

# The Colorful Music of Robert Starer

BY JUSTIN KOLB

**R**obert Starer is a composer and pianist whose music I have come to love, perform, and record over the last ten years. He is the recipient of a distinguished professorship from Brooklyn College, two Guggenheim Fellowships, Austria's Medal of Honor for Science and Art, and he is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Starer was born in Vienna in 1924 and entered the State Academy of Music at the age of 13. Soon after Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938, he went to Jerusalem and continued music study at the Palestine Conservatoire. During World War II he joined the British Air Force, then in 1947 moved to New York for post-graduate work at The Juilliard School and study with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood in 1948.

Starer's music is performed by seasoned virtuosos as well as students. His works for the stage include three operas and ballets for Martha Graham and Anna Sokolow; and his orchestral works have been performed by major orchestras worldwide under such conductors as Mitropoulos, Bernstein, Steinberg, Leinsdorf, Ozawa, and Mehta. Interpreters of his music include Leontyne Price, Roberta Peters, Itzhak Perlman, and Janos Starker.

Starer's memoir *Continuo: A Life in Music* (Random House) was published in 1987, and excerpts from it have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Musical America*, and the *London Times*. *The Music Teacher* (The Overlook Press), his first work of fiction, was published in 1997.

*How different is the process of writing an easy piano solo from a difficult sonata?*

It is the same although I might not include any octaves for a student piece because a small hand

cannot reach an octave. These choices do not alter the mental process or quality of the music. Robert Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, composed in 1838, is a supreme example of such pieces. One publisher asked me for pieces that would be fun for students, such as games with names. The result was a piece called *Turn Around*. The page can be turned upside down and played that way too. Even composition students ask how I did that, but Mozart wrote such pieces and so did Haydn. This is not a new idea and not difficult if you know how to approach the harmonies. Composing for the piano is best done

by people who play and love the piano. In the 20th century the majority of piano music was written by people who play the instrument well and love it. They know what is technically difficult and what is easy.

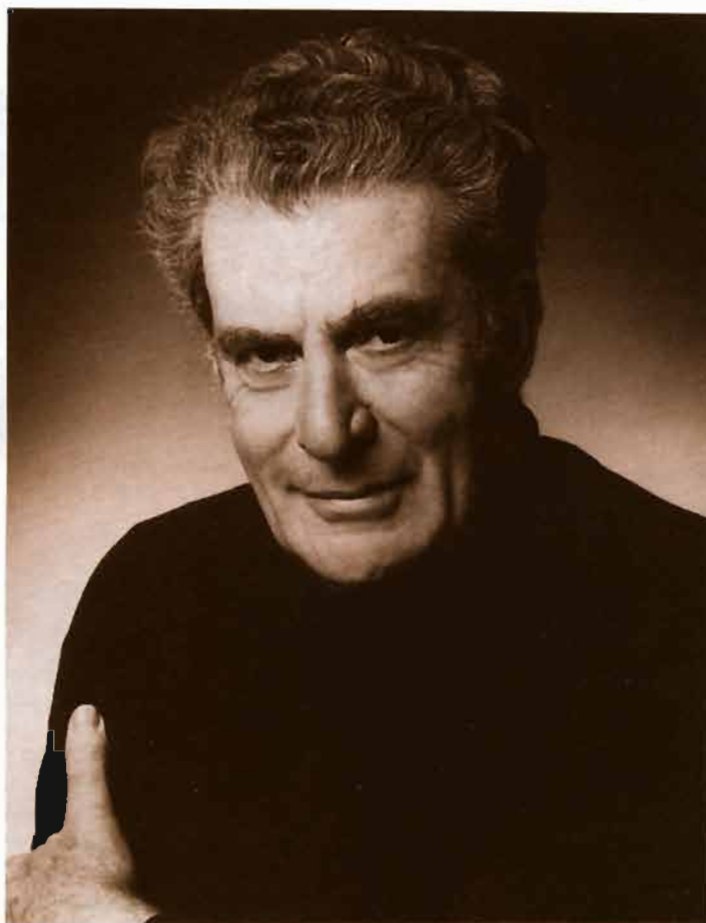
*Was the Prelude and Toccata for Piano your first composition?*

It is the first one I will admit to. At the age of 11, I wrote a little piece for my father's birthday that is played with crossed hands. I mention it in *The Contemporary Virtuoso*, which was recently published by Alfred; it inspired a new young person's piece that requires crossed hands from beginning to end. There were quite a

few student works among my early compositions, but I don't admit to them and didn't keep copies.

