

how to play full time: video notes

- 0:00 To get started: university work. Find a school without a staff pianist (a staff pianist is a person hired to play for the students) at a smaller school.
 - :32 Places you can play: voice lessons, choirs, opera workshop, diction class, recitals, studio classes, student auditions, opera/MT auditions etc.
 - 1:23 The piano students are generally too busy to do all this!
 - 1:28 What people are playing, and how many people do they cover? Is there room for you to work?
 - 1:45 What job arrangement can you set up to start this? Work nights? Work a church job? Get in touch with the department to start playing for voice lessons. (SCHOOLS NEED PIANISTS!)
 - 2:05 Over time you will be useful and develop a reputation to get gigs like weddings, community choirs, play in community orchestra. This is networking!
 - 3:00 My workload and honest job report: generally I make enough during the academic year to hang out during the summer.
- 20-30 voice students, play at lessons 2x a month. each student has 3-5 songs. I charge 30-40 dollars a lesson. I do 15 min practices for free. On Fridays they have studio classes and I play for various singers. So some weeks I make \$400 just on Friday studio classes.
- (the lessons thing: some schools DON'T have you at voice lessons all the time).
- 4:08 KEY POINT: having a lot of voice students is the best way to make money because the repertoire is easier.
- 4:16 Opera workshop- 6 hrs a week, \$25/hr. Voice ensemble 4 hrs a wk. \$25 an hour.

Vocal work is the most dollars per hour spent practicing!



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- Some vocal work you don't even need to practice. Learn during lessons.
- 4:50 Voice recitals. Take these seriously for students and your reputation. Charge north of \$120 for a recital.
- KEY: Recitals are opportunities to get videos (from the hall camera) for portfolios and auditions!
- These get big pieces on your rep list.
- 5:36 Some diction classes require students to sing, you play in class for them. I charge less for this, like \$10.
- 5:47 Instrumental work: Studio classes. Recitals. Auditions. Concerto competitions. (I've even done concerto comps with 2 wk notice) Recital rate for this. Concertos have reductions and you can water it.
- 6:29 Instrumental is a lot more work. And less regular work. (you don't typically go to their lessons regularly). But this is good rep list work. And grow a lot.
- 7:06 I have a "do not fly list" for instrumental pieces.
- 7:20 Teachers often reteach music, so once you learn the Hindemith Oboe or Flute sonata, you know it for next time. AND when the professor knows you know it they will assign it to another student, or next semester.
- ----(btw, a professor will sometimes assign certain works because they know "oh I have a good accompanist, so I can assign this work). ----
- 7:52 My practice time: usually less than 2 hrs a day outside of rehearsals. I DO practice ahead of time so things can gestate while I sleep. TIME and INCUBATION is the most important thing.
- 8:30 My practice techniques: aural listening, finger mapping, small cells of two beats, understand them and not read, memorize stuff once
- 9:18 You don't have to be the BEST piano player to do this job. Some of the music is easy. And you don't have to play every note. It's important to be a gentle rehearser with people. Read them and help calm them down. YOU should be confident so they feel good. Be a supporter of their music. Adjust to their mistakes. Play their tempo. They barely notice if you leave out notes.



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- 10:54 Responses from good work: I don't feel worried about my accompanist.
- 11:14 The volume of music: You WILL learn and improve because of the workload. Your workflow will grow a lot!
- 11:40 To perform well: an air of confidence. Notice how good musicians carry themselves. They act a certain way. Not too high stakes. You don't have to be perfect to be a good musician. Make yourself feel good out there and relax the stakes. Use tone, timing, and confidence to have a good performance.
- 12:37 What way to accept payments: Venmo and easy invoicing for your taxes. Google calendar allows for scheduling appointments. It saves so much time for emailing back and forth. It uses your existing calendar and only offers your open times.
- 13:35 Conclusion: reflecting on this as my career

This is my rep list so you can see what I ended up playing:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1uwO-qXo9bO282WPc9y5HJdIOuDY5h2Ix/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=114527741283629359261&rtpof=true&sd=true>

I still need to add diacritical marks to it.

This is my accompanying website: <https://www.uncollaborativepiano.com>

My studio website: <https://www.gestaltmusicstudio.com>

I have a YouTube channel for accompanying:

<https://www.youtube.com/@uncollaborativepiano>

Enjoy the rest of this guide!!



