

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS OF VINCENT
PERSICHETTI: A RECORDING DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Musical Arts, 2004

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This recording dissertation aims to expose the twelve piano sonatas of Vincent Ludwig Persichetti (1915-1987) which have never been recorded as a complete set.

Vincent Persichetti is considered as one of the America's most influential and prolific composers of the twentieth-century. He was admired not only as a virtuoso pianist, composer, and conductor, but also as a lucid theorist-teacher with nearly encyclopedic knowledge of music by other composers. His piano compositions--including two solo concertos, twelve sonatas, three volumes of *Poems*, six sonatinas, etudes, and works for piano four-hand and duo pianos as well as other smaller solo piano works--were written throughout his fifty-eight years of productive compositional career and are representative of Persichetti's varied styles. His piano sonatas, in particular, stand out as the most significant among his piano compositions; and as a set, they provide

a cross section of his eclectic language, exhibiting his firm grasp of keyboard technique as well as his thorough knowledge of traditional and twentieth-century compositional styles. Unfortunately, a large portion of his solo piano music has never been recorded, and many of the works that have been recorded are not available today. As for the twelve sonatas, it has never been recorded as a set, and only the *Third Piano Sonata* is available on compact disc. It is ironic that his works for piano, the instrument he showed most affinity to, have not received the due recognition in today's performing scenes except for a few exceptions of two-piano works and some of the smaller works such as the *Poems* and etudes. It is strongly hoped that the recording of the twelve piano sonatas will heighten the public awareness of the work of this important American composer and to inspire more pianists to incorporate his music into their repertoire.

In preparation for the recording, general research on his biography and sampling of recordings available of the composer's works for both piano and other instruments were done in order to better understand his compositional style and the significance of the piano sonatas, after which the written document was prepared to accompany this recording dissertation.

The written document includes an introductory chapter with pertinent biographical information and background of his compositional philosophy, as well as the discussion of the sonatas. The sonatas are discussed individually except for instances where it is more suitable to be discussed in groups, highlighting the stylistic traits, placing them in the context of his life when appropriate, and searching for the common threads amongst the seemingly bewildering assortment of styles. The chapter entitled *Observations Through Performance* includes a commentary based on practical observations taken during the

process of learning and performing the sonatas. The appendix lists the piano sonatas with movement titles, year of composition, and premiere information.

The twelve sonatas were recorded in four recording sessions of three hours each, scheduled approximately a month apart. The ordering and pairing of the sonatas for the recording sessions were decided with careful consideration to the length, difficulty, and physical and mental stamina required for each sonatas to ensure efficient use of time. For the finished CDs, the sonatas are presented according to the chronological order of composition.

The recording took place at the Joseph and Alma Gildenhorn Recital Hall at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, College Park during the following dates: December 22, 2003, January 24, 2004, March 4, 2004, and March 25, 2004.

Antonino Maria Paolo D'Urzo, of the Opusrite[™] Audio Productions was engaged for the producing, recording and editing of this dissertation recording.

THE COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS OF VINCENT PERSICHETTI:
A RECORDING DISSERTATION

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
2004

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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Antonino D'Urzo, who has given me, in addition to his professional assistance, constant support and friendship throughout the years of preparation of this recording project.

I also wish to thank Dr. Peter Beicken and Dr. Suzanne Beicken for their warm encouragement and helpful advice.

Most of all, I thank my advisor, Professor Santiago Rodriguez, for his generous assistance and invariable support. He has been a consistent source of inspiration for me.

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Introduction

There are few American composers of the twentieth-century whose contributions to musical life can equal that of Vincent Ludwig Persichetti (1915-1987).¹ For many, his name is associated with the comprehensive musicianship one would only dream of having. For him, this came naturally but certainly not without hard work, by immersing himself in all aspects of music from early on in his life. His formative years were spent in studying counterpoint, score reading, transposition, composition, lessons in piano, organ and double bass. In addition, he attended the Philadelphia Orchestra concerts weekly, always prepared by memorizing scores of the program ahead of time. As a composer, he wrote more than 160 works spanning virtually every medium and genre imaginable during his 58 years of productive compositional career. Considered a child prodigy, his gift as a virtuoso pianist /organist and unmatched skills in improvising and sight reading served him well already at the age of eleven when he was a seasoned professional performing musician. His teachers include such notables as Olga Samaroff Stokowski for piano at the Philadelphia Conservatory and Fritz Reiner for conducting at the Curtis Institute.

