

The Pros and Cons of the Music Theory Approach to Vocal Jazz Improvisation

Wendy Hargreaves

Background

- jazz singing and music education
- final stages of my PhD at Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University
- part of my PhD study exploring how improvising jazz vocalists differ significantly from instrumentalists

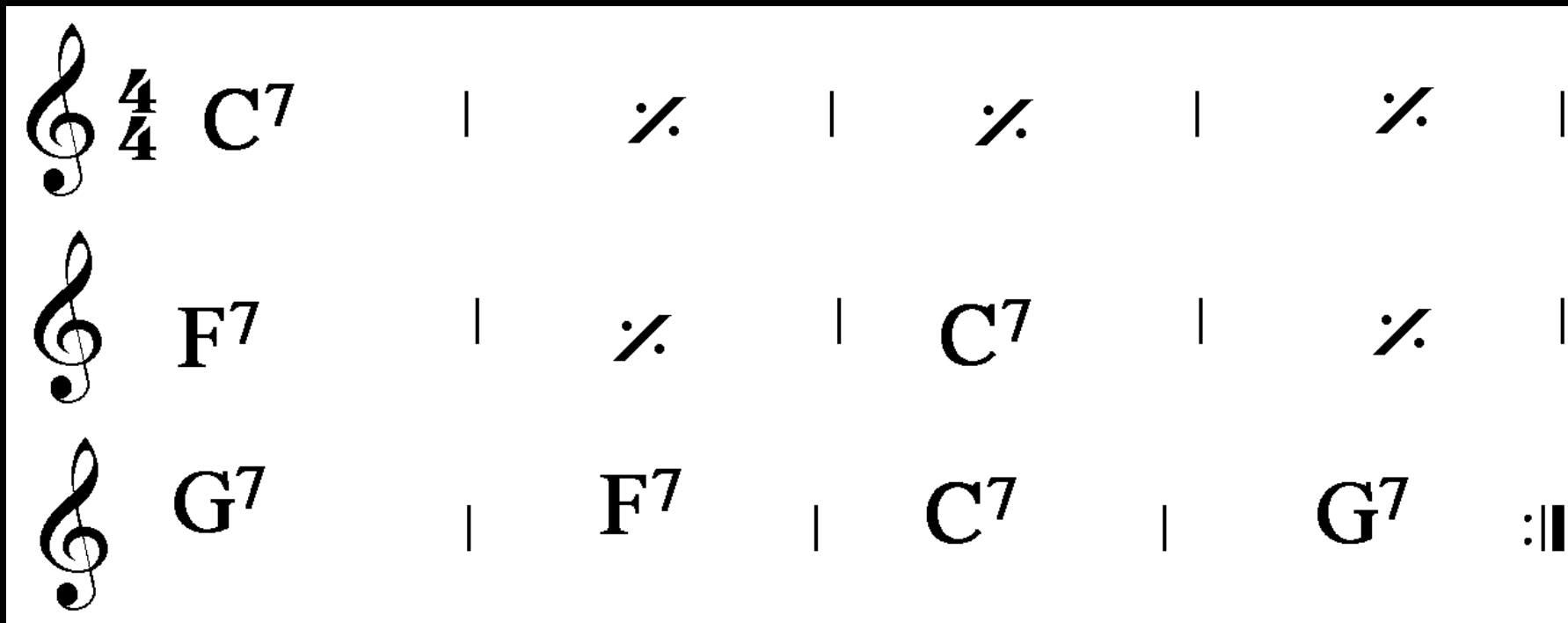
Data Sources

*Anonymous, online survey of 209,
currently performing, Australian, adult
jazz instrumentalists and vocalists*

*22 X 90-minute interviews of Australian
jazz vocal performers and/or jazz
educators in Australian tertiary
institutions*

Kenny & Gellrich describe the chord-scale formulaic method as the most widely practiced method of teaching jazz improvisation in western education (2002, p. 126).

