

Technical strategies for improving the accompanying skills in the piano-voice duo

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Abstract: *This guide of vocal accompanying studies in depth, the nature of a good collaborative relationship between the pianist and the vocalist, it is written from the viewpoint of the pianist, and deals with technical, practical and inspirational elements of accompanying singers. The importance of working with languages and knowledge of the text is emphasized. Much of the vocal repertoire presents technical hurdles that need generous hours of practice. But a good technique also opens up a great deal more in terms of tone production and control. A sensitive touch will allow for a range of flexibility in following the vocalist, and for matching tone quality.*

Key-words: *vocal accompanying, sight-reading, ensemble, balance, rhythmic clarity, tonal variety.*

1. Introduction

The term accompanist is a controversial one. After all, the piano is heralded by the accompanist as being of equal importance to the voice part. On stage, the singer is acknowledged as the leader of the duo, but behind the scenes, it is widely maintained that the pianist is more musically sophisticated, one of his tasks being to keep the singer in line on matters of musicianship. Also, the empathic capacity of both of the musicians is assessed as psycho-physiological potentiality to penetrate into the psychology of others, through which they can know, understand and predict the behaviours of others, a personality trait that facilitates duo performances (Rucsanda 2016). The high demands of the song repertoire necessitate a well-developed facility at the keyboard.

The physicality of the accompanist's body must be engaged while collaborating with a singer (Bangert 2009, 404). It is expected that the pianist keeps an eye upon the vocal line, but it is equally important for the singer to know what is going on in

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the piano part. If a singer neglects to study the accompaniment, the best way to get their attention is to play in a leading, confident, and creative manner.

An experienced accompanist will be able to identify two types of singers: those who understood the art of chamber music, and those who rely heavily upon the pianist to follow them. The highest form of art, of course, is the one in which both parties recognize the beauty and importance of the other's part. After both singer and pianist are secure in their own parts, the rehearsal process can be a time to share ideas on interpretation. This singer/pianist relationship will be unique to each duo. Some singers appreciate input more than others do, and different pianists will have varying degrees of imagination, information, and taste. The accompanist must be a well-rounded musician above all. One should be well-versed in symphonic repertoire, opera, chamber music, instrumental sonatas and all other genre of classical music. This is necessary for developing a complete understanding of how composers approach their writing.

2. Objectives

Vocal accompanying is a specialized discipline that is often overlooked in the arena of higher education. By studying the specific skills required of an accompanist, the quality of musical presentation can improve significantly. There are a few conservatories and universities that offer accompanying as a course of study. However, the greater population of accompanists will find themselves desirous of information, but won't know how to go about developing their skills. This guide of vocal accompanying studies in depth, the nature of a good collaborative relationship between the pianist and the vocalist and deals with technical, practical and inspirational elements of accompanying singers. The importance of working with languages and knowledge of the text is emphasized.

3. Material and methods

For a more professional collaboration with the singer, it is necessary to take into account some important aspects in piano training such as: text and style, consonants and liaisons, developing accompanist's skills, sight-reading, balance, voicing, phrasing and breathing together as an ensemble. Mastering these aspects, the accompanist will know how to assist and help with inaccuracies in rhythm, pitch problems, diction, mistakes in memory of text, wrong notes. This does not

mean that the accompanist will be giving a lesson to the singer—but (s)he can act as a guardian and caring steward of the music.

3.1. Text and style

Being familiar with the text, the accompanist can now appreciate the meaning behind the notes. The sum effect of the two forms (poetry/music) has a greater impact than they do alone. Moore (1981, 76) said that they "undulate with refreshing spontaneity and should be affectionately handled by the singer. They beg to breathe, and if strangled by the strict beat of the metronome are rendered lifeless".

One of the major downfalls of the inexperienced accompanist is the lack of interest in, or knowledge of the text. Language, in all its varieties, has many hues and aural patterns, but it is always the most significant component of any art song.

There is a difference in style between a Schubert song (lied) and a *mélodie* of Debussy. Touch, dynamics, tone, peddling, and articulation are all affected by language, and the period in which a piece was written. For instance, the prevailing component of a Spanish song is that of rhythm. There is a distinctly unique *rubato* that can only be learned through study and exposure to the style.