Fueling this fortunate musical upbringing was his insatiable curiosity about music which is described by William Schuman as follows:

¹ His father, Vincent Roger Persichetti came to the United States at age ten from Abruzzi region of Italy. His mother, Martha Buch was only an infant when she came from Bonn, Germany.

this curiosity has led him to play and study more music than one could imagine possible for any single person to encompass. And further, his curiosity has never been limited to a particular performing medium. In contemporary music, for example, he has played virtually the entire 20th-century literature of chamber music and of piano with various solo instruments and voice. His score reading ability has enabled him to play the most complicated orchestral compositions at the keyboard. His interest in the standard repertory and in the music of the earlier periods has always been as strong as his feeling for contemporary music. In short, there is no music he can resist.²

His nearly encyclopedic working knowledge of compositions by other composers is notorious: Dorothea (Vincent's wife, a fine pianist in her own right) recalls her husband "having ears like 'fly paper,' once he heard something it would stick."³ Also, his avoidance of any kind of musical partisanship is evident as documented in many interviews as well as in his treatise, *Twentieth-Century Harmony*. The eclectic nature of his works have encouraged comparison to numerous composers including Copland, Bartók, Hindemith, Harris, William Schuman, as well as Clementi. Persichetti himself mentions Russel King Miller as the most important influence on his musical development but states: "I credit no one in particular as my master in the craft of composition, with two quixotic exceptions: Haydn and [Robert] Schumann."⁴ Combined with his tireless enthusiasm for all things musical, his sunny, unassuming disposition made him a natural teacher, later to

² William Schuman, "The Complete Musician: Vincent Persichetti, and *Twentieth-Century Harmony*," *Musical Quarterly* July 1961: 380.

³ Donald Patterson, Janet L. Patterson, *Vincent Persichetti: a Bio-Bibliography* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988) 20.

⁴ Rudy Shackelford, "Conversation with Vincent Persichetti," *Perspectives of New Music* Spring/Summer 1982: 109.

become one of the most influential and popular theorist-teachers in recent history.

In view of Persichetti's prodigious musical career, it is hard to imagine his life outside of music. But he embraced life in all its aspects, consistent with his curiosity and openness in music. The following quote from an interview dating from 1982 (at age 67) is memorable for its childlike perspective and gregarious sense of life:

I've not yet decided what I'll do with my life. Perhaps I will concertize as a pianist. . . . Then again I'd love to have a larger herb farm, if it weren't for my keen interest in sailing. I know I'd like the life of the Main lobster fisherman, but my sculpting would keep me on solid ground. I'm too busy with composing to consider what my life's work will be. I suppose, though, at some point, I should decide to work for a living.⁵

Who can blame him then, for the eclecticism of his work? Following is his view on the subject: "while eclecticism is indisputably a characteristic of my creative approach, it's one that more often than not has been turned to a creative advantage—a reality that goes very much against the grain of the charge."⁶

Although piano was not the only instrument he played, it is the instrument he showed most affinity to and came back to compose for time and again throughout his life. His piano compositions—including two solo concertos, the twelve sonatas that are the focus of this project, three volumes of poems, six sonatinas, serenades, a variation, toccatinas, works for four-hand and duo pianos,

⁵ Shackelford 111.

⁶ Shackelford 109.

etudes, as well as other smaller works—is a fine representation of Persichetti’s varied compositional style. The twelve sonatas, in particular, stand out as most significant among his piano compositions. They attest to the composer’s mastery of the keyboard technique, and is a complete body of literature in itself exhibiting his gamut of compositional techniques and styles with the wide range of moods—from lyrical and light-hearted to the most serious which he himself calls “grazioso and grit.” These two temperamental elements, much like in the music of Robert Schumann, are present in all of the sonatas to varying degrees. Aside from this trait, there is no “stylistic common denominator”⁷ in his music nor is it possible to categorize it into customary divisions of “periods” or to make a generalization about his stylistic development. Nonetheless, beyond the initial stage of getting acquainted with his varied musical language, greater familiarity with the sonatas as a whole rewards the listener as well as the performer with his gift for balanced structure, original tone color, rhythmic vitality combined with ingenious yet idiomatic writing, general good humor, and above all sincerity of his music which is never derived for the sake of compositional procedures. Persichetti himself was adamant about this stance: “I can find validity in my music only when it is right for me. If I don’t speak as a human to the listener, I do not have the right to take the time of the audience.”⁸ This being the premise, he judiciously deleted many works from his oeuvre especially during the period between 1929 and 1939 which

⁷ David Ewen, *American Composers: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1982) 502.

⁸ Ewen 506.

he calls his “silent decade” when he was still experimenting to find his own voice. The sonatas, “viewed in perspective, do reveal the portrait of a composer coming to grips with the complexities and enigmas of his times”⁹ as well as perhaps of his own personality.

⁹ Shackelford 111.

Discussion of the Sonatas

One of the earliest surviving piano compositions along with the *Serenade No. 2*, Op. 2 from 1929 is the *First Piano Sonata*, Op. 3 which marked the end of Persichetti's "silent decade" in 1939. He was already the head of the composition department at Combs College in Philadelphia and was a student of Olga Samaroff at the Philadelphia Conservatory. This four movement sonata was initially entitled the *Sonata in E minor*. His musical syntax, in general, is tonal with definite key areas, and this sonata is no exception. But the themes which strongly suggest twelve-tone procedures may have inspired the decision to retract the original title. Detailed discussion of this sonata is worthwhile since many of Persichetti's mature compositional traits are already apparent. Immediately from the introduction of the first movement, one of the hallmarks of his piano writing is present: his sensitivity to the overtone series. This trait can be seen in a multitude of ways throughout his piano compositions: sometimes it is the use of sostenuto pedal which brings out certain partials of the following passages; and other times, it is apparent in the choice of voicing of the chords, especially in *ff* passages. Here, four keys are depressed silently and held up by the sostenuto pedal while the introduction unfolds so that pitches e, f, and g will resonate. An angular, chromatic first theme full of syncopation—part of his "grit" personality—is framed in a clear phrase structure which reveals the composer's neo-classical inclinations. A lyrical second theme, *grazioso*, supplies the contrast and leads into the development which begins with a section that emphasizes the imitative nature of the movement. In the recapitulation, the second theme is transformed in

character by the octave doubling in *meno mosso* to become the climactic “orchestral tutti,” then winds down on a pedal point with an interesting use of sostenuto pedal to lead in to the brilliant coda.

