

**Sing Like a Pianist, Play Like a Singer
Advice for the Piano/Vocal Duo
And the Self-Accompanying Vocalist**



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Sing like a pianist? Play like a singer? What?

In a pair of Facebook posts promoting gigs with my dear friend Katrien Van Opstal in July 2017 and July 2018, I wrote the following:

The duo. The most exposed collaborative performance setting. But if the two of you have complete trust in each other's musicianship, the results can be pretty magical. (2017)

In many ways, the duo is the hardest and scariest ensemble in which to perform. There is nowhere to hide, and you and your partner have to have complete trust in each other's musicianship and be willing to give and take throughout the course of the evening. (2018)

I love the art of the duo. For what it's worth, I also consider self-accompaniment to be "duo" work, because we (I definitely include myself here) approach performance in different ways when singing vs. playing. So how do we gain that trust? Well... In my opinion...

As singers, we need to keep the pianist's perspective in mind.

As pianists, we need to keep the singer's perspective in mind.

And that's what this clinic is about!

As pianists, how do we best provide foundational support for the duo?

First of all, I find that there is a definite "sweet spot" when it comes to piano voicings in general, not just when it comes to vocal accompaniment. The graphic below demonstrates how I tend to approach my core piano voicings. The overwhelming majority of the time, I tend to use "Bill Evans" voicings built by stacking (bottom to top) 3rd-7th-9th or 7th-3rd-5th, then adding color tones and extensions (as long as they don't clutter the harmony too much) though I also am fond of 2nd-3rd-5th-7th, particularly on minor 7th chords.

The "sweet spot" for piano voicings

The diagram illustrates four piano voicing examples for a C major 7 chord, showing the relationship between the piano and the singer's range. The piano part is in the bass clef, and the singer's range is indicated by a treble clef staff above. The examples are:

- Preferred ranges:** A clean voicing with the 3rd, 7th, and 9th stacked, centered around Middle C.
- Good voicings for CMa7:** Three variations of clean voicings, showing different ways to stack the 3rd, 7th, and 9th.
- On the edge..:** Voicings that are more extended, showing the 3rd, 7th, 9th, and 11th stacked.
- Murky and tinny:** Voicings that are too dense and high in register, showing the 3rd, 7th, 9th, and 11th stacked, with the 11th being particularly high.

In general, I like to keep my core voicings centered around Middle C, about a major 6th on either side. I rarely let my core chord voicings travel C5 and above or C3 and below. And I find this works with both soprano/alto and tenor/bass ranges, so I don't tend to adjust voicings based on voice type of the singer - doing so tends to make the piano sound worse instead of making the vocals sound better.

If you're going to accompany swing styles, it is vital to develop a solid concept for walking bass lines with your left hand. The best way to develop bass lines? Listen to bass players! (Especially Ray Brown. Listen to lots of Ray Brown.) In the examples below, I've employed the Steve Zegree concept of "master an idea and build muscle memory on *one* chord before you move ahead with *all* of the chords, otherwise you're not going to have anything on *any* of the chords."

Walking bass line concepts on CMa7

The first musical example shows a four-measure phrase in C major 7. The right hand plays a simple harmonic accompaniment. The left hand plays a walking bass line with the following fingerings and notes: Measure 1: 1 2 3 5; Measure 2: 1 3 5 Chr; Measure 3: 1 5 3 Chr; Measure 4: 1 5 1 Chr. The second example shows a similar phrase with chromatic passing tones in the bass line.

For a stepwise walking bass line, strive to insert chromatic passing tones so that the line hits either the tonic or the dominant on beat 1. Naturally, this doesn't ALWAYS align perfectly, but in general I try to keep that concept fairly consistent.

Additionally, a pet peeve that I have as a singer is when a pianist doesn't put walking bass lines in the bass. Remember that the low E string on an acoustic or an electric bass resonates at E1 – the lowest E on a (non-Bösendorfer) piano. When we take bass lines out of the traditional bass register, we're removing an important piece of the harmonic foundation.

