

# Two

## Breathing and Singing

The primary building block of successful collaboration is surely the breath. If you are to read only a single chapter of this book, please make it this one! Like me, many of my esteemed colleagues in collaboration admit to being secret would-be singers. It can be no accident then, that the voices and instruments we all accompany should enjoy the fruits of our vicarious but utterly complete physical identification where breathing is concerned. Any musician benefits from singing and, of necessity, breathing, but particularly those for whom air is *not* required to make the instrument work. A conductor, a violinist, an organist, and we hard-working pianists can play for hours at a time without taking a breath, and that is precisely the problem. For the pianist, singing and breathing are beyond crucial. Ignorance of this issue might limit a solo pianist's success somewhat, but for an accompanist it would be a disaster. Whether it be a physical necessity or an artistic choice, nothing approaches the importance of breathing in the quest for true collaboration.

I have never (well, almost never) stepped onto a stage or even into a rehearsal without being able to sing the soloist's music and play my own part simultaneously. If I have not yet achieved this coordination, then I know without a doubt that I am not ready to collaborate with another on this piece. Doing this may require very little practice, perhaps, for Barber's "A nun takes the veil" or Beethoven's "Ich liebe dich," or I may be facing endless hours to master the multi-tasking of Strauss's "Cäcilie" or Debussy's "Mandoline." All these practice hours must occur *before* we meet with our partners. Regardless of the difficulty involved, my credo is: If you can't sing it, you can't play it! By singing, I do not mean murmuring, whispering, or mouthing words to avoid embarrassment; I am speaking of truly using and enjoying our own voices, and as a result, requiring fuel in the form of breaths. No one would require a collaborative pianist to have a beautiful tone; we need only lungs, a mouth, and, most important, the permission we give ourselves

to feel foolish and vulnerable. Then and only then can we begin to identify with our partners and know how to handle various breathing issues.

Before we proceed with analyzing breath situations, it is necessary to acknowledge and accept as axiomatic that the ongoing progress of the music is our ultimate goal. Getting from the first note to the last is the job at hand. If the keyboard part has the moving notes, which is most often the case, this crucial responsibility is literally in our hands. If we prevent this progress, we can do so only when all other options have been eliminated or if a very unusual and striking effect is appropriate.


Once we have experienced singing a piece ourselves, it is an easy task to classify each breath the soloist takes as belonging to one of three categories.

### Type I: Nothing *Need* Be Done

This situation occurs when the soloist can inhale adequately, execute a phrase, finish the phrase in a polished manner, inhale again, and enter for the next phrase—accomplishing all of this without disturbing the ongoing flow and tempo of the piece. In this situation, there is enough time after the last note of a phrase to breathe. There may or may not be a printed rest between the phrases; the last note of the first phrase may need to be shortened, but what remains has enough length and polish to be deemed acceptable. Obviously, it is a given that the very first phrase of any piece falls into this category.

What does this situation require of the pianist? Nothing at all. Being the guardian of the music's progress, and recognizing this situation, the pianist has no worries beyond playing well. Later we will deal with telegraphing to the soloist *how* to reenter, but here we are speaking only of *when* to do so. As always, when our partner is absent—even momentarily—we may choose to play with a bit more sound, or more ego, for we are briefly the only game in town, but to reiterate, a pianist with no collaborative training or experience can remove this type of breath from his list of concerns. He continues to play normally, the soloist exits artistically, breathes, and reenters without difficulty, and the music never stops.

Here are some examples of this type of breath. In all the musical examples that follow, breaths are indicated with check marks in both voice and piano parts. As you listen to the recorded examples, note how I simply play the piano part, rhythmically disregarding the singer's entrances and exits. Nothing need be done by me.

Throughout the text, a  indicates a recorded example:

EXAMPLE 2-1 Schumann, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai"

*Langsam, zart.* *p*

Im

*p*

*Ped.*

5

wun - derschönen Mo - nat Mai als al - le Knos - pen spran - gen da

9

ist in mei - nem Her - zen die

11

Lie - be auf - ge - gan - gen

*ritard. -*

## EXAMPLE 2-2 Schubert, "An die Musik"

Musical score for Schubert's "An die Musik". The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The lyrics are "Du hol - de Kunst, in". The piano accompaniment is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. The piano part features a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The dynamic marking is *pp*.

