



THE ART OF COLLABORATION

Playing with a pianist presents rewards & challenges that string players should consider

By Greg Cahill

The union of strings—notably violin, viola, or cello—and piano can produce pure magic: Consider the seemingly telepathic coupling of violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter and pianist Lambert Orkis, the elegance of Yo-Yo Ma and Kathryn Stott, or the electrifying sound of the Miró Quartet teamed with pianist Jeffrey Kahane. But to

produce a successful result while performing the vast chamber repertoire of duets and piano trios, quartets, and quintets requires attention to everything from intonation to staging.

Strings asked violinists Rachel Barton Pine, Anne Akiko Meyers, Kelly Hall-Tompkins, and Philippe Quint; violist Melia Watras; and

pianist Anne-Marie McDermott about their approaches to playing in a piano ensemble.

“It can be quite thrilling to play with a pianist, especially when it is a true partnership,” says Watras, a soloist, composer, and member of the Corigliano Quartet. “I try to make it a chamber-music experience, certainly when it is a sonata, but also if it is a concerto or a viola showpiece. When you listen carefully for the color and harmony of the piano, and are open to trying new ideas, it can lead to wonderful places.”

A successful performance begins long before you take the stage. “First and foremost, be prepared,” says pianist McDermott, artistic director of the Bravo! Vail festival. She has experience collaborating with string players, including violinist Joshua Bell and violist Paul Neubauer, among others. “Everything you need to know is in the piano score, so study it well. Come with your own ideas,



but have an open mind. The greatest chamber music is a true collaboration. It's all about communication. Knowing the music thoroughly allows you to focus on the making of music.

"When the performance rises above the contributions of individual performers, a musical conversation comes alive."

Preparation is at the forefront of violinist Pine's mind as well. "When a pianist and I first start rehearsing for an upcoming performance, we think about three things," she says. "First, what is the texture of the work? If it's more of a duo, we will approach the interpretation as chamber-music collaborators, but if it's more accompanimental, like a lyrical piece or a showpiece or a character piece, I typically take more of a soloist role as regards to balance and rubato.

"Next, in what order will we rehearse? When scheduling rehearsals, the pianist and I work

together to create a detailed plan of which pieces will be rehearsed on which days, leading up to the dress rehearsal. We make decisions about which pieces need to be started sooner and which will need more time overall, influenced by each piece's inherent difficulties of technique, ensemble, and interpretation, and by how often we've played it together or how recently we last performed it.

"Lastly, what will the flow be in regard to staging and talking? We need to decide when to enter and exit, and who will say what and when for the spoken program notes."

Intonation, sticky keys, balance, fluidity, humidity, reverberant vs. dry halls, lighting—these are just some of the other issues that must be factored into a string player's delivery when performing onstage with a pianist, Akiko Meyers says. But don't be overwhelmed by those considerations. "As there are so many technical things that can test one's

patience, I always like to tell myself to let go and have as much fun as possible. Remember that you are there to simply create music and create a beautiful story, as it's impossible to control so many technical factors."

Indeed, the artistic nature of a performance can depend on the ability of the partners to tune into one another and respect the expressive opportunities afforded each instrument.

"For me, a successful collaboration [requires a] musician who has 'their ears wide open,' as my childhood teachers used to say," says Hall-Tompkins, soloist, chamber player, and concertmaster. "I sometimes encounter musicians who, as you play with them, if you make a rubato or make a color change, would never know it unless you stopped and told them. I enjoy playing with artists who are not only technically gifted, but who also play with a high level of nuance and can easily

go with me wherever my imagination takes me, as well as inspire me to join their special colors and timings. Often with a pianist, more so than with full orchestra, temperamental solo works have the opportunity to be the most nimble and dynamic, so a nimble and dynamic collaborator is key.”

But artistic chemistry can prove elusive. “Much like in any relationship, we want our music collaborations to have perfect chemistry, where we can trust our partners unconditionally,” Quint says. “In reality it happens very rarely. The comment I most frequently hear is, ‘I look for the most sensitive collaborator who is a great listener and can follow me.’ All important factors, but occasionally, with too much sensitivity and too much listening, a collaborator might be forgetting about the importance of their part’s personal voice. Occasionally, you hit a wall. No chemistry. What to do?”

