

The Transfemme Voice:
Exploring the Lived Experiences and Vocal Identity of Three Black
Transfemme Treble Voice Singers

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Abstract

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This research explores the lived experiences of three Black transfemme treble voice singers, examining how race, gender, and vocal identity intersect to impact self-perception and social interactions. Employing a phenomenological approach, the study captures the essence of participants' experiences, investigating how these unique identity intersections shape personal and collective meaning. Data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews conducted on Zoom, enabling participants to deeply reflect on their vocal identity in relation to their gender and racial identities. The thematic analysis of the interviews uncovered essential themes such as identity affirmation, social navigation, and community connection. This emphasizes the empowering yet challenging elements of voicing a treble voice within a transfemme identity. Ethical factors, such as

allowing participants to choose whether to share their names and engage openly, reflect the study's commitment to authenticity and regard for individual agency. This research enhances our understanding of identity and voice, providing insights into the intricate experiences of those at the crossroads of marginalized identities while expanding the conversation about gender, race, and vocal expression.

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Thank you, God, for the blessings you have bestowed upon my life and the work you will continue to do in, for, and through me.

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Vollendet ist das grosse Werk

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the life, contributions, and memory of my grandmother, Alethia L. Adamson. Her enduring influence as an educator has profoundly impacted countless students, and her role as a deaconess has touched innumerable parishioners. Furthermore, I acknowledge her unwavering love for me and her steadfast belief in my dreams.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice.

~bell hooks~¹

The primary aim of this study is to foreground the narrative voices and lived experiences of Black transgender women and transfemme individuals who sing in their treble register. By centering this specific community, the research seeks to illuminate the complex intersections of identity, representation, and social positioning that these artists navigate. Through a combination of ethnographic and narrative interviews, a review of literature on and about the transfemme voice from musical sociology and medical fields, and intersectional critical theory, the study explores how these singers express their authentic selves artistically while contending with societal expectations related to race, gender, and vocal expression.

This study collected and assessed data from three transgender women and transfemme voice users. The three individuals interviewed are professional classical singers who are Black (African American) and predominantly use the upper registers of their voices. I serve as both the researcher and a participant in this study. As a participant, I was interviewed by Dr. Janaé Collier, a distinguished researcher and scholar specializing in health education and counseling. Dr. Collier received the same interview questions that I presented to the other two participants. All interviewees hold advanced degrees in music performance from prestigious institutions such as the San Francisco

¹ bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no. 1 (1991): 1–12.

Conservatory of Music in California, Shenandoah University and Conservatory in Virginia, and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, UK.

About The Researcher

When I was young, my parents instilled in me a guiding principle paraphrased from the Bible: *To whom much is given, much will be required.*² This sentiment has shaped my life, particularly as a first-generation college student. I've always felt a deep sense of responsibility to give back to my community—a sense that has only intensified since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The simultaneous public health crisis and the resurgence of civil unrest, led by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities across the United States, in response to many injustices, prompted me to reflect deeply on how I could contribute meaningfully to the healing of both my community and the country as a whole. The persistent, unjust, and unethical treatment of Black and brown people compelled me to take action, leading me to embark on a research journey with a specific focus: documenting the experiences of Black and Black transgender individuals in the classical music industry.

Classical music entered my life early on. Encouraged by my parents, I received my first vinyl record—a copy of Vivaldi's *Gloria* and *Magnificat*—before my sixth birthday.³ I played it endlessly, immersing myself in the vocal solos, choral parts, and orchestral movements. These early experiences sparked my passion for music; the would-be maestro developed into a bold and courageous singer. Despite facing challenges and

² Luke 12:48 (New International Version)

³ Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat/Gloria*, directed by Riccardo Muti with the New Philharmonia Orchestra & Chorus (1977; London: EMI), LP.

moments of being overlooked, I thrived academically, eventually earning the opportunity to study at the Guildhall School of Music in Drama in London. There, with the mentorship of my coaches, Gordon Stewart, Sarah Walker, and Richard Jackson, and my teacher, Andrew Watts, I discovered my 'trans voice.' Their encouragement—and Andrew's direction of "*higher, faster, louder*"—gave me the confidence to become what felt like an unstoppable force in music.

However, returning to the United States was a different experience. While I had found my 'trans voice' in London, I had always known and embraced it since childhood. My identity has been evident in my preferences, musical choices, and how I navigate social spaces. Upon my return, I faced new barriers that made me realize just how necessary research that contributes to dialogues within the classical music industry about racial and gender equity truly was—not only for my personal journey but for the visibility and representation of others like me.

I returned to music with a renewed sense of purpose. Arriving at the University of Washington, I had a clear vision for my research, though the path was anything but straightforward. As Brené Brown states in *Dare to Lead*: "*What stands in the way becomes the way.*" This sentiment resonated deeply with me, helping me understand that the very challenges I faced were integral to shaping the direction of my research. As a Black transgender woman, I navigate a world that is often unsafe, where my thoughts, contributions, and even my very existence are frequently marginalized or dismissed. My study focuses on the experiences of Black transfemme singers with treble voices, a community of which I am proud to be a part. By amplifying these stories, I aim to

contribute to a more inclusive and equitable landscape where all voices can be heard and celebrated.

Historical, Cultural Context, and Medicalization of Transgender Identities

The evolution of how transgender women of color live in the United States, their general visibility, and the ways in which the injuries they sustain in what can only be called a hostile culture are studied and understood is among the most complex sociological phenomena of our time. The term "transgender" was first coined in the 1960s, but the challenge to the gender binary has been present throughout human history. Numerous cultures, past and present, have long recognized gender diversity, often incorporating it into their social and religious systems. For example, in the ancient Mesopotamian empires of Sumer and Akkadia, as well as in early Greece and Rome, priests and temple attendants like the *gala* and *galli*, though assigned male at birth, challenged traditional gender norms through their service as devotees of goddesses.⁴ Indigenous communities in North America, have long had the concept of two-spirit individuals, people who embody both masculine and feminine qualities and often hold unique spiritual roles within their communities.⁵ Similarly, in South Asia, the *Hijra* community has a long-standing tradition of serving ritual roles, particularly in blessing marriages and births, further emphasizing how gender diversity has existed in many societies beyond the binary.⁶

⁴ James Neill, *The Origins and Role of Same-Sex Relations in Human Societies* (McFarland, 2011), 84–86.

⁵ Erin Blakemore, "How Historians Are Documenting the Lives of Transgender People," *History*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-historians-are-documenting-lives-of-transgender-people>.

⁶ Neill, *The Origins and Role of Same-Sex Relations in Human Societies*, 85.

Modern research into transgender identities was pioneered by figures like Magnus Hirschfeld, who founded the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin in 1919, playing a pivotal role in early studies on gender variance.⁷ His work, along with that of sexologists Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, framed much of the early medical understanding of nonconforming gender identities.⁸ By the mid-20th century, researchers such as Harry Benjamin shifted focus to medical treatments for transgender individuals, including hormone therapy and surgery.⁹ This period also saw the influence of John Money, who introduced the term "gender identity," although his research, particularly on gender reassignment in children, remains controversial.^{10 11}

The shaping of Western concepts of transgender identities and experiences has been deeply intertwined with the medical field, largely because early conceptualizations of gender variance were framed through a medical lens. For much of the 20th century, transgender individuals were pathologized, often classified under mental health conditions such as "gender identity disorder."¹² Medical professionals, particularly those in psychiatry and endocrinology, played a central role in diagnosing, managing, and even gatekeeping transgender identities. Medical interventions like hormone therapy and

⁷ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, Second edition (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 55.

⁸ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 15.

⁹ Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, LGBT Thought and Culture (New York, NY: Julian Press, Inc. Publishers, 1966), <https://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?GLTC;2053993>.

¹⁰ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 117.

¹¹ Meyerowitz, 125.

¹² American Psychiatric Association, "Gender Dysphoria," in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, DSM Library (American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787.x14_Gender_Dysphoria.

surgeries became focal points for both individual transitions and the broader understanding of what it meant to be transgender.¹³

This focus on medicalization had significant consequences. While it provided some transgender people access to treatments that aligned their bodies with their gender identities, it also reinforced a narrow, biomedical framework for understanding transgender lives. The emphasis on "fixing" or "curing" gender dysphoria often marginalized transgender voices, placing authority in the hands of clinicians rather than in the lived experiences of transgender individuals themselves.¹⁴ This medical-centric view was limited, because it often ignored the broader social, cultural, and environmental factors that shape the health and well-being of transgender people.

In recent years, however, there has been a growing recognition that medical interventions do not solely determine health outcomes for transgender people. This shift is due to a greater understanding of the social determinants of health—the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age—that profoundly affect health outcomes.¹⁵ For transgender individuals, social determinants like discrimination, poverty, access to education, stable housing, and supportive social networks can have as much, if not more, of an impact on their health and well-being as medical treatment.¹⁶

For example, transgender people face disproportionate rates of homelessness, unemployment, and violence, all of which contribute to mental and physical health

¹³ Stryker, *Transgender History*, 159.

¹⁴ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Duke University Press, 2015), 82, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374794>.

¹⁵ World Health Organization, "A Conceptual Framework for Action on the Social Determinants of Health," Discussion Paper Series on Social Determinants of Health, 2, 2010, 76.

¹⁶ Sari L. Reisner et al., "Global Health Burden and Needs of Transgender Populations: A Review," *The Lancet* 388, no. 10042 (July 23, 2016): 428, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)00684-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)00684-X).

disparities with the general population.¹⁷ Research has shown that transgender individuals who experience rejection from their families, communities, or workplaces are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions.¹⁸ Additionally, transgender people, particularly transgender women of color, often face systemic barriers to healthcare access, resulting in lower rates of preventive care, delayed treatments, and higher mortality rates.¹⁹ These realities stress the need for a broader, more holistic understanding of transgender health—one that accounts for social, economic, and cultural factors in addition to medical ones.²⁰

As a result of new research in the field, scholars, activists, and public health professionals are increasingly advocating for an intersectional approach to transgender health. This means recognizing that the medical needs of transgender individuals cannot be separated from the social conditions they live in. It requires addressing structural inequalities like transphobia, racism, and economic disparity while also ensuring access to gender-affirming healthcare.²¹ Most of the literature on transgender topics used to come from medical or psychological perspectives, almost always written by people who were not themselves transgender.²² There is a growing push for community-led research

¹⁷ Sandy E. James et al., “The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS)” (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, May 22, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR37229.v1>.

¹⁸ Ilan H. Meyer, “Resilience in the Study of Minority Stress and Health of Sexual and Gender Minorities,” *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 2, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000132>.

¹⁹ Jaime M. Grant, Ph.D., Lisa A. Mottet, J.D., and Justin Tanis, D.Min., “Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey,” *National LGBTQ Task Force* (blog), February 3, 2011, <https://www.thetaskforce.org/resources/injustice-every-turn-report-national-transgender-discrimination-survey/>.

²⁰ Greta R. Bauer et al., “Intervenable Factors Associated with Suicide Risk in Transgender Persons: A Respondent Driven Sampling Study in Ontario, Canada.,” *BMC Public Health* 15 (June 2, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-1867-2>.

²¹ Reisner et al., “Global Health Burden and Needs of Transgender Populations,” 429.

²² Stryker, *Transgender History*, 2.

that centers transgender voices and experiences, rather than relying solely on medical professionals to define the needs and experiences of transgender people.²³

Intersectionality and Health: Beyond Medicalization

Over the past 20 years, research on transgender populations has expanded significantly, shedding light on mental health challenges, discrimination, and the importance of gender-affirming care.²⁴ Studies consistently indicate that transgender individuals face elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide, often linked to experiences of gender minority stress, societal discrimination, and body dysphoria. For instance, up to 40% of transgender young adults have attempted suicide due to these pressures.²⁵ Access to gender-affirming interventions, such as hormone therapy and surgeries, has been shown to improve mental health outcomes significantly, decreasing suicidality and improving overall well-being, but access to this care is often out of reach to minority populations.²⁶

Kimberlé Crenshaw,²⁷ in 1991, initially coined the term “intersectionality” to describe ways in which Black women were made invisible and marginalized in both white feminist spaces and male-led movements for Black liberation. Intersectionality examines the space that people occupy when they hold multiple marginalized identities at

²³ Spade, *Normal Life*, 6.

²⁴ Esther L. Meerwijk and Jae M. Sevelius, “Transgender Population Size in the United States: A Meta-Regression of Population-Based Probability Samples,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 2 (February 2017): e1–8, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303578>.

²⁵ Jeremy D. Kidd et al., “Prevalence of Substance Use and Mental Health Problems among Transgender and Cisgender U.S. Adults: Results from a National Probability Sample,” *Psychiatry Research* 326 (August 2023): 115339, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2023.115339>.

²⁶ Sara Reardon, “Science in Transition,” *Nature* 568, no. 7753 (April 1, 2019): 448, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-01237-z>.

²⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw is a leading authority in the area of civil rights, Black feminist legal theory, and race, racism, and the law. Her work has been foundational in two fields of study that have come to be known by terms that she coined: critical race theory and intersectionality. Crenshaw is a professor of law at UCLA and Columbia Law School.

once.²⁸ Research shows that transgender individuals of color, particularly Black transgender women, experience compounded discrimination based on both their gender identity and race, leading to more severe health disparities.²⁹

While research on transgender populations is growing, the voices included or leading in these discussions are changing. Brian Minalga, et al's letter "Research on transgender people must benefit transgender people" critiques the exploitation of transgender communities in academic research, where studies often prioritize academic interests over the urgent health needs of these populations. The authors emphasize that research methods, such as HIV-molecular analyses, can be harmful and unnecessary, as much of the relevant knowledge already exists within transgender communities.³⁰ They call for research to meaningfully benefit transgender people, particularly those facing structural oppression, and challenge researchers to reconsider their methods and the impact of their work, ensuring it does not perpetuate stereotypes or cause harm.

Black & Trans in the Media at the Turn of the 21st Century

As Beyoncé Knowles declares in her song "America Has a Problem." The title alone strikes a chord when reflecting on broader societal challenges.³¹ While the song addresses different issues, this statement resonates strongly in the context of how transgender individuals, particularly Black transgender women and transfeminine people, were portrayed in media throughout the 1990s and 2000s. During that period, mainstream media often either erased or misrepresented these communities, relying on harmful

²⁸ Laura Erickson-Schroth, *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities*, Second edition (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2022), 34.

²⁹ Reardon, "Science in Transition," 449.

³⁰ Brian Minalga et al., "Research on Transgender People Must Benefit Transgender People," *The Lancet* 399, no. 10325 (February 2022): 628, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)02806-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02806-3).

³¹ Beyoncé Knowles, *America Has A Problem*, CD, Renaissance (Columbia Records Group, 2022).

stereotypes and stigmatizing portrayals that contributed to their marginalization and reinforced negative perceptions. Talk show hosts like Ricky Lake, Sally Jesse Raphael, and the notoriously sensational Jerry Springer often featured transgender women as circus sideshows, exploiting their stories for ratings.³²

These shows created a spectacle around the lives of marginalized individuals, frequently depicting them in vulnerable and often humiliating situations. Viewers regularly witnessed emotionally charged moments where a Black transgender woman would “out” herself to her partner, who was allegedly unaware of her gender identity.³³ These segments typically incited a range of reactions from a raucous studio audience, with the atmosphere oscillating between mild pandemonium and outright hysteria. The most dramatic moments arose when the partner of the trans woman feigned surprise or disgust, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that equate transgender identities with deception and betrayal. Violence often ensued on the stage.³⁴ Such portrayals reduced complex lives to sensationalist narratives, perpetuating societal stigma and misunderstanding.

According to Julia Serano in her book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, the media’s depiction of trans women usually falls under one of two main archetypes: the “deceptive transsexual” or the “pathetic transsexual.” Where the “deceivers” can successfully “pass” as women, and the “pathetic,” usually juxtaposed in gender identity and physical appearance, are played for

³² Candice Frederick, “At Its Height In The ’90s, ‘Jerry Springer’ Exploited Black, Trans And Poor Experiences,” HuffPost, May 3, 2023, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-jerry-springer-show-exploitative-black-trans-poor_n_6452740be4b0a36ba6c4b638.

³³ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 37.

³⁴ Sarah McCammon and Raquel Willis, “Activist Reflects on Jerry Springer’s Depiction of Transgender People,” NPR, April 29, 2023, sec. Pop Culture: All Things Considered, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/29/1172918603/activist-reflects-on-jerry-springers-depiction-of-transgender-people>.

laughs. Yet, in our world, there are many types of trans women, as there are women in general.³⁵ The harmful rhetoric and sensationalism from that era continue to echo today. The media's role in shaping public perception cannot be overstated, as these portrayals have lasting implications for the safety and dignity of transgender individuals. According to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's report, "The Epidemic of Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in the United States," as of 2023, 320 transgender individuals have been murdered, with a staggering majority being Black transgender women.³⁶ This alarming statistic underlines a significant increase in violence against transgender people since the early 2000s when systematic data collection began.

The Transgender Day of Remembrance, initiated in 1999 by advocate Gwendolyn Ann Smith, was established to honor the memory of Rita Hester, a transgender woman murdered in 1998.³⁷ This annual vigil serves as a sobering reminder of the ongoing violence faced by the transgender community and the urgent need for societal change. Each year, communities gather to remember those lost to anti-transgender violence, advocating for justice and equality. The event not only honors the lives of transgender individuals but also highlights the systemic issues contributing to their vulnerability, including discrimination, lack of access to healthcare, and societal stigma.

³⁵ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 36.

³⁶ Human Rights Campaign Foundation, "The Epidemic of Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in the United States" (Human Rights Campaign, November 2023), <https://reports.hrc.org/an-epidemic-of-violence-2023>.

³⁷ "Transgender Day of Remembrance | GLAAD," GLAAD, November 8, 2019, <https://glaad.org/tdor/>.

Transgender Visibility and “The Tipping Point”

One of the earliest and most notable public transitions was that of Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s, whose gender-affirming surgery and subsequent public life brought transgender issues into the media spotlight.³⁸ After a half century of being used as a sideshow oddity, the transgender community reached a milestone in 2014 with *Time* magazine’s “Transgender Tipping Point,” which featured Laverne Cox, an African American transgender actress, on its cover. Laverne Cox earned fame in her role in the popular Netflix TV series *Orange Is the New Black*. Cox’s cover marked a historic moment for transgender women, especially women of color, and signified a broader acceptance and awareness of transgender rights and identities.³⁹ This event helped propel transgender issues, such as legal recognition and reform, healthcare access, and transgender representation, into mainstream discussions, representing a significant cultural shift in how society views gender identity. Before this, transgender people, though present in public life, often faced invisibility or negative portrayals.

The “Transgender Tipping Point” also led to a surge in transgender representation in entertainment, advocacy, and politics, with figures like Janet Mock, Jazz Jennings, and Caitlyn Jenner gaining prominence in the years that followed. As transgender people gained more visibility, there was however a simultaneous backlash, particularly in the form of anti-transgender legislation and increased violence against transgender

³⁸ Blakemore, “How Historians Are Documenting the Lives of Transgender People.”

³⁹ Katy Steinmetz, “The Transgender Tipping Point,” *TIME*, May 29, 2014, <https://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/>.

individuals, particularly transgender women of color.⁴⁰ Despite these challenges, the *Transgender Tipping Point* represents a crucial milestone in the fight for transgender rights, moving the conversation from the fringes into the mainstream and opening up a broader dialogue about gender identity, inclusion, and equality.

Beyoncé: Cultural Contributions and Representation in the Arts

Yet amplifying authentic voices and narratives is not done in a vacuum.

Beyoncé's *Renaissance* album (2022) is a powerful tribute to the contributions of Black queer and trans pioneers in music and culture and another milestone in public awareness and acceptance, with a specific focus on house and ballroom scenes⁴¹ that have long been central to LGBTQIA+ expression, especially among communities of color. The album features collaborations with iconic figures like Big Freedia, Grace Jones, and trans DJ Honey Dijon, illustrating Beyoncé's commitment to amplifying their voices and artistic legacies. For example, Big Freedia's bounce style is prominently featured on the track "Break My Soul," with its famous line "Release your job!" highlighting her distinctive sound and cultural influence.

In addition to drawing from the musical legacies of queer Black artists, *Renaissance* reflects Beyoncé's connection to the LGBTQIA+ community. The album is dedicated to her late Uncle Johnny, a gay man who profoundly influenced her exposure to the culture and music that inspired this body of work. In her liner notes, Beyoncé refers

⁴⁰ American Civil Liberties Union, "The Impacts of Anti-Transgender Laws and Policies: Evidence from Empirical Research," *American Civil Liberties Union* (blog), accessed November 3, 2024, <https://www.aclu.org/publications/the-impacts-of-anti-transgender-laws-and-policies-evidence-from-empirical-research>.

⁴¹ Ballroom culture, or ball culture, is an underground community that emerged in the 1960s in Harlem as a space primarily for Black and Latinx LGBTQ individuals who were excluded from mainstream, white-dominated drag events.

to him as her "godmother" and credits him with shaping her creative vision. Through this personal homage, she connects the historical struggles of queer communities with the joy and resilience celebrated in the album.^{42 43}

Beyond the music, Beyoncé's inclusion of trans and non-binary artists such as TS Madison and Honey Dijon represents an important gesture of allyship. Their presence on tracks like "Cozy" and "Alien Superstar" reinforces the significance of trans and queer voices in shaping not just *Renaissance* but broader conversations around representation and inclusion in popular music.⁴⁴ Through *Renaissance*, Beyoncé continues to use her platform to honor and elevate the work of queer Black and trans artists, weaving their contributions into the fabric of mainstream culture.

Beyoncé's *Renaissance* marks a significant step toward improving the representation of marginalized communities, not only in music but across various forms of media. However, while the album celebrates Black queer and trans artistry, it also draws attention to the ongoing challenges in achieving widespread recognition for these creators in other areas, such as film, television, fashion, and, more pointedly, classical music and opera. Many queer and trans artists, especially those of color, still face barriers to full participation and visibility in mainstream platforms. Beyoncé's work serves as a powerful example of how influential figures can uplift marginalized voices. Still, it also emphasizes the persistent gaps in representation that need to be addressed across all creative industries.

⁴² Lester Fabian Brathwaite, "On Beyoncé's 'Renaissance': To Be Queer, Gifted, and Black," EW.com, August 4, 2022, <https://ew.com/music/beyonce-renaissance-tribute-to-black-queer-culture-ball-scene/>.

⁴³ Mey Rude, "Beyoncé's 'Renaissance' Honors Ballroom's Queer & Trans Pioneers," July 29, 2022, <https://www.out.com/music/2022/7/29/beyonces-renaissance-honors-ballrooms-queer-trans-pioneers>.

⁴⁴ Scottie Andrew, "Beyoncé References These Black Queer Icons on 'Renaissance,'" CNN, July 30, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/30/entertainment/beyonce-renaissance-black-queer-influences-cec/index.html>.

It is difficult to find examples within the classical industry of such allyship. The popular music world made space for queer individuals to succeed, and allies in the business are increasingly making it a mission to amplify the reach and creative power of trans artists. Meanwhile, trans artists in opera struggle to find a safe and empowering place to exist. Classical Music, specifically vocal music and opera, has a problem.

Black | Trans | Femme: Unique Experiences

A closer examination of the visibility of Black transgender women and transfemme communities reveals a troubling trend: narratives in media often emphasize trauma, violence, and the harsh realities faced by these individuals and tether ‘black transness’ to a narrative of negativity, risk-taking, and fear. Research featuring Black transfemme subjects who are not being singled out in the context of research of sex work, HIV caution and prevention, lack of healthcare, and lack of trust in healthcare professionals is unfortunately scarce; Black trans women living normal healthy lives (as healthy as can be lived in a hostile environment) also deserve to be better understood. Instead, we encounter stories centered on the profound injustices they endure, including murders and other extreme acts of violence. These accounts serve as stark reminders of a society that often seeks to erase the existence of Black transgender women, driven by misunderstanding, miseducation, bias, and personal hatred, and many of those who may not actively seek to erase Black and queer individuals are only prepared to view them in a frame that foregrounds oppressors.⁴⁵ This focus on violence, while necessary to illuminate the dangers faced by these communities, can inadvertently reduce their

⁴⁵ Ilan H. Meyer, “Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence.” *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 1, no. S (August 1, 2013): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1037/2329-0382.1.S.3>.

identities to mere statistics or cautionary tales. Such narratives can obscure the richness and diversity of their experiences, overshadowing the resilience, creativity, and contributions of Black transgender women to society. Their stories are not merely tales of survival; they encompass a wide range of life experiences, aspirations, and achievements that deserve recognition.⁴⁶

Additionally, it's essential to understand that the experiences of Black transgender women are not monolithic. While there are shared struggles within the broader community, these experiences do not represent the entirety of individual lives. The notion of a single, universal narrative fails to capture the intricate tapestry of identities and realities that exist among Black transgender and transfemme individuals.⁴⁷ For instance, while many Black transgender women may share similar challenges related to discrimination, violence, and societal rejection, each person's journey is shaped by a myriad of factors, including geography, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and personal history.⁴⁸ This plurality enriches the understanding of their lives and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing each unique story.

⁴⁶ Stryker, *Transgender History*, 210.

⁴⁷ James et al., "The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS)."

⁴⁸ Stephanie L. Budge, Jill L. Adelson, and Kimberly A. S. Howard, "Anxiety and Depression in Transgender Individuals: The Roles of Transition Status, Loss, Social Support, and Coping.," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 81, no. 3 (June 1, 2013): 546, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031774>.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Given the critical role of voice in conveying gender information, it is unsurprising that transfeminine individuals may experience vocal gender dysphoria when their vocal expression does not align with their gender identity.⁴⁹ Vocal gender dysphoria arises from the dissonance between one's vocal presentation and gender identity, often leading to distress, especially when individuals are misgendered or face social exclusion. In "Perception of Voice in the Transgender Client," the authors state that such incongruence can further reinforce psychological challenges, contributing to heightened anxiety, depression, and social discomfort, which may persist if the voice does not authentically reflect their gender identity.⁵⁰ These outcomes underscore the need for vocal alignment in gender affirmation and point to the broader implications of gender-consistent vocal characteristics for social belonging and mental health.^{51 52}

Classical singing training often varies by gender, and this different training reinforces the societal imagination that men and women have completely different voices and are profoundly different from each other. For many transgender and non-binary people, the voice serves as a deeply personal and powerful marker of identity, one that can either affirm or contradict their gender expression. In vocal pedagogy, this poses a

⁴⁹ Shelagh Davies, Viktória G. Papp, and Christella Antoni, "Voice and Communication Change for Gender Nonconforming Individuals: Giving Voice to the Person Inside," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 16, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 117–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2015.1075931>.

⁵⁰ Emma J.M. McNeill et al., "Perception of Voice in the Transgender Client," *Journal of Voice* 22, no. 6 (November 2008): 727–33, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2006.12.010>.

⁵¹ Adrienne B. Hancock and Laura M. Garabedian, "Transgender Voice and Communication Treatment: A Retrospective Chart Review of 25 Cases," *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders* 48, no. 1 (2013): 54–65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-6984.2012.00185.x>.

⁵² Kerstin Neumann and Cornelia Welzel, "The Importance of the Voice in Male-to-Female Transsexualism," *Journal of Voice* 18, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 153–67, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0892-1997\(03\)00084-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0892-1997(03)00084-5).

unique challenge for singers and voice teachers who must navigate both the technical demands of voice training and the emotional complexities that can accompany a gender transition. Teaching transgender voice users, particularly in the context of Western classical singing, requires an expansion of, rather than a departure from, traditional approaches that were developed with cisgender students in mind.

The evolving nature of vocal pedagogy has begun to address the needs of transgender students, offering new frameworks that emphasize inclusivity, individuality, and holistic care. While the voice has historically been considered a gendered instrument—classified into binary categories of soprano, mezzo-soprano, and alto/contralto for women and falsettist, countertenor, tenor, baritone, and bass for men—contemporary vocal pedagogy recognizes that these classifications may not align with the lived experiences of trans and non-binary singers. For example, transgender women (transfemme individuals) who have undergone puberty before transitioning typically retain the lower vocal range associated with male-identified voices. Through specialized training, they however can achieve a voice that feels congruent with their gender identity. Transgender men (transmasculine individuals), on the other hand, often experience significant changes in their voice through hormone therapy, which can lower pitch and alter resonance. These physiological changes, combined with the social and psychological aspects of transitioning, make teaching transgender voices a multifaceted and dynamic process.

This literature review explores the growing body of research on transgender voice users, focusing on transfemme singers. My review will include research that has proposed specific voice pedagogy strategies, as well as research literature from non-voice-focused

medical and sociological research on the transfemme experience. The teachers, clinicians, and scholars offer a concise overview of the history, cultural recognition, medicalization, and representation of transgender identities, emphasizing the social and intersectional challenges that shape their experiences. The need for an intersectional approach is central to this review, as it acknowledges the importance of social, cultural, and medical factors in understanding transgender identities and advocates for greater visibility and inclusion.

The review also examines the roles of professionals, such as voice teachers and speech-language pathologists, who collaborate to help transgender individuals achieve their vocal goals. By analyzing current scholarship, this section aims to inform the reader of tools from a broad range of recent scholarship needed to create an inclusive learning environment for transgender singers. Additionally, it identifies gaps in the scholarship, particularly concerning transfemme voices and identities, and calls for further research. Lastly, this section seeks to advance the conversation on transgender voices and contribute to efforts toward making vocal training, particularly in classical singing, a more welcoming and supportive space for individuals of all gender identities.

Historical Context

Today, most of the principal and current researchers in vocal pedagogy understand that the vocal instrument is unique to each individual. Society and scientific knowledge has evolved considerably since the early 19th century, the era of Manuel Garcia and Mathilde Marchesi, and have even advanced considerably since the late 20th century, by which point Richard Miller's science-informed pedagogical texts had become the gold standard. Given their understanding of voice teaching as primarily an art of

preparing students to join an industry that was at its peak at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, it is no surprise that their published work would be built with no awareness, let alone acknowledgement, of non-binary or transgender singers. .

Richard Miller's (1926-2009) scientific and systematic approach to the utilization of the supported singing voice can be summarized in eight key points, with three specifically relevant to the transgender voice user. Firstly, the singer's concept of the physiological processes during the inhalation-exhalation cycle (breathing) plays a role in determining breath management.⁵³ Secondly, while good physical condition is crucial for proper breathing coordination, the singer's skill significantly determines breath capacity and management.⁵⁴ Thirdly, efficient inhalation must be silent.⁵⁵ Inhaling silently is advisable, as any sound during breath intake typically signifies avoidable constriction or tension in the throat and other areas of the body. This tension may impede vocal performance and lead to discomfort. For transgender individuals developing their voice, it is essential to adopt a relaxed and tension-free breathing technique, and the process of learning to vocalize in a register that is perhaps new to the user or that contains embedded cultural trauma are both mental states that commonly bring with them a great deal of internalized tension. Applying Miller's techniques and principles with trans voice users can facilitate greater freedom and comfort while singing, particularly when adjusting to a narrower vocal range that may occur due to voice training during transition.

⁵³ Miller, 38.

⁵⁴ Miller, 38.

⁵⁵ Miller, 39.

Miller's pioneering science laid the groundwork for the field of vocology, characterized as the science and application of voice habilitation.⁵⁶ The term vocology, first used by Dr. Ingo Titze, places a significant focus on habilitation, covering vocal training for both singing and speaking. Additionally, vocology involves the identification and treatment of speech pathologies through speech therapy, a field that is now increasingly serving members of the trans community struggling with voice change and dysphoria.

Miller and Titze however built their science on the presumption that the singers being served by their work would all be cis-normative and that aligning repertoire, language in the studio, and their students' identities would be as simple as connecting standard gendered voice types with roles in the standard repertoire. Historically, the classical vocal music world has been slow to embrace gender diversity, often adhering to rigid norms of gender binary and vocal classification as it seeks to preserve and serve the core repertoire that dominates programming within the industry. In recent years, as societal attitudes toward gender identity and expression evolve, so too has the landscape of vocal performance and vocal pedagogy. Scholars such as Liz Jackson Hearn, William Sauerland, and Loraine Sims have been pivotal in reshaping the discourse on transgender and non-binary voices in classical singing. Their work and the works of others have established an active dialogue on the importance of recognizing and addressing both the technical and emotional dimensions of teaching transgender and non-binary voices in classical singing. These researchers and teachers stress that the transgender voice user, much like any other, must be treated holistically. This means addressing not only the

⁵⁶ Ingo R. Titze, *Principles of Voice Production* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1994), xxii.

physical changes and vocal training needs but also acknowledging the psychological and emotional hurdles transgender individuals may face in the context of their vocal journey.

