

THE ESSENTIAL SKILLS OF COLLABORATIVE PIANIST FOR VOCAL MUSIC TEACHING

Wang Han,¹ Bhannavichaya Vadhanasiriphongs²

Faculty of Music, Bangkokthonburi University¹⁻²

China¹, Thailand²

Email: 983291239whh@gmail.com,¹ bhannavichaya.vad@bkkthon.ac.th²

Received: February 28, 2025; **Revised:** December 11, 2025; **Accepted:**
December 11, 2025

Abstract

Collaborative pianists play a crucial role in vocal music education, bridging the gap between voice and piano to enhance musical expression, which is deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and artistic traditions. This research explores the essential skills of collaborative pianists in the context of vocal music teaching, focusing on how these skills contribute to the interpretation and performance of culturally significant vocal works, as well as fostering a deeper understanding of the cultural and spiritual values embedded in the music. Using qualitative research methods, the study collected data through in-depth interviews and observations, focusing on the collaborative pianists at Kunming College of Music and Dance and Yunnan Normal University. Conducted between May 2024 and November 2024, the research identifies key competencies needed for successful collaboration, including advanced piano technique, cultural literacy, communication skills, adaptability in performance, and pedagogical abilities. **The research finding** highlights the collaborative pianist's role in understanding the historical and emotional context of musical works and their ability to guide and support vocal performers. The findings underline the importance of these skills in facilitating effective teaching and performance in vocal music, thus providing valuable insights into the development of collaborative pianism in academic settings.

Keywords: Essential skills; Collaborative pianist; Vocal music teaching

Introduction

Collaborative piano is performing piano with other musicians including vocal and other instrument. There are several roles in teaching and performing not only collaborating with instrumental and vocal musicians in the form of repertoire in chamber music, but also performing piano as part for orchestras and choirs. In rehearsing opera and dance theater, the piano artistic director plays an important and indispensable role as a musical accompanist. However, this study mainly focuses on the collaboration between collaborative piano and vocal music, and examines the role of the collaborative pianist in vocal music (Sun, 2024).

Piano art teaching and vocal art teaching each occupies its own important position in the teaching of colleges and universities. At present, many colleges and universities aim to cultivate practical talents at a stage. In vocal stage performances, including chorus and musicals, there is a role for collaborative pianists. In the collaborative performance of vocal teaching and piano player, the piano accompaniment support driving the mood of the vocal work, setting the atmosphere, guiding students to perceive the work more intuitively, results more expressive. Collaborative pianist is considered as second classroom of vocal teaching and stage performance. Excellent collaborative piano teaching can help students improve their own musical quality, artistic cultivation and aesthetic experience on the stage. In terms of tasks, "It does not only assume the function of piano accompaniment, but also according to the actual musical performance of the performer to play. Also, the piano art instructor needs to master a lot of professional music basics in the detailed treatment of the work, and also to be good at observing the problems it has and overcome them" (Xu, 2024). The collaborative pianist has 3 main importance roles: "playing the piano accompaniment". "Music Appreciation" and "Teaching Knowledge". These three roles are complementary and intertwined in order to help students present and demonstrate their work on stage, and to create and elevate their work in the performance process.

However, in practice, the researchers found that some collaborative pianist considered their role is only to "accompany the piano", and thus lack the knowledge of the basic skills they need to have while working with vocal performers. These results problems in vocal teaching and performance, as well as difficulties in the conductor's rehearsals. Therefore, myself, would like to make research about the basic skills of collaborative pianists because these are in-depth study for the researcher's work in the future. To resolve the mentioned problem, the researcher had chosen School of Music, Kunming College, Kunming, Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China to be a studying field. There are local song pieces in Yunnan which have never been recorded into audio but collaborative pianist in the school mentioned have been performed. According to this, the collaborative pianist has variety of experience. They are good sample to examine their skill in collaborating pianists. So, the collaborative pianist whom working in this college are appropriate samples for interviewing in order to receive the highest value from the research.

In October 2024, the school mentioned, had settled a vocal competition, including the rehearsal and cooperative stage of many vocal music performers and collaborative pianists. According to this, the collaborative pianist, vocalist, and conductor, as well as three key informants, would have had a chance to work with the collaborative pianist, vocal music and other related musician. So, there were cases which would be worth for studying during this opportunity.

