

Collaborative Resilience

Erika Switzer



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AS CARETAKERS WITHIN THE ECOSYSTEM of music performance and education, collaborative pianists bear the deep responsibility of meeting the diverse needs of colleagues, students, and institutions. We are witness to the inner workings of our communities' fragile infrastructures, our powerful influence fostering connection and communication at the foundational level. If we are well resourced and skilled at maintaining healthy professional relationships within our collaborations, our ecosystem can sustainably flourish. However, if we deplete our resources to the point of exhaustion or injury, our vast ecosystem begins to reflect our own collapse of care.

Many years ago, as an undergraduate pianist interested in collaboration, I participated in a staged pastiche-style vocal recital. It was a satirical operatic audition situation in which I explored the character of an old (male), downtrodden, curmudgeonly, vaguely lecherous, and begrudging accompanist. Rudely exposing his impatience and boredom, he drank whiskey between arias, muttered judgments under his breath, and eventually slouched off the stage without a backward glance. It strikes me now that even as a beginning collaborator, I was intuitively aware of the stereotypes and professional hazards of our field, if only to poke fun. In the context of my current efforts to experience and encourage collaborative resilience, this memory resurfaced as a comedic warning against the path of depletion. Basically: Do not do what *that guy* did.

As our culture becomes skilled at acknowledging historic and systemic barriers within classical music hierarchies, the audition satire takes on more layers. It wasn't individual or personal failings that led to stereotypes of the exhausted accompanist, it was the *system* that undervalued this work to the point of inequitable compensation, unrealistic expectations of service, and exclusion from the higher echelons of the performance world. While there are many rewarding elements in a collaborative career, success at the highest level, especially for those who do not identify as white males, requires perseverance against a rigid system of rank and privilege with seemingly scarce opportunities for advancement. That sense of scarcity tends to promote behaviors that can further alienate us from our colleagues and from community support.

In reorienting our systems toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, we inherently acknowledge that it takes more than perseverance to overcome such obstacles. Whereas the internal fortitude of perseverance costs energy, such that we may acquire emotional debt, systemic change universally invests in its

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constituents through equitable treatment and compensation, making resilience an institutionally supported commodity. In the meantime, as we persevere, resilience must be cultivated by individuals and within communities. In my own work, the essential elements of collaborative resilience are restorative piano practice, socially conscious communication habits, and regular celebration of accomplishments. Taken together, these elements express a global respect for ourselves and for others.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICE

Learning to practice well has required me to unlearn some basic assumptions about what it means to be a good pianist. Primarily, I had to release the notion that talent equals success. This mistaken belief had long restricted me from a self-compassionate approach to pianistic development. If I could not immediately play something well, I subconsciously assumed I was not talented enough and, to avoid that painful thought, quickly distracted myself with other tasks rather than engage with curiosity and problem solving skills. Restorative piano practice has taught me to suspend judgment while seeking physical comfort and the enjoyment of efficient solutions at the keyboard.

After noticing that it took me an average of three days (not three minutes!) to integrate the basic coordination of a new piece in such a way that it felt comfortable in my body, I consciously began adapting my practice schedule. Basic coordination, for me, encompasses an overall sense of comfort and release in the keys, a clear mental map of the technical landscape (melody, figuration, counterpoint), and a basic awareness of phrasing and text structures. When these elements are integrated without immediate time pressure and with the inclusion of sleep cycles for the ingraining of information in the brain, a healthy and robust foundation for complex choreography is laid. If the foundation of physical coordination is free from anxiety, trust can take root in our fundamental relationship with the music. A profound wellness at the center of our preparation is a source of resilience, both for ourselves and for those we care for in our collaborations.

Three days might sound like too much or very little time, depending on individual experience. To be clear, I am not describing how much time I need from first read-

ing to stage-worthy performance. That is a completely different math. I am also not talking about the pressing situations that arise in which we must scramble or sight read for any number of valid reasons. I am describing an intentional mindset for the time we spend alone at the piano, forming a safe space for each song, aria, or movement in which to anchor a nurturing coordination of body and imagination. Rather than rushing to win the race of musical digestion, restorative practice peacefully expands the learning capacity of the brain and body. As I intentionally ceased to bring anxious habits into the practice room, I began to discover the soothing power of specificity and focus when applied to the tasks of score reading. The more conscious I became of intentional physical execution, the fewer problems I unwittingly ingrained as I learned music. With fewer bad habits to undo, good habits take root at an accelerated pace, and acceleration of good habits fosters confidence by creating a cycle of positive reinforcement.

