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Teaching Transgender Singers. Part 2: The Singers' Perspectives

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IN PART 1 OF “TEACHING TRANSGENDER SINGERS,” three voice teachers shared their experiences working with select transgender singers in the voice studio and highlighted practices and techniques that led to their greatest vocal progress.¹ For Part 2, the three singers who were discussed earlier outline their vocal journeys in their own words.

As in Part 1, the singers were allowed to submit their comments anonymously, if they wished. For context, however, each singer’s age range and gender identity are shared with permission.

As prompts for discussion, the following questions were devised and approved by each of the singers’ voice teachers as sufficiently topical:

1. What are some of your greatest technical challenges as a singer?
2. What are some of the specific vocal approaches or exercises that have helped you make progress in gaining control of those technical issues?
3. Did you continue taking voice lessons during your transition? If so, in what ways did you find that beneficial (either vocally or personally)? If not, why did you postpone voice training during that time?
4. What elements of your singing do you feel are unique to your identity as transgender?
5. How important is your singing voice in your identity and expression of self as transgender?
6. Was your voice (either singing voice or speaking voice) a primary or secondary concern when deciding whether or not to take hormones?

The questions were then forwarded to the singers via email. Their responses are included below, edited only for clarity and space.

Singer One

T. G., trans woman, age 23

In a lot of ways, I feel like my “trans experiences” are quite different from the norm. I have never felt like I *had* to get on hormones, and I think it is important to point out that taking hormones is not an essential part of transitioning. I have often thought about starting hormones. I have done research about them, talked to other trans women who are on them, and for right now I have decided that I don’t need to take them. This is, in a way, a good thing for my voice. I have done a lot of [reading] about how hormones affect the voice. What I have concluded based on personal narratives and [reading] scientific research is that estrogen, when taken by a trans woman,

does not affect the voice very much. Some people say that their speaking voice raised in pitch, but I think it is important to realize that a lot of these women go to voice therapy to raise their speaking pitch, as well as take hormones. Or it has been hypothesized that when you see the feminizing effects of the hormones you start to speak higher because subconsciously you think that higher voice better fits the feminine changes brought on by the hormones. Because of these variables, it is very hard to say for sure whether estrogen actually affects the voice of a trans woman.

Of course, a trans man's voice changes quite drastically when he starts testosterone, but I can't personally speak to that experience. Even though I read everything I could find about hormones—and it seemed like they would not negatively impact my singing voice—I still did not end up starting them. [This was] partly out of fear, thinking, "What if I am the one weird case where I start hormones and things start changing and I'm still trying to sing big operatic rep and I damage my voice?" but mostly because I just have never felt they were essential.

So, because I didn't take hormones, my technical journey has been basically exactly the same as any other bass baritone. The real struggle for me was *what* to sing, not *how* to sing it.

I was surprised to find stories of other trans women in classical music and especially surprised to read that they sang opera! There is one woman in Germany who is a baritone and is enjoying a great career playing baritone roles in Germany. The opera company that she works for does something really cool for her. They make all the baritone roles that she sings women. She wears dresses and gets her hair and makeup done like the character is female, [even though] the role was originally written to be a "male" role. Another woman I read about graduated from San Francisco Conservatory a couple years ago. She is very lucky in that she has always had a high soprano voice and she gets to sing soprano arias by composers like Bach and Handel. Unfortunately, none of these options work for me . . . [as] a lyric bass baritone.

When I play "male" roles that have been re-characterized to be women, it just doesn't feel like it honors me. Oftentimes, when roles that are written for a male are re-thought and made female, it still involves love scenes, or misogynistic elements (opera is, after all, from a time period where ideas like women belonging to men were

commonly accepted) that I am not comfortable with. I am not lesbian, so playing a love scene with another woman is sometimes uncomfortable. And as an activist and feminist, the idea of playing a scene where the character is being very sexually aggressive with a woman is also uncomfortable for me. And to top it all off, most "male" roles include moments that I just can't understand, or connect with. I don't know what it's like to be a man. I may have been assigned male at birth, and been socialized as a little boy, but if anything proves I was never a boy, it's that I cannot play male characters well.

So that leaves female roles. And these are the roles that I love to play that I connect with. That makes sense and that honors me as an artist. I have personally "*Fached*" myself as a contralto bassa, or female bass. For me, this means that I sing contralto or mezzo soprano roles, but I sing them in my range, essentially just down an octave. Right now it's a challenge sometimes. Those roles often end up being a little too high for me at times. I feel like eventually I will be able to sing that high, but right now I am just so young as far as technique and vocal development goes that I can't quite sing everything.

