Gloria Cooper

# Once More with Feeling: The Crossover Artist's First Steps in Making an Emotional Connection with a Popular or Jazz Song

*Gloria Cooper*

A classically trained singer visited my studio recently with a request I've heard more and more often over the last few years. This singer needed to master the popular/jazz "style" in order to include some popular songs as encores in upcoming recitals. This singer's management had also suggested a more extensive exploration of popular/jazz repertoire, which could lead to a crossover CD in the future.

Because this singer, not unlike many others today, finds that the jazz and popular repertoire represents uncharted territory, the article begins with this story. For the uninitiated, getting this new material stylistically "right" can be a major challenge. Popular and jazz styles seem alien. Often, singers do not know where or how to begin.

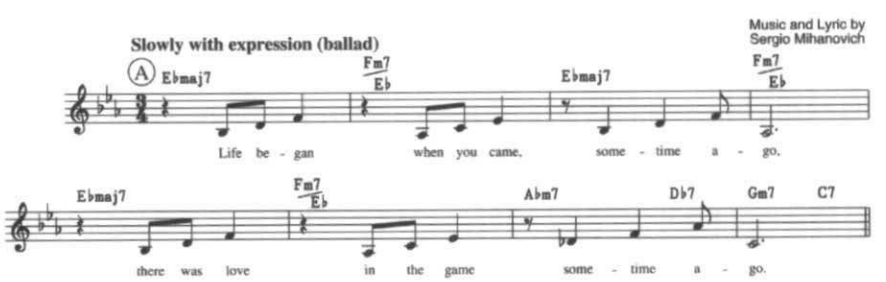
What obstacles, specifically, do classical singers face when they are expected to give convincing performances of jazz and other popular repertoire? What are the most effective approaches to overcome those challenges, resulting in performances that are convincing and stylistically authentic? It is the goal of this article to answer those questions and to provide teachers and coaches with some practical suggestions.

## THE LITMUS TEST

When classical singers enter the training studio with a request to explore the new and different world of jazz or popular styles, it is helpful to perform a quick "litmus test" to determine how comfortable and fluent they are in interpreting a popular/jazz song. A good first step is to choose a song in lead sheet format (this includes the melody, lyrics, and chord symbols), then ask the singer to sight read it. For this first experience in popular/jazz singing, the choice of the song is important. Because the first goal is to assess the singer's level of stylistic comfort, the song provided should be a selection in a comfortable range that does not pose vocal challenges. A good example of such a song is "Sometime Ago" (Example 1).

Let me describe what happened when I provided a singer with a lead sheet for "Sometime Ago." I played a brief introduction at the piano and invited a trial performance. Like most classical artists in this first testing phase, the singer sight read the piece extremely well and seemed to enjoy it. Yet the results were similar to those achieved by many classical singers in their first attempt to interpret a popular/jazz song. The resulting performance was something that most listeners would probably have termed rather "stiff" for a jazz song. Stylistically, the result was quite similar to what would be achieved if the singer were presented with "Tu lo sai" from the familiar Italian anthology.

Nevertheless, this singer, like most classical artists, felt pleased about the performance. After all, it had fulfilled




Example 1. "Sometime Ago," mm. 1–8. Copyright © 1963 (renewed 1991), 2003, Second Floor Music. Used by permission.

Journal of Singing, November/December 2003
Volume 60, No. 2, pp. 153–157

all the requirements for good singing learned in the studios of voice teachers and coaches over the years:

- All the indicated pitches and rhythms had been observed.
- All the notes "sounded" even and strong through the song's range in a way that would project audibly into a large recital hall.
- The voice had been supported well enough to sustain the longer notes for their indicated durations.
- All the notes were uniform in size, focus, and quality, produced with what might be called uniform vibrato throughout.

