Recitals of Contemporary American Composers series in White Plains, New York and is currently a member of the faculty at Philadelphia's New School of Music.

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WINTER CANTATA (Cantata No.2), Op. 97 for Women's Chorus, Flute, and Marimba
Soloists: James Earl Barnes, marimba; Edward A. Schultz, flute (publ. Elkan-Vogel)

- 1 Copper Pheasant (1:30)
- 2 Winter's First Drizzle (1:39)
- 3 Winter Seclusion (1:38)
- 4 The Woodcutter (1:15)
- 5 Gentlest Fall of Snow (1:04)
- 6 One Umbrella (1:10)
- 7 Of Crimson Ice (2:21)
- 8 The Branch Is Black (1:16)
- 9 Fallen Leaves (1:19)
- 10 So Deep (2:03)

11 The Wind's Whetstone (1:48)

12 Epilogue (1:57)

MASS, Op. 84, for Mixed Chorus (publ. Elkan-Vogel)

13 Kyrie (1:56)

14 Gloria (3:44)

15 Credo (6:27)

16 Sanctus (2:26)

17 Agnus Dei (3:01)

18 LOVE for Women's Chorus (2:58) (publ. Elkan-Vogel)

The Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia Tamara Brooks, conducting

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Bagatelles, Op 87. *O Cool Is the Valley*, Op 118 *Parable IX*, Op 121 Serenade No 1, Op 1 *So Pure the Star*, Op 91 *Turn Not Thy Face*, Op. 105 University of Kansas Symphonic Band, Foster conducting Golden Crest ATH-5055.

Concerto for Piano, Four Hands, Op. 56. Vincent and Dorothea Persichetti, piano CBS ML-4989.

Concerto for Piano, Four Hands, Op 56. Piano Sonata No. 9, Op 58. Sonata for Two Pianos, Op 13. Alexander Bakhchiev and Elena Sorokina, pianos Melodiya C10-16133-4.

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