

Facilitating the Empowerment of Transgender Voices Through Singing:

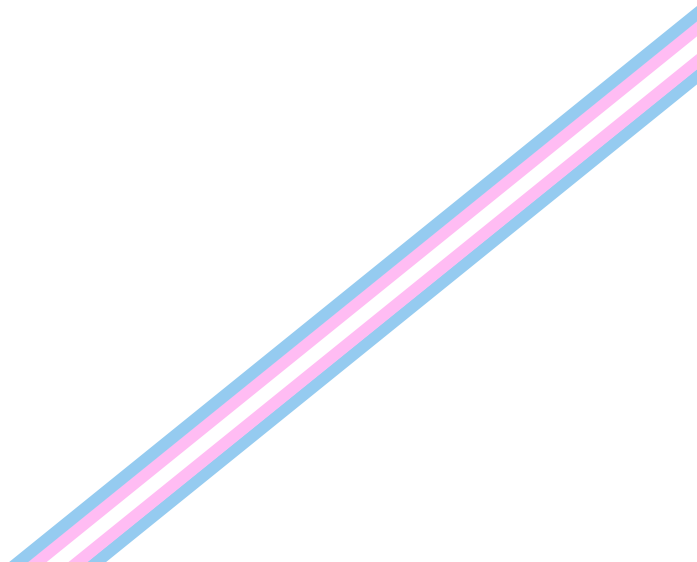
A case for the removal of cisgendered expectations in Western classical singing, and the creation of trans-positive singing spaces

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Introduction

The pain of not being able to sing with others is something many freelance singers have experienced over the past few months, as a result of COVID-19. Many of us who sing professionally have suffered not only from the financial impact of restrictions on live singing, but also the emotional impact. Despite our best efforts, we have lost much of our sense of community, and the tangible joy of singing together in front of an audience. It is encouraging to know that we might be singing together again before long, perhaps looking back and wondering how we all made it through that flat, sad, songless time. With a vaccine in sight, I am tentatively optimistic. The prospect of not singing together again indefinitely is excruciating to consider.

And yet, for many singers who are transgender, organised singing has always been, and will remain, largely inaccessible. I was entirely unaware of this until very recently. As far as I knew, I had never seen, nor worked with, any transgender singers: not as a boy chorister, nor as a choral scholar, nor anywhere on the freelance circuit in the UK and abroad. For a long time, the strangeness of this had not occurred to me. That is, until I made a connection between conventions in organised singing and the everyday challenges transgender individuals face – a connection I made as a result of being exposed to my (transgender) partner's experiences in the wider world. I cannot now unsee the viscerally damaging effects of ignorant behaviour – whether it is overt or much more subtle - upon transgender people in singing environments. In either case, the harm is both acute and lasting.

This simple shift in awareness means I can recognise transphobia in its various forms and intervene. The outcomes have been heartening on the whole. I have seen that institutional change is possible through education and dialogue. That is why I have chosen to develop my trans advocacy work in singing, and consolidate the knowledge I have gained, in order to share it with Sound Connections and my peers.

Group singing is a 'joyful activity which has the potential to enhance the lives of those people fortunate enough to discover the benefits it can facilitate' (Judd, 2013). It improves mental health (Morrison, 2011), actively promotes a connection to the body, and encourages social inclusion (Defined as: 'sense of self and of being socially integrated') (Graham F. Welch, 2014). Conversely, transgender people are well-known to suffer from poor mental health, and often to feel disconnected from their bodies; and they can be particularly isolated compared to their peers (Carmel, Hopwood, & dickey, 2014). Therefore, the benefits of group singing could

be particularly profound for transgender people. However, because of pre-existing gendered and cisgendered expectations associated with voice type, they are either excluded altogether, or risk being subjected to abuse if they participate. Despite these adverse conditions there are a small number who have achieved a high level of success, and I would encourage my readers to listen to their accounts of transphobia in the profession (Lester, 2019; NowThis Entertainment & Lucas, 2019; The Independent & Madagame, 2017; NowThis News & Sinclairé, 2019). The overall picture suggests that transgender people, who might need the benefits of singing the most out of any demographic, are among the least likely to access it. I argue that the need to make singing more accessible to them is urgent: not only because they are being unfairly excluded from an enjoyable pastime, but also because singing could directly help to alleviate the widespread mental health, body image and social isolation issues within the transgender community.

This article is divided into three sections. In Section One, I will explain how cisgendered expectations are enforced in the activity, and the teaching, of organised singing. In Section Two, I will discuss how these expectations cause specific harm to transgender people, leading to exclusion and/or avoidance. Finally, in Section Three, I will discuss how we can begin to address these issues and find possible solutions to them.

Section One

In this section, I will address wider society's gendered expectations as they relate to voice type. I will do this by first establishing what these expectations are, and why they are misplaced, with a brief discussion on the distinction between gender and sex and their relevance to voice. I will later explore how these expectations manifest in the classical singing community, and the consequences they have for transgender individuals (see Section Two). This will be in order to establish a clear path to finding solutions in Section Three.

Singing and gendered expectations

“Ladies, let's go again from the top”. This is a phrase I often hear in choral rehearsals, and it takes me a moment to realise the conductor means me. He is actually referring to the altos, of which I am one. I am a countertenor, and sing the alto line – a voice part regularly associated

with women, although I identify as a cis (not transgender) man. Cis men singing alto is, in fact, common practice in church choirs all over the country. When the conductor wants to hear from the basses or tenors, he might say, “Gents, let’s have that passage again”. In choral singing we frequently hear of ‘men’s’ voices (tenors and basses) and ‘women’s’ voices (sopranos and altos). There are certain expectations that any given voice part will belong to a particular gender (‘men sing low, women sing high’). Although these expectations are not always met, they persist, despite major developments in our understanding of sex and gender since 1990.

