



AMERICAN CLASSICS



# PERSICHETTI

## Harpsichord Sonatas

Christopher D. Lewis



<b>Harpsichord Sonata No. 1, Op. 52 (1951)</b>	<b>10:40</b>
① I. Andante sostenuto – Allegro	3:53
② II. Adagio	2:53
③ III. Vivace	3:54
<b>Harpsichord Sonata No. 3, Op. 149 (1983)</b>	<b>9:58</b>
④ I. Allegro moderato	3:06
⑤ II. Adagietto	3:42
⑥ III. Allegro molto	3:10
<b>Harpsichord Sonata No. 5, Op. 152 (1984)</b>	<b>11:57</b>
⑦ I. Moderato	5:26
⑧ II. Andante	2:07
⑨ III. Allegro	4:24
<b>Harpsichord Sonata No. 8, Op. 158 (1987)</b>	<b>11:09</b>
⑩ I. Andante sostenuto	4:26
⑪ II. Allegro ma grazioso	2:10
⑫ III. Allegro con moto	4:33
<b>Harpsichord Sonata No. 9, Op. 163 (1987)</b>	<b>14:36</b>
⑬ I. Moderato	7:08
⑭ II. Andantino	2:48
⑮ III. Allegro	4:40
<b>Serenade No. 15, Op. 161 (1987)</b>	<b>6:56</b>
⑯ 1. Prelude	1:31
⑰ 2. Episode	1:01
⑱ 3. Bagatelle	1:14
⑲ 4. Arioso	1:43
⑳ 5. Capriccio	1:27

#### Instruments

Pleyel Harpsichord from the 1930s originally purchased by the Eaton Auditorium in Toronto. Flemish double harpsichord by Kevin Fryer, San Francisco, 1997. Based on the work of Ionnes Ruckers, 1638.

*Sonatas Nos. 1, 3 and 5* are played on the Pleyel harpsichord.  
*Sonatas Nos. 8 and 9* and *Serenade* are played on the Fryer harpsichord.

## Vincent Persichetti (1915–1987)

### Harpsichord Sonatas

The harpsichord is renowned for its distinguished historical pedigree extending from the renaissance era to the early nineteenth century. Its sad decline in popularity among composers and the public was due to the appeal of the newly invented pianoforte. Yet the elegant beauty and characteristic sonorities of the harpsichord and its extensive repertoire were not allowed to be forgotten. Since the late nineteenth century there was a revival of the instrument which has grown and flourished ever since with the active participation of many composers, performers, and, of course, instrument makers.

The development of the modern harpsichord is due, primarily, to an increasing interest in early music. This led to a dramatic rise in the production of instruments at the start of the twentieth century which were created as a modern alternative in reaction to the lack of historic harpsichords that were available. As a consequence an entirely new type of harpsichord was born, the 'revival' harpsichord. Useful modern additions such as pedals were crafted on to these instruments to control which sets of strings were being played and to couple the keyboards. Modern materials were often used in these instruments, usually to try and make them sound louder in the larger auditoriums of the day.

One of the pioneers of the twentieth-century revival of interest in the harpsichord was the great virtuoso Wanda Landowska. Between 1905 and 1912 she assisted in the development of a harpsichord built by Pleyel of Paris. This proved to be an entirely new design quite different from traditional constructional methods as it used a heavy case including a cast-iron frame. Pleyel produced a two keyboard instrument, equipped with a deep register called a sixteen-foot, sounding one octave below normal pitch. It also had two eight-foot registers, a coupler, and a lute-stop. The instrument was a curious hybrid between a piano and a harpsichord, in effect, a plucked piano. Landowska played a new model of the Pleyel harpsichord at the Breslau Bach Festival in 1912 and it was on this type of instrument that she performed, recorded and taught until her death in 1959.

The two harpsichords heard on this recording are a 1930s Pleyel harpsichord (known as the 'Eaton Pleyel' as it was purchased by the Toronto Eaton Auditorium) and a Flemish double harpsichord by Kevin Fryer. The latter was made in San Francisco in 1997 and based on the work of Ionnes Ruckers and his 1638 harpsichord.

One of the eminent exponents of a twentieth-century approach applied to the harpsichord was Vincent Persichetti, American composer, teacher, and pianist, born to an Italian father and German mother in Philadelphia. Persichetti began his musical education aged five at the Combs Conservatory where, as well as studying piano, organ, and double bass, he learned theory and composition with Russell King Miller. During his adolescence he was active as a church organist. After graduating from Combs in 1935 he became part of the faculty. Following the award of a doctorate at the Philadelphia Conservatory, Persichetti joined the teaching staff there in 1941. He took up a post at The Juilliard School in 1947, and was appointed chairman of the composition department (1963) and of the literature and materials department (1970).

