

Singing, Sissies, and Sexual Identity

How LGBTQ Choral Directors Negotiate Gender Discourse

Abstract: This article explores how choral directors negotiate personal and professional identity in relation to gender discourse. Many music teachers have tried hyper-masculine messages, such as “Real men sing,” used as recruitment tools for getting adolescent boys to join choir. Designed to counter the perception that “singing is for sissies,” these messages reinforce limited views of masculinity that can present a problem for choral directors. Gay male teachers especially may feel obligated to divide aspects of their personal identity from their professional identity for the benefit of male involvement in their program. Given these circumstances, the question of what defines a man as “real” must be considered within the context of gender, gender performance, sexuality, and teacher identity.

Keywords: boys and singing, choir, chorus, gender, LGBTQ music educators, masculinity

How can we encourage boys of all orientations to enjoy participation in vocal ensembles? Here's a thought-provoking perspective.

If you are a choir director, you have probably encountered a journal article that focuses on the “missing males” in choir. Maybe you’ve attended a conference session or two on how to recruit more boys. Of course, we want more boys singing, but a common theme seems to emerge—advice that sounds innocent at first glance. Singing, we are told, must be sold as a masculine activity.

As a young music teacher who is gay, I struggled with the belief that my sexual orientation somehow impacted

my ability to be perceived as masculine, at least in the traditional sense. These notions seemed related to societal views of gender performance that linked acceptable masculine behavior to heterosexuality. As qualitative researcher and assistant professor of sociology at Boston University Catherine Connell states when discussing these issues in her book *School's Out: Gay and Lesbian Teachers in the Classroom*, “To do gender correctly is to perform not only ideal masculinity or femininity but

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also heterosexuality.”¹ Compounding these concerns were the narratives surrounding boys, masculinity, recruitment, and singing that existed within my own profession. Many of these messages focused on the importance of reinforcing a masculine image for singing. As Steven M. Demorest, professor and researcher in music education at Northwestern University, notes in his article “Encouraging Male Participations in Chorus,” while one set of recruitment strategies focuses on increasing boys’ interest in choir through engaging repertoire and skillful handling of the male voice change, another set of strategies “focuses on appealing to boys’ ‘masculinity,’ usually through stereotypes.” He goes on to say that “encouraging boys to sing in choir does require appealing to their identity as males, but what does it mean to be ‘masculine?’”² At least within a recruitment context, this question is commonly addressed with strategies that focus on a team-oriented, “masculine” atmosphere in rehearsal; exposure to and/or participation in single-gender/all-male ensembles; and providing images of strong male role models using sports analogies and/or the inclusion of athletic boys in choir.³

As a new teacher, I recall using these “male-friendly” strategies as part of my own recruiting campaign. Like many choir directors, my goal was to generate a more gender-balanced ensemble—one that my choral colleagues would envy. After all, the number of boys in your choir seemed to be an important metric of the program’s success. By using some of these strategies, I, too, was able to build a choral program with a healthy number of male singers. This success even motivated a colleague to mention my efforts in a publication focusing on boys in choir. When describing a rehearsal with my after-school boys’ group, he wrote,

The ensemble was run like a sports team. They met after school, and [McBride] was called only by his last name just as

students do with their athletic coaches. McBride often played basketball or touch football with his singers after rehearsal. In addition, “coach” McBride conducted a faculty chorus that included many prominent male faculty members and administrators in the building.⁴

Despite my limited football skills, the excerpt accurately described my efforts to create what I believed to be a “male-friendly” environment in choir. The program continued to build year after year, and although I was initially proud of the success that these strategies afforded me, something felt wrong about recruiting in this way. In using an approach that focused so heavily on heteronormative notions of acceptable masculine behavior and image, I began to wonder if, as choral music education professor Patrick K. Freer states, “for boys age 12 to 18 . . . the strongest determination of ‘masculinity’ appears to be the ‘avoidance of femininity,’” does having a gay male choral teacher reinforce the stereotypical belief that singing is an effeminate activity?⁵

Gender Discourse in Choral Music Education

The choir room can be a complex space in terms of gender for both students and teachers. With issues surrounding boys’ perceptions of singing as a girls’ activity, socially constructed gender roles, and the belief that participating in music “is gay,” it’s no wonder many teachers avoid certain topics when discussing recruitment. What we do find are plenty of hypermasculine messages to counter the perception that singing is somehow “unmanly.” For example, these quotes were retrieved from the website of the Cambiata Institute of America, an organization dedicated to the “assistance [of] vocal music educators and church musicians who work with students in the upper elementary, mid-level, and secondary grades,” simply by doing an Internet search of the phrase “getting boys to sing”:

In certain parts of the country, some still consider singing to be effeminate, an image that directors must strive to destroy.