But the biggest challenge I feel that I face is, what opera company is going to hire *me* to play Carmen, or any role like that? I don't have the answer. But my goal as an artist and activist and transgender woman is to encourage a much bigger trans presence in classical music, and especially in opera. Until trans singers are recognized for their unique view of the world and of music and are allowed, and encouraged, to sing the roles that honor them, I am going to stick to art song, where the lines are much blurrier.

I think that music has always been front and center to my transition. I mean, it was thanks to music I had the courage to come out, and it's thanks to the people who love and support me and are connected to me through music that I have the courage to continue to transition. If it weren't for the people I have met [through] my involvement with classical music, I would not have been brave enough to set up a breast augmentation consultation. Or I wouldn't have been brave enough to ask if I could wear a dress at choir concerts. And not only has music helped me that way, it is also thanks to music that I am able to express who I am. As we all know so well, music allows us to express things we cannot put into words, and it's no different for me. It is amazing, and

so interesting, the different meanings that music takes on when you consider it through a gender-variant lens. I find that art song (which is my favorite kind of music to sing) often takes an *extremely* introspective turn for me, and while that might not be the way I choose to interpret the song when I perform it, it is very often part of my artistic journey with a piece of music, and I always allow that interpretation to have its time, and its space.

Singer Two

E. F., trans man, age 53

For me, the greatest technical challenge encountered through my vocal transition, by *far*, is that of range. As a mezzo soprano I had a range of 3.5 octaves. That is now reduced to approximately one octave. It has surprised and challenged me on a number of levels as, a) I never really realized that some voices/voice types naturally only have a range of two octaves or less (I had just never really thought about it, or looked at their repertoire ranges!), and b) I did not think that my range would be compromised *quite* as much as it has been. I expected it to shift downward, to lose the top (except maybe in a falsetto, which I also do not appear to have), but to, perhaps, gain some compensatory range below that which I previously had.

Please do not misunderstand me. I had no “illusions” as to the quality of tone or ease of transition into a new voice type. I knew that it would be very “different” and would require “re-tooling,” but I did not expect to have *quite* so little to work with in terms of vocal range. The octave that I have sounds pretty good, well balanced, and put together (so I am told), but how “useful” it can be in any vocal situation, solo *or* choral, I am not sure.

I am also finding support harder to deal with. It feels different, somehow “bulkier,” harder to sustain. That may, possibly, be a factor of just being physically quite small, and not very muscular. It is definitely more tiring than it used to be.

Sadly, I also now have to learn how to warm up before singing—something that, rightly or wrongly, I *never* used to do and actually never needed to do. My greatest fear about warming up previously is that I would do too much, so I tended to avoid it. Now it is biting me in the proverbial backside, as I *have* to warm up to access even my one little octave in all its 8-note glory! I still worry about doing too much.

Working on the outer limits of my current range in an incremental way—half-step exercises through the upper/lower notes to “stretch” the range both up and down and in sliding thirds—appears to be helpful, as is using different vowels to experiment with placement and what feels most comfortable and affords the optimum space to sing in the top or bottom of my range.

I continued to take voice lessons through my transition, both in order to keep vocally active to a certain degree, and to monitor the changes with time and with increasing testosterone doses. I took testosterone as a gel, starting at a very low dose, and increasing the dose as time went by. It seemed to me to be a logical way to approach a vocal change, rather than the abruptness of full-dose T, but I remain unsure as to whether it was helpful or not in my vocal transition.

I also continued to sing in my church choir and in a low-key choral situation throughout transition. This was mostly beneficial for my personal well-being, as I was surrounded by caring people who were supportive of me and endlessly patient with my teenage boy voice and its random offerings! Sometimes, however, it made me sad, as many very well meaning people would express their sadness (sometimes even in tears!) at the loss of my previous voice, which they had loved. That was, and sometimes still is, very hard—hard to realize that something that was so normal to me was something so special to other people.

Generally, though, it was a good experience to continue singing through transition—and often very amusing!

I do not feel that there are any *vocal* elements that are unique to my identity as a transgender singer. There is no particular timbre or quality by which to label my voice as a “transgender” singer’s voice, as there is for, say, countertenors or *haute-contre*. I do, however, feel that there is an educational element in still being a working singer, particularly in the arena and geographical area in which I was previously well known. I think that it gives people pause for thought about a segment of society that might otherwise be invisible to them, or that they might regard as unusual, unnatural, or strange. I find this to be the case particularly amongst those people who know me through my previous voice, but did not necessarily know that I identified as trans. To see and hear someone whose voice and performance they previ-

ously enjoyed and admired, and learn that that person has always identified as transgender, has, I know, begun some interesting dialogue and discussion. That, I believe, is a good thing.