Research Objective

1.To study the essential skills of collaborative pianist in vocal music teaching

Literature Reviews

A collaborative pianist plays a crucial role in music performance and education, extending beyond traditional accompaniment to actively shaping musical interpretation alongside vocalists, instrumentalists, and choirs. Unlike regular accompanists, collaborative pianists contribute to artistic expression, coaching performers and enhancing musical understanding. Their

responsibilities include technical proficiency, sight-reading, communication, and adaptability to diverse musical contexts (Wang, 2020). Historically rooted in Western traditions, collaborative piano has evolved to integrate elements of conducting, pedagogy, and composition. Academic programs in collaborative piano emphasize theoretical knowledge, professional skills, and practical experience to prepare students for roles in performance and education (He, 2024). This research explores the definition, objectives, functional value, and competencies required for collaborative pianists, offering insights into their significance in contemporary music practice.

Functional values of the vocal collaborative pianist

The functional value of the collaborative pianist in vocal singing refers to the significance of the application of the collaborative pianist in teaching, practicing, and performing. The primary function of the collaborative pianist is to accompany and lead, and “cueing” is actually one of the most basic functions. Cueing is one of the most basic functions. It prompts the singer to enter the singing role in time by playing cues. It allows the accompanist to find the pitch and rhythm of the song in the first place. “Leading” is also one of the values. By playing the piano, it creates a state of infection and guidance, which influences the singer's expression. In addition, the collaborative pianist can achieve “complementarity”, through the harmonic coloration of instrumental music, to achieve the emotional complementarity of vocal singing (Lu, 2023).

This study explores the functional value of collaborative piano accompaniment in vocal singing, focusing on analyzing its application in teaching, practicing and performing. Through literature analysis and case studies, it reveals the basic functions of collaborative piano accompaniment, including accompaniment, cueing, guiding and emotional supplementation. It is found that piano accompaniment not only helps singers to accurately grasp pitch and rhythm, but also guides singers' emotional expression through the infectiousness of music and enhances the performance effect. This study provides a new perspective for vocal teaching, emphasizes the importance of piano accompaniment in vocal singing, and has a positive impact on the field of art education.

An important note about the role of the collaborative pianist in higher-level educational settings is that there is much overlap with coaching. The coach helps prepare soloists for specific performances and build repertoire.¹² Considered in these generic terms. The collaborator can be a more effective partner by using the same language and striving for the same musical image as the soloists' instructors as well as understanding the context and demands of the final performance. The vocal coach deals with musical and stylistic questions while the teacher deals with technique; however, both must collaborate on the terms and imagery they use. Otolaryngologist and musician Paul E. Kwak describes singing as the "hardest job in the world" and explains how it takes a village to curate a singing voice, a village which includes voice teachers, voice therapists, diction coaches, movement instructors, and physicians, and asserts the importance of all speaking a common language, accompanists not exempt (He, 2024).

Harmonic Performance. When we think of harmony, we subconsciously think of chords, but the two cannot be equated. Simply put, harmony is a continuous, flowing, "thick line" made up of several chords, connected and traveling according to certain rules. It is a "thick line" of several chords, connected and traveling according to certain rules. The harmonic language usually requires the application of weave modeling, but in the case of a unique harmonic effect with a clear expressive power, the weave modeling sometimes does not need to be very complex to show a high level of technical skill, with a rich expressive power (Zhang, 2018).

Research Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research methods to collect data through in-depth interviews and observations.

Scope of the Study:

1. Content: This study will investigate only the collaborative pianists of two universities.
2. Time: May 2024 to November 2024.
3. Place: Kunming College of Music and Dance and Yunnan Normal University.

Key informants:

1. Mr. Yuan Han: A professional collaborative pianist with over 10 years of experience as a collaborative pianist for vocalists or choirs. Has performed as a collaborative pianist in nearly 100 concerts, as well as with other collaborative pianists as a singer. She has won several gold medals for accompaniment in various singing competitions. 2023 Collaborative pianist for the Yunnan Art Fund promotion project “Cultivation--Yunnan Ethnic Original Language Choral Concert”, which was performed at the National Grand Theater.

2. Mrs. Guo Haibo Professor of Vocal Music, Kunming Music and Dance Vocational College, Yunnan Province, China, Folk Vocalist.

Vocalists who are well known among vocal performers and have sung many famous songs. Nearly 20 years as a voice teacher playing piano accompaniment for students.

3. Mrs. Xiao Li: Professor of Piano, Kunming Conservatory of Music, Yunnan, China, Collaborative Pianist. She has been teaching keyboard, piano improvisation accompaniment, song accompaniment and other courses for a long time. She was awarded the First Prize of Piano Accompaniment in the Yunnan Region of the First China Peacock Prize Vocal Competition of National Higher Art Colleges and Universities. In the past ten years, she has participated in many concert performances as a collaborative pianist and has rich experience in collaborative piano.

