

I'D LIKE TO TEACH VOCAL JAZZ, BUT...

I'm a choir director with no jazz background. Help!

(instrumental teachers - flip to the other side of this page)

Listen and imitate. The most important thing you can do is listen to great recordings of the charts your group is working on, with your singers, as part of the rehearsal process. Jazz is an aural tradition, passed down by ear. Stealing is encouraged!

Rhythm is key. Have your group speak the lyrics in rhythm with good style and time feel before you ever worry about notes or chords. Be ready for lots of syncopation. Again, listen and imitate. Find a good balance between learning rhythms by reading the score and by listening.

Learn to love dissonance. Jazz is more harmonically “crunchy” than some other types of choral music. Use warmup exercises to get your students comfortable singing whole and half steps against each other. Practice inverted chords so your basses get used to not singing roots (they usually won't in good charts). Most importantly, teach the hardest chords slowly. Find the most dissonant interval in the chord and make the singers lock it in no matter how ugly they think it is at first. *This is the fun part when you get good at it.*

Under-enunciate. This is very different from our approach in concert choir. In jazz, we don't emphasize consonants; your group should sing most words the same way you would speak them in casual conversation. Teach your singers a wide vowel concept for jazz (NOT a “tall” concert choir sound). Close, dissonant harmony won't blend well if you are singing with too much vertical space and vibrato. The Four Freshmen and the Beach Boys are great models for the sound we're going for.

Bass, drums and piano. Putting a strong rhythm section behind your singers is one of your most valuable teaching tools. If you can, hire professional players, or bribe a bassist and drummer from the local college, or use the rhythm section from your school's jazz band. Whatever it takes, beg/borrow/steal to get good instrumentalists for your performances. It's the equivalent of having a great (or terrible) pianist accompany art songs--it makes an enormous difference.

For further reading:

“The Complete Guide to Teaching Vocal Jazz” by Steve Zegree

“The Vocal Jazz Ensemble” by Paris Rutherford

Pssst: the other side of this page might be helpful, too.

I'D LIKE TO TEACH VOCAL JAZZ, BUT...

I'm a band director and I've never taught singers. Help!

(vocal music teachers - flip to the other side of this page)

Vocal jazz is still jazz. Instrumental jazz educators are often *more* suited to direct vocal jazz than a lot of choral directors. Teaching vocal jazz is 90% of the same stuff you tell your jazz band. A big band director who plays saxophone can still help the trumpets improve their part, even though he or she probably couldn't play it themselves. Teaching singers is no different. It's the same music.

Listen and imitate great jazz singers. Listen to the important jazz vocal groups and soloists with your students. If you're filling their ears up with Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Kurt Elling, Take 6, New York Voices, The Four Freshmen and other musicians from this tradition, your singers will start to imitate what they hear. You can also have singers do transcriptions, just like horn players - either as assignments, or in a group setting. *Tip: have singers transcribe singers and instrumentalists.*

Vocal technique isn't that complicated. Two steps to healthy singing in any style, ready?
1. Take big, low, supported breaths. 2. Relax the neck and shoulders when you sing, and don't have any pressure or tension up around the vocal cords. You can also ask the choral director at your school to come talk more about this with your jazz choir.

Lead rehearsals from the piano. If you aren't already a decent pianist, it's worth getting some basic jazz voicings under your fingers so you can reinforce what the singers are learning in real time during rehearsals. Vocal jazz scores are WAY easier to read than big band scores, because it's all in two staves (usually) and it's all in concert pitch. Singers will take longer to learn parts and hold dissonant intervals than your instrumentalists, so plan to be patient, teach them the parts slowly, and utilize sectionals and demo/part tracks if you can.

For further reading:

“Vocal Jazz Improvisation: An Instrumental Approach” by Darmon Meader

“Vocal Technique for Non-classical Singers” by Rita di Ghent

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