The Singing Teacher's
Guide to

Transgender Voices

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In an attempt to maintain cohesiveness and simplicity, this text will use "transgender" as an umbrella term that encompasses any individual whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex and/or gender they were assigned at birth.

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FOREWORD BY DAS JANSSEN, PhD

"Don't be silly."

"You'll grow out of it."

"What will people think?"

"Stop making mountains out of molehills."

"You'd be prettier if. . . ."

Or no words at all. Just that grim, embarrassed look some parents get when they introduce their kid to a coworker. The thin-lipped rigidity of a face refusing to see tears in the eyes of a child forced to look at the mirror over and over again during back-to-school-clothes shopping ordeals.

They don't always mean to gaslight us; it's really true that they don't understand just how it is their precious little daughter can be so adamant about being a boy. Or their handsome little man can long for a pretty dress. Or how their otherwise bright child can be so confused by demands to act like just one gender all the time. They changed our diapers after all; they know what they think is the truth. Sometimes their responses come from revulsion, but just as often, it's love; they're afraid for us. The world is not kind to people who are different and they want us safe.

So they shut us up. They teach us to hide and be quiet about the truth we know. They teach us to not make trouble, to control what we look at and say.

All. The. Time.

And then they decide that the eating disorders, the self-injury, the confused emotional outbursts are proof that we're intrinsically unstable, so they're less likely than ever to listen when we tell them the truth that contradicts what they think they know. We're not unstable; we're stressed.

Human beings are social animals. We need one another and we need to be heard. And we need to be heard as who and what we are. Another thing human beings need to do is sing, especially in community. This is why people still love to go to concerts in this age of recordings; it's why nearly every religion has some kind of communal singing: When we sing together, we create community. A certain manner of trust is forged when we sing together, and it is shattered when we are silenced. I still cringe at what I learned at age 7 when, as a newcomer to the church children's choir, I was told to mouth the words because I was too loud. Make no mistake, this was a gender thing: None of the other boys were expected to be ladylike and quiet.

We don't have to like everyone we sing with, but we do create communal experience by singing with them. One way a robust community is different from

a group of friends is that communities include people we aren't friends with. We don't have the intimacy with every member of a community that we have to our circles of friends, but we're not strangers either. We pursue common goals at varying emotional distances, varying levels of like and dislike. Community functions as one middle gear between alienation and friendship, one of the many found in human relationships.

Those middle gears often get lost to people who have to hide who we are. There are people we trust (a tiny few) and people we don't trust (most people) and that's all there is. Other options are a luxury we don't have when we have to hide ourselves away. Communities of singers, people who literally raise their voices, can be fraught spaces. Traditional choirs gender-categorize singers even beyond notions of masculine and feminine (bass, alto, tenor, etc.), hammering the messages home: "You don't belong here," "We can't accommodate you," "The entire science of physics contradicts what you say about yourself." (Spoiler: not true)

This is why what Liz and Brian are doing with this book is so important. In studying trans voice health, including vocal physiology, tone, volume, pitch, breath, effects of hormone therapy, and all the other elements of voices and how we use them, they address a crucial need: Trans people need voices that make sense in the context we occupy today. We need to be heard. Whether we're singing or modifying speech habits to bring our voices into conformity with what makes sense in our particular lives, in this particular time, and in these particular cultures we inhabit, many of us have a voice for the first time when we receive trans-friendly and knowledgeable vocal training.

In my case, being lucky enough to have a trans-affirming voice teacher has helped me reestablish my natural state as a loudmouth who sings for the sheer pleasure of singing. After starting to take testosterone, I had to reassure a lot of people that I wasn't sick, just hoarse. I was going through puberty at age 44. It was clearly time for vocal training, and I asked about that at my neighborhood music store. Finding a trans-friendly voice teacher is a pretty rare thing. Luckily, they had just the person for me. My teacher was never intrusive with questions but always ready to chat and did the one thing so many people forget to do: listened to me. Really listened.

