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Aida Edemariam can sing, but she can't swing. Will five months of muscle training (and animal impersonations) make her a great jazz singer?

How do you solve a problem like Aida?

I can't get any lower than this . . . Edemariam with teacher Laura Zakian

Every fortnight for the past five months, I have found myself standing in a living room in south London, quacking like an angry duck, meowing like a cat, whining like a dog, baaing like a sheep, and nagging like a witch. I've pretended I'm Carmen Miranda, a Smurf and a bored robot. I've wailed like a baby while pointing my chin up at the ceiling and holding my tongue between thumb and forefinger. I've beaten my chest and made creaking-door sounds. When Laura Zakian asks me, "Have we done 'going up sniffy mother-in-law, going down twang'?" the answer is yes.

I met Zakian a year ago when, somewhat ill-advisedly, I auditioned for a jazz-singing course. I liked her because she was bossy and forthright. Turns out she's also a pretty good teacher. She had to be: my voice is not exactly a jazz voice. I'm a soprano, for starters, and a mixture of requiems, evensong and a term singing choral music in French and German at university has produced a voice that's high, clear and polite. My Miss Otis Regrets came out as if I'd suddenly become a lady-in-waiting to the Queen. "It's terribly smart," said Zakian, amused.

Part of jazz's impact comes from the sense of being directly spoken to, though that, as Zakian puts it, "doesn't mean speaking it", but rather using elements more associated with your speaking voice. It turns out I had no "speech quality" at all. Any idea that I could make the transition from choirgirl to jazz singer in six weeks »

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PHOTOGRAPH **FRANK BARON**

was dispelled in that first lesson. We would have to start from scratch, entirely retooling my vocal chords.

There are, say laryngologists, two modes for the voice. The first is thick-fold, or chest voice: the voice that most of us speak in, where the vocal chords are relaxed and thick, producing a richer sound, up to what is called the first passagio, the note at which they start to stretch and thin. For women,

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this is usually at the D flat above middle C. The second mode is called, unsurprisingly, thin-fold. "That's fine if you're doing classical singing," says Zakian. But in pop and jazz, the idea is to get a more mixed sound over the passagio, blending it so that there is no break, while staying in speech quality. Because I'm used to the upper register, I simply don't have the vocal musculature required to take thick-fold higher. My vocal chords just flop, making a sound like a teenage boy's voice cracking. It feels like an elastic band twanging in my throat.

Singing takes all of you. That's what makes it so joyful – and so exasperating. The lessons prove incredibly physical, all about pelvic floors, hormonal cycles, tongues, spines and breath. You can sound different depending on how you stand, or how you tilt your head. And the voice is a barometer of psychological weather: tension is obvious; happiness lifts a voice; depression can take it away altogether. Self-consciousness strangles it, so you have to be vulnerable, relaxed – but in control. It's a tricky balance. As for training the voice, I quickly learned that musical comprehension happens on various levels: intellectual, which is straightforward enough; and physical, which is a whole other thing, achieved through practice and a kind of unconscious coaxing. Will a delicate muscle to work and the chances are it will promptly disobey.

Hence my introduction to what Zakian calls "the department of funny noises", designed to improve flexibility and strength, and develop speech quality. It's like doing press-ups: we're training muscles, even if we can't see or feel them much. In our first lesson, Zakian said I "might see a difference in three months – your voice won't change if you don't practise on a daily basis". Daily practice combined with a full-time job is a bit of a pipe dream for me, though. Some weeks I manage three hour-long sessions, others none at all. It feels frustrating and pointless. But then one day my voice just feels different, as though all the gubbins in my throat have suddenly got the point.

Another absolute fundamental in jazz, of course, is swing. While it is possible to say, as Zakian does, that "the underlying feel is one of triplets with the first two crotchets tied and the third accented a little to give you swing quavers", the fact is that there is a kind of alchemy involved, an unconscious understanding you only really get from listening to jazz all your life. Though she doesn't spell it out, I am not, it is fair to say, her most apt pupil. I didn't grow up listening to jazz and never thought about rhythm much, even in 10 years of piano lessons; trying to understand how someone might "push the quavers a lot, or sit back on them" defeats me. The fact that a professional jazz singer is expected to name a groove for the band, who will then launch into, say, a cut-time funk version of Love For Sale, I find incomprehensible. But it's also true that when I stop listening so hard, and over-thinking, and beating myself up because I've counted wrong, and just feel, things go a lot better. And singing songs like Shiny Stockings, by Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Foster, make you swing despite yourself.

