



Repertoire & Resources

Vocal Jazz



John Stafford II
National Chair, Vocal Jazz
jstafford@kckcc.edu

Strategies for the Vocal Jazz Ensemble

by John Stafford II

This article provides an overview on how to develop the vocal jazz ensemble and offers strategies for beginning- to intermediate-level vocal jazz directors. After sharing my personal philosophy, we will discuss the following aspects: audition process, rehearsal preparation, warm-ups, vocal technique, improvisation, sound systems, and literature ideas. I hope this article will serve as encouragement for directors who are wanting to develop or enhance their vocal jazz ensembles.

Nationally, “while all fifty states host one or more traditional statewide honor choirs, only twenty-four states either currently host or once hosted one or more statewide honors vocal jazz ensembles.”¹ While this article’s topic is not specific to honors ensembles, this statistic highlights the discrepancy between choral ensembles as a whole and those directors who work with a vocal jazz ensemble. It is very easy for directors who teach this genre to feel isolated—even moreso than

their broader choral colleagues, who already may be one of the only music teachers in their school or district.

For the purposes of this article, a vocal jazz ensemble is defined as a small vocal ensemble with four to sixteen singers that perform both arrangements of repertoire from the American Songbook and arrangements that are derived from contemporary/commercial music within the last fifty years. The ensemble either performs with a rhythm section (piano, bass, and drums) or a cappella. Regardless of whether or not the ensemble uses a rhythm section, the harmonic setting of the arrangements are based on the traditional 3/7 harmonic voicing used in American jazz music.

Personal Philosophy

The most important thing to do when starting an ensemble, in my opinion, is developing a philosophy about what you want it to be and setting goals to make the philosophy into reality. My general philosophy is based on concepts that I have developed as a vocal jazz ensemble director of high school and collegiate ensembles for the past twenty years.

1) *Teaching style contrast.* It is important for my students to understand the differences in musical styles. When I program music for the next academic year, I’m not



Repertoire & Resources - Vocal Jazz

only programming jazz standards; I also focus on programming a lot of popular music that contains jazz harmony. It is important to teach the swing concept, but it's even more important to explain the differences between swing, multiple Latin grooves, funk, and blues. I enjoy presenting music the students are used to hearing regularly such as pop, hip-hop, R&B, gospel, and rock (as stated before, arrangements that contain jazz harmony). By expanding the stylistic variety, a director can broaden their programming tremendously.

2) *Sound of the ensemble.* It's not just about singing the right note and rhythms! The tone quality of the ensemble is essential and can be very intriguing from the audience's perspective.

I also recommend picking music that is accessible to your ensemble. It's so easy to pick music outside the capabilities of the ensemble you currently have, and I have to remind myself of this every year. You might have to do some hunting for charts sometimes, but this is so important. Also, once you create your vision/mission statement for the ensemble, stick with that. It will be easier to track the growth of your ensemble this way.

Ensemble Size

The size of the ensemble depends on your vision for the group and the sound you want to create. I want a bigger but well-blended sound out of my ensemble, so I prefer to have twelve singers in the group (three on a part). For SSATB material, I always look for two lead sopranos, one second soprano, one first alto, and two low altos (splitting the second soprano and first alto to the middle part on three-way splits).

Another detail I look for is finding a combination of larger and smaller voices that blend well together to achieve the sound I would like for the group. This process is highly influenced by the St. Olaf Choir voice matching method, applied to a vocal jazz ensemble. I voice match all the students and have them sing in the same formation throughout the entire year (sometimes, I change the formation at the beginning of the semesters if needed). Standing formation, plus mixing larger and smaller voices together, will aid in the overall tone quality of the ensemble. Within each section, I also look for bigger and smaller voices that match well

together to create perfect pairs (two voices that complement each other to the point that they sound like one voice), and this just depends on the singers you have at the time.

