

**Gene Aitkin**  
Nat'l. Vocal Jazz Chm.

## VOCAL JAZZ

### Individual Miking The Set-Up & Rehearsal

Many times a vocal jazz ensemble's performance when using individual miking is not as good as it could be due to several reasons, one of those being a lack of rehearsal time with the full sound system. In many instances, vocal jazz groups have only an hour to an hour and one half to rehearse two to three times a week; and taking a half hour to set-up a P.A. system is not very good use of rehearsal time . . . especially true when using the more complex individual miking system. Is there a solution? Yes! Teaching the vocal group to set-up the sound system is not only a time-saving device, but provides the students with one more practical and educational reason for being in jazz choir.

The concept of individual miking (having a maximum of one or two singers on a mike) presents problems for many vocal jazz directors. First of all, there is not enough confidence that the system of individual miking will work. Second, there is the belief that it takes too much time to set-up and tear-down the equipment. Third, there seems to be an opinion that an overwhelming amount of time has to be spent rehearsing with the microphones. Fourth, there is a lack of literature published that can help the director with individual miking. And finally, the school doesn't have the money to spend on microphones. With all these barriers it is no wonder that the use of individual miking has not been explored more. Yet the use of individual miking will enhance the sound of the group, project the sound more, make it easier for the performers and listeners to hear and a myriad of other benefits.

#### THE EQUIPMENT SET-UP

The first one to four rehearsals of the year should be spent familiarizing the

vocal jazz groups with the sound system, how to operate it effectively and how to set it up and tear it down efficiently. Included in this familiarization should be guidance as to how to coil microphone cords correctly, how to set-up electronic support devices (like equalizer and digital delays), etc.

This means that the sound technician and the vocal jazz director must spend considerable time before these rehearsals planning out the specific allocation of responsibilities to each choir member and developing a summary of how the equipment works. Below is an example of what the beginning of a Responsibility List might look like:

#### VOCAL JAZZ RESPONSIBILITY LIST

NAME:  
Morty, Bob  
SET-UP AND TEAR-DOWN  
RESPONSIBILITY:  
Set-up choral risers  
Proper placement of piano, bass amp and drums  
Set-up plastic shield between rhythm section and singers  
  
Anne, Barb, George  
Set-up mike stands with mike clips  
Put SM-81 on clips  
Uncoil cables and connect mike cables to input box  
Etc.

This list extends to include everyone in the vocal group. The suggested set-up and tear-down procedure needs to be rehearsed numerous times so that it is always accomplished correctly and becomes second nature. Whatever equipment the students set-up, they tear-down, or else return it to its pre-rehearsal storage place.

With practice a complete set-up from start to finish (ready to use) can be accomplished in seven to ten minutes depending on the complexity of the sound system. The set-up can take place before the scheduled rehearsal hour and thus valuable rehearsal time is saved. Tear-down ideally would happen after the rehearsal. Oddly enough, the tear-down time may take a little longer since extreme care must be taken to coil cords correctly, put mikes away carefully and store equipment in an orderly fashion that will facilitate the next set-up.

Mid-way through the school year if there is a desire to change responsibilities, then students merely shift jobs and teach each other their "new" responsibility. Again, an excellent educational opportunity for the students.

#### THE REHEARSAL AND MEMORIZATION

There are many varied ideas and approaches of using individual miking in rehearsals. There are those who advocate using microphones every rehearsal and there are those who advocate using microphones only a few rehearsals before the performance.

It seems the most logical application of individual miking would be to use a combination of both ideas. When jazz choir members are first learning parts, it seems to be a waste of time and effort to set up a complete sound system and then have to concentrate on singing into the microphone while at the same time singing the right notes, being conscious of the blend, holding one's music, etc. A more practical approach would be to have the group rehearse a cappella in a circle until the music becomes a little more familiar . . . preferably memorized.

Using rhythm section and a cappella tapes can help with memorization and facilitate learning continuity and conceptualization. The rhythm section tape will assist soloists in learning chord changes and practicing improvisation as well as helping the choir with continuity and relating their part to the bass line. A second tape, an a cappella recording of the group, can be made as soon as the group can sing through the tunes reasonably well. This tape will help the singers hear how their part fits with the chordal structure in addition to assisting with conceptualization.

Is it too much to expect the choir members to memorize at least two tunes each week? No! Not if you provide tapes to help them with the learning process. Since the vocal jazz ensembles at the University of Northern Colorado rehearse only two, one-hour sessions each week, the above ideas are used so that most note-learning takes place outside of class time.

