The Ideal Jazz Voice Sound: A Qualitative Interview Study

Ella Prem,1 Richard Parnscutt,2 Annette Giesriegl3, Hubert Johannes Stigler4

1,2 Centre for Systematic Musicology, University of Graz, Austria
3 Department of Jazz, University of Music and Dramatic Arts Graz, Austria
4 Centre for Information Modelling, University of Graz, Austria

della@aon.at, richard.parnscutt@uni-graz.at, annettegiesriegl1, hubert.stigler@uni-graz.at

ABSTRACT

The vocabulary of words and phrases used by musicians to describe instrumental and vocal timbre has been explored by Bellemare and Traube (2006), Garnier et al. (2007), and Prem and Parnscutt (2007). The timbre of the ideal classical singing voice is linked to the need to project over loud accompaniments (e.g. singer’s formant, formant tuning; Schutte and Miller, 2000). The ideal jazz voice takes advantage of microphones enabling greater expressive variation. Implicit concepts of ideal or authentic voice sounds influence teaching in conservatories and music academies but have been the subject of little empirical investigation.

Twenty Austrian jazz singers (not necessarily German native speakers) are being interviewed. All are or used to be students of jazz singing. In open interviews, each participant brings ten examples of jazz singing on CD or MP3 and describes that singer’s voice sound. The qualitative data are represented in an XML database. XSLT stylesheets are used to create tag clouds where the size of a word reflects its number of occurrences.

Frequent terms (words that are used by more than 60 percent of the participants) for preferred singers include deep (tief), jazzy (jazzig) beautiful (schön), spoken (gesprochen), soft (weich), powerful (kraftvoll), instrumental (instrumental), airy (luftig), diverse (facettenreich), dark (dunkel), nasal (nasal), headvoice (kopfig) and manly (männlich). Apart from that more than 50% used the words: clear, warm, bright, playful, soulful, peculiar, ideal, full, high, light and narrative. The vocalists with the most listening examples is Ella Fitzgerald (10:20) who is commonly referred to as: present (präsent), soft (weich), musically talented (musikalisch), easy (locker), head voice (kopfig), big (groß), emotional (gefühlvoll). Female jazz voice sounds are most often described as powerful (kraftvoll), clear (klar) and airy (luftig) whereas male voices are described as soft (weich), spoken (gesprochen), and diverse (facettenreich). Most descriptors (260/587) were used by less than 10% of the participants, and few terms (25) were used by more than 50% of the participants, suggesting a big difference between active and passive expert vocabularies in this domain.

We explored the “ideal” jazz voice sound without asking for it directly. Participants additionally showed remarkable motivation to listen to and experiment with different sounds to cultivate their individuality as jazz singers, raising questions about the tension between uniformity (“ideal” prototypes or exemplars) and individuality. Our project is raising awareness for the importance of sound and timbre in jazz singing, improvising/composing and teaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

“What does an ideal jazz voice sound like”, what makes a jazz singer a jazz singer?” (Gibbs, 2012) and “how can jazz vocal sounds be taught?” are central questions in jazz singing practice and jazz voice pedagogies. The understanding of how the voice is used in different styles of singing is commonly based on intuitive descriptions offered by performers who are proficient in one style (Stone, 2003). The vocabulary of words and phrases used by musicians to describe instrumental and vocal timbre has been explored by Bellemare and Traube (2006), Garnier et al. (2007), and Prem and Parnscutt (2007). The timbre of the ideal classical singing voice is linked to the need to project over loud accompaniments (e.g. singer’s formant, formant tuning; Schutte and Miller, 2000). On the contrary a jazz singer can take advantage of microphones enabling greater expressive variation. The distinction between a jazz singer and a pop singer is much more intricate, as in both styles microphones are used. This enables a huge variety of voice sounds for both vocal styles. Furthermore each style influences the other (pop-jazz) and is influenced by different musical genres. One difference might be in the “singing motivation”: making arts/being authentic vs. making money (Prem et al., 2011). Gibbs outlines the thesis, that only and “authentic jazz singer is an ideal jazz singer” (2012). Jazz purists similarly differ between a real jazz singer and a jazz singer (Nicholson, 2005) respectively a jazz stylist (Gibbs, 2012).