The rhythm is an object lesson in flexible subtlety. This particular authenticity in the Spanish idiom is hard to describe - it consists of the most delicate shifts and agogics, and cannot be notated or imitated. But it is there, and it is what makes the music live and leap off the page. To play Spanish songs, you will need a technique that can manifest itself in a fiery temperament with splashes of colors, but one that can also maintain coolness in attitude. This paradox of untamed bravura pitted against total control, showcases the cleverness and ingenuity of the pianist, and occurs in both Spanish and French songs. For the pianist, performing French songs utilizes a wide range of touch and tone to evoke the power of the text.

Many strophic songs can come across as repetitive and uninspired. It takes a creative mind and soul to get to the heart of the composer's intentions. Pianist and singer must be in consort with one another when performing a strophic song. Each verse must be well defined in character and execution. Both musicians must agree ahead of time on how they will bring individuality to each verse. Even though you will usually see only one set of dynamics and articulations in the score, you can alter them to suit the character of each stanza. Strophic songs present a challenge for the pianist because of their inherent predictability. Playing your part in a creative and inspired manner will stretch the limits of your musical mind. Brahms believed that, "the strict strophic song represents the highest form of the lied" (Adler 1965, 161).

3.2. Consonants and liaisons

Although it is certainly of benefit to be familiar with many languages, it is unrealistic to think that an accompanist will be fluent in German, French, Italian, and Spanish. It is possible and necessary however, to obtain a certain amount of knowledge about languages that are used in art song. Specifically, the pianist must develop the skill to understand consonants and how they work. While much of a singer's life is spent in the study of the vowel sound and its production, a pianist needs to understand what is happening between the vowels. A thorough understanding of how consonants work will enable the accompanist to place the notes in alignment with the voice part. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized. To have good ensemble, the piano must play with the vowel. In the words of Bernac, "to obtain a proper line, a proper legato, one must fill the entire duration of each note with the vowel sound" (Bernac 1976, 23).

Consonants surround vowels. They act as the pianist's marker in a musical phrase. It is not uncommon to hear an accompanist playing on top of the consonant. It may not feel that way to the pianist but it gives the impression that they are rushing, and are playing ahead of the singer. Not only does this sound imprecise, but it also gives the singer the feeling that they are being pushed. There will always be a struggle for power in a situation like this. Sustaining the vowel to its absolute duration creates a smooth legato, so all efforts that are made to provide time for long vowels will be helpful. Anticipation of pulse is the enemy of good ensemble.

A "liaison" is the connection that occurs between two words. This connection might be necessitated for vocal reasons. Spoken language can be much different. In singing, liaisons can be made in order to enhance the legato of a vocal line, where when spoken, the consonant would normally be left silent. In the words of Bernac, "the last consonant, which is mute in an isolated word, is at times pronounced when followed by a word beginning with a vowel". "Petit" becomes «petit-enfant» with the «t» eliding with the «e» of «enfant» (Bernac 1976, 24).

There are many exceptions to the rules of liaison in French, but the final decision on whether or not there should be an elision must be left up to the taste and style of the individual singer. In song, liaisons can occur in all languages. A diphthong is a sound composed of two consecutive vowels in the same syllable (as in the word "day"). Even though this falls into the category of "vowel sounds". It must be mentioned here because diphthongs are sometimes important for the pianist. How a singer produces a diphthong can alter the continuity of the rhythm. If sung correctly, there should be no problem. However, if you are playing with an inexperienced singer, a diphthong could alter the inner pulse. When this happens,

the accompanist should stay true to the rhythm in the score and take over the flow of the music at that point.

This section on consonants and liaisons is not intended to teach language, but rather to provide some of the material that accompanists will need as they go about learning the art of listening to singers. Pianists, even those with the best of listening skills, might not know what to expect until they actually collaborate with a singer. Sometimes it takes a while to be able to focus the ear and to hear the details. Fortunately, the majority of consonants in Italian, German, French, and Spanish sound exactly as an English-speaking accompanist would expect. The accompanist will be able to decipher most consonants on his own. It will be helpful, however, to isolate and interpret those sounds that are unique to other languages, and that could pose potential ensemble problems between pianist and singer.

