

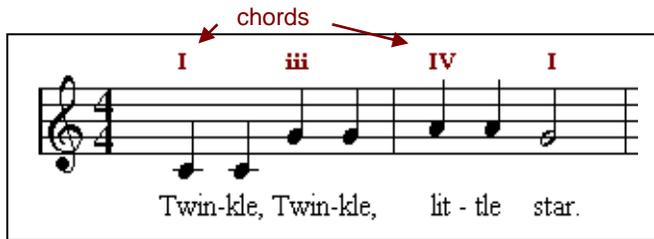
# Techniques



## In big terms,

the major elements of improvisational expression are: harmonic elaboration, word painting, and dramatic arc. The various ornamentation techniques I will describe below serve these basic ideas. Here's what they mean.

**Harmonic elaboration** – Each note in a song sits on top of a chord, which may be played by the piano, or guitar, or may just be inferred (heard silently) from the tune. Sometimes, instead of singing the note you're supposed to sing, [you can sing one of the other notes in that chord](#), and it sounds pretty good.



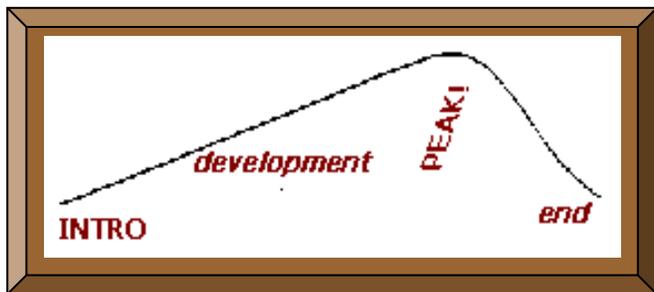
Then you can sing some notes between those notes, but as long as you emphasize the chord notes (rather than those in-between notes), it'll sound pretty good. More on that later.



**Word painting** -- If you sing the word "high", try singing it high; if you sing the word 'thunder', try making your voice sound a little like thunder when you sing it. Voice painting is like drawing a sound picture of what you are saying. It helps clarify your words, and gets the audience feeling what you say a little more. Here's a [quick example](#).

A good composer will write in some word painting, like maybe fast, falling notes for "rain" or long quiet notes for "silence" or "serenity". Porter's intro to [Night and Day](#) is a great example. When you add or alter the melody for improvisation, try to accentuate the meaning of what you are saying.

**Dramatic arc** -- Unlike most visual art (which just sits there no matter how long you look at it) dramatic art happens *in time*. Traditionally, audiences expect an arc of activity, starting out in one place, changing to something else, moving to a peak, then falling away and finishing. Kelley Johnson's version of [Tea for Two](#) is a brilliant example.

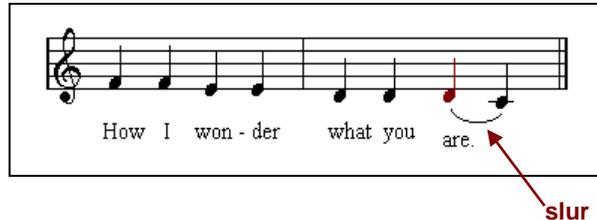


When you stylize a song, try keeping it fairly simple at the beginning of the song, then becoming more complex towards the middle, rising to a peak of intensity, then finishing. This is just a basic rule, and shouldn't prevent you from experimenting with alternative structures (for instance, starting out really complex, then simplifying from there, that might be interesting, too).

**Melisma** is the classical name for most types of ornaments, including appoggiatura, turns, runs, trills, and grace notes (see below). It means: *holding the syllable while changing the pitch*. It's written as a slur - a curved line over two or more notes. Melisma was first used as part of church chanting by [monks in the Middle Ages](#). They probably got it from the flashy street singers of the time.