*What was the inspiration for your piano suite Sketches in Color?*

During a stay at the MacDowell Colony I met a woman who painted scenes depicting nature. I would lie in the grass and watch as she mixed the paints and painted. My major work wasn't going very well, so I decided to use her paints and colors for inspiration. The result was *Sketches in Color*. Teachers tell me children play these pieces and



make others guess which color is represented. Children especially respond to "Pink," and they certainly notice the 12-tone piece "Silver and Gold." The only other 12-tone piece is "Gray," written in the 1960s after Boulez made 12-tone composition an essential musical language. I wrote it to demonstrate that you can make music within such limitations and it doesn't have to sound dreary.

*What is it about each piece that suggests color?*

I find "Bright Orange," which is a strong, noticeable color, a little jazzy and simply syncopated; the most important element is the rhythmic precision of the syncopated notes. The left hand moves in parallel triads and remains in essentially the same position, unlike most pieces in which the hand remains stationary and only the fingers work. Be careful with the pedal in "Bright Orange," and use it sparingly for special effects. The movement "Pink," on the other hand, should have a beautiful singing melody, which is sung with the inner voice. It calls for nuances of dynamics and character ranging from very gentle to more intense. Each statement of the melody is slightly different as it shifts quickly from one tonality to another. These shifts should be noticeable with changes in dynamics. Because pink is a very sweet color, this movement is the most tonal piece of the set.

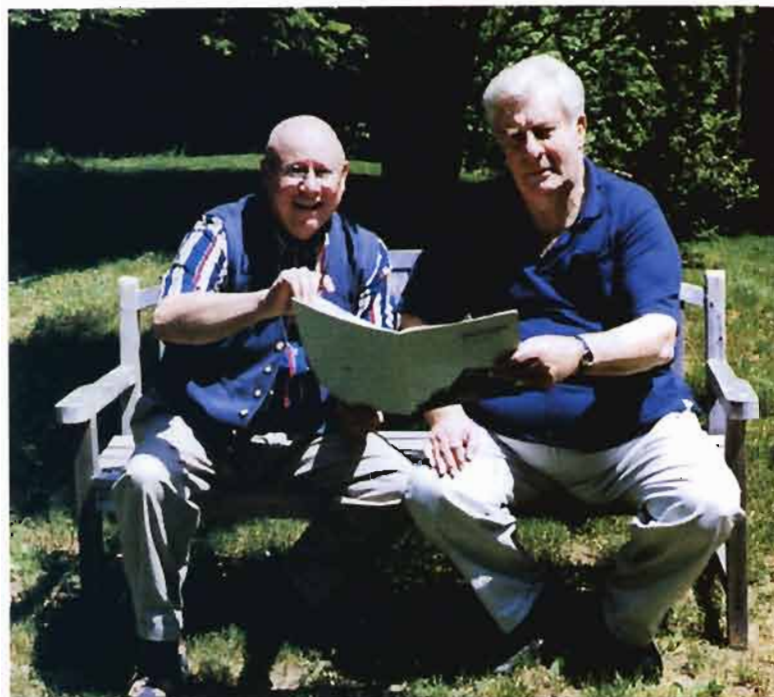
*What were your earliest musical experiences?*

As a five-year-old I could name pitches and improvise, and my parents sent me to a piano teacher I didn't like very much. His teaching was based solely on repetition. However, he was interested in politics so I engaged him in political discussions with my mother as a distraction. By age 13 I was the youngest student to enter the State Academy, a college-age institution. A very strict teacher gave me finger exercises that I still work on when I have been away from the piano for several weeks. While I performed these exercises, he used to sit there and play other music on the second piano, obviously not listening to the exercises.