His output of 120 compositions includes an opera, works for large instrumental ensembles (among them nine symphonies), choral music and solo songs, chamber and solo instrumental pieces, many keyboard works, and music for instructional purposes. His contribution to the harpsichord repertoire is unique among twentieth-century composers and constitutes a substantial body of work.

Persichetti's compositions cover a wide range of styles varying from diatonic simplicity to complex contrapuntal atonality. He commented how his works consisted of 'an amalgamation of techniques that I've inherited – not only the twentieth century. I think you can take divergent materials and give them unity and make them something.' In a lecture at DePaul University in 1985 Persichetti described his music as going 'from gracious to gritty very often. Sometimes it has a lot of serial in it: other pieces have less of that and are more tonal.' Persichetti

advised in the same lecture that his music was 'always enigmatic.'

*Sonata No. 1, Op. 52*, written in 1951, was premiered by Fernando Valenti on 10 January 1952, and published by Elkan-Vogel in 1973. Larry Palmer, harpsichordist and organist, described the sonata as 'wonderfully idiomatic for the instrument, a splendid prelude to the flowering of harpsichord sonatas late composed by Persichetti.'

The first movement is in sonata form prefaced by a slow introduction before the *Allegro*. The accompaniment to the opening *Andante sostenuto* consists of open fifths developing into larger intervals with thematic material contrasted above. The *Allegro* is characterized by a perpetual motion stimulated by alternating time signatures of 3/8 and 4/8.

The second movement, *Adagio*, is elongated by means of a slow basic pulse. It features a web of melodic and rhythmic patterns of increasing complexity. Though in modern idiom the filigree intricacy recalls baroque ornamentation. The last movement, *Vivace*, also in sonata form, is virtuosic with a vividly dynamic impetus. The interaction between keyboards creates a rich variety of tonalities idiomatic to the harpsichord.

*Sonata No. 3, Op. 149*, was commissioned by Elaine Comparone, an important figure who championed new harpsichord repertoire. The work was published in 1983. The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, in 6/8 time, is in sonata form. The work begins with an eight bar introduction before the first theme enters. Harmonically and rhythmically complex, the movement develops a dialog between left and right hands, each dependent on the other for the work's progressive integrity and thus truly virtuosic for the performer.

*Adagietto* contrasts episodes of contrapuntal textures with chordal patterns in a hymn-like 4/4 rhythm. A modified coda brings us cyclically towards the opening of the movement in a peaceful resolution of its tensions.

*Allegro molto* in 2/4 concludes the sonata, the stabilising chordal and rhythmic elements of the left hand contrasted against the brilliant articulations of the right hand.

*Sonata No. 5, Op. 152*, was commissioned by Arizona State University for John Metz, pianist and

harpsichordist, and published in 1984. For this composition Persichetti indicates possible harpsichord registrations, stop and manual changes, etc., in order 'to help clarify the expressive intent.' The composer's music requires a harpsichord with two keyboards, three sets of strings, a buff stop and a coupler. On each of the two keyboards a set of strings sounds at concert pitch while another set on the lower keyboard sounds an octave higher than written. The coupler allows the two keyboards to play all three sets of strings together. The buff (or 'lute') stop produces a more muted sound quality.

The first movement, *Moderato*, opens with a flowing melody supported by chords with intervals of fifths and sixths. After sixteen bars two-part writing takes over with chordal interventions occurring in contrasting episodes. *Andante*, the second movement, is marked *con espr. libertà* (with free expressiveness). A middle section in lively quavers intensifies the musical texture. Towards the end certain rhythmic figurations from the opening are repeated with harmonic modifications.

*Allegro*, marked *vigoroso*, is an extended movement full of inventiveness and vitality. The equality of both hands is significant throughout these passages of contrapuntal writing. Occasionally the textures of the first movement are evoked with accompanying chords supporting melodic fragments. It is significant that the bass resonances of the harpsichord are deployed in the final pages thus exploiting the entire tonal range of the instrument.

*Sonata No. 8, Op. 158*, commissioned by Michael Needle for Linda Kobler, harpsichordist and scholar, was published in 1987. The opening movement, though concise in its structure, is richly varied. The work begins with chordal patterns carefully voiced with a distinct melodic bass line. The second episode, marked *Meno mosso* (less animated), and *Ancora meno mosso* (still less animated) introduces a baroque-like filigree of detail, akin to recitative, until the return of the first tempo. Thus the movement proceeds with contrasts between the opening tempo and the brief less animated contrapuntal moments. These aspects are integrated in a short coda.

