

PEDAGOGY FOR THE JAZZ SINGER

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Culture, education, values, and taste all play a role in the popular music to which we choose to listen and perform both individually and collectively. To add to the complexity of our choices and our preferences, each new generation tends toward adjustments and changes—be they small or large in scope—in value systems, language, and definitions. These determinates shape our perspective as they relate to how jazz music fits into choral/vocal music education. As we look for sound operational definitions as tools for the teaching of jazz music and with which our greater choral community can work, it is imperative to describe what has happened and is happening historically, musically, and vocally in this genre.



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Musical, Vocal, and Style Requirements Specific to Jazz Group Singing

Although the vocal jazz group usually exists under the auspices of the choral music teacher, except in certain universities where it exists under the auspices of the jazz studies degree program, it really is not choral music as we in the American Choral Directors Association define choral music traditionally or historically. Why?

- Authentic vocal jazz singing usually calls for a close-up, one-on-a-microphone configuration and does not depend on natural/acoustic voice projection.
- Diction requirements in vocal jazz are based on vernacular, not formal, speech patterns.
- The voice ranges and tessituras of jazz music are generally written in keys that emphasize women's middle and low registers.
- Dynamic ranges generally fall between mezzo piano and mezzo forte, and rarely do jazz singers use extremely soft dynamic levels, which do not amplify well; or extremely loud dynamic levels, which cause sound distortion.
- The ensemble is considered a group of solo singers who do not use traditional rules of choral singing but rather blend their "solo" voices to create a variety of colors/timbres in the music (e.g., the New York Voices) or a group of singers with a match-to-sample tone (e.g., the Singers Unlimited or The Real Group).
- The definition of appropriate intonation becomes a definition of intonations (plural) to allow space for pitch bending, jazz inflections, and jazz articulations.
- Phrasing is more often than not two to four measures rather than the traditional four to eight measures found in more "formal" choral music.

- Breath-to-tone ratios change depending on the style of the music. For example, Bossa Novas and Sambas have more breath in the tone than, say, Bebop tunes and intimate ballads.
- Legato and vibrato are options and not constants in the interpretation of jazz styles.
- Resonance in the tone varies depending on style and is directly affected by the use of the microphone. The resonating chambers (the vocal tract) are not as open as they need to be for acoustic singing.
- The minimum accompaniment for authentic vocal jazz singing is generally accepted as being the jazz trio—acoustic piano, acoustic bass, and drums with occasional use of electric keyboard and bass depending on the style of the tune being performed and/or instructions given by the composer/arranger of a chart.

- The use of vocal percussion is used with unaccompanied groove tunes.

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Organization Structure and Signature Sounds of Jazz Singing Groups

Vocal groups that sing jazz music are correctly referred to both as vocal jazz groups and as jazz vocal groups. The description one chooses seems to parallel the person with whom one has studied the idiom/genre extensively. (For example: Steve Zegree, Indiana University, Bloomington, said vocal jazz; Larry Lapin, University of Miami, says

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jazz vocal.) Presently, jazz singing groups fall loosely into four categories:

- The vocal jazz trio, quartet, quintet, sextet, octet: the one-on-a-microphone, one-on-a-part group.
- The vocal jazz/jazz vocal ensemble: the one-on-a-microphone group of twelve to sixteen voices with more than one on a part.
- The honors vocal jazz ensemble/honors jazz choir (all-state groups): one or more on a microphone group of twenty-four to thirty-two voices.
- The jazz choir: thirty-two or more voices with microphones for soloists and, where possible, area microphones for the group.

It is important to note that some groups have eleven voices, some have eighteen voices, etc. Not every group fits neatly into this structure; it's often a matter of how many available and/or qualified singers there are and to what kind of amplification one has access. Odd numbers of singers do find their place in this blueprint.

There is more than one school of thought regarding the acceptable range of sounds a group of jazz singers can or should produce. This should not be considered odd since there is historical evidence of several schools of "formal" choral singing in America. For the sake of argument, let us consider the sounds of the Singers Unlimited and The Real Group at one end of the continuum and the sounds of the New York Voices at the other end. One end represents a more "refined," match-to-sample studio sound. The other end represents a more urban sound that is the result of definitive solo voices working together to create a wide palette of colors, timbres, and textures while still being

sensitive to blend and balance.

All three of these groups offer an artful sound, are musically sensitive, and sing with integrity. As we consider the continuum, it is likely that the majority of jazz groups fall somewhere toward the middle depending on personnel and teacher/director preference. The continuum is wider than you might imagine, and you have many choices. Now comes the question of how to successfully develop this kind of group and maintain vocal and musical integrity. As in all things artful, the answer lies in defining and engaging the craft.