Results

The Essential Skills of Collaborative Pianist in Vocal Music: This interview question is the most central research question in this study. Based on the key informants' answers, the researcher has the following findings about the “essential skills of collaborative pianists in vocal teaching”: First of all, solid piano playing technique is the most basic skill that one should have as a collaborative pianist. Nowadays, many vocal works are equipped with piano accompaniments that are created with great skill and artistry. The piano accompaniment for these vocal works of art is not simply to cue the vocalist's pitch and rhythm, but the weave and technique of these piano accompaniments are of a certain degree of difficulty. This requires that the collaborative pianist

must have solid piano playing skills to be able to interpret the piano accompaniment of this vocal work completely.

Second, collaborative pianists should have a deep cultural literacy. As a collaborative pianist, it is very important to master certain knowledge related to music history, literature and poetry. Music history takes the development of music as its main line, describes the characteristics of music in different times and backgrounds, and at the same time records many classical works. This knowledge is not only an important foundation for a deeper understanding of the ideas of musical works, but also provides technical guidance for performance. The underpinnings contained in the literature often enable collaborative pianists to provide guidance in a more intuitive manner. The expression of music requires not only to do with the notes on the pavement and various musical terms, but also to fully understand the inner thoughts of the composer, the musical style of each period and each work, the emotional tone, the characters in the work, and even the author's biography and condensed background of the times, and so on. If the collaborative pianists are unable to judge the basic style of the work accurately, they will not be able to complete a good stage work even if they have superior playing skills.

Thirdly, collaborative pianists should have the spirit of collaboration and good communication skills. In the title of “collaborative pianist”, the sense of “collaboration” occupies an important position. There are three stages of “collaboration” between the collaborative pianist and the vocalist. Before practicing, the collaborative pianist and the vocalist must communicate with each other. This includes analyzing and understanding the background, connotation, and mood of the piece. After completing their respective exercises, the two will enter the bonding stage. This includes the collaborative pianist's insight into the vocalist's singing breath, and the design of the accompaniment weave according to the vocalist's singing habits. After practicing with both partners, the final stage is the stage collaboration. The collaborative pianist and the vocalist need to work together to cope with unexpected situations on the stage. At the same time, collaborative pianists also need to pay attention to the artistic expression and humanistic connotation of the musical work, and convey the ups and downs and changes of emotions through the language of music. Effective communication and cooperation are important part of the collaborative

pianist's performance, which requires rigorous logical thinking, concise expression, an approachable tone, and the ability to solve problems quickly. The collaborative pianist is expected to correct vocal performers when they make errors or deficiencies using an easy-to-understand approach, which is a reflection of his or her teaching ability. The effectiveness of the collaborative pianist is reflected in the rigor of his/her logical thinking, the simplicity and clarity of his/her expression, his/her approachable communication style, his/her pleasant atmosphere and his/her efficient problem-solving ability.

Fourth, the accumulation of a large number of works, rich experience in piano collaboration and stage adaptability. Collaborative pianists only have accumulated enough works, the broader the vision to be able to have absolute hearing and perception, skillfully and quickly locate a good grasp of the overall style, as well as the characteristics of each work, so as to guide and cooperate with vocal performers.

Rich experience in piano cooperation can help the collaborative pianist to deal with some special situations or stage accidents in cooperation with vocal performers in a relaxed and professional manner, so that the stage presentation can be more complete. For example, without the accumulation of a large number of repertoire and stage cooperation experience, coupled with high performance skills, in the actual rehearsals and performances, the collaborative pianist often encounters due to the individual singer's range differences or stage temporary conditions that lead to the singing is not in accordance with the key of the original accompaniment score, at this time the collaborative pianist's performance cannot be stopped, and you need to flexibly and quickly take measures to make up for and cover up the singer's The collaborative pianist must be flexible and quick to compensate for and cover up the singer's mistake, to ensure the coherence of the work, and must not allow the music to stop, thus making the mistake more obvious. This requires the ability to transpose the music and a wealth of stage experience, always keeping the singers at the center of the work and maintaining the unity of the piece as a whole.

