

All Bodies Are Welcome Here

By Sarah Whitten

The singing world, and world at large, but we're talking voices here so we'll stick to this niche, has a long history of discriminating against bodies that fall outside of the acceptable norm — thin (and also white and cis-gender, but I want to focus on weight here).

This comes in many forms — being passed over for parts, being told by audition committees, teachers and directors to lose weight, being othered, and excluded in just about any situation due to the size of their body.

The reality is, in any circumstance where there can be a power-over dynamic, such as a teacher-student or director-singer, we have the potential to create trauma.

When we consistently and repeatedly expose singers to these false beliefs about weight and the voice, we perpetuate a harmful, traumatizing environment that removes the basic dignities we each deserve.

I find the work of Staci K. Haines to be illuminating in thinking about how we can revolutionize the voice world's approach to bodies. Haines' work and her book *The Politics of Trauma* incorporate a concept where we acknowledge that healing and change at an individual level is the default.

However, when we hold that perspective we not only overlook collective trauma but also miss the impacts of the larger forces of families, communities, institutions and social norms in creating the beliefs, but also their role in creating change.

You see, we can't resolve issues like this at the individual level. Except that's the typical approach. Not only do we burden the singer with changing to meet the norm, we expect them to heal alone as well. That's like Sisyphus trying to roll the bolder up the hill for all of eternity. It sets singers up for failure.

When we look at this image and see how the concentric circles are structured, it is a wonderful illustration of how the larger circles impact the smaller ones.

This means for the voice world to change our ingrained discriminations about weight, we need to be working on them at the societal level. We need companies that hire diverse bodies



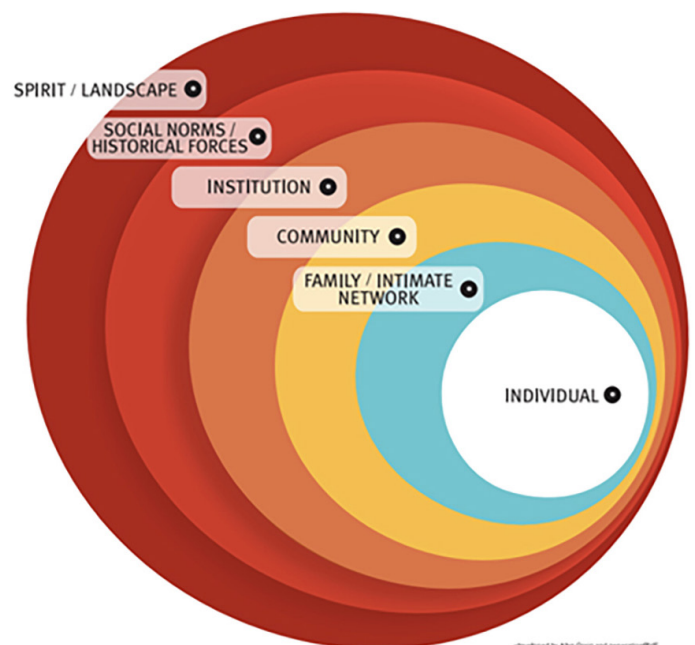
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to play roles. Schools and universities need to have policies to address these issues as well as procedures and protections for singers who encounter the discrimination and report it. We need larger institutions like NATS to think twice before publishing opinion pieces presented as fact, focused on singers losing weight to be more marketable. We need individual teachers to commit to not commenting on a singer's body as it relates to their size.

It means WE need to change. The singer does not.

I am in the business of working with singers to help their bodies function better. But I know the size of your body does not dictate how well it functions. I know you do not need to lose

Sites of Shaping Sites of Change



This graphic is based on a public health framework, developed by Alan Grier and generationFIVE. Haines elaborates on it in her work where I learned of it.



weight to live with less pain. I know strength and fat are not exclusive. I also know every singer walking through my door with a larger body has a lifetime of messaging telling them they

are not enough, not worthy and are less-than due to the size of their body.

What I want every singer I work with to know is this: All bodies are welcome here.

It is a message I want the rest of the voice world to embrace as well.

A voice and movement expert, NATS member **Sarah Whitten** focuses on whole body wellness and function for voice professionals. Her work is built on the concept of Vocal Interdependence, recognizing that the voice is influenced by every other system of the body and acknowledging that vocal technique alone cannot solve every issue. Using principles of biomechanics, research-backed movement and pain science, as well as a hefty dose of intuition, she works with singers' bodies to resolve pain and physical dysfunction and trains voice teachers to better understand the singing body. She holds a master's degree in vocal pedagogy and a master's degree in vocal performance, both from The Ohio State University. Additionally, she is a certified 500-hour yoga instructor, Level 1 Movement for Trauma, Integrative Somatic Trauma Therapy, Yoga Therapy Module 1 and 3, and is Restorative Exercise™ trained. To connect and learn more about her work, visit sarahwhitten.com and @vocalyogi on Instagram.

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