Adolescent boys are inclined to enjoy choral music more if directors treat them as if they were men. Directors should be careful to choose language that promotes masculinity. Talk about masculine topics and be positive and authoritative when relating to them. Choose literature that relates to the boys’ masculinity. Certainly, men should learn to relate to the finer, more artistic, and more aesthetic aspects of life, but possibly this should be a growth process that begins with young singers once they feel confident in their masculinity and once they have committed themselves to the choral program.⁶

These messages may seem harmless, and many choral programs have undoubtedly benefited from using these strategies as a means to simply get men through the choir room door. But are there consequences for teachers and students when we focus not just on recruiting boys but on selling masculinity? Should choral directors honestly be charged with “destroy[ing]” effeminate images in order to get boys singing?

Perhaps a less antagonizing phrase would provide some clarity to this discussion. For example, when reading the December 2014 *Choral Journal*, I came across an advertisement for the Barbershop Harmony Society’s “International Youth Chorus Festival.”⁷ The ad featured a picture of a dozen or so smiling high school boys, performing in front of what’s described as a “packed audience” to “thunderous applause.” Perhaps most noticeable is the large, bright banner across the top of the page featuring the headline “REAL MEN SING.”

Is there a subtext to this statement? What, exactly, makes a man “real”? More important, why does a boys’ singing festival need such a strong dose of macho legitimacy? My aim in posing these questions is to simply consider these statements in relation to our larger goals as educators—goals that include providing

a safe and accepting environment for students and teachers alike, in ways that are far more personal than those found in clichéd characterizations of what “real” men do.

Statements such as these concern me as a teacher, particularly when advertised in high school settings, where adolescent boys often read masculinity as a barometer for assigning sexual orientation. In many schools, the distance between statements like “Real men sing” and “That’s so gay” may be minimal. As gender studies scholar and sociology professor at the State University of New York Michael Scott Kimmel states in his book *Guyland*,

Calling someone gay or a fag has become so universal that it’s become synonymous with dumb, stupid or “wrong.” But to dig a little deeper, it’s “dumb” because it isn’t masculine enough. To the “that’s so gay” chorus, homosexuality is about gender nonconformity, not being a “real man.”⁸

Researchers, such as Adam Adler, Patrick K. Freer, Lucy Green, Scott Harrison, and Julia Eklund Koza, have challenged us to consider the effect of these narratives on adolescent boys’ involvement in school music programs.⁹ However, as a former teacher who felt obligated to promote traditional notions of masculinity and to downplay my sexual identity for the benefit of my program, I wondered what impact these messages may have on other gay male choral directors.

Negotiating Gender Discourse

I recently sat down with two self-identifying gay male high school choral directors to discuss these issues.¹⁰ “Dan” and “Ethan” are both “out” to friends, family, and some coworkers but remain closeted to their students. They are both white, are both in their early thirties, and have each been teaching for about eight years. Despite these similarities, their living and working environments are strikingly different.

Dan described his hometown school district as rural “farm country,” while Ethan works and lives in a suburb just outside of New York City. I asked them about their thoughts on singing and masculinity, recruitment, and the relationship between their sexuality and their teaching identity.

Both expressed concern over how their sexual identity affects the perception of singing as an effeminate or “gay” activity. Dan spoke to this issue when asked whether he has made a conscious decision to remain closeted as a teacher. He stated,

Yeah, I’m out everywhere except for at work. Part of the reason has been, I’ve been sort of concerned. I mean it is a very rural area. There aren’t a ton of gay people in the area. I have been sort of concerned with parental responses, too, because it’s also a very, very conservatively religious community. I’ve been concerned with the perception of guys as being less masculine and then guys being afraid to join choir for that reason. . . . It’s really, overall, been the health of the program more than anything else.

When asked how being out or closeted makes it easier or more difficult for the boys who he described as “hesitant” to join choir, he responded,

I don’t know, really, what the difference would be with me being out and how that would be received and how that would be easier. Part of me wants to say that for some of those people that are on the fringe, it might be the one thing that pushes them away because—especially if they’re straight going into a choir where the director is gay, there’s already that perception that music is gay and, um, I think it might be enough to push them away, perhaps? But then, on the other end of things, if they see that you’re very comfortable with it, you’re secure with it, it might be enough for them to say, “You know what? It really doesn’t matter.”

Dan’s hesitancy to disclose his sexual identity at school is, in part, motivated by a concern over the number of boys in his program. The belief that male

participation in music is “less masculine” or “gay”—words Dan used almost interchangeably throughout our discussion—is part of the reason he remains closeted to his students.

