Becoming Collaborative Pianists:

Student Experiences in Graduate Programs

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Abstract

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Accompanist is the old term. *Collaborative pianist* is the new one. *Accompanist* implies a mostly subservient role, whereas *collaborative pianist* gestures toward a more equitable relationship between the soloist and pianist, no longer a mere follower. Degree programs that prepare collaborative piano skills are growing rapidly in higher education since their inception five decades ago, encouraging a wider range of pianists to pursue an intentional career path. Becoming a seasoned collaborative pianist takes time, however. Little empirical research has investigated the preparation process. What is it like for collaborative piano majors to accumulate collaborative skills and practical knowledge? How is collaboration defined and experienced, and how helpful do students find their programs? Without understanding student experiences, the artistic well-being of collaborative pianists is at stake, and so is the field's own ability to do its work. This qualitative study examines lived experiences of collaborative piano students in conservatory and university degree programs. As researcher, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews exploring topics including, but not limited to, professional identity, attitudes and dispositions, competencies and skills, struggles and challenges, power dynamics as well as teamwork with four recent graduates in the United States. It seems that issues of professionalization, an unclear definition of "collaboration," and a lack of student agency are central to all lived experiences. An examination of these phenomena would contribute to the growth of the field, empowering its ability to do its job more efficiently and sustainably.

Table of Contents

Dedication vi
Prelude vii
Chapter I: (A Lack of) Voices of Collaborative Pianists 1
- Background and Context 1
- Problem Statement 6
- Purpose Statement 7
- Rationale and Significance 7
- Research Questions 8
- Overview of Research Design 8

Chapter II: A Story of a Field Attempting to Figure Itself Out 9
- Definition of Terms 9
- Discrepancies in Definitions 10
- What is a Collab? 12
- Yes to Accompany? 14
- Why Vocal Coaching? 14
- What Do *répétiteurs* Do? 16
- Perceptions of Accompanists' Effects on Performances 17
- Qualities of an Ideal Collaborative Pianist 18
- History of Programs 18
- Benefits to Institutions 20
- Graduate Assistantships 20
- Service vs. Education 22
- Pertinent Skills and Competencies 23
  - Algernon H. Lindo's The Art of Accompanying (1916) 23
  - Kurt Adler's The Art of Accompanying and Coaching (1965) 24
  - Deon Nielsen Price's Accompanying Skills for Pianists (1991) 24
- Collaboration as a Process 25
- Employability 26
- Conceptual Framework 26

Chapter III: A Way of Discovery 28
- Introduction and Overview 28
- Rationale for Employing a Qualitative Approach 28
- Rationale for Using Phenomenology 31
- Transcendental Phenomenology 33
- Research Sample 35
- Information Needed to Conduct the Study 37
  - Contextual 37
  - Demographic 37
  - Perceptual 38
  - Theoretical 38
- Pilot Study 38
  - Theme 1: Roles of collaborative pianist remain undefined 40
  - Theme 2: Unclear: What is Collaboration? 40

Theme 3: Service Needs for Others Still Outweigh the Educational Needs of Pianists 41
Theme 4: Lacking Room for Growth 42
Theme 5: Having a Process Primes Optimal Collaboration 43
Theme 6: Outlier 43
Implication for Further Research 44
Methods of Data Collection 45
Method 1: Interview 45
Method 2: Document Review 47
Method 3: Journaling 48
Data Analysis and Synthesis 49
Role of the Researcher 50
Researcher Assumptions and Expertise 51
Ethical Considerations 52
Informed Consent and Privacy (Anonymity and Confidentiality) 52
Data Collection 52
Issues of Trustworthiness: Credibility 52
Dependability 54
Transferability 54
Limitations of the Study 55
Chapter IV: Renderings: Journeys of Becoming 56
Alisa 58
A Little Encouragement Went a Long Way 58
"I don't think I knew what I was getting myself into." 59
Unbalanced Curriculum 59
Missed Opportunities for Teaching and Coaching 60
Collaborative Skills 61
Speed: Sight Reading and Repertoire Learning 62
Know Thyself 62
Struggling to Meet Standards at a High Volume 63
The Best Collaborative Experience in School, and the Worst 64
Collaborating vs. Accompanying 65
Power Dynamics 67
Being a Student and an Employee 67
Money 68
Employability 68
Kyle 69
Hooked: Singer's Legato 69
Integration and Transition 70
Formal Study: "I feel torn in a million directions" 71
Unfocused Curriculum 72
Change in Social Personality 73
A Greater Perceived Difference Than It Actually Is? 73
Good Piano-Playing Brings Existential Threats to Song Pianists? 74
Needing to Catch up on Vocal Knowledge 75
Landing Real Jobs 76

Audition Preparation 78
"It's like playing a video game" 79
Primary Value: Hands-on Experience 80
Sight-reading, The Most Important Competency 80
Vocal Coaching Demystified 81
Youth? Not an Asset 82
Power Dynamic Differences Between Rehearsals and Coachings 84
On Ego, Resentment and Unity 86
What is Collaboration? 87
Andrew 89
"I didn't know this field could be this exciting" 90
Learn Fast, and Even Faster 91
"Don't lose yourself" 91
"Oh, I can do this" 92
"Locked into the pianist you were when you started" 93
Settling In 93
Breakthroughs 95
Teaching Philosophy 98
Languages: The Biggest Learning Curve 99
Coaching in Different Contexts 100
Challenges in Teacher-Student Collaborations 102
Serving the Music 103
The Nature of Collaboration 104
Ellen 105
Declaration of Focus at the Start 106
Practicum 107
A Free-for-all System 108
Permission to Coach? 109
Karaoke Machine 111
Re-engagement 112
Money Changes Everything 113
Professorship Not Any Time Soon 114
Collaboration and the Best Collaboration 114
Agency 115
On Program Improvement 115

Chapter V: Reconceptualizing Key Aspects 118
Theme 1: What is Collaboration, Really? 118
Theme 2: Rethinking Pedagogy 126
Overwhelmed at the Start 126
Musically Satisfied? Not so Much 127
The Zone of Proximal Development 129
Graduate Assistantships 132
Accompaniment Systems 134
Dual Roles as Student and Staff Remains Challenging 136
Awkwardness in Charging Peers Money 137
Employability 138

Theme 4: Attempted Excellence Compromised 139
(Missing) Pedagogical Training 139
Vocal Coaching 141
The Need for Studio Matching 142
Summary 145
Chapter VI: Richness of Possibilities 146
Question 1: How do Collaborative Piano Students Describe Program Experiences? 147
Intentions and Expectations 147
Challenges and Learning Curve 148
Musical Dissatisfaction 149
Being Overwhelmed 150
Over-repetition 150
(Out of) The Zone of Proximal Development 151
Competencies and Qualities 152
Dual role as Student and staff 153
Question 2: How is Piano Collaboration Perceived and Experienced? 153
Best and Worst Collaborations 154
Nature of Collaboration Remains Unclear 155
Accompanist vs. Collaborative Pianist 156
Professionalization and Money 157
Question 3: How Do Programs Meet Student Needs? 159
Employability and Program Support 159
Program Improvements 160
Education, Training, Professionalization 163
What is Education in Collaborative Piano? 164
How Can We Make It More Humane and Student-Centered? 167
Recommendations for Future Research 172
Race, Ethnicity and Gender 172
Creating positions: Instrumental Coaches 173
Unionization? 174
What Might an Ideal Program Design Look Like? 175
Student Agency and Preserving the Relationship with Piano 176
Chapter VII: Epilogue 178
References 183

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1 *Diagram of the Family Tree of a Pianist* 24
Figure 2 *Graduate Study Design and Individual Experiences* 27
Table 1 *Participant Demographics* 56
Figure 3 *Daily Schedule Sample* 64

Dedication

To my supportive parents,
for whom I am forever grateful and indebted to.

To all my teachers, friends, collaborators, and participants,
for being a part of my growth

Thank you, Dr. Randall Everett Allsup, for guiding me in this journey
and sponsoring my work.

Thank you, dissertation committee, for your invaluable feedback.

Prelude

Thank goodness it's Friday! I feel relieved (almost) to have survived another week. I'm in my second year of a master's degree as a collaborative piano student at The Juilliard School. But my week is not over yet, because I have studio accompanying on Saturdays to prepare for. Every Friday afternoon, I receive a list of repertoire from the violin instructor at the Pre-College division detailing what their students will be playing in lessons the following day. Each student has one movement of a concerto, one complete sonata, and two show pieces to prepare for, and there are six students. Lessons are back-to-back. Sometimes the students and I manage to have rehearsals beforehand, sometimes not at all. In the event that a student and I meet directly in lessons, our ensemble is held to the same standard as if we have rehearsed: I will be delivering proper cuts of the orchestra part, playing in whatever tempos and musical characters set by the student or instructor. Upon glancing at the repertoire list, I feel anxious: Beethoven Sonatas, Kreisler's *Tambourin Chinois*, Ravel's *Tzigane,* Vieuxtemps and Tchaikovsky concertos, couple Wieniawski and Bruch showpieces, and many more. Much of the music, though quite standard, is not familiar to me. Delay no more, I storm to the library, swiftly check out a heavy stack of sheet music, and lock myself in the practice room to "swallow" the notes until midnight. While my friends socialize on a Friday night, I convince myself that expanding my instrumental repertoire through accompanying in a violin studio - even more hours than what is required of me by my collaborative piano program - is the best use of my time. I am often exhausted, but I am glad to be paid to provide a service that is integral not only to my study and training, but to my friends and peers.

Sometimes, I feel excited about what I do. I look forward to playing with friends in my departmental recitals in Alice Tully Hall and the like. There is no money involved, but I feel

rewarded. I feel that I am on a team, as an equal partner. For my departmental recital, I ask an instrumentalist to be my recital partner. My partner and I make repertoire decisions together, and it usually is a duet with equal substantial parts, be it the Rachmaninoff cello sonata with piano or a Fauré violin sonata. Our rehearsals are playgrounds for joyful musical explorations, and lessons with teachers light our paths to further mature our musicianship and interpretation of the works. Vocal concerts are structured differently. Either a singer invites me first to participate, or the pairing is pre-determined by the faculty, and the repertoire is usually decided upon by them already based on the singer's vocal needs. Playing with singers lets me "get under their skin," as my teacher calls it - a metaphor for complete integration with a singer's singing, characters, and storytelling. I synchronize my breaths with my partner's, listen to their vibrato with my elephant sized ears, and sensitively adjust my pedaling depth to provide just the right amount of harmonic support in Aaron Copland's *At the River*. When I feel that we are as one, I rejoice! I pay close attention to *accent l'insistance* in French *mélodie*, ensuring that the end of phrases in Reynaldo Hahn's *L'heure exquise* is musically congruent with the sensibility of the language. If my partner has a memory slip on stage, I murmur the words to them, jump a section, or do whatever it takes to save the show, empowered by the full score opened right in front of me. I like that we have a process, a common goal to achieve our best, and we honor each other's give-and-takes in this symbiotic partnership.

Somewhere along my journey, surprises hit. I was surprised that coaching skill is so critical to the success of a collaborative pianist, especially to vocal pianists. It requires a different kind of listening and thought process from merely playing the piano alone: the focus is on the singer, not on me. Does a singer really want an opinion from a pianist? What do I have to offer? That is challenging at first for someone from a solo piano background; I've been trained to listen

to my own sounds first and foremost. To be a coach is to double as an audience observer while simultaneously performing on the keyboard. In a coaching session, I am expected to play the piano part and give feedback to singers after the initial run-through. Feedback can focus on a broad range of issues, such as diction, musical style, expressions, character and text interpretation, or general musical elements of pitch and rhythm. To prepare for a coaching, I first internalize the word-to-word translations and International Phonetic Alphabets (IPAs) of foreign texts by copying it down to the score - be it Italian, German, French, or Russian - from credible sources. If it is an opera excerpt, I then move onto learning the synopsis of the opera and characters, and how that specific excerpt is situated in the larger work. Lastly, I then learn the notes on the page (both the vocal lines and piano reduction) and assess whether there are any prominent cues from instrumental parts to help singers navigate a complex orchestration while they sing and act. In the event that an orchestral reduction is barely playable at the piano (e.g. Strauss, Stravinsky, contemporary works), I make decisions about what to leave out and what to keep in, without compromising essentials. I also should be able to sing any vocal parts at any time. If there is a conductor conducting, my eyes go between the baton, the score, the keyboard, and the singers - my goal is to follow the baton like a fitting glove to a hand.

By the time I learn about the many moving parts a coach and *répétiteur* has to juggle, I am completely in awe of the time it takes to gain superb bodily coordination, commands of operatic languages, and the sheer experience needed in order to be sufficient. To my native Chinese tongue, all texts are foreign, including “old” English. With a knowledge gap on vocal production, languages, and repertoire, I often feel challenged and discouraged. But I tell myself: I have to keep trying.

Then there is a holding place of episodes that I am hesitant to remember. My slippery memory may suggest that my path of becoming a skilled collaborative pianist is actually filled with much trial and error. Before I am able to comfortably transpose Schumann's *Belsatzar* at sight in a live concert, my transposition of Debussy *Green* sounded nothing like the piece in voice lessons, and I have to leave the poor singer singing alone without piano parts. I even miss a simple key change from d minor to D major in Schubert's *Winterreiser*. Before I have stamina to play in over 20 auditions in one day, I had messy notes and shaky rhythms in some, and I walked away feeling bad about my playing. Should I tell you that my under preparation in rehearsals led my partner to look for someone else to play with instead? Should I also tell you that I charge fellow student colleagues for most rehearsals and recitals that they ask me to play in, as a standard practice? More, as workload increased, my exhaustion occasionally led to careless "accidents" before I became a seasoned performer. Once, my partner and I had to stop moments after we started a live recital. She apparently had switched the order of the program at the last minute and had informed me, yet I completely forgot about it. She whispered to me on stage: we switched the order, remember? Gasping, I ran offstage, and returned immediately with the appropriate sheet music to restart the show. Too many episodes were filled with embarrassments of my own. I burst into tears in the women's bathroom questioning: Why am I struggling? Am I not competent for the role? Why does everything feel so difficult? I am overwhelmed.

After some years passed, I felt that I may have finally gotten around to the other side, past my "growing pains." After having played in nearly 200 recitals, coached several new opera productions, and performed regularly in a tango band, I was able to sit down and play most music in front of me - whether I knew it or not, two staffs or several clefs simultaneously - with much more ease, awareness, and musical conviction. My repertoire base quadrupled. With only a

verbal tempo check with someone I just met for the very first time, I was able to carry a sense of confidence onto stage that I never had in my early years. Rehearsals were no longer necessary in some instances, at least not for me. I remember the moment of coaching American singers to sing in Chinese, the knowledge I accumulated from lyric diction classes and voice lessons all seemed to pay off in the most rewarding way possible. Three weekly private lessons on both instrumental and vocal repertoire (as opposed to one weekly private lesson like most non-collaborative piano majors) also unquestionably laid the foundation for landing my first professional engagements.

But how I got here, the process of becoming a collaborative pianist, remains perplexing. Initially, I thought collaborative piano equipped me for equal collaboration and teamwork, (e.g., performing duo repertoire with amicable colleagues). Soon, I learned that accompanying in lessons and auditions was expected of me. That meant having an enormous repertoire in all style periods, including music not written for piano, and being prepared to take engagements on very short notice, thus enhancing work prospects. Moreover, I realized that vocal coaching requires knowledge of languages, vocal mechanisms, and strong sight-reading skills. In addition, opera pianists must coordinate between playing the score, singing any voices in operatic ensembles, and following a baton simultaneously, effectively merging accompanying, performing, and conducting at times. On top of that, bringing up compensation with fellow student colleagues became part of my professional persona, sometimes further complicating tensions. My role as a collaborative pianist, specifically as a graduate student, constantly underwent negotiations. Others' needs, time constraints, budgets, all came into play. What remains unchanged, however, appears to be the never resolved debate between calling my role "accompanist" or "collaborator."

In retrospect, I could not help but wonder: was my accompanying services to others helping my own education more, or *them*? Playing for others was part of my program requirement, but sometimes I felt split too thin. When I accompanied lessons back-to-back, with binge learning the day before, *how much do I retain*? When I had to sight read on the spot because I was not informed of the repertoire ahead of time, did I learn much besides improving my sight-reading skills and tolerating my own wrong notes? When I face a choice between a Mozart concerto that I already played 20 times and a Prokofiev concerto that is brand new to me and will take at least several hours to learn, which one should I say yes to, if I get paid either way? Sometimes I found myself in conundrums, unsure if the reconfigured term "collaborative piano" really changes much from "accompanying" in terms of its subservient function: did the role become any *less* subordinate or hierarchical with just a name change? There seemed to be an elephant in the room that we never really discussed. At the end of the day, I remind myself how lucky I am to have the most dedicated and supportive teachers, and how grateful I am to have early exposure to employment - much of it thanks to the interdisciplinary approach - in contrast to many of my peers outside of my department.

These are snapshots of my *becoming*. I choose to tell this story with all its messiness because the story is my journey. Perhaps my tribe - my fellow collaborative pianists - may be able to relate to my journey. What are *their* stories like? I wonder how their experiences may resonate with mine, or not. Are there things we share? Do school environments - different tribes - make a difference? I want to know more and hear *from others*.

Chapter I: (A Lack of) Voices of Collaborative Pianists

This study is about understanding the student experiences of collaborative pianists in graduate programs. The inquiry concerns how students describe their studies and navigate growth in the process, namely, what it is like to go through collaborative piano training, how students view their collaborative roles, as well as the conditions that contribute to achieving their best, or impede their efforts. Topics explored will include, but are not limited to, professional identity, attitudes and dispositions, competencies and skills, the nature of collaboration, challenges faced, as well as institutional cultures and policies. By illustrating the voices of collaborative piano students, it is anticipated that the knowledge generated from this inquiry might reveal new understandings of student needs, thus informing policy practices in music conservatories and universities. It is my hope that improved student experiences will contribute to the growth of the field, empowering its ability to do its job more efficiently and sustainably.

I move next to an overview of what collaborative piano is, followed by the problem statement, intent of study, and research questions. This chapter provides research of its internal design and gives an overview.

Background and Context

The term *accompanist* – referring to a pianist in classical music ensembles – has sparked controversy (Barr, 2000; Lee, 2009). A typical audience member who comes to watch a world-renowned violinist in a recital might pay scarce attention to the so-called "accompanist." However, with no pianist playing the piano parts, no matter how beautiful the violinist plays, they can only perform a portion of the composition, as opposed to its intended whole. The sum, in this instance, is greater than its parts. Pianists in such ensembles are not only vital, but integral to a successful performance. In the event that a pianist calls out sick, the violinist may have to

either find a suitable substitute last minute or change their recital program entirely to exclude repertoire involving piano parts. Pianists contribute to the overall musical expression of a soloist and assist in the general learning of repertoire (Geringer & Sasanfar, 2013). Although both parts are needed, a pianist in such an ensemble has been traditionally called an accompanist, not a collaborator. Accompanist implies a subservient relationship to provide musical support. Pianists in such subsidiary roles often receive lesser musical recognition, lesser pay, and subsequently, deemed non-essential (Katz, 2009). The disadvantageous positioning of pianists as mere accompanists is a nurturing ground for unnecessary tensions, hierarchy, and disrespect (Wenger, 2008).

The concept of *collaborative piano* emerged to address these concerns. This new term gestures towards a more equitable partnership, rather than a follower role. American pianist Samuel Sanders, founder of the collaborative piano program at The Juilliard School, gave it its name in the 1960s (Lee, 2009; Wenger, 2008). A regular recital partner to noted performers such as cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, Jacqueline Du Pré, as well as sopranos Beverly Sills and Jessey Norman, Sanders was the first pianist to demand his name printed on concert advertisements and programs, along with "soloists", reported on The New York Times (Kozinn, 1999). His 30-year collaboration with violinist Itzhak Perlman yielded twelve recordings, and two of them were awarded Grammys. Sanders also advocated for women when "virtually all accompanists at that time were men," insisting on admission of women when he pioneered the master's program in The Juilliard School (Kozinn,1999).

To describe his role as a collaborative pianist, Sanders made a comparison to that of a catcher in a baseball team, in a sense that even though the pitcher is the glamourous figure, the catcher is the one that catches the ball, no matter how (erroneously) the ball is pitched (Kozinn,

1999). Sanders called his work “a combination of knowing the piece, luck, and having good reflexes ...The catcher is in on every play, and he really does see the whole field in a way that no other player sees it” (Kozinn, 1999). The position of a collaborative pianist requires much flexibility, sensitivity, precision, stamina, and knowledge. The notion of *collaborative pianist* was quickly adopted by most pianists as the preferred term used, for it better defines – at least aspirationally – the co-equal role that musicians in this context play (Baker, 2006; Barr, 2011; Katz, 2009; Wenger, 2008).

It was not until the 1970s that the field of collaborative piano was formalized into practices in higher education nation-wide as generative work that supports fine arts (Fincher, 2020; Rose, 1981). Creations of collaborative piano degree programs in conservatories and universities provided a path for an intentional career to accompany, coach, and perform alongside others, instead of falling into place as a chance or a lesser necessity (Barr, 2000). Since the first degree program was established at the University of Southern California in 1971, over 90 institutions now offer graduate degrees in collaborative piano, and the number of programs keeps expanding (Fincher, 2020). This growing field signals a continued demand for such specialization.

Specialization provides prospective classical pianists with several choices of graduate degrees: piano performance, piano pedagogy, chamber music, and collaborative piano. While piano performance and pedagogy programs prepare aspirants for how to become a soloist or a teacher, collaborative piano and chamber music programs equip students to become trained team players and performers, such as a specialist in piano trio or quartet, an instrumental or song recitalist, opera coach, or a staff pianist affiliated with an institution, etc. Many hats can be worn by the same pianist, and there seems no “one way” to pursue a career in collaborative piano

given the possibilities of "niche specialties." A diversified approach to one's career portfolio is celebrated (Barr, 2010; Garrett, 2019; Tostado, 2013).

Within collaborative piano programs, there are common specialties offered during training: vocal piano, opera coaching, and instrumental piano. Some students choose one specialty to focus on during study, some generalize and do it all (Garrett, 2019). Vocal pianists perform in voice recitals and auditions with singers, and coach concert repertoire with an understanding of lyric dictions, musical styles, and vocal production. A subspecialty within vocal piano – *répetiteur*, or opera coach – refers to pianists functioning as an orchestra by playing piano reductions or a full orchestral score, often in opera rehearsals under the baton of a conductor. Opera pianists are expected to know the traditions of a performance practice, "be conversant with the performance practices that have grown up around each work - not only standard cadenzas, ornaments and cuts but also the more subtle and complex history of how roles and voice categories intersect" (Zeger, 1997). They must also sing a given vocal line at the keyboard to cue singers as necessary. Many opera coaches become assistant conductors, and eventually conductors of operas. It is an implicit culture to coach singers, a practice tradition that deserves a closer look.

Instrumental pianists, on the other hand, while not having to work extensively with languages, must have familiarity with standard repertoire and understandings of specific workings of various orchestral instruments. An instrumental pianist specializing in string repertoire must know the viola's four standard concertos and be acutely beware of acoustics balance in specific registers of instruments. Much repertoire on woodwinds and brass instruments calls for composition from the 21st century and such complex scores require pianists to further simplify heavy orchestral textures. Instrumental sonatas tend to showcase strong

pianistic command. For instance, Brahms' cello sonatas with piano are not any less virtuosic than his solo piano sonatas. Collaborative piano students are expected to taste a wide array of specialties during their studies and specialize in several of them (Wenger 2008; Barr, 2011; Garrett, 2019).

A broad and deep knowledge base as well as skill sets gained during training contribute to the employability of collaborative piano graduates, at least in comparison to other piano programs (Baker, 2006; Corcoran, 2012; Lee, 2009; Tostado, 2013). Rose (1981) named over 20 essential collaborative piano skills: knowledge of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), lyric diction, poetry interpretation, ensemble repertoire, instrumental knowledge, keyboard skills, vocal coaching techniques, orchestral reduction, transposition at sight, sight-reading, score reading, rapport building, communications, recital program building, and more. In this way, employability is inherently designed into the program of study. As a part of graduate assistantship duties or program requirements, collaborative piano students work with student colleagues in a variety of settings, often compensated, with the intent that while collaborative piano students gain hands-on exposure in playing with others, student colleagues receive pianistic support in their learning of musical material (Fincher, 2020). As a result, service provided by collaborative piano majors benefit schools as a whole (Lee, 2009; Stowell, 2008). Collaborative piano programs even act as a recruitment tool for some institutions in attracting enrollments of instrumental and vocal students (Fincher, 2020; Wenger, 2008).

Discussions on collaborative piano mostly focus on desired qualities and skills of collaborative pianists, as well as administrative and operational aspects of such programs. How students receive their education and navigate expectations placed upon them remain unclear. Given the multifaceted nature and the unique functions of collaborative piano departments to

schools, collaborative piano students are frequently over extended, with the educational needs of student colleagues and musical needs of institutions prioritized over their own well-being, growth and educational needs (Lee, 2009). While faculty members and administrators acknowledge that collaborative piano students' education comes first, balancing needs while servicing others has proven to be challenging (Lee, 2009).

Despite a continued emphasis on the versatility of specialization in collaborative piano, exactly what collaboration looks like in this new shift of paradigm from "accompanist" to "collaborator" appears somewhat mystical. The acclaimed collaborative pianist Martin Katz (2009) jokingly said in his book *The Complete Collaborator: The Pianist as Partner*, "I still do what I always did, but now, instead of misspelling accompanist (accompianist or acompianist), people can trip over "collaborative" (how many l's and how many b's are there anyway?)" (Katz, 2009). The signal from this "bible for pianists," praised by mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne and others, seems to imply that the nature of a pianist's position has not changed, despite what "collaborator" has otherwise signified.

Problem Statement

How collaborative piano students perceive their graduate education experiences remains under-investigated. This study seeks to advance research on the experience of *becoming* a collaborative pianist, contextualized in graduate programs. Without insights on how collaborative piano students make sense of their own educational experiences, stakeholders involved (faculty, administrators, student colleagues) have an insufficient understanding of collaborative piano students' needs and challenges, which are vital in improving program design.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to describe and explore educational experiences perceived by collaborative piano majors in conservatories and universities. It is anticipated that the knowledge generated from this inquiry will reveal student voices of collaborative pianists, and a new understanding of student needs may potentially influence faculty members and administrators to make more informed decisions on future policy practices, thus improving student experiences.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this dissertation stems from my hope to uncover issues pertinent to collaborative piano students' growth in graduate programs as well as my desire to advance student experiences for both current and future prospective students who may be interested in pursuing this profession. Given the multifaceted nature and unique function of collaborative piano departments within schools, gaining insights on how collaborative piano students perceive their education experiences is one step closer to a more comprehensive understanding of this fast-growing field. An improved student experience not only benefits student colleagues, faculty members, and schools as a whole, but also continues to attract and retain a greater number of talented pianists in this field.

This research employs a qualitative phenomenological methodology to describe individual experiences situated in graduate programs. Participants in this study - all doctorate students - are purposefully selected, consisting of three recent alumni and one current student from six schools across the United States.

Research Questions

Given its intentions and history, and how the field of collaborative piano is being organized and taught, what does the graduate collaborative piano experience look like in recent years as perceived and experienced by collaborative piano students?

- How do collaborative piano students describe their program experiences?
- How is collaboration in collaborative piano perceived and experienced?
- How are collaborative piano programs meeting student needs?

Overview of Research Design

Since the study investigates the lived experiences of collaborative piano students in university and conservatory contexts, a qualitative phenomenological methodology will best shed light on the inquiry's features, characteristics, and mysteries. This research explores a bounded phenomenon through descriptive collection methods, with multiple data sources. The phenomenon is the experience of becoming a professional collaborative pianist in graduate programs, as expressed in theme and story. The unit of analysis is each participant, and their affiliated school is the context embedded therein. Data collection methods include in-depth interviews, aided by document review and researcher journal. The information obtained through individual interviewees form the basis for the overall findings of this study. Each interviewee has a pseudonym, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Although the nature of this study does not triangulate data, a comprehensive review of relevant literature and a substantial pilot study shaped and refined the three data-collection methods used, specifically the interview protocol. Themes and stories were generated and refined on an ongoing basis.

Chapter II: A Story of a Field Attempting to Figure Itself Out

Scholarship on collaborative piano is highly fragmented empirically, conceptually, and ideologically. The literatures reviewed in this chapter include research papers, magazine articles, and dissertations. Topics discussed include the very definition of collaborative piano, its history of degree programs, competencies, functions, and relevant developmental discoveries. The chapter concludes with a conceptual framework which guides data collection and analysis. However, as is typical in phenomenological studies, my conceptual framework was designed as open and amenable to new discoveries and surprises.

Definition of Terms

What is collaborative piano? Is it the same as piano accompanying? And what is accompanying? *Accompaniment*, *accompanying*, and *accompanists* have been used broadly and indiscriminately. The term *accompaniment* can be applied to almost all music, referring to those parts of composition that are not the primary melody (Wenger, 2010). *The Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1954) defines accompaniment as,

> Any subsidiary part or parts, whether vocal or instrumental, that are added to a melody, or to a musical composition in a greater number of parts, with a view to the enrichment of its general effect; and also, in the case of vocal compositions, to support and sustain the voices. (p. 20)

Almost any part of any ensemble, or any voice in a solo composition can be considered to be the leading melody or the accompaniment depending on the moment. A lute part to a chanson, a keyboard part of a basso-continuo, or a rehearsal reduction of an orchestral score can all be appropriately considered as accompaniment (Mann-Polk, 1984).

What is an accompanist, then? The *American Dictionary* defines it as "one who plays an accompaniment" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). With little distinction, an "accompanist" may be the supportive keyboardist in a dance studio class, a rehearsal pianist who has rendered a piano arrangement of an orchestral score for the purpose of practice, or even the co-collaborator of a duo in a violin recital (Mann-Polk, 1984). The term broadly refers to a pianist in an ensemble, traditionally implies a subservient relationship between a soloist (or group) and a pianist, though both parts are needed to complete a work. *The Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1954) further defines *accompanist* as,

> The performer playing as a rule with a single singer or instrumentalist usually on the pianoforte, whose part is nominally subsidiary, but who, in all music that matters and especially in music dating later than the 17th and mid-18th century accompaniment from a thorough-bass, should be regarded as an equal partner in the interpretation of a type of music which in a broad sense appertains to the category of chamber music (p. 29).

This definition is interesting in three ways. First, the framing of an *accompanist* is in the context of a duo, or pair - a relational positionality of a pianist to one other musician - as opposed in ensembles like trio or quartet. Second, compositions created during and after the Classical Era cover a vast amount of repertoire, hence the accompaniment should be considered as chamber music. Last and most importantly, the "nominally subsidiary" part in a duo context "should be regarded as an equal partner in the interpretation," suggesting that the role may not be otherwise formally recognized as equal despite its necessity.

Discrepancies in Definitions

The Oxford Companion to Music (2011), on the other hand, distinguishes accompanists in terms of repertoire types or genre rather than time period. "[An accompanist is] the performer of

an accompaniment. The term usually refers to a pianist playing with one or more singers, but it is also applied to the pianist in instrumental sonatas" (Latham, 2011). This definition is broadly applied to both instrumental and vocal repertoire indiscriminately, putting vocal "accompaniment" and instrumental "chamber music," two rather different categories - according to Grove - under one umbrella.

Just as the definition of accompaniment is not agreed upon, what accompanists do under different contexts remains similarly unclear. In the context of chamber music, the keyboardist is considered an equal constituent of an ensemble, in groups generally greater than two, such as trio, quintet, or octet, to be performed without the assistance of a conductor (Mann-Polk, 1984; Wenger, 2010). Pianists do not carry any more or less weight than any other members and are not referred to as "accompanist" in this situation. While chamber musicians provide a more desirable subtext for pianists, it does not cover duo ensembles (Wenger, 2010). Duos, such in the context of singer-pianist or instrumentalist-pianist, generally have been isolated from the category of chamber music.

If compositions dated from the Classical era consider accompaniment chamber music, as the Grove dictionary suggested, then pianists should not be referred to as "accompanists": when its interpretive and artistic responsibilities are equal to those of the singer or instrumentalist, the implication of accompanist is problematic (Mann-Polk, 1984). Pianists provide much more to the ensemble than mere rhythmic or harmonic accompaniments, as it often carries the music forward with character, texture and important compositional materials (Wenger, 2010).

To secure a better term for duo settings, *collaborative pianist* emerged in the last few decades, indicating an equal partnership between a soloist and pianist (Baker, 2006; Wenger, 2010). *Collaborative pianist* is preferred by some pianists, as it better defines a co-equal role of a

pianist in much of the collaborative repertoire (Baker, 2006; Katz, 2009). Yet, it is still used synonymously with *accompanist*, and sometimes with *ensemble pianist* and *coach*.

What is a Collab?

Given the intention of the term *collaborative piano*, its difference from *accompanist* and frequent interchangeable usage with *accompany*, what is the definition of collaborative piano, then? At present, the literature seems not to have come to a conclusion. The following are views from key pedagogues in the field of collaborative piano.

Let's take a moment to imagine a music major in a graduate school asking one another: "What do you do?" "I'm a collab." "What is a collab?"