Rhythm Section Considerations

Another consideration is the rhythm section. I prefer to have a combo (with guitar) as much as possible. I've considered in the past having my group be a solely a cappella ensemble, but then I run into several issues—mostly having the right bass singer and vocal percussionist (neither of which I have every year). A cappella groups are wonderful; they are, however, also limiting in terms of diversifying a concert program and changing tonal sounds throughout your programming. I like to not only blend styles but have combinations of tone colors happening throughout my set lists. Even on instrumental solos, I try to be very careful about not asking the pianist to take every instrumental solo. I'm fortunate that I always have a solid rhythm section for my ensembles, so I try to have solo features as much as I can (this is why I love having guitar in the combo).

Other details to consider regarding rhythm sections:

- 1) Pick accessible charts that the rhythm can play as well!
- 2) For drums: If you're not a drummer, ask questions about how they play their instrument and how their play changes between each style of music that your group would perform. For example, in swing music, I like my drummer to play a flat ride because I don't want them hitting the bell of the ride cymbal. It causes too many overtones to the point that it could wash out the sound of the entire vocal ensemble, and then I have a balance issue to deal with.
- 3) For bass: It helps to have a bass player who is comfortable on both acoustic and electric. For bass solos, I encourage them to play the solo in the upper half of the fret board to show more volume, contour, and versatility.
- 4) For guitar: If you perform music in different styles, the guitarist could provide unique tone colors for your charts. If they perform any style outside of Latin or

swing, have them experiment with different pedals to create electronic sounds that could accompany your group. For example, using a *wah-wah* pedal on the right R&B/Neo-Soul chart could be very intriguing from a color standpoint.

5) For piano: This is a little more self-explanatory. For most gigs, I like having the pianist use a keyboard for everything, because they can change sounds quickly instead of switching back and forth between two instruments. I love experimenting with different sounds on the keyboards to add to my philosophy of “tonal changes” within my set.

6) For all instrumentalists: When they solo, allow them to solo in the upper ranges of their instrument. Not only for the reasons I stated before, but this will provide some contrast to the chart and “in the moment” excitement for the audience member.

Audition Process

Testing how students hear harmony is the most important aspect a director needs to learn from the audition, even more important than sight-reading (in my opinion). Good sight-readers don’t always translate to singers who can adapt/adjust within complex jazz harmony. Sight-reading capability is a wonderful tool for any student to have; however, sight-reading doesn’t mean that the student can hear and adjust to the harmony around them (these are definitely two different things). I’d rather take a student who can’t read as well but have great ears for harmony than vice versa.

I start my audition by checking students’ vocal range and then have them sing either “My Country Tis Of Thee” or “Amazing Grace” (only the first few lines of each tune; that’s all I need to hear). I want to hear the low notes for altos and basses and the high notes from sopranos and tenors, plus find the vocal break for each singer. The goal is for me hearing how the student navigates through their instrument on a melodic line, and I like having them sing the tune in different keys (sometimes up to five different keys). This helps me understand how they sing through their vocal break, which register has the most resonance, and learn whether or not the student has learned how to access their mixed

register. Specifically for “Amazing Grace,” I like having them sing with and without vibrato and sing in different styles (most likely in a traditional choral setting then in a popular music setting). I obtain quite a bit of information from these two simple vocal exercises.

Afterward, I conduct three jazz ear-training exercises:

- *Melodic ID (pitch memory)*: using common intervals from jazz—Major 7ths, half-steps, thirds, and tritones. I just want to hear them navigate through those intervals in a short, linear setting. I play a three- to four-note motive, and they have to sing it back to me. This exercise is especially helpful for the tenors and basses because they often sing more complex intervals within their individual lines, especially tritones when they sing a succession of dominant harmony. The next two exercises test the student’s ear vertically.