Adolescent boys’ understandings of what it means to be gay may be limited to effeminate stereotypes or involvement in traditionally “feminine” activities, such as choir. It is here where the conflation of gender and sexuality becomes an issue. For many, it is the embodiment of gender—the actions, mannerisms, and even speech patterns that we associate as feminine or masculine—that becomes linked to sexuality. For some adolescents, the metric for assigning a label of gay or straight is based on how masculine or feminine one’s behavior is, as opposed to one’s actual sexual preference. As Dan and Ethan allude to in their responses, the very act of teaching choir may be viewed as an unmasculine action.

Judith Butler, a gender theorist and professor at the University of California, Berkeley, addresses the assumed relationship between sexuality and gender in her theory of performativity. She believes that we define gender by using repeated “stylized acts” that produce what we come to know as gender-appropriate behavior.¹⁰ We label these acts as masculine or feminine and perform gender in ways that our friends, family, and society as a whole find comfortable. If our behavior contradicts these “normal” gender performances, we may be perceived as gay.

These types of perceptions or misperceptions are important, especially in relation to the current narratives surrounding males and singing. If we assume that the *real* in “Real men sing” is simply code for traditional views of masculinity, then statements like these may be problematic for gay male choral directors who “perform” gender incorrectly. Thus, the purpose of this discussion is not to assume that all gay men behave effeminately or that they cannot be “real men,” but that participation in

singing is perceived as “gay” because some adolescent students may hastily link gay identity with stereotypically “unmasculine” behavior.

Connell used Butler’s theory when conducting a comprehensive study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) teachers in California and Texas. She found that “in the classroom, such embodied distinctions can lead students to ‘read’ teachers as gay or lesbian.”¹¹ These perceptions can have an impact on a teacher’s decision to come out. Connell’s findings are significant for LGBTQ teachers in all subject areas, but the discourse surrounding choral music complicates these matters more so for LGBTQ choral music teachers.

When asked whether he felt there was a difference in being a gay teacher versus a gay music teacher, Ethan’s response seemed influenced by portrayals of music teachers in the media. He stated,

People are going to see it as more stereotypically gay; gay teacher, “Oh, do you teach music?” It’s always been one of those things that in cinema and television, you see a lot more effeminate guys teaching choirs. . . . Men singing tend to be a little bit more gay in the eyes of the public. I think that is changing.

Like Dan, Ethan often used *gay* and *effeminate* as interchangeable terms. When responding to questions about the importance of recruiting athletic boys into choir, he stated,

In the general population, that [having male athletes in choir] makes it less gay. That makes it “I want to sing.” I think the fact that our kids at the middle school, they get such a great opportunity [in choir], they don’t see it as being a very effeminate thing.

Similar to Ethan, Dan spoke about the influence of his athletic involvement on his reputation. When asked whether he coaches cross-country after school for the purpose of bolstering his masculine image, he responded,

[It’s] one of those things where I think it’s me working against that stereotype of music and music teachers. So, I think that’s sort of my internal drive to do that. I mean, I love running, yes, but I think that was my main motivating factor there.

These types of actions support the findings of researchers Kathy Roulston and Martin Mills, who studied men working in feminized teaching areas. They would perhaps characterize Dan’s and Ethan’s behavior as an attempt to “legitimize their involvements in music teaching by emphasizing their engagement with ‘normal’ masculine practices.”¹²

Some of the most fascinating responses were elicited from both men when they viewed the actual “REAL MEN SING” advertisement. When asked what he believed is meant by the *real* in “Real men sing,” Ethan, once again, referenced masculinity and “straight” sexuality within the same response:

I think they’re trying to go for that more masculine stereotype where real men don’t sing . . . real men chop wood and real men play football, and real men, they play sports and they don’t sing. It’s going after those real men, those real men who are not . . . the straight, the more athletic, the more outgoing, the more adventurous, the more daring, as opposed to . . . those other men who sing normally. It’s kind of that weird thing, you know?

When sharing his reaction to the advertisement, Dan spoke of society’s changing attitudes and perceptions of gender identity and sexual identity:

It’s playing into the stereotype of what masculinity and femininity is. We’re saying, real men sing, and we’re going to sing these heavy man songs about drinking and stuff like that. We’re buying into that stereotype of what it is to be a man. . . . That’s probably what I’m most uncomfortable with is . . . I think it’s marginalizing those males that maybe don’t feel that sense of “huah” [deep grunting sound] that other people do.