One last point before moving to singers: as pianists, our ability to make better music in this setting expands drastically when we, as pianists, know the lyrics. And by "knowing the lyrics," I don't mean "having the lyrics on the lead sheet." I mean *actually* knowing the lyrics and how the lyrical construction of the song may impact the singer's phrasing and interpretation.

The next two pages of the handout contain what I am referring to as "core voicings" for George and Ira Gershwin's "Our Love Is Here To Stay." Take note of the ranges used for both the right hand chord voicings and the left hand bass roots. These are going to serve as guideposts as we add more and more in terms of rhythm, groove, phrasing, and collaboration, so I'd like to set these up as our starting point in how we think about the duo.

Our Love Is Here To Stay

Core Voicings

The score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It consists of four systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. Chord voicings are indicated above the vocal lines.

System 1 (Measures 1-5):
Vocals: It's ve - ry clear, our love is here to stay. Not for a
Piano: Accompaniment with chords: G7, Gmi7 (3), C7, FMa7, Ami7, D7

System 2 (Measures 6-11):
Vox.: year, but ev - er and a day. The ra - di -
Pno.: Accompaniment with chords: G7, Gmi7 (3), C7, Eb7, D7, Bmi7(b5), E7(b9)

System 3 (Measures 10-13):
Vox.: o, and the te - le - phone, and the mov - ies that we know may just be
Pno.: Accompaniment with chords: Ami7, D7, Gmi7, C7, FMa7, Emi7(b5), A7

System 4 (Measures 14-17):
Vox.: pass - ing fan - cies, and in time may go. But oh, my
Pno.: Accompaniment with chords: Dmi7, G7, Gmi7, C7, D7

Our Love Is Here To Stay

18 G7 Gmi7 3 C7 FMa7 Ami7 D7

Vox. dear, our love is here to stay. To - ge - ther

Pno.

22 G7 Gmi7 3 C7 Eb7 D7 Bmi7(b5) E7(b9)

Vox. we're go - ing a long, long way. In time, the

Pno.

26 Ami7 D7 Gmi7 C7 FMa7 Gmi7 G#dim7

Vox. Rock - ies may crum - ble, Gi - bral - tar may tum - ble, they're on - ly made of clay, but

Pno.

30 Ami7 D7 Gmi7 C7 FMa7 (Ami7 D7)

Vox. our love is here to stay.

Pno.

The image displays a musical score for the song "Our Love Is Here To Stay". It is divided into four systems, each containing a vocal line (Vox.) and a piano accompaniment line (Pno.). The vocal line is written in a single treble clef staff, and the piano accompaniment is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). Chord symbols are placed above the vocal line, and lyrics are written below it. The piano accompaniment consists of block chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score includes measure numbers 18, 22, 26, and 30. A triplet of eighth notes is indicated in measures 19 and 23. The final system ends with a double bar line.

This is a good place to start. However, it's fairly boring. Additionally, we haven't done anything to modify the phrasing of the melody or the construction of the chord voicings. The melody is as it would be written in a Real Book, and the chord voicings are strictly 735 or 379 shells - with the lone exception of the $E_{mi7}(b5)$ chord in Bar 13, which is built 357 to allow for clean motion and to avoid adding a 9th on a half-diminished chord. At times, the voicings and the melody are also in a bit of harmonic conflict between the notes of the melody and the underlying voicing, particularly on the final F_{Ma} chord.

As singers, what can we do to make the duo more musically fulfilling?

Well, the first piece of the puzzle is: know the tune as well as the pianist does. Know the chord changes. Know what the funky modulations are, if there are funky modulations. Know how the melody may interact in odd and dissonant ways with the written harmony. We all hear and hate the “musicians and singers” trope, but there’s some truth behind it. Be a musician who happens to use their voice as their primary instrument.

In 2018, I did a clinic at JEN with John Baboian on strategies for the guitar/vocal duo in which I discussed four key tips for success. Those tips apply here as well, so I’m going to include them.