The second movement, *Adagio*, is one of the most substantial of its kind among the sonatas. Intimate and sinuous theme in 4/4 time, whose resonant quality is typical of Persichetti’s lyrical writing, is accompanied by the slowly rocking left hand figure in 12/8. Its long expressive melody line in the high register can easily be imagined on a muted violin, but is exquisite on the piano. Persichetti’s sense of balance and breadth of technique is evident in a number of instances: subtle metric shifting of (quarter, eighth) to (eighth rest, eighth, quarter) in the accompaniment figure which changes the flow in the brief second theme area; and the use of the extreme low register for contrast in the beginning of the development which sets the stage for the following contrapuntal writing. Here again, the climax is a restatement of the main theme, now marked *ff* and *ardente*—the *tutti* effect common with many of his climactic moments and the quality that contributes to the classification of his music being, at times, Romantic in nature.

The movement is connected to the scherzo with trio by the indication *attacca*. This playful third movement reflects a typical Classical scherzo in its texture and form with a strongly bitonal twist, and it provides the needed relief from the weightiness of the surrounding movements.

The last movement, marked *Passacaglia* utilizes the ground with expressive chromaticism akin to that of the first two movements. Its flexible rhythm which combines triplets, eighths, dotted eighths, and sixteenths and its

low register hints at an improvised jazz double bass line. The range of emotions traversed, almost methodically, in this highly concentrated movement is achieved by change of texture and rhythm as well as tempo within a strongly motivic syntax. The eighth statement of the theme uncovers the spiritual lineage of the passacaglia theme: the quote of *la folia* provides the plateau in the general build-up very much in similar fashion to the treatment in the *Corelli Variations* by Sergei Rachmaninoff, who apparently had left a strong impression on the young composer. The sonata concludes with an emphatic statement of the theme pitting the original passacaglia against the bravura counter-subject which utilizes the rhythmic motive of an eighth followed by two sixteenths which in turn grew out of the initial triplets of the theme. The very last five measures recall the opening introduction of the first movement, now ascending, and supply a sense of unity and completion. Although the sonata does exhibit the “over exuberance and chromaticism”¹⁰ (in his own words) of adolescence and may not be the most representative of his mature personal style, it is a significant and effective work worthy of attention.

The *Second Piano Sonata*, Op. 6 (1939) was the first work Dorothea Flanagan (who became Vincent’s wife in 1941) premiered by the composer. In contrast to the strongly contrapuntal and often thick textures of the *First Piano Sonata* from the same year, this sonata’s simple lyricism in a transparent texture highlights the characteristics of the Neo-Classical idiom with its structural clarity,

¹⁰ Shackelford 111.

metrical rhythms, and distinct sense of tonality. At the same time, an Impressionistic influence is present in the choice of the pentatonic scale and by the use of *planing* technique (*parallelism*). The use of dance like material of Latin American flavor in the last movement is notable: it adds a distinctively American tone in the sense of a “melting pot”. All four movements are Classically proportioned, and the whole sonata lasts only eleven minutes. But the following quote by Dorothea (in reference to the *Serenade No. 7*, Op. 55) is apropos here and may prevent a misconception by a casual observer: “the little works are distillation of a musical expression that has undergone clarification to the point of great simplicity....”¹¹

The *Third Piano Sonata*, Op. 22 is by far the most popular of his piano works from the onset of its composition in 1943. It is also one of his seven abstract instrumental works that have been choreographed.¹² The work helped the career of this young composer in many ways: it was his very first composition to be premiered locally in Philadelphia (1943); and it was the second published work after receiving first prize at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Festival.¹³ Persichetti himself describes this broadly conceived sonata as follows: the sonata is “one of two ‘war pieces’; the other is the *Third Symphony* of 1946. The first movement

¹¹ Maurice Hinson, “The Solo Piano Works of Vincent Persichetti,” *The American Music Teacher* 15.5 (1966): 39.

¹² His daughter Lauren was a choreographer and leading danseuse in the James Cunningham Troup.

¹³ The first published work was his transcription of Organ Prelude and Fugue in A minor by Brahms which was an improvised byproduct at a lesson with Olga Samaroff when he was not prepared.

echoes the frightening implications of a war declaration; the second is a quiet episode of introspection during the war; and the third, a psalm of prayer and peace.”¹⁴ His decision to do away with conventional Italian tempo markings may indicate his patriotic state of mind.

The sonata is full of sections where long stretches of chordal progressions visually emphasize the vertical procedures (example 1); and this must have contributed to how some critics construed his music as being predominantly homophonic, “textually-conceived music rather than being based on the contrapuntal interplay of lines.”¹⁵ But a closer study reveals that the opposite is true: it is difficult to find any part in his music that is devoid of acute polyphonic and contrapuntal awareness.