In short, this singer had sung the song very well. Yet although the song was performed correctly, in terms of a literal rendition of the page, a very "classical" style emerged that seemed somewhat inappropriate to popular/jazz style and repertoire. This conundrum—doing everything correctly, but in a style that is nonetheless unsuitable to popular/jazz songs—represents a pivotal point for any classical singer. It is the place where learning to interpret popular/jazz songs begins.

## WHY DOES A CLASSICAL ARTIST SOMETIMES SEEM UNSUITED TO JAZZ SONGS?

From a listener's point of view, what makes many classical singers sound immediately out of the stylistic realm of a popular song—whether they are performing a jazz standard or a familiar song from the body of repertoire known as the "American Popular Songbook"? The stylistic hindrances these singers experience, as seen from the perspective of a jazz professional, usually include:

- Excessive use of vibrato that makes the voice sound stylistically inappropriate for the repertoire.
- Lack of awareness of time and flexibility (phrasing). Few classical singers find it comfortable to immediately enter the "inner sanctum" of bendable time and interpretation that is a hallmark of popular/jazz music.
- An overriding sense that the singer is more involved with listening to the sound of his or her voice than becoming involved with the words and phrasing of the melody and lyrics.

## CAN THE SINGER "LOOSEN UP"?

A classical singer obviously must learn an art song or aria exactly as written before he or she can begin to make personal interpretive choices. That is also the case with jazz singers. Yet after careful learning of notes and words has been accomplished, classical and jazz singers embark on very different interpretive paths. One might say that jazz artists use the written page as a starting point for a kind of theme and variation process, because they enjoy greater leeway to shape notes and words than classical singers do, while remaining true to the material provided by the composer and lyricist.

For this reason, it is a good idea to add a second step to the first sight reading "litmus test" recommended above. It is simply to have the singer follow along on the lead sheet while listening to an accomplished jazz or popular artist perform it. If the teacher or coach has that competency, then he or she can perform it in the studio. If not, recordings by jazz or popular singers should be used. It can be helpful at this stage to select a song that has been recorded by several artists. In the case of "Sometime Ago," for example, one could choose from at least two excellent recorded versions, including that of Judy Niemack on "About Time" (Sony Jazz) or Irene Kral on her CD "Kral Space" (Collectible). Interestingly, the first of these artists performs the song in a 4/4 time signature and the latter in 3/4 time.

After following along on the printed lead sheet, most classical singers are surprised to observe that the authentic performance of the song just heard, whether given by the teacher or heard on recordings, differed considerably from what appeared on the printed lead sheet page. They see that although the performer respected the composer's overall intentions, the notes and the rhythms were altered much more freely than would be likely in any performance of classical repertoire. The singer is coming to see that one of the first responsibilities in jazz interpretation is to sense the "inner time" that underlies a song—the essential element of jazz that is called "swing."

## THE CONCEPT OF SWING

Swing is difficult to explain, yet it is the defining characteristic of popular and jazz styles. When lacking, its absence is immediately felt. For this reason, a good next exercise for the singer is to attempt to perform the song again with less vibrato, and with the freedom to alter rhythms. As a way to help the singer find his or her own "inner time" and tempo before starting to sing, it is helpful to ask the singer to "count off the song" before beginning. In 4/4 time, saying "1x-2x, 1-2/x-3-4/x" [x indicates a finger snap that occurs concurrently with beats 2 and 4] and in 3/4 time, "1-2/x-3/x" to set the tempo. Note, in a ballad, a one-measure count off of 1-2-3-4 or 1-2-3 is sufficient. (In this way, the singer would indicate a tempo to a combo backing him/her up in a performance.)

This exercise often produces a freer rendition of the song. Sometimes, the singer immediately responds with a surprising demonstration of fluency with popular/jazz style. When that happens, it is, of course, a wonderful surprise. The singer is already somewhat up the "learning curve" and may even reveal an appealing personality transformation when performing this material. Perhaps the singer has performed some popular/jazz songs in the past. When this is the case, we sometimes get a preliminary glimpse of the singer's "style"—something that can be refined and cultivated so that a classical artist can perform popular music convincingly.

