

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COACHING

Tips For Coaching Vocal And Instrumental Collaborations With Pianists

By Thomas Lanners, NCTM

Nearly all vocal and instrumental teachers, whether in independent studios or collegiate music schools, utilize pianists to collaborate with their students. Yet many may be apprehensive about offering advice to pianists in coachings and lessons, perhaps doubting their ability to provide appropriate input, though they may be fine musicians and teachers. Some piano instructors are equally uneasy offering guidance to singers or other instrumentalists. It is vital, though, that all members of a performing ensemble are addressed, as necessary, in coachings.

There are several reasons why this is so. First, each piece, whether a duo or a work for a larger group, was likely conceived by the composer as a unified whole. Imagine how odd it would have been had Brahms, for instance, written the piano part of a piano trio from start to finish, then written the violin and cello parts, each in isolation, to complete the score.

Further, altering one person's playing or singing will likely affect how others play, because ensembles strive for a unified interpretation despite the inevitable diversity of musical perspectives and training within the group. Necessary, often minute musical adjustments will probably not occur automatically, especially when performers have limited collaborative experience.

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Teachers who focus all constructive criticism on one student risk creating a problematic personal dynamic, as “finger pointing” may occur in subsequent rehearsals. Although coaches regularly encounter discrepancies in performing abilities, with some players clearly needing more guidance than others, it is wise to offer at least a modicum of helpful advice to all players. This encourages equal ownership of the final musical product. Moreover, dedicated students always crave input to aid their growth as musicians, even if they are already fine players.

Why might teachers be apprehensive about coaching those who sing or play instruments other than their own? The most obvious reason is the fear of giving “wrong” advice due to a lack of technical knowledge. One way to become a better coach, then, is to learn as much as possible about how other instruments are played. This may be easier said than done for those with full teaching schedules and little time to spare. Short of taking lessons on various instruments (including voice, of course), it is best accomplished by collaborating with others as a performer, whether professionally or simply for enjoyment, always paying close attention, asking questions and remembering there is no universally accepted way to play any instrument.

Though one cannot master all instruments, one can still coach them effectively. Student musicians benefit greatly by discerning how to produce the musical effects coaches request, discovering for themselves the technique to do so. Consequently they build self-reliance, resourcefulness and an understanding that technique and musicianship are inseparable, which will serve them well.

Numerous commonalities exist between technical principles utilized on various instruments. Issues of bodily poise, balance, freedom and economy of motion are universal,

because all human beings share the same basic anatomical construction. Singers and wind players can exploit their knowledge of breathing by encouraging pianists, string players and percussionists to consider this important topic as it relates to phrasing, pacing, tone production and projection. Wind players could discuss tonguing in relation to articulation. String players might demonstrate bowing techniques when considering articulations, consistency of musical line, use of arm weight and freedom of coordinated movement.

Conversely, wise coaches remember the adage: "A little knowledge can be dangerous." Hackneyed statements like "breathe from the diaphragm," for example, may undermine the efforts of an otherwise competent teacher trying to disguise the fact that he or she has little coaching experience with singers. Err on the side of humility if your technical knowledge is minimal, trusting that sound musical instruction will compensate for that shortcoming. Teachers who constantly challenge themselves to broaden their musical knowledge and expertise will always serve students capably.

Some withhold potentially helpful coaching comments because they do not want to offend students from outside their teaching studio. It is better to have confidence that bright, ambitious pupils will be grateful for your input and will weed out any suggestions that prove less helpful. Some fear offending other students' teachers. In this case, bear in mind that there are as many interpretations of music as there are interpreters, and that one fine musician's insights may be as valuable as another's.

Inability to demonstrate on other instruments might also seem an obstacle to successful coaching. Effective demonstrations take many forms, however, such as singing (which almost anyone can do sufficiently to illustrate a musical point), conducting, dancing, bodily gestures, clapping, walking in time, speaking and the use of visual aids. These methods are far more vivid than the unimaginative "monkey see, monkey do" approach some employ when teaching their own instrument.

