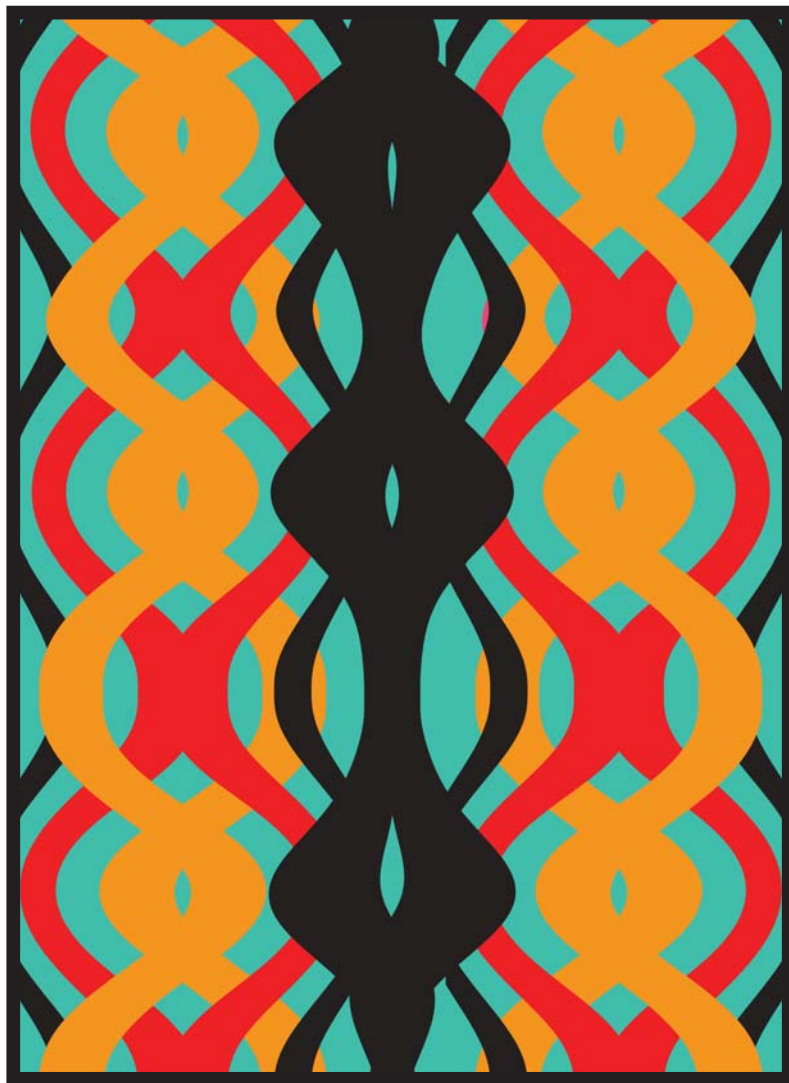


INCLUSIVITY IN ACTION:
Transgender Students
in the Choral Classroom



Joshua Palkki

“The scarcity of research on transgender issues in education is problematic because transgender people participate in the educational system at all levels. The number of transgender people who participate in the education system is difficult to measure because the high level of societal transphobia ensures that many transgender individuals are not comfortable publicly acknowledging their identity. Furthermore, lack of access to information prevents many young people whose gender differs from the dominant model from having the language to name their experiences and feelings.”¹

—Kathleen E. Rands

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In May of 2014, a *Time* magazine cover featuring actress Laverne Cox suggested that American society was at a transgender “tipping point.”² In addition, the visibility and activism of celebrities like Chaz Bono, Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Caitlyn Jenner have ignited conversations about trans(gender) issues across the United States. In the choral community, ensembles such as the Butterfly Music Transgender Chorus in Boston and the Trans Chorus of Los Angeles are giving voice to people who may not have felt welcome in more “traditional” choral ensembles.³ Choral programs exist within specific contexts of time, place, politics, and public opinion. Thus, it is important for choral conductor-teachers to understand the rapidly changing gender landscape of the twenty-first century. For a listing of gender-related vocabulary that will aid in reading this article and in better understanding trans issues, see page 23.

As gender identities that challenge the gender binary become more prevalent in American society, and as more trans youth “come out” at an earlier age, it is important for choral conductor-teachers to consider the complexities of gender and how these intricacies play out in the choral classroom. But how much do secondary choral conductor-teachers know about (trans)gender issues? Some scholars indicate that there may be a generational gap surrounding these topics.⁴ However, although more information is available, “coming out” processes remain complex and context dependent. Dissemination of information about trans issues, while important, does not change the internal struggle that people who are trans may face in navigating their gender identity, especially for those who identify as non-binary.