A key text that has been highly influential for my thinking on voice and gender is Liz Jackson Hearn and Brian Kremer’s *The Singing Teacher’s Guide to Transgender Voices* (Jackson Hearn & Kremer, 2018). It takes a multi-faceted approach to understanding the specific needs of transgender singers, and highlights many of the prevailing assumptions that deny them access to this activity. This book is the first of its kind, directed at singing teachers, rather than academic researchers or the singers themselves. The authors note that gendered assumptions go further than simply the idea of ‘male’ voices being low, and ‘female’ voices being high:

Even voices that sing some of the same repertoire and have similar qualities have different voice types for different genders, like in the case of countertenors, contraltos and some mezzo-sopranos... the idea that men can be sopranos and women can be basses is still met with resistance by some of the singing teaching community.

(Jackson Hearn & Kremer, 2018)

This widespread association of voice type with gender, and therefore body type, creates a highly gendered (and cisgendered) singing environment, with most choral groups divided into men and women. Whilst it is true that the voice develops according to sex (the direct result of hormones acting on the larynx at puberty), a person’s sex is not the same as their gender. This premise is central to my argument.

Gender, Sex and Voice

To orientate this premise within the world of singing, I have laid it out below:

Gender = sex (body type) = Voice type

(The prevailing assumption)

vs.

Gender \neq sex (body type)

(Observable reality)

Many books and papers have been written on the distinction between sex and gender, so I will not elaborate too much on it here. However, it is worth outlining briefly, because of its importance to my argument. Babies are assigned a gender at birth by the attending physician, based on their genitalia (a primary sex characteristic), and for many people, this poses no problem. This is because the gender they have been assigned aligns with the gender identity they grow up to inhabit. Unfortunately, the fact that this is true for the majority of people leads to an assumption that sex is identical to gender, held both in society at large, and by many individuals. This confusion filters into everyday language, where sex and gender are often used interchangeably (e.g. saying ‘the fairer sex’ to imply women, or ‘same-sex marriage’ to describe the union between two people of the same gender). See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (Fausto-Sterling, 2012); Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Roughgarden, 2013); Alex Iantaffi and Meg-John Barker, *How to Understand Your Gender: A practical guide for exploring who you are* (Barker, 2018); Sam Killerman, *A Guide to Gender: The Social Justice Advocate’s Handbook* (Killerman, 2017) if you would like to explore this material further.

Voice type is a product of hormones and is not defined by gender. For this reason, it can be concluded that assigning a gender to the voice in the way demonstrated by the conductor in my earlier anecdote (or in any way for that matter) does not make logical sense - even if it might seem simpler to do so. In fact, it is especially illogical if we consider that many people do identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth - people whose voices have developed according to their sex. To date, there are an estimated 600,000 transgender people living in the UK, roughly 1 percent of the population (Stonewall, 2017). It follows, then, that there will be a large number of men, women, and non-binary individuals whose voices defy the gendered labels that could be incorrectly assigned to the way they sound. In short,

transgender people, by definition, do not always meet this expectation that men sing low and women sing high. These labels are liable to exclude many transgender people from singing.

As Jackson Hearn and Kremer explain,

Labelling a voice as masculine or feminine is problematic... because it ties the quality of the voice to the gender identity of the singer. A male-identified person with a high range and light timbre is no more or less of a man than a singer with a low range and dark timbre. A female-identified person with a low voice range who sings traditional baritone repertoire does not have a “masculine” voice any more than a female-identified soprano, because they both identify as women; the femininity of both singers is not intrinsically linked to their voices, and neither voice has intrinsically gendered characteristics.

(Jackson Hearn & Kremer, 2018)

These gendered assumptions are, nevertheless, highly prevalent in the discourse around singing. As we have seen, the language in day-to-day rehearsal spaces perpetuates these assumptions. Because they exist in society as a whole, they also find their way into much of the writing about singing and voice types – even into the most progressive texts, whose aim is to make the performing of classical music more accessible. For example, in Chapter 7 of Anna Bull’s *Class, Control and Classical Music* (Bull, 2019), she discusses the benefits of singing as experienced by young women in a Young Opera Company production of *The Magic Flute*. As reported by participants, these included improved body image, increased connection to the body, and alleviation of eating disorders. In this context, Bull refers to the *Magic Flute* aria sung by Pamina after Prince Tamino rejects her as ‘written in a range only women can sing... it is written in a fairly high part of the female voice’ (p.146, emphasis mine). As such, the gendered expectation about voice type is very much in evidence; and the language used as a result does, unfortunately, exclude transgender people. This is doubly unfortunate, given that the body image issues described by these young women, reportedly alleviated by the act of singing, are experienced to a great extent by transgender people (Carmel, Hopwood, & dickey, 2014).

Cisgendered expectations and choral traditions

In the choral context, these expectations are not limited simply to categorising voice types, but also to how singers are addressed (recall the automatic reference to men's and women's voices earlier). Unfortunately, the deep-seated belief that sex is equivalent to gender means that there is a corresponding, and equally strong, *disbelief* towards those who do not conform. This leads to myriad damaging conventions and behaviours which serve to alienate, discourage and invalidate singers who are transgender. We have the example of conductors describing singers by gender instead of voice type. Gendered dress codes, particularly for concerts and church services, are another ubiquitous example of how cisgendered expectations manifest in practice. Furthermore, because the Western choral tradition originated in a religious context, this policing of what singers wear in relation to their bodies (Feinberg, 1996) may well be intensified in this sphere.