I wrote some of my early pieces when I was in my late teens and early 20s and had joined the British Air Force as a soldier. In North Africa the senior officer was so impressed with my playing on a captured German piano that he had me spend the rest of my military service playing piano concerts for

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*Justin Kolb, a distinguished alumnus of DePaul University, is a pianist who promotes music by living American composers; in 2000 he will premiere compositions of John Downey, William Ferris, and Peter Schickele. Kolb is a regular performer at the American Liszt Society's Great Romantics festival in Ontario, and this year will perform in the Chopin Festival in El Paso, Texas. A speaker at colleges and conservatories in the United States and Canada, he is known for his workshop for young audiences, Why Music Students are Special or How to Avoid Becoming a Nerd.*



*Pianist Justin Kolb reviews a piano collection with Robert Starer.*

British troops, composing and playing the harp in the orchestra.

*Did you listen to popular music as a youngster?*

I grew up in Vienna, where popular music was different from popular music in America. In beer gardens they played so-called *Schrammeln* music, which is written in predictable four-bar phrases.

When I was a composer-in-residence at Marlboro, 40 years ago, Pablo Casals commented during a masterclass that "Americans play everything too fast and too loud." For me such admiration for virtuosity is very understandable, and I share it. That is the big difference between concert music and popular music, which is constructed so everybody can play it. The sound has to be in the range of every human voice – which a Mozart aria is not – so the idea is different. When you write virtuosic music it is for people who are brilliant performers.

*Did you ever write or arrange popular music?*

I arranged folk songs as staff pianist and arranger for a Jerusalem radio station. People would come in with music scribbled on a dirty piece of paper, and my job included making up the accompaniments usually in a key different from what was written. Transposing was absolutely essential; if a broadcast was only half an hour away, I had to quickly make up accompaniments for almost anything.

*What other special skills have you cultivated as a pianist and composer?*

During my early years at Juilliard I taught keyboard harmony and played realizations of figured bass as well as keyboard reductions of string quartets and symphonies. Later the school dropped this course, and now it seems that no one believes a piano student needs such skills.

Some of your classes at Juilliard, if not legendary, are widely remembered. I remember a story in which two pianists performed a four-hand arrangement of something you assigned. They finished quite proudly, looked at you at the end of the piece and now, years later, realize you were being very kind to say, "Perhaps it could have been done a bit more elegantly."

I taught many classes related to the piano; one was called keyboard harmony and another was accompanying. One of my students, Sam Sanders, now runs it and is famous around the world. They had some incredible people in those classes.

*Do you compose at the keyboard?*

Yes, when writing for piano, but not for choral or orchestral music, although I go to the piano and try things out.

*Many composers maintain an idea notebook. Do you?*

Of the two composers who influenced my early life, Prokofiev carried notes for years so I followed his example. Prokofiev sometimes used an idea that had been in his notebook for several years. Later, as a student at Tanglewood, I met Darius Milhaud who said, "If you can't use an idea throw it out. If you can't have another idea then, you are not a composer." I have followed his advice more than that of Prokofiev and haven't kept a notebook for a long time. Still, I admire Prokofiev for his wonderful ideas and certainly as a composer for the piano.

As a student I played Prokofiev's *Vision Fugitives*, which was ideal for me: short statements of bright ideas with no long extensions or developments, just a sharp picture. My *Sketches in Color* follow that and were directly influenced by it. I also played Prokofiev's Sonata #2 for flute or violin

with a violinist. I like the violin concerto and, of course his Piano Concerto #3, especially the second movement.

