

# Creating Inclusivity: Transgender Singers in the Choral Rehearsal

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Recent political, cultural, and legal opposition to the oppression of the transgender community has resulted in greater awareness of the discrimination against transgender-inclusive gender identities and gender expressions.<sup>1</sup> As these issues continue to gain more attention, and as transgender individuals become more open with their identities, the choral community can expect an increased number of openly-transgender singers in choral rehearsals. As the community welcomes transgender singers, choral pedagogues need to create a pedagogical framework that welcomes and affirms the transgender singer. This paper provides the choral conductor with information regarding pedagogical considerations for working with transgender voices undergoing hormone replacement therapy. This paper also provides the conductor with insight into creating trans-inclusive policies for everyday practice in the choral rehearsal.

## *Defining Transgender*

Transgender, often shortened to simply “trans,” is an encompassing term for individuals whose gender *identity* or gender *expression* does not align with the cultural expectations associated with the individual’s assigned sex at birth.<sup>2</sup> Gender *identity* refers to how the individual perceives their gender: female, male, or another category or combination of categories. By contrast, gender *expression* refers to how an individual manifests their gender through behavior, clothing, mannerisms, and other cultural nuances of expressing gender.<sup>3</sup> Identity is a reflection of one’s internal perception, and expression is how the individual conveys this construct.

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<sup>2</sup> Tre Wentling, Kristen Schilt, Elroi J. Windsor, and Betsy Lucal, “Teaching Transgender,” *Teaching Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2008): 49–57.

<sup>3</sup> Becca Chase and Paula Ressler, “An LBGT/Queer Glossary,” *The English Journal* 98, no. 4 (2009): 23–24.

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<sup>1</sup> George Flaherty, Review of *Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Issues in Education: Programs, Policies, and Practices*, by James T. Sears, *The Radical Teacher* no. 76 (2006): 36.

Although many gender expressions and gender identities fall within the transgender umbrella, this article will focus on two identities: trans males or transmen, and trans females or transwomen. Transmen are individuals who were born female, but who identify and live as male, and may or may not have altered their bodies through medical intervention to resemble their gender identity more closely. Conversely, transwomen are individuals who were born male, but identify and live as female; like transmen, they may or may not have altered their bodies through medical intervention to resemble their gender identity.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Trans Male Singing Voice*

In teenage males, an increase in testosterone causes the vocal folds to thicken and lengthen. The cartilage of the larynx increases and tilts, pressing through the inner walls of the throat. This protuberance creates the thyroid process, generally known as the Adam's apple. This tilt is responsible for lowering the range and pitch of the speaking and singing male voice.<sup>5</sup> A common, and at times desired, side effect of testosterone for transmen is the deepening of the voice. Transmen undergoing hormone treatment commonly begin with using the highest recommended dose of testosterone. Upon receiving hormone replacement therapy, the trans male voice changes are similar to the developing cisgender (a person whose gender identity corresponds to their biological sex) male voice, but occur in a much shorter time. What takes place over several years for the cisgender male voice can occur in one year for the trans male voice.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Janice N Killian, "Perceptions of the Voice-Change Process: Male Adult versus Adolescent Musicians and Nonmusicians," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 45, no. 4 (1997): 521–35.

One key difference is the size of the larynx. Although the vocal folds of transmen grow thicker while taking testosterone, the vocal folds do not lengthen. Also, according to the work of Shelagh Davies, the cartilage of the larynx remains the same, creating a shorter, smaller vocal tract in comparison to cisgender men.<sup>6</sup>

Testosterone may not drop the speaking pitch of the voice to its desired range, and transmen report that the voice may become persistently hoarse and weak. However, the loss of singing ability is not definite, pedagogues such as Alexandros Constansis have catalogued strategies that accommodate the trans male voice into the choral rehearsal.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, a choral conductor's approach in working with transmen is contingent on whether the singer is receiving testosterone, and if so, how long the therapy has lasted. If the voice is new to the effects of testosterone, then it is important for the conductor to introduce singing habits and warmups that reduce strain and allow for the voice to settle. As the voice begins to settle under hormone replacement therapy, the conductor can aid the trans male singer in developing the breath by developing an awareness of forward resonance sensations; many trans male singers report signs of breathiness during hormone replacement therapy. Note that as the voice settles, the trans male singer should not sing pitches from c3 downward, as this can cause fatigue or damage to the developing trans male voice.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Shelagh Davies, "Training the Transgender Singer: Finding the Voice Inside," *Inter Nos* 49, no. 1 (2016): 10–12.