He went on to say,

I think anytime you do that you’re marginalizing a lot of people in the process, and alienating a lot of people in the process. We’re certainly approaching a time in society where we’re questioning what it means to be male and what it means to be female. We’re reshaping those gender identities and sexual identities, and all of that stuff. Phrases like that, real men sing, is a step backward . . . it’s a step in the other direction.

In response to my final question, “Do you think it’s important to be an out LGBTQ teacher, or not?”¹³ Dan offered this compelling admission:

I can definitely see the benefit of being an out teacher, yes. And, I think if I were not a music teacher, I would be much more receptive to that idea. I think the fact that I am a music teacher has really made me consider not being out at school . . . just the stereotypes and the concern about the involvement in the program. But, I can definitely see that there are so many students who are struggling with issues of gender identity and with being LGBT. I can see how having an adult who is an advocate for you, and who you can feel comfortable talking to about those issues would definitely be helpful. But in this community, given that I’m a music teacher, I can definitely see how it would be a controversial thing.

Based on their responses, it seems that the rhetoric surrounding males and singing has contributed, in some part, to Dan and Ethan’s decision to remain closeted at school.

The Challenge of Identity

Who are we when we teach? Are we gendered? Does our sexual identity matter when we’re in front of our students? When asked this latter question, a colleague of mine answered, “I am a gay male high school choral director and at my school, no one, including my male students, thinks twice about it.” But for some teachers, myself included, the process of negotiating professional and personal identity is more difficult.

When teaching high school, I was not just a gay male teacher; I was a

gay male *music* teacher. And, while being an LGBTQ teacher in a public school is not easy regardless of the subject one teaches, I perceived an added level of scrutiny simply because I taught choir. In the hopes of providing my students, particularly the males, with an image of masculinity and strength from the choral program's director, I purposely promoted an image of myself that was anything but stereotypically gay. In doing so, I created a version of myself that was anything but me.

For many LGBTQ students and teachers, music classrooms are still one of the most accepting and safe spaces in North American schools today. Clearly, however, the use of hypermasculine narratives as a recruiting method for boys complicates this notion of acceptance for some gay teachers. In our rush to recruit, we cannot forget to more deeply consider not just what is said but also what is *unsaid*. While remarks like "Real men sing" should not be characterized as explicit anti-gay sentiments, statements such as these are no less problematic than more ubiquitous phrases, like "Boys don't cry," "Man up," "Be a man," or "Boys will be boys." All reinforce a very limited view of acceptable masculinity that can be damaging not only to our students of all sexual and gender identities but also to the teachers who wish to work from a place of authenticity.

Has our profession become so concerned with its image as an *unmasculine* pursuit that we have, in a sense, overcompensated for something as inoffensive and inescapable as femininity or "gayness"? Should our recruitment methods kowtow to clichéd perceptions of masculinity, or should we help to redefine them?

With the goal of promoting positive societal change from within the profession, we must carefully consider the effect of these recruitment strategies on LGBTQ teachers of singing, their students, and the larger goals

of choral music education. A central part of the problem is that those who are most affected by these narratives barely seem to notice them. Similar to my own behavior as the unconvincing "Coach McBride," the men I spoke with seemed somewhat unaware of their decisions to play into these stereotypes or to use words like *gay* and *effeminate* almost interchangeably. These actions speak to the power of these discourses. If professionals in our field feel compelled to hide their identity at school simply because of the subject they teach, what messages are we actually sending to adolescent boys, LGBTQ or otherwise, about what it means to be a "real man?"

NOTES

1. Catherine Connell, *School's Out: Gay and Lesbian Teachers in the Classroom* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).
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3. Barbara A. Brinson, *Choral Music Methods and Materials: Developing Successful Choral Music Programs (Grades 5 to 12)* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996); and Don L. Collins, "The Cambiata Institute of America for Early Adolescent Vocal Music," <http://www.cambiatapress.com/CVMIA/recruiting.html>; Patrick K. Freer, *TIPS: The First Weeks of Middle School Chorus* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009); and Henry Leck, "The Boy's Changing Expanding Voice: Take the High Road," *Choral Journal* 49, no. 11 (2009): 49–60.
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10. Interview data were collected as part of a pilot study conducted by the author. Each participant provided informed consent. Data collection was approved under Institutional Review Board protocol 16-135.
11. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
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13. Kathy Roulston and Martin Mills, "Male Teachers in Feminised Teaching Areas: Marching to the Beat of the Men's Movement Drums?" *Oxford Review of Education* 26, no. 2 (2000): 221–37.
14. Question taken from interview protocol as found in Connell, *School's Out*, 211–12.