

Inclusivity in Choir: Uplifting and Engaging Trans and Nonbinary Voices

Chase Shoemaker, M.M. and Cam Mears

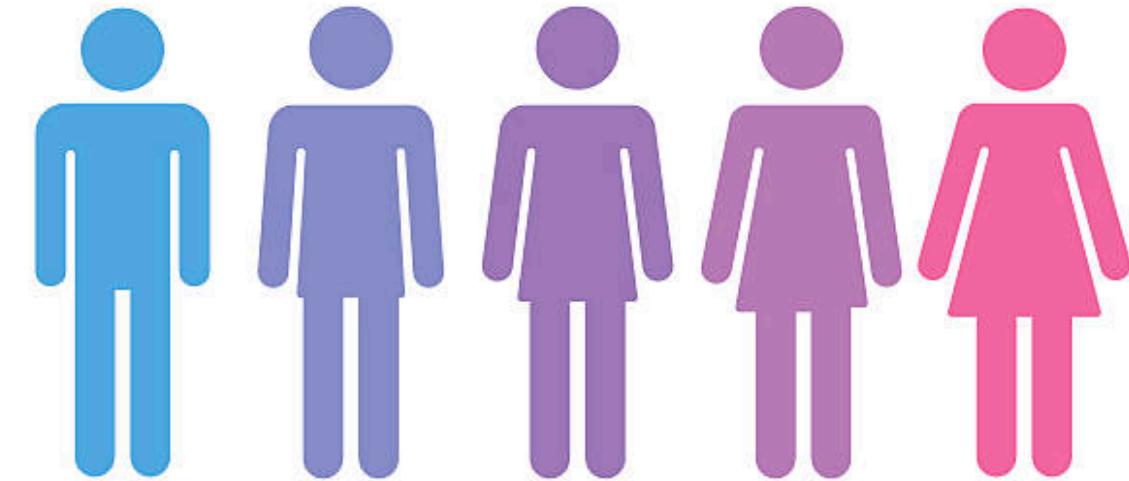
chase.shoemaker94@gmail.com / camemears@gmail.com

Purpose: To engage and uplift the transgender and nonbinary voices in our choirs by ...

- Enhancing our understanding of trans/nonbinary singers
- Exploring research on vocal treatments to feminize or masculinize the voice
- Identifying vocal considerations when instructing transgender individuals
- Offering considerations for creating an inclusive environment for people of all genders
- Highlighting resources to better navigate this topic and to provide resources to your singers if needed

Terms

Transgender - an adjective that describes a person whose self-experienced gender is not the same as the gender/sex they were assigned at birth



Trans Man – individual assigned female at birth but who identifies and/or lives as male

Trans Woman – individual assigned male at birth but who identifies and/or lives as female

Non-Binary - describes a person whose gender identity or expression exists outside the gender binary of exclusively male or exclusively female

Terms

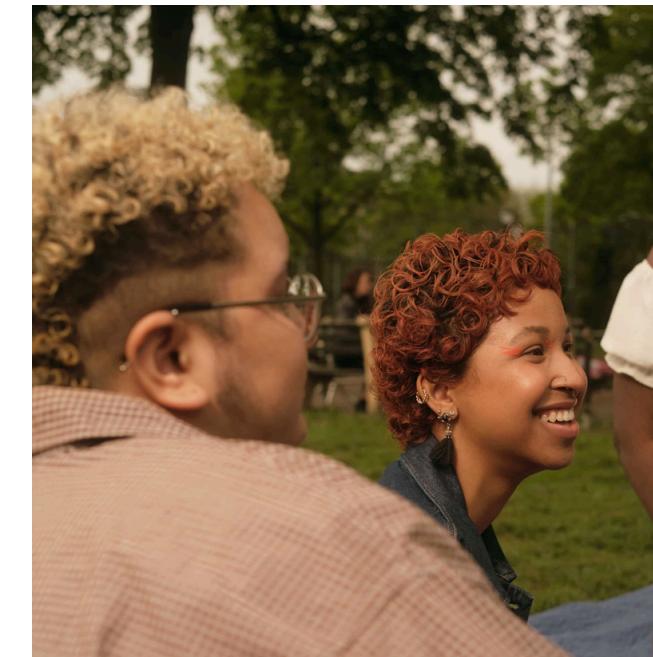
Gender Dysphoria - a medical diagnosis characterized by incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and their assigned sex