One vocal characteristic of a jazz group sound that must be attended to from the beginning is the concept of blended registration. (This does not compare to, nor does it parallel, a music theatre belt sound that is amplified by using area microphones or body microphones.) The jazz voice is the most flexible when the registers are blended through the entire range. Many of the more contemporary jazz vocal arrangements (solo and group) require a great deal of flexibility and maneuverability within the range, particularly in women's voices. Listen to Anne Hampton Callaway, Cleo Laine, Margareta Jalkeus (the original lead singer in The Real Group), or Roberta Gambarini. The registration "mix" can be adjusted to add more top or more bottom (more treble or more bass quality in the tone) depending on what timbre the singer chooses to use, but the key word here is "mix." The requirements in jazz music in men's ranges do not tend to be as wide as the women's requirements, except for men assigned to a low bass part; but men do need to be able to make a smooth transition between their chest, middle mix, and falsetto registers when the music calls for it.

One of the most efficient ways to address developing registration blending for the microphone singer is to focus

on the "middle mix" from the pitch D above middle C for women and below middle C for men up to the pitch B flat above middle C for women and below middle C for men as they warm up in octaves. Although this does not address the men's transition into falsetto, it does give the singers time to establish tone color and vocal freedom in the most used part of the range—the middle mix—and across an important "break" in the women's voices (pitches somewhere between E and G above middle C) when singing jazz music.

To the uneducated ear, a strong middle mix might be mistaken for a music theatre belt sound, so keep in mind that the level of volume and microphone proximity have everything to do with which is which. Middle mix for the jazz singer is a *mezzo piano* to *mezzo forte* close-up microphone sound, and the middle mix for the belt singer is a much fuller—louder, if you will—sound with the microphone attached to the singer's clothing, to the singer's ear, or placed in the singer's hair.

A Developing Pedagogy

Moving on from our choice of the kind and size of group we want to develop and a sense of a signature sound we wish to nurture, the next logical step is to incorporate a strong sense of pedagogy so as to keep the voice healthy while maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the medium. The path toward establishing a verifiable pedagogy for the jazz singer has been long and slow to develop for several reasons:

- Jazz singing falls under the umbrella term "Popular Music" and has one foot strongly placed in the entertainment and commercial arena and the other in Art music. Jazz was considered an entertainment music

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long before it was recognized as an Art form. (The designation Art suggests a “refined” craft.)

- Jazz was not considered Art music by critics and the public at large until well into the 1940s, and instrumental not vocal jazz was the focus.¹
- Vocal pedagogy based on scientific research did not come into play until the late 1960s when voice pedagogue Ralph Appelman (Indiana University, Bloomington) joined forces with Bell Laboratories to acoustically study the behaviors of the classical voice instrument.
- Programs in colleges and universities for training non-classical singers were not established until two-year colleges began offering vocal jazz group singing experiences in large numbers in the Pacific Northwest in the 1970s—although there were “pockets” of programs in Washington State and Oregon in the 1960s.
- Scientific research in vocal jazz pedagogy began some thirty-five years after Appelman’s research and after a plethora of pedagogy books were written specifically for the classical singer.
- Until recently, the majority of teachers of jazz singing have been performers and coaches, not pedagogues.
- Only since the 1990s have colleges and universities developed degree programs in jazz studies with an emphasis in voice, therefore requiring knowledge of pedagogy on the part of professors.

Spectrography Defines Behaviors of the Jazz Voice

A monumental shift in modern voice research took place in 1989 when, under the watchful eye of internationally renowned vocal pedagogue Richard Miller (1926-2009), the Otto B. Schoepfle Vocal Arts Center at Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio opened its doors. This technology laboratory welcomes singers, coaches, teachers, and researchers to investigate and diagnose behaviors of the voice instrument. The laboratory offers spectrography and other instruments of analysis that allow us to actually “see” the voice instrument at work. A significant measuring tool in the lab is a software program called VoceVista. This technology, originally designed with the classical singer in mind, has been used for almost two decades and is being installed in laboratories at college, universities, and voice studios worldwide. VoceVista is a “family of unique Windows software programs” that provides a non-invasive way (no scopes down the throat) to study the voice instrument acoustically. Through digital imagery, the programs provide spectrographic information about an individual’s sound with precise, visual feedback. Spectrographs record and indicate such vocal activities as resonance, vibrato, attacks/onsets, releases, breath management, Formant behaviors, and much more, and the information is registered in real time.