School choral music in the United States in the twenty-first century is gendered in many ways: consider “men’s glee club” and “women’s choirs,” choir dresses and tuxedos, lyrics portraying heteronormative situations, and gendered rehearsal language (e.g., “let’s have all the women sing here”). These traditions are compounded by the fact that choral programs may exist within a highly gendered school environment⁵ and that it may be difficult for transgender students to navigate their gender identity within a school and a program that may continually reinforce stereotypes about gender and sexuality.⁶

As of 2016, there have been ongoing political and le-

gal debates regarding the rights of transgender students in schools. According to a *New York Times* article:

The Obama administration’s directive Friday [May 13, 2016] on the use of school bathrooms and locker rooms by transgender students intensified the latest fierce battle in the nation’s culture wars, with conservatives calling it an illegal overreach that will put children in danger and advocates for transgender rights hailing it as a breakthrough for civil rights.⁷

This *Times* article references the May 2016 “Dear Colleague Letter” from the Obama administration to all American public schools regarding the use of school bathrooms and locker rooms by transgender students.⁸ Both Title IX and this “Dear Colleague Letter”⁹ can and should influence the experience of trans students at school. As trans scholar Genny Beemyn noted, in following these directives, schools must:

- (a) not discriminate against trans students and take steps to prevent [discrimination];
- (b) treat trans students in keeping with their gender identity, which includes giving access to the appropriate gendered bathroom, changing room, and overnight accommodation;
- (c) [use] the name and pronouns used by the student; and [allow] them to dress in accordance with their gender identity; and
- (d) keep a student’s trans status, birth name, and gender assignment at birth confidential.¹⁰

After the change in presidential administration in 2017, these federal guidelines have formally been rescinded. However, individual school districts may choose to continue to support and implement them. For example, the Long Beach (CA) Unified School District recently announced their intention to support the guidelines despite the change in federal policy.¹¹ The guidelines laid out by the Obama administration are considered by many to be necessary in protecting trans students in

Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom

Gender Vocabulary

Gender is a set of socially constructed and context/culture-dependent ideas regarding gender roles and what behaviors and physical attributes are considered “masculine” or “feminine.”

The **gender binary** is an often unquestioned assumption that all people are either male (men) or female (women).

Gender dysphoria occurs when trans people feel a disconnect between their gender identity and their body.

Transgender as a term and a concept has been understood in varying and sometimes contradictory ways.

- A commonly understood usage of *transgender* (trans) is as a blanket term to denote any kind of variance from, or opposition to, binary gender.
- The term *transgender* originally was meant to “distinguish people who cross sexes by changing their bodies (transsexual) from people who cross genders by changing their clothing, behavior, and grooming (transgender)”¹² but is now used more broadly and may now include a diverse group including people who identify as (among others):
 - Transsexual, transgender, transvestite, gender fluid, genderqueer, a-gender, gender non-conforming, demi-girl, demi-boy, drag queen, and non-binary.
 - An increasing number of trans people claim monikers like *non-binary*, *genderqueer*, *gender-variant*, *gender nonconforming* (or simply *queer*) that challenge the gender binary. These terms refer to a variety of circumstances, including: a disconnect between *assigned birth sex*, a medical determination made at birth based on a baby’s genitalia, and their gender identity and/or gender expression; or a fluidity of gender (i.e., varying their gender expression between male and female, or living permanently “in the cracks”).
- A *man* or *trans man* (or *trans guy*) is a person who has transitioned to living as a male (they also may use *female-to-male/FTM*) and a *woman* or *trans woman* expresses female gender identity (they may also use *male-to-female/MTF*). This is an important distinction that often causes confusion. When referring to a trans person who is transitioning, one should always refer to the gender *to which* they are transitioning, not their assigned birth sex.

An increasing number of people are choosing to identify themselves using pronouns typically reserved for a group of people—namely, *they*, *them*, and *their*. For example, in referring to a gender non-conforming person, one could say, “they wrote me a letter” or “I’m meeting them for coffee.” Some people also use the gender-neutral pronouns *ze* and *hir*.

schools, and this author strongly supports their continued implementation. As choral conductor-teachers navigate an educational climate in which more trans singers are comfortable expressing their gender identity within the choral context,¹³ they may wish to keep these directives and legal decisions in mind.

This article draws on a recently completed multiple narrative case study of three transgender students who participated in their high school choral programs.¹⁴ The participants in the study were: Sara,¹⁵ who identifies as a male-to-female trans person; Jon, who identifies as a female-to-male trans person; and Skyler, who identifies as a-gender and uses they/them/their pronouns (as they said, “I think gender is kind of dumb and I really don’t see the need to have one”). In addition to the perspectives of these three students, choral teachers and other important adults provided valuable data for the study. Throughout the article, I draw on these data to illustrate these students’ personal experiences navigating their gender identity within the context of their high school choral programs. The next section describes specific factors that may influence the experiences of trans choral students in North American schools and outlines factors that influenced the journeys of Sara, Jon, and Skyler, including geography, voice parts and gender identity, and mentors/relationships.

Factors Influencing the Experiences of Trans Choral Students

Geography

Choral teachers and other education professionals who wish to be openly affirming of trans students may need to carefully consider their specific contexts, including the state and community in which they live. For example, Sara’s first high school choral teacher was an extremely positive influence as she navigated her gender identity in a small, rural Midwestern town. Choral teachers in small rural communities across the country can provide safe spaces for *all* youth—regardless of gender identity.¹⁶ Teachers in more traditionally progressive communities should not assume, however, that their schools and/or communities are supportive of trans youth. Sara, Jon, and Skyler’s stories’ indicate that teachers who explicitly demonstrate their support of LGBTQA¹⁷ students are important for queer students, regardless of state or community.

