

VINCENT PERSICHETTI

COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS
GEOFFREY BURLESON, PIANO

DISC 1: TT: 77:10

Sonata No. 1, Op. 3 (1939) 16:08

1. I. Allegro moderato 3:57
2. II. Adagio 5:03
3. III. Vivace 1:48
4. IV. Passacaglia 5:20

Sonata No. 2, Op. 6 (1939) 10:01

5. I. Moderato 3:05
6. II. Sostenuto 2:23
7. III. Allegretto 1:29
8. IV. Allegro 3:04

Sonata No. 3, Op. 22 (1943) 12:12

9. I. Declaration 3:38
10. II. Episode 4:11
11. III. Psalm 4:23

Sonata No. 4, Op. 36 (1949) 17:47

12. I. Broad 5:15
13. II. Moderately 5:37
14. III. Plaintively—Briskly 6:55

Sonata No. 5, Op. 37 (1949) 8:44

15. I. With Motion 2:36
16. II. Tenderly 3:24
17. III. Briskly 2:44

Sonata No. 6, Op. 39 (1950) 11:25

18. I. Lightly 2:58
19. II. Slowly 3:18
20. III. Blandly 1:38
21. IV. Fast 3:31

DISC 2: TT: 72:46

Sonata No. 7, Op. 40 (1950) 5:55

1. I. Moderato 2:41

2. II. Andante 1:27

3. III. Vivo 1:47

Sonata No. 8, Op. 41 (1950) 6:37

4. I. Lightly 2:13

5. II. Quietly 1:52

6. III. Fast 2:32

Sonata No. 9, Op. 58 (1952) 8:53

7. I. Moderato 3:35

8. II. Allegro agilitate 1:50

9. III. Larghetto 1:04

10. IV. Allegro risoluto 2:24

Sonata No. 10, Op. 67 (1955) 21:37

11. I. Adagio 6:01

12. II. Presto 3:51

13. III. Andante 7:25

14. IV. Vivace 4:20

Sonata No. 11, Op. 101 (1965) 17:14

15. I. Risoluto 4:30

16. II. Articolato 4:16

17. III. Sostenuto 2:26

18. IV. Leggero 2:48

19. V. Conclusivo 3:14

Sonata No. 12 (Mirror Sonata), Op. 145 (1982) 11:37

20. I. Sostenuto-Risoluto 3:27

21. II. Amabile 2:25

22. III. Scherzoso 2:38

23. IV. Briosso 3:07

Vincent Persichetti and the Piano Sonata

How many significant American composers produced twelve piano sonatas? Virgil Thomson wrote four very brief ones; Roger Sessions, Ned Rorem, Leon Kirchner and Charles Wuorinen have three each to their credit; Charles Ives composed two monumental sonatas, and Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, Yehudi Wyner, David Diamond, and Roy Harris have given us one apiece.¹ One is hard-pressed to find many oeuvres by Americans approaching the size of Vincent Persichetti's output in this genre.² The composer's attraction to the piano sonata may indeed have something to do with his overall prolific propensities. However, Persichetti's twelve piano sonatas occupy a particularly vital and essential place within his substantial body of work.

It is certainly difficult to overestimate the extent of Persichetti's influence on America's musical landscape. As both composer and teacher, his effect is far-reaching, extending from public school ensembles to numerous prominent soloists, orchestras and concert halls. His composition students include such diverse musical figures as Thelonious Monk, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Jacob Druckman, Peter Schickele (a.k.a. P.D.Q. Bach), and Einojuhani Rautavaara. His extraordinary influence as an educator was garnered in part through four decades as a composition faculty member at the Juilliard School (from 1947 until his death in 1987), and the production of a seminal music theory text, *Twentieth Century Harmony: Creative Aspects and Practice* (New York, 1961).

