

The Silenced Voice: Exploring Transgender Issues Within Western Choirs

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Abstract: This essay reviews the difficulties that transgender people face within choirs, especially school choirs. Little research exists surveying these struggles, but existing literature does highlight issues related to safety, dysphoria, gender enforcement, and vocal transition. The essay argues that for the sake of choirs and the transgender choristers who are a part of them, choir directors need to be mindful of these issues and take proactive steps to ensure the comfort of transgender singers. Furthermore, far more research needs to be conducted examining the problems faced by transgender choristers.

Introduction

“That was the one thing that no one could take away from me was my music.” This sentiment, as uttered by a young girl named Rie, is one with which many musicians can identify. Singers in particular might find common ground with the girl’s love of choir, a space where she felt comfortable being herself. Rie’s choir experience was an exceptionally lucky one; although she felt safe in the chorus, she was at risk of facing numerous choral issues that her peers likely would not encounter. This risk comes from one simple fact: Rie is transgender.

The transgenderⁱ population is highly vulnerable, and in many ways it has received very limited study. This is especially true in the realm of choral music. The needs of transgender choristers are rarely examined, and this can lead to real but invisible hardships for those singers—hardships that should be made visible. As transgender choristers undergo struggles with safety, dysphoria, gender enforcement, and vocal transition, both choristers and their choirs suffer. Choir directors in particular can benefit from examining the problems faced by transgender choristers. The purpose of this paper is to:

1. Illuminate the issues that transgender choristers face in Western choirs.
2. Offer suggestions for choir directors and choral scholars to combat these issues.

Safety Concerns for Transgender Choristers

To date, little formal research has been conducted regarding active forms of anti-trans sentiment in choirs. There is some research available regarding homophobia, but discussions of transgender issues are rarely explored in non-pop music settings. However, some information can be derived from responses in Palkii and Caldwell’s survey of collegiate MOGAI (Marginalized Orientations, Gender Alignments, and Intersex) choristers. Transgender participants identified gendered solo parts, the avoidance of gender discussion, dress codes, and misgenderingⁱⁱ as barriers in safe choral education. In contrast, one participant wrote that their choir director had indeed cultivated a safe space

in choir; the director did so by referring to sections by voice parts rather than by gender (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5).

Although many choristers in the study indicated that anti-MOGAI bullying was a problem for them in choirs, it is unclear how many of those choristers were transgender. However, the transgender students as a whole felt less safe than their cisgenderⁱⁱⁱ MOGAI peers (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5). This finding is consistent with studies that compare the general sense of safety among different types of MOGAI students (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer, 2011, p. xix). One participant of Palkii and Caldwell’s study identified the ‘taboo’ nature of gender discussion as an obstacle against feelings of safety within the choir (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5). While cisgender MOGAI people do face discrimination, issues pertaining to homosexuality and bisexuality are far more visible than transgender issues (Huegel, 2011, p. 173). This may contribute to the idea of transgender issues being more ‘taboo’ than those which affect cisgender MOGAI individuals.

If an unsafe environment is cultivated, it can have a negative effect on both the choristers and the choir. Absenteeism is a significant problem when MOGAI students feel unsafe on college campuses (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer, 2011, p. 21). As ensembles, choirs are extremely reliant on high overall attendance to achieve an optimal sound. If a hostile environment drives choristers away from choir, the choir is harmed. More importantly, an already vulnerable person—the transgender chorister—is harmed.

Singing Dysphoria

The term ‘dysphoria’ is used frequently when discussing gender dysphoria of transgender people, which includes issues such as dissatisfaction with genitalia and with other sex characteristics that do not coincide with one’s gender identity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This may extend to gender dysphoria in relation to the singing voice. As with choral safety, dysphoria of the singing voice is an area that has been largely ignored in academic study. In fact, there are no accessible, peer-re-

viewed journal articles that discuss how dysphoria affects the relationship of transgender singers to music, although dysphoria of the speaking voice is noted in multiple studies of transgender people (Azul, 2016; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015; Gelfer, 1999; Hancock, Colton, & Douglas, 2014; Hancock & Garabedian, 2013; Hancock & Helenius, 2012; Hancock, Krissinger, & Owen, 2011; Owen & Hancock, 2010; Podesva & Callier, 2015; Thornton, 2008). Nevertheless, singing dysphoria is an area of discussion among many trans singers, at least online. Dysphoria is further complicated by the dramatic hormonal changes that can make singing after transition^{iv} especially difficult, particularly if the singer is not educated in ways to optimize vocal transition (Constans, 2008, par. 28-31).

