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Persichetti Score Analysis - Stage 1

Vincent Ludwig Persichetti was born on June 6th, 1915, as the firstborn son to immigrant parents. As a resident of South Philadelphia, Persichetti's exposure to classical music and the cultivation of his musical skills were inevitable. His neighborhood was predominantly made up of Jewish, Irish, and Italian immigrant families who all placed value on music literacy and musical tradition (Olmstead 6). As a child, Persichetti received formal music training at the Combs Conservatory Preparatory Department, where he developed his piano skills. At age six, he performed his first public piano recital, which was broadcast over the radio (Olmstead 9). After graduating from the Philadelphia School of Art at age eleven, Persichetti became an established organist for local Philadelphia churches and a collaborative pianist for chamber music with other public school students. His involvement in chamber music involved arranging classical music for mixed instrumentation to be performed in chamber settings, which began to inspire his interest in composing (Olmstead 9-11). He composed his first original composition *Serenade No. 1, Op. 1*, in 1929 at age fourteen for a ten-piece chamber wind ensemble (Tackitt 16). At this point in Persichetti's musical career, he was supporting himself financially in his musical training, which he continued at Combs Conservatory for a bachelor's degree in 1936, the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music and the Curtis Institute of Music for master's degrees in 1941, and the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music for a doctoral degree in 1945 (Gillespie 6-9).

Persichetti met his wife, Dorothea Flanagan, in the piano studio while at the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music, marrying her in 1941 (Gillespie 7). Flanagan was one of the first proponents of Persichetti's music, performing premieres of his piano works (Chester 7). While completing his collegiate studies, he also cultivated an interest in sailing and sculpting in his free time (Morris 37). Nearing the end of his college years, Persichetti quickly found work as a professor. In 1942, he accepted a position as Chairman of the Theory and Composition Department at the Philadelphia Conservatory, a role he held for twenty years (Gillespie 7-8). Additionally, in 1947, Persichetti accepted an offer from William Schuman to join the faculty of The Juilliard School, where he taught for the rest of his life (Gillespie 9). While teaching and composing, Persichetti authored a textbook entitled *Twentieth Century Harmony* in 1961. This book, written in collaboration with his wife Dorothea, was met with mixed reviews (Morris 111-112). Persichetti's most important contributions to music are found through his compositions for solo instruments and the wind band medium.

Even since the beginning of Persichetti's compositional output, he maintained an identifiable style which utilized bitonal and polytonal harmonic elements (Chester 32). Scholars such as David Morris describe Persichetti's compositions as displaying an "amalgamation of styles" that mirror his German and Italian upbringing (Morris 13). Persichetti's style has also been compared to other prominent 20th-century composers like Copland and Stravinsky, particularly in his treatment of harmony (Olmstead 158). His writing was influenced to an extent by his mentors in composition, piano, and conducting. His primary teachers included Russel King Miller, Fritz Reiner, and Olga Samaroff (Chapman and Momasso).

Persichetti's compositional output includes works for solo piano, solo instrument, solo voice, orchestra, choir, opera, and wind band. His twelve piano sonatas and three piano concertos

are among the most important works for piano in the American repertoire (Johnston). Over the course of two decades, Persichetti completed a total of twenty-five *Parables* for solo instruments and various ensembles. These works were a part of a long-term project in which he would compose these pieces mirror parables within the Bible. While he did note that each *Parable* was programmatic, they are not written with a specific story made known to the listener (Olmstead 304). Persichetti's band repertoire is among his most played and praised works. The financial success of his first band work, *Divertimento for Band* (1949), led to a lucrative avenue of composing wind band music (Olmstead 159). Persichetti's most notable compositions for wind band include *Pageant* (1953), *Symphony No. 6, Op. 69* (1956), *Serenade for Band* (1960), *Psalm for Band* (1963), *Masquerade for Band* (1965), and *Parable IX* (1974). Vincent Persichetti was adamant that his compositions were not driven by commissions but by original ideas. He accepted commissions only when they coincided with his inspiration for new projects, and most of his works were not commissioned (Duffie).

Throughout his lifetime, Persichetti accrued a number of awards and honors from his compositional and teaching career. His accolades include three Guggenheim Fellowships, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Brandeis University Creative Award, the first ever Kennedy Center Friedham Award, and the Juilliard Publication Award (Johnston). In surveys conducted in the late 1950s and 1960s by members of the College Band Directors National Association, Persichetti was listed as the second most popular composer of original works for wind band and was the most frequently mentioned composer among the most performed pieces for wind band (Olmstead 160). Persichetti's music for wind band continues to comprise many of the most important and frequently performed works in the repertoire. On

August 14th, 1987, Persichetti died to lung cancer, requesting not to hold a funeral but welcoming “good vibrations, warm thoughts, and spontaneous expressions” (Olmstead 376-377).