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what is a collaborative pianist?

Compared to concert pianists and jazz pianists, collaborative pianists play repertoire to accompany other singers and instrumentalists. They are pianists who:

- play repertoire that other musicians often play
- play in multiple genres (classical, jazz, opera, musical theater, casual music)
- know how to improvise
- sight read well
- learn music quickly, or learn how to water music in order to pull it off
- know how to coach individuals
- know how to coach groups of musicians
- know how to "stay out of the way" in a rehearsal
- ALSO know how to "help when people need it" (by playing voice parts when somebody slips, or by adjusting when somebody misses an entrance)
- know a little bit about italian, french, and german to coach singers
- know a little bit about singing to remind people about their goals
- have an understanding of psychology and good "green room" etiquette
- make people feel safe and secure

In short, being a collaborative pianist is ALL about who you are as a person, your people skills, your room reading ability, and your flexibility. If you have the traits above, you are TREASURED and rare. Without even being the best concert pianist or best musician, you can be an AMAZING collaborative pianist by having the skills outlined above and have endless streams of work via word of mouth.

What kinds of work might you do as a collaborative pianist?



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SITUATIONS YOU MAY ENCOUNTER:

- Sight reading 2-3 hours of musical theater auditions for strangers. (This is a WHOLE THING that I will detail, including a separate guide about "binder prep")
- Playing in churches
- Playing at dinner parties, weddings, or cocktail hours
- Playing in rock bands and not being able to hear yourself in the monitor, per usual
- Playing at high school "solo and ensemble" days
- Playing with high school wind ensembles or community orchestras (sometimes they give you harp parts and you just play random arpeggios)
- Literally teaching undergraduates the music they refuse to learn themselves
- Conductors who do not conduct well
- Being in rehearsals where you know you should be the one leading the rehearsal
- Playing for university and community choirs
- Reading open scores (SATB) of 4-8 parts to assist said choirs
- Playing for dance classes by improvising in various styles and moods
- Playing for undergraduate voice and instrumental lessons and recitals
- many more....



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HOW TO BE FLEXIBLE

When people miss entrances:

You continue vamping or repeat something so they can grab onto it.

You notice if they decide to jump in anyways, and adjust to them.

When people jump entrances:

You immediately move to where they are.

You should KNOW who you are working with. If they're young, they'll probably jump an entrance or drop a beat. You know this about young people or beginners and you are *prepared* for that possibility.

BUT sometimes they might know they made a mistake and just cover it up-- know your soloist!!

Also: You know how to make people feel confident. If you see they're unsure, you change your piano part to help them. Some people need support, and you read the room to know when.

Someone might ask you to add the melody they are singing for more support. OR you will notice they need the help and do it! This also applies when playing in a pit for a musical. I am treated like royalty when I read the situation and help the people find their notes.

If you're working with someone graduate level and higher, you should expect a completely different tone of rehearsal and need for support. Adjust to that and be as musical as possible for their high standards. Their pace of rehearsal will also be much faster and more demanding. You should try to match that level of culture and treat it as an opportunity to learn great musicianship.



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HOW TO BE FLEXIBLE

Learning how to "glue" onto other people is a huge part of being a collaborator rather than an accompanist.

Gluing means your timing and flow completely match the singer or instrumentalist.

Typically singers will take time for breaths (you should mark those in your music, and they might tell you about them), and they will have more flow and suppleness to their timing. You should glom onto them and flow with them.

Instrumentalists tend to be more precise and metronomic about timing, with an emphasis on pocket and feel.

For both, if you can listen to THEM first and fit your sound inside their sound (listen from an "audience perspective" of the overall picture), it will alleviate your performance anxiety AND make you a great accompanist.

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More generally:

Can you immediately accept musical advice from conductors and soloists? Can you reschedule for people? Can you meet early for extra rehearsals? Can you stay after for reviews? Can you get different music, or different arrangements? Can you deal with walking out to a random piano under stage lighting and play that random piano?



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HOW TO BE FLEXIBLE: BALANCE

A huge part of accompanying is knowing how to balance.

If they're a singer, they probably need quarter stick on the piano

Undergraduate singers will probably require you to be more quiet more often, because their voices might be quieter

If they're a flute and playing low notes, you have to quiet down

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In a dress a studio professor will probably tell you if the balance is off. If you have a good relationship, they might coach you a little bit and say “go ahead and expand those dynamics” or talk about tempos. Accept this advice! Being given advice means they believe in your musicianship.

