Vocal Jazz

The Reverse Triangle: Teaching Vocal Jazz Ensemble Tone Based on Vocal Register

by John Stafford II

Within a traditional choir, tenors and basses learn to tune unisons, octaves, thirds (sometimes sixths), fourths, and fifths. These intervals are usually sung in chest voice, so the resonance is maximized to properly tune the harmony (which complements with the overtone series). The struggle with introducing the vocal jazz ensemble to tenors and basses is that they must sing the thirds and sevenths of every chord. They rarely sing the root, fourth, or fifth of a chord, and instead of tuning octaves, they must learn how to tune sevenths (especially the major seventh interval, which is more common than the minor seventh interval in jazz 3/7 voicing). The students will want to sing these dissonance intervals in chest voice, but singing sevenths in chest voice will conflict with tuning the chord.

Chest voice, especially if sung with a healthy vibrato, will cause too many overtones for the interval to tune. Tenors and basses (more so the basses) really must learn how to use their mixed register or sing with minimal vibrato with a lighter chest voice. Vocalists must understand the intervallic content within the chart to sing the material in tune. Educators should understand how to teach these students how to sing the material with the correct tone associated with the interval and how to do so in a healthy manner. The diagrams below demonstrate the difference in tuning a vocal ensemble (Western Art Music vs. American Jazz Music).

In traditional choral music, the bass section is the harmonic foundation of the ensemble, regardless of whether the music is accompanied or not (see Figure 1). The soprano, alto, and tenor sections tune to the bass. Thus, the bottom/wide portion of the triangle represents the harmonic foundation, and the other three voices complement that foundation. Figure 1 also shows that the bottom of the triangle is chest voice, and the transition to the top of the triangle is sung in head voice.

In the accompanied vocal jazz ensemble, the opposite, in some ways, occurs (see Figure 2). The soprano is usually assigned to sing the "head" of the chart (meaning the melody), while the other three voice parts sing the harmonic content below them. The tenors and

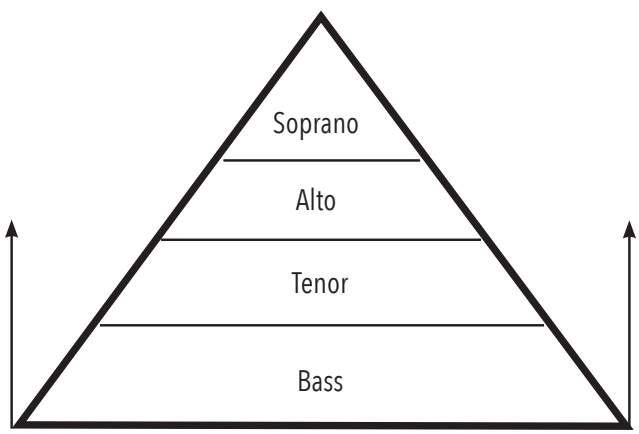


Figure 1. The Reverse Triangle - Traditional Choir
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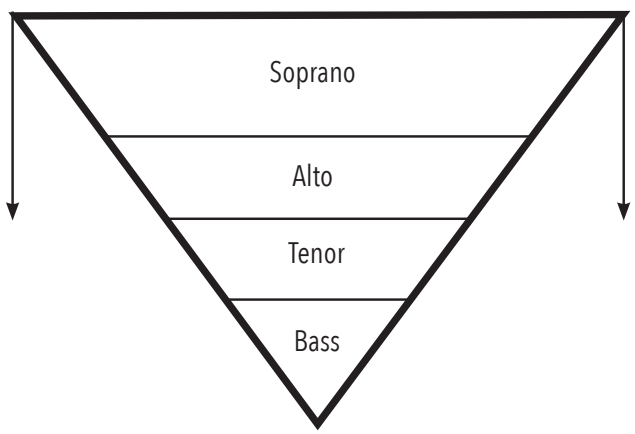


Figure 2. The Reverse Triangle - Vocal Jazz Ensemble
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basses sing mostly thirds and sevenths (the harmonic foundation of 3/7 voicing), while the sopranos and altos sing the chord extensions (a combination of chord tones, including ninths, elevenths and thirteenths).

Sopranos and altos, generally, have an easier time adjusting to jazz harmony, because jazz harmony tends to stack in triadic harmony between the upper voices (the chord extensions), while the tenors and basses tend to be in fourths (major and minor chords), fifths (major and minor chords), or tritones (dominant chords). In some more traditional jazz standards/arrangements, the tenors and basses sing quite a bit of dominant harmony in succession, which causes them to sing parallel tritones.

The root of accompanied vocal jazz ensembles is provided by the bass player. Students must be aware of tuning to the bass players because of chord function, but the lower voices must be aware of and also fit under the soprano so the melody is heard. Altos, tenors, and basses must always hear and adjust to the soprano melodic line to truly be in tune. The diagram represents the soprano being the most dominant/foundational voice in the ensemble, and the other three parts must fit under them, in terms of volume, balance, and tone. Stylistically, the best vocal jazz ensembles have the soprano part dictate the nuance, and the other three voice parts must adjust and/or copy that nuance, sometimes even during performance.

Conclusion

The idea of the reverse triangle is to: 1) help students understand the basics of listening to the foundational voices of the ensemble, and 2) sing the intervallic content using the correct register of their voices to tune the harmony. Teaching the vocal jazz ensemble is not as complicated as many directors think. Here are a couple of basic points for directors preparing students to sing jazz/understanding the Reverse Triangle concept:

Learn jazz theory. Understand the five chord qualities found in most jazz charts: major, minor, augmented, half-diminished, and full-diminished. It's also important to understand the correct chord extensions associated with each chord quality. Plus, learn how to read chord changes. All this knowledge is especially helpful for both tuning and understanding the correct accidentals for each chord tone.

Listen extensively. The best way to learn jazz is by listening to jazz music by both vocal and instrumental artists. Jazz is a genre that was originally developed by rote, not through notation. By listening to jazz, directors will develop an aural vocabulary that will help them in the rehearsal process. CJ

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