### ADDING THE RHYTHM SECTION

Most vocal jazz rehearsals during the quarter are conducted without the rhythm section. When the rhythm section is finally combined with the vocal jazz group, about four or five rehearsals before the performance, it is like having to start from ground zero once again. One begins to wonder, "what happened to the vocal group, why can't they sing?" and "what happened to the rhythm section, why can't they adjust to the vocal group?" An answer? It is just the first rehearsal with the two separate groups together and it will take most of the first rehearsal working on one or two tunes to get the desired balance and provide the sound engineer(s) with the opportunity to get the "bugs" out of the system. Believe me, rehearsals that follow the first one are much easier as the rhythm section and choral group will begin to function as one.

Bringing the rhythm section together with the choir four or five rehearsals before a performance will not necessarily work for all groups. However, rhythm sections and a cappella vocal groups do need to rehearse independently to work out notes, rhythms, phrasing, balance, etc. Combining the two groups when they have the basic fundamentals learned makes the end result, musicianship and musicality, a lot easier to strive for. Each group must set-up its own parameters.

### THE DRESS REHEARSAL

A dress rehearsal for each group in the performance area is a MUST. It is important that this rehearsal be open-ended and not have any time constraints . . . thus a two to three hour rehearsal may result. It is also important to set up the sound system, rhythm section, choral risers, etc., exactly as it will be in the performance.

The reason for this length of rehearsal is because a certain amount of time is required for the group to become accustomed to the acoustics of the

auditorium stage. I would recommend that each tune be rehearsed until the ensemble is satisfied that they can hear their part and each other, that the desired balance between the rhythm section and choir is satisfactory and that the desired level of musicianship is attained. After going through each tune in this manner, a run-through of the entire program in concert order would be appropriate.

### THE MICROPHONE

Whatever brands of microphones are used, how they are used becomes the most important factor. Two things normally happen when vocal jazz groups begin individual miking:

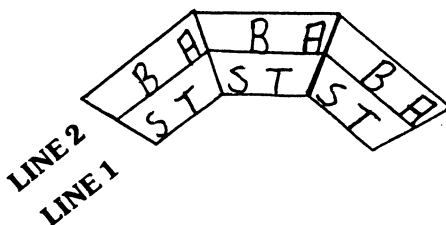
1. The singers sing softer in order to attain blend, and,
2. The singers back away from the microphone in order to attain blend.

Awareness of these problems and correcting them immediately is important. Ideally, the singers should sing using their normal singing volume. That is one of the reasons why singing a cappella is so important . . . to obtain a good choral volume and dynamic range and to get used to not holding back.

It is true that until the sound system is balanced or until the voices are balanced, a voice or voices may stick out. No problem . . . but don't have everyone back off suddenly and sing lighter. Sing no more than 2" from the microphone and as close to direct axis as possible. Getting this close to the microphone and using a good choral volume will do wonders. It is important to use good quality microphones (coupled with good choral basic fundamentals) that will help the choir to obtain an excellent vocal jazz sound that is pleasing to the ear. Furthermore, our classical counterparts just might take notice at the quality choral sound that is being produced.

### THE RISER SET-UP

When using the risers for a small group such as 12-16 singers, setting the group up in quartets as follows seems to work quite well.



This positioning has several advantages. First of all, the vocalists parts (in line one and two) are separated from each other in the quartet chordal structure by at least one voice part. This positioning provides for a little more opportunity for the student to hear and balance the chords correctly. It may also enhance the intonation, since relating to wider intervals is a little easier.

Secondly, when recording live or studio performances using 16-track or larger tape deck, there is much more control in the final mix-down by having the flexibility to balance the quartets. It is also possible to overdub some questionable sections. If using less than 16 tracks, the singers must then maintain a volume and distance-from-the-microphone technique within the quartet so that the recording engineer can balance each quartet. If there are problems, it is then possible to overdub one of the vocal jazz quartets.

### EQUALIZER

Equalizers are a must for any vocal jazz P.A. system. There are many types of equalizers on the market, but the one to consider that will best help the vocal group is the one-third octave equalizer as it will provide the most flexibility.

