MELODIC STYLIZING

by

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Melodic Stylizing is the method of a vocalist or instrumentalist to change a song's melody using techniques established by jazz improvisers. Many celebrated vocalists and instrumentalists can be identified by their treatment of a melody. This document demonstrates nine techniques learned from these jazz musicians. These techniques will be demonstrated over the first few measures of the George Gershwin song, Summertime.

The first three techniques will be considered by the author as "macro" techniques; these are so influential that they have a large effect on the performance as a whole. The last six techniques are "micro" and affect the phrases sung or played, but are large only in their totality. These techniques should be used more conservatively. The last page is a full demonstration of most of these techniques over a full chorus of Summertime. It is the hope of the author that this analyzation and demonstration provide a guide to hearing these techniques in other musicians and imitate the way that they are played, not seen on paper. This document can not encompass the feel, tone, and context that comes from a live performance.

Melodic Stylist, Sarah Vaughan

"MACRO" TECHNIQUES:

1. SYNCOPATION
2. BACK-PHRASING
3. FRONT-PHRASING

"MICRO" TECHNIQUES:

4. TRIPLET CONVERSION
5. MELODIC FILL
6. ORNAMENTATION
7. CHANGED NOTE
8. BLUES COLORING
9. LEVELING

FULL CHORUS
SUMMERTIME
WITH ANALYZATION

m. 1-3 Summertime (Gershwin) UNALTERED

①SYNCOPATION

One of the most fundamental methods of personalizing a given melody is to syncopate it. *Syncopation* is the method of changing the melodic rhythm to emphasize weak beats or in-between beats. Standards having unsyncopated melodies will be altered by the performer to bring notes forward, before their original placement (Anticipations) or to push notes back, behind the beat. (Delays).

Treatment of songs can be very syncopated to having very little syncopation. I like to subjectively assign an abstract number to decide how much syncopation exists in a song. I use a 1 to 10 scale. 1 having no syncopation added, and 10 being completely altered from the original.

Finding an acceptable mix of syncopation can be challenging without a frame-of-reference jazz language from other artists. They provide the template of syncopated rhythms, and how certain phrases can be changed. The first artist to listen to for jazz syncopation is Louis Armstrong. He sets the example of syncopated swing phrasing. Armstrong also finds balance in a song's given melody and the rhythmic changes made to it. Many artists have built upon Armstrong's syncopation, but we are all traced back to him.

Below is a syncopated version of the first bars to Summertime (ex. 1). The "D"s are delayed notes. The "A"s are anticipated notes. Compare this to the version at the top of the page:

Ex. 1—Syncopated melody

I took some of the more beat attached target notes in the phrase and moved them forward or backward by a 1/2 beat to create this syncopation. You can call these most important notes target notes. Target notes are (1) First note of a phrase or phrase segment, (2) High or low notes in the phrase, (3) Notes of a long duration, or (4) Final note of a phrase. Moving target notes 1/2 beat is a good way to start this tech.

Notice that a majority of the syncopated notes are anticipations. This is common. Also note that tempo and groove must be strong considerations in your decision of how much syncopation to use.

> *It needs to be stated that there can be too much of a good thing. Every note does not need to be syncopated, and the lack of syncopation on some notes can make well-placed anticipations and delays stand out.*

②BACK-PHRASING

Back-Phrasing is a fun, melody-personalizing technique often used by vocalists and instrumentalists in every genre of music. Jazz musicians have embraced it since the mid 20th century. It is a method to push segments of, or even an entire phrase back for a subjective number of beats.

An entry method to back-phrasing is to visualize the phrase being pushed back 2 beats (if 4/4 time). It requires room at the end of the phrase for the music to be placed into. This technique takes skill because if you will not receive a break at the end of the phrase and must quickly recover to begin the next, regularly placed phrase. You can back-phrase small or large fragments, but it is recommended to start small. Example 2 has a very small back-phrase. Compare it to Example 1.

Ex. 2—Back Phrasing

Back-Phrasing many times gives you very little room at the end of the phrase, and you might have to connect two phrases that normally are not joined. You'll lose precious recoup time normally given to you during a rest. Take big breaths, and consider the lyric placement if you are a singer. Experiment on songs that have plenty of space at the end of phrases. Try various amounts of beats in your back-phrasing– 1,2,3,4 etc...

③FRONT-PHRASING

Front-Phrasing is less-used and more difficult to execute than its opposite, Back-Phrasing, especially if used in large phrases. it is more daring because unlike Back-Phrasing, the front-phrase often belongs to a different chord or chord progression, therefore applying much harmonic dissonance to the melody if attempted to use in this new front-phrased location. Expert improvising vocalists like Betty Carter effectively use Front-Phrasing realizing that the dissonance will be temporary and the harmony will catch up to the early melody. It is a leap of faith and should be used in small phrase units like Example 3, when beginning this technique.

Ex. 3—Front Phrasing

Front-Phrasing doesn't always feel natural. Start by Front-Phrasing in small increments, gradually pulling the melody back in larger amounts. There must be space on the front side to do this.

