

Considerations for Teaching Transgender Singers in College Voice
by Nancy Bos

Societal shifts and new avenues for performance are giving transgender and gender non-conforming singers the opportunity to live openly with complete honesty and authenticity. The changing times also make majoring in voice a realistic option for transgender and non-conforming students. However there are many challenges for teachers who are just beginning to work with these populations. Historically, most of us come from an unwaveringly gender binary understanding of the world. In the words of Shelagh Davies, Speech Language Pathologist, specializing in work with transgender clients, "...now we realize that for some people, the sex they were assigned at birth does not match their personal sense of gender identity."¹ This is known as gender dysphoria. Opening the mind to transgender or gender non-conformity can not only lead to teachers wrestling with moral issues, it opens us to a new understanding of the basic tenets of being human, as well as the need to embrace a new non-binary vocabulary. These are challenging yet important tasks. Until a teacher has had some time and experience, practice if you will, those challenging tasks are things that a teacher will need to consciously and deliberately work through with the student in the room. The teachers' and the students' journeys in college will be smoother with the teacher having a basic understanding of how to create the optimal environment, as well a heads-up to some of the issues that might come up.

The Transgender Student's Journey

The transgender population is facing suicide attempts at a much higher level than the rest of the population. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and National Center for Transgender Equality, shows 41% of transgender people have attempted suicide, which vastly exceeds the 4.6 percent of the overall U.S. population². They may have suffered rejection by friends and family, discrimination at work, school, and leisure. Many times they have been physically, sexually, and mentally abused and may suffer from internalized transphobia (negative messages about transgender people)³. This history of trauma,

perhaps even PTSD, must be considered when dealing with the students one-on-one. Patience, respect, understanding, flexibility, and an open mind are all positive skills that will come into play for us as teachers. But it is also paramount that teachers establish boundaries and do not become the psychiatrists or social workers that our students might need. Rather, teachers should have the resources and team available to help the students with these issues. The team might be available at the school, or it might be beneficial to reach out into the community to develop the best team possible.

The wonderful news is that many transgender individuals are in position to take a courageous journey of exploring their artistic gifts like never before. For singing, they have the option of joining a traditional choir, a trans choir, or studying privately, and can find successful role models in nearly every genre. This is an exciting opportunity for us as their teachers and mentors.

The Voice Teacher's Journey

One stop on the journey as voice teachers should be blogs and vlogs by transgender singers. A simple internet search will turn up blogs that give a window into the issues they might be dealing with and personal stories of the effects of hormone therapy, such as the blog of Eli Conley, a professional singer and voice teacher who is a trans man. Vlogs will give the viewer a personal experience with the looks and sounds of transgender singers during their journey. I especially enjoyed the videos made by Isabella "Bunny" Bennett of the band Steam Powered Giraffe, showing her in every phase of her transition. In the videos, she rarely talks about singing or her voice, but gives us a wonderful opportunity to watch, listen, and learn throughout her transition.

In developing a new vocabulary for transgender people, it has become commonplace to introduce oneself with preferred pronouns. For example, at an orientation presentation at Western Washington University this summer, the president of the student body introduced himself by name and then, "I prefer he/him pronouns." If your new student introduces himself, herself, themselves, or xirself in this way, it is respectful to respond in a similar manner. Typical pronouns are he/him, she/her, they/them, xe/xir. Thorough lists

of pronouns can be found by doing an Internet search for “gender pronoun.”

Changes to the Singer’s Voice

The singers will come to voice teachers with a wide variety of circumstances and goals. The adage "no two people are alike," has never been truer, as is illustrated by Bunny Bennett and her identical twin brother, David. But there are some general considerations that we teachers can prepare ourselves with. First are the options for physical change open to a trans man versus a trans woman. Many trans men take hormone (androgen) therapy, which puts them through a transition similar to a boy going through puberty. Testosterone therapy lowers the average speaking pitch and singing range. However, some men do not take androgen therapy and could choose instead to keep their current range. If available, many find great benefit in studying speech masculinization techniques provided by a specialized Speech Language Pathologist.

Trans women have a less clear vocal path. Voice surgery is available, which can raise the average speaking pitch, eliminate the very low pitches, and increase the upper end of their singing pitch range. However these surgeries tend to be expensive and are not covered by insurance. More importantly, the outcomes are variable. Sometimes the pitch does not change substantially and there can be negative side effects, including deterioration of voice quality and even effects on swallowing. Instead, some trans women turn to a trans-knowledgeable speech language pathologist for voice feminization therapy. It is not uncommon, however, for a trans woman to have a striking physical transition but maintain a baritone range.