- The state of feeling uncomfortable with one's body as it relates to assigned gender
- The state of being uncomfortable with expectations of gender roles
- Discomfort with other aspects of gender expression and/or perception including clothing, makeup, hair style, voice, and so on
- Experienced by trans people in different ways and at differing severity

Examining Gender Identity, Expression, and Perception

Gender Identity

- One's individual, personal sense of their gender
- Inward and unique to each person
- Separate from outward expression of that identity
- Separate from the perception of others



Think: What is my gender identity? What is my internal experience of my gender?

Examining Gender Identity, Expression, and Perception

Gender Expression

- Outward presentation of gender
- Expressed through appearance, dress, speech, mannerisms, etc
- Separate from gender identity - sometimes related but not always
- Separate from the perception of others - sometimes aligns with perceived gender norms (masculine, feminine), but not always

Think: How do I express my gender? Does my identity inform my expression?

Examining Gender Identity, Expression, and Perception

Gender Perception

- Observations and categorizations about another person's gender
- Informed by social norms, personal experiences, media representations, biases, and stereotypes
- Attachment to the gender binary limits perception, detachment from the binary allows more fluid perception

Think: How binary or fluid is my perception of others' genders? How do I hope people perceive my gender?

Gender Aligning Vocal Production

Vocal Treatment

There is variation in the extent to which vocal and communicative changes are desired and undertaken.

- Some seek a sound that matches with a binary gender expression
- Some seek an androgynous voice
- Some seek to develop multiple speech patterns
 - to match a fluid or bigender identity
 - to appease external forces (family, employment, etc)



Source: Giving Voice, 2015

Vocal Treatment

Many transgender individuals choose to undergo behavioral, hormone, and/or surgical treatments to achieve a gender congruent voice.

These treatments are

- safe
- efficient
- patient specific

The singer and health care provider will make the best choice for the individual; it is inappropriate to make any medical recommendations for the student.

Voice Feminization

Vocal Feminization - Hormone Treatment

Hormone Replacement Therapy - mix of estrogen, testosterone blockers, and/or progesterone.

- Physical change: larynx and vocal mechanism does not change size or position. Trans women who went through testosterone dominant puberty in adolescence cannot undo its effects.
 - Testosterone Blockers
- Effect of hormone treatment
 - vocal fold swelling and production of thick mucus
 - increased risk in damaging the outer layer of the folds



Source: Singing Teacher's Guide, 2018

Vocal Feminization - Behavioral Vocal Treatment

Speech language pathologists (SLPs) assist patients to find an authentic, natural, and sustainable voice in a way that facilitates vocal health and efficiency.