Educator Linda McCarthy encourages teachers to ask themselves: “Do I stifle non-normative gender expression in my classroom?” Because gender identity is not necessarily something that can be seen with the plain eye, and because the gender landscape in the United States is rapidly expanding, it is best for choral educators

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Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom

to employ inclusive practices (e.g., inclusive rehearsal vocabulary) *all of the time*—not only when there are one or more “out” trans/questioning students in the program. This may be more complicated when considering non-binary students who may not be “visibly trans,” as was true for Skyler.

Voice Parts and Gender Identity

In recent years, a lack of knowledge about trans issues has caused some consternation in the choral community, and in particular there seems to be concern and confusion about the connection between one’s voice type/part and one’s gender identity. Some choral conductor-teachers may already have experience with a similar construct: it is not only trans singers who face “gender trouble” in the choral context—countertenors or cis-gender females who sing tenor can be considered “voice variant”¹⁸ (where there is some disconnect between one’s perceived gender and one’s voice). For example, several social media posts from choral educators with little or no knowledge about trans issues¹⁹ have demonstrated the unease many choral educators may feel about discussing gender issues. In addition, a recent study in *Journal of Research in Music Education* states that “the case could certainly be made that [transgender] students should sing the voice part appropriate for their vocal development.”²⁰ I consider this a questionable statement because it implies that a blanket policy can be applied to all trans students in all contexts. *Trans people are not monolithic, and when it comes to issues of voice and gender, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions.*

Some trans singers may revel in the fact that their voice does not match society’s notions of how their voice should sound.²¹ Other trans people consider the voice a vital way that they “do” their gender in society. Choral music educators can determine through conversation the level of connection, if any, between a trans student’s voice and gender identity. Based on this conversation, a personalized voice part plan can be devised. Conceptually, this is similar to middle-level choral educators who modify, adapt, or compose voice parts to fit the vocal range of singers in the midst of the voice change.²² Vocal health should *always* be taken into consideration, of course, but the connection between the choral experi-

ence and gender identity may determine whether or not a student continues to sing in choir. For example, as Jon said, “I don’t think I’d be as strong or as confident of a singer if I didn’t sing a male voice part. I really think it gives me confidence to be able to sing and to want to sing. I don’t think I’d want to sing if I were still an alto.”

In light of this recommendation, I offer three hypothetical examples of students who *do* feel a connection between their voice and their gender identity: (A) a trans girl who previously sang tenor who wishes to sing alto, (B) a trans boy who previously sang soprano but now wishes to sing tenor, and (C) a non-binary student joining choir for the first time as a high school sophomore and the student is unsure about their voice part. One necessary caveat here is that if a choral music educator determines that a student is not able to sing healthily in their preferred voice range, a rapport should be developed between student and educator in which the teacher is comfortable recommending that the student stay on the same voice part that they had previously been singing—at least temporarily.

“**Choral music educators can determine through conversation the level of connection, if any, between a trans student’s voice and gender identity.**”

Making changes to one’s vocal habits can be challenging for everyone, and so while switching voice parts might not initially be possible, re-assessing and providing ongoing individualized feedback might enable a healthy change in vocal range at a later time. For example, Sara, who identifies as male-to-female, initially desired to sing soprano or alto, but after working with her choir teacher one-on-one, he recommended that she remain a bass 2, and she was comfortable with that. This indicates that Sara does *not* feel a strong connection between her voice and her gender identity. As she proudly proclaimed: “I’m a girl and I’m a bass and I own that.” To illustrate the points below more clearly, I will use a hypothetical up-

coming concert in which the following pieces are being performed: “Little David, Play on Your Harp” arr. Rollo Dilworth (Hal Leonard), “Conditior alme siderum” by G.P. da Palestrina (Choral Public Domain Library), and “Domine, ad adjuvandum me festina” by Il Padre G. B. Martini, ed. John Castellini (Concordia). See Figures 1 and 2.

In hypothetical Example A, the choral teacher could work with the student to determine her ability to sing healthily in her falsetto. If the student was able to do so, the teacher could chart the student’s range and determine which voice part the student could sing on each piece. As illustrated in Figure 1, the student could sing every pitch called for in these three pieces. However, the teacher would need to monitor the student for tension, as the tessitura may be tiring for a student who had been singing tenor. This is especially true on pieces such as “Little David, Play On Your Harp,” in which the alto tessitura is consistently higher than the pieces by Martini and Palestrina. The teacher could also consider a “hybrid” tenor/alto tenor approach on “Little David Play On Your Harp,” as illustrated in Figure 3.

When considering Example B, the choral teacher could determine the full range of notes the student was able to sing healthily. While the student in Example B could theoretically sing nearly every pitch in the tenor parts of these three pieces, it may not be advisable for them to sing in such a low range for an entire concert. For example, during Jon’s freshman year in choir, he was assigned to sing alto but sang tenor on certain pieces or in specific sections of pieces. A similar system may also be feasible for some cisgender women who have naturally low voices. In the table below, notice that the tessitura of these three tenor parts does not sit at the bottom of the student’s range but rather surrounds middle C—a range in which altos regularly sing. For this student, the conversation may involve them singing tenor for some (or even most) of the piece and switching to the alto line where the tessitura is consistently too low (see Figure 3).