## EXAMPLE 2-3 Fauré, "Les berceaux"

Musical score for Fauré's "Les berceaux". The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a time signature of 12/8. The lyrics are "Le long du Quai les grands vais-seaux Que la houle in clin - nen si-". The piano accompaniment is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. The piano part features a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The dynamic marking is *p* and *p sempre*.

## EXAMPLE 2-4 Copland, "Heart, we will forget him"

Musical score for Copland's "Heart, we will forget him". The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb) and a common time signature (C). The lyrics are "You may for - get the warmth he". The piano accompaniment is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. The piano part features a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The dynamic marking is *mf*.

## EXAMPLE 2-5 Ives, "Two little flowers"

Musical score for Ives's "Two little flowers". The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 4/4. The lyrics are "On sun - ny days in". The piano accompaniment is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. The piano part features a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The dynamic marking is *mp*. The tempo marking is *Allegretto*. The piano part includes markings for *l.h.* and *p*. The piano part also includes markings for *Ped.* and *\* etc.*.

## EXAMPLE 2-5 Continued

our back yard, Two lit - tle flowers are seen One

Type 2: Nothing *Can* Be Done; There Are No Options

Easily identifiable, this situation exists when the soloist breathes, but cannot re-enter in tempo, *and* the accompaniment is in rhythmic unison with the voice. The pianist has no notes to himself, only the same rhythmic impulses that the soloist has at her disposal. Thus, whether it occurs out of physical necessity or as a choice based on text or a theatrical coup, the soloist's breath stops the piece cold in its tracks. This might be seen as the least musical or the most theatrical of situations, and fortunately it is the least frequently encountered of the three breath types, since the ongoing flow of the music is completely destroyed momentarily.

Again, this requires nothing from the pianist beyond identification of the type of breath involved plus avid listening. There is nothing in the physical execution of the keyboard part that can disguise this potentially awkward moment. This is what I referred to in chapter I as the legal minimum for vertical alignment; the pianist and indeed the composition itself are the hostages of the soloist's need to breathe.

And yet it is our business as collaborators to affirm and justify this kind of stop in the music's flow. We do not ordinarily stop our sound to match the soloist's silence, but wait willingly, with enough tone on our poor decaying piano, while the soloist does what is necessary. No sense of frustration or a resentful "Must you really breathe here?" should be detected in the pianist's performance. We enthusiastically second the motion, as it were, and create a sense of permission to breathe without apologies, and always with commitment and artistry. We have no other options here.

## Some examples of type 2:

EXAMPLE 2-6 Mozart, "Als Luise die Briefe"

brennt lan - ge noch viel - leicht in mir, brennt lan - ge noch viel - leicht in mir.

*p*

EXAMPLE 2-7 Schubert, "An die Musik"

du hol - de Kunst, — ich dan - ke dir!

*p*

EXAMPLE 2-8 Brahms, Clarinet sonata in f minor, op. 120, #1, i

*p*

*pp*

 EXAMPLE 2-9 Brahms, "Botschaft"



spricht: „Un - end - lich war sein

*f* *p*

4 We - - he, höchst be - denk - - lich sei - ne

*poco cresc.*

6 La - ge höchst be - denk - lich sei - ne La - ge

## EXAMPLE 2-10 Debussy, "C'est l'extase"

*p* *poco a poco animato*

Cette â - me qui se la - men - te Encet te plain - te dor man te C'est la nô - tre,

*sf* *sf* *p* *sf* *m.g.*

## EXAMPLE 2-11 Barber, "Sure on this shining night"

*dim. poco a poco*

wan - d'ring far a - lone Of

*dim. poco a poco*

*3* *rall.*

shad - ows on the

Before proceeding, I would emphasize again that with these first two categories of breaths, very little is required of the pianist. A piano soloist would not require much additional information or experience to handle these breaths expertly, nor would this chapter be as crucial as I have stated. It is in the third category that true understanding of and physical identification with the soloist shows the pianist's aptitude and talent for collaboration. I would venture to state that of all the techniques discussed in this text, this is the most important to be understood and mastered. It is the basis of everything.