Fifthly, advanced collaborative pianists should have basic linguistic skills. Depending on the style of the music, the advanced artistic director will help the vocalist to correct the pronunciation of the lyrics. For Western operatic

works, there is, for example, Italian “correcting”. In the case of Chinese works, for example, when singing some Chinese folk songs, the pronunciation and bite of the lyrics have their own unique singing style. The collaborative pianist needs to help the singer in the art of articulation and diction.

According to the observation of the rehearsal between the collaborative pianist and the vocal performer, it is found that the collaborative pianist will take the following measures before the rehearsal with the vocal performer starts formally:

When the collaborative pianist gets the accompaniment and score of the song, he or she will first familiarize himself or herself with the score and roughly analyze the song's compositional structure, emotional style, and harmonic direction. Ensure that the piano is in tune and adjust the distance between the piano bench and the piano. Ensure that the most accurate guidance can be given to the vocal performer. Next, start communicating and exchanging with the vocal performer. The communication includes:

The reason why the vocal performer chooses to perform the song; the advantages and disadvantages of the song for the vocal performer;

According to the vocalist's own conditions, determine the difficulty of the song, so as to facilitate the focus of subsequent rehearsals; according to the vocalist's ability and the difficulty of the song, formulate a rough rehearsal plan, rehearsal cycle and number of rehearsals, so as to facilitate the arrangement of subsequent rehearsals for the collaborative pianist and the vocalist; Both parties express their understanding and opinions about the historical background, humanistic environment, connotation and emotional atmosphere of the songs they are working on together.

Fourthly, the collaborating pianist watches the vocal performer's previous performance clips to have a preliminary understanding of the vocal performer's performance status, and has a short daily conversation with the vocal performer to understand the vocal performer's character, which can make the subsequent cooperation more tacit. Both parties maintain a positive mindset, making it easier to create a relaxed and enjoyable rehearsal atmosphere.

Finally, the collaborating pianist begins to collaborate and assist the vocalist in the “vocal practice” exercises that precede the formal rehearsal. In this section, the basic skills of the collaborative pianists are more evident.

During the “practice” session, the collaborative pianist uses the piano to provide accurate pitch and rhythmic support to the vocalist. The first exercise begins with basic scales to train the vocalist's intonation, range, and vocal consistency. This includes major and minor scales, and chromatic scales. The collaborative pianist here is very skillful in techniques such as transposition. The second exercise is a broken-down chord exercise, which is used to enhance the flexibility of the voice and the accuracy of the span of the range. These include major triads, minor triads, and seventh chords. The third exercise is breath and long tones. At this point the collaborative pianist uses the accompaniment of a coherent long weave to control the vocal volume of the vocal performer through crescendo and diminuendo, with the aim of helping the vocal performer to be able to better control the breath and improve the stability of the voice. The fourth exercise is a tuning exercise. The collaborative pianist plays short, explosive bursts of single notes with column chords in order to train the vocalist's voice to be bouncy and explosive. The fifth exercise is an actual repertoire exercise. The collaborating pianist intercepts two difficult pieces from the upcoming collaborative repertoire, drops four degrees from the original key, and then rises to the original key one by one, so that the vocalist's degree of difficulty gradually increases from simple to difficult when practicing the difficult pieces, thus achieving the purpose of “practicing the voice” and allowing the vocalist to familiarize herself with the difficult pieces.

In addition, in the process of “practicing voice”, the collaborating pianist will flexibly change the mood and rhythm of each piece to enhance the musicality of the piece. Moreover, it is improvisational for both the collaborative pianist and the vocal performer, which is conducive to the training of emotional cooperation between the two, so that the vocal performer will have the habit of listening to the accompaniment in the usual training, and the collaborative pianist will be able to cooperate with the vocal performer in a more tacit manner. Based on the observations, the researcher concluded that collaborative pianists need to possess the following basic skills before formal rehearsals with vocal performers:

Score analysis ability: the ability to quickly familiarize with the score and analyze the song's compositional structure, emotional style, and harmonic direction. Piano Tuning and Adjustment Ability to ensure piano intonation and adjust the distance between the piano bench and the piano to provide accurate guidance.

Communication and Interaction Skills: Communicate effectively with vocal performers to understand their reasons for choosing songs, strengths and weaknesses in performance, and the difficulties of the songs.

Programming skills: develop a rehearsal plan, cycle, and frequency based on the vocal performer's ability and the difficulty of the song.

Cultural Comprehension Skills: Understand the historical context, human environment, connotative meaning, and emotional atmosphere of a song and share it with the vocal performer.

Observation and understanding skills: Watching clips of past performances of vocal performers to understand their performance status and character for better cooperation.