It's safe to say that most of us are not going to become overnight sensations, taking the world by storm and making vast fortunes as singers. Most of us are never going to pursue professional singing at all. And those who will? Well, they'll certainly be aided by the work Liz and Brian are doing: The more we understand about trans voice, the more voices of trans people we'll hear on the radio. For us ordinary trans mortals not destined for superstardom, the benefits of voice training are life-altering.

Voice training allows us to take some control of something we've been told we're helpless over our entire lives. The discipline of regular practice, yielding the results *we* need and desire, asserts our own agency. That is reinforced when we are taken seriously by the professionals who teach us. Our lessons

and choir practices confirm that we are not hopelessly unintelligible and allow us to enter a broader range of community relationship with others.

Vocal training allows us to be heard as we really are in that wider community. Each of us has an imperfect body to work with, just like everyone else. Being able to set our own goals about how we want to be heard and learn how to achieve that also helps with coming to terms with the parts of ourselves that are more resistant to change. A healthy response is to find what we do like and can manage and work with those so we can continue to love ourselves. Dysphoria is a real thing, and singing is not therapy. But singing is one way of gaining the tools to find our own limitations, and happy surprises can help to undo some of the damage dysphoria does. We can say, "My lungs will probably never give me the boom I wish I could have, but hey, listen to how sweet it is in this range over here."

Trans-friendly and trans-competent music education engages us in a wider range of relationships with our own bodies and abilities as well as with other people. So listen to Liz and Brian. They're starting an important conversation, and there is a lot to be discussed and learned, not only about trans people and our voices but about human people's voices and our assumptions about who gets to be heard.

INTRODUCTION

It is in our nature as humans to categorize the sensory stimulants we receive into groups we are familiar with. Our ancestors needed to simplify their complex environments to ensure survival, and so separated objects into categories like blue or not-blue, water or not-water, one or the other. We make the same categorizations today about the people we encounter in our social environments. This person is old or young, tall or short, male or female. These categorizations happen immediately and subconsciously and are necessary for us as a species to help process the overwhelming amount of information we receive about our surroundings and encounters. The binary system is not always useful, however; there are innumerable of shades of blue, and each is meaningful in describing different objects. The same holds true for gender. Male and female are neither mutually exclusive, nor are they the only options available to describe a person. Gender, just like color, exists and is experienced along a spectrum.

In educating yourself to work with transgender singers, it is imperative to train your mind for flexibility. "Male" and "female" are intentionally put into quotations here to denote that these words may no longer have the concrete meaning that you traditionally assigned to them. As you explore the spectrum of gender identity, expression, and perception, you will begin to understand gender as a construct, a fallacy used to categorize whole humans into separable parts. You will notice the pervasiveness of the gender binary in our daily lives, from bathrooms and flight reservations to medical forms and clothing, even gender pronouns of deities. If you are ready to serve and guide your students in transgender and gender nonconforming communities, you may need to let go of previous ways of thinking about gender and see the world in a totally new way.

Before we attempt to digest the lives and experiences of transgender people, let's get clear about that word, *transgender*. It is an adjective to describe someone whose assigned and experienced gender are not the same—not necessarily opposite, but not the same. When you talk about transgender people, language is paramount because you are describing a group of multifaceted individuals in terms of one tiny aspect of themselves. As with any marginalized group of people, we see them for the nameable things they struggle with, but we must see them as whole, as well. These are individuals with rich lives and a variety of experiences and interests that have nothing to do with gender, so when we talk about transgender people in no other terms than their gender identity and expression, we owe it to them to at least be accurate and respectful about it.