In Example C, in which a non-binary student joins choir for the first time in high school, the teacher and choral teacher could begin a dialogue about the student’s voice and whether using one range or another causes feelings of dysphoria; this conversation could



Figure 1. Hypothetical Example A
Vocal Range and Tessitura Illustration

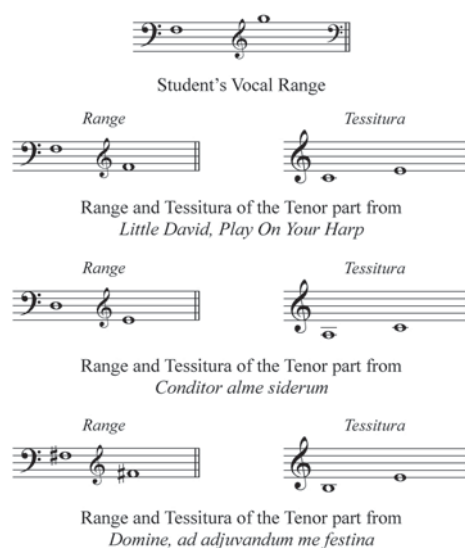


Figure 2. Hypothetical Example B
Vocal Range and Tessitura Illustration

Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom

be followed by a vocal range check. After determining which pitches the student can healthily sing, a voice part determination can be made through further dialogue. This decision may be quite simple (e.g., “Where does your voice feel most comfortable? In this range or this range? Your voice seems to lie in an alto 1 range.”) or quite complex (e.g., the kind of voice part exchanges demonstrated in Example B). The examples mentioned in the previous sentence reference two very different scenarios. To restate: the individualized approach agreed upon by the trans student and choral teacher should be based upon the level of connection, if any, between the student’s voice and gender identity. *The student and choral*

teacher must engage in this ongoing dialogue to ensure that the student is comfortable. As Jon’s choir teacher, Mr. Mullins, said:

If a student comes to you and wants to change voice parts or sing with a different part and you don’t—that’s understandable if you look at it and say, “I don’t think that’s healthy for your voice.” But can you talk to them about it and figure out what makes them the most comfortable that’s possible for the program and for their voice? What’s the most comfortable for them and doesn’t hurt them?

6

S
2. Qui con - do - lens in - te - - - ri -
4. Cu - jus for - ti po - ten - - - ti -

A
2. Qui con - do - lens in - te - - - ri -
4. Cu - jus for - ti po - ten - - - ti -

T
2. Qui con - do - lens in - te - - - ri -
4. Cu - jus for - ti po - ten - - - ti -

B
2. Qui con - do - lens in - te - - - ri -
4. Cu - jus for - ti po - ten - - - ti -

11

S
tu mor - tis per - i - re sae - cu - lum,
ae ge - nu cur - van - tur om - ni - a,

A
tu mor - tis per - i - re sae - cu - lum, sal - vas - ti
ae ge - nu cur - van - tur om - ni - a, cae - les - ti -

T
tu mor - tis per - i - re sae - cu - lum,
ae ge - nu cur - van - tur om - ni - a, sal - vas - ti mun - dum
cae - les - ti - a, ter -

B
tu mor - tis per - i - re sae - cu - lum,
ae ge - nu cur - van - tur om - ni - a,

Figure 3. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, *Conditor alme siderum*, mm. 6–15.

This process may involve trial and error and may be time consuming. But consider this: if a student is told they *must* sing a voice part that triggers gender dysphoria, they will likely leave choral music—potentially forever. Recall that the aforementioned suggestions apply specifically to students who *do* feel a connection between their voice and their gender identity. If a student does not experience such a connection, they can be classified like any other student. However, when such a student is in the choir, rehearsal vocabulary will need to be altered. If there is a boy who is singing soprano, then a choral teacher should not refer to the sopranos and altos as “women.”

Mentors and Relationships

Music educators can be influential mentors in their students’ lives. Previous studies have also shown that teachers are important figures in the lives of trans students. For example, in a study with transgender youth, researchers Arnold H. Grossman and Anthony R. D’Augelli reported that 75% of respondents disclosed their gender identity to their teachers—a larger percentage than disclosed to their parents (66%) or grandparents (50%).²³ This is a significant statistic for educators and should encourage all education professionals to learn more about gender and transgender issues; school counselors and all teachers should receive such training in their undergraduate and/or graduate programs and professional development. School districts can ensure that they have policies regarding gender—policies that honor trans students and also policies that specify details regarding anti-bullying. As recommended by several authors,²⁴ schools can include gender and transgender issues as part of the normal curriculum—perhaps removing some stigma surrounding gender issues.