Tip #1: Make the lyric the main thing!

- Focusing on the lyric provides a logical framework for phrase shaping.
- The more you work together as a duo, the more that the pianist can anticipate the way you approach the language in the lyric.
- If you’ve never worked together before, focusing on the lyric in a consistent fashion will assist your duo partner in collaborating with you. Speaking of which...

Tip #2: It’s a collaboration, not a vocal showcase.

- In the piano/vocal duo, generally the singer does take the lead. This is logical, since the singer has, you know, the lyrical story and everything. BUT! The best duos are collaborations, not soloist plus accompanist.
- Keep your ears open and listen for how the pianist is playing. Their choices in accompaniment can inspire new ideas in terms of your treatment of the melody.

Tip #3: Keep the alterations to a minimum, unless you’ve worked together A LOT.

- Few things can screw up a duo performance more than unnecessary alterations of the melody. Several sub-points to keep in mind here:
 - Never assume that every single member of the audience knows the melody of the tune, no matter how overworked you may think the standard may be. If one person in the audience doesn’t know the melody of “Summertime” while you are crafting your avant-garde treatment of “Summertime,” then that person still will not know the melody of “Summertime” when you are finished.
 - Your alterations may not jive with the pianist’s chord voicings. If you add chromatic alterations while the pianist is playing diatonic voicings, the results might be cool... But the odds are not in your favor.
 - If you hear the pianist adding altered extensions (particularly on dominant seventh chords), but you don’t know exactly what those extensions are, don’t try to alter the melody by building on the pianist’s ideas. Unless the two of you are extremely comfortable with each other and know each other’s musicianship intimately (or unless you’ve got either perfect pitch or insanely good ears), it’s a recipe for an unintentional modulation (or worse).

- My preference the first time through the melody is the Sunny Wilkinson approach – play with phrasing in a logical fashion, and add some ornaments here and there to add a touch of personalization to the melody. If it's a well-known song, and the A section repeats itself, you may have leeway to do a little more... IF it makes musical sense.

Tip #4: Make eye contact, and be consistent with your gestures.

- It's a little thing, but your connection as a duo improves exponentially if you regularly make eye contact with the pianist.
- Getting back to the consistency standpoint in Tip #1, be consistent with what your gestures and signals mean. If you use a gesture to indicate something in the form of one tune, but then use the same gesture to indicate something else in another tune... Well, then your gestures have no meaning.

Tip #5: Know what you intend to do during the piano solo.

- Option A: Sing background figures on guide tone lines (3rds and 7ths). Sustained hums are good; sustained covered round vowels can be good; sustained bright vowels are bad. Use rhythmic sequences (riffs) to create background figures, like a Charleston pattern on swing styles or a Partido Alto pattern on Brazilian styles.
- Option B: Sing walking bass lines. Obviously, this only works for certain voice types. Like the pianist, practice different patterns for walking swing bass lines, learn concepts for Brazilian and Afro-Cuban styles, and LISTEN TO BASS PLAYERS. (Especially Ray Brown.)
- Option C: Do some vocal percussion or hand percussion. Don't do this one swing tunes, but this can be very effective on Brazilian or Afro-Cuban tunes. Know that vocal percussion is NOT beatboxing. Beatboxing is using the voice to create a wide range of acoustic and electronic effects, and is part of the tradition of hip hop. Vocal percussion is exactly that – using the voice to mimic acoustic percussion instruments.
- Option D: Do nothing, and direct your attention to the pianist. It's okay to take a moment and let the pianist take the lead and have a moment in the spotlight. If you do choose to back off during this time, physically direct your attention to the pianist. This, in turn, cues the audience that they should also be paying attention to the pianist during the piano solo.

