

JAZZ CHOIR ESSENTIALS

From Day One to Performance

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I. JAZZ CHORDS AND EXTENSIONS

Chord symbols: Cmaj7, C6, C7, C-7, C-6, C-7b5, Cdim7

Extensions: 9, #11, 13; 9, #11, 13; 9, b9, #9, #11, 13, b13; 9, 11, 13; 9, 11; 9, 11, b13

Any note a whole step above any chord tone

II. RHYTHMIC GROOVES

A. SWING FEEL. Swing is the rhythmic feel most associated with jazz. Swing feel is based on an underlying sense of accent on beats 2 and 4, and *swing eighth notes*:

Two eighth notes = triplet of eighth notes

1. "2" Feel: A type of swing feel where the bass player plays only on beats one and three, and each 4/4 measure is felt in a feeling of "2."

2. "4" Feel: A type of swing feel where the bass player plays a walking bass line, and each measure is felt in a feeling of "4."

B. BOSSA NOVA. Bossa Nova is a *straight eighth* groove that originated in Brazil. Familiar Bossas are the songs "Girl From Ipanema" and "Wave," both written by the well known Brazilian composer, Antonio Carlos Jobim. Bossa Nova is normally played at medium or slow tempos.

C. SAMBA. Another straight eighth groove from Brazil, samba is often a little faster than Bossa Nova and has an underlying half note pulse which gives it a feeling of cut time.

D. 12/8 BALLAD. 12/8 ballad is a *bluesy* ballad with an underlying triplet feeling, and is generally a little more rhythmic than a usual, jazz ballad. It gets its name from the fact that each quarter note beat is subdivided into a *feeling* of triplet, adding up to a *feeling* of 12 beats per measure:

Quarter note | feels like | triplet of eighth notes

III. LINGO

Changes – Chord Changes

Chorus – One time through the song form. (The term “chorus” is used differently in jazz than it is in pop music.)

Bridge – The “B” section of an AABA song form

Trading Fours – Two or more musicians trading four measures each of improvisation (Often, soloists trade fours or eighths with the drummer)

Fake Book – A book of lead sheets

Ghost Note – A note that is suggested or implied, but only half-sung

Double time – A tempo that is twice as fast as another given tempo. (The opposite is *half time*.)

Double time feel – In double time feel, the music *feels* like its changing to a tempo that's twice as fast, but in actuality the chord changes and melody progress at the same rate. (Again, the opposite is *half time feel*.)

Laying Back – The placement of rhythms very slightly behind (*on the back side*) of each steady quarter note beat.

Lead Sheet – A tune written with notes, chord changes and lyrics only

Straight Eighths – Eighth notes that are performed with a “normal,” even subdivision, rather than the underlying triplet feeling of swing.

Swing Eighths – Eighth notes that are interpreted as a triplet with the first two notes tied, a fundamental aspect of swing feel.

Vamp – Two or three chords repeated four or more times, most often used for intros and endings.

IV. RESOURCES

A. PUBLISHERS OF VOCAL JAZZ ARRANGEMENTS AND OTHER MATERIALS

| | |
|---|--|
| PRIMARILY A CAPELLA www.singers.com | MAINLEY A CAPELLA www.a-cappella.com |
| JAMEY AEBERSOLD CATALOG www.jazzbooks.com | ALFRED PUBLISHING www.alfred.com |
| ADVANCE MUSIC www.advance.com | SHER MUSIC www.shermusic.com |
| HAL LEONARD www.halleonard.com | UNC JAZZ PRESS http://usonia.unco.edu |
| WARNER BROTHERS www.warnerbrospublications.com | SOUND MUSIC PUBLICATIONS www.smpjazz.com |
| MICHMUSIC www.michmusic.com | SHAWNEE PRESS www.shawneepress.com |

B. VOCAL JAZZ GROUPS

| | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| New York Voices | Clare Fischer and 2 + 2 |
| Take Six | M-Pact |
| The Real Group | The Double Six of Paris |
| The Manhattan Transfer | Lambert, Hendricks and Ross |
| The Hi-Lo's | Voice Trek |
| The Swingle Singers | The Singers Unlimited |
| The Four Freshmen | The Swingle Singers |
| The Idea of North | The PM Singers |

V. COMPARING JAZZ CHOIR WITH CONCERT CHOIR

A. The goal for both is to make great music, with beauty and integrity, healthy vocal technique, good blend, balance and intonation.

