Why Vocal Jazz?

Okay, there are lots of great warm-ups for choir out there…what would vocal jazz techniques have to offer in the choir setting? A LOT! About half way through my teaching experience I added a vocal jazz ensemble to my choral program. It was a slow process (mostly because of my inexperience) but I noticed my choirs began to have far less trouble singing a cappella in tune; balancing and blending; negotiating difficult rhythms; and understanding and being able to sing multiple parts with intricate harmonies. I believe it had a lot to do with the things I was learning from the jazz world. Why Vocal Jazz?

1. Jazz was born in America. How much more important is it that we study our own music? George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Hoagie Carmichael, Duke Ellington, Jerome Kern, Johnny Mercer, Fats Waller, and many more have given us tunes born in the country and of the 20th century. There’s nothing wrong with the music of earlier times from Western Europe, but we should embrace this music at least as much.

2. The stylistic elements found in jazz will challenge your singers ears, developing the aural and rhythmic skills as well as overall musicianship.

3. Jazz is hip! Great music and musicianship skills…plus swinging and singing cool music. Set up a microphone for your improvers. Your concert choir should be the foundation of your program as that is where you teach fundamentals of good choral singing, but the HQ (hip quotient – thanks Steve Zegree) cannot be underestimated.

Okay…let’s get going with some things you can do with your choir that will up your students musicianship skills and also increase HQ!

FEEL THE BEAT - SWING! It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing is more than just a song. It is life to a jazz song. Practice swinging until it feels, looks, and sounds natural. Emphasis on the back-beat or upbeats. In general, follow the dynamics with the melodic line.

EX: Sing a major scale straight and then swing it.

EX: Swing hands in circle down and out until your entire body feels the movement. (Getting your whole body involved is key)

EX: Swing the scale in a round *entering at different times to create harmony and dissonance.
EX: Here are some scales, triads, and arpeggios you can use to teach chord quality.

EX: Sing different qualities of triads and arpeggios. Swing the eighth notes please!
BUILDING A JAZZ CHORD

Traditional Chord structure - Bass on the root, Tenors on the 3rd, Altos on the 5th, and Sopranos on the octave.

EX: Sing in four parts on a "Da" to the following rhythm and syllables.

Ex. 1

Now to make it a little "jazzier" we have to add the 7th scale degree to make a dominant 7th chord. You could move the sopranos down a whole step as they were just doubling the root anyway. Try the exercise again. This adds some color but is still far from a jazz chord.

Let's jazz it up. The basses are usually relegated to the root. Let's give them the 7th by moving down a whole step – F – and putting the sopranos back up to the octave. This will create some interesting challenges for your basses who are used to singing the root, and for the men in general as the interval between their parts is the dreaded tri-tone!

Keep the baritones on that 7th scale degree and slap a bass II note on the root down an octave. Do the exercise again.

Now to top it all off, let's give the altos a little love. Raise the altos up a whole step (the 13th in a dominant seventh chord). Check out this sound! Now you has some jazz!

EX: Now that you have this cool cord let's stay here a moment. Hit the chord on a du and hold. Now move up and down by ½ steps. Do the listening thing and make them hear the other notes like you were doing before. Balance and blend with no vibrato will create some awesome sounds!

GENERAL SCAT SYLLABLE RULES

- Du is used for long sounds.
- Day or Dah are used for accented long sounds. (>)
- Va, or Ba are typically used on unaccented upbeats.
- Daht is used for accented short sounds on down or upbeats. (^)
- Dit is used for unaccented short notes.
- Dot is used for accented short notes.
- Dn is used for notes that are ghost or swallowed. Usually an X on the staff.
- Dow is used for notes that are followed by a fall off. ( )
- Dwee is used for notes that are preceded by a scoop or slide into the note. (/)
- Doo-dle-da is used to articulate eight note triplets.
- Dol-ya is used for turns and flips. (~)
Here are some rhythms to sing your new jazz choirs to that might challenge you and your singers. See if they can figure out themselves instead of teaching them by rote. Practice speaking them and then sing the jazz chord on pitch.

