





# *Not* I AM AN ACCOMPANIST

by Robert Thies

**W**e all know what makes a joke funny: the fact that there is truth to it. Two years ago I saw a brilliant six-minute mock interview with Nick Canellakis and Emanuel Ax, who showed a wonderful sense of humor. In this short video, Mr. Ax, in spite of his prolific and varied career as a soloist and recording artist, is introduced as nothing more than “the accompanist for Yo-Yo Ma.”

“Do you ever play the accompaniment parts alone?” asks Nick. “No,” replies Emanuel with a beautiful comeback, “you need those five or six notes from the cello.”<sup>1</sup>

There are many brilliant undercurrents running through this short interview, but I think the most important takeaway is the feigned annoyance that Nick shows over realizing that Emanuel’s identity doesn’t fit the mold that he conveniently made for him. It should give us pause and question our perceptions of the pianist’s role in chamber music.

Historically, concert pianists were severely warned by their managers that once they agreed to play chamber music, that they would be forevermore branded as accompanists or chamber musicians, and their solo careers would be

finished. In fact, many managers would drop artists from their rosters if they went down this path. One could not break the aura of being a soloist. When established artists like Arthur Rubinstein were asked to perform with superstars like Jascha Heifetz, they often demanded to

present a solo recital in that city first to reinforce their identity as a soloist.

The great collaborative pianist Gerald Moore wrote, “To some concert promoters in those days, the accompanist was hardly considered a supporting artist: he was a cipher of little importance, contributing no more to the success of the concert than the cloak-room attendant at the other end of the hall.”<sup>2</sup>

Why is that? Because for many years, there was a stigma around accompanying—a term still widely used to encompass any kind of collaborative music making—that one pursues a career in accompanying if he isn’t good enough to be a soloist. Obviously such an assertion is antiquated and preposterous.

In recent years, this categorizing and labeling have started to wane. With long-established soloists like Martha Argerich, Daniel Barenboim, and András Schiff agreeing to share the stage with

*How labels  
and semantics  
affect our  
understanding  
and performance  
of music*

*continued*



## So, what should the pianist do in a collaborative environment?

- › **Have conviction about the music and the way it should be performed**, and don't be afraid to share your ideas. The collaboration should be about serving the music, so if you have ideas for facilitating and improving the experience, speak up. Everyone is responsible for the outcome of the performance.
- › **Because you play from a full score, you have a broader picture of the music**, and often your partner will lean on you for your thoughts and ideas. Present them kindly, and most of the time your partner will be happy to oblige.
- › **Ask your partner if there is any place where he needs more time to breathe in a phrase.** Ask him if there are any places in the music where he could use more room dynamically.
- › **Have conviction about controlling your instrument the way you were trained for so many years.** Educate the other musicians and their teachers on what a raised piano lid does for the sound. Do not let them dictate how you should play your instrument. If your partner gets nervous about a raised lid, as many do, ask if you could rehearse once with it open. 99.9% of the time, someone in the audience will confirm that the balance is perfect, and this will give your partner reassurance.
- › **Respect yourself.** Don't accept an engagement that puts you in a compromised position professionally. If the violinist remembers only a week before the concert that there's a piano part in the piece, walk away. This isn't somebody you want to work with, as they are obviously self-consumed and not collaborative by nature.
- › **Understand and remember that most teachers only pass on what they were taught themselves**, so don't give up the fight regarding your convictions about the music or your role in it. Teachers need to continue learning too.
- › **Demand equal billing in promotion and advertising**, and ask for a fee that makes you feel respected for your efforts.
- › **Don't wait for acknowledgment** from your partner onstage. Stand up and bow with her.
- › **Be an active and enthusiastic participant in any pre-concert lecture.** Audiences love learning more about the music, getting to know the performers a bit, and they will enjoy your performance much, much more.

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other musicians, perceptions of these pianists' roles have evolved.

In the world of art song, starting with Schubert, the pianist became an equal partner in the musical expression of the poetry to which the music was set. The pianist is no more an accompanist than the singer is; they accompany each other. Schumann further expanded the role of the piano in depicting the poetry, and he is well known for writing extended piano postludes to some of his songs, as in his famous song cycles *Frauenliebe und Leben* and *Dichterliebe*.