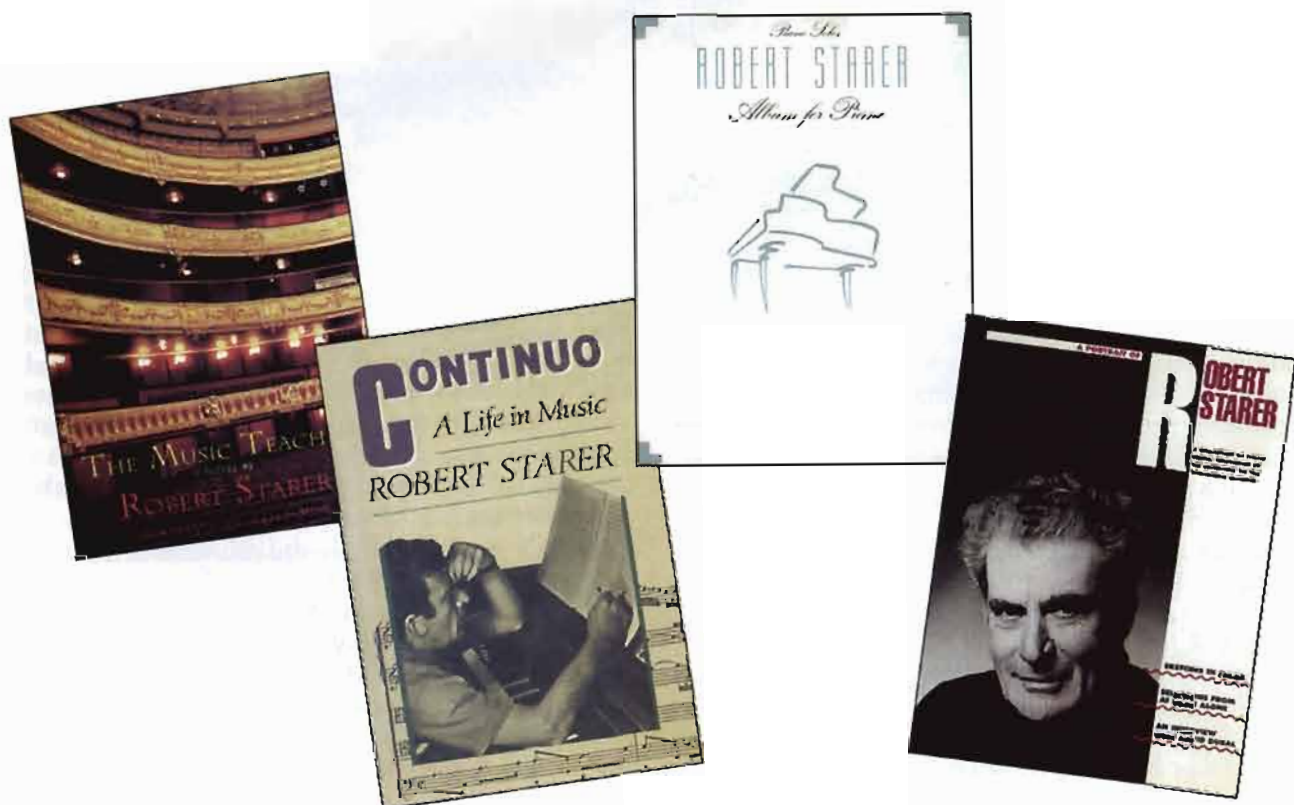
As a composer it is interesting to hear how differently people play your music. It can be a joy, and it can be disastrous. Consider the time it takes to perform a piece: one person may take 12 minutes and another takes only 10, which shows how different interpretations can be. Of course, this leads to the disagreements between concert artists and the tempos they use. Of the musicians who regularly perform my music, interpretations vary from performance to performance. That is human and it is understandable.

*When initiating a new composition, do you begin with the form or begin writing immediately and allow the form to follow function?*

Form does follow function, but I do have a concept of the entire work before I begin. Initially, I didn't know how many movements Sonata #3 would have. It was going to be called *Sonata Lyrica* but in the end it was not so lyrical. The last movement is really quite brilliant and requires stamina and force, which are not lyrical qualities, so I do not always know what will happen. I will change as new ideas come up; I don't rigidly follow a plan.

