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## THE UNACCLAIMED ACCOMPANIST

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Those who play the piano for singers are all too aware that as far as the audience is concerned, they seem to be far less important than the singer.

Nevertheless, sitting behind the keyboard, the song pianist has a special realm of influence. The partnership of singer and pianist is a pooling of resources between two people, one facing the audience, and the other whom can only be seen working in profile.

Gerald Moore, the most celebrated of all singer's pianists, wrote a book with tips for members of his profession entitled *The Unashamed Accompanist*, "accompanist" being the term for those who specialize with working with singers on the concert platform.

Outside the sphere of classical music, to accompany someone means being a travel companion, going somewhere with a friend.

In Germany, a song accompanist is a "Begleiter", a word that also means, rather embarrassingly, "escort". In North America the term used these days is "collaborative pianist". This inexactly defined profession is an occupation that is misunderstood throughout the world.

The term "collaborative pianist" may be suitable for the tough equality of chamber music, but it fails to encompass the special nature, the intimacy, of a song pianist's complicity in working with a singer. The word "accompanist" is scorned by American musicians who feel demeaned by it. Many English pianists feel differently: going on a journey *with* someone is a highly suitable definition of giving a recital with a singer.

Whatever word is used, the work of the accompanist remains a mystery to many people.

This was summed up by the American accompanist Algernon H. Lindon in 1916:

*There is no branch of the art of music about which so little is known as the art of the accompanist. It is the only aspect of music that is not understood, except by accompanists themselves, and in a lesser degree, by the artists they accompany. The idea of an accompanist, as it exists mainly in the public mind, is that he is a pianist who is not competent to play solos.*

This misapprehension has long haunted this profession; a professional accompanist has to be a very good pianist indeed. Contrary to cliché there is no such thing as *born* accompanist, or a *born* second violin in a string quartet, any more than there is a born orthopedic surgeon. One must have a talent for it of course, but it takes years of experience, years of *doing it* to achieve mastery. As in many fields, a long apprenticeship is needed to develop God-given gifts in tandem with acquired skills. Being an artist has a lot to do with innate talent, but being a professional craftsman is truly something to be proud of.

For many of those destined to be pianists, the life of playing the piano alone on stage is not very appealing. It is very lonely being a solo pianist practicing alone for hours. Accompanists, on the other hand, thrive on conversation during their working hours, and they also relish music associated with words and ideas.



Enthusiasm at school for languages and English literature can unexpectedly turned out to be an advantage in pursuing this musical career. Later encounters with vocal music are more fruitful with an already established understanding of foreign languages. Many accompanists come to love songs composed in German and French to the extent that they seem part of their own heritage. A daily engagement with the culture of those countries, and countless visits to Europe utterly change an artist's life and outlook. This did not mean that they are any the less enthused by the wonderful British contributions to the same repertoire.

The greatest example of a song composer crossing all the borders of European song, is Franz Schubert. Underestimated in Austria during his lifetime, and for many years afterwards, it was his English admirers, George Grove and the famous composer Arthur Sullivan who, decades after Schubert's death, initiated the wave of international performances and scholarship that instigated the composer's world-wide fame.

[Here follows a discussion, with musical demonstration of the Schubert song *Heidenröslein*:]

Sah ein Knab' ein Röslein stehn  
Röslein auf der Heiden  
War so jung und morgenschön  
Lief er schnell, es nah zu sehn,  
Sah's mit vielen Freuden,  
Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot,  
Röslein auf der Heiden.

[*A boy saw a wild rose/ Growing in the heather/ It was so young and as lovely as the morning/ He ran swiftly to look more closely/ Looked on it with great joy/ Wild rose, wild rose, wild rose red/ Wild rose in the heather.*]

Schubert composed over 600 songs to 120 poets. Schubert is the Shakespeare of accompanied song, but there are many other great song composers, and literally thousands of songs with texts in many languages. The song repertoire is a vast, multi-national mosaic made up of small but uniquely individual pieces ranging between one and eight pages of music, occasionally longer. The accompanist's task is to become familiar with each of these tiny and intricate pieces of the mosaic.

In a song recital, a careful assemblage of these potent miniatures (performers have an infinite variety of choices) can add up to something truly extraordinary where poet, composer, singer and pianist each have a chance to give of their deepest and best. When all four are at the highest level, reaching across the centuries to work together, the effect can be incandescent.

After listening to many recordings by other artists, and after attending countless recitals, the accompanist wonders what he or she as a pianist can bring to this music. One answer to this is an ever-closer study of the composers' wishes and intentions, a meticulously faithful deciphering of their printed legacy – what they had asked for in their scores. This of course requires the pianist or singer, to have faith in these composers, to become convinced that they knew exactly what they were doing. As far as the greatest of composers is concerned this confidence in the integrity of the composer's intentions, and the defense of those intentions, can take on the characteristics of a mission, almost a religious belief. In this way the accompanist is uniquely placed to serve as the composer's mouthpiece.

