

# Essential Skills for Successful Collaboration and Accompaniment

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## Introduction

Those of us who are pianists know what it is like to perform solo. Not only do we practice hard to master the notes, rhythms, dynamics, and tempi, but we also have free reign over the work's interpretation (constrained, perhaps, by knowledge of the composer's wishes and the customs of the musical period from which the work comes). Then, after our hard work preparing for performance, it is us and us alone who receive the accolades and accept (humbly or not) the seemingly endless praise heaped upon us.

However, when we find ourselves in a collaborative role or accompanying a choral group, we find that things are, well, quite different. If we are collaborating with a singer or instrumentalist, we find that they are the "boss." We may be able to have our voice heard when there are decisions to be made, but it is pretty much their game. And if we are a choral accompanist, with an almighty conductor in charge, we may well be resigned to simply doing our duty and following the wishes of the conductor, whether we agree or not.

None of this is to say that we become less worthy as a musician or performer. In fact, we are a very important part of the unified whole, and without us the performance would be seriously lacking. However, our tasks are, in many ways, much more complex than when playing solo. Learning these additional tasks well is essential to serving successfully as a collaborator or accompanist.

The goal of this presentation, then, is to illuminate and describe these additional skills. While we can collaborate or accompany in various settings (one soloist, a group, a chorus, chamber music, or even as two of the four hands in a piano duet), this presentation will focus on just two modes: 1) collaboration with a single singer or instrumentalist, and 2) accompanying a choral group.

## But First, the Basics!

Whether collaborating or accompanying, there are certain new skills that are common to both. In this section, we will explore those commonalities.

First, know and be comfortable with the reality that you are no longer in control. You will be working with a soloist or a conductor, and their ideas by and large have priority over yours. You may have a say, however, depending on the personality and willingness of the soloist to consider your input. But at the bottom line, it is fully within their domain to have the final say.

Second, you must be flexible. You need to handle situations, for example, when a soloist takes a different performance tempo (sometimes faster due to nerves!) or a conductor makes an on-the-fly decision to alter the depth of a ritardando. Most of these situations will happen when you least expect it, so constant vigilance is a must.

Third, be sure you completely understand the soloist's or conductor's expectations and wishes. Write them in your score! If you're not sure about a particular issue, ask!

Fourth, be willing to simplify your part if necessary. This is especially true for orchestral reductions. Very often, arrangers who reduce an orchestral score to a piano accompaniment have very little regard for what is possible with just ten fingers. By careful analysis, these scores can be modified without removing important items like counter melodies and other "features." Along the same lines, original compositions can be simplified if the conductor or soloist asks for a tempo that would require practicing night and day for six months. In summary, be willing to modify your score if necessary. Remember that it is the soloist or choir in the spotlight, and while important, you are in a supportive role.

Fifth, you must not only be very familiar and practiced with your own part, but you must also have solid knowledge of the soloist's or choir's parts. The reason has much to do with detecting and gracefully recovering from errors in performance committed by the other participants, but can also save *you* if you happen to have a "senior moment" while playing. Accompanists can learn choral parts mostly during rehearsals, especially if the conductor asks the choir to learn notes and rhythms by singing individual parts. Learning a soloist's part in a collaboration may take a bit of time on your own.

Sixth, dynamic balance must always be on your mind. Way too many performances have been utterly ruined by the accompanist being too loud, covering up the choir and/or soloist. Make balance one of *your* responsibilities, because the soloist or choir director might not even notice if you're too loud (or too soft). They have many other things on their minds! You should always be able to clearly hear the other performers, even though you are but two feet away from your own soundboard.

But there's more to it than just simple balance checks. In the performance space, especially if different from the rehearsal space, you must adjust to the acoustics of the room, and also account for any microphones that may be in the mix. Also, balance adjustments should be made as you play. If you have a counter melody, for example, bring it out. If you have an interlude, bring it out, as if you're performing solo. If the melody moves to the piano for a while, be sure to let the audience hear it.

Seventh, be sure to take breathing into consideration. As pianists, we don't have to synchronize our breathing with the music, and most of us don't. However, vocalists breathe and so do many instrumental players. We must allow time for a vocalist or instrumentalist to take breaths as they sing or play. Because the concept may be foreign to us, we should mark breaths in the score, and be sure to observe the markings. [I have a personal gripe on this subject: Too many organists accompanying congregational hymn singing don't pause for a tank-up at the beginning of each verse. Makes me crazy!]

Finally, be aware that you are an important member of the "team" and a very direct musical influence on the performer(s). If you play well and expressively, following the expectations as decided upon, they will be inspired to do the same. (Sadly, the converse is also true!) Do your own personal best, and the others will follow, giving the audience perhaps more than the experience they hoped for.