By the year 2003, another significant shift took place. Diana Spradling accessed a laboratory similar to the one at Oberlin Conservatory and began incorporating the use of VoceVista software into the research, diagnosing, and teaching of jazz singers. During the last decade, her collected information has produced significant scientific documentation of how the voice “behaves” when singing jazz music (and

other kinds of commercial singing) and provides significant evidence that there is a healthy way to produce a sung “microphone” sound, albeit with a different set of pedagogical rules than those in place for the classical singer. In addition to the behaviors of the (classical) voice studies first documented at Oberlin, Spradling discovered that spectrograms of the jazz singer’s voice could register behaviors including, but not limited to, pitch bending, consonant execution, breath-to-tone ratios, and jazz inflections.² Consequently, enough data has been amassed to establish scientifically documented operational definitions for a vocal jazz pedagogy.

Image 1 shows an eight-second, real-time spectrogram of Mark Murphy singing the words “Let your gentle light” from his recording of *Ballad of the Sad Young Men*. The numbers indicate the following: 1. A bent pitch; 2. An ascending smear followed by a straight tone; 3. Vibrato executed after a straight tone; 4. The execution of a diphthong; 5. The piano; 6. The bass. The fuzzy background is actually the recording of the brushes used by the drummer.

Just as helpful is the fact that this technology provides us with a means to study vocal behaviors through recorded examples, either commercially produced or recorded in a studio voice lesson. Since the study of the history of vocal jazz can be easily accessed by recorded examples, much has been learned. During a three-year study conducted by Diana Spradling of the spectrograms of recorded examples of professional jazz singers since the time of Frank Sinatra (a bridge between Big Band and Modern Jazz microphone singers) to the most contemporary of jazz singers, results show that vocal behaviors mentioned previously, including the execution of a broad palette of jazz inflections and jazz articulations, have changed very little since the 1940s. It should be noted

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that since the 1980s, contemporary jazz singers have more pedagogical training and coaching and therefore more tools at their disposal to protect, maintain, and experiment with their voice instruments. (Bobby McFerrin comes to mind.) The consistencies since the 1940s mentioned prior and over the past sixty to seventy years lead us to believe we can now establish a set of pedagogical rules that we can properly label "a working pedagogical system for the jazz singer."

Verifiable and Definable Pedagogical Tools We Now Have at Our Disposal as Confirmed through Scientific Research

The continuum mentioned in the section on organizational structure of

jazz singing groups (page ??) suggests a wide palette of sounds and style features. In order to establish a working pedagogy for jazz singers, it is important to identify and implement these features. Keep in mind that the same pedagogy applies to jazz solo singing and to jazz group singing; the only real difference is that a jazz solo singer can use a wider palette of colors, timbres, and unique sounds than members of a group can for obvious reasons. Therein lies an important reason to study recordings.

1) Jaw position and microphone proximity

Because the microphone is a part of the character of the "whole sound," the jazz singer should place less emphasis

on natural/acoustical projection and more emphasis on the relationship between the microphone, the voice, and the dynamic content. The vocal tract (a combination of resonating chambers) is not as open/expanded as that of the classical singer. Too much resonance and too much volume/intensity will distort the amplified sound. The open/dropped jaw used in traditional choral singing is only used in jazz singing to sing at loud dynamic levels or for holding certain "long" notes for an extended time for some dramatic effect. If the singer or singers think about the distance between the upper back and lower back teeth (as opposed to how open the mouth is) as being somewhere between a third and a half an inch depending on the singer's physical makeup, it will