### **Appoggiatura**

This is a pitch suspension. Instead of going right to your next note, start the syllable on the note you're on, then move to the next note. You can give it a 'hanging' feeling. Experiment with the timing; [hang long](#), [hang short](#).



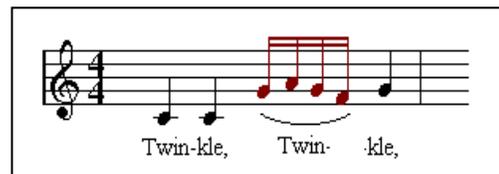
### **Grace notes**

A grace note is like an appoggiatura, except that you can sing almost any other note that sounds good. Frequently people sing the [grace note very quickly](#), but it's technically up to you how fast or slow you want to sing it. Grace notes are written as very small notes, usually before the main note.



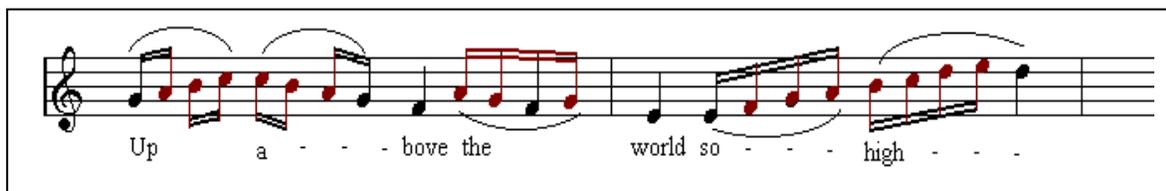
### **Turns**

Turns are added notes above and below a note, as though you are turning around it before moving on to the next note. Using a technique like this for a word like 'twinkle' is especially appropriate, so this is a good example of word painting. See if you can improvise other sounds for 'twinkle'.



### **Runs, coloratura, divisions**

These are general names for the collection of lots of extra notes that singers can add in around the main melody. If the notes are all right next to each other, it's a run. If the notes are more fancy, you can call it coloratura. If there are lots of sub-groups for each regular melody note, then you call them divisions. Whatever, it means *fancy fast stuff*.



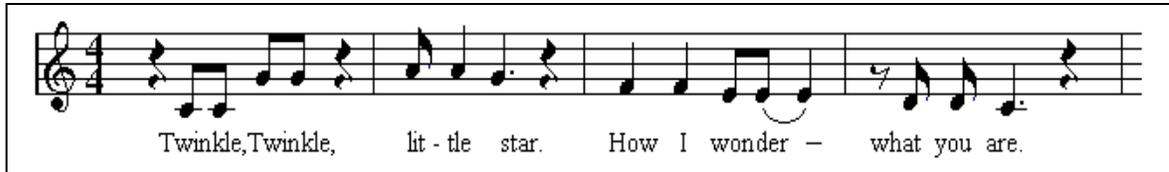
### **Cadenza**

Cadenza comes from the word cadence, meaning, the last chord change. Just before the last chord, a singer may use all of the **melismatic** tricks above, to create a florid, fancy, showy finish. It's so fancy that the other instruments just wait until the singer is done [showing off](#), then everyone finishes together. In pop music it is sometimes [called a tag](#).

## Rhythmic anticipation/suspension

This technique is especially prevalent in pop music. Try this: Snap your fingers or tap your toes to the beat. Now, instead of tapping once on each beat, tap twice for each beat, like eighth notes. Now try 16<sup>th</sup> notes.