### Type 3: Permit Breath and Preserve Flow

Having sung the piece himself, the pianist has now identified those phrases where exit and reentry cannot be accomplished in tempo, but the difference between this type 3 breath and type 2 could not be more significant: In this third situation, there is intervening material in the keyboard part during the absence of the soloist. It may be but a single note, a few chords, or perhaps an elaborate arpeggio—this depends on the pattern and texture the composer has invented for the piano—but it gives us the tools to preserve the flow of the music (type 2 does not, remember) and *at the same time* allows the singer to feel permission to fill her tank without apology. Here, the music seems never to stop.

One hears so many performances in which uninformed but well-meaning pianists cope with this situation gracelessly. These less than ideal solutions are variously described as “ritard,” “spread,” “expand,” or perhaps “stretch.” Worst of all is a pianist playing in tempo to the end of his intervening material and then simply waiting for the reentry of his partner—not dissimilar to walking straight into a wall, recovering, and proceeding in a different direction. All of these undesirable methods of handling type 3 breaths maintain the vertical alignment, but oh, how the music's flow and integrity are compromised! I believe a far more musical solution is available, one that readily acknowledges the soloist's need for breath *and* maintains the progress of the music, hence my title for this technique: Permit and Preserve, which, unfortunately, sounds very much like a recruiting slogan for the military.

The pianist chooses a point in the accompaniment after the soloist's last note and before the first note for her next phrase. Having chosen this point, the pianist phrases here—earlier than his partner—and proceeds in tempo. Extra time is thus taken by the pianist, but that extra time is *not vertically aligned* with where the soloist is taking her own extra time to breathe. When I suggest that the pianist phrase somewhere in the intervening material, I do not mean to suggest for a

moment that the composer's articulation directions are to be changed; I mean only that the pianist's timing can be altered. This can even be done beautifully with only one intervening note, which is sometimes all we have.

It is essential that this method *not* be combined with the unenlightened methods I cited earlier. If the pianist phrased during the intervening material as I am suggesting, and *also* ritarded or expanded that same material, more time than required would be added to the flow of the music, and a very artificial, inorganic, and inappropriate elasticity would result. Singers, winds, and brass players breathe involuntarily when they are out of air, and this physiological and emotional desire to reenter is aided and abetted when the intervening piano part is flowing in tempo. Thus both halves of the instructions for this type of breath are equally crucial: phrase early *and* proceed in tempo, permit the breath, and preserve the flow. Omitting either is helping neither soloist nor composer.

All of the foregoing is perhaps more easily understood with musical examples:

 **EXAMPLE 2-12** Chopin, Nocturne in E-flat, op. 9, #2

Andante

*p*

*espress.dolce*

24321

Ped. \*Ped. \*Ped. \*Ped. \*Ped. \*Ped. \*Ped. \*Ped. \*

To demonstrate this technique, let us consider the right hand to be the breathing soloist here, and the left hand the accompanist. In order to finish the first phrase gracefully, breathe, and reenter with the second phrase's pickup note, a bit of extra, out-of-tempo time is required. How do I know this? I have sung it myself and felt it in my own body. This is not an intellectual judgment; it is rooted in physicality. An eighth note is not quite sufficient for an expressive soloist and might cause the singer to end the first phrase crudely or abruptly. The pianist phrases before the eleventh left-hand note in the bar and proceeds in tempo. Just a bit of extra time is now acquired, the right hand "breathes" before the twelfth note in the bar, and the music seems never to stop.

Conversely, an uninformed handling of this situation would have the pianist phrasing *after* the eleventh note and waiting for his partner to be ready to continue. Try this. You will surely hear the music stop dead in its tracks! This is not col-

laboration; this is not permission to breathe; nothing about this sounds natural. This might be considered triage, but certainly not a remedy.