“At summer music festivals, you can be thrown in a group with some of the greatest musicians of our time. Shouldn’t this work beautifully? Sometimes. Great minds can be relentlessly uncompromising when it comes to making music together. It is hardly a guarantee of success. Can you imagine Picasso and Kandinsky trying to work on the same canvas? Still, I must have played the Beethoven Spring Sonata with close to 20 different pianists and each time there was a new person at the piano and I was absolutely fascinated by how different the music sounded. That has led me to some great discoveries in the score.

“In a perfect musical collaboration, it is not about agreeing on all ideas—it’s about give and take, it’s about yes and no.”

Akiko Meyers agrees that proactive listening is critical for any informed performance. “I think of this pairing as quite powerful and love the feeling of creating a new sound universe together,” she says. “The expression comes from listening and feeling the notes and phrases so that they *sing! sing! sing!* Henri Vieuxtemps loved saying this.”

Ultimately, there are fundamentals that a string player must master in order to get the desired results from a collaborative process.

Figure Out Where to Stand

There is no “right” place to stand relative to the piano. Some violinists prefer to stand where they can watch the keyboard and, instead of signaling with their instrument,

follow the pianist’s fingers. This results in uncanny coordination, without cues visible to the audience. Some cellists sit at the pianist’s side, others prefer a face-to-face setup. Larger string groups usually keep their accustomed position in front of the piano. Akiko Meyers requests that the piano be centered on the stage and likes to stand behind the piano so as not to block the audience’s view of the keyboardist’s passagework. For sonatas, Pine prefers to stand, with a music stand, next to the pianist in a more chamber-music-like configuration. “In accompanied repertoire, when I am playing from memory and have more of a soloist role,” she adds, “I typically stand in front of the [piano], right before the curve.”

But be flexible. Pianist McDermott adds: “Every venue is different. Just be sure that you are able to communicate clearly with each other. The audience will respond to your musical dialog.”

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—Anne Akiko Meyers

How to Strike the Right Balance

Should a piano’s lid be closed or open only partially to prevent the keyboard from overwhelming the string player? There’s no simple answer: It depends on the piano, the hall, the music, and the players. “Full stick is normally the way to go as it is a much fuller sound,” Akiko Meyers says. “I completely trust the pianist, who is in control of their sound and usually very sensitive to cohesively blending as much as possible. I say if you can’t hear the other person, you are definitely playing too aggressively or loudly.”

Pianists should beware of big, heavy chords that can swallow up the string player, not only with their weight, but also with

reverberation. Conversely, long notes on the piano can easily be obliterated by short, fast notes on the violin. “While pianists can play more notes simultaneously, I have always considered violinists to be luckier in that we can sustain notes more beautifully,” Pine says. “When playing chamber music with a piano, bowed string players must always decide whether to match or contrast when similar passages exist in both parts.”

As a violist playing with a piano, Watras says, you have to be aware of the challenges that come with the register of that instrument. “Though the viola is a powerful instrument, as a middle voice, we don’t have the E string that violinists can use to cut through the texture,” she says. “But, when both pianist and violist are listening, aware of each other, and respectful (as are any great chamber-music partners), you’ll get good results.”

About Your Intonation

Accompaniment is a special art. Soloists, however, know what a difference an excellent pianist who is able to provide both strong leadership and empathetic support can make to the quality of a performance. As recital programs have grown less virtuosic and more musical, pianists have demonstrated their skills as collaborative artists. Yet, the equal temperament of the piano’s tuning can make the non-tempered tuning of the fretless stringed instrument sound like both instruments are out of tune.

McDermott cautions string players: “The piano can’t adjust [its tuning], so string players must.”

To string players accustomed to bending pitch according to tonality and chromatics, the well-tempered piano can feel like a strait-jacket. But it also gives them an anchor, allowing them to play around the piano’s equal temperament, or fixed pitch, through vibrato, coloration, and nuance. Amazingly, this can create the illusion that, in context, the piano—or the pianist—is following suit.

“I find it easier to play with a pianist than to play with another string player or players,” Pine says. “With a pianist, other than checking balance, you don’t have to worry about blend or other considerations of tone production, nor details of intonation between players.”

This article references Edith Eisler’s 2009 Strings article “A Piano Ensemble Primer.”