Section Two

In this section, I will address different ways that the existing gendered expectations within the singing environment (as explored in Section 1) can cause specific harm to transgender people; and how this, in turn, prevents them from participating in singing. I will do this by first examining the particular problems cisgendered expectations may present in educational and professional settings, before drawing on two examples from my own professional experience to illustrate how the traditional choral setting can be exclusionary and ultimately transphobic.

Cisgendered assumptions and the impact on teaching

We are all members of a society embedded with cisgendered expectations, and singing teachers and conductors are no exception. Because of this, they are likely to assume sex and gender are the same; and this affects the way they label, and refer to, their students' voices. For example, the teacher might expect that a new student whom they regard to be male (either correctly or incorrectly) will have a low voice, and this expectation may not be met by the student. Further to this, a transmasculine student may be wearing a binder (a constrictive garment used to flatten the chest). If the teacher is unaware, and has not even considered this eventuality, the way they

teach that student about breathing will be at best ineffective, and at worst harmful. In the event that the singer feels comfortable to say that they wear a binder, the teacher may be ill-equipped to understand the fundamental need to wear it, and suggest that they simply take it off to sing, rather than helping to cultivate lower breathing that does not involve the upper ribcage as much (Jackson Hearn & Kremer, 2018). The outcome of this is that the teacher may unintentionally end up asking the student to do something they find distressing, whilst also remaining ignorant of this distress. With increased awareness, and the appropriate language, the teacher could work with the student to find more effective ways to breathe, using methods that do not undermine the student's identity.

Singing conventions

The enforcing of gendered dress codes in a choral context is, at best, alienating for transgender people, binary and non-binary alike. At worst, it is thoroughly dehumanising. For young transgender singers in an educational setting, the pressure to make clothing choices that reflect the way their voice is perceived by those in positions of power can be highly distressing, and can discourage those singers from continuing to take part in an activity they would otherwise enjoy or even benefit from. Drawing on the work of Molly Rastin (Rastin, 2016), Ryan Aguirre points out,

‘Asking students to wear clothing that conflicts with their gender identity or gender expression has the potential to create negative emotional associations with the choral classroom’ (Aguirre, 2018).

The impact of placing these sartorial demands on transgender singers can be equally damaging in both educational and professional contexts. I have seen numerous examples of cisgendered expectations being enforced in this way during my day-to-work as a freelance singer, both in the UK and abroad. I will now describe two examples. (To protect privacy, all identifying features have been removed from the accounts that follow.)

Example 1: Gendered expectations leading to misunderstanding about gender presentation in the case of a non-binary transgender person

While on a choir tour in mainland Europe, it transpired that a bass colleague, whose gender identity was a transfeminine non-binary one, was being forced to wear men's clothes for concerts. They were assigned male at birth; however, they presented their identity by dressing in clothes more typically worn by women. On the point of being booked for this tour, my colleague explained to the manager that they were non-binary, and did not present as a man; despite this, these clothing demands were made. I knew that being forced to present as a man would be highly distressing for them, so I raised the issue with management. I explained that treating my colleague this way was unacceptable.

In the meeting that followed (with the director, the manager, my colleague and me), it emerged that the decision to enforce the highly gendered dress code had come from a misunderstanding. The manager confessed that she had failed to clarify at the booking stage what non-binary meant. Instead, she had assumed that my colleague was actually a flamboyant gay man who wanted to cross-dress on stage for fun. This led to fears that they would dress in a way that was inappropriate for a formal concert – notably a high-profile performance in a cathedral, attended by the bishop. The manager and conductor were particularly concerned that my colleague's appearance would upset the conservative Catholic audience. They explained that they had a very good relationship with the locals, and did not want to jeopardise that by allowing a singer they (wrongly) understood to be a man to present in any other way. My colleague and I were able to allay their misgivings: the conductor and manager both apologised as soon as they understood that making cisgendered demands on clothing could be harmful to transgender singers. They also expressed gratitude for the time my colleague and I had taken to educate them on these issues. After some productive discussion, my colleague was allowed to dress in their usual choice of smart black skirt and blouse. Incidentally, the conductor and manager need not have worried – at the end of that concert, the bishop came to thank the singers, and was just as warmly appreciative to my colleague as to the rest of us. It is worth noting here that my colleague faced specific discrimination because of their non-binary identity. Their body type (and voice type) led to binary, sex-based assumptions about their gender identity and presentation. Because sex is largely a binary distinction, simply conflating it with gender can lead to ignorance about how non-binary people may want to be perceived. In this case, the resistance to allowing my colleague to dress in 'feminine' clothing was rooted in not understanding their need to do so.

Example 2: Witnessing transphobia in a UK choir for children and adults

I was booked as a choir deputy in a church with a well-established choral reputation. This particular choir, like many others, comprised adults singing the lower parts, and children singing the soprano line. This setup allows for an excellent educational opportunity for children to learn singing in a structured way, and to work with other children, guided by adult professional singers. As often happens on a Sunday, I was booked to sing services at the same church in the morning and in the afternoon. Between the morning and afternoon services, there was time to have a break and catch up with colleagues. The assistant organist joined us as we were sitting around a table, and mentioned that one of the choristers was undergoing a social transition (Defined as ‘Transitioning in the context of everyday life and social spaces, without necessarily taking steps to medically transition’ (Erickson-Schroth, 2014)). This young singer had made it clear that he had changed his name and pronouns to match his gender identity. The assistant organist told the group that he was at that time actively refusing to use the chorister’s chosen name and pronouns - regardless of how it might make the chorister feel - saying words to the effect of, ‘*she* can change *her* name and gender by deed poll when *she* turns eighteen, but until then I have to use the name and gender that match *her* passport for when we go on tour’. Through my past experience working with transgender people, I knew that treating a transgender child this way would have a devastating effect on their mental health. Furthermore, it was also against current UK law:

