
Jazz Singing: A Guide to Pedagogy and Performance

By Tish Oney

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For any musician not familiar with the genre, jazz can be an intimidating endeavour. From scatting to ballads, performance venues to stylistic expectations, vocal demand to vocal production, jazz singing occupies a lane all its own. Singers from other disciplines may find it overwhelming to try on this style, unsure how to “fit into” the genre without compromising their technique or their artistic voice. Drawing from a full career as a jazz singer, musicologist, arranger, composer, conductor, and private voice instructor, Tish Oney provides a guide to any singer or pedagogue ready to embark on that endeavour, approaching jazz not only as a style, but as a path towards artistry.

Before delving into the particulars of jazz stylings and performance practices, the author takes the time to establish a framework of understanding. The first five chapters feature detailed yet accessible descriptions of laryngeal anatomy, voice pathologies, vocal hygiene, alignment, breathing processes and pedagogy, phonation, and resonance. Oney also addresses the unique demands of the contemporary performer, discussing the extraneous tensions that holding a microphone or singing while seated can bring about. She considers singer-instrumentalists as well, providing pianists, drummers, bassists, and guitarists alike with tailored suggestions for releasing tension and facilitating a supported, sustainable alignment. Each chapter also offers corrective procedures for potential vocal faults. While these exercises are tailored to the demands of a jazz singer, they are not genre exclusive, offering pathways towards clear, efficient vocal production no matter the style. The author continues these teaching suggestions throughout the work, reiterating the importance of crafting a strong “baseline voice” - the healthy, consistent, and sustainable production from which all embellishments are drawn from and returned to.

Oney then begins to unpack the many and varied elements that comprise jazz stylings. She

provides detailed guides for ornamentation, jazz subgenres, and scat, breaking down these often-intimidating practices into accessible concepts. The author suggests that same approach to pedagogues, providing examples of exercises that can help a student build comfort and confidence when improvising, regardless of style. Oney also refers to jazz legends, unpacking what made their stylings so remarkable and how their successes can be drawn upon. She extols the value of crafting a healthy “listening diet” as a path towards artistry, particularly in the collaborative, improvisatory, and communal practice that is jazz music. The author’s lists feature names like Mel Tormé, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and many others, giving the reader a starting place - an appetiser round for their listening diet that exemplifies the wide range of tone colours, approaches to improvisation, and embellishments that make up the jazz style.

Despite this rich history of accomplished artists and storytellers, there remains a stigma surrounding jazz singers, insinuating that they are less educated, have poor musicianship skills, and are less capable of bandleading. Oney challenges that notion, imploring every reader to sharpen their skills and prepare for the industry demands facing jazz singers. As an artist, singers need to be able to craft their own arrangements, organise music, and lead their band. Otherwise, they surrender all agency and artistic voice to those around them. Oney also calls on teachers to help their students build these skills, advocating for a systematic approach to teaching not only jazz scales, arranging, and repertoire selection within the lesson setting, but also industry expectations for band leading. The author also proclaims the benefits that accompany a deeper understanding of jazz musicianship, as it cultivates higher level scatting, ornamentation, and expression of style.

Oney continues her discussion of industry-specific considerations in Chapter 9, diving into

microphone technique, its benefits and disadvantages, and the ways in which it can colour the voice. Oney describes the mic as the “second half” of the jazz singer’s voice, and as such, it must be chosen and treated with care. She provides recommendations for equipment based on voice type, arrangement, and performance venue, while also underlining the importance of collaboration between singer, band, and technical director. The author also acknowledges, however, that there is not always time to craft the most advantageous sound set up. In this case, she reminds the reader of the importance of vowel modification and formant tuning as it applies to tone colour. Vowel purity (or lack thereof) can greatly impact the way a microphone picks up and amplifies sound. By bringing awareness to this relationship, Oney equips jazz singers with the tools to produce an infinite number of colours and effects *without* sacrificing sustainability.

Perhaps the best hidden gem of Oney’s work is her discussion of the Dalcroze Method in Chapter 11. The author breaks down this kinaesthetic and improvisational methodology, detailing its uses in the voice studio and the many benefits she attributes to it. Oney describes the power of connecting mental processes with physical actions, offering exercises that involve a student’s entire state of being in his/her/their vocal work and music-making. The author encourages pedagogues and singers alike to utilise this method, not only as a tool for better learning and retention, but as a path towards self-discovery, tension release, and physical freedom.

Jazz Singing: A Guide to Pedagogy and Performance is an invaluable resource for any vocal pedagogue or jazz singer. It provides a clean, clear, and detailed description of the artform as an entity, suggesting various exercises, approaches, and methodologies to guide students towards their own artistry. Through her descriptions, Oney prioritises student goals and stylistic ideals above all else. Every suggestion offers a path towards authenticity, be it through optimal alignment, shining listening examples, or a deeper understanding of advantageous vowel choices during scat solos. The author never prescribes, taking great care to define jazz through what it is, rather than what it is not. This text is bountiful in its offerings towards singers and pedagogues alike. Any artist interested in jazz singing should invest in it, as Oney’s systematic and detailed approach creates an excellent foundation for understanding the style, respecting the industry, and cultivating authenticity.

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BIOGRAPHY

Sydney Hoel, soprano, currently serves as an Adjunct Instructor of Voice at New York University Steinhardt. She will complete her Master of Music in Vocal Performance: Music Theatre, Advanced Certificate in Vocal Pedagogy from NYU in the Spring of 2024. She received a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she was also a Chancellor’s Scholar and a Bronze Tablet honouree. Sydney has had the privilege of performing opera, music theatre, and vocal jazz, and she carries that love of multi-genre singing into her voice studio.