

CHORD Voicings & Balance

for the Vocal Jazz Ensemble

By Michele Weir

Good vocal jazz ensemble singing is the result of a variety of skills; it requires a well trained ear to hear the complex harmonies of jazz, good command of the sometimes inconsistent human voice, awareness of choral concepts such as unified vowel sounds, blend and ensemble phrasing, and an awareness of jazz related concepts such as keeping steady time, having a good rhythmic feel, and improvisatory soloing. In order for each chord of a vocal jazz arrangement to sound with fullness and clarity, the group members must sing their parts not only in tune, but also with an attention to appropriate balance and vocal tone color. To work effectively toward this goal, the director of the ensemble must rehearse the group with an awareness of the special needs of each particular chord voicing. This skill requires a familiarity with the basic set of chord types and extensions used in jazz, familiarity with chord voicing types commonly used in vocal jazz arrangements, and knowledge of how to treat particular problems of intonation, balance and blend.

Listed below are commonly used chord types and extensions found in vocal and

instrumental jazz arrangements. (Extensions are non-chord tones which may be added to a chord for color.)

VOICINGS IN VOCAL JAZZ ARRANGEMENTS

Listed below are voicing types which are common to vocal jazz literature. Most charts use a combination of at least two or three voicing types, often changing from one to another every two or three chords. Unlike much traditional choral literature, these voicings may not contain the root of the chord (which is normally played by the bass player), and may also omit other chord tones.

1. CLOSED

a) Four-part closed

In this voicing, chord tones are writ-



ten beneath the melody in close position. Often, extensions are substituted for chord tones. (For example, the 9th could substitute for the root.)

2. OPEN

a) Drop-2

This is a variation of four-part closed used when the melody range gets higher. An open voicing is created by dropping the alto note down an octave. That note is then sung by the basses and the other parts adjust accordingly.

Chord Type	Major Chords			Minor Chords				Dominant Chords		Diminished Seventh Chord
	Major Triad	Major Sixth	Major Seventh	Minor Triad	Minor Sixth	Minor Seventh	Minor Seventh, Flat Five	Dominant Seventh	Suspended Chord	
Chord Symbol	C	C ⁶	C ^{Maj-7}	C ⁻	C ⁻⁶	C ⁻⁷	C ^{-7b5}	C ⁷	C ^{7sus}	C ^{o7}
Commonly Used Extensions	9	9, #11	9, #11, 13	9, 11	9, 11	9, 11, (13)	9, 11	9, b9, #9, #11, 13, b13	9, 13, b9	Any note a whole step above any chord tone

"The director must rehearse the group with an awareness of the special needs of each particular chord voicing."

4-part closed	Drop 2	4-part closed	Drop 2
CMAJ ⁹	CMAJ ⁹	A ^b -	A ^b - ⁷

b). 3rd and 7th in the men's parts. (Sometimes the 6th is used instead of the 7th on major and minor type chords.)

In this voicing type, the men sing the two most important notes in the chord, the 3rd and 7th while the women generally have the melody and extensions. The 3rd and 7th are usually found in the mid-range of the keyboard. (This voicing type is sometimes identical to drop-2.)

ANALYZING VOCAL JAZZ ARRANGEMENTS

Many times, it is difficult to determine the correct name and function of a given chord. Much of this problem is due to the fact that a set of notes may configure a chord with two or more different names:

One way to be certain of the chord name is to simply look at the chord symbol written in the piano or bass part. If there is no chord symbol present, find the note that is written for the bass player because that will probably be the root of the chord.

Another method of analysis is to look at the chord in context of the chord progression. Remember that a great bulk of our vocal jazz literature is based on jazz standard tunes, and these tunes often have chord changes which progress through the circle of fifths.

1. E^{-7b5} A^{7(b9)} D⁻⁶
2. A⁻⁷ D^{7(b9)} G⁶
3. G⁻⁷ C⁷⁽⁹⁾ F^{Maj 7}

Be aware that sometimes a chord voicing may be incomplete, that is, it may only imply the notes in a chord with extensions.

c) Root in the bass

This voicing type is used frequently in a cappella arrangements, but can also occur when there is a rhythm section, especially in ballads.

d) Quartal

Quartal chord voicings are built primarily in 4ths. They generally have a balanced, open sound.



The Long Beach Polytechnic High School Vocal Jazz Ensemble performs during the 1992 IAJE Conference in Washington, D.C.

John Kuzmich

Example 1 "Starting Here, Starting Now" (arr. Weir)

Example 2 "C'est Si Bon" (arr. Weir)

Example 3 "A Sleeping Bee" (arr. Weir)

Example 4 "Ticket To Ride" (arr. Weir)

BALANCING CHORDS

1. Four-part closed and drop-2
All four notes may be sung with roughly the same volume. If there is a half-step between any two notes, those singers will need to use a slightly brighter, more pointed vocal tone. Generally, in the case of a half-step between a chord tone and a non-chord tone, the chord tone should be slightly louder.

(see example #1)

2. Root in the bass

The 3rd and 7th should be sung with enough brightness and focus to ring with clarity, even if the soprano is using a softer, warmer vocal tone. Sometimes there is a tendency for these important notes to become buried.

(see ex. #2)

3. 3rd and 7th in the men's parts.

Again, the 3rd and 7th need to be sung with a relatively bright vocal tone. Many times in this voicing type, the interval of a major 7th is created between the tenor or bass part and one of the women's parts. Be aware that there's a tendency for the tenors and basses to drift to the note which will create a consonant octave rather than the dissonant major 7th.

(see ex. #3)

4. Quartal

All four (or more) notes may be sung with roughly the same volume and vocal tone.

(see ex. #4)

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. If you use close voicing, the singers should adjust volume and tone color

primarily with their voices rather than constantly moving in and out of microphone proximity.

2. The lower the voicing, the more brightness and focus needed in the vocal tone.

3. In some cases, certain voice parts may tend to be too loud or too soft because of range and the relative importance of their note. For example:

The tenors will tend to dominate
The altos will tend to be hidden and unclear

4. The melody part should be predominant, and for that reason, many directors add an extra singer or two to the soprano part. However, regardless of the number of members in any section, each singer needs to habitually listen to the whole ensemble and sing with an awareness of balance.

5. In this example, because of the crossed parts and relative lowness of the melody, the sopranos should sing strongly and clearly while the altos and tenors back off in volume.

6. Because of the voicing density and harmonic complexity of vocal jazz, vibrato should rarely be used during ensemble passages. The sopranos may use vibrato sparingly for stylistic purposes, and occasionally for effects such as a shake.

7. When the sopranos are singing in their high range, they will need to back off of their microphones and work to retain a pleasing vocal tone.

Vocal jazz ensemble singers need to focus their attention on both the individual part they sing and the vertical chord voicings. This integration of melodic and harmonic singing is a key aspect of mature performance in vocal jazz. Through the understanding of chord voicing structures and their balance needs, directors can guide their students toward this goal.

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