I am a great deal happier with phrasing and melodic improvisation. Zakian's favourite jazz singer is Carmen McRae, because of the way she privileges delivering the story. "The words are the most important thing," says Zakian, "because you're a singer, and therefore a songsmith, and therefore a wordsmith. Even if you haven't written them yourself, you're interpreting the meaning of them."

The composer is paramount in most classical singing: you can interpret mood and feeling, but you have to follow, accurately, both the melody and the tempo written on the page. In jazz, what's on the page is the starting point. It's a performer's art, and the performance changes every time. Which sounds brilliant – licence to do whatever you like – but, of course, it's not quite that simple. You have to learn a language, of what works and what doesn't, and then you have to make it second nature. "It's like any language," says Zakian. "You choose which words to use, but you're not going to go through a sentence saying, 'Well, I've used a preposition and a verb followed by a conjunction, so now I'll use a noun.' You have to have the vocabulary in your head."

And so we learn octave displacement, in which you sing a note at the octave below or above the one written (a favourite Ella Fitzgerald trick); passing notes, in which you touch on notes between two written notes ("typically jazz – they give a bit more rhythmic agitation"); and melisma, in which you take a syllable and bend it through various notes before proceeding (you have to be careful with this, or it can go a bit Mariah Carey). We try inverting the melodic line, a bit of anticipation, a bit of delay, a bit of silence, a bit of a lick (a short melodic motif).

For a little inspiration, I go to see Claire Martin and Anita Wardell at Ronnie Scott's, and the amazing Christine Tobin at the Pizza Express Jazz Club in Soho, appreciating their nifty ways with chromatics. We try a bit of that, too, climbing up through semi-tones to see where I end up. Doing too much of it makes me sound like a drunk warbling in a shower, but used sparingly, it makes for lovely light and shade.

Finally, it's time to put it all together, in a rendition of Rodgers and Hart's My Funny Valentine, which seems straightforward enough – except that putting it all together, and making it sound natural and easy, is a bit like rubbing your stomach, patting your head, tap-dancing, doing yoga and having an intimate conversation, all at the same time. At least I don't have to think too much about swing. My Funny Valentine has been performed in many ways, from Sinatra's croon, to Fitzgerald's lush version with violins, to Sarah Vaughan's exploration of most of her four octaves, but no one really messes much with the tempo.

Everything else about it is hard enough, though. I've discovered a pleasingly resonant sound in my bottom register (I can now sing a low G, too), but this makes tackling the higher phrases without flipping into an operatic vibrato far more difficult. I've been practising in the key Ella sings it in, G minor, but Zakian moves me up to an A minor, which denies me some nice low notes, but makes it all sound much more integrated.

Once I get over my attachment to how the song "ought" to be and make my first forays into improvisation, playing with the melodic line turns out to be a lot of fun. We decide on a Chet Baker approach, slow and fragile, then throw in octave displacements, and an inversion or two. I try a bit of chromaticism, sliding into "unphotographable" like a snowball descending a hillside – and encountering a tree. I'm inordinately pleased, if a bit baffled, when Zakian says: "That's nice! Because you're getting the major 7 against the minor 7. That's really nice!"

But every time you think you're getting somewhere, something pops up to remind you just how far you have to go. Singing with a pianist, for example. Zakian explains: "Because you can sing anything you like, within reason, melodically and rhythmically, if the pianist plays the melodic line for you, that's going to constrain you." So the pianist Chris Lee improvises away, while I have to rely "on being able to hear the chord changes, being able to feel where the beat is".

It's like being sent out into a busy street blindfolded. But you just have to calm down, breathe, and listen, listen, listen. The first time I get it – when I start in the right place and end in the right place, nothing more – it feels amazing. Then, when I manage to sing with the piano, and improvise, and (mostly) stay in speech quality, well, it might not seem so to anyone else, but it feels to me as if I'm beginning to make music

Laura Zakian's album About Love is out on December 1.

PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL HOEFLER/REDFERNS; CORBIS; EAMONN McCABE; HULTON