In a brief article on the Steinway website, Brian Wise referenced pianist and author Susan Tomes, "The downgrading of pianists to accompanists would shock the composers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, composers were pianists themselves and conceived art songs as duos."<sup>3</sup>

The pianist Iain Burnside, writes, "I always think of what my mentor, Eric Sams, said – that the whole song repertoire is a piano art form rather than a singer's. After all, the great *Lied* and song composers were pianists [not singers]. Once you've got that idea in your brain, it's hard to be comfortable with the idea that what you're doing is merely 'accompanying'. And in *Lieder*, of course, it's the pianist who leads."<sup>4</sup>

I have pondered for many years just what it is that bothers me so much about the title "accompanist," and I finally arrived at an answer. Simply put, an accompanist is someone who *plays for* someone else, perhaps in a lesson, audition, or rehearsal. And many pianists are most comfortable in such an environment, but typically pianists prefer not to play *for*, but *with* others.

Still, many collaborative pianists are conditioned to believe that they are accompanying the "soloist." However, by definition, the word "soloist" suggests one who performs alone, and therefore, the title does not apply to chamber music. Many conservatory teachers fulfill an



unwritten mandate to foster soloists and superstars, and perhaps this explains why many singers and instrumentalists don't know how to shift their thinking when they are in a collaborative environment. I once saw on social media a violinist proudly announcing his upcoming "solo recital," and then he lists the sonatas he is going to perform with a pianist.

"Semantics," one might argue, but these subtle checks on misused terms can mean the difference of a polite pianist doing his job unobtrusively—but feeling forgotten in the process—versus an energized, committed pianist feeling acknowledged for the responsibility she has towards the success of the performance, and wanting to make a memorable musical statement.

If the pianist is an equal partner in art song, in the chamber sonata, the pianist is often the primary voice. While the Franck *Violin Sonata* or the Rachmaninoff *Cello Sonata* are two obvious examples, one can look at any chamber sonata of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms—or any Romantic composer—and see a pattern. Most of our celebrated composers were accomplished pianists themselves, and so it is natural that their writing for the piano became the foundation of the musical material.

The original title on Beethoven's

manuscript for his beloved *Kreutzer Sonata* was *Sonata for the Pianoforte with violin obbligato*. Beethoven might have learned this from the example of Mozart, and it was the standard title for the sonatas of Brahms and Schumann, and others that followed. However, the reality is that musicians and aficionados often refer to them as the *Mozart Violin Sonatas* or *Brahms Cello Sonatas* because it is less cumbersome to identify them in this manner. Unfortunately, by using this convenient shorthand nomenclature, the implications take root and gradually affect perception. But not for Johannes Brahms! There is

a beloved story among pianists that after premiering his own *E Minor Cello Sonata*, an audience member approached the composer and said, "Mr. Brahms, I had difficulty hearing the cello at times," to which Brahms remarked, "what cello?"

So, what is all the fuss about titles and names? Why do they matter? And if a pianist enjoys being called an accompanist, why should it affect me? The answer is simple: if pianists believe their primary

function is only to support the other performer and make him sound good—but stay out of their way in the process—they are falling short in their responsibilities to the music itself. And by not serving the music, they are doing a disservice to their audiences, their partners onstage, and the composer. Pianists

need to approach and perform this repertoire with a commitment and conviction that they bring to their solo repertoire.

Why are the chamber sonatas and art song so misunderstood by audiences? Part of it is psychological. As soon as one musician stands in front of the piano, it is natural for the eye to go to the person standing in front. "Tomes attributes the

modern hierarchy [of musicians] to the rise of celebrity soloists such as Paganini, who stood out front and moved about theatrically while the pianist sat in profile to the audience."<sup>5</sup> But as soon as you add one more musician to the stage to make a trio, everyone is seated making the "playing field"

equal, and suddenly the pianist is perceived as an equal. I always admired Yo-Yo Ma in recital because he positions his seat next to the pianist's piano bench. (A quick Google Image search "Yo Yo Ma in Recital" will illustrate this.) This stage positioning immediately encourages the audience to perceive the two musicians as partners.

