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Teaching Transgender Singers. Part 1: The Voice Teachers' Perspectives

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UNTIL RECENTLY, INFORMATION SPECIFIC to transgender singers was difficult to find in NATS resources. One of the first articles to appear was “Training the Transgender Singer: Finding the Voice Inside,” by Shelagh Davies. First printed in the Spring 2016 NATS *Inter Nos* newsletter, it has been available through NATS.org since April 2016.¹ As of this writing, the article “Considerations for Teaching Transgender Singers in College Voice” by Nancy Bos is the lone resource on the topic available through NATS-sponsored vocapedia.info.²

The subject has since been covered in three articles in the *Journal of Singing*, two by Lorraine Sims³ and one by Bos.⁴ Before that, there were no results for the word “transgender” in the Journal Online Index when searched as a Title Keyword or as an Article Summary Keyword. The one result a Full Text Keyword search received was due to a passing mention as a discussion topic offered at a NATS chapter event.⁵

In an effort to continue addressing this underserved topic, the next two columns of “The Independent Teacher” will explore issues related to transgender singers. For part one, published here, three voice teachers share their experiences teaching select transgender singers and highlight practices that have led to the greatest progress in the voice studio. In part two, the singers themselves will discuss their vocal journeys. As a precursor, and to avoid redundancy, we refer readers to Sims’s first article mentioned above for an introduction to related terminology, an explanation of preferred pronouns, and other pertinent information.

As part of the discussion, it is worth examining how current NATS policies impact transgender students in our chapter, district, region, and National Student Auditions. According to the October 2016 “NATS Auditions Regulations—v 2.0,” category guidelines divide singers by gender (i.e., High School Men, Lower College Music Theater Women, Independent Studio Men, etc.).⁶ Given these parameters—and without further explanation—chapters could logically interpret the letter of the law to indicate that transgender singers should enter categories based on their gender identity. In the case of the first profiled singer below, this resulted in a bass baritone singing alongside sopranos and mezzo sopranos. If this was an incorrect assumption and this particular singer should have been categorized with those of a similar voice type, NATS may consider revisiting and clarifying the language in the regulations in order to better account for trans singers.

Before continuing, it is important to delineate the intent of this article. First, the information below is introductory rather than exhaustive. It will not provide extensive explanations of the effect of hormone therapy on the voice or the impacts of laryngeal surgery, nor will it delve far into the psychological and cultural issues transgender people face. By focusing on the experiences of three teachers and three singers, the authors offer a more limited sampling that, nonetheless, hopes to provide beneficial insights.

Second, this article is not intended to offer a one-size-fits-all template into which all transgender singers should somehow fall. As voice teachers, we are accustomed to applying knowledge and experience in individualized ways, tailored to suit the singer in front of us. Though we may find similarities in the stories below, we should not expect that teaching singers who openly identify as transgender should somehow follow a formula any more than the other singers who walk into our studios.

By sharing our experiences, we ultimately hope to encourage continued conversation on the matter as we seek the most effective methods through which we may serve all our students.

Singer One

[Submitted by Michael Chipman, Assistant Professor of Music, Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah.]

I have a 22-year-old student preparing for her senior recital who began vocal studies with me four years ago as a young man but is graduating as a trans woman. It has been fascinating to watch and be part of T. G.'s journey.

I will say, first of all, that there has been no change whatsoever in the way I have taught T. G. vocal technique during this transition. She has been happy to remain a bass baritone (a very talented, smart one at that), so, artistically and technically, our work has continued on its normal trajectory. She has never, to my knowledge, pursued hormonal therapy or other surgical options for gender transition, so I have not addressed those issues with her to this point.

