

Violinist found—and will premiere—lost sonata of Vincent Persichetti

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Vincent Persichetti, American composer (1915-1987). Photo: Courtesy of the University of Utah School of Music

(Phys.org)—A University of Utah violinist has made a once-in-a-career music discovery in a story that hints of Indiana Jones.

Hasse Borup, who is associate professor and head of string and chamber music studies at the U's School of Music, has uncovered a lost, 70-year old sonata by American composer Vincent Persichetti (1915-1987).

The piece, "Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano," was composed in 1941 and has never been heard in public. In fact, until Borup retrieved it in 2010, it had languished for decades in the storage archives of the New York Public Library.

Now, Borup will perform the sonata in a world premiere with Heather Conner, associate professor of piano at the U. The premiere will be Sunday, September 30, 2012 at 7:00 p.m. – part of the free "Sundays@7" faculty concert series – in Libby Gardner Hall on campus in [Salt Lake City](#).

A prelude to the concert will be a free, public lecture by Michael Chikinda on the sonata and Persichetti's repertoire. Chikinda is assistant professor of music theory at the U and has done extensive additional research on the project. The "Fridays with Faculty" lecture will be held Friday, September 28, 2012 at 12:00 noon in the Thompson Chamber Music Hall on campus.

"Persichetti is a much-neglected American composer," says Chikinda. "Through the talk and performance, listeners will have a rare opportunity to learn about Persichetti's life, his work, and where this piece fits within not only his oeuvre, but the canon of 20th century Art Music."

Borup continues, "It is extremely unusual—perhaps as rare as a total solar eclipse—to find a [piece of music](#) that has never been played. And it is particularly gratifying for a performer to be able to play something

altogether new."

In addition to September's premiere, the piece will be recorded at the U in October as part of a project to record Persichetti's complete repertoire for violin and piano, highly important compositions for the genre. Chikinda will write the liner notes for the CD.

"Persichetti's music was well regarded and widely performed by his contemporaries, but a surprising number of his works remain unrecorded," says Borup. "I hope our work helps to elevate his important contributions as an influential composer and remarkable educator."

The recordings are being made for the classical label, Naxos, and made possible with a University of Utah Creative Research Grant.

The Discovery

The hunt started when Borup began looking for music to expand the catalog of recorded American violin works. He planned a recording to follow his "American Fantasies," which featured works for violin and piano by Arnold Schoenberg and his students. Borup came upon the catalog of Persichetti, whose work fit the profile that Borup and the label were looking for. Even better, it was the right amount of music for a CD.

Borup began comparing lists from Persichetti's publisher and from the New York Public Library of Performing Arts, which holds the musical estate of the composer. During his research, he uncovered a discrepancy in the descriptions of the composer's inventory.

But after a fair amount of detective work on his part, Borup deduced that there was a work in the library's catalog with a name that didn't appear elsewhere.

Borup then had to gain permission of the composer's daughter, Lauren Persichetti, to sort through the works stored at the Library. She readily agreed, and several music librarians picked up the scent and set out to track down the missing piece. After some months, the trail led to a library storage archive in New Jersey.

The sheet music was finally extracted, scanned and emailed to a thrilled Borup.

However, the detective work wouldn't end there.

"As soon as I saw the score, I realized it was unusable in its current form," Borup relates. "It was handwritten, with notes and scribbles that were impossible to ascribe, and I knew that there was still significant work to be done before it could be played."

Research and Preparing to Perform the Music

Enter undergraduate composition student Dexter Drysdale.

With a grant from the University of Utah's Undergraduate Research Program, Drysdale was able to complete student research in support of the main project, spending nearly two semesters to create what is called a "critical edition" of the sonata.

Importantly, the manuscript Borup discovered was a complete piece, but far from finished. It was covered in "all these little optional notes written in hand on the edges of the paper," Drysdale notes. "It was like trying to break a code." And deciphering the handwriting was a distinct challenge.

The sonata is one of Persichetti's earlier works, written before his better-known compositions. "So it was probably written in the same manner I

write and work as a student—full of questions," says Drysdale.

Once he figured out that the sonata was a twelve-tone piece, he could rely on the rules of that structure to decide about pitches and even chords.

Using the music composition and notation software held a special perk for Drysdale, "I typed out the piece as I went and used the playback feature—which means I was one of the first people to hear that piece since Persichetti created it."

Borup notes that "Dexter's knowledge of the instruments and the process of composing music helped put forth editorial decisions about the piece, which were then vetted by several sets of musicians' eyes."

"It has been a unique and incredibly valuable experience for all of us to work on material of this significance," says Borup. "The finished product showcases an important period of his development as a composer. Each of the movements of the solo sonata explores the vast range of tone colors and special effects available on the instrument, but the virtuosic writing never over-shadows the serene simplicity of the musical structure. Best of all, the music world now has a playable score of a piece that reflects what Persichetti had in mind in 1941," he concludes.

Persichetti and His Influence

Vincent Persichetti, born in Philadelphia in 1915, was one of the most prolific and important American artists of the 20th century. He was a pianist, composer and teacher, training many noted composers as the head of composition at the Juilliard School. His body of work covers nearly every genre of classical music, from solo pieces to large-scale symphonic works. He wrote [music](#) for a wide variety of media including

orchestra, chorus, band, keyboard and individual instruments as well as one of the definitive books on modern compositional techniques, "Twentieth Century Harmony: Creative Aspects and Practice."

Provided by University of Utah

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