B. There are often fewer singers in jazz choir than concert choirs or other traditional choral groups. (6-15 singers are common for jazz choir.)

C. Jazz choir literature is often rhythmic music, and consequently there is a strong emphasis on development of good rhythmic feel.

D. Words are generally pronounced conversationally in jazz choir. For example, unlike concert choir traditions, the "t" that occurs in the word "water" will be soft, just as in normal conversation. Vowel shapes are very close to what they would be in normal speech except in occasional circumstances.

E. Use of vibrato is extremely minimized in jazz choir, and often omitted entirely because of the dissonances inherent in many of the chord voicings.

VI. WARM-UPS

A. It's always a good idea to warm-up and educate the ear by listening to jazz in class regularly. Have a CD playing as the students come in to class. Also, do guided listening, pointing out and discussing various aspects of a given CD track.

B. Generally, good singing is good singing; traditional choral warm-ups will work well for jazz choirs. (Though vibrato is not used much in vocal jazz choir performance practice, use of a natural vibrato is welcome when doing most vocal warm ups. We want to work for a free yet energized tone just as in any other choral style.)

C. Jazz-specific warm-ups can be useful in the jazz choir for development of ear training, style and theoretical knowledge.

1. Sing jazz chord types by arpeggiating them a capella.

The image shows a musical staff in 3/4 time with a treble clef. It is divided into two sections. The first section is labeled 'Cmaj7' and contains a sequence of notes: C4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), and C4 (quarter). The second section is labeled 'C7' and contains a sequence of notes: C4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), and C4 (quarter). Below the staff, the notes are labeled with numbers: 'one three five sev'n five three one' for the first section and 'one three five flat sev'n five three one' for the second section.

2. Play one note at the piano and then call out numbers (to represent chord tones) for each section of the ensemble to sing. (For example, "basses sing the root, tenors sing the flat seventh, altos sing the ninth and sopranos sing the fifth.") Have the choir sing the given chord on "ah" or "oo," then move it up or down by half steps *or whole steps*. (You can find examples of chord voicings to use from within your jazz choir literature.)

3. Have the choir learn a transcribed improvisation solo by a jazz player or singer. Sing it regularly over a period of rehearsals along with the recording.

4. Practice group improvisation games, either a capella or with a practice CD. (Refer to the "Fearless Vocal Improvisation" outline or book/CD, "Vocal Improvisation" for ideas.)

5. Integrate sight-reading into warm-up time. In jazz choir music, singers must at least be able to sing the intervals of a 1/2 step and a whole step, respectively, *at will*. If they cannot find these intervals quickly and easily, it's going to be a tough road to get your choir to sing this music. Much

jazz choir literature tends to conflict with what the EAR naturally perceives as a “nice” melodic line! It’s vital for the singers to use a cognitive approach to note learning rather than just trying to pick it up by ear.

VII. REHEARSING THE CHOIR

A. DEVELOPING THE GROUP

1. The responsibilities of the singers include: being on time to rehearsals, staying attentive during rehearsal, knowing their parts well, attending weekly sectional rehearsals, participating in the set up and tear down of sound equipment, leaving personal problems outside of rehearsal.
2. The responsibilities of the director include: knowing what the music is supposed to sound like (by locating recordings, playing the pieces on piano, and so on), literature analysis in preparation for rehearsing difficult passages, teaching the students musicianship skills (not just spoon feeding notes,) improving their own musicianship or knowledge base as needed.
3. Until the notes are learned, there’s not much else you can do with the literature. It pays to figure out how to get the group to learn notes, fast! Ideally, students should be responsible to learn their own notes *before* rehearsal.
4. It’s important for the director to be very familiar with *both* choral and jazz concepts. For directors with a primarily choral background, taking jazz piano lessons, or, any other form of study in jazz may be appropriate.