Here are three examples that show how a singer lengthens vowel sounds. In *Remembrance* by Ives, the phrase, "A sound of a distant horn" will sound like "A sou ndo fa di sta nthom". (Say this out loud to yourself and it will make sense.)

Ex. 1. Charles Ives – "Remembrance", bars 1-4

It is important to be able to hear the vocal line in this way presented in the languages most often used in art song, so we will give examples in German as well as in French. First, in Strauss' *Morgan*, the phrase, "und auf uns sinkt des Gluckes stummes Schweigen ..." will sound like, "u ndau fu nssi nktde sGlú kke sstu mme sSchwei gen ..." (and upon us will descend the great silence of happiness). This may be hard to decipher at first, but the pianist will have success if he moves quickly through the consonants, and aim for the vowel.

*immer ruhig
sempre più tranquillo*

stumm werden wir uns in die Au-gen schau-en, und auf uns sinkt des

Glück-les stummes Schwei-gen...

1281

Ex. 2. Johann Strauss – “Morgen”, bars 30-43

From Mandoline, a mélodie by Debussy. «Les donneurs de serenades» becomes «Le do neu rde sé ré na de» (The men serenading). This piece has a quicker tempo from the previous two examples, yet the same presentation of elongated vowels pertains.

Allegretto (126 = ♩) *dolce e legg.*

Voice Les donneurs de

Allegretto

PIANO *fp* *pp*

sé - réna - des Ellesbel - les é - cou-teu - ses Echan-gent des propos fa - des

Ex. 3. Claude Debussy – «Mandoline», bars 1-9

3.3. Developing accompanist's skills

The best way to be familiarized with the vocal repertoire is to listen to as many recordings as possible, and to attend as many live performances of vocal recitals as one can. Before the first rehearsal with a singer, the pianist should prepare the score in a conscientious manner. The difficulty of song accompaniments doesn't have to be underestimate.

The accompanist should spend time on the technical passagework and to see the same solid practice techniques that it is use in preparation for a solo recital. There are so many things to be observed: indications of tempi, precision of rhythm, of values (values of the notes, values of the rests), the accents, the dynamics, the phrasing, the nuances, etc. It can be said that one never reads the score with sufficient care (Moore 1992, 103).

The pianist must play through the piece absorbing as many of the notes, rhythms, dynamics, and words as possible. He must also keep the vocal line in his sight at all times. The more advanced the sight-reading, the more details and language a pianist will absorb. Another important thing that an accompanist should do, is to read a translation of the poem and to write a word-for-word transliteration of the text in the score over each note.

The pianist should gather through research, any directions from the composer that aren't familiar to him (tempo indications, interpretive markings, etc.). He should sing through the vocal part while he plays the piano part; first on a neutral syllable, then with the correct words in the original language. As a accompanist spends more time with vocal music, languages will become more accessible to him. The pianist should look to the score and hear the entire piece internally. Not enough can be said for hearing the music with one's inner ear. Conceptualizing the piano part ahead of time, will make the pianist be able to divine the music quicker, and with greater understanding. Listening to several recordings of the pieces that are being learned it can be very helpful. This way, the recordings will provide the pianist with a point of reference from which he can find his own interpretation within a historically accepted style and tradition. Listening to a variety of accompanists will broaden the field of interpretive possibilities for the accompanist and, inspire him as well.

3.4. Sight-reading

Sight-reading a piece of music is a skill which is required by almost all musicians (Wurtz, Mueri, and Wiesendanger 2009). It is the unrehearsed performance of music and is needed when a musician plays a composition hitherto unknown to him/her.

Being a successful accompanist needs a good sight-reading ability. Sight-reading inevitably improves with practice. The amount of time and energy a pianist put into

sight-reading is commensurate with the benefit he will draw from it. Sight-reading ability dramatically cuts down on the time it takes to learn new repertoire (Cook, 1994). The amount of music the accompanist must have in their repertoire at any given time is enormous. Oftentimes, one may have several full-length recitals underway, as well as new music to learn for future events. It is just not viable to use valuable time in the practice room to wade through notes. A pianist who is good at sight-reading can adapt without hesitation in performance to those situations that require a quick reflexive response (Kopiez 2008, 45). He will be able to accept professional opportunities with little or no advance warning. A good sight-reader will be able to scan the score far ahead, enabling her/him to read the vocal part, and the piano part, with greater ease. Good sight-reading includes playing correct notes, rhythms, dynamics, and portraying the right character of the piece (Bogunović 2012, 120).