These treatments seek to modify

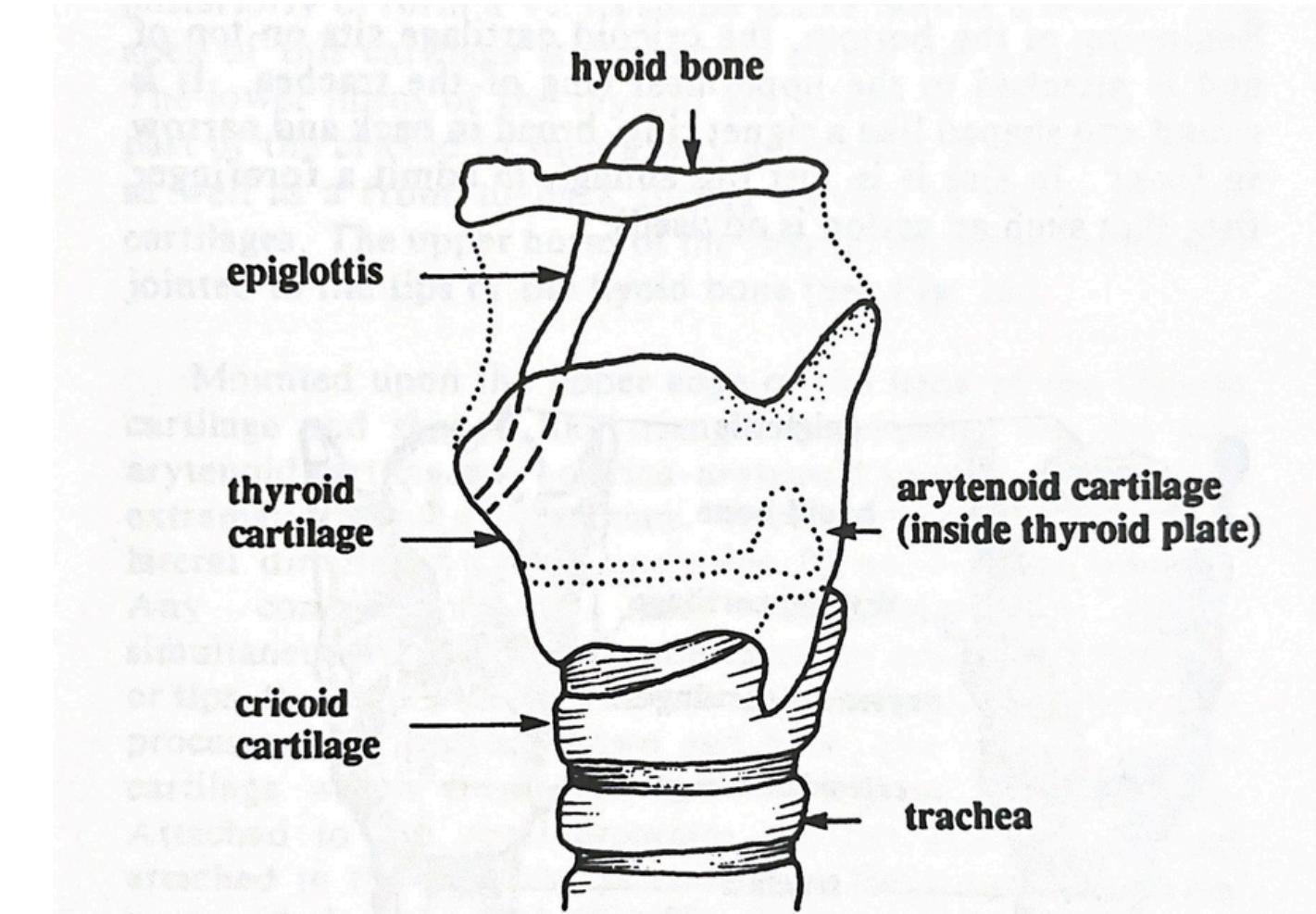
- speaking fundamental frequency
- resonance
- inflectional patterns/excursions
- vocal quality (breathiness)
- speech-sound articulation and duration
- average speaking intensity (volume)

Voice Feminization techniques involve

- aiming for a higher speaking fundamental frequency
- aiming for a "lighter" or "flutier" sound
 - shortening of the vocal tract
 - high, forward, and relaxed tongue position
 - vowel modification to more closed vowels [i, e, a]
- Timbre may play a more important role than pitch in gender perception!

Vocal Feminization - Surgical Treatment

- Surgical options include
 - Cricothyroid Approximation
 - Thyrohyoid Elevation
 - Anterior Glottoplasty
 - Feminization Laryngoplasty
- Vocal therapy is recommended before and after surgery
 - counsel on effects of surgery
 - assist with stabilization of the voice



The Functional Unity of The Singing Voice, by Barbara Doscher.
London, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994, p. 31.

Singing Considerations for Voice Feminization

Vocal teachers already have the skillset for this work!

Trans feminine students may want to explore higher registers and experiment with timbre.

- Work with your student on phonation, pitch matching, extending range, transitions through registers, and other concepts/obstacles as they come up.
- Be aware of the interplay of vocal dysphoria and gender perception
 - Be flexible and encourage experimentation of placement and tone
 - Help them discover vocal models - what kind of sound are they trying to achieve?
 - Help them find healthy ways to achieve that tone in a range they are comfortable with and enjoy singing in

Voice Masculinization

Vocal Masculinization - Hormone Treatment

Hormone Replacement Therapy - Testosterone

- "Second Puberty" - Very similar to cis male testosterone puberty in adolescence, just as variable

Physical changes to vocal mechanism through HRT

- Thickening of vocal folds
 - horizontally and vertically
 - result of collagen accumulation
 - will not reach same thickness as cis males
- Slight growth in cartilaginous structures
 - Ossification within older individuals may play a role in the malleability of the larynx for this cartilaginous growth

The thicker vocal folds paired with minimal growth of the larynx results in a unique vocal timbre.

