

Accompanist or Partner? Pianist Susie Allan in conversation with John Quinn

A little while ago I read two online reviews of the same *Lieder* recital. The singer and pianist involved were both highly distinguished musicians in their own right and, in addition, have worked together in recital quite frequently in the past. Both reviews were written by experienced and knowledgeable reviewers but there was a significant difference between them. One, admittedly the longer of the two, commented on both the singer and the pianist in almost equal measure. The other addressed the work and the performance of the singer but the contribution of the pianist was covered in a final short paragraph which consisted of just two sentences.

This seemed to me both unbalanced and unfair. In a way I can understand it; after all, the singer has the melodic line and the words are entrusted to him/her. However, it's always seemed to me that the pianist is equally crucial to the success of a performance, whether it be the performance of songs or, say, an instrumental sonata. When one listens to a song the pianist is crucial to the filling out of the harmony, and the colours that a pianist deploys may well raise a performance to the next level. In many songs the pianist either establishes the mood through a short introduction or will round off proceedings with a postlude; often, the pianist does both. And then there's the issue of fairness: the pianist will have put in as much practice as the vocal or instrumental soloist, so isn't equal recognition appropriate?

These thoughts had been brewing in my mind for some time but the experience of reading those reviews acted as a catalyst. I decided to explore some of the issues raised and to do so I turned to Susie Allan. She's a highly experienced and respected recital pianist, noted especially for her partnership of more than 20 years with the baritone, Roderick Williams. She studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama where her teachers included Iain Burnside, Paul Hamburger, Martin Isepp, and Graham Johnson, all renowned as recital accompanists. I should stress that when I used the term 'accompanist' during our conversation, it was simply for convenience.

Susie's career after the Guildhall included, for a time, a strong connection with the Britten-Pears School at Snape where she played for masterclasses conducted by a roster of distinguished singers, including Elly Ameling, Hugues Cuénod, Anthony Rolfe Johnson and Elisabeth Söderström. Passing on her experience to younger pianists has played an important part in her life and she is a former Professor of Accompaniment at the Royal College of Music and of the Royal Welsh College of Music, Cardiff. She has also taught as a Repertoire Coach at the Royal Academy of Music.



Image © Bill Wyatt

Unfortunately, by the time Susie and I were able to find mutually convenient diary slots, the movement restrictions related to Covid-19 had come into force so our conversation was conducted through various electronic means.

Inevitably, the first thing I wanted to ask Susie was how it came about that she forged a career partnering soloists rather than as a solo pianist. Somewhat to my surprise, I learned that her career choice had come about almost by accident and for rather personal reasons. Susie explained that during her time as a student at Oxford University her mother was very ill; sadly, she died at the end of Susie's second year. During her mother's illness Susie stopped playing the piano altogether for a time. She knew she wanted to perform in some capacity but she ended up missing the opportunity (in the first term of her third year) to audition for the solo postgraduate courses at music college; thus, effectively, that door was closed. Susie takes up the story. 'By this point, I needed to decide whether I even wanted to pursue a musical career at all. Up until then, I had loved exploring solo repertoire, but now decided

to try my hand - excuse the pun - at some more collaborative repertoire, and as an enthusiastic choral singer myself, it seemed obvious (finally!) to start getting under the skin of the vast repertoire of song. And I had lots of singer friends. Once I'd got my place at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (GSMD) I was up and running, and felt I'd found my performance pathway.'

As I mentioned earlier, Susie is especially renowned as the recital partner of the baritone, Roderick Williams. I wondered how their musical collaboration came about and, once again, it emerged that circumstances played quite a part. Everything began at Oxford University. 'Roddy was a year ahead of me at Oxford. I was a big fan of a fabulously ironic barber shop quartet he was in, and also good friends with Miranda, who eventually became his wife. Later, when Roddy was a music teacher at Tiffin School, I sometimes helped him out by playing for the odd singing lesson - I was in this strange year of limbo, waiting to go and study at GSMD, so it was good for my sight-reading and accompanying experience in general. Then, whilst Roddy was still at the Guildhall, I played for him in a number of competitions, including the Kathleen Ferrier Award, Tillet Trust and a BBC competition that we won (a precursor to the New Generation Artists Scheme, run by Adam Gatehouse).' From those early beginnings grew a musical partnership that continues to flourish, both on the concert platform and in the recording studio. They're now into their third decade of making music together: their fine SOMM disc, '[Celebrating English Song](#)', released in 2017, coincidentally marked 20 years as a musical partnership. Lovers of the English song repertoire should note also their earlier excellent recital disc for the same label, *Severn and Somme*. This programme includes a generous helping of Gurney songs as well as items by Herbert Howells, John Sanders, Ian Venables and Christian Wilson (SOMMCD 057).