In an informal Skype discussion with a young trans woman, Lia,^v I was allowed one perspective regarding singing dysphoria. Lia has not yet begun any hormonal or speech therapy (Lia, personal communication, 11 Nov. 2015). She is a singer who uses music as a coping mechanism for the struggles in her life (Lia, personal communication, 11 Nov. 2015). If one were to hear her sing without knowing anything about her, one might categorize her voice as being typical of a baritone. Lia admitted that this causes her some distress:

I feel dysphoria regarding my speaking and singing voice its very deep and not anywhere near as high as I would like and I don't like how It sounds especially when I'm listening to it. [...] i think i keep trying to go higher? because i want to sound higher? and it frustrates me when i reach the limit of how high i can go and its still not close to where i want it to be. [sic] (Lia, personal communication, 11 Nov. 2015)

Lia also admitted that her dysphoria can act as a deterrent to singing, saying that she would sing more if her voice's fundamental frequency was higher (Lia, personal communication, 11 Nov. 2015). In this way, it may be interpreted that Lia's relationship with music and singing has been negatively affected by dysphoria.

This information was provided in an informal context and has not been compared across other transgender singers, particularly transgender choristers. Nevertheless, Lia's account provides one important viewpoint and indicates a need for research in this area. Choral directors must be sensitive when encountering this problem, and additional study may help to develop strategies for minimizing the risk of reinforcing singing dysphoria in the chorus. Choral leaders may also benefit from the expertise of speech therapists and other vocal experts in navigating this potential issue (Kozan, 2012, p. 414).

Enforced Gendering of Choristers

Singers, possibly more than any other type of musician, are gendered by their instrument. Certain voice types (i.e. tenor and bass) are considered to be intrinsically 'male', while others (soprano and alto) are considered 'female'. These standards are accepted and normalized because of societal ciscentricism, which can be described as an unfair adherence to cisgender needs/desires over

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transgender needs/desires. The gendering of voice types is based on traditional assumptions of the cisgender (or 'default') voice, assumptions that limit all voices. Even within a framework that does not acknowledge transgender singers, O'Toole (1998) argues that 'female' voices are not given the opportunity to explore exceptionally low ranges, though these ranges can occur naturally (p. 21). The acceptance of these standards, which suit only the dominant group of a society, is a form of systemic oppression and erasure of the marginalized; privilege becomes invisible (McIntosh, 1995, p. 76-79). This invisibility makes it difficult for choir directors to recognize the existence of these problems, which is why it is imperative to examine them in depth.

In a narrative case study of the girl who was quoted in the beginning of this paper, Jeananne Nichols (2013) describes how Rie insisted that she sing in the alto section of her choir, although some might have classified her voice as that of a tenor. Palkii and Caldwell's survey also encountered the problematic nature of gendering of voice parts (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5). One participant wrote, "A trope that has become standard choral parlance is referring to [tenor/bass] voices as 'men' and [soprano/alto] voices as 'women.' As a [trans] person singing in a choir, this makes me feel awkward and uncomfortable" (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5). In both of these sources, voice types instill barely visible—but still destructive—issues for transgender choristers.

Choirs are divided by voice type for the sake of organization, but the gendering of these voice types presents a dilemma for transgender singers. A transgender woman, for example, may have the range and passagio typically found in a tenor—but if she is placed in the tenor section of her choir, the male gender may be imposed on her. The effects of this are dependent on how she perceives the identity of a tenor and how the choir director and choristers perceive tenors (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5). The more gendered the lens, the more likely it is that the woman will feel misgendered (Jiminez, 2014, p. 89). The matter is further complicated when taking into account transgender singers whose gender lies outside the male/female binary. When a choir is separated into 'men' and 'women', how can an agender person be expected to find their place? Indeed, in the case of non-binary trans people specifically, no studies discuss the effects of this very binary choral system.

It is important to note that transgender people are not a homogenous group, and their choices in managing gendered

voice types may differ from person to person. Anita Kozan (2012) articulates this well:

Some women choose to sing in a range that includes lower notes than the range used for their speaking voice. Other women want to develop a range that will be perceived as clearly female. Some versatile (and talented) singers will pick their “part” in choral works depending on their available range, singing an octave higher or lower, or singing with the baritones, altos, or tenors, as their range allows. These decisions belong to the singer. (p. 417)

The role of the choir director, then, is to accept whichever choices are comfortable for choristers so long as those choices are not harmful to the singers.