Choral teachers. The data from this study indicate that mentors, supportive teachers, and other educational professionals may encourage trans students. For Sara, Jon, and Skyler, the relationship with their choir teachers was significant, demonstrating the fact that music educators often have deeper relationships with students than teachers in other subject areas.²⁵ Positive adult mentors and role models can be influential for

trans youth—especially those who are not finding support at home. If it is true that (choral) music teachers often provide safe spaces for LGBTQA students, then all choral teachers should be equipped with the knowledge, vocabulary, and skills to honor a trans student in the context of a secondary choral program. Choral music education can be a powerful part of students’ lives—not just musically, but emotionally.

Canadian educators Kristopher Wells, Gayle Roberts, and Carol Allan proposed guiding questions for all teachers who wish to create a gender-inclusive classroom:

Ask yourself, how is gender represented in your classroom? How are these representations related to traditional social and cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity? How is gender represented and reinforced in your school and community? How do different cultural, ethnic, and faith-based contexts influence members of a gendered minority? What are the effects of these representations on youth who do not conform to traditional gender norms and sex role stereotypes?²⁶

Based on recent research, it seems likely that a large number of music teachers in America will eventually have a trans student in their program who openly discloses their gender identity. So, for most secondary choral teachers, having a trans student may be inevitable.

When a trans student does enroll in choir, individual adults may decide whether or not to use a trans student’s name and pronouns—a small detail to cisgender people—but one that can have a deep emotional impact on a trans student. This concept is evidenced in Jon’s experiences in honor choir in which he was publically misgendered and called by his birth name. Because his legal name was “Jane,” that name went on all of the official registration forms. Jon said:

We got there and my nametag said “Jane” on it and we tried to get it fixed and I texted [my choir teacher] about it. He said that they couldn’t change it though, because it was our credentials like our ID, but I took a sharpie and

Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom

I wrote over it... and we just told people that they misspelled Jon.

Choral educators can provide safe spaces for queer youth and make their acceptance of LGBTQA students explicitly known.²⁷ This can be through stories or words in class or via a Safe Space sticker on an office or classroom door/wall.²⁸

Choral conductor-teachers may have a fine line to walk when interacting with trans students and their families. The following recommendations are based on the data in this study (these assume that the choir teacher knows that they have a trans student): (1) speak with the student and ask about their name and pronouns, (2) inquire about the status of the legal name change, (3) ask to whom the student is “out” at home and at school so as to not inadvertently disclose their gender identity. If there has not been a legal name change, teachers may choose to communicate with the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the student to encourage them to approve the use of the student’s real name in concert programs and other choral department documents/websites but need not seek permission to use the student’s name in class. The final section of this article provides policy recommendations for choral educators who have or may have trans students in their programs.

Choral Classroom

Most secondary school choir teachers have a great amount of autonomy over the policies that govern their school choral programs. Encouraging teachers to rethink educational norms, Wells, Roberts, and Allen write, “Schools should work to foster environments that challenge binary representations and, in turn, embrace the fluidity of sex, sexuality, and gender.”²⁹ As discussed several times in this article, in taking a cue from the data and from guidelines set forth by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, there are several aspects of the secondary school choral experience that might be reconsidered in light of the inclusion of trans students.

Pronouns and name change. As a common practice, all secondary teachers should ask all students for their students’ preferred pronouns on the first day of a new

school year or term. It may be a good idea to have students introduce themselves on the first day, making sure to include their chosen name and pronouns in the introduction. Likewise, students must be able to go by a different name in class than the one printed on the school roster.³⁰ Teachers should understand that these names and pronouns may not remain static—they may change as students’ identities evolve. An open and respectful dialogue between trans students and education professionals is key.

For trans students, the ability to use their real (or “chosen”) name can be an important part of how they “do” their gender in society and at school. As previously discussed, under the guidelines from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, schools were required to use a trans student’s real name.

Structure of ensembles. As the gender landscape in the United States becomes more complex, choral teachers may find it necessary to reconsider the structure and/or names of their choral ensembles. Will a “women’s choir” at the high school level serve the needs of *all* women—including trans women who sing in the lower octave? Will a “men’s choir” be inclusive of trans men who formerly sang soprano—or still wish to? Sara and Jon both sang in high school co-ed ensembles in which they transitioned quite easily. Skyler (who identifies as a-gender and uses they/them/their pronouns) began in a single-gender ensemble then moved into two co-ed choirs. Skyler was unsure about how they would feel about singing in a single-gender ensemble now that they have disclosed their non-binary identity. They said, “Sometimes I’m a little unsure about being in groups that are specifically labeled for a gender.” There are no easy answers. Choral educators should learn as much as they can about gender and how it influences their choral philosophy and pedagogy. If they discover incongruence, perhaps a change in program structure (or simply an ensemble name change) is called for.

The presence of “gendered choirs” in the American choral community is a mainstay in many communities; for example: collegiate glee clubs, treble choirs with feminist roots, boychoirs, and single-gender collegiate a cappella groups. Many of these ensembles have proven vital to identity development for males³¹ and females,³² and

thus, personally important for many individual singers. For example, I have met many women who feel empowered through membership in a women's ensemble with feminist roots. Many male singers feel comfortable in all-male choirs or college glee clubs. I believe that these traditions have great merit and I do not deny their importance to countless musicians. If conductor-teachers choose to stay with the "gendered choir" paradigm, however, they must find ways to be inclusive of trans singers. Ensemble name changes may be necessary.³³ For example, several states have renamed their All-State women's choirs as "treble choirs." Because, as Skyler so aptly noted, if a choir is going to use the word "women," then these ensembles must be accommodating of *all* women; likewise with men's choirs.

