

The nature of professional accompanists and their roles: Performing with musical excellence and enjoying communicative interaction

Yuriko Kubota

University of London, UK

The aim of this paper is to explore the traits and roles of professional accompanists. This study is based on an internet survey. Professional accompanists were asked to complete a questionnaire through an internet website. The participants (n=96) identify themselves mainly as being sensitive, thoughtful, logical, and optimistic. At the start of rehearsal, accompanists generally try to establish a collaborative tempo and timing while seeing the big picture of the music. At the end of rehearsal, they concentrate on mood/feeling, dynamics, and aesthetic goals much more than at the start. Although some insist that accompanists should follow the soloist's expression, most accompanists enjoy and expect communicative musical activity within music. Expert accompanists point out that they have an important role in making music that is better than that created by the soloist him/herself. It would seem that professional accompanists should have an ability to perform with an overall structure of music with confidence from the very start of rehearsal. Furthermore, it is likely that particular techniques for accompaniment, including practical communication skills (social, physical, and musical), with flexibility and artistic excellence, have considerable influence on their work.

Keywords: accompanist; personality; rehearsal; roles; ability

Accompaniment has been researched by only a few authors, including Moore (1943) and Adler (1965), whereas there are more ensemble studies, for example, by Shaffer (1984) and Davidson and King (2004). Furthermore, Kemp explored musicians' personalities (1981, 1996).

The aim of this research is to investigate the nature of professional accompanists and their roles. In undertaking this research, I have set my heart

on raising the status of professional accompanists, many of whom have excellent artistry.

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred and twenty professional accompanists were asked to fill in a questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by 96 professional accompanists (experience of accompaniment: mean=23 years; men: n=38 and women: n=58) from 11 different nationalities. They are musicians (55%), school or piano teachers (11%), teaching staff in an academic position (10%), and others (19%). They accompany instrumentalists (34%), vocalists (32%), choirs (12%), chamber ensembles or orchestras (3%), all styles of ensemble (18%), and others (1%).

The criteria used in this study for professional accompanists are as follows: (1) people who have more than ten years of accompaniment experience; (2) people who have had formal education in piano performance or the relevant experience; and (3) people who identify themselves as professional accompanists and are paid from their accompaniment work.

Materials

This research is based on an internet questionnaire with 15 multiple choice questions, 23 rating scales, and 8 open-ended questions. The questionnaire covered personality, interests, rehearsal, solo/ensemble concerts, and ability.

Procedure

The questionnaire was uploaded onto a website, and the answers from the participants were analyzed.

RESULTS

Nature of professional accompanists

Personality

The accompanists describe themselves as being sensitive (60.4%), thoughtful (46.7%), optimistic (38.5%), logical (37.5%), inquisitive (31.3%), calm/gentle (17.7%), quiet (12.5%), stubborn (11.5%), argumentative (7.3%), or something else.

Kemp (1981, 1996) explored musicians' personalities. He found high levels of tendency to introversion (self-sufficiency). In contrast, he found high levels of extraversion among keyboard players. In this research, the results also did not show the typical trends of introversion of the accompanists. Just 28.0% of respondents were classed as introverts, 39.6% as neutral, and 31.3% as extraverts. Furthermore, there are more accompanists who prefer to be a leader (38.9%), or are neutral (32.6%), than a follower (28.4%).

Interests

The accompanists take an interest in their own accompaniment work; 70.8% of the accompanists prefer ensemble to solo performance, 15.6% prefer solo performance, and 12.5% like both. Through their work, 83.3% of the accompanists expect musical communication within music, 57.3% expect musical aspects (e.g. sound) in ensemble, and 32.3% expect social aspects.

Accompanists with less than 25 years of experience expect more social aspects than those with above 25 years ($p < 0.01$). On the other hand, performers who have accompanied for more than 25 years expect musical communication within the music more than less experienced players ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, accompanists aged over 60 expect more individual improvements than those in their 20's and 40's ($p < 0.05$).

Roles and ability

Gaps between performers

The biggest gaps, that is, differences and difficulties between their co-performer(s) and themselves, which the accompanists experience are: tempo (35.8%), ritardando (30.5%), articulation (30.5%), and boundaries involving places (27.4%) and treatment (27.4%). They also feel gaps of different expression caused by a different instrument (22.1%), accelerando (18.9%), dynamics (18.9%), mood (17.9%), and tone quality (16.8%).

Pianists who have accompanied for more than 30 years, especially those aged 41-50 ($p < 0.05$), feel more gaps of dynamics than less experienced players ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, pianists who accompany instrumentalists feel more gaps of ritardando than those who accompany singers ($p < 0.001$).

Aims of rehearsal

Although the accompanists' aims changed throughout their rehearsal, the levels of attention toward every goal at the end increased considerably ($p < 0.001$). Their main aim in rehearsal is synchronization. At the start, ac-

Table 1. Aims of rehearsal with level of importance (1-10, with 10=very important).

