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“Grit and Grazioso:” The Songs of Vincent Persichetti

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Vincent Persichetti (1915-1987) was one of the most respected and prolific American composers of his time. He was the recipient of three Guggenheim Fellowships, over 100 commissions from organizations such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the St. Louis Symphony, and was the first recipient of the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award. He also served as the head of the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music and Chairman of the Composition Department at the Juilliard School of Music.

Persichetti wrote music for nearly every musical medium and performance level. His output includes symphonies and chamber music, along with works for band, keyboard (piano, harpsichord, and organ), and chorus. Although he is perhaps best remembered for the keyboard and band works, Persichetti also wrote numerous song settings, two song cycles, and one opera. Four sets of his songs, along with the two song cycles, are still in publication today.

Regardless of the genre, when asked to describe his compositional style, Persichetti typically had two things to say. First, “I’m an amalgamator—I use the materials that are around,” which meant that he began with a musical idea and then developed it using compositional techniques from all historical eras and genres of classical music. Since he studied music literature and composition from the time he was a teenager, Persichetti had a phenomenal musical memory, exhibiting the ability to reproduce, from memory, even complex symphonic scores at the keyboard. That comprehensive knowledge of classical music repertoire was the touchstone of his amalgamation technique.

The second defining characteristic of his compositions, as described by Persichetti, was that “All of my music contains elements of both ‘grit and grazioso,’” which was his

general way of describing emotion in his pieces. “Gritty” works tend to be longer and feature more dissonance, virtuosity, complex rhythms, strong dynamics, and a fast harmonic rhythm. The “grazioso,” or gracious, pieces are generally shorter and more lyrical. They typically feature a sparse texture, simple rhythms, minimal dissonance, slow-changing harmonies, and a subdued dynamic palette.

The poster presentation would offer an overview of three published sets of Persichetti’s songs. All of the songs highlight various aspects of his amalgamation technique, as well as “grit” and “grazioso.” The sets are:

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| Opus 29 | <i>Two Chinese Songs</i> |
| | All Alone (traditional Chinese text) |
| | These Days (Wang Chi) |
| Opus 74 | <i>James Joyce Songs</i> |
| | Unquiet Heart |
| | Brigid's Song |
| | Noise of Waters |
| Opus 75 | <i>Hilaire Belloc Songs</i> |
| | Thou Child So Wise |
| | The Microbe |

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Vocal Music by Vincent Persichetti

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- Emily Dickinson Songs: When the Hills Do*. Theodore Presser.
- Emily Dickinson Songs: The Grass*. Theodore Presser.
- Emily Dickinson Songs: Out of the Morning*. Theodore Presser.
- James Joyce Songs: Unquiet Heart*. Theodore Presser.
- James Joyce Songs: Brigid's Song*. Theodore Presser.
- James Joyce Songs: Noise of Waters*. Theodore Presser.
- Harmonium*. Theodore Presser.
- Hilaire Belloc Songs: The Microbe*. Theodore Presser.
- Hilaire Belloc Songs: Thou Child So Wise*. Theodore Presser.
- A Net of Fireflies*. Theodore Presser.
- Two Chinese Songs: All Alone; These Days*. Theodore Presser.