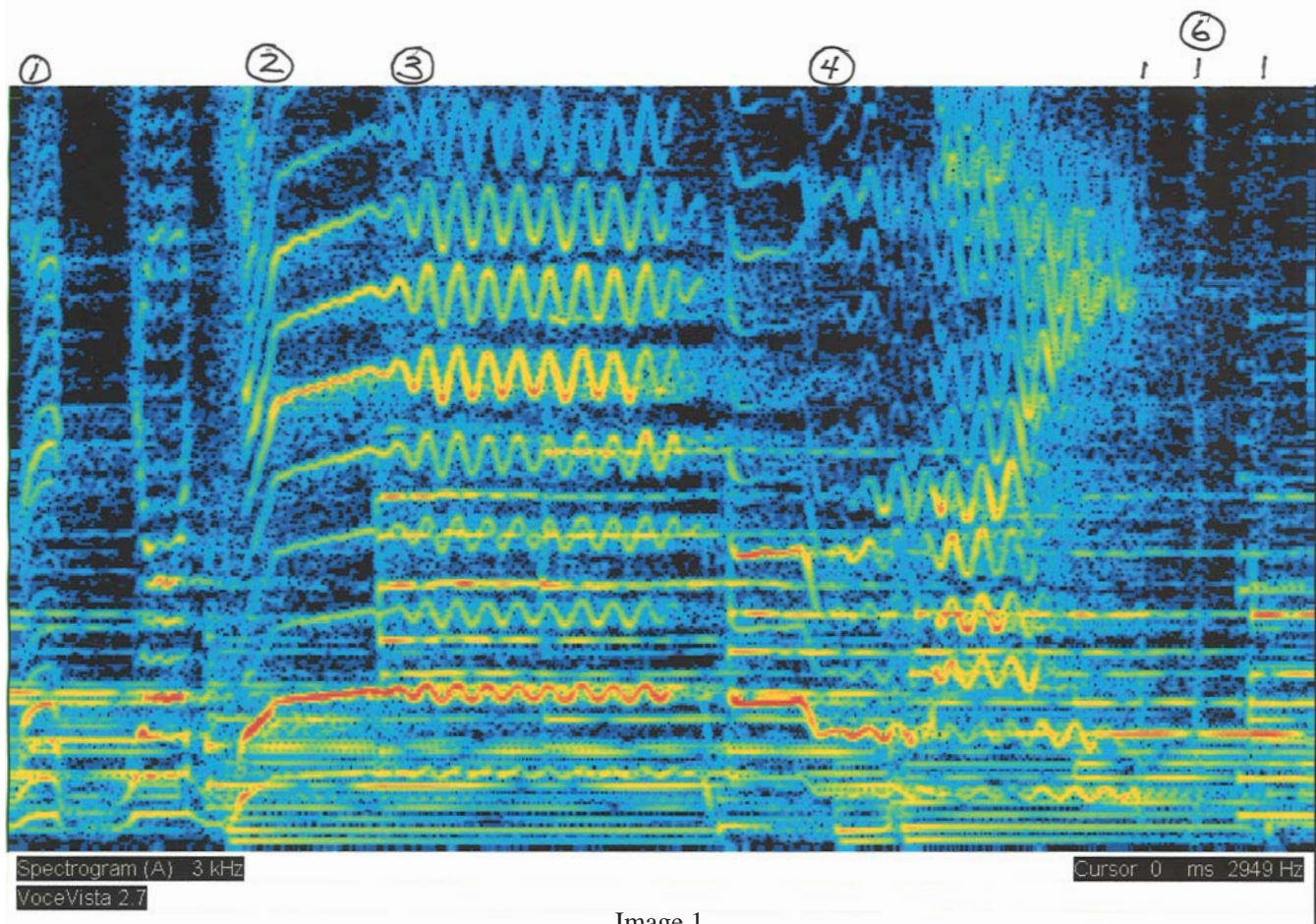


Image 1

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assist microphone compatibility, give the tongue room to function, and the singer will be able to better manage the amount of resonance in the tone and still have a relaxed, loose jaw without it being too open. As for the relationship between the lips and the microphone, a good rule of thumb might be: a) “mouth-to-the-metal” or one finger’s distance when placing the index finger vertically between the lips and the microphone; b) two fingers distance (placing the index and middle fingers together vertically between the lips and the ball of the microphone) for a fuller, well-balanced group sound for moderate swinging tunes, and Bebop tunes with lots of lyrics and/or scat syllables; c) a fist’s distance between the lips and the microphone for gospel and R&B styles.

Most microphone singing should be executed between *mezzo piano* and *mezzo forte*. In a thirty-two-plus voice group where close-up microphones are not used, the dynamics can be adjusted to a slightly more intense degree depending on the strength of the voices and the performance venue—more toward *mezzo forte* to *forte*—but the use of extreme dynamics should still be avoided for the most part in order to maintain the integrity of the styles and avoid lapsing into a “belt” sound. This often happens if students are in a school musical and singing in the vocal jazz group. They forget to distinguish between styles.

2) Resonance and the microphone

Measuring resonance in a jazz singer’s tone and comparing it to resonance in a classical singer’s tone reinforces statement one. VoceVista spectrograms are usually set at 5000 to 8000 Hertz (HZ) when studying vocal behaviors of classical singers but are set at 3000 to 5000 HZ when studying the vocal behaviors of jazz singers. The exact HZ settings depend on whether one is

looking at a male voice or a female voice and on the category of each voice (e.g., soprano, alto.) The naturally projected acoustical properties of the classical singer registers significant acoustic activity in the first (F1) through the sixth (F6) Formants (and occasionally higher) on a spectrogram, while the microphone singer’s behaviors are mostly registered in Formants 1, 2, and 3. (A Formant is a group of overtones that indicates bands of energy on a spectrogram.) We must consider resonance in the tone in degrees when teaching jazz singers, and this can happen rather naturally by simply adjusting the jaw opening and adjusting the palate higher or lower. If the palate is too low, the sound will be nasal; if the palate is too high, the sound will be too full and too resonant to remain microphone compatible.