The next six pages of the handout include samples of how “Our Love Is Here To Stay” could be performed. The first one illustrates 1) how I, as a pianist, might construct my accompaniment when working with an unfamiliar-to-me vocalist, and simultaneously 2) how I, as a vocalist, might approach the melody when working with an unfamiliar-to-me accompanist, working with the assumption that both versions of “me” are competent jazz musicians who are listening carefully to what the other is doing and reacting with a certain degree of reserve during this particular performance. After that is another version of “Our Love Is Here To Stay,” this time based on the way I, as a singer, would be treating the song when working with a pianist with whom I had a comfortable musical rapport, and vice versa. Note the ways in which I've built interaction between vocals and piano, including moments when both “feed” ideas to the other.

Our Love Is Here To Stay

Phrasing And Shaping

Melody sung in a way to emphasize key points in the text, while providing rhythmic interest and space for interaction

Vocals
It's ve-ry clear, our love is here to stay. — Not for a year,

Piano
Occasional altered extensions used on Dominant chords in ways that don't conflict with the melody
Bass line primarily 1-5-1-chromatic approach, some stepwise motion

Vox.
— but ev - er and a day. — The ra - di - o,

Pno.
#11 added to Eb7 chord to reinforce melody
Use of C pedal point, leading into 2-feel for 2 measures

Vox.
and the te - le - phone, and the mov - ies that we know may just be

Pno.
Lyric gets busier, accompaniment gets simpler and more sparse

Vox.
pass - ing fan - cies, and in time, may go. But, oh, my dear,

Pno.
Extensions added to either reinforce melody or provide harmonic crunch
Pedal root on 2 and 4 Stop time before pickup to second half

Chords: G7, Gmi7, C7(b9), FMa7, Ami7, D7(b9), G7, Gmi7/C, C7(b9), Eb7(#11), D7(#9), Bmi7(b5), E7(#9), Ami7, D7(b9), Gmi7 3, C7(b9), FMa7, Emi7(b5), A7(#5), Dmi11, G13(#11), Gmi7, C7, D7(b9)

Our Love Is Here To Stay

18 G7 Gmi7 C7 F#m7 A mi7 D7

Vox. our love is here__ to stay.____ To - geth - er, we're

Pno. Use of a similar approach to comping as before - you don't have to CONSTANTLY reinvent the wheel!

22 G7 Gmi7 C7 Eb7 D7 Bmi7(b5) E7(b9)

Vox. go - ing a long, long way. In time, the

Pno. Stop time

26 A mi7 D7(b9) Gmi7 C7(b9) F#m7 G mi7 G#dim7

Vox. Rock - ies may crum - ble, Gi - bral - tar may tum - ble, they're on - ly made of clay, but

Pno. 2-feel leading to end

30 A mi7 D7 Gmi7 C7sus F6 (A mi7 D7)

Vox. our love is here to stay.____

Pno. Note the use of F6 instead of F#m7. With the melody ending on the tonic, a Ma7 chord creates a BIG Ti-Do harmonic clash, while F6 softens it a bit

This is how I might both play behind a singer with whom I was unfamiliar - and how I might sing with an unfamiliar pianist. As a singer, I'm cognizant of not going too far with my melodic alterations and leaving some space for the pianist to interact. As a pianist, I'm aware of the original melody so that I can provide a certain degree of melodic reinforcement and create harmonic structures that are interesting but don't create uncomfortable dissonance. I'm still largely using 379 and 735 shell voicings, but I'm occasionally adding inversions and using a 2357 voicing that I just really like personally.

Our Love Is Here To Stay

Rubato Intro/Swung Head

Vocals

Piano

BbMa7/C

Rolled arpeggiation; the use of the slash chord reinforces the starting pitch for the melody

The

Vox.

Pno.

Tempo moves freely - natural push/pull effect

2 FMa9 Am11 D7alt Gmi11 BbMa7/C D7(b9)

more I read the pa - per, the less I com - pre - hend the

Additional chords added for harmonic motion and color, always being aware of fit with the melody

Vox.

Pno.

4 Gmi9 Bb/C C13(b9) F2/A G#dim7 Gmi9 C13(b9)

world and all its ca - pers, and how it all will end.