[Here follows a discussion, with musical demonstration, of the Schubert song *Der Musensohn* with a poem by Goethe, with particular reference to the composer's dynamic markings:]

Durch Feld und Wald zu schweifen,  
Mein Liedchen weg zu pfeifen,  
So geht's von Ort zu Ort!  
Und nach dem Takte reget  
Und nach dem Mass beweget  
Sich alles an mir fort.



[Roaming through field and wood/ Whistling my song/ Thus I go from place to place! / And all keep time with me/ And all move/ In measure with me]

Goethe is one of thousands of poets ranging from Auden to Baudelaire, from Eichendorff, to Pushkin whose names appear at the top of every song, side-by-side with the composer's. This acknowledges that each of these musical works has two parents, the poet and the composer, and that the poet's words have always existed first: words are never fitted into existing music, rather has the music been composed as a reaction to the poem, an amplification, and in the greatest cases, a transfiguration of the words, the combination of the two elements providing a mixture more potent than the constituent parts.

Words make us think a thought, music makes us feel a feeling, but a song makes us *feel* a thought. It is this realization that has transformed many an aspiring accompanist into a student of poetry.

In many songs the composer's biography, and sometimes the poet's, add further understanding. Schubert composed *Der Musensohn* in December 1822, the month he had to face a diagnosis of syphilis. This was perhaps the most desperate period of his life, a turning point; he felt himself to be a Son of the Muses suddenly abandoned by the Fates. This calamity once surmounted, concentrated his musical energies for the rest of his life, resulting in five remarkable years of musical masterpieces (1823-1828).

One of these is a famous song about a young nun, composed in 1825, *Die junge Nonne*.

[Here follows a discussion, with musical demonstration, of the Schubert song *Die junge Nonne* with particular reference to the interpretation of the text:]

Wie braust durch die Wipfel der heulende Sturm!  
Es klirren die Balken, es zittert das Haus!  
Es rollet der Donner, es leuchtet der Blitz,  
Und finster die Nacht, wie das Grab!

[How the raging storm roars through the treetops! / The rafters rattle, the house shudders! / The thunder rolls, the lightning flashes,  
/ And the night is as dark as the grave.]

A performance of *Die junge Nonne* must progress from life to death, from storm to peacefulness in a matter of a few minutes, without the help of movement on stage, or scenery, or lighting. Every opera house in the world, on the other hand, has any number of set and costume designers, lighting engineers and producers, and an orchestra and chorus, plus numerous famous conductors.

Artists working with the song repertoire have to assume all those roles with no budget at all. Singer and pianist have to conjure worlds of expression and feeling without any outside help. The singer has no microphone, and the piano is one of the few complicated pieces of machinery that has no need of electricity. The song world is all about economy, and devastating expressiveness within contained parameters.

Conductors of orchestras regularly hire singers but seldom ask their opinions regarding interpretation and tempo. Singers are expected to submit almost unquestioningly to the baton of the maestro. In contrast, the relationship between singer and pianist is a real collaboration. Nevertheless, it is the accompanist who is almost always required to initiate many of the choices otherwise left to a conductor regarding tempo and mood and providing the notes with his or her own fingers in a way not required of a conductor.

It is not enough for accompanists simply to play the notes. *How* to play them is a lifetime's work. Most songs allow only a very short time at the beginning to set the scene: the right mood has to be created at the keyboard, then and there. Accompanists have to *play text* – many texts on different subjects – to rise above the notes in order to incorporate the meaning of the poetry.



Experience as an accompanist is at least as important as wonderful piano playing. The brilliant execution of introductions and postludes does not automatically add up to good accompaniment. If that were the case, every solo pianist could turn instantly into a wonderful accompanist. This is usually not the case. Some celebrated virtuosos, completely unfamiliar with the repertoire, imagine that they can do better than professional accompanists despite a lack of experience in the medium.

Celebrity collaborations between singers and famous solo pianists make for good box office. These partnerships often turn out to be curiously unsatisfactory – voice and piano moving along on parallel tracks, rather than coalescing as a duo with voice and piano helping each other in symbiotic manner.

Accompanying as an art, as a life's work, as a skill taking years to acquire, is still treated by many people as a watered-down version of solo pianism, child's play. Surely it is not too much to acknowledge that accompanists do a special job, and that they are specialists? Imagine a famous divorce lawyer being asked to take over a murder case with most of the public incomprehensibly taking it for granted he will get better results than a lesser-known, but highly experienced criminal barrister! Imagine a famous brain surgeon turning up at an operating theatre and being permitted to “have a go” at plastic surgery!

Actually, plastic is no an inappropriate metaphor for an aspect of the accompanist's job - the art of covering up the singer's blemishes. On countless occasions the ever-attentive pianist has saved the day in a recital by jumping to strange places in the score where the singer's memory has led them in error. This has prevented breakdown and humiliation for the singer countless times, and it is all done in such a way that the audience scarcely notices that there has been anything amiss.