> "Collab" is a convenient nickname for pianists not primarily soloists … Chamber music pianist, orchestral pianist, vocal accompanist, instrumental sonata partner, operatic assistant conductor, operatic *répétiteur*; certainly, using such titles is necessary to explain what one is doing at any given time or in a particular venue. What message does that word convey? I understand it, in my own rather broadly based view, as a pianist who does not exclusively play soli and concerti. (Garrett, 2016, p. 1-2)

Short for "collaborative pianist," "collab" is described as a pianist who does more than just solo piano, with the emphasis on a wide range of repertory and functions, says the acclaimed American pianist Margo Garrett (2016). *Collab* in this sense, may be used as an umbrella term with a generalist approach to all music "not primarily solo," as well as a specialization with distinctive functions at the same time, mostly categorized as either instrumental piano (chamber music pianist, orchestral pianist, instrumental sonata partner) or vocal piano (vocal accompanist, coach, operatic assistant conductor, operatic *répétiteur*).

Garrett, once the department chair of collaborative piano at the New England Conservatory, The Juilliard School, and co-founder of the collaborative piano program at University of Minnesota, has shaped the field of collaborative piano significantly. Similarly, Anne Epperson, both as a performer and a pedagogue, influenced the field by developing notable programs, such as the ones at Cleveland Institute of Music, University of California, Santa Barbara; University of Colorado, Boulder; University of Texas, Austin, and the summer festival Music Academy of the West (Wenger, 2008). Explaining the reason for the term collaborative piano, Epperson says,

> The term "collaborative" emphasizes the cooperative (rather than secondary) role of the pianist throughout the performance preparation process. The late renowned collaborative pianist Samuel Sanders, one of the most important influences in collaborative education, first used the term in an interview to describe this more equal partnership .... Traditionally the role of an accompanying pianist has been thought of as a secondary or as a default for those who couldn't "make it" as soloists… but it's not enough to just stand up and say accompanists are not appreciated. We need to make the reasons for respect happen by developing a professional attitude and enthusiasm for our craft. (Wenger, 2008, p. 33)

Epperson's description of collaborative piano emphasizes positionality and process, a partnership that is "more equal," "rather than secondary." Traditional narratives of accompanying pianists are ones "who couldn't make it as soloists." Hence, professionalization of collaborative piano serves as a counter narrative: it is vital in gaining respect and appreciation from others for "accompanists," making the craft of "accompanists" worth standing up for as an equal "cooperative role." It is unclear, however, whether cooperation is distinct from collaboration in this context, and what collaborative education entails.

Yes to Accompany?

Despite an effort of renaming it collaborative piano, the term "accompanying" is still used interchangeably. Eastman School of Music calls their program Piano Accompanying and Chamber Music. Jean Barr, their founding director, is the first doctoral graduate of accompanying in the United States. In multiple occasions, she identified herself as "accompanist to Heifetz's masterclasses" during her time at University of Southern California. Similarly, acclaimed English pianist Gerald Moore (1899-1987), a name synonymous with the field of art song accompanying, proudly calls himself an accompanist, such in his book "Unashamed Accompanist." A regular partner to Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Dietrich Fischer Dieskau, et al., Moore insisted his name be printed on record labels in mid-1920s when that was hardly the practice of the time (Johnson, 2016).

Even though collaborative piano is preferred by some pianists (Baker, 2006; Lee, 2009; Wenger, 2008), there seems to be a lack of consensus of what the preferred term is given the use of accompanying still exists in some programs. Also, it is unclear what collaborative piano covers. The breadth of repertory - opera and orchestra reductions – has expanded beyond the duo repertory, and coaching has become an expectation of a collaborative pianist.

Why Vocal Coaching?

A collaborative pianist is expected to be a strong performer and be able to coach when necessary. A vocal coach is particularly important to singers. A coach is helpful to singers as it can be difficult for singers to hear their own sound objectively when they sing. Also, since many classical singers do not begin formal study until they are in high school or college, many of their musical skills are less developed compared to instrumentalists, and a vocal coach helps to bridge the gap (Corcoran, 2011; Hemsley, 1998; Spillman, 1985). In regard to the roles of accompanist

and coach, these two can become blurred (Hoekman, 2004). Reasons for that can be traced back to the tradition of accompanying: it has been an integral part in working with singers, it then evolved into opera coaching to provide guidance and suggestions to singers (Adler, 1965). Coaches can cross the line between coaching and accompanying depending on the contexts (Corcoran, 2011).

Even though the same pianist may serve as a coach and accompanist in one, a further distinction between a collaborative pianist and a vocal coach is made by Hoekman (2004). Hoekman explains that as a co-performer performing with a singer, a collaborative pianist must listen primarily to the entire ensemble - both their sound on the piano, as well as the singer's - for its balance and interpretations as a whole. In a coaching session, however, much of the collaborative pianist's attention as a vocal coach focuses chiefly on the singer. Coaches help singers the most by listening to them critically, rather than playing the piano part exquisitely (Corcoran, 2011). The shift in the focus of attention often is difficult for those who are trained to listen to their own sounds they make at the keyboard (Corcoran, 2011; Hoekman, 2004).

Vocal pedagogue Hemsley (2018) even advised singers to not perform in concert with the same pianist who they coach with, citing power dynamic differences. The teacher-student relationship in this circumstance inhibits a singer's full expression on stage. A singer should, instead, collaborate with an accompanist, someone a singer does not seek approval from. Hemsley's conception of power places vocal coaches over singers, and pianists under or equal to singers. This distinction in roles and power dynamics is consistent with Corcoran's description of a vocal coach and accompanist in different environments: singer/teacher/coach in school, singer/conductor/coach in opera house, singer/program director or conductor for opera productions in school, and singer/teacher/accompanist in private studios.

What Do *répétiteurs* Do?

Adding to the complexity of what a collaborative pianist does beyond the realm of performing and coaching, Zeger, former executive director of the Metropolitan Opera Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, depicts a blending of job titles of an opera pianist, a specific specialty under the umbrella of collaborative piano. Operatic assistant conductor, operatic *répétiteur*, vocal accompanist, rehearsal pianist and coach, these titles may all melt into one another: they describe a vital function that is important in the process of music preparation in operas (Garrett, 2019; Zeger, 1997).

> Rehearsal pianists accompany the staging and musical rehearsals at every point of preparation until the orchestra takes over, late in the rehearsal period. When pianists are helping singers prepare their roles one-on-one, they are known as coaches; musical preparation and accompanying rehearsals generally go hand in hand. If the opera house uses prompters, these are often drawn from the same pool of musicians, as are backstage conductors, who provide the all-important link between the maestro in the pit and the invisible backstage chorus or instrumental band. At the Met, most of these tasks are subsumed under the general title "assistant conductor."… Many pianists feel that a conductor who has spent years coaching, preparing and playing rehearsals of the repertory is in a unique position to help singers do their best work. (Zeger, 1997, p. 2)

Jack of all trades, opera pianists possess acute adaptability and multiple talents. The sheer demand of musical functions changes subtly and abruptly from one space to another, from a facilitator, performer, to a coach or helper. A rehearsal pianist may be called to provide any missing elements in a rehearsal, be it chorus, lead characters, or instrumental cues. Also, it takes years to master languages and develop sensibilities in regard to each libretto's linguistic and

poetic expressions (Montgomery, 2019; Zeger, 1997). The literature suggests that the ability to conduct is an important and integral part of the opera coaching profession, since coaches in opera houses are often given assistant conducting responsibilities (Adler, 1965; Montgomery, 2019).

Perceptions of Accompanists' Effects on Performances

Does a good pianist really matter in the overall performance of a soloist? Empirical research shows that accompaniment affects performance quality significantly, and it plays an important role in music learning (Sasanfar, 2012; Geringer & Sasanfar, 2013). Several quasi-experiments were conducted to examine the perceived importance of accompanying pianists on the influence of performance of soloists from high school to college level. Sasanfar (2012) found improvement in performance with eight students in a middle school band, particularly in the areas of rhythm and musical interpretation. These case studies suggest that regular practice with a live pianist or an interactive digital accompaniment program contribute to better preparation and improved overall performance, increased motivation, confidence, and understanding of a piece.

Moreover, pianists influence expressivity, both aural and visual, on audiences' perception of overall expressivity in collaborative performances of a soloist, according to a survey study involving 72 college students from both music majors as well as non-music majors (Sasanfar, 2012). Ninety-four percent of listeners reported that in a quasi-experiment, they perceived expressivity of a pianist in the overall performance for both instrumental and vocal settings (Sasanfar & Geringer, 2013). As such, listeners did hear collaborative performances at least somewhat collaboratively as opposed to separately, and most listeners also report that they paid equal attention to both performers.

These empirical studies show the importance of accompanying pianists in the overall effect of a solo performance of music students. At the professional level, good pianists are also critical in both the learning process as well as performance results. Opera singer Sylvia McNair commented on her experience with rehearsal pianists:

> If people think this is an unimportant job, they should experience a rehearsal with a bad pianist. You can tell within eight measures if the person at the keyboard is or isn't in command. But a fine one can produce all the refinements that we expect of ourselves and inspires us to be more musical. (qtd. in Zeger, 1997, p. 2)

Similarly, Deborah Voigt finds "good pianists can zero in on us - they really understand what we need" (qtd. in Zeger, 1997, p .2). No matter the level - either a collegiate student or an accomplished professional - accompanying pianists, or collaborative pianists are important in performers' preparation process and music performance.

Qualities of an Ideal Collaborative Pianist

The functionality and importance of a collaborative pianist seemed evident. What qualities, then, does a good collaborative pianist have? In describing an ideal collaborative pianist, Barr emphasized on one's flexibility, collegiality and communication, in addition to musicality in a collaborative pianist (Wenger, 2010). Open-mindedness, willingness to compromise and the ability to accommodate differing opinions are also essential. In addition, Corcoran (2011) found that opera coaches described most important personal/interpersonal traits as supportiveness and helpfulness.

History of Programs

Given the demand for special skills, it is natural to formalize the field of accompanying in higher education for ensemble pianists to gain practical knowledge. Graduate degrees in

collaborative piano or accompanying allows pianists an intentional career choice as an ensemble pianist, instead of falling into accompanying or coaching by accident (Wenger, 2010). The possibility of a degree gave accompanying the respectability of skills it had previously lacked, such as diction, languages, conducting, coaching, special classes for sonata and songs, and many other skillsets pertinent to teamwork (Mann-polk, 1984; Rose, 1981). Both the formalization and burgeoning of the field altered the American musical landscape and raised its artistic level by new talents in specializations (Lee, 2006).

Having been invited by the dean of the University of Southern California to establish a collaborative piano program in 1947, Gwendolyn Koldofsky was the first person to forge a path into the world of academia in the United States, a path that would later be followed by other schools including The Juilliard School, University of Michigan, the Eastman School, and many others (Wenger, 2008). USC was the first program conferred a bachelor's in accompanying, and later added graduate degrees including a doctorate in 1972. Jean Barr was the first person who has ever received a doctorate in accompanying in the United States (Fincher, 2020). By 2000, at least 50 graduate degrees on collaborative piano programs were listed in The College Music Society Directory (Baker, 2006; Wenger, 2008). And by 2020, there were 92 institutions in the United States that offer a master's of music in collaborative piano or its equivalent (Fincher, 2020).

Nowadays, few universities or conservatories offer a bachelor's degree in collaborative piano or accompanying. It is believed to be most productive to spend four years of undergraduate studies to build pianistic technique, solo repertoire, and to learn the fundamentals of music theory and history (Barr, 2011; Lee, 2009). While some collaborative piano degrees are designed to be broad, as a base training with a taste of all specialties (Garrett, 2019; Wenger, 2008), some

have more focus. Florida State University, for example, provides separate tracks for master's of music in either instrumental accompanying and chamber music, vocal coaching and accompanying, or opera coaching through the opera department (Wenger, 2010). Pianists interested in opera coaching may seek out graduate degrees specifically for opera coaching, but few of those exist, and getting admitted are challenging for someone who does not already have the experience of opera coaching (Corcoran, 2011).

Benefits to Institutions

Several benefits incentivize the addition of collaborative piano into an existing graduate music program. First, collaborative majors gain broad experience in their repertoire by providing accompanying needs to students from other departments (Lee, 2009; Wenger, 2010). Second, using collaborative piano students' service is cost effective for schools to reduce expenses on hiring staff pianists to cover most studio accompanying and in-class performances (Fincher, 2020). Third, the number of courses that would be created with the addition of the new collaborative piano faculty and the potential number of students gained through the addition of a collaborative piano program could be a significant boost to enrollment (Fincher, 2020). In fact, accompanying is expected as a service and recruitment tool by non-piano faculty (Wenger, 2010). Lastly, a collaborative piano program also encourages students to collaborate, explore, and discover together with their individual performing and community interests (Fincher, 2020).

Graduate Assistantships

The National Association of School of Music (NASM) 2019-2020 handbook illustrates guidelines for a master's of music degree in accompanying, chamber music, or collaborative keyboard to include a standard minimum requirement of thirty hours for degree completion, a flexible requirement relatively the same from solo piano degree (Fincher, 2020). Despite the

flexibility of NASM requirements for collaborative piano graduate degrees, the majority of institutions surveyed in Fincher's study have largely similar requirements at both the academic level and the applied level, which is consistent with core programs stated by Epperson and Barr (Wenger, 2010). Working with individual students within specific studios is the most common area of financial aid obligation, with a combined total of 76% of financial aid obligation performed in individual studio work (Fincher, 2020).

In designing collaborative piano programs, Epperson considers accompanying assistantship a win-win situation for the whole school (Wenger, 2010). While collaborative piano students are in school for their own musical education, they are required to perform with student colleagues as part of their assistantship or scholarship duties and to be placed to a variety of performing opportunities based on the educational needs of student colleagues and the musical needs of the institution (Fincher, 2020). When the assistantship is poorly assigned, both students and school suffer (Fincher, 2020; Lee, 2009; Wenger, 2010).

However, given the nature of repertoire difference, equitably distributing accompanying assignments presents difficulties (Wenger, 2008). Vocal and instrumental accompanying are needed differently in a school setting. Voice lessons need accompanists every week, whereas most instrumental students need accompanists some weeks before the performance or jury only. Vocal repertoire is less technically demanding compared to instrumental repertoire, but it most likely involves foreign languages. An opera pianist might be rarely needed during early and midpoint of a semester, but leading up to the performance of operas, rehearsals generally take up blocks of hours at a time. If there is no accompanying service covered by the school, non-piano students generally have to pay staff pianists to play with them. Collaborative pianists serve a unique role in fulfilling that need. A "star student" may want to play with "the best"

collaborative pianist, and some faculty members may feel left out if the distribution of accompaniment is not fair in their eyes (Wenger, 2008). Institutions under pressure to find pianists sometimes forget that assistantships are for collaborative piano students' own education (Fincher, 2020).

The importance of practical learning at the job is evident from both Epperson and Barr's early careers, as they both accompanied others in graduate school out of interest, and "fell into the profession" by working as accompanists in Heifetz's violin master classes at University of Southern California at different times (Barr, 2011; Wenger, 2008). "My own formal schooling soon took a backseat to the work with Heifetz, which was an incredible educational experience," says Epperson (qtd. in Wenger, 2008. p. 31). It is not a coincidence that working with others is essential in collaborative piano programs.

Service vs. Education

To take a deeper look in the curriculum designs of collaborative piano and the roles of collaborative piano students within conservatories, Lee explored several notable schools in her dissertation *The Collaborative Pianist: Balancing Roles in Partnership* (2009). Oftentimes collaborative piano students' repertoire study and performances center around the needs of other instrumental and vocal students. The purpose of Lee's dissertation was to explore the essential components of both collaborative piano curriculum and a school's accompanying service system, and how these two separate programs productively interact and prevent them from being confused (education versus service).

After interviewing six renowned professors in the field of collaborative piano, Lee's (2009) results show that while all of the administration and performance faculty understand that the primary aim and function of a collaborative piano program is educational, it is a fine balance

between the service provided by students and their own educational needs. Common challenges across all schools include securing funding, from hiring staff pianists to supervision on assistantship with a fair distribution, expectation, and regulation of accompanying resources. Interviewed faculty advised to design programs specifically for the needs of each school, such as hiring staff pianists to prevent collaborative piano students from overworking, having strong instrumental and vocal performance programs, as well as cooperation and support from the solo piano department. Lee concludes that a collaborative piano department benefits the entire school.

Pertinent Skills and Competencies

What skills do collaborative pianists learn during their training, if performing, coaching, accompanying, and playing in opera productions are expected? Few publications are available as resource aid for teaching collaborative piano skills (Rose, 1981; Wenger, 2008). Several pioneering studies, however, have identified pertinent skills and competencies deemed important to a collaborative pianist in areas of accompanying, coaching, and rehearsal techniques. These works influenced and contributed to the burgeoning growth of collaborative piano courses and programs in academic institutions (Baker, 2006).

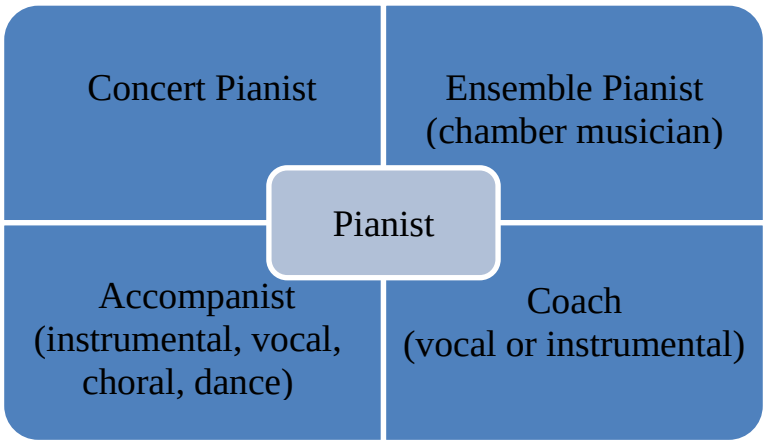
Algernon H. Lindo's The Art of Accompanying *(1916)*

Though dated, comprehensive skills and competencies listed by Lindo are still pertinent today: (1) Sight reading and score reading, (2) Transposition and clef reading, (3) Continuo and figured bass realization, (4) Instrumental collaboration and ensemble/rehearsal techniques, (5) Orchestral reduction and transcription, (6) Recital program-building, (7) Career issues, auditions, competitions, (8) Style, interpretation, and performance practice, (9) Effective piano preparation and practice, (10) Functional pianistic technique, (11) Cultural, historical, and aesthetic aspects, (12) Song translation, lyric diction, International Phonetic Alphabet, (13) Vocal collaboration,

(14) Educational materials and research, (15) Collaborative listening and the psychology of collaboration, (16) Repertoire development and maintenance.

Figure 1

Diagram of the Family Tree of a Pianist



Kurt Adler's* The Art of Accompanying and Coaching *(1965)

Adler's approach to identifying competencies is more context driven. The aspects he focused on are historic, technical, and aesthetic. On the historical background of accompanying repertory, Adler examined different eras (biblical, the age of the troubadour, Ars Nova, Baroque, Pre-Classical and Classical, Schubert and Romantic). On technique, Adler stressed the importance of understanding the intricacies of the piano, collaborator's instruments (both instrumental and vocal), and knowledge of International Phonetic Alphabets for operatic languages. On aesthetics, Adler discussed elements of musical styles, differences in art song styles, program building, and the art of accompanying and coaching. His diagram also illustrates various functions that a pianist may perform.

Deon Nielsen Price's* Accompanying Skills for Pianists *(1991)

This book is well circulated, such that 120 university music departments have each ordered multiple copies (Baker, 2006). Price's motivation to write the book was largely because

Prof. Gwendolhyn Koldovsky, Price's teacher at University of Southern California, spent much of her limited energy addressing basic concepts and skills, which hindered opportunities for higher artistic thinking. The book is divided into three parts: (1) The sensitive accompanist: beyond solo pianistic skills, (2) Stylistic insights: skills for specific historical periods and, (3) collaborative skills: preparing & performing. Price discussed competency of skills in blending "style, interpretation, and performance practice" with "cultural, historical, and aesthetic aspects."

Sight reading is an emphasized skill for collaborative piano training. Epperson insisted on live auditions for students wishing to enter her programs, with sight-reading as a requirement at the live audition (Wenger, 2010). Epperson believes that it is essential to be able to watch students play with one another and observe their musical interaction. In terms of competencies of incoming collaborative pianists, Epperson looks for strong pianistic skills, as there is little time to deal with technical issues in graduate programs. The ability to relate to a partner after a short rehearsal is also important, as a way to look for musical and interpersonal flexibility.

Collaboration as a Process

Kokotsaki (2007) investigated conditions that contribute to the attainment of high quality in musical ensemble performance from perspectives of ensemble pianists. Kokotsaki focused on the conditions which allow optimal performance. An ensemble pianist is defined as a member of a chamber group (trio, quartet, etc.), or a duo partnership such as a pianist/singer relationship. Participants in this study are professional pianists who are experts in their field. Findings show that five conditions are important in reaching high quality ensemble performances for pianists in ensembles: (1) pianists' desire to search for balance, (2) externalization of attention, (3) regulating, (4) time available or lack of time and, (5) integration. In order to achieve an optimal performance, all conditions indicate the need for a process.

While the nuances of collaboration in music making have not been named explicitly, Himmelman distinguished kinds of collaboration in community building. In using strategic collaboration to change power relations, Himmelman (1996) proposed that three common strategies, networking, coordinating, and cooperating, be considered in addition to collaboration. Each strategy builds upon the another. This differentiation in degree of collaboration is essential in examining the expectation as well as power dynamic between pianists and partners.

Employability

Since the intent of collaborative piano degree programs is to create an intentional career path, what do collaborative piano majors do after graduate studies? According to the description in Barr (2011), they usually enter a

> Remarkably diverse and exciting world: one in which they might perform with solo artists, form a professional chamber music group, be an opera coach-conductor, work in a ballet studio or other dance ensemble, be a freelance or staff accompanist, accompany a professional choir, or even direct a collegiate program in collaborative piano. (Barr, 2011, p. 16).

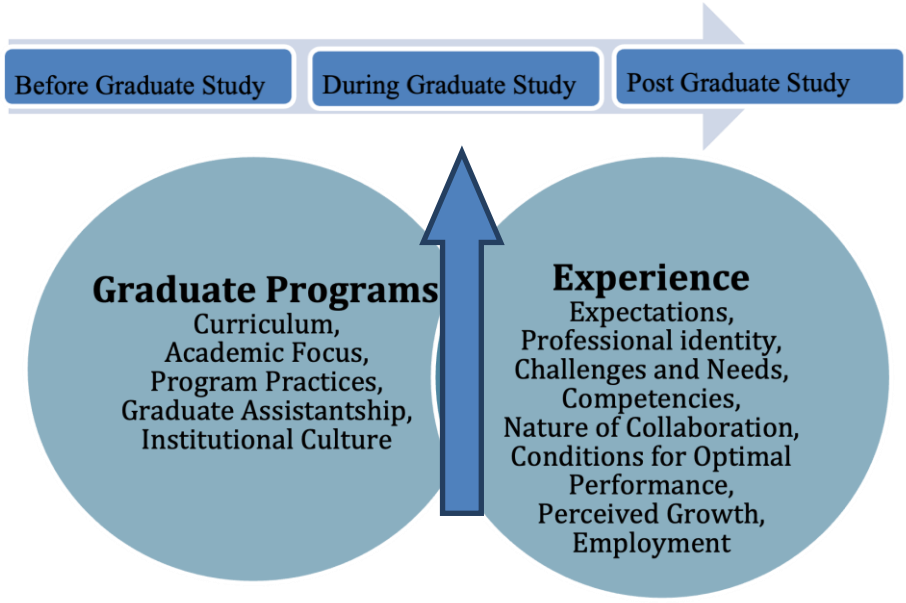
These traditional career options for collaborative pianists usually make up a mixture of professional profiles in the modern world (Tostado, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

The chart in Figure 2 maps out areas of focus in this study, including graduate program design and individual experiences during study. The making of the framework is an iterative process.

Figure 2

Graduate Study Design and Individual Experiences



Chapter III: A Way of Discovery

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore with a sample of collaborative piano majors their perceptions of educational experiences at the graduate level in conservatories and universities. A better understanding of this phenomenon would allow both educators and administrators to design and facilitate collaborative piano programs more effectively. In seeking to understand this phenomenon, the study addresses a research question in three ways:

Given its intentions and history, and how the field of collaborative piano has been organized and taught, what does the graduate collaborative piano experience look like as perceived and experienced by collaborative piano students?

- How do collaborative piano students describe their study?
- How is collaboration in collaborative piano perceived and experienced?
- In what ways do students find collaborative piano programs meet their educational needs?

This chapter describes the research methodology of the study. I present the rationale for research paradigm and method design, my role as the researcher, selection of participants and instrumentation along with research procedures. In addition, I explain ways to collect and analyze data, its trustworthiness, limitations of the study, and followed by a chapter summary.

Rationale for Employing a Qualitative Approach

This study intends to achieve a more holistic understanding of the current state of collaborative piano as a phenomenon from collaborative piano students' perspectives through individual experiences contextualized in their respective graduate programs. While this study is exploratory, descriptive, and possibly revelatory, it does not intend to solve problems through determining causal relationships nor testing hypotheses. A lack of existing theory in this field

calls for a descriptive nature of this research. Data is collected inductively from a purposeful sampling, rather than deductively from a randomized sample. As Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2018) describe, inductive reasoning uses specific and limited observations to generate a broader principle (a bottom-up approach), whereas deductive reasoning applies a general principle to specific cases to make conclusions (a top-down approach). Given a lack of general principle, an inductive approach is appropriate for this study. The range of topics discovered include but not limited to: what helped and hindered my participants' learning and growth, what meaningful collaborations looked like to them, what else they did incidentally or intentionally in their training along the way, and whether their take home message was close to the program's teaching message.

Since the focus of the study is to understand how students describe and interpret their experiences, qualitative inquiry is a better fit than a quantitative one. These two inquiries are distinct from each other. Qualitative inquiry better delineates essences of individual perceptions and experiences, and it seeks to understand the experiential phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, rather than the perspective of the researcher (Merriam, 2016). Qualitative inquiry recognizes that there is no single truth. Truth is socially constructed, it is relative, and it is dependent on one's perspective, location, history, and culture. Qualitative inquiry does not seek to generalize, rather, it is concerned with how a social phenomenon is understood at a particular point in time in a natural setting (Maxwell, 2013). Design is evolving and emergent, and its mode of analysis is constant comparative rather than statistical and deductive (Merriam, 2016).

Illustrating complex dynamics of the phenomenon and understanding "why" through multiple sources of data are the strengths of qualitative inquiry. This paradigm embraces the pluralism and complexity of human meaning-making without rejecting notions of objectivity.

The value of using a qualitative approach in my study is to enrich understanding with an inductive process by combining bits of interviews and documents into larger themes and contextual descriptions, using storytelling and personal narratives to describe the phenomenon of *becoming* a collaborative pianist. Also, the emphasis of my inquiry is not to measure processes and outcomes in the teaching-learning environment, instead, to apprehend them. Therefore, a qualitative paradigm best proceeds after the fundamental assumptions of my study.

Quantitative paradigms, on the other hand, seek to generalize. They are best fitted for finding causal relationships or measuring clearly defined outcomes with a larger randomized sample size. This paradigm is most suitable for questions of "how much," "how often," and "what" (Maxwell, 2013). Instead of gathering data from a naturalistic setting, a quantitative paradigm tends to conduct experiments in isolation of contexts, to test hypotheses, and have a predetermined structure (Merriam, 2016). The mode of analysis is deductive, numeric, and findings are usually precise and statistical rather than comprehensive and holistic. This approach would allow better determination of whether collaborative piano students achieved educational objectives or not through the lens of the researcher or instructor. But that is not the intent of this study. More so, the discovery of general principles through existing evidence is more of a concern in this study, not testing an existing theory. In other words, finding patterns and common themes across my participants may show directions for general principles for future study. Lastly, a lack of existing theories also invites an inductive approach as opposed to a deductive approach for this study. Surveys and quantitative methods will not answer the research questions with desired richness and vividness that I am seeking.

To sum up, qualitative measures can capture more complex phenomena that are not so easily quantifiable and understood. Student perceptions of their educational experiences are not

only difficult to measure but are also difficult to fully capture through traditional assessment methods. A qualitative approach better allows me to understand the phenomenon by exploring a depth and breadth of information about the individuals and their context for learning. Therefore, a naturalistic constructivist paradigm is more appropriate than a positivist one for this study.

Rationale for Using Phenomenology

Informed by narrative inquiry, a phenomenological method within the qualitative approach is most suitable for this study. The purpose of this study is to fill in a gap on the experience of becoming a collaborative pianist, and to find out what the emerging field of collaborative piano looks like through students' perceptions. It aims to describe, discover, and understand learner experiences by examining their perceptions of growth, needs, and challenges during training. While the method of ethnography is used to identify shared elements of a cultural group, it is not appropriate for my study since culture alone is not the focus of this research. A case study approach, which allows comparing and contrasting a single or multi-case, was considered but did not fully meet the intention of understanding inner thoughts of individuals. My primary goal is not to advocate for change through collaborative research, therefore action research is not the most suitable.

A qualitative phenomenological study is a research methodology that seeks to approach and possibly understand the underlying structure or essence of a phenomenon within its space (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam, 2016). It aims for glimpses, insights, and revelations. Phenomenological study describes and analyzes shared experiences by participants, and it allows the researcher to illuminate description and personal meaning (Peoples, 2021; Stake, 1995). Phenomenology is based on the assumption that awakening our conscious awareness is to truly know our experiences, including ways the experience is perceived and interpreted, and there is

no “objective” experience that can stand alone. Phenomenology also focuses on the dynamics of an experience and is particularly suitable for studying emotionally intense human experiences (Merriam, 2016). Phenomenology makes a reader come away feeling that “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Creswell, 2016, p. 62). The present research meets these criteria as I sought to better understand the experience of being a collaborative piano student in graduate programs beyond my own personal experience.

In this study, each student’s educational experience is shaped by the embedded environment in which they received their training, exemplified through different accompanying policies and curriculum guidelines. Hence, it is important to choose a method that examines not only the perceptions and wonders of individual student experiences, but also the affiliated program practices as necessary context for investigation. After all, service rendered by collaborative piano students usually benefits schools as a whole, and this study hopes to inform all stakeholders involved.

This phenomenology study is informed and given shape by narrative inquiry, using stories of first-person lived experiences through re-tellings and re-representations. Narratives are considered and grouped by themes to better understand the process of becoming a collaborative pianist. Both biographical and psychological approaches are used to examine how the story is constructed. A biographical approach to the narrative analyzes the importance and influence of, say, gender and race, life events and turning point experiences, as well as other persons in the participant’s life. The psychological approach concentrates more on the personal, including intentions, thoughts and motivations. These two approaches allow an inductive process to gain knowledge of both context and human intention (Merriam, 2016). It is holistic in that it

acknowledges the cognitive dimensions of meaning making while taking account of the environmental influences on one's development.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Phenomenology is heavily descriptive. As a research methodology, the primary purpose of phenomenology is to find ourselves in relation with others and other things. It is described as "an encounter," "a way of living," and "a craft" (Vagle, 2018). The focus on state of consciousness encompasses all different ways of conducting phenomenology. Epistemologically, phenomenologists are interested in studying the obvious, everyday life with "fresh eyes" in order to reach a new understanding of a lived experience. Phenomenologists examine the lived experiences carefully, reflexively, and contemplatively in how the world presents itself in our conscious relationship with it (Vagle, 2018). I would like to believe that they see the world as artists do.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered the father of phenomenology, both as a philosophical discipline and a movement that began in the 20th century (Peoples, 2021; Vagle, 2018). Husserl emphasized that our consciousness is always "of" something. He asserted that the mind was always in relationship with the "object" of its consciousness (e.g., an event, a person, and consciousness does not exist as a thing one does or as something one possesses). Husserl believed that nothing should be assumed or taken for granted when trying to understand a phenomenon; therefore, little use of theoretical framework is needed (Peoples, 2021). Vagle (2018) describes Husserl's concept of consciousness:

> When we experience something, it is experienced as something which has meaning for us. A phenomenon, to Husserl, was the thing itself – not a generalization, an

> approximation, a representation, or a deduced outcome. Husserl felt that we do not "reason" phenomena – rather we live them. (p. 7)

Husserl's branch of phenomenology is known as transcendental phenomenology, which this dissertation will be conducted in. This branch of phenomenology allows me to better understand my own journey of becoming a collaborative pianist through my participants' experiences. Hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology on the other hand, would be better suited for examining an experience that I have never had.

Intentionality, bracketing, and reduction are key concepts to Husserl. Intentionality is a principal theme within transcendental phenomenology, it is our awareness or consciousness of something. To examine a phenomenon with fresh eyes, bracketing is crucial. It is the suspension and setting aside of a researcher's biases and judgment. It allows the phenomenon to reveal itself, as if someone discovers something new for the very first time, even though the phenomenon may be a norm. Reduction is the process of bracketing, which allows one to get to the essence of a phenomenon. Noesis is the thought of thinking about something, and noema is the thing that is thought about. These two go hand in hand (Peoples, 2021).

What phenomenologists are *not* interested in are finding more ways to explain causal effects, make predictions, quantify, or generalize. In Vagle's analogy, phenomenologists also are not interested in trying to represent the qualitative properties of a tree (e.g., shape, texture, colors), rather, the focus is on how one finds themselves in relation to the tree. That means, in this study, I am trying to find out how participants relate their experiences to their program studies, rather than investigating their programs alone. The emphasis is on describing more than analyzing the relationships. By slowing down and opening up how things are experienced,

phenomenologists study how individuals are being, becoming, and moving through the lifeworld with intentional relationships with other things.

Research Sample

Samplings of participants in this study were purposefully selected. Purposeful sampling is most appropriate for this study because each student's experience and the program(s) in which they studied is unique and vivid in its own ways. My intent is to describe individual experiences with richness, rather than representing or generalizing such experiences to another context. Purposive sampling contrasts to the random sampling procedures typical of quantitative research, which relies on statistics and probability for generalization in a larger population.