William Sauerland, in *Queering Vocal Pedagogy: A Handbook for Teaching Trans and Genderqueer Singers and Fostering Gender-Affirming Space*, contextualizes the hurdles for transgender singers within the broader history of gender nonconformity in performance, citing examples from opera and musical theater where gender roles and performer identity do not align. Roles such as Cherubino in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* and Octavian in Strauss' *Der Rosenkaviler* are notable examples of the history of gender flexibility in staged music.⁵⁷ The flexibility of gender can be seen in theater, movies, musical theater, dance, and other performance arts. This historical backdrop, while still bound by binary conventions, can offer a starting point for vocal pedagogues and the greater arts community, aiming to create an inclusive and supportive environment for transgender singers.

Key Themes in the Research

The literature on transgender voice users, transgender voice training, and vocal pedagogy reveals several common themes that address the complexity and individualized nature of this work.

Theme 1: Individualized Approach to Vocal Training

A central tenet of effective voice teaching is recognizing that each student's journey is unique. Transgender voice users, particularly those undergoing hormone therapy or seeking specific voice feminization or masculinization techniques, require tailored instruction that respects their individual needs. In “Best Practices for Vocal

⁵⁷ William Sauerland, *Queering Vocal Pedagogy: A Handbook for Teaching Trans and Genderqueer Singers and Fostering Gender-Affirming Spaces* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 1.

Pedagogy with Gender Diverse People,” David Azul and Lisa Quoresimo advocate for a person-centered approach that considers the physiological and psychological complexity of transgender individuals and their voices.⁵⁸ Their work suggests that voice teachers and clinical professionals, such as speech-language pathologists, must create safe and inclusive environments that allow this instruction personalization.

When we talk about an “individualized approach”, this approach is in contrast to a historically common method of teaching classical voice by which a teacher starts by ascertaining the student’s voice ‘type’ or fach and proceeding through a routine curriculum of repertoire deemed to be ‘foundational’ for that voice type. Additionally, a teacher will have a set of foundational skills that conventional wisdom says that the voice type should master in order to perform professionally. If a student cannot acquire and master these skills in a reasonable amount of time, they may be advised to abandon professional aspirations. As you will hear in the interviews, this approach to teaching can be damaging especially to those who fall outside the historical system, and many pedagogues are now acknowledging this fact in their research.

Theme 2: Physiological Changes and Hormonal Considerations

One of the most intricate aspects of instructing transgender individuals relates to the effects of physiological changes resulting from hormone replacement therapy (HRT). The effects of testosterone on transmasculine singers have been widely studied, as testosterone can induce lasting changes to vocal pitch and timbre. In transmasculine individuals, testosterone leads to vocal thickening and lowering of pitch, often making

⁵⁸ David Azul and Lisa Quoresimo, “Best Practices for Vocal Pedagogy with Gender Diverse People,” *Voice and Speech Review* 16, no. 2 (May 4, 2022): 134, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268263.2022.2042120>.

vocal transition more permanent. In her article, Tessa Romano examines the impact of testosterone therapy on the voices of transgender singers, focusing primarily on individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) who seek masculinization. According to Romano, different methods of testosterone administration affect the voice, concluding that the form of hormone therapy plays a crucial role in vocal outcomes.⁵⁹ Felix Graham expands on this by exploring the implications of HRT on vocal performance, providing practical insights for voice teachers working with transmasculine students, including the use of voice professionals, such as speech-language pathologists, to aid in the care of the voice in transition, emphasizing the need to accommodate the significant changes induced by HRT on pitch and timbre.⁶⁰

Conversely, feminizing hormone therapy (estrogen) has little to no direct effect on the voice of transfemme individuals, as vocal fold changes after puberty are irreversible. For these singers, vocal feminization is often achieved through training that focuses on adjusting pitch, resonance, and formants to create a more feminine-sounding voice. In *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*, Liz Jackson Hearn and Brian Kremer detail how transfemme singers can maintain vocal health through a regimen of careful vocal hygiene, hydration, and structured practice regimens.⁶¹ Their guide offers transfemme singers tools to safely work within their vocal range while adopting characteristics that align with their gender identity. While hormone therapy in this case

⁵⁹ Tessa Romano, "Types of Testosterone Therapy and Their Effects on the Voices of Transgender Singers," *Journal of Singing* 78, no. 3 (2022): 330–31, <https://doi.org/10.53830/GFWW5031>.

⁶⁰ Felix Graham, "To T or Not to T: The Transmasculine Singing Voice on Hormone Replacement Therapy," *Voice & Speech Review* 16, no. 2 (2022): 192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268263.2022.2038349>.

⁶¹ Liz Jackson Hearn, *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices* (San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing, Inc., 2018), 128.

does not significantly alter the voice, there are physical changes that happen to the body when on estrogen—physical, emotional, sexual, and reproductive.⁶²

Transfemme singers may seek other methods, such as speech therapy or surgical interventions, to achieve their desired vocal characteristics. Voice feminization surgery may be considered, although it is less commonly pursued. Sauerland states: “While voice feminization surgeries may show positive results regarding increased fundamental frequency, most research indicated vocal therapy is still an important part of the voice feminization process.”⁶³ Jackson Hearn and Kremer touch on the surgical procedures available and emphasize that individualized care must be provided for each transgender singer, recognizing the diversity in both physiological response and personal preference.⁶⁴

Theme 3: Psychological and Emotional Aspects

The psychological and emotional components of transgender voice training are inextricably linked to the overall success and well-being of the student. As I’ve noted already, for many transgender individuals, the voice represents a critical element of gender identity. Achieving a voice that aligns with one’s gender can be a powerful and affirming experience. Researchers such as Ryan Aguirre and Nancy Bos stress that voice instructors must be aware of the emotional burden that comes with navigating voice

⁶² Madeline Deutsch, “Information on Estrogen Hormone Therapy | Gender Affirming Health Program,” UCSF Transgender Care: Information on Estrogen Hormone Therapy, July 2020, <https://transcare.ucsf.edu/article/information-estrogen-hormone-therapy>.

⁶³ Sauerland, *Queering Vocal Pedagogy*, 67.

⁶⁴ Jackson Hearn, *The Singing Teacher’s Guide to Transgender Voices*, 133.

training, especially when it intersects with gender dysphoria.⁶⁵ ⁶⁶ Creating trust between the voice teacher and a transgender voice student is foundational. Loraine Sims, in “Teaching Lucas: A Transgender Student’s Vocal Journey from Soprano to Tenor,” emphasizes the need for vocal instructors to foster an environment where students feel comfortable exploring their vocal potential while aligning their voice with their gender identity.⁶⁷ This involves addressing vocal comfort through technical training while also providing a level of psychological support to help students manage any gender dysphoria or internal struggles with voice and identity.

In “Trans Voices Speak: Suggestions from Trans Educators about Working with Trans Students,” Christopher Cayari, Felix Graham, Emma Joy Jampole, and Jared O’Leary propose several actionable strategies for vocal instructors, including promoting healthy music-making, fostering identity development, and regularly reflecting on language and representation in teaching materials.⁶⁸ Furthermore, by sharing their lived experience as members of the trans community, Cayari et al. hope to share applicable and actionable suggestions from actual trans people.⁶⁹ (This is a feature in the existing research that is quite rare: hearing and learning from transgender and non-binary people directly.)

⁶⁵ Ryan Aguirre, “Finding the Trans Voice: A Review of the Literature on Accommodating Transgender Singers,” *Update : Applications of Research in Music Education* 37, no. 1 (2018): 36–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/8755123318772561>.

⁶⁶ Nancy Bos, “Considerations for Teaching Transgender Singers in College Voice,” *LinkedIn* (blog), accessed October 7, 2024, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/considerations-teaching-transgender-singers-college-nancy-bos-costlow/>.

⁶⁷ Loraine Sims, “Teaching Lucas: A Transgender Student’s Vocal Journey from Soprano to Tenor,” *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 4 (2017): 373.

⁶⁸ Christopher Cayari et al., “Trans Voices Speak: Suggestions from Trans Educators about Working with Trans Students,” *Music Educators Journal* 108, no. 1 (2021): 52–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00274321211038481>.

⁶⁹ Cayari et al., 55.

One of the critical challenges for transfemme singers, as outlined by C.J. Greer in their personal account, “Finding Grace: A Singing Teacher’s Journey with Her First Transgender Student,” is the psychological incongruence between the voice and the body during voice transition. Greer’s work discusses how vocal pedagogy can play a crucial role in mitigating this incongruence through careful repertoire selection and adjustments to teaching techniques that validate the student’s gender identity while supporting vocal growth.⁷⁰

Theme 4: Collaborative and Interdisciplinary Support

The literature strongly emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration when teaching transgender voices. Danielle Cozart Steele explores how speech-language pathologists (SLPs) with a vocal music background can play a crucial role in training transgender voices. SLPs and voice teachers have overlapping responsibilities in caring for the voice, but each brings different expertise that, when combined, offers a holistic approach to transgender voice care. Cozart Steele advocates for a "vocal care team" that includes the voice teacher, SLP, and other professionals to ensure that transgender singers receive comprehensive support.⁷¹ This interdisciplinary collaboration is critical, particularly for singers undergoing vocal transitions due to hormone therapy or other medical interventions.

The interdisciplinary nature of transgender voice training is particularly important when dealing with vocal transition due to HRT or surgical procedures. It is essential for

⁷⁰ C. J. Greer, “Finding Grace: A Singing Teacher’s Journey with Her First Transgender Student,” *Voice & Speech Review* 16, no. 2 (2022): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268263.2021.1955457>.

⁷¹ Danielle Cozart Steele, “Speech-Language Pathologists with a Vocal Music Background: Exploring Impact on the Training of the Transgender Voice,” *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 10, no. 3 (2019): 376, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2019.1640781>.

all professionals involved in transgender voice care to communicate effectively and collaborate to support the singer's health and progress. Jackson Hearn and Kremer share that voice teachers, medical professionals, and therapists must work in tandem to offer the best care for transgender singers, ensuring that each aspect of the voice—whether technical, emotional, or physiological—is attended to.

Theme 5: Voice Feminization and Masculinization Techniques

According to Matthew Mills and Gillie Stoneham in *Voice and Communication Therapy with Trans and Non-Binary People: Sharing the Clinical Space*, feminization and masculinization are broad labels, but these categories are helpful to both voice clinicians and transgender and non-binary voice users.⁷² Voice feminization often focuses on pitch, resonance, and articulation. For transfemme singers, this may involve exercises that emphasize the development of a lighter, more forward resonance and higher pitch range. Conversely, transmasculine singers may work on deepening their voices through the effects of testosterone therapy and exercises designed to build vocal strength and stability.

Vocal exercises can help transgender singers navigate these changes in a structured manner. Gerald Gurss's writing "A Brief Discussion of the Potential Vocal Hurdles for Singers Who are Trans and Suggested Vocalises for Navigating a New Voice" provides a range of exercises specifically aimed at helping transgender singers extend their vocal range, improve breath control, and strengthen vocal cord closure. These exercises are critical in maintaining vocal health during periods of transition, particularly when singers are experiencing dramatic shifts in their voice due to hormone

⁷² Matthew Mills and Gillie Stoneham, *Voice and Communication Therapy with Trans and Non-Binary People: Sharing the Clinical Space* (London ; Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2021), 45.

therapy.⁷³ For those that engage the services of a speech-language therapist, in addition to singing vocal exercises, the speech-language therapist should communicate clearly about what is involved in the therapy program, including the length of practice time, the nature of the exercises, and the frequency of practice sessions.⁷⁴

For transfemme singers, one challenge is refining the vocal sound to match the desired gender presentation. Jackson Hearn's *One Weird Trick: A User's Guide to Transgender Voice* offers specific advice and exercises for both feminine and masculine vocal presentation, making it a valuable resource for transgender singers and their teachers. *One Weird Trick* and her co-authored *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices* serve as foundational texts in this area. They provide transgender voice users and teachers with actionable strategies for building and maintaining their voices.⁷⁵ These texts also offer specific exercises for masculine and feminine-perceived voices, making them valuable resources for teachers and other professionals working with transgender singers.

According to Pamela R. Hendrick in "Two Opposite Animals? Voice, Text, and Gender on Stage," the study of gender behavior is something of a landmine. As soon as we begin to investigate "difference," we are in danger of reinforcing the stereotypical and artificially binary definitions of "masculine" and "feminine."⁷⁶ The main idea of Hendrick's statement is that when people explore gender differences, they must be

⁷³ Gerald Gurss, "A Brief Discussion of the Potential Vocal Hurdles for Singers Who Are Trans and Suggested Vocalises for Navigating a New Voice," *The Choral Journal* 60, no. 9 (2020): 76–77.

⁷⁴ Shelagh Davies, Viktória G. Papp, and Christella Antoni, "Voice and Communication Change for Gender Nonconforming Individuals: Giving Voice to the Person Inside," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 16, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2015.1075931>.

⁷⁵ Liz Jackson Hearn, *One Weird Trick: A User's Guide to Transgender Voice* (United States: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018).

⁷⁶ Pamela R. Hendrick, "Two Opposite Animals? Voice, Text, and Gender on Stage," *Theatre Topics* 8, no. 2 (1998): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.1998.0011>.

careful not to reinforce outdated or limiting notions that assume men and women (or masculine and feminine characteristics) fit into two distinct, opposite, and exclusive categories.

Instead, when a student wishes to align their voice development with gender binary ideas, it is essential to approach this with respect, inclusivity, and a tailored strategy that supports their individual goals. Start by engaging in open dialogue to understand their motivations and affirm the validity of their preferences, establishing a supportive environment. Technical training should focus on vocal qualities—like resonance, brightness, and range—rather than gendered terms, allowing the student to achieve their aims without restrictive language.⁷⁷ By thoughtfully incorporating a spectrum of examples, modeling inclusive language, and encouraging gentle exploration, educators can help students reach their vocal goals while recognizing the broad range of gender expression in voice.

Theme 6: Addressing Gender Bias and Inclusivity in Vocal Pedagogy

As the field of vocal pedagogy continues to evolve, it is crucial for voice teachers to actively address any gender biases they may have. In Mills and Stoneham's *Voice and Communication Therapy with Trans and Non-Binary People*, one of the contributors, Natasha, argues that educators must confront their unconscious biases before working with transgender and non-binary students, recognizing that binary gender norms have traditionally shaped vocal pedagogy.⁷⁸ In doing so, teachers can create more inclusive vocal spaces that respect and affirm the identities of transgender students.

⁷⁷ Richard Kenneth Adler, Sandy Hirsch, and Jack Pickering, *Voice and Communication Therapy for the Transgender/Gender Diverse Client: A Comprehensive Clinical Guide*, Third edition. (San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing Inc., 2019).

⁷⁸ Mills and Stoneham, *Voice and Communication Therapy with Trans and Non-Binary People*, 25.

William Sauerland also addresses the need for vocal pedagogues to move beyond traditional curriculum structures that may limit the inclusion of transgender voices.⁷⁹ By promoting diversity in vocal repertoire and challenging long-held assumptions about gender and voice, teachers can help dismantle some barriers that have historically excluded transgender singers from the classical music world.

Voices in the Literature

Across disciplines—whether within the humanities, sciences, or arts—the narratives of research subjects are nearly always mediated through the lens of the researcher’s perspective and experience. However, scholarship grounded in the first-hand experiences of transgender (especially transfemme) individuals as primary subjects and participants has its own unique value as research.

Four sources in my literature review provide direct insights from transgender or nonbinary individuals, including students, educators, coaches, and speech-language pathologists. Four additional sources offer experiential accounts from teachers and vocal coaches actively engaged with transgender voice users, allowing readers to gain an understanding of these professionals’ real-time interactions and methodologies.

Hearing Directly from Trans and Nonbinary People

In "Teaching Transgender Singers. Part 2: The Singers' Perspectives," Brian Manternach gathers personal stories from transgender singers, offering readers a window into the challenges they face when undergoing vocal training. These singers share their experiences with voice changes, navigating traditional vocal methods, and how their

⁷⁹ Sauerland, *Queering Vocal Pedagogy*, 211.

gender identity interacts with their vocal development. Manternach emphasizes that centering trans voices is crucial in developing inclusive teaching practices that acknowledge the unique needs of transgender students.

William Sauerland's *Queering Vocal Pedagogy: A Handbook for Teaching Trans and Genderqueer Singers and Fostering Gender-Affirming Spaces* expands on this by presenting interviews and case studies of trans and genderqueer singers who detail their vocal transitions. The singers themselves and their teachers discuss the physical and emotional aspects of working with their voices in a way that challenges conventional vocal pedagogy. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present the lived experiences of “Trans Feminine Singers,” “Trans Masculine Singers,” and “Trans-Nonbinary Singers,” respectively.

In *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*, Liz Jackson Hearn and Brian Kremer offer practical advice on working with trans voices while incorporating stories from trans students who reflect on their vocal changes, from range issues to resonance. This guide provides a technical understanding of how hormone therapy affects the voice while stressing the importance of sensitivity and adaptability in teaching. “Trans Voices Speak,” by Christopher Cayari, Felix Graham, Emma Joy Jampole, and Jared O’Leary, further expands on this theme by compiling insights from trans educators, many of whom are singers. They address not only the technical challenges trans singers face but also the emotional and psychological aspects of voice training. These sources collectively call attention to the necessity of directly engaging with trans-identified singers to develop more inclusive, supportive, and effective vocal pedagogy.

Hearing from Teachers and Coaches of Trans Voice Users

In "Teaching Transgender Singers, Part 1: The Voice Teachers' Perspectives," Brian Manternach and colleagues explain how voice teachers navigate the unique challenges posed by transitioning voices, especially the effects of hormone therapy. They emphasize the need for ongoing learning, open communication, and affirming environments tailored to each singer's evolving vocal needs.

In "Teaching Lucas: A Transgender Student's Vocal Journey from Soprano to Tenor," Loraine Sims recounts the vocal and emotional challenges faced by her student Lucas during his transition. The case study emphasizes the importance of individualized instruction and patience as Lucas's voice shifted dramatically. Similarly, in "Considerations for Teaching Transgender Singers in College Voice," Nancy Bos shares the complexities of teaching transgender singers in academic settings, emphasizing the need for technical adjustments and emotional support in the vocal studio and, more broadly, on college and university campuses. Bos advocates for a more inclusive curriculum that addresses gender diversity within vocal programs.

Finally, C.J. Greer's "Finding Grace: A Singing Teacher's Journey with Her First Transgender Student" offers a personal account of how she adapted her teaching methods to support her first transgender student. Greer emphasizes the importance of empathy, self-education, and flexibility in teaching, underscoring the broader need for voice teachers to evolve their approaches continually.

Identity and Race

There is a lack of representation of racial diversity in the literature on transgender voice users in music and vocal therapies. This is not a surprise. The underrepresentation

of Black musicians is exacerbated by systemic barriers, such as limited access to quality music education and mentorship, which hinder entry and advancement in the field. These structural obstacles contribute to an environment where opportunities for Black artists are limited. In “Confronting Silence: Black Excellence in American Classical Music,” Lexi Holloway presents instances such as that of Josh Jones, a Black percussionist who, in 2023, faced denial of tenure at the Kansas City Symphony, illustrating the ongoing discrimination in hiring and career progression. Holloway further explains that while measures such as blind auditions have been adopted to reduce biases, they do not entirely eliminate the systemic racism entrenched in the industry. Holloway underscores that actual progress requires more profound, comprehensive changes addressing the root causes of these inequities. Until such changes are implemented, the classical music industry will continue to grapple with the legacy and impact of systemic racism.

In her new book, *The Sound of Difference: Race, Class and the Politics of 'Diversity' in Classical Music*, Kristina Kolbe uses ethnographic and interview data to explore how diversity discourses are shaped in music production’s organizational and creative processes. In chapter three, “From ‘white space’ to ‘diverse space’? How music practitioners reflect on diversity’s hopes, tensions and drawbacks,” she reports how Black and African American musicians navigating classical music spaces often confront significant challenges embedded in the industry's legacy. These spaces are described as "white spaces" where musicians of color feel the weight of systemic exclusions.⁸⁰ One musician noted that “you have to work twice as hard to get half as far,” illustrating the heightened effort required to gain recognition. Others highlight the persistence of

⁸⁰ *The Sound of Difference: Race, Class and the Politics of 'Diversity' in Classical Music*, pg. 70.

tokenism, with a performer stating, “there’s absolutely no chance of promotion for that black person...they’re made to feel that they are a token, and eventually that black person will leave.”⁸¹ The pervasive association of classical music with whiteness leaves many feeling hypervisible yet out of place, with an African American orchestral player recalling, “I can’t believe a Black person was that person that was playing,” highlighting the shock and disbelief at their success. Such experiences underscore how deeply “the classical music sector continues to be oriented around whiteness,”⁸² perpetuating a cycle where representation becomes both a burden and an emblem of exclusion.

⁸¹ *The Sound of Difference*, pg. 85.

⁸² *The Sound of Difference*, pg. 90.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Phenomenological Approach

This study employs a phenomenological design to explore the shared, lived experiences of professional Black, transfemme, treble voice users. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding the essence of a phenomenon as it is experienced subjectively by individuals. Rather than explaining or predicting behaviors, phenomenology seeks to uncover the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences, capturing the depth of personal interpretations. In this study, phenomenology is particularly appropriate because it explores complex identity intersections—including race, gender, and voice—by focusing on how participants experience and interpret these facets of self.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As both researcher and participant, I bring an insider perspective to this study, which enriches my understanding of the phenomenon. However, this dual role also requires a commitment to reflexivity, as I am both an observer and a subject within the research. Reflexivity in phenomenology is critical because it ensures that the researcher remains aware of their biases, assumptions, and reactions throughout the research process.^{83 84}

⁸³ Esha Patnaik, “Reflexivity: Situating the Researcher in Qualitative Research.,” ResearchGate, accessed November 6, 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263916084_Reflexivity_Situating_the_researcher_in_qualitative_research.

⁸⁴ Aileen Barrett, Anu Kajamaa, and Jenny Johnston, “How to ... Be Reflexive When Conducting Qualitative Research,” *The Clinical Teacher* 17, no. 1 (2020): 9–12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.13133>.

I engaged in ongoing reflexive journaling to document my thoughts, reactions, and potential biases, particularly during data collection and analysis. This process allowed me to recognize and reflect on how my personal experiences might shape my interpretations of other participants' narratives. In addition, I held regular discussions with a research advisor to maintain objectivity, which provided an external perspective on the research process. Through these reflexive practices, I aimed to approach the data with openness and integrity, ensuring that my interpretation was grounded in participants' voices rather than my subjective lens.

Participants

Participant Selection and Sampling

This study involves three participants (including myself), each purposefully selected to reflect the specific identity markers of professional Black, transfemme, treble voice users. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that all participants embody this unique intersection of identities, as this homogeneity allows for a focused, in-depth exploration of shared lived experiences. The small sample size is consistent with phenomenological research, which emphasizes quality over quantity and seeks to attain rich, textured narratives rather than broad generalizability.

In selecting participants, the goal was to include individuals who could provide authentic, first-person accounts of the phenomenon being studied. By focusing on participants who share a unique combination of racial, gender, and vocal identities, the study seeks to understand how these intersections shape individual perceptions and social interactions.

Role of Self as Participant

Incorporating myself as one of the participants introduces an autoethnographic component to the study, where my personal experiences contribute to understanding the phenomenon. This choice aligns with phenomenology's emphasis on subjective meaning-making and supports the authenticity of the research. As both a researcher and a participant, I have a direct, experiential understanding of the identity intersections being studied, which enriches the exploration of these shared experiences. However, to avoid overshadowing others' narratives, I maintained a reflexive practice that allowed me to separate my insights from the objective analysis of other participants' responses.

This autoethnographic approach enhances the study by incorporating my intimate knowledge of the identity intersections at the center of this research.⁸⁵ At the same time, I was mindful of the potential influence of my role on data interpretation, maintaining a balanced approach to ensure that my involvement added to, rather than detracted from, the depth and richness of the participants' experiences.

Data Collection

Overview of Interview Structure

Data were gathered through semi-structured Zoom interviews. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, enabling participants to explore their experiences freely while ensuring that central topics—such as identity, voice, and social navigation—were consistently covered. The interview design reflected phenomenology's emphasis on allowing participants to share their lived experiences without constraints. Interview

⁸⁵ Alec Grant, *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography*, Writing Lives. Ethnographic and Autoethnographic Narratives (New York ; London, 2024).

questions were open-ended, encouraging reflection on personal and social dimensions of identity. Some examples of guiding questions include:

- "How do you experience your voice as part of your transfemme identity?"
- "What role does your voice play in affirming or expressing your sense of self?"
- "Can you share specific instances when expressing your voice has affected your interactions with others?"

These questions were designed to invoke introspection and authentic self-expression, allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words. Follow-up questions were used to encourage deeper exploration and clarity, as phenomenological interviewing seeks to capture the immediate and deeper meanings embedded in participants' responses

Conducting Individual Interviews via Zoom

Individual interviews were conducted providing each participant a private, secure environment to discuss personal insights. Zoom's audio and video recording features enabled me to capture participants' verbal responses and nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and pauses, adding context to the data. The choice of Zoom was intentional, allowing participants to join from anywhere in the country and in their own spaces, where they felt comfortable and could express themselves freely.

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, and participants were encouraged to take their time responding. The Zoom platform's secure features, including password protection, helped maintain confidentiality and comfort, allowing participants to focus on sharing their authentic experiences without concern for technical or security issues.

Recording and Transcription Process

All interviews were audio and video recorded on Zoom, with participants' informed consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, preserving pauses, emphasis, and body language as these elements added to the context and depth of participants' responses. The verbatim transcription process supports phenomenological analysis, allowing the analysis to remain faithful to participants' voices. This level of detail was crucial in capturing the content of participants' responses and the emotional undertones that accompanied their words, enhancing the depth of interpretation.

Limitations of the Study

This study explored the lived experiences of three professional Black transfemme treble voice users. The study's small sample size (n=3), which includes the researcher, inherently limits the breadth of the data collected. While qualitative research often focuses on depth rather than breadth, the small sample may not capture the full spectrum of challenges and nuances faced by the broader Black transfemme community, particularly those who do not share the specific treble voice range. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire transgender population. Additionally, the participants' experiences may be influenced by localized social, cultural, and environmental factors that differ significantly in other regions or contexts.

The researcher's dual role as participant and analyst can introduce biases affecting the study's objectivity. While sharing an identity with participants fosters trust and richer data, it also presents challenges regarding subjectivity. The researcher's personal experiences and beliefs might influence interview questions, discussions, and data interpretation. This "insider" perspective can lead to confirmation bias, where the

researcher favors themes aligning with their experiences. Although efforts like participant transcript review enhance trustworthiness, separating personal perspective from analysis remains a limitation.

The study focuses on Black transfemme treble voice users, providing a unique lens but limiting identity representation. The intersection of race (Black), gender identity (transfemme), and vocal range (treble) defines a specific subgroup. Consequently, it overlooks transfemme individuals identifying across these axes, including non-Black individuals, those with different vocal ranges (e.g., baritone, tenor), and those outside the transfemme spectrum (e.g., non-binary, genderqueer). While this focus allows depth, it may not fully capture the diversity within the broader transfemme or Black LGBTQIA+ communities and limits exploration of how different identity intersections (e.g., socioeconomic status, geography, access to medical transition) shape experiences within the transfemme community.

Qualitative studies emphasize an in-depth understanding of specific experiences, making broad generalizations difficult. The unique musical and cultural context of treble voice users, combined with factors such as racial and gender identity, may lead to findings that are not readily applicable to other groups. For example, transfemme individuals who do not engage in vocal music or come from different cultural backgrounds may have significantly different experiences. Furthermore, societal attitudes toward transgender individuals vary widely across regions and communities, potentially impacting the relevance of the findings outside the specific cultural and social context of the study participants.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological Data Analysis

At the end of interview transcription, I have identified key points of interest that recur throughout the interview and linked specific quotes that represent these points of interest under discrete Themes. Data were analyzed through a phenomenological approach, focusing on identifying themes that reveal the essence of participants' shared experiences. The process involved several stages:

1. **Immersion and Holistic Reading:** Each transcript was read multiple times to allow for a comprehensive understanding of the data, focusing on the totality of participants' experiences.
2. **Identifying Meaning Units:** During the initial readings, meaning units were identified—phrases and expressions that captured essential aspects of participants' experiences. For example, expressions such as “I feel that I’m the happiest singing as my true self” were coded under identity affirmation. In contrast, phrases like "Sometimes navigating public spaces feels like balancing on a line" were coded as duality in social interaction.
3. **Essence Extraction:** Related meaning units were grouped into core themes that expressed the shared essence of participants' experiences. This thematic analysis allowed me to identify themes such as identity affirmation, social navigation, and vocal empowerment. Themes were refined through multiple iterations, ensuring they accurately represented the collective meaning while remaining grounded in each participant’s narrative.

Key Themes and Essence

Through phenomenological analysis, the following key themes emerged, each reflecting a unique facet of the phenomenon:

- **Identity Affirmation:** Vocal expression was central to participants' sense of self, acting as a means of authentic self-expression and identity confirmation.
- **Duality in Social Navigation:** Participants described affirmations and tensions in social contexts, emphasizing the complexities of navigating societal expectations while maintaining authenticity.
- **Representation and Visibility:** Participants emphasized the importance of vocal expression in enhancing visibility and representation. The voice emerged as a conduit for challenging dominant narratives, allowing participants to assert their presence and articulate their experiences within broader social and cultural discourses.

Social Positioning and Power Dynamics: Vocal expression is intertwined with social hierarchies and power structures. Participants highlighted how their voices both reflected and resisted these dynamics, using vocal presence as a tool for negotiating social standing and asserting agency in spaces where their identities are often marginalized or misunderstood.

Trustworthiness and Reliability

Member Checking

To ensure credibility, each participant reviewed and approved their interview transcripts through member checking.⁸⁶ This process allowed participants to confirm that their perspectives were accurately represented and provided an opportunity to clarify or elaborate as needed. Member checking is particularly valuable in phenomenological research as it ensures that interpretations remain grounded in participants' authentic voices.

Reflexive Journaling and Bias Mitigation

Given my dual role as a researcher and a participant, I maintained a reflexive journal to monitor any personal biases and reactions that arose. As I have already said, reflexive journaling helped me approach the data with openness and awareness, reducing the risk of my interpretations overshadowing participants' voices.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent and Transparency

Informed consent was obtained from each participant before beginning data collection. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and rights, including their right to withdraw or decline specific questions at any time. This transparency is essential in phenomenological research, ensuring that participants feel comfortable sharing personal reflections without concerns about coercion or discomfort.

Use of Names and Participant Preferences

⁸⁶ Courtney McKim, "Meaningful Member-Checking: A Structured Approach to Member-Checking," *American Journal of Qualitative Research (AJQR)* 7, no. 2 (2023): 41–52, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12973>.

Participants agreed to have their names used in the study. This choice respects their preference to be identified by name, providing transparency and reinforcing the authenticity of their contributions. All names used in this report are the actual names of the participants, as agreed upon, honoring their agency and the significance of their identity.

Ethical Reflection on Researcher-Participant Dual Role

My dual role necessitated an ongoing ethical reflection. Regular discussions with a research advisor allowed me to address potential dilemmas, ensuring that my role as participant and researcher maintained the study's integrity and respect for each individual's narrative.