At the start		Mean	SD	At the end		Mean	SD
1	Synchronization	8.5	1.9	1	Mood/feeling	9.7	1.0
2	Tempo	8.4	1.8	2	Synchronization	9.5	1.1
3	Mood/feeling	7.7	2.5	3	Aesthetic	9.3	1.3
4	Overall structure	7.5	2.4	4	Dynamics	9.3	1.2
5	Timing	7.3	2.3	5	Tempo	9.1	1.6
6	Dynamics	7.2	2.3	6	Characteristics	9.1	1.8
7	Characteristics	7.2	2.5	7	Overall structure	9.0	1.7
8	Motion	7.2	2.5	8	Timing	8.9	1.7
9	Aesthetic	7.1	2.6	9	Motion	8.9	2.0
10	Structure (local)	6.9	2.4	10	Structure (local)	8.4	2.2

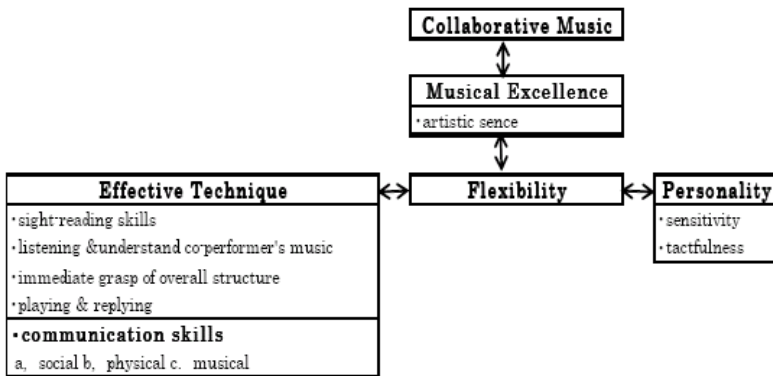


Figure 1. Abilities required as a competent accompanist.

companists generally try to establish a collaborative tempo and timing, while seeing a big picture of the music and its overall structure. At the end, they concentrate on mood/feeling, aesthetic goals, and dynamics much more than before (see Table 1).

Ability

As far as the accompanist’s ability is concerned, three themes emerged: effective technique, personality, and musical excellence (see Figure 1).

Firstly, accompanists require a particular (effective) technique for their work. Most accompanists insisted that sight-reading, listening skills, and

ability to have an immediate grasp of the overall structure of the music are important. Furthermore, accompanists report that communication skills have a significant influence on their work; these involve social, physical (keys of synchronization/leading the co-performer), and musical (give and take) skills.

Secondly, personality affects their work considerably. Most reported that sensitivity and tactfulness are important for their effective work and flexibility is a necessity. Without accepting and leading the other's expression and opinions, collaborative expression will not work satisfactorily.

Finally, musical excellence (artistry) was mentioned by a number of participants. Although some accompanists insist that they should follow the soloist's expression, the majority of accompanists would agree with expressions like these:

Accompanists have an important role in making music better than that created by the soloist him/herself (participant 7).

Make your partner comfortable, while not losing your own musical integrity (participant 91).

As a result, it seems that the levels of both performers' musicality and technique are the keys of successful performance.

DISCUSSION

The expression of a pianist (timing/dynamics) with a violinist (including their rehearsal) was investigated in my previous research (Kubota 2008). Student performers played a Mozart Sonata for Violin and Piano.

It seems that there is a difference in the process of rehearsal between students and professional accompanists. The student performers' aims of rehearsal at the beginning were solving technical problems, sharing general ideas, and synchronization, and at the end the aims were developing ideas with broad structures, more creative expression, and synchronization/fluency. The student accompanists' expression developed considerably throughout the experiment, especially in the period before a concert. It is likely that less experienced accompanists grasp the overall structure of the music gradually while practicing together. On the other hand, it seems that expert accompanists should have the ability to perform with appropriate and artistic interpretation of overall structure from the beginning.

At the beginning of rehearsal, I prefer to seek a big picture rather than details. If all parties are well-prepared and experienced, the music will sync with minimum negotiation (participant 85).

Ensemble performance has the social and psychological aspects of music-making. Accompanists might be attracted by the art of synthesis.

Accompaniment is the most rewarding and fun thing one can do as a musician! (participant 48).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the participants in this survey.

Address for correspondence

Yuriko Kubota, 496-19 Ichi-cho, Kawachinagano-shi, Osaka-fu 586-0002, Japan;
Email: yk25@student.london.ac.uk

References

- Adler K. (1965). *The Art of Accompanying and Coaching*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Davidson J. W. & King E. C. (2004). Strategies for ensemble practice. In A. Williamson (ed.), *Musical Excellence* (pp.105-122). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kemp A. E. (1981). Personality differences between players of string, woodwind, brass and keyboard instruments, and singers. *Council for Research in Music Education Bulletin*, 66/67, pp. 33-38.
- Kemp A. E. (1996). *The Musical Temperament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kubota Y. (2008). A pianist's expression in the role of co-performer: Changes in timing and dynamics through communicative interaction with a violinist. In K. Miyazaki *et al.* (eds.), *Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition* (pp. 140-149), Sapporo, Japan: ICMPC.
- Moore G. (1943). *The Unashamed Accompanist*. New York: Macmillan.
- Shaffer L. H. (1984). Timing in solo and duet piano performances. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 36, pp. 577-595.