Example 1



This is understandable in light of the fact that Persichetti had an “overdose of counterpoint”¹⁶ during his “silent decade” directed by Russel Kind Miller whom

¹⁴ Shackelford 111.

¹⁵ Joseph Michlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) 577.

¹⁶ Shackelford 118.

the composer credits as the most influential in his musical development. The chorale setting of the second movement theme as *The Life in Christ* in his last composition *Hymns and Responses for the Church Year, Vol. 2, Op. 166* (1987) attests to this point. Persichetti himself clarified this point as follows: “my harmony is counterpoint, and my counterpoint harmony.”¹⁷

The *Fourth Piano Sonata*, Op. 36 (1949) in three movements stand out as one of the weightiest sonatas among the twelve. In terms of the scope and length as well as in difficulty performing, the work can rub shoulders with his tenth and eleventh sonatas. The opening introduction with full chords and wide leaps immediately sets the serious tone and supplies the melodic motive for the following prelude and fugue. Unity and variety among the three sections is achieved by thematic transformation of the opening motive in the Berlioz-Liszt tradition. His thorough knowledge of the instrument is evident from the virtuoso writing utilizing the full range of the keyboard as well as from judicious pedal markings that can come only from a seasoned performer. The fugue is concise but technically challenging to carry out the tonal connection of the subject that “spans three octaves and moves like an octopus”¹⁸ in Persichetti’s own description (example 2).

Example 2



¹⁷ Shackelford 118.

¹⁸ Shackelford 118.

The second movement starts with an introduction akin to the prelude section of the first movement. It soon turns into a buoyant rondo in mostly 6/8 meter with a Latin American flavor and frequent shifting of emphasis within the meter. The plaintive introduction to the last movement is reminiscent of the music of Bartók, and it functions as a brief slow movement. The same thematic material is used in the following section marked *briskly*, but it is transformed in character to a point that it is hardly recognizable upon casual listening. Frequent meter changes and the improvisatory and playful “stop and go” at a fast pace makes this finale an athletic feat for the performer.

The *Fifth Piano Sonata*, Op. 37 (1949) marks the first of the five sonatas Persichetti wrote in close succession during the short span of years between 1949 and 1952. They are characterized by lean textures and modest scope, and are noticeably “lightweight” compared to the ambitious casting of his third and fourth sonatas. Persichetti himself calls the sonatas nos. 5, 7, and 8 “baby sonatas” and no. 6 a “Viennese bouquet.”¹⁹ The *Ninth Piano Sonata*, however, may need to be discussed in a separate category since it is more substantial if not in length but in the depths of thematic materials. In addition, with the ninth, Persichetti returns to the one continuous movement structure which he has not done for piano since the experimental sonata inspired by Liszt’s B minor sonata during the “silent decade” and the large *Prometheus* from the 1940’s, both of which he no longer lists among his “approved” oeuvre.

¹⁹ Shackelford 111.

The fourth and the fifth sonatas are the only two compositions Persichetti composed in 1949; while the sixth, seventh, and eighth are parts of eleven compositions (of which six are for solo piano) from the following year. With the exception of the *Variations for an Album* Op. 32 (1947), all the solo piano works that came prior to 1949 were premiered by Vincent or Dorothea. But from the *Fifth Piano Sonata*, all the premieres except for the *Eleventh Piano Sonata* were done by other pianists. It is possible to conjecture a practical stance on Persichetti's part to balance accessibility with expression. He may also have attained the level of maturity where he was content with refined simplicity, and it, in turn, facilitated the process of having his works premiered by other pianists which was more fitting for his status as an established composer. 1949 is also the year his life-long interest in mirror writing begins to be reflected in his compositions. In the *Fifth Piano Sonata* (m. 56, third movement), there is an example of a passage akin to his later "mirror" writing: the passages in the hands are in exact reflection of each other, but in this case, only intervallically as an inversion and not an exact "mirror" in the sense of physical combination of black and white keys on the keyboard. The real "mirror" appears in the sonatas for the first time in the *Sixth Piano Sonata* (m. 34, 36, and 77, fourth movement).

An example of the use of dissonance in a non-expressive context can be seen in the outer movements of the *Fifth Piano Sonata*. In the disarmingly simple neo-classical texture and phrasing of the first movement, motivic handling of the opening germinal idea results in a surprisingly dissonant first theme. It is a continued thematic development in the tradition of Haydn and Beethoven that

holds this movement together. His choice of developing repeated small germinal cells and resulting temporary but extended plane of dissonance reminds one of jazz improvisation. For Persichetti, “improvisations are preliminary drafts of projected works.”²⁰ This unique combination of improvisatory character and formal craftsmanship is one of the most important characteristics of Persichetti’s style. The second movement marked *tenderly* is decidedly consonant, and provides the needed contrast and repose before the last movement.