CHAPTER 4. TONA BROWN

Introduction to Tona Brown Interview

Tona Brown is an accomplished violinist, mezzo-soprano, music educator, and advocate for LGBTQIA rights. Distinguished as the first transgender woman to perform at Carnegie Hall and the first African American transgender woman to sing for a sitting U.S. president, Brown's career is marked by her trailblazing achievements and dedication to fostering inclusivity within the arts. Born in Norfolk, Virginia, Brown's musical journey began at the age of 10, leading her to advanced studies at the Governor's School for the Arts and Shenandoah Conservatory of Music. Her performances have taken her across the U.S., Canada, and Europe, showcasing her artistry and commitment to elevating marginalized voices. Through her podcast, *Conversations with Tona Brown*, she amplifies the voices of artists, politicians, activists, and community leaders, celebrating and supporting the LGBTQIA community.

A pivotal aspect of Brown's career is her exploration of vocal identity and its connection to gender expression, offering insight into how societal norms and language around transgender identities have influenced her understanding of herself and her public image. Her reflections underscore the significant underrepresentation of transgender and Black artists in classical music and highlight the systemic barriers that have limited their participation. Through her experiences, Brown illuminates the broader sociocultural challenges that artists face, where biases against gender nonconformity and racialized identities perpetuate exclusion from prominent platforms.

The following interview explores Brown's personal stories, examining the realities of systemic inequities in classical music and beyond. Her voice is not just a

vessel for music but a powerful tool for activism, advocating for change and calling for greater representation and equity. Through her experiences, readers will better understand how Brown continues to champion progress and foster an environment of inclusivity in the world of music, education, and LGBTQIA advocacy.

Interview with Tona Brown

CEE: Tona, tell me a bit about yourself. In the beginning, state your full name and pronouns if you choose to list them.

TONA: Sure. My name is Tona Brown. I go by she and her.

CEE: Perfect. Thank you, Tona.

CEE: The conversation today is a lengthy one. There are several questions that are going to expand the idea of yourself, your identity and your voice, your professional career experiences, your development as a musician, as a singer, the impact of transition on the voice,-as well as your relationship is with your teacher, your mentors, and then looking at what “success” means to you. My first question: how do you or how would you categorize your voice, whether inside or outside the typical classification or a fach system⁸⁷ known in Western classical music?

TONA: Absolutely. I would classify it as a mezzo-soprano, and I can sing contralto as well now that I'm getting a little older, so I'm loving that. But that would be my voice classification.

CEE: How has your voice evolved throughout your gender transition, and how has this affected your self-perception?

⁸⁷ The fach system is a means of classifying singers, primarily opera singers, according to various criteria. These criteria include, but are not limited to vocal range, weight, and color, physical characteristics, and personality of the performer. The fach system was developed to facilitate casting.

TONA: I will say that ever since I was young, I always sang in the soprano and alto sections even before transitioning in choir and things like that growing up. I just always had a very high treble voice, and I was a very high soprano as a young male. And then, as I went through puberty (which I didn't take any puberty blockers or anything like that), I thought that I lost that top register, which, for me at that time, was like up to F above high C. It was just a very high voice. My voice literally would crack when I would speak all the way through college. So, I always had issues with my voice, and it wasn't until I actually started to train it that I realized what fack was.

I started working with a vocal specialist at Shenandoah University, and it helped me with my identity. At the time, I was probably what most people would consider very androgynous at that time. I had not fully transitioned. There was no chemical transition at that time; I still had the same voice that people would hear today. So, it wasn't the chemicals that made me a soprano. Do you see what I'm saying? So I do want people to know that, because I do know so many different transgender singers and people assume that you've had some kind of surgery or have a chemical transition to be the voice types that we are. And that's not the case. It might be helpful to add a footnote clarifying what year this was (although maybe she doesn't want to be that specific).

CEE: That's a big part of the conversation because after the formal questions are done, we will circle back.

TONA: But that's the thing. That's what you have to understand with me. I'm not bought out by any entity. I'm totally an independent artist, and I will give you the truth. So if you ask me a question, Tona Brown is going to tell you exactly from my experience, obviously, whatever you want to know.

CEE: Do you believe that your voice plays a role in how others perceive your gender identity? And if so, how?

TONA: Absolutely. Besides the visual, the second thing that people are going to hear, see, or feel is going to be your voice. And so it was very traumatic for me, because I had this high [voice]; at that time, it was even a higher speaking voice, and it would crack all of the time. You can ask anyone who went to college with me. I was the butt of jokes, because when I got upset, my voice would go up into the rafters, and I would crack just speaking or when I was animated. I always knew that my voice was different. But I think when you're before you are your full authentic self as a transgender person, you just kind of like deal with it. You know what I mean? You just kind of deal with it and just be like, you know, guys, that's really not funny because I'm not doing this on purpose.

And then auditioning was, of course, very challenging, because when I walk into a room, you are seeing a masculine-embodied person at that time or an androgynous person. Like you didn't know what to call me at that time. And so I would just go in there and just close my eyes and just sing and be over it. Things are so much more open for the younger generation now. There's terminology. People have more awareness of who we are. That was not the case back then. Honey, you walked in, and if they saw, at the time, Thomas⁸⁸ on my, you know, audition or, you know, whatever, they didn't really know what was going to happen. And the other thing that was weird about my voice is that it doesn't sound like a countertenor type of sound. And so they were amazed at the fullness, the roundness and how big it was. And so that caused all kinds of problems with them trying to decide what kind of roles to put me in.

⁸⁸ Thomas was Tona's birth name. Now considered a 'dead name'. Tona references this in her memoir, *Tonacity: The Tona Brown Story*.

And I just got to the point where I was, like, I don't really know if I want an opera career anyway. I'm just here to work on my vocal production, clarity, and agility. That was the way I kind of got through that very challenging time. I just said, well, you know, (and I would downplay things and say, you know) I would tell different teachers, I just want to be able to sing duets with my friends. I'm a violinist. So therefore, there was no pressure, even though ever since I was young, I would hear Leontyne Price and, Reri Grist, and just all these different people. I ended up interviewing Shirley Verrett and all these people that I really admire, Grace Bumbry, these type of folk. So I always had that passion for opera, but I didn't think it was possible being a transgender person.

Oh, and the other thing I will say is that along the way, I met other trans singers and they all gave up, unfortunately, because like myself, they didn't think that a career was possible. And one was a fantastic coloratura soprano. We used to sing and do all the songs from the Baroque Duets album by Kathleen Battle and Wynton Marsalis. The first time I ever heard them was from this lady. Isn't that amazing? And she could trill and get all around and just this lovely, you know, full lyric coloratura voice. And I was just always amazed by her talent. I always tried to support her as much as I could. But she started getting depressed and abusing cigarettes. And of course, that affected her self-esteem. And it just got to a point where she just stopped singing, unfortunately.

CEE: What emotions do you associate with your singing and speaking voice, particularly related to your trans identity?

TONA: I don't know. I think I'm very indifferent to it. I think I've carried it around my entire life. So I think what happens (I'm sure you can relate) - I think that this is just what my voice is. But I do use it in my activism for the arts and for our voices and letting

people know that it was very open-minded instructors that constantly reminded me of something that we need more instructors to do. The voice, is the voice, is the voice. I just remember being so amazed by that, because, again, I was slowly transitioning in my late teens, early 20s. And again, I didn't know how the opera world was going to perceive me. And when I realized, trying to sing next to these countertenors, my voice didn't sound like that. It wasn't a "hootie" quality, wasn't super light. All these things that I was trying to force myself to do. That's the funniest part. And I think it goes to beat that woman identity where we kind of take things in so much instead of just letting it be, and at some point, I got with phenomenal women coaches who were just like, "Tona, just sing." Don't worry about whether you're too loud for Mozart or Haydn or whatever. Just sing the things that you love to sing. And if I can advise any young singer of a mentality to have when you're different, that needs to be what it is. And we can also look at examples from some of the women I just mentioned, Shirley Verrett and others, where because they had these very large ranges and they had various abilities, Grace Bumbry, they were able to not just "Stick to a specific fach", right? They might have started as mezzos and transitioned to sopranos.

And I'm going to tell you guys the secret that most people don't know. Whenever I would go around and not disclose that I was transgender, a lot of the opera companies and a lot of the coaches thought that I was a dramatic soprano. And I knew that I wasn't ready to sing dramatic soprano, and I think that is why I still have the voice that I have today, because I knew that my body couldn't support it and I would have some vocal fatigue. And no matter what they said, I was like, "OK, but this doesn't feel right," whereas singing mezzo just felt right.

Singing contralto during that time as a young singer below like B flat or A flat below middle C, my voice would kind of, like, fall apart. Like, it just wasn't aligned with the rest of my voice. So you would hear like this, [uh, low sound], you know, like, the bottom fell out sort of thing. And I wasn't intentionally trying to do that or sound heavy down there, but I just couldn't figure out how to do anything else. And my early EP ⁸⁹, you can hear that a lot now, as I got older, that lower register, (which, by the way, having good coaches, Dr. Geraldine Boone told me that was going to happen as time progressed). Everything started to get more in alignment. I remember crying in a lesson one day where I was learning some stuff for Messiah and thinking, "Oh, my goodness. I remember a time when I would not be able to do these runs and have it feel on the breath and effortless," because my voice, child, after once I got below middle C, it was in its own plane compared to the rest of my voice. I think these are the types of things that we all need to be honest about, so that the younger generation or even other singers cannot feel bad about it. Just to know that that's part of our journey, just like with our cisgender women. They have certain things that they can communicate and say it is part, and then some of those things all intersect. But if we're not all honest and start to talk about those things, I don't think that it's going to be helpful in the future.

CEE: Coming from a place of interest in holistic identity and voice, have you ever considered part of yourself or your identity being an asset or maybe an inhibitor?

TONA: I don't think so. I think that I [felt] more empowered by just the term itself, because you have to remember, I'm from a time when we didn't even have the term for who I was, especially before my generation, which is one of the reasons why I do so

⁸⁹ In 2012, Tona recorded and released a seven-track EP titled, *This Is Who I Am*. The EP is available on YouTube and [Spotify](#).

many interviews and talk to so many other trans people. There wasn't terminology. So, by the time I started to transition and have these experiences, it was still under the guise of people not really knowing where to place you, and so when this category and the language started to come out in time, I felt very empowered. It was, like, "This is who I am," and my voice was just another iteration of that. It was just like, "Wow, this is another example of who we are as transfemme people or transgender people," but I never felt that it was holding me back in any kind of way. What I did know was it would make other people uncomfortable who weren't used to it, but that wasn't my problem. I had such dynamic coaches that made sure that - look- if we train and you work hard, you go in there, and you do what needs to be done. You're, you know, you're doing competitions, you're doing different things, and of course, I also had violin to fall back on compared to someone who just is a singer, and a lot of singers also play piano, but I was also excelling on violin. So if there were places where I didn't feel that I could do something vocally, I could even go and either audition or just perform on violin. And I was always at the top of those circles, whether it was concertmistress or whatever it was, so I still got to get that musical experience.

CEE: In this last question in this section, a summary question, and it's quite early in this conversation to ask: what is your opinion about being a Black trans person and a treble voice user in the world today as a classical singer, as an opera singer?

TONA: I think that Shirley Verrett gave me the best advice, and what she told me was, and so many big singers, Dolora Zajick (I remember meeting her at my high school graduation and I was so mesmerized by her voice. And in fact, a lot of her teaching and her sound and everything helped me to figure out my own as well) but what they all told

me was that your voice is meant to be heard. You're just going to have to find your own niche, and now that I'm a content creator and I do so many different things, that's what everything is, marketing, everything. I think the fear that we have is that we are different and that our voices might sound a little different from others. Right? Not all the time. I know so many that their voices kind of blend. Mine never did.

You know, I always - my voice always stuck out for good and bad reasons, you know, wherever it was in my level of development as I was starting to sing more, so I never had that kind of privilege to be able to just walk into some place and sing next to somebody and no one not hear me or think that I'm just like everyone else in that regard. It just always stood out, but that was my superpower, and I want so many of us to realize that those differences, those unique tones and sounds that we make as transgender people are going to be the future of opera one day, simply because there are enough people that sound just like everybody else- no shame, no shade - but our stories, I believe, are what's going to be musical theater and opera one day. And our actual sounds and just being different in the way we present that our energy is needed in the full collective of the arts. It's been lacking for so long and now this is our time.

CEE: So you talk about your singing voice. And so, when did you first discover your unique singing voice? Was it back in church? Was it when you were younger?

TONA: It really was. It was in church. My grandmother was a contralto, and she would just get up there. She wasn't trained or anything, but she loved to sing. And so that was where I developed my love for the Negro spiritual was just from being a little child. And my grandmother was always singing them around the house, and she had this huge voice, like, her speaking voice was like most of our singing voices. I mean, it was just a

humongous contralto instrument. They (the church) kept asking me to sing and do things. That was the first time I realized that I had something special, because a *masculine-embodied person* is a term that I use for that. You know, here you are singing soprano, or you're singing in an alto section, and people are looking at you like, "Oh, that's interesting." You know, so I would just be like, well, I have to sing what's comfortable. When I tried, as we all go through it, I'm sure when I tried to do something else, that's what was hilarious, because you couldn't tell me when I was young that I wasn't going to be the next Pavarotti or something, because I had all those high notes for tenor, so it was just never a problem, but I would crack and it was too many things: it was just too much tension on the [vocal] cords. Now I know as a vocal instructor, right, so I'm, like, doing all this stuff, and it was cracking, then I would be frustrated and I would go to someone, whoever it was, and ask them.

But it was a young lady who is one of my friends today, she is a dramatic soprano. Once I got to college, she told me that she heard me in the gospel choir at Shenandoah University, (it was called the Harambee Gospel Choir) and one day she just said she did two things, and this is the power of women of color working together. She just said, "Sweetie, I'm going to need you to move over here to the alto section." Hello. No, she didn't. And she was like, "I think this is going to feel a lot better for you. You know, you're not a tenor, like no shade." You know what I'm saying? And I was like, "OK, you know, is everyone going to feel weird about that?" You know, I might have been 19, 20, so, you know, we all have our insecurities at that time. (And I'll never forget her name is Kida, and Kida and I are still friends today. I've actually given her daughter violin lessons. She and I sing together from time to time. She doesn't sing as much as she used

to, but she really, I think, saved my frustration because then I was able to sing.) When we would go to different events, people would always stare and notice that here I was singing in the alto section and also doubling with the sopranos for certain songs, you know, because in gospel, the music usually is not that high anyway compared to classical, so I could interchangeably do both, and what she started doing was saying, “Tona, you're going to sing on this one soprano. You're going to sing on this one here.” So I could fill in the different parts, and I was just so - I just felt so blessed to be able to sing in my authentic voice that I just went wherever it was comfortable.

And that's the main thing I want to say: sing where it's comfortable for you. It's not about sticking to a fach. It's not about sticking to a gender expression and saying that you should sing this or that. Sing where it's comfortable. You see what I'm saying? That's going to be the longevity of anyone's career, and unfortunately, some of the people who started with me in college that weren't transgender have ruined their instruments, because they weren't singing the things that were comfortable for them. You know, even if it's you have a favorite aria that you love, and it might be semi comfortable or it might be comfortable, but are you ready to sing that right now? I've learned the hard way living vicariously through other people and watching some phenomenal voices, some of the best voices in the world just end up ruining their instruments, and that has nothing to do with whether you're transgender or cisgender or whatever.

Trust your [vocal] cords, and if there's something that you need to work on, then get with the right instructor who is going to do it. Not everyone is going to be able to do it.

Especially with our voices, because there are some certain sounds that people are not used to that we can produce that can throw people off. They don't know what's

happening. You know, so, you just kind of shake your head and just get through it, but you want someone that's going to be very, very comforting, that's going to experiment with different things when it comes down to your voice and your presentation, right? You're trying; you're learning how to present in your authentic self, you know, your body language or the role for the recital, all these types of things. I feel that we are those warriors, those courageous warriors, because you have to block everyone out. You can't care about what your gown is. Is it too tight around your stomach? You can't care. You can't care about any of those things. You have to get up there and present because your audience is your biggest fan. Your audience doesn't want to know that all those things are going on when they hear your presentation. They want you to be free, and if your voice is not free, then you need to do that in the practice room and with someone that's going to make sure that it is.

And it's one thing I will say for male-to-female trans people is that if there's any part of your voice that is still in your throat in any kind of way, you need to do the work to get your voice from feeling anything in your throat at all, at all. This means that oftentimes, because we're trying to mimic other voice types or listen to other people, we will cover our sounds. I hear it everywhere. And I hear some really phenomenal singers that I worry about their longevity, because they don't want to sound too nasal or too forward or something, but where you are in your journey, that's where that voice is.

And the minute you move from that, you're going to find – here's a test – is if you lose your upper notes or you feel like you're straining or something like that. It's not usually that you don't know how to sing. It's usually that you're starting to cover your sound to sound like other people, and so that's why I feel that the work that you're doing, thank

you so much for doing this work, it's going to free up people. We have unique sounds and that's OK. That is really OK. And you have to learn to love your voice for what it is, and trust me, your audience is going to love it. You know what I mean? That's the thing that I found. If I could go back and tell the young Tona of 20s through 30s, ~~if I, you know,~~ "They're going to love the differences; they're not going to hate them." Well, I mean, think about it. Why do we like certain sopranos or mezzos in the first place? It's because they're different. You know, they're going to love that you can make this sound on the D or whatever it is, they're going to be like, "Wow, that was so interesting. That tone coloring that you had", and you're sitting there like, "Oh, good. I'm glad you like it because that's all I can do right now." So give yourself that license, you know, experiment with things. But like I said, the main thing that I've noticed with all the trans singers that I have worked with, both professional and amateur, is they're covering their sound. I've been a victim of it myself as well, and I had to stop doing that. Like, you know, this is what it is. If you're not used to that [pingy] resonance, that's on my E5 (*pitch, not vowel*), and I can (you know, I don't know what to tell you) it's free of my throat. It's up here and it's supported. Boom. That's what it is. If you want someone that's going to float on a B-flat and I can't right now, then you need to hire someone else. You know what I'm saying? This is what I can do right now. You know, child, and then even the way they're writing trans roles right now is just ridiculous. Why is this person on the stage for an hour and 20 minutes nonstop?

CEE: See, see, see.

TONA: What are y'all doing? Are you trying to ruin our voices before we get in our prime? But you have to be that person to say, "I'm not going to do that, even if it seems

like an amazing opportunity.” And I will tell you, I’ve learned the hard way with that. I’ve fainted before a performance, because the part did not fit my voice. The composer was lazy and just basically told me that I could do whatever I wanted to do, because they didn’t want to work on it. I didn’t have enough food and rest, staying up till three or four o’clock in the morning to try to recompose a role where I should not have had to do that, and I’ll never forget that experience. It was the worst experience I ever had.

CEE: My gosh. Oh, my gosh. You definitely just turned the page here for this one. You mentioned folks like Reri Grist, Leontyne Price, and Dolora Zajick. What other professional role models or examples have influenced your own singing?

TONA: Leontyne Price definitely... just gave me a love for singing. Just listen to her. Kathleen Battle, of course, and I’ve seen her live maybe four or five times doing her Underground Railroad tour. Grace Bumbry, definitely. I actually was supposed to meet her in St. Louis, and it didn’t happen. She got ill, but she used to follow me online all the time. She was very, very, very congratulatory on my career.

I honestly think that a lot of the singers who went to Europe were just waiting for people like us, because they already have seen us. That’s the amazing thing. America is just late and racist. And so, there are a lot of things that we are not accustomed to that if you go just overseas or into Canada or go other places, you will hear rare and unique voices everywhere. It’s just in America where they have this cookie-cutter view of what Donna Anna should sound like or, you know, a particular role and all those types of things or that they can’t adapt the key or all of these types of things. As you go everywhere else, you’ll find that there are so many different things that they do to accommodate the singers and people want to hear different sounds like myself. I was thirsty for them. That’s why I

fell in love with Shirley Verrett and Grace Bumbry, and Jessye Norman; all of the Black singers. And then I went to Renee Fleming with the Beautiful Voice (CD). When I was in college, I was in love with her. Denyce Graves, who also was supposed to sing at my high school graduation; she got sick, but then Dolora Zajick came in her place, and I just think that was just divine intervention, because I think I needed to hear a voice like hers. I was so used to hearing so many light lyric sounds and thinking that I needed to push my voice into this little box, and when you're alone, a young, spinto or dramatic singer, that will kill your instrument. If you go through a period where you can only sing loud for a while you're trying to develop your support and breathing, then I mean, as Dolora Zajick, if you read her "The Dramatic Voice", it says it very, very clear. I totally agree. That is something that I work on with my students. As long as everything is in line and freed up. That's what I care about when you're a young singer, and then we work on some of those nuanced things, so that you can still kind of mimic what everyone else does a little bit, but you're on your support and it's your mezzopiano, not the chick sitting next to you. You know what I mean?

You know, it's so funny. I never really thought of myself as having such a large instrument until I started singing next to other people, and I'm just like, how are you all just getting around? You know what I'm saying? The note doesn't even come out this way. But, you know, my body just wasn't ready for that at that time, and so that can be something that's frustrating to a lot of young trans singers.

And if you're not empathetic to that one, you shouldn't be a teacher. That's the first off. I'm sorry. I'm very critical. I'm so sick of sending my students around the country to these other teachers that don't know what they're doing, you know, and that I've had not just

trans students but everyone else go to some of these schools, and literally they lost their whole top register, because you're a coloratura and now you can't even sing in an A-flat because these teachers don't know what they're doing. They just don't. They know how to work with the voice types that they're familiar with.

But the blessing about being trans, like I said, I love who I am. The blessing is because I had to figure things out because it wasn't the traditional way. And I was going to the Met auditions and competitions and listening to so many different voices and listening to voices all around the world just to figure out what was going on with me, I became like a vocal connoisseur, and so I started to hear what was going on and then I would see what they were doing and see if I could mimic it just to hear what they were doing. There was this thing that we used to do with my friends from the Governor's School for the Arts in Norfolk, Virginia. If someone was playing the violin, we will first [listen for] 15 seconds... We wanted to know who the violinist or singer was, what style [of music] that person was in, the period of the piece, and the [name of the] piece. So imagine hearing the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto or something, and I could tell you that Itzhak Perlman was the one that was playing it. Plus that it was Mendelssohn and this and other. Those were the type of coaches that I had.

You had to train that ear, and if you're not totally immersed in classical music, which is the problem that I have with my young students today, I don't understand how they think they're going to be successful. Like you, you have to really, really immerse yourself in this art form, because it's not what you hear on the radio every day. So, as an instructor, I've definitely learned a lot, helping other people get over vocal problems and just so many different things. I definitely think that once you have a solid foundation and you've

done some things to consider taking on a few students and just helping them, even if it's for free, so that you can hear their voices and learn how to teach what you know, because teaching helps you.

CEE: Hmm. I have found that to be very true. What are your dream and career goals and/or operatic roles? Do you have any of those that you would dream of?

TONA: Yeah, I would love to sing Dalila [from *Samson et Dalila*, by Camille Saint-Saëns]. I would love to sing [that] just, because I love all her arias. That would be awesome. I'm still in love with some of the contralto roles that have been presented to me that I've done with some of the smaller companies like *La Zia Principessa* [from *Suor Angelica* by Giacomo Puccini]. I never thought I would be able to sing any Puccini because of my voice type, and then to finally find something that I could actually sing. There are things that really fit my voice, but I don't know the language or a lot of the kind of Slavic or Russian roles. They are just amazing. I can sing them in my sleep. One that I couldn't sing in my sleep that took a lot of technique to learn was Tchaikovsky "Adieu, fôrets" [from *The Maid of Orleans*]. What I will say is that no matter what the role is, I want it to be something that is comfortable, something that feels great and that I can express the role properly more than just the singing part. I'm now singing a lot of Verdi and rep like that with my coach, like Azucena [role from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*]. But the difference between a lot of people and me is that, although I love opera so much, I mean before we got on here, I was looking at some documentaries of Leontyne Price singing Cleopatra. I do live for the field itself; both classical orchestras and opera have been hard for me to go into because I'm an activist, and there's so much racism involved with the field. Part of me realizes that I probably would be better suited as an arts activist

and to bring awareness to some of these things, and that's what I'm working on now. I'm talking to different people. I'm talking to DEI folk. They want me to do some things in Dallas with the Symphony, all of that kind of stuff. I feel that might be the lane for me, and performing is one aspect of that. And I enjoy that, of course, but I want to see more of us get in. OK, because the reality is, if you're really aware and I've had people contact me when they finally got it and be like, "Oh, my goodness, I see what you're talking about," the reality is, by design, a lot of these spaces don't really want us there. That's the only way I can really say it. And so the things that we are all doing are phenomenal, but we need to do more work to say not only that we belong but that we see what you all are doing.

I mean, I know of stories where people won auditions for, let's say, concertmistress of a particular symphony. And when the conductor met them and saw that they were a person of color at the dinner, decided not to hire them. This is still going on. The only reason why most of us are getting into these symphonies is because of the blind audition. Y'all, let's keep it real. Think about it. How do you go to a place like Baltimore or D.C., which is there because they're called Chocolate Cities, or Pennsylvania, and the orchestra is all white? And we got Peabody right here with all those dynamic people of color who train through Peabody, but then when they go to audition for, let's say, the Baltimore Symphony, as an example, not calling them out per se, but, you know, they're not getting in. They're not. They're only used as alternates. All of these things are still going on.

I faced racism consistently throughout my career. Even when I used to audition for masterclasses with some of the top performers at some of these symphonies. One example in particular was when my coach at the time called me bawling, crying because I

didn't get this masterclass with this concertmaster. I felt bad because I felt like I didn't represent my school well. She said, "No, sweetheart, it's not that you did not do well. This particular concertmaster said that you were too good and there weren't enough talking points that he could have with you with only 20 minutes in front of the audience." I was a teenager at that time so that was really hard to hear. Other people, who got on the stage for the masterclass, actually wrote me and said, you really should have been here. But I'm going to tell you how God works, y'all. So that happened, but then I won the concerto competition at the Governor's School with the same piece, mind you, the third movement of the [Max] Bruch Violin Concerto. Everybody who knows it knows it is wickedly hard. And I auditioned for another ensemble, and they gave it to this white girl whose father had donated \$10,000 to the youth orchestra, and so they told me again that they just felt that I was playing too fast and that the youth orchestra wouldn't be able to accompany me. These types of things happen. And so until these things are outed, we're going to always have that struggle. What I want Black singers and all minority singers to understand is not to give up. You may not be able to go the traditional route yet, but there are other things that you can do. You know, you can put on your own events, you can do different things. We just have to be resilient while we're going through this transitional time.

I do want to applaud people. I think his name is Terrence Blanchard. Isn't that the man who did the stuff at the Met? Now, y'all got to look at it on a whole level. You know, that's great that we can get at the Met singing Porgy and Bess and a Black composer, OK? But look at the programming around the world. How many programs around the world showcase Black composers? That was the reason why at Carnegie Hall I did

mostly Black composers and Negro spirituals in the first place, because we were doing research. And I think it was not even two percent, two percent. So you're telling me William Grant Still and Florence Price and all these people that have these phenomenal works aren't good enough to be on stages around the world? Come on. I don't really audition anymore. Most people contact me when there's a role or an opportunity. So they contact me and say, "Oh, my goodness, we need a ____, are you available?" And I go in and do my thing, but I'm not underneath an opera company or anything like that. I just go do what I got to do and leave.

CEE: That's powerful. And I definitely want to really get into that activism.

TONA: Oh yeah, we got to. You can't talk about Black femme voices and not talk about systemic racism. I mean, think about it. I couldn't even keep an accompanist. I've never had a steady accompanist who performed with me all around the country. No, no. Are you serious?

Let's talk about all the Black symphonies and orchestras that have seen my career. They see all the stuff I do, but how many of them have asked me to come and be in the front of their orchestra? So we're still at a place where being a transgender person can be harmful to your career, if you're an out transgender person, right? Doesn't matter if I perform for a President. You know, I'm going to be known in history for the things I've done. And if I perform for Kamala Harris (which I just went and did my early vote. Hallelujah! Got that out of the way...but) if I perform for her, I will be the first openly transgender person to perform for two sitting Presidents. You see what I'm saying? This is the type of work that I'm more interested in doing than just being, you know, a regular singer that, you know, does what everyone else does. I want to make sure that, when I leave this planet, I have

made a statement that, yes, there were obstacles against us as Black transgender people or transfemme people, but I did some things so that I can encourage the rest of us that we can do. I mean, you can do something even bigger. You can be the next Leontyne Price, which I'm hoping one of us becomes.

CEE: Amen to that. What advice would you give someone of the Black trans or Black trans feminine experience to start and to get into activism? What would you say to that person or how would they go about it?

TONA: OK, first, do your research. You need to learn the terminology. You need to go to places like NBJC's website [The National Black Justice Coalition] and other different places, so that you can see what the issues are that we're facing and educate yourself on those things.

First off, go to Lobby Day events, so that you can know what it's like, because even with my own family and just people I know, they've never been to these things, so they don't even really know how the government works. Volunteer at these not-for-profit organizations, sit on some boards, and you will be amazed at the work that they're doing, both good and bad, because not all are equal. I've had to get off with some boards. I'm, like, "I'm not going to jail for you." You want to do that first, and then start performing for their events. Volunteer at first. Unfortunately, in this work, you don't become an activist because you're doing it to make a lot of money. That's the first thing that you've got to get in your head. You know, when I perform for presidents, and I've done things, those are all volunteer events. No one gets paid for that, but people don't know that. So they assume, oh, you must have got all this money. No, no, no. I had two hundred dollars in my pocket. Me and my assistant and cellist at the time ran up there, because they tell

you and you only have a little window of time for security purposes. We rushed up there. I had like two hundred dollars or something in my pocket, went up there, and did the event. So understand that, if you really have a passion for the activism side of your career, know that you're not going to get filthy rich from doing it, but your presence there is so important. Oftentimes, when I'm invited to events [where] I know I've never seen another trans person to be at as far as being a performer or headliner, I mention it. That's all you have to do. You don't have to get up there and be all extra. "You know, I just really appreciate you all giving me this opportunity, because normally transgender people are not part of the conversation," you know, get people thinking, also learn how to use some comedy and don't take yourself so seriously.

I think that's another thing that I'm seeing, that some of the younger people are doing where I'm like, "I love the work you all are doing. It's the way you're doing it. It's not helpful." Unfortunately, sometimes you got to 'break it down' and all the stuff I get, but it's not helpful, because if you, for instance, you're a beautiful chocolate sister, right? and so you decide that you want to do some activism, and then so you get a[n offer] because you have gorgeous skin. So someone says they want you to be a part of a campaign for gorgeous skin and makeup or cleansing products or something, and then you get up there and say something crazy and get fired. Like, how did you help anybody? You didn't. You didn't help yourself.

CEE: Right! Like what was your point?

TONA: So now did you not help the rest of us? Because we're all trying to get corporate funding for different things or whatever. So now you've got these people that have an excuse to not fund our events, which I will say is why Carnegie Hall, my 10-year

anniversary, didn't happen, because of this election, we got no funding. If I would have tried to have done this maybe three or four years ago, we would have gotten about \$150,000. And I'm not mentioning that number for no reason, because when other people went back to Carnegie Hall after I did my debut, that was the type of money they got. I didn't get any money. We couldn't even get \$5,000, because I'm a Black trans woman that was headlining. And y'all, we still have these issues with people not trusting Black transfemme people; that's just what it is. So, you're going to find that there are these different issues that will come up, but then you're also going to find your tribe and you're going to be networking and you're going to see people are going to say, "You know what? I love your energy and we're having a women's history event. Could you please come and sing?" Take the opportunity, y'all, because normally, even if it's not for a lot of money, a non-profit event is going to also have a lot of media there, so you're going to get the exposure that really counts. Don't listen to these people that don't have an audience and they talk about it, giving you exposure. That's b*****! That's not going to do you any good.

How I really got out there being a poor Black trans person was I started volunteering, and then they would tell me that we're going to have a gala function or something. I said, "OK, can my string ensemble open up for you? Could y'all just pay for the basics? I could do it for free, but I need to pay my musicians." I kept making these types of deals, and what would happen is now I'm on the red carpet of that event, and so now y'all are seeing me on Huffington Post or Getty Images. I did not get paid for that, y'all. That's what people don't understand. And unfortunately, that's what keeps it so that no one really gets to see your art on a global, international, or even a regional level. You can't rely on these schools.

