

The empathy of accompanists

A soloist may get top billing, but, as all professionals know, the recital is really a team effort of equals with their piano accompanist.

Henrietta Bredin talks to one of the great exponents of that art

WHAT would be the collective noun for a group of accompanists? Having been fortunate enough to sing with the support of several, I would suggest 'an empathy'. Being a piano accompanist is an extraordinary skill, in which few excel and which is frequently overlooked or taken for granted. Malcolm Martineau, a renowned exponent of the art and artistic director of the annual Oxenford International Summer School for solo singers, was asked recently whether he had attended a 'wonderful recital' by a famous singer. 'Yes,' he replied, 'I was playing the piano.'

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The term itself is often disputed, some preferring to call themselves collaborative pianists or song pianists, but the common denominator, the essential accomplishment, is to establish an empathetic connection with a singer, a shared musical understanding and commitment to communicate. Pianists talk of having a sixth sense, a connection to a singer's breathing that enables them to act as a musical safety net, anticipating problems before they occur, reacting seamlessly to a change in pace, in emotional intensity.

Mr Martineau is valued and admired by the many singers he has accompanied, from the world-famous—Bryn Terfel, Elina Garanca, Simon Keenlyside, Anna Netrebko—to college students, aspiring professionals and amateur enthusiasts, and takes genuine delight in working with singers of varying abilities.

He comes from a musical family, the son of a brilliant pianist and an influential teacher, Hester Dickson. 'She was very wise,' he says. 'She never taught me herself. I started when I was four, with the same piano teacher who had taught her, 40 years earlier. Her name was



Baritone and teacher Richard Jackson with singing students and pianists Alisdair Hogarth and Chris Pulleyn at the annual Oxenford International Summer School



Accompanists Malcolm Martineau (below) and Serge Rybin (above, with mezzo-soprano Ann Murray coaching at Oxenfoord)

Edna Lovell, she was never seen without a hat, and I adored her. Small boys are not known for their lengthy attention spans, but she had the gift of keeping children absolutely entranced. She didn't teach me technique,' he continues, 'but she taught me how to read music and how to make colours and tell stories through playing the piano. She put words to everything you played, some of them ridiculous and nonsensical, to help you establish the rhythm and feel of the notes in your head. I think that's what got me into text and storytelling from the beginning.'

Not all accompanists are singers, but Mr Martineau is (his rendition of Cole Porter's *The Tale of the Oyster* is a favourite) and it adds another layer of empathy to his playing. 'I became obsessed with Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at the age of 11 and would come home from school, drop my bag inside the front door, sit down at the piano and play the whole thing, singing all the different roles. Mum got thoroughly sick of it and asked my uncle, Sidney Newman [a retired professor of music], to please teach me another opera. So he taught me Wagner's *Ring*, complete with leitmotifs—gold, the Rhine, Fafner the dragon—the lot.'

A deep-rooted love of language has gone in tandem with music-making for



Mr Martineau. He is a fine linguist and considers that an accompanist should know not only the meaning of every word in a song—whether in German, Spanish, Russian or Czech—but the syntax, the inflection, the place and the implication of a word within the line. Whereas singers (in most cases) memorise the songs so as to be able to communicate directly and effectively with the audience, accompanists, even when knowing every note, invariably have the music in front of them. 'It's really important,' he affirms. 'You see new things on the page every time, a new shape to a phrase, a diminuendo that suddenly means something quite different. Singers constantly reinvent and reinterpret. I've performed

Winterreise with Florian Boesch [Austrian bass-baritone] many, many times, but it's never the same twice. As performing partners, we can always surprise each other, to good effect. That was what inspired me to become a professional accompanist.'

In 1974, aged 14, he heard Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Daniel Barenboim at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh. 'It was like a game between them—they were trying to nudge each other into corners that they weren't expecting. It was astounding.'

Another aspect of being an accompanist is programming. 'I love the way songs can go together in a concert, the

way they balance and complement each other,' observes Mr Martineau. 'A themed recital can be a revelation, but it can also not work at all. For example, when someone's thought "Let's have a whole evening about flowers" or death. You can end up with something impossibly sweet or overwhelmingly gloomy.'

An accompanist needs to stay fresh, in interpretation and in response. 'It's much better to explore the music and the text through playing and singing, rather than discussing it first. Some singers organise every bar, every breath, down to the smallest detail, but that's not my style. My challenge, the fun that I find, is in trying to make what I do mesh with any interpretation. If the singer has an honest connection with the words and with the music, even if it's not what I expect, it always works.'

Malcolm Martineau will be accompanying Dorothea Röschmann at the Oxford Lieder Festival (October 14–29, www.oxfordlieder.co.uk) and Florian Boesch at Wigmore Hall, London W1 (www.wigmore-hall.org.uk) on November 10.

Other Wigmore Hall dates include Susie Allan accompanying Roderick Williams on October 13, Julius Drake with Christine Rice on October 17, Simon Lepper with Masabane Cecilia Ranguanasha on October 19, Keval Shah with Karita Mattila on November 8 and the Ludlow English Song Day on October 22. Julius Drake will be performing at Middle Temple Hall, London EC4 (www.templemusic.org) with Christoph Prégardien on November 22 and with Sarah Connolly and Toby Jones on December 14.