

# Creative Collabs and Technology in the Time of Coronavirus

Margo Garrett



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**T**ODAY IS MAY 1 IN MINNESOTA and it should be a sunny day. Like many similar days of late, it looks as if it wants to be sunny. I can see bright azure sky peeping out of tiny openings in a translucent covering of Watteau-esque gray. Perhaps Mother Nature does not want to offend our prevailing states of sadness and fear with the overt gleefulness of her brightest splendors. If so, I thank her for her sensitivity. I simply cannot all at once *rejoice* in coming spring, but trust that Nature will gradually persuade me by her overwhelmingly opulent gifts of warmth, green, fragrance, breeze, and, yes, even sun, to join her May Day dance. I pray that by the time you read this in September, we will have found a treatment or even a cure. In the meantime, music, musicians, friends, my husband, and Zoom sustain me.

I bought a Zoom recorder some years ago for my students to use to record their lessons and to borrow when they needed to make audition videos. The audio is superior, and the video the clearest I have ever seen. A wonderful little machine it is. So when someone asked me in the last year or so if I used Zoom, I enthusiastically responded, “Yes, of course!” How shocked I was, then, to find myself soon thereafter staring at my own live image in a bingo-like grid on my computer desktop with eight other friends and board members smiling in delight and waving at me! What a wonderful invention! Since then, it is my preferred choice of communication—a telephone all grown up and personal. I just love being able to see all attendee’s faces at the same time. So much better than being in an actual room where normally one cannot take in the full measure of each and every person’s facial or physical reactions to statements, questions, opinions, proposals, etc. I cannot believe I am actually writing these words, for I am so missing physical closeness; but Zoom is a huge gift, never more so than now.

On March 4 I flew home to Minnesota from a lovely visit with my mother in North Carolina. En route and realizing—after seeing several people wearing masks on board, and hearing a passenger with what I perceived then and believe now to have been that distinctive dry, Covid cough—that life was going to be different immediately upon my landing, I eagerly sought the late night news. In stunned, unbelieving shock I tuned into CNN and BBC news for most of the rest of the month, except for the time I talked to friends and family on the phone. But April brought me gradually out of that daze, gratefully, through the online presences of many young collabs. Via individual

invitations to ZOOM-teach or to Zoom-visit many of my colleagues' seminar classes with their collab majors, I have had a chance to visit with many across our country as well as in China, Canada, and Italy. All the collab stories I have heard of late are remarkably similar. I have been much comforted by these conversations and want to share information gleamed from some of these treasured gatherings.

First, collaborative pianists are *people* people! Many of us chose this field primarily because we love to rehearse, travel, and share music with others. I am sure most of you know the oft-heard saying, "I don't really care so much about the performances; it is the rehearsing and playing, even arguing through rehearsals *together* that really means everything to me." So to take us away from the physical presence of a partner is to, well, sort of cut us in half! But collabs with whom I have been speaking this past month all have quickly and smartly, if sadly, adapted. Don't forget that students were taken out of their physical schools to travel, many of them, half way across the world to sequester with family. Yet they continue to work with their partners (albeit in different capacities and from afar), teach online, make tracks for church services, and find focus, meaning, and growth through committing to special projects, which normally they would be too busy even to entertain attempting. Some are wisely taking language classes online. Two very entrepreneurial collabs told me they traded vocal coachings online for online language coachings with foreign singers. Some collabs are learning new technology that most of us would have done well to know prior to this pandemic, of course. Several are taking or are preparing for DMA online oral exams, and one is even beginning to research a DMA dissertation, for which program this eager beaver has not even applied! Several are learning new repertoire, including one ambitious soul who says she will have completed by summer's end all phases of learning *Tosca* and *Rosenkavalier*, making her own translations, being able to sing all vocal parts using her best Italian and German lyric diction skills, and playing with effective orchestral choices for reducing or embellishing the written piano score. One is learning *all* Schubert's songs; another is designing recital programs for a whole season, the first, of his own concert series. (He is working on alternate plans, learning the required technology to be able to address what will need to be

done if the series must be virtually presented. Cancelling is not an option, he said.) Many are enjoying movies on YouTube and TV, especially those like the tender and somewhat fictionalized 1947 biopic, *Song of Love*, about Robert and Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms; or the brutal, if historically accurate, *Total Eclipse* of 1995, the harsh story of Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine.