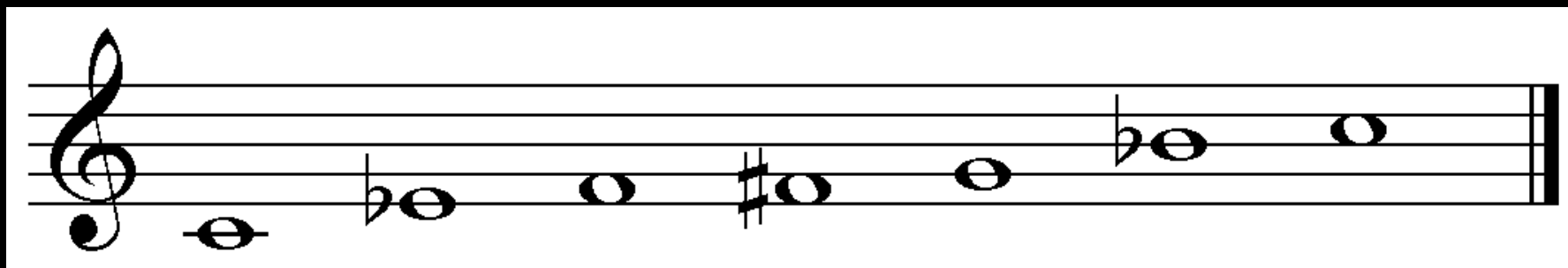
12 Bar Blues Harmonic Progression



A diagram showing the 12-bar blues harmonic progression in 4/4 time. It consists of three staves of music, each starting with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff begins with a C7 chord. The second staff begins with an F7 chord. The third staff begins with a G7 chord. The progression is as follows:

Staff	Bar 1	Bar 2	Bar 3	Bar 4
1	C7	/	/	/
2	F7	/	C7	/
3	G7	F7	C7	G7 :

Blues Scale



A musical staff showing the G7 blues scale in treble clef. The scale consists of the following notes: G (one line), F (flat, one space), E (one space), D (sharp, one space), C (one space), B (flat, one space), and A (one space). The staff ends with a double bar line.

Characteristics

- 1) Initially focuses on explicit knowledge of the function of musical elements
- 2) Does not require audiation for instrumentalists to apply the approach
- 3) The formula is instilled using repetitive practice, 12 keys

Pros of Teaching the Music Theory Approach to Vocal Improvisation

- Conscious knowledge
- Communicable teaching content
- “...explicit knowledge may help the learner to notice features in the input that would otherwise be ignored...providing ‘hooks’ on which to hang subsequent implicit knowledge”

(Ellis in Berkowitz, 2010, p. 32)

“It’s the most fascinating, intriguing, sumptuous thing...when you start pulling [music] apart and analysing how this works... As soon as you point out things like that, things start to take shape in [students’] minds and they go ‘oh, okay. Now I’ve got something to hang my hat on.’ ”

(Sharny)

Plethora of resources to access

“Creative Jazz Improvisation” by Scott Reeves

“How to Improvise” by Hal Crook

“Improvising Jazz” by Jerry Coker

“The Jazz Singer’s Guidebook” by David Berkman

“Vocal Improvisation” by Michele Weir

“Vocal Improvisation – An Instrumental Approach” by Patty Coker and David Baker

Familiarity with music theory encourages
vocalists' autonomy

- Power to communicate with other musicians
- Power to choose keys

Combined instrumental and vocal classes

- Money saver
- Vocalists can learn by watching instrumentalists' attitude to practice

Cons of Teaching the Music Theory Approach to Vocal Improvisation

Discrepancies in theory levels

“...[I]mpro class is fundamentally looking at the cutting edge kind of approaches to improvisation, but you couldn't possibly do it with the vocal students here because they wouldn't know what you're talking about. It would be a waste of their time and the teacher's too.” (Craig)

The difficulty with goal notes

Instrumentalists

A goal note is selected in absolute pitch



Fingers/arms are placed on the instrument using visual feedback and motor memory in a position known to generate the goal note



The goal note is played

Vocalists

A goal note is selected in absolute pitch



Audiation and muscle memory combine for prephonatory tuning, positioning the vocal chords to generate the goal note



The goal note is sung

Audiation plays a role in the prephonatory tuning process to assist vocalists in singing an intended note.

