

A Fresh Start

By Gene Aitken

Each year as school begins, many choral directors consider the possibility of adding a vocal jazz group to their already busy schedule. The popularity and value of the vocal jazz choir as a part of the choral program has been substantiated and is not now a questionable entity. Junior highs, high schools and colleges are adding vocal jazz offerings to their curriculum at a rapidly increasing rate . . . especially at the college level.

Many directors would like to add vocal jazz to their programs, but due to a lack of jazz knowledge and know-how, have delayed getting the ensemble started. The purpose of this article is to answer some basic beginning questions and to provide information to help the director who is new to the vocal jazz area.

AUDITIONS

If one has a limited background in jazz, don't worry about trying to find jazz music for an audition. Music selected for an audition needs to provide the director with information such as levels of musicianship, pitch discrimination, rhythmic understanding, music note-reading skills, musical memory and tone quality. Most standard choral literature can provide basic music fundamentals information that will help the director determine the expertise of the auditionee.

What about time, improvisation and the ability to interpret the jazz line? These very important aspects of jazz can be learned by the director at a later time and can be included in future auditions as he/she becomes more familiar with the jazz idiom.

SIZE OF THE VOCAL JAZZ GROUP

Several possibilities exist in determining the size of a vocal jazz group. One of the first considerations all directors have is quality and quantity of sound equip-

ment. With educational funding the way it is, there is very limited funding for the purchase of such things as a sophisticated sound reinforcement system. But if a school owns just about any standard public address system and 3 microphones, then there IS sufficient sound equipment with which to begin a vocal jazz ensemble.

A second consideration is the number of students who are really interested. If there are only eight students, and they are all good singers, then one may have an eight-voice or less vocal jazz group after the potential balance problems have been solved.

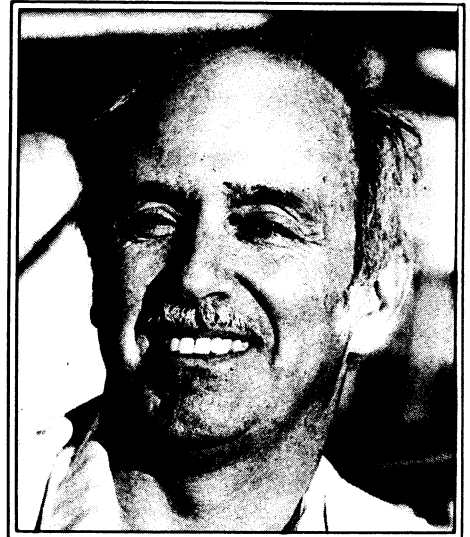
The last consideration is the number of students the director wants in the ensemble, provided 30-50 have tried out. Many schools have outstanding vocal jazz groups numbering from three to thirty members, so size is not one of the major stumbling blocks.

ACCOMPANISTS

Select the best classical accompanist available. In the beginning don't be concerned about rhythm sections or how to rehearse them. It usually works best to have the accompanist with the group until two to three weeks before the concert, at which time one can add the rhythm section. Also, in the beginning, it seems better to leave out the extra horn parts until the vocal jazz concepts feel a little more natural.

FIRST REHEARSALS

The concept of sound of vocal jazz groups has evolved drastically over the past ten years. The light airy vocal jazz sound of the past has given way to the full rich vocal jazz sound of today. So, first rehearsals should deal with techniques that will bring about good vocal production and health. Singing Bach chorales with vowel sounds is one excellent way to



introduce and teach the basic fundamentals of vocal sound.

In addition, spend five minutes or more at the beginning of each rehearsal listening to outstanding vocal jazz groups. Doug Anderson, McMinnville High School, McMinnville, Oregon specializes in retailing quality vocal jazz recordings.

MUSIC

One of the first pieces of music to introduce to a new group might be a very hip ballad that relates to the students of today. Most music stores will have their racks filled with the latest hits. The hits change so fast that the store's stock is hardly on the floor before the new issues arrive.

Next, select a tune that demands energy and is well within the technical capabilities of the group. What the other school did last year or what was heard on a recording is not a consideration unless the music has the potential of being sung correctly. Contrary to popular belief, students do know when their group does not sound good . . . so choose literature that is within their technical and vocal abilities. Rather than list specific tunes, look for music written or arranged by Kirby Shaw, Ed Lojeski, Dave Cross, Michele Wier, Ken Krintz, Frank DeMiero, Jack Kunz, Kelly Kunz, Mark Mazur, Kirk Marcy, Dave Barduhn,

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GET READY

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ways and color coded by: title, composer/arranger, grade level of difficulty and musical style. For further information, contact Roger Rickson at 1015 W. Rancho Road, Corona, CA 91720.