<sup>7</sup> Alexandros Constansis, "The Changing Female to Male (FTM) Voice," *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008): paragraph 32.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## *Pedagogical Considerations for the Trans Male Singing Voice*

Many vocal pedagogues, such as Alexandros Constansis, warn that it is imperative that the trans male singer and conductor take care to avoid abuse of the changing voice during the beginning stages of testosterone therapy; for example, expecting the trans singer to be able to sing in a tenor or baritone range when it is uncomfortable. Many transmen also decide to pursue chest binding along with testosterone, which can restrict range and breathing capacity. Therefore, the choral conductor will need to help reinforce proper diaphragmatic breathing; this technique can protect the voice from harm and enhance the presence of the voice during transition. According to Constansis, practicing appropriate diaphragmatic breathing allows for full lung capacity despite the restrictive sensations of chest binding, and supports the vocal transition to a lower fundamental frequency.<sup>9</sup>

Since the trans singer can undergo a series of rapid physical changes within a short period of time when beginning hormone replacement therapy, it is helpful for the choral conductor to demonstrate the physical sensations of diaphragmatic breathing:

1. Allow the singers to stand in a relaxed, upright position with their eyes closed.
2. Have the singers place one hand on their upper chest, the other on their navel.
3. State that the goal of the exercise is to have the lower hand rise first during inhalation.
4. Direct the singers to breathe out gently, pause, and then begin to inhale.
5. After the initial breath cycle, instruct the singers to breathe naturally.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

6. Remind the singers that this is not an exercise in forcing a deeper breath, but rather a natural inhalation and exhalation in which the lower hand rises before the upper hand.

7. Continue the exercise for 2–3 minutes.<sup>10</sup>

There may be a time during a singer's transition when open vowels must be used sparingly, as they can be taxing on the changing vocal folds. Shalegh Davies, a speech-language pathologist who specializes with trans singers advocates that it is important to allow the trans male voice to 'mark' at this time, giving singers the option and opportunity to build awareness of their vocal journey. It is a good idea for both the singer and conductor to debrief about the changing voice, so that the conductor understands the comfort, capabilities, and direction of the voice.<sup>11</sup> If open vowels are taxing during transition, one way to help the trans male singer reinforce diaphragmatic breathing is through the practice of phonating consonants, especially fricatives before adding a vowel. For example:

1. Practice diaphragmatic breathing and have the singers exhale on the consonant [v] or [f]. The pace of breath should be consistent. The goal of this exercise is to encourage appropriate phonation after a diaphragmatic breath, rather than taxing the student's breath.
2. Using the consonants [s] or [z], lead a call and response exercise utilizing a variety of rhythmic passages. Start with simple rhythmic patterns with longer note values, then continue toward more complex passages. The conductor should continually check for consistent and appropriate inhalation and exhalation.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, "Training the Transgender Singer," 10–12.

3. Next, allow the singers to explore their full range with the consonant [ŋ]. Remind singers to be mindful of the limits of their voice when performing this test.
4. Have the singers phonate with a lip trill on a five-note descending scale pattern. The purpose of this exercise is not to check in with the range, but to emphasize supported breath throughout phonation.
5. Finally, using the same scale pattern, have the singers utilize an open vowel after a fricative, e.g., [fa]. Remind singers that the goal of this is not to sing at full voice, especially if approaching a break. Allow the use of falsetto.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Trans Female Singing Voice*

Although testosterone has more pronounced effects on the trans male voice, estrogen may not have noticeable effects on the trans female singing voice. Unlike the trans male, many transwomen went through puberty as males. Therefore, the larynx enlarged and descended, and the vocal cords have lengthened and thickened. Once puberty is complete, estrogen cannot manipulate or change the physiology of the voice.<sup>13</sup> Trans women may elect to undergo voice therapy with a speech pathologist to raise the speaking pitch of the voice, however this does not necessarily alter the range when singing. However, the choral conductor should remain cognizant of the fact that that voice change—as an important part of trans voice therapy goals—will result in raising the speaking voice through modifying vocal quality, resonance, and inflection. These changes will affect the singing habits of the trans female singer as well.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Constansis, “The Changing Female to Male (FTM) Voice,” 32 pars.