3) Tongue activity and tone colors

There is often weak spectrographic activity in developing jazz singers in Formant 2 (F2), indicating that the tongue is not functioning correctly for this kind of singing. An argument can be made that the singer might be trying to not over-enunciate for fear of sounding “too trained” and therefore inauthentic, but an inactive tongue is not the answer. The most efficient way to “manage” resonance and diction and increase individual colors/timbres in the tone of the microphone singer, thus strengthening the F2, is to keep the tongue active.

Even though we are not relying on natural projection, the tip of the tongue must remain active so as to produce clarity of diction. The middle of the tongue cannot remain flat or too low in the mouth, because the sound will lack vibrancy and create too much space in the resonating chambers. Because a less open jaw is needed for microphone singing, engaging the tongue plays a major role in creating an interesting,

free, and clear jazz tone. Keep in mind that the tongue moves in sections. We can activate the tip, the blade, the back, and the sides separately as we speak and sing. The tongue will not get in the way if we remember to put space between the back teeth (refer to #2); as goes the tongue, so goes the timbre.

4) The use of vernacular/ conversational diction

The appropriate use of diction in jazz music falls under the category of vernacular/informal/conversational pronunciation. When one uses a “formal” palette of pronunciation in this genre, the delivery of text sounds stilted, stiff, or, as some would say, affected. The example that comes immediately to mind is the song “When I Fall in Love.”³ In a formal group/ensemble setting, we would sing the word “when” using the vowel “eh” as in the word “bet.” In a jazz setting, however, we would sing “win.”

Vowel substitutions are common in interpreting the text. The stressed schwa vowel “uh” is also commonly used. Again thinking of the title “When I Fall in Love,” in a formal setting the word “love” would contain an “ah” as the vowel, but in jazz singing the stressed schwa vowel “uh” would be substituted. How do we know when, where, and how to make adjustments? Simply speak the texts as you would say them in casual conversation and you will have the answers. Recordings are, again, also very helpful.

Many final consonants are imploded at the ends of words to make the delivery of the text more microphone compatible. Imploded means the tongue is stopped at the roof of the mouth and never released/exploded with a breath as the tongue moves back into the floor of the mouth. Exploded consonants create an extra puff of air that registers as a “pop” through the amplification system.

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5) Legato as a choice and not a constant

Legato is a means of “text phrasing” in all styles of music, but according to spectrographic analysis it usually only connects three to six syllables (occasionally a few more) of the text at a time when interpreting many jazz texts.⁴ The longest phrases, of course, are in ballads, especially the unaccompanied ones, and the shortest phrases are used for dramatic emphasis in the telling of a story. For example: listen to Frank Sinatra, who is a master of text phrasing. A helpful way to prepare a score for rehearsal is to listen to several solo and group artists phrase a tune. Sing along, match the phrasing, and make choices.

In this music, the text is the major determinate of how the tune is to be interpreted. Refer to the concept stated at the beginning of this article that jazz group music is not exactly like traditional choral music. The area of legato phrasing is a major factor that separates a “choral sound” from a “jazz sound.” The lengthier the phrasing in any jazz tune, the less it will swing! The editing of arrangements and original vocal jazz charts by publishing companies rarely suggest a “freedom to phrase.” Because the charts look like more formal choral music (octavos) on the page, we don’t necessarily think about taking liberties with the printed score. You are encouraged to think outside the box and adapt charts to reflect your own ideas of interpretation within the bounds of authenticity and of course without completely rearranging the arrangement!

6) Vibrato as an ornamental tool

The classically trained singer is taught to initiate vibrato at the onset of a vowel and keep the vibrato flowing through as much of a musical phrase as possible. According to extensive study of spectrograms, this is absolutely not the

case in jazz singing. This concept tends to be a bit off-putting to the classical voice teacher; however, we should be teaching students how to do both. Spectrographic recordings of how jazz singers use vibrato indicate the vibrato for the microphone singer is first and foremost an ornament. It is often initiated after the onset of the vowel and can follow a straight tone or even be as short as a flip (about one and one half beats) or for as long as a note value of an important word in the text is to be held.⁵

7) The straight tone

According to spectrographic analysis, even a tone defined as straight has a slight oscillation, and probably to no one’s surprise, a healthy straight tone is directly related to efficient use of the breath management system. With well-executed breath control, the so-called “straight tone” can be defined as having a bit of movement in the tone all the time even though the ear may not always be able to detect it.