Vocal Masculinization - Hormone Treatment cont.

- Vocal Inflammation and Water Retention
 - occurs during the first six months of treatment
 - can be felt in the vocal tract and vocal folds
 - may lead to a temporarily hoarser sound
 - causes pitch breaks and voice cracks in speaking and singing voice
 - Cracks and hoarseness, if not painful, can be sung through
- Gradual approach to HRT (lower dosage) can help alleviate vocal inflammation and slow down the vocal change to assist the singer in navigating changes
 - Even advanced singers will have to renegotiate their new instrument



Vocal Masculinization - HRT Timeline

The first year is characterized by different periods of heavy mutation and periods of relative stability.

- Effects and timeline vary for each person depending on biology and dosage.
 - 3 months - Significant drop in fundamental frequency
 - 5 months - separation between registers, nearing an octave drop
 - 6 months - Stability in the SFF and control of the voice
 - 1 year - Resonators are potentially still slightly changing
 - 1 year - SFF begins to stabilize and vocal stamina improves

Mutational Periods

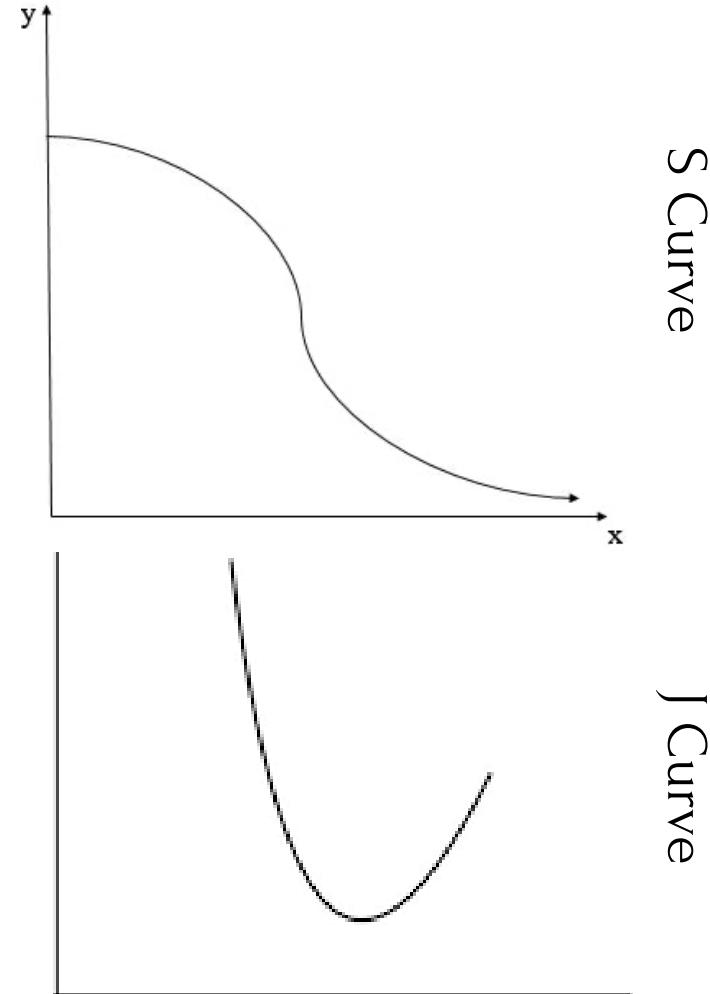
- Voice is at its weakest with narrow range
- Crucial to sing throughout the process
- Not the time to challenge or stretch the voice
- Avoid open vowels and loud singing
- Focus on breath support, articulation, and interpretation

Source: The Singing Voice, 2018.