C. INTERPRETATION OF BALLADS

1. Choral concepts for jazz ballads include: a vocal tone quality that is appropriate to the mood of the piece, vowel shapes and consonants that are rarely modified from their conversational form, mitigation of vibrato, utilizing natural word stresses as an expressive tool, legato singing, and shaping each phrase, dynamically and emotionally.
2. Learning to hear/sing dissonances in chord voicings is one of the biggest challenges in jazz choir singing. Part of that process will involve the singer's awareness of chords with dissonance, and developing an understanding of the nature of the dissonance. There are two forms of dissonance that are very common in vocal jazz:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. Half step between two notes | 2. Interval of a major 7th between two notes |
| D ^b maj7 C-9 | Dmaj7 E ^b 7(#9) |
| | |

3. Generally, in difficult musical passages, rehearse slowly and vertically. Ultimately, singers must sing the music horizontally, with a sense of linear forward motion. (See last page for musical example)

D. INTERPRETATION OF SWING TUNES

1. The inner rhythm of swing feel must be strongly internalized, and felt independently of the rhythm section. Swing feel is based on and underlying feeling of triplet eighth notes.
2. At medium and slower tempos, “lay back” behind the beat slightly. At fast tempos, stay more “on top” of the beat.

3. Use a metronome to develop a very strong sense of steady tempo. All grooves and tempos have a slightly different relationship to the steady beat. Nothing will “groove” until the steady beat is strongly internalized.
4. Generally, breathe and release in tempo.
5. Mastering complex rhythms is a common challenge in singing rhythmic music. A good approach to singing tricky rhythmic passages is to speak them in tempo until they are comfortable. It’s important for the singers to tap steady quarter notes as they speak the rhythms, (or step in tempo) since all rhythm must ultimately be felt in *relationship* to the steady beat.
6. The tendency to rush or drag is another common challenge to overcome in rhythmic music. It’s a lifelong process for all musicians (including singers), whether they be students or pros, to work for very solid, steady time! Most of the battle in jazz choir is simply to develop a very keen *awareness* of the steady beat and be able to maintain it *while singing with style and expression*. (It’s easy to get distracted from the steady time awareness when singing emotionally, or grappling with complex voicings and harmonies.) Practicing with a metronome, at least sometimes, is a must!

"MICKEY'S DINER" (Tutti) ARR. MICHELE WEIR (AVAILABLE WWW.MICHMUSIC.COM)

The musical score is arranged in three systems, each with a Soprano/Alto part on a treble clef staff and a Tenor/Bass part on a bass clef staff. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The first system includes a first ending bracket labeled '8'. The lyrics are: 'SOME ARE COM - I - CAL OTH - ERS ARE SIN-IS-TER'. The second system lyrics are: 'SOME AIN'T WRAPPED TOO TIGHT CO - LOR - FUL CIR - CUS OF CHAR -'. The third system lyrics are: 'ACT - ERS AT MIC - KEY'S DI - NER TO - NIGHT QUEEN'. There are 'me' markings above the lyrics in the first system and below in the third system.

D. INTERPRETATION OF STRAIGHT 8TH TUNES (BRIGHT TEMPO)

1. Again, singers must feel the inner rhythm of the groove independently of the rhythm section.
2. Unlike swing, don't “lay back.” At brighter tempos, there should be a slight sense of almost pushing the beat forward. (Generally, the faster the tempo, the lighter the vocal quality needs to be.)

"SO DANCO SAMBA"

ARR. MICHELE WEIR (AVAILABLE WWW.MICHMUSIC.COM)

The image shows a musical score for the song "SO DANCO SAMBA" arranged by Michele Weir. The score is written for Soprano/Alto and Tenor/Bass voices. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has four measures, and the second system has four measures. The lyrics are: "SO DAN - CO SAM - BA SO DAN - CO SAM - BA VAI VAI VAI VAI VAI SO DAN - CO SAM - BA SO DAN - CO SAM - BA VAI SO". The music is in 4/4 time and features a mix of eighth and quarter notes, with some triplets. The bass line is written in the left hand of the Tenor/Bass staff.