‘Under the equality act 2010 any young person has a right to be addressed as their true gender, regardless of any diagnosis or medical intervention and irrespective of age’
(Asquith, 2020)

During the informal gathering, I felt unable to confront the assistant organist on his transphobia directly, and believed it would be more productive to do so in a professional environment with the support of the music director. At the time, I simply challenged the assistant organist by suggesting it surely made more sense to call someone what they wanted to be called. However, I did raise what I had heard, and highlighted the need for immediate action, with the music director (who oversaw all the musical activities of the church). Ultimately, I understood it to

be a safeguarding concern: educators have an obligation not to harm their students. The music director was very surprised to learn what had been happening. He acted very quickly, engaging the extensive safeguarding team and arranging a follow-up meeting with me. During that discussion, I was able to advise that Mermaids (a charity to support transgender children and their families) provide staff training in transgender awareness, and the music director agreed that approaching them would be a positive step. As I will demonstrate later in this article, this was not an isolated incident.

The Singing Environment

We saw in Section One that Western society associates voice type with gender. Because the majority of people identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, the voice (particularly in terms of pitch and inflection) functions as a *gender marker* (Jørgensen, 2016). That is, a person is often perceived as male or female based on how they sound. We also saw that sex and gender are two different things, and how transgender people, by definition, do not conform to this belief. They are, in fact, living proof that sex and gender are not the same. However, because the voice type originates in a person's sex (i.e. it is the product of hormones), not their gender, the assumption that a transgender person is male or female based on voice type could well be incorrect; and if so, this would cause them - whether they are binary or non-binary - profound distress in many forms.

Because of the strong association in Western society between voice and gender, many transgender people hesitate to be involved in singing, for fear of being misread (or, perhaps, misheard) as a different gender than the one they are. For example, one transgender interviewee in an article about teaching transgender singers reports,

‘My discomfort with my voice actually held me back from singing for a long time. I have loved singing my whole life, but I was too uncomfortable to join choir until about a year after my voice had changed [to align with my gender identity] and was finally stable. I was very afraid of joining choir and being gendered for a long time and only finally joined after my voice had changed and I knew that my range was finally considered “male”’ (Brian Manternach, 2017).

The relationship between voice and gender identity is a complex one. It is true that voice type does not itself indicate a gender - hence the need to dispose of these assumptions when discussing voice type. However, voice type is also held to be either an affirming or dysphoria-inducing component of an individual's experience of their gender identity (Jørgensen, 2016) (Goldstein, 2014). This is one of the reasons it can be very distressing when a transgender person's particular voice type (and body type) leads to the incorrect perception that they are a gender they are not. The perpetuation of this learned equivalence of sex and gender is integral to transphobia.

Examples 1 and 2 above illustrate how transphobia can occur either through ignorance or 'outright malice' (Lester, 2019). In Example 1, with my non-binary colleague, management were not actively misgendering them or trying to erase their identity. They were simply unaware of the reasons why someone they (wrongly) understood to be a man would need to wear anything other than 'smart black shirt and black trousers' in concert. In Example 2, a person in a position of authority actively denied a child's gender identity, misgendering him by using the wrong pronouns and a female name. It is important to remember that in both cases, the pain inflicted on the singer is equally great. This is why it is so crucial to raise awareness of the potential harm that can be caused, and to create spaces that are trans-inclusive and trans-positive. In singing spaces that are neither of those things, there is intrinsic potential for transgender people to be abused, either through ignorance or on purpose. This can manifest in a variety of ways, as we will see from the following excerpt by transgender opera singer, writer and activist CN Lester. Writing for the National Opera Studio website, they report:

Over the past few years, I have spoken to more trans musicians (trans singers in particular) than I had ever hoped I would know. All have emphasised the supportive people in their lives, the teachers, colleagues, directors and coaches who have believed in us and helped up [sic] to succeed. But every one of them has spoken of the other people who, through ignorance, lack of care or outright malice, have made our lives worse. Interactions with these people are common, and can be more damaging, than most cis (not trans) people imagine.

At one extreme are cases of insulting and exclusionary behaviour, sometimes turning into outright harassment. It's being told that there's no place for 'people like you' in the music industry or educational institutions, being humiliated in masterclasses, and

being cross-examined and insulted in auditions. There are educators at universities and colleges who tell aspiring singers that we should give up, that no one will hire us, that our ambitions are laughable and our talent doesn't matter. It is being treated as though we are something shameful and disgusting.

But it's also the discrimination that comes under the guise of curiosity, and the ways in which unexamined behaviour from those around us can diminish and exclude us. I have become used to new colleagues asking about my genitals: what they are, am I going to get them altered, "what are you really?". I get asked how I have sex, told that I'll have to "make up my mind", am misgendered, and turned into an awkward joke. Not everyone does this – but not everyone has to. It happens enough, and with sufficient regularity, to poison a great many working environments, and make it hard to connect with my colleagues, to give the best of myself, and to feel safe and supported at work.

(Lester, 2019)

This account points to systemic issues in the world of singing: a high level of personal intrusion and intolerance in a variety of singing-related situations, enacted both by colleagues and people in positions of authority. Elsewhere in the article, Lester describes how many transgender singers, after a while, cease to be involved in singing altogether, because of the conditions described. Lester indicates that even those who would pursue singing as a career are prevented from doing so by an environment that is predisposed not to accept them. Here we can see the devastating impact of gendered and cisgendered expectations on the futures of many aspiring singers.