Catherine E. Lhamon and Vanita Gupta, on behalf of the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, stat-

ed: "Although separating students by sex in classes and activities is generally prohibited, nonvocational elementary and secondary schools may offer nonvocational single-sex classes and extracurricular activities under certain circumstances."³⁴ It is likely that choral classes are considered "nonvocational single-sex classes." It seems that this will continue to be a topic of conversation—both within the choral music education community and within the broader education dialogue and perhaps even legal communities.

Standing arrangements. When an "out" trans student is enrolled in a choir, the teacher should carefully consider seating/standing arrangements. For instance, Sara, the trans girl who sang bass 2, sat on the edge of the soprano and bass sections so that she could be near her voice part but also sit next to other women. Cho-

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ral educators can create similar arrangements in which trans students can be successful and comfortable vocally, socially, and visually. In concert settings, such careful standing arrangements may be less crucial visually if all students wore gender-neutral uniforms.

Uniforms. Regarding uniforms, Skyler said, “In a perfect world maybe uniforms would be gender neutral.” Uniforms did not prove to be a challenge for Jon as he navigated his gender identity in high school choir. Things were less smooth for Skyler, who seemed to settle a bit by agreeing to wear the uniform meant for their assigned birth sex. In the changing gender landscape of the twenty-first century, choral teachers may need to decide whether or not some of the traditional choir uniforms (e.g., dresses and tuxedos) best honor the gender identity of all students. The U.S. Department of Education states, “Some schools have policies that allow transgender students to dress consistent with their gender identity [...] Washington State Guidelines encourage school districts to adopt gender-neutral dress codes that *do not restrict a student’s clothing choices on the basis of gender.*”³⁵ Choral teachers may explore a “concert black” approach in which every singer dresses in all black within specified guidelines to ensure that all outfits are school appropriate. Perhaps in the future, choral teachers could employ fashion designers to create gender-neutral choir uniforms.³⁶

Rehearsal language. Choral music educators can refrain from using blatantly gendered language in rehearsal. *Choral teachers should refer to sections, not genders.* Trans singers who do not feel a strong sense of connection between their voice and gender may experience this even more often, as evidenced by Sara’s insistence that her teachers not refer to the tenor and bass sections as “men.” In addition to honoring trans students by carefully choosing words in class, Mr. Ames (Sara’s choir teacher) demonstrated how rehearsal language could influence other subsets of the LGBTQA community:

I try to keep any analogy I’m using sort of gender-neutral as well—when we’re talking about a piece dealing with love, I try and say, “a *person* you might have feelings for” as opposed to the

stereotypical *boy loves girl or vice versa*. I do this also because we have a gay student in our chorus, and probably more that I’m not aware of. I try really hard to be as neutral as I can when using examples or analogies.

All choral teachers should bear in mind what kinds of examples they use and what those examples say about gender-sexual diversity.

Honor choirs. State choral associations and music education organizations will need to explore their honor choir audition policies. At the time of this writing, this author has interfaced with choral officials in various states. On May 28, 2016, there was a change made to a large Southwest state’s honor choir policy, which had previously not allowed females to audition as tenors and forced students to audition for a voice part that matched their assigned birth sex. These restrictions have now been abolished. Jon’s choir teacher was instrumental in having honor choir policies changed in his state in the Northeast. Referring to the previous requirement that the state music educators’ association (MEA) ask for students’ gender on the application process, Mr. Mullins said that after consulting with an MEA lawyer, “They took that out completely. At the Region level we’re not even asking for gender anymore, because there’s no need.” State officials will need to consider state education law and policies while examining how they run their honor choirs—including considerations about ensemble types (e.g., the large Southwestern state referenced previously changed “women’s choir” to “treble choir”), voicing, and uniforms.

Rooming assignments. Similar to discussions about name changes and choir names, dialogue regarding rooming arrangements on overnight choir trips should be carefully approached when considering transgender students. Most importantly, the choral teacher can have a dialogue with the trans student to see how they feel about their rooming situation. According to the “Dear Colleague Letter,” “A school must allow transgender students to access housing consistent with their gender identity and may not require transgender students to stay in single-occupancy accommodations or to dis-

close personal information when not required of other students.”³⁷ Conversations with supervising adults may be required, especially if the trans student is not widely “out.” Choral teachers should also consult with their administration and school district policies.

Conclusion

Are we at a transgender “tipping point” in choral music education? That question remains a complex one with an elusive answer. What is clear, however, is that gender issues and transgender rights have come to the forefront of political and educational discourse. As noted by Kathleen E. Rands who uses *ze/hir* pronouns in the opening quote, transgender students exist everywhere—including in school choral programs. It is my hope that this article will add to the ongoing discussion about how to include and honor *all* gender identities in the choral context. The experiences of the three students in this study illuminate new issues for consideration and multiple possible paths forward. Hopefully in the future, choral conductor-teachers are not afraid to traverse these paths. As Mr. Mullins, Jon’s choir teacher, said:

If it’s not an issue for you yet, it will be. It’s not a matter of *if*, it’s a matter of *when*. So yes, we should be having these discussions and laying the groundwork *now* so that when you do have a trans student, you’re not wondering what the hell you’re supposed to do.

As Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, Lisa Ruzzi, Connie Di-medio, and Jeanne Stanley write: “Recognize how the work you are doing now will help other children in the future... You must be willing to spend the time and effort, and know you are making a difference.”³⁸

NOTES

¹ Kathleen E. Rands, “Considering Transgender People in Education: A Gender-Complex Approach,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 60, no. 4 (September 1, 2009): 421, doi: 10.1177/0022487109341475.

² Katy Steinmetz, “The Transgender Tipping Point,” *Time*.

com, May 2014, <http://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/>.

³ Robin Young, “Chorus Helps Trans Men And Women Find Their Voice,” *Hereandnow*, June 30, 2015, <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2015/06/30/butterfly-transgender-chorus>; Catherine Womack, “L.A.’s First Trans Chorus Is Drowning Out the Nasty Rhetoric,” *L.A. Weekly*, May 5, 2016, <http://www.laweekly.com/arts/las-first-trans-chorus-is-drowning-out-the-nasty-rhetoric-6899760>.

⁴ Genny Beemyn and Susan R. Rankin, *The Lives of Transgender People* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁵ C. J. Pascoe, *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

⁶ Joshua Palkki, “Gender Trouble: Males, Adolescents, and Masculinity in the Choral Context,” *Choral Journal* 56, no. 4 (2015): 24–35; Julia Eklund Koza, “Big Boys Don’t Cry (or Sing): Gender, Misogyny, and Homophobia in College Choral Methods Texts,” *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 4–5, no. 4–1 (1993): 48–64; Patricia O’Toole, “A Missing Chapter from Choral Methods Books: How Choirs Neglect Girls,” *Choral Journal* 39, no. 5 (1998): 9–32.

⁷ Jack Healy and Richard Pérez-Peña, “Solace and Fury as Schools React to Transgender Policy,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2016, para. 1, <http://www.nytimes.com/>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ C. E. Lhamon and V. Gupta, “Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students” (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, May 13, 2016), <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201605-title-ix-transgender.pdf>.

¹⁰ Genny Beemyn, personal communication, July 27, 16.

¹¹ Liam Stack, “Trump Drops Defense of Obama Guidelines on Transgender Students,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com>; “Long Beach Schools - Newsroom: Article,” accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.lbusd.k12.ca.us/Departments/Newsroom/article.cfm?articleID=2333>. The statement from superintendent Christopher J. Steinhauer reads simply: “The Long Beach Unified School District embraces all students and remains committed to affirming a safe, productive learning environment for everyone. Transgender students in LBUSD will remain

Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom

protected regardless of the new executive order by the Trump Administration pertaining to access to restrooms and locker rooms. California Education Code permits students to use facilities consistent with one's identity."

¹² Riki Anne Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer* (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Books, 2004), 26.

¹³ Joshua Palkki and Paul Caldwell, "We Are Often Invisible': A Survey on Safe Space for LGBTQ Students in Secondary School Choral Programs," *Research Studies in Music Education* in press (Accepted for publication June 6, 2016).

¹⁴ Joshua Palkki, "My voice speaks for itself: The experiences of three transgender students in secondary school choral programs" (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 2016).

¹⁵ All names associated with the dissertation study are pseudonyms.

¹⁶ Joshua Palkki and Paul Caldwell, "We Are Often Invisible"; U. S. Department of Education, "Examples of Policies and Emerging Practices for Supporting Transgender Students," May 2016, <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oshs/emergingpractices.pdf>.

¹⁷ L (lesbian), G (gay), B (bisexual), T (trans), Q (queer, questioning), and A (asexual). This is the way that I have chosen to represent sub-populations of gender-sexual diversity. When used in other forms (e.g., LGBT), I am quoting the acronym used by another author in an effort to accurately represent their writing. I have chosen these seven letters (representing eight terms) because at this juncture, I consider it a fairly comprehensive representation of the many facets of the non-cisgender and non-heteronormative population. I am aware of the fact that these letters are not all-inclusive. For a quick primer on LGBTQ issues in the music classroom, see: Paparo, Stephen. "The ABC's of Creating the LGBTQ-Friendly Classroom." *National Association for Music Education (NAfME)*, August 18, 2016. <https://www.nafme.org/abcs-creating-lgbtq-friendly-classroom/>.

¹⁸ Vanessa L Bond, "Like Putting a Circle with a Square: A (voice-variant) Choral Singer's Story" (Society for Music Teacher Education Symposium, Greensboro, NC, 2015).