The most interesting part of T. G.'s process came at the beginning of her junior year when she came out to me as a trans female. At first, after coming out, she had a bit of an existential crisis with the idea of having to sing male roles in operas because of her vocal range,

timbre, and *Fach*. We talked at length about this, and after discussing the fact that opera is and has always been replete with gender-bending roles (pants roles for women, castrati, etc.), T. G. seemed content to settle into her new identity as a woman with an extremely low voice who may occasionally have to dress in "drag" to play male roles. Her gender transition also opened up some interesting discussions of repertoire choice, and I suggested she sing low voice transcriptions of songs traditionally sung by women, such as Schubert's "Gretchen am Spinnrade," Schumann's *Frauenliebe und -leben*, and opera arias like "Iris, hence, away!" from Handel's opera *Semele*. Focusing on the more flexible genre of art song has proved to be a rewarding way for T. G. to explore her identity on her own terms through classical music. Because of her newfound love for art song, she is now considering graduate programs and is focusing on programs where art song literature and voice pedagogy are a major focus.

I would also add that I think it is a crucial part of our job as teachers to provide a safe space for students like T. G. to discover, explore, and strengthen their identity as artists and human beings. There is a continuum between those two worlds, and allowing students to move freely around, in, and through them while still making consistent progress in their technical work is an important part (if not the most important part) of my job as a teacher and mentor.

Singer Two

[Submitted by Ruth Rainero, private studio teacher in San Francisco, CA, and New York City.]

Although E. F. did not begin Testosterone Hormone Therapy (THT) until 2014 at age 50, he had known since he was five that he was not female. He resented being referred to as "she" and kept expecting his body to develop into that of a boy. Instead, the changes went in the other direction. E. F. grew up thinking that no one else in the world was like him until, when he was 17, he watched a TV program called "George and Julia" about a man who transitioned to a woman. It was difficult to obtain accurate information during that era, and the little information available involved male-to-female transitions, which were generally regarded, in E. F.'s words, as a "freak show."

E. F., who was born and grew up in the UK and had been singing in choirs, performing solos, and winning competitions as a teenager, first studied plant biology at university, before receiving a scholarship to the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England. He then received a grant to study voice at a university in the USA, after which he remained in this country and supported himself through singing for the next 25 years.

Thanks to his biology background, E. F. knew that males have more testosterone, and that one of the primary effects of this hormone is to lower the voice. But because of his chosen profession as a singer—plus his concern about alienating his family—E. F. did not consider transitioning for many years.

Performing trouser roles helped him maintain a sense of identity, as did singing in church, where he could wear a genderless cassock and surplice. This was where he was happiest; at other times, he wore baggy sweaters and slouched to hide his bust.

When he was 34, E. F.'s grandmother died, leaving him some money. At age 38, he underwent top surgery, but did not embark on hormone therapy because of how it would affect his singing. By the time he was in his late forties, however, E. F. was no longer being cast in the young trouser roles, and, although he enjoyed the occasional comedic “old lady” role, there wasn't much work in that area, nor did it compensate for continuing to live as a woman. When he turned 50, he thought, “now or never,” and embarked upon THT in February 2014. The road of hormone treatment was quite bumpy; the initial dose proved to be too high so, after two injections, he switched to a gel, gradually increasing the dose. In May 2015, he re-embarked on injections, which he continues to this day.

E. F. began working with me in April 2014, two months after beginning the initial THT injections, as the single subject of a research project designed by myself and a colleague who is a speech-language pathologist with a specialization in voice. Data collection was identical at each session and included recording E. F. singing the same aria (“Ombra mai fu” by G. F. Handel) in three different keys, as well as recordings of his performable and physiologic range, duration on two different pitches, etc. (Preliminary results were presented at the Pacific Voice Conference in the fall of 2015.)

The most obvious changes in E. F.'s voice, which were discernible soon after he began THT, were the loss of his upper range and the appearance of register breaks. According to E. F., his pretransition range spanned from G₃ to E^b₆, and he had never before had difficulties with either his lower or upper *passaggio*. As the THT took effect, E. F.'s usable range shrank to less than an octave—from about E₃ to C₄. Moreover, he developed register difficulties, lack of stability in tone production, and loss of breath control. He had hoped to become a countertenor, but the sound he produced in that range was thin and unsteady. The only comparable situation familiar to this author is that of teaching an adolescent boy as he transitions to adult voice. But major differences are that *every* adolescent boy knows his voice will change, and an adolescent body and voice are much more malleable than those of a 50-year-old, whose larynx will no longer increase in size. A boy soprano who has been a successful singer may, indeed, be very disappointed to find his adult voice lacking, but he has his entire life ahead of him. E. F., after singing professionally for nearly three decades, took the plunge into female-to-male transition with no safety net.