Susie's work with Roderick Williams is probably her highest profile collaboration but, as she told me, she has many other strings to her musical bow. Some years ago, she made the break from the London musical scene, deciding to move to the quieter environs of Shropshire in order to raise a family. Though no longer in the London hurly-burly, she has forged other, important musical relationships with artists such as Mark Padmore, the Carducci Quartet, Jonathan McGovern (Ludlow English Song Weekend), the soprano Sophie Daneman and Opera à la Carte (with whom she enjoyed directing *Così fan Tutte*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*, all from the keyboard). She also mentioned a notable additional career development. 'More recently my passion for collaborative music-making has led me into the coaching of up and coming young instrumentalists and singers - teaching them how to get the most out of the art of collaboration.'

That last comment provided me with an ideal cue to move the discussion on to how Susie approaches her side of a musical partnership. I was keen to get her thoughts on what makes a good accompanist and Susie had some fascinating thoughts to share. 'One of my marvellous teachers at GSMD, Paul Hamburger, declared that the only thing needed to be a fine 'accompanist' is the ability to listen. I agree. From this skill, many other necessary components of a successful collaboration can flourish. We need to know our piano parts (and our texts if playing for a singer) so well that we can switch on our listening ears in order to offer a flexibility of interpretation, without denying our own individual musical personality. We need to respond to the colouristic, rhythmic and textual nuances afforded by the 'soloist'. But of course, it's not just about responding - it's also about setting appropriate moods, inviting a singer to give of his or her very best; trying to capture the timbre of a voice or instrument in one's own playing. For instance, it might be deemed insensitive to play with the same tonal colour for a bass-baritone as for a light soprano. Perhaps we need to be willing to be pianistic chameleons: knowing when to lead or when to hang back; when it's appropriate to show off and when it would be up-staging to do so; having sensitivity to 'help' a singer through a long phrase in one breath. We should always be trying to help a voice do the very best it can to deliver the essence and spirit of a song and its text.'

I suggested to Susie that the recital pianist's role is more specialised than some may think: after all, not all solo pianists prove to be successful collaborators with other artists. Susie admits to finding this something of a conundrum: 'I don't know why some pianists find it hard to switch from solo playing to

collaborative playing, other than to suggest some personalities enjoy the sense of 'give and take' more than others. (Do we perhaps need to put our egos to one side when we make music?)'

When studying at the Guildhall, Susie Allan had the good fortune to study with several top accompanists. She'd already referenced Paul Hamburger earlier in our conversation and now she drew on her recollections of another teacher, Graham Johnson. 'When it comes to performance time, Graham was keen for us to understand that we should put any of our own performance anxiety to one side, and aim to offer a strong sense of emotional support, as well as musical, to our performance partners. And in the performance itself, to take risks! This is a wonderful thing to be able to do with another artist - if the trust is there, spontaneous music-making can follow and this is what makes live performance a totally unique experience (and we must never lose it). This is what it's all about. If you feel well-rehearsed with your soloist, and you have prepared your music as well as you can, then you can feel confident to let the muse take over, and stay 'in the moment'. That is what I aim for.'

Before you can get to such a level of spontaneity, of course, it's necessary to do the hard yards. When I asked Susie about her personal practice regime, she gave me an interesting, very personal insight: 'I feel piano practice is a bit like doing yoga. Each time I return to the material (my musical 'mat'!), I'm aiming to deepen the process, to discover a bit more about the music, and maybe myself, little by little. I don't like to rush it.'

The last time I was able to see Susie Allan in action was at a Three Choirs Festival recital with Roderick Williams in 2019 ([review](#)). On that occasion, they included a selection of individual songs by living British composers; most of these items were unfamiliar and I inferred that they had been prepared for that particular recital. Prompted by that memory, I asked Susie how she goes about preparing new repertoire in general. 'If it's instrumental music, I will play through the piece, making mental notes as to where the main technical work may lie, looking out for the most challenging areas. When I get down to the work, I will usually try and surmount those areas first. I try to learn the instrumental part at the same time. I work out fingering, do lots of separate hands and slow practice. Metronome will usually come in at some point!'

With vocal music, she says, the approach is rather different and I was intrigued to learn that she will take as much care over the sung texts as a singer would do. 'With vocal repertoire, although an individual song is likely to be a shorter structure, there is more to absorb, at least initially. I try to start where the composer most likely started - with the words. I read the poem, translate it (or find a translation) and get the general gist of it before looking at the piano part. I sing the vocal line to get a sense of what it would feel like to sing. I might do some research on background to the song. I'll try and analyse the construction a bit and try and see how the composer has responded to the poem, to give me a way in to a possible interpretation. When I've got to know the piano part quite well, I'll start to sing the song with it. When it gets near the performance, I often record myself playing the piano parts too, and then reflect back on long walks with the dog!' Susie's point about singing the vocal line as part of the preparation is an important insight: I wonder how many other pianists do that.