Persichetti was a prodigiously prolific composer in many genres, with numerous works in almost every major genre to his credit.³ He was centrally and durably dedicated to the piano, a devotion that seems to have been catalyzed both by his formidable expertise as a pianist and his personal life. Born in Philadelphia on June 6, 1915, he was studying piano from the age of six (eventually adding organ, double bass, theory and composition) at the Combs Conservatory in his hometown. When he graduated in 1935, he served as head of the composition and theory faculty at Combs, all the while continuing to study piano with the great Olga Samaroff at the Philadelphia Conservatory, and conducting with Fritz Reiner at the Curtis Institute. In 1941, the year he became head of the composition and theory departments at the Philadelphia Conservatory, he married Dorothea Flanagan, a concert pianist. The two had initially met when they tied in competition for a piano scholarship to study with Samaroff. Flanagan seemed to act as a kind of muse to the composer, pianistic and otherwise, in a similar vein to the partnership of Roy Harris and his wife Johana. One testament to Persichetti's fervent devotion to Dorothea appears on the title page of the complete piano sonatas, which bears the following dedication: "All of these Sonatas were written for and because of Dorothea Persichetti."⁴

Persichetti had actually studied composition with Roy Harris, albeit for only three weeks, and has mentioned sporadic composition lessons taken with numerous well-known composers. At the Philadelphia Conservatory, in addition to piano lessons with Samaroff, he studied composition with Paul Nordoff from 1941-45, earning his D.Mus. in 1945. His most formidable and long-term composition mentor, though, by many accounts including his own, seems to have been the one overseeing his work throughout childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood: Russell King Miller at the Combs Conservatory.

Persichetti's prodigious talents as a brilliant musical polymath and his constantly fertile, prolific nature helped him to garner numerous awards, prizes and recognition. Their sheer quantity renders them way too numerous to mention in totum, but some highlights include the Juilliard Publication Award in 1943 for his *Dance Overture*, three Guggenheim Fellowships (in

¹ The living composers on this list may well compose additional sonatas, of course.

² Alan Hovhaness actually wrote twenty-three piano sonatas, but he arguably holds several other genre production records as well, with more than thirty symphonies, and more than four hundred opus numbers. One may also consider John Cage's sixteen one-page "sonatas" among his *Sonatas and Interludes*, but these of course aren't sonatas in any real formal or scalar sense.

³ The only major exception is opera. Persichetti wrote only one, *The Sibyl*, in 1976, to his own libretto.

⁴ Vincent Persichetti, *Piano Sonatas (Complete)* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Elkan-Vogel, 1988)

1958, 1968, and 1973), the 1959 Star of Solidarity Medal from the Italian Government for contribution to American culture, the 1964 Edwin Franko Goldman Memorial Citation, the 1966 Symphony League award, a 1975 Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, the 1978 First Kennedy Center Friedheim Award for Excellence in Symphonic Composition (for his English Horn Concerto), the 1981 Philadelphia Art Alliance Award for Distinguished Achievement, the 1981 American Institute for Italian Culture Presidential Award of Merit, the 1987 College Band Directors National Association Distinguished Service Award, grants from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the National Endowment for the Arts, and honorary doctorates from several prominent conservatories, colleges and universities.

Persichetti's twelve piano sonatas were written over a forty-three-year period. The first nine sonatas, written between 1939 and 1950, are strong, integral and varied works reflecting diverse approaches toward synthesizing a number of styles and idioms. In these pieces, the voices of Schoenberg, Hindemith, Copland, and Bartók and jazz are variously combined and distilled within Persichetti's own developing compositional language, with an increasing emergence of an original style that reaches a kind of initial culmination in the expansive Sonata No. 4. The last three sonatas were created over a much longer span of time than the first three, appearing in 1955, 1965, and 1982, respectively. Each of these last three sonatas represents dramatic culminations of Persichetti's musical universe. Throughout his output, Persichetti employs a very wide stylistic palette, embracing diatonic and modal tonalities, pandiatonicism, polytonality, and atonal languages, as well as other diverse musical approaches. Like all of his works, the piano sonatas are brilliantly crafted, with the opening material usually serving as a unifying element for the entire piece. There is a strong penchant for homophonic textures, a great rhythmic vitality in the fast movements, and often a sense of very affecting poignance in the slow movements. Persichetti also uses scintillating registral contrasts and juxtapositions brilliantly throughout all of his piano writing.