The gendering of choristers is enacted in dress as well as in organization. Some choirs enforce explicitly gendered clothing during performances; women are often required to wear dresses or skirts, and men are often required to wear tuxedos (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5). Unfortunately, some choristers may be assumed to be women or men while their gender identity is completely separate. One participant in Palkii and Caldwell’s study was particularly distressed with their choir’s treatment of the issue, saying, “I hated having to wear the dress. If you want a standard (i.e. gender specific) uniform, allow the singers to choose which one they wear” (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5). In imposing gender on this singer, a very negative experience became synonymous with a choral experience.

The Effects of Transitioning on the Voice

Transgender singers face unique physical challenges, and these challenges can be exacerbated during the transition process. Dramatic hormonal changes affect vocal strength, range, and passagio. Alexandros Constansis, a trans male singer, discussed the experience of changing from an alto to a tenor to a baritone throughout his transition (2008, par. 14-19). Constansis’s work was groundbreaking in that it was the first to argue that trans male singers might benefit from gradual transition periods, rather than rapid hormonal treatment (2008, par. 13-15). According to Constansis’s findings, rapid hormonal treatment does not allow the body time to adjust to the dramatic vocal changes

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that occur when foreign testosterone is introduced to the body (2008, par. 28-31). The negative effects of this can be diminished through gradual hormonal treatment (2008, par. 28-31).

During his hormonal therapy, Constansis’ voice ‘broke’ (similar to the ‘breaking’ of cisgender male voices in puberty) and he required long periods of vocal rest (2008, par. 15, 18). For a chorister, transgressing voice types over a short period of time could make it difficult to find a place in a choir, and enforcing vocal rest could be frustrating. Furthermore, Constansis describes a condition for many trans men called ‘entrapped FTM voice’ (2008, par. 4). In this condition, a trans man’s vocal folds elongate in response to hormonal treatment, but because his voice box does not grow as dramatically, the vocal folds are unable to resonate properly (2008, par. 4-5). Constansis also faced one other issue as a singer: Because of his extreme binding (a practice in which trans men and people of other genders restrict the breasts to attain a flatter chest), he experienced a decrease in lung strength (2008, par. 22). Without knowledge of these issues, a choir director may erroneously expect the transgender male singer to have the same needs as any other singer, leading to possible vocal damage and distress for the chorister.

The experience of a transitioning trans woman is in some ways simpler than that of a trans man, but it is more complex in other ways. For trans women who transition after puberty, hormone therapy does little to affect the voice’s pitch. The effects of testosterone on the voice in puberty cannot, at this point in history, be reversed (Shufelt and Braunstein, 2009, p. 64). Because of this, vocal range does not change as dramatically for most trans women as it does for trans men. Nevertheless, trans women do face certain challenges in transitioning.

Many trans women enter speech therapy to produce a more feminine pitch and tone, and this extends to their experiences in singing (Kozan, 2012, p. 416). For example, although Lia had not begun any hormonal transitioning, she admitted to pushing her range in an attempt to achieve a more feminine sound (Lia, personal correspondence, 11 Nov. 2015). Furthermore, hormonal therapy can affect the vocal system, despite its minimal effect on pitch range. When ‘female’ sex hormones are dramatically higher than usual in cisgender women (such as during the process of in vitro fertilization), vocalists can face conditions such as posterior chink (a gap at the back of the larynx) and congested vocal folds (Abitol, Abitol, and Abitol, 1999, p. 435). Conditions like these can cause vocal fatigue, loss of vocal power, decreased dynamic and pitch range, and a husky or metallic vocal timbre (Abitol, Abitol, and Abitol, 1999, p. 435).

It is likely that the transitioning transgender woman would face similar issues as the cisgender woman who receives an increase of ‘female’ hormones, and the trans woman may indeed face additional difficulties resulting from her unique physical makeup. Like much else regarding transgender singers, there is a critical lack of research that examines how hormonal therapy affects the transgender woman’s singing voice; formal studies are necessary for a better understanding of these issues. In addition to this, speech therapists, private voice instructors, and trans women themselves may offer a unique and personal per-

spective of the singing voices of trans women; information from these sources could prove to be valuable in both formal and informal settings (Kozan, 2012, p. 414).

The situations indicated above are largely applicable to trans singers who transition after puberty. For both trans men and trans women, vocal transition is typically believed to be easier when it occurs before sexual maturity. This allows trans boys to grow larger larynxes in tandem with their cis male peers; these larynxes are better equipped to house masculine vocal folds. Conversely, trans girls do not experience the dramatic and irreversible effects of testosterone on the voice when testosterone is blocked before puberty. Therefore, choir directors who manage ensembles with younger trans choristers will likely face different issues than in choirs for adolescents and adults.