When performing this exercise, many singers still find it difficult to utilize the freer interpretive options available. A common comment at this stage is, "I understand intellectually what you are asking me to do, I just can't do it yet." More listening, experimentation, and work are necessary.

## UNDERSTANDING VARIETIES OF LEEWAY IN JAZZ SINGING

Even after it has been demonstrated, when a classical singer is invited to perform a popular/jazz song freely, as suggested just above, he or she is often puzzled about how to enter that new zone of freedom. Even after explanations of the latitudes available to interpreters of the genre, the singer's attempts at popular style often remain somewhat stilted and classical in mood.

It can be a frustrating stage. When encouraged to sing more freely, often the singer may delay some notes and cut off some of the longer sustained notes instead of holding them all the way through—or even take some of the material up an octave. Demonstrating high notes may be laudable in classical singing. However, it is somewhat beside the point in jazz, unless extra range is employed in service to the text and the mood. Overall, the process may feel unnatural to the singer at first, and may therefore be uncomfortable and unconvincing to the listener.

It is at this point that listening is so very important, and the singer would be well served to listen to a variety of jazz and popular recordings (both vocal and instrumental) in order to become more familiar with the many characteristics of this style of music.

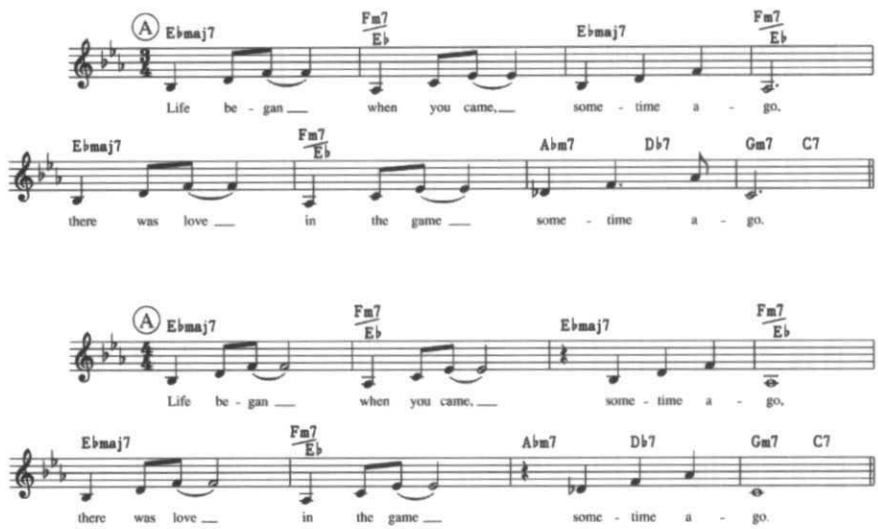
## "SPACE IS THE PLACE"

To achieve real flexibility and fluency, it is important to think about the concept of space as applied to popular and jazz singing. A better idea of space can be gleaned by listening to a variety of artists performing "Sometime Ago" and other standards. Another significant pedagogical goal is to introduce the singer to the notion of space and possible changes in rhythms, and in this case, time signature, by changing the rhythm in the original version of the melody and experimenting with performing the song in ¾ time signature (Example 2).

After the singer has learned a song as written by its composer, grasping the concept of space—and applying it—is the first step in gaining an entry into idiomatic singing of popular and jazz music. In its most basic elements, space means that the note that appears on the page serves as a point of departure. It can be sung as written, of course, but many other options are available too:

- The pitch of a note in the melody can be changed either up or down, while respecting the underlying harmony.
- The note can become more than one note (repeated notes, arpeggios, ornaments, and the like).
- The note can be started either earlier or later in the phrase.
- The duration of a note can be lengthened or shortened.