8) Pitch bending as a style tool

When the first spectrograms were created of jazz singers from Sinatra to McFerrin and beyond, the amount of pitch bending registered in any given phrase was so prevalent one wondered if there were something wrong with the software. To much of the classical community, the use of such a tool has always been described as scooping, but the technology reveals that the bending of pitches in jazz singing varies in how far the pitch is bent and is not always discernible to the ear. We do hear ascending and descending smears, fall-offs, and glissandos of various lengths; but these articulations, just as portamento is used by classical singers, are not meant to be used over and over in an artful jazz tune. The so-called Crooners



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A graphic of musical notes and a treble clef, rendered in a golden, metallic style, set against a background of blue water.

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of the 1940s (Dean Martin comes to mind) were professional performers who turned “crooning” into a pop art form, but make no mistake: “scooping” was not and is not considered a jazz style feature. As in all things, the way this feature is used is supposed to give it artistic definition.

9) Onsets/Attacks and releases of vowels

Here is another area of jazz singing that is clearly identifiable by spectrographic analysis. Onsets are not ever meant to be hard glottal attacks. An attack can be a balanced onset, meaning there is no leaking air or glottal indication, or a soft glottal stroke initiated when a syllable begins with a vowel. Releases depend on whether the final letter of the word is a vowel or a consonant. Vowels are often ended with a breath release. Hard glottal attacks are not commonly used by jazz singers.

10) The use of diphthongs

Rules for executing diphthongs are quite different in classical singing and in jazz singing. Spectrographic analysis shows that jazz artists negotiate diphthongs in at least five different ways.⁶ Each vowel in the diphthong has its own job to do.

11) Breath-to-tone ratios

Untamed or unmanaged breath is very easy to see on a spectrogram. The breath “leaks” all around the tone and all over the graph and looks like television static. The exception to this is the way the drum set registers on a spectrogram. It closely resembles a kind of static, but as one listens to a recording while reading the graph, you can distinguish between leaking air and brushes on a drum set. The old idea that microphone singing is

generally a Marilyn Monroe-type breath management system is erroneous at best, and very few spectrograms of jazz singers indicate this condition.

Although Brazilian singer Astrud Gilberto’s spectrograms might look like Marilyn Monroe’s voice sounds, we must consider that she was a singing housewife and not a professional when she was “discovered.” At another point in the continuum, Betty Carter uses a fair amount of air in her tone but it is not leaking; it is actually infused into the tone. Leaking air simply indicates that the cords are not completely coming together (adducting). Adjusting breath-to-tone ratios for different styles of singing is different from leaking air and is executed by controlling the amount of air coming through the cords as the tone is being produced (fusing the tone). Think of adding breath to the tone as you adjust the size and the shape of the vocal tract to create different colors or textures. It doesn’t take much air to change the timbre. This tool is only as efficient as the singer’s breath management system. For the beginning group it is probably wise not to incorporate this concept but to simply focus on establishing a clean, clear, microphone sound.

Vocal Percussion and Vocal Bass

The use of vocal percussion in vocal jazz music is a trend inspired by the hybridization of pop unaccompanied and vocal jazz styles. Following in the footsteps of early groups like A Cappella and Acappella Vocal Band, ensembles such as the University of Northern Colorado Axidentals began adding vocal percussion and pop unaccompanied elements to traditional vocal jazz in the early 1990s (several members of the Axidentals went on to become found-

ing members of the jazz/pop hybrid ensemble M-Pact). TV shows like *Glee* and *The Sing-Off* and the movie *Pitch Perfect* have exposed millions of viewers to professional groups like Pentatonix and collegiate groups like Afro Blue, all of whom creatively and artistically blur stylistic lines between pop and jazz. One of the distinguishing features of both unaccompanied pop and jazz/pop is the use of vocal percussion. Some important distinctions occur in the differences between vocal percussion and beatboxing and are detailed below:

- Beatboxing involves elements of vocal percussion but also involves using the voice to imitate record scratching, audio sampling, dubstep loops, electronic effects, and sounds that cannot be replicated outside of the human voice. Vocal percussion is exactly what its name implies—using tongue, teeth, and resonant space to replicate acoustic percussion instruments.
- Beatboxing is an integral part of hip hop culture and tradition. Vocal percussion comes from vocal mimicry of jazz, pop, and folk musics.
- While both beatboxing and vocal percussion require the use of amplification, beatboxers often utilize large amounts of EQ manipulation from the soundboard, sometimes adding effects pedals to their sound setup. Vocal percussion requires only minimal manipulation of EQ settings on a soundboard.
- For an example of the differences between vocal percussion and beatboxing, compare Jake Moulton’s work with M-Pact (vocal percussion) versus his work with the House Jacks or Mo5aic (beatboxing). Both are examples

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of strong musical artistry, but there is a difference in his approach with M-Pact's more jazz-oriented sound.

