

# Collaboration—A Look from the Other Side:

## *The Instrumentalist's Contribution for Successful Collaboration with a Pianist*

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As a single-line instrumentalist married to a collaborative pianist with whom I frequently co-teach, I have heard many times told to student pianists: “You have the full score – it is your job to find your instrumentalist if the two of you get off.” While it is true that the pianist sees both parts and that it is impractical and rarely even possible for the other player to perform from the score, I believe it is not solely the responsibility of the pianist to “fix it” when the two players get off. There is a lot the instrumentalist can do to not put that burden entirely on their collaborator. Of course the pianist performs from the score, and I have seen many times when experienced collaborative pianists have seamlessly covered when the two parts get off; it is certainly a skill to which collaborative pianists should aspire. But how nice would it be if they didn't have to cover at all? For professionals who have played together for some time, a lot of verbal communication is not needed – they can sense one-another and each knows what the other will do in certain situations, both in rehearsal and in performance. For students still learning how to collaborate, this process is still a bit more challenging.

It goes without saying that both players need to solidly be able to play their own part. This does not mean, however, that they cannot start rehearsing while they are still learning their parts, but with the understanding that it needs to be under tempo and with the goal of learning how they will

fit their parts together. Because the instrumentalist generally will not be able to play from the score, it is critical that they do score study in advance. The instrumentalist knowing the score is arguably the single most important factor for a successful collaboration. The easiest way to do this is to listen to a recording while reading the full score. (If there is no recording, study the score to hear and see how the parts fit together.) While repeating this several times, mark things that might be helpful to know: times when the players are together (rhythmically and/or in pitches); the piano part in rests shortly before the instrumentalist comes [back] in; times when one part leads into and hands off a line to the other; transitions; sequences and staggered parts; rhythmically challenging sections; phrasing and places to breathe, etc. Once this has been done several times, the instrumentalist should mark all those cues into their [single-line] part and then repeat the listening process, being sure all necessary cues are marked into their part. Personally, I write in the rhythms of the piano part where needed, at times with up-stems and down-stems or in the pitch direction the line goes. It will also be helpful for the instrumentalist to let the pianist know where they plan to breathe and what kind of breath it is (phrasing breath or catch breath). When score study is done, both players will feel more comfortable.

Breathing is key for the players to be together. This holds true regardless

of whether or not the player needs air to make their sound (woodwind and brass versus percussion and strings). If both players breathe together at an entrance where they come in together, not only will they be exact in their entrance, but also in their tempo. The same should be done for phrasing; breathing with the instrumentalist will help the pianist feel the phrasing and probably also stay more physically relaxed.

Cueing and physical movement are crucial skills for instrumentalists to learn. Each player has different ways in which they can physically use their instrument to cue, but breathing is the common thread for everyone. Physical movement on the part of the instrumentalist will help the pianist know what the player is trying to convey. This does not mean conducting the pianist with one's instrument or constant, metronomic vertical beating. It can simply be moving with the music, and it can be very subtle. The most important thing is simply that it be clear for the pianist.

One of the hardest things collaborative pianists have to deal with is when players jump measures. Inexperienced instrumentalists, especially if they are not very familiar with the score and how the parts fit together, have a tendency to jump ahead if they get lost. They frequently will think they are behind, yet they rarely are. This is where knowing the score is so important; if a rhythmic fumble occurs, or the instrumentalist miscounts rests, they should still be

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able to hear what is happening in the piano part and come back in correctly. Staying mentally calm and not skipping are key. If an instrumentalist skips too far, it can be disastrous if the collaborator is not experienced enough to be able to find them quickly. Even with a seasoned collaborator, if the instrumentalist jumps a page or more of the score, finding their way back to each other may not be possible. The best thing is not to jump, even being a bit behind is easier for a pianist to cover, whether by suspending a chord or vamping.

Every musician's goal is to have a perfect performance. This rarely happens. More important is to make music. Mistakes happen. It is not the mistakes that matter; it is what happens after the mistake that matters. How, and how quickly, one recovers is important. With an experienced collaborative pianist, one can be sure they will cover any

bobbles. With a less experienced pianist, as in the case of two students playing together, there can be less certainty. In this case, it will be helpful for the players to discuss what to do if something happens in performance – who will adjust. The key may very well lie in how well the instrumentalist knows the score and how clear they are in their physical communication with their pianist.

Happy collaborating!

*Dr. Christina Guenther is Professor of Flute at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas where she has taught since 2005. In demand as a clinician and performer, she has performed domestically as well as abroad in Australia, Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Germany. She is the flutist for the Stone Fort Wind Quintet – the faculty quintet at SFA. An enthusiastic proponent of new music, Guenther has commissioned and premiered many new works for flute by American composers. She holds degrees from the Florida State University and Rutgers—the State University of New Jersey. Guenther is married to Dr. Ron Petti, Director of Collaborative Piano at SFA, with whom she frequently collaborates.*