[I would love for some movie loving collab to create a complete listing of all extant movies that are based on or inspired by operatic and/or song repertoire: the poets, librettists, composers, and their literary or historical sources. I would love, then, to amass the library of these films and make them available to all. And while I am dreaming, please allow me to say that I have always wanted a collab to do a DMA dissertation on dances found in song, from Mozart to current time. Why did the composer choose this particular dance? What was that dance to the poet? Who did certain dances, and who did not? How did the composer expect us to receive or understand these dances? Did any chosen dance have political, religious, or cultural familiarity and significance in the time and place of its setting? And, of course, I want to *see* the actual dances performed!]

It is clear to me that these engaged students as well as my excellent and devoted colleagues share my nervousness and worry about what is to come. Will the world look like itself? Will we have classical music concerts? Will we have concert halls? We don't know of course, yet it is clear to me that we will forge ahead and help define the future for us all as naturally creative artists needing to find, perhaps more than ever now, creative ways to express our own talents.

Jane Olian and Donna Gill recently invited me to a Zoom chat to share what it is like to teach and work these days as pianist and singer/teacher and vocal coach in coronavirus times. Jane, treasured friend and former recital partner, is a noted voice teacher. She and Donna, a much admired former student and now valued colleague well known in New York for her diction classes at Mannes School of Music, Manhattan School of Music, The Juilliard School, Queens College, NYU and beyond, work together in a private teaching studio, in Evening Division classes of The Juilliard School, and in a terrific summer festival for singers and collabs, CSNY (Classical Singing and NY in June), which they founded 12 years ago. They both have remained as busy as ever this spring

semester in all their routine teaching and coaching assignments. The way, however, to accomplish the work changed hugely. They were as well prepared for these changes, I thought, as any pianist and singer could have been, for they are technologically sophisticated.

Their assessments agree largely with those colleagues and students with whom I spent time online this spring: that sequestered singers and pianists are not able to work successfully together now because technology has not yet been developed enough to meet their needs. Personal distancing requirements do not allow togetherness and technology as the only alternative. That electronic instruments and tools are not yet available or sophisticated enough to satisfy artistic needs leaves teachers, coaches, and students frustrated. Yet even as technology has proved sadly wanting and all are living in isolation, I notice that many speak of online togetherness. One described a virtual recital performance to the recorded accompaniment made by his accompanist, a thousand miles away, as a profoundly “together” and inspirational experience. He said their work together on that recital was a lifeline for each of them.

Donna has spent much of the last six weeks recording songs and arias students wish to bring to virtual coachings or virtual lessons with Jane. She also has made many recordings to be used as the virtual partner in required recitals and juries. Imagine, a whole recital! The track Donna creates for performance use is the shape and tempo the singer must adopt. Now, I think this is really good practice for singers, especially when the pianist making the recording is as highly experienced in the repertoire and knows the singer as well as Donna does. Too many singers, we know, rely so much on their pianists for forward flow in phrasing that they, in fact, sometimes never really develop rhythmic independence. A pianist’s skill can hide that singer’s flaw. But making music with a recording instead of an acoustic piano and pianist creates a huge challenge in finding one’s own music and personal message inside a totally dictated rhythmic and dynamic format. I think it is very good for singers to experience this, however, and I think more of this kind of training would be very helpful at any and all times. When, on the other hand, the singer has sung the piece with Donna in coachings, or Donna has played the work in the singer’s lessons with Jane, they sometimes get lucky, they tell me, and the result can sound rela-

tively collaborative. But otherwise, the singer is simply constricted to follow a dictated interpretation.