Implications for Research and Choral Leadership

A common theme throughout this paper is that academia is sorely lacking in research regarding transgender choristers. Neither choristers nor choir directors have many resources available to them with regard to managing issues that are unique to this population. Since transgender choristers do exist and are heavily marginalized on the basis of their gender identity, this deficit in academia is dangerous and reflects a need for greater discussion within the choral community. Further study as a whole needs to be conducted with the goal of examining how transphobia, dysphoria, gender roles, transitioning, and other issues affect transgender choristers.

The choir director holds an intrinsic role of power over the choristers (O'Toole, 2005, p. 5). This hierarchical structure can be minimized, but it is extremely rare that it is completely dismantled, especially within any system wherein the choir director is required to evaluate the choristers as students. Therefore, directors have the benefits and responsibilities that come with power. Choir directors are capable of making an ensemble feel like a safe space; conversely, they may allow outside oppressive forces to marginalize members of the choir (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5; O'Toole, 2005, p. 2-24). They may even act as oppressors themselves (Palkii and Caldwell, 2014, p. 5; O'Toole, 2005, p. 2-24).

As discussed previously, choral safety is imperative for the health of both the choristers and the choir. To cultivate this sense of safety, choir directors should be actively involved in social justice within the choir. Jorgensen (2007) writes that music educators should have an interest in social justice because music is interconnected with the lives of those who practice it, and social structures affect the way music is created and experienced (p. 170-174). The experiences, moods, and personalities of choristers change the production of music (p. 170-174). Furthermore, I argue that directors have an ethical responsibility as citizens—especially as citizens in a place of power—to reduce oppressive realities wherever possible.

Choir directors can help to combat oppression simply by making changes in language, such as by referring to sections by voice type rather than gender. They can cultivate safe spaces through this language, through gender-neutral performance dress, and through allowing and encouraging choristers to express their

voices in vocal parts that feel comfortable for them. Furthermore, directors should be educated in how the voice works and in the effects of transitioning on the voice. It is extremely important that choristers who require vocal rest or other accommodations during vocal transition are supported by the choir director; pushing the fragile voice may cause damage to the vocal system. Finally, choir directors should be part of a system of supportive experts who are equipped to manage the transgender voice. Speech therapists and private voice instructors often are more aware of the vulnerabilities involved in individual voices, especially if they are trained in work with transgender voices.

Western society is one that enacts great pain against those who do not meet arbitrary, heteropatriarchal standards of the 'acceptable human'. For many marginalized people, music and choir serve as an escape from the violence of the world that surrounds them—but this can only be achieved if the music-making space is welcoming and safe. As a person in power, the choir director must help to facilitate this, especially if they are cisgender. If these efforts can be made, it may be possible to develop a world that celebrates the unique—and so often silenced—voices of the transgender community.

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ⁱ In the context of this paper, 'transgender'/'trans' will be operationally defined as adjectives describing any person whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth, regardless of their status in physical transition or specific gender identity.

ⁱⁱ This describes a form of discrimination in which a person uses incorrect pronouns or gender terms when referring to a person.

ⁱⁱⁱ This term indicates a person whose gender identity is the same as the gender they were assigned at birth; the 'opposite' of transgender.

^{iv} This can be defined as the process of physically altering the body to align with one's gender identity (i.e. through surgery or hormonal therapy).

^v To protect the identity of this woman, a pseudonym is used in this paper. Her commentary has been included with her permission.



Mezzo-soprano Molly Rastin graduated with a Bachelor of Music at the University of Windsor in 2016. She has been a recipient of several awards, including the Catherine McKeever Memorial Scholarship in Music and the Rotary Club Scholarship. Her passion for social justice steers her work. Currently, she is earning her postgraduate degree in music therapy at the University of Jyväskylä in Jyväskylä, Finland, after which she aspires to use music therapy with victims of abuse. This is her first published work.

Précis

La voix muette : une exploration des défis des transgenres dans les chorales occidentales

Cette dissertation examine les difficultés rencontrées par les transsexuels dans les chorales, surtout les chorales scolaires. Peu de recherches font état de cette réalité, mais les publications existantes mettent en évidence des défis concernant la sécurité, la dysphorie, la contrainte identitaire et la transition vocale. Ce travail insiste sur le fait que, pour le bien-être des chorales et des choristes transgenre, les chefs de chœurs doivent être conscients de ce type de problèmes et doivent adopter une attitude proactive pour s'assurer que les chanteurs transgenres sont à l'aise au sein de l'ensemble choral. En outre, il faut engager plus de recherches pour examiner davantage les défis auxquels font face les choristes transgenres.

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