At present, more research is needed on how transgender singers are treated in mainstream choral settings. This is not surprising, given that the conditions outlined above prevent many transgender people from feeling able to take part in the first place. Beyond the world of singing, transgender people are deliberately erased by mainstream society: by the persistent use of gendered language; and the enforced association between sex and gender in all aspects of life, as described above. Even Stonewall, a highly respected LGBT+ rights organisation, only began to recognise the needs of transgender people as late as 2014 (Hunt & Manji, 2015). For myself, I can say that in my twenty-two years of choral singing, I have knowingly met or heard of only a very small handful of transgender singers. One of these was the child I mentioned earlier,

who was subjected to persistent transphobic abuse in a UK choir - abuse that, if unaddressed, could have continued for years. It is worth considering that, in our demonstrably and systemically transphobic society, many transgender people are not out, because they fear the very real possibility of discrimination and attack (MacNeil, Bailey, Ellis, Morton, & Regan, 2012). This fear – an understandable response – makes it far more difficult to collect quantitative and qualitative data which would direct research into making choral music more accessible to transgender people.

We have seen in Sections One and Two that singing environments are generally not trans-inclusive, and that the potential for suffering leads to transgender people not taking part or, worse, taking part and being subjected to transphobic abuse. This means that an entire demographic is needlessly excluded from singing, an activity that has the potential to help alleviate the specific difficulties they face (mental health issues, feeling disconnected from their bodies and being socially isolated). However, as I will discuss in Section Three, there are changes that can be made today that will help transgender people access singing.

Section Three

In this section, I will discuss a range of possible strategies to address the problems identified so far. First, I will look at the need to raise awareness, and how this can be achieved; secondly, I will suggest how singing environments could be more trans-inclusive; thirdly, I will make suggestions for creating new trans-positive spaces; fourthly, I will make recommendations for improving the audition process; and finally, I will make recommendations for further research. Improvements in each area will certainly contribute towards achieving the overall aim of more trans-inclusive and trans-positive singing environments. However, because many of these problems are structural within the world of singing, it is not sufficient for music institutions and teachers to pick and choose the areas of potential for transphobia they feel best suited to address over others. Simply put, nothing less than a combined approach will be sufficient to lead to widespread and lasting change.

1) Raising awareness in singing teachers and choir directors

An increase in the teacher's awareness of transgender identities is vital for achieving two things: the comfort and safety of the singer, and greater understanding of how best to teach them. For a transgender person to feel comfortable approaching a teacher for lessons, they need to know that that teacher will be trans-aware. As previously demonstrated, the voice is a key component of identity, and of how one's gender is perceived in society. Therefore, a transgender individual, whose voice may not conform to the cisgendered expectations around voice type, will hesitate to enter spaces commanded by those who hold or even exaggerate those expectations. Consider the example of a choral setting: the attitude of the other singers, particularly in an educational context, may be heavily influenced by the conductor. From this point of view, those in positions of authority within any group singing environment should also implement a zero-tolerance policy towards transphobia, and lead by example with a trans-positive attitude. For instance, they could encourage new members to give their pronouns with their name.

One key resource for raising teachers' awareness is *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*. It has proved invaluable to me in writing this article, and for directing further reading. Notably, it highlights the complex relationship a transgender pupil may have with their voice, relative to their gender identity. This is crucial for understanding what that particular singer hopes to achieve, and what they might find empowering or disempowering during a lesson. It identifies the important role a singing teacher may have to play in developing a transgender singer's overall confidence in their voice and sense of connection to their body. While a teacher may already have all the right skills to teach a cis male baritone, for example, they may not yet know how to adapt those same skills and language to teach a transgender female baritone. That is unless the teacher accepts and understands, *prior to her reaching out for tuition*, that a woman can indeed have a baritone voice. In fact, there is a wealth of precedent for lower-voiced women singing in choirs, Vivaldi's works written for all-female ensemble being a well-known example (Jackson-Roberts, 2008). However, for a transgender woman specifically, having a low singing voice may cause her to experience considerable prejudice and vulnerability - specific to her gender identity and voice type - prior to coming for lessons. A simple way for the teacher to reduce the risk of deterring transgender students is to know that a person's voice type does not automatically indicate either their gender or their gender presentation.

In order to facilitate awareness-raising for teachers and choir directors, *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*, or an equivalent text (so far I have not found one), does need to be widely available. Hearn's and Kramer's book is the ideal primer for developing a comprehensive understanding of what is needed to teach transgender singers sensitively and safely. Retailing at over £100, this book is currently out of the price range of many individual teachers - placing it firmly in the category of a specialist text. I believe that, whilst the price may be justified because of the volume of work it represents, it will considerably limit the book's potential to be widely distributed. I would like to stress that, for this reason, it falls to conservatoires and school libraries to obtain copies for their staff. The field of trans-aware vocal pedagogy is still in its infancy, which is why Hearn's and Kramer's book is the first of its kind. On the other hand, singer-orientated texts have a great deal to offer transgender people, and are much more affordable – see Mills and Stoneham's *The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People* (Stoneham, 2017); and Liz Jackson Hearn's, *One Weird Trick: A User's Guide to Transgender Voice* (Jackson Hearn, *One Weird Trick: A User's Guide to Transgender Voice*, 2018). Ultimately, however, they do not serve the same purpose as a text aimed at those who teach. The distinction is crucial, because as we have seen, the onus must be on the teacher to develop trans-awareness, and not to be reliant on the transgender student for education about gender identity. For the purposes of gaining salient information that relates to the student's vocal background, a new student form that includes space for pronouns and relevant voice history would be helpful. Adopting the form as standard would help to normalise an awareness of gendered pronouns, especially where they might differ from those expected. It would also provide a matter-of-fact way for students to include information about relevant aspects of their transition (e.g. vocal surgeries), without feeling scrutinised about their personal history. I have included a template form as an appendix.

