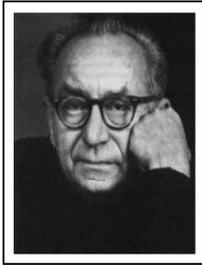


“Grit and Grazioso:” The Songs of Vincent Persichetti

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Vincent Persichetti 1915-1987



Vincent Persichetti was one of the most respected and prolific American composers of his time. Although he is perhaps best-known for his works for keyboard and symphonic band, Persichetti also wrote numerous songs, two song cycles, and one opera. Four sets of his songs are currently in publication: *Two Chinese Songs*, op. 29, *James Joyce Songs*, op. 74, *Hilaire Belloc Songs*, op. 75, and *Emily Dickinson Songs*, op. 77. This poster will examine Persichetti’s compositional style in the first three sets of songs. He delineated two emotional extremes in his music: “grit and grazioso.”

“Grit and Grazioso”

“Even from the beginning of my career, my music had a gracious or *grazioso* element and a gritty element. Each piece is a happy combination of the two, although a piece is usually mostly gritty or mostly *grazioso*.”

Gritty music is generally extroverted, vigorous, menacing, mournful, or edgy in character. Gritty pieces tend to feature more dissonance, complex rhythms, virtuosity, strong dynamics, and a fast harmonic rhythm.

Gracious music is generally introspective, sweet, contented, or serene, and can sometimes be humorous or light-hearted. Gracious pieces typically feature a lyrical line, sparse texture, simple rhythms, minimal dissonance, slow-changing harmonies, and a subdued dynamic palette.



Self-portrait by Vincent Persichetti.

Two Chinese Songs

All Alone

Examples 1-2. *All Alone*, mm. 1-3 and 6-9. *Grazioso*. The minimalistic accompaniment, gong-like pedal tone, subdued dynamics, and sparse texture set a meditative mood.

These Days

Example 3. *These Days*, mm. 1-10. *Grit*. A minimalistic accompaniment, indicated for alternating hands, is used here for a belligerent “piano-xylophone” effect. Forceful dynamics and accents further illustrate the cantankerous poet, who sees no reason to remain sober if others behave like drunkards.

Example 4. *These Days*, mm. 15-19. *Grit*. The vocal line alternates between pointed, aggressive phrasing and tipsy slurring.



James Joyce Songs

Unquiet Heart

Example 5. *Unquiet Heart*, mm. 1-3. *Grazioso*. Rocking rhythmic ostinato, slow harmonic rhythm, and subdued dynamics create a hazy, hypnotic effect.

Example 6. *Unquiet Heart*, mm. 5-10. *Grit*. The rhythmic ostinato is transformed by a more biting, dissonant chord progression and increasing dynamics.

Brigid's Song

Example 7. *Brigid's Song*, m. 14. *Grazioso*. Parallel octaves evoke the line “ding, dong, the castle bell” from the poem.

Example 8. *Brigid's Song*, mm. 22-26. *Grazioso*. Chant-like melody and parallel perfect fifths in the piano illustrate the childish prayer of the poetry.

Noise of Waters

Example 9. *Noise of Waters*, mm. 1-2. *Grit*. Stinging chromaticism suggests a restless, agitated state of mind.

Examples 10-11. *Noise of Waters*, mm. 7-8 and 15-18. *Grit*. Descending intervals in the melodic line conjure a “musical moan.”

Hilaire Belloc Songs

Thou Child So Wise

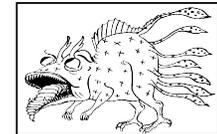
Example 12. *Thou Child So Wise*, mm. 1-5. *Grazioso*. The transparent texture, simple rhythms, and narrow range complement the simplicity of the poem.

Example 13. *Thou Child So Wise*, mm. 18-19. *Grazioso*. An innocent, a cappella melody is used for the line “Tu creasti, Domine” (“you bring forth, Lord”).

The Microbe

Example 14. *The Microbe*, mm. 1-4. *Grazioso*. “The Microbe Chord” appears four times throughout the piece, reflects the whimsical mood of the poem, which mocks scientists who conjecture about fantastical organisms that they have not yet been able to see.

“It’s making fun of people who get too serious about science . . . teaching . . . or too serious about giving you elementary theory.”—Vincent Persichetti



“The Microbe” illustration from *More Beasts for Bad Children*, Hilaire Belloc.

Conclusions

The vocal works of Vincent Persichetti exhibit bravado or sensitivity, “grit and grazioso,” in close synchronization to the poetic source material. Performers of all ages and nationalities will find them imaginative, accessible, and gratifying to sing.

For Further Information

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