My singing voice is, and always has been, important to me as a way to express myself as *human*, not as transgender, and I do not think that has changed. If vocal music is written that specifically tells a transgender story, or brings understanding/focus to the trans community through the fact that the musicians involved in its performance are transgender, then I am totally supportive of using my voice with the label “transgender” attached to it. But I think a singing voice—*any* singing voice—should be used to express human emotion, and should be used in the service of great music, and that trans or cis gendered is irrelevant in the big picture.

My voice was the primary and *only* concern when deciding whether or not to take hormones. My friends were all supportive. My family would have to deal with it (luckily, they have turned out to be very supportive!). My cats didn’t care one way or the other. The *only* concern anyone expressed was about my voice, and whether I would still be able to sing or not.

My *speaking* voice actually caused me more distress than my singing voice, as my speaking voice was an immediate giveaway that I was not “male,” even if I had been perceived to be so before I spoke. My speaking voice was not particularly high, but it was modulated enough that people would feel that they had made a “mistake,” and would fall over themselves to “correct” it. It was annoying, frustrating, and soul crushing.

My singing voice was the reason that I waited until I was 50 to begin hormone treatment. I had had a wonderful 25 years of a varied vocal career, and was entering that time of my life where, eventually, things would vocally wind down and the voice would begin its natural deterioration. I knew that I would never be a *young* man, but I wanted a few years of being able to feel comfortable in my skin, and to truly be “me,” and I do not regret making that decision, despite the difficulties that it has presented financially, and through no longer having the singer “status” that I previously had enjoyed.

It is hard to go to performances of groups that I used to perform with, as, not only can I not afford the tickets, I know that it is highly unlikely that I will ever sing with that level of musical group again. However, when

I can score a comp, or squeeze out the cost of a ticket, I go and support my former colleagues, and nourish my soul vicariously.

Another thing that I have experienced since my singing voice has changed is the return of my audition/performance nerves. I used to suffer *terribly* from audition and performance nerves when I was younger—shaking, throwing up, all sorts of fun things. When I sang competitively in local competitions and music festivals, my mother would split one of her Xanax with me, as she was almost as nervous as I was!

However, the more successful I became at those events (and, fortunately, I did usually place in the top three places), the easier it became. But my nerves never fully went away, and didn’t really become a non-issue for me until I was in my late 20s. By then, I had worked enough, and become well known enough locally, that I didn’t always have to audition for roles or concert gigs. I found that, if I was just offered/given a role, I didn’t suffer from nerves in the same way at all. It turned out that, in a repertoire of pants roles and eccentric old women, both lyric and comedic, I was totally comfortable on stage, and even became known for the believability of my character portrayals.

Now I find that even the thought of auditioning for opera, concert, or chorus work, fills me, once again, with complete dread. I think that it is probably made worse by the fact that I will certainly have to audition for everyone who knew my previous singing, and comparisons will, inevitably, be made.

Also, since my vocal change, my ability to make funny voices and imitate animal noises has totally deserted me, which makes me *very* sad. I could imitate monkeys, parrots, other birds, sirens, cats, dogs, car alarms, could play an incredible mouth trumpet and almost accompany myself in “Let the bright seraphim,” and I had a peacock impersonation that could set every peacock in the grounds of Warwick Castle crying as if the end of the world was nigh! It was quite remarkable.

Now, presumably because of a change in the thickness of my vocal cords, such delights and amusements seem to have been possible only in my “former life.” There may be some people who are quite relieved and happy about that—but I am not one of them! I really miss those noises.

Singer Three

Anonymous, trans man, age 20s

I find that vocal stamina is a big challenge for me. Since my voice change, I have found that my voice feels much weaker and can be strained more easily. My biggest technical challenge, however, is in navigating the ranges of my voice. I have difficulty in how I should approach lower notes versus higher notes in my register because these registers almost feel like a different voice to me. My lower notes feel very low to me, and my high notes feel very high. This means that I tend to stretch for these notes instead of creating them in a more natural way. I think it is all a process that goes along with getting used to my voice and its qualities.

I have found that exercises in loosening up—such as wiggling my jaw while singing or swaying my body a bit—have helped me relax and project more naturally rather than tightening up. I often carry my tension in my shoulders or jaw, and if I can move to relax these areas, my sound often opens up. As for my vocal stamina, I try to drink a lot of water and tea as well as gargle with warm salt water.

I actually had not taken voice lessons prior to my transition, so my vocal training all happened during my transition. I found voice lessons to be incredibly helpful for me both as a musician and on a personal level. I found that vocal training not only helped refine my sense of pitch, but it also helped me with range on trombone (my main instrument). By approaching higher notes on the trombone in the way I was being taught to approach them with my voice, I found a greater sense of comfort and accuracy.