The second movement, *Allegro ma grazioso* in 4/4, is taken along at a fast tempo. The right hand melody involves the compositional technique of 'reverse chromaticism' in dotted rhythms in which chromatic scale fragments turn back on themselves. The left hand provides support in two-note chords for the first part against the right hand pulse of dotted rhythm but eventually the lower range of the keyboard is utilised to provide the chromatic patterns and syncopated movement.

*Allegro con moto*, the final movement, in 2/4 time, takes the form of a rondo-sonata. After an introductory section a series of elegant quaver figurations in the manner of a toccata, marked *con agilità*, dominate the texture till the left hand reverts to its chordal accompaniment. The work builds up into a brilliant finale demanding virtuosic dexterity.

*Sonata No. 9, Op. 163*, commissioned by the Arcady Music Festival for the pianist Masanobu Ikemiya, the founder of the festival, was published in 1987. The first movement presents lyrical melodic passages accompanied by left hand chords with intervals of thirds and fifths.

*Andantino*, the second movement, develops in phrases imitative of the first movement but in a calmer mood. Thematic elements from previous movements are evoked in the final *Allegro*. The animated dialogue between left and right hands and contrasting keyboards is a significant feature of this sonata.

Mirabella Anca Minut, a Persichetti scholar, commented: 'After the first movement of this sonata introduced an extended scalar motive as well as the soft

consonant intervals of thirds and sixths, these elements were further developed in the subsequent movements, thus generating a cyclic treatment of the thematic motives.'

*Serenade No. 15, Op. 161*, published in 1987 and commissioned by Larry Palmer, is part of a series of fifteen works of the same title for various combinations of instruments. The opening *Prelude* is a short lyrical composition with gently chromatic melodic touches and inventive chords in the accompaniment. *Episode* presents an energetic piece in which intricate rhythmic patterns make effective use of the harpsichord's staccato abilities. *Bagatelle* shares the spoils between the two keyboards in an ingenious display of elegant contrapuntal writing. *Arioso* in 6/8 time deploys a flowing bass against snatches of quavers in the treble. Finally, *Capriccio* offers a toccata-like brilliance to conclude the suite.

Graham Wade

Grateful acknowledgements in the writing of these notes is due to Dr. Mirabella Anca Minut and her dissertation *Style and Compositional Techniques in Vincent Persichetti's Ten Sonatas for Harpsichord* submitted to Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, in 2009.

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## Christopher D. Lewis



Photo: Drew Kelly

Christopher D. Lewis is a contemporary harpsichordist and a Naxos recording artist. Born in Rhiwbina, Wales, he moved to North America in 2005 to study harpsichord with Luc Beauséjour and Hank Knox at McGill University, Montreal. He completed a Master's of Music at the San Francisco Conservatory with Corey Jamason, both degrees with a specialization in contemporary music. In 2012 he joined the Naxos label and made a recording of modern harpsichord concertos (8.573146); this was followed by *20th Century Harpsichord Music* (8.573364) in 2014, and *British Music for Harpsichord* (8.573668) in 2015. Lewis is currently an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded PhD student at the University of Southampton in a project entitled The Making of the Modern Harpsichord, working with harpsichordist Jane Chapman and in conjunction with the National Trust. He also works as a university lecturer in the UK.

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Vincent  
**PERSICHETTI**  
(1915–1987)

**Harpsichord Sonatas**

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|--------------|--|--------------|
| <b>1-3</b>   | <b>Sonata No. 1, Op. 52 (1951)</b>         | <b>10:40</b> |
| <b>4-6</b>   | <b>Sonata No. 3, Op. 149 (1983)</b>        | <b>9:58</b>  |
| <b>7-9</b>   | <b>Sonata No. 5, Op. 152 (1984)</b>        | <b>11:57</b> |
| <b>10-12</b> | <b>Sonata No. 8, Op. 158 (1987)</b>        | <b>11:09</b> |
| <b>13-15</b> | <b>Sonata No. 9, Op. 163 (1987)</b>        | <b>14:36</b> |
| <b>16-20</b> | <b>Serenade No. 15,<br/>Op. 161 (1987)</b> | <b>6:56</b>  |

**Christopher D. Lewis**

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**AMERICAN CLASSICS**

The contribution of the American composer, teacher and pianist Vincent Persichetti to the harpsichord repertoire is unique among 20th-century composers. He wrote a diverse selection of music, including an opera and nine symphonies, while his substantial output for harpsichord offers a vivid and rich variety of expression. The ingenious contrapuntal writing alludes to baroque ornamentation while remaining firmly rooted in the contemporary idiom. Lyrical passages and technical brilliance abound with vitality and inventiveness.

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Playing  
Time:  
**65:16**