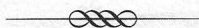
Now some examples from the *real* vocal literature:

EXAMPLE 2-13 Schumann, “Du Ring an meinem Finger”

*Innig, p*

Du Ring an mei-nem Fin-ger mein gol-de-nes Rin-ge-lein

There is but one intervening note between “Finger” and “mein” for the pianist, but it is enough. The pianist phrases before this sixth note in the bar, proceeds in tempo, and the singer, now full of air, is swept back into the song.



EXAMPLE 2-14 Strauss, “Allerseelen”

*pp*

wie-der von der Lie-be re-den, wie einst

*pp* *cresc.*

Red. \* Red. \* Red. \*

Just as with the first example, the pianist here phrases before the sixth note in this bar and proceeds in tempo. When a pianist uses this technique, he should avoid apologizing for doing so; do not hide your collaborative insight—let its benefits be heard!

 EXAMPLE 2-15 Fauré, "Nell"

The musical score is for Fauré's "Nell". It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a *cresc.* marking and a *f* dynamic. The piano accompaniment also has a *cresc.* marking and a *mf* dynamic. The second system begins with a measure rest of 3 measures, followed by the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has a *pp* dynamic and a *subito* marking. The piano accompaniment has a *pp* dynamic. The lyrics are: "chè - re a - mour, ô Nell, ne fleu - ris - se plus ton i - ma - - ge ne fleu - ris - se plus".

This is a much more excited song, with a shimmering accompaniment that must remain so, always horizontal and linear in attitude. In this example the pianist has three intervening notes between the singer's exit and her reentry. It would be acceptable for the pianist to phrase before the third or fourth sixteenth note in beat three, but the song's enthusiasm would be slightly reduced. I would therefore suggest the best choice to be phrasing before the second note in beat three, and of course, as always, proceeding in tempo.

## EXAMPLE 2-16 Schumann, "Helft mir, ihr Schwestern"

*Ziemlich schnell.* *mf*

Helft mir, ihr Schwe - stern, freund - lich mich schmück - en,

*mf*

*Immer mit Pedal.*

5 dient der Glück - li - chen heu - te, mir. Win - det ge - schäf - tig mir um die Stir - ne

9 noch der blü - hen - den Myr - te Zier. Als ich be - frie - digt, freu - di - gen Her - zens,

13 sonst dem Ge - lieb - ten im Ar - me lag, im - mer noch rief er,

 EXAMPLE 2-16 Continued

16



Sehn sucht im Her - zen, un - ge-dul - dig den heu - ti-gen Tag. Helft mir, ihr Schwe - stern,

We have an even more excited example here—it is close to wedding vow time after all! This song taxes any singer's breathing, and after only four measures she will be winded, needing significant extra out-of-tempo time to inhale. Again, as with the Fauré example above, I would suggest the earliest of the possible legal phrasing options for the pianist. This choice not only affords the singer enough time, but preserves the joyous hyperactive atmosphere of this particular song.

It is worth pointing out that a type 2 breath never changes in terms of the pianist's responsibilities. We cannot proceed ahead of our partner *ever!* However with types 1 and 3, the tempo chosen for the piece has everything to do with its breath type. A higher metronome mark turns a type 1 into a type 3, while with a slower tempo a type 3 may morph back into its easier cousin, type 1. Again, the only truly guaranteed way for the pianist to categorize breathing situations and to know how to behave, is—you guessed it—singing! Your own singing! It is always the surefire passport to your most musical decisions.

A final caveat about breathing is in order here—delivered much too late, I fear: I would warn collaborative pianists against telling their partners about the type 3 breath situation and how it is to be handled. All of the suggestions I have made are predicated on natural, involuntary, unselfconscious breathing by the soloist. Too much information about what we are doing at the keyboard while breaths are taken can ruin everything. Soloists will begin to think too much about how and when they breathe, the natural process will be ruined, and this problem will be impossible to correct ever again. Pianists, say not a word! When your partners compliment you on how easily they breathe with you as their collaborator, let them believe it is radar, or sheer luck, or magic of the spheres, and something of which you yourself are not even aware. As far as your partners are concerned, this chapter never happened!