This attention to the words is a fascinating point and Susie was adamant that her role is about much more than the notes: 'the music composed has been inspired by the words the composer has chosen to set. The most natural way to play the piano part is to sing the vocal line.' She added that she feels that an understanding of the words is crucial, especially when rehearsal time with the singer is at a premium. If she's inside the words then she'll be better able to anticipate what the singer is likely to be seeking to put across.

The 2019 Three Choirs Festival recital programme that I referred to earlier ended with a performance of Arthur Somervell's song cycle, *Maud*. Being honest, I had reservations prior to the concert: I'd heard *Maud* many years before and thought it a bit stuffy and Victorian. The performance I heard from Roddy Williams and Susie Allan was something of an ear-opener. They've now recorded the cycle as part of an all-Somervell disc for SOMM Recordings, which also includes the Housman cycle, *A Shropshire Lad*.

With the release of the CD imminent, I'm looking forward to reviewing it. I asked Susie for her thoughts on the music on the disc. She told me that she'd really enjoyed having the opportunity to record these songs with Roddy Williams, not least because the two cycles have plenty of contrast within and between, to make great repeated listening.

Though Somervell's ten Housman songs will probably be better known in settings by George Butterworth and John Ireland, Susie reminded me that Somervell deserves acknowledgement as the pioneer who was the first English composer to set them. She talked first about the Housman songs. 'There is an economy of style here in the piano parts, which characterises these songs, resulting in a feeling of Victorian stiff upper lip and face-value simplicity. I particularly enjoy 'The street sounds to the Soldiers' tread', and 'White in the moon the long road lies'.' She describes *Maud* as 'a different kettle of fish'. In this cycle, she says, 'Somervell really goes to town with the piano part, and reflects perfectly the agonies and ecstasies of the paranoid and passionate romantic that is the narrator of the story. It's a really fulfilling part to play, with its tendency to extremes of register and mood. I particularly love the way he nods to Schumann in 'I have led her home' and 'Come into the garden, Maud'. And there is a wonderful sense of tremendously uplifting Victorian pomp in the last song as the narrator succumbs to the idea of death through going to war, thereby being reunited with Maud. The piano has the final say with full-ranging, valedictory B flat major chords.' There aren't too many versions of these songs currently in the catalogue but, in any case, on the basis of what I heard last year in Cheltenham, this will be an important release that should prompt a reassessment of Arthur Somervell's songs.

It's customary to finish an interview such as this by asking the interviewee to share, as far as is permissible, some information as to future plans. However, in the current climate, this really isn't an appropriate question to ask. Live concerts, and recording sessions too, have been suspended all over the world and, like her fellow musicians, Susie's plans are in limbo for now. For the sake of all our musicians – and also us, the listeners - we must hope that the current emergency will soon ease. Instead, at the close of our conversation, I asked Susie if there are any works, vocal or instrumental, which she hasn't previously performed or recorded but which she hopes to tackle in due course. In fact, it turns out that she's set herself a "Lockdown challenge": to master the Bach-Busoni Chaconne. She was inspired to do this, she says, by hearing it played in a recital at Ludlow by Sofya Gulyak, the first female winner of the Leeds Piano Competition in 2009. 'The piece has within it, more than enough technical challenges to keep me going for well past lockdown and into our new world to be! What's more, Bach is probably the composer I will turn to most readily in a crisis.' As Susie pointed out, it's not the sort of work she's normally called upon to play in public, so this is an ideal, if unexpected, opportunity to approach this great work for private pleasure.

Susie has ranged widely across the art song repertoire during her career but she told me that there's a lovely work which, so far, she's never had the chance to tackle: Grieg's only song cycle, *Haugtussa* (The Mountain Girl), Op 67. This is a cycle for soprano and piano, composed between 1895 and 1898, in which Grieg set eight poems by Arne Garborg (1851-1924). Susie says that the cycle is full of gorgeous melodies and textures and she finds the songs 'touching and sad'. I hope she can find a soprano with a command of Norwegian with whom she can perform them. A more immediate priority is to learn a set of four songs for baritone and piano by the late John Joubert. *That Time of Year* (2013) consists of four settings of sonnets by Shakespeare, each of which is concerned with one of the four seasons of the year. The music is new to her and she's due to perform them with Roderick Williams once the restrictions on concerts are eased. She's looking forward very much to adding this music to her repertoire.

We must hope that normal concert activity resumes before too long, enabling Susie and all her fellow musicians to entertain and enrich audiences again.

[John Quinn](#)