## Collaboration

We now turn to a few points that are specific to collaboration, and all of them are based on the abilities of the soloist. Often we are asked to collaborate with students of various abilities, as well as seasoned professionals. Once we determine the musical status of our soloist, we can apply any of the following with care.

For students or soloists with limited experience, we need to be able and willing to provide additional support to the soloist beyond what is printed in our part. For example, the soloist may need help with their melody. Since our score contains their part, we can integrate the playing of their melody into our accompaniment. Perhaps they may need the downbeats of measures to be slightly pronounced (accented or stressed) in order to help them keep time. There are a number of similar ways in which an accompanist can be helpful in this regard.

Some publishers recognize the need for accompanists to fulfill the previous paragraph. Online publisher [www.musicnotes.com](http://www.musicnotes.com) often allows different versions of a song to be downloaded and printed. If the singer doesn't need to have the melody doubled by the pianist, the version marked "Singer Pro" should be downloaded. In this case, the melody is missing from the accompaniment. In other versions, often just marked "Piano/Vocal/Chords," the melody is fully present in the accompaniment.

Also, for the less experienced soloist, we can offer to serve as a vocal coach if willing and able. In this endeavor we can bring our own musicality and thoughts regarding interpretation to bear. Many students often welcome this! However, we should not assume they wish us to serve in this way. Out of respect, their permission should be secured first, and their role as "the boss" should not be forgotten.

For more advanced soloists, even the best of the best, we should be willing to literally work *with* them on the final product. This means being willing to offer suggestions on performance details as they occur to us. However, we must be careful! Unfortunately, some soloists will not permit this. In these cases, though, we are not participating in a true collaboration. Collaboration implies equal standing, and the best results are often obtained only when the collaborators view each other in this light. Only *true* collaboration is deeply satisfying for performers and audience alike.

One closing thought: Make a pre-performance deal with your soloist. If they go off the rail, do not let them try to find you and rejoin. Make sure they understand that it is your job to find them. (This is assumed by professionals, but not as understood by students and amateurs.)

## Choral Accompanying

While collaboration has its challenges, choral accompanying offers quite a few more. This section describes several of the unique skills that are particular to accompanying a chorus or choir.

First, we must become accustomed to working with a conductor. At a minimum, we must understand physical directing patterns in all time signatures, and become very familiar with our particular conductor's manner of realizing these patterns. Some conductors' patterns are quite obvious, but others' can be more stylistic and sometimes confusing. In time, our particular conductor's patterns and nuances will become clear to us.

Second, we have to learn to keep one eye on the conductor and the other on our music. This can take a while to get used to. Something that can help is to position the piano, and hence ourselves, so that the sight line to the conductor is more-or-less in line with the sight line to our music. If we have to move our head only slightly (or not at all) to see both, we can observe the conductor in the background while focusing on our music. Often this is sufficient for continuous monitoring of the conductor's movements. Another point: It is safest to be positioned closely to the conductor rather than to either side of the chorus. If the singers are on risers there should be no issue with their visibility from the audience.

Third, we must expand our score-reading abilities. Choral parts are often depicted on four separate staves: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Sometimes during rehearsal we may be asked to play all parts rather than the accompaniment. This can be quite tricky, and with some complex scores (such as fugues) nigh on impossible. On a case-by-case basis, be sure to let the conductor know what you can and can't handle. Perhaps you'll only need to cover entrances, or maybe you can leave out the melody, often in the soprano part. Do what works, but don't set yourself (and the chorus) up for a lot of mistakes. Also, you will need to know what a tenor clef is. It is often (but not always) depicted as a treble clef with a little "8" hanging from the bottom. Notes on this staff are read as if on a normal treble staff, but played (and sung) an octave lower. One more thing: stem directions. If two parts are scored on the same staff, stem directions will determine which of the two voices sings which notes. Notes with stems up are sung by the higher part (soprano or tenor), while those with stems down are sung by the lower part

(alto or bass). Notes that are double stemmed (one up, one down) are sung by both parts.

Fourth, integrate with the conductor. By this I mean understanding the nitty gritty of their rehearsal style for the sake of efficiency. As you work more and more with this person, you will discern their *modus operandi*, and be able to anticipate exactly how they are likely to drill the parts. For example, you'll be able to anticipate which part will be drilled next, and from which point in the score, without being explicitly told. This is extremely helpful to the conductor and can save a good deal of rehearsal time.

