

Ideas for Integration of Singing in Jazz Ensembles Ensembles

Dominique Eade 2019 (for Downbeat)

The human voice has been integral to jazz from its prehistory to present day. From ring shouts, to every era of Duke Ellington, to Jen Shyu with Miles Okazaki, the resourceful and creative use of the voice, and its symbiotic relationship with other instruments, has fed the jazz tradition. In pre-jazz Black American Music, the voice often carried the musical traditions when the contributions of other instruments were prohibited. At other times, instrumentalists relayed the message when those words were suppressed. We need only think of Lester Young and Billie Holiday, Norma Winstone and Kenny Wheeler, or Louis Armstrong, who, as a trumpeter, interpreter of lyrics and wordless vocal improviser embodied it all, to appreciate the rich interaction and creative expression of the interwoven vocal and instrumental traditions. Yet I sometimes encounter jazz educators who are uncertain how to incorporate singers into their programs without relying solely on vocal jazz groups or the conventions of more traditional settings for a solo vocalist. In this article, I will suggest ways to expand the role of singing in ensembles in jazz education. Applying these approaches can provide the vocal student, and everyone in the ensemble, with a richer learning experience that connects to the history of the music itself.

Before we explore how to employ the voice with more variety, let's open our ears to some of its features. Like every instrument, the singing voice has complex technical aspects. Here are some basics to consider.

Vocal Range

Instrumentalists in ensembles with singers should learn the singer's full range, as well as the normally smaller area they are comfortable singing with words as a soloist in a given style. Ranges may fall into classifications such as soprano, mezzo, alto, tenor, baritone, and bass, but individual voices vary, and these classically derived categories aren't always useful, especially in other genres that use different sound qualities or registration.

Awareness of specific range and registers is not only crucial to writing successfully for a singer, it's also important for anyone playing with singers. Often, instrumentalists have not stopped to identify what octave the singer is singing in, where that falls on their instrument, and how that might affect what they choose to play. The octave being sung will not necessarily be accurately represented on a lead sheet. Tenor voice, conventionally written in treble clef, sounds an octave lower. A higher voice may sing an octave below the written part to avoid excessive ledger lines. Or, the singer may choose to deviate from the written music.

Singers should be challenged to extend their range and registral facility as their technique and musicianship develop, but some basic awareness of what is reasonable to expect in an educational setting makes that development less hit or miss.

Lyrics and Language

The human voice is incredibly malleable and can produce many sound qualities over a large area of range. If you think of character voices, or impersonators, you can recognize the flexibility of the voice, and yet, in the fine details of its' timbre, each person's voice is as, or even more unique than their fingerprint. (That's why only you can open your iPhone!) It's important for music students of any instrument to begin to develop their ear for the individual quality of each voice, as well as familiarizing themselves with more general aspects of range and tone production. Just as Ellington famously wrote for the individual instrumentalists in his band, he also treated each vocalist singularly. Ivy Anderson, Adelaide Hall, Herb Jeffries and Alice Babs were not interchangeable to Ellington's ear, and he composed for them correspondingly. I'm not recommending a vocal student only be placed in their comfort zone or "sweet spot." Their voices are developing as they build their technique and musicianship, and reasonable challenges and experimentation are vital to that growth. But understanding some basics about the voice and even each individual singer's sound makes the path of that progress less hit or miss.

Unlike any other instrument, the voice can combine words with pitch. We all use words every day so it's easy to take their contribution to the musical soundscape for granted. Words not only impart meaning, both literal and evocative, but they create textures of varied tone colors, rhythm, and dynamics that should be considered in arranging, and listened for in musical interaction. While singing any given pitch, singers constantly modify the shape of the "bell" of their instrument (lips, jaw, tongue, soft palette and pharynx), to create the sounds of language. Paying attention to the sonic properties of language and the shifting tonal palette of the voice is like hearing how the different parts of the drum kit sound, recognizing tongued vs. legato saxophone articulation, or distinguishing trumpet mutes.

Vocal pitch begins with the breath's vibration of the vocal folds in the larynx. To form vowels, the shape of the vocal tract above the larynx is modified to amplify certain resonant frequencies, or formants. Vowels are sometimes labeled bright to dark, or high to low. As an experiment, whisper "ee," "eh," "ah," "o," "oo" to hear the (second) formant's pitch descend from high to low. But a "bright" vowel can be sung "darkly," or vice versa, to impart another layer of musical and emotional nuance.

Consonants, too, have different features to consider. For instance, which consonants are phonated (have pitch made by the vocal folds vibrating), and which do not? Which consonants have pitch that can be sustained? What consonants can sound more than one way?