Vincent Persichetti’s *Divertimento for Band, Op. 42*, was his first attempt at writing for wind band. Before this, his only experience writing for winds was his composition *Serenade No. 1, Op. 1* for ten wind instruments at age fourteen (Olmstead 155). *Divertimento* did not begin as a piece for band. He recounts his compositional process as “writing a piece where the woodwinds were fighting the brasses and there was a timpani arguing with them. After a while, I realized that the strings weren't going to come in” (Morris 184). Free from commission restraints, he was able to experiment with the wind band medium. After spending the summer of 1949 writing in a log cabin kindergarten school house in El Dorado, Kansas, *Divertimento* was dedicated to and premiered by the Goldman Band on June 16th, 1950, under the baton of Persichetti himself (Olmstead 155; Duffie).

While the wind band medium had standout composers such as Percy Grainger and Gustav Holst building the wind band canon in the early 20th century, the early 1950s showcased the band world as being undeveloped and associated with negative connotations. As band became more popular throughout public schools in the United States, there was great potential for original compositions to be adopted into the repertoire. Speaking on the legitimacy of wind band music, Persichetti commented:

I know that composers are often frightened away by the sound of the word *band*, because of certain qualities long associated with this medium—rusty trumpets, consumptive flutes, wheezy oboes, disintegrated clarinets, fumbling yet amiable baton wavers, and gum-coated park benches...When composers think of the band as a huge, supple

ensemble of winds and percussion, the obnoxious fat will drain off, and creative ideas will flourish. (Olmstead 153)

Persichetti's first venture into the wind band medium established a foundation for the potential of wind band music, serving as a model for composers to follow as they added to the repertoire.

The instrumentation for *Divertimento* features a standard wind ensemble instrumentation. The word *divertimento* alludes to a classical composition, light and entertaining in nature, composed as a suite for chamber orchestra. Persichetti's work features six movements of contrasting moods and harmonic textures: I. Prologue, II. Song, III. Dance, IV. Burlesque, V. Soliloquy, and VI. March.

The first movement, "Prologue," offers the listener a quick introduction to Persichetti's compositional style. The music is clearly tonal but incorporates poly-chordal juxtapositions between brass and woodwind choirs (Blocher et al. 320). The lyrical movements "Song" and "Soliloquy" both utilize a ternary form. While "Song" utilizes melodies against repetitive motives in the accompaniment, "Soliloquy" features a cornet solo with chorale-like accompaniment (Olmstead 157). Persichetti's use of the cornet in an extensive lyrical solo setting was a novel concept that helped to establish the archetypes that the cornet lent itself to lyrical playing, while the trumpet catered better to heroic music in the wind band setting (Olmstead 158). "Song" features a lighthearted tune in the higher tessitura instruments such as flutes and piccolos, accompanied by polytonal harmonies (Morris 22-23). "Burlesque" features a humorous melody set for the tuba alongside quartal harmonies. The "March" features Persichetti poking fun at the traditional march by utilizing woodblock, timpani, and off-beat bass drum (Olmstead 157).

Vincent Persichetti (1915–1987)
Divertimento for Band, Op. 42 (1949)

Vincent Ludwig Persichetti was born on June 6, 1915, in South Philadelphia to immigrant parents. Growing up in a culturally rich neighborhood of Jewish, Irish, and Italian families who valued musical literacy, he learned how to play the piano at an early age and enrolled in lessons at the local Combs Conservatory Preparatory Department. By age six, Persichetti had given his first public piano recital on the radio and began accompanying churches as an organist throughout elementary school. His early experience arranging music for mixed chamber ensembles and lessons with his primary compositional mentor, Russel King Miller, sparked his interest in composition and led to his first original piece *Serenade No. 1, Op. 1* (1929) written at age fourteen.

Persichetti earned degrees from the Combs Conservatory, Philadelphia Conservatory of Music, and the Curtis Institute. He served as Chairman of Theory and Composition at the Philadelphia Conservatory for twenty years, and later joined the Juilliard School faculty in 1947.

Divertimento for Band, Op. 42 (1949) served as Persichetti's first contribution to the wind band repertoire. The piece was first conceived while he spent the summer of 1949 composing in a Kansas log cabin schoolhouse. While originally imagined as a piece for full orchestra, the opening prologue, which features the woodwinds "fighting" the brass gave inspiration for Persichetti to flesh out his ideas for wind band. *Divertimento* was dedicated and premiered by the Goldman Band in 1950, under the baton of Persichetti himself.

This work features six movements of contrasting moods, forms, counterpoint, and harmonic textures: I. Prologue, II. Song, III. Dance, IV. Burlesque, V. Soliloquy, and VI. March. Persichetti's signature style of utilizing polytonality and large choirs of instruments is especially present in this piece. Persichetti's approach to composing for band considers the wind band as a "supple ensemble of winds and percussion" that sought to counteract the negative connotations that military and recreational bands had in the 1950s. *Divertimento for Band* serves as a cornerstone work in the wind band repertoire, holding a position as one of the most popular and beloved pieces among academic and professional ensembles.

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