VIII. RHYTHM SECTION

A. PIANO

1. The role of the pianist is to play intros, endings and interludes; comp; support the vocals; fill; lay out at times; and solo.
2. Though piano is not directly concerned with playing a steady rhythmic pattern, he or she, along with all of the players and singers, have the responsibility to *groove*. (To make it feel good, rhythmically.)
3. *Comping*, short for *complementing* or *accompanying*, is a style of accompaniment played by a pianist, guitarist or vibes player behind a soloist or ensemble. The chord voicings used in comping usually don't contain the root of the chord because it would already be played by the bass player. See below for more about constructing comping voicings.
4. Common issues include wrong notes, weak chord voicings, rhythms that conflict with what the choir is singing, playing out of the rhythmic "pocket."

**Special Note:* In some published piano parts, bass lines are written into the left hand. But in most of these cases, this left hand bass line is designed *only* to be a substitute for situations when an actual bass player can't be present. Therefore, when a bass player is present, the pianist's left hand should *not* double the bass line.

B. BASS

1. For swing tunes and ballads, it's ideal to use acoustic bass, though electric can be made to simulate the sound of an acoustic if necessary. The goal for swing tunes and ballads is to have a natural, warm and round sound. (If using electric, bass player can play with their right hand closer to the neck of the bass to help emulate an acoustic bass sound.) Adjustment of the tone controls on the amp can make a tremendous difference in the overall sound of the bass. (Try turning down the high end EQ, allowing the mids and lows to create a warmer sound.) For latin or rock tunes, electric can work well, and the tone can be a little brighter. The bass player should of course tune up before every rehearsal and performance.
2. The role of the bass player is to be the foundation of and the link between the rhythm and the harmony, to play whatever is appropriate to the style of each piece, (walking bass lines when in swing feel, etc.), and to solo.

3. Walking bass lines are a style of bass playing in swing music where quarter notes are played on each beat of each measure. Usually the root of the chord is played on the first beat of each new chord change. The bass player should work to smoothly connect the notes of a walking bass line, yet also have a clear, defined sense of articulation. ("2 Feel" is a type of swing feel where the bass player plays primarily on beats one and three, and each 4/4 measure is felt in a feeling of two beats per measure. There is no walking bass line in a "2 feel.") See below for more about constructing walking bass lines.

4. Common issues include wrong notes; tone quality too bright or too muddy; out of tune; too loud or too soft; floating sense of time; not enough definition in the pitch or rhythm; poorly devised walking bass lines; not enough connection between notes in walking lines.

5. If you're not able to recruit a bassist, it is workable to have a 2nd keyboardist play the bass notes on synth. It's *not* workable to have piano and drums with no bass.

* *Special note:* Don't give the bass player or drummer music that requires page turns! Make bass parts 2-3 three pages max if possible, and use two stands next to each other to lay out the full chart as necessary.

C. DRUMS

1. Parts of the drum set include snare, toms, cymbals (ride, crash, sizzle), hi-hat, bass drum, sticks, brushes, mallets. (Also, drum rug keeps drums from migrating away while playing.) Overall size of the jazz drum set should be kept to a minimum.

2. The role of the drummer is to keep time, play patterns appropriate to the style of the piece. (Swing, bossa, jazz waltz, ballad, etc.), to support (kick) rhythms in the vocals; setup rhythms in the vocals; fill; to "color" a ballad; occasionally to solo.

3. Definitions

- Setup: In a setup, the drummer plays an improvised rhythmic fill leading into and *preparing* ("setting up") a certain rhythmic kick or series of kicks.

- Fill: The interjection of rhythmic ideas in places where there are open "holes" in the music.

- Kick: A rhythmic accent played by a drummer, often on the bass drum and/or snare drums. Kicks are played to musically support a rhythm that occurs in the vocal ensemble or the rhythm section as a whole.

4. The drummer may use sticks, brushes or mallets, depending on the song. Sticks are commonly used for swing, latin, shuffle, rock, and sometimes 12/8 ballad styles. Brushes are virtually always used on ballads, often on bossas, and certainly sometimes on swing tunes. Often at the end of a ballad, mallets are used for cymbal roles. 12/8 ballads are sometimes played with sticks.