It's good to remember that words don't always sound the way they look on the written or musical page. For example, the word "fire" could be assigned a single rhythmic articulation in music, but the word is not just one sound, but four in succession: the fricative "f," the vowel "ah," followed by "ee" and then "er."

Just as you can sing a multi-syllable word on one note, you can also extend one syllable over many notes, called a melisma. Melismas can be a stylistic choice in interpretation, or composed. A stream of notes on one syllable, often improvised, is called a riff or a run. Melismas affect the lilt of the melodic line. Compare "Happy Birthday" to "Silent Night."

Instrumentalists who play effectively with singers usually listen to singers and know lyrics. Memorizing lyrics to a few standards, even a poem, is a good place to begin. The rhythmic content of speech is complex, undulating with odd groupings and accents. Unfolding these contours in the context of meter is part of the singer's interpretive skill and something a collaborator can learn to perceive and react to.

With a better awareness of range, register, tone color and the nuances of meaning and sound in language, it is possible to include the voice more effectively in an ensemble setting, allowing both the vocalists and instrumentalists to gain valuable musical skills. Here are some suggestions.

Written Music and Learning Parts

- If individual parts are being given to other instrumentalists, singers should also be given their own notated part.
- Singers' written chart should include some other pitch references such as chord changes or instrumental cues.
- Singers should do their best to sight-read according to level, but getting music in advance and/or taking the music home helps.
- Encourage the entire ensemble to learn some music by ear and sing their parts in the ensemble so there is, at least occasionally, more emphasis on aural transmission skills.

Arranging and Composing

Vocalists can participate in ensembles in many ways. They can sing with lyrics and wordlessly, but they shouldn't be limited to only singing the head in and out with everyone else soloing in between, or, when singing wordlessly, always doubling the melody with another instrument.

Here are some other possibilities:

- An instrumentalist plays the melody in the original key, after which the chart modulates and the song is sung in a new key (like old big band arrangements). This gives the lead instrumentalist an opportunity to improve their melodic interpretation and the band to practice playing in different keys.
- Singer is featured “instrumentally” on the intro, then interprets the melody with lyrics, eg: Ivie Anderson on “It Don’t Mean A Thing.”
- Singer is given a harmony part rather than always doubling or singing the lead line.
- Singer is given a background line while someone else is playing a melody or soloing.
- Singer sings obbligato (written or improvised) lines while someone else plays the melody. (This is great ear training and other instrumentalists could try to sing like this as well.)
- Singer sings obbligato lines **with** the lyrics of the song, answering an instrumentalist that is playing the melody. For example, the horn plays the first three notes of “All of Me,” and the voice answers, “all of me,” altering the melody and rhythm to adapt to the delayed placement.
- Singer sings the melody with lyrics but the arrangement modulates within the form. Bill Evans’ “Days of Wine and Roses,” is an instrumental example.
- Singer, or others, writes lyrics to a piece that has no lyrics, or new lyrics to a song that does.
- Singer writes lyrics to an existing instrumental solo, or composes a solo-like line and adds lyrics.
- Arrangement features horns and voice alone in chorale-like harmony.
- Singer doubles an unusual instrument such as bass, or bass and piano left hand, in a melody, background, or shout chorus.
- Singer uses spoken word.
- Singer sings repeated lyrics in a looped section.
- Singer sings an ostinato or another accompanying figure.
- Singer is given a percussive role.
- Singer sings some portion of the arrangement rubato with one or more instruments.
- Accompaniment features different sub-groups of instruments. For example, the bass and the voice could double a melody with only drums accompanying.

Improvisation

As with any student, vocalists’ level of familiarity with improvising will vary. Whether the student is accomplished or just beginning, they should be given every opportunity to practice within an appropriate set of parameters.

Here are some suggestions on musical ways to give vocalists more experience with improvisation, beyond simply scatting over the form:

- Singer improvises over a vamp as an intro, interlude or coda, rather than the entire form.
- Singer improvises using the lyrics but changing the melody, often done as a second chorus.
- Singer is given a guide-tone line to embellish as a solo or a background line for another soloist.
- Singer trades with other soloists or solos on only one section of the tune and sings backgrounds for another. Trading doesn't always have to be a set number of bars, or a back and forth between soloists, but can be a call-and-response structure where everyone plays a short figure together and the vocalist improvises in the "response" section.
- Singer is given a fixed rhythmic figure, but improvises the pitches, or vice versa.
- Singer participates in a group solo, over a form or "free."
- Singer solos percussively with drums.
- Singers should be able to take the music home to practice.

I'm sure there are many more possibilities than I have listed here. It's my hope that these ideas will stimulate the director's and the students' imaginations, giving the vocalist, and their peers, the chance to develop their musicianship in an informed and creative environment.