Chromatic walkdown added at the end of the phrase

Our Love Is Here To Stay

6 $B\flat Ma9$ $A mi9$ $G 13(\#11)$ $A mi9$

Vox. No - thing seems to be last - ing, but that is - n't our af - fair.

Pno.

8 $B\flat Ma9$ $A mi9$ $G mi9$ $F Ma9$ $E mi7(\flat 5)$ $A 7(\#5)$ $D Ma9$ $G mi9$

Vox. We've got some - thing per - ma - nent, I mean in the way we

Pno. Diatonic walkdown to reinforce melody

10 $B\flat Ma7/C$ $C 13(\flat 9)$ In time - tempo set by singer's pickup

Vox. care. It's ve - ry clear,

Pno.

A little countermelodic motion on the cadence

12 G9 C 13sus C7(b9) F Ma9 Bb13 A mi7(b5) D7(#9)

Vox. our love is here to stay. Not for a

Pno. 2-feel in the piano to start - simple accompaniment for purposes of growing later; also space to let the melody evolve

16 G 13(#11) C 13sus C7(b9) Eb7(#11) D7(#9) B mi7(b5) E7(#9)

Vox. year, but ev - er and a day, The ra - di -

Pno. Vocal setup for accompaniment Hard swinging pickup
Pianist picks up on vocal rhythm, leading to stop time before B section
Tritone sub on stinger

20 A mi7 D7(b9) G mi7 3 C7(b9) F Ma9 E mi7(b5) A7(#5)

Vox. o, and the te - le - phone, and the mus - ic that we know (uh) may just be

Pno. Walking feel - quarter note motion in both hands gives a classic swing effect
Vocal pickup - INTENTIONALITY!

24 D mi7 G 13(#11) F#7 G7 C 13sus D7(#9)

Vox. pass - sing fan - cies, and in time may go. But! Oh, my

Pno. Chromatic shift driven by melody
Stop time, likely cued by vocalist

Vocal pickup in m.23 sets up bluesy ideas in m.24; pianist does gospel-inspired contrary motion

Our Love Is Here To Stay

More blues-based alterations on the melody in response to piano shuffle accompaniment

28 G7 C9sus F#m7 Bb A mi7(b5) D7alt G7

Vox. dear, (ah) our love is here to stay. To- geth - er, we're

Pno. Shuffle accompaniment in response to singer's blues pickup in m.27

32 G7 G mi7 C7(b9) Eb13 D7alt Bmi7(b5) Bb13

Vox. go - ing a long, long way. In time the Rock -

Pno. Vocalist picks up on syncopation in piano
Pianist sets up syncopation to feed the vocalist

36 A mi9 D7(b9) G mi9 C7(b9) F#m9 3 BbMa9 G mi9 G#dim7

Vox. - ies may crum - ble, Gi - bral-tar may tum - ble, they're on - ly made of clay. But!

Pno. Hits on "crumble" and "tumble" - communication!
Stop time cued by vocalist

40 A mi7(b5) D7 G mi7 C13sus F6 Bb9 (A mi7 D7)

Vox. Our love is here to stay.

Pno. Ending flows naturally - communication between duo
Simplified voicings as cooldown/turnaround

That was fun, right? In the second example presented, both voice and piano were taking more liberties, but both 1) are acutely aware of the original melody, harmony, and lyric, and 2) were listening to each other like crazy. I also included the introductory verse here as a way to demonstrate effective interaction between voice and piano in a rubato setting. This is reminiscent of the way I often play and sing this particular song on gigs where, even when performing with my trio, I'll usually do the verse solo, self-accompanied. Speaking of which...

Okay. What about ballads?

Ballads are awesome. Ballads are also terrifying, particularly rubato ballads, because that's when you are completely flying on the trapeze without a safety net.

I can't really say anything profound about rubato ballads other than it's a huge amount of give-and-take. The pianist can't always be following the singer. The singer can't always be following the pianist. There should be a sense of elasticity and freedom, but never to the point where nobody knows what's going on. Again, I'm going to come back to the lyric, and I'm going to introduce the idea of intentionality.