In ways like these, any definition of a great accompanist goes way beyond pianism. He or she is someone whose playing and presence makes an audible difference, not only to how the piano sounds, but how the singer sounds too - someone able to nurture his partner bar by bar, phrase by phrase, and thought by thought – a guide through the storm, someone to give encouragement and confidence and a provider of the framework that holds everything together.

And yet, despite all this, in the eyes of the public, one cannot deny that there is a real inequality of status between singer and accompanist. There is no real musical reason for this. Whereas only a handful of song composers have been singers, almost all the great song composers have themselves been accompanists of their own songs: Brahms, Wolf, Strauss, Fauré, Debussy, Poulenc, Britten – all of these great men wrote their piano parts for themselves. There is no record of Schubert playing his piano sonatas, but he insisted on accompanying all his own songs, as did Benjamin Britten., a composer who accompanied Schubert with a freedom and connection with the music as if he had composed them himself.

[Here follows a discussion, with musical demonstration, of the relative merits of Herbert Hughes arrangement *The Salley Gardens*, and Benjamin Britten's arrangement, and accompaniment, of the same folksong]

Accompanists have the daily privilege of being immersed in great music, combined with the challenge of bringing it to life, together with their colleagues. This remains the most important reason for doing this job, and it is surely the most important reason why hundreds of young people at music colleges throughout the world are still choosing this profession. There may have been a decline in audience numbers for lieder and song, but there are no fewer young people wanting to devote their lives to this discipline.

Nevertheless, student pianists should be aware that embracing such a career has formidable drawbacks. It is a profession where the player's self-esteem has to be quietly secure, and not in need of continual praise and reassurance. Developing the ability to work for the sake of the music alone is very important. And of course, this means not counting on making a lot of money.

Idealistic student singers and pianists tend to split their fees fifty-fifty, but as soon as agents and larger arts organizations get involved, this changes dramatically. When accompanying a famous singer, accompanists regard themselves very lucky to earn between a third and a half, sometimes much less, of the singer's fee.



But money is not the only issue, appreciation is often lacking. In the Green Room after a concert compliments very often follow a predictable formula: “You played most sensitively” or “beautifully”. This formula is a polite way of saying “Thank you for not disrupting the more important proceedings”

Too many accompanists have experienced condescending treatment after concerts for it to be possible that this is the result of considered artistic judgement. It seems far more likely many of these audience members have simply not heard the accompanist’s work in any depth or detail.

Many music-lovers who attend concerts of vocal music do so on account of being thrilled by the sound of voices. They have no special musical or aural training and are only interested in, only able to hear, the top line of any musical texture, usually the singer. Anything beneath that is simply a fog of sound. For many listeners an accompaniment, well or badly played, is part of that fog. Fortunately, there is such a thing as innate *listening* talent in many audience members that does not require training, just curiosity and concentration. Without these two things the accompanist’s hard work disappears into a nebulous no man’s land of anonymity. In the course of their careers, accompanists will encounter both kinds of listener – discerning and superficial.

Accompanists sit next to their singers, at the top table in a musical sense, but in the eyes of many they don’t really belong there; they are near enough to fame to imagine and hope that its proximity may rub off on them, but it seldom does; they have many of the responsibilities of conductors (who are the kings of the musical world) but at the end of the day they are, in the eyes of many people, even within their own profession , nobodies and also-rans.

At first this accompanying life seems very exciting, a dizzying experience for a youngsters who appear to be lifted by those with whom they work to a level of equal celebrity, travelling the world with singers, staying at the same hotels, and treated with consideration and civility for as long as they are part of the “A” team. For those pianists who are excited by divas and operatic stardom (for many opera singers give recitals) it is very exhilarating to be a temporary resident in the Hollywood of classical music. The equality of the musical work leads the accompanists to suppose that they themselves are stars, but in truth this is not the case.

The only point in doing this work is for the sake of serving the music itself. The music will never disappoint those who give their life to it, and great composers will never let the performer down. Those who teach accompaniment should encourage into this profession young pianists who will clearly take pleasure in the nurturing of singers for its own sake, those for whom a life of service to composer and singer will not result in their banging their heads against a glass ceiling of resentment and envy.

The lecture closes with a complete performance of *Auch kleine Dinge* from Hugo Wolf’s *Italienisches Liederbuch*

The text of this small and delicate song encourages the reader, the listener, all artists, and members of the public not to underestimate precious and beautiful things (a pearl, an olive, a rose) on account of their diminutive size, and this includes the song form in general.

[Here follows a discussion, with musical demonstration, of the Wolf song *Auch kleine Dinge*.]

The central challenge facing all those in the song community is how best to deliver to their audiences a result worthy of this breathtaking music. It is the devoted work of a lifetime.