Vocal coaching: Provide accurate pitch and rhythmic support during “vocal practice”, and practice scales, broken chords, breath and long tones, and tuning.

Pitch shifting skills: mastering pitch shifting skills to suit the vocal performer's range and practicing needs.

Improvisation and accompaniment skills: Flexibly change the mood and rhythm of the vocal exercises, enhance the musicality and train the emotional coordination.

Emotional coordination: Through improvisation exercises, we train emotional coordination with the vocal performer, so that he/she can get used to listening to the accompaniment and enhance the tacit understanding. These skills help the collaborative pianist and the vocal performer to establish a good cooperative relationship in the pre-rehearsal period, ensuring the smooth progress of the subsequent rehearsals and performances.

Discussions

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of collaborative pianists in vocal music, demonstrating that their responsibilities extend far beyond merely providing accompaniment. A solid foundation in piano technique is essential, as modern vocal works often contain intricate and technically

demanding accompaniments that require high levels of skill and precision (Li, 2018). However, technical ability alone does not define a successful collaborative pianist. Cultural literacy is equally important, as understanding the historical and literary context of a piece enhances the depth of interpretation. By possessing knowledge of music history, poetry, and the composer's intentions, collaborative pianists can guide vocalists in capturing the emotional essence and stylistic nuances of a piece (Ma, 2016). Without this awareness, even the most technically proficient pianists may struggle to deliver an artistically convincing performance. Moreover, strong communication and collaboration skills are necessary for building an effective partnership with vocalists. The study underscores the importance of pre-rehearsal discussions, where collaborative pianists and vocalists analyze the background, mood, and interpretative approach of a piece. This process not only enhances artistic expression but also establishes a foundation for smooth and cohesive performances.

In addition to musicianship and interpretative skills, the study reveals that a successful collaborative pianist must possess teaching and adaptive abilities. During rehearsals, collaborative pianists often take on the role of vocal coaches, providing real-time guidance on pitch accuracy, rhythmic precision, and expressive phrasing. The ability to offer constructive feedback in a clear and supportive manner is crucial for refining a vocalist's performance. Furthermore, the study highlights the necessity of flexibility and problem-solving skills, especially in live performances where unexpected challenges may arise. For instance, if a vocalist deviates from the original key or tempo, the collaborative pianist must swiftly adjust to maintain musical coherence (Chen, 2018). Advanced collaborative pianists also need linguistic skills to assist vocalists with pronunciation, particularly in operatic and folk repertoire where diction significantly impacts artistic expression. Additionally, experience in repertoire accumulation and stage performance is indispensable. A pianist who is well-versed in a wide range of musical styles and performance practices will be better equipped to anticipate a vocalist's needs and respond intuitively. Ultimately, this study confirms that the role of a collaborative pianist is both dynamic and multidimensional, requiring a balance of technical skill, cultural understanding, pedagogical insight, and adaptability to ensure successful vocal performances.