Examples #1-3 macro-effect phrases. The remaining examples are often used in smaller, micro ways

④ TRIPLET CONVERSION

A *Triplet conversion* can mean converting either (1) an eighth-note melodic phrase into quarter note-triplets or (2) converting a quarter-note melodic phrase into half-note triplets. It is possible do the reverse, converting a triplet rhythm into eighth or quarter notes. This has a subtle rhythmic effect of speeding up or slowing down the phrase. The triplet conversion in Example 4 has the effect of slowing down. Compare it to the original melody.

Ex. 4—Eighth Note to Quarter Note Triplet Conversion

Be careful in attempting to mix syncopated eighth notes with triplets. Sing the melodic line to yourself; if it feels awkward to you, it probably will sound that way to others.

⑤ MELODIC FILL

A *Melodic Fill* is adding your own original material into or around the given phrases of the song. Vocalists and instruments often add fills to phrases that have a lot of space or held out notes. Often the musician feels the phrase needs more melodic interest. This effect tends to work better in instrumental arrangements because non-vocalists are not tasked with creating lyrics on the spot. Using good planning and instincts, vocalists can personalize fills to a tune. Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald both expertly add fills to melodies. Higher intervallic jumps, syncopated fills and fills with more notes will make the melodic fill more noticeable. Example 5 is a small, modest fill.

Ex. 5—Melodic Fill

Even though a fill truly embraces the spirit of improvisation, you tread a fine line when adding new material to a melody of an already finished song. The addition must fit the vibe of the song without overshadowing it. It's sometimes a difficult balance to achieve. Fills are tempting but space can be a good thing, also. If you are beginner in improvisation, don't add too much material to these already established standards.

⑥ ORNAMENTATION

Ornamentations are the extra flourishes or effects in a music performance. Many times they are unique to the instrument, but there are a few ornaments that are common among most instruments. Effects often used are glissandos (See Example 6 below), scoops, falls, tremolo, trills, shakes, and turns. In vocals, the use of ornaments will often coincide with certain consonants and vowels. The use of lyrics complicates ornamentation.

Ex. 6—Glissando ornament

❗ *Ornamentation can be overused and become cliché. Use sparingly.*

⑦ CHANGED NOTE

A *Changed Note* is simply taking a given note of the melody and changing the pitch. This is done to give different and new identity to the phrase. It is safer to change notes that are not "target" notes (see Syncopation for definition of Target Notes), but a good changed note to an integral note can fundamentally influence the way other artists perform a tune.

The further in interval distance that the changed note is from the original, typically the more notice it receives. Some singers and instrumentalists make a song "theirs" through these adjustments. Sarah Vaughan's version of *Days of Wine and Roses* comes to mind. Octave displacement (Example 7) is an easy way to experiment with changing notes. This means to change the pitch by an octave.

Ex. 7—Changed note with octave displacement

❗ *Start by imitating the work of other jazz musicians. Use their template to experiment on the same song, or try to apply their notes to another, similar song.*

⑧ BLUES COLORING

Blues Coloring is the act of taking a melody and changing certain notes to the blues scale. (minor pentatonic scale). This can be effective to songs that already lend themselves to the "blues". Like other micro stylizing effects, if done too much, it becomes overused and cliché.

Blues coloring can be applied in two ways: Changing the notes to fit the blues scale, or to add ornamentation that is common to the blues. For this to be successful, a player must be able to play with a good blues feel.

Observe the harmony when you are attempting this. This tech works over minor 7and dominant 7 chords, but not as well over major 7. With a little experience and listening to other vocalists and instrumentalists who do this well, you will get a sense when this is appropriate. If you're a vocalist, also consider the lyrics. Example 8 demonstrates changing the melody with the blues color.

Ex. 8—Blues Coloring

! *This could come off as "cheesy" if you don't play or sing the blues well.*

⑨ LEVELING

Leveling is the act of taking the "hill and valley" pitch-contours of a melody and simply leveling them out into a single pitch or two, Like in Example 9. The rhythmic identity is unaltered. The reason for leveling some or all of a phrase is to (1) eliminate large intervals, making a melody easier to play or sing or (2) Divert attention away from a melody. Billie Holiday would level a lot of melodies to great effect for personalization. Her version of, "The Very Thought of You" uses this technique.

! *Too much leveling will eliminate some of the melodicism that makes a tune unique.*

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Gwinnell
Melodic Stylized
Summertime
Gershwin

Example 10 is an entire chorus of Summertime, utilizing most of the tools in this instructional document. Example 11 is an analysis of the same chorus.

In conclusion, many musicians focus most of their creative energy on improvisation "sections" of songs. Offering a unique perspective on the melody of a song can be equally rewarding to both you, your fellow musicians, and listeners. Listen to the vocalists and instrumentalists that inspire you. Imitate them, borrow their techniques, their ornamentation, and their versions of songs. Don't hesitate to analyze them.

Be fearless and remember that in music you always get another shot at it. Stylize your melodies in a remarkable, memorable enough fashion, and people will be analyzing you.