Each voice lesson, after data collection, was devoted to aspects of singing similar to those of cisgender singers, namely, vowel uniformity and modification, *passaggio* issues, breath management, etc. As a teacher, I was faced with a number of unusual challenges. Professional singers know their own voices very well and are usually aware of personal areas of difficulty, for instance, a register transition on a particular vowel; but E. F. was now singing with a voice he'd never experienced before, and he was ill equipped to maneuver it. I repeatedly had to bring him back to the basics of voice production in order for him to “get to know” his new voice. In addition, this new voice was a different voice at nearly every lesson. Although every singer presents slightly differently at each lesson—influenced by physical, emotional, and psychological circumstances—these differences are miniscule compared to the wildly swinging pendulum that was E. F.'s voice in transition. I needed to be on my toes and very creative, constantly designing and altering exercises to aid E. F. in his new world of sound production.

As of this writing (April 2017), E. F.'s voice has stabilized within the range of C₃ to E^b₄, and he has developed

a lovely baritone timbre within that range. He is gaining resonance on B₂ and B^b₂, but his voice is not strong enough to incorporate these notes in a piece of music. Although his range is still too truncated for all standard opera and oratorio repertory, we have found a number of art songs that he is able to sing when transposed. Only time will tell whether E. F. will eventually gain the minor third below and above his current range that he needs in order to re-enter the professional singing world.

Singer Three

[Submitted by Caitlin Stave, private studio teacher in Los Angeles, CA, and instructor at the Irvine School of Music.]

The student I worked with was a 20-year-old female-to-male transgender student; he had been on hormone therapy for almost three years by the time we started working together. This individual had a long standing passion for singing recreationally and had been very observant of the change in vocal register during the first year of his hormone treatment. Prior to joining my studio, he had no formal training in voice and had only recently started singing in a men's vocal ensemble.

My initial impression of the student's instrument was that it sounded similar to that of a teenage cismale a year or so past his initial voice drop. Although low in pitch, the voice had a light, reedy, and slightly fragile quality. Compared to cisgender singers of the same physical age and experience, the vocal range was less developed, the timbre was brighter, and there was a greater lack in vocal stamina. The student's most comfortable vocalizations occurred between C₃ and A₃. Additionally, there was a noticeable but normal amount of strain near C₄, indicating the beginning of the student's *zona di passaggio*, or the end of his effortless Mode 1 production. Based on these observations, I made the decision to instruct the voice as I would that of a roughly 16-year-old cismale baritone.

Because no formal training had been given in the past, I started with the process of understanding the breathing mechanism and finding the area of his vocal range in which the freest sounds were produced. Simple vocalises were chosen and initiated in the middle of the student's vocal range where he was the most comfortable. The vocalises mostly consisted of three-note and five-note scales and slides of no greater distance than an interval

of a fifth; these exercises were gradually introduced to the extremities of the student's range. Various vowels were tried and found to be useful in different ways; [a] and [o] kept the larynx relaxed and the pharynx open and encouraged a warm tone quality, while [i] was found to be helpful in maintaining resonance as the student approached his *zona di passaggio*. I chose repertoire that had been arranged for a baritone range and that stayed within a manageable *tessitura*.

After approximately two months of instruction, the range of the student's Mode 1 had expanded. The lower boundary of Mode 1 had extended from A₂ to G₂ and the beginning of his *zona di passaggio* had risen from a C₄ to an E₄. Additionally, the timbre of the voice had become darker and rounder, with less of the thin and reedy sound quality from before.

In this circumstance, training a transgender male voice with the same techniques one might use to guide a cismale voice through the first few years after puberty was successful. My student did seem prone to a level of vocal fatigue higher than what might be found in a cismale voice. Therefore, it was important to create a collection of low impact warm-ups that would keep the instrument active without wearing it out. Additionally, it was important to set boundaries for how often my student could practice voice and for what duration.