This last point is crucial. A reflexive criticism of beatboxing and vocal percussion is that they damage the voice. Neither is inherently unhealthy, but both beatboxing and vocal percussion should be amplified via sound system at all times—professionals rarely ever articulate above a *mezzo piano*. The sound system needs to be an integral part of any use of vocal percussion.

With those distinctions in mind, we can now discuss vocal percussion in terms of appropriate VP approaches for jazz settings. Any vocal percussionist should listen to jazz drummers in order to develop a sense of jazz drumming articulation. Max Roach, Philly Joe Jones, and Louie Bellson are three excellent listening examples. In working to replicate the timbres available via the drum set, the following syllables are recommended as starting points:

Bass Drum/Kick Drum:

- /dn/ (spoken on a low pitch with lips apart, soft palate raised, and an open throat, feeling vibrations in the nasal area)
- /dm/ (spoken on a low pitch with lips together, open throat, feeling vibrations in the nasal area)
- /p/ or /b/ (softly exploded consonant with a little air behind it)

Snare Drum

- /pf/ (with a small explosion of air accompanying)
- /ps/ (with a very short s, stopping the airflow almost immediately)

- /k/ (used for a heavy backbeat, usually on beats two and four)

Toms

- /bm/, /dn/, and /tn/ all work as syllables here, on three pitch levels (somewhere around Bb4, F3, Bb3)

Hi-Hat

- /ts/ (short or sustained for an open effect)
- /ch/ or /chk/ (short and with a small explosion of air)

Cymbals

- /dsh/, /ksh/, /psh/
- /ps/ (with a very short s, stopping the airflow almost immediately)
- In vocal percussion, the non-hi-hat cymbals will primarily be used only for accents and crashes.

Now, let's consider some combinations. In a basic swing feel emulating the use of brushes on a snare drum, the vocal percussionist should consider using an almost closed-mouth "shuh-fshuh, shuh-fshuh" or "tih-ftsih, tih-ftsih" syllabic approach, with a slight emphasis on beats two and four and the *f* being placed slightly before the beat. From here, additional accents on the snare, bass, and cymbals can be added:

Example 1: Basic vocal percussion "brushes" swing groove

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
tih f----tsih tih f----tsih

Example 2: "brushes" swing groove with

snare accents on the upbeats of 3 and 4

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
tih f----tsih tih k tih k

Example 3: "brushes" swing groove with "Charleston" accents added in the bass drum

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
dn f----tsih dn tih f----tsih

Another way to incorporate a vocal percussion element to a swing selection is to add a hi-hat "ts" to a walking vocal bass line on the second and fourth beats. Anders Jalkéus of The Real Group works this into his bass lines frequently to outstanding effect. In this style, the walking bass line ends up being vocalized "dn-tsn-dn-tsn," which has the added benefit of providing an extra emphasis to the upbeats, creating a more authentic swing feel.

Latin jazz grooves provide a particularly fertile opportunity for the use of vocal percussion due to the wide variety of hand percussion utilized in Cuban and Brazilian jazz styles. Again, a few examples to consider as possibilities:

Conga (Cuban) or Surdo (Brazilian)

- /dohn/ (with a rich, round, resonant approach—this can also be done at varying pitch levels and generally on the downbeat)
- /kohn/ (less heavily than the downbeat /dohn/)
- /ka/ (with a heavy *k* to mimic a slap)
- /ta/ (lightly, usually on an upbeat)

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Guiro (Cuban)

- /drrr/ (rolled r) /chih-kih/ (this being done on a “one, two-and three, four-and” pattern)

Shekere (Brazilian) or Shaker (Cuban)

- /shih-k-t-k/ (with a very heavy emphasis on the downbeat)

Agogo Bells (Brazilian)

- /ken-goh-goh/ (high, low, low, with the high being on a pickup)

Several Latin Jazz arrangements (notably The Real Group’s “Chile Con Carne”) build some percussive elements into the melodies and harmonies. Do not be afraid to experiment with adding more percussive ideas. Layering vocal percussion can be a tremendously effective way to create a samba tune by setting up a groove in the vocals then repeating it until cue:

Beat: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Agogo goh goh ken goh goh ken

Shekere shih k t k shih k t k

Surdo dohn ka dohn ka ka

The use of vocal bass was mentioned earlier in relation to swing styles, but it is important here to talk about bass considerations. Often, directors who are inexperienced with the jazz idiom will look at written vocal bass lines and ask the singers to vocalize those lines using standard vowel conventions. The problem with this is that vocal bass lines in unaccompanied vocal jazz charts are modeled after instrumental bass lines and should be treated as such, particu-

larly regarding timbre.