Implicit concepts of ideal or authentic jazz voice sounds are influencing the teaching but have been the subject of little empirical investigation. Since jazz has been taught at universities, researchers, pedagogues and artists are constantly striving for a definition of jazz and mainly result in the idea of the “core” of a jazz sound. De Vaux describes the core of jazz as: “improvisation, swing and blues” (Grandt, 2005). This definition provides an informative basis for what jazz is, but doesn’t provide a satisfying definition for jazz singing. Many jazz singers don’t improvise, the repertoire is influenced by different musical styles, not only swing and blues. Related to that the so-called “core of the American jazz pedagogy” is assumed as a common language that should be taught and spoken before moving on to variations of it and the wider aspects of jazz (Rinzler, 2008). “The style of jazz taught in high schools, colleges, and universities is derived from the conventions of the bebop-hard bop style of the1950s and 1960s” (Nicholson, 2005). Apart from teaching what has been done in the past, jazz singers and musicians aspire to gain individuality. So educational institutions have to offer a framework of teaching the core of jazz (mainly bebop) just the same as keeping the musical language of jazz alive, by developing a periphery and managing the diversity. Students themselves are diverse and in addition to that exposed to an infinite diversity of musical experiences which encourages individuality. According to Rinzler, it seems that “the opportunity to encourage individuality in jazz education is an
empirical question” (2008), which we aim to explore in this empirical study.

II. METHOD

Twenty Austrian jazz singers (ten male, ten female) have been interviewed. The interviews have been held in German language, the interviewees were not necessarily native but fluent German speakers. All were or used to be students of jazz singing on universities or conservatories. All have had experience in teaching jazz singing, but actually 14 out of 20 are working as vocal pedagogues. There regular occupations are quite diverse, varying between being full time student, actor/actress, vocal coach or musical director in a theatre. All participants were performing or used to perform as jazz singers regularly (at an average of twice a month). The average age is 33 years, the youngest participant was 19 the oldest 61.

In open interviews, each participant brought ten listening examples of jazz singers on CD or MP3 (if both wasn’t available, the music was searched for and listened to on Youtube. If so, the participant was not allowed to watch the video). After listening to an example for 15 seconds, the participant was asked to describe the singer’s voice sound in his/her own words and with his/her everyday language. The interviewer was allowed to ask questions according to the vocabulary like: “what do you mean by jazzy, ideal, authentic, and so on?” The interviews had a natural conversational character. If the interviewees couldn’t think of any way to describe the sound, the interviewer asked questions like: “What images or associations arise when you are listening to it?, What kind of emotions do arise?, What would you have to do to produce the same sound?, Why do you (not) like it?, …” and were encouraged to talk freely.

The qualitative data were analysed using a XML database. XSLT style sheets are used to create an html homepage and to generate tag clouds, where the size of a word reflects its number of occurrences. Currently we are creating a sound descriptor search engine and working on a co-occurrence matrix of all the sound descriptors using SPSS.

III. RESULTS

A. Vocabulary

The jazz voice sound vocabulary reappears as an individual, diverse and intuitive language. All together 2654 times a description has occurred. Each example has been described with an average of 133 words. The number of different terms that have been collected is: 587 words voice sound descriptors.

The “common language” (words that are used by more than 50% of the participants) consists of 25 out of 587 words (s. Figure 1) and reflects the most important criteria for an ideal jazz voice sound. These 25 words form what we use to call this actively shared vocabulary the core of an ideal jazz voice sound. Deep, jazzy and beautiful are the words that are used most often to describe jazz voice sounds. Spoken, soft, powerful, instrumental, airy, diverse, dark, nasal, headvoice and many are also among the words that are used by more than 60 percent of the participants. Apart from that more than 50% used the words: clear, warm, bright, playful, soulful, peculiar, ideal, full, high, light and narrative.

B. Music Examples

All together we collected 198 music examples (two interviews had to be interrupted after nine examples), performed by 97 different jazz vocalists (60% female and 39% male jazz vocalists). The number of jazz vocalists that only appeared once throughout the interview study (60 examples) is almost twice as high as the number of performers that appeared at least two times. That means two-thirds diversity (periphery) compared to one-third common agreement (core).