Some worry that vocalists and instrumentalists do not speak the same coaching language, primarily because the vocal instrument is internal. This fact prompts many vocalists to use imaginative, metaphorical or allusive technical explanations, which may also color their interpretive suggestions, while some instrumental teachers prefer more "concrete" vocabulary. To resolve this concern, coaches should encourage open, inquisitive discussions among all performers in rehearsals and lessons.

When coaching singers, one should learn as much about pronunciation in commonly sung languages as is practical. Finer professional vocal coaches have encyclopedic knowledge of vocal repertoire and diction, and therefore can offer far greater and more specific advice, but even a modest working knowledge of basic diction principles is helpful for those who only occasionally work with vocalists. Collaborating with singers as a performer is the most effective way to begin this learning process.

The most compelling reason fine musicians make effective coaches is that music is, first and foremost, a *language*. Each instrument is merely an "on ramp" to the use of the language, so if one is fluent, one can communicate with all others who use this same mode of expression. Because music may be played in many "dialects," coaches must be open to such natural variables when molding heterogeneous elements into a unified whole.

Because nearly all instrumentalists and singers perform with pianists to varying extents, it is worthwhile to examine some issues specific to coaching pianists.

Balance

Perhaps the most frequently addressed issue in works involving pianists is balance. Too often the pianist is simply told to play softer so others may be heard more clearly. This may seem to be the best, or perhaps the *only*, solution, but ideal balance is usually achieved through a more nuanced, detailed process that requires the attention of all performers involved.

Pianists who never learn proper balancing techniques may ultimately sound like musical wallpaper, playing without character or assertiveness for fear of being "hushed" or scolded by well-meaning coaches. This results in uninteresting performances and unsatisfying musical experiences. In true collaborations, all players must be keenly aware of whether they are leading or supporting ("accompanying") at any given point. Listening to recordings of fine collaborative performers, while reading scores and marking important role distinctions and alternations, may help train less experienced students in this skill.

Pianists must carefully voice their own parts before rehearsing with others, typically avoiding the creation of sounds that are overly "thick" or "opaque" in favor of those more "transparent." While visual transparency means one can see through an object, aural transparency means one can *hear* sounds through others. As an acoustical phenomenon, this is of utmost importance when pianists play in the same pitch range as others. Such pitches are most likely to "cover," while those far below or above probably will not. Therefore pianists must carefully review their musical partners' lines when practicing, noting which voices in the piano texture might cause balance problems then working to subdue them. This process is refined in rehearsals when other musicians are heard.

As soloists, pianists are typically taught that soprano melodies in homophonic textures must project clearly above accompanimental lines below. When collaborating, however, their *bass* line, being the harmonic foundation of the aggregate musical texture, may be more important. Furthermore, their soprano lines may cover female singers or treble instruments, depending on specific musical contexts. In Figure 1, from Richard Strauss' lied *Ich trage meine Minne*, the pianist's top line doubles the vocal line, so it should be played softer than in a solo work, tipping the balance more toward the bass. (If a tenor performed this song, he would sing an octave lower than written, so the pianist's tenor line would need to be subdued.)

Figure 1

The image shows a musical score for the first four measures of Richard Strauss's 'Ich trage meine Minne, Op. 32, No. 1'. The tempo is marked 'Andante con moto'. The score is for voice and piano. The voice part is in the upper staff, and the piano part is in the lower staff. The lyrics are 'Ich tra - ge mei - ne Min - ne vor Won - ne stumm, im'. The piano part begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes.

Richard Strauss, *Ich trage meine Minne*, Op. 32, No. 1, mm. 1–4. Edited by Sergius Kagen (New York: International Music Co., 1961; Used by Permission), p. 34.