Before I go on I want to point out that the jazz articulations are much easier to do if you are performing them at a softer dynamic. Nothing above an mf please (until you get to the shout chorus). That is why you often see jazz choirs on microphones. Singing softer with a controlled sound in the mics with a good sound system gives you more flexibility to do the articulations cleanly and stylistically correct. Louder acoustic singing (like in show choir) this is much harder to do. More on dynamics latter. Notice that the syllables are appropriate to the length of the note.

Ex. 2

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

Ex. 5

Ex. 6

Ex. 7

Ex. 8

Ex. 9
DYNAMICS
Let’s add some dynamics to what we are doing. When you teach dynamics don’t just teach the words and meanings, have them also feel the size of the sound and how to apply it to the meaning of the music. Remember I said earlier that as your students become better musicians they can move to other levels of musicality.

Here are my definitions of the levels of sound.

- **Fortissimo:** As loud as you can play and sing in full control
- **Forte:** Push
- **Mezzo Forte:** Down the middle - Don’t push, don’t hold back
- **Mezzo Piano:** Hold back (stay strong - not weaker)
- **Piano:** Make a circle in front of your body with your arms. Sing with only enough sound to fill that area. Remember...keep sound supported and alive
- **Pianissimo:** Sing as soft as you can in full control

Okay so I know that different analogies work with different folks, so here’s another one. This one encourages intensity as you get softer.

- **Fortissimo:** Hold a beach ball in front of you with your arms in a big circle. Full sound!
- **Forte:** Pack the sound into a basketball. Same energy packed into a smaller area.
- **Mezzo Forte:** Pack the sound down into a volleyball. Again...same energy!
- **Mezzo Piano:** How about a softball?
- **Piano:** Tennis ball. Tons of energy but small in sound!
- **Pianissimo:** Super ball (that’s what I called them when I was a kid) Super duper packed sound in a very small area.

Still not convinced? One more. This is also one of my favorites.

- **Fortissimo:** Connect a garden hose to the outside house faucet. Turn up the water to full. Imagine how the stream comes out of the end of the hose. Put your hand in front of it. How much volume and how far will it carry?

The mistake that young singers make is that when they get softer and anticipate a decrease in sound, instead of keeping the intensity of the fortissimo (which is easily produced by a choir) so they go to the imaginary faucet and turn down the water. Imagine how the stream comes out of the end of the hose turned down by half. (mf) What used to shoot out 6-8 feet now only goes 4-5 feet. It takes much longer to get things wet or fill a bucket. Now turn down the faucet half again. (pp) It just dribbles on the ground in front of you. Unless we keep the energy our sound will do the same thing.

- **Forte:** Don’t turn down the faucet, put your thumb over the end of the hose a little bit. The stream is a little thinner but the water shoots out about 10-12 feet.
- **Mezzo Forte:** More thumb...about ½ way. The stream is getting thinner and we can hit the car about 15 feet away!
- **Mezzo Piano** More thumb yet. You’re out there about 20 feet. Thin and intense stream.
- **Piano** Almost there. The energy is so intense and yet the stream is so thin.
- **Pianissimo** Cover the hose as much as you can. Hard to hold isn’t it. Now you have a very intense small sound.

Don’t turn down the faucet…intensify the stream! A good judge of any choir is how they handle a wide range of dynamics. The students need to know that a crescendo means something more than just “getting louder”. Give the dynamics meaning.
Here are some 12 bar blues progressions with our jazz chords in the key of F. Learn the Chord progressions starting on the second system, and then have individuals use the scale on top to improvise.

Now have the low basses add in this walking bass line. Have fun!

Ex: CIRCLE SINGING – One more improvisation exercise that can’t be beat. You can find many examples of circle singing on YouTube. Get everyone into a large circle by part. Start with the basses. Have them together come up with a melodic line using scat syllables about 4 bars long. After they are solid together have the tenors add something on top followed by the altos and the sopranos. After everyone is jamming individuals can step into the circle and improvise. Lots of fun and encourages the choir to listen, balance, and blend.