These schools are a business. I love school. But as far as being a performer, you don't have to go to these schools in order to do that right. Only thing you need is a dynamic teacher and someone who really, really sees the talent in you, and I had so many of my mentors (which I would love for us to talk about more) my mentors who traveled all around the world with a performer. I remember one of my cello teachers back at the Governor's School. She went all around the world with a famous cellist, and she would go study a little at this school, and if he transferred somewhere else, that's what this diva did; she would go with him. She learned the whole repertoire. If he was sick or something like that, she would be out there playing the concerto with the symphony, y'all.

So there's more than one. There's more than one way to make it, and I wish everyone the best, and I just feel that we're so stuck in the classical music world where people are not taking chances. Most of you guys know the work that I've done. If you really think about it, have they been in purely classical spaces? Absolutely not. I mean, the Out Music Awards, before my performance playing Vivaldi, it was a rockstar swallowing a mic. And we were like, "Oh, my. How is he going to?..." Well, wait a minute, you know, I just had to pray, you know, say, you know, I'm hoping that this goes well, but those are the type of challenges that you have to do for yourself. And mind you, she didn't get a standing ovation, but we did. OK, tore the house down, you know what I'm saying? Because we got to, you know, and I just told all the musicians, I said, just be a little more over the top. You know what I'm saying? I'm throwing my braids and I'm just swinging all around, but that was all we did. But the music speaks for itself. We perform some of the greatest music in the world of all time.

Now, another thing I want to say to choose your repertoire wisely. If you're going to break into mainstream, no one wants to hear about some flowers and pearls. All this stuff is cute in academia. That's not "it" in mainstream. You bring the best of the best of your repertoire that you know is going to hit them emotionally, things that are rhythmic because we're people of color. If I can get the audience moving or they feel that in me when I start playing or singing, then they're going to feel it no matter if they're used to classical music or not. Yeah, you see what I'm saying? You have to be strategic. But please don't get up there and embarrass yourself in front of a rap crowd or something like that, and you up there talk about this "*La fleur...*" No! Nobody's going to want to hear that! It doesn't mean that they don't like classical music. It's the repertoire that you are choosing to present in front of them.

One of the things that my friend had- she was a dramatic soprano -she used to sing these encore pieces that were comedic. And I'm telling you, it didn't matter if you liked opera or not. By the time with her acting and having the pianist come over there and move her, or move her train out the way and make you laugh, it would be a hit, and why she doesn't have a career is because she didn't lean into that. That was her strength. She didn't lean into it. So as artists, we all have something that we can lean into that is different than everyone else right now. That is what's most important for classical musicians. You got to bring something different.

CEE: Amen, Tona. Amen. So how would you advise someone, a teacher or a coach to work with your voice?

TONA: Right. It's very quick and very simple. Realize that my voice is my voice, period. Don't say just because I was born male that I can't sing an F. I've had this happen in

rehearsals.. Lord, Jesus, I wish I was over-exaggerating. Um, so we have these microaggressions and stereotypes and just these things that we think that if someone is of one gender that they can and cannot do – you got to wipe all that out. We go to the piano, and we sing, and every coach that has ever done that with me has never had any problems. OK, also do your research on trans voices, and I will say that, as a vocal instructor, the first thing that you're going to notice is that there are stamina issues when you're young especially. It's not a range issue or anything. It's just that we cannot sing usually as long or hold out these long, long phrases when you're still trying to develop that middle to upper register, that kind of thing, in the beginning. That's going to get better, y'all, as time progresses, when you get better, as your muscles and everything get more accustomed, and the more you work on challenging yourself with the longer lines and all of that. So that's what I would recommend. Just realize the voice is the voice is the voice. Just hear what the voice is and place me where it needs to be.

CEE: How would you advise someone, so composers, librettists, other artists, to create or adapt works for your voice?

TONA: First and foremost, as I do when I go to these colleges and universities, I tell them to stop writing these pieces using light lyric mezzos as the paradigm for what our voices are supposed to be. Period. What infuriates me about this is that a lot of the opera companies get all these grants and awards that we're seeing now with modern operas. They get a lot of money. So you're trying to tell me you cannot pay my sis [sister] to go through your piece before you put it out there? That a trans person is just supposed to be able to sing this? And then let me tell you what they do. They're going to use you and what you write, but then send these cisgender people all around the country, but then say,

oh, yeah, we had a transgender person sing this. OK, so these are the type of things that we're going through now. I feel that that's going to change when we are more vocal about these things and when we don't tolerate the foolishness and we call them out for what they're doing. They get plenty money, y'all, so they can do the proper research. They just don't feel like they have to, because there's not enough of us. I've heard that a lot, too. Well, I'm sorry, I've been on the Internet for the past 20 years. OK, I have videos just on YouTube. I just went and scrubbed that going back like 14 years. If you really care about the trans voice, especially the Black trans voice, with all of the newspapers I've been in, all of the coverage of my career, you're going to tell me that you didn't know at least one example? –one example? – that doesn't make any sense. It's because they don't have to. And they don't want to go through the trouble of finding us and, you know, everything comes back down to coins. They don't want to pay us our worth, which is another reason why you don't see me everywhere doing everything with every company out here. Pay me. I have been in the industry for a long enough time. You've seen me do all this stuff from coaching to having my own business, everything else, but you don't want to pay me a livable wage for my time and talent. But that's not what we're going to do. No, ma'am. No, ma'am.

CEE: So, I know of one. Well, to my knowledge, I have a book here of trans and non-binary opera arias or [*New Music Shelf Anthology of New Music – Trans & Nonbinary Voices, Vol. 1 (Curated by Aiden K. Feltkamp)*] My question to you and to all the work you've done over all these years (this is not a scripted question): what are trans stories that could be incorporated into opera, even a song, a classical song? What are stories that can translate into that? Because through my experience and my research so far, it's all

about the trauma, the drama, the murder of Black trans women, the Black trans women and HIV and Black trans women and sex work. And I mean, there's nothing there's wrong with those stories, but I just wonder what kinds of stories or experiences can shed light on the trans experience? What story can look at the transfemme, the transgender woman experience in a positive light?

TONA: Well, first of all, some of us have books about our lives and our experiences that you can take up.⁹⁰ Now, one of the things that I'm trying to do is, and I hate having to use myself, it's just like -oh, God - but I have been presented with people who are saying, "You know, you should maybe try to change it into like a screenplay or something like that in the future. A one woman show." I've been presented with a whole bunch of different ideas, but I think that there are so many... Like I said, let me focus, so we can go through books and stories. We can not just focus on the trauma of the person, but the whole totality of the person and their experience, and we also don't have to focus just on their transness, right? Like trans people can play and we often do cisgender characters. So again, they're using all these things as excuses for not hiring us or saying that, "Oh, we don't know what to do."

Another thing is you can take poetry. One of the things that I regret is that one of my mentors, her name was Monica Roberts. Monica Roberts and I were working on an art song and it was called "Black Trans Woman is Me" based off of Maya Angelou's poem, but what she did was she changed the words to Phenomenal Trans Woman instead of just saying Phenomenal Woman. One of my professors and mentors, Dr. Geraldine Boone, she was going to compose music to that poetry. So we can also take poems, poetry, and

⁹⁰ Tona's memoir, *Tonacity: The Tona Brown Story*, is an excellent resource for authentic trans experiences. She recounts personal stories and experiences from her youth to the present day.

stories from trans authors and writers and make them our own and then make art songs, which honestly, if there's anything I would like to see more are art songs that actually let the world know that we exist. That would be nice. You know, movies that let people know that we actually have always existed. So there's a ton of stuff, if we're creative, that we can do. And I really am sad that she passed away before we could complete that project. And I mean, even the first chord that Miss Boone did, when I felt that it was a B-flat and when she hit that chord and she wanted it to start very, very low and just keep gradually going up. But we could take something by a major author, poet, or creative, and then change it to speak about a transgender person's life. You know, saying the things that are specific to us, and again, that just don't focus on the trauma of being murdered and or assaulted. Again, if we're creative enough, we can figure out a way.

But the other thing is that you also know everything is systemic. So they want to look at how much power do we have in the Black trans community? Hello. How much money do they think they're going to be able to make from our stories? And until we can convince them that we can sell out an arena and those type of things, [t]hat's going to be the reason why they're not doing it. Because in the end, everybody wants to make money. We are in a capitalistic country. We have to be real about that. So until we can prove that we can sell out these places, that people want to hear our stories, that there is an audience for it, once we're able to do those things and more of us get exposure, which I'm so pleased to say that Terry Loftis of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and I, we had like an amazing conversation and he was just like, I am so sick and tired of not seeing representation of our Black trans people on these classical stages. What can I do to support you? I say, (you know, I wasn't talking about him in particular, but just people, "Y'all act like we're

asking y'all to do something crazy. I can come in and just play on a chamber music festival. I can come in and just play a movement with your orchestra, because think about all the publicity that's going to get because no one has ever done it.” So it doesn't take rocket science, but it takes people who actually care and know that we're trying to progress and are willing to put their neck on the line, and that's another thing that we have to be.

Let me make sure I mention this, too before we go, is that we also have to support the allies. If anyone's been following me, and sometimes I get so emotional about it, I'm like to tears, because there are many women who have been behind the scenes who have supported me and never asked for any recognition whatsoever. One of the reasons why I have this conversation series is that I'm going back to those people who are willing to talk and going back and thanking them publicly. You know, the people who recommended me for different things and that sort of stuff, you know, who made the phone calls or volunteered or, you know, I mean, even that conversation with Terry Loftis, this happened because it was a woman by the name of Gail who saw this post that I put up about allies. She is very connected, Gail Ross. And she went and said she contacted like five or six symphonies on my behalf. Some of them were like, we don't take recommendations for who performs with our orchestras. And she was like, OK, have a nice day, on with the next place. So there are those warriors out there like the abolitionists, people that are different to see our path as more challenging. And those allies are going to help you along the way with Carnegie Hall. It was a gentleman who was a stockbroker where I couldn't get the money. So we did a GoFundMe, and he paid the money for us to book the space. And I transferred the money from GoFundMe right

back to him. And he has a book called *Pearls of Asia*. And he felt that he wanted to do what he could because he saw I was putting it out there online. Oh, my goodness. What is that man's name? Lee Geiger. And it's because of him that we were able to book the space so fast and hold the date. None of this is going to happen just on your own, but what I feel is that some of us are starting to get to the point where we just feel entitled to be in these spaces, and we're not acknowledging the people who are helping us along the way.

CEE: What qualities do you value most in a voice teacher or a mentor, especially in relation to your identity?

TONA: OK, we were just talking about this because I actually want to see if I can get that man to come on my podcast. I was telling him that what I'm so appreciative of is just what you just mentioned about the gender identity. He never acted like it was a big deal. Never. Now, you know, we will poke fun at certain things as I was going through it. You know, just as friends. But as a mentor, what you need is a person that adores your talent and understands that the talent is above everything else. They may not understand who you are and why I got on orange eyelashes or something, whatever it is, you know, but they understand that you have this drive and need to perform or do whatever your talent is.

And I'm going to tell you, I was one of the most fortunate people I've ever met to have these people who were from the HBCUs who were all in their 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s, not shun me, not treat me differently. And mind you, the stereotype about people of color not accepting, you know, people like us, oh, honey, not only did they accept a diva, they made sure I knew how to present myself. Honey, they had me performing for their

sorority sisters. I'm sitting here singing the Lord's Prayer in the soprano key, honey, up there in the rafters back in the day, because we're still trying to figure out if I was a soprano or not. I got to do a lot of Ave Marias, all that kind of stuff in front of Dr. Boone's sorority sisters performing for her sorority sisters' weddings.

Mr. Daryl Husky, who was the gentleman I was talking to last night, he's been a mentor to me. He was the first Black violin teacher in Hampton Roads in Norfolk. The first time I looked at his music and saw these crazy high notes and ledger lines that I had never seen before, I knew I wanted to work with him. But the story is interesting, because I was told to go work with a woman, a lesbian white woman. She denied me, because she wanted me to go a certain route on violin. And then the funniest story about he and I were talking about, he was like, Tona, what she didn't tell you was that she couldn't play the music that you wanted to play. So she went to him and said, I have a young person here that I feel needs a male mentor or guidance and whatnot. That's how I started working with him. And then I started going to Gateways Music Festival at Eastman at 14. I was in a Juilliard experience, because they needed more minority students, and so I started seeing all of these Black musicians from all around the world at these festivals that look like me, had the same passion. They might not have understood that I was trans, but you could not deny that I could play my music. I was in there doing solos and four violin concertos with the orchestra and playing in these ensembles with the head of the organization, them speaking to the press on my behalf and saying, "I just didn't hire Tona because she is a transgender person. She's an artist first", and talking to them about how they were processing the fact that I'm transitioning while they knew me, you know, during that time. So the mentorship is extremely important. And I was just very fortunate.

Dr. John McCormick, who was the principal violist of the Norfolk Symphony, as well as a violist in the New World String Quartet; they used to go all around the world. This man had perfect pitch. He was kind of odd and funny. But let me tell you, he would take me to the Virginia Symphony and I had to analyze the whole symphony. He would pick out an oboe player and say, “What did you think about their phrasing? etc: Now, was that a flat third or raised seventh?” Something like that. And I had to, you know, he took me there with his family. So people, when you're talented and they see that you have a passion and you're not playing with their time, these sort of mentors, that I know everyone unfortunately does not have, but these sort of people will treat you like anyone else and give you free lessons. I mean, that man used to give me three-and-a-half-hour master classes as lessons every week and on top of everything else he was doing. But we don't just don't see that kind of thing happening as much anymore. I was just very, very fortunate.

CEE: And I think that's helpful, too, to know that we, as anybody, anybody in the arts, we're not built upon our own reputation, our own spaces that we have. We are on the support of the allies, but also teachers and mentors that also pour into us for the work that we do as artists, particularly artists, Black artists of any quality, both violin and voice. In terms of the voice and going back to your vocal coaching for a bit, is there any information or anything that you would have loved or would have liked for your voice teacher to know about you and to work with you at that time you were studying regularly?

TONA: It depended on who it was. Sometimes I was coaching with people for different things. I just wanted to be treated like any other voice student. And thankfully, I started to

come across women in particular who kept saying, “Well, I don't understand why you're having these issues finding a teacher or a coach or anything like that. You sound like a mezzo soprano.” You know, it's just what it is. You have a mental instrument. I'm taking you to the piano. It wasn't something that was fabricated in my mind. That's the only thing I wanted them to know. I just want to learn this repertoire. I'm listening to “Che farò” (“Che farò senza Euridice” by Gluck from *Orfeo ed Euridice*) or something and it touched me. I'm listening to a “Va” [“Va! Laisse couler mes larmes” from *Werther* by Massenet], you know, whatever it was, you know, the music was moving me, and so I just wanted to work on those particular pieces, whether it was Schubert or whether it was a crazy aria, whatever it was, an art song or anything, I just want to be treated like everyone else. And I think that's what we all want. We want to be treated like human beings.

CEE: Absolutely! You spoke about how you got into singing, growing up in or singing at church first and then wanted to sing duets with your friends. In terms of outside of like teachers and mentors, can you talk a bit about what community or peer support felt like during that time as you were navigating such a change or transition?

TONA: Well, I didn't have a lot of peer support in the sense of, you know, a whole bunch of friends. I will say that I have always been different, and I didn't really realize until I was reminded when I was doing a speech at Muskingum College, and my ex, who was the professor there, I wanted him to tell the audience what it was like knowing me as a teenager. So I was always very different, and I was always pretty much a loner, especially when I got to college, because I went through a period where I had everyone around me, and so my support really just came from my mentors and just a few people. And you got

to remember, too, again, the career that I saw for myself was something that no one had ever seen before. So you're not going to have a lot of people who are going to be like, "Oh, rootin' you on," like, it just had never been done. So everyone just thought...maybe they thought I was crazy that it was in my head and that I couldn't do it. You know, you and I, we know mutual people. Think about some of those people who knew you and I, knew me back then, you know, _____⁹¹, you know, I'm saying I used to talk to him from time to time over there at Shenandoah, but like, it wasn't like they were at my concerts all the time and rooting for me, you know. If anything, everyone was so weirded out, because they thought it was so taboo and strange. So even if they were nice, you know what I'm saying? There was still this distance. And you also got to remember back then, a lot of them thought if they associate themselves with me, it was going to do something harmful to their career. And being a naive young person, I didn't really notice that until later on where I was just like, how come I'm not asked to do this or why am I asked to do that? But now that I'm older and I'm so particular with my students, um, when I see stuff like that, I don't allow it. You know what I mean? So I definitely learned the hard way. It was like, oh, that's why this was happening. And people were making rumors about this, because what I was doing was so strange and unheard of and taboo. And they thought - they literally thought - I've had so many mezzos from around the world when I came out internationally, that literally thought I ruined my career. And if I mention these mezzos, y'all know who they are, baby. I ain't gonna lie. You don't know who these girls are, but they were so scared. And again, that's why I never had a steady accompanist. That's why I wasn't invited to do a number of things. And that's OK. You know, I look at life and I

⁹¹ Name omitted.

don't hold any grudges. I know it had to be hard to support a transgender person back then. It had to be.

That's why I'm doing everything I can to go back and thank all of the people who were actually there for me, because, you know, that had to be challenging. To put your livelihood, especially in your mind at the time, on the line to feature me on the radio or, you know, to come to my stuff and to put me in the front and all those type of things. But when you talk to them, they just say, you know, when I ask even my mentors about it, they're just like, "Tona, we just always knew that you were going to do well. You just needed an opportunity. So if there's anything that we could do to kind of just help minimally along the way, they were willing to do that." And we're talking about churches. We're talking about politicians. We're talking about other classical musicians. You know, we're talking about people who are advocates and stuff who would ask me to come and speak and that kind of thing, like people, people put themselves on the line for us, and we need to acknowledge that and we don't need to just walk up in there and be like, you know, I'm here and it's this, but no, we need to be gracious and we need to let people know how much we appreciate them going against the grain.

CEE: Mm hmm. That's powerful because, you know, in terms of looking at time frames, and we were at Shenandoah (I think I just missed you) just looking at just the community there and a little Winchester and what that meant and stepping out— they didn't see me. I came, I appeared, I mean, my first year, 2004, I appeared this one way and then by the fall of 2005, it was like, "Oh! who is that?" You know, without having things like the name change or whatever., I showed up differently in my singing lessons and classes, and it was like, "Oh, how do we navigate this now?" I just remember thinking back to and

even the circle of colleagues (I won't say friends because they weren't at that time) but colleagues I had in the conservatory, essentially were shady and judgemental towards me, and like, "Oh, you got cast for that?" Then, you know, there's a story.

TONA: And they can be very shady, and the thing was back then, they were malicious. They were so malicious that they were starting all kinds of rumors about stuff that I didn't even know was going on, and like I would hear about it. But you got to remember that the Internet age was coming, so like, they would see that I didn't hang out with them anymore, because I just noticed that people were uneasy and strange. But I had my best friend, and she was one of the best singers at the school, compared to all of them queens, child. And so I had her, and she believed in me, (and thank the Lord for that) because it was just a nerve-wracking time. You know, I'm trying to figure out my gender identity expression, and then on top of it, I don't have the voice that I thought I was going to have. It was difficult, you know. And so here I am reaching out to other queens, and they are sitting here talking about who is sleeping with who and all that kind of stuff. I have nothing to do with it. I would stay off the campus. And when I finally found a family outside of there, my hairstylist, she took me under her arms. There in Winchester, Virginia. I started working at the bank and a data entry company. I had all these people who were my friends. It was only a few, but they were real friends. Like the trainer at the bank, these people started taking me and inviting me to events, and doing different things. And that's why I keep saying over and over, you will find your tribe. You will find your tribe. And if you're a good person, can't none of them queens that were jealous [stop you]. I never did anything to them. Not one of them can say I did anything to them. But they could not stand that I was still winning as a trans person.

CEE: And that is it! The reason I've laughed so much or just smiled so much in this conversation is because it's too similar to say that it's only me. It was the system of that place. You know, I talk about how, in my own writing, I had been let go from production at Shenandoah because of something that someone said or someone thought. And I was like, wait, I am an artist diploma student, I'm a fucking adult, and I am the only, at the time, countertenor that can carry this opera off. In fact, I was actually the only countertenor in the area. And they replaced me with, let's just say, a low-grade mezzo. I spoke up and was like, so because of something that you heard or didn't ask me about, I got released from that production? Hell, that hurt. And absolutely, you know, it wasn't just the things with my colleagues or my friends; it was the conservatory, it was also the faculty.

TONA: Well, remember, we didn't touch on this. But that was the reason why I left the school, because they ran out of the top violinists and as a ploy to make me stay there, they would not give me my performance degree. They told me that I still had to take a class. It was Dr. Black. He had a class; it was an ear training class. Everybody would get a D in the class and people would be cheating and doing everything to just try to pass the class. And here I am with my ethics and integrity. I don't know why I didn't just do it. I just couldn't do it. And so they were like, well, we need you for the following year. So why don't you do a fine arts degree? I said, absolutely not. Who is going to pay for it? Because I'm a full scholarship student. Well, you know, you would just have one year. I'm supposed to pay you all thirty thousand dollars to help your program. Absolutely not. I got up from the deans of the conservatory's office and walked out. Absolutely. And she even said, "Well, you know, a degree from our institution." Honey, really? That's another

degree. They also tried to take my scholarship a couple of times, because I had good teachers.

See, I went to that school. That was my backup school. I had auditioned for Juilliard and other places. I was going to audition for Juilliard, and my parents did not get me there. It was just a whole fiasco. And because I really don't think that my parents wanted me to go to New York for some reason. I think they thought I was too naive and soft to go to New York, so my back up school was Shenandoah, but honey, the reason why I was Shenandoah was for the teacher, because Olivia Hodgeoff was a beast. But what happened, she took me out of orchestra, because I needed to work on some things with my bowing technique and everything. I was also taken out of having to do choirs and stuff like that just because these teachers were specifically saying, "You're going to be a performer, and these are the things you need to work on." And the school didn't like it. So the school was like, well, if you don't come back, we're going to cut your funding. These are the type of things that happen to us that nobody talks about. Nobody talks about it. You know, I know you've gone through it.

I still do go around the colleges and stuff and always talk about education, but I'm also very real. I mean, I always tell the schools that I'm like, "If you're going to get me in front of this student body and I'm going to tell my journey, you know, I'm going to tell my journey and part of it was the drama of going through all the drama in these schools."

And when I did the opera, I [sang] La Zia Principessa for Shenandoah. So I went back.

Now, here I am coming back to the school and the conductor that was there at that time, he didn't know what he was doing. And so I'm telling him, look, I go around and do this role. [My talk for the students was] supposed to be freeform at the beginning, all this type

of stuff. Man, it was horrific. But he had this super-crazy attitude and like, man, no, no one even knows who you are, but that's what you learn about school. They're in this little bubble ,and a lot of these professors and conductors and whatever, they act like they're just, like, they're Bernstein or something. Yeah, they can get away with it, you know, amongst the scholastic community. But don't no one even know who you are outside of that. So here I am coming to do something during the pandemic for and with the students. I'm all excited because, you know, I'm a nerd, you know, saying something like, yes, we're going to do this. We're not going to let the pandemic stop us. You know, I'm all going to go. And it just ended up being a bad experience. And I kept thinking to myself, "Oh, my God, I forgot what we were in college. These are the personalities that you have to deal with and they know that you have to for a grade." See, I didn't have to deal with that for a grade. I thought, OK, let's do as many takes as possible. We'll do it drudgingly slow and inappropriate for what the composer said, but I'm going to do what I got to do, record this, and then I can go and be free and express and do. But these poor students, they don't have that same luxury. I mean, it's a lot of it. I mean, [...] that was the other problem with that other opera I did. It was at a college and that conductor did not know how to manage the whole project. It was the first time he'd done an opera and a modern opera at that. And it was just horrible.

CEE: Oof, I mean, the learning curve must have been steep. My last few questions: What has been the most rewarding aspect of your journey as a trans singer, violinist, and activist?

TONA: Meeting so many phenomenal people, talking to wonderful spirits like yourself that actually are empathetic to people that are different, I think that has been wonderful.

Seeing how when I go to these schools, I don't take myself that seriously, but when I go to these schools and these people are reading my book, and they're telling me how I've encouraged them, that means the world to me, because I still struggle to this day because I refuse to be a part of so many systems. So therefore, there's financial problems that arise, because I'm not a sellout, and I only go to the things that I feel very passionate about. So, of course, if you're doing that and you're selective and you're not just taking things because of money, commercial deals, all these different things that I have said, I'm supposed to sing. Why do I have to write a clause and check off that says that I'm going to show my butt? Absolutely not. But this has happened on Broadway. This has happened in different things where you just see that what you thought the project was is not what it really is. And for some of the girls, they're OK with that. I'm just not their girl. So I would be like, "No, I'm sorry." I'm like, well, "We know this might go against your brand, but, you know, we'll pay you ten, fifteen thousand dollars to come and do this, that, and the other, or could you come and do this panel about sex work?" I'm like, there are so many people that can talk about that. That is not my story. Why are you trying? Because I'm a Black trans person?

And thing is that organizations that should know better. That's why I don't mention names. Organizations that should know better are supposed to be out here advocating for us, but because I'm a Black trans woman, I always have this sexualized, fetishized part to some of these opportunities that come along. And I'm just that girl that will leave the project, you know Everybody else saying, "Oh, my God, you could have made X, Y, Z." Look, I just go and make me some beans and rice and keep it moving. You know what I'm saying? Because it's not worth it. And I know so many people, trans and otherwise

look up to me. What do I look like twerking on the stage where they told me it was supposed to be this mezzo part and be great to have a transgender person come and sing this? You know, it's going to be on NBC or ABC or something like that. And then I have to sign a clause that says, "Oh, well, this is a sexy scene and we want you in a garter belt." What does that have to do with this part? Are you serious? I teach little girls. I don't want them seeing me out there like that.

CEE: Right.

TONA: So again, it's not there are a lot of different opportunities out there for us as trans artists and as trans people, but when you have integrity, unfortunately, and in today's society, there are a number you're going to see more no's than yeses, but that's OK, y'all. Say the no's, you know; figure out things that you can do so that you can support yourself and just keep it moving; go to the next thing. It's very frustrating.

Now, I'm not going to lie. There have been times when I have called my friends, and we were all excited. Like that one in particular, the Broadway thing, I'll never forget that because I was so excited. But oh, my goodness, you know, I can do something on Broadway and blah, blah, blah. And then when the lady called and said that and she understood, she knew I was going to say no. But if you want to make that coin, and all money is not good money. And so I said, ma'am, I can't do that. There's no way we can get around this in the contract? No, no, no. ... we want the character to literally show their butt, y'all. And I really wish I was over-exaggerating, and I'm not. I'm not at all. You trying to tell me I couldn't have a t-shirt or a skirt or something, but that I had to expose my rear end. Mind you, this is not what everybody goes through. That's why when I wrote the book; so many people were so shocked by my experiences, that it was so

normalized for me growing up for sexual assault. It was so normalized the way that I was treated in certain places that I knew something wasn't right about it, but I thought all women went through those things. And a lot of those things were trans-specific, so you have to be real about it, and we have to expose these things, and we have to just let people know that this is not OK, but if we don't say anything, then people are, especially these men, just going to keep doing it.

CEE: Absolutely. If you could share one key takeaway or a message to those who may listen or those who may read my dissertation, your excerpt for this project, what would that be?

TONA: It would be never to give up. For all the challenges that I've had along the way, I wouldn't change anything that I've gone through. It's made me not just stronger, but it's made me more aware of why more people like myself, yourself, need to be out here doing the work. We need to be vocal. We need to be letting people know what is OK and what is not. We need to be putting it out there to the universe that we want to sing Amneris [role in Verdi's *Aida*] or that we don't want to do classical music because of dot, dot, dot, or whatever it is. You know, this is what kept me from doing it. I'm speaking on behalf of so many women that I know are trans feminine and feminine-embodied people that unfortunately just said, "You know what? I'm going to pass, and I'm going to go work in a call center." And it's not just trans people, but this conversation is about Black trans people. And so we're not getting the best of the best of voices. We're not hearing [them]. We're not represented well, so people don't know that we exist. We're not hearing these rare and unique sounds that would have kept the opera community and the classical community going. We're not giving the opportunities to people who deserve these

opportunities. We're not asking you for a gift. We work just as hard. We get the degrees. We do everything that we're supposed to do, but then all of a sudden, there's a ceiling that we can't cross. And you want to... how can I say this nicely? You want to pour water on our back and tell us it's raining. I'm trying to be nice about it. When we know what it is, it's because I'm a Black trans person. So that when you went to your board of directors, there was a problem. OK, some of these things I'm mentioning, all of them have happened to me at some point in my career. I just did not allow it to stop me from soaring and trying new things. And as Shirley Verrett said, "Your voice is important." You just need to find your niche and find your individual audience, and the beauty about today is that we have the Internet. So even if you can't get anybody to come into a space, you can record something and put it out there. You can do a Facebook Live. There are so many different ways to get our art out there and to let people know I'm here; I'm not going anywhere. Y'all can keep hating all you want to. You think that we're going to mess up your career or whatever it is, but I'm here. Y'all, you didn't stop me from getting to where I was supposed to go. None of the little shade and all of that. It didn't work. It did not work. And I will be known for generations, because I was brave enough to be myself, live in my authentic truth and not lie like people kept recommending for me to do about who I am.

CEE: That is so powerful. A woman of her convictions. Is there anything that we haven't covered today in this conversation you feel is important to share about your experiences and or your voice, meaning your singing voice, your activism voice?

TONA: I don't think so. You've been very thorough. I don't I can't think off the top of my head. You know, I think, you know, the biggest thing is having those mentors, I think,

that accepted me. I think the more I do the work and the more I realize where my career is going, now becoming a host of a podcast that I just love that work because, again, I'm just one of those people that I don't want to be censored. I don't want to feel like I can only say [certain] things. I want to be in my truth, and I want to help other people as well do it.

What is a blessing is that when those celebrities get on my show, whether they're politicians (I have a wait on Pramila Jayapal now). But when Gwen Moore got on there and she talked about how she had to rethink [how] she never supported it - let me put that out there- the bathroom bills in North Carolina. She met me on a plane, and I never went to the bathroom during the flight. Our plane had to land due to horrible weather; she was going through a very difficult time. For the first time, she was sitting next to someone and realizing how this legislation affects real people.

You know, when I talked to Mike Ruiz, and he let us know that he's a highly sensitive person and his journey, when I've talked to so many different people now, Samson McCormick and DeMarco Majors and just different reality stars and stuff like that. What I do is I always say to them, "What is the message you want to get out into the world?" And my job is to present to everyone who you are authentically as a person, because we know how we're all branded in society and with marketing. But who are you as an authentic person? What do you really want to get across? How can we support you? It's all about uplifting. I want no catty crazy stuff on my show. That's not what this is about. There's enough shows that you can go to for that. And also the last thing is, what tips do you have for others? It's a pattern I always point out when they're talking of people who are successful, who go through the things that we go through, especially in the Black

LGBTQ community. What are the things that kept you going when things were difficult? Because that's what's transformative. Because I don't want to be the only person out here doing this. Not a gatekeeper. I want to see all of you make it. I want to wake up and there is an NPR news thing that you are out here singing, some kind of concert or, Brianna (Sinclairé) is doing her thing. I want to see all of us succeed in this field. But again, we have to be real and tell the truth, because the truth will set you free. Right? We have to be honest. People think that I just had it laid out in some kind of plan and everything just worked out for me. That was one of the things that made me stop and say I needed to do a memoir, because I kept hearing that and I kept getting messages from trans women saying, "Oh, it just seems like you're accepted by everyone and what planet do you live on?" And just because I don't see the hate on my page doesn't mean it's not there. I press the hide button, delete button, privacy setting, and all those things, because I don't want to re-traumatize people with some of the stuff that I get every day being in front of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people.