Of the two main themes of the last movement which is a modified rondo, the first one marked *brittle* features widely spaced extended chords juxtaposed against tumbling broken ninths and synthetic scales moving in either contrary or parallel motion. The theme thrives on a ferocious rhythmic gesture which is emphasized by the avoidance of the functional harmony principle of relative manipulation of tension and release. Persichetti’s sense of rhythm and balance in phrasing nonetheless gives a strong coherence, and the end result is this exhilarating theme that could only be the product of modern times. The contrasting theme in flexible meter and complicated play of syncopation could well accompany a tap dancer and contributes to the American flavor of this movement.

The same conciseness is present in the *Sixth Piano Sonata*, Op. 39 (1950). Persichetti comes back to the four movement structure which he used only in the first two sonatas. The first movement, in particular, is more conservative and

²⁰ Shackelford 125.

neutral in the choice of themes with a hint of homage to Hindemith. It is full of subtle nuance, and the breadth of expression is remarkable in this compact movement. The second movement is one of the most expressive and sincere of his slow movements and contains passages of great poignancy. With the unusual marking, *blandly*, Persichetti aims for the deflating effect with the short third movement which sets the stage for the last movement, a brilliant toccata typical of Persichetti in its virtuosity, improvisatory character, and occasional Latin American quotes.

The *Seventh Piano Sonata*, Op. 40 (1950) is perhaps the leanest in texture among the sonatas but not in terms of quality of the content. As Maurice Hinson mentions, the sonata is “more difficult technically than a quick glance would suggest”²¹ due to its distilled expression with scrutinized melodic content which requires utmost care on the part of the performer. The first movement, for example, is a Neo-Classical perfection. What appears to be two themes in close succession is a variation technique in disguise. The statement at measure nine with an added voice fourth and fifth apart in the right hand is an augmented version of the main theme with characteristic left hand accompaniment/countermelody which is to serve as developmental material as well. Themes are developed thoroughly by processes such as rhythmic augmentation, inversion, change of articulation and mood to the extent of thematic transformation. The balance between unity and variety achieved within

²¹ Hinson 39.

the brevity of a five page movement is a testimony to Persichetti's compositional prowess. A spacious slow movement marked *Andante* is perhaps better imagined on wind instruments: long melodic lines with slow note values is a challenge to execute on the piano. This is one of the diminutive examples of Persichetti's piano writing being orchestrally conceived which, as Dorothea admits in the following, sounds contradictory: "his pianism is always orchestral in concept: this is somewhat paradoxical, because the writing is extremely pianistic."²² The fleeting last movement has a character reminiscent of Carter's *Piano Sonata* (1945-46). The lightness combined with non-legato skips, and the rhythmic accuracy required to execute the syncopation and sudden meter changes, all at the fast pace, makes this movement extremely athletic for the performer.

The *Eighth Piano Sonata*, Op. 41 is similar to his fifth in its germinal motivic development and extended areas of dissonance as well as in general emotional detachment in the outer movements. In the first movement, the stuttering first theme is complimented by a smooth, veiled second theme which reminds one of slightly off-pitched school chimes. The lyrical second movement is strikingly similar to the equivalent of the fifth in terms of rhythm, opening melodic contour, mood, and even tonal center. Although the movement is not devoid of delicate beauty and there is ample evidence of fine craftsmanship, the function within the sonata is that of "cleansing the palate". The coquettish last movement has a character of its own and is a combination of his typical toccata

²² qtd. in Hinson 59.

writing full of his favorite “zigzag” melodic contour, bursts of seemingly improvisational passages, and orchestral conception.

The *Ninth Piano Sonata*, Op. 38 (1952) abounds with unique and memorable themes. It is “breezy, witty and charming,”²³ and surprisingly compact especially considering the variety of themes in a four continuous movement structure. All the hallmarks of Persichetti’s language are present compositionally as well as musically. The four movements are tied together by the use of a “fade-out” effect, and the balanced architecture of the sonata as a whole is both extremely coherent and satisfying.

Three years passed before the *Tenth Piano Sonata*, Op. 67 appeared when Persichetti was forty years of age. During the intervening years, he had composed two large important works: his *Symphony for Strings* (*Symphony No. 5*), Op. 61 and *Quintet for Piano and Strings*, Op. 66. The sonata is a “continuation of the composer’s preoccupation with the one-movement form derived from a single generating source motive”²⁴ as he did in his *Symphony No. 5* and the *Third String Quartet* (1959) as well as, only in the formal sense, the *Ninth Piano Sonata*. David Burge comments: “perhaps Persichetti felt that it was time for him to write a ‘big’ sonata after having produced several of modest size. If so, it would seem that in this instance his sense of proportion let him down.”²⁵ The sonata, indeed,

²³ David Burge, “Contemporary Piano: Persichetti’s *Fourth Sonata*,” *Contemporary Keyboard* April 1981: 48.

²⁴ Suzanne Axworthy, letter to Maurice Hinson, 22 Feb. 1965.

²⁵ David Burge, “Contemporary Piano: Persichetti’s *Eleventh Sonata*,” *Contemporary Keyboard*

is the largest of the solo piano output of Persichetti, and the seriousness of the thematic material and the overall projection indicates the composer's vision for a work of large proportions. As far as the question of whether its extended length is justified by its content is concerned, one could argue that there is a cumulative emotional effect achieved by the repeating of sections (slightly altered) much similar to the Schubertian process of rondos. It is, regardless, a tremendous challenge for the performer to project the structural balance.