My goal was to recruit five participants, but the amount of data yielded after four participants was indicative of data saturation. After the completion of interviewing three participants, data started to become somewhat predictable, therefore I did not recruit the fifth participant. This dissertation is best presented with a rich description of four participants rather than a spread-thin description of five. Participants were recruited with a snowball sampling strategy, whereby they were asked to recommend other people who could also satisfy the one predetermined criterion for the study, which is that *the collaborative piano alumni have graduated within the past three years.*

The purpose of this single, selective criterion is to include anyone who has finished, at the minimum, a master's degree in collaborative piano. As it turned out, all participants have either obtained their doctoral degrees, or were in the process of doing one at the time of interview. Although participants are graduates of collaborative piano, there are differences among them in regard to their academic focus, gender, age, and time spent in their programs. Design is evolving and emergent, and its mode of analysis is constant comparative rather than

statistical and deductive (Merriam, 2016). Within purposive sampling, I aimed for maximum variations in order to represent the widest range, such as kinds of graduate degrees, sizes and fundings of schools, geographic regions and academic emphasis. This sampling method represents the widest possible range of characteristics or dimensions being studied, and it identifies important common themes or patterns that cut across variations through displaying multiple perspectives of student experiences.

In terms of sites for research, the four participants brought in experiences from a total of six conservatories and universities. These programs are at a similar playing field, deemed appropriate for comparing and contrasting for the purpose of this study. Each school served as an embedded context. Three participants stayed on in the same school in which they did their masters, respectively, for all of their advanced degrees in collaborative piano, whereas one participant went to three different schools.

Selections of participants were prioritized over sites, because my study is not a study of programs, rather, a study of student experiences. Data was collected virtually over video conferencing. In this study, student experience is defined as a formal learning journey in a conservatory or university. Graduate degrees include Master of Music, graduate diploma, professional studies, artist diploma, and doctorate in musical arts. Pertinent programs are commonly called collaborative piano, accompanying, or opera coaching. Collaborative piano is defined as specializations in piano accompanying and/or coaching (instrumental and/or vocal), but not chamber music. Nature and makeup of my participant sample is introduced in the next chapter.

Information Needed to Conduct the Study

This transcendental phenomenological study focuses on four graduate students in collaborative piano from six conservatories and universities located in different parts of the United States. To understand the educational experiences perceived by collaborative piano students, three research questions were explored. The information needed to answer these research questions is illustrated by the conceptual framework, and they fall into four categories: contextual, perceptual, demographic, and theoretical (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Contextual

This contextual information describes the culture and environment of the educational setting. Such contextual information may include departmental policies, stated mission, curriculum requirement, set up of accompanying services, organization history, size, funding, as well as hierarchies and roles of staff. Contextual information on multiple sites is included in this study for element comparison, and it is key to understanding learning behaviors of these participants in their institutional settings. Such contextual information – descriptive by nature rather than evaluative - was obtained through individual interviews and document reviews of school websites.

Demographic

Demographic information may pertain to related educational background such as degree enrolled and years in programs, concentration of study, time spent in the U.S., (native) languages spoken, gender, age, and ethnicity. This information was used to understand what may be underlying an individual's perceptions as well as similarities and differences among participants.

Perceptual

Perceptual information relates to how students make sense of their educational experiences, such as how and if attitudes, ideas, and thoughts have changed during their graduate study, what they learned, how they internalized events, and to what extent their education met their expectations. Each participant's response is rooted in their own frame of reference, and there is no right or wrong to their stories.

Theoretical

An ongoing literature review provides minimal grounding for the study, but it is not used as a frame. Existing literature covers grounds of program growth and needed skills to become a collaborative pianist, but the supporting evidence is not a data collection method. The existing knowledge base on the field of collaborative piano is limited, and therefore few theoretical frameworks or hypotheses are available to use. With a limited available literature, new studies are likely to be exploratory and descriptive in nature, such as this study.

Pilot Study

A major step in designing a study is to confirm that the chosen methodology is indeed best suited to answer the research questions. A pilot study was conducted for this purpose. Through interviewing three participants separately, this pilot study explored, and subsequently ensured that perceptions of student experiences are in fact well answered by phenomenology. The embedded context adds significant opportunities for extensive analysis (e.g., the nature of collaboration across different schools, policies and practice, as well as curricula). While the pilot study confirmed the suitability of methodology, a potential pitfall is worth noting: if too much attention is given to contexts (graduate assistantship, accompanying system, for example), and if the larger, holistic aspects of the phenomenon begin to be ignored, the study itself will have

shifted its orientation and changed its nature. So far, no explicit justification is needed to address the relationship change to the original inquiry.

The pilot study contributed to the generation and revision of protocols used in the semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are the ground basis for the emerged narratives. Another purpose of this study was to explore what important concepts the dissertation should cover. The semi-structured interview covered topics including professional identity, attitudes and dispositions, competencies and skills, nature of collaboration, power dynamics, and more. Participants shared what it was like to go through collaborative piano training, how they viewed their collaborative roles, as well as conditions that contribute or impede them from achieving their best. In order to get a comprehensive view of participants' educational journey, I recruited alumni who have recently finished their formal study.

Out of the three pilot study participants majored in collaborative piano, two finished doctoral degrees and one with a master's degree. At the time of the pilot study, Julie was an Asian American female in her early career as a professor in a liberal arts college in the Midwest. Joe was a Central European male conducting job search after completing his doctorate in the U.S. José was a Hispanic American male working as a staff pianist at a conservatory in a metropolitan city on the East Coast. At one point, all participants received training with me in the same institution. Hence the similarity in academic context potentially leads to familiar experiences and possibly bias. While true, it also offers opportunities for corroboration and cross checking of viewpoints. The differences in participants' academic interests were noticeable, as well as their paths to pursue collaborative piano. I received feedback on the interview protocol from all participants. One suggested I provide more guidance from broad to focused questions,

another suggested adding a question on the stigma of skills, and the third asked several clarifying questions to help me refine questions.

All interviews were conducted over Zoom video conferencing platform, lasting from 90 to over 120 minutes. One interview felt productive, and the other ones seemed long. The relatively long lengths of interviews prompted me to consider adding a pre-interview survey or incidence report in hope to free up some time for deeper probing in interviews. All names are pseudonyms. The following are preliminary themes generated from the pilot study.

Theme 1: Roles of Collaborative Pianists Remain Undefined

Joe expressed confusion about expectations of collaborative pianists in collaboration: "are we equal partners, or position ourselves higher as a coach to tell our opinions? Or just sit there to shut up like a piece of furniture, because sometimes it ends up being like that." Joe even went as far to call the labeling of collaborative piano specific to America, as a gesture to create the appearance of equality disregarding the inherent power differences in accompanying and coaching. A collaborative piano student wears many hats. To collaborate, he does not necessarily feel equal all the time, and the ideal of equality is one-size-fits-all. Example: coaching others *feels too pushy.* This response is somewhat consistent with Hemsley's (1998) description of power differences between singer and coach, and singer with accompanist. To my surprise, Joe's response implies that he prefers a clearer labeling - accompanist - if it indeed better describes the role.

Theme 2: Unclear: What is Collaboration?

Two participants reported that the nature of collaboration, or the power dynamics within collaboration, is not clearly articulated in program studies. A lack of clarity leads to ambiguity and confusion about what collaboration consists of (e.g., how dynamics differ when playing with

a lesser or more experienced player, if the term accompanying or coaching is more appropriate in certain circumstances than collaborating, or whether specialization hurts or helps one's professional development). The definition of collaborative piano prescribed by collaborative piano programs, as interpreted by Julie, is very vague:

> Loosely, collaboration means any project with more than one person: it is the act of having to deal with another person and create something together without hierarchical power dynamics, leader/follower, or ownership of vision. The problem with that definition is that it creates discouraging unequal power structures. The locus of power was not with us, so there is nothing we could have done.

In contrast, her definition of collaborative piano in her life is as follows: "I want equality in the process, including equal status, voice, and artistic value." She even prefers to take away the labeling altogether: "I just want to be an engaging pianist, I don't care what kind of music I play, whether it's solo or with people."

The imbalanced power dynamic is a central theme with Julie. She found frustration from "this dogged adherence to a culture that was resistant to change," from curriculum design, program set up, to administration. The labeling of collaborative piano appears to be a burden to her, rather than an accurate description of what she does.

Theme 3: Service Needs for Others Still Outweigh the Educational Needs of Pianists

These two participants experienced a conflict of interests in their education; there is a lack of support to become good at something if they are not already good at it. Consistent with Lee's finding (2009), serving other students' accompaniment needs still outweighed these pianists' own educational needs when time is at a premium. For example, if Joe is not already good at chorus accompanying, he would not have been assigned to accompany the school choir

as part of his graduate assistantship responsibility. If he is not equipped to accompany chorus, on the other hand, and he wants to get better at it, he has to gain experience on his own before he is "qualified" to accompany the school choir. This is problematic; if Joe is the only one who is good at chorus accompanying in his school, then he is expected to continue what he is already good at by repeating the same assignment because nobody else is qualified to serve in that post. As a result, Joe unwillingly repeated accompanying assignments several times, and he also had to work with people he strongly disliked just to fulfill the obligation of his fellowship.

Similarly, Julie also felt that her educational needs were outweighed by her fellow singer classmates' needs. "It was a waste of my time to take those unenriching courses," referring to the year-long diction and vocal lit classes that could have been one semester-long instead. She was in classes more to provide accompaniment service to her classmates than for her own enrichment. Roles of graduate assistantship and compensation deserve closer interrogation, of which this pilot study did not get to fully achieve.

Theme 4: Lacking Room for Growth

Both participants acknowledge that "flaw in the system" as *an imbalance of professional expectation and the grace of being students*. There is a lack of help to transition phases and support pianists' growth; it takes time and experience to build repertoire and collaborative skills. As a result, piano students usually get to work on what they already are good at in order to service others. In return, collaborative piano students lose the opportunity to learn something new that will enhance their growth; it is not educative to them. Using the chorus example, Joe said, "How do you expect someone who doesn't know how to accompany a choir to do a fantastic job? And some opera directors expect everything to be perfect before rehearsal starts." If a pianist does not know how to do a task, little help seems available for nurturing their

development. Support for growth was severely lacking, as there was little to no feedback to these pianists. The transition to professional maturity is largely absent in program design. There needs to be planning for that phase to better foster student improvement.

Theme 5: Having a Process Primes Optimal Collaboration

Despite missed opportunities, rewarding collaboration still took place. Both participants addressed the importance of having an inclusive process for optimal collaboration. If the process is bad, or lacking, optimal collaboration is unlikely to occur. Two-way communication, engaging musical material, and collaborators at comparable levels contribute to optimal collaborative experience.

Theme 6: Outlier

Interestingly, José perceived his educational experiences very differently from the other two participants. He found the program generally helped him achieve all he was hoping for, and he perceived no inherent lack of equity in training, nor an ambiguity in the nature of collaboration. Unlike the other participants, José came into collaborative piano with a lot of "preparation." Julie switched to music from law unexpectedly, and Joe came to America for a fellowship by chance, but José had long planned his collaborative piano pursuit since he was a sophomore in his undergraduate program. His previous training as well as his deep love for orchestra reduction positioned him to enjoy doing the same music repeatedly, with room to tweak and improve. Struggles mentioned by the other two participants - service over education, imbalanced power dynamics - did not come up much if at all with José. He frames a lack of two-way communication in collaboration, both in rehearsal and on stage, as "a lack of respect for music," rather than a power dynamic struggle.

His moments of growth are described as follows. After repeating the same music many times, he consciously realizes that he can perform with an ease that did not exist before. He has matured with skill, artistry, and repertoire knowledge. His appreciation of finding those "small victories" in repeating the same music is not mentioned in the other two participants, and those small victories are crucial in making him better at each repetition.

Implication for Further Research

First, more needs to be understood about the conditions for optimal collaboration. Both Joe and Julie happened to emphasize the importance of processes. What are other conditions? Are there priorities? What else is essential? Can partners of collaborative piano students accommodate those conditions practically? Do conditions inherently place service and educational needs of collaborative piano equitably? This pilot study did not probe deeply enough into what else contributes to optimal collaboration. It would be crucial to identify these elements, both from a policy and practice standpoint.

Secondly, given the low satisfaction of musical collaboration (25% - 50%) from these three participants, artistic wellbeing of collaborative piano students is at risk. A lack of equity comes up in many forms. How do "a flawed system" and "a culture resistant to change" stand in the way of fostering optimal experience for collaborative pianists? What change can prioritize collaborative piano students' needs while meeting the accompaniment needs of other students? Will it be helpful if the role of collaboration is made clearer by having different degrees of working together? What does the process of "room for growth" look like? By acknowledging and prioritizing the educational needs of collaborative piano students, universities and conservatories could potentially identify an entryway to reimagine the integration of accompanying system and curriculum and improve student experiences as a whole.

Methods of Data Collection

Methods are specific procedures or tools used by the researcher to generate and analyze data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The use of multiple methods is critical in obtaining an understanding of the phenomenon. The three data collection methods used in this study are interview, document review, and journaling. The combination of methods enhances the quality of the data, with the idea that such data from multiple sources converge ideas and enrich narratives, in this case, stories told by participants and information on their programs. Using a variety of data sources, this approach ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood.

Method 1: Interview

To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, phenomenological interview is the primary research method of data collection. It has been long used as a research method in its own right in social science. Research interview is a structured and purposeful conversation in the hope of understanding things that are not directly observable, such as feelings, thoughts, intentions, and past events (Kvale, 2009; Merriam, 2016). Data primarily is collected to elicit rich and thick descriptions.

In addition, semi-structured interviews keep a balance between focusing on the research topic and allowing for a "disciplined naturalness" in phenomenological research (Peoples, 2021). Such interviews allow spaces to reconstruct and investigate experiences and answer the "how" and "what" in specific circumstances (Creswell, 2016). This guided conversation is purposely structured by the researcher as a form of knowledge construction to facilitate focused exploration (Kvale, 2009, Peoples, 2021). It allows deeper understanding to capture participants'

perspectives of an event or experience, and uniquely offers spaces to clarify statements and probe for additional information. It serves as specific observation data through stories told by participants, namely perceptions, attitudes, and emotions, hoping to build explanations from ground up (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Phenomenology is about illuminating experiences (Peoples, 2021), and the creation of the interview protocol is instrumental in identifying areas to study and in constructing overarching themes. Prior beliefs about a phenomenon of interest are temporarily put aside, or bracketed, so as not to interfere with seeing the elements or structure of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2016). The formulation of interview questions in this study went through several revisions. A list of 12 to 15 interview questions were developed and constructed in a matrix table based on three research questions. Interview questions were then consequently tested in pilot study interviews for further refinement. The protocol first started with concepts from literature review, such as competencies and needs, intentions and expectations, and it was later expanded to the nature of collaboration and power dynamics. Artistic agency and attitudes were the most recent inclusion.

Although interviewing is a legitimate way to generate qualitative data through conversations with participants, it has its drawbacks as well. First, not every participant is equally articulate, reflective, or comfortable sharing honestly. Some may not express their thoughts concisely or answer questions directly, which results in an extended duration of interview as experienced in pilot study. To prepare for clear interview questions, I made several revisions of the questions with sensitivity. In rare instances, some may still have reservations in disclosing their thoughts to avoid any unintended consequences.

To address potential risks to participants, I have also prepared informed consent as an important step. I informed them that they can stop participating at any time, and they do not need

to answer questions that they do not wish to answer. In addition, I monitored adverse effects on participants by the way they react to my questions. Data is an outcome generated from interactions between the researcher and participant, and the semi-structured conversation is not considered as neutral since every individual has their own biases.

Method 2: Document Review

In addition to narrative descriptions in interviews, document review is another source of data. Document review refers to a wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study. Documents such as personal journals, pictures, and physical artifacts can be used to depict a personal experience (Merriam, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Personal documents and artifacts convey snapshots into what was important to the participant in a specific moment in time. Recital programs, personal calendar, schedules, transcripts, travel logs, and so on, reveal how a participant chooses to document their activities and personal perspectives. Use of visual documents both as a data source and presentation of research findings has also been increasingly popular (Merriam, 2016). For example, photos of marked up music scores alone can tell the story of what was important to capture to the pianist.

A public document is another common type of document. I gathered website information about schools to get to know each participant's contextual environment. Much online material, such as school websites, audition requirements, course listings, curriculum requirements provide a convergence of data. Analyzing such documents is a way to seek corroboration of the meaning of the documents and interview data, connecting them to a broader narrative outside of textual convention. Public documents are also often written for a particular purpose such as attracting and retaining students, marketing, and branding, etc., so such data need to be considered as a social filter, rather than a neutral or transparent reflection of an organization's culture. Both

public and personal documents exist before the study. They are considered extant materials (or stable materials) that are unobtrusive to a researcher's influence (Merriam, 2016; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

As a potential downside, because documents generally are not produced for research purposes, the information they offer may be fragmentary, or not in a form that is useful to the research. Furthermore, determining documentary materials' authenticity and accuracy can be challenging. Distortion in personal documents may be unintentional in that the writer is unaware of his or her biases or simply does not remember accurately.

Method 3: Journaling

In transcendental phenomenology, the goal is to illuminate the essence of the phenomenon without the corruption of personal bias (Peoples, 2021). As Maxwell (2013) explains, the reason for making my perspective, biases, and assumptions clear to the reader is not to eliminate the researcher's beliefs and perceptual lens; rather, it is to understand how my values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusion of the study. Journaling is effective in reflecting upon my thinking as a researcher, to see the phenomenon more objectively. It brings an effort to position myself to think about participants' way of thinking, hence lessening dependence on their subjective minds. The more transcendental phenomenological researchers think about how they think, the more they can think proactively and contemplatively about a phenomenon. Husserl emphasized that the lived experience should be bracketed so that structures of phenomenon could be carefully described as they were experienced in consciousness. Journaling my own assumptions is a way of bracketing. It reveals things that have become "normal" in my assumptions.

As part of my journaling, each interview yielded an interview summary. This allows me to better document salient ideas learned, integrate data, and generate follow-up questions for the next interview. Summaries included topics covered and impressions made. Ideas include (a) participant profiles (i.e., a brief description of the person's prior history of musical training, degrees enrolled, experiences before formal training, where he or she was currently in program); (b) a description of accompanying services and school practices; (c) related academic focus (vocal piano, instrumental piano, or opera); (d) demographics, race and gender of participants, and its perceived impact on study; (e) personal stories deemed important to participants. These basic questions provide a snapshot for me to gauge both the breadth and depth of participants' familiarity with collaborative piano training.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The analysis of the data involves identifying recurring patterns. Findings are recurring patterns or themes supported by the data from which they were derived (Merriam, 2016). The overall interpretation is based on my impressions, feelings, and understanding of the participants' experience: the phenomenon of becoming a collaborative pianist in graduate programs. My analysis favors the nontangibles, affects and the "overtones," but not so much the cause and effect.

In addition to journaling and bracketing, there are other strategies unique to phenomenological research. Phenomenological reduction is the process of continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself. Horizontalization is the process of laying out all the data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight. These data are then organized into clusters or themes. Moustakas (1994, p. 96) explains that in horizontalization, "there is an interweaving of person, conscious experience,

and phenomenon. In the process of explicating the phenomenon, qualities are recognized and described; every perception is granted equal value, nonrepetitive constituents of experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived" (Merriam, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative inquiries. The human instruments are able to immediately respond, clarify and follow up with unanticipated responses (Merriam, 2016). My academic training was in collaborative piano, and I have studied all three sub-concentrations, instrumental accompanying, vocal coaching, and opera coaching. My work experience resembles an evolution from a staff pianist in academic institutions, to a freelance performer, to a vocal coach in opera productions and higher education, all of which allow me to be conversant with the phenomena being investigated.

Discussion through the years with former colleagues and teachers served as a fertile ground for identifying research problems and key issues. While my insider knowledge is a source of strength in this study, the very same can also be a bias in my designing this research and interpreting findings. In conducting interviews, I minimally interjected my own opinions unless it was called for by the interviewee. In analyzing and interpreting data, I used multiple sources of data trying to keep biases at bay. My own preconceived notion of collaborative piano programs shaped the kind of questions that I asked as well as the way I asked them. When presenting data and retelling stories of my participants, my interpretation is inevitably intertwined.

That being said, a potential drawback of using a researcher as a primary instrument is one's subjective biases. It is important to identify and monitor biases and make clear how they may shape the collection and interpretation of data (Merriam, 2016). By stating my assumptions

and bias explicitly at the outset of the study, I remain committed to an ongoing documentation of self-reflection. I did so by keeping a journal reflecting and documenting my own assumptions going into the study, and periodically reflecting how these biases might be influencing me at critical points while interviewing and analyzing data. Bringing assumption to consciousness is an important step. After all, I am an instrument in this study, and my interpretation is not neutral. Implementing such precautions aids in strengthening the credibility of the research.

Researcher Assumptions and Expertise

Based on my background as a graduate of collaborative piano, several assumptions were made regarding this study. First, most pianists specializing in accompanying and coaching prefer the term *collaborative piano* over *piano accompanying* as a way to emphasize the intended co-partnership. This assumption is based on existing scholarship and missions stated by collaborative piano programs. Second, because collaborative piano students are expected to provide service to their student colleagues during study, balancing that with one's own educational needs remains challenging, occasionally resulting in a lack of room for growth. This assumption is based on existing literature and supported by my pilot finding. Third, what collaboration looks like in collaborative piano, or the role of a collaborative pianist in different contexts, is not always made clear. Given a wide range of functions provided by pianists in ensembles, a lack of nuance in collaboration sometimes leads to confusions in collaborative piano students. The ambiguity and the fluidity of roles remain unaddressed as "the elephant in the room." Lastly, individual educational experiences vary greatly depending on chosen specialty, school context, and previous experience.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent and Privacy (*Anonymity and Confidentiality*)

Participants were made aware of the research nature of the conversations. Consent had been obtained - both written and verbal. Institutional review board (IRB) expectations were met for publication purposes. To protect anonymity and confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities, and related identities of individuals mentioned in interviews were masked. None of the participants were working in the same organization as me and there was no conflict of interests. Participants were made aware that they are permitted to leave a study or refuse to participate at any point.

Data Collection

I collected data over online conferencing software Zoom. Two to three 90-minute interviews for each participant took place over a course of a semester. Follow-up questions were asked in the remaining interview(s) to fill gaps of understanding, clarifications and further rumination. A semi-structured protocol was used to allow for essential spontaneity of phenomenology. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by me. All data is stored in a secure computer with a protected password and is accessible only to me. Audio data is destroyed after the study is finished.

Issues of Trustworthiness: Credibility

Credibility, or trustworthiness, is how true the data correspond with the phenomenon being studied in its collection and analysis. To increase credibility, multiple methods (interview, document review, and researcher journal) and multiple sources of data (interviews from students in different schools and follow-up interviews with the same people) contributed and confirmed

emerging findings. The different findings thus created a broader and deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021).

Secondly, adequate data engagement in data collection was used as a strategy to get as close as possible to participant's understanding of a phenomenon until data became "saturated." Instead of conducting one interview, two to three interviews per participant were conducted throughout the course of a semester. The duration of each interview, 90 minutes, allowed in-depth conversations, reflections and follow-ups. A prolonged interaction with participants also allowed exploration of details to a depth that helped establish what is important and irrelevant to the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). Spending extensive time with participants in their natural environments also warranted more trust in communication and helped to limit misrepresentations in data due to the presence of a researcher. Rich descriptions of context, a detailed account of participants' experiences where patterns and themes emerge, was key in showing the complexity of the lived world of participants.

Member checking was part of the credibility strategy, but it did not become necessary. When called for, transcripts of interviews are typically reviewed by participants for accuracy. Certain initial interpretations or passages of interviews may be shown to participants for feedback and confirmation. There may be an expectation that participants should also review the interpretations of their experience and agree that the conclusions are plausible. Not all participants would agree with the results, but that does not mean that the results are inaccurate. In this study, each participant yielded over 30 pages of transcripts single-spaced. Given the sheer volume of information generated, I did not ask participants to verify the accuracy of the transcripts, since I did not perceive any inconsistency that needed clarification.

Dependability

Dependability, or reliability, concerns how replicable a study is if someone were to repeat it. Reliability is problematic in social sciences because human behavior is never static, nor does it exist in a vacuum. Instead, it is in constant flux, context specific, and the research setting is natural rather than in an isolated laboratory (Merriam, 2016). Replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results given the very nature of human interactions. However, this does not discredit the dependability of the study, nor suggest that results are inconsistent with the data collected. An audit trail helps with dependability. It is a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study; it allows readers to authenticate findings by following the account description made by the researcher. An audit trail enhances transparency by describing how data are collected, how categories are derived, and how decisions are made throughout the inquiry (Merriam, 2016). The best I can do is to explain how the results are arrived at, since I cannot expect others to replicate the exact study. Researcher journals, memos on the process, reflections, questions, and decisions made with regard to problems, issues, or counter ideas also serve as an audit trail.

Transferability

Lastly, transferability concerns the extent to which a reader may be able to apply the finding elsewhere. Providing enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations may be applicable to the finding of this study (Merriam, 2016). The burden of proof lies less with me, the researcher, than with the reader seeking to make an application elsewhere. Thick descriptive data makes transferability possible through rich description of the setting and findings of a study. In addition, maximum variation is another strategy for enhancing transferability in selecting the sample, be it sites or

participants. It allows for the possibility of a greater range of application by readers through diverse selection and common patterns across diversity.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study refers to methodological weaknesses, in this case, qualitative inquiry and phenomenology. Since qualitative inquiry does not find causal relationships, I cannot prove what causes students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction only through their perception and affect. In addition, qualitative inquiry does not generalize. I am not able to repeat the same experiment on other participants and expect to get the exact same answers, since every person's experience is different.

Limitations for my phenomenological dissertations are the small sample size, time limitations and bias in the participant sample. Phenomenological data is mostly generated from in-depth interview analysis. As the sole researcher, I can only realistically handle data from a few participants for the purposes of this dissertation. In terms of time limitation, I only spent several hours in total conversing with each participant in the span of several months. This is not a longitudinal study where I am able to follow their trajectory for years. Covid also impacted most of the study. Ideally a longer time frame would be preferable, but funding does not allow that. Lastly, participants were recruited based on snowball strategy, which may enhance bias in participants. The results of phenomenology study also have limited transferability because each context is unique.

Chapter IV: Renderings: Journeys of Becoming

In this chapter, I present the research findings by narrating stories, painting for each participant a portrait of their unique experiences of becoming a collaborative pianist in graduate program(s). Each individual experience comprises meaning units, headlined in each section, and they are typically grouped into themes. The themes, then, are combined to form overall impressions of the phenomenon.

All interviews were conducted over Zoom at a mutually agreeable time, and each interview lasted for at least an hour to 90 minutes. Almost all participants had three interviews each. All participants have either obtained their doctorate within the past three years or are currently finishing the last steps. Interviews were audio recorded, and subsequently transcribed by me. Degrees my participants obtained include Master of Music (MM), Graduate Diploma (GD), Professional Study (PS), and Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA). The chart in Table 1 outlines the kind of degree programs, number of schools each participant attended, area of focus, and their graduation year.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Year DMA Completed	Focus	Degrees in Collaborative Piano	Number of Schools Attended
Alisa	Female	Asian	2021	Instrumental	GD + MM	1
Kyle	Male	White	2023	Vocal	MM	1
Ellen	Female	Asian	ABD	Instrumental	MM + PS	1
Andrew	Male	White	2022	Both	MM + PS	3

In this chapter, you will notice a change of tone in my writing. If the style was formal in previous chapters, this chapter appears less so. Le Guin (1989) calls the softer and gentler tone the "mother tongue," a style that invites vulnerability and inspection, connecting individual experiences with common and colloquial languages. It differs from the commanding style of a "father tongue," typical of public discourse and reasoning. The validity of the "mother tongue" is in its subjectivity; it embodies experiences that are vulnerable and intimate instead of concerning objectivity (Le Guin, 1989). I find a change of tone appropriate for my data presentation, as it best conveys its emotional appeal that would otherwise be lost in translation.

The stories that make up my phenomenon are conversation-like. In re-telling my participants' experiences, I strategically use the stories as if there were no filters, preserving its naturalness and authenticity, with its casual tone, in order to best describe the phenomenon with immediacy, simplicity, and freshness. In examining the phenomenon of becoming collaborative pianists in graduate programs, participants offer their very own lived experiences as their truths. Recall, this study aims to answer the following question and the subdivisions of the question:

Given its intentions and history, and how the field of collaborative piano has been organized and taught, what does the graduate collaborative piano experience look like as perceived and experienced by collaborative piano students?

- How do collaborative piano students describe their study?
- How is collaboration in collaborative piano perceived and experienced?
- In what ways do students find collaborative piano programs meet their educational needs?

Alisa

Born in South Korea, Alisa moved to the U.S. in fifth grade with her family. She went to Canada for college, then returned to the U.S. for three graduate degrees in collaborative piano from the same conservatory. Alisa has this grace and calm composure in her. She seems very easy going, a person who goes with the flow. Sitting in her kitchen, she took her time to speak, shared her experience with non-judgement and openness, as if she was recounting someone else's experience. "I don't have strong opinions about things generally," she said in our second interview. At the time of interview, she had just finished her doctorate two years prior, and was actively freelancing in a metropolitan city in the Northeast. Most of her clients were instrumentalists, and she was not affiliated with any particular school specifically.

A Little Encouragement Went a Long Way

Alisa always had easy going piano teachers growing up. When a new piano teacher came on board in her junior year in college, she became Alisa's toughest teacher by far: she never gave Alisa any compliments. "I never took piano seriously or competitively. I thought that if I went to music school, I'd wake up and become more serious about piano." Instead, she found herself wanting to drop out of college, and even considered quitting piano altogether. "The teacher was so tough … It was hard being a solo pianist, *so lonely*." A solo career was out of the picture for her; Alisa felt very convinced about that.

Just a few months later in a summer festival, the same tough teacher gave Alisa her very first positive recognition after nearly a year: "I think you can be good at this, chamber music, playing with others." Imagine what this tiny encouragement did to Alisa? It got her thinking about collaborative piano. By senior year, Alisa decided to pivot. She applied to several master's programs that required no pre-screening and got into three out of the four schools that she

applied to. Faculty were the determining factor for her in choosing her school; a trial lesson helped her make up her mind.

"I don't think I knew what I was getting myself into."

Not exactly an overstatement, Alisa took a leap of faith to test out this new field; she did not have much of an expectation. Turns out, there was so much to learn. When her two-year master's program was up, she wanted more. She subsequently added a one-year graduate diploma, common for students at her school. During that time, she focused on audition preparation for doctoral admissions. She only auditioned for one school, the same school she has been in, because she wanted to continue with her teacher.

> My family was quite an influence. They were telling me "why would you turn down an almost-free education? You can study more, why wouldn't you?" I don't know why that convinced me, but it did. It wasn't like I wanted to become a professor and therefore I wanted to pursue a DMA.

Admissions results were in her favor, so she committed herself to one of the most reputable DMA programs in the U.S. for collaborative piano.

Unbalanced Curriculum

Alisa preferred instrumental music. She played the viola in high school, and that experience naturally helped her in ensemble music making, such as listening to bow speed, vibratos, and general sense of togetherness. The collaborative piano curriculum was surprisingly "very vocal heavy" for Alisa. Every semester, she took vocal repertory and diction classes in some language combinations (French, German, Italian, and English). A core class on *song interpretation* was required for all collaborative majors in their first semester. This class covered important periods and languages as an introduction to song repertoire. Interestingly enough, no

equivalence of such instrumental classes was found in the core curriculum for collaborative piano majors. The closest one, as Alisa recalled, was a sonata class, which was open to the entire school instead of only to collaborative majors, therefore solo pianists were also eligible to take this class, as long as they passed the required auditions. Other course offerings on instrumental repertory with similar audition-based criteria became available later on, but they were again open to the entire school rather than designed specifically for collaborative piano majors.

Another reason the program was "vocal heavy" was the way graduate assistantships were set up. Assistantships awarded to collaborative piano majors mandated their accompaniment in voice lessons five hours a week. "It had to be voice lessons at first. Each singer is assigned a pianist throughout the semester to work with. With instrumentalists, it was not a thing. For me, with my instrumental focus, I had to find my own partners." There was no pairing of instrumentalists to collaborative piano students. Matching only applied to staff pianists who work with specific instrumental departments (string, woodwind, or brass) or studios depending on their repertoire strength. Before Alisa developed her own network of partners to play with, she relied on her teacher's help to secure instrumental partners. Finding partners initially was an added challenge for many instrumental-focused collaborative piano students. Vocal partnerships, on the other hand, were set up more systematically in Alisa's school.

Missed Opportunities for Teaching and Coaching

A second surprise was a lack of opportunity to practice coaching and teaching during her doctoral training. If the doctoral program is to produce professors, educators, and coaches, shouldn't there be opportunities for her to practice those skills, she pondered? "I don't know if we are just expected to know how to teach based on our experiences and what we have seen first-hand with our teachers, but I feel there could also be something more structured." *There was no*

class for her to learn how to coach. The closest class perhaps was an elective opera coaching class being offered for a few years, but she was not able to make it. She was also offered an assistantship to coach undergraduate singers, but she had to pass up that opportunity because of a visa issue.