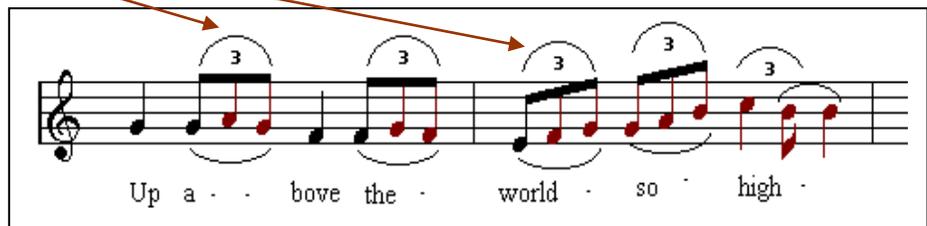
Now try singing a note a bit early, or a bit late. Let these anticipations and suspensions fall on one of the smaller SUB-beats, (eighths, sixteenths). Sing two notes together quickly, and then hold out a later note to make up for it. As long as you listen closely to the chords your piano is playing, and you keep a very steady, strong sense of the beat inside your head, you'll sound pretty good.



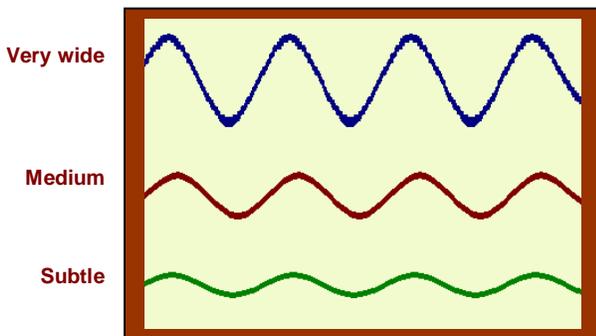
Be careful, though. If you lose your sense of the beat, it'll be too confusing to listen to. [The example above](#) shows the melody divided up by eighths. (notice how the smallest note value is an eighth, there are no sixteenths).

## Triplets

This is basically the same as the above exercise. Try this: Count out the beat, one tap for each beat, then make it three taps for each beat. Notice how it turns into a swinging feeling, very fun, it makes me want to sway back and forth. [In the example](#), I've added some triplet runs and turns.



## Vibrato Shaping



Almost every note you sing has a slight waver in it; the pitch goes up and down very slightly. Most song stylists (singers) shape the longer notes by starting them with the subtlest vibrato, [then widening it towards the end of the notes](#). Practice on long notes. Start with a straight tone, controlling your breath, then release a bit more breath power into the note so that the vibrato begins. Now, try widening it into a big wobble. This bigger wobble is sometimes called a jazz *shimmer*.

**Think of vibrato as a sailboat sailing on the wind of your breath.**



## Trills

Trills are very fast alternations between two notes. This is accomplished the same way that vibrato shaping is accomplished. You just start a vibration, open it to a wobble, and widen it until you're a full note away. [It requires lots of energy](#) because it all happens at once, for a relatively short duration. If it's done right, it really sounds like a [bird tweedling](#).

The basic rules for trills are:

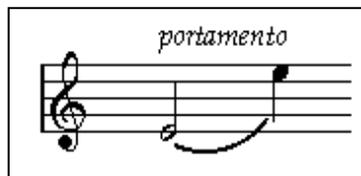
- 1) Start the trill on the higher note
- 2) Finish on the lower note
- 3) Vary the pitch, not the volume

But rules are made to be broken.



## Portamento

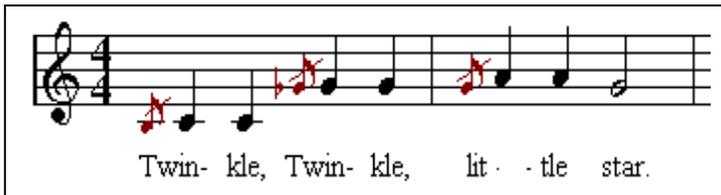
This is fancy classical word for a slide. Instead of singing just the two notes as written, you start on the first, then slide gracefully to the second, very smoothly, running through all intermediate notes.



Depending on the type of energy you put into it, it can feel like a leaf falling, or a rock. Upward portamento almost always means an increase in energy, like a plane taking off. → [Samples](#).