Everybody is not going to like you. So what makes you think everybody likes me? So I had to do that book. It was the most cathartic thing I've ever done in my life. I didn't even realize I was holding so much in, because again, that was just a part of my existence. All of those things that you guys are reading about, that was just what it was, you know, and then when I would talk to other people and say, "Hey, did you ever have X, Y, Z happen?" And they're like, "What?" Then I feel some kind of way. I'm like, "What?" And the other thing about the memoir experience, too, I'll say briefly for y'all is that it's also crazy to have terminology for everything that you go through, because you're just living your life. But to know that your family was dysfunctional and to have to accept that as

fact, you see what I'm saying? That's just a small example, because you all know it's trigger warnings and everything in the book. Absolutely. You know what I'm saying? So, just to go through that process and realize there's a definition to this. You know, no wonder my upbringing was challenging. This is not the way it's supposed to be. And to have my good friend, Megan, for her to break everything down, to define and everything. And do you know that's what helped her? It was the evening she needed a publishing credit for her doctoral stuff and to be, you know, head of the department and all that. And Christopher King, who was a journalist, to bring all that out of me. Just like I told you, you asked me the question. I'm going to tell you; I can keep things to myself. But the minute you ask, I'm going to tell you the truth.

CEE: Okay, Tona. That's all for tonight. I'm going to let you go. But thank you for this conversation. Thank you for your time.

Tona Brown's interview featured several significant themes, particularly about vocal identity, systemic biases, and her advocacy initiatives. In addition to the issues surrounding identity, representation, and social positioning—topics presented in chapter 7—direct quotations from Tona provide insight into the themes that surfaced during her interview. (Table 1)

Table 1 Themes and Direct Quotes from Tona Brown Interview

Themes	Direct Quotes
Authenticity in Voice and Identity	<p>“I would classify it as a mezzo-soprano, and I can sing contralto as well now that I'm getting a little older, so I'm loving that.”</p> <p>“This is who I am, and my voice was just another iteration of that. It was like, ‘Wow, this is another example of who we are as trans femme people.’”</p> <p>“Sing where it's comfortable for you. It's not about sticking to a fach or a gender expression. That's going to be the longevity of anyone's career.”</p> <p>“I realized the importance of not pushing my voice into a box it wasn't ready for. That's why I still have the voice I have today.”</p> <p>“You have to learn to love your voice for what it is.”</p>

<p>Navigating Othering and Bias in Education and Auditions</p>	<p>“I faced racism consistently throughout my career. I know of stories where people won auditions, but when they met the conductor and saw they were a person of color, they decided not to hire them.”</p> <p>“The biggest challenge was that people didn’t know where to place me because of my voice and gender presentation.”</p> <p>“They were amazed at the fullness and roundness of my voice, which caused problems with trying to decide what roles to put me in.”</p> <p>“I was fortunate to have open-minded instructors who reminded me that the voice is the voice.”</p> <p>“I just wanted to be treated like any other voice student.”</p>
<p>Community and Support</p>	<p>“I didn’t have a lot of peer support. My mentors and a few close people were my support system.”</p> <p>“I met other trans singers who all gave up, unfortunately. One was a fantastic coloratura soprano, but she started getting depressed and stopped singing.”</p> <p>“I always tried to support her as much as I could. It’s important for us to uplift each other.”</p> <p>“You will find your tribe. The people who believe in you will show up, and they will make a difference.”</p>
<p>Visibility, Advocacy and Change</p>	<p>“I want to see more representation of Black and trans musicians in classical spaces. It’s not just about me performing; it’s about paving the way for others.”</p> <p>“My advocacy is about challenging racial and gender biases in music, using my platform to bring visibility to trans musicians.”</p> <p>“I use my platform to push for systemic changes, to make sure we are seen and heard in spaces where we have traditionally been excluded.”</p> <p>“I want to make sure that when I leave this planet, I have made a statement that, yes, there were obstacles against us as Black transgender people. But I did some things so that I can encourage the rest of us.”</p>

CHAPTER 5. BREANNA SINCLAIRÉ

Introduction to Breanna Sinclairé Interview

Breanna Sinclairé, soprano, is known for her exceptional talent and groundbreaking success as a Black transgender opera singer. In my talk with her, we explore how her career and identity intertwine. Sinclairé's journey is an authentic example of the intersection of identity, representation, and advocacy within the traditional realm of classical music.

Growing up in Baltimore with a passion for opera sparked by her grandmother, Sinclairé pursued training at the Baltimore School for the Arts and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in vocal performance from the California Institute of the Arts. Her historic acceptance as the first transgender woman in the San Francisco Conservatory of Music's opera program was a milestone for inclusivity.

Her career includes landmark moments such as her 2015 National Anthem performance at an Oakland Athletics game. Through self-produced concerts, community engagements, and being featured in numerous interviews and documentaries, Sinclairé advocates for marginalized voices while highlighting the systemic barriers that persist, particularly for Black and trans artists who remain overshadowed by their white peers.

The following interview reflects on the ways in which Sinclairé's narrative has been shaped by issues of race, gender identity, and resilience in the arts. Her statement, "I'm an opera singer but with trans experience. But my trans experience does not negate the fact that I am an opera singer," embodies her dedication to authenticity and excellence. Her story enriches the dialogue on representation and equity, urging classical

music institutions, higher education, and related fields to adopt inclusive practices and celebrate the diversity of artists, especially transfemme, treble-voice performers.

Interview with Breanna Sinclairé

CEE: I'm so glad that you've joined me today. Tell me a bit about yourself. Please state your full name and your pronouns.

BREANNA: Yes, my name is Brianna Sinclairé, which is actually a French last name, and I am a soprano. My pronouns are she and her.

CEE: Fantastic. Thank you. Now, you said your voice is a soprano. My first question: how do you or how would you categorize your voice, whether inside or outside the typical classification or a fach system? You know, a soprano can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people.

BREANNA: It does. Yes, I think that, to be honest, I feel like the fach system was created by Westernized culture--colonized culture--which I believe [in], but I think people's voices, wherever your voice is comfortable, it's in "where it sticks". That's what voice you should be using authentically. I think for myself, my voice has - I wouldn't say it has been through a series of "changes". It has been through a series of changes of technique, but I could see that I've already had that range of the treble range, and I've had the middle range and baritone. And surprisingly, I do have a bass range, which, you know, my voice teachers,...I feel like they'd be trying to gag me. My voice teacher loves to experiment with that, but, so I kind of classify myself for the world. For me, personally, I'm just a singer, you know? I am a singer [who] chooses to sing in that range, in a register, because it feels comfortable to me. In the opera world, I probably could say that I'm a baby dramatic soprano because I do have a large voice, and I am under

coaching and under supervision. [I am] learning how to sing it correctly and not damage my voice. You know, we are still young singers. I'm in my mid-thirties, and when you're in your thirties, that's when your voice really starts to blossom. I'm really starting to see that I'm becoming more comfortable, but I can say in my own personal experience, or, as in my personal life, as a musician, I call myself a singer, but within the world, I call myself a baby dramatic soprano.

CEE: Nice. You know the thing, a *Jugendlich dramatischer Sopran*.⁹²

BREANNA: Yeah.

CEE: How has your voice evolved throughout your gender transition, and how has this affected your self-perception?

BREANNA: I transitioned at 19, which was, like, my sophomore/junior year in college. I remember vividly because, as voice students, when we're going to school, we have voice jur[ies]. At that time, when I was at the California Institute of the Arts, which was in Santa Clarita, California. (it's quatably known as the "Disney School", so I actually went to the Disney School) but the music department was great. During my sophomore going into my junior year, I decided for myself that I wanted to transition.

The experience prior, when I was homeless in New York City, I met a transwoman. She was a Latina transwoman. She was in her late fifties, and when I met her in New York, I was completely just in shock and in awe that you can transition to be your true self. As a result of seeing her, [the experience] made me realize that this is who I really am, and my whole gender identity was totally under attack.

⁹² Some roles in this 'youthful dramatic soprano' category are Chrysothemis in *Elektra* (Richard Strauss), Suor Angelica in *Suor Angelica* (Giacomo Puccini), and Mimi, *La bohème* (Giacomo Puccini) to name a few.

Since I was a child, I've always thought I was a female since the day I was born, and my uncle (God rest his soul! Rest in peace) whom I love so much, who is my epitome, my gay uncle, he said to me, when I got out the womb, he knew immediately, because I was a very dramatic kid.

When I was studying at Cal Arts, I was strictly a tenor, and I think the thing was voice teachers were so embraced by, like, “Oh, she's tall. She could play this heroic man on stage. She would light up the stage”, and that just wasn't me. I'm just like, “No, I don't want to be a tenor.” It was so weird because even singing in that fach. I did have issues singing in it. I think it's just because (1) I was very uncomfortable with singing this music, and (2) I was very uncomfortable with my identity at the time. Everything was so tense, like, I didn't sing very freely. Everything was just, like, my brain was not connecting to the work of a tenor, and I have amazing friends who are tenors, and I'm like, “You better sing. Okay?” But that's just not [me].

CEE: Hmm.

BREANNA: What I remember, when I decided to transition: I told the vocal jury during my end-of-the-semester voice jury, I said, “I do not feel comfortable singing this music. I would like to transition to more mezzo or soprano repertoire.” I remember one of the teachers (I'm not going to say their name) but she said to me, she says, “Who do you think you are that you can just change voice types in the middle of your schooling?” I said, “Well, I just do not feel comfortable with it”. She said, “Well. I don't want your scholarship to be removed.” Then, they were planning on trying to remove me from the curriculum and remove me from college, because of that.

And my close friend Jacoby, whom I love to pieces (We went to school together. He was a filmmaker. He was a part of the film program), [Jacoby] actually went to the board of directors and said, “Please do not...” , he said. “We don't have many Black people in this school, and she's a fantastic singer, and just because she decided to transition is not an issue, she is a great student.” So, if it wasn't for him, I don't think I would technically be staying there. And then we had, rather, *he* had a team of people to [sign a petition]. I guess a lot of people signed on for me to stay, and he gave that list to the board of directors.

So then, during my junior and senior year, I was singing as a mezzo. My teacher there (I won't say his name, either) was a baritone, and he trained me as a tenor. He was so confused with the whole transitioning process that he let me go as a student. Then, I worked under soprano Maria Dean for my junior year, and then I worked with Kate Conklin, who is a soprano as well, during my senior year. That experience in my senior year transformed my singing, because she was an expert in Alexander technique. This is Kate Conklin. She really embraced me, took me in with loving arms, and said, “We are going to look at your sound. We're going to review your sound, and we're going to figure out which places in your voice that [are] comfortable. Then we're going to develop from there and feel that comfort when you're reaching to the upper part of your register and the lower part of your register.”

It was literally baby steps. I really felt like I had to start all over as a musician. I felt embarrassed, because all my friends were singing and doing all these arias, and they were going on and singing off. I felt in my head that I was going backward, vocally, but with the eyes of the voice teacher, she saw that I was moving ahead. [Conklin] was teaching

me all these Alexander techniques that weren't even taught in schools yet. She was giving me, like, all of these unique situations, like, barking on the ground animal position, bringing my yoga mat to my lessons. It was an experience! I'm so grateful for Kate Conklin, because she really believed in me. I think, especially as a trans artist or trans musician, you need that one teacher, at least one that's going to embrace you, accept you, want you to evolve, and want to see you succeed, and it's very rare to find voice teachers like that.

That's when I took a year off when I graduated, because I said I didn't want to sing anymore. I am done. This was so stressful. I took a year off, and I was still in Los Angeles, and I was staying with a girlfriend of mine, who was a visual artist/ animator; she worked for Pixar and everything. We were really good friends. She lived in this gorgeous condo in Los Angeles. I stayed there with her, and I was working at a call center for an entire year, because I said I was done. I don't want to sing; I don't want to be a part of this anymore. I love going to operas. I've always been a musician since I was a child. I started singing literally at 5 years old, but I started my classical training around 12 at Morgan State University with Nathan Carter when he was alive at that time.

Yes, I took that year off, I worked at the call center, and I was just fine with it. Then my friends were really mad at me, because they wanted me to get my master's degree. They would repeatedly call me, text me, and email, like, "Bree, what are you doing? Get out of this horrible job!" One of my dear friends, Benjamin, sent me an email saying that the San Francisco Conservatory of Music is having openings in the spring and onward. They did a random audition for the spring, Benjamin said, "Go!" So, this really and actually happened. I checked my email, and I saw, "Congratulations! Your application to the San

Francisco Conservatory of Music was submitted,” and I was like, “What is this nonsense?”

At first, I thought it was junk mail, but then I saw an email that was attached to it; it was Benjamin, who's a pianist and my best friend in the world. We're still friends today. We talk literally every day. [Benjamin] picked the repertoire and everything. He says, “Breanna, you're gonna sing as a mezzo for this audition. I'm picking you up. We're driving to San Francisco. I'm playing for your audition.” Boom! Boom! And that's how that all happened, and literally, the rest is history. After that, and when I had my audition at the conservatory, I remember the voice faculty looked at my application because, at that time, my name hadn't changed. I didn't change my name or my gender marker at the time and the [audition] jury, said, “Can we just acknowledge the pink elephant in the room?”

CEE: Okay.

BREANNA: I said, “What pink elephant?” And she said, “You have two names on your application. So what are you?” I said, “I'm Brianna, that's my name. It's just I haven't got my name changed.” Then they were like, “Okay, go wait in the hall.” So, they deliberated. I thought I was done, girl. They sat there, because I sing the repertoire, the same that everyone sings, the mezzo staple, but I gagged them when I sang that song. I think the thing was when they were deliberating, and I was outside talking to [Benjamin], I said, “Is everything okay?” He was like, “You did amazing. Don't worry. Everything's gonna be okay.” I said, “I don't know, like, they call me pink elephants.” Deliberation went on, and they called me back in, and they said to me: “Welcome to the San Francisco Conservatory of Music!” and that “this is a very unique situation; you will be our only

trans student in the master's degree program. We do have trans musicians in our program in the composition and instrumental [departments]. Still, we've never had a trans singer in the master's [voice] program." I'm a Black transwoman. I think that was a full spotlight on everything. They continue, "We would like to give you a full scholarship. We would like to add you an extra year just for your vocal development since a lot of the students in a master's program are well advanced." I said, "Thank God!" They gave me three years; the program is only two, and they gave me three years. What an experience! I've grown tremendously. When I graduated from the conservatory, Sheri Greenawald from the San Francisco Opera, (who was [a regular singer at] San Francisco Opera, a famous soprano, very well known, and she's worked with so many great students), she called me and said, "I would like to take you in as my student. I feel like there's something special there, and we need to work on it." I said, "Okay, sure." So, she cut my lessons in half. I didn't have to pay much for some of my lessons, she said. I didn't have to pay, because I think she understood the assignment, that being a Black transwoman, it is hard for us, economically and socially, to survive and thrive. That was very kind of her to do that. And I remember our very first lesson. She vocalized me to a high soprano C [6]. And she says, "I'm sorry, baby", and I'm like, "What?" She said, "You're not a mezzo. You're a soprano, and we're going to really work on this top of your voice. It is there; it is powerful; it is strong. You don't sound like a countertenor." She continued, "When I close my eyes, I hear female soprano singing."

I worked with her for five years, and then Covid happened. That kind of stumped the process, because she had to go back to Ohio. [Covid] was a very weird time. I still talk to Sheri to this day. She actually just recently wrote me a recommendation for the San

Francisco Opera auditions. I got an audition, thank God! But we'll see what happens, you know, it's politics. They might not even take [me].

That experience with Sheri was the most precious, vulnerable, and unique experience as a young singer. She really believed in me. When she was working on parts of my voice, we were doing very basic scales. I'm talking, like, 2-note scales, and she says, "I know you want to be like all the other singers, singing up and down." She said, "This is what is going to teach you how to be an efficient and well-grounded singer."

From then on, I've just grown and performed and traveled, but I always say, especially for trans artists, we need mentors who see beyond our transness, because it's not just trans. [Sheri] was like, "Go to that audition and sing. Be the soprano that you are. Who cares that you're trans? That's your personal life," and it's true. That's my personal life.

That should not be a matter in y'all hiring me where y'all can hire countertenors. Y'all can hire drag queens, but you can't hire Black transwomen in the opera world? See? See?

That is something that I just don't get. What does that mean? What does that mean to our society? What does that mean to our world? But y'all can hire drag queens off the bat, child, and they can be singing all types of know-whats and get standing ovations, and no offense, I love my drag queens and all, but it's just it's not right, and it's unfortunate. So yes, I'm sorry.

CEE: Don't you ever be sorry about anything, especially when you talk about your lived experiences! You've talked a lot about things like mentorship, and what Sheri and Kate did for you. What emotions do you associate with your singing and speaking voice, particularly in relation to your trans identity?

BREANNA: Oh, wow! That's a great question. So I always spoke high, and I know people find that strange, but I never had to go through a [pronounced] voice break and all that. I never experienced a voice break. I've always sounded like this, and that was another thing Sheri Greenawald did. She introduced me to a vocal therapist and vocal pedagogue, and she heard me sing. [The voice therapist said to me], "You know what I realized," she said. "The voice is unique and unusual.," I said, "Okay." She said, "You know what I realized? How long have you been speaking like this?" I said, "Since I was a child," and what I've discovered is that it was trauma that forced me to speak in this upper register, because my father kept trying to force me to sing lower, to speak lower, and to act a certain way, and I would reject that and speak in a higher voice since I was probably in elementary school. That mainly was more of my protection and gender identity at that time, and connecting that voice made me feel like a woman. And so she said to me, "Just like you are using a specific part in your vocal folds, that is creating the sound because of trauma." I never thought about that until it brought me back, when my father said to me, "You need to speak lower. You need to sound like a man. What is this? You are my son." So, that's what I realized, but I never had a vocal break, and I don't know what that's supposed to mean.

But also, genetically, my mother went to the doctor, and the doctor was saying that I might have a little more estrogen than I should have as a normal boy at the time. Maybe that is that as well. It's very [interesting]. I do want to do some more research on my voice. I do wanna do more collaborative work and figure out how I'm producing this sound, because I think sometimes when I sing in front of voice teachers, they are

completely speechless, and they're like, “What is this? What have I gotten myself into?”
I'm just like, treat me like a normal singer.

CEE: Absolutely. Have you ever considered parts of yourself of your trans identity being an asset or maybe an inhibitor in any parts of your life? Your career? Your life in general? That's a left-field question, I know, but it's used for a purpose.

BREANNA: Well, first thing, our transness is beautiful. Who we are. Our transness is one of a kind. We see things more than we see of the average person. Things are more revealed to us than the average person. But that's a really good question, because I don't know, and that's the other thing. Sometimes I audition for something. I'd not get it because I was trans, or did I not get it because I wasn't good for the part, or, you know, did I not get it because of something else, or whatever, because, you know, when we're auditioning, there could be many reasons why you didn't get the part, but I do sometimes feel like my transness is an inhibitor, especially when I am trying to be part of classical spaces like my peers.

Being a classical artist, aside from the business aspect of it, is very difficult. It's a very challenging, beautiful, complicated experience, and it also comes from the love and passion for music. My passion is music. I never focused on [wanting] to be famous, or I want to do this. My main focus is I want to sing full time as a job. I'm built to be, you know, we're built-- both of us, as singers – are built to be on a platform and to sing to people. And so I think sometimes I could. I have high anxiety, especially when I am auditioning, because I always feel that is always the first thing they see. “Oh, she's tall,” or “look at her big hands,” or “look at her feet.” You know, they'd be reading me, and all of that from head to toe, from my earlobes to my chin, to my shoulders, to my elbows, to

my pinky toe. Maybe it's just I always feel like there's always this fear and anxiety, and it always ~~fucks~~ [messes] me up in an audition or catches me off guard, but I've learned to ignore that. I've been working with a lot of teachers who are teaching me how to just focus on the voice, focus on the composer, focus on the language, and focus on producing. I have really matured as a singer to really focus on that, but I do. I can say it. It's so hard to explain this, because, in all reality, the opera world has very racial issues. CEE: Hmm.

BREANNA: They can hire a white transwoman in a role, because, obviously, they're white or they're white with connections. I do feel like, as a Black transwoman, my experience is a little bit different than it is of a white transwoman in this field of music and that it's a very interesting place to navigate, because, you know, I support my trans sisters, in whatever they do, you know, we're supposed to support each other, but it's very hard to see where they hire more white trans or white gender nonconforming voices than they do trans voices or Latina trans voices or whatever. I think sometimes I do believe that this is also rooted in it, the racial challenges within the opera world.

CEE: That's a very valid point. Part of this research came about because, well, I'll get to that later. Okay, I'm going to name-drop. I look at Lucia Lucas, and she is a fantastic and stunning musician. Nothing but love and 10s across the board, but she's singing in her modal or her first phonation, her modal, her rich baritone voice, which is marvelous. I just also think that there's space for other transgender people too. If you are a transman, but you happen to sing soprano. No, I haven't seen that. If you're a transwomen and have a stellar voice, you could be an amazing Violetta, or an amazing Carmen. I haven't seen that, either. My issue with that is - yes, I can. I can love you, and I can support, you

know, everyone in the field -no, no- in all of the identities, intersecting or otherwise, but also, like, you left out an important population. That's the transwoman who can sing in the upper register, but also Black people in general.

BREANNA: Yes.

CEE: As I write in my work, when the pandemic met the murder of George Floyd, all these opera companies, orchestras, and arts organizations, in general, started to be and wanted to be "DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] focused" and bring persons of color, namely Black artists, to the stage. Today, we have Terrance Howard's new operas and Tazewell Thompson's new opera, *Jubilee*, that just premiered here at Seattle Opera; you know, all of this new work that is happening is fantastic, but again, it's that one piece missing. Why hasn't someone created - why doesn't someone create - this opportunity for Black transfemme treble voices or utilize these persons to be in production? That's where I am. I feel as though I cannot be the only person, my age, and my voice, and my whatever, that's trying to hustle out here.

BREANNA: Absolutely.

CEE: You know, trying to book a gig, you know, more of a *Carmen*, and not trying to be no Third Tree from the Left! At this point in time, I would take that, too, because that means I'm on the stage. You said earlier. "We're singers. We're meant to be on stage." So that's the next question I have, and so I'm going to preface it by looking at all the Huffington Post and the Getty materials, because you are that girl...

BREANNA: Oh no!

CEE: Yes! What is your opinion about being a Black trans treble voice user in the world of classical music? I know you do your concerts. You do your gigs with the choruses.

What's your opinion about that, just generally and unfiltered as you want to be?

BREANNA: Yeah, I think. Well, first of all, I'm very grateful for the experience that I've had. It has really taught me a lot as a musician and an artist how to navigate professionalism and being professional. Still, there's also another side to it where I do believe sometimes audiences question my ability, where some audiences don't know who I am, and I'm being introduced, let's say, to the San Francisco Symphony or whatever, and they don't know who I am, and they go, "Oh, she's trans," and then you can hear this silence. It's like the interesting silence. I remember when I was singing at the San Francisco Symphony in 2018, and the conductor was like, "She's a transwoman, Breanna Sinclairé," and I could hear slight silence. When I walked out, everyone stood up, clapped, cheered, or whatever, but I could see this kind of thing in the audience. [Questioning], "is she? Can she really do this? Can she really sing with the full San Francisco Symphony?" I saw; I could feel that energy, so I think sometimes, as a classical singer, I feel a lot of people question my ability. I think right now I'm in a place in my life where I'm trying to transition out of only doing just LGBT events, like, I'm only safe to do LGBT events where it's, like, you know, I'm doing a gig in Brazil, which is not LGBT related, and so where I can actually be the classical singer that I'm supposed to be. I think sometimes, that is a challenge for me, because they want to pigeonhole me into this. "Oh, you're this, you're that," but I'm, like, "No, I can sing a La Traviata." I can attempt, you know, maybe later in my life, but I can sing Tosca, maybe later. You know, I can do these roles. I really can. I can sing in Rusalka [the title role from Rusalka by

Antonín Dvořák’], if I wanted to, but they're not giving me the opportunity, which I do believe it's through misogyny, patriarchy, and all of that, especially being a woman in society, in this world we're still looked upon. As you know, they still look down on women, and, you know, we have this class and this social system. I do believe the world hates women, because we continually fight for our rights consistently, and what I've realized is that I, being a trans woman, being next to, let's say, a male counterpart who is my lover or someone, I think, for audiences, their heads [will tilt], kind of go, “Hmm. Oh, she's trans, but she's with a man she's gonna...” Then I feel like there becomes [a discomfort] when I'm, like, “We're playing a character #1. #2: you should not be worried about my transness. That is not an issue. Thirdly, you need to be worried about the music and enjoying the music and enjoying the connection, and us characters connecting to the story.” That is the main thing. I feel like that's all aligned with patriarchy and misogyny and all of this. All of that is a part of that, and I believe that, oh, you can hire a drag queen to sing, because everyone knows. Oh, this drag queen is going to be out of their regalia, and they're going to be a man at the end where it is, for me, - there's no regalia. I will take off my makeup and be who I am. I think that's hard for them to process that. It's so interesting, because my friend Chris likes to sing karaoke. He's a famous tenor, one of my best friends, and he sings at the LA Opera. Every time he visits, he's like, “Bree, let's go sing karaoke.” He asked me to sing, and it was a bunch of San Francisco opera chorus singers that were there, and we were all singing, having a good time, whatever, so I did say, “Oh, I'm trans, and this is my situation, but I am a classical singer.” I sang. Gag the people, and then these two elderly white ladies came up to me, who go to the opera religiously, had been having season tickets for 20 some years, came up to me. She goes.

“Why aren't you singing at the San Francisco Opera? You have a lovely voice,” and I said, “See, they didn't even care that I was trans.” So I don't understand: they cared about the music. There are people in the audience who really don't give much of a thought about it. They just go there, because they love the opera. They love the sounds of the orchestra, etc. There is a group of people who support that, supports that part of my transition.

CEE: Let's talk about career and professional experiences. How did you discover your singing voice?

BREANNA: How did I discover it?

CEE: Yes. How'd you find out? When? Other than, you know, out the womb, either as a classical singer, other styles, or otherwise.

BREANNA: Probably around 12 or 13 years old. I studied with Nathan Carter. I sang ‘My Favorite Things’ from *The Sound of Music*, which was my first song, and then I went to Boston School for the Arts, and then I went to Tanglewood Institute, and I met Jessye Norman when I was in high school. When I did the Tanglewood Institute, and she saw me, she grabbed my hand. She said, “Young child, there's something special about you. Just keep going.” She said that to me, and I was a teenager. I think when I really knew, it was when I was taking voice lessons and studying with Sheri in 2014. I sang “O mio babbino caro” [from the opera *Gianni Schicchi* by Giacomo Puccini] and I sing the “Porgi, amor,” [from the opera *Le nozze di Figaro* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart], and the German arias, and this and that, and Sheri looked at me in my eyes. She said “You are an opera singer!” It's so profound, and that day I left that lesson, just feeling, like, yes, this is what I'm supposed to be doing. I love this. This is my life. My love for music came

from when I was a kid, because my father plays several instruments, my mom played the flute and the cello, and my grandmother could sing, so I was immersed in a family of musicians. That love of music really came from my mother's womb like I was birthed with this blanket of love music onto my life. So, even if I don't have a career, I know that is always part of me. That's just it. It is what it is.

CEE: But why classical music? Why opera?

BREANNA: I didn't care too much about opera. My grandmother is the fire starter. She started the fire, because there was no way in hell that I wanted to see an opera as a child, but she did that for me, because I was so bad. I was a bad, very dramatic child, and so she would take me to operas to calm me down, and they actually did. I was quiet. That was the most quiet that my grandmother saw me in those 3 or 4 hours.

I've said this in many interviews, but it was [Giacomo] Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. I was struck by the production, the choir, the vocalists, the costumes, and the makeup. I thought it was just something extravagant. I said, "Grandma, this is what I want to do." She was so happy. Also, my grandmother had this little radio in our kitchen, and she played cassette tapes of Leontyne Price, Marian Anderson, and George Shirley. She was introducing me to history that I really didn't care about at the time, but now that I'm in my thirties - wow! - she really instilled that into me, but when I saw *Madama Butterfly* at 6, that was my introduction, and I thought this is something that I want to do for the rest of my life, and I stuck to it.

I went to Baltimore School for the Arts. Baltimore School for the Arts is like LaGuardia Art School in New York City. They had, I think, about 300 vocalists that auditioned, and they only accepted 10. I was one of the 10. One of the students from Baltimore School

for the Arts, she was on *The Voice* a few months ago, and then the other student, Christian Siriano, the famous fashion designer, we went to high school together. I grew up in the arts, you know. That was just kind of my life, and I think Sheri solidified the fact that I am a classical singer. She got me out of my head, because I was so in my brain thinking, “Oh, no one's gonna accept me, because I'm trans.” I was just very negative in the head, and she really took me out of that headspace.

But it is still hard to navigate classical spaces today. I do have a difficult time or dressing room issues. [People say] “Why, she in here?” and stuff like that. Yeah, there are some other things I could tell you, but I'll share that another time.

CEE: We talk about things like transness, gender identity, gender presentation, and things of that nature, and, like, it blows my mind that even by looking at a person that someone can say, “Oh, like, they don't belong in here,” especially in this grand, queer space of opera.

BREANNA: Yes! That's what it is, and it shocks me. Opera is so queer, and I'm so confused. I am so lost, and I'm so flabbergasted, because we live in the queerest space from the history of the castrati from pants roles to now; I just don't understand how, you know, being trans is an issue.

CEE: Exactly. It doesn't...

BREANNA: Make any sense!

CEE: What professional role models or examples have influenced your own singing?

BREANNA: Oh, well, Jessye Norman, of course, Leontyne Price, I've been more enveloped in her life and career, because I've been hearing that from a lot of voice teachers that I have a mix of like Leontyne and Jessye sound, because now I can float my

[soprano] A's and my B's and my C's, which I thought I could never do, and it's working. It's working healthily. So, Leontyne Price and Jessye Norman. Who else? Joan Sutherland. I am so in touch with Joan, because she was really tall, around 5'11", 6 feet. I'm tall, and I would always look at her to make sure I stand on stage with confidence. I love J'Nai Bridges. We talk a lot on Instagram.

Angel Blue as well. She messages me and encourages me a lot. I am actually more connected with my Black opera singers, especially Black female opera singers, because the role that they go through is so unique and challenging. I am more connected to Black female opera singers, because they give me the drive to continue this work and this music. Jessye Norman was a big figure in my life. I was obsessed. I used to like some countertenors. What's his name? David Daniels until he had the scandal. I used to love the sound and timbre of his voice.

I remember when I was at the Tanglewood Institute; that was during the time when David Daniels was really the big countertenor; everyone knew who he was. I remember my voice coach at Tanglewood Institute said to me, "Have you thought about or have you been interested in countertenor repertoire?", which I was like, "No." I was, because my voice sits very high. They just didn't think I was a tenor when I was at Tanglewood, so I was getting opinions from so many different people. She was the one who introduced me to David Daniels. There was a classical music store that was within the Tanglewood lot and I bought all his albums. I listened to them for the whole summer, and when I went home, I had my CD player, and I listened to them all the time; I would not stop. I don't know what made me drawn to him, maybe because I felt like there was kind of this synchronizing place in my life. I felt synchronized with him because he was singing in a

treble voice, but you know not after the scandal, but I can say, prior to the scandal, he made me question a lot about my vocal development

CEE: Understandable. With that, what are your dream career goals or operatic roles?

