

VINCENT PERSICHETTI'S *THE PLEIADES*: BACKGROUND ON A MAJOR WORK FOR TRUMPET AND ORCHESTRA AND AN INTERVIEW WITH THE SOLOIST GORDON MATHIE

BY DAVID MATHIE

On May 10 and 12, 1968, the 37th Annual Festival of the Arts Concert, presented by the Crane Department of Music in Potsdam, New York, featured the premiere of Vincent Persichetti's *The Pleiades*, Op. 107, a work for solo trumpet, chorus, and string orchestra. The performance was done by the Crane Chorus and Orchestra, with the composer conducting and trumpet faculty member Gordon Mathie as the soloist. This 23-minute composition, using text from Walt Whitman's poem "On the Beach at Night," features a virtuosic trumpet part that is comparable to that of a solo concerto.

Vincent Persichetti (1915 – 1987) was born in Philadelphia, where he enrolled in the Combs College of Music at the age of five, studying piano, organ, and bass. He later added theory and composition. After graduating from Combs with a BMus in 1936, he went on to the Philadelphia Conservatory to earn an MMus in 1941 and a DMus in 1945, studying piano with Olga Samaroff and composition with Paul Nordoff. Persichetti also studied conducting with Fritz Reiner at the Curtis Institute, earning a diploma in conducting. In 1947, Persichetti joined the faculty at The Juilliard School, where he became chair of the composition department in 1963 and chair of the literature and materials department in 1970. He remained at Juilliard for the rest of his life. His awards include three Guggenheim Fellowships, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award.¹

Gordon Mathie is professor emeritus at the Crane School of Music, State University of NY – Potsdam. Mathie was the first treasurer for ITG and has served the organization as vice president and as a member of the board of directors. He has contributed numerous articles to the *ITG Journal* and many other professional journals. Mathie has performed with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Vermont Symphony, and Potsdam Brass Quintet, and he served for seven summers as solo cornetist for the Leonard Smith Concert Band. Mathie has been honored by the State University of New York with the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, in addition to receiving the Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Orpheus Award and the Wayne State University Arts Achievement Award. His publications include *The Trumpet Teacher's Guide*, along with several etudes and transcriptions for trumpet, piccolo trumpet, and brass quintet.

Vincent Persichetti composed 168 pieces and is known for his superb compositional craftsmanship and thorough knowledge of instrumentation. His style is soundly American—for the most part tonal, but often including atonal and modal elements. He was strongly committed to writing music for winds, and important woodwind and brass works are found in his *Parables* (primarily for solo instruments), the *Serenades*, and

his many compositions for concert band (notably *Divertimento*, *Pageant*, and *Symphony No. 6*). His compositions for trumpet include *Parable XIV* for solo trumpet, *Fanfare* for two trumpets, *Parable XXV* for two trumpets, *The Hollow Men* for trumpet and string orchestra, and *The Pleiades* for solo trumpet, chorus, and string orchestra. Persichetti was also a virtuoso pianist who wrote twelve piano sonatas, a concertino for piano and orchestra, and a piano concerto.² In the May 1968 festival where he conducted the premiere of *The Pleiades*, he also conducted his Piano Concerto with Anthony di Bonaventura, who had performed the work's premiere as soloist in 1964.³

The origins of *The Pleiades* began in 1966 with a letter from Helen Hosmer, director of the Crane Department of Music, to Persichetti, asking him for the "commission of a choral and orchestral work in my honor," to be funded by the Crane Alumni Association.⁴ Persichetti accepted the commission,⁵ and after correspondence with the Crane Alumni Association president,⁶ the fee of \$2500 was agreed upon, and the concert dates of May 10 and 12, 1968, were set by the new director of Crane.⁷

Once on campus in 1968 for the premiere, Persichetti sat for an interview with the college newspaper, *The Racquette*, in which he discussed composing the piece.⁸ He felt strongly that he would never accept a commission under strict stipulations, saying that he would "never write on commission unless it coincides with something I want to do." Rather, if commissioned, he would submit a piece that he had already begun. In 1966, he was in the process of writing two works, one of which became *The Pleiades*, completed by June

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Facing page: Vincent Persichetti. Photo credit: William Thompson, courtesy of the College Archives and Special Collections, SUNY Potsdam College Libraries

1967. In the interview, Persichetti described Walt Whitman as his favorite poet, whose “On the Beach at Night” had been used for the text. In the musical work, the idea of a soft night on a beach is interrupted by “irritants,” specifically the viola section and the solo trumpet. Persichetti considered the trumpet integral to the piece, but he was worried about the trumpet part. It “had to be unusually difficult... because it was demanded by the music.” He also had great praise for Gordon Mathie, saying that he “played so wonderfully, he gave me security in the premiere with his ability to get the kind of qualities of tone that the piece demands.” After the two performances, Persichetti wrote to Hosmer, saying, “*The Pleiades* is a very special piece to me,” and ended the newspaper interview by relating that it was one of his favorite compositions. Over the years, Persichetti stayed in contact with Mathie (as well as

this author, who was in graduate school at the time) and often mentioned Persichetti’s fondness for the work.¹⁰