The decision to support and teach transgender singers is not as simple as just taking on another student. We must start by noticing our own gender biases and begin to separate the sounds a voice can make with the gender identity of

the singer. Our students need us to research into trans identity, trans issues, and the trans/gnc experience, so that we can meet them where they are, rather than ask them to be expert gender theorists for us. We need to offer evidence-based information about the physiological changes that sometimes accompany medical transition (if a singer decides to go through medical transition), which can affect vocal function in ways that might be different from what we are used to. We need to learn about the aspects of social and legal transition that affect our students, as well. We must put effort into creating a gender-inclusive learning environment where singers feel affirmed, welcomed, and respected.

The goal of the following text is to aid in the development of a successful vocal pedagogy for the training of transgender singers, help the academic community understand the needs of transgender students as it pertains to vocal training, and engage in a broader discussion about the presence of transgender students in lessons and classes and how this can improve teaching, curriculum, and classroom environments. It is hard to fathom the difficulty and daily stress trans people go through. We in the voice teaching community have so much catching up to do to serve and to understand our trans and nonbinary students and our fellow teachers who are trans and nonbinary. We have a responsibility to learn from trans voice teachers when we can and amplify the voices of our students when they are ready to be heard.

As you embark on your journey into guiding trans singers toward healthy, joyful singing, you will find yourself faced with new challenges, new sounds, and new ideas about gender and voice. Open yourself to those challenges, and create a singing studio where people with different gender identities and expressions have a welcoming, open space in which to express themselves through singing. Know that by revealing themselves to you, they are fighting against a lifetime of disappearing. See your students, hear them, learn about them, but remember that the person standing in front of you is complete already and that their gender identity and expression are only parts of that whole person. They have come to you to unveil, discover, and claim their true voice and you have a precious opportunity to help them find confidence and strength in that process. Practice patience and compassion, and the willingness to be equally visible yourself. To earn the trust of a transgender person enough for them to turn over their voice is a powerfully humbling experience, and hopefully this text will start you on the path in this rewarding, life-changing work.

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Liz:

Thank you, Sean, for your support and patience, and for making me feel like a superhero while this book took over our weekends and living room tables. Das, thank you for constantly challenging me, from that first coffee shop conversation where you asked me, "What is gender?" to holding me and walking with me through my own journey. Thank you, Kelly, for your mentorship and solidarity, and for giving openly your experience and expertise. Thank you to friends and family, and to my colleagues at The Voice Lab for cheering me on and helping us continue to grow in service to trans and nonbinary singers. Thank you, Brian, for your partnership and friendship; your deep passion and enthusiasm are inspiring and infectious, and I am so excited for what lies ahead with this project. And to my students, especially the four of you who shared so generously in your interviews, I am immeasurably grateful. You surprise and delight me, and because of you, I see and hear the world in new ways every day. I have learned so much from you, and I am deeply honored to be a fellow traveler with you.

Brian:

I would like to thank my wife Jen and daughter Harley for their constant love and support and for allowing me the time to write this book. To my mother, Melinda, whose beautiful coloratura soprano voice inspired me as a child as it rang through the house and whose kind and generous spirit lifts those around her. To my father Stuart and sister Jenna, I hope that you are together somewhere, singing, dancing, driving cars, riding motorcycles, and swimming with the dolphins. I am grateful for the time we had together and love you both very much. To all the family, friends, students, and colleagues who have been with me along this process, thank you for your encouragement, curiosity, ideas, and motivation. Thank you, Elon University and University of the Arts, for supporting this research. Lastly, thank you, Liz, for being an amazing and brilliant research partner and friend.

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two is the gender of singer. The table also becomes less useful if a singer demonstrates characteristics of a baritone voice in range and weight, but the singer identifies as female. That voice type currently has no label within the framework of this system. Furthermore, nonbinary singers could demonstrate any number of characteristic traits of a particular voice type but don't fit into the current categorization system.

The systems that are in place in the industry today cannot support gender-diverse singers, and it may be time for this to change. A person's gender identity does not alter the quality and range of their singing voice, unless that person chooses to do so through the process of their transition. Perhaps it is time to reimagine a voice classification system that does not delineate genders and to do away with gender-dependent voice categories. Future researchers in training trans and nonbinary singers will be charged with helping to create this reimagined voice classification system.