Returning to the concept of swing, it is important to remember that swing




Example 2. "Sometime Ago," mm. 1–8. Copyright © 1963 (renewed 1991), 2003, Second Floor Music. Used by permission.

might not occur when a singer reproduces the printed notes exactly. A sense of "inner time" is required. Jazz musicians know that, unless they are performing a well known arrangement that requires stricter adherence to the notes on the page, written lead sheets provide indications that are not to be too slavishly observed.

In fact, a jazz artist's skill lies in exploring the many interpretive options that lie in and around the written notes. Many classical singers, too, are well aware of the numerous interpretive choices that lie in the periphery of what appears on the page in classical music. ("What's best in music is not to be found in the notes," Mahler once observed.) The difference is one of magnitude. A classical singer can change dynamics, color words, or sometimes add an ornament to bring meaning to a text. After learning a song note for note, a popular/jazz artist has greater latitude to make changes to bring personal meaning to the song at hand. A few of the interpretive wiles that jazz singers have applied to text include:

- Approach the song in a conversational manner while singing it.
- Change some note values to call attention to certain words and their meanings within the phrase.
- Extend notes—even across bar lines—to accentuate their meaning.

To make things even more complicated (or liberating, depending on one's point of view), the jazz singer's opportunity to manipulate and utilize the space in and around the text and the notes is not at all limited to the melody or the text. It is also practiced on a wider level by jazz singers, extending even to the makeup of the songs.

- *Structural changes.* A vocal lead sheet might present a song in the composer's original structural format, such as A-A-B-A, or some other. In jazz, the singer can make alterations of his or her own, which might include starting to sing at the B section, the bridge, or any other section of the song. Often too, popular/jazz singers utilize some material from the lead sheet as an instrumental introduction. They frequently use the last four bars of the song for that purpose—or sometimes the bridge, or anything else that seems to serve the purpose well.
- *Changes of rhythm or genre.* A simple jazz ballad can, with a subtle rhythmic shift, be performed as a *bossa nova*. A song with a Latin "feel" also can be effective with a swing rhythm. Through such shifts, many songs can take on a whole new character and tone. A song such as "Sometime Ago" might be performed in a slow ¾ tempo as originally composed, or in a ⁴⁄₄ time signature, but in any case, allowing the words to find their own emphases.

So it becomes apparent that lead sheets are musical guidelines, a form of musical notation that is far looser than the traditional notation that classical singers have lived with for years. Lead sheets provide a lot of information—the melody, lyrics, and chord symbols, but without all the piano voicings that are seen in standard notation of classical repertoire. A lead sheet may resemble a piece of printed classical music, but in practice it is used in a substantially different way.

## LISTENING TO RECORDINGS

To provide a glimpse into the new terrain they are free to enter in interpreting a popular/jazz song, it is important to give singers suggestions for listening. Since the greatest jazz artists always find ways to add personal interpretations to the music they perform, encouraging classical singers to listen to as many recordings of jazz singers as possible provides a very worthwhile experience. Listening to recordings of instrumentalists as well as vocalists, in fact, offers valuable insights and is one of the quickest ways to help a classical singer grasp the many freedoms available in popular/jazz singing. For this reason, the singer may be encouraged to purchase a book of popular/jazz songs in lead sheet format, and follow along with recordings whenever possible. This should become an ongoing activity, one that will reveal more and more options available in structuring and interpreting popular material.

## LETTING THE WORDS INCREASE INTERPRETIVE FLUENCY

As is the case with classical repertoire, it is important to encourage singers to spend a lot of time with the texts of the songs—reciting the words, finding personal meaning in them, exploring vocal colors that make each word unique. Jazz singing, perhaps even more than classical singing, is an art that is founded on insightful interpretation of text. The old maxim *prima la musica, poi le parole* (first the music, then the words) really needs to be read in retrograde with this genre.

Consider the words of "Sometime Ago" (written by the song's composer, Sergio Mihanovich) and what can be learned from reciting them.

Life began when you came,
sometime ago,
there was love in the game,
sometime ago.
So unconventional you and me
and so essentially young and free.
We were both very smart
until the end,
little girl/boy with no heart

I would pretend,
now I'm discovering
as I'm recovering
love wasn't really just a game,
but we're the only ones to blame.