In short, Alisa wished there had been more formal opportunities to coach others, and to gain experience giving a masterclass or teaching a classroom subject during her doctorate. “It was up to us to be proactive.” To fill that gap, her classmate brought in a singer to her private lesson and coached the singer in front of her teacher as a way to gain practical coaching skills. If Alisa could make program improvements however she wants, she would add a plethora of teaching and coaching opportunities for doctoral students to gain hands-on experience.

Collaborative Skills

What were some challenges during her study? Keeping tempo, being together at the onset of the music, finishing the chord together, literally *being together in the music* was challenging at first. “Collaborative skills… I had a hard time with that at the beginning because I wasn’t used to listening very, very carefully.” Besides attentive listening, she also rewrote orchestral reductions of concertos and operas as a part of “personalizing” different sounds and colors at the piano. Playing orchestral reduction was Alisa’s least favorite. “We are playing something fake. We put so much effort into it. Why are we doing it? Reality, I guess.” Main complaint of orchestral reduction concerns their un-pianistic nature, as pianists find the materials awkward to play with unnecessarily complicated arrangements. These materials were not written for piano like piano sonatas and solo works. Instead, they were arranged by editors to condense orchestral writing to be playable on the piano for practical purposes. A cellist is able to run through the Shostakovich concerto with a pianist thanks to the orchestral reduction, for instance. An open orchestral score

by the composer exists, but a pianist is unlikely to read off of 10 staves simultaneously, unless they are a seasoned *répétiteur*. Working on materials that Alisa did not enjoy was part of the challenge.

Speed: Sight Reading and Repertoire Learning

Sight reading skills, part of collaborative skills, was not Alisa's strong suit at the onset. It is one crucial skill she spent most time acquiring. Needless to say, playing in voice lessons was rough at first.

> The nerves …. My sight-reading capability was not great. It did improve because we were going through so much music all the time. We are talking about *hundreds* of songs. I came into the program with only two sonatas and three songs.

In addition to collaborative skills and sight-reading skills, learning repertoire very quickly was also challenging. As much as she wanted to take on more playing at the beginning of her master's degree, she was able to do little beyond her curriculum demands. "Anyone who goes into a collaborative piano program for the first time without much prior experience is overwhelmed with the amount of new repertoire." Expanding repertoire was the main goal, and there was never enough time. She found herself always working with tight deadlines and last-minute requests. Every night, she stayed until the guards went away in school to fit in as much practice as possible. Days were *so* long.

Know Thyself

The last big challenge was getting to know herself; it was deceptively important. A lack of time to learn repertoire was a given, therefore staying organized became even more critical. She wanted to fulfill requests she had agreed to at a somewhat satisfactory level. Part of that organizational process was to know how to determine what requests to say yes to. How much

time would it take to learn a movement of Strauss violin sonata in a week on top of what she had going on? How about the entire Stravinsky *Suite Italianne*? "Knowing myself, knowing what I could do in a few days, in a few hours … gauging that was more challenging at the beginning of the program, I would say." She had been there to step in for other pianists who needed substitutes at the last minute because they could not learn the music in time, and she had also been there asking for help herself. Getting to know her own capabilities was evidently important to her success as a professional.

Struggling to Meet Standards at a High Volume

Most commonly, new collaborative piano students start their formal study with only a small list of repertoire. A seasoned collaborator, on the other hand, not only has a large repertoire base, but is also able to deliver any known repertoire on short notice.

> Expanding repertoire is the big thing. I always went to my lesson under-prepared because I was working on so many things …. When you get busy, you just play enough to get by. Other people may not notice, but you yourself don't really feel great about it. It is a rite of passage that one must go through when we are learning.

Given all challenges encountered, Alisa found the lack of time most frustrating. Needless to say, achieving that personal level of satisfaction for the music she was learning was no easy task. To overcome that, she did her best to get at least close to what she would be okay with. "What else could you do? You have a certain number of classes you have to take, a certain number of hours you have to fill, part of whatever requirement it is to meet for scholarship." With the limited time that she had, preparing performances as part of her degree program were her priorities. Those shows were highlights in her study, pushing her forward as a performer. A typical day for Alisa, as demonstrated in her schedule, Figure 3:

Figure 3

Daily Schedule Sample

The Best Collaborative Experience in School, and the Worst

Alisa loves French music and culture. One of her favorite collaborative experiences was to play with a French violinist. From playing in school to touring France together as a duo, their relationship grew over the years. “I think that it was a really fun collaboration …. For me, great collaboration is when I don’t have to try as hard …. It just works well naturally.” For Alisa, that meant no need to discuss too many things together. She did not have to try as hard to put the

music together, get her ideas across, or worry how her opinions would be perceived. The duo felt things naturally and musically as if they spoke the same musical language.

At the core, a willingness to try new ideas is a must for good collaboration, said Alisa. Everyone has different musical ideas. When one is alone learning their own parts, they are the sole decision-maker. Rehearsals and collaborative performances, however, involve more than just one person. Ideally, both partners are comfortable communicating and experimenting with their ideas. "Even if you feel super strongly about the way that you interpret the music, sometimes you just have to let go. It's a give and take. Maybe one passage you play it the way you want, and you let the other person play the way they want, kind of like that." It is imperative to be open to try out each other's ideas as a team.

As for a not-so-great collaborative experience, Alisa gave an example of her plucking out notes and rhythms for a young singer who had little clue during the entire rehearsal.

> Honestly, a lesser great experience comes from the fact that the other person is not as prepared, not having done their part …. It is not so much in terms of collaboration issues. Obviously, collaboration issues do arise when you don't know your parts.

Her role was more to serve others in that context. Playing for pre-college students, usually is not much of a collaboration for Alisa, either.

> I think that is where the term that people want to avoid 'accompanying' comes in. You are on edge trying to catch the young student. *Collaboration, I would define it as a two-way communication.* You are listening to each other, not just to yourself.

Collaborating vs. Accompanying

Listening is crucial for *any* collaboration. It also distinguishes collaborating from accompanying by enabling two-way communication, according to Alisa. Listening applies to

both the pianist and their partner in collaboration, because without it, two-way communication is not attainable. If one is not actively listening, they miss different nuances, real-time happenings, and forgo potential spontaneity. Even without rehearsals, for instance, in an audition setting playing for/with someone for the very first time, as long as there is good listening happening, Alisa sees it as a collaboration. When asked what her mindset is, she said:

> Playing in entrance auditions is just like [playing] in a rehearsal, you are doing the first run-through. You play it the way you want, but you also are not just playing it as if you had earmuffs on. You are still trying to listen and react. That is why I am saying I would consider that I myself am trying to collaborate in audition settings …. I don't know if the other person [in the audition] would say the same.

On the topic of listening in collaboration, she spoke more on playing with pre-college students. Depending on the type of student and how much experience they had working with a pianist, there could be potential collaboration, especially if they were accustomed to playing with pianists. On the other hand, it would become an "accompanying service" if a young student needed help with the very basics and lacked ideas of how the music goes. Sometimes Alisa's work was just accompanying, not collaborating. If students did not play the right rhythm, she "catches" them when they "fall." "That is part of my job. I am there for that. I am there to help them. It is a little more tiring in that sense, since you are on edge. It's like having a baby, something can happen at any moment. You gotta jump in and fix the problem." As long as young students had some musical ideas and actively listened to her playing, there was potential for collaboration. Quite clearly, two-way communication is at the heart of collaboration for Alisa.

Power Dynamics

As far as different dynamics between playing with people better than her or lesser skilled than her, she did not treat a young student or a professional differently, at least in her mindset. Of course, she wanted to be at her best when playing with a professional, but even for pre-college students, her work ethic commanded her to prepare as best she could.

In our discussions, we did not get too much into her coaching others. She may coach a young student only if she was leading a rehearsal with the absence of the teacher. A quick run-through hardly warrants coaching. Rehearsals at the pre-college level are only about 30 minutes long, with the goal of running through the piece with a pianist, and spot checking only when time allows. If Alisa was tired that day (a full day of playing is usually about 8 hours back-to-back), she wouldn't say much. "I don't have the energy to assert myself." Coaching a college-level student would be even less likely.

Being a Student and an Employee

When I asked if Alisa felt competing priorities as a student meeting her own educational needs versus having to deliver services to others, she said the two complemented each other rather well during her study. She liked the fact that she could "get paid" to complete her doctorate study with assistantships and fellowships (she was in charge of piano for non-majors' courses and others). She compared her education as a *paid internship*. "I think it is kind of a bonus that we are getting paid for basically being in school, studying our major. No other students in the school get paid for playing with other people." Lee (2009) found challenges to balance the roles of being a staff and student simultaneously, but Alisa disagreed. "It made time management more difficult, but I don't know if being a student and being of service to the school clashes that much, personally." Her experience seems to reflect a win-win situation for both the

school and her, just as how assistantships were intended to be in collaborative piano (Fincher, 2020; Wenger, 2010).

Money

During her doctoral studies, Alisa paid $800 monthly for her tuition after scholarship. "Not bad …. I didn't get a full scholarship, but there was a lot of funding at the time." She was able to sustain herself from her assistantship and fellowship to pay for rent and living expenses.

As a student providing accompanying service to other students, she did not have to ask her classmates to compensate her for her time, at least not frequently. It was either a give-and-take exchange situation, or the rehearsal hours were covered by the school (each instrumentalist has five hours per semester for rehearsal usage). If an instrumental student ran out of those hours, then Alisa would ask for compensation from the student.

Charging others money has always been an uncomfortable topic for Alisa. It was then, and it still is now. As a professional, she charges students whatever her hourly rate is. Sometimes a lump sum may work better for projects such as recitals and recordings. Even at the time of the interview, she sometimes asked her colleagues how much to charge in certain contexts. "We are usually working with students who do not have money. That is always difficult." Indeed, compensation turned out to be a recurring theme for all the participants.

Employability

When I asked Alisa how her program prepared for her career, she answered quite positively. "The skill sets, definitely. I already know a lot of the repertoire now. I don't think that if I had been in a solo piano program all throughout, I could be doing what I am doing right now." Many solo piano majors are great at collaborating, and they do the side work of accompanying. Alisa liked to think that collaborative majors are more subject-matter experts

who are equipped with more experience and repertoire knowledge. She also found the school name helped her a great deal in getting employment opportunities. She was very active as a freelance musician, not a staff member by association to any institution.

My impression of Alisa is that she validated the program design as it was intended despite the challenges she encountered. She compared her program experience to an internship, and she truly valued two-way communication, which distinguishes collaborating from accompanying.

Kyle

Kyle is rather noticeable. He is tall, blond, confident yet approachable. He seems so easy to talk to. You want to befriend him the moment you meet him; he is so charismatic. Did I mention he is a really good pianist? He is one of the few having received a full-time young artist job offer from a U.S. opera company before he even finished school. As soon as he had completed his DMA, he was then hired by a European opera house as an ensemble *répétiteur*, that is, a rehearsal pianist. Playing in staging rehearsals, prompting and coaching are all parts of musical preparation expected of his role. A success story, some may call him.

As the youngest collaborative piano major in his class, he found his love for collaborative piano early on. He entered college at the age of 17 and started taking private lessons on collaborative piano at 19. By the time he finished his three-year young artist program, he was only 28 years old. He received a BM in solo piano, an MM and DMA in collaborative piano, all from the same school.

Hooked: Singer's Legato

How he became interested in collaborative piano originated from one simple incident. In his first piano lesson in college, his piano teacher said to him, "I don't like your legato. Go listen

to Jessey Norman sing four last songs of Richard Strauss. You will learn everything you ever need to know about legato and phrasing." Nobody ever told him to listen to voice. He took a listen; it was "eye opening" and "world-shifting."

> I fell in love with the singing voice. I never understood this weird concept that the piano is an instrument that decays. And yet, singer is the ultimate legato. There is no decay. Playing with singers solves all the problems of piano. It compensates for the fact that the piano is constantly dying.

He was hooked. He wanted more. He asked what his singer friends were singing, and if he could play through their repertoire together in a practice room. He did not care how hard a Berg song was, he just wanted to learn it. To take his interests further, he requested to formally enroll in a graduate level vocal accompanying course. To his surprise, not only did he receive permission to take the class with collaborative piano majors, but he also had that class count towards his undergraduate degree requirement. Much of his early interests in collaborative piano was made possible by the Dean of Academic Affairs, who provided flexibility with curriculum requirements to enable his formal exploration of "a territory that is outside of the norm."

Integration and Transition

By his junior year as a solo piano student, Kyle became a regular community member in the voice department in his school, while most vocal pianists were graduate students or post-graduate staff pianists. Kyle secured stable weekly hours playing in two major voice studios in school, learning everything he could from singing techniques, standard repertoire to unwritten rules to decorum. Not only did he make a majority of his student income through playing in voice lessons, but the lessons also doubled as a coaching class for him. "It is the best way to learn. I learned the language of singers. After hours and hours, it helped me become the coach

that I am today." There was no doubt that Kyle spent his time differently than his fellow solo piano classmates, despite their pursuit of the same degree. Better, the professor of vocal accompanying class, Renee, offered to give him private weekly catch-up lessons. Quickly, the two built a strong mentorship. He took various diction and vocal literature classes in subsequent semesters per her suggestion.

Formal Study: "I feel torn in a million directions"

By the end of his undergraduate study, it was clear that pursuing a masters in collaborative piano would make more sense. After Kyle officially became a collaborative major, how did he like it?

> Once I got into the master's program of collaborative piano, it became chaos, I don't really know what it is the school wants me to be learning. I feel torn in a million directions. Especially at the beginning, I had to take snippets of everything. I feel like a complete idiot for not knowing the repertoire and skillset in instrumental accompanying class... The idea is that you need to do everything …. I found the program throws so many things at you. I don't think I really settled into being interested in playing for opera honestly, until I got this [young artist] job that I didn't even apply for.

It was four years of unsettlement before clarity emerged. When quantity overwhelmed quality, his playing suffered, understandably so, similarly to Alisa's experience. Sometimes he did not even have time to rehearse with a partner before performing a piece in class. If the enjoyment of what he did came from a rehearsal process, and if that process was missing, then he started disliking the experience. Too much emphasis was placed on the product as opposed to the process.

Unfocused Curriculum

The program is unfocused by design, aiming to cover a breadth of repertoire and skills for both the instrumental and vocal tracks. Kyle saw it as a two-edged sword. It did give student pianists windows into many different worlds, from which they could choose what speaks to them the most. For that exact reason, unless one commits to a specialty early on in their study, it is tricky to go deep despite the array of available resources. After seven years of formal training on collaborative piano, he still did not feel confident about how to accompany a brass instrument, for example. On the contrary, without trying all specialties, how would anyone know that playing for singers is not their new favorite thing if they had never done it before? At the master's level, most collaborative piano majors come in with limited experience and repertoire. It is expected of them to acquire many new concepts and skills within two to three years' time.

A second factor exemplifies the breadth of his training is the astounding number of private lessons Kyle received weekly. Typically, any given student received one private lesson a week from their major teacher. For Kyle, as a collaborative piano major, however, he had *five* different teachers that he studied with weekly at one point; that means he had one private lesson every day of the week, and that is five times more lessons received than any other students in his school! Because each teacher has their own specialty, Kyle tried to play a different repertoire for each at first. But soon he fell behind. He stopped learning one complete sonata and a new set of songs per week. Instead, he brought the same material to all five teachers. Oftentimes, these teachers had competing ideas on how to play a piece, and that led Kyle having to choose one teacher's interpretation over the others, especially in performances. Some instances made him feel awkward. In theory, resourcefulness to gain multiple perspectives on a work should be an advantage. In reality, it was confusing at best when it was overboard.

Change in Social Personality

When asked what advice he would give to young solo pianists who wanted to switch to collaborative piano, Kyle mentioned a big difference in social personality, the ability to articulate thoughts to others. He would not describe himself as extroverted by nature. It took effort to become good at talking to people, reading people, and knowing how to pick his battles. Solo pianists, generally, spend much time making musical decisions in solidarity, instinctively in their heads. They rarely need to put their thought process into words. Articulating musical ideas to partners, however, is one of the most important skills as a collaborative pianist:

> It is a big change to go from being alone in a practice room rarely interacting with people, making all musical decisions on your own, to constantly being around people, constantly articulating what you want, what you need, what you don't like in the other person, and what you like from the other people. That is honestly a bigger step than you think it is, after decades and plus of being alone musically.

Kyle was referring to the initial adjustment to the collaborative piano program; the relational change was subtle, sudden, yet wide-ranging. The second big difference is the way of listening, both to himself and others in the ensemble. Kyle described this new way of listening as incorporating imaginative ears that can travel as far as 20 feet away from the body to hear things outside of himself. This holistic listening helped him hear larger ideas: the longer musical lines, the not-so-obvious counter melodies, the harmony in all voices, the rhythmic modulation, etc.

A Greater Perceived Difference Than It Actually Is?

Kyle noticed some fellow collaborative students struggled to play with singers at first, no matter how technically capable they may have been, yet, they sounded great playing with instrumentalists. When they played with singers, for some reason, they made more mistakes,

their technical abilities suffered, and their sound became more tentative. They got worse the moment they played with singers, as if they went from sounding like a confident pianist to sounding like an immature student pianist doubting themselves. Kyle suspected that the difficulty they perceived in playing with singers hindered their full engagement, so much that "they forgot to play the piano."

How does a pianist forget to play the piano? I asked him to clarify. Kyle combed his fingers through his blond hair. There was the balance to worry about, breaths to catch, consonances to avoid "stepping on," and drama to paint along with singers' storytelling, etc. One easily became paralyzed about what to do. Is the singer running out of breath? Am I pedaling too much? The more technically brilliant a pianist is, the more adjustment there may be in playing with a singer. Brilliance in sound is sometimes perceived as "loudness" in vocal accompanying. Being too loud is almost a "crime" that every collaborative pianist actively avoids committing. A slower keystroke, superb awareness of vocal register, and in-depth knowledge of the text could help, but this conscious awareness need to be gained in training. When there is so much emphasis on the nuts and bolts, some new collaborative pianists become hyper-focused, overcompensating for their brilliance in sound, and holding themselves back in piano playing. Free to express themselves? Not so much, at least not in the old way that they knew how.

Good Piano-Playing Brings Existential Threats to Song Pianists?

Kyle noticed that the song accompanists he had the honor to work with did not possess great pianistic capabilities, no matter their fame. These song pianists seemed to have resentment towards pianists who *do* have superb technical abilities, as if virtuosity represents an existential threat to what they do. Song interpretation and poetry analysis are strong suits to song pianists.

What happens, then, when there are technically excellent pianists who also have all the other skills? Would that "threaten" song pianists?

> Well … if you are not a great pianist, none of that matters. You cannot translate [your ideas] into what your fingers are doing. You can write a book about it, but you can't play it on the piano. I was always fascinated by this weird resentment that they have about great pianists.

As I understood it, Kyle was commenting on perceived differences in theory (scholarly study of a composition) and practice (piano performance of the same composition). Tension exists in the gap between the two. Technical brilliance, both in sound and capability, typical of virtuosic piano playing, also contributes to the tension. Virtuosity in solo piano playing can be looked down upon in song accompanying. How come? Kyle thinks it may be because these song pianists whom he worked with lacked the very brilliance in piano playing themselves. Their insecurity is then compensated for by their scholarly interpretation of songs.

Needing to Catch up on Vocal Knowledge

Vocal repertoire was what Kyle spent most of his time focusing on since his study in collaborative piano. He had his reasons:

> I focus a lot on vocal related things in my coursework, less because I was more interested in it, but because I felt that it is a skillset that I could not get on my own. What happened was that I spent much time studying and working with singers, people assumed that is what I wanted to do. Obviously now that is mostly what I do, but I always have to let people know that that is not my single-minded interests, it was just what I spent initial periods studying a lot.

Kyle believed that he did not necessarily need a teacher to tell him how to play a Brahms violin sonata, because he knew how to play Brahms' piano music and chamber music, so he could figure out the rest. Whereas for diction, operatic practice and such, he needed the classes and guidance. People saw that he spent much time on vocal related activities, they assumed that was his chosen specialty. As a result, he was offered a position to play in a school opera production, an honor to any student; only experienced staff pianists receive this opportunity, ordinarily. Later, even an opera job landed on him serendipitously. The job offer happened like a dream; by chance, the director of an opera company heard Kyle play in his doctoral recital, and he ended up liking Kyle's playing over any of the other applicants for this position. The very next day, the director offered Kyle a three-year young artist contract in spite of the absence of a formal audition. This job is a dream opportunity for any pianists wanting a career in opera. Kyle had not considered working full-time in opera until then. Soon the pandemic hit, and he had job security.

Landing Real Jobs

Fast forward to three years later when he was finishing his young artist job in the U.S. What happened next? Just months after Kyle earned his doctorate, he won another full-time position as a professional ensemble *répétiteur* in a European opera house, a level up from being a young artist. The hiring manager gave Kyle only ten days' notice to prepare for the audition (with no repertoire restriction). Reasonably so, Kyle brought in music he already knew. The way he prepared for this audition reminded me of a samurai in a fight: efficient, skillful, just impressive.

Kyle viewed orchestral reduction as freedom for creativity. "An opera score is only as difficult as you choose." He had two different versions of the entire opera *Macbeth*, as he did with most of his challenging vocal scores. One version was quite a bit easier; he changed the

16th notes to triplets in a fast excerpt, for example, for his last-minute audition. For staging rehearsals, he played the "full" difficult version when he had time to get the 16th notes back in shape.

Unlike most, this audition lasted for 90 minutes. The entire *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* by Strauss, Act I of *Macbeth* by Verdi, Act I of *Magic Flute* by Mozart, scenes from *The Ring Cycle* and some Wagner songs were just a few that he had prepared. He sang and played all materials, sight read an excerpt from *The Ring Cycle*, and was asked to prompt under a conductor for a text-heavy "sprechen scene" in *Magic Flute*. All of which, playing and singing under a conductor, sightreading, and prompting, are key functions of a pianist in an opera company (Garrett, 2019; Zeger, 1997).

Since he went into the real world, he has come to learn that languages are so much more important than diction, the exact opposite of his training in school. In opera houses, little emphasis was put into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), but Kyle had spent many semesters studying it in school. Languages, on the other hand, were crucial to his career success, yet he only spent one semester on them. "How come?" I asked Kyle.

> What people care about is expression in a language, which requires knowing a language to a certain extent.… I wonder if the ones who designed collab curriculum, especially vocal things, if they ever worked in an opera house?

Kyle saw a misalignment in the practicality of subject matters and his curriculum design. To him, few collaborative piano teachers managed to stay active in the opera world. His curriculum reflected the very gap in teaching and practice - what he learned may not have been useful nor relevant to him.

Audition Preparation

Kyle was one of the participants who took my questions in ways that I never imagined. I was impressed by his story. Nearly 10 hours' worth of music and foreign texts, how did he prepare such a high volume with a high standard within *ten* days only? Kyle had three steps that he learned from his training. The first day was his assessment: he took mental notes of what excerpts needed work while playing through his entire program without stopping. Day two through nine were strategized into working details of various rotations of material, one day on *Macbeth* finale, another day on the quintet, for example. Day 10 was another playthrough, aiming to place him in the zone of confidence. What I was most surprised about was that he had only two hours each day on the piano; most of his preparation was done away from the piano singing the foreign text. Kyle shared that it is one thing to know the pitch, and another thing to produce that pitch while simultaneously playing and watching a conductor.

> An opera score is only as difficult as you choose it to be.… *Die Frau* is really really hard to play and sing. The vocal line is very divorced from the piano part.…You are not accompanying yourself. Orchestra is doing something entirely different rhythmically in a different key, vocal lines are not always super melodic .... In my mind, I know what the correct vocal lines are, but it is another thing when I am playing and start singing something very atonal with the correct German and watching the conductor. I actually spent a lot of the 10 days just practicing the vocal lines for *Die Frau.*

In addition to singing and playing, Kyle also prompted. Remember what a prompter does? A prompter gives verbal cues to opera singers about what words come next, discreetly, yet clearly, both in rehearsals and performances (Corcoran, 2011; Zeger, 1997). The timing of the cues is of

the essence. It should not be so early that one forgets, it also should not be too late for singers to react. Kyle describes prompting as a GPS for singers: it provides a safety net to singers, indicating what text comes next *right before* critical junctures. For singers who jump in at the last minute (e.g., an understudy) or doing the role for the first time, having a prompter is particularly lifesaving. Not usually taught in school, prompting was a skill that Kyle learned in his young artist program. Strauss' *Die Frau*, for example, is too complicated for singers to take cues from the orchestra part. When the conductor focuses on the orchestra, the prompter cues the singers in.

"It's like playing a video game"

The school Kyle studied at is not known to "produce" *répétiteur*s. What is the appeal to be an opera pianist, anyways? *Répétiteur*s often do not perform in the final products, that is, performances. They are involved mostly in the rehearsal process only. Their function is transitory, and they mostly work with piano reductions that are not intended for the piano. They are not even on stage for the audience to see, either (a prompter stays in the pit, with an assistant conductor behind the scenes leading the chorus, for example). Performing on stage may not be a top priority for many *répétiteur*s, but it is a priority for Kyle personally; performing is his "ultimate pleasure" and "thrill of music making." For that exact reason, he had trouble seeing himself staying as a *répétiteur* in the long run. Part of me sees the validity of his preference. At his level, I would not want to put aside performing, either.

Playing opera scores, nevertheless, is appealing to him. First and foremost, he loves the operatic repertoire, at least most of it. Secondly, following a conductor is thrilling. The stimulation from playing a difficult score, watching the conductor, having to adapt at any moment, resembles the sensation of playing a video game that tests his agility and reaction. It is

really fun for him. Lastly, the enjoyment of being a part of something big is wonderful. Knowing that he contributed to the production in some way, seeing his name under musical preparation on the playbill made him happy. Even though he did not end up performing in the actual opera performance, he treated each opera piano rehearsal as a performance, a performance for a smaller audience, namely the singers and directors in the room. Conductor's upbeat? That is his cue to enter his performance mode.

Primary Value: Hands-on Experience

The "end product" of Kyle's schooling is full of exciting endeavors of the profession. Looking back to his journey, what are some key takeaways? Through experience, Kyle learned how quickly he could accomplish a certain task, and how he could best achieve it efficiently, similar to what Alisa had mentioned. He summed up three core tenets of vocal accompanying that he learned, the concept of breath, understanding balance, and "tracking" words. Everything else is learned through experience, such as knowing how to "handle" a singer's personality, how to be with them on stage, and how to manage a heavy workload. Only through experience can one find out how many recitals a semester is too much. How to pace for 30 recitals when they all happen within six weeks? For Kyle, a main benefit of getting a degree in collaborative piano is being able to play a high volume of recitals and lessons during his study. Experience, training, and education are almost synonymous to him in this context. The primary value of his collaborative piano education is hands-on experience which he would not have otherwise gained.

Sight-reading, The Most Important Competency

To become the stellar pianist that he is now, what competency did Kyle spend the most time acquiring? Sight reading in a way that serves its context and benefits all parties involved was number one, as it is "a skill that sets most collaborative pianists apart from solo pianists,"

said Kyle. Sight reading means to keep time. It means to know how to look at a massive number of notes and recognize patterns and motifs. Kyle gave two snapshots, where he started, and where he arrived.

The first voice lessons he played in, he had to sight read Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with an "insane orchestral reduction." He was noticeably scared seeing the score. Under the voice teacher's guidance, he focused on providing only the bass and harmony in that voice lesson. The more he did it, the more confident he became in providing the structure of the music at sight. Kyle realized sight reading is not the same as learning how to play a piece and play everything on the page. Good sight reading is a conscious effort in making many quick decisions on what to play and what not to play, depending on the need in the room. Kyle is so comfortable sight reading now. He played through a brand-new commissioned opera in a semi-performance setting with a moment's notice in a room full of people. Kyle has never seen the score in his life, let alone hearing it. "I felt fine doing it." Pretty cool, isn't it?

Vocal Coaching Demystified

Besides skills training, what else were the highlights during his study that he found particularly important? Vocal coaching class, to this date, has been "the most amazing class" to Kyle. It demystified the process for both singers and pianists by removing the power dynamics involved in working with each other. It taught the two how to rehearse, communicate, as well as how to better understand each other. It was not just a coaching class on how a pianist talks to a singer, but how the two can work effectively on an equal level. Kyle was glad that this coaching class existed for him, because to his knowledge not many schools offer it.

> It really informed how I approached everything with singers, which is true collaboration. If I say to a singer "your singing is all a little bit flat. I don't know what the line is," the

> singer won't take me seriously. That is a pianist who doesn't understand anything about voice. Instead, try to say, "as the line goes down, and you are going into your low-mid, you are losing vibrancy of head voice. Including more chest registration will help maintain your line." Then the singer knows that the pianist understands how singing works. The singer starts to respect the pianist and will listen to the pianist. On the other hand, singers learn to communicate with a pianist with fluency and vocabulary. Often, singers say to pianists "I need more here'." A pianist has to calculate what that means. Is it more support? How and where? It would be very helpful for a singer to say this instead: "could you voice more towards the bass? Have a slower key speed? a softer attack?" I immediately am like "oh they know what *they* are talking about." I also know how to respond to that immediately.

Nowadays, Kyle tries as much as he can to get singers to understand the piano because it is so important to good collaborations. If string players are expected to articulate key speed and voicing to pianists, shouldn't that apply to singers, as well? It only seemed reasonable that all musicians have some basic understanding of what each other are doing, asserted Kyle.

Youth? Not an Asset

Kyle named one unusual attribute that frustrated him the most during his studies, his young age. He joined the field of collaborative piano about four years earlier than most of his fellow classmates. He felt that to be young and full of new ideas as a coach and collaborative pianist was undesirable. Youth meant inexperience and a lack of wisdom in the field of coaching. People questioned his opinions. It was difficult for him to be taken seriously, especially when he first set foot in the field at the age of 19, whereas in solo piano, youth is an asset. There is an association between youth and beauty. Youth is to be praised, think child prodigies, young

winners of Chopin and Tchaikovsky competitions who have barely entered adulthood. Making a name at a young age is the norm. Yet in collaborative piano, there is a strange attitude that the older the wiser, and the better inherently as a coach. If one is young, their opinions do not matter in the same way.

> It has always been insanely frustrating to me that if you are a young collab, you apparently don't know anything. It matters less in technical abilities, and more on the wise experience. I was even described as arrogant, which was shocking to me. In my first big professional gig, I was really excited. The director saw this young person (me) saying stuff, having my own ideas, smart and wanted to do things, that to him came off as arrogant. It was quite defeating to me at the time. I became, the next few years, hyper-aware of not coming off arrogant, or too young to be having good ideas.

Feeling too young to be having good ideas was a big knot for Kyle. Two titans of the vocal coaching field gave Kyle the impression that his ideas were not welcomed. Instead, he should listen to theirs, old-school figures. Calling someone too young to work with singers has to do with the idea that a coach should know what is going on more than a singer does. Being both a vocal pianist and coach is similar to a conductor being the relayer or gatekeeper of tradition and formation, said Kyle. There is an expectation to offer advice and guidance given their wealth of knowledge and experience.

Is Kyle indeed too young to be having good ideas? He disagreed wholeheartedly. The first time Kyle felt he was trusted with his ideas was outside of school in a professional setting where he intentionally withheld his age and his status as a student.

> It doesn't matter that I am too young …. I'm only 28; I feel very qualified to have ideas because I have now spent the last couple years taking my teacher's advice to just speak

> like I do have ideas. After that, I was like, this whole thing is stupid …. So much of coaching is trust, that singers trusting what you are telling them is from a place of experience, wise, that I don't know if it would have musically gone as well if they were concerned that I wasn't experienced.

Would anyone care that Kyle is young if he was playing the Franck violin sonata? Probably not as much. Would anyone care that Kyle is young if he was coaching Schubert's *Winterreise*? Probably yes. A coach is expected to have a profound level of understanding, be able to relate to singers, possess mastery from decades of living and understanding it, said Kyle. This construct complicates the power dynamics of young coaches and singers.

Power Dynamic Differences Between Rehearsals and Coachings

To further distinguish power dynamics, Kyle approached coachings and rehearsals differently. He noticed that many singers felt paralyzed to make musical decisions without a coach giving them ideas. He went as far as saying that even pre-college instrumental students would be freely making musical choices, but not necessarily young singers. When a singer came in for a coaching without much musical ideas, his goal was to empower them to find their own. A lack of ideas was not just on diction, notes, elements of style, but also basic aspects of decision making. "There is a weird power dynamic that coaches have created, that singers become reliant on them for everything. That is the disturbing power dynamic of coaching at its worst." If Kyle starts the coaching with the expectation to provide every idea from big to small, he hopes to end the coaching with a more balanced dynamic, inviting singers to make more choices freely on their own.

If a singer both coached and performed with Kyle, then his approach differed. Think what is on stage; if Kyle coached a singer regularly and had the end goal of performing together in the

future, he did not want to get on stage with an unbalanced dynamic, because the performance would be less wonderful. Think performing for your teacher; part of the singer's mind is complying to Kyle, feeling subordinate the entire time, and also slightly worried if they forgot to do something Kyle had asked them to do. This is not what Kyle wanted in his partner's head on stage. When rehearsing with a singer who was also a collaborator, he tried to avoid coming off as patronizing or teacher-like, both in his wording and tone of voice. The last thing he wanted was for them to feel that he was above them, or he knew more than them in the process.

To him, there is a big power dynamic difference between coaching and rehearsals. True collaboration does not happen in coachings as far as he is concerned. There are things that he can say in a coaching that can also be said in a rehearsal, such as corrections of words, notes, and rhythm. In a school environment, however, oftentimes he needed to coach and perform with the same singers; it is just the reality. In that situation, he would start the rehearsal process being more like a coach at the beginning. Leading up to the recital, he would rehearse in a way to invite them to generate more ideas of their own, to feel that they are equal in this collaboration. So, when they stepped on stage, the singer felt like something resembling an equal partnership rather than Kyle telling them how to perform in a recital.

