The role of the piano accompanist when performing with a soloist

Alice Rosser

Affiliation: University of Sheffield UK
Address:  
25, Chatsworth Avenue  
Blackpool  
Lancashire  
FY2 9AN  
UK  
Telephone: (00 44) 01253 350014  
Email: alicerossermusic@piano9.freeserve.co.uk

Aim and objectives

This paper examines the musical and social communication between accompanists and their soloists in rehearsal and performance, with particular emphasis on the accompanist's role in the dyad.

Context

There have been a number of studies of group dynamics in music ensembles (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991; Young and Colman, 1979; Ford and Davidson, 2003) but to date there is little on the dyad of the piano accompanist and their soloist. Previous research on this type of ensemble has concentrated on purely musical issues such as the management of musical process and content within a rehearsal and performance context, (Goodman, 1998) or has considered co-performer communication (Williamon and Davidson, 2002). This study has a broader framework, seeking to uncover the impact of socio-cultural, socio-historical issues and interpersonal dynamics on the interactions of a small ensemble during their preparation for a performance and the performance itself.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken for this study, using Grounded Theory methods to explore the phenomena under investigation (Charmaz, 1995). Semi-structured interviews with six experienced accompanists sought to uncover perceptions of their roles and responsibilities and approaches to rehearsal and performance. This was followed by two case studies involving video recorded observation and analysis of pre-concert rehearsals and the subsequent performances given by two accompanists and their partners working towards solo recitals. One duo knew each other well while the other had only met at the pre-concert rehearsal. Qualitative assessments were then made of verbal communication during rehearsal and links made with the emergent themes from the interviews and the literature. Observational techniques attempted to illuminate factors which may be subconscious on the part of the pianists and which may show up in their use of gesture, eye contact,
Results

The results revealed important findings for group functioning within the context of a small music ensemble with the following main emergent themes:

**Role:** - The accompanists interviewed felt that they had at least an equal role in the partnership, with some saying that the role was central, carrying even more responsibility. They acknowledged both the musical and social importance of their function and felt that their role was multi-faceted.

**Leadership:** - Leadership issues appeared to be affected by the context within which accompanists were working but both pianists in the duos displayed strong leadership characteristics in both task and socio-emotional areas.

**Conflict and co-operation:** - Conflict was viewed as healthy and inevitable and as a natural reaction to differences of opinion on interpretation, but the results show friendships are a critical factor in the social dynamics of a dyad. However, compromise came through as a key theme of this study, with accompanists feeling that they have to compromise more often than they would like, due to such factors as lack of time, technical limitations on the part of the soloist and the context.

**Communication:** - The amount of verbal communication in rehearsal varied between the two duos, but both seemed to benefit from spending time playing to try out interpretative issues, rather than talking. Gesture was seen to be useful for communicating ideas in rehearsal, but was not specifically used as a communication tool in performance. Eye contact was considered to be less important than listening in order to co-ordinate the musical content, but there was general agreement that this differs with instrumentalists, where accompanist may watch more than they would with singers. Generally, aural communication appears to be more important than visual in this kind of ensemble and this may be because of the position and orientation of the soloist. The accompanist appears to have the main responsibility for co-ordination of musical process, in contrast to other ensembles where there is more of a mutual exchange of information.

In comparing this kind of dyad with other small music ensembles, it would seem that the piano accompanists’ musical and social function is more diverse than that of individual members of larger ensembles. This may be because the accompanist has the full score, players in other small ensembles only have their own part to play from and therefore other factors influence their various roles. However the accompanist, like the conductor has access to the full picture and this enables them to take control in regulating, driving, facilitating and leading a rehearsal. The accompanist was thus found to be very proactive in rehearsal.

Accompanists appear to drop into the background in performance, taking more of a following role, being alert to the soloist’s needs and adapting and adjusting where necessary, in the event of mishaps or in response to spontaneous deviations from agreed tempi or other interpretive features in performance, so the role here appears to become more reactive. Socio-historical factors play a
part here, with accompanists, seeming to acknowledge the audience and soloist’s expectation that
they should play a ‘background’ part, with many accompanists referring to ‘convention’.

Overall how the pianist behaves in an accompanying situation is affected by a number of
constraining and facilitating factors including; physical constraints such the performing environment
and proximity to and position of, the soloist, group dynamics, for example how well they know and
get on with the soloist and historical aspects, including audience and soloist expectations. This
highlights the critical value of socio-cultural context and interpersonal factors and how these
interface with socio-historical ‘facts’ such as musical style and performance practice and etiquette.
How all of these interact is crucial to the outcome of performance.

**Key contribution**

These findings when compared to group dynamics in other small music ensembles such as
string quartets, wind quintets and piano duos highlight the unique social and musical role of the
accompanist.

**Key words**

Ensemble rehearsal, musical performance, piano accompanists, small group behaviour, social
interaction

**References**


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