Sundberg notes the process is described colloquially by singers as “hearing the next tone in advance” (1987, p. 58)

“If I’m getting [my students] to play a minor 6 pentatonic off the flat 2 on a dominant chord, then a saxophone player can press a button and produce a tone that’s pretty close to the note that’s intended, whereas obviously vocalists don’t have the ability to hit and miss like that...”

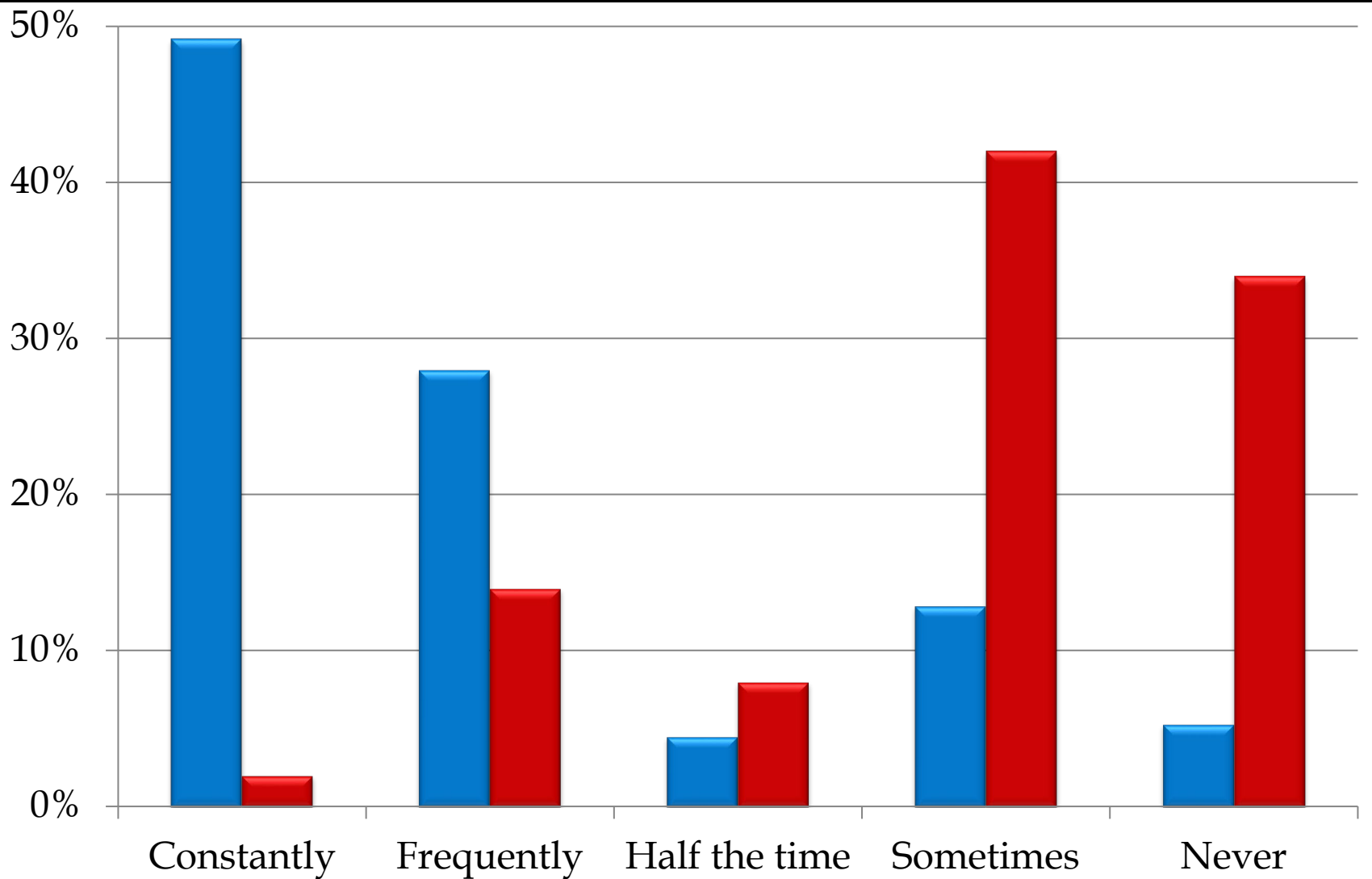
(Jamie)

