

Piano Skills for Singers and Voice Teachers

By Brenda Earle Stokes, BFA, M.Mus

When I first got my professional start in New York City, I had no idea how lucky I was. I got multiple well-paid job offers, teaching singing classes and conducting choruses for several arts outreach organizations. At the time I had minimal choral conducting experience and had little working knowledge of vocal pedagogy, but I had no troubling winning these jobs against people with actual degrees in choral conducting and years of voice training. Why did they hire me?

Because I could play piano. I heard time and time again that these organizations didn't have the budget to hire a voice teacher and an accompanist, so they hired the person who could do both. Even though both of my degrees were in piano, I was teaching more voice than any of my singer friends were.

I tell this story to my voice students all the time, because it shines a light on something that I feel is grossly overlooked in vocal music education: Singers need to be able to play the piano in order to make a living.

"What I have discovered is that many piano courses for singers are designed by pianists who don't understand the actual skills that we singers need in order to function properly in our work."

You want to teach voice lessons? You need to play piano. Conduct a community chorus? You need to play piano. Want to learn your music? Hiring a coach to learn every song is prohibitively expensive. Think about all of the opportunities for singers to make a living, and you'll see that they all require or would be enhanced by functional piano skills.

We could ruminate on the fact that there should be better funding for music programs so that accompanists can be hired, but in the current state of music education I think we need to face



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the facts and act accordingly. We need to make sure that our singers are graduating with all of the skills they need to be competitive and earn a sustainable income.

You might be wondering, since college voice programs require piano proficiency classes, why is this even an issue? Why do so many singers struggle at the piano?

I have taught hundreds of singers and voice teachers to play piano — a vast majority of whom have already taken their required piano proficiency courses. Unfortunately, they still can't function properly at the keyboard, which is a source of great frustration and shame. This wasn't a matter of laziness or lack of effort. What was the problem?

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So, many piano classes resort to method books, hands-together scales, a plethora of technical exercises like Hanon and classical piano repertoire. (Bartók Mikrokosmos, anyone?). These skills are great if you want to be a piano player, but is this useful for singers? In my experience, the answer is a resounding NO.

Instead, I suggest that we put a heavier priority on building the actual skills that singers need in order to function in our work.

These primary skills include:

1. Playing voice exercises on piano
2. Accompanying ourselves and our students
3. Playing melodies on piano to learn and teach songs

Rather than insisting on a classical model of piano training, I have discovered a much more user-friendly method that consists of:

1. Learning to play voice exercises instead of Hanon
2. Learning major and minor chords in 12 keys
3. Learning a variety of strategies to "fake" accompaniments
4. Using vocal music to learn melodies — everything from their solo rep to choral music and fake book reading.

FUNCTIONAL PIANO SKILLS FOR SINGERS

Rather than:	Learn to play:
Hanon exercises	Voice exercises
Method books	Master major and minor chords in 12 keys
Fully notated piano music	Faked accompaniments
Sight reading books	Your own vocal and choral music



The above skills can be easily learned and applied in 1-2 semesters of group classes and will ensure that graduating singers will have useful training that will help them function as professional performers and educators.

If you are a college instructor, I recommend you investigate how the piano classes for singers are taught. Consider collaborating with the instructor of these classes to ensure that your students are learning the material they need.

If you are a voice major or current voice teacher who needs to improve their piano skills outside of a degree program, don't fret! You don't have to invest a lot of time or money to become more functional at the keyboard.

Find a local or online piano teacher who will teach you the four areas I describe above. Jazz and pop pianists can help you master chords and play from lead sheets. You also might consider self-paced online courses, which are both cost and time effective and can help you develop your piano skills.

Just as you devote time every day to working on your voice, you can prioritize spending even a small amount of time each day to make your piano skills more functional. In a matter of weeks or months, you could make measurable progress.

In order to thrive as singers and voice teachers, it is crucial to have a solid foundation at the piano. The approach I describe is immensely effective and has helped hundreds of singers feel confident at the keyboard.

If you would like a more in-depth look at this approach, check out this blog post, "[Piano for Singers: The Complete Guide.](#)"

Brenda Earle Stokes is a singer, pianist and music educator based in New York City. In addition to her busy performance career as a jazz musician, she specializes in teaching piano and musicianship to singers through her bestselling online courses. Although both of her degrees are in jazz piano, she has extensive experience in the fields of vocal pedagogy, choral conducting and music education. She is an online course creator and runs a busy voice and piano studio.



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