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Working with Living Composers

(And Introducing
A Piano Piece By Robert Starer)

BY JUSTIN KOLB

The first time I performed a composition written by a living composer was during a Frances Clark piano workshop in the early 1950's. I believe this work was titled *Trick or Treat*, and was written by Mr. Everett Stevens, who was often in residence at the Kalamazoo-based summer session.

That first encounter with an other-than-dead, white, European, male composer caused no anxiety on my part. This was due, I am sure, to Mr. Stevens' kindness, and to Frances' well-known jocularly when working with youngsters (I was nine). Stevens awarded me with an "attaboy" — and that was that.

Ten years later, I was rehearsing the *Sonatina for Three Timpani and Piano* when the composer, Alexander Tcherepnine, unexpectedly walked into the studio (that was at Depaul University's School of Music in Chicago, where "Sasha" and Madame Tcherepnine both occupied a position on the faculty). Chuck, the timpanist, and I were embarrassed because we had agreed to play it once through as loudly and fast as possible. The Maestro simply looked at us and said, "I like some of the things you did." He smiled and left. This brilliant Russian composer later told us that he was pleased that we were performing the *Sonatina*. In the language of the sixties, "we were floored" that this composer, who was performed and recorded world-wide, would show appreciation to two guys playing one of his minor works in a fraternity pledge show.

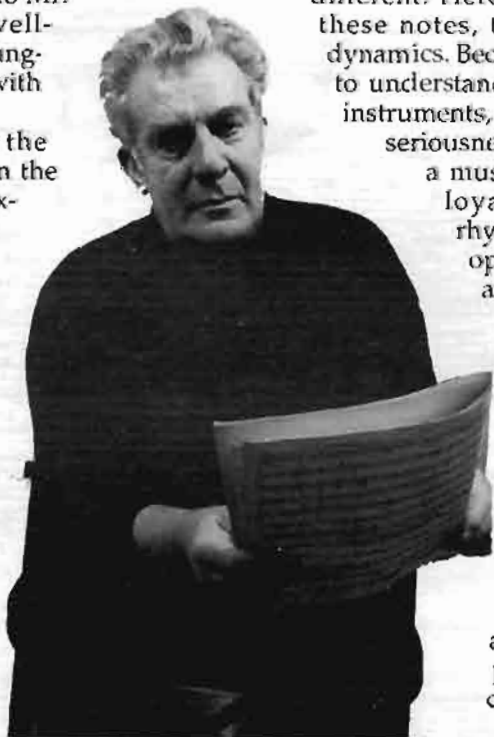
I had never thought one way or the other about performing the work of a living composer until a year later, when I was asked to play in a chamber work by William

Ferris, written for clarinet, cello and piano. It was to be performed at the old American Conservatory for the Chicago chapter of the International Society for Contemporary Music. A Pulitzer Prize nominee, Bill is still composing, conducting, and performing. I learned more about listening to music, voicing, and phrasing during the Ferris rehearsals than I ever had before. Despite ten years performing as soloist with symphony orchestras, small ensembles, and choruses, this was different. Here was the man who had written these notes, these tempo indications, these dynamics. Because of Bill's efforts in assisting us to understand the dialogue between the three instruments, I developed a new respect for the seriousness of this business, of performing a musical composition with a sense of loyalty to the printed notes and rhythms, most importantly, I developed greater attention to detail, and a passion for telling a musical story.

Anecdotes and gossip abound with regard to composers temperaments and attitude toward performers of their music. Generally speaking, I've learned that if you work hard and pay attention, all composers will respect your effort and appreciate the fact that you are introducing their music to the public. After all, you are the conduit. Stravinsky addressed this nicely in his *Poetics of Music*.

Responsibility notwithstanding, weird things sometimes happen. The result can mean

great disappointment to both composer and performer. We all have witnessed or experienced the regrettable "off night." It hurts much more when the composer is



Robert Starer

in the audience.