Dynamics

Dynamics must be understood as relative to one another, rather than indicating precise decibel levels. A forte in a piece for trumpet and piano may be significantly louder than in a work for flute and piano, and an accompanimental forte will be softer than one marked in a leading melodic line. To be consistent with the overall dynamic scheme, a piano interlude in a piece for a brass instrument should, in most cases, be played louder than the same interlude in a work for a small-voiced singer or a viola. For that matter, players must know the idiosyncrasies of the instruments and individual voices with which they perform, including strong versus weak registers on various instruments and how quickly those instruments “speak” when played. Under certain circumstances, non-pianists must play or sing somewhat louder than the dynamic level might suggest if the composer wrote an extraordinary number of notes in the piano part, perhaps placing them in a conflicting register as well.

Pedaling

Issues of pedaling are critical, yet rarely addressed, when dealing with pianists’ balance problems. When the right, or “damper,” pedal is depressed, all the dampers that would otherwise halt the sound are lifted, allowing pitches to be sustained after fingers have left the keys. This pedal also adds resonance when keys are held down, because it allows strings in the overtone series of those played to vibrate sympathetically, helping create the piano’s characteristic ringing tone. The potential complication, though, is that sound “piles up” when the pedal is fully depressed (lifting dampers to their highest point off the strings) for long durations. Therefore making pedaling adjustments, both in depth and length, can significantly impact balance. Listening skills necessary to adjust with precision, without causing unwanted dryness or lack of tonal color, may take years to hone, but will pay great dividends. In Figure 2, from Ravel’s Piano Trio, the pianist may wish to hold the pedal through the entire first bar to build an enormous crescendo to *ff*, but this may obliterate the violin and cello parts notated above. Pedal changes, even partial ones, may be necessary on the

three main beats of this bar. Similarly, one may want to fully depress the pedal from the bass octave C-sharps that conclude the first bar through its repetition at the end of the second, but some fluttering of the foot could peel away precisely enough sound to reveal the string parts, while still communicating a lush fortissimo.

Figure 2

The image shows a musical score for Maurice Ravel's Piano Trio, movement I, measures 19-20. The score is for piano, violin, and cello. The piano part is in the lower staff, and the violin and cello parts are in the upper staves. The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes and a strong crescendo leading to a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic.

Maurice Ravel, *Piano Trio*; movement I, mm. 19–20. (Paris: Durand S.A. Editions Musicales, 1915; Used by permission), p. 2.

Many use the *una corda* (“soft”) pedal as a crutch when playing quietly. Its main function is to affect timbre, though, similar to a mute. While most pianists utilize this left pedal more frequently in collaborations than in solos, the ability to play softly without its aid is indispensable. After all, it would sound strange if brass players inserted mutes into their horns or string players attached them to their bridges whenever the dynamic was softer than mezzo forte. Some pianos have an unattractive, “nasal” sound when the left pedal is depressed completely, and the timbre may be uneven from note to note unless the instrument has been voiced recently by a fine piano technician.

The Piano Lid, Music Stand And Stage Positioning

Another common balancing ploy is closing the lid of a grand piano, using its shorter prop stick, or placing a book or wooden block on its case to prop the lid slightly. Closing it completely creates a muffled, inarticulate and nondescript sound, because listeners hear only what resonates from the bottom of the amplifying sound board into the floor. The other lid options listed above may be appropriate depending on the size and acoustics of the performing space, the innate timbre and loudness of the piano and other practical concerns. The lid is not a volume knob, however, so ultimately pianists must learn to control sound with their hands and feet. Those with little sensitivity will still likely balance poorly with the lid closed and may never improve if they do not practice occasionally with the lid raised.

Coaches should remember that the music rack affects a pianist’s ability to hear his or her sound. On a grand piano, the sound projects up from the sound board, located on the opposite side of the music rack from the pianist, reflects off the lid, then travels toward the audience. Consequently the audience and other performers are in a better position to assess accurately the piano’s sound. Coaches might experiment with having the pianist lower the music rack, placing

the score flat on top, and then playing some passages with others that are particularly difficult to balance. This will provide them with a more accurate aural impression and, in turn, help them adapt appropriately when the rack is upright.