The *Eleventh Piano Sonata*, Op. 101(1965) came after 10 years of silence in his piano sonata output. Persichetti seemed to have busied himself with noticeably large number of works for voice and chorus as well as continuing his series of *Serenades* for various solo and ensemble settings. His most notable compositions during the intervening years are: the *Hymns and Responses for the Church Year, Vol. I*, Op. 68, the *Symphony for Band (Symphony No. 6)*, Op. 69, the *Seventh Symphony*, Op. 80, the *Third String Quartet*, Op. 81, the *Mass for Mixed Chorus*, Op. 84, the *Bagatelles for Band*, Op. 87, the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, Op. 90, the *Stabat Mater*, Op. 92, and the *Winter Cantata*, Op. 97.

A quick glance of the first page of the *Eleventh Piano Sonata* is sufficient to notice a radical departure from his ordinary style (example 3).

Example 3

Eleventh Piano Sonata

(Risoluto – Articolato – Sostenuto – Leggero – Conclusivo)

Duration: c. 19'

VINCENT PERSICETTI
Op. 101

Risoluto (♩ = 54)

(1) ♦ = press keys silently.
(2) only the right hand chord sounds through.
(3) play grace notes rapidly before the beat.
(4) three eighth notes (not a triplet).
(5) flutter pedal until *pppp* level is reached.

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David Burge describes the sonata as follows:

this is a new kind of language for Persichetti. Until this work his music had always been relatively traditional with regard to rhythm and meter, and the rhythms are a far cry from the regular, easily perceived syncopations of his earlier music. The first measure contains four quarter notes . . . Bar lines are, obviously, serving a different kind of function here than in his earlier metered music. And the rhythms themselves are so unpredictable that little or no sense of a regular beat is ascertainable.

Sonorities are often thicker and therefore more dissonant than those previously associated with Persichetti's music. Tone clusters such as those found in the ninth measure occur in various

configurations throughout the sonata. Also, thematic material is far more elusive than in earlier sonatas, in which the composer seemed purposely to employ motivistic material of such a nature that it would be immediately perceptible. This is not the case in the *Eleventh Sonata*, in which mood and gesture often serve the function previously reserved for motivistic material. This extraordinary work is in five sections—*Risoluto*, *Articolato*, *Sostenuto*, *Leggero*, and *Conclusivo*—which flow together without a pause, giving the impression of a rather long one-movement composition.²⁶

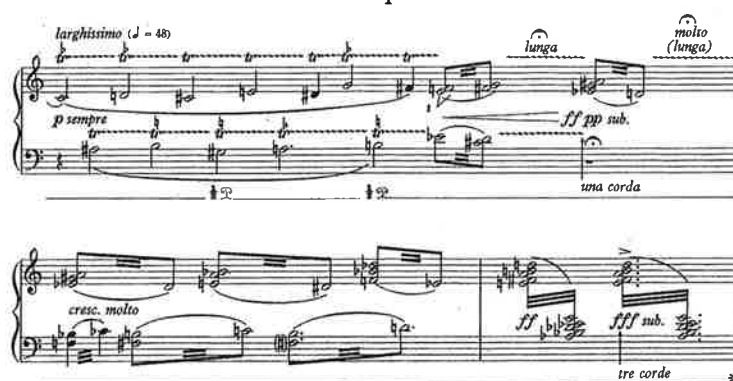
Features of the sonata in the use of the twentieth century piano technique include: echo pedal--catching the echo of the sound in the pedal after the note is cut physically, prominent use of sostenuto pedal, as well as other specific written instructions about pedaling, *ff* with *una corda*, purely percussive use of the piano (example 4), tone clusters, and a special effect perhaps imitating the sound of theremin (example 5). His willingness to venture into new musical horizons and the seriousness of the content is revealing of his outlook in life at turning fifty. It is understandable why none other than Dorothea gave the premiere of this important work.

Example 4



²⁶ Burge, "Persichetti's *Eleventh Sonata*"

Example 5



Fifteen more years elapsed since the *Eleventh Piano Sonata* before the composition of his twelfth which is subtitled, *Mirror Sonata*, Op. 145 (1980)(example 6).

Example 6



Meanwhile, Persichetti composed judiciously and systematically in his series of *Parables* (which started in 1965) for all solo instruments imaginable including the more unusual guitar, piccolo, harp, organ, double bass, and carillon and for larger settings such as band, string quartet, and even opera, (the only opera of his, *The Sibyl*, Op. 135)—21 in all. He also produced the massive *Creation*,

Op. 111 (1969) for SATB soli, chorus, and orchestra, the *Lincoln Address for Narrator and Orchestra*, Op. 124 (1972-73) as well as the *Masquerade for Band*, Op. 102, and the *Symphony No. 8*, Op. 106. The only piano works during this period is the *Parable XIX for Piano*, Op. 134 from 1975 when he turned sixty, and works in preparation for the *Twelfth Piano Sonata*--namely, the *Reflective Keyboard Studies*, Op. 138, the *Mirror Etudes for Piano*, Op. 145, and the *Little Mirror Book for Piano*, Op. 139--along with the smaller *Four Arabesques*, Op. 141 and the *Three Toccatinas*, Op. 143 all in between 1978 and 1980 when he seemingly had a renewed urge to compose for piano. After the *Twelfth Piano Sonata*, he is to compose only two more works for piano: the *Parable XXIII for Violin, Cello, and Piano*, Op. 150 (1981), and the *Winter Solstice*, Op. 165 from the penultimate year of his life in 1986. In 1987, the single and last work is his *Hymns and Responses for the Church Year Vol. II*, Op. 166.