Of course, it is not always possible to keep to an ideal preparation schedule, especially in the midst of a busy semester. Overlapping projects and multiple deadlines have a way of wreaking havoc on available practice time and mental space. This happens to us all, and it's ok! What is more concerning is the impact of havoc on our wellbeing. This is where restorative practice can help. It is not an additional daily task at which to succeed or fail, but an approach to musical learning that accompanies us through the busy and the quiet times as a reassuring road map. If we can prioritize health through unpressured practice, we then can make the occasional necessary exceptions with protection from the cumulative detrimental effects, both physical and emotional, of constant last minute preparation. When persevering through havoc, restorative practice is returning to the bench and finding comfort in the work we do for our own sake. Every pianist knows from personal experience that nothing can be deeply absorbed when we are rushed. If we have to learn something faster than our comfort allows, we must be sure to acknowledge to ourselves (and maybe to our partners) that we are playing in a compromised state. Our bodies won't be entirely free and our minds will be inundated with unprocessed information, adrenaline fueling some version of fight or flight. Playing in a compromised state can easily become

a default if it is regularly repeated without compassionate interference.

Whether an individual needs two, five, or ten days to find comfort, restorative practice honors the cyclical roles of repetition and rest in our learning processes. The bulk of our practiced work is digested by the brain while we sleep. If we practice rushed choreography and superficial understanding, our brains will digest and then reproduce that experience along with its anxiety-induced limited growth potential. However, if we intentionally program physical and mental comfort at the piano, our brains will instead integrate that higher quality experience along with its potential for exponential growth.

CONSCIOUS COMMUNICATION

As we move from preparation toward collaboration, communication establishes the path forward. From logistical planning and musical discussion to relationship building and physical cue reading, our partnerships require diverse communication skills. I have personally found communication to be the most challenging and humbling aspect of my work, whether it is in the classroom or leading up to a performance. It is a mirror to my capacity for compassion and self-trust, and it frequently reveals the lessons I have yet to learn.

With more available avenues of communication than ever, it often feels that we have increasing opportunities to miscommunicate. This is certainly confirmed by the regular conversations I have with academic colleagues about the unsustainable volume of daily email correspondence, along with a regular sense of frustration at its contents. Add to this texting, messaging on any number of platforms, the occasional phone call, and we have a whirlwind of sources of information to track and hold in our consciousness. It is exhausting and it leads to miscommunications that seem most often to occur when we transition from logistical planning to matters of opinion. Emojis, as entertaining as they are, are simply not adequate to fill the digital-emotional gap when we have complex situations to address, especially when we hope for our collaborative relationships to thrive. A wise colleague of mine often says, “If it’s not about times or dates, pick up the phone.” I think it is excellent advice. Receiving the nuanced inflections of speech is reassuring and informative. Talking builds connection.

Beyond defining and agreeing to a preferred medium of communication, we are responsible to our collaborators for how we navigate shared time and work. Cultivating an ability to listen deeply is the most profound action we can take. With the proliferation of slow movements around the world—slow food, Cittaslow, *The Slow Professor* (2016), to name but a few—now is a resonant time to consider the practice of slow communication and its primary goal of understanding the needs and feelings of others. Slow communication prioritizes understanding by asking listeners to fully receive the speaker’s thoughts before considering their own response. Rather than simply waiting for the right moment to share one’s own opinion, slow listeners ask follow-up questions and give time for the speaker to say more. Slow communication is particularly important when conflict arises, but even in peaceful exchanges it promotes empathy.

Fortunately, as collaborators, we have trained our listening skills over decades. We know how to listen both inwardly and outwardly and are adept at holding both directions simultaneously in our minds as we play. If we bring this attentive listening to our communication, we intrinsically express appreciation for our partners and their work, before saying a word. And, in truly hearing what others have to say, we care for their experience and acknowledge their wisdom. Listening honors the inherent value of individuality, opening a safe space for vulnerability and the establishment of trust. When expressed appreciation anchors our partnerships, we can promote collaborative resilience with the momentum of reciprocity.