Fifth, give opening pitches in a consistent way during rehearsal. Usually my order is bass to soprano. Other accompanists may go in opposite order, but the choir will soon learn your method and it will help each member to consistently pick out his or her own note in the sequence. Sometimes the conductor may ask that you play all parts a measure or two beyond the starting point. This is to give the choir a sense of the tonality at that point in the piece. Lately I have been playing the opening pitches followed by just a couple more notes, without being asked. I think it is helpful for the choir to know their opening intervals as well as their opening pitches. So far, I haven't received any complaints from conductors about this!

Sixth, be picky about observing dynamics and articulation – and especially breath marks – to match the expression of the choir. If you lift when they should breathe, they are more likely to do it, even though the conductor may be directing the breath as well. When giving opening pitches or intervals, be sure to observe the prevailing dynamic level for the chorus. If you give pitches at *f* when the choir should be at *p*, they are likely to follow suit.

And finally, you may be occasionally asked by the conductor to add something to your part in support of the chorus or a choral section. This is similar to playing in a collaboration, where the soloist needs some additional support. These requests are usually made to help out a section's entrance. For example, if the basses are having trouble hitting their starting pitch after a few measures of tacet, you may be asked to play it along with your accompaniment.

The above list, of course, is incomplete. It contains just the most important points I have encountered during my years as a choral accompanist. You will undoubtedly add other points during your accompanying experience.

## Off the Record

Before we head to the conclusion, I'd like to recount a couple of personal anecdotes that I've collected over my years as an accompanist/collaborator. These are just for fun, and I hope you get a little chuckle.

First, I was an accompanist for several years at Barbara Ingram School for the Arts (BISFA) in downtown Hagerstown. BISFA is a high-school in the Washington County school system, but is unique in that it specializes in a number of the fine arts. Students are auditioned or interviewed before entering, and along with curricula in their chosen art field, participate in honors or AP academic coursework. My job as one of three accompanists was to collaborate with music students for adjudications and recitals. I worked with many vocalists and instrumentalists over the years. One thing I noticed, much more often than I liked, was the complexity of the accompaniment as compared to the simplicity of the soloist's line. Sometimes I would need to practice quite a lot to get ready, while the soloist (it seemed) could just breeze right on through. And it was as if the adjunct applied music teachers didn't care! They took no pity on the poor accompanists! So I "composed" a piece called "Accompanist in the Underworld" (I wanted to call it "Accompanist in Hell," but didn't want to get in trouble for using a questionable word for high-schoolers) and put a note at the bottom, saying: "Dear instrumentalist or vocalist: If your piece for recital or adjudication in any way resembles the above, please choose another piece or hire an orchestra. Thank you!" The bottom line: I got a few laughs, but the tough accompaniments kept coming.

Second, I have been the accompanist for many years for my wife Deborah's two chapters of the Encore Chorales, a system of over twenty chapter choruses primarily located in the MD-DC-VA area, administered by the organization Encore Creativity. These Chorales comprise singers over the age of 55. As all Chorales learn the same repertoire in any given season, they often combine to give concerts. One year I was asked to be the accompanist at the Kennedy Center Millennial Stage for a post-Christmas concert given by about 250 Encore singers, and conducted by the organization's founder (now retired), Jeanne Kelly. One of our medleys included "Jingle Bells" (of course!), and I decided to modify how the piano simulated the jingle of said bells. During rehearsal, I played *my* jingle bells as part of the interlude leading into the singing, whereupon Jeanne called a halt and asked me what I was doing. I told her I didn't like the way the jingle bells were scored and decided to "improve" it. She had only three words for me: "Don't do that." It reminded me, yet again, that I was *not* the boss!

## Conclusion

As has been shown, being a pianist in collaboration or as a choral accompanist is quite different from being a soloist. Although this type of playing involves much loss of control, the upside is that we are an important force in a larger good, and fully in community with our fellow musicians. Many audiences are thrilled and inspired with such an effort by all the participants. Collaborations and choral concerts are staples of our society, and we should feel genuinely honored to take part. We have so much to contribute, and without us our fellow humans would not be as well served. Without *us*, it just wouldn't be the same.

## Accompanist in the Underworld

Op. 666, No. 13

**Prestissimo con fuoco** (♩ = 208) Lucifer A. Demon

Violin

Vln.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is for Violin and the bottom staff is for Piano. The music is in 2/4 time and features a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The tempo is marked 'Prestissimo con fuoco' with a metronome marking of quarter note = 208. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Dear instrumentalist or vocalist: If your piece for recital or adjudication in any way resembles the above, please choose another piece or hire an orchestra. Thank you!

- Your friendly BISFA accompanists. :-)