

From your Vocal Jazz R&R Chair: Keri Staley

Make Connections and Have Fun with Vocal Jazz

This fall gives many of us the ability to hear our singers in person again and allow for them to hear each other. Hooray! With that joy comes new challenges of rebuilding confidence and remembering how to blend and match vowels. Choosing activities and repertoire that meet these challenges and bring forth a sense of community is essential. I challenge you to take a deeper look at what vocal jazz has to offer.

Our singers are coming to us with a craving for connection; connection to music, to each other, and to life. Vocal jazz represents community. Singing jazz brings people out of their comfort zone, which beautifully aligns with how we all inevitably feel during and after the Covid pandemic. It's a great time to give it a try!

Vocal jazz sometimes gets a bad rap from choir directors, viewed as "light" or "easy." True vocal jazz music is a wonderful world of new chords, dissonance, give and take, and vowel blend. All singers must be confident in their individual part, which can feel incorrect at times, needing to trust the dissonant harmonies by locking in the chords with matching vowels. It's a choir director's dream! Taking time to clean each chord and listen carefully challenges singers to trust, gain confidence, and make "fun" music sound truly outstanding.

Where do I start? Because vocal jazz derives from mimicking instrumental jazz, try listening to musicians like Benny Carter, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis with your students as an introduction. Have them identify what they hear, recognizing the various timbres of each instrument and how beautiful they blend with each other. Compare how voices have similar sounds and can blend with similar timbres. (The listening activity is a great time to let the aerosols dissipate when breaking up a longer rehearsal.)

Here are some more ideas on how to incorporate vocal jazz concepts with choir singers:

1. Swing your favorite vocal warm up by snapping on the 2 and 4 and turning it with a swing style. Play around with different vowel sounds (doo ba doo, doh van doh, etc.) to teach vowel blend. Watch the smiles in the eyes light up!
2. Build tall chords in your vocal warm-up. Divide parts in thirds, keeping adding.
Examples:
 - A. Basses: Do, Tenors: Mi, Alto: Sol, Sop: Te (Te)
 - B. Basses: Do, Baritones: Mi, Tenors: Sol, Altos: Ti (Te), Sop: Re
 - C. Basses: Do, Baritones: Mi, Tenors, Sol, Altos: Ti (Te), Sop2: Re, Sop1: Fa
 - D. Options:

- Once the chord is understood, play around with singing on the same vowels/words.
- Invert the chords with different voice parts on different solfege, remember to embrace the dissonance. Try telling your singers, “Sing it like it’s right.”

3. Play around with rhythm and improvisation!

- Have your singers stand in a circle, put a track like this on <https://youtu.be/5XdjRYtHe2M> (There are so many wonderful swing tracks on YouTube that students can use both in the classroom and at home to gain skills with their improvisation.)
- Share a fun article or short story to take turns reading aloud with swing rhythm. (You could even use a music theory study guide to reinforce other concepts learned in class that you want to stick in their brain. Hello, reinforcement!)
- Each student reads one sentence aloud, playing around with the jazz rhythm to fit with the track.
- When students feel ready, they can add some vocalization to their rhythm. (Note: the trick is to have fun, get comfortable with improv, and be OK with making mistakes. Laughter is good!)

This year brings more uncertainty and new challenges. I hope these vocal jazz concepts and activities bring you and your students a smile and something new to play with as we navigate back to the choir classroom. Remember to trust your heart, have fun with your students, and lean on your colleagues for comfort and reassurance. We all will be a little like Bud Powell, Un Poco Loco! (Look this one up on YouTube.) Bring it on, 2021!

From your Children’s and Community Youth R&R Chair: Jane Morison

Happy fall, y’all! For the past six years I have served as the Membership Chair for VA ACDA, and I have now flipped roles with Leslie Dripps to become the R&R Chair for Children’s and Community Youth.

I would like to get to know our Virginia Children’s and Youth Choir directors better, and I hope we can plan some get-togethers at both state and regional conferences. I would also encourage you to join the Children’s and Youth Choirs Repertoire Forum on Facebook: [https:// www.facebook.com/groups/408679839272450](https://www.facebook.com/groups/408679839272450). In addition to a great exchange of ideas and some wonderful information, they sponsor a fantastic biennial workshop which I attended in Atlanta in January 2020. Hopefully we will convene January 15-16, 2022 in Tucson, AZ.

I am also available to meet you on my bike! My other passion is cycling--both mountain and road--and I would love to host you on my favorite local ride, the beautiful Virginia Creeper Trail, or meet you at the New River Trail or any other trail or road you love to ride. I had an awesome “bike meeting” with our Shenandoah Valley Children’s Choir colleague Janet Hostetter this summer!

I hope you are having a great start to your semester, and if you have any ideas about how ACDA can serve you better, please let me know.