The success of these works was recognized by authoritative sources. Of the Fourth Sonata, Virgil Thomson wrote: "Persichetti delivers his music superbly, for he is a marvelous pianist, and the writing (in the 4th Sonata) is suited to the instrument better than almost anything written in America today."⁵ However, critical reception was often mixed, in part due to the composer's refusal to attach himself to any particular school of composition. Often seesawing between largely diatonic works and acrid atonal compositions throughout his career, Persichetti was always direct in addressing both admirers and detractors, declaring that his music "doesn't fall into periods," and illustrating that this propensity has always been with him:

"At eleven, I wrote a very hospitable intermezzo, set politely in an E-flat modal area, alongside a razor-sharp keyless scherzo, whose 'mijor' and 'manor' chord structures were whipped into a tonicless batter. So I set the tone right from the start."⁶

The composer has often characterized a strong dichotomy in his writing between "grit" and "grazioso."

Persichetti entered the realm of the solo piano sonata genre with two works written in the same year, when he was only twenty-four years old. With these pieces, Persichetti offers two dramatically different essays on how to write a piano sonata in 1939. The **First Piano Sonata** displays a pervasive flavor of Austrian expressionism, opening with a twelve-note row, with the first eleven notes slowly descending in wide intervals, covering the piano keyboard's range. The twelfth note initiates the *Allegro moderato* tempo of the movement, the first subject of which has the flavor of an impish scherzo. The internal stylistic juxtapositions of Persichetti's musical language are quickly encountered via the lyrical second subject, each phrase of which begins and ends very diatonically. The potential identity of this sonata as being "purely" atonal is thwarted at this point. The movement accumulates energy, initially climaxing with broad *pesante* phrases, followed by a canon on the row rendered eerie by use of the *sostenuto* pedal, and a powerful *Presto* conclusion. The second movement projects both fragile lyricism in its opening and ardent power in its climax. It ends with an *attacca* of the third movement *Vivace*, a scherzo which proportionally contains much more diatonic material than any of the other movements. The last movement is a classic and very effective

⁵ Virgil Thomson, *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* (no date), as cited on <<http://www.presser.com/Composers/info.cfm?Name=VINCENTPERSICHETTI>>

⁶ Rudy Shackelford, "Conversation with Vincent Persichetti." *Perspectives of New Music* 20 (1981–2): 112.

twelve-tone *Passacaglia*, which nonetheless contains one very diatonic variation.⁷

The opening movement of the **Second Piano Sonata**, written the same year as the first, is strikingly different: quite tonal and diatonic, and very Hindemithian in its arpeggiated quartal harmonies. The first three movements are largely lyrical, fragile and occasionally pensive. After this setup, the last movement's kinetic dissonance and intense climaxes make for a stunning conclusion.

Persichetti's **Third Piano Sonata** was written in 1943, and it is the only sonata with programmatic movement titles. Written in the midst of World War II, Persichetti has referred to it as one of his two "war" pieces, along with the Third Symphony of 1946. Both of the outer movements, *Declaration* and *Psalm*, build and develop thematic material through broad chordal sonorities exploring the entirety of the piano keyboard. There are also numerous shifts in tempo which project a sense of progressive climactic acceleration in each movement. The inner movement, *Episode*, presents two alternating themes, with a sense of vulnerability and poignancy achieved through its manipulation of harmonic and textural materials. The piece itself is largely quite tonal, with a few bitonal episodes at climactic points. It is also pandiatonic (using major and minor scales, but "ignoring" voice-leading rules to create harmonies and "resolutions" rarely encountered before the twentieth century). All of these techniques contribute to the piece sounding very much like a part of American concert music from the 1940s, and may very well recall for the listener works by Aaron Copland written around the same time.