When we recite this poem a few times, its inner shape becomes clearer. Like the text of any interesting song, classical or popular, there are many lovely things about it, and some puzzling undertones that offer opportunities for individual interpretation.

As noted, it is possible to sing the text of "Sometime Ago" quite beautifully, yet have it still sound somewhat cold and unfelt. It is on this issue that authenticity lives or dies. The best popular/jazz singers are those who somehow are able to make an emotional connection between the words and the music and make that connection palpable to an audience.

At a lecture attended by this writer, the great singer Phyllis Curtin made a point that is central to this question, offering the view that in any performance, an artist needs to be specific, not general. It would appear she was suggesting that the audience will not gain an emotional foothold in a performance unless the performer has made a very definite commitment to and decision about what she brings to the work that is being performed. If a performer is not sure about what she is doing on an interpretive level, how can the audience be?

Consequently, the popular artist needs to create a "scene" and be convinced within herself that she really is there. When the singer fully occupies that imaginary place, interpretive issues fall into place rather quickly and the audience is invited into the inner world the singer has created. If an artist just sings the words to a rhythm and melody, the audience cannot know where or how to become involved.

This admittedly somewhat abstract concept will come into sharper focus when the singer is directed to explore considerations of space (the internal shape of the text) and to ask questions about the text:

- What is the story?
- What is the setting?
- What kind of reaction is the singer getting from the person to whom he/she is singing the song?
- Who are the characters in the song?

When such questions are raised, most classical artists quickly begin to grasp the real parameters of personal expression available in popular music. Suddenly, the singing of jazz becomes not just an opportunity to make beautiful sounds, but to tell a very real story. Such questions allow the singer a chance to present an emotionally charged, highly specific work of art to an audience. As a teacher or coach, the more decisions you get an artist to make regarding these issues, the more authentic the performance will become.

The singer now has created several worlds to step into when performing the song, and often experiences a remarkable upturn in interpretive quality. While the singer still may be far from a fully formed jazz artist, the singing itself suddenly will take on a more authentic popular/jazz style. She now may seem less like a singer singing notes, and more like a person making a rather intimate, highly personal statement. Interestingly, questions of space, word colorations and even jazz style may begin to resolve themselves spontaneously. The singer need not figure them out, because they emerge readily from interpretive choices made.

Other important issues and questions remain. What kind of repertoire is best to explore? How could one take songs and work out arrangements for them? Would he or she eventually become a singer who is comfortable as a "scat" artist who could improvise freely, using syllables? All such considerations will fall into place in due time, once a good beginning has been made. It is hoped that, through this article, teachers and coaches everywhere will be able more effectively to open the door for classical artists who are interested in taking the first exploratory steps into the unfamiliar territory of jazz and popular song.

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*Dr. Gloria Cooper grew up in Missouri, where she earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in music at the University of Missouri. Dr. Cooper then moved to San Francisco, where her performing career flourished as a jazz vocalist and pianist. She was a mainstay of the city's musical life at the Hyatt on Union Square, where she appeared during an unbroken span of twelve years, and in many other venues, alongside such notable jazz artists as Donald Bailey, Herb Gibson, Eddie Harris, Eddie Henderson, Red Holloway, David "Fathead" Newman, Jimmy Witherspoon and others.*

*Dr. Cooper subsequently moved to New York City and earned an EdD from Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1992. She is currently Assistant Professor of Music at Long Island University, Brooklyn, where she teaches voice and jazz performance. Dr. Cooper's new CD,* Day By Day *(GAC Music), is available online from Jazznow.com, Amazon.com or gacmusiconline.com. Additionally, Dr. Cooper has just served as editor/contributor for* Sing Jazz! Lead-sheets for 76 Jazz Vocals, *published by Second Floor Music and distributed by Hal Leonard Corporation.*