

**RICCARDO MUTI
CHARLES DUTOIT
THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA
VINCENT PERSICHETTI**

New World Records 80370

**Symphony for Strings
Piano Concerto**

ROBERT TAUB, piano

During the last four decades of his life, the name of Vincent Persichetti came to signify musicianship of a comprehensiveness virtually unmatched among American composers. Today his influence continues, reaching young pianists nurtured on his Sonatinas and *Little Piano Book*, school musicians who first experience serious contemporary music through his works for band, church choirs who turn to his *Hymns and Responses for the Church Year* as an inexhaustible resource, young composers who find his classic textbook *Twentieth Century Harmony* an indispensable tool, and soloists and conductors for whom his sonatas, concertos, and symphonies stand among the masterworks of American music. Throughout his life Persichetti encouraged healthy, creative participation in music at all levels of sophistication, while shunning dogmas that advocate one compositional approach at the expense of others.

Persichetti was born in Philadelphia in 1915, and remained a lifelong resident of that city. At the age of five, he learned to play the piano, organ, and double bass at the Combs Conservatory. He also studied theory and composition under Russell King Miller, who became his most influential teacher. Immersing himself in music while in his teens, Persichetti memorized the scores to be performed weekly by the Philadelphia Orchestra and then attended the concerts to compare his mental realizations with the actual sounds. Composition was an integral part of his study from the start, as was exposure to other arts. Persichetti attended art school during his adolescence, and sculpture continued to be an important creative outlet for him until his death in 1987.

Upon graduating from the Combs Conservatory with a Bachelor of Music degree in 1936, Persichetti became head of its theory and composition department. From 1932 to 1948 he served as organist and choirmaster at Philadelphia's Arch Street Presbyterian Church. In 1941 he earned a Master of Music degree from the Philadelphia Conservatory, which then appointed him to head its theory and composition department. His doctorate followed four years later and then, in 1947, William Schuman invited him to join the Juilliard faculty as well. Persichetti was appointed chairman of the Juilliard composition department in 1963, and of the Literature and Materials department in 1970, and commuted regularly between Philadelphia and New York.

During his active teaching career Persichetti continued to compose prodigiously, producing more than 160 works. Through his compositions-and through his writings and lectures-Persichetti eloquently advocated the creation of a fluent working vocabulary, or "common practice," capable of a rich spectrum of expression, based on the wealth of materials and techniques that appeared during the twentieth century. His own music extends over a broad stylistic range-rooted in the languages of Stravinsky, Hindemith, Bartok, and Copland-from extreme diatonic simplicity to complex, contrapuntal atonality. However, Persichetti's stylistic evolution does not follow a conventional chronological sequence, from simplicity to complexity. Rather, the composer identified two temperamental elements

present in his work from the beginning: a "gracious," amiable spirit and a "gritty," abrasive one. These two elements underlie his entire output, to one degree or another, in various manifestations.

Persichetti's stylistic breadth has prevented some casual listeners from recognizing a personal profile or unifying character in his music, leading them to construe it as a mere display of virtuoso craftsmanship. With greater familiarity, however, a distinctive personality emerges, characterized by an almost childlike sense of mischief and a pervasive geniality of spirit in full control of whatever dynamic conflicts may be at work within the music. His works reveal a propensity for pandiatonic, quartal, and polytonal harmony, lucid contrapuntal textures, and lively, syncopated rhythms in duple meter. Although he often worked with large structures, Persichetti was inclined toward sparse gestures and epigrammatic forms—indeed, many of his large works are elaborate integrations of diminutive elements.

Both the Symphony No. 5 (*Symphony for Strings*), Op. 61, and the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 90, are major works from the most fertile, representative period of Persichetti's compositional career. Each emphasizes the "gritty" aspect of the composer's creative personality, displaying considerable structural complexity, and attenuated sense of tonality, and an astringent harmonic vocabulary.

The *Symphony for Strings*, the fifth of Persichetti's nine symphonies, was composed in 1953 on commission from the Louisville Orchestra, which introduced it the following year under the direction of Robert Whitney. Similar in structure to others of the composer's most significant works from the 1950s, e.g., the Concerto for Piano, Four Hands, Op. 56, the Quintet for Piano and Strings, Op. 66, and the Piano Sonata No. 10, Op. 67, the symphony is in one continuous, highly concentrated multi-sectional movement based entirely on the elaborate theme introduced at the outset by the violas. This fifteen-measure theme, which contains all twelve chromatic notes within the first five bars, sets a severe tone and then builds to a level of emotional duress uncharacteristic of the composer. As the work unfolds, the enormous potential of this theme is explored through a series of linked episodes contrasting in tempo and character, but all intricately related to the opening theme. Despite its abstract design and harsh harmonic language, the symphony reveals moments of tenderness and warmth, and seems to exude a sense of exultation in the joy of pure creativity.

The Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 90, was completed in 1962 and first performed two years later in Hanover, New Hampshire, by pianist Anthony di Bonaventura with an orchestra from Dartmouth College conducted by Mario di Bonaventura. Persichetti himself was a virtuoso pianist, and his twelve sonatas, six sonatinas, two concertos, a concertino, and numerous other works reveal a thorough mastery of twentieth-century keyboard technique. The concerto's musical language is similar to that found in the fifth symphony, though the two works are entirely different in structure, gesture, and attitude. In contrast to the intense concentration of the symphony, the concerto is an expansive, three-movement work that wholeheartedly embraces the traditional romantic virtuoso genre, with the soloist asserting a heroic stance in opposition to the orchestra, dazzling with pyrotechnics and cajoling with warm lyricism. However, the hearty bravura manner disguises a formal structure no less logical and unified than the outwardly more economical symphony.

The work is almost entirely derived from the intervallic implications of the stentorian five-note motto proclaimed at the opening by the horns. The sprawling first movement develops the thematic material in a loose, dramatic, fantasy-like manner that allows for leisurely excursions through a variety of moods. The second movement provides a wistful lyrical interlude. The vigorous final movement is probably the most immediately accessible movement of the concerto, and a fine example of Persichetti's distinctive use of duple meter. A tour-de-force of rhythmic agility, the movement accumulates

tremendous energy, recalling material from the preceding movements before coming to a brilliant conclusion.

—Walter Simmons

Walter Simmons *writes regularly for Fanfare magazine, is a contributor to The New Grove Dictionaries of Music and is a recipient of the ASCAP/Deems Taylor Award for music criticism.*

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Bagatelles; O Cool is the Valley; Parable IX; Serenade No. 1; So Pure the Star; Turn Not Thy Face. University of Kansas Symphonic Band, Robert Foster conducting. Golden Crest ATH-5055.

Harmonium; Piano Quintet. Darleen Kliever, soprano; New Art String Quartet; Lois McLeod, Vincent Persichetti, pianists. Arizona State University JMP-102679.

Love; Mass; Winter Cantata. Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, Tamara Brooks conducting. New World 80316.

Serenade No. 7; Piano Sonatas Nos. 10 and 11. Ellen Burmeister, pianist. Owl 29.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Patterson, Donald L. and Janet L. *Vincent Persichetti: A Bio-Bibliography.* Westport, Conn. Greenwood Press, 1988.

Shackelford, Rudy. "Conversation with Vincent Persichetti." *Perspectives of New Music*, 1981-2, pp. 104-34.

Simmons, Walter. "Vincent Persichetti." In *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds. London and New York: Macmillan, 1986.

Riccardo Muti became the Philadelphia Orchestra's music director in 1980, after serving as principal guest conductor since 1977. He has been music director of Milan's La Scala opera house since 1986. Born in Naples in 1941, Muti has been principal conductor and music director of the Maggio Musicale in Florence and of London's Philharmonia Orchestra. He is a regular guest conductor with the Berlin Philharmonic, the Vienna Philharmonic, and the Salzburg Festival, and conducts new opera productions in Munich, Vienna, and London, as well as at La Scala.

Robert Taub has performed throughout Europe, the United States, the Far East and Latin America, playing music from the Classical era to the present day. He has collaborated with several contemporary American composers to create their music. He is the winner of major international prizes, including the 1981 Peabody-Mason Award of Boston. His acclaimed recordings feature music of Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt, Scriabin, and Babbitt.

Charles Dutoit, music director of the Orchestre Symphonique de Montreal since 1977, was born in Lausanne, Switzerland. Formerly music director of the Bern Symphony, the Goteborg Symphony and the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico, he has conducted more than 150 orchestras throughout the world, including those of Boston, New York, Chicago, and Berlin, as well as at Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera. Dutoit is also artistic director and principal conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra's summer concert series.

The Philadelphia Orchestra founded in 1900, has had an unbroken chain of distinguished musical leadership, including Leopold Stokowski, Eugene Ormandy (an unprecedented 44-year tenure), and, currently, Riccardo Muti. One of the world's most-traveled symphony orchestras, it was the first to visit

The People's Republic of China in 1973, and made major tours of South America in 1988 and Japan in 1989. The Philadelphia Orchestra was the first orchestra to make electrical recordings, in 1925, and the first to experiment with long-playing discs, in 1931. Muti and the orchestra currently record for the Angel/EMI and Philips Classic labels.

Vincent Persichetti

1- Symphony No. 5
(Symphony for Strings) (19:19)
(in one movement)
Riccardo Muti, conductor

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra
2- I. Allegro non troppo (14:22)
3- II. Andante sostenuto (8:08)
4- III. Allegro vivace (9:14)
Robert Taub, piano
Charles Dutoit, conductor
The Philadelphia Orchestra

Producer: Elizabeth Ostrow

Engineer: George Blood

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