Next we encounter a large-scale, masterly work that acts as a kind of arrival point for Persichetti's individual voice. The **Fourth Piano Sonata** (1949) opens with broad, *fortissimo* polytonal phrases, leading to a pedal-sustained sonority juxtaposed with thin, high-register, hypnotic phrases, rising like wisps of smoke from the opening explosions. A second manifestation of this is followed by the high-register phrases taking over in an *innig*, gently rocking lyrical passage. Following is a bizarrely compelling *fugato*, with an extremely disjunct subject. This succession of genres is all contained within the first movement, providing a highly original structural approach. As with all of the sonatas, though, the germinal ingredients for the entire piece are all heard within the opening phrases. The second movement begins as a kind of modal folk song, which is contrasted throughout the movement by scherzo-like material. The last movement opens with a very slow, dark, brooding introduction, and is followed by a highly rhythmic, virtuosic finale.

Over the two-year period of 1949–1950, Persichetti wrote five piano sonatas, including the Fourth Sonata. Three of these (Nos. 5, 7 and 8) are much more sonatina-like in scale. Persichetti's **Fifth Piano Sonata** was written in 1949. The first movement begins with two very brief phrases that provide the motivic DNA for the rest of the piece: a three-note descending phrase, with two voices about four octaves apart, followed by a short, lyrically arching phrase. Thereafter, the movement juxtaposes passages of engaging rhythmic energy and angular lines with more lyrical sections recalling the opening, although the energetic material wins out in the end. The beautiful, *berceuse*-like second movement is followed by a boisterous finale, a bitingly rhythmic and somewhat sardonic *scherzando*. The **Sixth Piano Sonata** opens with a movement that is a good representation the composer's *grazioso* style, with the opening homophonic subject contrasted with a *leggiero* second theme in dotted rhythms. The lovely second movement's arching phrases are followed by a movement with possibly the most self-deprecating title bestowed by a composer on his own work: "Blandly." The concluding movement is a brilliantly virtuosic sonata-rondo.

The **Seventh Piano Sonata**'s opening movement very effectively displays Persichetti's juxtapositions of "grit" and "grazioso." The Andante movement is in a *loure* rhythm,⁸ and although starting gently, proceeds to an intense and acrid climax. The final movement is quite driving, with allusions to both scherzo and gigue. In fact, the *loure* was often referred to as a "slow

⁷ One wonders whether the choice to use the 12-tone passacaglia form in Persichetti's first piano sonata was in part inspired by Anton von Webern's first official opus (the Passacaglia for Orchestra, Op. 1.)

⁸ The *loure* is a slow, languid French Baroque dance that is often found in French stage works of the period, and more fitfully in the suites of J.S. Bach (in his French Suite No. 5, and in the E Major Partita for solo violin.) The intentional allusions to *loure* in the movement are amplified not only by the characteristic dotted quarter-eighth-quarter rhythm, but the eighth-quarter anacrusis that begins the movement, another defining element.

gigue,” which further suggests an intentional subtext of the Baroque suite in this sonata (in Bach’s French Suite No. 5, the *loure* is immediately followed by the concluding gigue.) The **Eighth Piano Sonata** opens with an effectively quirky movement, with its humorous motives contrasted by a disjunct, arching and lyrical section. A delicate central movement is followed by a very witty finale that recalls Poulenc and *Les Six*.

In 1952, Persichetti produced a kind of transitional work, leading to the remarkable final three sonatas. The **Ninth Piano Sonata** is cast as a single-movement work, although its four “sections” are really movements with different kinds of segues connecting them (I will refer to them as “movements” here). The introductory movement contains distinct sections though, and opens with a fanfare motive that unifies the entire piece. Like the first movement of the Fourth Piano Sonata, the structure of the movement is highly original, with several marked tempo changes and much textural contrast, with the opening material returning at the end. The second movement, *Allegro agitate*, is very delicate and fleeting until several interruptive phrases from the first movement’s material re-enters. At the very end, an E-flat Major chord created through a *sostenuto* pedal effect connects to the short, hymn-like third movement. The final movement is energetic and very climactic, with many large sonorities and registral shifts, leading to a *maestoso* transformation of the hymn theme, and a final *animato* rush to the end.