- *Chord Cluster*: I play three notes as a blocked chord, and the students sing the middle note on a neutral syllable. I do five examples of these in the middle of the keyboard (so the cluster can easily be heard): C-D-E, E^b-F-G^b, B^b-B-C[#], D-E-F[#], and B^b-C-C[#]. All of the examples are either a group of whole-steps or a half-step/whole-step combination. This is especially helpful for altos and tenors, because they will have several occasions where they have to sing whole-steps and half-steps apart, especially at cadence points. It’s amazing how many students can only hear the top or bottom note but struggle with the middle one!

- *Six-Note Jazz Chord*: I learned this exercise from Jennifer Barnes at the University of North Texas, who learned it from Connaitre Miller from Howard University (both of them direct fabulous vocal jazz ensembles). It’s a wonderful exercise on how students hear harmony while they sing. I play a six-note jazz chord (blocked), and the student has to identify all six notes in the chord (just sing a pitch one at a time on a neutral syllable, not ID the exact pitch). I play the chord multiple times and use the following voicing for my three examples (each example is a different chord quality, and none of the notes within the chord are doubled):

1) Gmaj13 (from the bottom up...G-F[#]-B-C[#]-E-A).



Repertoire & Resources - Vocal Jazz

2) B^b7 full-diminished (from the bottom up...B^b-A^b-C-D^b-F^b-G).

3) A^b13 (from the bottom up...A^b-G^b-B^b-C-D-F).

The beauty of this exercise is that it shows both the student's voice part they are used to singing and, more importantly, the other voice parts they are used to listening to while they sing! Three correct notes per chord is an average ear, and four is above average. Students who can consistently find five or six notes per chord are the students I want in my vocal jazz ensembles. These are the students who can hear the entire chord while singing within an ensemble, and the intonation and blend work will move faster during the rehearsal process. Students who can only hear one or two pitches per chord should not be in a vocal jazz ensemble. Their ears aren't ready for it yet. For example, if you have a bass singer who can only hear the bottom note in every chord (of course, the root of the chord), and then you put that student in a vocal jazz setting, that singer will naturally gravitate toward singing the lead soprano melody down the octave (which will conflict with the 3/7 voicing they should be singing).

When and How Often to Audition

The decision of when and how often to have auditions depends on your program. My students usually stay in the same ensemble for the entire year, so I only have auditions once a year. The audition above is for new students entering my program. The returning students who want to do vocal jazz have to re-audition, and that's a different process. Even the best singers in my top group have to re-audition to keep their spot in the ensemble. I give the students a few pages of a chart to learn on their own and have them make a video for me singing their part. I then send the videos to several colleagues (both on-campus and out-of-state) to adjudicate and score. This is helpful for me to justify my thoughts, and if a student doesn't get into the ensemble they want, it's easier for me to explain the reasoning with adjudication notes from someone who isn't biased.

Rehearsal Preparation

Here are a few thoughts to consider when it comes to rehearsal preparation. Within any chart, I want to micromanage every single phrase. Every moment of the music is planned out, and I found myself being a better director because of that philosophy. My rehearsals are about developing consistency from rehearsal to rehearsal, which hopefully translates to the performance. Much of my focus is on matching vowels within the groove of the music, changes in the tonal placement throughout each line, word stress/phrasing, and articulation. I keep focusing on this every single rehearsal until they are absolutely consistent! I tell them regularly that we don't do this job to be mediocre. I expect excellence, and they should expect that from themselves!

By rehearsing this way, I should be able to walk away from the ensemble off stage during a performance, and the music happens on its own because they are so prepared. If I'm on stage giving cues to the vocalists or the rhythm section, that means I'm not comfortable with them being on their own yet. (This is more of the case in the fall semester.)

Warm-Ups

I am critical about warm-ups for a variety of reasons. I mostly don't do warm-ups for my vocal jazz groups because all of the students sing in my concert choir earlier in the day, and I teach warm-ups during that time. Within my warm-ups for choir, I mostly want to establish the ensemble tone, vowel matching, and the concept of listening to the entire chord, not just the part they are going to sing. I have students sing a chord (usually, an open-voicing) and sing OO-EE-EH-AH-OH and back to OO.