¹⁹ As an example, in December 2014, a concerned high school choir teacher posted the following in a choral director group on Facebook: "Recently, one of my sophomore sopranos came out to me as transgendered [sic] and

would like to identify as male. Since then, I've switched out that student's choir dress for a vest and black dress shirt (male concert choir outfit), and of course, I have switched to using male pronouns when addressing this student in order to support him. However, I need guidance on what part I should have him sing" (social media, December 2, 2014). The teacher went on to explain that the student desired to sing tenor and had been "practicing low." He very much wanted to switch voice parts. This teacher's reaction is encouraging—she immediately was understanding and supportive about pronouns and concert dress, and she was trying to do the best thing for her student. What is not encouraging—and quite frightening—were some of the responses to this post, including the very first reply: "Tell him there is such a thing as a boy-soprano. Then, tell him you didn't wake up one morning and decided [sic] to be a choir director; you went to college to learn the difference between a soprano and a tenor and that *he has to sing soprano*" (social media, December 2, 2014, emphasis added).

²⁰ Jason M. Silveira and Sarah C. Goff, "Music Teachers' Attitudes Toward Transgender Students and Supportive School Practices," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 64, no. 2 (July 1, 2016): 16, doi:10.1177/0022429416647048.

²¹ Lal Zimman, "Gender and the Voice," in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 127.

²² Andrea Ramsey, "Choral Music in the Junior High/middle School: A Junior High State of Mind: Considerations for Composing and Arranging for the Middle Level Choir," *Choral Journal* 49, no. 2 (2008): 73–74.

²³ Arnold H. Grossman and Anthony R. D'Augelli, "Transgender Youth," *Journal of Homosexuality* 51, no. 1 (2006): 111–28, doi:10.1300/J082v51n01_06.

²⁴ Jennifer Bryan, *From the Dress-up Corner to the Senior Prom: Navigating Gender and Sexuality Diversity in preK-12 Schools* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2012); Kand McQueen, "Breaking the Gender Dichotomy: The Case for Transgender Education in School Curriculum," *The Teachers College Record*, August 14, 2006, <http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 12663; Rands, "Considering Transgender People in Education: A Gender-Complex Approach"; Gayle Roberts, Carol Allan, and Kristopher Wells, "Understanding Gender Identity in K-12 Schools," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*

- 4, no. 4 (September 1, 2007): 119–29, doi:10.1300/J367v04n04_08; Caitlin L. Ryan, Jasmine M. Patraw, and Maree Bednar, “Discussing Princess Boys and Pregnant Men: Teaching about Gender Diversity and Transgender Experiences within an Elementary School Curriculum,” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 10, no. 1–2 (2013): 83.
- ²⁵ Louis Bergonzi, “Sexual Orientation and Music Education: Continuing a Tradition,” *Music Educators Journal* 96, no. 2 (December 2009): 21–25, doi:10.1177/0027432109350929; Palkki and Caldwell, “‘We Are Often Invisible’: A Survey on Safe Space for LGBTQ Students in Secondary School Choral Programs”; Cecil Adderley, Mary Kennedy, and William Berz, “‘A Home Away from Home’: The World of the High School Music Classroom,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 51, no. 3 (October 1, 2003): 190–205, doi:10.2307/3345373.
- ²⁶ Kristopher Wells, Gayle Roberts, and Carol Allan, *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools: A Guide for Educators* (Ottawa, ON, CA: Canadian Teachers’ Federation, 2012), 31.
- ²⁷ Palkki and Caldwell, “‘We Are Often Invisible.’”
- ²⁸ For more practical suggestions about creating an LGBTQ-friendly classroom, see: Stephen Paparo, “The ABC’s of Creating the LGBTQ-Friendly Classroom,” *National Association for Music Education (NAfME)*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.nafme.org/abcs-creating-lgbtq-friendly-classroom/>.
- ²⁹ Wells, Roberts, and Allan, *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools*, 33.
- ³⁰ U.S. Department of Education, “Examples of Policies and Emerging Practices for Supporting Transgender Students.”
- ³¹ Alfonso Elorriaga, “The Construction of Male Gender Identity through Choir Singing at a Spanish Secondary School,” *International Journal of Music Education* 29, no. 4 (2011): 318–32; Patrick K. Freer, “‘I’ll Sing with My Buddies’—Fostering the Possible Selves of Male Choral Singers,” *International Journal of Music Education* 27, no. 4 (2009): 341–55, doi:10.1177/0255761409345918.
- ³² Sarah J. Bartolome, “‘It’s like a Whole Bunch of Me!’: The Perceived Values and Benefits of the Seattle Girls’ Choir Experience,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 60, no. 4 (January 2013); Patricia O’Toole, “A Missing Chapter from Choral Methods Books: How Choirs Neglect Girls,” *Choral Journal* 39, no. 5 (1998): 9–32.
- ³³ Palkki, “‘Gender Trouble.’”
- ³⁴ Lhamon and Gupta, “Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students,” 3.
- ³⁵ U.S. Department of Education, “Examples of Policies and Emerging Practices for Supporting Transgender Students,” 10–11, emphasis added.
- ³⁶ Many thanks to my friend and colleague Andrew Minear, who came up with this idea.
- ³⁷ Lhamon and Gupta, “Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students,” 4.
- ³⁸ Graciela Slesaransky-Poe et al., “Is This the Right Elementary School for My Gender Nonconforming Child?,” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 10, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2013): 40, doi:10.1080/19361653.2012.718521.



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