As I was processing the intricacies of coaching that Kyle shared, it appears that I was honored into his space that he tapped honestly inside. I was led into his experiences deeper and wider with each interview. Some conversations struck me as unexpectedly philosophical, some surprisingly spontaneous, and some casual yet introspective. Our time together within a few months made me feel that I really had a sense of what he had navigated through in the past several years.

On Ego, Resentment and Unity

Going forward, Kyle shared an interesting observation; many collaborative pianists did not necessarily want to be playing with others, but they never admitted it. Some had tried solo piano and failed. Instead of playing Liszt Sonatas, they turned to art songs hoping for an "easier" career. Or they wanted to be conductors, but they never made it, so they became "stuck" playing opera rehearsals. Kyle can "hear" their resentment; these pianists wished to be doing something else instead. This seemed to appear in the way they played, the way they acted, and the way they coached. Surprisingly, there are a large number of these pianists, said Kyle.

> This all has to do with ego …. I often find a weird level of passive aggressiveness when they are coaching [the singers] ... "dumbing them down" .... It is bizarre for me specifically, because I went into collab piano the way I hope most people do, and I think everyone should, not out of resentment, but out of enjoyment. I enjoy the repertoire, I enjoy working with people, I enjoy the process. I was lonely as a solo pianist. Because of that, it is very easy to subdue my own ego in the process because when I get in a rehearsal with someone, I am so excited to do that. I enjoy the idea of two people coming together and making something together.

Kyle was annoyed when his collaborators possessed big egos and only wanted to shine alone. These partners were not really interested in collaborating, and that attitude also applied to pianists, too. People paid attention to singers' ego, instrumentalists' ego, but rarely talked about pianists' ego, which to him was a bigger problem, as a good number of collaborative pianists on a deep level may not want to be there, said Kyle. I agree with him that this has not been talked about enough.

Why are we talking about ego, and pianists' ego? Is this study not about the educational experiences of collaborative pianists? One may say that ego exists in all forms of working together. Learning how to recognize and navigate ego is part of the collaborative piano educational process, unwritten in curriculum, but practical every day. How did Kyle's own ego evolve over the years when he worked with people who were ostensibly better than him and not as skilled as he? Kyle put it this way: no matter the strengths of his partners, he prioritized unity, the overall effect of the musical product. He himself is not the focus. In the most ideal situation, he could freely be himself artistically if his partner was equally strong. When called for, he could also subdue his ego and make the less skilled collaborators sound good, even if it meant to suppress his own showmanship. In general, he tried to match the energy with whoever was sharing the stage with him, and he did not want the audience to be aware of capability differences.

> In collaborations, it is not what the pianist is doing or what the singer is doing individually. It is the combination of sound that we are producing that is outside of us. That is what I try to work towards. If that means I need to draw attention *away* from myself, then that's what I do. That definitely takes a loss of ego.

What is Collaboration?

To Kyle, collaboration is working together to achieve a common goal. His goal was to have audiences enjoy the performance by not having to be constantly aware of how lacking one side is, if at all. When paired with a weaker partner, he naturally scaled his own ability in a way that did not highlight the difference between himself and his collaborator. His own virtuosity was never the focus: it required a letting go of his ego by accepting that these particular performances would not be his most impressive performance.

> Your goal cannot be "I'm gonna sabotage this person," or "I'm gonna help out this idiot." Your goal has to be like "we are two equal partners working towards this thing" because … there is a level of respect regardless of what the individual levels are in the group, you have to go on stage in that moment believing that everyone is at an equal level, even if it is not true.

He further suggested that people were, in fact, rather conscious of their own abilities in relation to those around them, especially when they were the lesser-skilled ones in the room. Usually, they were already aware of their own discrepancy in skills and musical maturity, and they desired to be better. The worst thing to do was to talk down to them in rehearsals; that just adds salt to the wound. Talking to them as if they were equal, even if they did not possess the same skills level, is more effective. Graham Johnson, a well-known coach, once said "it's the accompanist's role to serve up a singer on a platter in their most flattering light," as Kyle recalled.

What was more common now for Kyle was having to work with people who were far more famous and important than he was. As an opera coach, it was part of his job to give corrections, literal corrections on words and rhythms, often to well-known singers. Approaching someone who was light years more established, famous, and everything than him was very intimidating at first. He still remembered how nerve-wracking he felt giving notes to a celebrity soprano star. Even to this day, he remembers dreading that, worrying how his comments were received.

Then there was the most ideal, the best kind of collaboration; no one had anything to prove, everyone could "just be there." There was mutual respect. In other words, everyone was aware of each other's abilities, as well as their own. There was no peacocking; nobody took

anybody's comments the wrong way. "Any time an idea is thrown out, it's an idea thrown out with the intention of making the possible best product; no one is receiving the idea as condescending, patronizing." Playing with his friend Lilya was one of his best collaborations. She was showy, charismatic, and vocally excellent. Kyle did not need to hold back or compensate for anything. He was totally himself; he intuitively matched her energy by just acting like a solo pianist on stage. This kind of collaboration was "easiest" and "most ideal." Nevertheless, this kind of collaboration is not easy to establish. Frequently, he found collaborators overcompensating needlessly.

By the time we finished our conversations, I felt that I had completed a run twice as far as one I had initially planned. Kyle had articulated answers and questions in ways that I never thought of, both opened my mind and challenged my assumptions. Even the most abled had their fair share of struggles and uncertainty. Perhaps that is a universal theme in journeys of becoming.

Andrew

Andrew's story is somewhat circuitous, yet nothing short of surprising. A full-time vocal coaching faculty and class instructor in a reputable university, Andrew had earned his doctorate just a year prior. One may call him another success story. This current role is his second academic appointment as a professor. His first full-time professorship started in year three of his doctorate study; he served as a director and coach for an opera program at a small university in the Northeast. He taught art song repertoire, accompanying courses, and performed in student recitals. In his current role as a coaching staff and faculty, he coaches over 30 voice students, teaches a French diction class and an accompanying course to undergraduate solo pianists. He returned to his alma mater to teach, where he had received his DMA. Such a seamless transition

in jobs suggests his strong command in this field. Throughout our times together, Andrew appeared to be gentle, patient, and insightful.

Unlike previous participants, Andrew had attended three different schools for his formal study in collaborative piano with a wide array of teachers, deliberately striking a balance in both instrumental and vocal realms. Pursuing a specific focus was not his goal. He was open and had gone in different directions at different times. After solo piano, he spent two years in the Midwest for his master's in collaborative piano, focusing on vocal repertory, followed by two years of Performance Diploma in the Southwest focusing on instrumental repertory, and finally four years of doctoral work in the Northeast doing both. Wearing a pair of glasses and a collar shirt, Andrew occasionally petted his cats when they cruised by.

"I didn't know this field could be this exciting"

In his undergraduate days, Andrew had a scholarship for accompaniment. "I loved it. I found myself most looking forward to playing with friends." He kept getting inspired and motivated by collaborative music after several required courses in accompanying, and he particularly enjoyed the faster pace in accompaniment than solo piano. In a masterclass in his junior year, he happened to meet his future teacher. Andrew was completely dazzled by his knowledge and expressivity. How could the medium of art song and opera be so exciting and stimulating? thought Andrew. The way this teacher delivered text, the orchestration and the context of opera opened up a whole new world to him. Up until that point, Andrew had simply tried to be a good student playing the right tempo. That masterclass lifted the veil for him to see better: "There is much more than just being a good pianist. I just loved the possibilities of what I was seeing in his work."

Learn Fast, and Even Faster

Then he went for his master's in collaborative piano. Equipped with a decent amount of repertoire, knowledge of diction, and experience from his undergraduate program, he thought he would be ready for this change. He was so wrong: His training up to that point did not prevent him from feeling very rattled by his transition into collaborative piano. The speed of learning happened so fast. He was constantly on others' timeline, tracking musical needs, getting weekly repertoire ready for different partners, trying to gain multiple skills at the same time. There was no all-year to learn one recital as was in his undergraduate. "The learning curve was high. It was rough being thrown into it." All he wanted was to survive. Learning how to do everything fresh with little time was the biggest challenge; the initial adjustment required both a high volume and a high quality, which was the hardest part of his development as a collaborative pianist. Remember how Alisa found a lack of time most frustrating in her study, and Kyle feeling torn in a million directions? Sounds familiar, I thought. Andrew was stressed and anxious. He felt that he was not keeping up.

"Don't lose yourself"

The second biggest challenge, which was also a danger to many newcomers, is the risk of losing your inner voice as a musician amidst a high volume of repertoire learning. If not careful, you could lose touch with your own love of piano playing after being in survival mode for a while. Said Andrew sipping his tea, "you can be a great sight-reader, you can learn music really quickly, and do many different things at the same time, but after a while, you lose yourself." What he meant is a disconnect with the musical material beyond the surface level. The busier Andrew became, the easier he fell into the habit of cramming notes. To avoid that pitfall, Andrew's teacher was intentional about cultivating Andrew's own voice as a musician. Going

beyond playing the right notes at the right time, his teacher reminded him to bring his *own* ideas to the pieces:

> Being a good sight reader and learning music fast, that is just the bare minimum to be a collab pianist. That is just a start. That is not the goal. And that was hard for me… I was too young to get it right away in my Masters. I felt that I was learning a lot, but I just couldn't let go.

Letting go of "note perfect" was hard for Andrew. After two years of what felt like a struggle, Andrew's confidence was low by the time he finished his master's. On one hand, he was able to start settling into his own musicianship more, and eventually start thinking beyond just getting the job done. On the other hand, he felt far from ready to enter the professional world. Burned out and stressed, he wanted a break from vocal music. What scared him the most was vocal coaching.

> Just step in from being a solo pianist, suddenly singers want comments [from you], to coach with you .... I didn't feel like I had the knowledge and the experience yet …. Why singers, who had been training for their craft for years, would seek out opinions from a pianist for what they do? What do *I* have to offer them?" At that time, vocal coaching did not quite make sense to him**.**

"Oh, I can do this"

To escape from the unease he felt about vocal coaching at that time, he chose the instrumental track for his next phase of study, an ideal opportunity to explore the opposite end of the spectrum from vocal music. Andrew hoped to boost his confidence up. During his two years doing a Professional Diploma in the Southwest, a ton of instrumental repertoire was learned, and many hours were spent on stage performing. "It was good for me at that time." The high volume

of musical activities presented the same danger, note cramming, that he had experienced earlier. To his surprise, this time around he felt that he was able to handle a massive amount of music better. It was his first time feeling that "oh, I can do this. I can make music, and people can enjoy having me as a collaborator, and want to hire me." He proved to himself that even in the midst of a total overwhelm, he never was going to completely fail to deliver a recital. He became more efficient, more assertive, and finally realized being note perfect is not the point, all things that he was working towards in his master's but was unable to accomplish then. For a while, he thought the instrumental track was where he was going to stay.

"Locked into the pianist you were when you started"

After specializing in instrumental collaboration, Andrew's confidence was restored. He knew he had experience, that he had an extensive repertoire list and was able to put ensembles together quickly. He felt good about his collaborative skills overall. Some things were still missing, however; pianistically, he was not too happy with his technique at the piano. A lack of time to work on his own piano playing was a challenge for him. He felt that he had been locked into the pianist he was when he first switched to collaborative piano four years ago.

> I really just wanted to make sure my own playing matched with the people I am playing with. I didn't want to be the pianist who can merely play the right notes in the background …. I wanted to refine my playing.

For the next phase of study, he was determined to fix his technical problems by redirecting focus back to himself pianistically.

Settling In

During his doctoral study, "something really changed." Unlike experiences with his previous degree programs, Andrew gained a sense of clarity. Noises quieted in his mind. He felt

that he could afford to just be there *to learn*. What about proving his worth to himself or impressing his teachers? No longer much of a concern of his. For the first time, he sensed that he finally had a space to focus on his own playing in the way that he wanted. “I felt like my teacher really respected me at a high level. …. She already made me feel like I was good enough, so now let’s just work on the things that I need to work on.” He was treated like a professional for the first time as a student. In his lessons, they dived deep into his playing techniques; an entire lesson was spent on two bars of music. That was what Andrew wanted, not to be coached through every violin sonata, but the patience to examine closely as if he had a magnifying glass.

Andrew also loved the balance he struck during his doctorate. One is the equal amount of instrumental and vocal music; the other is a clear boundary delineated for his assistantship and degree requirements. What did that look like? He did not have to “hit a wall” like he did in previous study before finding the limit of workload. Andrew felt that the school prioritized his own educational interests. While performing was important, it came after rigorous doctoral academic preparation. “The point was not trying to play a billion recitals all the time. … The DMA program really keeps the academics high on the list.” The expectations of assistantships and degree requirements were also clearly laid out, lacking ambiguous overlap of the two as he previously experienced.

> For my doctorate, it actually was the only school where I had to pay some out of pocket …. Bizarrely enough, I was totally okay with that. I totally had the right to protect my own education. I was paying some of my own money into it, which for a while, kind of strange to be a collab serving the school and also paying tuition. But it really was actually a good thing for me. It allowed me to have boundaries for myself and *get the education I wanted, rather than be basically a staff pianist*.

I paused there. “Get the education I wanted” versus “being a staff pianist.” Did Andrew just articulate and confirm the competing priorities between his roles as a student and staff without me even asking him the question? Spending money in exchange for a boundary was to protect him with the much-needed space for his own artistic growth, which he was deprived of, it seems like.

Breakthroughs

Andrew continued as his cat came by for some attention. He wanted space to grow, a space dedicated to his *own* education, and his doctorate made room for that. He blossomed as a result. For the longest time, he was convinced that there was something wrong with his way of playing the piano, that he had bad techniques. He always worried about flopping fast passages and being inconsistent onstage.

> We collaborative pianists want to fight the stereotype. We are not failed solo pianists who decided to accompany and be lesser than. We are all advocating for that. ... I will be honest. I still had my own imposter syndrome. I think there are still parts of me worried that I was not a very good pianist.

He has spoken the unspoken for many! Imposter syndrome is a recurring theme for Andrew. To actively change what he was unhappy about in his piano playing, he minored in solo piano. With aspects of collaboration removed, solo piano was distilled to just Andrew and the piano. In solo piano lessons, he was ready to be told that he was a terrible pianist, this was why it sounded bad, and that was a list of things to fix. But the professor did not do that. Instead, he directed Andrew to hear his music making with more intentionality. How do you want this phrase to sound? What is it that you want to achieve? Andrew openly shared his vulnerable feelings of being

experienced and secure in some ways collaboratively, and also insecure in other ways pianistically. The professor reassured Andrew that there were minor technical things to work on, not huge fixes as Andrew had anticipated. What a big moment for Andrew to hear a validation, one from a reputable solo pianist who was further removed from his field, who had "no say" in his degree, and had "no agendas" for him. Having his doubt removed was like clouds leaving the sky: "Oh, I can actually do this. I just need to know what I actually want from it, and not make my only goal to not suck." He started to trust himself even more.

The biggest aha moment took place with his other primary teacher, Nathan, whom Andrew described as "probably in some ways the closest teacher I was trying to find." It has not been easy for Andrew to find a teacher in the collaborative piano world who was patient enough to break things down to a foundational level while allowing him time and space to reconstruct in his own way. Nathan tore apart Andrew's playing, and really fine-tuned it. Working out nuts and bolts was Nathan's way of showing Andrew his own process, how he listened, how he made his musical decisions every step of the way, and how to make things better even if they were not sounding great at that very moment. Enlightened from understanding Nathan's process, Andrew felt he absolutely for the first time knew the steps he needed to take in order to achieve what he wanted. Compared to his clueless start in his master's, what he gained in his doctorate were tools to better himself for the rest of his career. "It is more useful than what I was hoping for." He became independent, to learn, to think, and to express musically.

As the transformation unfolded, he gradually solidified his own artistic voice. Initially, what Andrew was unhappy with was his pianistic abilities; he thought what he disliked in his playing required some kind of rehaul or relearn. The truth? He was not willing to accept where he was pianistically at that time. He felt behind. He felt anxious. As a young pianist with

imposter syndrome, he always wanted to catch up. He constantly tried *not* to screw up. But if his only goal was not to mess up, what else better was going to come out of that? There was no reward. The interconnectedness, musicianship, technique, and knowledge, all made sense to him, suddenly. These were different facets of the same thing rather than massive changes that he thought he needed to make.

> If I just learned to listen to my own playing more and always approach any music with a real sense of curiosity, forming an idea of what I am playing, that would have fixed so many issues rather than me cramming for the sake of learning notes and trying not to screw up in performance. … In retrospect, the reason I kept bouncing around wanting to have some kind of realization that wasn't happening, was because I was always worrying about very specific things. I always thought I understood what the problems were, and I wanted to fix it by addressing those problems with the teacher, but really there were many small differences in many different ways rather than one big problem.

That sense of being overwhelmed is not unfamiliar in the experiences of my participants. Remember how Kyle described his initial transition as chaotic, and his classmates seemed to have forgotten how to play the piano when there was too much to worry about? In addition to the project of re-integration, Andrew realized that he was not being creative in the right way in his playing. "I wasn't always investing in the best way possible. I was always practicing too much, not as effectively as I should have been." His issue was not so much about piano techniques on a micro level, but more on how he conceptualized music on a macro level. Recognizing the change was like a light bulb going on; the new mentality enabled him to break free of his own imaginary limitations. Just as Andrew was about to leave school, he was finally ready to embrace the

opportunities of forming his own ideas and trusting the validity of his own musicality without anyone's approval!

He gained tools to keep on learning more independently. He succeeded in internalizing what he learned at school and "using tools to help" with the rest of his career, as he called it. He attained freedom of thought to trust his own. This much-needed freedom had been difficult to attain in his early times when he prioritized getting good grades, impressing his teachers and meeting demands that he was obliged to fulfill. It took him a long time to get past his belief that he was too young to be any good (sounds familiar from Kyle?). I wonder, is freedom not what education is supposed to achieve? As the great American education philosopher John Dewey said, the most important freedom is the freedom of intelligence, to apply observation and judgment to purposes that are worthwhile (Dewey, 1938). We may have a success story here, I thought.

Teaching Philosophy

Andrew's own circuitous journey as a young coach and pianist informed his teaching philosophy. As a professor now, he approaches teaching holistically; he is concerned with how to better guide students in finding their own voice and accepting their validity sooner in their process. Andrew believes keeping music alive is central.

> You are serving the music (composer) and text (poet) first, and you are serving your partner second. You and your partner are both together serving the music and text. But too often, teachers try to teach those nuts and bolts for the sake of themselves.

Andrew thought that when teachers focus too much on details, it is because the pianist has not learned to create a goal of what the piece should sound like, rather than simply being inexperienced collaboratively**.** Solving many small problems, problems in ensembles, balance,

sight reading skills, etc., should not be the primary goal of teaching new collaborative pianists. These small aspects of collaboration cost Andrew so much time to acquire, that he at one point lost track of why he was making music in the first place. So, how does Andrew guide his students with big picture ideas?

He put his teaching philosophy into action in a core accompanying class for undergraduate solo piano students. Andrew spent half the class time on lectures, and the other half on practicum (coaching repertoire). In lectures, students interpret same poems set by different composers, illuminate on comparative settings, and come to their own ideas of how they want a song to sound. Coachings are then spent on the collaborative skills of getting an ensemble together with a partner present. This way, beginner students are at least able to learn how the details are just the first steps to collaborating, rather than the goal. There is more to it than surviving the voice lessons they are playing for, for instance. As Andrew maintains, guiding with the bigger picture of what the actual goal is in performing a composition helps to address many aspects of collaboration on a foundational level. This approach also allows growth to happen more from within.

Languages: The Biggest Learning Curve

When I asked Andrew what competency was most challenging to acquire when he first transitioned into the field, he said languages. Starting out, it was scary for Andrew to even suggest to singers a place to start the music because that meant Andrew would have to say the foreign text to indicate where they were on the music. He was so freaked out that his diction was horrible. “You are not a singer, you don’t know these languages, and then you are in that vocal world really needing to catch up. That is a very scary thing as a pianist …. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

As soon as Andrew finished saying that, he laughed. He is now so used to reading out foreign texts, demonstrating vocal lines, and playing the piano parts simultaneously as a full-time vocal coach. What a complete contrast from when he first started out! Singing text became his second nature, a way to communicate ideas to singers. It took years before he was able to do so comfortably, same with coaching. Most of his growth, both in languages and coaching, happened on his first coaching job. When he was a student, he did not feel that he was able to be the coach. It took him time and experience to realize what vocal coaching is, why it works the way it does, and why singers would want to work with a pianist and coach.

When it comes to organizing coaching materials, Andrew, similarly to Kyle, prepares two versions of orchestral reductions, and chooses whichever version best serves him at the moment. He compiles his own "library database" of personal versions of certain orchestral reductions with heavy notation, including translations, cues of instruments, added voices, rearrangement of chords, eliminations, etc. This is the version that he will perform and coach from, one that sounds most orchestral to him, rather than a random copy. He enjoys rewriting his own version of orchestral reduction, similarly to Kyle and in contrast with Alisa. "There is no one right way to do it; each version can sound so different."

Coaching in Different Contexts

Discussing coaching, Andrew further described three nuances given different contexts. First is his favorite, the context that he is currently in. Voice students come in for coachings, he plays in their coaching and grades them, but he does not play in their lessons and performances (piano students do). This way, he is able to give singers 100% attention as a coach and does not need to worry about the collaborative dynamics with them. Singers come in primarily for his ideas, not so much for his service as a pianist.

Then there are times when he does not work with students, (e.g., coaching someone more advanced than him professionally, or playing a faculty recital with a colleague). Andrew has worked with singers with much bigger careers. If they want Andrew's input as a coach, he gives it to them. If they want a pianist to perform with, he plays the piano. His role does not change based on the level of his partner, but on the expected function. When it comes to performing a faculty recital with a colleague, however, he finds it difficult sometimes; his role is not so clear-cut. In rehearsals, his colleagues seemed to want to be coached, but the interaction was ambiguous enough that Andrew was hesitant to provide input, if at all. But right before they stepped out onto the stage, they'd ask for Andrew's input explicitly. Why does the timing put Andrew in a difficult position? Having coaching right before performance is not the best for collaboration in terms of team dynamic.

> A lot of people get more insecure actually the older they get, I found… giving faculty recitals is its own thing, because we are all performing for our students. We are always rehearsing after having taught for eight hours, exhausted**.** That's a very specific context to make music in. There can be a lot of insecurity there, but it is not in the same way that your students feel insecure.

Despite that, he still finds this type of collaboration easier, because his partners are more experienced, and they operate on a similar timeline. Andrew is still navigating how to be helpful and encouraging in that context when he is not really a coach or a teacher.

The third context: When doubling as the coach and pianist for his voice students, that combination is hardest. While he provides feedback as the coach to the voice students (and grades them), he also functions as their collaborator in recitals and lessons. Even the way he

coaches is at a different pace. He coaches in a way that is sustainable to both his voice students and him, who will end up being on stage performing together.

Challenges in Teacher-Student Collaborations

A few things happen in this context that makes it challenging to collaborate with students whom he grades. First is the pianistic aspect; there is the danger of losing the freshness of the music after playing and coaching the same repertoire all year, then performing way past his peak preparation. Andrew may sound best by week three, but his voice students need many repetitions before the actual performance at the four-month mark. In an ideal world, Andrew would like to perform on a smaller timeline with a lot of variety in repertoire. With young voice students, this can be hard to achieve. In order to get ready for a performance, they need to be (re)visiting that same repertoire to solidify their memory and cycling through the same program repeatedly and frequently. Because of this, Andrew really had to rethink and adjust his pacing as a piano collaborator because he often played his best early on in the process and his engagement gradually lessened (not by choice). Keeping his chops up where he wanted with everyone all the time was nearly unrealistic. By the time he performed at the end of term, he never quite felt like he played the music as well as months earlier. Needless to say, this arrangement is not his preferred model.

The second challenge is the power dynamics at play; he found it hard to balance both roles as a collaborator and a teacher at the same time, as their priorities may even be conflicting. As a professor, he has an obligation to grade these voice students that he accompanies and performs with. He has an agenda to meet, an assessment rubric to follow, and the goal of preparing students for certain standards. As a collaborator, on the other hand, the goal is to present the best performance possible by being in the moment. “It’s really hard to be a person’s

teacher and their accompanist… I don't think I can just collaborate in a sense." Andrew has power over his students, and his students are aware of that. To really collaborate, he still prefers to play with his colleagues who are at a similar stage, so that they can prepare the music on a similar timeline. "That is a true collaboration and not a teacher-student situation."

Because of the power dynamics, Andrew's worst performances often happened with the students he coached the most. "I just can't… it's really hard to pull myself out of that role [as a coach] to them." It is a mindset issue. He had to consciously turn off his coaching brain and go into the performer mode, yet still he found that he was constantly overcompensating in performances, overreacting to small details.

> You get to know a person's voice, their strengths and weaknesses, and their issues. You get to know them so intimately well as their teacher that you are almost hyper aware in performance with them in a way that is not helpful. When you are the person who is coaching them, working on all the things with them, I have a hard time having that boundary then as a performer.

Serving the Music

As a performer, sensitivity is one of the most desirable skills of a collaborator. Can you be too sensitive, I wonder? Andrew thinks so. For example, he often sped up the music to "scoop along" his voice students in performances when he heard the unexpected, missed breath. His overcorrection actually agitated the singer: sometimes they made it through the phrase with the missed breath anyway. Or, when he heard a pickup note that was set slower than usual, even to a miniscule level, he would take the "new" tempo. But his oversensitivity ended up creating more problems for his student singer in the performance. Any young collaborative pianist would hope to be as perceptive and adaptable as Andrew is. But there is a fine line; is it more helpful to play

twice as fast when the singer runs out of breath, or is it more helpful to stay solid, and trust that they will fall back with him after derailment?

The further Andrew goes in his career, the more he learns to trust his partners. He does so by pulling himself back from oversensitivity.

> The biggest thing for me is to learn to serve the music, not to serve my partner. For a while as a student pianist, your motivation is to do everything that that person wants you to do. That is serving the partner… I do think there is this misconception that just being sensitive is enough.

Remember how Alisa named sensitivity as her number one important quality as a collaborative pianist? When his goal is serving the music, Andrew also noticed a positive change in his performance anxiety. He used to worry about his technique, worry about missing notes and messing up passages, etc. As long as he has an idea behind everything that he plays, he knows nothing can *really* go wrong. "If you always have a message, you can't really lose anything."

The Nature of Collaboration

On my favorite topic, Andrew pushes his glasses up his nose bridge and names one common denominator across all different collaborative contexts; whether accompanying, collaborating, performing, or even coaching, collaboration is to have a voice, a point of view, and bring that to the table. That - *having a voice* - is the essence of collaboration to Andrew. Even basic accompanying takes skill and care to be done well. As simple as matching tempo and staying steady, all pianists failed at some point starting out. Anyone with over a year of piano training can play an Alberti bass accompaniment, but to play in a way that engages an audience and support the partner, that takes real skills. As long as there is another person in the room, it takes skill to make music together.

> Any time a pianist just shows up, being told the tempo and plays the notes, I don't think that is collaborating, or accompanying, that is just playing notes on the piano. I do not view collaborating is more of a worthwhile experience, whereas accompanying is less than. I view collaborating and accompanying as interchangeable terms; that is kind of the goal of what we are doing. I sort of view it if you are not interested, you are not bringing something to the table, and you don't want to be there, then you are just there to play notes… [because] it pays the bills or something.

The terms *collaborative piano* and *accompanying* are used pretty much interchangeably by Andrew. I asked, is there any difference between them, then? Only if there is a difference in its treatment, e.g. pay, interaction or acknowledgement, he says. Andrew does not really care to be called an accompanist, contrary to what the literature suggests. As long as Andrew is treated as equal, his partner(s) there to collaborate, and he is compensated properly, this label does not keep Andrew awake at night. On the flip side, if someone calls Andrew a collaborative pianist, but cares little about what he has to say and barely shows interest in collaborating, then Andrew does not care for this fancy term. Labeling does not matter, the interaction does.

In 10 years' time, Andrew went from being a novice himself to a teacher now training the next generation, and everything in between. His journey is about an artist who almost got lost, who constantly tried to catch up, who came back stronger than ever after claiming the educative spaces that were needed for his growth.

Ellen

Last but not least, Ellen is our final participant. Unlike previous participants who have already finished their study, Ellen was still in the process of finishing her DMA five years after starting. Ellen satisfies the criteria for this study despite the fact that she was still in school

because she held a master's degree in collaborative piano at the time of interview. ABD, All But Dissertation, she calls it. Prior to that, she had spent two years in a master's program and one year of Professional Study in collaborative piano studying with the same teacher. Before she switched to the field of collaborative piano, she also earned a master's in solo piano from the same school. It was Ellen's 10th year in her school. She was comfortable there, maintaining a good network of working relationships.

Sitting next to her green plants with beautiful long black hair, Ellen shared that she had grown up in China before coming to the U.S. for graduate study. As a non-native English speaker, her student experience was inevitably different from other participants who had spent most if not all of their lives in the U.S. Seeing an overwhelming number of solo pianists in her first years, Ellen had a hard time making sense of where her career would lead. Debating between going home or staying in the U.S. for another degree, she went for the latter; her enjoyment of chamber music catalyzed her change to the collaborative piano program. She loved playing music with her friends. She was more motivated when she had responsibility for others. She also thrived under the pressure of needing to learn her parts and making the ensembles work. Solo piano, on the other hand, did not provide her with that same motivation and responsibility. Once she switched to collaborative piano, she knew she wanted to stay with her teacher and keep growing her connections in her school.

Declaration of Focus at the Start

Ellen's program mandated that collaborative piano students declare their focus at the beginning of their study. That means Ellen's course requirement was intentionally focused rather than broad as was Kyle's. As an instrumental focused pianist, she needed to take diction classes only during her master's. Her DMA curriculum required no vocal related courses at all, but a few

doctoral classes in research and writing. In fact, her curriculum requirement was rather barebones, departmental requirements were so minimal that she could freely choose elective classes that interested her. Throughout her eight years in the collaborative piano department thus far, the overall difference between the degree programs had not been great. The longer she stayed in the department, the more repertoire she learned, and the more people she met. In terms of performance activities, all collaborative majors participated in their respective departmental seminars with their studio teachers weekly; some called it studio class. It is a three-hour masterclass with each performing pair receiving one hour of class time. Students critique, comment, and discuss ideas. Each teacher runs their studio class independently, and there is no combined seminar of all collaborative majors. In short, the vocal and instrumental pianists have little overlap in their required performance training.

Practicum

Besides studio classes, practicum is another curricula requirement for all degree levels. This hands-on experiential component exists for all collaborative piano programs that I know of, designed to function as an equivalent of a "lab" section. For Ellen, practicum was a mandatory 70-hour minimum annually playing with instrumentalists. These hours were unpaid, except at the DMA level. Only lessons, masterclasses and rehearsals count towards these mandatory hours, whereas recitals and recordings do not. For students in master's and professional studies, each lesson they play for comes with an hour of rehearsal beforehand. Together, that is counted as two required hours towards mandatory practicum hours. For DMAs, each lesson they play for couples with only half an hour of rehearsal beforehand plus the rehearsal does not count towards the overall required hours. Why a shorter rehearsal time? DMA students are expected to be efficient and knowledgeable with the repertoire. Beyond the fulfillment of the 70 hours, students

are paid hourly by the school. They are therefore incentivized to play more to receive compensation if able.

The importance of how the practicum, or the lab component, operates in each program is not to be underestimated. If Ellen's goal was to gain pertinent collaborative skills to better prepare herself for jobs, this hands-on space allows her to build repertoire, and translate what she learns alone in classes into playing with others in real time. Also, through this lab component, Ellen meets a large number of students outside of her program, developing an essential network for future collaborative opportunities. Lastly, monetary compensation is usually involved for practicum, which has its pros and cons to be discussed later. Remember Alisa's practicum hours had to be fulfilled with mostly vocalists, and Kyle's practicum hour was 60 hours per year that could be fulfilled by working with any major. Andrew's was to be fulfilled by assignment from his teachers. Practicum design works differently for each school, depending on their needs.

A Free-for-all System

The accompaniment system at Ellen's program was designed as a free market, so is Alisa's and Kyle's. That means any student and teacher can reach out to any collaborative pianist or staff within the school, mimicking how the "real world" works. This free-for-all design is intentionally open, but it could also be rather disorganized. Like Alisa, Ellen had no "matching" of instrumental partners set up for her. Initially, Ellen received help from her teacher at the beginning of semesters to secure instrumental partners, to help her "break into the scene." Her teacher made thoughtful assignment pairing based on her repertoire needs and studio requests from others. For example, if Ellen had two Brahms violin sonatas missing on her repertoire list, her teacher will try to match those two violin requests to fill Ellen's educational needs. After the initial assignment pairing, Ellen was free to build on these relationships while cultivating new

ones on her own. After some time, studio teachers and returning students may also reach out to Ellen directly for their accompaniment needs. Ellen had a choice not to take on any requests that she is not interested in.

The problem here was the incidental learning, not only for Ellen, but also for Alisa, who reported the challenge of not having partners. What I mean by incidental is that much learning is left to chance, whether Ellen has partners to play with at all, what level of partners, and what repertoire there is to work with. These are factors that matter to her learning but are mostly outside of her control. A lack of partners at the start of Ellen's studies was a big challenge; on top of being an international student learning to assimilate into a new environment, it was difficult for her to satisfy the required 70 hours. If Ellen had to gain her collaborative skills by playing with partners, but the program does not secure partners for her, doesn't that make her learning somewhat incidental, I wonder?

