

## **Accompanying: Mind Reading for the Non-Telepathic**

Portland Regional LDS Church Music Workshop

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### The Basics

#### **1. Preparation**

- Know your part
- Know the solo/choir part
- Know how they fit together
- Musical “Spatial Awareness”: Have a mental overview of the piece. Know where you are and what is coming up. This allows you to adapt as needed

Come to rehearsal prepared. “Mind-reading” takes concentration and effort—and being able to look up from the notes here and there. Rehearsal is not the time to be learning your notes, buried in the notes or stumbling over tricky rhythms.

#### **2. Know Who You Are Working With**

A good accompanist is adaptable. Are you playing for an experienced singer or a nervous newbie? How might you adjust to either? Experienced singers/conductors usually have clear ideas of what they want. Newer singers often need suggestions and ideas to help them out.

#### **3. Carry On**

Keep the flow! Perfectionism is your enemy. Nobody cares if you really can get all of the notes in practice. Know what to drop. If you know that you are not going to be able to get something right by the performance, alter it. Cross out notes if need be. But, at all costs, KEEP THE FLOW and KEEP THE BEAT. Maybe you play left hand only for a measure. But don’t stop!

#### **4. Follow By Knowing Where You’re Going**

To be able to follow it is crucial to know the solo/choir part well. You need to know what is coming to be able to anticipate and listen for any differences (i.e. fermatas, breaths, ritardandos) that the soloist or conductor may make.

#### **5. A Helping Hand/Make Them Look Good**

If the soloist/choir lacks confidence, you can discreetly help by adding melody notes into the accompaniment, setting the example for dynamics, etc. Your job is to make them look good. If they skip a measure, skip it with them. If they come in early, jump to where they are.

#### **6. Coaching**

Is it appropriate to make corrections if the singer is making mistakes? Gauge how much rehearsal time you have. If you have time to address and fix the mistake, then point it out in a polite but straightforward way, (i.e. “The rhythm in measure 6 is different than you were singing it. Can we go over that again?”). However, know when to let it drop. If they don’t get it or if you just don’t have enough rehearsal time to fix the problem, just ignore it and adapt.

#### **7. Talk it Out**

Use rehearsals to ask questions. If you are uncertain, ask! Don’t be afraid to ask the conductor to demonstrate how he/she conducts cutoffs, crescendos or fermatas. Discuss body language with a soloist; ask what signals or gestures they use to communicate certain things.

### The Fine Art of Following

- Listen and watch! One eye and one ear for the soloist/conductor.
- Make sure the soloist/conductor is in a place where you can see them (Insist on this! It is important.)
- Listen for breaths.
- Watch for body movements.

- Listen for the consonants. The consonant comes before the beat. The vowel happens on the beat.
- Be aware of places where you set the tempo (where the soloist has long held notes and you move underneath) and where the soloist sets the tempo. Discuss with the soloist how they would like it to move when you have the lead.

### Accompany Me or Are You Just Along for the Ride?

- It's a collaboration

I prefer the term “collaborative pianist” to accompanist. It is an artistic collaboration, much like a partner dance or a duet—both parts are important. The accompanist is not just background. You can make or break the performance.

- Play from a centered base in your back, hips and torso

A good accompanist plays from his or her body, not just the fingers. No, I don't mean dramatic excess movement—this hinders your musicality and your connection with the soloist. Stay centered on your hips and play from a strong torso and back, leaning slightly forward. Your entire upper body is involved in creating the sound.

- Communicate with your body

Your body can be an important tool for communication between the soloist or conductor. Do not underestimate the importance of using your eyes, small gestures or significant looks to stay together. With a good accompanist there is a physical synergy between him/her and the conductor or soloist.

- Don't be boring

My biggest pet peeve with accompanists is when they fade into the background like old wallpaper. Many are afraid of “standing out” too much or overpowering the soloist and so instead settle for being continuously boring. Your musicality (or lack thereof) makes a direct impact on the performance. Boring and bland is just as bad as overpowering.

- Don't overpower, complement

Pet peeves on playing boring aside, it would look awful if a couple was dancing and one half of the pair was wildly more flamboyant than the other. You want to match and complement each other. That said, if your other half is expressionless you can nudge them along a little.

- Dynamic contrast

Make loud loud and soft soft. But your loud should be slightly *less* loud than the soloist and your soft should be slightly *more* soft than the soloist.

- Support the soloist/choir

For a choir or soloist to feel comfortable singing loud, they need to feel “supported” by the accompaniment. If the accompaniment is too soft, it is very difficult for the soloist or choir to feel comfortable being loud. Don't be afraid to be loud when it's supposed to be loud. Many amateur choirs NEED the accompanist to urge them on and set the example of dynamic contrast.

- Be aware of the mood and the spirit you are trying to bring

Are you playing for a worship service or concert? Is your expression (or lack thereof) creating or hindering a worshipful atmosphere? Either too much or too little expression can hinder the spirit of the music. Keep in mind the spirit and purpose of the music you are trying to convey.

- Are you in the foreground, background or some combination of both? Is it a duet?

Know when you are in the foreground or the background. Are you playing a repetitive background figure? Do you have a melodic line that needs to be brought out? Do you need bring out the bass line to balance out the solo line? Know if you are “upstage” or “downstage.”