2a) Use of language

As we have seen, the use of gendered language in rehearsals immediately dictates how the group relates to voice types. To cisgender singers with higher voices, being referred to as 'ladies' will probably not be noticeable to those who do identify that way. But for those who do not, for example transgender men, it can be profoundly distressing and invalidating. The same applies to transgender women with lower voices being referred to as men. Further to this,

choirs described as being ‘for men’ or ‘for women’ have the potential to deter non-binary singers altogether, as well as those whose voices are more typically associated with a different gender. Conceivably, a low-voiced choir described as being ‘for men’ would not be a welcoming space for a transgender woman tenor or bass. A high-voiced choir ‘for women’ could be unwelcoming for transgender men; and either a men’s choir or a women’s choir could be exclusionary for a non-binary person (Jackson Hearn & Kremer, *The Singing Teacher’s Guide to Transgender Voices*, 2018). This is because belonging to a group labelled in this way would not only erase their identity from that of the group; it would also embolden those unaccepting of their identity – such as my colleague in my second account of transphobia (Example 2). In addition, it would be a missed opportunity to bolster transgender visibility for audiences who may be unaware of their own gendered and cisgendered expectations on voice type. For further reading on how language is exclusionary for non-binary people in general, see *The Emergence of Trans: Culture, Politics and Everyday Life*, Chapter 8 (shuster, 2020).

2b) Concert dress codes

In my experience, the dress code for performers in a concert setting is often set by the conductor (who, in many cases, has been trained in Western choral institutions and inherited certain cultural conventions about male and female respectability (Bull, 2019)). Therefore, the conductor’s awareness of how gendered dress codes can affect transgender singers has a direct impact on whether or not a transgender person feels safe and respected. As we saw in the example of my non-binary colleague, a rigidly enforced gendered dress code can ironically leave certain singers feeling forced to cross-dress in front of an audience. I have found that there is often one dress code outlined by the conductor for men, and one for women. For instance:

Men: Black trousers, black shirt, black dinner jacket, black shoes

Ladies: Black knee-length skirt, black blouse, black shoes

While this approach may be unremarkable for the majority of singers, it can leave some transgender singers feeling unable to dress in a way that matches their identity (assuming they have not already been put off from singing at the rehearsal stage). First of all, a binary, gendered dress code (i.e. one for men and one for women) is by definition incompatible with non-binary

identity. Secondly, transgender people who are not regularly read as the gender they are (a concept known as ‘passing’) can expose themselves to harassment, because they may be seen to be cross-dressing or even trying to deceive. Thirdly, as with my colleague on tour, pressuring them to present as a gender other than their own can cause dysphoria and distress, and communicates an attitude that their gender presentation would necessarily be subjected to ridicule and harassment. One solution to this could be to have the same clothing options, perhaps listed and itemised, but not to specify that any particular combination is for men or for women. In practice, this leaves the singers free to choose, while still allowing them to adhere to the specified concert dress code. This small change, a few words in a pre-concert email, removes the restriction that could otherwise be needlessly distressing and alienating. Here is one solution:

Black shirt, blouse or roll-neck top

Black knee-length skirt or black trousers

Smart black shoes, low heels or flats

3) All-Trans Choirs

The main aim of this article is to help make singing more inclusive for transgender people in the context of singing lessons and existing choral environments. In addition, the setting up of all-trans choirs is a vital means of providing dedicated spaces for singers who are transgender to feel safe and supported, and at home in an environment where they do not have to feel like a minority. There is enormous potential for transgender empowerment in all-trans choirs. These spaces are led by directors who have awareness of the specific nature of transgender voices and transgender identities - either through personal lived experience or training - and are ideally placed to empower and nurture the singers. The choir can provide a safe, validating, and trans-focused environment for potentially isolated transgender people to meet each other, and foster community. During my research, I encountered a number of these choirs, such as Resonate and Boston Trans Chorus in the USA, and one - London Trans Choir - in the UK. It is my hope that teachers can encourage their students to join all-trans choirs if they feel comfortable doing so; or, better still, encourage trans-aware and trans-positive singers and directors to form their own, ideally in collaboration with local LGBT-focused organisations.

Aside from the direct benefits to singing members of all-trans choirs, these groups could also create positive role models for transgender youth. Because of the nurturing, trans-affirming environment, the young singers could develop and advance to become prominent singers, and even singing *teachers*, themselves. In turn, more young transgender people might feel comfortable entering this space, when they would not do so in non-trans-friendly environments. For a young transgender person, seeing an all-trans choir in concert could be deeply affirming, empowering, and inspiring, and allow them finally to see themselves represented on stage. It would challenge conventional narratives both about singing and what it means to be transgender as represented in mainstream media (Feder & Scholder, 2020). This is in contrast to the lack of visible transgender singers usually seen, particularly in classical singing, for the reasons already given. Within a classroom setting, including posters of transgender vocalists in various genres would also contribute to making transgender students feel validated and encouraged to sing. It would also help to normalise the existence of transgender singers, and transgender people generally, for the other cis students. A selection of twenty-four transgender singers and vocal ensembles, and a film about gender diverse singers, *Riot Acts*, is given in Nancy Bos's article, 'Forging a New Path: Transgender Singers in Popular Music' (Bos, 2017). The author also mentions the websites of archivist JD Doyle – Queer Music Heritage and JD Doyle Archives – which contain a wealth of gender-nonconforming artists, as well as newspaper clippings and other artifacts of LGBT+ history.

