



Michele Weir works with students at a summer jazz workshop in The Netherlands.

PRACTICE CONCEPTS FOR Vocal

FUNDAMENTALS OF PRACTICING

There's a direct relationship between practice time spent and competency. Instrumentalists have long accepted the fact that paying "practice dues" comes with the territory of being a jazz musician: it can't be avoided if they wish to sound good. However, it seems that most vocalists don't practice improvisation nearly as much as good players do, though there's no reason they shouldn't. By paying careful attention to fatigue and taking frequent breaks, singers can potentially practice a number of hours each day.

Practice doesn't have to be boring or pedantic. A daily practice routine should include the following:

- *transcribing* and singing along with solos and/or call-and-response;
- *working on the mechanics of jazz improvisation* including hearing the changes, learning licks, and executing syllables; and
- *spending time improvising* with accompaniment recordings or live players.

Experimenting with improvisation and implementing what you have practiced is an important part of the practice routine—and where you can have the most fun!

Repetition—the repeated intake of musical information that results in it becoming a useful part of your musical vocabulary—is a very important factor in learning the jazz language. For example, when singing along with a recorded solo, first learn the solo well; then continue singing along with it many more times after that. Similarly, drill licks until they become almost automatic. Only then are they imprinted into your musical memory, becoming usable improvisational tools.

Creative interaction with others is another fundamental element in jazz improvisation. Instrumentalists at all levels typically get together

with other instrumentalists for jam sessions. Unfortunately, singers are rarely invited to these sessions; but perhaps this will change as more singers develop their improvisational skills to the same level as their instrumental counterparts. Singers can certainly get together with other singers in small groups and improvise with accompaniment recordings or singing a cappella.

SINGING WITH SOLOS & TRANSCRIBING

Singing along with and/or transcribing solos is probably the most important part of practice for a vocal improviser, as it can be for an instrumentalist. Transcription has been a common activity for countless jazz instrumentalists, who listened to the given recorded solo numerous times. These repeated listenings draw awareness not only to another musician's melodic lines but also to the subtleties of style, phrasing, inflection, rhythmic feel, and tone in much greater detail than you would receive in casual listening.

The process of writing solos down (transcribing) can provide even greater insights because of the inherent accountability to get every note and rhythm correct. You may also become more aware of patterns, melodic shapes, stylistic subtleties, and other musical elements because you can see them on the page. Transcribing can also help you in the acquisition and development of general musicianship skills because you're forced to count out rhythms and notate melodic lines.

I suggest that you transcribe or sing along with instrumental solos first, then bass lines, and then vocal solos. Instrumental solos are often more harmonically sophisticated than vocal solos, and the pitches may be more accurate. Transcribing bass lines now and then helps you hear chord progressions and tune your awareness into rhythm and groove. Matching other

singers' solos will help with development of your repertoire of sounds and syllables, plus enhance your sense of style.

It is not necessary that you transcribe all solos in their entirety. Transcribing only the first chorus or even sixteen bars of a long solo is perfectly fine; this may be the most appropriate amount to tackle because of a solo's difficulty and/or your experience level. Here is a suggested step-by-step process for transcribing solos:

- *Listen to the solo repeatedly until you can sing along with it.* Try to match every detail: the tone, phrasing, articulation, and dynamics. It may take the bulk of your time in the process to complete this important step. You may wish to tape record yourself singing along with the solo to see if it sounds well-matched. Or, try singing it a cappella. This is the true test of whether or not you really know the solo!
- *Get set up to transcribe.* Staff paper and pencil with eraser are necessary. Bring your CD or tape player very close to the piano because you'll be starting, stopping, and rewinding often.
- *Identify the key, meter, song form, and chord changes of the tune.* Either transcribe the changes or consult a lead sheet of the tune. (It's much better to transcribe!) Keep in mind that an out-of-tune piano or a tape player that plays slightly slow or fast may shift your perception of the key of a solo by a half-step or more. For example, if the solo appears to be based on blues in F#, it's likely there's a pitch-reference problem with the tape player or piano: more common keys for blues would be F or G. This problem must be corrected via a different tape player, or perhaps a speed adjustment provided on the tape or CD machine, or by using an electronic keyboard with pitch adjustment.