Masculinizing HRT Singing Considerations

Pitch

- 90% of trans men will experience a lowering of the speech fundamental frequency (SFF) after 4-5 months of taking testosterone (UCSF).
 - On average, speaking pitch drops from 190-200 Hz to 100-140 Hz.
 - Studies show pitch following either a reverse S or J curve
- Loss of range is expected around 150 to 200 days into HRT
 - Upper range is usually regained or surpassed by the end of the first year
- Two voices develop: limited soprano and a true tenor/baritone
- Challenges:
 - Quick to fatigue throughout the first year
 - after reaching stability, can build back endurance
 - Difficulty matching and hearing pitch



Source: UCSF Transgender Care. The Singing Voice, 2018. Giving Voice, 2015.

Masculinizing HRT Singing Considerations

Registration

- Barbara Doscher notes that testosterone can alter connective tissue and create uneven vocal folds
 - alters ratio between vocal fold mass and laryngeal size, making blending registers more difficult
- Use exercises that would help any other singer navigate pasaggi (slides, octave jumps, etc), while acknowledging the unique challenge the singer faces

Resonance

- The vocal tract (pharynx and mouth) does not change with testosterone hormone treatment
 - Data has shown changes in the formant frequencies during the first year of hormone treatment
- Singer will need to explore how different resonators and placements work with their new voice

Dynamic

- vocal fold swelling makes it difficult to reach higher amplitudes
- softer repertoire and messa di voce exercises can help

Breath

Vocal Masculinization - Behavioral Vocal Treatment

Speech therapy with an SLP

- Masculinazation - aiming for "bigger" or "heavier" sound
 - release of tension
 - long/wide vocal tract, low laryngeal position
 - modify position of tongue to allow the larynx to release lower
 - vowel modification towards open vowels [O, Ε, Λ]
 - These modifications to the resonators can make the SFF seem to be significantly lower than what pitch is actually being produced
- Speech therapy post HRT
 - intervention with an SLP was shown to decrease speaking pitch by an additional 35Hz
 - resolved pitch instability and vocal fatigue



Source: The Singing Voice, 2018. Giving Voice, 2015. UCSF Transgender Care.

Vocal Masculinization - Surgical Treatment

Surgery - Relaxation Thyroplasty

- loosens the tension of vocal folds through depression of the anterior segment of the thyroid cartilage
- shown to considerably lower the mean fundamental frequency (187Hz to 104Hz)
- less vocal chord tension - voice often becomes rougher and quieter
- vocal therapy is recommended before and after the procedure for stabilization

Program Considerations for Inclusion

Rehearsal Language

Default to precise and accurate language: say what you mean

Communicate with colleagues and student leaders about gender neutral language

INSTEAD OF:

"Womens/Men's Chorale"

ladies/gentlemen/girls/guys

"girls, parallel arms!"

masculine/feminine sound

"his or her"

TRY:

Treble/Bass Choir

tenors and basses, sopranos and altos

"dresses, parallel arms!"

precise adjectives

their or "the singer's"



Dress Codes and Concert Attire

- Robes
- Concert black
- Choir polos with black slacks
- Jeans and a white button up
- Individually bought professional concert attire



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Voice Placement

- Absolve yourself of the tenor/bass soprano/alto binary
- Describe sections by ranges and color rather than gender
- Place students in the section that will allow them to participate comfortably and joyfully
- Vocal health or ideal section placement is not more important than mental health
- Each trans singer's approach to vocal placement will be different



Trans Chorus of Los Angeles

Considerations for Inclusion

Auditions

- Gender neutral language in postings
- Invite all singers to audition for solos in their vocal range

Preferred names

- Best practice is to know the preferred name and the public name of each singer
- Some students will want to be called one name at school and another with family
 - Dead-naming - using a name no longer used by a trans person instead of their chosen name
 - Best practice is to always use preferred names when able, and public names when asked
- Same goes for pronouns



Repertoire Selection

Ask yourself:

- Does the rep fit the voices of the ensemble?
- Do selected composers reflect the singers of the ensemble?
- What does the lyrical content have to say about the singers personifying the text?

Discuss gender-specific thematic pieces with trans and nonbinary students ahead of programming them

Additional Resources

Iowa Safe Schools

- Queer Student Organization Guide
- Safe Schools Academy
- Student Advocacy Services

One Iowa

Blurring the Binary

American Psychological

Association

Advocates for Youth

GSLEN



<https://tinyurl.com/transvoices23>

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