The variety of tempi and textures in the opening movement of this work, along with the segues, and the return of previous material and tempi in the second and fourth movements, makes the sense of a distinct four-movement design more abstract for the listener. This would become a great formal preoccupation of Persichetti’s from the 1950s onward: increasingly integrated single-movement designs superimposed on multi-movement classical structures, with the very opening material providing the DNA for the entire piece.⁹ The **Tenth Piano Sonata** (1955), Persichetti’s longest and perhaps most masterly work in the genre, accomplishes this brilliantly, with the opening descending motive engendering the capacious organism that follows. Like the first movement of the Ninth Sonata, the Tenth’s opening movement proceeds through several sections, but here the sections are more numerous, of more varied lengths, and contain an even larger palette of textures and moods. A vigorous and agile *Presto* follows. Then, we encounter one of the most affecting and extensive movements in the sonatas, a lengthy neo-Baroque *arioso* with a great deal of expressive filigree, and a fugato section. In a similar manner to the conclusion of the Ninth Sonata, the dazzling finale climaxes with an explosively sonorous expansion of the movement’s initially plaintive second subject, but with an even more unrestrained sense of glory, befitting the grander scale of this work.

Ten years later, Persichetti wrote by far his most abstract and dissonant piano sonata. On the surface, the basic musical language of the **Eleventh Piano Sonata** (1965) is much more related to prevailing post-World War II currents of composition, and would not be at all out of place within the ethos of Darmstadt. It is again a single-movement work, with five main sections. But there is a far less pronounced sense of clear sectional divisions than in the previous two sonatas. In this work, Persichetti also beautifully exploits the potential for abstract colors and rhythms from the instrument, including many brilliant effects involving the *sostenuto* pedal, without ever sacrificing the clarity of the prevailing melodic thread that traverses the entirety of the work. And the composer’s harmonic language is highly distinctive throughout, with the very dissonant sonorities still laced with subtle tonal allusions that prevail by lending the work a discernible long-term sense of linear harmonic development.

In his final **Twelfth Piano Sonata** (1982), subtitled “Mirror,” Persichetti provides us with a culmination of his “mirror” technique. Although appearing fitfully in earlier sonatas, the Twelfth Sonata’s composition was preceded by a set of *Mirror Etudes*, wherein quite methodically, every note and sonority in one hand is simultaneously reflected intervallically by the other hand. Thus, a kind of constant, mirror-image symmetry is projected throughout the piece.¹⁰ With his final piano sonata, Persichetti finally applies the technique to the formal genre that he seemed to embrace most fully. The piece consists of four

⁹ Works in other genres that incorporate this approach include Persichetti’s Symphony No. 5 (1953), Symphony No. 9 “Sinfonica janiculum” (1970) the Concerto for Piano-Four Hands (1952), the Piano Quintet (1954), and the String Quartet No. 3 (1959).

¹⁰ Persichetti has remarked that this technique was an abiding compulsion: “All my life, I’ve kept my fingers in shape by playing a unique kind of mirror music that develops both hands simultaneously. Reflective playing introduces a kind of finger manipulation neglected throughout the history of keyboard instruments.” Shackelford, p. 112.

compact, contrasting movements. The first movement opens with lyrically arching block harmonies, and is followed by a toccata-like *Risolto*. The second movement, *Amabile*, is very affecting, with a good deal of pandiatonic writing contrasted by a central chromatic section. The fleeting *Scherzoso*—like the second movement—is in ABA form, but in symmetrical contrast to the second movement, the outer sections are quite chromatic, and the middle section is tonal. The climactic *Brioso* is highly propulsive, and contains in its rondo form elements of all three previous movements.

