

Vocal Technique 4

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VOCAL TECHNIQUE 4

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Vocal Technique 4

Welcome to Vocal Technique 4, the culminating course of your technical vocal studies. By now you have developed a rock-solid foundation in the most critical forms of vocal performance: breathing and breath support, resonance, vocal projection, posture, diction, vowels and articulation, vocal registration, the physiology of singing, range extension, tone quality, and vocal health; among others. As you near the next phase in your life as a fulltime working professional musician, it is time to take your technique to the next level and focus on two of the main ingredients of contemporary music: *interpretation* and *improvisation*. Through assessing and executing topics such as scatting, stylization, ornamentation & embellishment, articulation, tension/resolution, groove-based considerations, chord progressions, transcriptions, communicating with instrumentalists and working with your band, you will soon be on your way as a first-call vocalists with the ability to professionally express yourself and deliver world-class vocals in any contemporary musical style and genre.

Course Description

In this course, you will continue to learn about the art of approaching any piece of music with the proper vocal technique. Through a thorough exploration of vocal philosophy, preparation, tools, decision-making, phrasing choices and communication, you will rapidly grow as a singer and overall total musician. This will be accomplished through the execution of literature reading, transcription exercises, vocal warm-ups and chart reading. Through these studies, you will gain the confidence and experience necessary to demonstrate poise, confidence and professionalism in every musical engagement you will participate in for the rest of your life.

Objectives

Through this course, you will develop the ability to identify and utilize specific musical time-feels or “grooves” and their corresponding rhythmic patterns. You will learn to interpret, shape, and enhance melodies using genre-specific and harmonically appropriate improvisations and stylizations characteristic in various musical idioms. Skills and topics covered in this class will allow vocalists to project a rhythmic pulse consistent with stylistically appropriate considerations. You will learn to create arrangements and realistic practice and accompaniment recordings in a multitude of styles and keys using the Band-in-a-Box software, and will use the free Musescore to transcribe lead sheets. Through activity and analytical discussion, you will identify chord-scale relationships, building the melodic vocabulary required to improvise intelligently over sophisticated chord progressions.

Chapter 2

Introduction to Principles of Interpretation & Improvisation

Vocalists in the World on Instrumentalists

Jennifer power walks down the jam-packed Massachusetts Avenue in Boston, MA. She holds a dozen pages of sloppily crinkled loose pieces of sheet music that she downloaded from the Internet, and looks down at her watch. Rehearsal was supposed to start three minutes ago. "Agh," she gasps.

"On second thought," she thinks to herself, "this is *my* rehearsal. Surely I can arrive a little late. The guys in the band must be thanking their lucky stars to get the chance to accompany an incredible singer like me. They can wait."

She arrives at the rehearsal room to see the pianist, upright bassist, guitarist and drummer all set up and ready to go. It's time to begin preparing for their wedding cocktail hour gig, and she has picked a handful of tunes she'd like to perform.

Jennifer places the first piece of crumpled-up sheet music in front of the pianist.

"Do you have a copy for me?" the guitarist asks.

"Yeah, how about for me?" echoes the bassist.

"No, I only brought one copy. How about you all come over to the piano and read off of the pianist's copy?" Jennifer says, impatiently.

The instrumentalists look at each other, all locking eyes and exchanging an unspoken and unanimous thought: "Oh great, she's one of *those* vocalists."

"Well, what's the tune?" the guitarist asks.

"I Get a Kick Out of You," Jennifer answers confidently. "Do you guys know what one?"

"Yeah, of course!" they all reply. These cats are seasoned players, and have memorized nearly every tune imaginable from *The Real Book*. Not only that, but they can all pretty easily play any tune in any key. They've been practicing hard for their entire musical lives, and on-the-spot transposition is something they've worked diligently on in their practice routines.

"So what key would you like to sing this in?" the pianist asks.

Jennifer pauses. She had never thought to figure that out before arriving to the rehearsal. "The one Ella sings it in, obviously," she snaps.

The instrumentalists all exchange another weary glance. "Can you tell me the letter name of the key? Is it in E \flat major?"

"I don't know! You guys figure it out!"

"Ugh," the bassist groans.

The pianist shakes his head. "Can you sing the first few bars for me?"

Jennifer gladly belts out the first line, "I get no kick from champagne. Mere alcohol doesn't 'hmm hmm hmm' all." "Uh, I don't have the lyrics memorized all the way, let me look at my lyric sheet."