I hold each vowel and remind them of the raised palette with the forward tongue (tip of the tongue placed behind the bottom teeth). I also have them sing a crescendo/decrescendo on MI-ME-MAH-MOH-MOO and have them move their arms in circles while doing that exercise. These vowel warm-ups are what I do every single day. I do other short warm-ups to sing through their ranges and change these warm-ups daily. Lastly, I sometimes have the ensembles sing chromatic scales on solfège and sight-read a short excerpt during our warm-up time.

Improvisation

I mostly teach beginning- to intermediate-level improvisation to my students. I make them do a lot of listening... That comes first! To practice improvisation as a group, we do an all-scat: they all go to a different part of the room and practice scatting over whatever music I give them (this also helps with beginners' comfort level). I usually have them scat over music we are already learning as an ensemble. I personally enjoy having them scat over the blues the most because that's an easier adjustment since that "sound" is already in their ears (based on the popular music they listen to regularly outside of class). Lastly, I discuss concepts such as: scatting using the head as the foundation, syllable usage, guide tones, macro and microform/contour, spacing, and using long tones to help create a lyrical melodic line.

Sound Systems

My ideal sound system includes using nine powered speakers (I highly recommend QSC K10s or 12s for both monitors and mains), digital mixer, and digital snake. For microphones, I personally like the Sennheiser e935 mic because of the clarity of tone. For a cappella bass and vocal percussion EQ, I would prefer a different mic like the classic Shure SM58 (the Sennheiser e935 don't seem to have the same clarity with low EQ and distortion). For wireless mics, I use a Shure ULX-D Wireless System and love the depth and clarity it provides! In general, the goal is to have a clear, natural sound for each singer in the group. To tune this complex harmonic content, the clarity of each voice is critical. Using EQ and compression to obtain this sound is essential.

We rehearse on sound for most rehearsals. Rehearsing on sound for new students can be cumbersome at first, but they will get used to it. To create the organic musical performance I want them to have, they need to be exceptionally comfortable with the mic, and this can only be achieved by rehearsing on mics regularly.


Repertoire

Listening is everything, and I regularly incorporate it into my rehearsals, especially when teaching students

how to sing in different styles. Listening is the most important aspect to teaching this genre, and if you struggle with teaching a certain concept (like swing feel, for example), find a recording of what you want to teach and play it for your students. Not only play it, but make your students have a discussion about it so they can learn from one another. Jazz is a genre that has to be primarily learned from listening. Exposing students to the wide variety of jazz and contemporary styles is one of the most important things we need to do. Table 1 on the following pages contains suggestions for vocal jazz repertoire suitable for high school and collegiate ensembles.

Who are the essential ensembles and artists that directors/students should listen to? Here are my favorites/the most influential for me, but there are so many not on this list. For ensembles: Take 6, New York Voices, The Real Group, Lambert, Hendricks and Ross, and The Singers Unlimited. For soloists: Mel Torme, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Joe Williams, and Chet Baker. I'm also a huge fan of artists that crossover into popular music like Earth, Wind, and Fire, Steve Wonder, Michael Jackson, Prince, Robert Glasper, Jon Batiste, Moonchild, and the list goes on and on! I don't have essential pieces; it's important for me to teach as many styles as possible. I recommend you do what you're most comfortable with and teach what you want your students to get out of the course.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to provide a foundation on both how to start and develop a vocal jazz ensemble. Some of my methods might seem unique, but these concepts work for me, and they might help other directors as well. If you want to contact me for more insight about the subject, I would be pleased to hear from you. jstafford@kckcc.edu 

NOTES

¹ Tyler Thomas, "The Emergence of All-State Vocal Jazz Ensembles in the United States from 1978-2022" (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2022), 1. <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1987176/>



