

# On freelancing, multi-tasking, and keeping an open mind about your work



Pianist Christopher Cooley on what professional training does (and doesn't) prepare you for, the realities of working as an accompanist in NYC, and why you should never underestimate the power of bringing music into other people's lives.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2991 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Income](#).

**When you graduated with your doctorate, what was the plan? What is the typical career trajectory with a music degree such as yours?**

The main reason I moved to New York was to get my doctorate, but really probably the bigger reason that I moved here was to become a freelance pianist and then to stay here. That was actually my goal, and the doctorate was just a way to accomplish that. I knew that I would have to work as an accompanist—I'd have to work my way through school in order to afford Manhattan School of Music. So I knew that I would graduate and already be working. I'd already know people whose studios I'd be playing in. I would already know a lot of opera singers, and my name would have already gotten around. I knew it would be a smoother transition than if I'd gotten my doctorate in Texas, which is where I lived before. To suddenly try to drop everything and just move here cold turkey from Texas while needing to work right away, to afford the cost of living here? I don't think I could have done it that way. I guess that answers the question of how I made the transition—I was already pretty much working my way through school, so when I graduated I just kept working.

**So you felt like you were prepared for what the realities of being a working artist in the big city were going to be?**

I think so. I mean, I had just resigned myself to being a starving artist, knowing that I was going to be doing that for a long time. And that I might always be that. But I also knew that I was a hard worker, and that I was musically versatile. I can play cocktail gigs, I can play church jobs. And as an accompanist in the city, as soon as your name gets around, you're pretty much in constant demand, or at least you can be. So I didn't worry too much. I kind of knew what I was getting into.

**A lot of people might assume that the ultimate goal for a pianist is to be a concert pianist, but I understand that is not the case. Can you explain what you mean when you say accompanist?**

Well, it means that when I'm on stage, I'm playing for someone else. First of all, before the 1980s, there were no degree programs in anything like accompanying. The whole world of being an accompanist and being a collaborative pianist was something that people just figured out and ended up doing and kind of taught themselves.

Eventually a few universities started offering degrees in accompanying, but it's always kind of been the stepchild of solo piano playing. We think of solo pianists as being grandiose virtuosos. And we tend to think of accompanists as has-been, wannabe solo pianists who weren't good enough. Also, the word "accompanying" can have this connotation of being in a secondary role. More recently, a lot of programs in accompanying have changed the name of the degree to "collaborative piano." Now it's kind of shedding that image of being secondary or, like I said before, being the stepchild of the virtuoso solo piano world.

But the hard truth of solo piano playing is that you can't really make a living at it. There just aren't enough solo concerts. Unless you're one of the basically half dozen pianists in the world who have name recognition and are playing concertos all over the world with the New York Philharmonic and so forth, you can't really make a living doing those concerts.

So for me, if I wanted a life on stage, I had to be realistic about how that was going to happen. And I didn't want to do what a lot of fellow pianists do, which is get their doctorate in solo piano and then just start applying for teaching jobs. Because there's literally nothing else to do with those degrees but get an academic job. And I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be in New York City. I wanted to be on stage. I wanted to be creative. I wanted to work with great people. I wanted to scrape my own life together and be my own boss and strike out on my own somehow. So that's what I've done for 20 years here.

**What is the breakdown of your creative life right now? Do you have steady, ongoing gigs or does it change from month to month?**

For most of the last 20 years, things have been pretty much changing constantly. I'm always hoping from one month to the next, from one year to the next, that there will be enough work. And then somehow there always is. The beginning of fall is always a slow time, because people are away. I actually spent the whole summer working in Europe, which was nice, but even just being out of the city for two or three months can take you off of people's radar. So it's kind of slow getting started again. Thank goodness I have a church job that I get paid for every Sunday, which is reliable and a decent check. But that's the only steady income I have had in my life for about the past seven years or so. Otherwise it's always, "Gee, I hope I get enough gigs this month!"