REPERTOIRE

Just as with any student, there are some factors to consider in searching for repertoire when working with a trans singer. Beyond the obvious elements such as range, tessitura, musical style, and pedagogical purpose, some factors of repertoire selection directly collide with gender identity. Because the singing instrument is the only instrument that creates words, singers are tasked with telling understandable and compelling stories, either as themselves or through character interpretation. The gender identity of the singer may prove to be a factor when deciding if a piece is the right fit, so that the artistic intent of the singer complements the artistic intent of the composer or librettist.

Universal Versus Plot-Specific Lyrics and Libretto

When analyzing the text of a piece, consider the following two types of lyric: universal and plot specific. A universal lyric has no predetermined context, or can be taken directly out of context without disturbing the cohesion of the story. For example, "Early in the Morning" by Ned Rorem has a universal lyric. The piece does not dictate a preset fictional or nonfictional character and the moments in the story before and after the piece are not established. A plot-specific lyric is one that has a

preestablished context or character. These usually come from an opera, musical, or other form of vocal work with a libretto.

Many plot-specific lyrics can be performed as universal lyrics, but it could prove detrimental if the piece is associated with an iconic character or experience. An example of this is the song "Maria" from *West Side Story*. Although the actual lyric could be taken out of context and the song could be about any person named Maria, the characters of Tony and Maria are iconic and directly linked with the performance of the musical and this piece within it. This does not necessarily mean it could never be taken out of context, but it is a factor worth considering.

Opera

The historical realm of opera has included problematic themes surrounding race, class, religion, and gender, but the art form is so beautiful and so revered that we are driven to continue producing it. Modern theaters attempt to reimagine traditional opera repertoire and use more socially conscious practices, aware of the responsibility to contextualize centuries-old stories for 21st-century audiences. Redesigning traditional opera roles to remove heteronormative tendencies in casting and production provides opportunities for diversity and growth. Fringe and new opera is also emerging as a medium to explore new themes and support upcoming artists, including transgender and nonbinary composers and performers.

Box 3–1. Lucia Lucas

Lucia is a professional operatic baritone performing internationally in opera houses and through independent projects. She says that after having learned to "perform" as a male for 30 years, her confidence and competency in performing male roles remains secure as long as she is not required to play that part offstage. She says,

"Transitions are front-loaded, meaning the most difficult times are in the beginning. At first, there may be a temptation for singers to reject roles of their gender assigned at birth, but the farther away they get from the moment of coming out, the easier it is for the characters to be simply a character and not a blueprint for future life.

I would always get upset when I had to play old men, but now I have taken steps to ensure that is not my life path so it doesn't bother me anymore. I recently had to prove to an opera house that I could still play a man. While it seemed silly, it also meant that they took my identity very seriously.

"I would encourage your students to make their own opportunities, especially trans students who feel most comfortable doing things that are not inherently baked into the curriculum. I did my first Marcello in a church very sparsely sold with a conductor who was only 20 years old at the time. We got a bunch of people together who wanted to get extra stuff on their resume. The next time an opportunity came up to do Marcello, it was for a 1,000+-seat opera house. That conductor is also now world famous.

"This is even more important for singers who may feel left out because they don't fit the mold. Changing the genders, singing in different keys, and reimagining roles are all things best tried out in less risky situations. If a trans person wants to try to build a career in opera, they do need the mainstream roles, because side projects can't pay the rent. At this moment, it is not possible to have a career unless you are willing to do drab/drag.

"I'd say in a private situation, let the students work on head voice or chest voice if they want. Let trans girls whose voices have dropped know that you can train their head voice, but it will take a lot of work to get it to be professional grade. Schools are tricky because you have a lesson plan and can't deviate too far from it with recitals and juries each having specific requirements.