You can also ask about the balance and how the room/hall sounds for the combination you're in.

Part of being flexible is adjusting to the piano you're on in the particular hall you're in. For example, if it's a muddy hall, you might pedal less! You have to trust the room.



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TYPES OF PEOPLE

Different people have different personalities and cultures depending on the instrument they play. These are just things I've noticed about undergraduate musicians, take it or leave it:

Voice: tend to be more emotional and need plenty of reassuring (this is an element of using their body to sing! the confidence has to be there)

Trumpet: tend to have a "bro" attitude, and a certain machismo. This is very much a part of studio culture, and doing "routine" each morning, and the like

Trombone: tend to be laid back but competent and accurate

Flute: either very competent and accurate, or a bit flighty and nervous

Clarinet: tend to be nerdy and competent, or nerdy and unskilled

Oboe: either suffering from bad tone, or a very prim person and absolutely accurate

Bassoon: a more relaxed/hipster class of nerd, but might be unwieldy with their instrument in terms of tuning and fingering

Sax: plays insane repertoire and either nails it or completely over their head (saxophone rep is notoriously hard for the pianist- watch out)

Tuba/Euph: hard to hear, but both tend toward competence



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HOW TO BE ATTENTIVE

When playing for a group rehearsal:

The conductor is in charge. Full stop. If you address the conductor about something, be amiable and conciliatory. It is a collaboration where you are in a position of service. You are NOT in charge. Sometimes you will feel like a bit of background feature of the situation. That is part of the gig.

Be attentive by being attentive. Think about what is probably going to get rehearsed next and be ready to go there. Also, you can probably guess what passage is about to be rehearsed next, and what starting notes or introduction to give people. This is being prepared and helping things move along.

With soloists in rehearsal:

You need to notice their confidence level. Are they young/new? Should you take the lead in the rehearsal, or do they know what they want? One of you is going to have to call the segments you rehearse, and you can tell by judging what the person's attitude and needs are.

With soloists and logistics:

If you're dealing with a person who doesn't seem to plan ahead or give you what you need, you might need to lead. Send an email saying you think another rehearsal would be good, or say you need the music PDF to be clear. Part of being attentive is noticing that your partner isn't addressing problems that need fixing. You can make the entire situation go better by taking the lead.

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HOW TO WATER MUSIC

Watering music means realizing you don't have to play every note that's on the page. This depends on GENRE, DIFFICULTY, and PERFORMANCE TYPE.

Take this example from musical theater:

If you're playing as a one-off rehearsal sub, you don't have to play the book note-note perfectly.

If you're playing a SHOW, you should probably learn the book.

If there's something literally too hard for you, water it and play something more musically sensible.

Or in classical performance:

If you're playing a one-off studio class last minute, you don't have to be perfect.

If you're playing a RECITAL, you should be note-perfect.

If you're playing an orchestral reduction, it's up to YOU to figure out what to play to give the best musical presentation. Reductions are a separate topic of their own (Appendix).

If something is literally too hard, water it.



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Appendix: Binder Prep Guide

What is binder prep? As a pianist, you have to know that when people come to a musical theater audition, they bring a "cut" of a tune from a musical theater song. This means they create a "mini song" showcasing their voice and acting.

In an audition, the committee sits at a desk. The applicant comes in, says hi somehow, and approaches the piano. At the piano, they talk you through their cut. They will say things like: start here, do this for an intro (or give a bell tone starting note), they will have parts of the music blanked out to skip, and show you where to skip to. They will also give you an indication of their tempo.

BUT often, they will not explain everything needed for you to help them, and you'll have to ask for information in a kind manner. They will try to RUSH through this process, and will often skip things or give you a faster tempo than they actually want.

The binder they bring in may or may not be prepped properly.

They might not hole punch it. (Bring your own hole punch and binder). They might cut off lines or even pages. They might not know how to determine a sensible introduction. You might have to invent a good one for them (like if they marked an intro that's in literally a different key than what they're about to sing).

You should be ready for these contingencies!

Below I will provide the guidelines for good binder prep that the applicants should have. I have taught undergraduates and advanced summer summer camp students these principles to be sure they know what to do.



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Appendix: Binder Prep Guide for Vocalists

*Written out, this is a lot, but is actually common sense looking at the big picture.