I have met perhaps a dozen well-known composers and have worked with six or seven of them on compositions they had written. Incidentally, I have found it advantageous to study other compositions as well with these composers. Paul Alan Levi has been especially helpful to me in understanding the underpinnings of much traditional repertoire. In 1992 at New York's Merkin Concert Hall I premiered his *Touchings*, a piece that I had commissioned. Because of a rigorous recital schedule I was unable to play it for Paul prior to the premiere, though we had discussed it during long distance phone calls. Even though the audience loved the composition, Paul was upset because we had not had a run through.

I have also had the privilege of working with and performing the music of Joan Tower, Peter Schickele, Alfredo Diez Nieto, John Downey, Philip Ramey, and Robert Starer. I have never felt that they were looking over my shoulder nor have I performed their works with any trepidation, even though they have been present in the concert audience. They are a marvelous collection of gifted and talented people, each one loving music and its effect on us.

The composer with whom I have worked the closest and longest is Robert Starer. His *Twilight Fantasies* brought us together in 1989 and I have programmed his

all," I heard Robert shout over the din, "Talk about sloppy!!!" It quickly brought me back to reality and I will never again be unprepared. This is the only close-to-harsh comment he has uttered, and our working relationship has been truly uplifting and edifying.

For me, Robert's piano compositions run the musical gamut from far left (what some call his Boulez period) to the far right. In between are sonatas, preludes, fantasies, as well as pieces that could be played as pop tunes, such as *A Faded Old Photograph*. *Doggedly*, *Mulishly*, *Almost Pig-headedly* is a favorite of mine. The *Three Israeli Sketches* are exquisite miniatures. These smaller forms of Robert's music are in many ways as difficult as his *Twilight Fantasies* and his concerti, in that there is nothing to hide behind. Perhaps this is why young students have so much success with Robert's music. Their honesty facilitates their musicianship.

A year ago I shared with Robert my desire to perform an all Starer program in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall to celebrate his seventieth birthday. As he had recently been inducted into the American Academy of Arts & Letters, I thought that a New York recital of his solo piano music would serve to punctuate his birthday that same year and, in a small way, his gift to pianists for



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music every season since. Simply stated, I love the music Robert writes and he enjoys the manner in which I play it.

Sometime ago I was engaged to perform his Second Piano Concerto and we had agreed to rehearse at the home of a friend who had two grand pianos. After we greeted each other, Robert inquired about a certain recital of a mutual acquaintance of ours that I had attended. I told him how disappointed I had been as the playing was quite sloppy. Robert and I then began rehearsing the Concerto. I was not really prepared for this rehearsal and it became quite apparent to Robert. As we approached the tumultuous climax (triple *fortissimo*) of the first movement, I plunged ahead, banging and humming as loudly as I could, hoping to obfuscate my unpreparedness. Robert was concurrently playing the orchestra part on the second piano. As we were about to "peak," and I'm thinking, "not too badly after

providing so much wonderful music — not only for concert virtuosi, but for students as well.

In preparation for the Weill Hall event, we had only one session together. During that session we concentrated on his Third Piano Sonata. He had written it especially for the recital and I felt quite honored to be given the responsibility of its premiere. I was rewarded fully when, after the recital, Robert said, "Justin, I felt totally and completely understood." This generous and warm comment made my months of effort truly fulfilling and seems a fitting close to this article. Although this is somewhat victorious sounding, I should add that back in July I performed a composition by another award-winning composer. After that performance, she said, "Justin we gotta talk!" ■

See Robert Starer's little-known piano piece, *Mountaincalls*, beginning on page 52.

See the article on Robert Starer beginning on page 50. This piece was originally commissioned by M'lou Dietzer, author of "First Impressions," an intermediate piano method (PO Box 161, Orange, CA 92666).

for Willetta

MOUNTAINCALLS

Quite fast, with vigor

8^{va}

ff

* (Ped.)

p

mf

crescendo

*From the composer: "If you use pedal as indicated in the opening two bars, the feeling of an echo effect will be obtained, similar to a call issued when surrounded by mountains."

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16 *f* *più f*
staccato

20 *ff*
(staccato) 8va-----

24 8va-----

27 *p*

30 *mf* 8va-----

33

(h)σ

37

f *crescendo*

41

ff

44

mf *poco rit.* *pp* *p* *a tempo*

48

8va-----

52

pp *p* *mf* *f* *ff*

56

A little slower

mf

60

poco rit.

p *pp*