In the beautiful *A-Major Violin Sonata* by Fauré, the pianist, without introduction, dives right into the first theme of the exposition, and only then does the violinist enter, commenting on the theme. Many who came to hear the "featured" violinist might perceive this opening as nothing more than a gratuitous piano introduction, in which case they have just missed the opening theme of the piece.

Indeed, an audience's misperception may not be due to the performers at all, but rather the presenters. Was this pro-

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## What should our string, vocal, and woodwind collaborators do?

› **Come to the first rehearsal fully prepared.** Know the piano part as well as your own, and understand how your melodic lines fit into the overall texture. Know when to make room for the pianist when they have the melodic line.

› **Ask the pianist “What do you need from me?”** This will be an unexpected, but welcome gesture. It immediately shows respect for and interest in the pianist’s burden. You will be colleagues for a very long time.

› **Be prepared that a pianist will often seek a slower tempo** than you had conceived. Many factors come into play in choosing a good tempo, and one consideration are all the voices the pianist must negotiate. If backing off the tempo a little allows the inner voices to be heard clearly, then “less is more” (i.e. slightly slower tempo provides a better musical result.)

› **Make sure that all performers’ bios and photos** are present in all publicity, and that they are treated with the same respect and professionalism.

› **If the pianist is shy and is conditioned to play** with the lid at half-stick (or worse), ask him if he would mind raising the lid completely. A raised lid significantly increases the clarity of tone, not the volume, and this will improve your performance.

› **Always refer to the pianist** as a pianist, and encourage others to do the same. Instead of saying “my pianist,” say “my partner.”

› **After the piece is over,** give the pianist a handshake or hug onstage acknowledging the great experience of the musical journey you took together, and then bow together.

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moted as a “violin recital”? Did the poster include both performers’ names in equal font with both of their photos? These subtleties in the publicity can affect one’s perception of the experience they are going to have. What would happen, for example, if the pianist’s name were listed first in the program or in the publicity? It would defy tradition, but does that make it wrong? Too frequently the pianist’s name is not even mentioned in the publicity. When the honorarium is already low, as is the reality for many concert-presenting organizations, sometimes the only thing one can hope for is a sign of acknowledgment and respect.

Noted collaborative pianist Warren Jones believes that “a rewarding career comes down to mutually respecting the ego and self-respect and self-worth of our partners.”<sup>6</sup> Before we can expect our audiences to understand the dynamics of a chamber music performance, the performers must understand their roles, and then perpetuate a sense of partnership and equality onstage and off. Students might question the traditions that their teachers were taught and learn by example by attending live performances.

In conclusion, why do we have collaborative pianists, but not collaborative violinists? Are pianists the only musicians who collaborate? Warren Jones prefers the title “pianist” and humor-

ously points out, “We don’t think about, for example, whether someone is an opera soprano or recital baritone.”<sup>7</sup>

One who sings is a singer; one who plays the violin is a violinist. Can we agree then that one who plays the piano is simply...a pianist?

To effect change in the way audiences and musicians perceive the musical experience might take generations to accomplish. When I take my bows after playing a huge sonata program with a violinist or cellist, and I see that most of the audience members’ eyes are on my partner, I can get disheartened and even feel invisible. And yet I keep pursuing these performances because this repertoire is among the most sublime in all the literature, and with the right partner, there are few musical experiences more gratifying. ■

1 Nick Cannelakis, “Conversations with Nick Cannelakis: Emanuel Ax,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKCPczntriE> (accessed June 9, 2017).

2 Gerald Moore, *Am I Too Loud?: Memoirs of an Accompanist*. (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1962).

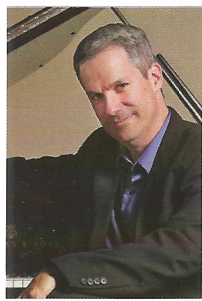
3 Brian Wise, “Revenge of the Collaborative Pianist,” <https://www.steinway.com/news/features/revenge-of-the-collaborative-pianists> (accessed June 10, 2017).

4 Tom Service, “Accompanists: the Unsung Heroes of Music,” <https://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2012/mar/04/accompanists-unsung-heroes-music> (accessed June 9, 2017).

5 Brian Wise, 2017.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.



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