In my experience, it is important to create an understanding with the student that, depending on when hormone therapy is initiated, the age of the voice is not necessarily the same as that of the body. Therefore, if the instrument seems more limited or less developed than that of a cismale voice of the same physical age, this should not be a source of frustration. Rather, the voice simply needs the same amount of time to solidify its shift in registration as it would have done if the lowering of the voice had happened earlier in the individual's life.

CONCLUSION

Considering the above, a few observations may be highlighted. First, as Sims points out, "a trans man taking testosterone will experience a profound and permanent voice change."⁷ Therefore, one of the primary concerns for the voice teacher is whether or not the student is engaging in, or has engaged in, hormone therapy. T.G., as a male-to-female singer not taking estrogen, is able

to continue working with Chipman to cultivate her natural bass baritone voice. By contrast, Rainero and Stave have to find ways to help their students contend with the more drastic physical changes hormone therapy has on their voices.

For the two students taking testosterone, their ages make their circumstances quite different from each other. Stave's student started THT in his late teenage years, well before reaching the vocal maturity of adulthood. Meanwhile, E. F.'s THT commenced at age 50, impacting a fully developed larynx.

Though the situations of these students are unique, all three are in a wait-and-see mode, but for different reasons. T.G.'s challenge is largely one of professional identity. Launching a career as a classical singer is difficult. Doing so as a female bass baritone is without precedent—there are no mainstream, successful examples (of which the authors are aware) upon which she can model her career. For E. F., the question is if professional quality singing can be maintained after the laryngeal changes that come as a result of THT and what role vocal training can play in that process. For singer three, as his voice develops in the coming years, it will be intriguing to see whether that development will mirror the growth we are accustomed to seeing in cisgender singers.

In the next issue of the *Journal of Singing*, the three singers will describe, in their own words, how they are facing their unique challenges. They will share their vocal successes and struggles as voice students, as singers, and as transgender individuals.

NOTES

1. Shelagh Davies, "Training the Transgender Singer: Finding the Voice Inside"; http://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/_article.html/What_s_New/Training_the_Transgender_Singer_Finding_the_Voice_Inside (accessed April 3, 2017).
2. Nancy Bos, "Considerations for Teaching Transgender Singers in College Voice"; <http://www.nats.org/cgi/content.cgi/ConsiderationsforTeachingTransgenderSingersinCollegeVoice.pdf?id=12953&name=ConsiderationsforTeachingTransgenderSingersinCollegeVoice.pdf> (accessed April 3, 2017).
3. Loraine Sims, "Teaching Transgender Students," *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 3 (January/February 2017): 279–282; Loraine Sims, "Teaching Lucas: A Transgender Student's Vocal Journey from Soprano to Tenor," *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 4 (March/April 2017): 367–375.

4. Nancy Bos, "Forging a New Path: Transgender Singers in Popular Music," *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 4 (March/April 2017): 421–424.
5. Kari Ragan, "The Connected Voice Teacher," *Journal of Singing* 67, no. 1 (September/October 2010): 67–71.
6. Available at http://www.nats.org/_Library/NSA_Files/NSA_Categories_-_v_2_0_-_October_2016.pdf (accessed April 3, 2017).
7. Sims, "Teaching Transgender Students," 280.

Brian Manternach, tenor, is on the voice faculty of the University of Utah's Department of Theatre, maintains a private studio, and serves as president of the Northern Utah Chapter of NATS. His students have been cast in professional productions in the US and abroad and have earned top honors in vocal competitions from the local to international levels.

Brian was the recipient of the 2016 Voice Pedagogy Award from the NATS Foundation and has given lectures for the National Center for Voice and Speech, the University of Utah Voice Disorders Center, and TEDxSaltLakeCity; he also presented a poster paper at the 54th NATS National Conference.

An Associate Editor of the *Journal of Singing*, he also authors "The Singer's Library" book review column for *Classical Singer* magazine.

Manternach has made solo appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and Cleveland Chamber Symphony, among others, and his stage credits range from Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus* to Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* to Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (Sankt Anton, Austria). For two seasons, he served as apprentice-artist at the Skylight Opera Theatre in Milwaukee.