Voice lessons helped me a great deal personally, as well. I was very pleased with my voice change from hormone therapy, but I did not feel confident about how I sounded in comparison to other male voices. Through vocal training, I received a lot of affirmation about my voice because I was recording my voice lessons and listening back each week. This process gave me a lot of insight as to how my voice sounds outside of my head, which gave me a lot of confidence. Gender dysphoria can make you perceive yourself much differently than how others view/hear you, and being able to hear recordings of my lessons gave me a new ownership over my voice.

I feel that my voice sounds much younger than my age because of my late puberty as a trans man. I feel that

my singing is unique to my trans identity because it is rather androgynous. While my voice has dropped to a typically male range, I lack many of the overtones typical in a male voice of my age. Even though I can manipulate my voice to sound more masculine, I do try to sing in a way that is most natural for me and my voice. [My voice and I] are a little androgynous, and I try to let that come through in my singing because I don't want to just try to sound like other people, I want to sound like me.

I have actually recently written a short song about gender dysphoria that has helped me express some of the aspects of being transgender that I do not often talk about. But, I would say that, moreover, my singing voice is very important to me as a way to express my character. While I am singing, I am not thinking about the fact that I am trans; I'm thinking about the song and what I want to convey in a way that is most genuine to me. I am not ready or at a place where I would want to publicly sing a song about being trans, but I would like to do that someday at an LGBTQ open mic performance because I do think that expression and vulnerability are very important for us to grow and learn from each other.

My speaking voice was a primary concern when I started taking hormones, because I was very self-conscious of my voice. My voice was a big tell; it was always giving me away as female. I was so excited about my changing voice that I posted video updates to my friends and family every couple months during the first year of my transition so that everyone could hear and so that I could keep record of how I sounded over the months. My discomfort with my voice actually held me back from singing for a long time. I have loved singing my whole life, but I was too uncomfortable to join choir until about a year after my voice had changed and was finally stable. I was very afraid of joining choir and being gendered for a long time and only finally joined after my voice had changed and I knew that my voice range was finally considered "male."

CONCLUSION

This column represents the fifth *Journal of Singing* article on transgender singers in the last calendar year. While it may seem unusual to devote this much space to a single topic, especially considering the relatively small percentage of transgender people in the greater population, two explanations may be offered.

First, the *Journal of Singing* pledges to provide “current information regarding the teaching of singing” while serving as “an historical record” and “a venue for teachers of singing and other scholars to share the results of their work in areas such as history, diction, voice science, medicine, and especially voice pedagogy.”² As stated in the previous column, there has not been any information related to transgender singers in NATS resources until recently. Therefore, a flurry of articles on the subject is necessary to catch up and finally provide information on an underserved topic.

Second, while a 2016 report estimates that just 0.6% of the United States adult population identifies as transgender, this still represents about 1.4 million people, not even including transgender youth.³ This represents a twofold increase from just five years earlier, and researchers believe the rise is due, in part, to a growing awareness of transgender identity—a trend that is expected to continue in the coming years.⁴ For that reason, voice teachers are increasingly likely to see transgender singers in their studios, necessitating at the very least a basic understanding of the aspects of singing that are particular to this population.

As experienced voice teachers understand, elements of vocal function and artistry are difficult—if not

impossible—to separate from our humanity. As has been emphasized by the singers and teachers who have been willing to share their stories in these pages, their singing has been a valued means of self-discovery and self-expression. In this regard, while certain technical elements of singing may be unique to transgender singers, their reasons for singing are much more universal.

NOTES

1. Brian Manternach, Michael Chipman, Ruth Rainero, and Caitlin Stave, “Teaching Transgender Singers. Part 1: The Voice Teachers’ Perspectives,” *Journal of Singing* 74, no. 1 (September/October 2017): 82–88.
2. https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/about_journal_singing.html (accessed June 14, 2017).
3. A. R. Flores, J. L. Herman, G. J. Gates, and T. N. T. Brown, “How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?” (June 2016) Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute; <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf> (accessed June 8, 2017).
4. Jan Hoffman, “Estimate of U.S. Transgender Population Doubles to 1.4 Million Adults,” *The New York Times* (June 30, 2016); <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/01/health/transgender-population.html?mcubz=1&r=1> (accessed June 8, 2017).

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Keeping voices healthy through injury prevention strategies, education, and outreach is both my passion and my profession. It is my mission through these monthly posts and podcasts to keep you informed of current scientific research in wellness and vocal health, working to bridge the gap between art and science.

If there are topics that you would like to suggest, please feel free to reach out and let me know. Wishing you all a happy, vocally healthy lifetime of performing!

~ Dr. Wendy LeBorgne
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