The pianist has phenomenal aural skills and quickly figures out what key Jennifer would like to sing the classic Cole Porter tune in.

"She wants to sing it in the key of A major, guys."

"Awesome, that's a tritone above the original key!" the guitarist sarcastically exclaims. This is going to be a *long* rehearsal, he thinks to himself.

Jennifer doesn't really know what that means. She starts to grow irritated.

"What's with all of this talking? I want to start singing!"

"We have to figure out some basic parameters of the tune before we begin," the pianist rebuttals. "What kind of intro would you like?"

"I don't know, just play something *jazzy!*" Jennifer shouts.

At that instant, all pandemonium breaks loose in the rehearsal room. The bassist smashes his upright against the concrete wall. The guitarist rips all of his guitar strings off and chucks them across the room. The pianist starts repeatedly bashing his head on the keys. The drummer attempts to light his snare drum on fire.

Fantastic rehearsal, Jennifer.

Okay, so maybe the last part about all pandemonium breaking loose (hopefully) isn't something that would truly happen. However, everything else in that story about Jennifer's rehearsal couldn't be closer to the truth of the horrifyingly typical situations that inexperienced vocalists put themselves in, time and time again.

In the world of instrumentalists, vocalists are often not taken seriously. Instrumentalists place a huge stigma upon singers, and unfortunately, this stigma is solidified on a consistent basis. Band members often feel that singers cannot communicate with the band, that we don't know the music well and that there is a division between the musical knowledge base of the instrumentalists and vocalist.

In this Vocal Technique 4 course, we will fuel ourselves with the necessary knowledge to not only be able to communicate with instrumentalists intelligently, but to efficiently prepare ourselves for every rehearsal and performance situation. We'll learn how to create lead sheets, how to communicate the form of any given tune, how to count off the band with the correct tempo and groove/feel, how to *improvise*, and how to do all of the little things to give instrumentalists no choice but to view us as serious, professional musicians.

The Necessities of Singing and Communicating with a Band

In order to destroy any possible chance of this stereotype being projected onto you, here is a list of things that are absolutely necessary for a vocalist to know and prepare.

- 1). **Know the tune, inside and out.** You must learn the music fully, *before* you bring it to the band. Begin by analyzing the form of the song. Is it AABA? Verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus? Verse-refrain? ABAC? Learn the background of the song. Who is the composer? Which singer made it famous? Is it from a musical? Which one? You must also be aware of the chord changes. Analyze them fully. Know where the ii-V7-I's are. What are the harmonic patterns? Are there any key changes? These are all standard things that instrumentalists do before they rehearse with a band; and in order to get the respect of the instrumentalists, you have to think like an instrumentalist.
- 2). **Know your key.** Figure out the key you desire to sing the tune in. If you are singing it in a different key than is written in the Real Book, make sure you know exactly what key your version will be in before you come to the rehearsal. Go to the piano. Sing the first few bars of the tune and figure out what "do" is by using your ears to match your "do" with the correct note on the piano. Your ear-training skills have prepared you well for this—*so do it!*
- 3). **Learn the written melody first.** So many vocalists simply listen to a version of the tune, and rely solely on their ears. They'll sing the song like they hear it, with all of the licks and lines that the famous singer performs. Of course, you should absolutely make the tune your own; with your unique twists and turns. However, the very first step is to learn the actual melody, as the composer intended it to be played. Ella didn't just start singing her own rendition of the melody right away. She learned the exact notes as written on the sheet, and then brilliantly made it her own. It is crucial that you do the same thing.
- 4). **Listen to at least five different versions of the tune.** Don't just settle for one version. Get on YouTube or Spotify and explore several different versions of the tune. You will instantly attain ideas for different arrangements, intros, endings etc. Listen to multiple takes from multiple artists, and then make the tune your own.
- 5). **Learn to count off the band correctly.** First, figure out the tempo of your tune. Before you begin your count off, take a moment to internalize the exact pace and speed of the tune. Next, be aware of the genre, groove and feel of the tune. Snap or clap on every beat while you give a standard verbal numeric count-off, or at least on beats *two and four*. Figure out the time signature, and use those numbers to count off. Is the tune in 4/4? If so, a standard "one, two, three, four" will do the trick. Is it in 3/4? Then you'd better make sure you count to three when communicating your tempo to the band.
- 6). **Learn how to create lead sheets.** One of the best ways to set the tone for your professionalism as a vocalist in the world of instrumentalists is to walk into the rehearsal or onto the band stand with crisply clear, accurate, perfectly legible and specific lead sheets. You may create them by hand if you have neat penmanship, but it is recommended to use a music notation software program like Finale or Sibelius. Even though the best players will often know many of the standards that you select by heart, nothing gains respect more than coming in completely prepared with the correct chord changes, form and arrangement all nicely laid out on a sheet of paper.

