

SONIC NUANCES

Post-task : Vocal Embellishment

The voice is a musical instrument. To find your own voice, a great way is to learn to step away from the standards and those tried and tested formulas that obviously work, such as delivering the lyrics in a certain tonal structure that doesn't deviate from the diatonic progressions. This is a wonderful foundation that you have learnt, but once you have learnt it you are able to stretch the boundaries to see what else is possible. In other words, step away from the melody and start embellishing and come up with new phrasing.

Some people may call this improvisation and why not? Take scatting for example. Improvising while scatting creates that element of surprise. By hitting notes you didn't consider possible or using scales you might otherwise shy away from, you will give your solo a different shape. Scatting allows you to move into uncharted waters and be more creative.

Drawing from tradition

The Xhosa folk music tradition is known as one of the most musical. There are distinct Xhosa harmonies, rhythms and progressions which draw us back home and sound extremely South African. Music and dancing are part of traditional ceremonies. Siya grew up with this music and really loved the tonal aspects of Xhosa folk music. She loved the way the women have a language as a group and the music is very communal. A lot of what she learnt was from watching these traditional people as they play, their holistic group dynamic.

Part of finding your own voice is recognising where you come from. There is something unique about how we approach our music in South Africa. Identifying with our traditional music helps us to identify the space we are in. When we have an interest in our own folk music, it is a great base from which to develop an interest in the genres of folk music because there are some extraordinary similarities. Take, for example, the split-tone singing of the Eastern Cape and the split-tone singing of Mongolia. The music is a bridge that can bring these communities together, even if people can't speak to one another, because of the language barrier.

The foundations of traditional music forms have been around for a very long time. They are well versed styles of music and a lot can be drawn from them, even from a Western point of view. Even in traditional African music there are harmonic and tonal structures that can be decoded in Western theory. The language of traditional African

music can be interpreted in a way that makes sense to Western schooled musicians and students. This is a musical gap that can be bridged through ethno-musicology so that these concepts don't stay hidden or considered as something that is other to Western music. African music needs to get to the point where we have our own language for it.

Many South African musicians such as Bheki Mseleku have used traditional South African music to create a unique sound. Your roots music from home really helps to shape and develop how you turn out as a performer. Your roots are crucial to how you are going to present yourself and stand out, particularly when you arrive on the international stage.

Now, complete the following exercise:

1. Siya developed her vocabulary by taking standards from the great jazz composers such as John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Chick Corea or Herbie Hancock and transcribing the music and then playing it out. This helps build your vocabulary.

Take one of the compositions of these great composers, and learn the melody. Rearrange the melody in such a way that you embellish it. Bring in new notes that are not necessary and create your own interpretation of the song. This can become a new melody.

2. How does this new melody speak to you in terms of your compositional voice?

Take note of the formulas and foundational structures that come into play: the context; style; musical thematic and progression elements?

3. What are the different nuances that are used and how do they relate to your compositional capabilities?

4. Poly-rhythm is essentially being able to take a rhythm in a certain meter and then to start adding other rhythms on to it – that all correlate, even though they may be in different meters. It is mathematics at the same time.

A great influence for all popular music is that African Groove or what Siya calls, “the intrinsic African pulse.” There is a difference between a beat and a pulse in the poly-rhythm of African music. The African pulse is always constant and speaks to the internal rhythm of the body. It adds to the excitement and movement of the music.

Find a poly-rhythmic song that you love and improvise with the rhythm. Now see if you can find a poly-rhythm song in a jazz context.

Can you count out the rhythm?

Can you feel the pulse and feel how it pushes and pulls the rhythm?
Can this inspire you to create something of your own?