5. Common issues include unassertive playing; floating sense of time; using sticks when brushes are more appropriate or vice versa; lack of (or not stylistically appropriate) fills or setups for the ensemble; playing too loud or too soft; no dynamics; playing patterns that are not stylistically correct; too much bass drum; mushy hi-hat.

D. THE RHYTHM SECTION AS A TEAM

1. The quality of the rhythm section is vital to the success of your jazz choir! They need to spend rehearsal time both on their own, and with the jazz choir.

2. Rhythm section players should be responsible to play every note of their part accurately and musically, just as the singers.

3. Sectionals should be held regularly for the rhythm section.

4. Each individual member should spend much time practicing with a metronome and playing along with good players on CD's.

5. Bass and drums in particular need to operate like a team, listening very closely to each other and locking up their rhythmic feel.
6. The rhythm section needs to play dynamics. They should keep their ear on the choir. (If they can't hear the choir well, they're playing too loud.)
7. Setup: usually rhythm section is on stage right of the choir. All rhythm section players must have visual contact with each other and the director; drums should setup furthest away from singers, and bass should be in between piano and drums. Remember, they all need to be in visual contact.

IX. SOUND SYSTEM

A. SOUND SYSTEM IN REHEARSALS

1. It's ideal to rehearse on sound system regularly so that singers will become accustomed to its use.
2. Assign teams to be in charge of various aspects of P.A. setup and tear down. With specific task assignments it can be done quickly. (They should start setup prior to class so you don't waste precious rehearsal time.)
3. Microphones should be no more than 1-2 inches from the singer's mouths, except when sopranos are singing a particularly high or loud passage.
4. Have a dedicated sound person to attend a few rehearsals and run sound at concerts. That person should become familiar with the music, turn up appropriate soloists at the appropriate times, make adjustments for any voices that may be particularly loud or soft, and so on.

B. SOUND CHECK IN THE CONCERT VENUE

1. For concert preparation, allow ample time for set up of sound, sound check, and singing on the system for the singer's ears to acclimate. (A couple of hours, minimum.) Ideally you would have one monitor for every 3-4 singers, and at least two monitors for the rhythm section.
2. Sound check in concert venues should include the following:
 - Checking to be sure all of the signal routing is correct and everything is working. (For example, 'is the piano coming thru the vocal monitors?')
 - A test (by one person) of each mic to make sure all levels are "flat." (The same volume)
 Test first the monitors, then the main speakers for this. (Later, you can make slight adjustments for that quiet soprano, or the bass singer with the big booming voice.)
 - The choir should sing part of an a capella tune while director is in the house listening to tone (EQ), balance, reverb levels, volume levels, and so on. Make adjustments as necessary.
 - Rhythm section should play alone with the director listening in the house again.
 - Choir and rhythm section should play together while the director again is in the house.
 Singers and instrumentalists need to give feedback to the director about the level of their monitors. Adjust as necessary.
 - Once all of the above basics are in places, spend some time singing thru several of the concert pieces. It often takes a little time for the singer's ears to completely adjust to a new venue. This extra time spent can make all the difference in the singer's aural comfort level, and consequently, the success of your performance!
3. Ultimately, *you* know what your group should sound like better than anyone. Decisions on what equipment to buy, and how your choir should sound when singing on it should be guided by what your ears tells you is 'right.' Don't settle for less than quality sound.
4. At educational festivals, often there is little or no time between groups for individual sound checks. Prepare a stage plot to give to the sound engineer identifying the location and voice part of each singer. Also give the engineer a song list of your set, listing all solos (in the correct order) for each song, and noting any special needs you may have such as volume boosts for vocal percussionists, vocal bass lines, and so on.

C. THE EQUIPMENT

1. Microphones

Use one mic per singer whenever possible. Unidirectional dynamic mics are by far the most commonly used in jazz choir; they are relatively durable, and require no batteries or phantom power as condenser mics do. Shure SM 58 is a popular mic choice; it is affordable and does the job well. You'll also need straight as opposed to *boom*) mic stands for each mic, and mic chords (also known as *cables*) long enough to comfortably reach the board. (It's always a good idea to have extra mic cables on hand. They've definitely been known to break!)

