Repertoire & Resources

If I Don't Scat Sing, How Can I Teach It?
Strategies to Help Directors Demystify Vocal Improvisation in the Jazz Choir Setting

by Justin Binek

For many choir directors, the art of wordless vocal improvisation, better known as scat singing, is one of the scariest parts of teaching jazz and often serves as a roadblock in doing so. This is compounded by the fact that very few music education programs prepare choral educators in the area of jazz pedagogy, which includes improvisation. And so, our default instruction to students is often, "Well…just make something up."

Unfortunately, the prompt of "make something up" doesn't actually help our students, nor is it what professional jazz musicians do. Proficient jazz singers call upon a variety of patterns and melodic ideas gleaned through hours upon hours of practice. An analogy I use with my own students is to think of improv like breadmaking (I love bread). If you are setting out to make a loaf of bread, you don't just reach for random ingredients in the kitchen; you use specific ingredients that can be combined in creative ways to produce different types of bread… But it's still bread! So, let's identify some "ingredients" for our improvisational recipe.

One of the quickest and easiest ways to help students become comfortable with the concept of wordless improvisation is variation on the melody. Have them start by singing the melody on scat syllables, using B and D as onset consonants with relaxed vowels: buh, bee, duh, dee, dn, doo, etc. (Figure 1). Once students are com-

Figure 1. Scat solo using scat syllables and melodic variation
on the first 8 bars of "Bye, Bye, Blackbird" (Ray Henderson and Mort Dixon).

fortable with this, we can encourage students to stretch by adding ornaments or small melodic modifications. As the students' ears develop further, the more comfortable they will feel wandering further away from the melody. This exercise also helps students internalize the form of the song.

Part of what makes jazz fun (and, at times, frustrating) is the harmonies. The sooner that students can become comfortable with harmony, the more success they will have. I often begin by having students sing the bass roots of every chord, in time with the chord progression. This again builds familiarity with the form and gets students thinking about listening for the bass. After this, I like to have students sing Simple Chord Patterns using the root, second, third, and fifth of every chord—a Do-Re-Mi-So pattern on each chord (Figure 2). Foundational harmony is king here. And while I might not want to listen to an entire solo of 1-2-3-5

patterns on every chord, that pattern can actually lead to some great lines!

Super-secret hack: for an overwhelmingly large number of jazz standards, if the student sings ideas based on the tonic scale associated with the key signature of the piece, it's going to sound pretty good most of the time. Scalar Patterns using thirds, fourths, and enclousures (surrounding Do, Mi, and So with upper and lower neighbors) all fall into the category of "things that sound a whole lot more complex than they actually are" (Figure 3).

Jazz is a direct descendent of the blues. And your students already know the altered pentatonic scale that we refer to as the "minor blues scale" (La-Do-Re-Ri-Mi-So-La) because they listen to pop music. Blues is the "B" in R&B, after all. Call-and-response is a great way to help students build blues vocabulary, and doing so over a twelve-bar blues is even better (Figure 4)!

Figure 2. Rhythmic "1-2-3-5" (Do Mi Re So) pattern
on the chord changes of "All the Things You Are" (Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II).

Figure 3. Diatonic B♭ major enclosure figures and scale in 3rds
on the chord changes of "There Is No Greater Love" (Isham Jones and Marty Symes).

Let's talk about theft. Every great jazz musician I know learned to improvise in large part by listening to great improvisers, stealing ideas from them, and modifying those ideas to build new ideas. Encourage your students to listen to (and steal from) the great vocal improvisers from Ella Fitzgerald to Sarah Vaughan to Chet Baker to George Benson to Dee Dee Bridgewater to Darmon Meader (and so many others!) (Figure 5).

Finally, and maybe most importantly: Groove! A melodically and harmonically "simple" solo that locks into the swing (or bossa nova or samba) style ALWAYS sounds hipper than a melodically and harmonically

Figure 4. Two measure *call and response* ideas on a 12 bar blues progression
(instructor sings the blues lick, students echo)

Figure 5. Recording transcription of Ella Fitzgerald,
accompanied by Leonard Graham, John Lewis, Ray Brown, and Joe Harris.
"How High the Moon," Decca 24387, Master No. 74324, recorded December 20, 1947.

complex solo that doesn't.

All of these "ingredients" help provide students with context to help them succeed. For additional resources, *Scat!* by Bob Stoloff and *Vocal Improvisation* by Michele Weir are two books that I highly recommend for novice improvisers. Michele's ScatAbility app for iOS is also a great teaching and practicing tool. I also have a number of classic scat solo transcriptions available on my website (justinbinekjazz.com/educational-resources).

Go and help your students make great music!

Justin Binek is an associate professor of music theory and jazz studies at Kansas City Kansas Community College. Dr. Binek is an internationally renowned jazz and classical singer, pianist, educator, clinician, and composer/arranger. www.justinbinekjazz.com

2024 ACDA REGIONAL CONFERENCES

Northwestern
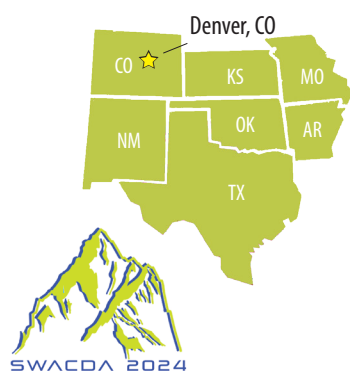

January 24 - 27, 2024
Spokane, WA

Midwestern

February 7-10, 2024
Omaha, NE

Southern

February 21 - 24, 2024
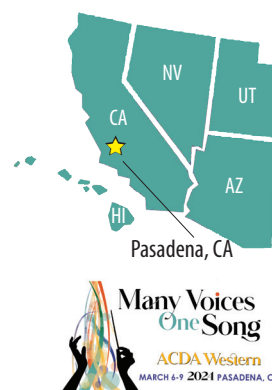Louisville, KY

Southwestern

February 27 - March 2, 2024
Denver, CO

Eastern

February 28 - March 2, 2024
Providence, RI

Western

March 6 - 9, 2024
Pasadena, CA

Registration Opens September 13th for Northwestern and Midwestern Regions - October 4th for Other Regions