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When I first started to explore jazz as a young vocalist, I already had four years of classical training during high school. I was taught to learn the notes that were on the page exactly as written, no alterations. When it came time to go to college, I surprised myself when I decided to audition for a jazz voice program. I was so excited when I got accepted, but when I started my freshman year it was a whole new experience with some aspects that were very different from my classical training.

While I was taught traditional technique, art songs, and got to explore different genres, really connecting to jazz was still hard for this 18 year-old to figure out. It was hard for me to be handed a piece of music and then told not to sing what was on the page! I was told I could sing whatever I wanted! Now, my 32 year-old self knows what an awesome and freeing experience this is. But 18 year-old me felt lost. When you are given so many options, it can feel almost impossible to know where to start. Luckily, I had great teachers to guide me, and they gave me a solid foundation of jazz training that led me to become the confident jazz singer and educator I am today.

During the last few years of teaching, I have had more and more high school age students coming to my studio with

JAZZ PHRASING FOR YOUNG VOCAL STUDENTS:

TEACHING YOUNG SINGERS HOW TO RHYTHMICALLY STYLIZE A JAZZ STANDARD IN 4 EASY STEPS.

an interest in jazz. This is partly thanks to artists like Lady Gaga and Amy Winehouse, whose vocal style has brought an interest in jazz singing back to the mainstream, and exposed the genre to a much younger audience. Teaching the concept of jazz singing and having it sound authentic can be a tricky task for any teacher. Through my experience I have developed a basic four step process designed to introduce young vocalists to the concept of playing with the rhythm of the song while helping them develop their own style and unique phrasing approach. The steps are; teaching them the melody (itches and rhythm) as written on the page, introduce the concept of back phrasing, introduce the concept of front phrasing, and then mixing steps one through three together to help them feel confident when stepping away from the written page.

STEP 1: TEACHING THE MELODY AS WRITTEN

With a beginning jazz student, I always pick a simple jazz standard that will be easy for them to learn quickly. The faster they learn it, the sooner they can start playing around with the rhythm, and the sooner they can feel comfortable with the song. I like to pick something that has a repetitive melody like "Bye Bye Blackbird" or "My Romance." I have the student learn the melody exactly as written on the page, and I mean the exact rhythm and the exact melody. I know this sounds like a funny concept, considering the aim of this whole article is to have a student step away from the melody as written, but stay with me.

The reason this is done is so the student becomes responsible for the original melody. It is like starting with a blank slate. If they never learn the melody as

written, they will never really know how much they can play around with it or what improvisational choices they can make. After the student has learned the melody, I encourage them to listen to multiple recordings of the song, both instrumental and vocal. Listening is an essential part to growing as a musician. Also, now that they know the melody, they can more clearly hear the phrasing choices that different artists make, and they can take ideas from them.

STEP 2: INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF BACK PHRASING

When the student is comfortable with the melody, I move onto step two of my process, which is introducing the concept of back phrasing. Back phrasing means to sing the melody slightly behind the beat. Just be careful, because there is a fine line between back phrasing and dragging. They can move away from the original rhythm completely or just change a note here and there. For example, if a melody starts right on beat one of the measure, maybe they wait until beat two, or even beat three to begin singing the melody. They can change up the rhythm however they need to make it fit. I have found that students are pretty comfortable with this concept because a lot of current music artists use back phrasing.

I take the first A section, or the first 8-16 bars and I have them practice using this concept. Starting with a smaller section of the song makes them feel more confident, and it also makes it feel more manageable. I usually demonstrate a few different examples. During this step, I stress that some things they sing will work out well, and some things won't turn out the way they wanted. It is all part of the process of learning. For many

students, stepping out of their comfort zone is scary. They don't want to make a mistake, or sing "wrong notes". Make sure you encourage them and remind them there is no such thing as a wrong note, but they can make a better choice next time.

STEP 3: TEACHING THE CONCEPT OF FRONT PHRASING

Step 3 is introducing the concept of front phrasing. Front phrasing is singing the melody in front of the beat. Again, I start with a small section of the song and always demonstrate first. I have noticed that this step is the hardest for most students. I compare it to reading a sentence in a book, and mid sentence jumping ahead two words. It is tricky to consistently front phrase for a long period of time and 16 bars can feel mighty long. I always re-emphasize that this is still part of the learning process. I would never go to a gig and sing whole tunes using front phrasing alone. This exercise makes them responsible for the groove and "pocket" of a song, and really helps you pay attention to the chord structure. This also helps students build a better practice structure. When students start mixing up their phrasing (Step 4), they usually figure out more natural ways to incorporate front phrasing.

STEP 4: USING ALL 3 STEPS TO CREATE DIFFERENT RHYTHMIC PHRASING IDEAS.

The last step in my process is having the students sing the entire song using a mixture of the melody as written, back phrasing, and front phrasing. This is basically the step where I say, "Go ahead and do what ever you want." The difference is that now they have sung the song using three different concepts, and have sung a different melody many times. They now have points of reference to which they can go back. I have found that when students sing after completing Steps 1 through 3 they connect to the lyrics so much more. They are telling me a story and deciding which words and what lines of text they want to bring out. Most end up finding phrasing that has a natural flow and are able to tell a beautiful story to which a listener can

relate simply by playing around with the rhythm. Again, encourage students to try what ever they want, and encourage them to connect to the emotion and lyrics of the song.

After the fourth step has been completed, students have seen how the melody of a song can be pushed, pulled and moved around. Next you can choose to move them on to more advanced melodic alterations if they want, or you can let them go by ear. You can use these same steps with other genres. Creating covers of pop and contemporary pieces

is something that interests many of my students. Using these steps can help them come up with a new take on a popular tune. I have found great success when using these four steps. Together they help students build confidence, a more solid structure for practicing jazz, and help them begin to develop a genuine style that is all their own. ▾

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