BREANNA: Do you know what I'm really obsessed with? I love concert work. I never thought I would enjoy it, but I'm obsessed with it. I love singing with orchestras. I love doing new song cycles, working with other composers, writing music for me, etc. I really want to stay within the concert trajectory. Also, I feel like you make more money doing it. Yet, my dream is, even if it's just the one role in my life, I at least want someone to hire me to sing one female operatic role in a more prestigious operatic setting, like the San Francisco Opera, the Metropolitan Opera, or the New York City Opera. I might be dreaming very big, but I would like to have that experience of being a female character singing in my treble voice, and I really want to travel the world. I'm obsessed with Amsterdam. I would like to do more work in Italy and live in Europe. That's just kind of been my dream. My fantasy is to spend the rest of my career in Europe and do a lot of concerts and recitals and maybe some operas. The opera world, I feel it's very hard. I feel like it's not easy to do concert work, but I feel it's more accessible for people like us, because we can also plan our own recitals. We can make things happen. That's what I learned when I was applying for grants. I created my own space, using the grant money to have my own recital, paying for a great pianist, and getting it recorded. Sometimes, you just have to create opportunities for yourself. I've done that a lot, and so I would love to do a lot more concert work. Maybe in the future, maybe when I'm older, I would love to open a school for just trans and gender-nonconforming voices. That's always been a dream of mine - to have my own school where we have a curriculum to train treble trans

and gender-nonconforming voices, at least keep history alive, and keep the trajectory positive and moving forward, because, you know, we're out here. I think there are a lot of things, especially as trans individuals, that we go through in our personal lives, such as gender dysphoria and trying to get access to healthcare and access to housing, and access to food. These are the necessities. If we don't have those necessities, we cannot go to a voice lesson and get headshots or get a dress, or whatever, if we don't have the basic necessities. I would like to create a space where we can learn how to get those basic necessities along with [vocal] training.

I feel like that is so important because, in my case, I don't have the resources. I don't have millions of dollars. I didn't come from a family of money. In my case, I have to work twice as hard and be better than the rest, you know, have to be, you know, and that's just a sad case of affairs that I have to go through this extra amount of stress just to sing.

CEE: You mentioned things like healthcare, and I can appreciate that. As a Black classical singer, there are enough hurdles. There are more than enough hurdles for someone who's in the LGB community, but that specific hurdle for transness and how that shows up in spaces. Can you share about what I'm presuming to be sometimes a challenging atmosphere at home, because you referenced your dad? How were you able to still possess the fortitude and the mindset to truly be authentically who you are?

BREANNA: I had to leave. That was the only way. I had to get out of that space of homophobia and transphobia. I had to get out of those spaces. I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. Now, that's a whole ball game, especially when you're living in Baltimore City. I had to get out of that space, and that was very hard. I worked very odd jobs, you know, cleaning places, working at gas stations. trying to get myself the basic necessities

that I need. Now, I can say that living in San Francisco, I live in a very sanctuary state. I'm very lucky for that matter. I'm in a place where they promote and support trans folks. I've worked and know so many people, trans folks, within the healthcare facilities in San Francisco. Having access to that has helped me live my authentic self.

Prior to that, it was very hard. When I was at CalArts getting my bachelor's, there were very few trans folks there, maybe, like, 2 or 3. My girlfriend, Kat Black, we went to school together. She's a famous trans blog commentator, and my friend Keen, he's a transman, and he was the one that introduced me to his endocrinologist. He said to me, "I could take you to all of your appointments. Just let me know. We'll schedule it." I had support like that when I was trying, and I think getting out of that transphobic environment with my dad and being in an environment where I was being embraced, loved, and protected.

I feel like that's so important for a lot of trans people to have. They don't have spaces that really protect and love on you, to make sure that you're okay, to make sure that you get your hormones, make sure you have transportation to get your blood work done, and making sure you're able to get assistance. I feel like it's good to transition when you're in college, because, at least in a college where they are more open and loving towards the LGBTQ community, you will have the support, or there will be some type of support somewhere. It might just be one person. It could be your counselor or therapist. I felt like that was the appropriate time for me to transition, because I was under a safety net, and it was also in California. I cannot imagine if I went to school in Mississippi, I would probably have to move out of there, find different ways, or find community. I think finding community is the most important, because that's the only way you'll be able to get

access to healthcare and to specific things. Being connected to community is so important.

When I was dealing with gender dysphoria I used to be scared to go out. I used to be scared to socialize, because I was just so dysphoric, but when I made the decision and choice to go to a trans [support] group, a trans event, let me go to the trans day of visibility event, that's when and where I was exposed to other trans people. We were all walking the same path. That's why I feel community is important. Now, I cannot speak for a transgender person who lives in Alabama, Mississippi, or Texas who has struggled to get trans healthcare, because I live in a city that's all about trans healthcare.

CEE: Absolutely. Community is so important. It's essential that we don't go through life or through these experiences alone. In speaking of community and voice development and training, how would you advise a teacher or a vocal coach to work with your voice?

BREANNA: When I work with voice teachers or a new voice teacher, I would tell them, "These are the parts of my voice that need work, that need more attention and tender love and care." Then, "This is the part of my voice that is very strong. It does need tender love and care, but I still need to develop the appropriate technique to be efficient." I share that, "This is my break. This is where my head voice is." I think letting a voice teacher know where you are vocally is important.

You have to be transparent about your voice. You can't just go and expect the teacher to just help you. You also have to be transparent and say, "This is what's happening. This is what does not feel right. Why am I singing this way? These are the parts of my voice that I can sing from head to toe." You have to be very vocal, and that's how I am. I'm very vocal with my voice. I hear and I feel things. I'm all about singing comfortably and

singing freely and with no tension, and that was something that was embedded in me when I worked with Kate Conklin, because she was so focused on me singing comfortably, which actually opened my sound. When I first started with Kate Conklin, I said, “This is the voice type I want to sing in, but I have tension.” I had terrible tension. I was always putting my shoulders up when I'm singing. There was so much tension around my neck, and I was very transparent with her. She took me through baby steps to get rid of that tension. It was like I was going to debutante school, because she [focused on] breathing, inhaling and exhaling, and making sure my spine is aligned, and making sure my jaw is relaxed, and all of these elements. So, I think, as a trans singer, be honest and vocal about your situation and where you are vocally.

CEE: You previously mentioned concert work and creating opportunities. How would you advise someone, such as a composer, a librettist, or other artists, to create or adapt works for your voice?

BREANNA: Well, I think first I'd start with the skeletal part of the process, which is, “This is my range. This is where I'm singing from middle C and up to this or that.” I think you should explain your [vocal] needs to the composer and the librettist and how they can assist those needs and how they can create from those needs. You have to show them what you need, but also, I always tell them, “I want to be challenged.” I can tell you my needs and say, “Oh, I'm not good at this with this,” but I need a challenge as I have to grow as a singer. I need to express my [vocal] needs, but also accept the fact that when you're creating something, I want you to challenge me as well: challenge me in a way that doesn't damage my voice but challenge me in a way that it's going to evolve and help my voice grow.

CEE: I love that. We talk about creating recital programs for ourselves and trying to find different and new ways to create work. What are the stories of opera? Is there a need to make an opera based on someone's trans story? We hear, see, and know operas about Black people that have been either written or co-written by Black folks, but these works often take the form of a showcase of trauma, crime, murder, or killing in some fashion. What kind of stories would you like to be featured, see, hear, or learn about trans identities, trans voices, and trans people? Does that not matter, or does it?

BREANNA: Actually, I don't think it matters, but I do appreciate Black composers who create work for Black singers, and I do appreciate gender nonconforming or transgender composers who create work for us. On the other hand, I do feel like, why do we always have to do that? Why do we always have to be pigeonholed into this? And it just saddens me, because opera has a racial issue.

I see more Black artists singing works by Black composers and librettists, and these African American stories are amazing. I just feel like they just never give us the chance. We always have to revisit our trauma all the time, and I feel like that's something that we shouldn't have to do. However, these stories are also important. If [someone] did a Rosa Parks story and hired a trans female to sing Rosa Parks, that's beautiful. If [someone] creates a Madam C. J. Walker opera, you can have a trans treble voice play Madam C. J. Walker or something like that. As African Americans, we have a history that is powerful, and I want us to express that history. I just feel like sometimes that we're just... I don't want us to feel like, that's all, you know, that's all we have. There's so much more to us as a people. You know what I mean? I don't know how to explain it. You understand what I'm saying, girl.

CEE: I hear you; I hear you. It's like the “yes, and, or both”.

BREANNA: Correct.

CEE: We want to have these stories. We want to have these experiences. We want to center identity. This is my own personal thought. I would center blackness more than transness. Does that make sense?

BREANNA: Absolutely!

CEE: I would center the exposure of being an artist who is Black than Black and trans.

BREANNA: Yeah.

CEE: Yeah. Some of the language is changing in scholarship. One ideology is there aren't ‘trans voices.’ There are voices. Perhaps a person is a trans voice user, or the person is singing with their authentic voice and happens to be of trans identity. One colleague said, “The voice is the voice is the voice.”⁹³ I love quoting that from her, because it makes perfect sense. The identity of transness, in some cases, I believe [is overemphasized]—so what if I'm trans? I have these notes, I can sing, now put me on stage.

BREANNA: Yeah. You see, we're vocalists with trans experience, and I think that is what I continually say. I'm an opera singer but with trans experience, but my trans experience does not negate the fact that I am an opera singer. My trans experience is a beautiful experience. We all have experiences. We all have transformations in our life. I feel like in some spaces, it's not seen that way. It's seen. “Oh, you're trans first, then you're the singer. I'm uncomfortable. How do I handle this?” That's kind of how it is rather than, “Oh, you're an opera singer who can sing this work, and [you] have trans experience.” That, you know?

⁹³ This quote is from the interview with Tona Brown. It is referenced in detail in the previous chapter.

CEE: And maybe that's the shift that needs to happen. I think that opens some more doors and opportunities as opposed to not. Leading with 'la voce'.

BREANNA: Yeah.

CEE: Leading with what you can obviously hear then see, in terms of blackness, in terms of race and identity, in that respect. These classical spaces need to center the voice.

BREANNA: I feel like a lot of classical spaces are very traditional classical spaces. They're comfortable. They want to feel comfortable, and they're trying to navigate the fact that you're trans and can sing, and because they're having a difficult time navigating that, they will make your experience in a way that comforts them and not that comfortable to you.

CEE: You have some amazing voice teachers, amazing people, amazing folks in your corner throughout your education, throughout your time in and out of school. In terms of summing them up, from Kate to Sheri and beyond, what qualities do you value most in a voice teacher or mentor, especially in relation to your identity?

BREANNA: That's a good question. What I love about my voice teachers is patience, because, especially when you're dealing with trans singers or dealing with any singer, [it] requires patience. It requires parental guidance, I call it. You're guiding the voice from a good place to a healthy place and making sure that this person is singing comfortably. I think patience and grace are what I've gotten from a lot of my voice teachers. They have extended their patience and their grace, knowing that I was in this weird, interesting, vocal, and personal experience. They were patient enough to say, "Let's look at each part of your voice," and if they extended the grace to me to embrace it. I think that was another thing that I loved about my voice teachers. They taught me how to embrace my

journey. I would always try to be, like, “I want to be like my friends. I want to be like all the other master’s students. I want to be amazing, like them. I want to do this.” My teachers would go, “No, no, enjoy the process. Take it one day at a time.”

I think that patience and grace are what a lot of my voice teachers had, and that gave me a lot of strength. What I've noticed is that a lot of my voice teachers did not focus on my transness. They focused on the developmental aspect of my voice, and that was something that, as a trans singer, is what I loved, because they did not care about my transness. They cared enough to say, “Oh, that is beautiful, your trans experience,” but they're like, “No, honey, you're a singer. Let's get this going.” That's how Sheri was. Every time. And she said, “Why are you worrying about that? You're a singer, girl, you are a singer. Be the soprano that you are”, that kind of ability to see past that and to just embrace me as a human being, learning my voice.

CEE: Brilliant! Is there anything that you would have liked for them to know before working with you? I'm talking technically now, such as vocabulary in the studio or stuff in general that you would have liked them to know?

BREANNA: Oh, yes, I feel like a lot of vocalists—we have musicality issues. I was very vocal about my musicality. I had issues singing with the rhythm, having rhythm, but it's just when it comes to learning specifics, like, seeing and putting a triplet into a word or whatever. I would have serious complications. I would have issues with pitch. Now, I'm fine, but when I was under study, I would let them know that I really wanted to focus on language, making sure I was saying the language correctly, making sure that I was translating the language, and delivering the message of what I was saying. Ruby Pleasure, when I was at the conservatory, she would give me a new piece of music, and she

goes, “You said you wanted to work on musicality, right, Bree?” I said, “Yes,” and she’d say, “Now, after this lesson, you have an hour ‘til your next class. I need you to go to the library and translate and research your aria.” Every time I had a new song, that was something that she did. She said, “I want you to write down your rhythms. I want you to speak your rhythms, and when you come back, I need to know the history behind this aria. I need you to clap these rhythms. I need you to speak the text.” That was how she operated, because she knew that was my weakness, and she really needed to strengthen that part of me, so that when I was out into the real world, I could pick up a piece of music and boom. Now I'm into the real world, they don't care. They don't care if your musicality sucks. I had to really do it and work on it and become a steward of my music. I think the whole musicality aspect really helped me sing more freely, because I knew what this character was singing. I knew what I was singing about. I knew the setting of this aria. I knew the meaning behind this aria, and then I was able to sing me, sing in my voice, and bring this character to life.

I think people don't realize that classical singing takes a lot of discipline, and that was something that I was very vocal about with my teachers. I didn't have much discipline, so they whipped me into shape. (I'm a crazy Virgo, so...)

CEE: That Virgo energy. Right there, I love it. How do you define success in your singing?

BREANNA: Wow! That's a good question. I find success in my singing when I am out of the way. I'm always in the way of my singing. I'm always questioning if I sound like a woman or I'm questioning, “Do I present as a woman?” When I'm out of the way t,hat's when the success happens. When I'm like, “You are where you're at.” If they judge you –

oh, well, but you made some huge strides in your vocal development, and appreciating that and nurturing that—I think me getting out of the way really establishes a freer sound, a freer performance. When I'm in my head, I am not free. It just gets complicated. I get tense, just a ball of mess. But now, I'm learning how to just embrace every stage of my vocal development and not try to sound like another person. I think that was another thing. My voice teachers were very adamant about being authentic vocally. “Don't try to sound like anybody else. Sound like you.” You sound like Cee; I sound like Breanna. I [feel] that the gem of my success was to sing in my voice and sing it healthily and correctly and not get in the way. I think we always get in the way of our own development. I think that really the secret to success is to be humble, be gracious, and to continually have the discipline to stick with it. That is, I feel like the [formula] of success.

CEE: Wow. That's quite powerful.

BREANNA: Also being open to new ideas, being open to new techniques, being open, and to seeing which works for you. I had a voice teacher who gave me a technique. Child, it was terrible, I said, “This is not it,” but it worked for another student, because they are a baroque singer. I had a big voice, and she was giving me the techniques of a baroque singer, which wasn't working with my voice. Now I can understand the more coloratura aspect of it, which really worked, because it taught my voice how to be and have agility, so I did take something out of that. Other than that, there were certain things that didn't fit my voice. I think another thing that's a [recipe] to success is finding a teacher who works with your voice and hears it, hears the issues, and wants to work at it and build from it.

CEE: I love that! Who was the first person to make you go into a tailspin about your voice? What did they say, and how did you receive or perceive it?

BREANNA: Tailspin, meaning positive, or tailspin, meaning negative.

CEE: Any way or both.

BREANNA: Well, I think the tailspin was Sheri when she said, “No, you're not a mezzo, you're a soprano.” That was like opening Pandora's box after that point, and then I felt like the lessons were just great afterward. For her to be who she was (she was the artistic director of Merola, and she's worked with students from the Adler Fellows) and for her to even say that I had the potential to be in Merola and Adler Fellows really was kind of like –wow, thank you, Sheri, for that.

When it comes to negative, I remember I was working with Maria Dean, who I love and is a great teacher. We still talk, but she was very negative about me transitioning and singing in soprano. I remember the first three lessons: I could hear her huff and puff. She really did not want to do it. I could sense the [discomfort] when I had my lessons with her, and that really did take me on a tailspin because at that point. I'm like, “Should I be doing this?” I really was in a dark place at that time, because I felt she just wasn't interested in working with me. That's when I got out of her studio to work with Kate Conklin, and she really gave me the drive to do it, to keep going. So yeah, Sheri, Kate, and then Ruby Pleasure, who was the interesting voice teacher that I had at the conservatory. [Ruby's] honest. She is very honest, and what she hears is what she hears. I remember I was singing the Dalila aria, because we were dissecting it again and really working at it, and she said, “No, no, let's fix this.” I'm like, “What's the matter?” She's like, “No, your vowels are off. The sound is going all over the place,” and that just took me into [a tailspin], because I thought I was like, “Okay, I could do this.” But when she said that to me, I left my lesson crying, but she did it out of love. Now, today, she hears

me singing, and she's so proud of me. She was a very positive teacher. She was just very brutally honest. I think I just never had a voice teacher that was that honest with me before and very intricate about the way I use my sound. I think that really got me to a place of focusing on technique and focusing on, "Okay, this is serious. This is what you want to do. Let's really work at things and become a good singer."

On the other hand, I do deal with a lot of jealousy, you know, especially from cis[gender] counterparts. They are jealous in the fact that I'm Black and educated and trans, who can actually sing, and that, as a result, can become a threat. Just like you, Cee, you're a fabulous singer. You're an artist. You're educated. That becomes a threat to the cis counterpart, and that is another thing that I have to maneuver in the classical professional world. I had a conductor, which will remain unnamed. I performed for him, and everyone congratulated me at the end. And I heard him say, "Why are they making this all about Breanna? What about my performance?" I'm just, like, you invited me to sing!

Cee: What?

Breanna: Well, Cee-cee, you have to understand, when you're trans and Black, and you're doing a professional field, you have to be above the rest. You have to be better than everyone, because people question your ability. If y'all want to hire me in these spaces, then I have to make sure that my languages are right. I have to make sure that my rhythms are correct. I have to make sure that I know what I'm singing about. Don't you want me to be an adequate singer? Then, when I am an adequate singer in these professional spaces, the cis counterpart getting all up in their feelings and jealous. I'm like, isn't that what y'all want me to be, a good classical musician who knows their work and who has studied their work? It's this yin and yang, this push and pull, this tug and

pull. It gets very complicated, and that is something that I really don't understand. If y'all want me in those spaces, I need to be as professional as my peers. Correct? Is that correct?

CEE: Absolutely!

BREANNA: Yeah. I think that's another situation that I have to navigate, and I've been seeing more of it often. Within my trans sisters circle, that type of jealousy does not happen. I deal with it mostly with the cis counterparts in this profession, which is very interesting and could be a book in itself.

CEE: That is exceptionally interesting. I'm definitely going to highlight that in another conversation with you. What advice would you give to other transgender women or transfemme people who are pursuing or would like to pursue careers in singing?

BREANNA: To do your research. Do your research on voice teachers who not only work with trans singers but also who know how to really hear your voice and work with it and who have the love, because you want a teacher that gives honesty but also shows love in your work. I think researching the right voice teacher for you, having conversations with them, and emailing them. That's what I did. I emailed. I said, "Look, I'm a trans singer. This is my situation," and I built a community within the classical circle by going to recitals and programs. If a school has a recital of a bachelor's or master's degree singer, go. Go to see operas. Go see Broadway productions and be a part of the community. That's what gets you from point A to point B: being a part of the community and listening to other singers. Research. It's not just about you being a singer and the teacher just picks you. No, you have to do your research! (Oh, my God! I sound like my voice teacher.)

CEE: No, but it makes sense because, in a way, you are also an educator, by default, by sharing your experiences. Someone's going to learn from this. I've learned from you already. I learned about you and what your journey has been, and this conversation adds depth and breadth to that.

What has been the most rewarding aspect of your journey as a transgender singer?

BREANNA: As much as there's a percentage of people, as much as they hate me singing classical music as a trans person, I am the (most) happiest and the most authentic singing as my true self. The classical field boxed me so much. "Oh, you're going to be a tenor. This is what you're going to do. You're going to go to Juilliard. You're going to do this, do this, this, and this." I did get into Juilliard as a tenor, but I felt like I went against the grain. Now that I'm singing in my true self, my throat really has opened up. I'm able to sing with peace. I think that the number one thing that I gain from this experience is that when you really are your authentic self, you really can make some serious magic with your voice.

That's just it. There's no theory. There's no deep answer to this. It's just that me singing in my true self is the most rewarding experience I have ever had. It's so rewarding. As much as people might hate me because I am being who I am, it gives me joy. It gives me peace. A peace that surpasses all understanding. You hear me?

CEE: Absolutely. Loud and clear! It's absolutely about being authentic and true to oneself. If you could share one key takeaway or message for those who may read or hear your story, what would it be?

BREANNA: Don't be afraid to ask questions. Actually, yes, because there were parts of my vocal training where I had to ask those questions, because I was just in a very

confused part of my voice trying to figure it all out. Don't be afraid to ask your voice teacher questions, but also don't be afraid to educate your voice teachers as well. Let them know about your experience. I always say to give a brief history of your experience to your voice teacher on the first day so they have the groundwork to work with you. I remember I was working with Sheri. I said, "Financially, I don't have the money to continue lessons," and that's when she said, "Ok. We're going to cut your lessons in half, and I'll give you some free lessons, and we'll work together." Sometimes, you just have to be honest with your teacher. That's a takeaway. I think trans singers should let voice teachers know that my experience is not the average. This experience, you know, and then letting them know that, and giving them that gateway to your life so that they know how to navigate that situation. I just want trans students to feel comfortable in studio spaces and not have to feel like we have to be so cis-looking or cis-this to feel a certain way; you know, that stresses us out. We always have to do so much to fit into these spaces, whereas just be yourself, be raw and call it a day, and embrace that.

CEE: Is there anything that we haven't covered today that you feel is important to share about your experiences or your voice?

BREANNA: No, I feel like we discussed a lot.

CEE: Excellent. Thank you for your time today, Breanna. It was such a pleasure to speak with you. Please let me know how I can support you, through my work or otherwise.

BREANNA: Blessings. This was a beautiful conversation and thank you for this. I really do appreciate it.

CEE: Thank you. We'll chat soon. Take care!

BREANNA: Yes, bye-bye.

Breanna Sinclairé’s interview underscored important themes, particularly those related to vocal identity, mentorship, and emotional resilience. Her direct quotes provide significant insights into these topics, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2 Themes and Direct Quotes from Breanna Sinclairé Interview

Themes	Direct Quotes
Voice and Identity	<p>“Since I was a child, I've always thought I was a female since the day I was born”</p> <p>“Oh, I'm trans, and this is my situation, but I am a classical singer.”</p> <p>“I classify myself for the world...as a baby dramatic soprano because I do have a large voice, and I am under coaching and under supervision.”</p> <p>“I had a big voice, and she was giving me the techniques of a baroque singer, which wasn't working with my voice</p> <p>“I’m an opera singer but with trans experience. But my trans experience does not negate the fact that I am an opera singer.”</p>
Peer Support and Mentorship	<p>“If it wasn’t for my friend Jacoby, who went to the board of directors, I wouldn’t have been able to stay in school.”</p> <p>“Benjamin sent me an email saying that the San Francisco Conservatory of Music is having openings in the spring and onward. They did a random audition for the spring, Benjamin said, “Go!” I checked my email, and I saw, “Congratulations! Your application was submitted””</p> <p>“Kate Conklin really embraced me...she saw that I was moving ahead even when I felt I was going backward.”</p> <p>“Sheri Greenawald...she really believed in me and taught me how to be an efficient and well-grounded singer.”</p> <p>“We need mentors who see beyond our transness, because it’s not just about being trans.”</p>
Institutional Oppression	<p>“The opera world has very racial issues. They can hire a white transwoman because of connections, but for a Black transwoman, it’s different.</p> <p>“Opera is so queer...I don’t understand how being trans is an issue”</p> <p>“It’s [opera] rooted in racism and transphobia...opera companies started wanting to be ‘DEI focused,’ but they still overlook Black trans femme voices.”</p> <p>“They were planning on trying to remove me from the curriculum and remove me from college because of [my transition].”</p> <p>“”You will be our only trans student in the master’s degree program.” They’ve never had a trans singer in the program.”</p>
Resilience Through Advocacy	<p>“I am the happiest and the most authentic singing as my true self.”</p> <p>“I took a year off because I said I was done...I don’t want to sing; I don’t want to be a part of this anymore.”</p> <p>“I had to leave. That was the only way. I had to get out of that space of homophobia and transphobia.”</p> <p>“I had to create my own space, using grant money to have my own recital.”</p> <p>“We’re vocalists with trans experience...that’s what I continually say. I’m an opera singer with trans experience.”</p>

CHAPTER 6. CEE ADAMSON

Introduction to Cee Adamson Interview

I have always sought to be the kind of artist who is known for versatility and excellence. I have juggled (hopefully skillfully) roles as an opera singer, voice instructor, choral director, music scholar, arts administrator, and student affairs professional. I transitioned from soprano to countertenor to contralto, gaining valuable life lessons both on stage and off. I have always worked to navigate educational and professional landscapes while remaining true to my music and authentic self.

I examined how gender identity, race, and vocal artistry intersect in classical music. In my interview, I share my strategic journey of gender transition, influenced by my desire for stability and the challenges of societal expectations. My narrative showcases a transformation from inner conflict to harmonious acceptance of both my vocal and gender identities, allowing me to embrace the full spectrum of my voice. I critique the lack of visibility for trans voices, especially among Black transfemme singers, within vocal pedagogy and classical music literature. I note a significant gap in accommodating diverse vocal characteristics and calls for an approach that truly reflects the lived experiences of trans vocalists. Additionally, my account addresses the dual biases I face as a Black transfemme performer, noting the ongoing challenges posed by racial and gender stereotypes in academic and professional settings. The following interview offers an honest perspective on my journey, emphasizing the urgent need for greater inclusivity and advocating for the recognition and support of diverse identities in the classical music field.

Interview with Cee Adamson

JANAÉ: Hi Cee, I am Dr. Janaé Collier. My pronouns are she, her, and hers. I am the research interviewer for this project. Before we get started, I will ask you a series of questions. Please introduce yourself and your pronouns.

CEE: Sure. Good afternoon. I am Cee Adamson. Pronouns are she/her and they/them.

JANAÉ: The first question concerns personal identity and voice. How do you categorize your voice inside and outside the typical classification or fach system?

CEE: Well, good question. I am a mezzo-soprano, but often, as I'm getting older, I would say more towards a contralto, and that's in the strict fach system. My voice is round and luscious and full. It brings me great joy, and hopefully, it brings others joy, too.

JANAÉ: I can tell. Your tone changed. It sounds like you get a lot of energy from thinking about your voice or what your voice does in music.

CEE: Oh, certainly, I'm a musician, so I use my voice in many different ways, you know, and I think that as I was younger, there was insecurity about my instrument and not knowing what my voice part was or how to navigate that, and as well as navigating gender identity and gender presentation. Now I'm all grown up, so to speak, I love the sounds I make. Of course, there's always room for improvement, but I love the sounds I make. I really enjoy them.

JANAÉ: So, how long have you been on this journey of music? Can you share more about how your voice has evolved through your gender transition and how that's affected your perception if you want to take us through more of a timeline?

CEE: I first fell in love with music around 5 or 6 years old. Influences are my grandmother, for sure. I was singing in church. After singing around the house with her

for many years, I got dragged to church to sing. And I've always had a treble voice. It was always high. As the folds and chords thicken, they lose their malleability. I'm a lower speaker now, but I was a high speaker with a bright and resonant tone until about 17. My first change in vocal color timbre happened in 6th grade. I had a high soprano solo in my elementary school choir. That's when my voice "cracked". I remember it well. We sang "White Christmas," and I had one of the solo bits. It was me and two other girls. My voice "cracked," and it was a moment of shock. My choir director and pianist just kept going. I was shocked at that moment, but I started to laugh, and then my solo mates laughed, the choir laughed, and the entire audience laughed. It was an embarrassing but fun moment, and we eventually got the song back on track. But in terms of how my voice evolved in the transition.

In self-perception, I always identified as "femme" or "transfemme," meaning that you couldn't tell me I *wasn't* feminine. I liked to dress well and played the occasional sport. For me, perception involves both internal and external aspects. They are two different things that have shaped my life through my experiences in elementary school, middle school, high school, college, and all my travels during my education. That process has been evolving, so I, in terms of my self-perception of my voice, has always been high and feminine through my lens. My transition process happened later on in life. I made the decision to strategically, let's say, wait until I was comfortable to make a gender transition.

JANAÉ: When you think about your voice, do you believe it plays a role in how others perceive your gender identity? If so, how?

CEE: I think so. I think the voice is one of the first things people notice about you. If you walk into a room, they'll see you, but then they'll scope you out. Well, I suppose the visual appearance is first. One of these first tells is how you speak. It does play a role in how others perceive me because it's a tell. When I'm walking into a space or to an audition, you know, I do my best to mitigate anyone else's thoughts about how I present myself or who I am. So, it's "Hi! I'm Cece Adamson, and I'll be singing ____". For me, that has been a point of reflection and evolution. I think that helps me to be affirmed in my identity as well as being connected to my voice.

JANAÉ: What emotions do you associate with your singing and speaking voice? I know that you said it affirms your identity. Could talk more about that affirmation and the emotions, particularly if you could name emotions, particularly in relation to trans identity?

CEE: Often joy. I think about my journey and just have to celebrate being alive. Several of my friends and colleagues are not alive due to various reasons, albeit health-wise or acts of violence. Anytime I'm able to be present in a space, or even I'm alone. I celebrate my life. I celebrate my voice. I celebrate my wide range of emotions. So, happiness and joy often come with that. Now and again, I've shifted between joy and sometimes sadness and regret because of my vocal training and its complicated journey.

At that time, I was coming through school. There weren't teachers who knew how to navigate or work with my instrument, being such a high-voiced person who presented as masculine at one time in life. I believe that many opportunities or doors were closed for me because I was not the norm. I didn't fit a box, and so the suppression or depression of my singing voice by previous teachers or advisors makes me sad sometimes. I often

think, “I was born at the right time, but also sometimes the wrong time.” Quite the juxtaposition. I think that if I were a little younger than I am today, there would now be access to teaching and working with trans voices and engaging in an intersectional, diverse pedagogy for teaching all types of people and voices. That wasn’t the case during my early schooling, so my voice has taken some hits. My voice has not developed in the way I wanted it to. If I had the affirming training (...), alas, that's the present-day knowledge coming through.

So again, happy, sad! I’m joyous and, at times, somewhat regretful about how I feel sometimes about my voice, but all in all, I have [my voice], and I want to continue to use it. Now that I’m wiser, I often say that it doesn't matter what voice part I am. I'm a singer, and I want to sing forever. That part brings me joy, so I focus on that part more than the past. There are things that I cannot change. I can continue to hold onto my craft and my own voice and do that.

JANAÉ: That's comforting to hear, and I can understand why it would bring such sadness. Thinking more on joy, as you brought up, have you ever considered parts of yourself or your trans identity as an asset or maybe an inhibitor?

CEE: As an asset. Yes, only because I also promote and advocate for all things diversity, equity, and inclusion, and so I think that identity makes sense. In that instance, it's certainly an asset. It's a voice, musically and experientially, that's often missing at the table and that can bring a different perspective into life. And then an inhibitor, not so much.

Well, there's this thing about performing artists, singers particularly, and singers of size. There’s still scandal and bias around opera singers and weight. That trope is still out

there. That isn't necessarily my trans identity, but it's coupled with that, in the fullest measure of identity as a whole. Some of that can show up in spaces. There are many trans and non-binary people who conform or can fit into a particular aesthetic, and others don't, and that's okay. In terms of that being a true inhibitor to me, my identity, or my life. I don't think so.

JANAÉ: What is your opinion on being black, trans, and treble voice user in the world of classical singing and opera?

CEE: Great question. I have many, many opinions about this. I think that blackness and opera have come a long way, but I think that there are issues with being trans or gender-nonconforming or gender binary or genderqueer that have not made their way to mainstream or the mainstage of opera yet. I often talk about my experience in which identity shows up in spaces. First, it's obvious that I'm black. When I walk into a space, people can have any number of assumptions, predetermined notions about how I move in my department, or what have you. Until I may disclose or share something, and there are other things that come out or reveal themselves to people, I'm always going to be black. I'll be whatever and who I am all the time, but the fact is that by showing up in spaces as a black musician, folks will label you. "You're a black singer," and that's fine. There is a prominence of black singers coming onto the scene, having experiences, being exposed to and showcased, and being presented opportunities to be on stage and offstage or even teaching. There's so much to be done to showcase the full totality of identity on stage. As a musician, as a singer, as a teacher, that blackness shows up often first, then transness or gender identity, and then the treble voice part is just my instrument; it's not like it is a

choice. I would rather be affirmed in my identity, in my treble voice, rather than dysphonia or dysphoria by using my lower voice.

