

The Missing Piece: The Establishment of Jazz Choirs in School Choral Programs

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Jazz education in the United States has grown significantly for nearly a century. Originating as an aural-imitative art form, the study of jazz is a symbol of American culture, and music educators have based their justification of its place in schools on jazz's intrinsic value as an art form and its relevance to the standards of music education. In vocal jazz, Cole Porter, Harold Arlen, and George Gershwin are significant pillars of American song. Singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, and Sarah Vaughan evoke a history that is indigenous to America. The Boswell Sisters and the Mills Brothers started a lineage of ensemble singing that continued with the Mel-Tones, Lambert Hendricks and Ross, The Four Freshmen, The Hi-Los, Manhattan Transfer, and the New York Voices. Despite this rich history, in school choral programs, the existence of a jazz choir is far less common than are other types of choral ensembles, including the ever-increasing number of school a cappella groups. However, with a clear overview of how to establish a jazz choir, a personal interest in expanding the musical focus of your program, and a desire to aid students in their musical growth, it is possible to plug in the missing piece and reap the rewards of vocal jazz study.



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The Ensemble

If you're not sure where to begin, here are some aspects of a vocal jazz group to consider:

- Ensemble Size:** Vocal jazz ensembles and choirs will vary in size from 4–20 singers. The number of singers will highly influence methods of instruction and areas of focus. A smaller ensemble of 4–8 singers will require a high degree of vocal independence, impeccable intonation, and ability to blend with the other voices. On the larger end of the range, 18–20 singers will allow the ensemble to handle splits into 6–8 parts in more advanced vocal jazz repertoire.
- Ensemble Voicing:** Vocal jazz music is generally scored with the melody in the soprano voice and other voices layered harmonically below. The bass voice does not sing a true bass line, except in the case of a cappella repertoire. Rather, the roots of the chords are left to the bass or piano. Therefore, when selecting an ensemble of 18–20 singers, it is helpful to split the ensemble into Soprano 1, Soprano 2/Alto 1, Alto 2, Tenor 1, Tenor 2/High Baritone, Baritone.
- Rhythm Section:** The rhythm section is the heart of the jazz ensemble and will not only provide a strong underpinning of rhythm and time but also a harmonic underpinning for the music. The main instruments of the rhythm section are piano, bass, and drums. In many music programs, there are students within the school program who have an interest and ability to perform in the rhythm section. Rhythm sections can be enhanced with other instruments, such as strings, winds, or brass, but be careful not to create an ensemble that will overtake the sounds of the jazz choir.
- Ensemble Setup:** The ensemble should be placed in a way that keeps the rhythm section as compact as possible while not affecting the balance between rhythm section and jazz choir. To help the balance, it is common practice to use microphones in a vocal jazz choir. There are two fundamental philosophies when it comes to using microphones in a jazz choir: Individual microphone use will require a microphone for each singer, a soundboard that will accommodate each microphone, monitors, speakers, and a fair amount of instruction on microphone technique and audio engineering. The simpler use of 2–4 area microphones will require less equipment but often results in less effective sound amplification. I recommend the use of two solo microphones in addition to the area microphones.

Jazz is generally considered one of the most significant forms of American music. Yet, school choral programs often do not include jazz choir as a curricular course of study.

The Curriculum

The curriculum is the foundation for instruction and should thoroughly outline course content. Singers in school choral programs are in need of techniques and instruction that are universal across music styles. However, the six basic focuses of a vocal jazz curriculum are:

- **Vocal Technique:** These involve skills and behaviors designed to enhance the breath as the power source, use of tone placement and resonance, proper body alignment and tension-free technique, and use of articulators for proper diction. Areas of technique specific to vocal jazz may include jazz inflections, text delivery, forward phrasing, and back phrasing.
- **Aural Skills and Music Literacy:** This primarily involves the relationship between the eye and the ear when hearing music or interpreting notation. Through sequential tonal, rhythmic, and harmonic instruction, students enhance their ability to interact with music. In vocal jazz, aural skill activities using call-and-response, chord and scale studies, and exercises developing scat vocabulary improve singers' abilities to not only interpret the music, but to use this vocabulary in speaking the musical language through improvisation.
- **Elements of Music:** Music styles throughout history are defined through analysis of texture, harmony, rhythm, melody, form, timbre, and expression. Through vocal jazz study, singers learn how these elements can be used to create the various jazz styles of swing, Latin, ballad, bebop, fusion, funk, and rock. A thorough comprehension of the musical elements is necessary to achieve the variety within jazz styles.

