

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk

Citation

<u>Gregson, Edward.</u> 1978. 'Review of *Twentieth Century Harmony: Creative Aspects and Practice* by Vincent Persichetti'. *Contact*, 19. pp. 32. ISSN 0308-5066.



TWENTIETH CENTURY HARMONY: CREATIVE ASPECTS AND PRACTICE by Vincent Persichetti Faber, 1978 (£2.95)

EDWARD GREGSON

At £2.95 this book seems, on first appearances, to be a bargain for the student composer. However, on examining it a little closer, doubts start to develop. Firstly, it is a paperback reprint, without revision, of the version that originally appeared in 1962. This is a pity, for in the source materials that appear throughout the book, many examples of the intervening 16 years might have been added to advantage. This leads me directly on to the second point, which is that, quite frankly, too much of this source material is geared to the American scene, of which the 20th-century musical diet is obviously quite different from our own. For the life of me, I don't know where I could easily lay my hands on copies of Bruno Bettinelli's Sinfonia breve, Guido Turchi's Preludi e fughette per pianoforte, Easley Blackwood's First Symphony or Hugo Weisgall's Purgatory, but then perhaps that is my loss. This is one obvious drawback in transferring such a book as this to another market, though to be fair many of the examples suggested are very sensible and well-known. (Stravinsky, for example, is cited over 30 times.) But it is a sign of the book's dated quality, that in the section on clusters, Penderecki is not mentioned, though of course Cowell is.

The whole point of this book is that its function is practical. 20th-century harmonic techniques are here meant to be explored by putting pen to paper. (In this respect

it differs from Wilfrid Dunwell's *The Evolution of Twentieth Century Harmony*, which is purely historical and analytical, and which, to be honest, I much prefer for its all-round conciseness and clarity.) At the end of each chapter there is a list of 'applications' to be tried out by the eager student. Many of these are very sensible and are the sorts of exercises that teachers give composition students anyway. Unfortunately, the chapters themselves are often unnecessarily complicated and tend to be dull.

Aspects dealt with include such basic matters as chord-building by seconds (including clusters), by thirds (up to 17ths), and by fourths (including multi-note chords), polychords (both triadic and non-triadic), as well as digressions on 'Harmonic Directions' and 'Embellishment and Transformation'. The most spurious chapter is that on serial harmony, and the best (one that should be expanded)

is that on rhythm and dynamics.

COLUMN TO WAR THE THE PARTY OF

One is loth to dismiss a book such as this, particularly as there is such a shortage of relevant material for the student, but it must be explored with great care. I certainly cannot agree with the over-generous blurb which states that is 'one of the most important books on contemporary music to appear in this century'. I wonder who could have written that?