According to the number of appearances Ella Fitzgerald is the favourite jazz singer of our participants (10 examples), followed by Kurt Elling (8 examples), Carmen McRae and Mark Murphy (7 examples). Also among the most often cited vocalists are Chet Baker, Nat King Cole, Jamie Cullum (6 examples each). Andy Bey, Diane Reeves and Frank Sinatra are also among the favourite jazz singers (5 examples each). There is a greater consensus on male vocalists and a higher variety or individuality of female vocalists. This implies, that
female voices need to have greater variety (practice the periphery) in contrast to male voices who need to have a strong core.

The voice of Ella Fitzgerald is mainly referred to as an ideal jazz voice sound (6 out of 10 participants used that descriptor). Furthermore her voice is described as jazzy (jazzig) (4/10) and commonly referred to as: present (präsen), soft (weich), musically talented (musikalisch), easy (locker), head voice (kopfig), big (groß), emotional (emotional). Out of 103 descriptors, 75 were only used once to describe special nuances of her voice sound. Her voice sound has a small core (9 words) and a huge periphery (94 words), which on the one hand reflects her jazzy voice sound and on the other hand reflects the huge individuality of the perception and description of her voice sound (periphery).

C. Gender Differences

Among the top 10 sound descriptors that are used to describe male and female voices are spoken (gesprochen), jazzy (jazzig) and instrumental (instrumental). Among the top 25 (referring to 25 words, that form the core of an ideal jazz voice sound) the words: airy (luftig), deep (tiefe), beautiful (schön), body of a voice (kernig), diverse (facettenreich) and in front – according to resonances in the vocal tract (vorne) describe female and male jazz voices. Together with technical (technisch) these are the ten descriptors that form the core of an ideal gender-free (either female or male) jazz voice sound (s. table 1.).

Words that are commonly used to describe female voices but not commonly used to describe male voices are: powerful (kraftvoll), clear (klar), big (groß) and nasal (nasal). Furthermore a female jazz voice in contrast to a male jazz voice ideally sounds: breathy (hauchig), intimate (intim), ideal (ideal), bright (hell). Female jazz voices are more often described as the ideal jazz voice sound, and regularly represent an african-american/ black (afroamerikanisch/ schwarz) sound ideal. Those ten descriptors reflect the core of an ideal female jazz voice sound (s. table 1.). Altogether 197 words are used to describe female jazz voices. In describing female voices the interviewees tend to refer more often to the register that is used (chest voice – 15 nominations, head voice – 12 nominations). Registers and mix of registers seems to be more important for female jazz singers and influences the quality of a jazz voice sound. Five of the top ten descriptors refer to a head voice quality (clear, nasal, breathy and bright). Big is an association that typically refers to the range of a voice sound (chest and head voice). Only powerful represents the chest voice quality.

Male jazz voice sounds are more often described as: warm (warm), manly (männlich) and dark (dunkel). In contrast to female voices, which are more often described as the ideal jazz voice sound, male voices are more often described as authentic (authentisch). Additionally male voices in contrast to female voices sound: distinctive (unverwechselbar), reduced (reduziert), emotional (emotional), relaxed (entspannt) and scratchy (kratzig). Their timbre equally often is described as having either a poppy (poppig) or a classical (klassisch) quality.

According to these results male jazz singers ideally should have a warm and emotional (typically female) quality and female singers a powerful (typically male) quality in there

Table 1. Most typical descriptors according to gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position in list (1-587)</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>powerful, clear, big, nasal</td>
<td>soft, warm, manly, dark, authentic</td>
<td>spoken jazz sound instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-25</td>
<td>“black”, breathed, intimate, ideal bright, sad</td>
<td>distinctive, scratchy, reduced, emotional, relaxed</td>
<td>airy, deep, beautiful, body (kernig), diverse in front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>technisch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D. Qualitative Analyses

The word that is not part of the vocabulary (list of 587 sound descriptors) but was used by every jazz singer is the word vibrato. It seems to be a sticking point of the preference of a jazz singer. The favourite vibrato is sometimes linked to the sound of the participants own voice sound. One interviewee realized after the third music example, that she had chosen only jazz singers, who have the same kind of vibrato she has (JS218). Several interviewees don’t like too big (groß) vibratos, which sound too classical (klassisch) or forced (förciert) but prefer reduced (reduziert, einfach, schlacht) kind of vibratos, which are used sparingly (savorsam).