Permission to Coach?

Although Ellen had a good handle on standard viola and flute repertoire, her strong suit is violin repertoire. She spent most of her time playing for violinists, the largest population in her school. Even pre-college violin students play repertoire at the college level. After a while, she knew the repertoire so well that she was comfortable coaching students. At first, she coached only pre-college students, then later undergraduates and young graduate students. "You see potential in them. They want to discuss the music. When they make positive changes from the coaching, I feel very nice, too."

In a way, Ellen functions as an assistant to a teacher. By the time she became a doctoral student, she had a good sample size of musical interpretations as a result of playing in many different violin studios. After hours of violin lessons, she knew the standard approaches for

certain passages, traditions of performance practice, pacing for different cadenzas, etc. In rehearsals, she effectively prepared a student for a solid grasp of the basics (e.g., rhythm, notes, and general characters), so that in lessons, studio teachers are able to focus on higher-level matters. A rehearsal with Ellen effectively served two purposes for instrumental students, familiarizing the piano parts and receiving feedback in preparation for their lessons. Who wouldn't want to be better prepared for their weekly lessons?

Not every studio teacher was on the same page on coaching, however. Some preferred Ellen to keep to her piano playing in rehearsals, but some encouraged her to provide corrections for their students in lessons. Starting out as a coach, Ellen did not feel confident to offer opinions of her own at first. All she wanted was to try to fit in, to follow the students. As she matured, she gradually learned to speak her mind as she built trust with studio teachers. Ellen called it a natural process; she did not proactively think to offer coaching. It happened organically with those who she deemed receptive to her advice.

> When you feel like they are easy to work with, do not have an attitude, or they are someone you know very well for a long time, then you advise them. You don't want to talk to someone who does not want your opinion. If I feel like someone is really seeking feedback from me, I will share my opinion with them.

She no longer is just the pianist, but a musical mentor in students' growth journey. She enjoys that.

While vocal coaches are common, instrumental coaches are not the norm, at least in higher education. Pianists, accompanists, or collaborative pianists are the most common job titles serving essentially the same functions, but not "coach." Despite the absence of the more proper title "instrumental coach," highly experienced instrumental collaborative pianists do think of

themselves as coaches, said Ellen. They guide students with styles and interpretations, offer them musical ideas, and treat the rehearsal process as an educational experience for others. Their function is way beyond simply putting together an ensemble quickly. When I asked if Ellen saw herself landing a position as a coach for instrumentalists in a college after some years, she struggled to name a position. I can imagine, how can she name a goal if few appropriate job titles exist?

Karaoke Machine

Over-repetition is one challenge that many collaborative pianists face; with it comes dangerous effects. Ellen's level of playing went down when it happened, and she became gradually dissatisfied musically. For instance, Ellen played the Tchaikovsky violin concerto every week. No matter how much she loved the piece, she grew tired aesthetically from overplaying it. "Sometimes you feel like you are just a karaoke machine. You are just an accompaniment track." Nearly in awe of the way she put it, I was not too surprised by the way she felt. Desensitized from a lack of stimulation, she played the same notes over and over with different students. She felt stuck. Where is growth for her? What else does she gain from playing this piece? Not much. Moreover, when over-playing with students at a suboptimal level, she formed bad habits from over accommodating. It frustrated her.

> There is a weird timing in this passage… I know it is difficult for them [the young students] technically. Am I getting into bad habits by accommodating them each time?

How is the music really supposed to sound like? I'd better listen to recordings to find out. Though she had not considered over-repetition a bad collaborative experience, she now made a conscious effort to process her negative feelings towards it. Unlike her first couple of years, most repertoire was fresh; worries like this did not exist. She now, as a more matured collaborator,

struggled with a form of disengagement from over-playing. Let's not forget, Andrew struggled with over-repetition with his voice students, also. For Ellen, sometimes it was out of convenience that she played the same repertoire again and again; she knew it, no practice necessary, she simply shows up and plays it. How much time did she spend on playing? I asked. During the busy period between February to May, Ellen started her day around 10 o'clock in the morning and ended around midnight, typically. Ten to twelve hours a day is pretty dense, but not atypical.

Could she, then, refuse to play the Tchaikovsky concerto when asked again? Oftentimes she felt the pressure to say yes in order to maintain the relationships she had built with the studio teachers; they could be her core network. If she already knew the students and teachers, it was hard for her to turn down their requests. It is one thing to reject a piece that would take her hours to learn, but it was another to reject a request requiring no preparation time (as is the Tchaikovsky concerto). Playing this Tchaikovsky concerto once again, in this context, is to purely serve others. Educationally, she saw her priority as nurturing her own curiosity and growth as a musician, rather than making near minimum wage by playing the same repertoire. On the other hand, her commitment to maintaining her relationships and taking care of others' needs would advance her own career in the long run, even if her growth may be temporarily stifled in the short term. Wanting to be as supportive as she could to other colleagues, she ended up playing the repertoire she knew again and again. She struggled to make sense of these competing priorities at times between her education and service.

Re-engagement

Were there ways to get around her jaded feeling towards certain pieces that she frequents? I asked. She offered a potential solution, incorporating coaching into rehearsals to promote long-term engagement. Remember what Andrew said about instrumental pianists being

primarily paid to play the piano, for coaching is not an expectation such as that of vocal pianists? Ellen believed coaching should be an integral part for an instrumental pianist. Ellen said,

> You really need to coach them [the instrumental students] if you still want to be a part of the conversation of music, this rehearsal that is, rather than just trying to fit in with your playing. You really need to get yourself engaged again.

That made a lot of sense! To break away from being a "karaoke machine," listening actively to others, sharing ideas, and being more than "just playing the notes" were all important elements to sustain her engagement in collaboration. The reality, though, is that not every instrumentalist welcomes coaching, and there is the lack of expectations for collaborative pianists to coach. Given that resistance, how do seasoned collaborative pianists deal with such prolonged disengagement? "Some instrumental pianists do not mind the repetition. They think of it as helping students, so they find satisfaction in another way." Perhaps as an employee to an institution, that is the cost of the service to others in this profession. But these students are in school to become performing artists instead of workers, are they not?

Money Changes Everything

Ellen agreed completely that balancing the roles of being a student and employee is challenging, as if little has changed since the early 2000s (Lee, 2009). As a doctoral student, she felt that people respected her more now, and the power dynamic was more balanced. When she first started out, however, this was not the case. As a student, receiving compensation to serve others changed everything from dynamics of collaboration to their relationships. "How do you position yourself when you interact with other students?" She was puzzled. Moreover, how did she fairly relate to her collaborative piano colleagues on the topic of money? If she charged a violinist nothing for rehearsals, but her colleague does, would she be "stealing" their work? On

the contrary, if she is learning something new for the first time and needs rehearsals for her own sake, does that not make it right to offer rehearsals for free? This was not a dilemma solely for Ellen, but for Alisa and Kyle as well, those who were in the free market accompaniment system. I cannot help but wonder, at what point is it appropriate for a new collaborative piano student to start charging, and how much? Is there ever "too early" to receive compensation? Should collaborative piano students even receive compensation at all? These are not easy questions to answer.

Professorship Not Any Time Soon

Ellen admitted that she had not had a clear picture of what she wanted to achieve with her career. Being in collaborative piano was another path to equip herself; it is practical. She liked to believe that the network she built through her program would lead to more performance opportunities and contribute to her success years down the road. One day, Ellen would love to be a professor of collaborative piano at the college level. From her observations, however disappointing, landing those teaching positions any time soon post-grad is highly unlikely. "You need to keep playing for another decade(s) to get one [teaching job]. I don't see people under their 40s, the earliest, to get teaching positions. Many freelance for quite a while." Taking a sip of her green tea, freelancing was Ellen's plan for the immediate future.

Collaboration and the Best Collaboration

To Ellen, as long as two people are playing together, that is collaboration. The level of engagement determines the enjoyment of collaboration (similar to Alisa). A high level of engagement has either or both of these elements, playing with someone she likes, or playing repertoire that she likes. When achieved, she is highly engaged and satisfied. Contrarily, she is least likely to be engaged if her partner is not making good music, or the piano part is purely

accompanimental. She further indicated that whenever her partner asked her to simply follow, then she is just accompanying. Yet, accompanying is still a collaboration, though arguably the least engaged one. She considered compositions written for piano by nature are more "collaborative," and concertos are more "accompanimental." In short, as long as there are at least two people in the room making music, no matter what music they play, that is a collaboration to Ellen.

Agency

Ellen considered sensitivity the number one quality of a collaborative pianist, similar to Alisa. Listening to her partner attentively had become her second nature, so much so that she instinctively wanted to fit in no matter what. During her early years, following her partner to achieve a seamless ensemble had been her aim. Too much fitting in is not always good, however, just as Andrew had also realized. At year four, a sweet balance was gained as she matured; when called for, she led instead of followed. She took more leadership in certain passages, was more confident as a whole, and was in the driver's seat rather than simply following. This realization awakened a renewed sense of agency, encouraging her to take more initiatives and be more active in the way she collaborated, essentially striking a new balance in teamwork. Ellen grew more confident by validating her inner voice and trusting herself. Whether solo or collaborative, Ellen maintained that the core of good piano playing is to have pianistic capabilities and an authentic understanding of music.

On Program Improvement

Ellen found it tricky to have money involved as she honed her craft as a collaborator. In her first two years, she found it difficult to bring up the conversation of money with her collaborators. Oftentimes she was the one who needed the rehearsal time, so how could she feel

comfortable charging? The act of charging is delicate. When compensation is involved, her partner expects to receive a standard of service. The grace of being a student for her, as a result, was discounted. She may lose the performance opportunity if other pianists offer the service for free. What if she needed the education for herself rather than providing a service for others? Given all the conundrums that money brings into the equation, she would redesign the obligatory practicum differently by taking away money involvement entirely from instrumental students. That means either the school absorbs all the expenses incurred for instrumental students' accompaniment needs (and pays collaborative piano students), or the school pays collaborative piano students nothing, assuming all accompanying work is pro bono and contributes to their own education.

To further improve the program, Ellen named three things. One is to reduce the stress for newcomers by lowering the accompaniment hour workload when they were brand new to the school. Second, the accompaniment system can be more organized, and be intentional in its planning to establish consistent partnerships rather than leaving it to incidental free market projects. Lastly, adding a class on concerto accompaniment would be very helpful for practicality. I was surprised to learn that no class on orchestral reduction and show pieces was required in Ellen's program, for these materials differed drastically from duo sonatas covered in her seminar. Not only can these materials be tricky to accompany, but they also made up most of the repertoire played in studio accompaniment, at least from Ellen's experience.

As I finished my time with Ellen, I realized that her experience in collaborative piano was not as complete as other participants, for in comparison to the others, she had not yet completed her doctorate. Nonetheless, her experience is a valid one and not to be overlooked. Her image of "karaoke machine" stuck with me. Her story is of a person who constantly tries to balance her

own educational needs with serving others, a person who fights for artistic agency and re-engagement. One may argue that “real” growth, the independence of mind, happens during the transition into professionalism as a post-graduate. I wonder, what would growth after school look like for Ellen as a professional?

Chapter V: Reconceptualizing Key Aspects

This chapter presents salient themes emerging from participant experiences. These themes are compared and contrasted with relevant literature by ways of realizing agreements or discrepancies between existing scholarship and my findings. The goal is to illuminate upon the phenomenon of becoming a collaborative pianist in graduate programs with a deeper understanding.

While phenomenological study examines experiences in depth, it has general limitations of a small sample size. The results found in this study may not be generalizable to a larger population based on the experiences of four participants. As a research instrument, I also have my own limitations; not everything can be realized by me. My own relevant experience is limited to the master's program only, for instance, whereas all participants have earned more degrees and have spent more time formally studying collaborative piano than I had.

You will find three main ideas broadly connecting each theme being discussed below: unclear definition of collaboration, the integration of professionalization, and a lack of student agency.

Theme 1: What is Collaboration, Really?

As the field of collaborative piano intends to formalize training to help pianists nowadays to become what used to be called professional accompanists, the distinction remains unclear, as *collaborative pianist* and *accompanist* still remain somewhat interchangeable, as reported by participants. As mentioned in Chapter II, even definitions of "accompanist" have not been agreed upon. The *Grove* dictionary (1954) applies the term accompaniment to compositions after the mid-18th century chamber music, including genres of art songs, instrumental show pieces, sonatas, just to name a few. Yet, the *Oxford Music Companion* (2011) applies the term

"accompanist" broadly, even to instrumental sonatas, which are as pianistic as any compositions can be besides piano concertos.

Rather surprisingly, no participants found big issues with the labeling *accompanist*, despite what the literature suggests about its negative connotation in recent decades (Barr, 2010; Corcoran, 2012; Fincher, 2020; Garrett, 2019; Wenger, 2008). Their sentiments towards "accompanist" is not as what literature has suggested. For instance, Andrew did not care about being called an accompanist as long as he was treated well. Alisa had never corrected anyone who called her an accompanist, either, as she did not mind the labeling:

> It doesn't matter what they call me. I like to keep peace with others. I don't get upset…They either call me accompanist, or pianist, but rarely collab pianist… if I play for a church, I am a church accompanist, I am not a church collaborative pianist. Same thing for a choir, a large ensemble type of thing. You are looking at a conductor, you are just trying to follow like everyone else.

While treatment of accompanists has changed (and improved), the nature of the role has not changed (Katz, 2009). Ellen, similarly, did not get offended by the term, although she recognized many of her colleagues may be strongly against it. She did not correct people, either. As a student, she was not in a position to correct others, though she may start doing that soon. Generally speaking, Ellen identified herself as a pianist, not just a collaborative pianist. She wanted to avoid being put into a narrow category:

> Say in the music score, you don't really say that part is violin part, that part is collaborative piano part. It is just the piano part… I do not get mad about people calling me accompanist. That is a general term that has been used for so many years.

Indeed, the term *accompanist* has been used for decades, if not centuries. In the UK, *accompanist* is the default word, and the only word that they use. One of the most acclaimed English song pianists of all times, Gerald Moore, named his book *The Unashamed Pianist* (Moore, 1984). Kyle goes back and forth about how much he cares about the labeling. He does not have a problem with the word in the literal sense on the linguistic level. If someone says that "he is accompanying me in my recital," Kyle did not get upset. Some people are old school by using that word, and that was fine to Kyle. What he did get bothered by is how that word is used occasionally. Some misinterpret an accompanist as a bad pianist, a lesser than. It truly bothered him when those predominant associations translated into lower pay and lower recognition.

> People I know who have a lot of problems with the word, the problems can stem from two things: first is the whole resentment thing. People have ego - I am not an accompanist, I am a pianist. Calm down, it is not that serious. The real problem is the corresponding idea that some people have: collab pianists are lesser. When that then translates to lower pay, less billing, smaller print, or no billing at all, I have a huge problem. I do think that those things are related… No one is going to call Emanuel Ax or Yuja Wang the accompanist when they play with a cellist. I am sure they got paid the same amount and got the billing.

Overall, participants took no serious offense to the term *accompanist*. Andrew, for example, used *accompanist* and *collaborative pianist* nearly interchangeably in our interviews. While participants cared less about the labeling, they cared more about the nature of interaction and their overall treatment. This emergent theme also shed new light to my own stated assumption: I assumed that collaborative pianists nowadays strongly prefer *collaborative pianist* over

accompanist. While the sentiment may remain true, as reported by participants, the degree of preference did not appear to be nearly as strong as I had anticipated.

One common interest was shared amongst all participants before they pivoted into collaborative piano, their love of playing music with friends. Turns out, being a collaborative pianist went way beyond playing with friends at their musical level. Not only did they accompany and coach, but they also often played with people more or less mature than they are musically. Within the addition of new functions, how is collaboration perceived and defined? Parts of this study aim to find out what collaboration looks like in collaborative piano in different contexts. As the data shows, each participant defined collaboration in their own terms based on their unique interpretation. A lack of consensus on collaboration suggests further investigation, particularly from a pedagogical standpoint. While Alisa and Ellen broadly defined playing together as collaboration, Andrew and Kyle further distinguished collaboration to various engagement levels with nuances specific to each context. I wonder, what do curricula and the general spirit of collaborative piano convey in terms of the nature of collaboration? What is collaboration, really?

As collaborative pianists wear many hats (rehearsal pianist, performer, coach, recording artist, etc.), I argue that nuances of collaboration need addressing beyond "playing together equates collaboration." Similar to what literature suggests (Garrett, 2016; Hemlsey, 1998), Kyle and Andrew do not consider coaching as collaboration for its difference in power dynamic. If a core function of collaborative pianists, that is, coaching, is not considered collaboration by participants, then we have a problem. There is an urgency to have a better description and definition. If collaboration is at the heart of what collaborative pianists do, how do we best educate the next generations of collaborative pianists if the curricula, the ways in which the

classes are taught, and the overall spirit do not effectively convey what collaboration looks like in various contexts?

What is collaboration in collaborative piano? This is a messy topic. My participants had their own definitions, and my field has not reached consensus. To illuminate different degrees of collaboration, I looked at how other disciplines define collaboration. Literature in organizational studies, management, and community building attempt to examine collaboration, but there is no unified definition. In *Creative Collaboration*, Steiner (2006) describes the extent of a collaboration being a transformative process depends on several key elements: a shared vision and purpose, joint passionate interest, complementarity in skills and knowledge, endurance and perseverance, timing, and productivity of each partner. Such a transformative process is exemplified in a piano quartet when every part is relatively even. In the case of accompaniment in a duo setting, however, the purpose may not be the same for both parties; joint passionate interests may not be attainable, even though skills and knowledge may be complementary. Based on Steiner's definition, accompaniment is unlikely to be a transformative collaboration for both parties.

Since the literature has different agreements on a definition of collaboration, I am highlighting a few salient ones that may be applicable to our context. Himmelman's (1996) study in community building describes these "3Cs" with increasing levels of involvement.

1. Coordination is defined as exchanging information and altering activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.

Example: two agencies share information about program activities and then decide to change their program content and schedules in order to better serve their common client or customer service areas.

2. Cooperation is defined as exchanging information, altering activities and *sharing resources* for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.

Example: Two agencies share information about program activities, decide to change their program content and schedules in order to better serve their common client or customer service areas, and share physical space for programs and vans for transportation needs.

3. Collaboration is defined as exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources and *enhancing each other's capacity* for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.

Example: Two agencies share information about program activities, decide to change their program content and schedules in order to better serve their common client or customer service areas, as well as sharing physical space for programs and vans for transportation needs. In addition, they also offer a series of staff training workshops to each other in areas in which each organization has special expertise related to their common purposes.

As Himmelman explains, collaboration is the mutual enhancement of capacity for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose that cannot otherwise be achieved independently. This deeper level of engagement is usually accomplished through shared resources, aligned activities, as well as a shared structure and accountability (Gutner, 2022; Himmelman, 1996). At a minimum, collaboration implies the act of working together with shared understandings of problems and a set of shared goals. For the same reason, cooperation may occur without collaboration (Gutner, 2022).

Applying Himmelman's framework, what does a typical collaborative piano setting look like? Scheduling rehearsals, choosing repertoire, and setting a performance calendar can be part of coordination. Sharing resources for cooperation could be attending each other's lessons for coachings with instructors and playing in each other's recitals. Collaboration, enhancing the capacity of one another, may look like touring France together as Alisa and her collaborator did, creating opportunities beyond what their school had initially provided for them. They tapped into their own resources to enhance each other's artistic capacities, to further enrich each other's educational experiences in a meaningful way. This community building framework, while applicable to the context of music making to some extent, also has its limitations. It is not always feasible to enhance the capacity of one another in the collaborative piano setting. As Gutner said, cooperation could also happen without collaboration, as it is not always obvious with the distinctions between cooperation and collaboration.

Thus, let us examine a second definition of collaboration. Salvato et al. (2017) look into the Latin roots of these three words in the context of interorganizational management.

> Coordination comes from the Latin *cum ordinare*, (i.e., putting in order, organizing, together with others). Cooperation originates in the Latin *cum operare*, that is, operating together with others. For collaboration, it comes from *cum laborare*, that is, working together with others, which we could identify with a *broader notion* of joint action than the one assigned to coordination …. It generally refers to the act of two or more persons working together toward an agreed-upon goal. However, it remains *unclear* whether collaboration and cooperation carry distinctive meanings (qtd. in Castañer & Oliveira, 2020, p. 967).

Collaboration is the act of two or more persons working towards the same goal, as Salvato defines it. With unclear distinctions from cooperation (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020; Gutner, 2022), collaboration is a broad term that does not indicate an increased level of engagement, different from Himmelman (2006). Here is how Salvato defines the "3Cs":

> Collaboration is the act of working together by two or more persons to accomplish something; coordination is joint work that is performed orderly, efficiently, and effectively; and lastly, cooperation is joint work performed by persons who share a common goal, where the alignment of interest is central (qtd. in Castañer & Oliveira, 2020, p. 967).

Worth noting, cooperation, in this definition, requires an even higher engagement level than collaboration, for it has "joint work," "common goal," and "alignment of interest," whereas collaboration is merely "the act of working together by two or more persons to accomplish something." It is interesting that collaboration in this sense matches with the broad definition that Alice and Ellen came up with; as long as they are working with others, they are collaborating. I wonder if this definition was what Samuel Sanders was thinking about when he renamed the field of collaborative piano a couple decades ago?

Lastly, there is the third definition of collaboration for us to reference. Castaner and Oliveira (2020) add that collaboration features an attitude that can prompt behaviors and outcomes that are different from coordination and cooperation. A collaboration attitude has a willingness to voluntarily help another partner in the accomplishment of a common goal or the partner's private goals. In this sense, it aligns more with Himmelman's definition, such that collaboration is the highest level of working together.

To sum, the definition of collaboration in the context of community building and organizational management seems to be in agreement on the broadness of "collaboration," but not so much on the distinction of collaboration and cooperation. Collaboration remains unclearly defined in organizational management, community building, and in collaborative piano. It is not a surprise why collaborative piano students feel confused about their different roles. What makes a pianist collaborative, but not merely cooperative?

Theme 2: Rethinking Pedagogy

Since collaboration means different things to different people, many newcomers entering the field felt "torn into a million directions." Some were surprised to find that accompanying and coaching were expected of them. In addition to learning many collaborative skills, concepts and repertoire at the onset of their transition, newcomers were also tasked to accompany other students as part of their training. There was a lot to learn in very little time. The field has been attempting to figure out how to teach collaborative piano effectively.

Overwhelmed at the Start

Typically, graduate programs in collaborative piano include classes on lyric diction, vocal literatures, instrumental/vocal accompanying, sonatas, songs, multiple semesters of practicum on accompanying, and weekly private lessons (Fincher, 2020; Lee, 2009). Some programs mandate specialization in either instrumental or vocal track, but some programs prepare students for both (Corcoran, 2011; Garrett, 2019; Wenger, 2008). This is consistent with what participants describe in their study.

Regardless of programs and schools, all participants reported that their formal entry to the field of collaborative piano presented the greatest learning curve compared to their subsequent degree studies. The start of their master's in collaborative piano was significantly harder than

their graduate diploma or doctorate. Students were overwhelmed by a high volume of brand-new repertoire as well as collaborative skills and concepts. As a result, they committed to learning everything the best they could at a "presto" speed, often stretching themselves too thin. Alisa and Ellen struggled with the very basics of ensemble togetherness at first, Kyle felt like a "complete idiot" with instrumental repertory, and Andrew got so overwhelmed that he almost got lost musically. "Chaotic," "throw so many things at you," "loss of self" are a few recurring descriptives.

While the enjoyment of playing with friends is an obvious motivation across all participants, their psychological change during the transition from solo piano into collaborative piano was not as easily perceivable. Spending hours working with others daily changed participants' mindset: they learned to be on others' timelines, prioritized others in their listening, constantly articulating their ideas, staying organized from musical details to overarching project planning. Inexperienced in this field, each of them "hit a wall" before they knew how much workload they could handle.

Musically Satisfied? Not so Much

The literature has little insight on the inner thoughts of collaborative piano students as they moved through their program of studies. How did participants navigate under such chaos and overwhelm? Most reported a low level of musical satisfaction at different points of their study. Quantity over quality, underpreparedness, and suboptimal partners at times were just a few factors. Alisa found herself always underprepared for lessons during her doctorate, juggling competing priorities between her academic coursework and performance activities. Ellen even laughed when she heard my question: "ratio-wise [for satisfaction] is not very high, hahaha ... You need to play with so many people, even from a very young age." Playing at the pre-college

level occupied substantial time for Ellen and Alisa, during which they worked with students who were far less mature than them musically. Because of that, their sentiment was not a total surprise. On the other hand, while Kyle had the comparative luxury of collaborating mostly with his peers at the college level, he also struggled to achieve personal musical satisfaction in his master's given the sheer workload.

The most frustrating factor was a lack of time. In one semester, Kyle played over 30 recitals of different programs as part of his studio accompanying responsibility. He showed up and rehearsed, but he did not *really* have time to learn 30 recital programs. By the end, he was basically sight-reading. He did not *really* know the music.

> It was quite rare that I really felt musically satisfied because I was learning music so quickly and so much of it. In performance, it often felt I wasn't able to really just relax and enjoy the experience. I was kind of trying to survive.

That one time he zoned out on stage playing an easy song *Nacht und Traume* was the only time in two years where he felt satisfied on stage. Feelings of being overwhelmed, particularly at the start of their training, was consistent for all participants.

As an outlier, while overwhelmed, Andrew was satisfied with his collaborations for the most part, even if these were not his best performances. He liked the people he was playing with as well as the repertoire. The times he did not feel as satisfied were with his own self confidence issues, when he felt that he did not play well. He described himself as having the opposite of performance anxiety. He had preparation anxiety; he stressed his day-to-day practices and ways he prepared performances. Once he hit the stage, all anxiety disappeared; he was excited and happy. His mentality is rather unique, I find:

> I always felt that on stage, no one could hurt me in a way …. The beauty of performing is that no matter what happened on stage it was truly my place. A teacher wasn't gonna stand up and start yelling at me for something they didn't like in the middle of my performance. Sure, you are still there getting graded, people are still gonna have opinions of how your recital went. At the end of the day, it is the performance that makes everything worth it. Think back how difficult what we do is, the amount of frustration, low self-confidence at times, confusions, pressure I felt as a student, the performing was the part that made it worth it. That is the part that keeps me coming back for more.

Remember what Andrew said earlier "as long as there are ideas behind what you are doing, you will never really make mistakes"? It makes so much sense here; this kind of ease and freedom is a result of his thoughtful and intentional preparation. The beauty of performing lies in its ephemeral nature, for it never really exists except for that one moment.

Let us not, nevertheless, forget the danger of a prolonged period of musical dissatisfaction: what happens to students when they remain unhappy with their own playing for a while? "They may lose themselves," as Andrew said. "If we stay there for long, if we just want to survive, nobody will call us anymore." How honest is that? Indeed, nobody prefers to stay in surviving mode, much less being happy there. I remembered my own piano playing suffered with low standards when I spread myself too thin, and at worst, the low standards perpetuated. To break out of that cycle, however, is not an easy task. How can we help students better protect their artistic wellbeing?

The Zone of Proximal Development

Educational theory, the Zone of Proximal Development by Vygotsky (1930), describes a range for a learner to achieve with help of a more knowledgeable other. This zone is beyond

what the learner can achieve independently, but within the boundaries of what they *cannot* achieve despite help. The key here is the *potential* they can achieve *with help*, as long as the tasks, or skills, are within reach, and there is help readily available. Within the zone, scaffolding takes place; it is a series of steps or activities to help a learner to achieve a task. A teacher usually provides scaffolding, but it can also be a competent peer, a knowledgeable other. If the task is too hard or too easy, it falls outside of the optimal growth zone, no matter scaffolding. Challenging tasks promote maximum growth, and within this zone, proper guidance and instructions (teachers, peers, technology, etc.) is most beneficial for learning. It focuses on what is possible for a learner to do independently tomorrow with proper help today (Vygotsky, 2005).

For all of my participants, there is no doubt that they worked hard trying to achieve whatever tasks at hand. But were they placed within the zone of proximal development if they were always overwhelmed, I wonder? With the goal of making them experienced collaborators, was there sufficient and intentional help, scaffolding, to guide them achieve the task? Scaffolding is a series of support needed to achieve a goal. Sometimes, I wonder if scaffolding was lacking, or if the zone was misplaced. If dissatisfied with their own music making no matter how much they worked (largely due to a lack of time), perhaps my participants were placed out of their optimal learning zone. The zone, the expectation of what can be achieved, is a moving target as learners grow. Would it help to change the target, or to set up more help?

The zone of proximal development is widely applicable to the master-apprentice model that classical musicians are taught. As Kennell (2010) suggests, applied music teachers teach with a combination of personal experience and historical anecdote. This practice is based on the oral tradition that intends to pass performance expertise from one generation to the next. It was not a surprise that faculty members were participants' deciding factor in choosing particular

programs – students were choosing their lineage through weekly applied lessons with their studio teachers. Musicians trained in this tradition have most often focused their attention on the musical canon, learning what their teachers think is important to them. The danger of this approach is a reduced sense of agency, as composition comes before the student, teachers' ideas come before the student, and gradually, students may lose motivation.

Theme 3: Professionalization (and Its Problems)

Since collaborative piano programs are to prepare pianists to be so-called professional accompanists (Garrett, 2019; Mann-Polk, 1984; Stowell, 2008), how, and how well does professionalization integrate in the education of collaborative pianists? Having collaborative piano students to cover accompaniment services not only reduce the cost of hiring staff pianists (Fincher, 2020), the additional classes that collaborative piano programs generate also boost enrollment numbers (Corcoran, 2020; Lee, 2009). Therefore, it can be a win-win situation for the school and the collaborative piano program. Every collaborative piano student serves some staff function given the service nature of the profession. The integration of graduate assistantship and accompaniment system is a key aspect of collaborative piano programs. Yet, research found the overlap of their dual roles as student and staff to be at odds with each other when time was at a premium, as evident in Lee's investigation with six renowned faculty members of different collaborative piano programs (Lee, 2009).

The transition into collaborative piano is shown to be most challenging, no matter how ready they think they may be. How come? The integration of professionalization and expectation of a standard service is key. Doubling as students and employees to their school, collaborative piano students are not only in school for their own education, but also to serve others as part of

their training. This double expectation, to learn as a student with room for failure while providing reliable service to others, at times creates conflict of interests.

Graduate Assistantships

Assistantships in collaborative piano are fixed hours of paid work that collaborative piano students receive from their programs. While gaining invaluable hands-on experience to play with other students, collaborative piano students are also guaranteed a certain amount of financial support. Depending on the amount awarded in assistantships, collaborative piano students may be able to offset their cost of attendance significantly, if not entirely. Andrew, for example, received full assistantships to override tuition costs for his master's and professional study. Alisa commented that no other majors received more assistantships than collaborative piano majors in her school. Instrumental and vocal students depend on the service collaborative piano students provide, and collaborative piano students depend on assistantships to support their study. Ways to set up such codependency are namely repertoire-based or people-based, sometimes both. While Alisa, Ellen and Andrew all received doctorate assistantships with a certain number of hours that they accompany, Kyle's program did not offer such an assistantship, only tuition scholarships.

A people-based assistantship works like this: Andrew was assigned five partners a semester, which equated to five hours of weekly lessons with a rehearsal prior, roughly totaling ten hours a week of work. A certain payout is guaranteed. No matter what repertoire these five partners played, Andrew functioned as their collaborative pianist in their rehearsals, lessons, and recitals. Their relationships were carried over throughout the entire semester. Clear cut and organized, this approach not only removed the hustle of having to secure partners by collaborative piano students, but also spelled out the limits of the expectations. There is one

caveat, however; if there is repertoire that the collaborative pianist already knew, they would have to repeat that whenever their partner needed it.

A repertoire-based approach emphasizes the chosen repertoire, not partner. Ellen, for example, had to find her own partners to fulfill a total of 70 hours of assistantship per year. If violinist Jordan L needed to learn the Franck Sonata, and Ellen also needed to learn that piece, then they were matched to work on it together. After the Franck Sonata is learned, coached and performed, Ellen and Jordan L were not obligated to continue their partnership beyond the stand-alone assignment. They may choose to continue working together should they wish. As a result, violinist Jordan L could prepare the Franck Sonata with Ellen simultaneously as he prepared Ravel's *Tzigane* with pianist Rachel Z for the same recital. Alternatively, Ellen could also play with two other violinists on the same piece. This approach allows maximum flexibility with partner pairing and repertoire choice, yet the duration of partnership is generally shorter. Efficiency is increased for collaborative piano students who need to target the repertoire they need to learn.

There are pros and cons to both approaches. With people-based matching, pianists may not attain as long of an impressive repertoire list, because they are not continuing to expand their repertoire all the time. They have consistent partners to play with, clear delineation of expectations, and room to mature over several projects together, but they may not fill every "hole" in their repertoire list. They are in the safe zone with workload. Whereas a repertoire-based approach is more specific on targeting the standard repertoire, aiming to efficiently add missing repertoire to their knowledge base. This approach has fewer boundaries, is murkier with the workload, and requires pianists to constantly be on the lookout for the next project. There seems no perfect way to structure assistantship. The programs where Andrew attended his

master's and doctorate had a mix of both approaches, for example. He had a few assigned singers for the semester (people-based matching) and played with different instrumentalists who he met in classes (repertoire-based). Every school has their own needs and financial distributions.