I also coach opera singers, which is a form of teaching. Because a lot of times, all they're really doing is learning their music and they just need you to play along with them while they do that. But right now, I actually don't have a huge amount of work. I'm doing a couple of concert-type gigs with opera singers this week. I'm playing in a wedding this Saturday and a wedding next Saturday. A few coachings. I work with a cabaret singer who's putting a show together, so he's going to be coming every week to work on that, at least for two or three months. But you get the idea... the work is not predictable at all.

**In some ways, is that part of the appeal? The work is always changing, you are working with new people all the time, etc?**

Definitely. Also, there are people who have come to rely on me, knowing that if they come and learn their new music with me, that they'll learn it correctly. And that I'm tough, but in a good way. I also stay in touch with what operas are being written, who the composers are, which composers are having their work put up and getting produced, and who the singers are that are singing for them, and so forth. That is all useful information for me, because I'm also a composer. I'm trying to add that to what I do. Ultimately, I'd really like for that to be the main thing that I do, but I've got a long way to go to make that transition. But for most of my life, at least for the 21 years that I've been in New York, I have been of a freelance pianist, doing all kinds of different things. And I like the variety that comes with that.

**If a person is studying to become a collaborative pianist, does that involve having a working familiarity with lots of different styles of music? Like, do you also study jazz?**

Actually, no, not at all. It's all classical music in school. It's even stranger for me, because at Manhattan School of Music, if you get a doctorate—and I think it's true for a master's degree, too, or any degree in collaborative piano—you have to specialize in vocal or instrumental. So vocal would be largely playing song

recitals and maybe, to a lesser extent, opera, because the majority of the actual paying work in the city is opera work, of one type or another.

But instrumental accompanying is basically chamber music with one or more instrumentalists, usually string players, because that's the repertoire that really requires the most refinement. That's the repertoire that my teacher specialized in, and that's actually how she managed to have a freelance career. So when I came to Manhattan School as her protégé, I really had no choice but to go into instrumental accompanying, even though I knew full well, and she knew full well, that I was already a specialist in vocal accompanying, by virtue of the fact that I needed work, and that's where the work was. That's the kind of work I had been doing to pay my way through undergraduate school, and that's probably what I'd do in New York to pay my way through graduate school... that's probably what I'd always do. But studying the instrumental chamber music with her, and doing all that repertoire on my doctoral recital, really helped refine my playing.

My story is even stranger, in the sense that the thing that I specialized in in school, which is instrumental chamber music, I hardly ever play anymore. I've actually played very little of it since. I've had a couple of classical trios that I've done consistent concerts with, but instrumentalists don't need pianists like singers do. A singer or a voice teacher needs a pianist in every single lesson they teach. A string player doesn't. An opera company needs a pianist in every single audition, but orchestral auditions really don't. There's just a constant supply of work for me in vocal accompanying.

So even though I have no actual literal training in vocal accompanying, I've just always related to singers. I've always gotten in there and figured it out and taken an interest in their repertoire, and taken an interest in the languages that they have to sing in, because I'm also kind of a linguist. I have to coach diction in French, German, and Italian constantly, even though I don't have real training in any of that. I just kind of figured it out over the years and have taken an interest in it.

As far as the non-classical stuff I do, I don't really do jazz. I don't call what I do jazz, but I can play cocktail music. I can play by ear. I've done musical theater over the years, and I really like old-fashioned show tunes. I've memorized a lot of them. Also, I can play that stuff for hours. And that's good money, if you can get those gigs.

**When I was a freelance writer for many years, it took me a while to figure out what I felt like my worth was. There were certain periods where I would say yes to everything, because I needed to. And it felt nice, after a certain point of time, to be able to say no. Or just to know when something wasn't really going to be worth my time. But it took a while to figure that out. How does that work with your line of work?**

All I can really do is occasionally ask other singers or other pianists what they charge for certain things. Certain things tend to be more standardized than others. Playing a single audition, for example. The going rate for that is now around \$35. But now that I live in The Bronx, and most of the auditions are in Midtown, it's too far for me to go for just one thing. I'll only do it if a couple of singers have back-to-back auditions, or I'll go do auditions if the opera company will hire one pianist for their whole afternoon of auditions and if they pay an hourly rate. I like to go do that. In that kind of situation, the rate can be \$60 an hour and up.

