

Interview with Ms Prue Gibbs, professional member of the Accompanists' Guild of Qld, Inc.

1. What or who influenced you to become a piano accompanist?

My first piano teacher, Miss MacKenzie, suggested I become an accompanist when I was in Grade 3 piano, but it wasn't till I discovered Lieder – well, poetry and music combined – that I realised that she was right. I love the idea that music can give such power to the words in the hands of a skilful composer.

2. Did you follow a particular training path or ...?

Once I had my Diploma I couldn't wait to do things – I'm a very hands-on person – so getting experience was the key. I started accompanying at the Con, then had the opportunity to repetiteur for Opera and Ballet, whilst being in theatre as musician, actor, composer, as well as playing in the pit for Musical Theatre.

In the accompanying world you're always learning, there's always something new, a new challenge, and that suits me fine.

3. Describe a few highlights of your career to date.

Playing Glockenspiel in "The Magic Flute" for the Queensland Opera Company; composing and conducting music for "The Ancient Mariner" for the Queensland Arts Festival; performing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 2 with the Ensemble Instrumental de Toulon et du Var conducted by Georges Bouisson, my music teacher; working with Ronald Dowd and Bernd Benthak on "La Boheme" at the Bathurst Summer School for Singers; playing harpsichord for the Sydney Bach Orchestra in the Concert Hall at the Sydney Opera House; having a fantastic job as accompanist at Ascham School.

4. Name your favourite role-model accompanist[s].

Stephen Sondheim for sheer creativity and brilliance; David Miller for his exciting bravura playing, and his mastery and understanding of many different styles of vocal and chamber accompanying.

5. What has been your most emotionally-fulfilling accompaniment experience?

Performing Schubert's Piano Trio in E flat: it's not strictly an accompaniment, it's a part in a Piano Trio. The work journeys to so many emotional places that it's exhausting but very satisfying.

6. What was your worst accompaniment experience?

I accompanied the Australian Opera Children's Chorus in a concert for Lady Fairfax. I prepared my photocopied music in my new folder – the repertoire was well-known songs – and I felt all was ready. When we started the performance I realised I'd put the pages in the wrong order in my folder!! I hadn't time to change them as I was playing, so I had to make it up as I went along!! Since that day, I have ALWAYS checked my page numbers!

7. Do you have a favourite genre of music or area of expertise? Why?

I always get completely absorbed in whatever I'm working on, be it Opera, a Musical, instrumental music, art song, Choral music. It's about understanding the composer and their thought processes, and how they construct the music. I find it fascinating to try to put myself in their place and hear it as they'd hear it. Then I get the most out of it, and it's a very enjoyable experience.

8. What do you consider to be your most memorable accompaniment experience?

I played for a friend who was auditioning for Opera Australia. She performed the Composer's Aria from "Capriccio" by R. Strauss. The Composer is very impassioned and excited in this Aria, and we both were really touched by the magic of the music, and I felt that the huge fortissimo climax had lifted us off the floor! As it was an audition, all we got was a cursory "thankyou", but subsequently we did get some very good feedback!

9. How do you cope with backstage nerves, yours and/or the soloists'?

Everyone's different in this respect. I try to make sure I know my work thoroughly. It's beneficial to know what the performance space is like, and whether it will change when there are bright lights and people in the auditorium – that is, be prepared and you won't be put off. If soloists get nervous I ask them to breathe in and OUT, since breathing in can make you hyperventilate, but breathing out is relaxing. Make sure you all know where you'll be positioned on stage to ensure you can see and hear each other.

10. Please pass on 3 useful accompaniment tips to less experienced accompanists.

1. Make sure your music is in order.
2. Always mark things in your music to help you remember page turns, dal segnos etc and other moments e.g. breath marks for wind players and singers.
3. If you can't hear your soloist you're playing too loudly.