I argue that people-based matching may provide more advantages compared to repertoire-based matching, mostly for consistent relationship building throughout the entire semester. Such an arrangement has the added strength of cultivating a safe space for coaching practice, a pertinent skill that collaborative pianists need to develop but are usually deprived of opportunities, as reported. As their working relationship matures throughout the semester, both pianists and partners may learn new aspects of themselves (e.g., their own methods, each other's working habits, and artistic styles). Most importantly, partners create zones of proximal development for each other (Steiner, 2006), the potential to problem solve beyond their independent ability through working together (Vygotskii, 2005). I argue that becoming comfortable on developing longer-term working relationships is perhaps more important than getting a few more sonatas and arias under their belt, as stable partners provide collaborative piano students conditions to hone their soft skills in a safe space.

Accompaniment Systems

As part of professionalization, graduate assistantships go hand in hand with the accompaniment system in which they are embedded. In most schools, accompaniment services are supplied by a combination of experienced staff pianists, collaborative piano students in training, and a handful of solo piano students. These pianists collectively cover the accompaniment needs of the entire school. It would be unfair to have no pianist to play in Rachel L's violin recital, when Zander W has two, would it not? But what if Rachel L's repertoire is so unusual that nobody knows it? Typically, a handful of staff pianists, depending on the size of the

school, are hired to ensure sufficient coverage. While vocal coaches are staffed to give regular coachings and provide production preparation in the voice/opera departments, collaborative piano students are rarely included. Instrumental, on the other hand, usually includes all collaborative piano students and some solo piano students, in addition to staff pianists. How to equitably distribute accompaniment assignments has been challenging (Corcoran, 2020), given the mixed levels of experiences as well as different interests from pianists.

Accompaniment services are set up similarly in the programs Kyle, Alisa and Ellen attended. On the instrumental side, as mentioned, both collaborative piano students and solo piano students can serve. This is a free market, meaning any instrumental student and teacher can reach out to any pianist for their accompaniment needs. For singers, on the other hand, much is controlled by the vocal department. From making schedules to assigning pianists to lessons and coachings, no solo piano students are involved, only collaborative pianists and staff pianists. Alisa's school, for example, has five voice staff pianists to coach singers weekly and play in their opera productions. Collaborative piano students are only able to play in singers' lessons. Based on my small participant pool, student pianists got paid by the school roughly $20 per hour for a lesson, staff anywhere from $35-50. Ellen, Alice and Andrew's schools covered rehearsal costs, but Kyle's did not. As a result, instrumental students in Kyle's school paid out of pocket for rehearsals.

Alisa's school even has an office designated to keep track of how many hours an instrumental student had used. How it works is that each instrumental student is provided with a certain number of hours with pianists per semester. If the student exceeds those quotas, they need to pay their pianists out of pocket themselves. A cap for the maximum charge per hour is usually set by the collaborative piano department. What is this arrangement trying to achieve?

Instrumentalists can strategically plan how and when to use their time with pianists, and collaborative piano students do not have to initiate the awkward conversation of charging them money.

Why do we examine the integration of graduate assistantships and accompanying systems? The parameters generated from the two form the context of professionalization, which greatly impacts the experience of collaborative piano students. Are students expected to function mostly like staff pianists to cover other students' accompanying needs? What activities do collaborative piano students participate in? When are they expected to charge their peers for compensation? Is their workload clearly delineated and assigned? What is more important when time is at a premium, to repeat something they already know, or to learn something new for themselves? These are a few questions that center on the practicality of such integration.

Dual Roles as Student and Staff Remains Challenging

Unfortunately, most participants reported that it was still difficult to balance their roles as students and staff at the same time, as the grace of being students is still lacking in 2020s. For example, faculty members do not always remember which pianist is a staff, and which pianist is a student. Quite often, Kyle was expected to play a standard repertoire perfectly at the first try, whether he knew the material or not. Faculty members would give their own students the grace of learning something new but may forget studio accompanists were also students playing this music for the first time. Worse, faculty would complain about their own students to Kyle, as if he were their teaching assistant. It was disturbing and awkward to Kyle; student pianists have different relationships with the actual students than staff pianists. Andrew also shared that some of his worst collaborative experiences were his not knowing the traditions of opera. His good sight-reading skills did not help. If he did not know the performance practice of a certain aria, no

skill would get him through the first reading. “It just takes experience and time. You simply don’t know what you don’t know starting out.”

Ellen felt strongly about the competing priorities of the two, as if little had changed from over a decade ago. Over-repetition became her big struggle as she matured. Remember she called herself a “karaoke machine” as she played the Tchaikovsky violin concerto once again? By the 20th time playing the same piece, she knew that she was not going to learn anything new, that it would not help *her* musical growth. It was expected of her, however, as an experienced collaborative pianist now, to be able to provide service when requested, whether or not it is beneficial to her own growth. With hopes to maintain and strengthen working relationships, she often agreed to repeat repertoire that she was already familiar with. That is what a staff pianist does, to serve others. While professionalization provides many benefits as a result of hands-on experiences, it comes at a cost. “Am I really here to make $20 per hour to play the same thing over and over? I’d rather nurture my own interests some time.” Every day, she has to make many small decisions in an attempt to balance the two.

Alisa, quite the opposite, refuted the idea of a conflict altogether. She found time management more challenging, but a competing priority was not experienced. She called her collaborative piano training “a paid internship,” an almost “free education” in her doctorate. What an analogy, I thought. Should education be a paid internship, though, I wonder?

Awkwardness in Charging Peers Money

As I see it, professionalization in collaborative piano intends to create conditions of the real-world for freelance artists, as a way to better prepare collaborative piano students for professional opportunities after school. Inevitably, monetary transaction is involved in professionalization. Ellen expressed she did not know how to position herself when she was with

her peers. Is she more a student or a staff when she gets paid by the school for a service that she provides? Money further adds dynamic complications into her interaction with peers whom she plays with, particularly when she charges peers money directly for services not covered by the school.

Asking for compensation was awkward for most participants. Collaborative piano students know that similar to themselves, other students have little disposable income. For that reason, sometimes collaborative piano students opted out to not charge their partners. Even to this day, as professionals now, most participants remain somewhat uncomfortable to set rates and charge others. Unless one has an agent, they are likely having to deal with talks about money, a must-have skill for freelance musicians. Again as an outlier, Andrew did not recall instances that money created awkwardness with the partners that he had, except a few clarifications of the expectations. His assistantships clearly set boundaries to prevent confusion.

With a taste of transactional working relationship, one that differs much from playing chamber music with their friends, I would say, I cannot help but wonder at what point should money be involved. In free market accompaniment systems that simulate the real world, such as the ones Alice, Ellen, and Kyle were in, are students exposed to professionalization before they are ready to provide a service? Is monetary reward serving collaborative piano students more, or hurting them? Would it even make sense to have a sliding scale to differentiate between a demanding Nielsen clarinet concerto reduction and a note-simple Italian art song *Caro Mio Ben*? These questions are worth pondering but may never have perfect answers.

Employability

Despite the dissonances mentioned above, professionalization in collaborative piano education seems to help with employability. Overall, participants find their programs effectively

prepare them for a career in collaborative piano, which is consistent with what literature suggests (Cocoran, 2011; Fincher,2020; Tostado, 2013). As a freelance pianist, Ellen enjoyed the network of opportunities the program provided her. Alisa would not have accumulated the amount of repertoire knowledge had she stayed in the solo piano program all throughout. It would have been unlikely for a fresh doctorate graduate, like Andrew, to hold college teaching positions without a degree in that field. And for Kyle, perhaps his serendipitous job offerings would not have taken place had he not intentionally caught up on vocal knowledge. Collaborative piano majors like to think that they have gained more expertise, knowledge, and experience from their training to better their job prospects in this competitive market. If employability is the goal, and if my participants believed that they achieved that goal, their programs may have succeeded as intended.

Theme 4: Attempted Excellence Compromised

(Missing) Pedagogical Training

Did my participants succeed on their own, or did their respective programs help them? A few ideas surfaced concerning program improvements. Both Alisa and Andrew wished that their doctorate had been more intentional pedagogically about preparing them to be professors and coaches. They had the impression that as doctoral students, they were just expected to know how to teach based on their first-hand observations of their teachers. With a lack of influence on teacher training, student teachers revert to teach the way they were taught, as Lortie (1977) described in *Apprenticeship of Observation*. From hours of observing their teachers' teaching and being at “the other side of the desk,” student teachers intuitively imitate the way they are taught based more on individual approach rather than pedagogical principles. This is a cycle of continuation; unless future teachers become cognizant of the way they were taught, they will

likely perpetuate the same style of teaching for generations. There is a problem; where is innovation, and how to cultivate change? It takes the deliberate study of teaching to break out of traditional teaching. It also takes a deliberate effort of reflection in order to form student teachers' own teaching practices. As Andrew and Alisa described it, both pedagogical theory and practice were missing in their doctoral programs. Without the space for reflection and practice, the way collaborative piano is currently taught in most conservatories and universities will likely be perpetuated.

For Alisa, she would also add more structure in her curriculum to practice coaching. Coaching seemed more important than ever now for her as a freelance professional, in opera coaching, chamber music, vocal and instrumental coaching, just to name a few. As her partners expected her to provide feedback, she found herself constantly needing to brush up her articulation and public speaking skills. The lack of teaching and coaching opportunities, however, as Alisa noticed, is a problem for the entire doctoral program at her school, not just her department. Similarly, as a professor now, Andrew could have benefited tremendously had there been intentional training on his pedagogical skills. He had to learn how to teach on his job.

> As a coach, you really are an educator to the singers. If you are teaching collaborative piano, you are doing it for the pianists. A lot of programs don't have either. So, you are there to perfect your skills playing with other people, but there is no training if you ever get a faculty position for how to teach collab piano, or how to coach. They are both neglected in a way. They are assuming as we are learning these skills ourselves (forming these opinions working with singers), we have what we need to work on with young singers. It would be very helpful to have a chance to work on those things for the sake of your development as an educator.

As a field, we need to rethink pedagogy. What is it to teach for innovation rather than simply continuing from the past? Are content specialists delivering the best pedagogy, and if not, what can we do to make room for improvement? With the absence of hands-on opportunities, Andrew found it bizarre that some programs do not even offer coaching classes. Ellen's program, for example, mandated no coaching classes for instrumental collaborative pianists, only for vocal collaborative pianists. Since Alisa was an instrumental-focused pianist, she was not mandated to take coaching classes, either. To Andrew, it did not make much sense to have graduate degrees in collaborative piano with no training on coaching since coaching is a core competence that sets a collaborative pianist apart from any pianists. No matter the area of focus in collaborative piano, I agree that having training on coaching is crucial.

Vocal Coaching

Let us take a moment to discuss a core function, coaching, in collaborative piano, and why having sufficient classes on it is important. Remember how Andrew felt uneasy with vocal coaching at first? It took him a while to understand why young singers need a coach to help bridge their musical skills (Cocoran, 2011), how interchangeable the role accompanist and vocal coach can be (Hemsley, 1998), as well as the challenge to switch between the two (Hoekman, 2004), all of which are consistent with the literature. As a coach, he primarily focuses on the singer. Yet as a performer, his attention is on the entire ensemble as a whole. Both Kyle and Andrew found it difficult to perform with singers who they coach, and for that, Hemsley (2018) explicitly advises singers to not perform in concerts with the same pianist who they coach with, because the teacher-student relationship inhibits a singer's full expression on stage. Hemsley advises singers, instead, to perform with an accompanist, not a coach. Given what literature

suggests, I affirm that Andrew's feelings of unease with vocal coaching were not an isolated experience.

What is inconsistent with literature, however, is the idea of being flexible as a collaborator (Wenger, 2010). Can you be too accommodating and too flexible? Andrew, now as a professor who performs with his student singers, considers his willingness to compromise as a collaborator a disfavor to music making at times. While it is important to be flexible as a partner, is it really helping the student partner if he suddenly plays the phrase twice as fast when the singer runs out of breath? He challenges the mainstream idea of what being "helpful," "accommodating" and "flexible" (Cocoran, 2011; Wenger, 2010) means in his new roles.

The Need for Studio Matching

Incidental learning is a crucial revelation in this study. Student experiences are similar to a "choose-your-adventure," or "design-your-own" type of experience, most notably in the way studio accompanying works. The third idea of program improvement pertains to the structure of practicum. Practicum, or studio accompanying, is intended for collaborative piano students to practice ensemble skills by playing repertoire with other students, often in lessons and classes. Many programs mandate a certain number of hours of practicum each semester. Piano students can learn as many sonatas, songs and operas as they can with their own teachers independently, but they need to play with partner(s) in lessons or performances to really gain the experience of the piece, and practicum provides that opportunity for feedback. Some schools take on the burden of assigning collaborative piano students with partners throughout the semesters, some programs do not. Matching pianists with other instrumental or vocal students is called studio or partner matching.

The programs Alisa, Ellen and Kyle attended provided no studio matching. In a so-called free market accompaniment system, it was up to the collaborative students to seek out their own partners, usually project-based, lasting a few weeks at a time. This approach, resembling the "real-world," is often disorganized and time consuming, as students either ask to play in their friends' lessons, or ask studio teachers directly. Newcomers, in particular, find it especially challenging to secure partners to play with; it takes time and skills to "break" into the scene. The lack of partnership is prevalent in the instrumental track, as Ellen and Alisa both reported heavy reliance on their teachers for partner matching at first. Let us not forget that most instrumental music is not sight-readable; therefore, advance planning is a must. On the vocal side, while Kyle incidentally had a decent number of guaranteed vocal lessons to play in, he secured those hours not by help of his program, but his own connections built prior to the start of school. Many of his colleagues had trouble securing stable partners and sufficient studio hours. As for Andrew, his programs paired most of the partners for him.

If the goal of collaborative training is to gain skills from playing with others, should the programs not arrange such opportunities, I wonder? At a minimum, a safety net guaranteeing a certain number of partners provided to collaborative students would be helpful. For the purpose of learning, having partners is a necessity, not a luxury. Sufficient scaffolding, studio matching in this case, has to be in place for optimal learning, as the zone of proximal development indicates. How is it fair that "I" only managed to play in two recitals whereas Kyle played in 30 (even though it may be too much for him)? What help is there if "I" want more partners and opportunities but building connections is beyond my capacity at the moment? I am not sure if it is the best for programs to place the burden of finding partners onto the collaborative students, on top of their overwhelm and exhaustion. Should new collaborative piano students be placed in

this sink-or-swim situation at the start of their education? Even if the answer were a yes, and that the program design is to "choose-your-adventure" in the "real-world," can there be at least some mechanisms to guide students away from the potholes on the ground? I argue that schools have an ethical responsibility to provide necessary resources for learning, and in this case, stable partners and consistent hours for *everyone*.

John Dewey talks about the moral responsibilities of schools (Dewey, 1909). Why do students go to school? Attending school helps students to become better citizens in the world that they live in. And teachers are to enlarge students' worlds, to help students gain independence, so that they can be better equipped to do what they want to do after they leave school. Collaborative piano students came to school to become better pianists, and their programs have moral responsibilities to help them become better. It is not sufficient just to place students in a sink-or-swim situation with little help offered. Proper conditions need to be provided for students so that they may grow in as many ways as they can, to enlarge their world, to be better equipped and be independent.

I say that more needs to be done to enlarge the capacities of collaborative piano students. First and foremost is to organize partners and performances, at least some, for them, to create more structure and consistency in studio accompanying. As reported by participants, much of the hands-on learning happened by accident, not so much by strategy. What is learned through experience seems to be left to chance on the individual student, rather than intentional design by the program. Kyle did not learn those 30 recital programs because he was assigned to, but because he built connections with the teachers before school even started. What about Alisa and Ellen, who struggled to fulfill their required hours at first - could they all benefit from taking some workload off of Kyle's, if they were in the same school? I for sure think so. If Kyle did not

happen to meet these studio teachers, would he have built up a big repertoire and been offered jobs in opera houses? As he described it, his program did not intentionally help prepare opera auditions; he did not even expect to enter the vocal world fulltime. It does not mean that the program was not helpful, but it may suggest that the program was not intentional in its design. It is worth thinking about what it may look like to go from incidental learning to a scaffolded, strategized, and intentional learning from a programmatic standpoint.

Summary

Themes discussed in this chapter make up important "elements" of becoming a collaborative pianist in graduate programs in recent years. With programs as contexts, this phenomenological study has focused on understanding student experiences. A few themes exemplified how participants experience and define collaboration (or the lack thereof), as well as the impact of professionalization in their education. While I was somewhat surprised to learn about their sentiment towards the term *accompanist* and various definitions of *collaboration*, I was not shocked to find their continued struggles with workload, confusion with dual roles, and their incidental learning. Sometimes I wonder if the expectations are reasonable within the zone of proximal development, or if enough scaffolding, strategizing steps to help, is in place. These emergent themes, to me, are symptoms of the phenomenon. What are some underlying larger problems that lead to these symptoms that we see in their experiences? The next chapter attempts to look beyond the observable by asking a few broad questions of the field.

Chapter VI: Richness of Possibilities

This dissertation explores the student experiences of collaborative pianists in conservatories and universities in the United States. This phenomenological study seeks to understand how students experienced and perceived their study in the field of collaborative piano, and how helpful their programs are in meeting their needs. Three of the four participants were recent doctorate graduates; one was in the final dissertation stage. This chapter summarizes the emergent themes generated from this study and makes recommendations for future research. The research question asks the following: Given its intentions and history, and how the field of collaborative piano is being organized and taught, what does the graduate collaborative piano experience look like in recent years as perceived and experienced by collaborative piano students?

- How do collaborative piano students describe their program experiences?
- How is collaboration in collaborative piano perceived and experienced?
- How are collaborative piano programs meeting student needs?

Answers to the research questions cover three general aspects: (a) what is learned during the process, (b) the integration of professionalization, and (c) dissonances of the in-between. While my discoveries reveal some general principles of becoming collaborative pianists, each student experience is not easily transferable due to their unique embedded programs. As part of my discovery, I offer one question that has the potential to take on its new meanings beyond the scope of this study. I want to ask the field of collaborative piano to think deeply about what an education in collaborative piano is, particularly in regard to fairness, incidental learning, and humane treatment. As it turns out, the answers to my research questions yielded more questions. Recommendations of future research will conclude this chapter.

Question 1: How do Collaborative Piano Students Describe Program Experiences?

This question seeks to understand different aspects of program studies. What were participants' intentions and expectations of their programs? What challenges, frustrations, and surprises did they encounter in common? How about competencies, specialties, and turning points during program study? Furthermore, what are we training? Are we training for a profession, for an art, or a craft? Are we training artists or workers?

Intentions and Expectations

All participants were in solo piano programs before they formally switched to collaborative piano study. Kyle and Andrew knew they wanted to go into collaborative piano early on since their sophomore year in college. As a result, they accumulated relatively substantial repertoire and experience prior to joining their formal collaborative piano study. Whereas Alisa took a leap of faith to try this new field later in college, entering with just a few pieces prepared for auditions. Ellen did not switch until she finished her masters in solo piano, with little prior collaborative experience. All of them mentioned their enjoyment of working with others and loneliness felt as solo pianists. They expected collaborative piano to equip them with the practical skills and knowledge that they need in order to improve their livelihood as pianists. Studio teachers, not a surprise, was the draw for participants in choosing which programs to attend in this master-apprentice model. All participants hoped to accumulate a vast amount of repertoire while fine tuning their collaborative skills through hands-on performances with other students.

One surprise was that no matter the amount of prior experience (or a lack thereof) during participants' solo studies, all participants reported a great sense of overwhelm at the onset of their formal study in collaborative piano. The initial switch from solo piano to collaborative

piano presented the greatest learning curve no matter how ready they thought they may be. Fast paced deadlines, new collaborative concepts and skills, as well as a psychological change are just a few major adjustments. Such a learning curve became less and less intense as participants advanced through the course of their study from MM to DMA. All participants had some training in both the instrumental and vocal tracks. For Ellen and Alisa, they had to declare their specialty (instrumental) at the beginning of their master's as mandated by their program, whereas Andrew and Kyle did not officially choose a focus until the very end of their doctorate studies. Programs differ in emphasis (instrumental or vocal) and approach (broad or focus).

Challenges and Learning Curve

"Know yourself" is another common challenge encountered across all as new collaborative pianists. How much could they achieve within a couple hours? How to pace themselves when they had the entire semester to prepare 20 recitals? They described it as "you hit a wall before you know it." The self-discovery was critical for their professional success, as the understanding of self allowed them to meet the expectations of the promises they make for others, while maintaining their own artistic wellbeing.

Secondly, a lack of stable partnership was a challenge that some participants encountered, especially for pianists in the instrumental track. They had to seek out instrumental partners to play with, which proved to be challenging when they did not know enough people in their schools. Vocal pianists did not seem to encounter this challenge, however, as most vocal-piano partnerships are usually matched. A missed opportunity for learning is observed here for instrumental pianists; learning was left to chance, as a necessary condition (having partners) was not strategically provided by the program. It felt messy, reactive, rather than organized and strategic.

Lastly, intentional classes on certain subjects were missing, resulting in students having to acquire those skills on their own, another example of incidental learning. Some were terrified of vocal coaching at first; they did not understand why a singer would want to get ideas from a pianist. Vocal coaching became easier over time, but not every program offers classes in vocal coaching. The ones that do, still lacked opportunities for collaborative piano students to gain hands-on practice. Most of the participants reported that their coaching skills matured after they finished their training, because only then had they had the opportunities to practice coaching. In addition, some programs do not even offer classes on how to play orchestral reductions or showpieces. Students were left to figure out those materials on their own during hands-on practicum. According to Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938), in order for experiential learning to be an optimal educative experience, learners' needs as well as capacities need to be met. In both practicum and classes, the needs of collaborative piano students are not fully met.

Musical Dissatisfaction

Unresolved challenges contributed to participants' musical dissatisfaction at different times during their studies. They did not *really* know the music that they were playing given the workload. Most of them felt musically underprepared and overwhelmed. They tried their best to meet their own personal standards, but there always seemed to be a lack of time. Constantly being underprepared is a dangerous space to be in - as they are well aware. If they stayed there long, they would be almost always sightreading, rarely achieving the satisfying high level they wish to be at artistically. Their musicianship would suffer in the long run, too. Most participants recalled struggling to break out of that state of being when they were in school.

What is at stake here? I see three things: the artistry of the musicians, the art of the compositions, as well as the humanity of the artists. Students' capacity to do justice to the

compositions that they are playing is jeopardized due to a lack of time. The art of rendering someone's work is being jeopardized when a process was lacking. As a result, the art of the composition is compromised. In addition, students' capacity to grow as humans is also jeopardized. In turn, the field's own ability to do its work is compromised.

Being Overwhelmed

Everyone was overwhelmed at the beginning. "Survival mode," "it was tough being thrown into it," "torn into a million different directions, not sure what the program wants me to learn," "stretched too thin," were a few direct recapitulations from the participants. They found themselves in a sink-or-swim situation, always trying to catch up. It was unclear whether participants did far more than what it was required of them, or they were doing just minimum, but a lack of time needed to achieve their task was consistent throughout all participants. Such discursive learning is experiences disconnected from one another, as described in *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938). Even though each experience can be lively, interesting, and even exciting in and of itself, learning is not linked cumulatively. In other words, current learning experience does not connect with further experience. As a result, learners' energy is dissipated, and learners become scatterbrained. In experiential learning, disconnected experiences are not optimal educational experiences, while connected experiences are.

Over-repetition

Over-repetition also led to musical dissatisfaction. When Ellen repeated material that she knew too well in studio accompanying, she called herself a "karaoke machine" "feeling jaded." She agreed to play the Tchaikovsky violin concerto once too many times mostly in hope to maintain her working relationships with studio teachers, knowing that experience would benefit the student or the studio teacher far more than her own. She acted as a staff pianist to serve

others by shortchanging her own educational needs, essentially. Here again, is another learning experience that fails to connect meaningfully with further experience.

Not all experiences are educative, according to Dewey (1938). The ones that are not, (i.e., disconnected experiences), restrict the growth of further experiences. These can be experiences that engender callousness, produce insensitivity and a lack of responsiveness. For Ellen, her increased automatic skill in Tchaikovsky violin concerto also came with increased aesthetic fatigue, leading to narrowing her richer experiences of that piece in the future. The way she experienced learning may also result in her losing impetus to learn further. If she had not yet associated boredom with playing that piece, she would soon. Not alone in her struggle, the other participants also experienced over-repetition in different points of their study, if not in their post-graduate life. To combat the karaoke problem, Ellen offered a potential solution: to incorporate coaching (particularly in instrumental coaching), which will be discussed more later.

(Out of) The Zone of Proximal Development

While Dewey calls such discursive experiences (in this case being overwhelmed, over-repetition, and other various challenges) uneducative, Vygotsky may call it out of the zone of proximal development. This educational theory describes the range in which a learner can achieve maximum potential with the help of an experienced other (Vygotsky, 2005). What a learner cannot achieve today independently can be achieved tomorrow, as long as there is sufficient help in place, and the tasks are close to being mastered. If a task is too hard, it is beyond reach (being overwhelmed). If a task is too easy, a learner is not challenged to grow (over-repetition). Both cases here, insufficient time with new material or too much time with old material, seem to fall out of the zone of optimal learning in opposite directions. The goal of repertoire accumulation, the speed of learning in particular, may have been beyond what was

optimal for them *even with help*. Moreover, it is unclear whether enough help, or any help, from the program was set up to aid. And for Ellen, staying within what she was comfortable with (playing the Tchaikovsky once again) did not provide enough challenge that she needed; she never even entered the range for optimal learning. It is not a surprise that she felt unstimulated and disengaged.

In both scenarios of being overwhelmed and over-repetition, the artistic well-being of collaborative piano students suffer. The consequence of forming such habits is the danger of losing control of future experiences (Dewey, 1938). In other words, these are experiences of reaction. Students take experiences as they come, rather than strategic planning. How do we get around the fear of drowning under a massive amount of workload? Ellen suggested lowering the required practicum hour for newcomers as a way to reduce stress. Note that the range for optimal growth is a moving target. To redefine the zone of optimal growth, it is on the educators to assess learners' potential and make proper adjustment on the kind of help needed.

Competencies and Qualities

Sight reading, ensemble skills, and communication are the three top competencies participants reported. As the literature suggests (Baker, 2006; Adler, 1965; Price, 1991), sight reading is the most important competency. It is a functional skill, a way of seeing and hearing music, that comes with time and experience. It contributed to the greatest learning curve for new collaborative pianists. In addition, ensemble skills are another important competency. It is the vertical alignment of rhythmic "togetherness" with partners: lining up on the vowels, landing together on fast notes, synchronization of the musical materials. Knowing how to work well with others, or the soft skill, is a third competence mentioned by all (Cocoran, 2011; Wenger, 2012). To be a good team player, it is imperative to stay open minded, and be willing to try others'

suggestions no matter how different it may seem, reported by participants. The moment a partner says “no” to an idea is when the collaboration stalls. One does not need to be an extrovert to be a wonderful collaborative pianist, but one has to have the desire to help others, according to participants.

Dual role as Student and staff

A distinct uniqueness of the collaborative piano program is its integration with the rest of the school. Born out of professionalization of accompaniment (Barr, 2013), collaborative piano students are not only students pursuing their own educational endeavor, they also are employees to their school serving other students’ accompanying needs. In providing service, a certain standard is expected of the collaborative piano students. When time is at a premium, their grace of being students is sometimes compromised. Money also comes into play as part of professionalization. Since they are paid either by the school or the accompanied students directly, power dynamics complicates their working relationship at times.

To sum, literature on collaborative competencies, qualities, intentions and expectations are consistent with what participants reported. As part of professionalization, how to balance the roles of being a student and employee to an institution remains unclear, which is also consistent with prior research. Low musical satisfaction, a big learning curve at the onset of program switch, as well as challenges encountered are somewhat surprising, though not entirely. All participants adopted the sink-or-swim mentality at some point trying to catch up, indicating a lack of agency and control.

Question 2: How is Piano Collaboration Perceived and Experienced?

This question attempts to understand what collaboration is in the context of collaborative piano from the perspective of pianists. How do participants define collaboration? Do

collaborative piano students feel equal? Do they necessarily *need* to feel equal in all roles? What is their attitude towards the stigma of the label "accompanist"? Broadly speaking, what does it mean to collaborate, to be together, and figure out a place apart from power differentials?

Best and Worst Collaborations

To better understand collaboration, participants were asked to share their best and worst experiences of collaboration. Most participants considered that playing with musicians who are on the same page with them musically contributed to their best collaborations, consistent with themes emerged from pilot study. Sufficient preparation time, a back-and-forth discussion on musical ideas, and a love for the repertoire were a few obvious elements. When the playing field, or power dynamic, is level, the act of making music with capable colleagues "calms down" the noise; they feel more relaxed in their ways of communicating and playing, less concerned about how their ideas are being perceived. Participants are more at ease to show their thoughts or virtuosity without concern.

The worst collaboration has to do with a lack of back-and-forth musical ideas. If the communication is one-sided, such as instances when a pianist teaches the soloist their solo parts, playing with someone entirely unprepared musically, or simply following the soloist no matter what, it can be a bad experience. For Alisa and Ellen, coaching young students who were not at all prepared musically was not great collaboration. Andrew also mentioned that not knowing the traditions of opera repertoire was his worst collaboration experience, because no sight-reading skills could save him from that scenario.

The conditions for optimal collaboration, as reported by participants, included two-way communication in the process, engaging musical materials, and collaborators at similar levels.

This is a recurring theme from the pilot study. When these elements were present, participants were mostly likely to feel musically satisfied.

Nature of Collaboration Remains Unclear

There was no uniform answer from the participants for their definition of collaboration, similar to what the literature suggests in the field of community building and management (Castaner & Oliveira, 2020; Gutner, 2022; Griesemer, & Shavit, 2023; Himmelman, 1996; Steiner, 2006). Ellen and Alice reported that as long as they were playing with someone else, that is collaboration, a broad definition similar to that of Salvato's conception (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020). A two-way communication is likely to promote collaboration, whereas accompanying is more one-way communication. Yet, accompanying is still a collaboration. Kyle focused on the unified product of a good performance; whatever it takes to present a good performance, that is collaboration, so he could be accompanying, coaching, or performing. Andrew thought that a common denominator in all activities that collaborative pianists do is to bring ideas to the table and have an artistic voice in the process. Both Kyle and Andrew's definitions of collaboration had more resemblance to Himmelman's increased level of collaboration, with coordination as the start, cooperation next, and "a mutual enhancement of capacity" as the ultimate level of working together characterizing collaboration (Himmelman, 1996).

Some participants further specified that coaching is not collaboration, for the very nature of coaching presents an uneven power dynamic. This is consistent with literature in vocal coaching (Garrett, 2016; Hemsley, 1998; Hoekman, 2004; Katz, 2009). Coaching and collaboration may even be at mutual exclusivity with each other depending on situations. Given many hats collaborative pianists wear at different times, accompanist, coach, performing artist,

what collaboration means to participants remains ever-changing depending on the context. Some participants were even surprised to learn about their roles needing to coach others.

It is unclear whether participants felt equal in the various contexts mentioned above. Generally, participants felt more equal no matter their roles if there was two-way communication, consistent with those themes emerged from the pilot study. Recall that pilot study participant Joe compared himself to "a piece of furniture" accompanying in lessons at times, and Julie said, "the locus of power is not within us"? A sense of equality may not have been feasible in all collaborative contexts. Andrew insisted that having his own opinion was the basis, a common denominator, for any meaningful collaborative contexts.

I maintain that different degrees of collaboration, or the nuances, deserve more articulation and discussion with students from collaborative piano programs. Even broad strokes would help to clear confusion of what "playing together" means. Without better delineation of what collaboration looks like, I worry a sense of being overwhelmed will inevitably hinder students' fullest development during their studies. Students should not be too surprised to discover on their own what collaboration is during their programs, should they?

Accompanist vs. Collaborative Pianist

A surprise was that no participant took offense to the label of *accompanist*. They did not correct others when they were addressed as accompanists, since the nature of their function did not fundamentally change since the new term *collaborative piano* has become widely accepted. They did, however, have a problem if the label of *accompanist* translates to lower pay, smaller (or no) billing, and less respect. Half the participants identified themselves as *pianists* rather than *collaborative pianists*, as they felt the term *collaborative piano* was limited and limiting. Being a good pianist and musician mattered more, as reported by all participants.

Professionalization and Money

The accompaniment system, graduate assistantship and compensation knit tightly in framing collaborative piano student experiences within their own contexts. Since collaborative piano programs intend to formalize the field of accompanying, collaborative piano students are naturally integrated to provide accompaniment services to others during their study. Schools depend on collaborative piano students - schools that have collaborative piano programs, that is - to some extent in meeting accompaniment needs of others within the institution. In return, collaborative piano students gain much needed hands-on opportunities, often through paid graduate assistantships. Most participants were able to cover most of their tuition cost, if not all, through graduate assistantships or paid practicum hours that are mandated in their curriculum. Beyond what is delineated, collaborative piano students can charge their partners for accompanying services rendered.

Since schools do not cover all accompanying services rendered, most of the participants charged their colleagues for compensation as a result, which was uncomfortable for them. Ellen had difficulty positioning herself as a staff pianist interacting with other students; Alisa and Kyle found asking their peers for compensation straight up awkward. As I see it, the challenge stems from the dual role of being a student and staff, as the two roles have murky overlap between service and education. When receiving compensation, services collaborative piano students provided were held to a standard; there was not always the grace of being students. To simplify the matter that compensation brings, some even suggested taking away the money factor in collaborative piano training, either by eliminating the pay for collaborative piano majors altogether (in exchange for free tuition), or by fully covering the accompaniment service collaborative piano majors provide so no act of asking peers for compensation is necessary. In

short, providing reliable services to others while allowing room for failure as a student generates conflict of interests at times.