New Knowledges

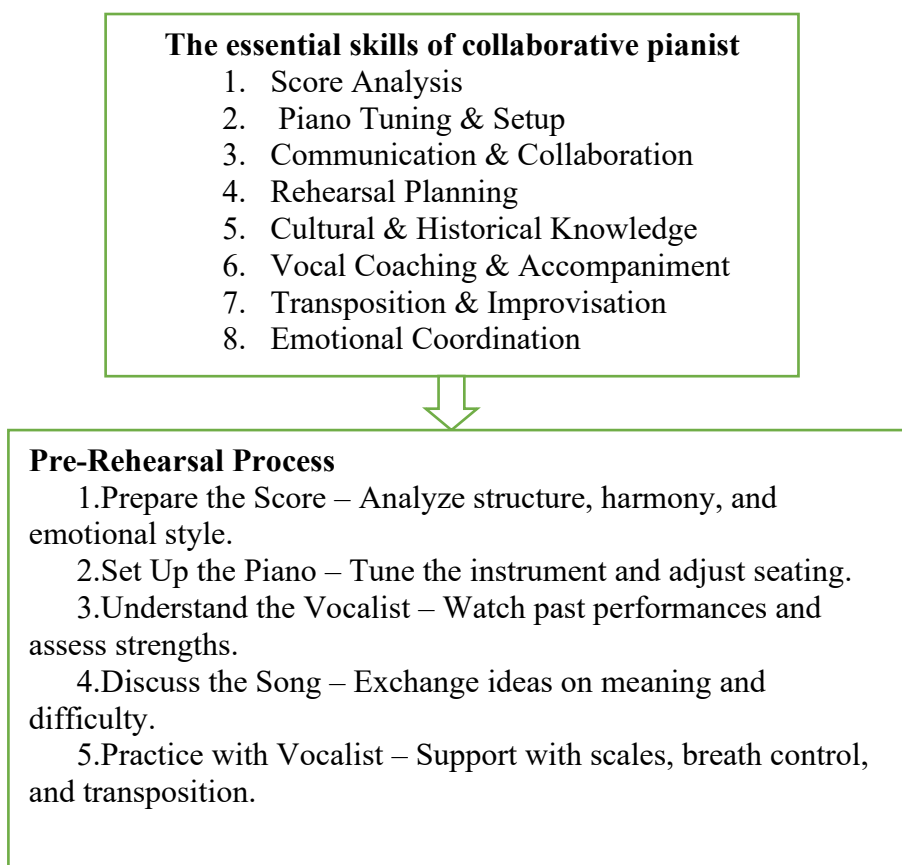


Figure 1: New Knowledges Diagram of the essential skills of collaborative pianist in vocal music teaching.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that the role of a collaborative pianist in vocal music extends far beyond technical accompaniment, requiring a combination of advanced piano skills, cultural literacy, strong communication, adaptability, and pedagogical expertise. A successful collaborative pianist must not only master the technical demands of accompaniment but also understand the historical and literary context of the music, engage in effective collaboration with vocalists, and provide insightful coaching during rehearsals. The ability to

adapt to unexpected situations in live performances, assist with linguistic nuances, and maintain emotional coordination with vocalists further highlights the multifaceted nature of this role. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the development of well-rounded skills in these areas is crucial for ensuring a seamless and expressive performance, reinforcing the indispensable contribution of collaborative pianists to vocal music education and performance.

Suggestions and Recommendations

In terms of overall positioning, collaborative pianists can be defined as “comprehensive musical talents”; in terms of degree settings, bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees should be offered; in terms of specific training modes, students can be co-supervised by professional teachers, singers and collaborative artists, and collaborative pianist training can be divided into two types of degrees: academic and professional, with a research direction in vocal and instrumental collaboration and a comprehensive “Doctor of Musical Arts” degree. In terms of specific training modes, students can be co-supervised by professional teachers, singers and collaborative artists, the collaborative piano training can be divided into academic and professional degree types, and the research direction of vocal and instrumental collaboration can be set up.

The researcher think we should increase the number of practice courses, let collaborative piano students participate in the classroom activities of other majors, increase the opportunities for joint practice, and hold regular practice concerts to provide students with a good learning environment and quality learning atmosphere, so that they can become more familiar with the stage, and make the stage a part of their lives.

Psychological quality is a key factor in determining the success or failure of a stage performance. Students with good psychological quality are able to give full play to their efforts on stage, while those with poor psychological quality may only be able to give 70% or 80% of their performance on a tense stage even if they have performed well in rehearsals. Therefore, carrying out practical courses, combining theoretical teaching with stage practice, exercising students' psychological quality and enhancing their self-confidence will enable music teaching to truly realize its purpose, i.e., to perform and display.

References

- Chen, Y. (2018). **Competencies that collaborative pianist should possess in the face of vocal works** [Master's thesis]. Henan University.
- He, M. (2024). **The Role and Practice of the Collaborative Pianist in Ethnic Vocal Works**. *Artistic View*, (13), pp. 76-78.
- Li, C. (2018). **An Initial Exploration of the Professional Qualities a Collaborative Pianist Should Possess** [Master's thesis]. Henan University.
- Lu, Z. (2023). **Singing with a collaborative pianist in the teaching of voice majors**. *Delta*, (14), pp. 164-166.
- Ma, L. (2016). **The role and place of the collaborative pianist in vocal performance** [Master's thesis]. Northwestern University for Nationalities.
- Sun, A. (2024). **A study of the interaction between collaborative pianists and vocal singing**. *Contemporary Music*, (5), pp. 186-188.
- Wang, H. (2020). **The role of the collaborative pianist in vocal teaching and singing**. *Drama House*, (32), pp. 89-90.
- Xu, T. (2024). **Explorations in the Orientation and Practice of the Collaborative Pianist**. *Drama House*, (4), pp. 115-117.
- Zhang, F. (2018). **Exploring the organic combination of collaborative pianist and vocal art**. *Chinese Literary Artist*, (12), p. 226.