The discussion of the *Twelfth Piano Sonata* is not complete without mentioning Persichetti's preoccupation with the mirror technique. Following is from the *Composer's Note* in the preface of the *Reflective Keyboard Studies*:

“*Reflective Keyboard Studies* are exercises designed to develop both hands at the same time giving fingers, wrists and arms strength and flexibility. This unique species of keyboard technique introduces a kind of finger manipulation that has been neglected throughout the history of keyboard instruments.”²⁷

²⁷ Vincent Persichetti, preface, *Reflective Keyboard Studies for Piano*, by Vincent Persichetti (Pennsylvania: Elkan-Vogel, 1981).

Persichetti himself apparently kept his fingers in shape all his life with unique kind of mirror music that he improvised, and he notes: “one [work] that used more of my compositional energy than any other piano piece is the *Reflective Keyboard Studies*, Op. 138 (1978).”²⁸ The work is comprehensive but extremely concise: there are only two to three lines for each of the pieces in three sets of 16 exercises, with subtitles such as *Scales with Leaps*, *Interrupted Arpeggios*, *Modal Changes*, and *Synthetic Scales* which indicate his careful consideration to be thorough from the standpoint of a pedagogue. Several of the exercises are the same material he used in the *Twelfth Piano Sonata*. *Mirror Etudes*, Op. 143 is the first attempt for him to make the studies “blossoming into music.”²⁹

Despite the musical confines set by the usage of mirror technique, Persichetti manages to create a substantial four movement sonata with varied and appealing materials. The whole sonata retains many of his musical and compositional traits from the earlier sonatas: pianistic writing with abundant rhythmic punctuation in the fast movements, lyrical expressiveness full of color in the slow movement, regular meter and phrase structure, and a direct, concise approach. From the rather vigorous, relentless character of the two outer movements, one could imagine a man of abundant youthfulness at the age of sixty-five.

²⁸ Shackelford 112.

²⁹ Shackelford 112.

Observations Through Performance

After thoroughly getting acquainted with the twelve sonatas of Vincent Persichetti, there is no question about the complete grasp he had of the keyboard technique—both traditional and twentieth-century—in terms of mechanical transportation as well as in control of the sonority. His musical intentions are abundantly clear since his editing includes traditional and more specific performance indications together with careful pedal markings and dynamics to clarify the context. This is consistent with what he advocates in his treatise, *Twentieth-Century Harmony*:

any tone can succeed any other tone, any tone can sound simultaneously with any other tone or tones, and any group of tones can be followed by any other group of tone, just as any degree of tension or nuance can occur in any medium under any kind of stress or duration. Successful projection will depend upon the contextual and formal conditions that prevail, and upon the skill and the soul of the composer (emphasis added).³⁰

The detailed markings are especially helpful since his melodic and harmonic language is often extended just enough from the traditional diatonicism (if not atonal) to be not obvious of the intended musical content. And the additional indications are necessary, as he very well knew, to convey to the performer the rather simple (in the best sense of the word) musical message hidden underneath

³⁰ Vincent Persichetti, *Twentieth-Century Harmony: Creative Aspects and Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961) 13.

the surface. In some instances, for those of us not accustomed to the expressive (as opposed to coloristic) use of synthetic scales, it takes a little while to initially familiarize the ear with the sound of the scale in use before it is possible to discern the nuance needed for delivery of a coherent melodic passage. The variety of articulations needed, whether indicated or implied, is rich due to his predilection for orchestral conception. For example, a simple sixteenth note passage can be like a pianistic toccata in one instance, closer to string *detache* in another, pedaled harp, slured clarinet, and so the list continues.

Another element of his compositions that may not be immediately apparent from the score is his frequent voice crossings that tend to be placed in between phrases and sections. This occurs often between hands and is practically unnoticeable, especially in the context outside of functional harmony, without careful analysis or repeated performances. Only in the *First Piano Sonata*, does he indicate the voice leading with dotted line to clarify his intention.

On a technical note, Persichetti's use of the extreme registers of the piano is surprisingly challenging: there are instances in his sonatas where both hands are kept in either unusually high or low registers for a complete phrase or series of phrases. It requires ample flexibility in the wrist and arms as well as balancing of the whole body to get accustomed to the "new" extreme positions. His own experience in performing a large number of four-hand (and duo piano) music with Dorothea as well as with Stravinsky may have inspired this effect.

Both Vincent and Dorothea must have had relatively large span of hands, comfortable reaching a tenth. For the sonatas, a span of a tenth is not a

requirement although certainly useful in some instances. The only challenging moments for smaller hands are found in the third movement of the fifth sonata, first movement of the eighth sonata, and first two “movements” of the tenth sonata.

