

Instrumental Transcriptions For The Solo Vocalist

By Janice Borla



For some time now, jazz instrumentalists have utilized solo transcription as a learning device to enhance their improvisatory skills. In this article I would like to suggest that the practice of transcribing and learning to sing instrumental jazz solos remains a relatively untapped resource which can be an invaluable tool for the aspiring jazz vocalist.

In an improvisatory art form such as jazz, an intrinsic part of the learning process is listening and imitation. Every jazz artist begins by first learning how to imitate the techniques and ideas of favorite artists. Once mastered, these elements can then be incorporated and utilized as a "vocabulary" of rhythmic, melodic, harmonic and textural ideas and techniques with which to create one's own improvisations. So too with jazz vocalists: by including the work of the great instrumental improvisers in your listening and study, a wealth of material becomes available to you which will serve to further broaden your perspective and enlarge your "catalog" of musical ideas. When you transcribe an instrumental solo — i.e., translate it into musical notation — you accelerate the learning process by creating for yourself a visual image of its musical content and an organized format for the assimilation of the artist's playing style and of the musical idiom in general.

There are many published solo transcriptions available which can be obtained from jazz periodicals and publishing houses of jazz educational materials. However, in order to derive maximum benefit, I highly recommend that you *do your own transcriptions*. The process of transcribing each note and nuance of a solo requires *intensified*

listening: not only will your "ears" and your notational skills be sharpened, but the repetitive nature of the exercise will reinforce your absorption and assimilation of the musical ideas and techniques contained in the solo. By the time you have completed your transcription, you will have essentially learned the solo. The completed transcription then becomes a permanent tool to be used as part of your vocal study and practice.

What follows is a step-by-step approach to preparing an instrumental solo transcription and adapting it for vocal execution. With regular use, this habit will: 1) improve your jazz concept; 2) expand your rhythmic and melodic vocabularies; 3) improve your jazz phrasing and use of idiomatic articulations; 4) enable you to spontaneously utilize natural-sounding phonyms (scat syllables) as you improvise; and 5) provide excellent exercise material for improved vocal technique.

HOW TO PREPARE A TRANSCRIPTION

There are probably as many methods of doing a transcription as there are transcribers. What I have outlined here is simply one approach that I find very workable, regardless of one's level of musical knowledge or vocal ability.

First, *select a solo*. Choose an artist whose playing style you particularly admire and enjoy. For vocalists I strongly suggest choosing a *wind instrument*, because the relationship of breath placement and support to phrasing and tone quality is common to singers and horn players. Also, select a performance of a tune for which you can

obtain a lead sheet giving you the basic melody, form and harmonic structure.

As you make your selection of artist and specific solo, consider your own level of musical and vocal ability. Remember, you are looking for a solo whose melodic, rhythmic, harmonic and textural patterns you can imitate and ultimately absorb into your own improvisatory style. Select one which will be challenging, yet feasible. Listen for musical ideas in the solo which you will be capable of singing.

As an example for this article, I have chosen Miles Davis' solo on his composition "Pfrancing," from his album "Someday My Prince Will Come" (Columbia CS 8456).

1) **Determine the shape of the solo.** Listen to the entire solo a few times and determine its shape, relative to the form of the tune. Is it one full chorus in length, or several choruses? Is it played on the form of the tune (AABA, AB, blues, etc.) or over a vamp? Are there separate "blowing" changes? How many bars in each chorus?

The form of "Pfrancing" is a 12-bar blues; Miles' solo extends for five choruses. (Hereafter, the fourth chorus

of his solo will be used to illustrate the transcription procedure.)

2) **Rhythmically notate the solo.** Write out the rhythms, measure by measure, without regard for the pitches. This will give you a more precise framework from which to work as you go back to identify the pitches, and serves to emphasize the rhythmic fabric of the solo when seen independent of the melody.

Rhythmically notated, the fourth chorus of Miles' solo looks like this:

See Figure 1

3) **Now add the pitches.** Be sure that your transcription is written in the same octave or register as that in which the soloist is playing. (Also at this point add the chord changes.)

Here is the same 12-bar excerpt with the pitches (and chords) added:

See Figure 2

Now, since one of the objects of this exercise is to enable you to emulate the soloist's performance, there are certain performance aspects that must be addressed and notated.

4) **Notate the phrasing.** The correlation of phrasing to breathing is of major concern for all singers and wind instrument players. How the soloist has phrased his/her musical ideas (i.e., length and character of each phrase, tone quality, etc.) is directly related to where and how much breath was taken throughout the solo. In order to accurately emulate the soloist vocally, you must breathe where he/she breathes.

In your transcription, indicate each point at which you perceive a breath was taken. (Generally, but not always, these points will correspond to places where one musical idea is concluded and a new one begun.)

Here is the excerpt with phrase markings added:

See Figure 3

5) **Notate the articulations.** Articulations are to music what inflection and consonants are to speech: the devices that clarify the musical line. Accents (>, ^), short sounds (•) and long sounds (—), effects such as slurs, doits (r), fall-offs (r), glisses (r), and ghost notes (G), along with various types of attacks and releases, give texture and expressiveness to the musical line. *Articulations are an essential element of your transcription; without them you*

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

will not be able to accurately sing the solo.

Listen very carefully to how the soloist articulates his/her improvisation and notate it accordingly. Become familiar with the standard articulation marks commonly used in arrangements for large instrumental (and vocal) jazz ensembles; these will get you started in

the notation of articulations. They are, however, by no means a complete set. When you hear an articulation for which there is no standard symbol, as is very likely to occur, simply invent your own notational symbol. What matters is that you compile a notational system that works for you, enabling you to simulate the soloist's sound when you sing the

solo.

