

ONE

An Introduction: What Is Collaboration Anyway?

During my high school and college years, and indeed until very recently, I called myself an accompanist and never thought a thing about it. To me, it described everything I do. Nowadays, however, the word “accompanist” has been almost universally replaced. The old title seems to strike many as pejorative, demeaning, or indicative of a lack of self-esteem; as a result, a different word for this specialized art has come into common usage today: collaborative pianist. I still do what I always did, but now, instead of misspelling accompanist (accompianist or acom-pianist), people can trip over “collaborative” (how many I’s and how many b’s are there anyway?). The Latin roots of this word are patently obvious; “with” and “work” are found in equal measure here, and indeed, as collaborators, we work with others. As the reader will come to see, we are speaking of the largest meanings of both these root words.

Whatever we may call this art, it is not the simplest way to make music, although when all is said and done, it may be the most fulfilling. It has certainly been that for me. Of immediate concern, however, is the notion that collaboration is merely rhythmic synchronization, vertical alignment, if you will, along with the care not to play too loudly. To be sure, both perfect ensemble and good balance with one’s partners are essential—I will devote quite a bit of space to both these subjects—but they are only a small part of the big picture of collaboration, and perhaps the least imaginative of all our jobs. A quick glance at the chapters that follow will give some idea of the myriad tasks facing any accomplished collaborator. Some of these challenges demand our physical understanding of how our partners feel; others are entirely subjective as we wordlessly tell stories or emotionally manipulate our partners and our audience. We are fourfold custodians: We guard and maintain the composer’s wishes, the poet’s requirements as the composer saw them, our partners’ emotional and physical needs, and finally, of course, our own needs as well. I believe passionately in this quadruple responsibility, and I will try to articulate here what my many years of experience have taught me,

experience not only on the concert stage, in the recording studio, and in rehearsal, but also as a teacher of this specialized way of thinking and playing—collaborative piano in its largest sense.

If I did not believe all of this could be calculated and organized, I would not have set out to write this text in the first place. Indeed, I know that it can be analyzed and codified and finally articulated in order to impart it to others, because I have done so. Previous generations of pianists were advised that collaborative talent was a kind of innate radar; one was born with it or not, period. In truth, after all of the ideas presented herein have been digested and implemented, 10 percent of a collaborator's success might still be attributed to an arcane, mystical ability to intuit what on earth one's partner might do next. If it exists, that small percentage cannot be verbalized or taught, and thus cannot be examined in this or any other text. It can only be appreciated and used to add icing to the cake. In this text, I much prefer to offer objective (well, perhaps occasionally subjective) guidance that can give a pianist almost all the tools required to achieve a complete fusion with his or her partner.

It will be probably be immediately apparent that this text is directed chiefly at collaborative pianists, those attracted to this specialized field, those seeking to improve, or perhaps those gifted collaborators who already excel at this way of making music but who have never articulated to themselves or to others what it is exactly that works so well. Perhaps the reader will need to teach collaboration at some point; more and more schools are adding courses in ensemble playing as its worth becomes less taken for granted and more appreciated. But informed collaboration need not be reserved for the professional pianist or graduate music student; I would hope that interested amateurs and curious novices might also be intrigued by what is discussed here, and that their performances too might profit from new information or new ways of expressing established ideas or instincts. The interested, sensitive listener who reads this text may also develop an increased appreciation for all that collaborators must do. The musical examples I have chosen are all from the standard repertoire, and the technical language, it is hoped, will be familiar and friendly.

Let me digress just a moment: To absolve myself of sexism from the outset, I will alternate between using "he" and "she" when referring to the performers throughout this book, in order to avoid the necessity of endlessly repeating cumbersome additional words. For fun, I will juggle the pronouns for both pianists and soloists as I proceed from chapter to chapter. If I were writing this as few as thirty years ago, I would not have allowed myself this shortcut; at that time, so few women were able to make careers in this field—for nothing but ridiculous reasons—that I would have felt it to be my mission to insist on always mention-

ing both genders. Females were found at the keyboard occasionally as behind-the-scene coaches perhaps, but on the stage and in public, they appeared all too rarely. My own teacher, Gwendolyn Koldofsky, managed to beat this bias against serious odds, but even as late as 1964 no less a celebrity than Marilyn Horne had to stubbornly insist on having Koldofsky with her on stage for her New York recital debut. Today, however, this absurd prejudice and unjustifiable tradition have given way to impartial good sense, and I am happy to see concert stages, rehearsal halls, coaching studios and music schools populated with men and women collaborators in equal numbers. I can thereby benefit in this text and leapfrog from gender to gender in every other chapter.

I hope that once the techniques and ideas discussed here have been understood and correctly implemented, they will disappear into the fabric of a performance. The finished product will not allow for separating the partners from one another. Perhaps another informed and aware collaborative pianist might discern the mechanics at work, but certainly no one else should be able to do so. Sometimes even the singer or instrumentalist being partnered will be unaware of all that is transpiring (or not!) underneath and around him, but he will somehow sense that he is more (or less!) comfortable in so many ways, and therefore more available for expression than ever before. To the audience and the soloist, this performance will seem natural, believable, organic, and it will shine with a physical and emotional inevitability.

Let us take to heart the words of Richard Strauss's immortal creation, the Marschallin, as she tells us in act one:

- *Doch in dem "Wie" liegt der grosse Unterschied.*
But it is in the "How" that all the difference lies.