

## The Perfect Partnership

*Mezzo soprano Catrin Johnsson and pianist Rachel Fuller are highly accomplished musicians and both teach at the University of Auckland. It was our good fortune to hear them in masterclass at our Conference 2020, where they offered numerous suggestions to help singers and pianists build the perfect partnership. Fay McNeil reports.*

For many years the art of accompanying has been underrated and as a professional singer, I know just how important a good accompanist is in making a successful performance. The redefinition to collaborative pianist is long overdue.

Rachel opened by discussing what is required of a good collaborative pianist, including good sight reading, score reading and transposing skills.

- The ability to keep a steady beat, precisely subdivide and follow a conductor are important. Be aware of balance between hands, and the voice and piano.
- Foster aural, visual, physical and instinctive awareness of resonance, breath, movement, intention and text. Respond to the room's acoustic.
- Consider the orchestral and pianistic sound world and use dynamics to create light and shade. Pay attention to articulation (clear and dextrous fingering), pedalling, voicing and beauty of tone.
- Make historically informed choices, bearing in mind traditions, settings, instrumentation and the composer's idiosyncrasies.

### **L'Invitation au Voyage – Duparc**

Catrin encouraged the singer to own the stage from the moment of entry. When learning the song, speak the words in rhythm: tapping the pulse on the sternum helps to develop the physical memory and ensure notes are given their full value. The pianist should notice when the accompaniment overlaps in pitch, bringing more support from the bass part and making the right hand more piano. Breathe with the singer to allow for a little rubato.

### **Suleika 1 – Schubert**

During the introduction you are remembering 1000 kisses: as you prepare your breath, focus so that the pianist knows when to start. The pianist should watch the text to avoid anticipating dynamic changes. Don't underestimate the bass line – it represents the masculine that she is calling for in the right hand and text. In the second section lean on the first beat to create the dance feeling and ensure that each bar has its shape.

### **The Nurse's Song - from A Charm of Lullabies - Britten**

Catrin suggested using different characters to add more colour to the text and music. Rachel said when accompanying a big sound keep the weight and warmth in the tone to give the singer something to sing against. This gives extra support especially in difficult places for the voice.

### **Let the Bright Seraphim from Samson - Handel**

Use the consonants to help the pianist feel the speed – especially by anticipating them before the beat – and by finishing them clearly, particularly when using agogic accents. In ABA form, take extra time at the end of the B section to fully complete the statement. Pianists working with orchestral reductions should listen to orchestral recordings – then you can decide what you need to play. For example, not all the repeated quavers are necessary. The mid-section needs a lot of co-operation between the piano and voice so that the piano can give support and help the rhythm.

This was a very valuable and enlightening session – more please!

*Fay McNeil studied in New Zealand, Australia and London, and has considerable performance experience, from opera to oratorio. She is a member of NEWZATS and has taught music for nearly 30 years. She enjoys seeing singers reach their potential whether performing professionally or simply becoming skilled enough to join a choir or sing along with a community event.*