When I was a younger singer, I would totally ignore anything that I called “in the basement.” Now that I am older and I am living life to truth and living truth to power, I embrace the fullness of my instrument, the lows, the middles, and the highs. When I said earlier that I want to sing forever, it doesn't matter what I sing. I want to be on stage. I want to perform. I want to do this work. It just so happens that I am black, and I am a trans person as well.

JANAÉ: You were talking earlier about your voice finding the love of music at the age of five or six. How did you discover your singing voice? Was it from being taken to church and singing? Was it from family members? Your hanging out with your grandmother? What were some of those key factors? Then, when you found it, who trained you?

CEE: Both my parents worked, and so I got dropped off at my grandmother's house, where she and my grandfather would babysit me. A lot of my education, work, and life came from watching PBS [Public Broadcasting Service]; in my case, it was MPT [Maryland Public Television]. We would watch Sesame Street, and I would sing along with that. Reading Rainbow and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood were staples of my upbringing. If it was educational and had music elements, I was zoned in. When both parents worked at night, I was staying at my grandmother's house in the evening. My grandparents and I would watch things like Masterpiece Theater, Mystery!, and Great Performances, which is the show that played all of the arts: music, theatre, dance, and opera. It was a great time! It was at that time, along with just hearing my grandmother sing around the house, that I found my love of music and singing. She [My grandmother]

had this great, bright, and high soprano voice. She just sounded like a bird. She was a petite woman but had a powerful, high, soprano voice.

She loved opera and loved classical music, and as I say, she passed that on to me. I think I discovered my own voice by mimicking hers. We'd sing all types of songs and even make up a few. Oh, gosh! I remember that we used to sing from hymnals. She was African American Methodist, but there was this Baptist hymnal in the house. I remember. It was hymn #41⁹⁴, "Oh, I Want to See Him," from a Baptist hymnal. It's funny how I remember that, but that was one of her favorite songs. She would always sing, and so I got to singing. Then I'd sing the melody, and she'd sing a descant. She taught me basic harmony, so then she would sing the melody, and I had to improvise a harmony that would fit the melody; we'd sing together. That's when both discovered my interest in singing and that I had developed a very accurate ear for music.

She was a member of her church choir. Then, one fateful Sunday, in the middle of service, she just said, "Okay, well, come on up here and sing for us. Lead us in that song. You know it."

JANAÉ: Really? How old were you?

CEE: This had to be about seven years old.

JANAÉ: Wow!

CEE: I'm like, "I don't... want to sing in front of people. I want to sing in the house. I don't want to sing in public." She just stared and smiled. And, of course, you know, in every Black church, the congregation started to hype me up and offer words of support and encouragement. The "You can do it, baby" and "Let God use you" poured from the

⁹⁴ "O I Want to See Him" from The New National Baptist Hymnal

congregation. I remember turning to my father, and he looked at me and said, “I know you’re not going to disappoint your grandmother.”⁹⁵ I distinctly remember rolling my eyes toward heaven and quietly saying, “Help me, Jesus!” I got up from the pew, and the congregation was clapping. I walked up to the front of the church, shaking. The choir director handed me a microphone (that I didn’t really know how to hold), and I sang. I sang the first verse as a solo, and then she [my grandmother] came down from the choir loft, and we led the rest of the hymn together.

That’s one of the most powerful moments and memories of my life. I’m reflecting on my journey. I’m reflecting on just how I’ve so far come as an artist, as a human, and as a person. It’s impactful that that key moment of being in her house, hanging out with her and singing, cooking with her, and, you know, watching TV with her (which is why I still love and remember *All My Children*; we didn’t only watch PBS). This is the reason why that has that moment; those moments continue to impact my life because of those moments singing with her. Every Christmas program or every holiday concert, I started singing regularly at church, and my little treble soprano voice would soar. I would eventually join the choir, and then just all those things happened, and I had a life full and immersed in classical music.

Now, this wasn’t new, because my dad played drums. My dad was a percussionist. He taught me everything else about music. My grandmother handled the classical and church music, and my dad was everything else, from Motown to rock, blues, and jazz. I had a full music education growing up in that household.

JANAÉ: You have the whole package.

⁹⁵ My grandmother, named Alethia, is my father’s mother.

CEE: Absolutely.

JANAÉ: So would you say that your training really came from family? When did you go into professional training? I know you said school.

CEE: From home and church, then I joined choirs. I love singing in the choir. I joined choirs in school; then there was the Maryland County Honors Chorus program;⁹⁶ I joined that in 4th grade (which wasn't supposed to happen). I did elementary honors chorus from grades 4 to 6, middle school honors chorus from grades 7 and 8, and finally, high school honors chorus from grades 9 to 12. I really became the poster child for that program. I was one of those folks who was able to be in the honors chorus so early because I had the ability to read music and sing very well. That was a very big accomplishment. To be in that program and how that music education program supported and helped me as a person. I remember the county music education supervisors; I believe that they oversaw all the music: choral, vocal, and instrumental. Ms. Virginia Sims and Mr. Joe Richter, they'd say to me, "Oh, it's great to have you back again." I also made friends at different schools in the county, so that was a good thing. And then I wanted to go to college.

JANAÉ: Wow!

CEE: Then I wanted to go to college and had the idea that I was going to be an accountant. No thanks, at least not yet. I went to a small school in New Hampshire, Franklin Pierce College then, and now a university. I had a really good time during my first two years there. My voice was still relatively high, but then I saw and felt a lack of development, so, being very adamant about what I wanted to do with my life, knowing

⁹⁶ Prince George's County Public School Honors Chorus

that my little school was not a big conservatory or a classical music school, sought out a teacher at a different college in the area. There was this New Hampshire Consortium of Colleges and Universities in the state, and the school a few towns over from Franklin Pierce was Keene State College. It was there that I met the late Dr. Carroll J. Lehman, and he was the one that set me on the path my junior year. I was able to, with a bit of a controversy, leave my voice teacher at Franklin Pierce to pursue voice lessons and other music classes through the consortium. Thank goodness that it didn't cost any extra money out of pocket. Keene State is a state school with a Bachelor of Music degree program. I was going to transfer but eventually said no, as I loved my experience at Franklin Pierce too much.

I only had two years left, but I was able to have voice lessons with Dr. Lehman, who just really showed me the way. This man was an exceptional musician. He himself was a bass-baritone. I was calling myself every voice type under the sun, from soprano to mezzo-soprano, male soprano, to sopranist, falsettist to countertenor, whatever. Carroll (or "Uncle Carroll," as I eventually started to call him) invested time into me and poured knowledge and vocal technique into me. He went the extra mile to help me figure out my singing voice. This man went online to one of those old-school AOL [American Online] ⁹⁷ chat groups and chat rooms to ask other voice teachers and professional artists technical and artistic questions and how to nurture and cultivate a voice like mine.

⁹⁷ America Online was a web-based company that, at its peak, dominated the early internet age. In the 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s, it was a go-to service for dial-up internet provision and a major e-mail and instant messaging provider. One of their popular features was chat rooms and groups, where internet users could engage in discussions with one another and the group in real-time, often about a specific topic and typically in an informal setting.

Then I was singing countertenor, and as a male-bodied person who sang very high, that meant it would be good for me to meet other male-bodied persons who sang very high, like a support group. Dr. Lehmann had me meet some exceptionally talented and exceptionally famous musicians. I didn't even know who these people were because my scope was so closed off, so narrow. Dr. Lehmann drove me from Rindge, New Hampshire, all the way to Poughkeepsie, New York, where I got to meet, have a lesson, and spend the full day with Drew Minter at Vassar College. That was also a day that I'd never forget. I told Drew that I wanted to sing opera and that I loved early music. "Then you must do it," Drew said.

"I will be an opera singer," I exclaimed.

Looking back, I didn't think that was possible until that very moment. The realization that my voice could do wonderful things was a novel idea and concept to me. See, it's these things. Unbeknownst to me, and frankly, my arrogant first teacher, as she didn't set me on a path to success, a career in the arts was possible. Once Dr. Lehman opened those doors up for me, I was like, boom, great! I got to finish my degree. Go get my Master's degree. Go sing, go audition for big companies, whatever. The fire was lit at that point in time! From there, I've been to schools all over the world: to Shenandoah University, in Winchester, Virginia, for my master's and advanced artist diploma, then eventually to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama London, and now, currently at the University of Washington, finishing my doctorate, very, very soon. All of that to say is that training through every teacher, I've evolved through a process of discovery, of being authentic, of being engaging, of not in a way hiding my light under a bushel, but to truly learn, to sing and be authentic and full, and engage with myself, regardless of what was going on

outside with the world, but regardless of what other opinions told me, I knew that if I was able to build this technique and build an instrument, build my voice in a way that I wanted to use it, then, I would be successful in my endeavors, and I think I have been, for the most part.

Some challenges occurred in my master's program at Shenandoah, and what happened at Franklin Pierce with my first voice teacher carried that weight, or what I often call trauma, into other spaces. So, happily, I was released from that when I got to London. It was a big thing.

JANAÉ: I want to ask a follow-up. You shared the journey. Now, you're earning your doctorate. Has it been straight through? Did you pause? How did you make that decision to get your terminal degree in music? Recognizing you want to sing for the rest of your life, understandably, so I can understand that decision. But how did you get there? Did you know, from being an accountant, that I wanted to do this?

CEE: I dropped the accounting major at Franklin Pierce but eventually went back for it. I came in as a music major, became a business major, then wanted to be an English major, and then one of the deans, Joan Epro, was like, "Girl! Figure it out. You want to be a singer. You're going to be a singer. Go back to music... and stop wasting paper and sending those Change of Major forms to my office." Well, you get direction like that, you take it. I subsequently went back to music and finished my degree there.

It was after my time in London, which was a fantastic time. My voice was settling and falling in alignment. It was an amazing instrument. It was solid. It was built. I had done the work with my teacher, the wonderful countertenor Andrew Watts. I got back to America, and I couldn't find any work. I could not find professional singing work. Not

one gig. That was soul-crushing. That was a big challenge for me, so much so that I left music and focused on other skills.

My other background in higher education administration came in handy after my time in London. I diverted my career from music to higher education administration and have worked my way up from hall director to assistant dean. It wasn't until the pandemic started that I was reckoning as I was sitting in my lonely apartment in Los Angeles, realizing that COVID-19 is real. People I know, my colleagues, and my family members have passed away from that. In that moment of solitude, I thought, if I was to die here alone, could I say that my life would have been fulfilled? The answer was No. So, I got on the internet and started applying for grad school, and said, "Okay, let's go for your doctorate." I said, "I want to be a doctor. I want to do this work." That experience led me to the University of Washington. It was hard to give up my job, and I had not been in school for several years, so coming back to school has been challenging but also rewarding because I still get to live and breathe music every day. That has been life-giving. That has been the solace, the balm of the pandemic, and just at any point in my life that I felt down. I've always turned to music. And so it's been life-giving that instance, too.

JANAÉ: I have a question about that time gap and a reference point you made about being a trans singer earlier. When you started out in music, the level of support and training was not as present as now. Would you say that this has been more beneficial to delay, and it supports more of your identity today rather than if you had gone straight through to the doctorate degree?

CEE: Oh, absolutely, 100%. I know that it wasn't until I got job security and worked in my job in Los Angeles that I began a significant part of my medical transition. So that, with that alone itself, was access to healthcare and to access to behavioral health. Those are the things that I couldn't get through my other jobs. It was that job, at that right time, the right place for me to live in the fullness of my identity. I'm grateful for many things, and grateful for that time because it got me to, in a way, 'grow up', but also to not be[...] What's the word? To not be delusional in terms of "Oh, well, I'm this big opera star, and I'm just waiting for my big break." That doesn't happen to many of us, darn near all of us. It took me out of this space to say that. While I would have loved to have been performing during that 15-year gap, I didn't leave music totally. I wasn't pursuing music as a career. I wasn't applying for many gigs. I wasn't seeking out opportunities. If someone needed me to sing, I would do it, but I wasn't doing that as my primary or even my secondary work. It was, sadly, a hobby at that point. Then the pandemic happened, and I sat in my large apartment in L.A. in my home office, with my digital piano, and said, "Well, let's sing." I kept doing it. I would make it a goal to sing a little each day, and I did.

Part of this thing is that as musicians, we have to have our needs met, and I never wanted to be a 'starving artist.' So, I had to reckon with myself. It was, "Well, are you going to choose to go to sit in the accounting firm office, or do you want to go and not be employed and go apply for this gig?" Girl, bump that gig; I want to eat! I want to live somewhere comfortable," and so I did that for a while. Again, it wasn't until the pandemic that I was like, "Well, you now have a decision. You're now at a fork in the road." Not to be dramatic, but my next decision, my next move, was going to determine

the path for the rest of my life. It was a very lucrative career and a job that I loved, and I believe I will eventually go back to that field. It was an either-or, go left or go right decision: fulfill the dreams of having your doctorate in music, and that is what I decided to do. It boggles my mind, to this very day, that the time away from music allowed me to grow up. It essentially allowed me to grow up to see the world and have a holistic view of my life. I said, “Okay, at this time, at this age. We go (sings) into the unknown.”

JANAÉ: I'm happy that your journey brought you back during that fork in the road. What is your dream career? What are your opera goals and opera dream roles?

CEE: That's a good question. Part of being a musician, I think, is that we all have little elements of, let's say, 'slight delusions' in addition to wanting to sing forever. I have this idea of my dream at one time (maybe still want to do this), but I wanted to be the General Manager of the MET.⁹⁸ I wanted to be the leader of the 'greatest (and toughest) show on earth.'⁹⁹ I guess dream roles right now are tough because all the roles for my voice type are rarely leading roles. But in the future, that remains to be seen. These days, the elements of what music is, what music does, and what music can be in the future are exciting. The idea of taking operas and roles and making them, adjusting them, or changing the key, changing the voice types of them, is rather exciting.

As an opera singer and fan of the art form, I am obsessed with certain characters. They are often called 'mad women.' Opera, in its grand scheme of stories of mostly historical stories, has a way of treating women poorly. In opera, what does madness look like (or hysteria) back then? Donna Elvira from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* would be a dream. It

⁹⁸ The Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

⁹⁹ This is a reference to former MET Opera General Manager Joseph Volpe and his book called *The Toughest Show on Earth: My Rise and Reign at the Metropolitan Opera*.

currently sits slightly just out of reach as it's written, but with some work post-dissertation, I think I could start that goal.

Outside of that, I would love to do lots of mezzo or countertenor roles. I've always been a big fan of Handel's operas and baroque works. While it may sound cheesy in terms of role or a career goal for mainstage opera, I love singing Dittre Dame in *Die Zauberflöte*. It's a smaller role, but I could do great things with it. Lastly, I'd say the role of Erda in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. Erda is the earth goddess and goddess of knowledge. It's a low role, a real contralto role. That's the one! I can say, "I made it," by singing Erda, and I would be content with whatever happens in my career afterward.

JANAÉ: Beautiful. As you think about those shows and roles. What professional role models or examples really bring you to say, this is the role I want to play? Are there any individuals in particular that have influenced your singing?

CEE: When I arrived at the Guildhall School, I opened my mouth to sing, and someone said, "Oh, my gosh! It's like Jessye Norman." She's the singer I admire most. Her grandeur, her work ethic, just the consummate professional, and, of course, her sound. My first opera watching with my grandmother was seeing Leontyne Price sing Leonora in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. I was like, "Oh, grandmother! Who is that Black woman? Oh. Black folks do this? I want to do it, too." So Jessye Norman is the one for me. Everyone, well, anyone who knows me, will tell you she's my role model. I have photos of her in my house, and I have her photo in my teaching studio because she means that much to me as an artist. It's funny, because it's mostly the Black women, from Leontyne Price to Shirley Verrett to 'La Norman.' Those women defied the odds and overcame herculean obstacles to present the highest quality and type of opera in their singing. It's funny that

they are all sopranos, albeit very different types of sopranos. Other people who come to mind are Cecilia Bartoli, Deborah Voigt, and Ruth Ann Swenson. All have a very special place in my heart and my musical ear. Again, they are very different singers.

My role model (and I pray that I meet her one day) is Natalie Stutzman. She is a contralto and a conductor, and that's more of conducting now. I have all her albums, and they are even on Spotify. I even have her physical albums, too, because her voice is so amazing. It just moves me. It's like I can feel her instrument when I hear her sing. The last person I'll mention is Jochen Kowalski, the German countertenor. My graduate advisor and director of the opera workshop when I was at Shenandoah, Bard Suverkop, gave me one of Kowalski's CDs during the second week of school. His sound was unlike any other countertenor I heard. His voice was mesmerizing. It was a rich, full-bodied sound. From that moment, Kowalski was the gold standard and the model for much of my work as a countertenor because I, too, had a bold, rich, and even countertenor voice.

Then I met my dear teacher in London, Andrew Watts, and I had just fallen in love with his sounds and how he used his voice. Andrew is a very smart man and a brilliant teacher. It's funny, but he was my first and only countertenor teacher. His studio at Guildhall had five countertenors at the time, and none of us sounded alike. Andrew's individualized approach ensured I was honest with my authentic sound. I still call him 'teacher' because he, like "Uncle Carroll," kept me honest and authentic. Carroll, Andrew, Lynn Holding, and my current teacher, Carrie Shaw, kept holding up the mirror so that I could see myself and my place in this art form. It's why (and they are a large part of why) I'm still singing today. Those are the people who influenced my singing and are my role models, so to speak, who give truth to power to doing good work and quality work in this field.

JANAÉ: As we think about, you've named males and females for the voices or individuals that were role models for you. What role has community or peer support played in your local training as a transgender woman? Have you received more support from certain identities than others? From a different lens, black, white, transgender community, how would you really, if you had to pull back the layers, [describe your experience of support among those with different] identities - older and younger, bearing out a lot of categories?

CEE: Yeah. But yeah, it's a great question. I think that peer support has been important, but only at a certain time. And I say this not to slight the American education system. But it wasn't until I got to Guildhall that I had felt [it], and I am still friends with many people, and we talk regularly.

In my time there, there was no competition in terms of singing against each other or what I call 'battling' with each other. It was like, "Honey, we got into Guildhall. We're all amazing!" A lot of my friends, my true friends, have left Guildhall and have pursued amazing international success. Many of them have recordings. Many of them are world-class. One of my great friends, a German soprano, Dorothea, just landed her first Bayreuth Festival gig. For me, it was like I really went to school with some amazing people. Peer support, in that instance, was without rancor or malice.

One of the best parts of being in London was that it was an international city, with singers and students from all over the globe. So, if you're speaking and singing in Italian, your Italian tenor friend and classmate will tell you, "That's wrong," or coach you through the diction in your aria. Your German soprano friend is going to say, "Oh, dear, your

diction's a little sloppy here.” That was the sort of support and community that helped me grow as an artist. That's one of the reasons why I am proficient in German lieder today, because of just being able to be precise and intentional. How do I support in terms of outside of music? I think community is important, but I've often found myself being a bit of a loner. Even back in my time at school, I felt as though I was the only trans person, as well as the only Black person. My friend groups and community groups within my classes and my work didn't really see that, because my physical transition happened a little later. But there were signs, and they were supportive, with bathrooms, sleepovers, etc., I just fit in as one of the girls. It happened slowly; the layers started to come off. By the time I left London, I was working on Verdi Requiem, which surprised many.

For years *she*'s been there.¹⁰⁰ There's been a transition happening ever so slowly, you know, through that process. I think it's essential to have support and community. I have close friends and family, but that's a bit different. My program, my doctorate program, is lonely. I'm by myself a lot. Yes, I have community and colleagues around school, but my doctoral program has been more of a solo journey.

JANAÉ: Is this being a loner come from being the only one with your identity in these spaces? Or is it a personality trait?

CEE: Oh. That's a tough question. I don't know. I think it comes from a bit of both. It could come from when I first got to the University of Washington. I didn't sing publicly. I was sitting in the workshops and classes and not singing. I don't know what that was about. Maybe I just hadn't sung publicly in a relatively long time. When I did open my mouth to sing, I saw the audience, and most of my peers stared at me with wide eyes and

¹⁰⁰ She meaning, “Cee”

dropped jaws. I heard a lot of “I didn't know that type of voice could exist” and “Oh, you're a mezzo?”

People would ask questions about something in class and look to me for answers. I would offer my advice if it were solicited. I wouldn't give out advice or my opinion willy-nilly. That can cause drama, and I've been there and done that.

I think between me being what I assumed was the only trans person, a Black trans person, and sussing out people before I could be open and, frankly, vulnerable. Singing is personal and quite vulnerable. The voice is the only instrument we can't remove and put on a shelf or a case somewhere. It's the essence of who you are. The voice is a part of your identity. I think I was coming into the space, in Seattle, Washington, which had never been before, and feeling out who was in the space, who was in the room. Who is the friend, and who is the foe kind of a thing? Then again, I'm the youngest of my three siblings and the baby of the family. As my siblings were older, I was always a loner. As a Black transfemme, sometimes there's safety in being alone.

JANAÉ: One thing I want to touch upon. You said in the class space that when it comes to music, you'll contribute and support other people and operate as a loner. Have you noticed that you give to others in the music spaces and create that other type of community when it comes to music?

CEE: I do. I know what it means to be a great colleague, and I think that is not often taught in schools or in life. I think that it's a skill that I think people don't necessarily have, either in professional engagements, or in acting as a director or an [assistant director] for opera productions, or in singing in a production myself, it's a skill that I think people don't necessarily have. I can't say why or why not. I just know for me that

the curriculum at Guildhall was just that. My colleague and I were together all the time. We had our moments free from each other, but we were in classes, singing together daily with our leader, professors, and coaches. We had Eugene Asti, an outstanding pianist, and a fantastic collaborative artist. He would be our teacher for a term in the German repertoire course. It would be him teaching both the student repetiteur and us postgraduate singers, and on other days, it would be you and Eugene leading and teaching from the piano, working in front of the class. You would get up, sing your piece, and he'd give feedback. Then, you also had your colleagues sitting no less than 10 feet away from you, looking, examining, critiquing, raising hands, and asking questions to provide feedback, all under Eugene's guidance. It was that space. It was collegial. It was never like, you know, "Oh, you suck," or "This is flat," or whatever nonsense or those catty things you may think you would hear. It was truly learning how to improve your craft. Comments like, "Now I would try this instead," or questions like, "What happens if you try a different approach." It became these 'masterclass' and 'workshops,' five days a week. The postgraduate program has about 15-20 singers, and these courses would also be open to advanced undergrads, so they, too, were learning who and how to be in this musical field. We were all together, figuring it out together. I think that as a community, as a support system, and as a colleague, I brought some of that back to America and brought those concepts and ideas into other spaces. Still, I can also be a support or reflective, sometimes, often, like holding up the mirror. "Hey! Here you go! Look at this. I see this, or I hear this. What do you think? What do you hear? What do you see?"

JANAÉ: How would you advise someone, let's say, a teacher or vocal coach, to work with your voice?

CEE: I think I would advise the teacher to be patient. I would advise them to truly be open to the experience they will witness or hear. I'd advise that they leave bias outside of the studio door. They say, "Okay, you're in front of me now. You make these sounds. This is your voice. Let's figure some things out. Let's play." I think an element of play and experimentation needs to happen within lessons and working with voices.

Of course, we want to do well, be good, and sing efficiently, correctly, and properly, but we're not machines. While an engineered recording can achieve perfection, it does not offer the experience of live music—not the experience of sharing and being with your teacher or learning your craft.

There has to be an element of laughter. I mean, I always laugh at myself as a teacher myself. I am like, "We're going to laugh today!" I'm not going to laugh *at* you, per se. But we're going to laugh together. We'll find that moment of bringing sparkle, joy, and connection to your sound. I would advise someone to have that approach as well-to be inquisitive about the person and the voice in front of you. I'll note that as singers, we may have a lot of baggage and carry a lot to our lessons. One day can be great, and the next can be absolute trash. One day, a student can be full of joys, smiles, and laughing, with all synapses firing, and another day, it can be nothing but sobs and tears and disconnection. This is because other things, internally and externally, impact our voice. I would advise the teacher or the coach to lead with kindness.

JANAÉ: Hmm. Wow!

CEE: If there's access to this, I'd also advise truly becoming a thought partner or creative partner with the student. Ask them about their goals. I believe teachers and coaches have an obligation to help pivot, adjust, or provide knowledge about changing some of those

goals if they're not achievable within a certain time frame. All that to say, I have a teacher who was able to truly spend some time with me to get to know me as a person.

So, when I mentioned things about my goals in my lessons, it was through the element of care and longevity that this teacher said. "If that's a goal for you, we'll work on it.

However, I would advise you that this will not be of industry standard. This is not going to fit into the mold of what you think it is because..." and so that, as I say to my friends, knocked the delusion right out of me. It was, "Okay, I may never get to that point..."

Whatever that was in my thoughts or my goal, the way forward was to pivot. "So let's pivot. Let's pivot to something that's healthy," she says. That's what I would advise. I would advise it. It takes more than just sitting at a piano, doing vowels, and technique. I think that intake, quality time, and that moment are important to foster and teach holistically. Show me things I may not know or my blind spots, too.

JANAÉ: How would you advise someone, composers, librettists, or other artists, to create or adapt works for your voice?

CEE: Great question. As a transgender voice user, there isn't much work written specifically for our unique voices. Yes, we can sing the classical canon as it's written or with some modifications. For something more modern or contemporary, I would advise folks to create for our voices. Again, when I was in London, I took a class called "Creative Voices," which was led by the amazing mezzo-soprano Sarah Walker. In the class, she paired up a pianist, a composer, and a singer for the term to create and co-create a piece of music. Let me tell you, that course and experience were life-giving. Truly working with a composition student and helping them understand my unique and

specific voice was special. Then, I learned what composers have to do to plan and prepare music, from harmonics to form, style, and structure. Then, getting feedback from the pianist and workshopping these new pieces under Sarah Walker's tutelage was mind-blowing! I performed a song cycle on my final doctoral recital, composed by my dear colleague in that class. My friend, Alistair, who has since passed away, was so talented and inspiring. He took the time to examine my voice and even attended one of my voice lessons to get a greater understanding of my voice.

In speaking about creating or adapting works for voices. I mean, why not? Honey, Mozart has been dead for a few hundred years. We can deal with a refresh or a new approach. We can love our traditions, but also, we can change them. Why is this opera story about misogyny still important? How can we adapt it to present-day understanding or experiences? Or just create new works?

I would advise someone in terms of working my voice; specifically, it is getting to know the highs and lows, literally and figuratively. Knowing what subject matters resonates with me and means a lot to me. I am a Black trans person, and I am sick of hearing and singing about Black trauma. I am sick of operas or works or stories that talk about, you know, the essence of Black people in a negative light or the essence of Black trans people. For example, there are a few scholars that I enjoy who speak and write about Afro-futurism. That can explore trans and non-binary people and our voices. Outside of that, for a different approach, does it matter that I am Black? Does it matter that I'm trans? Listen, I can sing these notes; here is my range. Just write for me or, better still, write with me and people like me in mind. What about incorporating black stories, trans stories, and stories of varying dimensions of difference into the work? That's one of my

other biggest gripes about composition. I believe every composition student should at least take a class or a short course in composing for the voice. The voice is uniquely human. The voice is uniquely made of us. That's what I'll say.

JANAÉ: As you talk about your voice being uniquely made for you, have you ever thought about speech therapy to aid your transition?

CEE: No, I haven't. I know that the literature talks about speech therapy and ways that, for example, trans women can shift and create and navigate their voice, but, you know, as an inner-city Black youth, I didn't have access to speech therapy growing up and during parts of my transition. I did have access to speech therapy during my time in London.

When I was at the Guildhall School, I met a gentleman who was working on his doctorate at the time. His name was Ron Morris, now Dr. Ron Morris, and he was from Australia. He was visiting there, working with students on breathing and technique, which is called the Accent Method Breathing. It was through The Accent Method¹⁰¹ that I got connected with someone. That did some speech work, not speech specifically in terms of affirming my trans voice, but in terms of just getting my speech together. I used to have an exceptionally bad lisp. It was horrible. In fact, it was one of the significant barriers to my furthering my career as a youngster. I didn't have access to those things to correct my issues then. They went unchecked until I got to my master's program in London. My instructors at Guildhall said, "This will not do."

JANAÉ: That had to be tough.

¹⁰¹ Accent Method, designed by Svend Smith, is a holistic therapy regime that coordinates respiration, phonation, articulation, and resonance to produce clear and well-modulated speech. Ron Morris and Janice Chapman pioneered its use in classical singing, adapting it to work within a singing teaching context. Ron Morris and Linda Hutchinson outlined the technique in their book *If in Doubt, Breathe Out! Breathing and Support for Singing Based on the Accent Method*.

CEE: To be a Guildhall Artist, a designation they put on you once you finish your two-year degree, you need to be proficient in your craft. The idea is that when you step out on stage, you are representing yourself as a professional and the School. Guildhall School was more like a professional school, like a finishing school. You learned how to be a professional in many aspects. When giving recitals, taking gigs, talking to the public, etc, there was decorum, and I feel that that helped me with my speech. Some say I have a bit of a British accent when I speak professionally, but I like to think clear diction is essential, and the British or transatlantic accent helps. (That all started when I would watch Masterpiece Theatre or British comedies and dramas with my grandmother.) While that didn't aid in my transition, per se, I learned how to shift and use my speaking voice in a way that was affirming to me. It just so happens that I took those lessons into other facets of my life and my transition.

JANAÉ: What advice would you give to other transgender singers who are considering or undergoing a hormonal transition?

CEE: It takes time, depending upon who you are and what you're navigating. For folks taking testosterone, the voice can shift quickly, seeming almost overnight. If you're a trans masculine or transman, know that the ingestion of testosterone can be harsh on the system, whereas, for trans fem folks, there is no change marked through taking estrogen for postpubescent trans voices. My advice is to navigate where you want your voice to sing. There are many transmasculine folks still singing in their upper registers, soprano or mezzo. Those folks that sing up there are generally not on testosterone, whereas the folks that are transfeminine or trans women can naturally sing (post-puberty); they can sing in the lower registers, tenor, or bass. If you want to navigate your transition successfully,

figure out who you are and where you want your voice to be, and then take the time to build your instrument. Vocal dysphoria and gender dysphoria are real. There is a connection between voice and identity. My advice is to do your work, talk to trans and nonbinary people, and find community. You have to learn what you can, be it about formants, resonance, the vocal tract, and beyond. Of course, one can speak with a vocologist, a speech pathologist, a voice therapist, or an ENT. Those people and others who may form your vocal care team are helpful, but you, as an individual, must take responsibility and do your work.

I remember being in London. It wasn't that I was having a voice transition. I was with a new teacher, Andrew Watts. After a few weeks of working, he said, "It's like you're the Six Million Dollar Man... We will rebuild you!" So, brick by brick and piece by piece, we did away with old and inefficient techniques and moved to build a voice that was and is of a higher caliber, a voice that is proficient and efficient to do the work as a world-class artist.

JANAÉ: What qualities do you value most in a teacher or mentor, especially in relation to your identity?

CEE: Hmm! It's the ability to affirm my identity. The ability to affirm me as a person, as a human standing in front of them doing something exceptionally vulnerable. It is the one that has carried concern for me, similar to what I would look for in a teacher.

Patience and honesty are also necessary. An honest teacher will not set me up for failure. My teachers and mentors have poured into me some excellent skills and knowledge, not only about music and the world of work in the business but also about life. I learned to develop other interests and hobbies away from the practice room.

The last thing I'll say about that is to examine whether those teachers and mentors have a vision or are forward-looking enough to assist me in navigating or avoiding barriers in my career development. As a coach, teacher, and mentor, I do that work for people. I think it's essential that I value that. I value that in my own work, and I value that in my teachers and my coaches. If they see an issue, they will say, "That's a hurdle or a barrier that can be overcome. We're going to work through it." It is important that my teachers and coaches help me get to where I can go, not 'want to' go. As a dear friend of mine says, "You're never on an island by yourself."

JANAÉ: What information would you have or want your voice teacher to know?