"The mainstream opera world is not waiting with open arms for trans/nonbinary singers. They are scared their donors won't approve. We must challenge them and hope for steady progress." (Lucas, 2017)

As singing teachers in private studios and institutions, there is a unique opportunity to challenge the mainstream opera world and to support students as they do the same. Talk with students about the kinds of roles they are passionate about and why, and create room for flexibility in how those roles are performed. Some students may feel comfortable performing roles that align with their personality, regardless of

range and tessitura. Perhaps that role can be transposed or altered. It is important to keep in mind that trans people avoid scenarios that might feel inauthentic or overtly contrived; some trans masculine singers feel comfortable in pants roles, and some worry about portraying a false representation as a woman in men's clothing. Continual and open conversations with students, institutions, other singing teachers, and directors is imperative in paving the way for gender-diverse opera singers.

Music Theater

Much like opera, traditional music theater is mired in gender stereotypes and expectations, although more modern works challenge those norms and make room for greater diversity of roles and stories. One such example of a gender-liberated music theater role is the Leading Player from Stephen Schwartz's *Pippin*, who is listed in the character breakdown as "either gender" (Stage Agent, 2017b) or "both" (Music Theatre International, 2017). Although this language implies binary gender, this role could conceivably be played as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or anything in between. The allegory of *Pippin* is universal; there is nothing inherently gendered in this character's archetype and audience members can connect to the story regardless of the actor's gender.

The role of St. Jimmy in the Green Day musical, *American Idiot*, is listed in the character breakdown as "male," but it has enjoyed a gender-variant casting history (Stage Agent, 2017a). Originally performed by actor Tony Vincent, Green Day lead singer Billy Joe Armstrong and rock star Melissa Etheridge also played the role on Broadway (Futterman, 2011). In a 2015 Immersive Warehouse production of *American Idiot* in Los Angeles, St. Jimmy was played by Caitlin Ary (American Idiot LA, 2015).

When casting transgender and/or nonbinary performers, it may be tempting to look to cross-dressing roles such as Albin/ZaZa in *La Cage aux Folles*, Lola/Simon in *Kinky Boots*, or Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray*. Proceed with caution. As with opera, some transgender performers may feel comfortable in these roles while others may not. This determination requires an open and honest dialogue with the actor. Look beyond traditional gender assignments of musical theater roles to determine whether flexibility with the character's gender will significantly alter the story. The challenge emerges when casting

directors search for leading roles and ingénues with limited visions of the character.

In a recent article, actress and transgender activist Shakina Nayfack discussed gender-specific casting and means toward reducing hetero- and cisnormativity. She says,

> I think the reason writers create gender-specific characters is the same reason they create racially-specific or age-specific characters: There is an experience and a history that the writer is hoping to capture, an experience and a history that is part of the larger story they are telling. That said, if we're talking about smaller roles that don't require specific experiences or histories to contribute to the storytelling, then yeah, why not say "this role is open to anyone who is quick witted and snarky" for example, or "we need someone grounded and wise," then let the actors do their work to bring those qualities, as opposed to using gender or racial identity as the marker. (Castanho, 2017, para. 20)

Art Song

The rich and varied music within the art song repertory provides myriad opportunities for artistic exploration without attachment to gender and encourages some flexibility for transposition of keys and slight modification of texts. When searching out art song repertoire, students may gravitate toward themes of transformation or transfiguration, celebration of the natural world, love (romantic or otherwise), whimsy, or historical stories. All of these themes are easily found within art song, and much of the music contains universal texts rather than plot specific. Allow students to take part in decisions about art song repertoire and to explore voice ranges that feel natural and authentic within this realm.

Jazz, Pop, Rock, and Other Contemporary Commercial Music

Contemporary commercial music allows for the most freedom and flexibility in transposing keys, changing pronouns within lyrics, and exploring different voice qualities. Context and personality should be considered when choosing songs within this repertoire, along with pedagogical purpose, voice range, and technical requirements.