

COLLA VOCE

Colla voce literally means *with the voice*, and refers to the out of tempo accompaniment to a singer or solo instrumentalist. Colla voce is sometimes shortened to *colla* or abbreviated to *CV*. It is most commonly found in the verses to standards which then proceed to go into tempo at the start of the chorus, sometimes reverting to a few bars colla voce at the very end of the song. However, colla voce playing does not need to be limited to this and can be used anywhere and for any length of time.

Singers, in particular, love colla voce passages because they can milk the words to add extra drama to their performance. Any words which are at all passionate will result in a singer, particularly a female singer, wanting to linger over the emotions it conjures up - provided that the music permits him or her to do so at that specific point. If the note or notes corresponding to the word or phrase is too high or difficult to sing, it may be rushed over, but with a long pause afterwards for the significance of the word/s to sink in. On the other hand, emotions which cause the pulse to race obviously seem to require a quicker pace in the tempo.

Remember that singers have an added dimension to put over, namely the words to a song, which is something that does not apply when the song is played as an instrumental number, although knowing the lyrics to a song never comes amiss.

A misconception among some players is that colla voce means slow. It does not. Colla voce passages vary a lot in tempo. Imagine a lyric that contains these dreadful lines:

*While I was polishing the mantelpiece,
I saw your picture and my heart throbbed,
and I suddenly realised
how dusty it had become,
and I sobbed and sobbed
and threw it into the fire.*

(For non-English speakers, a *mantelpiece* is the shelf over the fireplace.)

Here the mundane is mixed with heart-felt emotional content. In the first two lines, the mundane part will be gone over quickly, speeding up when the emotional part (excitement) is reached, but then come to a complete halt after the words *throbbed..* The next few lines are pretty mundane but when the words *I sobbed and sobbed* come, the pace will get slower and slower, perhaps stopping altogether after the second *sobbed* before finishing off the song at a very fast pace.

In other words, for an accompanying pianist or guitarist (or conductor), it really is useful to know the lyrics. Rushing a singer or failing to keep up will try the patience of all singers and cause a lot of ill feeling. Another thing to remember is that where the voice stops for a while at the end of a phrase (where a dramatic effect is **not** required) the

accompaniment has to cover the ground quite quickly as a singer doesn't like to rest for long.

Having the lyrics in front of you is a great help in not getting lost, as it is usually far easier to follow the words than to follow the notation, especially if the music repeats itself a lot. When writing colla voce passages out, arrangers should therefore include lyrics on the accompanist's music.

To make life a little easier, you may like to give this a try. Above the clef or the lyrics, draw a line that goes up when the tempo should speed up, stays straight when it remains stable, and goes down when there it slows down. Where a pause is required, the line can be discontinued or a pause mark can be shown. As an example, let's take the first two lines of the lyric on the previous page.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. Above the first staff, a tempo line starts at a low level, rises to a peak over the first measure, remains high through the second measure, and then gradually descends through the remaining measures. Chord symbols are placed above the staff: F, /, Gm7, Am7, B \flat Δ , and B \circ addG. The lyrics "While I was po-lish-ing the man-tle-piece I" are written below the staff. The second staff continues the tempo line, which rises to a peak over the first measure and then descends. Chord symbols are C7(\flat 9), /, C \sharp addA, Dm7, and E \flat 13(+11). The lyrics "saw your pic- ture and my heart throbbed" are written below the staff.

Not every singer would sing it this way, but most would certainly pause on the word *throbbed*.

Where an instrumental colla voce passage is required, the pattern is often for the music to slow down or even come to a stop at the end of each musical phrase. Where there is a particularly long phrase, it may be played fairly quickly before finally slowing down. In fact, playing colla voce can be quite rapid and makes a welcome relief from a slow ponderous tempo which would be the alternative.

When whole bands have to play colla voce, there is often a problem in everyone trying to co-ordinate their efforts. At times, nods and hand gestures are the only solutions.

Let's look at how a chordal passage could look like with a line showing the tempo.

colla voce

Three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The notation consists of chord symbols above a staff line, with a melodic line above each staff. The first staff contains: C Δ E \flat 7 | A \flat Δ G7(\flat 9+5) | Em11 A7(\sharp 9) | A \flat m9 D \flat 9. The second staff contains: C7sus4 G \flat 7(-5) | F Δ A \flat 7(+11) | Dm9 Em7 | Fm9 E7(\sharp 9+5). The third staff contains: A Δ E \flat 9 | D Δ 9 D \flat Δ 9 | G \flat Δ 9 C7(\flat 9+5) | B Δ G7(\flat 9+5). A fermata is placed over the final chord of the third staff.

How this chord progression would be played would be at the discretion of the arranger/bandleader - this is just one way. Try playing it over as a band with a soloist. You still have to use your ears, but the general direction of the tempo could be used as a guideline.

Sometimes, a rough idea of the starting tempo might be useful, eg. moderate, 120 bpm, or whatever.

Another form of colla voce is where a soloist plays a cadenza on a chord, played by the rest of the band. This is often found at the end of a tune, where a soloist is featured. However, it could occur anywhere. In the tune *Dung Ho*, I start most of the solos off with an cadenza and it is up to the soloist when he/she brings in the tempo and when the band should come in. Nodding or lowering the instrument in a rapid gesture (easiest done with horns than pianos or double-basses!) does the trick.

Cadenzas need not be limited to a single chord. Cadenzas on a number of successive chords can be very effective, as writers such as Kenny Wheeler have shown. This is a real test for players. Eye-contact with fellow musicians is important to remember. Or as the saying goes, *the eyes have it...*but don't forget the ears.