The solo piano sonatas provide an excellent overview of Persichetti's complex and multifaceted compositional language. Laurie Spiegel, a student of Persichetti's, has encapsulated his approach as producing a kind of stylistic counterpoint, with each style maintaining a kind of contrapuntal integrity, as opposed to projecting a vertical stylistic "blend."¹¹ In any case, the piano sonata is by no means the only genre through which Persichetti's musical universe is traversable. His nine symphonies, four string quartets, his twenty-four Parables for various solo instruments and small chamber groups, and nine harpsichord sonatas also display his vast palette within each genre. It is highly unusual for a composer this prolific to maintain such great integrity and distinction within so many works, but this is a strong testament to the rarity of Persichetti's talents, and the uniqueness of his voice.

—*Geoffrey Burleson*

Geoffrey Burleson, pianist, has performed throughout Europe and North America, and is equally active as a recitalist, concerto soloist, chamber musician and jazz performer. His numerous acclaimed solo appearances include prominent venues in Paris (at the Église Ste.-Merri), New York (Weill Hall), Rome (American Academy), Athens (Mitropoulos Hall), Mexico City (National Museum of Art), Rotterdam (De Doelen), Chicago (Dame Myra Hess Memorial Series), Boston, Washington, Switzerland, England, Spain, and elsewhere. Mr. Burleson made his New York City solo recital debut at Merkin Hall in 2000, sponsored by the League of Composers/ISCM. He has appeared as a concerto soloist with the Boston Musica Viva, Arlington Philharmonic, New England Philharmonic, and the Holland Symfonia in The Netherlands, performing repertoire ranging from Mozart, Weber and Saint-Saëns to Gershwin and Klaas de Vries.

Mr. Burleson is principal pianist with the Boston Musica Viva, The New York Art Ensemble, and David Sanford's Pittsburgh Collective. He also performs with the Tango Project, a trio with accordionist William Schimmel and violinist Mary Rowell, and Impetus, an avant-cabaret trio with vocalist Maria Tegzes and guitarist David "Knife" Fabris. In addition, he is a member of Princeton University's Richardson Chamber Players. As a jazz pianist, Mr. Burleson has performed extensively at home and abroad, both as a soloist and in many ensembles.

A laureate of the International Piano Recording Competition (Silver Medal), and the Vienna Modern Masters International Performers' Competition, Mr. Burleson was also the recipient of a DAAD Grant from the German government to support a residency at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. A graduate of the Peabody Conservatory, New England Conservatory, and Stony Brook University (D.M.A.), his principal teachers include Gilbert Kalish, Leonard Shure, Veronica Jochum, Lillian Freundlich, Tinka Knopf, and Audrey Bart Brown.

Mr. Burleson's first solo CD, *Arthur Berger: Complete Works for Solo Piano* (Centaur), received high praise from *The New York Times*, *Gramophone*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The American Record Guide*. Upcoming projects include *Roy Harris: Complete Piano Works* for Naxos, and an American Cello CD with Matt Haimovitz, featuring the Barber and Carter sonatas as well as cello and piano works by David Sanford and Augusta Read Thomas, which will appear on the Oxingale label. Mr. Burleson teaches piano at Princeton University, and is Assistant Professor of Music and Director of Piano Studies at Hunter College–City University of New York.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Choral Works: Love, Mass, Winter Cantata. Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, Tamara Brooks, conductor. New World

¹¹ Laurie Spiegel in conversation with the author of this essay, April 23, 2007.

Records 80316-2.

Concerto for English Horn and String Orchestra. Thomas Stacy, English Horn; String Orchestra of New York; Vincent Persichetti, conductor. New World Records 80489-2.

Night Dances. Juilliard Orchestra, James DePreist, conductor. New World Records 80396-2.

Pageant. The Northwestern University Symphonic Wind Ensemble, John J. Paynter, conductor. New World Records 80211-2.

Piano Concerto, Symphony for Strings. Robert Taub, piano; The Philadelphia Orchestra, Riccardo Muti, Charles Dutoit, conductors. New World Records 80370-2.

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