

REPERTOIRE & STANDARDS

Vocal Jazz



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The Choral Music Teacher as Artist: Vocal Jazz and Improvisation as Expressions of Artistry

By Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman

Sometimes it seems as though the idea of an improvising choral music teacher is an oxymoron. Although improvisation study is essential to a degree in *jazz*, future choral music teachers are required to focus on *classical* music, not jazz, and rarely have the opportunity to improvise. Yet, many choral musicians catch the vocal jazz bug through a secondary school or college ensemble and find that there is much to learn about performing jazz authentically and artistically. Vocal jazz is an engaging and powerful musical art form because of its propulsive and cathartic swing rhythm,¹ its American popular song repertoire, its challenging extended harmonies requiring near-flawless intonation, and its potential for self-expressive and innovative improvisations.

In my research with jazz singers, I have found three distinct factors underlying improvisation skill. Not surprisingly, the first two are good musicianship and knowledge of jazz style. Learning a new style of music, such as jazz, can feel like trying to learn a new instrument! In fact, my research showed an *inverse* relationship between classical voice lessons and

the ability to improvise. However, we can grow artistically by being open to different ways of singing, and as one of the research subjects stated:

I think that because of my background, particularly the ten years of choral training, I have not only had to learn new skills, I have had to unlearn those skills and characteristics which contradict the ones I need to be a good jazz singer. This is mainly to do with stylistic and rhythmic feel, and also stage presence and tone colors.

The third factor underlying improvisation skill is the creative or inventive use of dynamics, range, tone color, articulations, lyrics, melodies, and rhythms. It is this *creative* aspect of improvisation that can provide the necessary enjoyment and motivation for more choral musicians to develop their artistry as improvisers. Artistic self-expression and innovation emerge through conscious awareness of the musical criteria that can be played with. The artist might choose to simply vary or elaborate on a musical idea. Or she might explore different possibilities of vocal timbre, including vocal and body percussion or unusual vocables. The artist needs to risk breaking the rules in order to discover those original ideas that have worth.

In my own teaching experience with children to adults, I have witnessed the transformation from rule-bound, sterile, and tentative improvisations to relaxed, joyful, and humorous ones within one class period. With novices in improvisation, the musical materials must be simple (perhaps a pentatonic or blues scale with accompaniment), the words can be improvised from a chosen theme (per-

haps an upcoming holiday), and the form can involve two-bar calls followed by two-bar responses that relate yet contrast in some way. Psychologist Emanuel Hammer asserted that teachers should assist their students in "breaking their creativity loose from their intelligence, i.e., to gain freedom to momentarily suspend their orientation of convergent thinking to allow divergent flights."² He adds that we can teach them how and when to suspend the over-evaluative, criticizing, judging function of the mind in order to remain open to uncritically "receiving" the creative idea.

It is not the sole responsibility of the performance majors and professional musicians to teach us about innovations in music. We as artist-musician-teachers have a wellspring of music within ourselves. My research subjects provided insights to the development of their own improvisation skills, and these included listening to a range of musical styles and playfully improvising to all of it, paying attention to interactions among the instruments to gain melodic and rhythmic ideas, using lyrics to help provide context, and seeking out musicians who are better improvisers than themselves. "Fearlessness" was named as a key to learning to improvise by this subject:

The greatest developments have come when I felt secure enough to be adventurous! Had I begun lessons with a teacher other than the one I had, who made it fun and fearless, I may not have pursued improvisation at all. Sadly, the biggest hurdle in my development has been getting over the paralysis of caring what anyone else thinks and getting back to loving (and being motivated by) the process and the result. It is called

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"playing an instrument" after all—it should always come back to being about play.

Why Does Artistry Matter?

Why does artistry matter? Because we know that choral music education is only as good and as inspired as its teachers are. And while we may not always be able to keep up with the most current music and styles of our younger students, we can model the essence of artistry. The busy music teacher may be tempted to accept a mediocre level of self-achievement that may seem adequate for one's profession in the schools. However, our students should learn from us that musicians must study, practice, and grow throughout their lives—that music is not only a skill that needs practice but an art that allows for self-expression and innovation in a way that perhaps no other outlet can provide. Improvisation experience prepares students to anticipate the unexpected in life and to take advantage of the possibil-

ities offered in the moment,³ and helps them discover and have confidence in their own unique voices.⁴ Our musical gifts should be artfully honored for a lifetime. We can do this by remembering to practice and to try something new each time we do!

NOTES

- ¹ J. Pressing, "Black Atlantic rhythm: Its computational and transcultural foundations," *Music Perception* 19, no. 3 (2002), 285-310.
- ² E. F. Hammer, *Creativity, Talent and Personality* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger, 1984), 119.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ B. Howey, "Bobby McFerrin: 'In the moment,'" *JAZZed* (September 2009), 44-49.

Updates from Student Chapters

Georgia State University (Atlanta, GA)



The Georgia State University ACDA Student Chapter has been involved in many wonderful musical activities during the 2014-2015 academic year. We kicked off the year hosting SingFest, Georgia State University's annual high school choral and solo singing festival. Our chapter members hosted the event by directing students around campus and serving lunch. Two chapter members were selected to partake in a conducting master class with Amanda Quist of Westminster Choir College. Repertoire included Mozart's *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and Britten's *Evening Primrose*. A group of ten students from the chapter traveled to Salt Lake City to attend the ACDA National Conference. Highlights included getting to meet Ēriks Ešņvalds, hearing the King's Singers and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir live, and attending many exciting concerts and interest sessions, including one led by Georgia State's own Patrick K. Freer. We will end the year by attending our state ACDA conference in June 2015 at the beautiful Spivey Hall. We look forward to hosting our guest clinician, Kent Hatteburg.

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Southwestern Illinois College
(Belleville, IL)



The ACDA Student Chapter of Southwestern Illinois College meets biweekly to have discussion activities regarding all the aspects of choral conducting. We do everything from sharing inspirational music to holding an annual conducting competition. Our chapter is a place for serious-minded musicians to come together, learn more about what

we enjoy, and figure out which musical paths we each want to pursue. Our most recent activity was a "draw from a hat" game. We sat in a circle and each pulled out a piece of paper describing a common problem that arises in choral conducting. Each person began by addressing what they would do in their given situation. They would then open it up to the rest of the club to discuss. Each topic brought about so much discussion that we had to extend the activity out over two meetings. It could not have gone better, and we all learned so much! It was great to get people thinking about these things and to have the ability to learn from different ideas. This is an activity we will definitely be doing in future semesters!

Is your student chapter doing interesting activities? Email news updates and photos to sflansburg@acda.org. Updates should be 250 words or fewer. Include the name and email address for the person we should contact if there are questions on the information, as well as the name of your college or university and the city and state in which you are located. Space is limited, but we will publish as much as possible - with a preference given to submissions that are interesting, creative, and relevant to other student chapters and the wider ACDA.

MUSICA SACRA
Kent Tritle, Music Director

Eternal Reflections
Choral Works of Robert Paterson

Eternal Reflections • Choral Suite from A New Earth
Lux Aeterna • The Essence of Gravity
Snow Day • Did You Hear?
Life is But a Dream • A Dream Within A Dream

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MUSICA SACRA Kent Tritle, Music Director

Eternal Reflections
ROBERT PATERSON • Choral Works

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