4) Auditions and voice classifications based on voice type, not gender

While steps 1) to 3) will help make existing spaces safer for transgender people and create dedicated new ones, some of the most profound changes will come from institutional overhaul (Lester, 2019) (Bull, 2019). At present, auditions largely take place under the assumption that auditionees of a certain voice type will also be a certain gender. This is a potential barrier to transgender people who, in the context of their gender, will often have a voice type the audition panel might not be expecting. Further to this, members of the panel may also have absorbed prejudices against transgender people, as held by wider society (Lester, 2019). I should stress that singing spaces must be made accommodating to transgender people before, and not after, they have been encouraged to apply. This is because, otherwise, a well-intentioned openness to transgender applicants could unwittingly invite them into the transphobic, and potentially unsafe, environment they sought to avoid in the first place. In short, a practical and

demonstrable trans-awareness and a trans-positive attitude is a prerequisite to the necessary adjustment of the audition process. I would like to amplify the call for auditions based solely on voice type, actively removing any connection to gender; a connection which, I will reiterate, is not only alienating to transgender people but also illogical.

I am compelled to add that the gendered division of voice types is upheld in the most prestigious choral institutions, namely, several ancient choral foundations at Oxford and Cambridge. These institutions, deservedly celebrated for musical excellence, are the benchmark for practitioners around the UK and across the world. They, unlike less prestigious choirs, have the power to lead and promote lasting change. Many of those who hold choral and organ scholarships in those institutions go on to work as freelance singers and conductors for top choral ensembles. Perhaps the most concentrated version of this is the ‘male-voice’ choir, which has the alto, tenor and bass positions filled by cis men, and the soprano line occupied by cis boy trebles. The historical reasons for this centre around cis women being prohibited from singing in churches, and/or in the same spaces as cis men (Stanfield-Pritchard, 2013), combined with the implied link between voice (and therefore body type) and gender. The sound of ‘male-voice’ choirs is, indeed, different from mixed-voice choirs; but, as I have pointed out, this is not because of the gender of the singers, but their hormonal development. Ultimately, if a choir director is looking for voice types *typically offered* by cis men, there should be no issue with extending the auditions to include transgender female tenors and basses, and indeed anyone who is able to match the voice type required (including non-binary transgender people, potentially some cis women, and intersex people). Here, Lester’s suggestion of blind auditions would be helpful for the first round, to counteract the current prejudice against gender diverse singers (Lester, 2019). As the full range of transgender people’s voices becomes more accepted, opportunities for transgender singers will hopefully increase. In turn, this could lead to greater visibility of transgender singers at all levels, providing both inspiration for young transgender people, and living, singing examples of gender-diverse people flourishing. We must acknowledge that gendered expectations do not operate in isolation. It is well documented that Western classical singers are far more likely than the population at large to be white, and they are far more likely to be middle class (Bull, 2019). I have met very few black or working-class singers on the freelance choral scene. The current racial landscape of classical singing contributes to unconscious bias about who should be admitted into the singing environment (Barone, 2020). We must consider this when examining how the wider Western classical music tradition excludes a diverse range of transgender people: a singer who is black and transgender

will likely face compound and interconnected difficulties in accessing opportunities to participate in classical singing, as the ability to assimilate becomes harder. An intersectional understanding of transphobia is therefore necessary to fully dismantle the obstacles to this group (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). In the wake of Black Lives Matter, I would urge institutions who have already begun to acknowledge their contribution to systemic racism to address issues of diversity with an understanding and awareness of intersectionality. This would be in the hope that, in particular, black transgender and queer voices can also be heard – a group the most silenced, and the most violently silenced, of all (Savage, 2020).

Suggestions for further research

More research on trans-inclusive singing education is needed, as this is a very new field. For instance, a 2017 article in the *Journal of Singing* reported that, ‘Until recently, information specific to transgender singers was difficult to find in NATS [National Association of Teachers of Singing]’ (Brian Manternach, 2017). The authors note that there was only one article in that database about teaching transgender singers in college (Nancy Bos, ‘Considerations for teaching transgender singers in college voice’) and no articles there at all with the keyword transgender prior to 2016. Due to the trans-exclusionary singing environments I have described above, it may be that choirs and educational institutions need to be made trans-inclusive before larger studies can be carried out. To ensure that new research in this area is steered by transgender people for the benefit of transgender people, it is vital that they have an active role in the research process, as well as being participants. Historically, there has been a tendency to place their perspectives and interests second to those of the cisgender researchers (Gill-Peterson, 2018). For more on ethical considerations when researching with transgender people, see *The Emergence of Trans: Cultures, Politics and Everyday Lives*, Chapter 12 (Rhi Humphrey, 2020). Although there is much work to be done, progress is indeed being made in the field of trans-inclusive singing, and research is very much ongoing. The first ever transgender singing voice conference took place in the USA in 2017, at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. It served the dual purpose of allowing singing teachers to learn more about singers who are also transgender and how best to teach them; and for many transgender singers in the USA to gather and find community. It also allowed an opportunity for a case study on the conference itself, and how participants found the event. On the whole, the event was

reported to be a positive occasion that was as highly informative and empowering as it was pivotal (Cayari, 2019).

Conclusion

I will conclude with an invitation. I have charted my own progression, from total lack of transgender awareness, to seeing the abundant systemic obstacles to transgender people in classical singing - maintained by conventions, and by institutions and people who work within them, through lack of knowledge or wilful ignorance. We know that singing in groups is good for us, and that transgender people could be helped a great deal by it; but the scale of obstruction against them is so great, the conventions so pervasive, that it will take a concerted effort from cis allies, working with transgender singers and teachers, to end this cycle. It is an insidious one: widespread trans-exclusionary conventions and attitudes make choirs and singing studios unwelcoming, or likely to be so; often, transgender people avoid singing as a result, meaning they do not train, do not perform, and do not see themselves represented on stage. Because of this, the singing environment remains unwelcoming, lack of understanding continues, and transgender people remain invisible and maligned. My main aim is to introduce these issues to practitioners, many of whom may not have considered them.

