

Vocal Jazz Ensemble Concepts

(A.K.A Everything you need to know. V. 1.0, K. Marsh)

GROUP SOUND

- Consider at all times: "What is my contribution to the sound of this group?"
- Consider also "What makes my voice different than the voices of the other members of the group, and how can I modify my sound to BLEND?"
- All parts of the chord are equally important and should be heard.
- The lead should have the most stylistic freedom.
- In a group with more than one person to a part, no *vibrato* should be used. With one to a part, vibrato should be controlled if used at all.
- A group that breathes together sings together.
- The feeling with SATB is that they should overlap, and the qualities between the voice parts should blend well enough that it would make it difficult for someone to transcribe what you're singing.
- Consider, as you sing, what the part writing density is, and adjust your sound appropriately. Sung with all voices at the same dynamic, a unison will be louder than density 2 (a two note voicing), which is louder than density 3, and so on. Sometimes the density makes rapid and frequent changes within a single phrase, and so you must be careful not to sing the low densities too loudly.

GROOVE

- "Sing" the rests. Every rest is not required that you take a breath; Keep forward motion going through rests.
- Swinging part 1: Listen to Count Basie first (especially later years, Nestico charts), then Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Lester Young (among many other greats).
- Swinging part 2: the faster the tempo, the closer swung 8th notes will feel to straight 8ths. The slower the tempo, the closer to a triplet feel. This ends at the 12/8 feel ("Cry Me a River" and "Stormy Weather").
- Swinging part 3: Any 8th note on an up-beat (the "and" of 1, 2, 3, or 4) that isn't followed by a note on the next downbeat needs to be laid WAAAY back. Again, see Basie.
- Swinging part 4: There are many occasions where "short" and "fat" is a very good thing.
- Latin grooves: Whereas in swing, the feel is one of laying back behind the beat, Latin often feels like they are rushing the beat, because of the intense driving groove. The eighth notes are straight, and there will be many complex rhythmic figures that require you to be very adept at subdividing the beat.

LYRIC AND STORY

- Let the lyric guide your phrasing. This will help you tell a story. Don't sing unimportant syllables or words as if they are important. "Phrase off" those syllables and words. Likewise, don't breathe in the middle of a word.
- You've got to understand the words in order to tell a story that will move someone. Do this right away with every chart you're handed.
- One of the biggest differences between classical singing and traditional choral singing and vocal jazz is that in jazz we use a conversational or vernacular approach to the lyric.
- Prioritize flexibility in singing. You should be able to make many different kinds of sounds (bright, dark, warm, hushed, excited, angry, friendly, etc) so that you can access whatever sound is required by the piece of music.
- Ballads: Here, the lead really determines where the rhythms are altered for the sake of the lyric, and they **MUST** be altered in every case, in some way. The listener needs to feel like it's a spontaneous performance of the tune, and that there is no written music to the tune anywhere!

WORDLESS VOCAL/ SCAT SYLLABLES

- Scat syllables are unimportant and should be under-pronounced almost all the time. Listen to the New York Voices for an example. Don't refer to early scatters for this, because the aesthetic has changed over the years.
- A general guideline for scat syllables on 8th notes is to consider that downbeats should have more use of "D" and up-beats should have more use of "B" and "V." Use bright and dark vowels to create accents in bebop (dah bah doo BAY yah dat)

NOTES AND CHORDS

- Basses and Tenors, in a group with a rhythm section, should be prepared to sing lots of tri-tones as the 3rd and 7th of dominant chords. EMBRACE the tritone, gentlemen! It is your best friend. Listen very carefully for the tuning.
- Basses (usually) and either altos or sopranos will occasionally have major sevenths between each other as part of either Major seven chords (Tonic and 7th, respectively), #9 dominant chords (Major 3rd and #9 respectively), or dominant 13th chords (7th and 13th, respectively). The basses will tend to want to go flat and the ladies will tend to want to go sharp, so you must be prepared for this tendency and resist!
- Tenors and altos will often be singing half steps or whole steps with each other, and usually it is the altos on the 3rd and the tenors on the 9th. Since the 3rd is more important to the definition of the chord, the alto note must be more present, and the tenor(s) must listen carefully to subtly fit his(their) note into the chord and not be overbearing. This will be a

challenge, usually, because the tenor(s) will be higher in the tessitura and the alto(s) will be lower, and so the tenor will tend to overpower.

- The above mentioned sonorities, in particular, **MUST** be sung "senza-vibrato," or in other words, with a straight tone, because wobble in the voice will destroy the sound.
- Think about your individual part/line as a melody! When learning your part, think about learning it so well that it becomes almost a physical part of your being. The notes must seem to "live" in your body.

PERFORMANCE LOGISTICS/APPEARANCE

- Soloists, step forward when your solo starts, and back again when it's over. This is as much for the sound person as it is for the audience.
- For almost every performance we give, the attire will be suits for the men and nice "evening wear" formal for the ladies, heavily preferring dark colors. No cologne or perfume, please.
- Smile as you come onstage, and make it a brisk walk. Stand in front of your mic until everyone is in position and then grab your mics together. It just looks nice that way.
- Please allow the music to enter your body and your movement. Groove, physically, as you feel is appropriate, and just try to keep from going too crazy. But a group that moves together is always very pleasing to watch.