Very simply, rooms and/or auditoriums because of their particular or unique design, will cause certain frequencies to vibrate when the P.A. volume is increased. This can cause feedback. Feedback can result in both monitor and/or main speakers. One way to "ring-out" the system is to use an equalizer. Increase the volume of the mains until you have feedback. Identify the feedback note (such as an A-440) then cut that frequency back on the equalizer until that feedback note stops ringing. Repeat this process. When you finish the main speakers, do the same with the monitor speakers. Be conscious of the fact that if too many cuts are made on the equalizer, the resulting sound will be the old "choir-in-a-box" sound. Also, be aware that when the auditorium or room fills with people, the acoustics of the room may change.

A quicker way to analyze the room is to use a spectrum analyzer. This piece of equipment will identify the problem frequencies and will indicate how to set the contour of the equalizer.

The final adjustments in any sound system will be based on the sound engineer's ear and his concept of vocal quality.

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JAZZ EDUCATORS JOURNAL

## SINGING BIG BAND FIGURES

Many of my students upon seeing a chart for the first time will try to play every figure perfectly. I in turn pass a tip on to them which was taught to me by the great Harry James. Harry always told me to first read the important parts of the chart, bass kicks, dynamics, etc. and create the groove the first time down. Then, after hearing the chart's concept, study all the notes and road maps; play good time and groove. I also suggest that the drummer sing the shouts and kicks out loud when rehearsing the chart by himself. By being vocal this will give him more horn like phrasing. Another way for the drummer to develop coordination is to play all the figures in a jazz-like feel with the left hand while the right hand is playing the standard ride rhythm.

## STYLES

In playing in today's stage band the drummer is expected to cover many styles of playing in order to compliment the chart and the band. The director should know the best examples of drummers past and present and have his drummer listen to them to know their styles.

Here are some of my favorite records and the musical settings in which these drummers shine. For big band, the Thad Jones - Mel Lewis Orchestra recordings on Solid State, (which are the bands first recordings), the Bob Florence band live at Concerts by the Sea features some great Nick Ceroli drumming, and the Rob McConnell "Boss Brass" with Terry Clark on drums. These recordings demonstrate a great variety in styles yet all of them groove hard, while the drummers conceptions are relaxed, loose, swinging and the performances totally compliment the band.

I had the pleasure of leading a big-band on my first record date as a leader. The L.P. still pops up from time to time. The title of that album is "The Les DeMerle Spectrum" on United Artist Records. I was happy to feature such players as Marvin Stamm, Lew Tabakian, Joe Beck, Garnett Brown and Arnie Lawrence, to name a few. This is one of the L.P.'s that was tight in concept but at the same time the band played loose, with a lilt in it's groove which developed naturally after many notes played together.

I feel it's very important for the band director to stress the importance of good communication between the drummer

and the orchestra, the main people being the lead trumpet player and the bass player. If things don't feel right the first time down then talk over the concept and come to an agreement on the piece.

I also suggest taping rehearsals and performances. Then, listen and critique the playing. You may also, without realizing, change the whole concept as time goes on. By taping and preserving the rehearsals of a new piece you can always refer back to the orientation.

These are a few suggestions that I hope will better develop a rapport within the band. When the drummer is aware of these concepts it can only benefit his growth as an overall musician.

Les DeMerle is a distinguished drummer, clinician and band leader. He has performed with Lionel Hampton, Dizzy Gillespie, Lou Rawles, Sarah Vaughn, Joe Farrell, Eddie Jefferson, Harry James and many others. His band, "Transfusion," has attracted some of the finest musicians available. Alumni include: Randy Brecker, Ray Pizzi, Joe Beck, Dave Liebman, Ronnie Laws, Garnet Brown, Milcho Leviev, Frank Foster, and Lew Tabacken among others. Les is the author of two drum technique books.

effect as that of a doubler and can enhance and "fatten" the choral sound by essentially doubling the number of voices. This is accomplished by delaying the original sound and feeding it back into the system. Setting the digital delay for about a .33 delay usually produces a good aural effect. This unit is not the same as a reverb unit or an echo unit. It is not a good idea to use a digital delay on the solo microphones. Also, one will not and should not hear the doubling effect in the monitors.

## CONCLUSION

The above information just begins to scratch the surface of individual miking. It is not a hard concept to understand nor does it present anymore problems than group miking. However, the end result using individual miking will be much more rewarding for both the audience and the performer.

Thanks again for your interest and if you have any questions or comments, please write or call me at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado 80639, (303) 351-2577. See you next issue!

## MIKING

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### DIGITAL DELAY

Another useful piece of equipment which can be used in a performance situation is the digital delay. This is helpful if you are using a small group of singers, 4-12 voices.

The delay has the same outward



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