When selecting music for a one-off audition, here are some tips to help you succeed:

-If allowed, contact the pianist and send your music to them. They might advise you get a better copy etc. They will also be able to review/listen to the cut and play closer to what you're expecting. Some people practice in advance with the audition pianist. If allowed.

-The edition you find should be professionally engraved. There shouldn't be crossing stems, bad rhythmic beaming, or bad enharmonic spellings. Muscore is notorious for this!

-Some editions are lower quality. The chord voicings are bad, have poor leading, or are hard to read. Ask a pianist what they think when they glance at the page.

-The music should have a vocal line for the pianist to follow. Otherwise they are deciphering based on context and chord progression.

-Some pianists can or can't read a jazz chord chart. Most are more comfortable reading some kind of piano part. At the least, lyrics with chords can help. Remember, any jazz standard has SOME kind of arrangement out there that you could bring.

-Bring complete music. Don't cut off the music too early and continue singing, leaving the pianist to improvise. Make sure the bottom piano lines are complete. Don't have a jazz standard missing chords on the right side of the page because you didn't "fit to page" when printing.

Then prepare your audition binder:

If more than two pages, print the music two sided.

Make sure the title and show are on the music. The pianist often has a sense for genre based on this.

Clearly block out unneeded music, usually by covering unneeded portions with white boxes.

Write a start point, write the tempo and indicate if you want a note, or an intro. (Sometimes a vocalist gets their note but doesn't audiate the key area. Some pianists play a short progression so you get that, others don't. So indicate what you want!) Internalizing a key area requires three chords or at least a V I.

Clearly mark repeats that are skipped, highlight cut to cut points, or remove sections etc. Make the roadmap obvious.

Clearly mark the ending and what you want the pianist to do. Does it make sense? End on tonic? Have a fermata or something?

Hole punch the music and put it in a binder. A good pianist has a hole punch and a binder, but don't risk it.



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Appendix: Binder Prep Guide for Vocalists

At the audition:

- Say hi to your pianist, give them your music.
- Show your cut to the pianist. Where it starts, if there are repeats, fermatas, tempo changes, a second ending etc. Don't rush this. Your pianist is scanning and comprehending the key area and deciding if anything needs watering.
- Give tempo/say your first phrase. Say something about meter, like if you're counting in cut time etc.
- Be accurate when giving your tempo. Often the singer is nervous and rushes this process and they sing completely differently once they begin.
- Tell them if it's swung or straight time.
- If you sing confidently and know your rhythms, your pianist will play much better for you.

Introduce Yourself to the Panel:

"Hello, I'm _____. Today I'll be singing _____ from _____."

SING

Congrats!

Remember: You don't have to be perfect to be evaluated based on your merits. A good audition comes from factors outside of perfection, and your panel is capable of recognizing circumstantial errors versus a shortcoming in musical literacy. Some key behaviors:

- amiability, ease, poise
- secure, loud vocal usage, even if a little out of voice or off that day
- being musically flexible, taking mistakes in stride instead of asking to restart
- clearly knowing the tonal scheme, singing in correct time and feel
- independent, able to endure when a pianist makes mistakes



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Appendix: What are reductions?

Reductions are condensed piano parts that represent larger ensembles: orchestras, whole pit bands, etc.

A reduction will include multiple parts on the page, and sometimes you can't play everything that is on the page.

Because the reduction is representing music played by other instruments, it might be awkward on piano!

Furthermore, some reductions are lower quality and less pianistic than other reductions!

It is up to you to decide how to interpret the reduction to give the best musical information to your soloist, the audience, and to the source material.

You might have to choose what orchestra lines to play because there are too many.

One choice you might make is to play something chordal that outlines the harmonies going on without committing to every single note that is happening.

Or, you can take something that is difficult to play on the piano, and make an adjustment. Take this example from Rimsky-Korsokov:

Allegro vivace

Posaune

Klavier

f p simile



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Appendix: What are reductions?



My philosophy:

As a collaborator, I believe it is SELFISH to try and play every note and then screw up your timing and therefore your soloist. Take out as many notes as you must in order to be bulletproof for your soloist. It is NOT about you!

In *some* scenarios, it is important that you play every note. If you recording, play every note. If it is a recital, try your hardest to play every note. But the bottom line is that most situations do not require it. It is unmusical to be making mistakes.



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