MIC TECHNIQUE

- With Shure SM-58 microphones, there is some degree of "proximity effect," which means that you need to hold the mic around three fingers' width from your mouth at about a 45 degree angle below level—as a default position—and leave it there for the most part. Adjustments are made from there, and will be slight.
- If there are problems with popping ("P" consonants in particular), or when you're singing a section of backgrounds on an "oo" vowel, put your mic "off axis." This means that you continue to point the mic at your mouth, and at the same angle to the floor, but you pull your hand to the side a bit so the air from your mouth doesn't go directly into the mic. Saves lots of hassles.
- Don't go into "Diva Mode," which is serious over-use of pulling away the mic when some high/loud/dramatic moment occurs. A little pulling back goes a long way, and if you go too far, you won't be heard at all, and that is very frustrating for the listener. One or two inches, max!
- If you have to "stagger breathe" in some section of a tune, do a quick decrescendo, pull the mic away, take a super quick breath, and do a quick fade in to get back into the game. This whole process takes than a second. The point of the fading is to hide the fact that you're dropping out and coming in again, of course, and the point of moving the mics is to avoid broadcasting the sound of your huge breath!

VOCAL IMPROVISATION

- Buy Michele Weir's book, *Vocal Improvisation*, available at www.jazzbooks.com. It is an excellent resource, period. Once you buy it, you must utilize it, of course, and go through the exercises.
- Buy Jamey Abersold Play-a-longs to practice with. I recommend Volume 54 for starters, and can advise you beyond that when needed.
- Keep your ideas simple until you've really had some major practice at the art form.
- Leave varieties of space between your ideas so that people have time to think about what you've done.
- Listen to and transcribe the solos of great instrumental improvisers, starting with Miles Davis, Chet Baker, and Stan Getz, and then moving onto Charlie Parker, Michael Brecker, and others once you've gained some experience.
- Listen to and transcribe the solos of great vocal improvisers, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Kurt Elling, and Darmon Meader, among others.
- Transcribing can involve writing out the solo, but it doesn't have to. As a singer, you can fairly easily learn the solo in your car while commuting! Be patient, though, it can take some serious time to master these solos. This is the best way of learning the jazz language, though, and it must be done, and can be very fun and rewarding!

REHEARSAL ETHIC

- Come to all rehearsals and performances (and studio sessions, etc) warmed up.
- Pencil and music at every rehearsal, ready to mark any changes or specifics immediately. If your music gets too covered in marks, I'll be happy to make you a new copy!
- In the first half of the semester especially, you should be prepared to spend some time outside of classes and sectionals working on your parts. If you can't teach yourself your parts, make arrangements with someone who can play piano (while at the same time learning how to play!).
- Take care of yourself. You can avoid many illnesses by maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Do remember to hydrate! Drink plenty of water.
- A positive, uplifting attitude is the only one that is acceptable in rehearsal, regardless of whatever else may be going on in life at the moment. While this may not be as vital for an instrumental group, it is **ESSENTIAL** for a vocal group.
- While I would like to consider our rehearsals a democracy, I need for you to trust me to take care of problems with the music in due time, and not get into the habit of getting the rehearsal off track. Momentum is key to our rehearsals. Please feel free to see me before or after class or email me if

there are specific concerns, and you can be sure I will address them if needed. So in other words...our rehearsals are not a democracy. ☺

- However, I will often ask for input from the group on certain musical decisions, especially with interpretation issues.
- There will be NO trash talking. None. I know it's difficult, but we must restrain ourselves, and change some habits if necessary. It makes fit a much more peaceful world in which more music can be made.

AUDITIONS

- I will hear everyone sing an audition every semester. This is for fairness as well as the fact that students need the experience of auditioning to prepare for many real-world situations.
- Auditions are neither fair nor unfair, and they are meant to be neither pleasant nor unpleasant. They are simply designed to gather information and perspectives.
- Know in advance that those hearing the auditions want very much for you to do well, and are rooting for you. Many times, you will receive the benefit of any doubt about a certain skill because it is expected that you will be nervous.
- The following information can be gained from an audition...
 - Is the singer dressed appropriately for an audition (comfortably but respectfully)?
 - Are intonation and overall sound good, or do they distract?
 - Is the audition music appropriate for the audition call?
 - What happens then the singers makes a mistake? Does he or she get rattled, or does he or she act professionally? Is he or she apologetic, either before or after the performance (hint, no one hearing auditions wants to hear apologies)?
 - Is the singer prepared and comfortable, or does he or she have to refer to sheet music often or get clues from the auditioner(s)?
 - Does the singer have good ears (can he or she reproduce intervals as requested)?
 - Does he or she sightread reasonably well?
 - Is he or she available for the schedules of the groups being filled?
 - For vocal jazz ensemble auditions, you should sing with your best soloistic jazz sound on your prepared pieces, and also be prepared to display your ability to control your vibrato and dynamics for blending purposes.
 - Scatting in the audition will always be voluntary, and should be thought of as "extra credit".