Rubato ballads have to be about the lyric first, the lyric second, the melody third, the chords fourth, and the lyric fifth, which is again why the pianist needs to know the lyric as well as the singer, and why the singer needs to sing with intentionality. There has to be a reason why the lyric is being shaped and spun in a particular way, and if there isn't a reason, the whole thing will cease to make sense (lyrically or musically) and collapse in on itself.

Oh, and pianists? Make sure you avoid "The Liberace Zone." You know what I'm talking about.

Whatever you do on a ballad, please avoid "The Liberace Zone."

The image shows a musical score for piano and voice. The piano part is written in treble and bass clefs. A chord marking 'G7(?)' is present above the first few notes. The vocal part is written in a single staff with lyrics 'In a sen-ti-men-tal...' and a performance instruction '(Confused and slightly terrified vocalist)'. A 'PIANO' dynamic marking is at the bottom left.

For in-tempo ballads, I've included a couple of ideas that I like to use as a pianist when it comes to keeping a sense of harmonic motion and changing some textures without getting in the way of the vocal melody.

In-tempo ballad comping ideas

The first musical example shows a piano accompaniment for a ballad. The right hand plays steady quarter notes in a guitar-like style. The left hand plays sustained half notes or a 2-feel with a bit of pickup motion. The chords are CMa7, Ami7, Dmi7, and G7, repeated in two measures.

An EXTREMELY effective way to comp ballads under a singer is to keep steady quarter notes in the right hand, almost a guitar approach. The left hand can either be sustained half notes or 2-feel with a little bit of pickup motion added to get to the next root.

The second musical example shows a piano accompaniment for a ballad. The right hand plays sustained half notes or a 2-feel with a bit of pickup motion. The left hand plays steady quarter notes in a guitar-like style. The chords are CMa7, Ami7, Dmi7, and G7, repeated in two measures.

Another useful tool is the "slow stride" approach, alternating LH bass/RH voicing with LH voicing/RH high doubled root or doubled 5th. While you probably wouldn't want to do that for an entire song, it can be a very effective way to change textures in a ballad.

Student Demonstration Examples

Question-and-Answer Opportunity

A Half-Dozen Piano/Vocal Duo Albums That I Love

The Tony Bennett/Bill Evans Album

Ella Fitzgerald: *The Complete Piano Duets*

Roberta Gambarini and Hank Jones: *You Are There*

Jeanne Lee and Ran Blake: *The Newest Sound Around*

Bobby McFerrin and Chick Corea: *Play*

Norma Winstone and Fred Hersch: *Songs & Lullabies*

Thank you so much for attending!



Dr. Justin Binek is an internationally recognized jazz and classical singer, pianist, clinician, and composer/arranger. Justin is a co-author of the upcoming third edition of Richard J. Lawn's *Experiencing Jazz* textbook; he is also a contributing author to Diana Spradling's *Jazz Singing: Developing Artistry and Authenticity* and Katrien Van Opstal's *Vocal Jazz Technique: The Mixing Table Model*. A renowned scat singer and teacher of vocal improvisation, Justin is a featured clinician in Michele Weir's *ScatAbility* iOS app. Justin's compositions and arrangements are available from Kerry Marsh and Anchor Music, and his original jazz-inspired mass, *Missa Lucis*, made its Carnegie Hall debut in June 2022.

A 2021 and 2022 GRAMMY Music Educator Award Quarterfinalist, Justin currently serves as an Associate Professor of Music Theory and Jazz Studies at Kansas City Kansas Community College, where his students annually receive numerous *DownBeat* Student Music Awards. He also teaches on the faculties of The Jazz Harmony Retreat and the Halewynstichting Jazz Workshop (Belgium). Justin is an active performer in the vibrant Kansas City jazz scene. He lives in Olathe, KS, with his wife, Claire, an accomplished vocal pedagogue and middle school choir director, and their daughters, Cora and Iris. For more information, visit www.justinbinekjazz.com.

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