Vocal Improvisation: Be Not Afraid

BY KRISTINA PLOEGER

I have been awed by the concept of vocal improvisation since my first Ella Fitzgerald recordings. Recently my interest in vocal improvisation has been broadened to include other genres as well. After attending Nicole Lamartine's session about Choral Improvisation at ACDA in Seattle and Marc Silverberg's Choral Improvisation session at ACDA National in Dallas, my thinking regarding this incredibly interesting medium has broadened considerably. Although I have had many wonderful teachers and practiced numerous methods of thinking and doing, it seems that improvisation never gets easier-only more interesting. The point at which it became really interesting, however, was when I tried to let go of my fear regarding the outcome. As teachers, we know how important emotional safety is in our learning space. Tom Carter, the author of *Choral Charisma*, wrote an effective chapter on establishing a "safe" environment in a choral classroom. It is a popular resource because it is something about which we are all concerned. It may appear to be easier to simply avoid vocal improvisation (and the extra obstacles it presents) in order to prevent the possible discomfort that may arise. This, however, would deprive our students of valuable skills, musical enjoyment, and possible growth in thinking patterns. So, before we explore the "how to," let's examine the "why."

Vocal Improvisation–"Why?"

Why should we work to find ways to teach vocal improvisation in our choral classrooms? It might be helpful to begin with some historical context. The nine National Standards for Music Education (1994) include references to improvisation in Standards 1 & 3:

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.

The 2014 National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) Core Music Standards now in place on the NAfME website provides a strong reason for classroom vocal improvisation to be included in our curriculum.

> "The standards cultivate a student's ability to carry out the three Artistic Processes of: Creating, Performing, and Responding. These are the processes that musicians have followed for generations, even as they connect through music to their selves and their societies. And isn't competence in Creating, Performing, and Responding what we really want for our students?"

The "Creating" Artistic Process in the form of vocal improvisation is perhaps the most difficult to address in a choral setting. Let us think for a moment about Common Anchors #1 & #2 in the category of "Creating" in the NAfME "Core Music Standards–Ensemble Strand." The following is an excerpt of information taken from: http://www.nafme.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Core-Music-Standards-Ensemble-Strand1.pdf.

CREATING		
Imagine: generate musical ideas for various purposes and contexts.		
Common Anchor #1	**Enduring Understanding:** The creative ideas, concepts, and feelings that influence musicians' work emerge from a variety of sources. **Essential Question:** How do musicians generate creative ideas?	
	Novice	**Advanced**
	MU:Cr1.1.E.5a Compose and improvise melodic and rhythmic ideas or motives that reflect characteristic(s) of music or text(s) studied in rehearsal.	MU:Cr1.1.E.IIIa Compose and improvise musical ideas for a variety of purposes and contexts.
Plan and Make: Select and develop musical ideas for defined purposes and contexts.		
Common Anchor #2	**Enduring Understanding:** Musicians' creative choices are influenced by their expertise, context, and expressive intent. **Essential Question:** How do musicians make creative decisions?	
	Novice	**Advanced**
	MU:Cr2.1.E.5a Select and develop draft melodic and rhythmic ideas or motives that demonstrate understanding of characteristic(s) of music or text(s) studied in rehearsal. MU:Cr2.1.E.5b Preserve draft compositions and improvisations through standard notation and audio recording.	MU:Cr2.1.E.IIIa Select and develop composed and improvised ideas into draft musical works organized for a variety of purposes and contexts. MU:Cr2.1.E.IIIa Preserve draft musical works through standard notation, audio, or video recording.

The above table only shows the "novice" and "advanced" levels. Between those levels, there are three others: "intermediate," "proficient," and "accomplished."

Equally important to the standards listed above, however, is the opportunity for students to develop thinking skills. Improvising within a construct is the perfect marriage of convergent and divergent thinking. So, while we are teaching our content, we are also providing opportunities for our students to think in a way that will extend far beyond our subject area.

As a choral music educator, it is extremely challenging to find opportunities to address these concepts related to "Creating." I am grateful to come from an area of the country that has such a rich tradition of jazz training available in schools. This has given me a platform, both as a student and as an educator, to appropriately address the issue now called "Creating" through vocal improvisation in the jazz idiom. Recently, however, I was fortunate to spend 15 months in Kentucky and re-examine many of my assumptions about, and methods of teaching.

In Kentucky, there are fewer vocal jazz groups. However, there are many "pop" a cappella ensembles. There are also many skilled and open-minded educators who hope to expose their choirs to new ideas. Some of these wonderful people invited me to do some vocal jazz clinics with their students. This made me think about what the real purpose of such a clinic would be in their particular setting.

In preparing the clinic, I took out all the old sessions I had presented regarding vocal jazz improvisation. I soon realized that for a student who does not normally sing jazz, this might be an extremely uncomfortable activity, and thus feel "unsafe." The questions I asked myself at that point were exactly to ones from Dr. Patricia Bourne's article in VOICE (October 2014): "Who are my students? What do they need? How do they best learn?" Having been one of Dr. Bourne's students long ago, I believe that is where I learned to ask these questions. In organizing activities for improvisation, these are extremely relevant guiding questions. It was questions like these that were very much on my mind as I went to work with teachers and students I did not know in 2012. I needed to make this foreign activity feel safe for students uncomfortable with the jazz genre. This particular experience in Kentucky led me to a very different "how" than I had previously practiced.

Vocal Improvisation – "How?"

Previously, I enjoyed transcribing great recordings (whether it be actually writing out or just learning to imitate), "Blues Poetry" phrasing (3 phrases of 4 bars

each), learning songs with similar chord changes (compressions), and working on guide tones as methods of teaching and learning about vocal improvisation in the jazz idiom. These clinics in Kentucky, however, were going to require a different approach. So, I thought about two of the many things choirs do really well in Kentucky: solfège and "pop" a cappella music. There is an entertaining YouTube video of the comedy band *The Axis of Awesome* performing a medley of songs with the chord progression I-V-vi-IV. Watching that video, I realized I had to start the process of vocal improvisation with songs the students already knew. After we had established some kind of comfort level together, we could work toward some genuine improvisation.

First I had them sing in a circle (with hand signs):
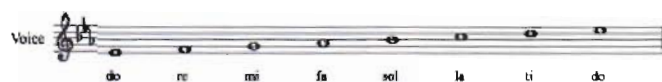
Then I taught the parts below with everyone singing the bass part (in their respective octaves) by rote. After they were all comfortably singing the bass part, I moved sopranos, altos, and tenors up to the tenor part; then sopranos and altos to the alto part; and, finally, sopranos to their part so we had a 4-part chord progression in whole notes.

Once they were comfortable with that, I invited the students to use their hands to make an open channel from their mouths to their ears. Then they could improvise rhythms on neutral syllables to a rhythmic groove generated in Garage Band without others hearing them. I asked them to drop their hands and sing out loud when they were ready. Then we played games to see how thin/thick we could make the texture (more notes, less notes, etc.).

At that point, I handed out a list of about 120 popular songs that have the same chord progression and had them try to hear/sing a song they knew while we all sang the I-V-vi-IV progression. I asked them to mark two or three songs they felt they could successfully sing. Then I asked for volunteers to sing those songs solo. I was amazed at how willing they were, how quickly their friends created harmonies, and how their friends joined them in the middle of the circle. This became the gateway activity for some circle singing.