There are relatively few subsequent performances on record, including the following:

- 1 North Texas State University Choir, March 8, 1969 (Jan Ellerd, piano; William DeJong, trumpet)¹¹
- 2 Goliard Chamber Orchestra and Astoria Chorale, October 30, 1985 (Patricia Handy, conductor; James Hamlin, trumpet)¹²
- 3 New England Conservatory Philharmonia and Chamber Singers, March 7 and 25, 1996 (Tamara Brooks, conductor; Christopher Still, trumpet)¹³

A complete audio recording of the premiere performance with Gordon Mathie and the Crane ensembles is available to stream at the *Crane School History Project* website.¹⁴

Three versions of the score are available from Theodore Presser—a full conductor’s score, a full study score, and a piano/vocal reduction score that includes the complete solo trumpet part as a separate line (also available from Amazon.com). The vocal/string/trumpet parts are also available for rental from Presser.

On November 4, 2017, the author conducted a telephone interview with his father, Gordon Mathie, about his recollections of the first performance of *The Pleiades* and about working with Persichetti during the week of the festival.¹⁵

David Mathie: *The Pleiades was commissioned by the Crane Alumni Association in 1967 to honor Helen Hosmer, who had recently retired as the director of the Crane Department of Music. Did you hear anything about the piece back then, prior to the premiere?*

Gordon Mathie: Not about the piece, just that the Crane Alumni Association had made the offer of a commission and then received a message from him that he didn’t do commissions, but that if he was working on something and they liked it, they could buy it.

David: *Did you get a copy of the trumpet part in advance?*

Gordon: Yes, probably two or three weeks in advance.

David: *What did you think when you got it?*

Gordon: Horror!

David: *Oh no! Why?*

Gordon: Because it is a difficult, difficult piece. There are some runs in there that seemed as if he didn’t write what I wanted to play; they were a little bit different from standard diatonic runs. Some of the intervals were



Gordon Mathie.

Courtesy of the College Archives and Special Collections, SUNY Potsdam College Libraries

awkward; I remember there was one major seventh going up to a high C, and that's a little scary on the C trumpet.

David: *Did you talk to him about any of these concerns you had before he arrived on campus?*

Gordon: No. I didn't think it was my place to express any concerns. I had some questions, but they were not concerns—like the bucket or barrel marking. [In the ending cadenza, there is an indication play into a large bucket.] I just wanted clarification.

David: *Did you discuss with him anything else about the piece before he showed up for the first rehearsal?*

Gordon: No, except that I knew that I had a lot of practicing to do!

David: *Tell me about the bucket indications. For instance, what was in the part, and what did you ask him?*

Gordon: It just said "bucket," and then there was a rapid change; one note was open, then the next note was in the bucket. My question to him was, "You can't put a bucket mute in that quickly." He answered, "No, I meant a barrel."

David: *So, then what happened? What did you do?*

Gordon: Well, he answered and said, "No, I was thinking of a bucket, the kind that movers use when they move china." That made it very clear to me. I had to have Bob Mero [technical assistant to the director of the Crane Department of Music] make a barrel—no problem.

David: *Do you remember any other comments or advice from Persichetti, other than the barrel?*

Gordon: No. Everything in the part was very clear. Not easy, but clear.

David: *How many rehearsals did you have before the first performance?*

Gordon: I think I had three rehearsals. His first three rehearsals were just with the chorus—not even the strings or me.

David: *Did he ever mention balance issues between the trumpet and the orchestra?*

Gordon: No. All of the dynamic markings were very clear, and they fit with what the strings and the choir were doing. He would correct some balance things between the strings and chorus, but never "too loud" or "too soft" to me.

David: *Did he say anything to you about how you were playing the solo part? Did he have any suggestions?*

Gordon: No. After we agreed about the bucket/barrel notation, he never said a thing to me and never looked at me. If he had something to correct, he would have said it, because he certainly corrected the strings and the chorus. No, he never said a word to me.

David: *He conducted the first performance of The Pleiades [as well as his Piano Concerto on another concert]. What were your impressions of him as a conductor?*

Gordon: He was very clear, not dramatic. The beats were there, and you knew where to put the notes.

David: *When you came to the first rehearsal, where did you sit? Did you sit in front of the orchestra as if you were a soloist in a concerto?*

Gordon: I sat in the third row back, where the first flute would normally sit. Persichetti never said a word. I just came to the first rehearsal and decided that was where I was going to sit, and he never wanted any change. I picked it, because it

was right in line with him, and I felt it was a good spot; he obviously agreed, because he never said to move right, left, up, or down.

David: *Do you think Persichetti considered this piece to be a trumpet concerto or an orchestral piece that happened to have one solo wind instrument—trumpet?*

Gordon: It was not a concerto, which would usually start with a statement of the theme and then variations. No, it was definitely an orchestral part.

David: *Is there anything you would like to say to trumpet players reading this who most likely have never heard of this piece? Can you offer any opinions or advice?*

Gordon: Oh, I think it's a terrific piece!