*Are there works of yours that you don't like?*

I had a brief Boulez period in the 1960s, when he was so dominant, and wrote my Sonata #2. It was performed, recorded, and discussed in magazines; but I am not terribly fond of it. This was a brief, atonal period, but some people say this is my best period. A 12-tone admirer wrote the text of my first entry in *Grove's* and stated that my best music was



written in the 1960s, but I don't think so. I was irritated and wrote a letter asking that the next entry be changed. In those years Boulez ruled the musical world, much like a dictatorship or a fascist state. Only those who wrote 12-tone or atonal music received any public approval. I wanted to find out whether it was possible to humanize the system, in other words, to use it but remain myself. In 1965 I wrote *Mutabili*, an orchestral piece for William Steinberg and the Pittsburgh Symphony. Although they recorded the work, it was not for me. I dabbled in electronic music and was one of the first to use the Moog Synthesizer. I still feel that even though it can do many things, it cannot produce beautiful sounds, so I don't use it. Minimalism just bores me to tears. It is difficult to listen to the same thing repeatedly because it induces something like a drugged state; it is like wallpaper. All these things had a fashionable period, but 12-tone composition is more serious.

*How do you feel about your piano concertos?*

The third concerto was written for David Bar-Illan shortly after my Boulez period. It is not my favorite kind of work. The second one is about 40 years old and is outliving the others. I made a band version of it. There is a topic I would like to touch on from one of the four theses written about my piano music. One author made the observation that with the exception of the sonatas almost all of my pieces have an evocative title. It is true. My piano pieces come from some human gesture, or picture, or emotion that gives me the title, for example, *At Home Alone*. Even in the *Three Israeli Sketches* each movement has an individual title. *Dialogue With The Self* is a title that represents the back and forth people experience when they have to make decisions from the dark or light side of their character. It is a very serious piece. *Deep Down the Soul* is my title; I wanted the word soul in it because the piece is a bit like a chorale and a bit like a spiritual.

In contrast *Pop Time* and *Herman The Brown Mouse* are not serious. Years ago we had a very lazy cat and a mouse that clearly lived in the house. One evening the cat was asleep in front of the fire while the mouse, who we named Herman, ran across the room. The mouse ran and the cat woke up but didn't catch him. Some pianists program the piece back-to-back with Copland's *The Cat and the Mouse*; its formal title is *Scherzo Humoristique*, and it was the first work Copland published. He was a student of Nadia Boulanger and played it for her; they published it in Paris.

I studied with Copland in the summer of 1948 and even asked him for a recommendation. He not only sent the recommendation but a postcard saying, "Your recommendation is in the mail." I have done that for students ever since. Copland was a fine man, a real gentleman.



Robert Starer was a harpist with the British Air Force Orchestra.

In class sessions he gave us two bars of his music and asked us to orchestrate them. In my orchestration a different instrument played almost every note, and he loved it. At Tanglewood Copland was in charge of a public debate on women as composers: Leonard Bernstein argued for the faculty and I argued for the students. Incidentally, Bernstein said men compose because they can't have children.

*Was Milhaud an early influence?*

Yes. Darius Milhaud and Aaron Copland were the composition teachers during my student days at Tanglewood, and while working with Copland I got to know Milhaud and liked him personally. He worked in ink – which only Mozart has done before – because he didn't need to erase, and he was extraordinarily prolific. He advised me to never use folk tunes but to write new ones, and I did so. I did not play much of Milhaud. In retrospect I find him an uneasy composer: he wrote too much, and it came too easily. Not all his pieces are of the same quality.

*For which compositions would you like to be remembered and why?*

That is not in my hands. I worked hard on many pieces that are dead; I also quickly and easily wrote many that are very much alive. This week I received three new C.D.s of my music, a choral piece, a trumpet composition, and my piano trio,

and this is how pieces survive. These pieces are all close to 40 years old, and that is pretty long when you think of how many pieces have one or two performances and are entirely forgotten.

*Do composers approach publishers or do publishers approach composers?*

That depends. For many years I had an exclusive contract with MCA Music, which published two of my major works and two small works each year. In those days MCA had a large classical music department and tried to publish music of every style, such as 12-tone, jazz, and so forth. I have since worked with other publishers, but almost all of my piano music is still with MCA or Hal Leonard. My brass music is published with Robert King Music, which specializes in brass music. My band music is with a company that publishes only band music.