Originally from Iowa, his degrees in voice performance include a BA from St. John's University/College of St. Benedict of Minnesota, an MM from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and a DM from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. He has also completed all three levels of training offered by the CCM Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah Conservatory.

Baritone **Michael Chipman** is an assistant professor of voice and head of the vocal performance program at Westminster College in Salt Lake City. He has performed twice as a soloist at Carnegie Hall and has sung with opera companies and orchestras across the United States and abroad. Last summer he sang the role of Guglielmo in Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte* in St. Anton, Austria. He is the coauthor of *The Naked Voice*, a book on vocal technique published by Oxford University Press in 2007. He holds a masters degree in voice from the University of Utah and an Artist Diploma in vocal performance from Oberlin College Conservatory.

Ruth Rainero received her Masters in Voice and Voice Pedagogy from the Royal Conservatory of The Hague and resided in The Netherlands for

many years before returning to the United States. Her areas of expertise range from early Baroque to contemporary music, and she performed throughout Europe at various international festivals and with a wide range of ensembles. In Europe and the United States, Ms. Rainero performed under the direction of conductors ranging from Philippe Herreweghe, Niklaus Harnoncourt, and Nicholas McGegan to Steve Reich and Reinbert de Leeuw. Ms. Rainero speaks five languages, sings in five more, and has been teaching singing—first in Amsterdam and then San Francisco—for thirty years. She also travels regularly to New York City to teach a select group of professional singers.

In addition to her classical voice studio, Ruth receives referrals from laryngologists of both singers and nonsingers suffering from muscle tension dysphonia and other voice disorders. Ms. Rainero often gives presentations and master classes at international voice conferences, including the Pan European Voice Conference IV, 2002 (Stockholm), the International Voice Symposium 2003 (Salzburg), the Physiology and Acoustics of Singing Conference 2004 (Denver), the Pacific Voice Conference/Pixar “Emotions and the Voice,” 2004 (Pixar studios, Emeryville), the UCSF Voice Conference, 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2011 (San Francisco), and the Pacific Voice Conference, 2015 (Santa Clara University). Before

devoting herself exclusively to her private studio, Ms. Rainero was on the faculty at the American Conservatory Theater (ACT) in San Francisco, the University of California at Davis and Skyline College in San Bruno.

Her article, “Practicing Vocal Music Efficiently and Effectively: Applying ‘Deliberate Practice’ to a New Piece of Music,” appeared in the November/December 2012 issue of the *Journal of Singing*.

Caitlin Stave is a professional singer, voice teacher, and coach currently based in Los Angeles, California. She is currently on the music faculty at the Irvine School of Music, and is a staff singer at the Parish of St. Luke the Physician Episcopal Church in Monrovia, CA.

Stave was awarded the degree Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance from Portland State University (2007), and Master of Music in Vocal Performance and Performance Pedagogy from Central Washington University (2016) where she was a Graduate Teaching Assistant. While living in Portland, Oregon, Stave maintained a private studio of as many as 50 weekly students from 2007–2014, and was active as a professional vocalist.

Stave is an experienced operatic soprano whose roles have included Susanna in Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*, Josephine in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*, and Nanetta in Verdi’s *Falstaff*. Her performance experience extends to music theater, sacred oratorio, cantata, and choral genres, as well as conducting. Her academic work included extensive study of voice pedagogy and musical scholarship, including an examination of the terminology of vocal registration, and panel reviewed academic presentations on Mozart’s comic operas and Libby Larsen’s song cycle, *Try Me, Good King*. Stave is an avid student of voice pedagogy whose research interests include vocal registration, vocal health, and transgender vocal transition, health, and pedagogy.



A circular graphic featuring a soprano singing with her arms raised, set against a background of an orchestra. The text is overlaid on the image.

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I have come to a still, but not a deep center,
A point outside the glittering current;
My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,
At the irregular stones, iridescent sandgrains,
My mind moves in more than one place,
In a country half-land, half-water.
I am renewed by death, thought of my death,
The dry scent of a dying garden in September,
The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.
What I love is near at hand,
Always, in earth and air.

“The Far Field,” Theodore Roethke