## Scooping

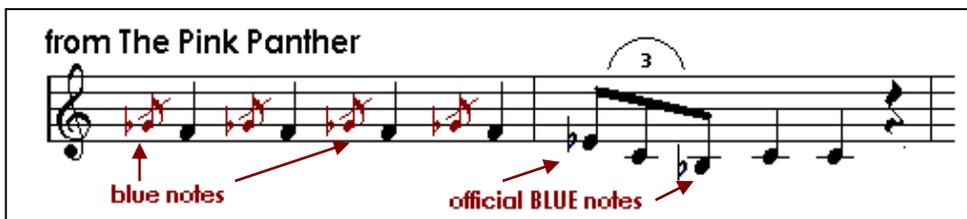
Popular styles almost always include some kind of scooping. Start the word you are about to say on the note just below the written note, then very quickly slide up to the proper note. It's like a quick, [smooth sliding grace note](#). There isn't an agreed way to notate scoops, but I've used grace notes to show where the scoops might go. Think of Frank Sinatra or Elvis, or any country singer at all.



The danger with scooping is to make the scoop too big, or to do it too frequently. It's a form of emphasis, so you want to do it sparingly and mean it when you do it. Remember, if it's ALL emphasis, it equals NO emphasis.

## Blue notes

Technically, the *blue notes* on a scale are the flattened 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. However: the colloquial use of blue notes, or blue-ing a note, more often refers to flattening, or lowering, any note by a half step.



See how the little note isn't a real G, but instead it's a G flat. When it's done right, it sounds like you're [flirting with it](#). Done wrong, it can sound like bad singing, as though the singer can't quite reach the note.



## Bending

Bending a note frequently goes along with bending the vowel sound. As you trill, or slide, or blues a notes (all forms of bends) you can also distort the vowel sound a bit. Instead of just singing the word “high”, it becomes “hi-ee-igh”. Or “world” might become “Wo-ooo-oh-ooo-ohh-orld”. In especially bluesy stuff, or gospel, the word might mutate into another word, like this: “sky-ee-ah-ee-yeah”. This technique can [get out of hand rather easily](#), though, so watch out for cheeseball singing.

“ooo—woh-ooo-bay-eee-yay-ee-bay-yay-yeah.”



## Wailing and crying

Country and western singing employs a great deal of this technique. It's a large scoop, with a lot of extra air on the attack. Sometimes there's a little yodel added into it for effect. Practice this by pretending to be a wolf and howling at the moon. Obviously, it's a very [emotive ornament](#), but **be careful** - it's a strain on the voice. It's easiest on words that starts with an 'H' or a vowel.



## Yodeling

Yodeling is an emphasized flip between the head and chest voices. Classical singers try to minimize any switch in register so that the notes resonate very evenly in all parts of their range, and avoid the chest voice entirely. But C & W, pop and gospel singers must move in and out of their head and chest frequently in order to achieve a good range, and sometimes choose to emphasize the switch rather than hide it.

Practice the switch from chest to head and back again, learning to emphasize the flip, then practice hiding the switch entirely. Below, I've shown a [yodel exercise](#), and an example in a song.

<p>chest   head   chest</p> <p>Ho - dee - duh Ho - ee - uh</p>	<p>chest   head   chest</p> <p>Twin-kle, Twin-kle,   lit - tle   star.</p>
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## Summary

These are all good ornaments to start with, but a full lexicon requires that you listen to lots of different singers and experiment with imitating their sounds. Then you can pick and choose what to use in your own songs.

Styling is like a spice: be VERY careful how much and what combinations you use. There is an awful lot of bad tasting, overdone ornamentation out there. Remember, ornaments are for EMPHASIS. IF EVERYTHING IS EMPHASIZED, THEN THAT IS EQUAL TO NOTHING BEING EMPHASIZED. IF I WROTE A WHOLE PAGE IN ALL CAPS, YOU'D EVENTUALLY STOP PAYING ATTENTION. So vary your ornaments, choose only a few places, and it won't sound **cheesy**.