A few targeted changes with regard to language, training, inclusion, and further research could bring about a major shift in perceptions about transgender people and their voices, within the world of music and also within wider society. There is even the possibility that the use of singing to champion and celebrate transgender voices could play a leading role in societal change, as constructive changes to the singing environment could have a widespread and lasting impact on the lives of a great many people. To achieve these changes, it is crucial for singing teachers and choral directors to be aware that voice type exists independently from gender. From here, the targeted changes I have suggested will help to i) make transgender people feel welcome and safe; ii) make them more likely to be accepted into prestigious singing and teaching positions; and iii) increase the number of transgender singers on main stages around the world – which will in turn encourage young transgender people into singing environments that accept and nurture them. This means the existing cycle of erasure and

hostility can be replaced by one of visibility and acceptance, and the transgender community will be able freely to access the profound human benefits of singing.

I admit that there is much I have not addressed in this article. While I have raised several issues and offered some solutions, I have not provided extensive detail about how to implement them. That is beyond my experience - but there are those who do know how to bring about change. It is these people whom I hope to make aware. It cannot occur without a combined effort across the classical singing world. It falls to all of us to engage institutions and influential figures, those with the knowledge and experience to build new policies and spaces that welcome transgender people. It may take time and persistence to convince some cis people of the necessity of this; or even that it can be done without somehow undermining the integrity of classical singing as we know it. I believe that, the more spaces can be made trans-inclusive and trans-positive, the more visibility can be achieved, and the more acceptance and celebration of transgender people and the contribution they can make. To some, the idea of overhauling all classical singing environments for the benefit of a small minority might seem extreme. However, removing oppressive restrictions on the most vulnerable benefits all of us. It will bring diversity of lived experience (meaning richer musical offerings), and foster greater compassion. Ultimately, it will allow all of us the freedom to express ourselves without being bound to rigid gender norms about what we can wear, whose voices can be heard, and whose stories can be told.

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APPENDIX 1

NEW STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET

Student preferred name: _____

Pronouns (e.g. he/him, she/her, they/them): _____

Parent/guardian (if student is under 18): _____

Address: _____

City: _____

Country: _____ Postcode: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Voice History Information

Have you ever taken lessons or received voice training? YES NO

If yes, please describe:

What are your goals for voice training?

Are you currently participating in hormone therapy treatment? YES NO

If yes, please describe: type(s), dosage, frequency and length of treatment:

Have you had any operations that would affect your voice (e.g. laryngoplasty, rhinoplasty, facial feminisation surgery, voice feminisation surgery)?

Do you smoke? YES NO

Have you ever had problems with your voice (e.g. chronic hoarseness, sore throat, long periods of laryngitis, haemorrhage, nodules, cysts, polyps, or other lesions)?

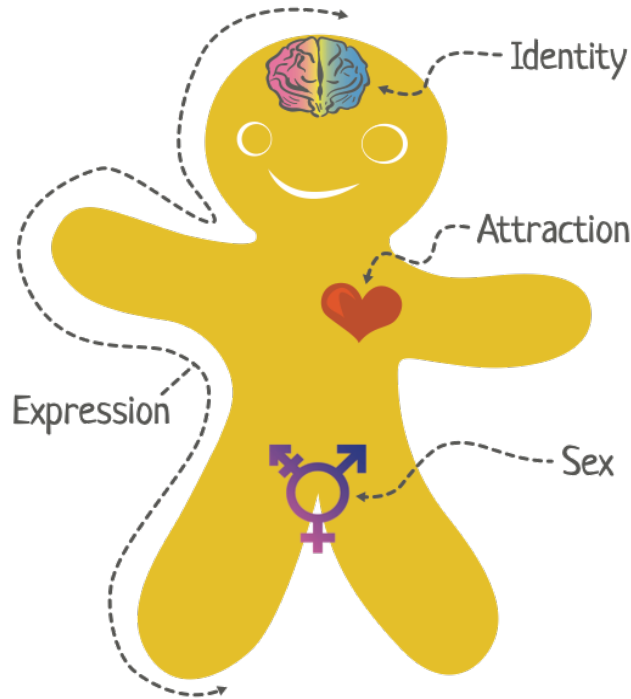
YES NO

If yes, please describe:

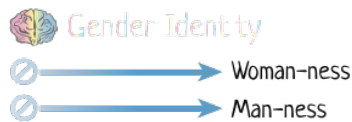
New Student Information Sheet, adapted from *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*, p. 191

APPENDIX 2

The Genderbread Person v4 by its pronounced METROsexual.com

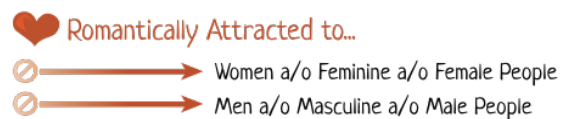
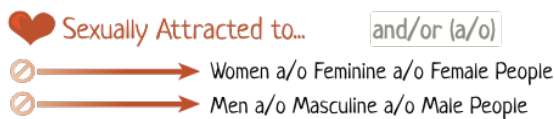


⊖ means a lack of what's on the right side



Identity ≠ Expression ≠ Sex
Gender ≠ Sexual Orientation

Sex Assigned At Birth
 Female Intersex Male



Genderbread Person Version 4 created and uncopyrighted 2017 by Sam Killermann

For a bigger bite, read more at www.genderbread.org

Further Reading:

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