Nowadays, of course, everyone has a computer and can create nice looking music at home. Both desktop publishing and photocopying disastrously affect music publishing. At concerts a chorus of 200 singers may have photocopies of a composer's music, which means that instead of buying 200 pieces of music the director bought one. Decent people don't do that.

*When an individual commissions a work, does he also suggest a format, size, genre, or style for the piece?*

If the commission is for a specific performer, which I've done several times in my life, I take that performer's qualities into consideration. David Bar-Illan has great technical prowess and can play tremendous octaves in both hands, yet he has a delicate staccato in the upper register. I kept these qualities in mind when writing the third piano concerto. My violin concerto was written for Itzhak Perlman. We share an Israeli background, and I decided to draw upon this. In the second movement there is a glissando to a single note, first from above and then from below the pitch in imitation of an instrument called the oud that the Arabs play. Itzhak understood what I wanted without any explanation.

Writing for a specific performer is perhaps the best circumstance. Brahms wrote for Joachim. I wrote a cello concerto for Janos Starker, who has a natural elegance and the ability to sustain a musical idea, so the piece is continuous rather than separate movements. Starker made specific suggestions during a collaborative session that made

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# Pink

From *Sketches in Color*

Not too fast, with sentiment ( $\text{♩} = 60$ )

BY ROBERT STARER

The musical score for "Pink" is presented in five systems of piano notation. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The piece begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The first system includes a *p* dynamic marking. The second system includes a *p* dynamic marking. The third system includes a *poco f* dynamic marking. The fourth system includes a *mf* dynamic marking. The fifth system includes a *pp* dynamic marking and a *poco rit.* instruction. The score features various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and fingerings.

"Pink" is from the piano suite *Sketches in Color* by Robert Starer. © 1964 MCA Music Publishing, A Division of Universal Studios, Inc. Copyright renewed. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission. (Distributed by Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 7777 West Blue Mound Road, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.)

the concerto more effective. Of course, final decisions are always made by the composer.

*Tell us about your relationship with Janos Starker.*

We are about the same age, and I like his playing. On a program where he played Dohnányi, Gerard Schwarz conducted my *Concerto A Quattro*. Afterward there was a dinner party and someone said "Starer, Starker, why don't you two get together?" Starker said it was not a bad idea, and Schwarz was interested so I wrote a Cello Concerto for Janos Starker. Gerard Schwarz conducted the première. Starker recently played my piece for four cellos in Toyko and my *Elegy For A Woman Who Died Too Young* for violin at the funeral of a friend of his.

Composing for a dancer is a different experience altogether. Robert Frost, now well respected in Hollywood, gave me a detailed plan right down to the number of bars of a certain type of music, but Martha Graham only roughly described what she thought the piece was to be about, and I wrote what I wanted. Recently I completed a piece for chorus. The director wanted a joyful-sounding text to celebrate the centenary of a university and suggested a text. Instead, I used a wonderful Whitman text, *The Sound of Joys*. I don't find it offensive at all when a particular length is suggested, and neither did Stravinsky, by the way. He liked limitations.

*Do you still play through the English and French Suites of Bach?*

Yes. My pleasure playing is largely Bach. I also use Bach to get my fingers back into shape because he uses the left hand in a way that later music does not. I particularly like the Preludes of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, some of which are really technical exercises for the keyboard.

*Do you think it is important for children to take music lessons even though they may not end up playing professionally?*

If you make music as a child you will have a deep understanding of it later in life, and it gives you the pleasure only music can give.