Michele conducting the World Youth Choir in Belgium.

Improvisation

Lay out the form on staff paper. Mark the appropriate meter signature and the key in treble or bass clef as appropriate. Then add bar lines to make enough measures for the solo. If you think a symmetrical four bars per line will provide enough room for the notes, great; if it's a particularly "notey" solo, three bars per line may be best—or even fewer for certain passages.

Transcribe and sketch in all of the rhythms lightly above the staff. If you're not sure of a rhythm, move on to the others; and go back later. Some players will have such an elastic approach to the execution of their rhythms that the rhythms sound "in the cracks" and are difficult to determine. You may have to make your best judgment about when a player is "laying back" or simply playing triplets.

Fill in the notes on the staff underneath the rhythms. Again, if you're not sure of a note or series of notes, fill in the ones you can hear; then go back to the others later. Sometimes

you have to make an educated guess and then check to see if it's correct. For example, if you know the first and last notes of a fast scalar line over a Dm7 chord change, check to see if perhaps your missing notes are from a D Dorian scale. For very fast passages you may need to use a tape player that is capable of playing at half speed.

- Check your transcription by playing it on piano or singing the notes you wrote with the recording. Be sure to sing or play the notes you actually wrote, not the ones to which your ear naturally gravitates.
- Note for future practice any patterns or licks within the solo that you particularly like. Make an exercise out of them to practice in all keys.

HEARING THE CHANGES

In order to better define the chord progressions in a tune while improvising, learn to "sing the changes." This system of practice would also

be helpful to any instrumentalist: sing the scales and arpeggios on each chord change of a tune. A simple turnaround progression demonstrates the process in **Example 1**, with suggested syllables that you can modify to suit your personal style.

First, at about quarter note = 100, sing the roots to each of the chords in tempo (first staff). This is the most important step because the roots are the most defining element of a chord progression. Then practice singing the root and the third, as shown in the second staff. Only after mastering that skill should you proceed to arpeggiate the chord (third staff) and then sing a five-note scale on each chord (fourth staff). Remember, if you cannot do one of these steps correctly and with confidence a cappella, you need more practice before moving on to the next staff. Eventually you can build up to arpeggiating the full chord, up to the ninth, and singing the entire scale for each chord change.

It's a good idea to sing the changes on every new tune you study. For a while, you'll probably need to write out the scales and arpeggios before being able to sing the changes over the chord progressions. But once you've practiced the technique to the point where you can sing the changes with ease on one or two tunes, you'll find that the benefits transfer naturally to other new tunes because there is so much harmonic commonality among jazz standards. Eventually you will be able to sing the exercises over the changes as soon as you encounter the chord symbols.

IDEAS FOR STRETCHING

All jazz musicians get into an improvisational rut now and then where only the most habitual, predictable licks come out. Stretching exercises are designed to get you out of your musical rut and into new territory where the spark is rejuvenated.

EXAMPLE 1

Roots

B \flat A7 C7 C-7 F7

doo

Roots and thirds

doo doo

Arpeggios

doo-ba doo-ba ba doot

5-note scales

doo-ba doo-ba dee bop doo-ba doot doo-ba doot

It's amazing how many various types of new ideas come out by confining your improvisation to a single musical parameter. For example, if you limit your palette of rhythmic ideas, then it's very likely that you will "stretch" as much as possible to compensate by finding more interesting melodic ideas. Below are just a few concepts to get you started; practice each with a recorded accompaniment. Use only:

- one pitch, but allow the possibility of any rhythm; then use only two or three pitches with any rhythm allowable;
- half notes, quarter notes, or eighth notes, but allow the possibility of any pitch;
- short phrase lengths;
- long phrase lengths;
- simple, sparse ideas with lots of space;
- busy ideas with lots of notes;
- melodies that move almost exclusively by scale;
- melodies that move almost exclusively by skips;
- wide intervals with big melodic leaps;
- a preponderance of ascending lines;
- a preponderance of descending lines;
- double-time licks;
- phrases that begin on a certain beat of the measure;
- simple melodic ideas that are highly stylized; or sequential ideas.