- **Ensemble Skills:** A jazz choir will learn ensemble skills to enhance their ability to improve ensemble performance. Tone quality, balance and blend, intonation, expression and phrasing, dynamics, rhythmic precision, diction, and technical facility are ensemble skills that can be developed in jazz or traditional styles.
- **Jazz History and Context:** The study of vocal jazz is founded upon the eras of jazz and the great jazz musicians of the past and present. From ragtime to modern jazz, Scott Joplin to Wynton Marsalis, a careful study of jazz history, including listening to great recordings and live performances, is essential to jazz education.
- **Improvisation:** In the words of Steve Zegree, "Improvisation is one of the most important elements in jazz performance. It is also one of the most challenging and is something that can strike fear in even the most accomplished musicians." Vocal jazz offers singers a chance to speak the musical language as part of the music performance. Educators need not be expert improvisers. Rather, an open exploration of vocal jazz improvisation opens the door for both teacher and student to share a musical journey together.

National Core Arts Standards: Creating, Performing, Responding, Connecting

The vocal jazz curriculum comes to life through the National Core Arts Standards. Educators and students engage in music

learning activities that address the contents outlined in the curriculum and result in interaction with the music itself.

- **Creating:** Singers engage in spontaneous music improvisation and composition. Students create music of their own as they transcribe and compose vocal solos
- **Performing:** Singers transform music notation to a living, breathing, piece of art. By performing vocal jazz compositions, educators and singers interpret the musical intentions of the composers and present them to each other and the audience.
- **Responding:** Singers engage in written and verbal discussion and communication about the music. Written assessments, such as performance reviews, theory assignments, aural skill activities, and others, provide a vehicle through which singers can respond to musical stimuli.
- **Connecting:** Singers listen to music for exposure, repeat listening for analysis, and reflect on music to comprehend and connect to the music.

Conclusion

A comprehensive school choral program should explore the music of various styles and cultures, including American music. Jazz is generally considered one of the most significant forms of American music. Yet, school choral programs often do not include jazz choir as a curricular course of study. This article includes information to consider while creating a jazz choir, outlines the core elements of a vocal jazz curriculum, and describes how singers may interact with music while meeting the Core Arts Standards. While the focus of this article is the establishment of a jazz

- Provide role models that reflect a variety of gender and sexual orientations. Years of research shows that gender norms influence students' choices of instruments.
- Queer up songs with "heterosexual" lyrics or texts that reinforce heteronormativity. Explain that although the text expresses a heterosexual perspective, not everyone is heterosexual.
- Refer students to the appropriate school guidance counselor or social worker to get further assistance if they share concerns about their sexual or gender identity.
- Start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in your school (<https://gsanetwork.org>).
- Treat all students with respect regardless of their personal attire, such as hairstyle and color, jewelry, tattoos, and clothing, as these are expressions of identity.
- Use appropriate pronouns. Some students prefer to be referred to as "they" or the non-gendered "ze" as opposed to "he" or "she."
- Voice concerns regarding school policies and practices that lack appropriate provisions for LGBTQ students, such as gender-neutral locker and bathrooms.
- Welcome opportunities for voluntary professional development on LGTBQ topics, and invite others to join you.
- Xerox and distribute GLSEN's "Safe Space Kit" that is available as a free download at <http://www.glsen.org/safespace>.

- Yield to professionals who are knowledgeable in working with LGBTQ youth; don't think that you have or need to have all of the answers.
- Zap gender-specific directions, such as, "Please line up with boys on one side and girls on the other." Instead, use other characteristics, such as birth month or clothing color.

This list is not exhaustive; it represents a number of effective ways to immediately create change in the status quo. Though some may argue that these actions privilege a minority of students. In fact, research shows that all students benefit from a welcoming and inclusive learning environment. In short, these actions will make everyone will feel more safe and secure, regardless of their sexual and gender identities. •

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