When talking about ideal jazz voice sounds, the interviewees made clear distinctions between their own ideal and the ideals of their educational institution respectively the official (international) jazz voice sound ideal. Even though interviewees sometimes believe, that the influence of the educational institution and their own ideals will fuse together into “one entire…sound” (Gesamtklang) they feel constantly torn between “two worlds” (JS107). Very often they referred to Ella Fitzgerald as “the ideal jazz singer”, “the mother of jazz” or even the reason for them to start sing jazz. There is not such a great consensus on male jazz singers among others Frank Sinatra, Andy Bey, Chet Baker and Jamie Cullum are referred to as being participants ideal jazz singers.

The importance of an erotic voice sound has been discussed in several interviews. Some interviewees are convinced, that it is in the nature of singing and therefor singing is always erotic others think it is a cliché of a jazz singer to have an erotic voice sound. Distortions that reflect throat-sounds (kratzig, knarrig, kehlig…) or breath sounds (breathy, airy…) in voice qualities are associated with an erotic voice sound.

African American jazz singers are represented in our data with more then 50%. Jazz singers seem to agree on an African
American sound ideal, which is presumed to be the original root of jazz singing.

IV. CONCLUSION

We explored the ideal jazz voice sound without asking for it directly. Participants additionally showed remarkable motivation to listen to and experiment with different sounds to cultivate their individuality as jazz singers, raising questions about the tension between uniformity (prototypes or exemplars) and individuality.

According to our results, jazz singers use a highly intuitive and individual vocabulary to describe jazz voice sounds. The common language, 25 words that are used by more than 60% of the participants, reflects the core of jazz voice sound descriptors. Almost 50% of the vocabulary is only shared by 10% of the participants (periphery). The common language (words that are shared among jazz singers, active vocabulary) facilitates communication in teaching situations and jam sessions. Words that are used by only one or two participants (partly understood by other jazz singers, passive vocabulary) reflect the individuality of the vocabulary on the one hand and the diversity of jazz voice sounds on the other hand. This bigger part of the vocabulary consists of descriptions that reflect the perception and the description of the interviewees listening experience as well as the diversity of the voice sounds themselves.

Ideals differ according to gender. Female jazz singers ideally sound powerful, big and clear. It is important for female jazz singers to be technically skilled especially according to register transition. Male jazz singers on the contrary, represent an authentic voice sound that needs to come across very relaxed, warm, simple and manly. It seems to be more respectable to describe a male sound as sexy. If women sound sexy it has quite often a negative connotation and comes across imitated or inauthentic.

Ideally a jazz vocalist needs to develop a core of a jazz voice sound, by on the one hand listening to and imitating traditional jazz singers (e.g. Ella Fitzgerald) and on the other hand having a good voice technique (register transition, relaxed sound). At least equally important is to develop one's own sound, by listening to a great variety of (voice) sounds, not necessarily jazz voice sounds. The use of vibrato is important, what is preferred differs from period to period and from person to person, the material of one's own voice, the kind of vibrato a singer naturally has, is intended to be a reference point.

The diversity of students listening experience nowadays offers a rich basis to develop the so-called periphery to gain an individual, original and authentic jazz voice sound. Mentoring in peer groups at universities and colleges might be a possible solution to broaden musical horizons and manage this diversity. Working together with musicians our project is raising awareness for the importance of sound and timbre in jazz singing, improvising/composing and teaching. By using our database jazz singers will not be forced to use a limited core of a common language anymore but can also communicate the periphery of sound descriptions and hence the individuality of voice sounds.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank the twenty jazz singers that participated in the qualitative interview study for openly sharing their thoughts and feelings on jazz voice sounds as well as their music with us.

REFERENCES