OTHER IDEAS FOR PRACTICE

Patience and care in practice habits will result in better improvising. Tape record your improvisation and listen back. We don't always have a good sense of what we sound like until we hear it on a recording.

Play the chords of a tune at the piano and "doodle around" singing melodic lines, slowly and out of tempo. Isolate the connecting points (shifting key centers) of the chord progression and work the transitions, especially the ones that are difficult to navigate. At first this may seem like a chore for non-piano players; but after some time getting comfortable with jazz piano, you'll be very glad you are able to help yourself this way. If necessary, help your ear along by playing pitches at the piano that work in the progression.

Scat-sing while simultaneously playing the same notes on the piano (accompanied by a play-along recording). This is fantastic practice! It simultaneously helps you to see, hear, feel, and understand the notes as they relate to the chords. Of course, non-pianists will want to start with slower tempos and simple progressions.

Practice improvising a cappella in your car or virtually anywhere. Choose a tune that you've been working on, and see if you can "hear" the changes in your improvisation all the way through the tune. If your ear gets stuck in a certain part of the progression, "sing the changes" through the passage (as outlined earlier in this article) until it's comfortable.

Choose a tune; and while playing each of its chords slowly and out of tempo at the piano, sing the notes of an ascending scale straight up to the comfortable end of your high range, then straight down to the comfortable end of your low range. Use your ear to choose appropriate syllables and to find notes that sound like they fit the chord changes well. Sing consecutive notes only (intervals of half or whole steps); and don't change directions at any time until the extremes of your range. You'll discover that this exercise really forces your ear to gravitate to notes that fit the changes.

Get together with friends for improvisation sessions with accompaniment recordings or a cappella.

Finally, go out and listen to music! This is one of the best things you can do. It's inspiring and will give you a boost to want to go practice.

DAILY PRACTICE ROUTINE

You must decide for yourself how much time you are able to devote to practice. Here are my own suggestions for a well-rounded daily practice routine:

- *Technique/Warm-up.* 10-20 minutes. Good vocal improvisation requires great command of the voice, especially agility and pitch accuracy. If possible, take lessons in vocal technique.
- *Jazz Piano.* 15-30 minutes. This may include playing two-handed scales, chordal patterns in all keys, and/or playing through the changes of tunes.
- *Harmonic Ear Training.* 10-20 minutes. Practice may include singing the roots or the

complete changes of a tune you're working on, guide-tone lines, or playing chords slowly at the piano and finding notes to sing over them.

- *Melodic Development.* 15-30 minutes. This will include patterns, licks, sequences, scales, and arpeggios, sung with an accompaniment or a cappella with a metronome in all keys.
- *Singing along with and/or transcribing solos.* 15-30 minutes.
- *Improvising.* 15-30 minutes. Use various vehicles for general improvisation practice: tunes with fast tempos, slow tempos, various rhythmic grooves, various types of changes, major keys, minor keys, and more. Stay with one tune at least two weeks, sometimes using the "stretching" parameters discussed above. Sometimes don't try to do anything in particular; just have fun improvising.

If you have specific tasks to be completed for each practice session, it will be much easier to get started and avoid procrastination. You may wish to create a form such as **Example 2** to help keep your practice goals on track.

SOLOISTS IN JAZZ CHOIR

There are several built-in challenges for scat soloists in the jazz choir setting. The sections for improvisation in jazz choir literature typically are relatively short, providing the soloists little time to warm up into their solo or develop ideas; and usually there's too little available rehearsal time to practice these solos with the rhythm section. Complicating matters further, the vocal background parts behind improvisation solos can be distracting to the soloist.