On a related point, singers and instrumentalists are almost always located to the pianist's right on stage, projecting their sound toward the listeners and away from the pianist. The optimal way to overcome this inherent difficulty is to remind pianists that if they cannot hear others' playing or singing, it is likely the audience cannot either.

The final step in coaching balance is to listen to the students playing in the actual performance space whenever possible, as adjustments will probably be necessary based on differences in pianos (their size, timbre and innate volume levels), room acoustics (dry or boomy), proximity of audience members and so forth. The placement of instruments in relation to each other, the angle of the piano (perpendicular or diagonal to the audience) and other practical concerns should be addressed then.

Ensemble Precision

Aside from balance, the most frequently encountered challenge is ensemble precision or "staying together," which is, to an extent, a rhythmic accuracy issue. Pianists, though, must carefully read their partners' lines as they play to keep the ensemble "tight." They have the benefit and responsibility of reading the full score, while instrumentalists' scores typically include only their own parts. Inexperienced pianists may immerse themselves myopically in their own part, ignoring the staves printed above. This renders subtleties of rubato and other tempo alterations, including ritardandos, accelerandos and fermatas, difficult to coordinate. In these instances, the musician playing the shortest rhythmic values should lead, while the person with the full score is in the ideal position to identify efficient solutions. Figure 3, also from Ravel's Trio, illustrates this point as the violinist carries the melody, but the pianist's triplet 16ths actually drive and coordinate the *animé* acceleration. Pianists are also primarily responsible for "covering" ensemble miscues, skipping ahead or back as needed when players enter early or late, for they can quickly determine in the score what went awry. If those without the full score do so, chaos might ensue.

Figure 3

Maurice Ravel, Piano Trio; movement I, mm. 15-16. (Paris: Durand S.A. Editions Musicales, 1915; Used by permission), p. 2.

From a strictly musical perspective, pianists concerned solely with their own parts may fail to note important contrapuntal elements, perhaps not matching the sound, volume, phrase shape and articulations of imitative lines; ignore significant harmonic, melodic or structural aspects that become clear only when all parts are considered; not recognize leading and supporting roles they must play; not allow adequate time for singers or wind players to breathe; and fail to notice score markings that appear in upper staves but not their own.

Working With Song Text

When accompanying vocalists, the sung text makes reading all parts imperative for additional reasons. First, the text's meaning should serve as an interpretive guide. Foreign languages must be translated, both in poetic and word-for-word versions, for this to occur. Punctuation marks must be noted, being likely places for breaths or slight elongations that make phrases and sentences sound natural, as one might speak them. If a pianist plays strictly in time through a singer's big breath at the end of a sentence, glaring ensemble problems arise. Perhaps the most complex skill related to accompanying singers is that, excepting voiced consonants such as "m" or "n," pianists must match sung *vowels* rather than consonants that may precede them. Because double or triple consonants take longer to pronounce than single ones and because singers sometimes vary lengths of consonants for expressive purposes, this skill takes experience and diligence to hone. Referring back to Figure 1, the pianist must align his first chord with the "a" of "trage," then the "ei" of "mei-," the "e" of "ne" and so on.

Cueing

One final topic related to ensemble precision is cueing, which is far more commonly utilized by instrumentalists because matching singers' texts and natural breathing points typically render it unnecessary. Pianists rarely give visual cues because they are usually located in the back of an ensemble, but must know what to watch for, what to listen for and when. Coaches must help decide who should cue in difficult ensemble situations, whether that cue will be visual (such as a nod) or aural (such as a sniff), and whether it will last a specific duration (such as a quarter note in the prevailing tempo). Most instrumentalists will draw upon their own performing experiences when offering cueing advice.

Armed with the information in this article, combined with fine musicianship, an inquisitive spirit, openness to different perspectives and the experience of coaching many musical collaborations over time, teachers should have the confidence to offer superb advice to all they coach.

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