<sup>13</sup> Shelagh Davies, Viktória G. Papp, and Christella Antoni, “Voice and Communication Change for Gender Nonconforming Individuals: Giving Voice to the Person Inside,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 16, no. 3 (2015): 122–23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Pedagogical Considerations for the Trans Female Singing Voice*

Transwomen may wish to discuss ways of exploring the expanse of their voices—the choral conductor may provide assistance through the use of the semi-occluded vocal tract technique.<sup>15</sup> Although the reasons for using the semi-occluded vocal tract technique are varied, one pedagogical benefit for transwomen is that it aids the singer in improving breath management. According to vocal pedagogues John Nix and Blake Simpson, the singer can engage in greater thoracic and abdominal support without using a pressed phonation, allowing for greater ease in expanding the top part of the range. This technique encourages the use of head-voice, due to the sympathetic vibration of the oro-facial tissues and sinuses of the face, as well as the vibration of the upper surface of the vocal folds with acoustic pressures above the glottis.<sup>16</sup>

The conductor can present this technique in two parts in the choral rehearsal, as follows:

1. Postures where semi-occlusion remains consistent throughout sustained phonation. The conductor can ask singers to sing a specific phrase or melodic pattern into a straw using a variety of vowels. Conductors can also have the singers phonate the same phrase of pattern using voiced fricative consonants or sustained nasal consonants.
2. Occlusion as oscillation. Conductors can ask singers utilize lip buzzing or a rolled [r] throughout a phrase or warm-up sequence.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Davies, “Training the Transgender Singer,” 10–12.

<sup>16</sup> John Nix and Blake Simpson, “Semi-Occluded Vocal Tract Postures and Their Application in the Singing Voice Studio,” *Journal of Singing* 64, no. 3 (2008): 339–42.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

To aid in the transfer from semi-occlusion to singing in the language of the score, choral conductors can toggle between two exercises. First, the conductor can ask students to sing a phrase from the score in a semi-occluded posture, remaining cognizant of the sensations they are experiencing. After this, the conductor can transfer to singing the exact same phrase in the language of the score, making sure that singers are mindful of replicating the sensations experienced with semi-occlusion.

### *Practical Gender Considerations in the Choral Program*

In keeping with the best interests of the trans singer, the choral conductor should recognize that a trans singer's decision regarding how they express their gender and whether they choose to undergo hormone replacement therapy does not inform their desired voice type. For example, a trans male might wish to remain an alto after their transition and thus refuse testosterone. A trans female may decide to take estrogen while maintaining the voice they had before their transition.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, an inclusive practice separates gender identity from their choir's respective vocal sections. A baritone section might have singers that identify as male, female, trans, or something entirely different. The conductor should thus refer to their sections as soprano, alto, tenor, or bass rather than men or women, in order to honor the diverse array of genders and gender expressions in the ensemble.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Davies, "Training the Transgender Singer," 10–12.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Miller, "Creating Choirs That Welcome Trans\* Singers," *GALA Choruses Blog*, February 8, 2016, <http://galachoruses.org/blog/creating-choirs-that-welcome-trans-singers/>.

Transgender singers may choose to express their gender in ways that challenge the cultural concepts of what is traditionally masculine or feminine. Therefore, as many trans singers undergo a transition that may also result in a new name or series of personal pronouns, the choral pedagogue will need to negotiate addressing students with pronouns that may challenge the traditional binary of he/him/his/himself and she/her/hers/herself. For example, some trans singers may choose to identify with pronouns associated with their gender before transition, whereas others may choose the opposite. Some singers may prefer to be addressed with gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns such as they/them/theirs/themself, or more recent classifications, such as zie/zim/zir/zis/zieself.<sup>20</sup> To avoid assumptions or mistakenly using the wrong pronoun for a singer, at the beginning of an audition, semester, or rehearsal season, allow singers to pass around a sign-in or info sheet that details the name that they would like to be addressed by in class or rehearsal, as well as the pronouns they prefer.

The inclusion of transgender singers in choral programs also requires an examination of the program's choral uniform or concert attire policy. Many choral ensembles subscribe to the tradition of western choral concert attire, reinforcing the gender binary of masculine and feminine. This policy may not acknowledge singers that do not identify within this gender binary. Therefore, the conductor should consider providing a uniform option that presents as gender neutral. However, if the conductor would like to continue with traditional uniforms while maintaining a transgender-inclusive lens, the conductor can give each singer the option to choose which gendered uniform they would like to wear, thereby allowing the transgender singer to present themselves in a way that honors their gender expression.

<sup>20</sup> Chase and Ressler, "An LGBT/Queer Glossary," 23–24.

## *Conclusion*

Considering that choral music can be an outlet for social change, social justice, and inclusivity, our musical practice should be inclusive of—and welcoming towards—singers of all genders and gender expressions. Choral conductors can provide a space for transgender

singers that avoids common stereotypes of gender, and instead honors and respects all gender identities and expressions. Work toward creating inclusivity for transgender individuals allows pedagogical philosophies to celebrate social change within a profession that continues to become more multifaceted, modeling a framework that celebrates diversity and champions equity.

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