- 7). **Don't blame your mistakes on the instrumentalists.** Even if we know the form by heart, we are human and sometimes may get lost in the form. When this happens, a common tendency is to get frustrated with the band, even though *you're* the one in the wrong! Don't let this happen. Shake it off and own up to your error.

- 8). **Always bring a microphone and cable to the rehearsal and gig.** Just like a guitarist will always bring his guitar, amp, cables, pedals etc, we must bring all of our necessary equipment to every performance situation we encounter.

Remember, preparation is 95% of the battle. If you show up prepared, with all of these tools in your musical toolbox ahead of time, you have the greatest possible chance of being viewed as a true professional by the instrumentalists. You must respect yourself to earn the respect of others, and the best way to respect yourself as a musician is to practice, prepare, and perform with the same knowledge-base, clarity and confidence as the instrumentalists you will be working so closely with for the rest of your professional life.

Chapter 3

Ornamentation, Embellishment, Scatting & Stylization

Improvisation

Improvisation is the act of spontaneous rhythmic and melodic composition within a piece of music. Occurring in genres as distinct as jazz, gospel, blues and R&B, the performer essentially creates a melody on the fly. Vocal improvisation can be executed by inventing an entirely brand new melody, and/or creating variations on the written theme as the chord changes glide by underneath. It is one of the greatest elements of musical freedom, and the feeling of expressing oneself by instantaneous composition is unparalleled.

The general principal of improvisation is to first establish the melody of the piece. Let's use the simple tune "Happy Birthday" as our foundation for this chapter's lesson.

First, sing through the original melody in its original time signature.

Ex 1.1

♩ = 120

C7 F C7 C7 F

Hap - py birth - day to you, hap - py birth - day to you! Hap - py

F7 B^b F C7 F

birth - day dear Ton - y, hap - py birth - day to you!

Obviously this tune is very familiar to you. Now, take this same melody and adapt it to a jazz swing feel:

Ex 1.2

♩ = 120

C7 F C7 C7 F

Hap - py birth - day to you, hap - py birth - day to you! Hap - py

F7 B^b F C7 F

birth - day dear Ton - y, hap - py birth - day to you!

As you have learned in your Sight Singing 4 studies (Unit 3, Chapter 2, p. 72), the swing groove is driven by the underlying swung eighth-note feel. The first and third eighth notes in a triplet pattern are used to create that unique swing groove. Notice in example 1.2 that the majority of notes are comprised of quarter and half notes. While these rhythmic values are used occasionally in swing, and standards from the Great American Songbook are often written with quarter notes and half notes, they are meant to be adapted to swung upbeats—where eighth notes typically fall.

Sing through this next example of “Happy Birthday” as a seasoned jazz musician may interpret it:

Ex 1.3

♩ = 120

C7 F C7

Oh hap-py birth-day to you, — (ah') hap-py

C7 F F7

birth-day (ah') to you! — Oh hap-py birth-day ah' dear-

B \flat B \flat mi F C7 F

Ton-y, — hap-py birth-day (ah') to you! —

There are a few things to note about this example. First, take a moment to observe and circle the differences in rhythmic values. How did the performer manipulate the downbeat rhythms from the original melody?

Next, you will notice a chromatic passing tone in measure 5. These types of notes are extremely common interpretation tools within the jazz idiom. Please refer to your Sight Singing 4 studies (Unit 1, Chapter 3, p. 17) for a complete lesson in tension and resolution. This musical tool will appear throughout our upcoming studies of improvisation, so it is crucial that you become well versed in it.

Finally, take a look at the text. Notice the “oh”s and “ah”s interspersed throughout. As a vocal improviser, we have the liberty to artistically add stylistically appropriate lyrics to the written lyrics. These added lyrics are used to add definite pitch rhythms to propel the song forward. Some examples of the most common lyrics used as improvisational tools include: “yeah,” “hey,” “alright,” “well,” “oh,” “ah,” “uh huh,” “you know,” “let’s go,” “come on,” “woo,” and “baby.”