

Symphonies for Band - Part 2: Persichetti

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Persichetti has given wind ensembles a number of highly distinctive works, ranging from his youthful *Serenade* for thirteen winds, Opus 1, to the *Masquerade*, written in 1966.

Persichetti (1915-1987) received musical training from the Philadelphia Conservatory and the Curtis Institute. As well as studying conducting and composition, he was a virtuoso keyboard performer. From 1947 he was head of the Composition Department at the Julliard School of Music. He is the author of a widely-used text on 20th-century harmony, and his compositions in many genres are known world-wide.

Apart from eight major works for band, his symphonic oeuvre includes seven published symphonies written between 1946 and 1970, with No. 5 for strings and No. 6 for band.

"The Symphony no. 6 is called a Symphony for Band because, as No. 5 is for Strings, No. 6 is for Winds, and I did not wish to avoid the word 'Band'"

The Symphony No 6 was commissioned by the Washington University of St Louis in 1956, and given the first performance at that year's Music Educator's National Conference in St Louis.

In 1964 Persichetti said of band music in general:

"Band music is virtually the only kind of music in America today which can be introduced, accepted, put to immediate wide use, and become a staple of the literature in a short time."

This had certainly been his experience with the Symphony No. 6.

The Symphony is in four movements:

1 Adagio-Allegro	4/4 2/4	5'30"
2 Adagio sostenuto	3/2	3'45"
3 Allegretto	6/8, 3/4	3'00"
4 Vivace	2/2	4'00"

The total duration is 15 minutes. The work is scored for conventional band instruments:

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo in C	E♭ Baritone Saxophone
Flutes I & II	B♭ Cornets I, II & III
Oboes I & II	B♭ Trumpets I & II
E♭ Clarinet	F Horns I, II, III & IV
B♭ Clarinets I, II & III	Euphonium $\frac{2}{2}$ (Baritone)
Alto Clarinet in E♭	Euphonium $\frac{2}{2}$ (Baritone)
Bass Clarinet in B♭	Trombones I, II, & III
Bassoons I & II	Tubas
E♭ Alto Sax I & II	Percussion (3 players)
B♭ Tenor Saxophone	

Persichetti's thematic material is often motivic, lending itself to rhythmic and intervallic manipulation. The themes are often rather terse, and based on a loose tonal centre. For example the first movement is loosely based in B flat and the adagio of the first movement opens with two motives, a three note horn call and a step-wise theme in the woodwinds:



The three main instrumental families: woodwind, brass and percussion are given equal prominence in his scoring, with the percussion writing especially detailed and careful. While he uses many 20th-century techniques, there is a melodic and harmonic underpinning which makes the music quite approachable. For example, he scores conventional triadic harmony within an instrumental family, combining with a different triad in another family to form a polychord.

Persichetti was appointed organist to a Presbyterian church at the age of 16, and used one of his own hymns *Round Me Falls the Night* as the basis for the second movement. The scoring is very simple, largely in E minor. The effect calming and introspective.

The third movement has two themes, one a sturdy tune in 6/8, and the other a light-hearted duple metre with a repetitive rhythm. It's lightly scored, with a transparent texture.



Here Persichetti describes the complex fourth movement in his own words:

"The finale is a free rondo based upon materials from the entire symphony. It gets under way with a highly percussive passage of light woodwinds, cymbal, snare drum and xylophone. The first theme is stated at measure 39 in a sudden fortissimo. A brief B is suggested by the high woodwinds at measure 69. A bugle-type C theme is hinted at by the oboe at measure 92. This is followed by a playful clarinet D theme which appears at measure 104. The boisterous bugle call by cornets and trumpets at measure 120 is followed by the naïve E theme by the full clarinet section.

A leggiero development features fleeting percussion music accompanied first by light woodwinds (measure 153), then muted brass (measure 192). A rude brass interruption (measure 206) lets the horns sound the Symphony's source motive at their top dynamic level. Various sections join the horns in chordal jabs until finally the whole band thunders the thematic material of all the movements in a display of dazzling counterpoint. The work ends at this high pitch - a complex compound tonic structure (everyone seems to be playing a different note) with the percussion section

supplying the final version of the rhythmic figuration of the symphony."

The final chord has a distinctive sound that defies description yet remains memorable. Scored tutti, fff, and sustained for 6 bars during which the percussion comment, it is based on a B, in the tubas and second bassoon, yet contains all twelve semitones.

The *Symphony for Band* Op. 69 was published by Elkan Vogel in 1958.

Works for Band

All published by Elkan Vogel unless otherwise stated.

Bagatelles for Band

Op. 87 (1961) 8 min E F Kalmus

Celebrations

Op. 103 for Chorus and Wind Ensemble (1966) 23 min Text by Walt Whitman.

Chorale Prelude: O God Unseen

Op. 160 (1984) 8.5 min

Chorale Prelude: So Pure the Star

Op. 91 (1962) 4 min.

Chorale Prelude: Turn Not Thy Face

Op. 105 4.5 min

Divertimento for Band

Op. 42 (1950) 11 min Oliver Ditson Co. (A division of Theodore Presser Company)

A Lincoln Address

Op. 124A for Narrator and Band (1973) 12 min

Masquerade for Band

Op. 102 (1965) 12 min

O Cool is the Valley (poem for band)

Op. 118 (1971) 6 min

Pageant for Band

Op. 59 (1953) 7 min Carl Fischer

Parable IX for Band

Op. 121 (1972) 17 min

Psalms for Band

Op. 53 (1952) 8 min

Serenade No. 11

Op. 85 for Band (1960) 6 min

Symphony for Band

(Symphony No. 6), Op. 69 (1956) 16 min

Discography:

Persichetti: *Divertimenti for Winds* Winds of the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by David Amos Harmonia Mundi HMU 907092

Bibliography:

Journal of Band Research, Vincent Persichetti, Vol 1 No 1 Autumn 1964

The Band's Music Volume 1 Frederick Fennell Village Press 1992

The Twentieth Century American Wind Band/Ensemble Frank Battisti, Meredith Music 1995

Three Symphonies for Band by American Composers, J B Mullins unpub MA thesis U of Ill, 1967