Here is the excerpt with my articulation markings added:

See Figure 4

Now that you have a fairly detailed "picture" of the soloist's improvisation, you will need to "adapt" it to your vocal apparatus in order to sing it.

6) **Transpose the solo into another key, if necessary.** This is specifically a vocalist's concern. You may find that the improvised solo lies partially or entirely outside your own vocal "comfort range" (see my article "Key Selection for the Solo Vocalist," *Jazz Educators Journal*, Sept/Oct, 1985 for a detailed discussion of this issue). If so, you may need to adjust the key upward or downward in order to get a better match with your particular vocal range and timbre. Choose a key which will enable you to sing the solo without strain or discomfort, yet *with the same energy level and tone quality as the soloist*. In other words, try to place the solo within your range much as the soloist places the solo within his/hers.

7) **Find phonyms with which to vocally articulate the solo.** Choose phonyms (i.e., "scat syllables") which you feel *best emulate the sound of the soloist and the articulations used*. What you are in fact doing is translating instrumental sounds into combinations of vowels and consonants.

I refer you here to a book co-authored by trumpeter Clark Terry and Phil Rizzo, *The Interpretation of the Jazz Language*, in which they discuss the conversion of characteristic horn sounds into appropriate vocal vowel sounds based on their color and timbre, duration, register, and so on.¹ Similarly, your conversion of the soloist's attacks and releases into appropriate consonants will come not only from what you hear but also from whatever you can learn about horn players' methods of articulating. Ultimately, however, let your choice of phonyms result from what naturally occurs when you try to vocally match what you hear. In other words, phonyms should be used strictly as *vehicles for the articulation of the musical line*.

The best way to do this is to tape yourself singing along with the recording. Again, try to sound exactly like the horn as you sing the lines with the soloist. (If you have trouble because of key, temporarily change octave wherever you have difficulty.) Record several

takes, until you are quite comfortable singing the improvisation. Then go back and transcribe whatever syllables you sang which you feel best imitated the soloist's sound.

8) **Note the nuances of the soloist's performance.** There are certain aspects of any performance for which there is no notation. Tone quality, energy and intensity levels, texture, vibrato — these are some of the subtle *nuances* of the performance which, although they cannot be written into your transcription, are nonetheless a characteristic part of the soloist's playing style.

As you sing the improvisation with the recording, match the nuances as much as possible: try to match your vibrato and tone color with that of the soloist, for example, and recreate the energy level at which the original solo was performed. In short, you must try to capture the soloist's musical "attitude" and incorporate it into your vocalization.

Here is my final version of the 12-bar excerpt, which I transposed down a 6th, with my phonyms added:

See Figure 5

HOW TO UTILIZE YOUR TRANSCRIPTION

There are numerous ways your completed transcription can be used, for purposes of stylistic analysis as well as for the development of vocal technique and facility. Here are a few suggestions:

1) *Analyze the relationship between the pitches of the improvised solo and the harmonic structure of the tune.* Using the chord changes for each measure, identify each note of the melody as a chord member or a non-chord member. Soon you'll begin to see the harmonic nature of the soloist's playing style: i.e., using diatonic or chromatic lines, playing "inside" or "outside" the changes, arpeggiating the chords, using recurring motifs, and so on.

2) *Analyze the construction of the solo as a whole.* Consider how the soloist "builds" his/her improvisation from beginning to end: how each phrase relates to the one preceding it, and how each chorus relates to the others in intensity and complexity of musical ideas.

3) *Sing the solo at varying tempos.* Start very slowly and gradually increase speed with each repetition. This exer-

cise will improve your ability to execute characteristic instrumental rhythmic figures.

4) *As a technical exercise, try singing the solo in a variety of keys.* Expand your range of keys outward from your original key choice so that you utilize the uppermost and lowermost areas of your vocal range as well as the more comfortable mid-range. In addition to giving strength, suppleness and consistency to all parts of the voice, you are likely to discover new ways to use your voice with each new key you try: new vocal techniques, means of articulation, textures, etc. will be discovered.

5) *Using the rhythmic transcription you prepared (Step 2), learn to improvise your own melodies.* Add all the articulations, phrase marks and scat syllables to your original rhythmic transcription. Taking one phrase at a time, begin by speaking the rhythms without definite pitch; as you repeat each phrase, melodic ideas will evolve naturally as you articulate the rhythms. By utilizing the rhythmic patterns of the solo in this manner, independent of the original melody, you will develop the ability to intuitively use them in your own improvisations without necessarily quoting verbatim from the original solo.

History has shown that innovative playing styles have evolved from listening to and imitating the sounds and styles of other instrumentalists. Similarly, contemporary jazz vocalists like Bobby McFerrin, Al Jarreau, Ursula Dudziak, Sheila Jordan, Jay Clayton and others have been exploring and expanding the range of sounds, timbres, articulations and techniques available to singers in a manner which suggests the direct influence of instrumental jazz styles. The regular use of instrumental solo transcription provides the aspiring jazz vocalist a practical means of exploring the limitless possibilities of sounds and styles with which he/she can ultimately shape a unique vocal style.

¹ Clark Terry & Phil Rizzo, *The Interpretation of the Jazz Language*, M.A.S. Publishing Co., Bedford, Ohio, 1977 (Chapter 2).

Janice Borla is rapidly becoming one of the most sought-after jazz vocalists/clinicians in contemporary jazz. She was a featured guest vocalist at the 1985 NAJE Convention in Dallas and at the 1986 University of Northern Colorado Vocal Jazz Festival. Janice has performed with such well-known jazz talents as Clark Terry, Bunky Green, Terry Gibbs, Ashley Alexander, and many others. Presently she leads her own group, comprised of drummer Jack Mouse, guitarist Frank Dawson, bassist Bill Harrison and vibist Brad Stirtz.