To sum, the definition of collaboration remains unclear to collaborative piano students. Given the wide range of set ups of graduate assistantships, accompaniment systems, and the involvement of monetary compensation, the nature of collaboration became even less clear as collaborative piano students wear multiple hats at different situations. The literature indicates that equitably distributing workload for assistantships can be challenging (Fincher, 2020; Wenger, 2008).

What Is Fair?

I cannot help but wonder - what is fair? I don't mean it narrowly in terms of workload. What is fair treatment? Is it fair to have the grace of being students stripped away in the name of professionalization? Is it reasonable to expect a fresh student pianist to double up as a staff, sometimes scramble to learn, sometimes repeat the same thing like a "karaoke machine"? Is it fair for them having to deal with the awkward topic of money while other majors do not? Does fairness during study even matter if collaborative pianists are likely to have work after they graduate anyways?

If the messiness of the experience is intentional, I am not sure if it was communicated to students beforehand. The messiness may have helped some, but not others. As long as students are not totally surprised by the mess, that could be an exciting way to learn. In this sink-or-swim situation, I am afraid there was more cruelty than necessary, not to mention, the limitations of the human body; it is not meant to sustain an overload of repetitive motions every day. School is supposed to be a safe place to test-run ideas and practices before students are out in the real world. If Ellen had not agreed to play the Tchaikovsky again for this teacher, someone else

would have. If Kyle had refused to play 30 recitals, maybe he would no longer have been the go-to pianist for many. Some may call this exploitation. But is it exploitation if the piano students have the right to say no to what they do? Is it cruelty if they have work after graduating from school?

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Paulo Freire (1986) describes oppression as a lack of control. When you have no control, or lack agency, then your freedom is taken away. Education, to Freire, is either to conform, or to liberate. When opportunities for fuller realization of humanhood is taken away, then they are oppressed, and are taught to conform. They are not treated as human, rather, workers and objects. For my participants, they were often in do-or-die situations. Over-repetition, over-tiredness, under preparation, and constantly trying to catch up with deadlines - that sounds like overworked workers. That is an education of reaction. Are we in school to be performing artists, or are we in danger of becoming mere workers, I wonder?

Question 3: How Do Programs Meet Student Needs?

Since the field of collaborative piano was born out of professionalization of accompaniment, and collaborative piano programs are designed to create formal venues to bridge learning and practice, how helpful do participants find these programs?

Employability and Program Support

The good news is that participants found their programs prepared them effectively for their livelihood as collaborative pianists, for the most part. Their training, the repertoire learned, the collaborative skills acquired, and the performance/coaching experiences that they accumulated during their studies set them apart from those who did not go through this program, as they believe. The cost, however, was not trivial, and the process was messy, as discussed at length in Chapter V. Even their artistic wellbeing was at risk at some point. In general, they felt

that they had what they needed in order to succeed professionally, although there were intentional components missing in their curriculum. They all established a professional network of contacts as a result of their training. Kyle started to be a full-time opera *répétiteur* halfway through his doctoral study. Andrew started his first full-time college teaching job as an opera director and professor of collaborative piano. Alice and Ellen had become busy freelance musicians in their region.

Program Improvements

While students may succeed in securing work, there are several proposed program improvements. The learning seemed to be incidental, rather than intentional, as revealed by all participants. Andrew did not learn how to teach from his doctoral education in collaborative piano, but at his job. Kyle was not prepared to be a *répétiteur* by his program, until the day he was offered a job as a young artist.

Some pointed out that it is bizarre not to have coaching classes offered as a core curriculum component for a degree in collaborative piano, and the same goes for orchestral reduction. I argue that not enough intentional classes are being offered to help students succeed. How can a class on coaching (and orchestral reduction), a core function of collaborative pianists, be left out in curriculum design in Ellen's school for instrumental pianists?

A lack of expectations for instrumental pianists to coach may have contributed to that. Although instrumental pianists do not traditionally give coaching to the same extent as vocal pianists do, I argue instrumental coaching should not be treated with any less importance. To combat the "karaoke machine" problem that many encounter, Ellen offered a potential solution: to incorporate instrumental coaching. In order for instrumental pianists to stay engaged with repetitive musical material, constant attention in providing feedback to their partners helps to

rejuvenate their curiosity and sense of problem solving. As Dewey (1938) said, every experience influences the next one to some degree. If an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense, it helps a learner to get through future hard times, and continuity works in favor of their experiential learning. Identifying, articulating and solving problems with each partner creates a new space for instrumental pianists, allowing room to go beyond merely playing the piano parts.

Besides coaching, pedagogical training is also missing, reported by Alisa and Andrew. Most participants finished their doctoral study, a terminal degree required for a teaching career. Yet, most found pedagogical classes, both theory and practice, were entirely missing in their curricula. A doctoral degree in collaborative piano functions more like an extension of their master's degree, one that focuses on playing rather than an intensive preparation on how to give masterclasses, conduct research, or teach subject matters. As Lortie (1977) said, student teachers revert to teaching the way they are taught, unless they have conscious awareness of forming their very own teaching practice with pedagogical principles. Without an intentional space for teacher education, there is no innovation of ways of teaching. Without innovation, teaching ceases to progress, so is our field. How are doctoral students going to be prepared for teaching jobs if they are not provided with teaching opportunities in training? Andrew had to learn how to teach on his first job, for example.

In addition to adding classes on coaching and pedagogy, the design of studio hours, or practicum hours, can also use a retouch. Studio hours is a certain number of hours "playing together with others" required of collaborative piano majors, similar to a lab section for a science class. Three out of four participants were not matched with stable partners by their programs, resulting in a lack of necessary resources to learn. One may say that playing in studios is one of

the main reasons students enter a collaborative piano program - to gain hands-on experience from playing with many partners. Such experiences help them become seasoned collaborators. In this study, instrumental pianists had to find their own partners, and they may not have any sometimes. This added layer of worry hinders a student's development. Can the instrumental curriculum work more like the vocal curriculum in regard to practicum hours, matching instrumentalists and pianists for a semester-long partnership? If a match is too challenging logistically, how about reducing hours required for newcomers to ease overwhelm, as suggested by Ellen?

A lack of studio matches is another example of incidental learning. Ellen and Alisa found themselves in a stressful situation at the start of their study with no stable partners to play with. No matter the approach, repertoire-based or people-based, studio matching should be in place for newcomers, I suggest. The burden, at least the majority, of securing resources to learn should not be placed upon students, rather, the faculty and program administrators. Having stable partners is a must for learning, not a luxury. If pianist Kyle B is matched with soprano Janette K for the entire term, no matter what Janette K sings for that semester, Kyle B is her go-to pianist for everything. They are partners for the semester no matter the repertoire. This is people-based pairing, and I argue that it may be more beneficial in developing core competence of coaching than a repertoire-based approach, which emphasizes more on repertoire building. People-based pairing allows Kyle B to really get to know Janette K beyond just one piece of repertoire and has a longer time frame to gain a holistic view. I argue that programs have an obligation to provide necessary resources in an organized manner to promote learning, rather than leaving chances largely to the overwhelmed students. Asking a student to "build your experience" is a big ask.

(A Lack of) Student Agency

As revealed, the circulation of what students want is complex. In other words, their agency is complex. They are in control and also not in control. For example, they can say no to work that they do not wish to take on, but they do say yes under the pressure of serving others. They have quite some agency, and they are aware of the cost and burden they are taking on. The context of collaborative piano comes with complex relations, not mere interactions. What does student agency look like in this space?

Education, Training, Professionalization

Collab programs are born out of formalization of the profession: its intention is to create a pathway for students who are interested in the field of accompanying to gain practical knowledge (Lee, 2009; Wenger, 2010). As I formulate my themes, I catch myself alternating between *education*, *professionalization*, and *training* frequently. How are they similar, or not, I wonder?

Alisa compared her education to a paid internship: "I think it is kind of a bonus that we are getting paid for basically being in school, studying our major. No other students in the school get paid for playing with other people." If the goal is to gain practical knowledge, programs have succeeded, according to our participants. But is training education? Recall what Andrew said about his paying tuition to protect his own education?

> Bizarrely enough, I was totally okay with paying some tuition for my doctorate. As strange as it sounds for a collab who provides service to others, the boundary gave me the total right to protect my own education, rather than basically being a staff pianist. It was a good thing for me.

Andrew guarded the space he very much needed for his own growth, for *his own* educational needs. He gained agency. This space did not prioritize serving other people but was reserved for himself. He turned out to have a transformative experience. Thus, I do not think an education is synonymous with an internship or professionalization.

Training is behavior, it is the process of learning the skills you need to do a particular job or activity, according to Cambridge Online Dictionary. Training can be educational, but education is not *just* training. Professionalization is the process of giving an occupation professional qualities, typically by increasing training or raising required qualifications, defined by Oxford Dictionary. But education is not just training to become a professional, is it? Or perhaps it is, for an occupational/vocational school such as conservatories and schools of music?

What is Education in Collaborative Piano?

In other words, what is education in collaborative piano? We know that participants gained skills and repertoire knowledge as a result of training. We also know that all participants experienced professionalization, and their service provided is expected to be a dependable "deliverable" to be relied upon by others. Although there were many problems, if the goal is to provide skills needed to be collaborative pianists, collaborative piano programs succeeded in that, for the most part - training and professionalization helped collaborative piano students secure work.

But students are in school for an education, are they not? If education is larger than training, if education is the umbrella of professionalization, when are students having a strategic education, one that moves away from incidental learning? A strategic education is professors and administrators have purposeful set up coursework that would lead to a particular outcome. Some of that exist, but I wonder if some are missing, or if they are too broad. As the stories revealed,

we have seen the shortcomings of a technical model of education as opposed to an experiential and embodied one.

In *experience and education*, Dewey (1938) names continuity and interaction two principal criteria of experience. Collaborative piano students are in programs to gain experiences. The interaction of continuity and interaction indicates the significance and value of an educational experience. If to be latitudinal is to go far along the X-axis, to know something deeply, then longitudinal is to move broadly along the Y-axis, connecting expertise to new situations in life. To go deep, to master something, learners must be provided with conditions suitable to their own needs and capacities. The failure to adapt to learners' needs and capacities would cause an experience to be non-educative. Hence, interaction with material should not be accidental, it should be intentional.

Then there is continuity, or longitudinal learning. It is knowing how to apply the skills in different situations by taking the future into account at every stage of the learning process. Technical skills acquired in isolation, for example, are placed in their own compartment, disconnected from the rest of conditions of life. To go broad is to take the technical skills out of the compartment and apply them under the actual conditions of life. It is one thing to play the Rachmaninoff Cello Sonata alone beautifully in a practice room, it is another thing to introduce music meaningfully to various groups of people outside of the traditional concert hall settings. No matter how thoroughly a skill is learned, if we do not know how to apply it, it is not an educative experience.

What is the role of an educator, then? A teacher is responsible for determining the objective environment, the social set up, in which continuity and interaction takes place. Responsibility lies on the teacher to assess learners' needs and capacities at any given time, and

to provide appropriate conditions to meet those. Thus, a teacher serves as the conduit for a worthwhile learning experience. Dewey says it is not enough that certain materials and methods work well with certain individuals but not with others. Similarly, it is not enough that the messiness in collaborative piano study has worked for some but not others.

Together with continuity, interaction, and objective environment, collateral learning will form enduring attitudes from learners. Learner's likes and dislikes are important attitudes indicative of a desire for future learning, or a lack thereof. "If impetus in this direction is weakened instead of being intensified, something much more than mere lack of preparation takes place" (Dewey, 1938, p. 48). How about Ellen's karaoke machine struggle? She was losing impetus to learn further from the way she experienced learning. Under such circumstances, learners are unable to connect to next experiences positively, according to Dewey. They might quit learning altogether. If Ellen has not gotten bored playing the Tchaikovsky concerto in studio accompanying, she soon will, unless she is able to coach others as a way to re-engage. It is on the teacher to institute conditions that cultivate a favorable present experience that impacts the future.

Education is synonymous with growth and maturity to Dewey. Training is growth, but training is more behavioral; it is not an education. Education is to know how to apply the skills and knowledge acquired to achieve intellectual freedom. Knowing how to play the C major scale is from training, but knowing when to use the scale is education. Education is independence of mind. When Andrew and Kyle realized they were not too young to be having good ideas, they gained their independence. Education is also knowing something deeply as well as broadly. We should learn a few things deeply, and also be curious and open to investigate broadly even if we specialize in certain things. Education is to give us those capacities - both vertical and horizontal

- to master something and use it in real life in order to achieve our intellectual independence. Collaborative pianists are experts in this broad field, but are they getting an education? Perhaps professionalization and training is education? If their program study is just training, are we here to train pianists like medical doctors, lawyers, or soldiers?

Education is to grow. It is to enlarge the capacity of life; it is to enlarge the capacity for learner to do this collaborative piano work. Of course, we need training and skills, but how do we apply those skills in a way to evoke agency? Educating for growth has to be experiential and embodied, or we lose students' motivation to engage further. Dewey's conception of growth is not a matter of merely getting better and better at specific things, but a matter of the connections we make horizontally, the ways in which our expertise interacts with and accommodates surprises. We are not just professionals (deep vertical expertise), we are also artists (bringing specialization to wide interests).

How Can We Make It More Humane and Student-Centered?

I worry that the field may not flourish as it might if too few changes are made. I am not sure if we can attract talented students and retain them in the long run. Will we (continue to) have better quality musicians who willingly stay and grow the field if their experiences are so messy? Or will pianists prefer to not enter the collaborative piano degree programs, instead gaining collaborative skills ad hoc? I know that the enrollment rates for collaborative piano are not as high as we would like despite generous scholarships. I also know the quality of pianists are not as high as some faculty members would like to see. We can call ourselves whatever we want – accompanist, collaborator, or equal partner – if the artistic well-being is in jeopardy, it is not sustainable. It is a warning sign for everyone involved.

If people who do this collaborative work suffer, the capacity of the field to do its work is also limited. Let us not forget, the artistry of the field starts with its people, the artists. Being artists starts from being their whole persons, and I am concerned about the artists. I dare say that the lived stories of my participants are an alarm bell: we must better embrace students' personhood by rethinking what it is to teach collaborative piano, and how to teach it. Embracing the people doing this work, honoring their personhood, is to grow the field. I am hesitant to compare collaborative pianists to cogs in the wheel or laborers. Nobody is making them, are they? I am hesitant to describe the experience as oppression and exploitation, but I am afraid there is some, as revealed. Are we happy to just train technicians? Or do we have a moral responsibility to provide more than just training? How can we better enlarge the field of collaborative piano by attracting and *retaining* talent?

The programs we examined provided access to other performers and faculty members, and some specific coursework, but I am not sure if schools fostered enough growth and education. Students grow once they start to use their training with independence to gain new freedom. Once independence is achieved, training ceases to be mere training, it then becomes an education. Andrew, for example, is a success story. He struggled at first with the "many small things" in his training, but once he carved out a space for discovery on his own terms, he gained his independence. He trusted himself. He was able to use what he learned and apply that knowledge to his teaching. How can we help more students to gain independence of mind from their training, and help them become better artists rather than mere workers?

Education to Dewey is to change with society, and education has to include personhood. When a student feels seen and heard, then they blossom in ways that they did not know was possible, just like the way Andrew experienced in his doctorate. Education is intentional, and

what is taught is also changing. School is a space where we can try things out before being thrown into the so-called real world. I say that we must protect that safe space in school for collaborative pianists - they are not yet in the real world, so they need sufficient guidance and protections. If their program experience is disconnected and chaotic, it negatively impacts their future experience. The purpose of conservatory and classical music skills training is to continue tradition, is by its nature *not* to change with time. Traditional education has established routines with plans and programs handed down from the past, one that focuses on discipline and cultural heritage (Dewey, 1909). And vocational or occupational schools such as conservatories, is to train students for certain skills. Walking in the beaten path is easier than incorporating something new, but I urge my field to think about how we can be more humane to our students by centering their needs. Why matter? If talented students lose the impetus to engage further, they will leave this field sooner or later. Do we not want to attract and retain talents, and better grow our field for decades to come? The curricula, how much has changed to reflect our current needs? As Kyle wondered, should he learn so much diction and so little language?

It is interesting that Anne Epperson, who established many notable programs in the U.S., said that "my own formal schooling soon took a backseat to the work with Heifetz, which was an incredible educational experience" (qtd. in Wenger, 2008). That was before collaborative piano programs existed. Are programs in the 2020s, five decades after the inception of the first collaborative piano programs, intentionally designed with a similar mindset? Should formal schooling take the backseat with the presence of practical hands-on skills? If the collaborative piano education is training and professionalization, I think it would benefit significantly with more educational elements. So here is my humble question to the field of collaborative piano and

partners at large: what is education in collaborative piano, and how can we make it more humane and student-centered?

If we want to produce more wonderful artists rather than karaoke machine-like workers, we need to think deeply about the problems and dangers in our field with an open mind. Dewey says education is growth, and growth leads to more growth. What good is it to collaborative piano students if they are robbed of the desire to learn more, to go further on this path? As Dewey (1938) said,

> What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur. (p. 49)

Education as growth should be an ever-present process. That means, attentive care must be given to the conditions that nurtures each present experience. A worthwhile present experience positively impacts the future experience, and the opposite rings true, too. Traditional schools tend to sacrifice the present for a remote future, and the space that we are in for collaborative piano is traditional. If more emphasis is not placed on instituting conditions for favorable present experience, then the future is unlikely to be positive experiences.

The pedagogical philosophy of collaborative piano must be reexamined, along with the master-apprentice model conventionally applied to classical music training in conservatories and universities. The irony is that we are losing artistry in our approach of master-apprentice model of skills training. We are losing the artistry, the person. The problem is not only about these degree programs of collaborative piano, it is the pedagogy, the approach that we teach across the

board in classical music. A more wholistic approach would be beneficial to learners. Just as Andrew said, the small things were not important; let us not get lost in a million details. It is the current pedagogy that encourages a focus on the many tiny details, focusing on a fraction that is not perfect. We use a deficit model that is not learner-centered. That is anxiety taking us away from the present, as Andrew described. We must keep a balance between producing a product versus having a process. As it now appears, too many of the experiences are outcome driven, and too much was focused on the product over the entire process. Education, after all, is a process. If we are trying to develop artists, we must start with the individual. How can we bring in greater educational value to these students?

Education and skill building are not mutually exclusive nor are they a simple binary. There is a rigid notion in the field of classical music training that we have to be master-apprentice model to attain excellence. As observed, collaborative piano students were disempowered. They all lack agency to some extent. If not changed, disempowerment will grow into resentment and anger, and negatively impact the succeeding generations. It gets more complicated with scholarship and money in professionalization. By leading from student strengths and student-centered approaches, we can still achieve excellence, I argue. It may look different. Maybe not every pianist is able to do everything, but whatever they do, they will love. In rethinking the philosophy of pedagogy in collaborative piano, we must encourage more autonomy of learning and better pedagogies. Content specialists may not necessarily be the best pedagogues. Teaching requires intentional reflection and strategy to break away from the past. What is an educative experience for collaborative pianists in classical music, and who defines that?

Recommendations for Future Research

Some ideas emerged during data collection, but they were outside the scope of this study. I suggest the following topics as potential areas of study warranting future investigation, hoping to help others to think about how to teach collaborative piano and its richness of possibilities.

Race, Ethnicity and Gender

The field of collaborative piano in the instrumental track has mostly Asian female pianists, as reported by all participants. Languages can be a barrier of vocal works, especially for those who these pianists use English as their second language to learn another language(s). As Kyle and Andrew saw it, the vocal piano track has more racial and gender diversity. It is perceived as more "white." Poetry, languages, coaching, and interpretation all play a role. Female coaches, as observed, have more stereotypes that they have to fight against. How does race, ethnicity and gender affect a collaborative pianist's experience, especially female coaches?

Employing an Inductive or Quantitative Approach

This qualitative study used in-depth observations from a small sample to generate broader principles, a bottom-up approach. It is inductive, naturalistic, comprehensive and holistic. It would be beneficial for future study to apply a deductive reasoning, a top-down approach, using theory, hypothesis, or frameworks to test a larger sample. A more quantitative approach is suitable for examining cause-and-effect, making generalization, or measuring outcomes (Maxwell, 2013). This approach would allow better determination of whether collaborative piano students achieved educational objectives or not through the lens of the researcher or instructor, for example. Other questions that have to do with "how much", "how often, or "what" would also benefit a quantitative approach using methods including surveys, experiments, or statistics.

Creating positions: Instrumental Coaches

I cannot help but wonder how much is discussed about a discrepancy in job availability. I notice an obvious difference between the instrumental and vocal realm; it is expected of vocal pianists to coach singers, but instrumental pianists are not expected to coach instrumentalists, at least rarely. As reported, however, most seasoned instrumental pianists eventually function as coaches to young instrumentalists, e.g. staff pianists in schools. They are still labeled as staff pianists, not coaches. I wonder, can we draw more similarities between vocal and instrumental pianists? Specifically, is there space to create more coaching opportunities for instrumental pianists?

This difference of expectation in coaching translates into job prospects. There are more job openings for vocal coaches, but few, if any, for instrumental coaches, because the label for instrumental coaches does not exist. At best, they are staff pianists, which does not necessarily capture the expectations of coaching students or teaching a subject. If Andrew had stayed in the instrumental realm, he could perhaps have gotten a staff pianist job, but no hope for a professorship like the one he has now, according to him. Similarly, for Ellen, she was not aware of any fresh graduates becoming a professor of collaborative piano until they have years of freelance experience. There seems to be two systems at work resulting in a discrepancy of job prospects.

Will it make sense to create positions in instrumental *coaching*? What other ways to maximize the impact of instrumental pianists beyond the act of playing the piano? Andrew had an idea: how about hiring staff pianists who can also be teachers of collaborative piano to other young solo piano students? This way, these staff pianists can train young pianists to be potential collaborators, multiplying the usage of existing pianists in any given school. Moreover, these

staff pianists can tap into the pedagogical space, and better incorporate their talent besides playing on the piano; many great collaborative pianists are equipped to teach with their doctoral degrees, as was the case for my participants. This new entry point may be a way to reframe Ellen's "karaoke machine" problem from over repetition, coaching as a way to engage and re-engage pianists who experience fatigue. As Dewey said, experiences that arouses curiosity and strengthen initiative, will help learners to carry over challenging times. Future studies may benefit from looking into the feasibility of this idea.

Unionization?

As a follow-up to Freire's idea in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, unionization may potentially improve the conditions and treatments of the oppressed. Workers are expected to work long hours with low pay, knowing that they can be easily replaced if they make further demand. According to Freire, these workers are being treated more like objects than humans, as their full potential to humanhood is restricted. To improve workers' situation, they first need to come together as a group, to name the problem, and present a solution in their own language to demand change. The key is here to *band together* for *the same yearning.* If all collaborative pianists in a school join together and go on strike until their demands are met, they will likely have a better chance of transforming their treatment. When collaborative pianists stifle their voice as individuals, they also stifle their musical voice. A union may help them find their collective voices. Then, justice might be possible, as oppressors will not hand over their power unless forced. Within the hierarchies and structure of western conservatory, it is worth looking at the feasibility of a union of collaborative pianists from the lens of critical pedagogy. Even though it may only fix the symptoms, it may be a good first step to consider.

What Might an Ideal Program Design Look Like?

It may be worth considering making master's program three years instead of two. According to National Association of School of Music (NASM), credit hours for collaborative piano programs at the master's level (72 credit hours) are generally twice as that of solo piano programs (36 credit hours) (Garrett, 2016). Some collaborative piano programs mandate students to choose one specialty while others do not. There is substantial merit in preparing collaborative piano majors for both tracks, so that they can be prepared for whatever opportunities arise, and make informed decision about their future specialty, if any (Garrett, 2016). As Kyle said, if a new collab has not yet played with singers much, how do they know that they do not want to be in the vocal world? If the idea is to intentionally keep a broad curriculum, maybe it is feasible to consider making a two-year master's program to three years instead, given the sheer volume of information and skills needed to be acquired.

With a lack of clear definition of "collaboration", there is also lost time in a new student's navigation of their study to warrant a longer duration. Should collaborative piano programs be more intentional in clarifying, defining, and categorizing different degrees of collaborating? Chamber music was mistaken by some as core component in collaborative piano study, just as Alisa and Ellen were surprised to learn about coaching and concerto accompaniment at first. Many new students learned about what collaborative piano was actually about after they started their study. Is "accompanying" talked about enough, since it is a term to be "avoided"? If the program articulates these different components and expectation with more intention and clarity, it may help reduce confusions for inexperienced collaborative piano students. A feasibility plan can look into a more reasonably paced three-year program, one that hopes to prevent burnout while keeping the rigor and breadth of study.

We may also consider adding a peer mentoring component to the program design, to address the not-so-obvious, by pairing a more seasoned collaborative piano student with a fresh incoming student to talk about navigating their journeys through big and small observations. “Do I *really* want to work with others?” “Do I like language enough to make a career out of this?” “Or … is it devoid of something?” These are important questions that collaborative pianists must answer truthfully to themselves, whether it is before or during their formal study. The answers may not be easy and obvious. Understanding the “why I am in this” can serve as an anchor point in getting through rough times, which was inevitable to all participants. If the answer is primarily “to pay the bills” or “not having to memorize music,” those alone are unlikely to fuel the engine of becoming a *great* collaborative pianist persevering for years to come. A true desire to prioritize the overall musical product shall come before a sense of ego, which can be hard for many to navigate. Let us not forget Kyle’s comments on resentment; he could hear it in some collaborative pianists’ playing. This sensitive topic warrants more future research.

Student Agency and Preserving the Relationship with Piano

Everyone was overwhelmed, feeling that they had to catch up in order to do the next thing. How come students feel disempowered to say anything? Are there ways to carve out space for students to feel more in control? Are faculty being controlling in determining the “only ways” to produce a product? What are some ways to produce a stronger sense of agency? If so, what would that look like? Would that look like giving students a free range to choose whatever number of practicum hours they can manage? Would that look like freely choosing their specialty without having to learn both instrumental and vocal repertoire if they wanted to? Is the pursuit of a long repertoire list really worth the trade-off of artistic well-being? Should money be involved in their training? I believe that students know what is educative to them, and we shall

let them lead the way. What we can do is to support them in achieving their goals, rather than defining their goals for them. We may not even need to dictate a certain number of studio hours as part of the curriculum. High-performing students tend to be naturally motivated to achieve their best, and by empowering them to choose what matters to them most, it is a more student-centered way to grow.

If the goal is to preserve collaborative piano students' relationships with piano despite their heavy workload, why they are doing what they are doing deserves a closer look. If pianists do not feel satisfied from their own playing, how do we expect them to keep going? What can be done to better prevent burn out and encourage sustainability? This will take a village to figure out conditions for sustainability. How can we make this more humane? How can we make it more student-centered?

Chapter VII: Epilogue

I cannot help but to feel a continued resonance with my participants with the many immediate concerns of collaborative piano in training, particularly in their master's degrees: rhythmic synchronization, vertical alignment of the text, and the caution around not playing too loudly. One may say that pianists are always too loud! It is the nuts and bolts that occupy the forefront of our awareness as music collaborators. Andrew constantly tried to catch up, Ellen and Alisa worked hard to achieve collaborative skills, and Kyle's instrumental colleagues even became worse pianists in an attempt to play with singers. All of it, I certainly was there, too, worried about many small details, and almost forgot how to play the piano. Am I pedaling too much? Did I come in too early? Was there enough bass? Lots of noise in my head, rules to follow, and I did not feel enough freedom and confidence. Examining my own journey turns out to be an encouragement to better help others, my tribe members, to find their "unsung tunes and theories" (Vinz, 1997).

In my own becoming, I feared that I was lacking as a pianist and musician. But when I listened to some of my recordings later (the well-prepared ones, that is), there was soul and expression there. I barely noticed the nuts-and-bolts problems - they were so miniscule to be perceivable. Listening back, I was in awe of my own musicality; this is exactly how I would like this second movement of Fauré Violin Sonata to sound. It was not all as bad as I remember. How come there was such a big contrast from how I felt and what it sounded like? Would it help, as Andrew suggested, to lead with musical intentionality rather than focusing on achieving the nuts and bolts? For me, probably. Many of my learning experiences were disconnected, and I was clearly, in retrospect, scatterbrained. The thousand little worries in my head fed off of my little insecurity: I lack experience, I am young, my language is weak. How about remembering that I

do have ideas, and good ideas! I may have even succeeded in gaining my independence from my studies by transforming training to education, at least moments of it. Going back in time, I would tell my Then-Self this: As long as I focus on my informed musical intentions, the collaborative skills would land, and that I am capable as a musician. I would assure myself that I needed not to worry too much; instead, redirect inward to nurture my own little voice, focus on the present, make it enjoyable. Through conducting this research, I have found comfort in knowing that I was not alone in feeling many dissonances in my master's, the most challenging stage of switching into collaborative piano.

I would also warn my Then-Self about the most salient skills as a collaborator, sight-reading. Do work hard to become good at sight-reading; stay in the moment with the music, do not let fear overwhelm me, get used to leaving out notes without guilt, and play with musical conviction. In retrospect, I may have overdone it; I became over-reliant on my sight-reading skills, to read songs, orchestra reductions, sonatas, new music, opera scores, almost anything.

It is also this exact skill that I worked hardest on that put me in the danger zone; I never felt that I knew the music well enough. I spread myself too thin in doing too many things at the same time. As Dewey (1938) describes it, these many small instant "satisfactions" promoted a careless attitude which hindered me from achieving my fullest. I probably also placed myself beyond the zone of proximal development, so I ended up not really learning as well as I could have. I gained a 50-page long repertoire list three years after my training compared to the few pages that I started with. But what do I really know? There is a phrase in Chinese, water sliding over the back of a duck, referring to the transient nature of the act, that nothing is absorbed meaningfully. Though water momentarily stayed on the back of a duck, it essentially slipped off the feathers soon afterwards, as if nothing had happened. After three years in the collaborative

piano program, while I surveyed a large amount of music, I felt that I did not really know the majority of the repertoire well enough with my own artistic conviction.

Third, I would advise myself to go the extra mile to further understand the musical material, analyze it, and really make it my own. Essentially, slow down, at least tolerate the slow down. Get to know the words, mark down the orchestration, take note of the bowing. It will be worth it, generating my own library of collection and my own thoughts. This is a long-term game plan and may be competing with short-term deadlines. But setting aside space to do so will boost my own confidence and make lasting impact on the music that is "my own version." That means I would have to free up time to do this, maybe by saying no to a couple hours of accompanying pre-college lessons, maybe taking on fewer paid gigs off-campus. In retrospect, rejecting half of the short-term projects that I agreed to do would have been wise for my own educational benefit.

Also, I must actively guard my educational space like Andrew did, to attend to my own needs. "Karaoke machine" – how accurately Ellen captured my state of being in many instances. I put myself in that situation to repeat the repertoire I knew; nobody made me. I did it partially to maintain my working relationships and pay my bills with minimum wage work. So much I could have chosen differently to allow time for nurturing my artistry instead. I was not, at that time, consciously aware of the preservation of tradition being our paradigm in music schools. As Allsup (2012) maintains, if students are taught in the service of history, preservation of musical tradition keeps tradition safe from change. But if students are the locus of attention and aid, tradition sparks innovation. I would certainly love to create space for potential innovation.

Not to forget, sharing and constructing knowledge is a social interaction. I am here to learn with others. We form experiences together. I would remind my Then-Self to put more emphasis on cultivating deeper relationships with my peers. I would also have reminded myself

that the monetary compensation during my study should not be as important as I thought it was. A genuine learning experience is far more meaningful than having a few hundred dollars. Building meaningful relationships with colleagues may not have been the easiest with money in the picture, but I should have at least tried.

These are the stories of my tribe. Along with my own journey, what do I learn from these stories? What does it mean to be a truth teller with fearless speech in a community? Maybe it is about me, about my tribe members' stories, but it is also about the structure that we are in. I seemed to have discovered stories of a field that does not quite know how to define itself and how to teach its own complex topics. I am lucky to have had the most dedicated and supportive teachers during my becoming, which I am eternally grateful for, but that did not make my experience any less messy and challenging. It is the problems of our field, and the ways the degree programs are structured. The ways in which we act in a profession can precisely shift how things are going if we change our ways of conduct (Foucault, 2001). It is my humble hope that we find ways to make more room for the learner, to focus more educational values in the training process, and to grow the field sustainably.

At the end of the day, the most precious is my relationship with the piano. No matter what music I play, solo piano, duet, mixed ensemble, opera reductions, art songs, it is how I feel at the piano that matters. It is my love for piano playing that fuels me through the good times and bad times. In retrospect, have I compromised my relationship with the piano in exchange for the skills I needed to acquire? Did I push myself to perform tasks prematurely too often that it became a norm? Perhaps, I did, rather often. Did I have to do that in order to grow outside of my comfort zone? Probably so to some extent. If I were to do this again, I would have toned down

my ambition, trimmed down the number of hours of accompanying that I did, and really focused on the quality, and follow my love for the music.

If I had a magic wand to experience my education in collaborative piano once again, I would lead with Dewey's (1938) central point of experiential learning, to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences. I, as the learner, am in control to lead with my little voice, for I have agency to shape my own experience, starting from many small decisions I choose for what constitutes educative experience - *it has to be educative to me*. It is the many small moments, enjoyable moments, that lead to sustainable growth in the rest of my artistic life. I wish that every newcomer to the field can afford to guide their path with a torch, a torch of love for what they do, to go far, and with enjoyment.

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