All the sonatas have metronome markings as well as timings for the entire work. I have carefully considered the markings and have chosen what I consider to be the most convincing tempo given my own technical orientation. In some instances, I found justification in adjusting the tempo with the knowledge of the following comment by Dorothea: “[he] plays his music slow. . . slower than marked, and the fast music faster than indicated.”³¹

One of the curious observations is that the later sonatas (except for the twelfth) tend to have less frequent punctuations by rests or by a clear finishing gesture of a phrase. There are phrase endings, to be sure, but the musical intention tends to carry over more between phrases and rests if not completely overlapping.

In terms of tempo and other performance indications, it is interesting to note his indecision about Italian (both customary and modern adjectives) and English markings. There are periods of time when one system is employed, but it is not very long before the other appears. It is hard to say whether his identity as an American with Italian heritage had an influence, but this must certainly be one of the traits contributing to the bewilderment about his work from many of his contemporary critics.

³¹ qtd. in Hinson

All the piano works except the *Variation for an Album*, Op. 32 (1947) is published by Elkan-Vogel. There are separate scores available for individual sonatas as well as a complete sonata edition with dedication, “all of these Sonatas were written for and because of Dorothea Persichetti.”

Conclusion

Contrary to some critics who question the existence of his individual voice as a composer, repeated listening and performance of Persichetti's piano sonatas does reveal, as a whole, a strong personal style. Based on his solid belief in individualism as a composer and pedagogue, Persichetti maintained composing music close to his heart making use of "all the stops." He had "no reason to try to please or entertain the listener"³² as long as his message was sincere. Thomas Scherman said of Persichetti's works:

Persichetti has synthesized the several features of twentieth century music, but has also retained a connection with the musical culture of the last three hundred years. At the same time his language is sufficiently advanced to allow further exploration of combinations that may bring a new realm of values. . . into a general musical speech.³³

This "new realm of values" is what we find in the piano sonatas, just as much as what his native country is proud to be: a melting pot of diversity. As Persichetti remarked:

It's easy, from a too-close view, to see stylistic variety as a splintering of musical vocabulary. But the long-range look will, I believe, reveal this diversity as a rich fabric of common expression.³⁴

³² qtd. in Ewen, *American Composers* 505.

³³ qtd. in David Ewen, *Composers Since 1900: a Biographical and Critical Guide* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1969) 406.

³⁴ Shackelford 123.

The music of Vincent Persichetti, therefore, can be said to be distinctively American, embracing and integrating diversity. His fluency in a variety of musical styles does not need to be seen as a reason for criticism but rather as an asset—to have the wealth of expression available to choose from at will. The uniqueness of thematic materials may not necessarily be where his strengths lie. Instead, the balanced architecture and impeccable craftsmanship make his music capable of bearing the weight of interpretation over time. This acute sensitivity to the context (including the selection of the themes and matching them with the structural methods suitable to reflect his intentions) is exceptional and qualifies him as a masterful composer with his own personal voice.

The piano sonatas of Vincent Persichetti are worthy of attention by performers and teachers alike. It is sincerely hoped that the present recording project facilitates the dissemination process of these important compositions.

Appendix

List of the Piano Sonatas

Sonatas	(timings as it appears on the music)	Year of composition (Premiered by)
First Piano Sonata, Op. 3 Allegro moderato Adagio Vivace Passacaglia	(c. 16')	1939 (Vincent Persichetti)
Second Piano Sonata, Op. 6 Moderato Sostenuto Allegretto Allegro	(c. 11')	1939 (Dorothea Flanagan)
Third Piano Sonata, Op. 22 Declaration Episode Psalm	(c. 12'30")	1943 (Vincent Persichetti)
Fourth Piano Sonata, Op. 36 Broad-intimately-broad Moderately-brightly Plaintively-briskly	(c. 18'30")	1949 (Vincent Persichetti)
Fifth Piano Sonata, Op. 37 With motion Tenderly Briskly	(c. 8'30")	1949 (Jean Geis)
Sixth Piano Sonata, Op. 39 Lightly Slowly Blandly Fast	(c. 12')	1950 (Dorothy Lewis)

Seventh Piano Sonata, Op. 40	(c. 7')	1950 (Robert Smith)
Moderato		
Andante		
Vivo		
Eighth Piano Sonata, Op. 41	(c. 7')	1950 (Clair Shapiro)
Lightly		
Quietly		
Fast		
Ninth Piano Sonata, Op. 58	(c. 9')	1952 (David Burge)
Lightly		
Quietly		
Fast		
Tenth Piano Sonata, Op. 67	(c. 22')	1955 (Joseph Raieff)
Moderato - allegro agilité - larghetto - allegro risoluto		
Eleventh Piano Sonata, Op. 101	(c. 19')	1965 (Dorothea Persichetti)
Risoluto - articolato - sostenuto - leggero - conclusivo		
Twelfth Piano Sonata: Mirror Sonata, Op. 145	(c. 13')	1980 (Jeffrey Jacob)
Sostenuto		
Amabile		
Scherzoso		
Brioso		

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