EXAMPLE 2

Week of NOV. 3

Tune(s) "How High the Moon" & "Red Top" (blues)

| Goals: | Technique | Piano | Harmony | Licks, patterns, scales | Transcribing | Improvising |
|--------|--------------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| MO | Warm-up 15 min. | ii-7 - V7 - I in B ^b , E ^b , A ^b , D ^b | Sing roots w/ guide tones to "how high" | arpeggios 11-9, and 12-9, with the oct. | Sing with Dexter Gordon on "red top" | improvise on "how high the moon" w/ blues w/ accompaniment |
| TUE | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | incorporate sequential patterns |
| WED | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| THU | Warm-up 30 min. | play changes of "how high the moon" | Sing the changes to "how high the moon" | ↓ | ↓ | General improv on OTHER TUNES! practice Dexter tunes |
| FRI | Warm-up 15 min. | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| SAT | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | improvise on "how high the moon" a cappella |
| SUN | ← | D a y o f f | | → | | |

Notes: Start writing down Dexter's solo next week; need more work on minor key

sections of "how high"; choose one lick from Dexter's solo to sing next week in all keys

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DIZZY GILLESPIE
MONTEREY JAZZ FESTIVAL 1990

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So here are a few tips for jazz choir soloists:

- Don't be in a hurry to begin your improvisation solo; wait until you are ready to "say" something musically. Even in short solo spaces you can take a moment to get mentally centered before jumping in.
- In the beginning of the solo, focus your awareness on rhythm and groove. Too often inexperienced improvisers try to sing too many notes with very little sense of groove. It's much better to sing a few choice notes with great style and feel rather than many notes that are not "in the pocket" of the groove.
- Keep the improvisation in the spirit and mood of the piece; match the intensity level.
- Solos generally should grow out of a seed or idea. Let them unfold naturally: be patient, and imagine you're telling a story.
- Keep your solo fresh by making it different each time. Resist the temptation to fall back into what you've sung before. Reach for new ideas each time you sing the solo, whether it be in a rehearsal or in performance.
- Tape the rhythm section accompaniment to use when practicing your solo at home. Ample practice time outside of class is necessary.
- One remedy for short solo spaces in a piece is simply to open up the arrangement, adding measures to the solo section while retaining the integrity of the song form. For example, if the improv solo is written to take place over the AA part of an AABA tune, then add the

chord changes of the BA part of the tune. If you're in doubt about this process, consult an arranger.

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

Fear of the unknown is the first bridge to cross when learning jazz improvisation: the average singer in high school or college probably didn't grow up listening to Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. For this reason, it is especially important to spend substantial time listening to jazz recordings. Having role models to emulate is an important part of the process.

Beginning improvisers tend to be self-critical about whether or not they are doing it "right"—understandable given that the bulk of their study in school is not focused on individuality but is rather centered on assignments that are judged as correct or incorrect. It is important to note that this art form is not about achieving perfection; it's about creativity and individuality. Vocal improvisation should emphasize personal expression rather than correctness: experiment and take chances!

Once you have explored structured activities such as call-and-response, transcribing, and singing written exercises, then invention of melodic ideas and their development will logically follow. Eventually you will develop the skills to build complete solos that not only have a cohesive flow but are also interesting and adventurous.



Michele sings at a benefit for the Fullerton High School vocal jazz ensemble (Jill DeWeese, director).

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School. A former member of the Grammy-nominated vocal group, "Phil Mattson and the P.M. Singers," she has also worked as a pianist, including touring as accompanist for singer Bobby Vinton. Michele's vocal arrangements are published with UNC Jazz Press, Hal Leonard, and Aberdeen Music and have been performed by numerous vocal groups including Beachfront Property, Voice Trek, Chanticleer, Phil Mattson and the P.M. Singers, and M-Pact. Her instrumental arrangements and/or compositions have been featured on the Shari Lewis TV Show and the Holland America Cruise Line; and her orchestral work has been performed by the Long Beach, Buffalo, Modesto, Cincinnati, and Pacific Symphonies. As an internationally respected jazz clinician and adjudicator, recent jazz clinics have included presentations for the World Choral Symposium and the National ACDA and IAJE Conferences. Michele has served as an ARTS panelist for the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts. In 1998 she supervised the foreign-language dubs for the Dreamworks film "Prince of Egypt" in Mexico, Greece, Portugal, Denmark, Thailand, and Japan.

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