Simultaneous long distance performance is certainly popular these days. We see and hear it more and more on YouTube and TV. I note daily that what I hear in those performances, however, are pieces that can successfully move to a click track, pieces whose styles do not demand or even invite rubato from any participant unless it is in a moment of *a cappella* singing or solo playing. Donna told me that, at the Manhattan School of Music where she teaches, she was called in to create an accompaniment for a virtual choral piece when a student pianist who had been asked to do the task was not successful. I immediately felt great sympathy for that student. Surely few of us in the classical collab world are equipped to step easily into the demands of what Donna continued to describe to me. She was asked to record on keyboard two pieces for a chorus project. She recorded the bass line first and then “layered” (the term that was used to describe this technique) each choral part, one by one, over her own recorded bass line. This had to be done 100% at the same tempo each time she played another part over the bass; there could be no variation of tempo at all. The bass line effectively became a click track and all else piled up on top (like musical pancakes to my mind), having to be of exact rhythmic “shape.” The idea of click tracks has been anathema to much classical music and to many musicians, but I am advising all of us to design and offer courses in these techniques; making click tracks, developing skills for using transposing technology such as Sibelius or Finale (which we collabs could have mastered years ago), and even developing a basic understanding and use of MIDI sequencing programs. After Donna returned the finished recording to the engineers, a click track was then embedded into her product. Their need of a click track is lost on me, as Donna labored hard to be sure she was as metronomic as a click track. She had to be, or the layering would not have worked. Donna was given little time, of course, in which to complete this project, and one of the two pieces was from *Hamilton*, extremely rhythmically and technically challenging, especially considering metronomic demands and a very fast tempo. It had to be, for example, quarter note = 132, not 133 or 131. I would have had trouble just adjusting to the action of a keyboard, so very different from an acoustic piano. It

was a stressful experience, Donna allowed, as I began to be aware of how much the game is changed now for collabs. We have arguably been heading this way, but coronavirus has forced us into a world in which we need a large, additional set of collaborative skills, much of it having to do with technology and keyboards.

It has taken the collaborative piano world many years to begin successfully to get the message out that collabs are *not* click tracks or, alternatively, servants to the every wish of a singer. Both singer and pianist are servants of the music, and partners in that effort. In an ideal world, making music in the same room and with an acoustic piano, both partners come to agreement as to style and desired performance goals, share equally in their realization, and play off one another, gently pushing or lagging, leading and following. But when using an electronically created piano part, the lesson for the singer is: *The piano rules and you must be with and make your music compatibly within this exact tempo and dynamic.* I think this is very good training, for most singers tend to drag. This will teach real rhythmic precision. Perhaps, in order to remind young singers of their own rhythmic powers and stylistic needs, studying and performing *a cappella* pieces or singing to self-accompanying (guitar, piano, or keyboard, etc.) would also be a great asset to the growing of one's recital repertoire and to many aspects of one's musicianship.

Jane and Donna now spend much more time working alone with their mutual students rather than together, as has long been their practice. Donna now coaches and makes recordings (tracks), while Jane teaches alone without piano accompaniment. Donna says she enjoys her diction classes most of all among her various endeavors, as the clarity of Zoom makes for easy, true hearing of speech. Jane maintains that teaching largely without piano accompaniment has provided an opportunity to work more on basic musicianship. Without a pianist present, she says the lessons sometimes move naturally to issues into which she might not have gravitated in the presence of a pianist. She has enjoyed working on independent rhythm with her students. An experienced pianist's skill can often hide a singer's rhythmic weakness or lack of preparation. She finds that singers take more responsibility as she challenges them without the piano's presence. Now, I am certainly not trying to talk the voice teaching world out of welcoming collabs in to

their teaching studios! I do think, however, that this issue and perhaps others we are learning in this unwanted experience might well inform future teaching and coaching practices when we once again are working together in the same room. Donna added that every class she teaches now is a gift. Knowing that the students are starved for mentors they can see and with whom they can have verbal exchange is important to remember. So many professors are putting up assignments on Google Classroom without ever making personal contact. Donna and Jane both feel sustained by the fact that they are teaching in these days, that the students are ever hungry to learn, and that they themselves are doing OK—because they are teaching. Teachers and students need each other in these difficult days, it seems.