“The challenge I put forward for all the instrumentalists if they ever have a problem [with attitude towards singers], ...I ask the instrumentalists to sing the topic and they haven't got a hope in hell of doing it.”

(Jamie)

Foundational steps rely on working
in absolute pitch

“How often do you know the name of the
note you’re on while improvising?”



n=182

■ Instrumentalists ■ Vocalists

“Singers just take too long to pitch things. They can’t go to a note as quickly as an instrumentalist can who can just push the buttons. For a singer to complete an exercise that is set for them in improv just takes them so much longer than an instrumentalist who can just sight read it, who can look at the notes while they’re playing it.”

(Libby)

Value of the 12 Key Approach is Misunderstood

“not all that much point” (Nick)

“kind of pointless” (Melissa)

Sharny recommended singers write their songs out in 12 keys to build theoretical knowledge “but don’t bother singing it in 12 keys.”

Objections to the 12 Key Approach

- Pointless (not the same motor programming need)
- Concerns about length of practice time (vocal health)
- Concerns about introducing technical issues with register changes

Johnson-Laird (1987, 2002)

- The valuable subconscious, procedural knowledge is obtained through “considerable work”

Berkowitz (2010)

- Transposition/rehearsal as a means of becoming intimately acquainted with structures

Both authors note a connection between subconscious knowledge and generation of audiated ideas

By dismissing the 12 key approach as irrelevant to singers, vocalists may be missing out on a crucial developmental phase of moving structures from explicit memory to implicit memory, adding to the ideas bank which generates “audiated ideas” (Hargreaves, 2012).

Pedagogical Considerations for teaching the Music Theory Approach to Vocalists

- Make adjustments for a lag in theory knowledge
- Vocalists need aural familiarity with a formula in order to accurately phonate it
- Make adjustments for difficulties in applying formula communicated in absolute pitch
 - Fostering skills for calculating pitching

Change the emphasis on the value of repetition

- It isn't pointless. We were just focused on the wrong point.
- Concerns about register changes – how about practicing it in 6 keys instead of 12?

“With a voice you can’t just sit down for four hours and just do the same thing over and over because you just get really tired, particularly if your technique is rudimentary...That’s not to say that as a singer you couldn’t sit at the piano and do the same practice hearing the sounds...”

(Melissa Forbes)

In closing

The music theory approach to teaching jazz improvisation is likely to remain a popular pedagogical method. Its many advantages include conscious communicable knowledge, providing hooks for thinking, and facilitating conversation with other musicians.

However, the need for vocalists to conceptualise in absolute pitch, to audiate for accurate application, their generally lower level of music theory knowledge, and a misunderstanding of the value of the 12 key approach are ever-present complications. They require specialised assistance from teachers for the method to be as effective for singers as instrumentalists.

References

- Berkowitz, A. L. (2010). *The improvising mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hargreaves, W. (2012). Generating ideas in jazz improvisation: Where theory meets practice. *International Journal of Music Education: Practice* 30: 354-367.
- Johnson-Laird, P. N. (1987). Reasoning, imagining and creating. *Council for Research in Music Education Bulletin*, 95, 71-87.
- Johnson-Laird, P. N. (2002). How jazz musicians improvise. *Music Perception*, 19 (3), 415-442.
- Kenny, B., & Gellrich, M. (2002). Improvisation. In *The science and psychology of music performance*, eds. R. Parncutt & G. McPherson 117-134. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sundberg, J. (1987). *The science of the singing voice*. Dekalb, IL:Northern Illinois University Press.