Repertoire & Resources - Vocal Jazz

Table 1. Suggested Vocal Jazz Repertoire List for High School and Collegiate Ensembles

Title	Composer/Arranger	Voicing	Level
Swing/Standards/Ballads			
You Make Me Feel So Young	Gordon/Myron, arr. Jeremy Fox	SATB with rhythm section	2/3
There Is No Greater Love	Jones/Symes, arr. Jennifer Barnes	SATB with rhythm section	4
There Is No Greater Love	Jones/Symes, arr. Justin Binek	SATB and SSAA with rhythm section or big band	4
A Child Is Born	Jones/Wilder, arr. Martez Rucker	SATB a cappella	3
Lover Come Back To Me	Romberg/Hammerstein, arr. Jennifer Barnes	SATB with rhythm section	3
Come Back To Me	Lane/Lerner, arr. Kerry Marsh	SSATB with rhythm section	4
I'm Old Fashioned	Kern/Mercer, arr. Matt Falker	SAB with rhythm section	2
Tight	Betty Carter, arr. Matt Falker	SSATB with rhythm section	3/4
Nature Boy	Eden Anbez, arr. Anders Edenroth	SSATB a cappella	4/5
For All We Know	Lewis/Coots, arr. Peter Eldridge and Darmon Meader	SATB with piano only	3
I Remember You	Scherzinger/Mercer, arr. Matt Falker	SAB with rhythm section	2
Come Rain or Come Shine	Mercer/Arlen, arr. Gene Puerling	SATB with rhythm section	4
I'll Be Seeing You	Fain/Kahal, arr. Phil Mattson	SATB a cappella	
Latin (these are mostly Samba or Bossa nova)			
Mad Heaven	Peter Eldridge, arr. Rosana Eckert	SSATB with rhythm section	3
Forever Blue	Peter Eldridge, arr. Rosana Eckert	SSATB with rhythm section	3/4
Bailando	Greg Jasperse	SATBB a cappella	3/4

At the End of the Day	Rosana Eckert, arr. Michele Weir	SATB with rhythm section	2
Open Invitation	Darmon Meader	SSATB with rhythm section	3
New Day	Carol Welsman, arr. Jennifer Barnes	SSATB with rhythm section	3/4
Chicago	Fred Fisher, arr. Michele Weir	SATB with rhythm section	2/3
Fly	Al Jarreau, arr. Matt Falker	SSATB with rhythm section	4/5
Spain	Chick Corea, arr. Kelly Kunz	SSATBB with rhythm section	5
Funk/Contemporary			
Afro Blue	inspired by Robert Glasper, arr. Justin Binek	SATB with rhythm section	3
PYT	Michael Jackson, arr. Ned Rosenblatt	SSATBB with rhythm section	5
Green Garden	Laura Mvula, arr. Kerry Marsh	SSATB with rhythm section	4
As	Stevie Wonder, arr. Tim Brent	SATB with rhythm section	3
Rest	Michael Engelhardt	SATB divisi with rhythm section	3/4
Amazing Grace	arr. Jeremy Fox	SATB with rhythm section	3
How Sweet It Is	Holland, Dozier, and Holland; arr. Jeremy Fox	SATB with rhythm section	3
Fly Away, Birdie	Nelson/Gazarek, arr. Matt Falker	SATB with rhythm section	2/3
Still Fighting It	Ben Folds, arr. Kerry Marsh	SATB with rhythm section	2
Too Good	Drake and Rihanna, arr. Amanda Taylor	SSATB with rhythm section	5
At Last	Warren/Gordon, arr. Kerry Marsh	SSSAAA a cappella with vocal percussion	
Desert Song	Erin Bentlage	SSAAB and SSAA with rhythm section (no drums)	3
Green Lights	Sarah Jarosz, arr. David von Kampen	SSATBB with rhythm section	3
Bridge Over Troubled Water	Paul Simon, arr. John Stafford II	SSAA with rhythm section	2