As we become more knowledgeable about gender transition, some people begin to feel more comfortable accepting gender expression that is non-binary and are willing to accept a person’s own sense of gender even if they do not have the usual secondary sex characteristics. For example, ideally a teacher would feel comfortable accepting as female, a trans woman who identifies as a woman, but has a low voice, facial hair, and masculine speech patterns. This can be the most comfortable option for some transgender individuals, but also the most challenging for the cisgender, “novice to non-binary”

teacher.

Another challenge to the “novice to non-binary” teacher can be teaching the gender non-binary student, who does not identify at either polarity of gender. In such cases, thoughtful avoidance of any gender specific references (such as, "Way to go, girl!) is essential. Fostering honest and safe discussions about repertoire will also be part of the voice lessons.

Choosing Repertoire

A place to start with repertoire is selecting non-heteronormative music. Forget about the gender the song might have been written or published for, and let the student “own” the song that speaks to their heart. If the student is studying contemporary commercial styles, there are a myriad of choices dealing with transgender singer’s real life issues from transgender and cisgender songwriters. In classical music the singer will find many selections in art song literature, and college students should have the opportunity to explore arias.

For a trans man who has gone through androgen therapy, he should be expected to sing traditional male repertoire in a traditional male range. For trans women, the journey will require a more creative approach to repertoire, perhaps focusing on contralto rep, and an overriding goal of developing and balancing the entire range of two to three octaves. Transposing songs is an excellent choice, even transposing it a fifth or more. According to Seattle voice teacher, Scott Farrell, “the immediate gratification of singing in a comfortable key in gender appropriate pieces is so empowering. I actually had one woman come to tears feeling the power of her voice singing a song that felt like it matched who she saw herself as. ‘I feel like it’s the first time I’ve actually heard my SELF sing’ were her words.” As always it’s a good idea to ask the student about their musical preferences.

Other Considerations

Some personal issues of transition might have an influence on voice study. Some trans

men with large breasts may bind their chest so as to not send a confusing message to the public. The bindings can be quite restrictive, stiff, and affect breath support. It is something that might need to be addressed with care in the voice studio. Another issue would be trans women or men who experience vocal fatigue or dysphonia by speaking or singing in a tessitura outside their physical comfort range. This should be addressed by an SLP who is competent in working with transgender voice, in conjunction with the singing teacher.

The freedom that college allows the student might give them the chance to explore gender and sexual identity for the first time, leading to tremendous distraction and emotions stemming from personal upheaval. It is not uncommon for a student to present as one gender for one quarter, the opposite gender for the next quarter, and to move briefly or permanently into a gender non-conforming presentation after that. The teacher must be thoughtful and sensitive to the student while considering how to meet the repertoire goals of the program and prepare the student for post-college opportunities.

Moving Our Field Forward

Much of the field of voice is binary in nature regarding choirs, adjudications, and casting. In academic institutions, a division-wide discussion and understanding will help ease the experience for the students. Repertoire requirements should be considered, along with choral practices regarding voicing. The faculty must present a unified and encouraging front in order to communicate to all of the student body that all students are respected and cherished. Organizations such as NATS, ACDA, and MTNA are developing programs and inclusive policies to address these issues. The ACDA has recently sponsored panels such as "Building Safe Space for Transgender Voices," "Embracing Transgender Singers," and "Inclusivity in Voicing." NATS is developing resources for teachers and has also sponsored conference sessions. And MTNA has provided poster sessions and presentations on working with transgender singers. However, considering the exciting new opportunities for the future, health, and well being of the students, our field is moving too slowly toward preparing teachers to provide an absolutely safe and nurturing environment. To learn more, there is a growing collection of print resources available.

For teachers who would like to understand their students psychological and physical journey better, especially concerning pre-college years, *Where's My Book?* by Linda Gromko is excellent.

It is through sharing experiences, as a college and as a community, that we will together learn the best pedagogy for teaching transgender singers. And it is through the courage of the students who insist on following their dreams, despite immense hurdles, that we can take our inspiration.

1. Shelagh Davies, "Training the Transgender Singer: Finding the Voice Inside," *NATS Inter Nos*, Spring 2016,
http://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/_article.html/What_s_New/Training_the_Transgender_Singer_Finding_the_Voice_Inside
2. Haas et al., "Suicide Attempts among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults," The Williams Institute, January, 2014.
3. Brynn Tannehill, "The Truth About Transgender Suicide," *The Huffington Post*, November 14, 2015.