CELEBRATING COMPLETION

After all the excitement and stress of preparation and performance are done, where does the forward momentum go? How does it dissipate? How do we process the immense investment we have made and recognize the outcomes? From my experience, postperformance energy is typically reinvested into the next project—often immediately, without the benefit of rest or reflection.

Emily and Amelia Nagoski make a compelling case for “completing the cycle” in their excellent book *Burnout* (2020). They describe the physiological need to process stress through practices of awareness and release, nam-

ing processing tools such as social engagement, breath work, and physical exercise. Differentiating stressors from the stress we experience in our bodies, the Nagoski sisters describe how these processing tools can facilitate the transformation of the lingering physiological reality resulting from adrenaline-driven experiences. They explain that processing stress is key to avoiding burn-out. If we complete the cycle of stress and release, we can then move on to the next challenge without latent encumbrances.

Pandemic life has made a powerful example of the dangers of incomplete cycles. Performances that were able to happen, virtually or otherwise, were under significant restrictions: Rehearsals were logistically problematic, ensembles were physically distanced, and the dialogue between performer(s) and audience was severely limited. An experience that normally carries a predictable stress load was suddenly inundated with extreme additional pressures. Simultaneously, outlets for stress release decreased. Typical postconcert social celebrations were not possible, exercise was limited by gym closures or lack of access to safe outdoor spaces, and sustaining meditative practices such as breath work or yoga at home where others were busy learning or working virtually was, at best, an exercise in patience. So by now, I am sure we can all viscerally appreciate the vital benefits of completing stress cycles.

Celebrating successes, acknowledging disappointments, marking the completion of projects and semesters: it is all physiologically necessary to our health and resilience. Find the practice that works best for you and start releasing that stress (Figure 1)!

Resilience, by definition, is the ability to return to original form after being stretched. As collaborators, we are frequently stretched by the demands of an incredible array of responsibilities, relationships, and repertoires. Our resilience depends on the integration of awareness practices that gently encourage continual renewal. If we cultivate personal daily renewal, we also strengthen our musical ecosystem with our wholehearted presence. Now, as the boundaries of music finally expand to embrace diversity, which will undoubtedly increase the resilience of our field in general, we must rely on mutual respect and inclusive practices to undo the harm of past exclusions, including those we ourselves have propagated or experienced.



Figure 1.

My wish is to advocate for a self-compassionate approach to collaboration, one that allows pianists to benefit from the very care we extend to others. These are the principles I share with the collaborative piano fellows at Bard College, who, like all staff pianists around the world, work *incredibly hard* to ensure the success of others. And, these are the principles I return to when I find myself depleted. I know we have all been there. It is comforting to remember that we are never alone.

Erika Switzer is an accomplished collaborative pianist who performs regularly in major concert settings around the world, including at New York's Weill Hall (Carnegie), Geffen Hall, Frick Collection, and Bargemusic, at the Kennedy Center, the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the Spoleto Festival (Charleston, SC). Her performances have been called "precise and lucid" by the *New York Times*, and Renaud Machart of *Le Monde* described her as "one of the best collaborative pianists I have ever heard; her sound is deep, her interpretation intelligent, refined, and captivating."

From 2000–2007, Switzer performed and studied in Germany, an experience that profoundly inspired and shaped her work. During that time, she appeared at Festspielhaus Baden-Baden and in the Munich Winners & Masters series, and won numerous awards, including best pianist prizes at the Robert Schumann, Hugo Wolf, and Wigmore Hall International Song Competitions.

Switzer has long been a leader in envisioning and promoting the future of art song performance. In 2009, in collaboration with soprano Martha Guth, she founded the organization Sparks & Wiry Cries, which commissions new works, presents the *songSLAM* festival in New York City, and publishes *The Art Song Magazine*. She is also devoted to new music, and has recently premiered new compositions at the 5 Boroughs Music Festival, Brooklyn Art Song Society; and Vancouver's Music on Main.

Switzer collaborates with a range of top singers. A frequent collaborator is baritone Tyler Duncan, and as a duo, Switzer and Duncan have performed in major concert halls and music festivals around the world. She is also an active teacher, serving on the music faculty at Bard College and Conservatory of Music. Switzer holds a doctorate from The Juilliard School and lives in New York's Hudson Valley.