David: *Especially with the unusual instrumentation—chorus, strings, and trumpet—would it be worth the difficulty of getting the forces together to perform it?*

Gordon: Yes, it is a good piece! It is a very, very difficult piece, and I mean everyone—not just the trumpet, but also the strings and the voices. When you hear the piece, you know you're going to have to have a pretty good chorus. It is an orchestral piece for the trumpet. It is not like a Bach piece for the trumpet, but a contemporary piece where you're not playing all the time, but when you are playing, it is important and often difficult. Persichetti was very meticulous about dynamics. Boy, there was never any doubt in my mind what the dynamic was at any time.

David: *We know that Persichetti would study an instrument in great detail before writing a piece for it. Even though you said it is very difficult and there are passages that push the trumpet player, do you think it is a well-written piece for the trumpet?*

Gordon: Oh yes. Everything in the part is possible—just hard!

"Everything in the part is possible—just hard!"

"All of the dynamic markings were very clear, and they fit with what the strings and the choir were doing."

About the author: David Mathie is professor emeritus at Boise State University, where he was professor of trombone, euphonium, and music education from 1992 until his retirement in 2014; he was also the associate department chair for seven years. He served as a regular reviewer for the *International Trombone Association Journal* Literature and Audio/Visual columns, contributed many articles to that journal and other publications, and was a member of the ITA Research Committee. He holds degrees from Ithaca College, The Juilliard School, and the University of Georgia. He has per-

formed with the Hartford, Stamford, and Connecticut symphonies, the Hudson Valley Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera (as an extra on trombone and euphonium), and the Boise Philharmonic. As a transcriber and arranger of brass music, Dr. Mathie's publishers include Alessi Publications, Balquhider Music, Cherry Classics, Kagarice Brass Editions, and Tuba-Euphonium Press.

Acknowledgments

Gary Galo, audio engineer emeritus, Crane School of Music
Robyn Hosley and Scott LaVine, Crane School of Music
emeriti professors and co-creators of the *Crane History Project* website
Raymond Mase, The Juilliard School

New York Public Library of the Performing Arts
 Andrea Olmstead, author of *Vincent Persichetti: Grazioso, Grit and Gold*, published by Rowman & Littlefield, November 2018
 Maryalice Perrin-Mohr, archivist/records manager, New England Conservatory
 John Rojak, American Brass Quintet and The Juilliard School
 Larry Alan Smith, president, Vincent Persichetti Society
 Jack Sutte, Cleveland Orchestra

- 14 "Crane School of Music History Project," SUNY Potsdam, accessed July 24, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/itg1910p>.
- 15 Gordon Mathie, interview by author, November 4, 2017.



Endnotes

- 1 Walter Simmons, "Persichetti, Vincent," in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 3:539.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Concert program dated May 11, 1968, Crane School of Music, SUNY Potsdam, Potsdam, NY.
- 4 Helen Hosmer to Vincent Persichetti, February 3, 1966, in Box 26, *Correspondence*, Folder 14, *Vincent Persichetti Papers, 1918 – 1996*, and undated (bulk 1930 – 1987), JPB 90-77, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.
- 5 Helen Hosmer to Vincent Persichetti, March 1, 1966, in Box 26 *Correspondence*, Folder 14, *Vincent Persichetti Papers, 1918 – 1996*, and undated (bulk 1930 – 1987), JPB 90-77, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.
- 6 Margaret Minotti to Vincent Persichetti, March 5, 1966, in Box 26 *Correspondence*, Folder 14, *Vincent Persichetti Papers, 1918 – 1996*, and undated (bulk 1930 – 1987), JPB 90-77, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.
- 7 Ralph Wakefield to Vincent Persichetti, October 26, 1967, in Box 26 *Correspondence*, Folder 14, *Vincent Persichetti Papers, 1918 – 1996*, and undated (bulk 1930 – 1987), JPB 90-77, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.
- 8 John L. Simson, "Persichetti Leads Chorus and Symphony in Festival Program," *The Racquette*, May 17, 1968. <https://tinyurl.com/itg1910o>.
- 9 Helen Hosmer to Vincent Persichetti, May 1968, in Box 26 *Correspondence*, Folder 14, *Vincent Persichetti Papers, 1918 – 1996*, and undated (bulk 1930 – 1987), JPB 90-77, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.
- 10 Gordon Mathie to Vincent Persichetti, July 1977, in Box 12 *Correspondence*, Folder 13, *Vincent Persichetti Papers, 1918 – 1996*, and undated (bulk 1930 – 1987), JPB 90-77, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.
- 11 Concert program dated March 8, 1969, in Box 115 *Programs*, Folder 15, *Vincent Persichetti Papers, 1918 – 1996*, and undated (bulk 1930 – 1987), JPB 90-77, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.
- 12 Tim Page, "Music: Goliard," concert review of *The Pleiades*, *New York Times*, November 1, 1985.
- 13 Concert programs dated March 7 and 25, 1996, Blumenthal Family Library, The New England Conservatory of Music, Boston, MA.