Hal Sherman is one of the most experienced educators in the field of jazz education. He has spent thirty years teaching public school music in the State of Washington. His groups, at Kent-Meridian High School, have gained national recognition.

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Steve Zegree and many others too numerous to list in this short space.

From this point on, one can enlist the input of the students. They do have good musical taste and can provide insights into selecting quality music. The difficulty level is always a serious problem, so give this a number one priority before acquiring music. If one finds an acceptable tune and there are just a few sections that may be too hard, then *rewrite* those sections to make the chart easier.

There are also many excellent music stores that are experienced in the vocal jazz idiom that will send perusal copies or music on approval. See the *NAJE Jazz Educators' Journal* spring issue for a list of music stores with addresses and phone numbers.

REHEARSAL SET-UP

Rehearse the vocal jazz group in a circle with director in the center. If the group is small, five to nine voices, then rehearsing in a semi-circle would be more advantageous. The accompanist should be outside of the circle and have direct eye contact with the director. When the rhythm section is added, it should be to the director's left side. Rhythm section players must have eye contact with the director as well as each other.

MICROPHONES

If three microphones are all that is available with the public address system, then two of those microphones should be put in an "xy" configuration. Place the microphone stand with a boom approximately eight to nine feet high and approximately five feet in front of the center of the choir risers. Fasten the microphones to a T-bar at 90 degrees to each other with the focal point facing the center of the choir. The third micro-

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phone can then be used as a solo microphone.

RHYTHM SECTIONS

This is the most important and perhaps the least understood sections of the vocal jazz choir. With the wealth of information available on rhythm section techniques today, becoming informed should not be a problem. There are numerous instructional videos and texts with tapes on how to play piano, bass and drums in the jazz idiom. Ed Soph, Steve Houghton, Frank Mantooth, Chuck Sher, Rufus Reid are a few names with which to become familiar. The local music store can be of valuable assistance.

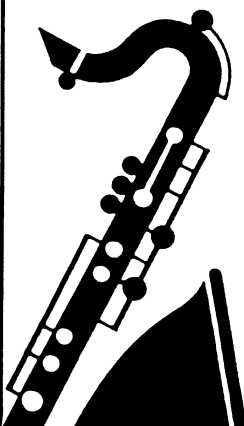
NEW TRENDS IN VOCAL JAZZ

Today the idea of having the vocal jazz group standing on risers and just singing a concert is a thing of the past. With our audiences television-educated, they want some visual with the audio. Limited movement to enhance the music is a must! The best source for ideas are the students themselves . . . they are the television authorities. Let them view a Manhattan Transfer or Bobby McFerrin video and come up with a plan for each tune. Simple, effective choreography can really enhance a performance.

The jazz music of today also has more of a fusion direction. Singing nothing but straight-ahead bebop and ballads may prove to be singing dated material. However, balancing bebop and ballads with the straight-eighth fusion style may result in a choir that has the potential for being exciting, energetic and musically rewarding . . . and being educationally sound.

Finally, enter every festival as a non-competitive group. Listen to other vocal jazz groups, listen to the clinicians work with the ensembles on stage and attend every session possible dealing with vocal jazz and rhythm section techniques. And most importantly, listen to solo jazz singers, vocal groups and instrumental soloists.

Gene Aitken is Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Northern Colorado. The UNC Vocal Jazz, Lab Bands and Jazz Combos have received numerous *down beat* magazine awards, a 1986 Grammy nomination, and have appeared at many jazz festivals throughout the United States and Canada. In addition to heading UNC Jazz Press, Gene is also active in the Los Angeles area.



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JAZZ CROSSINGS!

Answer Key
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ACROSS:		DOWN		
2. Davis	16. Mitchell	1. Jimmy	9. Mute	17. Fender
4. Crosby	18. Viol	3. Point	10. Eadg	19. Pegs
8. Bridge	20. Vinnegar	5. Ron	12. Williams	22. Arco
9. Mingus	21. Stanley	6. Bassist	13. Pizzicato	
11. Dave	23. Jones	7. Heath	14. Paul	
13. Pettiford	24. Stop	8. Blanton	15. Walking	

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