*Do you think it makes you a better person?*

It is one of the greatest pleasures of life. It doesn't make you morally or ethically superior but it gives you a knowledge of taste as well as a knowledge of the past. It gives you a great many things. □

## Calendar

Music Academy of the West (Santa Barbara, California) includes concerts, solo recitals, and a complete staging of Handel's rarely performed opera *Rodelinda*. (Diane Eagle, 1070 Fairway Road, Santa Barbara, California; phone 805-969-4726)

July 1-August 14

Aspen Music Festival and School (Aspen, Colorado) celebrates its 50th season with concerts by Misha Dichter, Joseph Kalichstein, Yefim Bronfman, and Vladimir Feltsman. (Aspen Music Festival, 2 Music School Road, Aspen, Colorado; phone 970-925-3254)

July 1-August 22

Norfolk Chamber Music Festival (Norfolk, Connecticut) features the world première of Christopher Theofanides' Piano Quartet and a two-piano performance by Claude Frank and Lilian Kallir. (Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, Ellen Batell Stoeckel Estate, Box 545, Norfolk, Connecticut; phone 860-542-3000; fax 860. 542.3004)

July 1-August 26

Ravinia Festival 1999 Season (Highland Park, Illinois) features the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; guests include pianists Mischa and Cipa Dichter, Ramsey Lewis, Andreas Haefliger, Alicia de Larrocha, and Leon Fleisher. (Ravinia Festival, 400 Iris Lane, Highland Park, Illinois; phone 847-266-5000)

July 1-September 6

Music Teachers' Association of California (Monterey, California) holds its state convention featuring Angela Hewitt, Nancy and Randall Faber, and others. (414 Mason Street # 500, San Francisco, California; phone 415-392-3340)

July 2-6

The Santa Fe Opera (Santa Fe, New Mexico) celebrates its 43rd season with productions of such operas as Bizet's *Carmen*, *Idomeneo*, and *Ariadne auf Naxos*. (Joyce Idema, P.O. Box 2408, Santa Fe, New Mexico; phone 505-986-5909)

July 2-August 28

Pipe Organ Encounter (Des Moines, Iowa), sponsored by the American Guild of Organists, offers instruction and performances for students age 13-20. (Luke Mortensen, 4316 Allison Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa; phone 515-277-6988)

July 5-9

The Taubman Institute and International Piano Festival (Williamstown, Massachusetts) offers masterclasses with Dorothy Taubman and recitals by Michael Curt, Kemal Cekic, and others. (Enid Stettner, The Taubman Institute, Medusa, New York; phone 800-826-3720)

July 11-24

Vienna International Pianists Academy (Vienna) presents a week of masterclasses and recitals on Liszt's works and other musical topics. Faculty include Fernando Laires, Leonid Brumberg, Eugenic Russo, Donald Beattie, and Stephan Moller. (phone +43-1-503-9183; fax +43.1. 505.2919)

July 16-30

1999 Skaneateles Festival (Skaneateles, New York) features works of the 20th century, including *Noye's Fludde* by Britten, *Verklärte Nacht* by Schoenberg, *Songs of the Wayfarer* by Mahler, and *Prélude a l'après d'un faune* by Debussy. Robert Weirich is the artistic director. (28 Hannum Street, Skaneateles, New York; phone 315-685-7418)

August 5-September 4

Thirteenth Annual Festival of the Lake Superior Ragtime Society (Superior, Wisconsin) presents pianist Bob Darch, Colm O'Brien, and others. (Ragtime Society, 4361 East White Pine Trail, Superior, Wisconsin; phone 715-394-4319)

September 17-19

International Society for Contemporary Music (Bucharest, Romania) offers a symposium on new music as well as orchestral concerts and new music ensembles. (Gaudemaus, Swammerdamstraat 38, 1091 RV Amsterdam, The Netherlands, phone 31-20-6947349)

September 25-October 2

The Great Romantics Festival (Hamilton, Ontario) features performances and lectures by Justin Kolb, Ann Schein, Richard Zimdars, Georgia and Louise Mango, and Alan Walker, artistic director. (phone 905-529-7070, ext. 23674, or fax 905.648.9728)

October 7-10

World Piano Pedagogy Conference (St. Louis, Missouri) will feature coaching by John Perry, Fernando Laires, Illana Vered, Emilio del Rosario, and Vladimir Viardo. (phone 203-552-0918; fax 203.552.0914; write World Piano Pedagogy Conference, P.O. Box 1073, Greenwich, Connecticut)

October 20-23