3.5. Balance

Balance does not imply holding the soft pedal down and staying in the background, yet, there is a point at which the piano can easily slip over the line and cover the singer. At the other extreme, in an effort to stay under the singer, one might be tempted to play too softly. Balance is achieved by listening, and by providing the correct level of support for the singer.

Schumann's compositional strategy in writing a song cycle such as *Dichterliebe*, is worth contemplating. Each song is like a small fragment of a larger entity. The idea of the "Romantic Fragment" (Walsh 1971, 56) had been in use for a while before Schumann started writing his song cycles (in the cycles of Schubert, for instance), but his particular genius excels in forming a complete and coherent musical composition accrued from several smaller parts.

While finding the correct dynamic level under the singer is important, what is most essential is that they feel the support of the piano beneath them. Rather than think of balance as an issue of loud vs. soft, the pianist should think of it as this: how much support is appropriate here? This interplay is very subtle, and it takes years to move about freely and with confidence as you strive to achieve the perfect balance with the singer. The amount of support the pianist should render has a lot to do with the song, of course.

A song by Brahms, for instance, necessitates a different approach to balance and tone than does a song by Schubert. In general, Brahms' piano accompaniments call for a weightier, thicker sound than those of Schubert. (Daverio, 1999). Ideal balance is achieved by gently threading the vocal line through the fabric of the overall sound. This statement could sound as if this is the responsibility of the singer, yet, it really falls into the hands of the pianist. There are innumerable instances in vocal music when the printed dynamics don't seem to make sense. Sometimes the piano part will be marked at an equal, or at a higher dynamic marking than the voice part. The first thing the pianist must do is to identify the

problem. He has to be observant and see potential hazards. The next thing to do is to remember that character determines dynamics and tempo. The conscientious accompanist should question all printed dynamics.

3.6. Voicing

Accompanying allows the pianist the freedom to create truly subtle and pure inner lines. When the singer has the melody, the accompanist will have the bass line, the inner pulse and counter-melodies to consider. In a way, being unencumbered by the melody-line leaves your hands and mind free to explore more far-reaching territories in the score. There is much richness to be found in piano accompaniments that can tap, in ongoing spirit, into the creative juices of one's musical imagination.

3.7. Phrasing and breathing together as an ensemble

The need for singers to breathe presents a constant challenge for the pianist. This challenge will be met with varying degrees of success depending on how the pianist incorporates breaths into a musical phrase. Allowing for breathing can unify the ensemble between the pianist and the singer. Use the singer's breath as a chance to enliven phrases, and to enhance *rubato*. After all, one of the strongest sources of expression for a singer is their breath. The pianist might as well reap the rewards of this natural asset by giving room in his own playing for breath.

4. Results and discussion

In the course of the career of an accompanist, a large variety of repertoire will pass before his eyes. Whether the pianist is partnering singers or instrumentalists, it is a part of his job as an accompanist to learn to "read" and anticipate the people with whom he is working. Many of the skills needed for instrumental accompanying are directly transferable to the vocal studio, and vice versa. The greatest goal will be to become a musician who will not compromise the intentions of the composer.

After the notes are written down on the page, the composer then has passed it along to the performer. The text that is chosen by the composer is the inspiration for the music that they write. Just as poetry and music complement one another in this art form, so do the pianist and singer rely upon one another to create a unified and collaborative product. This interdependent relationship is at the heart of art song. When someone begins the activity as an accompanist, he should keep in mind that must be more advanced technically than the singer with whom he is partnering. This will enable the pianist to act as a support for singers; creating an atmosphere of security for them.

5. Conclusions

In the field of accompanying, it is especially true that experience is the best teacher, and that the insights which the pianist glean from his collaborators are invaluable. Unless the accompanist has an accompanying teacher, he might not have the opportunity to acquire much helpful advice or encouragement. Often, accompanists need to rely upon themselves to monitor and assess their own progress and growth. Listening to recordings of their own performances will enable the accompanists to see how they are "making their way" by the development of skills that contribute to ensemble, balance, rhythmic clarity, cut-offs, and tonal variety.

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