

POINTERS FOR PRODUCTIVE REHEARSAL WITH ACCOMPANISTS

By Ruth Bonetti

Has this ever happened to you? You're performing a concerto. The orchestral conductor or pianist, as the case may be, has set a tempo too fast or too slow. As an experienced soloist you know to assert exactly the tempo you want, backed with eye contact and decisive body language. You expect them to follow you. And they do, right?

Confidence can rescue a misjudged tempo. You're aware that big gestures and time-beating would destroy the mood, and probably your own poise. But your students need to be forewarned. Younger ones, especially, are unused to asserting themselves with those they see as more senior, experienced and respected. Sometimes we need reminders also.

Whether to prime students before a rehearsal, or to increase our own ensemble efficiency, the following points will enhance productive and successful interaction with our pianists.

Time counts

In the real world, there are times when musicians have to cope with "one run through and on with the show". Rehearsals gel more quickly if you know the music thoroughly – both your own part and, equally importantly, the piano's interaction. Listen to recordings and live performances of the work. Practise from the score so you can see what is going on.

It's especially reassuring to pencil in crucial rhythmic cues so that you know what to

listen for.

But where possible, it's important to allow plenty of rehearsal time rather than rely on pianists' listening skills – or powers of extrasensory perception. Be specific in asking for help with eye-contact cues for entries.

What if the pianist sets the wrong tempo in an introduction?

Frantic gestures and beating the air during the opening bars will merely destroy the mood, your own poise and the audience's enjoyment. Eye contact may work the trick, otherwise allow the pianist to continue playing the intro, then begin resolutely at the speed you really want and expect the accompanist to follow you.

What if I come unstuck from my pianist mid-piece?

Even the most prepared and experienced player can upset ensemble by slips such as jumping a line, or forgetting that *Da Capo*. Another cause of losing the plot is to give mixed signals, such as a toe tapping at a completely different tempo.

If you make a mistake, resist temptations to go back and pick up that lost note or beat, or you may both grope for each other in the frightening fog of no-man's land. Just keep going rhythmically and rely on the pianist to find you. Good pianists soon learn to jump a beat, bar or line without the slightest flicker to give the game away. After all, they have a big advantage with the solo line written in their score. They accept that it is their role to reconnoitre, yours to lead.

A time to listen – and a time to just count

Of course, teachers stress to student that they must listen, not just rely on the pianist to follow. Soloists must know when the accompaniment changes pulse, for example from duple to triple time. Yet, there are some times when listening may be counter-productive, when you just need to keep your nerve, a steady beat and forge ahead. During cross-rhythms you must survive with reliable counting and nerves of steel.

Don't shoot the pianist!

Solo recitalists soon learn to value a supportive, reliable accompanist. Treasure the one who breathes and thinks with you, who will jump bars to follow any memory lapses or confusions.

Never take pianists for granted or 'ride them'. The highly acclaimed British accompanist Gerald Moore experienced this:

A certain singer had me reduced to such a state of nervousness that I could hardly play the introduction to the simplest song at the start of a program without wrong notes: my fingers quivered as if with ague, my heels rat-tatted on the floor. Such was the state of mind that playing the piano was a torture to me.

Bowing to his audience after his first song, under the noise of the applause he would turn and snarl at me with smiling moveless lips, but with a baleful glitter in his eyes which only I could see: 'Come along, come along, wake up, man. What's the matter with you?'

White of face, I sat there wondering what was the matter with me. (Am I too Loud?

Penguin, 1962, pp. 35-6)

Keep your pianist on-side and save rehearsal time-wastage by being efficient and well prepared. Alternatively, here are some foolproof ways to shoot your reputation in the accompanying fraternity:

- Walk in to the first and only rehearsal bearing fiercely difficult piano parts with the nonchalant words: “What am I playing? Oh, did you want to see it first?”

(Give or send the music to your accompanist at least two weeks before the performance.

In busy times, pianists must cover much fierce repertoire. Nasty little surprises can upset the equilibrium of even the most fluent and virtuosic fingers.)

- Each rehearsal, change your mind back and forth about the best breathing points or bowings. Borrow their pencil and eraser to change on your part.

(Mark your bowing decisions or breathing points in the piano score. Warn them of places where performance pressures may require an extra breath.)

- Change tempi according to whim or the difficulty of the notes.

(Mark any tempo and dynamic changes or extra ones.)

- Send a text message just before the performance notifying that the venue is changed from what you’d said.

(Note the time, date and place of the performance on a Post-it slip of paper, or perhaps on

the music.)

- After playing a duo concertante, bow profusely, but keep the pianist skulking on the piano bench.

(Acknowledge your accompanist at the end of the performance. The piano part is often as demanding as the solo part, if not more so!)

- Say after the recital: “Oh did you expect to be paid?”

(Ask what the fee will be and have it ready after the performance.)

Treat your accompanists professionally and with respect and they will be happy to work with you again. Working as a team, your relationships develop as you learn to instinctively breathe and feel and flow together. Then you will truly enjoy the depths and riches of playing ensemble music.

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Byline

Ruth Bonetti is author of the method *Enjoy Playing the Clarinet* (Oxford University Press) and was Editorial Consultant for the Australian Music Examinations Board Clarinet Grade Books published by Allans Publishing. Her recent books *Confident Music Performance; Fix the fear of facing an audience* and *Practice is a Dirty Word; How to clean up your act* (Words and Music) are available on-line at www.RuthBonetti.com Ruth is in demand as a seminar and keynote presenter, helping musicians and speakers to prepare for confident performances and to present to their best ability. Her musical and speaking career has taken her around Europe, Australia and the USA, where her seminars were repeated by popular demand and she was invited to return next year.

Ruth writes a complimentary fortnightly E-Zine for teachers: *Music Educators' Energiser* and the weekly *MusoMotivator*. For seminar and adjudication presenters, there is the *Crisp Confidence Communiqué*. Those interested can sign up at www.RuthBonetti.com or by emailing ruth@ruthbonetti.com

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