

## **The Care and Feeding of a Collaborative Pianist**

Excerpted from a talk given as part of the Collaborative Piano Retreat at the  
Vancouver International Song Institute, June 12, 2009.

...The title of this talk was meant to be benignly cynical. It was inspired by two things: First, I have often seen a masterclass or program attempt a Collaborative Piano focus, and it is very long before it became all about the singers in some way...diction, actual discussion of “how to give the singer what he/she needs,” etc.

Second, and this is perhaps even more important: collaborative pianists are often deeply involved in developing other people’s projects at the same time in which their own art is growing and changing. Collaborative pianists do not just do one thing...we are passionately involved in recital work, but that is generally not how we pay our rent; we can be involved in various chamber music ensembles, play for choruses, sight-read at other people’s auditions or competitions, and become repititeurs for an opera company. When we work with singers in lessons and coachings, for example, we are present while singers work to find an emotional center and communicative clarity that can be supported by their technique. The same interpretive connection to the work must be felt at the piano as well. I have had some wonderful mentors in my life who have opened up a world of deeply personal connections to music, and through those experiences I began to get a whole new set of musical and collaborative values from singers’ lessons I attended. During this talk, I want to discuss the ways in which we foster the care and feeding of pianists, because a good collaborative pianist is a rare, unique, and exotic animal, and, like rare, unique and exotic animals we must absorb specific things from our environment in order to thrive and prosper in the world.

...I started playing chamber music with some close friends in high school, and when I went to college at Oberlin Conservatory I quickly let it be known that I could sight-read and had no sense of personal limits. I played for singers and instrumentalists as much as I could. The upside: I encountered a ton of great repertoire. The downside: my own technique was going down the drain...you know what happens when you sight-read more than you practice? Your hands are in a perpetual state of suspension, above the keys, wondering where you'll jump next! After Oberlin, I worked with a wonderful pair of teachers at Cleveland Institute of Music on a double Masters degree in Solo and Collaborative Piano, Anita Pontremoli and Anne Epperson. Anita stabilized my technique by giving me a survey of solo pieces in chronological order of style (Bach, Haydn, Schubert, Brahms, Ravel, etc). Anne gave me a well-rounded taste of instrumental sonatas and orchestral reductions, and she also created a strong sense of community among her students with a weekly studio class, some of which was for playing and some of which was for airing questions and grievances about our activities. My passion for teaching started after I graduated from that program, as I began to process the huge differences in how Anita and Anne worked and how much they both influenced my musicianship...

Each collaborative project usually generates a lot more, and the jobs require different skills, and a lot of on-the-job training...I think it is common knowledge among those of us who work so closely with singers that there are often instances where our role becomes that of "supporter"; there are also innumerable instances in which singers view us as their coach/teacher/note-player/water-carrier...When I was a freelance pianist in Boston, I was happy to play with all sorts of people and organizations, and I took a lot of the supportive behavior for granted. It seemed natural, really; I was energetic and quick, eager to make professional contacts and working relationships, and a pianist doesn't have to worry about protecting her instrument from wear and tear. It was only when I began

teaching and producing my own concert series that I realized how UNSupportive I was being; by taking on too many things for other people, I was preventing myself from really engaging in the music, collaboration, and devotion that has been the rewarding aspect of this career...by treating each new project as a chance to expand our skills with care, we will be well-equipped to meet new opportunities in our careers as well as in the field in general.

...The Parnassians believed a poet must use words as a craftsman; words are the materials with which the poet creates meaning in his art. As pianists, we must craft art with the piano, through our fingertips and our bodies, with all the technique, imagination, control, and discipline that any craftsman needs. The piano is the only common denominator for the many roles, jobs, styles of music, and personalities that we encounter—that's how we ended up with the clumsy term “collaborative pianist” instead of “accompanist,” anyway! It is for each of us to figure out how to process and integrate the many experiences we have, of course, and it probably won't happen soon enough for all those performances we have coming up. But, if collaborative piano is to become the vibrant, exciting, and respected field that we all want it to be, it must be carried on by excellent pianism within excellent collaborations. So, by all means, listen to your partners, listen to your mentors, listen to wonderful colleagues from the past, present, and future, but don't ever stop listening to yourselves. The care and feeding of anything you love starts there.

[The title of this talk was meant to be benignly cynical: “The Care and Feeding of Your Singer.” I’m just curious—did anyone either take offense, or take it completely seriously? The thing is, I probably would have taken it seriously a few years ago! I think it is common knowledge among those of us who work so closely with singers that there are often instances where our role becomes that of “supporter”; there are also innumerable instances in which singers view us as their coach/teacher/note-player/water-carrier, whatever...When I was a freelance pianist in Boston, I was happy to play with all sorts of people and organizations, and I took a lot of the supportive behavior for granted. It seemed natural, really; I was energetic and quick, eager to make professional contacts and working relationships, and a pianist doesn’t have to worry about protecting her instrument from wear and tear. It was only when I began teaching and producing my own concert series that I realized how UNSupportive I was being; by taking on too many things for other people, I was preventing myself from really engaging in the music, collaboration, and devotion that has been the rewarding aspect of this career.]

[If you look at some of the university teaching positions available for collaborative pianists, they are more likely to include duties like teaching music theory courses and beginning piano than they are to be about sharing your enthusiasm for Hugo Wolf songs with the college community. This flabbergasted me at one time, but I am beginning to realize what the reasons are. In a little while, I’m going to throw out some questions to you all that will start a discussion about the many roles that a collaborative pianist can play. First, I want to tell you a bit about the trajectory of my life, so that you’ll have an idea of where I’m coming from.]