Our current situation has proven a huge need for keyboards that are even modestly worthy of classical music standards, and video recorders capable of reproducing a beautiful Steinway timbre or at least improving upon an average piano's sound. Every recorded electronic keyboard I have heard in the last two months sounded what can only be called ugly. Even worse is the total distortion in most recordings of human voices in their high or low register extremes, and, above all, the seemingly unavoidable time lag that, so far in my listening, renders all ensemble efforts between a long distance pianist and partners wasted. I have been assured that the technology exists to solve these issues. Dr. Lucas Wong, superb collaborative pianist, pedagogue, soloist, chamber musician, vocal coach, online resource developer, and so much more, whom you will meet in the next "Collab Corner," told me that about ten years ago, there existed an app, created by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and its conductor, Gustavo Dudamel, called Bravo Gustavo. The app could control tempo, rubato, and silence in the same way as a conductor does, by motion of the arms and hands. Playing excerpts from the orchestral canon including Mahler and Strauss on an iPhone held by the "conductor" whose arms caused the actual rhythmic and dynamic changes, Dr. Wong says, "is an easy app to create." So why don't we have better technology available for collaborative use?

The answer, surely, is that we have never asked for better technology in studio and concert hall needs. Certainly there hardly exists an acoustic piano, however poor, which one would willingly replace with an elec-

tronic keyboard unless the repertoire was written for a keyboard. There is truly nothing better than an acoustically excellent and attractive concert hall with a beautiful, great sounding Steinway. But we are in unprecedented times, and suddenly our available tools are insufficient to our needs. We need to urge development of better pianos for any virtual future. Perhaps you are hearing too that this kind of event will reoccur. I do hope we are better prepared by then. In a “Collab Corner” column to come soon upon further research, I will try to identify those who might present solutions and/or improvements for our current problems as collaborative pianists—especially that awful time lag between keyboard and singer. In the meantime, 4D Piano (<https://www.findbach.com/subscription>), created by Lucas Wong, and Appcompanionist ([www.appcompanionist.com](http://www.appcompanionist.com)) first presented at the NATS 2018 National Conference in Las Vegas, offer some significant assistance.

Singers, please tell your pianists how much you appreciate their efforts in creating your tracks and recordings. It is lonely and largely ungrateful work. We dream of a time to come when we once again are physically together. Until then, please be safe and well as you continue to encourage your communities and yourselves through music.

**Margo Garrett** has enjoyed a long and respected performing career as a collaborative pianist and has enjoyed lengthy performing relationships with many noted American recitalists, including sopranos Kathleen Battle, Barbara Bonney, Elizabeth Futral, the late Judith Raskin, Lucy Shelton, and Dawn Upshaw, tenors Anthony Dean Griffey and Paul Sperry, as well as a large number of leading instrumentalists and chamber music groups. Ms. Garrett has premiered over 35 works. Her recordings can be found on Albany, CRI, Delos, Deutsche Grammophon (1992 Grammy for Best Vocal Recital), Dorian, Musical Heritage Society, Nonesuch, Orion, and Sony Classical.

Ms. Garrett codirected the Collaborative Piano Department at New England Conservatory from 1986 to 1992 while simultaneously heading the Collaborative Piano department at The Juilliard School from 1985 to 1991. She returned, in 2000, to The Juilliard School, where she remained until the close of the 2017–18 academic year. Ms. Garrett directed the Tanglewood Music Center vocal program for the last 6 of her 19 years of teaching there (1979–1997), was awarded the 1989 American Society of Composers and Publishers (ASCAP) Most Creative Programming Award, and, from 1999 through 2006, was Faculty Chair of The Steans Institute for Young Artist’s vocal programs at Ravinia. In addition to frequent U.S. classes and residencies at “SongFest” in Los Angeles and at Vancouver’s VISI, recent seasons have found Ms. Garrett in residence at Suzhou, China’s Sochow University, Taiwan Normal Teacher’s University, in Germany at Munich’s Hochschule für Musik, and in Zwickau as a judge for the 15th International Schumann Vocal Competition.

*This will be our response*



## Voices of COVID-19

**This series of interviews seeks to capture the lived experiences of the vocal performing arts during the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020.**

The project began on March 16, 2020 and remains ongoing. Interviewees are drawn from every walk of life in the vocal performing arts from agents, singers, opera companies, to Broadway casting directors, stage managers, and composers, etc. The goal has been to produce a sizable account of the community; not to judge, but to provide space to explore the realities of this situation and learn about how best to support the delicate balance of the global arts community.

[https://www.nats.org/Voices\\_of\\_COVID.html](https://www.nats.org/Voices_of_COVID.html)