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



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Associate Professor of Music Theory and Jazz Studies, Kansas City Kansas Community College Jazz Education Network Annual Conference, Thursday, January 4, 2022, 11:00 AM

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 <u>singers</u>, we need to keep the <u>pianist's</u> perspective in mind. As <u>pianists</u>, we need to keep the <u>singer's</u> 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) 3^{rd} - 7^{th} - 9^{th} or 7^{th} - 3^{rd} - 5^{th} , then adding color tones and extensions (as long as they don't clutter the harmony too much) though I also am fond of 2^{nd} - 3^{rd} - 5^{th} - 7^{th} , particularly on minor 7^{th} chords.

The "sweet spot" for piano voicings



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 <u>vital</u> 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 2 3 5 1 3 5 Chr 1 5 3 Chr 1 5 1 Chr

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 <u>when we, as pianists, know the lyrics</u>. 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





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 Emi7(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 FMa 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 <u>musician</u> 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 <u>logical</u> 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 <u>consistent</u> 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.
 - o 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" <u>could</u> 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





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



Chromatic walkdown added at the end of the phrase



A little countermelodic motion on the cadence





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...

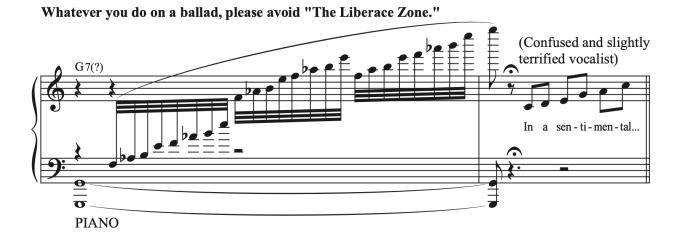
Okay. What about ballads?

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 <u>really</u> say anything profound about rubato ballads other than it's a huge amount of giveand-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.

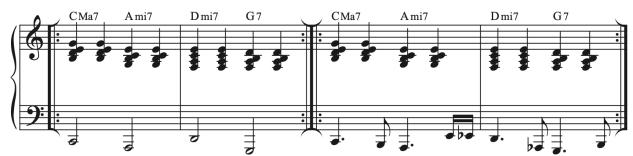
Rubato ballads <u>have</u> to be about the lyric first, the lyric second, the melody third, the chords fourth, and the lyric fifth, which is again why the pianist needs to know the lyric as well as the singer, and why the singer needs to sing with intentionality. There has to be a reason <u>why</u> the 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.

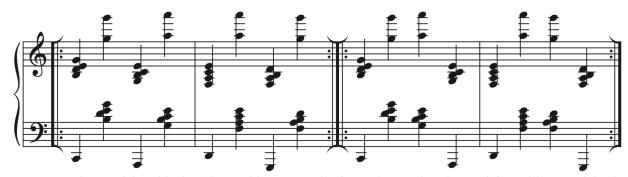


For in-tempo ballads, I've included a couple of ideas that I like to use as a pianist when it comes to keeping a sense of harmonic motion and changing some textures without getting in the way of the vocal melody.

In-tempo ballad comping ideas



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.



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.

Many thanks to my wonderful colleagues at Kansas City Kansas Community College, particularly John Stafford (Vocal Music), Jim Mair (Instrumental Music), Dr. Ian Corbett (Audio Engineering), Dr. Donna Bohn (Dean, Division of Arts, Communications, and Humanities), Jerry Pope (Vice President for Academic Affairs), and Dr. Gregory Mosier (President).