2. Monitor Speakers (What the singers hear on stage)

There should be one floor wedge monitor speaker for every 2-3 persons; it's imperative that your singers can hear well. Also, with an adequate number of monitors, less volume per monitor is needed, and therefore less chance of feedback problems. (Don't forget that you'll also need speaker cables.)

3. Main Speakers (What the audience hears)

Mains are needed for performances only; they are not necessary for rehearsals. Usually two is sufficient for small-medium venues. (Don't forget that you'll also need speaker cables.)

4. Amplifiers (Amplifies the signal going to the speakers)

If you are using monitors and mains that are not self-powered, (some are, and some aren't), you'll need an amplifier for each. Or, a 2-channel amplifier could be used; one channel powering the monitors, and one channel powering the mains.

5. Mixing Board (Also called, *Console, Board, Sound Board*)

Generally, a mixing board combines and processes all sound sources that are plugged into it. For example, when a vocalist sings into a mic, the mic chord is plugged into a channel of the board, and its signal routed thru the board, processed, then sent on to the amplifier(s) and finally on to the speakers. Mixing boards used for jazz choir often have 16 or 24 channels, and they come in a wide variety of configurations and can have various capabilities.

6. An *integrated console system* is a mixing board that has not only basic controls such as EQ, but also additional built in features such as an amplifier, reverb, and/or a graphic equalizer. (EQ is short for *equalization*, and has to do with tone control.) This type of board may be convenient for use in daily rehearsals. (Easy set up; fewer things to plug in, and so on.) A *component system* is one where effects processors (reverb, etc.) and amplifiers are separate from the mixing board. (*Reverb* is simply, echo.) This type of system allows for more fine tuning of the overall sound quality, and may be appropriate for use in live performance providing you have a qualified sound technician to run it.

7. Extra Equipment (Optional)

A *snake* is like a big extension chord that runs all mic chords and speaker lines to where the mixing board is located in *the house*. (Where the audience sits.) A separate *effects processor* provides a variety of possible special effects such as reverb, digital delay, and so on. A *limiter/compressor* can be used to help control sudden extreme volume peaks, helping to avoid feedback and keep the group in balance. *Graphic equalizers* allow individual volume control of certain frequency ranges; very helpful in avoiding feedback and balancing out the overall frequency response of a venue. *Side fill monitor speakers* are particularly helpful with larger choirs standing in two rows. A *separate mixing board* can be dedicated to the monitors, allowing the best possible control over what the singers hear on stage. (Some of the components mentioned here are more common in professional concerts than in educational performances.)

8. Dealing with Feedback

Feedback is that evil loud/ugly ring that happens sometimes and that we try to avoid at all costs. Here are a few common causes of feedback that can easily be avoided:

- Pointing a microphone toward a speaker. (This is a big no-no)

- Covering the top (ball) of the microphone with the hand. (Another no-no, even though it is often seen in rock/pop performances.)
- Sudden, very loud singing, catching your sound tech off guard. (For particularly loud or high notes, singers should pull away from the mic a little.)
- Overall volume of monitors and/or mains being too loud. Try simply turning everything down a little! This may require the rhythm section to play softer.
- Inadequate number of monitors. If there are for example, 10 singers but only two monitors, then of course the monitor volumes will need to be pushed to the max, and this is risky.
- Singers holding the microphone too far from the mouth. Again, anything that requires speaker volumes to be turned up creates more feedback risk.
- Singers standing too far from the monitors, therefore requiring more monitor volume. (In jazz choir, singers tend to migrate further and further back away from the monitors as the concert proceeds. Everyone once in awhile, they should all take a step back in, closer)

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Vocal Jazz Arrangements:

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Jazz Piano Handbook: Book/CD set, Alfred Publishing

Jazz Singer's Handbook: Book/CD set, Alfred Publishing

Vocal Improvisation: Book/CD set, Advance Music Publishing

CDs: *Night in the City* (Phil Mattson and the pm singers)

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