Just as it is important for vocal percussionists to listen to jazz drummers, it is important for singers who sing bass lines to listen to jazz bass players. Any bass singer in a vocal jazz ensemble would be well advised to listen to the playing of artists such as Ray Brown, Paul Chambers, and Christian McBride. If a selection has a more “electric” feel, those singers would be well advised to listen to the playing of Jaco Pastorius and Victor Wooten.

Many swing bass lines in vocal jazz scores are written out with a “doon” or “dum” syllable, but a more appropriate approach would be to close to the vocalized *n* or *m* as quickly as possible in order to create a timbre that more closely mimics the sound of an acoustic bass. In this way, placing an emphasis on beats two and four while closing to the vocalized consonant creates an authentic swing sound and feel. Because fretted and fretless electric basses sound different, it is important to keep this difference in mind when going for a bass sound centered in this approach. A “fretless” sound should be covered with a high soft palate, and extremely imploded consonants, with a walking bass line built around syllabic combinations such as “gn-gn-dn-gn.” A fretted bass should be more forward and percussive, using combinations like “bng-dng-pn-dn.” Alvin Chea of Take 6 provides an excellent example of mimicking various bass timbres, particularly his use of the syllable “bank” as an electric slap-bass effect.

Two examples of walking bass line (swing) syllabic choices, emphases on 2 and 4:

Beat: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
 gn Gn dn Gn
 dn Dn dn Dn

Fretless bass mimicry on a straight-eights groove with heavy backbeats:

Beat: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
 bng dng PN dn bng dng PN dn

Alvin Chea-inspired walking bass line (swing), imitating fretted electric bass, with an upbeat “slap” accent:

Beat: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
 dn dn dm BANK ba

The Future of Vocal Jazz Ensembles


As has happened in the instrumental realm, vocal jazz ensemble singing will become broader and less defined as a “one-size-fits-all” idiom; this has been happening for quite some time, and this trend will only continue. The choices available to ensembles (and their directors) can be broken down to a number of different levels and questions:

- Is the ensemble unaccompanied, does it have rhythm section accompaniment, or is it a mixture of both?
- Does the ensemble sing repertoire primarily in the established vocal jazz tradition (e.g., Gene Puerling, Phil Mattson); primarily new repertoire in a contemporary jazz style (e.g., Kerry Marsh, Rosana Eckert); jazz/pop hybrid repertoire (e.g., Afro Blue, Pentatonix); or a combination of all three?
- Is the ensemble’s focus primarily centered on ensemble singing? Is the focus on soloists backed by the ensemble? Is it a combination?

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- Does the ensemble have a more “blended” Singers Unlimited-inspired group sound, a more “so-loistic” New York Voices-inspired group sound, or a combination?
- Does the ensemble have a specific timbre and blend that is an inherent part of the group’s sound (regardless of personnel changes), is the ensemble’s timbre and blend almost exclusively influenced by its personnel, or is it a combination?
- Does vocal improvisation play a large or small role in the ensemble?

The answers to these questions potentially provide 648 possible definitions of a “vocal jazz ensemble”! With that in mind, it is vital that vocal jazz educators and students embrace diversity of choice and stylistic preference. The precedent has already been set on the instrumental side (look no further than Sierra Music’s “Radiohead Jazz Project”). As vocal jazz educators, we need to embrace new influences in the music while respecting the traditions of the art form; this will continue to keep the music relevant and provide more meaningful and enriching experiences for our students. 

Thing (1957, Capitol Records).

⁴ Diana R. Spradling, *Jazz Singing: Developing Artistry and Authenticity* (Sound Music Publications, 2007), 135, 136, 142.

⁵ For more complete information, see *Ibid.*, 35-38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

NOTES

¹ Scott DeVaux, *Black American Literature Forum*, Volume 25, No. 3, Literature of Jazz Issue, Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography, Fall 1991, 525-560. URL: <http://music.columbia.edu/~davidadamcyk/MusicHum/resources/PDF/Constructing-the-Jazz-Tradition.pdf>

² Diana R. Spradling, *Jazz Singing: Developing Artistry and Authenticity* (Sound Music Publications, 2007), 135-142.

³ Nat King Cole, *When I Fall In Love, Love Is the*