So while there's a standard rate for playing auditions, coaching is very different. People just charge whatever they think they can get away with. I mean, there are coaches in this city who I know don't have my expertise with languages and things, that are charging more than I charge. I could probably charge a little more, but I don't know. Maybe I'm not a good business person! *[laughs]*

**These days, how would you say most jobs come to you? Do they come to you through a network of people that you know? Do people find you through your website?**

Pretty much all of it comes through word of mouth. And it pretty much always has. I never really applied for any kind of job. I never put myself out on any platform, with one exception. About five years ago, I found out about GigMasters. One day I got kind of curious about it, because I was concerned that my website wasn't really being found by people looking for pianists. I just started googling "NYC cocktail pianist" and with every single Google

search that I put in, GigMasters came up first. And I was like, well, I can either spend lots of money optimizing my website or I can try this out.

So I got a profile on GigMasters and I think in the past five years, I've made almost \$10,000 through gigs I got that way. It's a lot of weddings and wedding receptions. Cocktail gigs and party gigs. A lot of classical people turn their nose up at that stuff, but it's the easiest money that there is for me to make. And I don't have to practice. I don't even have to bring music. All I have to do is dress up and show up. I like those gigs.

**That feels like good advice—to have an open mind about being able to do lots of different kinds of jobs, especially if you're really going to try and cobble together a living for yourself as a working musician.**

For me, that's always been a choice—doing non-classical things for a broader, more general and perhaps less sophisticated audience. I mean, there's just so little work in the rarefied, highly refined world of high-level classical music. There's just so little of that work. And you have to be so incredibly good. And frankly, I am good, but there are so many people in this city who are also just as good. I really just stay focused on my bank account. My church job, for example. I could totally just roll my eyes and be snooty about it, like, "Oh, these people don't have any idea about what I actually do, or my training, and I'm playing this old, crappy organ."

But then I think about the fact that you never know what this music—or hearing this music in a church, for example—means to people. The church I play in is an hour north of the city. Some of these people don't have access to a lot, and maybe this is the only live music experience they have in their life. I might be playing this old organ that hasn't been tuned in 30 years, but I'm still playing along with this wonderful opera singer who is doing a beautiful version of "Ave Maria" and perhaps that has tremendous meaning for them, you know? The same thing for a cocktail gig. You just never know what a song means to someone, or what this old-fashioned American Songbook standard, or this old sentimental show tune means to someone who is hearing it, or what creating a certain kind of atmosphere added to the party. There are more ways to connect with people than just strictly using the narrow view of classical training that we all have.

**When do you feel you're at your most creative?**

It's changed since I've started writing music again, which started happening kind of gradually about ten years ago. Now, I would say I feel most creative when I'm writing—when I'm looking at a text that someone wants me to set to music, and I'm hearing music in my head, and I'm trying to decide, "Do I like it? Is that how I feel it? Who's the singer that I'm writing it for? Will her voice sound good singing in that range?" The rewards of the accompanying life have been kind of diminishing for me over the years. The composition feels more exciting, and it moves people in a different way. That's exciting for me. So right now, I would say that's where the greatest rewards are for me. And that's why I'm taking a big chance and putting a lot of energy into that.

**As a working pianist, are there specific things you need to do in order to take care of yourself?**

Not really. I mean, other than just sleep well and eat well, and common-sense stuff that everybody has to think about. As a creative person I really need to feel inspired. If I'm going to keep getting good ideas for pieces of music, if I'm going to play music well, I need to be taking in interesting things. I need to be reading interesting poetry. I need to be listening to what other people are writing. I need to hear what other composers are doing. I need to be engaged. I think that's the most important thing of all.

**Christopher Cooley Recommends:**

If you are someone who's interested in this sort of thing, there's a book that you might want to look into called, *The Muse That Sings* by Ann McCutchan. It features a bunch of different composers talking about their creative process. It's interesting hearing them talk about the conditions under which they like to work, what gets them to sit down and write, what inspires them, what routines they need, how they do it, stuff like that. There's a little chapter with each one. It's really inspiring.

Name

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Vocation

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