

Vocal Jazz – A Style Hard to Define

The vocal jazz ensemble has been around since the late 1930's with groups such as The Boswell Sisters and The Mills Brothers. The 1940's, 1950's and 1960's brought us The Four Freshman, The Hi-Lo's!, and Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. But, it wasn't until the popularity of The Manhattan Transfer and The Singers Unlimited in the 1970's that vocal jazz became part of music education. In historical terms, vocal jazz is still in its infancy.

What is vocal jazz? Is it a choral ensemble? Is it a jazz ensemble? Vocal jazz ensembles should be founded in traditional choral singing. Vocal production and technique, diction, blend, balance, intonation, and tone quality are all aspects of choral singing that are foundations of any choral ensemble, including vocal jazz. Elements of traditional jazz that are found in vocal jazz ensembles included jazz harmonies, styles, standard literature and improvisation. Vocal jazz is a combination of choral *and* jazz traditions.

There are very few college music education programs that provide opportunities for future choral directors to experience performing in a vocal jazz ensemble and even fewer that offer courses in instrumental or vocal jazz methods or rehearsal techniques. So, this leaves new choral directors with the question "Where do I start?" Here are some suggestions:

1. Listen, listen, listen! Listen to vocal jazz ensembles, jazz singers and all types of instrumental jazz to get the styles, harmonies and feel in your ear. Some groups to listen to include: The Hi-Lo's!, The Swingle Singers, The Singers Unlimited, The Manhattan Transfer, The PM Singers, Take 6, New York Voices, The Real Group, M-Pact, and Vocalogy. Recordings of many old and new vocal jazz groups can be purchased through Primary A Capella (www.singers.com)
2. Examine resources available from expert sources or from colleagues who have been doing vocal jazz longer than you. Example resources: *The Complete Guide to Teaching Vocal Jazz*, by Stephen Zegree (Heritage Music Press); *Vocal Jazz: The Art & Technique*; Phil Mattson (video available through Primary A Capella; www.singers.com)
3. Select quality literature by great arrangers that can teach your students aspects of jazz. Some places to look include:
 - a. UNC Jazz Press (<https://www.arts.unco.edu/uncjazz/jazzpress/>). Arrangements for women's, men's and mixed ensembles with various accompaniments. All arrangements are graded level I to V for difficulty and many include sound clips. UNC Jazz Press carries the complete catalog of Ward Swingle arrangements.
 - b. Sound Music Publication (<http://www.smpjazz.com>) Arrangements for beginning vocal jazz ensembles, including many original charts. Each chart has a specific jazz aspect that can be taught or reinforced.

- c. Hal Leonard has a vocal jazz series that features arrangements by Paris Rutherford and Steve Zegree as well as others. Walton Music carries arrangements written by members of the Real Group, and Shawnee Press publishes many of the New York Voices charts
4. Find someone in your area, or ask your state Vocal Jazz R&S Chair to come and work with your group. Bring a college vocal jazz ensemble to your school or take your students to hear a vocal jazz ensemble in a live performance.
5. Attend a summer vocal jazz workshop or training session such as: IAJE Teacher Training Institute; North Texas Vocal Jazz Workshop; Phil Mattson Vocal Jazz Workshop; Steve Zegree Vocal Jazz Workshop. As summer approaches, I will get more information to you concerning these summer training programs and workshops.

As Vocal Jazz R&S Chair in Pennsylvania for the past four years, I believed that my job was to help directors in the state to find good literature, clinicians, locate resources and to offer help whenever needed. That is still my responsibility. If I can be of any help to you, feel free to contact me by phone or email. Vocal jazz is alive and well in the Eastern Division. Let's continue to strengthen it and make Jazz – the true American art form part of our choral tradition.