

# Presiding

At The

# Pianoforte

## A Brief History Of Accompanying

By Richard Masters

**O**n a wintry morning in February 1860, New Yorkers perusing the *Times* came across a small item announcing forthcoming “Amusements.”<sup>1</sup> Among the advertised events were performances of *The Barber of Seville* (featuring singing sensation Adelina Patti<sup>2</sup>) and Laura Keane’s Theater Company, which planned on presenting “in consequence of...unabated public desire” the Scottish drama *Jeanie Deans: or the Heart of the Mid-Lothian*.<sup>3</sup> The second-to-last entertainment on the list offered a “Grand Concert” given by Mrs. Jason H. Barclay; this concert was to feature a solo pianist, a virtuoso cornet player, a tenor, a baritone, and last, “Mr. H.C. Timm, Accompanist.” This was the first-ever appearance of the word “accompanist” in the United States’ paper of record, a word that would

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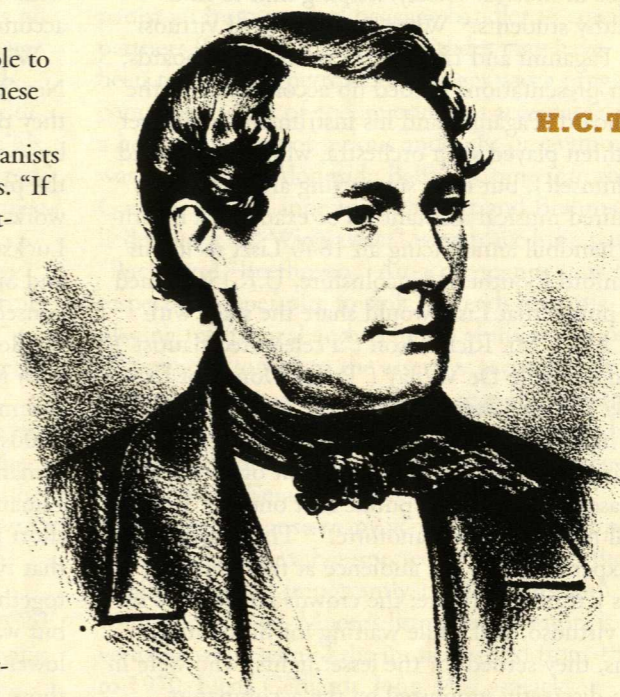
be alternately reviled and adored for the next 150 years. Although attempts have been made to alter or dislodge it (“collaborator,” “collaborative pianist”), the moniker has stuck, though the role of accompanist has fluctuated over time. Once the awkward, sickly sibling of the glamorous concert pianist, the accompanist has come into his own; in

the past 100 years, accompanying has received increased critical acknowledgement, achieved respectability as a legitimate musical profession and has been firmly established in academia with the creation of hundreds of accompanying programs throughout the United States. Famous solo pianists vie to present lieder evenings and chamber musicales, and thousands of talented youngsters aspire to a life of musical collaboration. The scales have tipped for the time being in favor of accompanying as an art form, but this current state of accomplishment was reached via an arduous process.

Accompanying was not a new development in 1860. The art form existed for several centuries in the hands of talented keyboardists who busily realized figured bass accompaniments for instrumentalists and singers. During the baroque era, the art of accompanying occupied a unique position of privilege; no keyboardist could hope to compete for any sort of position without possessing a high level of accompanying ability. Some commentators have gone so far as to describe the harpsichord as an instrument used primarily for accompanying, having displaced the lute roughly at the same time the modern violin family overtook the viol consort.<sup>4</sup> The importance of accompanying in this era can be seen in the production of hundreds of accompanying treatises written throughout the baroque period.<sup>5</sup> These treatises detail numerous methods for inventive realizations and appropriate

support for partners; many gems still applicable to the modern accompanist can be taken from these ancient instructionals. The violinist Francesco Geminiani’s treatise of 1755 warns of accompanists who don’t pay close attention to their partners. “If an accompaner thinks of nothing else but satisfying his own Whim and Caprice, he may perhaps be said to play well, but will certainly be said to accompany ill.”<sup>6</sup> Geminiani’s favorite accompanist was a German emigré living in England, a keyboardist so trusted that Geminiani invited him to accompany a performance before King George I. The accompanist? One Georg Friedrich Händel.<sup>7</sup> Even aristocratic amateurs appreciated a good accompanist; C.P.E. Bach was prized for his inventive accompaniments to the flute stylings of his boss, Frederick the Great.<sup>8</sup>

The story of figured bass’s gradual disappearance could fill an article of its own, as could a description of the appearance of new notational methods for songs and sonatas, but suffice to say, by Mozart’s prime in the 1790s, methods of notation had reached a stage of development that would hold until the 20th century. Songs were now written on three staves: two for the keyboardist and one for the singer, freeing the keyboardist from the monotony of constant doubling.<sup>9</sup> Sonatas and other instrumental works featured an independent keyboard part fully realized for the keyboardist. Continuing in the tradition of great composer-keyboardists like Bach and Händel, Mozart and Beethoven often accompanied their own works, pieces written with significant keyboard parts suited to the composers’ strengths as performers. In fact, many sonatas of this period were written for solo keyboard, with obbligato violin or cello parts added later by the composer himself or others.<sup>10</sup> Mozart came from a musical family that understood the importance of skilled accompanying; his father’s treatise on violin playing offers many valuable instructions to would-be accompanists, including advice on pacing when dealing with rhythmically challenged soloists.<sup>11</sup> Mozart himself was often engaged as a free-lance accompanist in Vienna, performing at soirées as soloist and collaborator to the point that he told a friend “I have so much to do that often I do not know whether I am on my head or my heels.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps for temperamental reasons, Beethoven seems not to have been as regular a col-



H.C. Timm

laborator as Mozart, though his performing career included some important accompanying appearances. One of the most important concerts of his youth was as accompanist to the cellist Jean-Louis Duport in a command performance of the two Sonatas Op. 5 before the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm II.<sup>13</sup> In 1803, Beethoven played the premiere of his own “Kreutzer” Sonata Op. 47, a piece he went so far as to mark “Sonata for piano and violin obbligato,” the title emphasizing the primacy of the keyboard part while admitting the essential nature of the violin contribution.<sup>14</sup> In the works of most classical composers, the accompanying keyboard was not merely a harmonic prop for the star soloist. The period of the meek accompanist was yet to come.

The accompanist we think of today was born with the rise of the public recital and the appearance of the virtuoso. Part of our understanding of the accompanist’s role comes from the evolving concert scene of the 1800s, which only reached the “solo recital” as we know it by the end of that century. For many audience-goers of the early 19th century, a “concert” meant a motley assortment of music presented over the course of a long evening, featuring a wide variety of instrumentalists, singers and others. This potpourri recital grew out of a long tradition of “benefit concerts” in which a musician would present himself and favored col-