CEE: That, in a way, "Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind."¹⁰² I would like for them to know (...). The world today is different than when I was growing up and becoming my authentic self, so it is important to take great care in affirming or supporting your students. I would like my teacher to know that my voice, my body, and my identity are not monolithic. That I show up in spaces in a myriad of different ways. When I show up to my lesson at your door, I am embraced in that space. (Photos and text were going around on social media about how choir rooms and band rooms in grade school were places of comfort and solace for people.) I believe it is the same for teachers and coaches. I could present challenges when I step into my lesson, but I know the person there has my back. We may disagree with something, but there's never a point where it is an insurmountable challenge, so be kind.

JANAÉ: Clear is kind, and unclear is unkind. What has been the most rewarding aspect of your journey as a transgendered singer?

¹⁰² A quote from *Atlas of the Heart* by Brené Brown.

CEE: I don't know. I think rewarding is doing the work I'm doing now. My research is rewarding. Do I want to perform? Absolutely. Do I want to be on stage somewhere? Absolutely! But I think the [most] rewarding perspective of my journey as a trans singer is documenting the work I'm doing now, because this is missing from the research. I don't see myself, my identity, or my intersectional identities in the work or the research. This is rewarding already; just stepping up and stepping out and stepping on stage at any point in time is rewarding, because, trans or not, we all have a voice to share, and we may do it, either in a speech or in a job. I get to do it on stage. I get through every day. When I wake up every morning, I wake up, and I'm proud of that journey. I'm alive, again, because many of my colleagues and friends are not here to see it. I would say also, as rewarding as it is for you, it's also a gift for others.

JANAÉ: Absolutely! If you could share one key, takeaway, or message for those who may be listening to your story, what would it be?

CEE: That's tough. I want to be cheesy and say, "Keep calm and carry on," but I think that is one of the things I would say. One key message is your voice matters, and if you choose to do this, if you are a teacher or a mentor, or a coach, or have a friend, or know someone who is pursuing education in the arts, music, pursuing singing as a hobby, a gift, or a livelihood, that their voice deserves to be heard. May they be heard in the quietness of their shower, and may they be heard in the loudness of a karaoke bar. May they be heard on one of the greatest stages on earth. What I would share with someone who's listening is that their voice matters. That transgender, specifically, transfemme voices matter, and there's room for everyone. So don't leave us out.

JANAÉ: How do you define success in your singing?

CEE: Whew! To me, success shines when I know I've truly given my all. It's about being fully prepared for the work I was brought on to do. Success feels wonderful when I'm enjoying both what I'm doing and what I'm singing. Often, I realize I'm in that special success zone when I find myself so immersed in the performance that I can hardly remember what happened afterward. It's as if I've been transformed or taken to another place entirely! When I say I'm prepared, I mean I've really put in the effort and know exactly what I need to do. I've studied my languages, completed my translations, and can sing it even in my sleep! However, I've found that true success in my journey isn't just about performing—there's so much more to it.

Success means taking care of my body and mind and being in tune with what needs to happen. The performance setting success means that I am connected to, or on the same wavelength for, or with my colleagues, albeit a pianist, other singers, or members of the creative team or ensemble.

Success is also learning from challenges and setbacks. I remember things like auditions and where I would not successfully obtain the role or the part. I often times go back to the voice studio and assess and create a new action plan for the next opportunity to present myself and my art.

At the end of the day, I know that I have done my best work and have presented my best self in that moment. That does not mean that my performance was the best. My father always says, "Proper preparation prevents poor performance." So when I step out on the stage to perform anything from an opera role to a solo in church, it is that I have done the homework and prepared for the task at hand.

Music has the power to heal, to move, to love, to inspire, to do many wonderful and powerful things. So when I sing whatever I'm singing, I say a little prayer before performing publicly. I say, "Regardless of the words and me as a being, that the spirit and the intent of the music presented from me reaches and meets the needs of the person hearing it." You see, music and singing are spiritual for me. It is a gift, and I am committed to using it responsibly. There's a poem by George Parsons Lathrop, [titled] "Music of Growth," which I found because composer B.E. Boykin¹⁰³ composed a song with Lathrop's text. I knew it was special when I first heard it, but it incorporates my fundamental appreciation and success in music. The song and poems start with: 'Music is in all growing things.'

JANAÉ: Who was the first person to make you go into a tailspin about your voice?

CEE: That's an interesting question! One experience comes to mind. After years of growth, unlearning, and relearning, I will say that this tailspin experience changed me. I often say, "We learn what to do and what not to do." If you pay really close attention, it's easy to see what you will take with you and what you will leave behind.

My first voice teacher, let's call them L.B. I arrived at their studio as a young and inexperienced singer, but with joy and curiosity to learn about this field. And over a period of two years, I was set on a path that was unsustainable.

You see, I always had a treble voice, and that voice was exceptionally high in the early part of my life and my career. When I got to L.B.'s studio, there wasn't a roadmap for teaching my specific voice. This was before any serious thought about transitioning. In a

¹⁰³ B.E. Boykin is a contemporary African American composer, conductor, and pianist. Among her many accolades and accomplishments, she is an Assistant Professor of Music at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

way, it was helpful, because they saw me as, “You have these notes and this range, so you’ll sing this repertoire.” For that, I don’t fault them. Although it’s a cookie-cutter or a downright lazy way to teach, I went with it. I didn’t know any better, and I didn’t know what advocacy looked like then. But things took a turn after I had shown some promise and had some success.

After my first year, my voice had gone through a slight shift, and I had inquired about singing different repertoire or simply adjusting the repertoire that they were giving me. I was met with some slight resistance on this at first and was told, “Just sing what I give you.” Now, I, being a young person, followed suit, believing that this teacher had my best interest and safety and my longevity as a primary focus for them teaching me. Wow, naïve! Well, I discovered that that was not the case.

When I got to my master’s program and in subsistent schooling, there is a reason why my peers and colleagues often looked to me for support or “free coaching.” You see, I’m not the best pianist, but I know a lot of rep from my time with L.B. I was trained as a soprano, and by trained, I mean everything from general song repertoire to opera arias to oratorio solos from every or just about every prominent composer and the classical canon. So, when I realized that I wouldn’t benefit (from a singer standpoint) from that massive amount of knowledge, I sought to casually “advise or coach” my colleagues. During my first two years of study, I was impassioned. I was hungry for music. I would learn repertoire so quickly. It was literally one song per day. I’d start in the morning by doing (but mainly finding translations in my ‘Ring of Words’ book). In the afternoon, I’d move on to learn the melody. By the end of dinner, I’d head to the practice room and sing to put it together, and before hanging out with friends, I’d perform it with my pianist

colleague. (This is why my rep list for my doctoral program application was so extensive.)

After my second year of study with LB, I knew that I would not be a “legit” soprano. So, I found a new teacher, who sent me on a path to success, on a path to pursue a viable career as an opera singer. My new teacher told me that I would have to unlearn many things and relearn more.

So, I know a lot of music, and when friends and colleagues ask me, “How do you know that Haydn aria?” or say, “You know those Messiah sopranos better than I do!” or “Can you help me discover new ornaments for ‘Let the Bright Seraphim’? I offer support where and when I can. There’s room for all of us in the vast and welcoming music space. Those questions are the things that I can look back on and laugh at now. There’s a story I told about one time at Guildhall. One day, walking the corridor, searching for a practice room, I heard a pianist (a collaborative pianist) playing the intro to ‘Let the Bright Seraphim.’ So, being myself, I waited until he got to the singer's entrance, and then I randomly walked in and began to sing the aria! The funny thing is, he kept playing until I finally said, “Ok, this is a little too high! Can we take it down to 415, maybe even a third lower?” It was an enjoyable moment! What a way to meet new people! I thought I startled him, but he was unphased and said, “Hey, we were in the groove. I didn’t mind.” He and I eventually worked together in a studio recital with the appropriate repertoire. News of that random event spread through the school, and the pianists were lovingly put on alert that I could pop in at any time to read through the song repertoire. But I wonder if I had had some compassionate and, frankly, some common-sense care, I would be on a different pathway or at a different level as a musician. I can’t take those

two long, arduous, challenging, and informative years back. I still use some of the repertoire I learned back then in my teaching today. Again, you learn from people. You can learn what to do, and you can learn what not to do.

While I am not a soprano and will never be a soprano (though I believe in never say never...), I know a large amount of the repertoire. A lot of my education was also listening, so if you're talking about some obscure opera or the standards, I likely know it. I know many of the soprano, mezzo, contralto, and countertenor arias or ensemble numbers from opera—even obscure operas. I enjoy the opera titled *Rienzi* by Wagner. And there is an opera called *Palestrina* by Hans Pfitzner that, one day, I would love to produce. Okay, those are not the best examples, but opera, of all kinds, holds a significant space in my life.

So now I don't sing soprano, obviously! But I still keep a few tricks up my sleeve. Generally, when I was in London and subsequent places after that in my career, whether it was a karaoke, a cast party, or just a random house party alongside my musician friends, I had a few numbers I would sing. I became known as a 'party soprano.' Listen, honey, even at my age, and thank goodness for the excellent teaching that eventually came along and the stable technique I have today, I can sing a mean *Pamina* (*Ach ich fühl's!*).

JANAÉ: Is there anything we haven't covered today that you feel is important to share about your experience or your voice?

CEE: I don't think so. I think we talked about a lot today. I think the discussion can move a different way, meaning it could talk about vocal technique or approaches to singing, but I think this conversation is enough to get people started. My work will continue into the

next chapter of my life, post-degree. I believe that the experiential learning of this document and the sharing of experiences of transfemme folks are important enough to enter the conversation and the chat, as they say.

JANAÉ: What do you want individuals to understand from everything you shared today? What is your plan for sharing your story? It takes a lot of courage, reflection, and vulnerability to state what you shared earlier. What do you want the result to be from you sharing your story? What do you want to happen?

CEE: In the grand scheme of things, I want to see people with voices like mine and all voices given the opportunity to present and represent themselves in classical music. That's the point, right? I think classical music can be a final frontier for appreciating and celebrating the diverse identities of people. I believe it's important to create this conversation now and explore it further after my degree. This way, composers can create more music about us as individuals and, generally, about transness and blackness. People should learn how to engage with transfemme individuals in the art world. Those in academia should embrace and grow from the experiences and voices of transgender black transfemme individuals, both literary and actual.

JANAÉ: Wonderful. Well, thank you. Cee, for your time. Thank you for your impact, and thank you for your research.

CEE: Thank you for your time and your assistance with this, Dr. Janaé.

In my interview with Dr. Janaé Collier, I discussed self-perception, advocacy, and family influence. As Table 3 shows, the direct quotes from our conversation provide valuable insights into these topics and other subjects.

Table 3 Themes and Direct Quotes from Cee Adamson Interview

Themes	Direct Quotes
Identity and Self-Perception	<p>"I've always identified as 'femme' or 'transfemme'... My voice has always been high and feminine through my lens.</p> <p>"The visual appearance is first, but one of the first tells is how you speak... I do my best to mitigate anyone else's thoughts about how I present myself or who I am."</p> <p>"My vocal journey has been about finding alignment between my true self and the sounds I create. Even back in my time at school, I felt as though I was the only trans person, as well as the only Black person."</p> <p>"When I walk into a space, it's obvious that I'm Black. Then, people may notice my trans identity, and my voice is another layer. These parts of my identity often shape how I am perceived."</p>
Othering, Setbacks, Resilience, and Reclamation	<p><i>"There weren't teachers who knew how to navigate or work with my instrument, I believe that many opportunities or doors were closed for me because I was not the norm."</i></p> <p><i>"When I was in school, there was no roadmap for teaching someone like me." "My early teachers didn't know what to do. It was a cookie-cutter approach that didn't support my unique needs."</i></p> <p>"I got back to America, and I could not find professional singing work. That was soul-crushing."</p> <p>"I've had to fight to reclaim my voice from past teachers. My new teacher told me that I would have to unlearn many things and relearn more."</p> <p>"I want to sing forever. It doesn't matter what voice part I am. I want to be on stage."</p>
Family Influence and Legacy	<p>"My grandmother loved opera and classical music, and she passed that love on to me."</p> <p>"My grandmother, we'd sing all types of songs and even make up a few... She was a member of her church choir. Then, one Sunday, she just said, 'Okay, come on up here and sing for us.'</p> <p>"My dad was a percussionist. He taught me everything else about music. My grandmother handled the classical and church music, and my dad was everything else, from Motown to rock, blues, and jazz."</p> <p>"Seeing Leontyne Price sing Leonora in Verdi's <i>Il Trovatore</i>. I was like, 'Oh, grandmother! Who is that Black woman? Oh. Black folks do this? I want to do it, too.'"</p>
Diversity, Advocacy, and Change	<p>"I am sick of hearing and singing about Black trauma... I want to see more stories that celebrate the fullness of our identities.</p> <p>"I promote and advocate for all things diversity, equity, and inclusion... voices like mine are often missing at the decision-making tables."</p> <p>"In speaking about creating or adapting works for voices. I mean, why not? We can do with a refresh or a new approach. We can love our traditions, but also, we can change them."</p> <p>"I think classical music can be a final frontier for appreciating and celebrating the diverse identities of people."</p>

CHAPTER 7. FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

Findings

Analysis of Themes Across Interview Subjects

Identity, Career and Institutional Oppression

A key theme shared among the three interviewed artists is how their gender identities influenced their career trajectories. Each artist discussed the profound impact of their trans identity on their professional experiences, highlighting both challenges and the unique perspectives they bring. All three artists navigate the rigid structures of classical music institutions, which often struggle to accommodate diverse gender identities. The traditional norms of the classical music industry—rooted in a history of rigid gender roles and conservative vocal classification systems—do not easily adapt to artists who fall outside the binary framework. This shared struggle highlights a fundamental lack of inclusivity in classical music, where gender-based expectations and biases affect professional opportunities and talent recognition, notwithstanding racial identity as Black singers.

An emergent theme among all three artists was the fact that they embraced and categorized themselves within traditional terminology (dramatic soprano, mezzo soprano, etc) and within standard operatic roles, while also being aware how this terminology binds them in ‘boxes’ that they say don’t always fit. It is well documented that finding “an authentic voice” that matches one’s identity is a key part of the mental health journey for many transgender people, and much of the current vocal pedagogy literature on the subject of teaching transgender voices advocates strongly for empowering students to define their own voices in that regard; what the literature does not do is to advise people

with power (teachers, opera directors) to pursue more aggressive forms of deconstructing those boxes in professional contexts. If much of our operatic repertoire is built in ways that require such rigid conformity to historical norms, isn't the endpoint for a student with professional aspirations, regardless of how open-minded their teacher may be, that they will *still* be measured against rigid expectations that individual musical works have acquired over the centuries? The interviews suggest that, indeed, rigid preconceived notions about how one should look and sound are, in essence, a way in which the field is *not honoring highly qualified transgender individuals' right to claim their authentic identity fully as artists*. Why is it not possible to lightly re-orchestrate 'Samson et Dalila' for a transgender mezzo whose voice doesn't fit the score as it is, but who could sing the role and tell the story very well? Why is it not possible to cast the romantic lead to match a talented transgender singer, rather than worry that the transgender singer might not match the preferred cisgender singer? If truly institutions and individual allies wish to serve this community equitably, these are the questions we need to be asking.

Mentorship and Community Support

Mentorship emerged as a critical element in the success of all three artists, underscoring the importance of support networks in their development as musicians. Tona Brown emphasized the role of open-minded instructors who accepted her voice authentically, particularly in classical music, where there *was* limited understanding of trans voices. Nowadays, acceptance and better education about the transgender voice experience has become more common thanks to scholars and researchers in the literature review and national associations such as the National Association of Teachers of Singing

(NATS), American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), and the British Voice Association (BVA). An interesting emergent theme throughout the interviews is narratives that emphasize drawing from intersectional communities for both emotional and material support. In some cases, the ‘community’ being referenced is centered on a collegiate cohort; in others it is ‘singers’ more broadly; and in others it is the queer community. A question begins to emerge within these examples - do the subjects find themselves having specific needs met by different communities and consciously curating what they ask for, what they expect, and what they think is expected from them in these different intersectional environments. If cast in a production in which they are the only Black singer or only transgender singer, how might their experience be if cast in other contexts? As a teacher or someone shaping the behavior of a collegiate program do you need to know about cultivating strong community and helping your students build up their intersectional connections as they are becoming themselves as an artist and as a human?

Resilience and Advocacy

Resilience and advocacy appear in the narratives of all three artists, who use their platforms to push for greater inclusivity and visibility in the classical music industry. Tona Brown views her advocacy as part of a larger movement. She believes that the recognition of trans voices will help shape the future of opera. Her resilience is evident in her commitment to mentoring and empowering younger artists. Breanna Sinclairé frames her advocacy as a fight for the inclusion of marginalized voices, particularly emphasizing the need for representation of Black trans women in classical spaces. I see my vocal journey as an act of reclamation, expressing a desire to sing freely despite societal

constraints. My advocacy is integrated into my role as an educator, where I champion inclusive teaching practices.

Resilience however is not only represented by pushing for change in the establishment. A fascinating emergent theme within the interviews was the extent to which preserving one's sense of self (long-term resiliency) was asserted by the subject putting themselves in spaces in which they held the power. In Breanna's case, she wrote grants to create spaces where she could control her artistic activity; in Tona's case, she aggressively sought teachers in whose space she felt nurtured. While trauma requires resilience, it also requires relief, and these narratives draw out a common thread amongst those who persist: the willingness and ability to create one's own safe spaces apart from convincing others to participate.

Interviews versus Pedagogy Literature: Intersections, Gaps, and Emergent Themes

The comparison of the literature review and interview data from Tona, Breanna, and myself reveals both significant consensus and some notable discrepancies. Vocal gender dysphoria was a central focus in both the literature and interviews. According to Evan Kennedy and Susan L. Thibeault, in "Voice–Gender Incongruence and Voice Health Information–Seeking Behaviors in the Transgender Community," self-perceived voice gender incongruence is one of many voice and communication challenges faced by gender-diverse people. This concern has predominantly been investigated in the past through the perspective of feminine-identifying individuals seeking feminine-sounding

voices.”¹⁰⁴ However, while the literature discusses this broadly in a clinical context, the participants provided impactful personal and vivid accounts of the emotional distress they faced during their training. Breanna, for instance, shared experiences of frustration and discomfort when instructors failed to recognize her vocal dysphoria, illustrating a need for more empathy and psychological sensitivity in teaching practices—something current literature promotes in theory but which may still not be the norm in practice.

Similarly, there was a strong emphasis on inclusive and individualized pedagogy in the literature, with many scholars advocating for tailored teaching approaches that respect the unique needs of transgender singers at the highest levels of professional voice training; the two participants and I are professional-level musicians with conservatory level degrees. Yet, in practice, the participants experienced a gap between this ideal and reality. Tona noted that many teachers still relied on traditional gendered classifications, such as labeling voices strictly as soprano or tenor, which did not align with her identity during her vocal and personal development. Breanna and I echoed these sentiments, finding that, while some teachers attempted to adapt their methods, their knowledge of gender-affirming strategies in cultivating a trans femme singer was often limited or inconsistent. It's important to acknowledge that many of the incidents described in the interviews happened before researchers began publishing in earnest, and further research on the current state of university training for transgender students is needed.

¹⁰⁴ Evan Kennedy and Susan L. Thibeault, “Voice–Gender Incongruence and Voice Health Information–Seeking Behaviors in the Transgender Community,” *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* 29, no. 3 (August 4, 2020): 1569, https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_AJSLP-19-00188.

A significant difference emerged in the consideration of race and intersectionality. Although the literature briefly acknowledges systemic barriers and the lack of racial diversity among transgender voice users, researchers have not fully explored the compounding effects of race and gender identity. Tona, Breanna, and I, as Black transfemme singers, provided concrete examples of racial bias and microaggressions in our vocal training experiences. We described feeling hypervisible in predominantly white classical music spaces, often tokenized or subject to stereotypes about our capabilities. This lived reality goes beyond the limited references in the literature, pointing to an urgent need for more intersectional research that addresses the unique challenges faced by racially marginalized transfemme singers, specifically Black transfemme singers.

The theme of collaborative, interdisciplinary support emerged as another area of difference. While existing literature endorses a multidisciplinary method that includes voice teachers, speech therapists, and medical professionals (e.g. vocal care teams), participants noted that such collaboration was often sporadic, fragmented, or non-existent. A potential barrier to speech therapy and other coordinated care can be cost and access to such programs and services. Tona and Breanna have never collaborated with a speech-language pathologist. I encountered difficulties securing coordinated care, with miscommunications among various practitioners resulting in contradictory advice and frustration. I only tackled speech therapy through the Accent Method. This underscores a disparity between the ideal interdisciplinary model depicted in the literature and the fragmented, uncoordinated care frequently experienced by participants. Notably, from a cultural perspective, Tona, Breanna, and I, as Black transfemme individuals, have adeptly adjusted our voices according to our backgrounds and environments, enabling them to

effectively "pass" as feminine in both speaking and singing. Each has access to our upper vocal registers, allowing us to communicate and sing comfortably in higher pitches.

In terms of voice feminization techniques, the literature and interviews emphasized the importance of exercises aligning the voice with gender identity. Participants like Breanna found these techniques crucial in their vocal journey, yet they also faced limitations that needed to be fully addressed in the literature. While many sources in the review focus on technical strategies such as pitch elevation, participants pointed out that these exercises often felt artificial and disconnected from their broader artistic and expressive goals. I, in particular, stressed the need for a more holistic approach beyond pitch adjustments to include elements of resonance, articulation, and overall vocal quality that align with the singer's identity and artistic aspirations. Resonance, articulation, and overall voice quality are, however, addressed in recent texts by Liz Jackson Hearn, William Sauerland, and others.

Overall, the participants' narratives provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of their challenges, particularly regarding the intersections of race, gender, and artistic expression than much of the broad research on transgender voices. This suggests that while the literature is moving towards more inclusive and individualized pedagogical approaches, albeit at a glacial pace in the field itself, there is still much work to be done to translate these ideas into effective, empathetic, and culturally responsive practice, especially in addressing the compounded challenges of race and achieving truly interdisciplinary support. As Nancy Bos states about moving the [music] field forward, "Our field is moving too slowly toward preparing teachers to provide an absolutely safe and nurturing environment. The faculty must present a united and encouraging front in

order to communicate to all of the student body that all students are respected and cherished.”¹⁰⁵

Community Support

The subject of community support appeared frequently and in various form throughout the interviews. This is an outcome that I did not anticipate. Community is not a prominent topic nor is it readily addressed in pedagogy literature, though it loosely parallels the concept of the “vocal care team” previously discussed. The idea of joining or belonging to a community is difficult to articulate, yet it is essential. In the context of this study, community appears to represent a supportive and affirming space where questions or challenges surrounding gender identity, gender presentation, vocal production, and race do not dominate one’s sense of self. Here, community likely encompasses the people, environment, and systems that actively support, align, and affirms an individual’s goals, growth, and development.

Affirming and supportive communities, similar to a chosen family, are crucial for Black trans individuals, fostering belonging and solidarity. These groups can manifest as subcommunities or subcultures, providing environments to discuss shared experiences and challenges. Although some communities emphasize one aspect of identity, they can also address the various intersecting identities that shape individual experiences.

While colleges and universities, and social and peer groups may have spaces and resources to provide a sense of community, forming or building a community cannot be done overnight. In a community, there must be trust and vulnerability. Having colleagues,

¹⁰⁵ Nancy Bos, “Considerations for Teaching Transgender Singers in College Voice,” *LinkedIn* (blog), accessed October 7, 2024, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/considerations-teaching-transgender-singers-college-nancy-bos-costlow/>.

classmates, and friends is a good way to support the Black transfemme journey, whether they are white friends, queer friends, online, or in person.

What advantages or benefits do we gain from joining a community? The process of discovering our voice can often feel lonely, even with guidance from teachers and coaches. But how does this impact our overall well-being? Our voices play a crucial role in our identity, and it's essential to practice holistic self-care while also uplifting other singers, regardless of their gender identity, on their journeys. There's space for everyone.

Outside of this study defining community can be difficult because of unclear goals and individual needs. Additionally, the language used to describe community needs to be broadened to better support transgender and non-binary singers.

Peer Support and Interventions

In this study peer support also emerged as crucial in fostering inclusive environments and a strong sense of belonging, particularly for Black transfemme singers. However, current systems fail to adequately serve the transfemme, treble voice population, as evidenced by their limited opportunities. This highlights the need to examine systemic failures and address gaps in support.

Positive peer interactions and inclusive communities can significantly impact the experiences of these singers, suggesting the importance of implementing cohort learning models. Pedagogy literature might also consider advocating for students to actively support or defend their peers, though this approach carries potential risks and challenges. Encouraging peer groups to promote positive behavior and mutual support could create a more equitable and empowering space for Black, transfemme, treble voice singers.

In higher education, student success is formed where academic enrichment and social engagement meet. Peer support can look like what it did for Tona, where a trusted friend affirmed her voice and identity in a choir so that she could sing comfortably and authentically. Breanna's friends completed her graduate school application and advised her on what to sing for her audition. My native language-speaking colleagues were willing to help with my French and German diction. These are instances where the other party could have ignored the unstated needs of these black transfemme treble voice singers. But by having a shared connection and being a peer, Tona, Breanna, and I were able to have our needs addressed, thus removing a barrier to potential success.

The literature does not discuss peer learning or peer relationships for trans and non-binary singers. What is evident is that, in the conservatory level education, the pairing of groups of student-artists to help support and encourage each other could prove vital not just for the Black transfemme treble voice users in this study but for other musicians in education or conservatory systems. As I stated above, studying music, specifically voice can be a lonely experience. However, with peer support and intervention, one is never on an island by themselves.

Unique Themes for Each Subject

Cultural and Historical Context

Tona Brown was particularly interested in placing her experiences as a musician and public figure within the broader historical context of transgender identities, adding depth and complexity to her story. Unlike today, when there is a growing awareness and vocabulary for discussing trans experiences in music and the broader society, Tona grew up in a time and environment where these concepts were either poorly understood or non-

existent. This historical gap meant that Tona had to navigate her gender identity without the social frameworks or language that might have helped her articulate her experiences and find community. Her journey, therefore, was marked by a pioneering spirit, as she had to forge a path for herself in a world that did not yet recognize or validate her identity. This historical context shaped her challenges and underscored her role in advancing visibility and recognition for trans individuals in the classical music industry and beyond.

Intersectionality

Breanna Sinclairé's thoughts focused on the compounded obstacles encountered by individuals with multiple marginalized identities. As a Black transgender woman navigating the predominantly white, cisgender, and heteronormative realm of classical music, Breanna faces uniquely daunting challenges. Her experiences reveal the systemic racism and transphobia embedded in the industry, often leading to her exclusion from opportunities and recognition granted to her peers. Breanna's narrative illustrates how race and gender intertwine to form a specific set of challenges that cannot be viewed in isolation. By focusing on this intersectionality, she calls for a broader dialogue on diversity and inclusion within the classical music sector, pushing for trans visibility and racial equity. Her insights provide a vital perspective on diversity in the arts, showing how different facets of identity can intricately shape an artist's experience and career path.

Family Influence

My musical journey is deeply shaped by my family, particularly my grandmother. Unlike Breanna and Tona, who attribute much of their progress to professional mentors and industry contacts, my experience is rooted in personal relationships. My grandmother and my father provided emotional support and was an early guide in my musical education, fostering a passion for performance and creativity from a young age. This nurturing environment allowed me to develop my talent well before I pursued formal music training or external mentorship. My grandmother's encouragement and our shared cultural traditions were essential in shaping my unique musical identity, demonstrating that family bonds can be just as significant, if not more so, than professional mentorship in an artist's growth.

Compendium

The experiences of Tona Brown, Breanna Sinclairé, and I reveal the deep-seated challenges and incredible resilience required of Black transfemme treble voice artists in the classical music industry. Our narratives underscore the profound impact of systemic barriers rooted in racial, gender, and vocal biases that continue to limit opportunities for many trans artists. By navigating these complex intersections of identity, each artist has brought forward a unique perspective that challenges the rigidity of traditional norms in classical music. The industry's established practices, which often fail to accommodate non-binary and trans voices, highlight the necessity of comprehensive changes in how talent is recognized, supported, and nurtured. Our stories call for an urgent reevaluation of entrenched pedagogical frameworks and structural biases, advocating for an inclusive

environment where diverse vocal identities can thrive without the constraints of outdated expectations.

Suggestions for Further Research

An area for further exploration is the impact of vocal coaching and community support on the experiences of Black transfemme treble voice users. Vocal development often occurs within the context of relationships with teachers, mentors, and peers. For transfemme individuals, these dynamics may be influenced by intersecting identities of race and gender. This research would focus on how affirming and supportive interactions contribute to vocal confidence and authenticity, providing practical insights for vocal educators and community leaders in creating inclusive and affirming environments for transfemme singers. A related topic of research is the role specifically of peer mentorship and representation in music for Black transfemme singers. This study would focus on how having visible transfemme vocal mentors influences the confidence, career development, and vocal identity of younger transfemme singers. By examining the impact of seeing oneself represented in positions of artistic leadership and teaching, future research could highlight the importance of mentorship and visibility in creating pathways for transfemme individuals within music and performance spaces. Such findings could inform strategies for music programs and arts organizations aiming to foster more inclusive and supportive environments for marginalized voices.

Secondly, a cultural phenomenological study could explore the influence of Black vocal traditions—such as gospel, spirituals, and jazz—on the vocal identities of Black transfemme treble voice users. These rich cultural traditions carry historical significance

and often emphasize expressiveness, improvisation, and community connection. By investigating how cultural heritage shapes the vocal practices and self-expression of transfemme singers, this research could illuminate how cultural context intersects with gender identity. Such a study would not only deepen our understanding of the lived experiences of these individuals but also provide valuable insights for educators and performers seeking to implement culturally responsive and inclusive approaches in vocal pedagogy. Together, these avenues for further research could contribute to a more holistic understanding of the vocal experiences of Black transfemme individuals, highlighting the intersections of voice, identity, community, and culture.

A final suggested area for future research is a comprehensive survey of Black musicians in classical music, focusing on their experiences of racial and gender identity within the predominantly white, cisnormative, and heteronormative landscape. This research would aim to capture the voices of Black musicians (e.g., vocalists, instrumentalists, conductors, and composers) to identify common themes related to access, representation, mentorship, and career development. The survey could explore issues such as the prevalence of racial bias and microaggressions in classical music spaces, barriers to accessing elite training programs, and the impact of limited representation on the professional aspirations of Black artists. Additionally, the research could examine how cultural expectations around voice and repertoire influence the experiences of Black performers, particularly those who challenge traditional norms regarding gender presentation or vocal classification (e.g., treble voice users). Findings from this survey could provide a much-needed evidence base for music institutions,

educators, and industry leaders to address structural inequities and implement strategies that promote diversity and inclusion. By highlighting the unique challenges and successes of Black musicians in classical music, this research would contribute to ongoing efforts to create more equitable and welcoming environments for artists of all backgrounds.

Conclusion

A Call for Systemic Change and Inclusive Representation

The intertwined themes of identity, representation, and social positioning underscore the need for systemic change in the classical music industry. The narratives of Tona Brown, Breanna Sinclairé, and myself serve as powerful examples of the importance of embracing authentic identity, advocating for increased visibility, and recognizing the impact of social positioning on access and opportunity. Together, our stories challenge the industry to move beyond superficial diversity efforts and to address the deeper structural issues that perpetuate exclusion based on race, gender, and voice type. In embracing our identities and leveraging their platforms for advocacy, we are not only redefining what it means to be classical musicians but are also actively shaping a more inclusive future. Our collective efforts and resilience provide a model for how the classical music world can evolve to be more equitable, diverse, and representative of the richness that marginalized voices bring to the art form. Our stories are a testament to the transformative power of visibility and advocacy, paving the way for a more just and inclusive industry.

This study points to a pressing need for a paradigm shift in the fields of vocal pedagogy and performance practice. There is a clear call for the development of culturally responsive, gender-affirming approaches that honor the full diversity of treble voices, moving beyond the binary frameworks that currently dominate. Educators and voice practitioners must be willing to engage in ongoing learning and adaptation, incorporating practices that recognize and celebrate the unique qualities of voices like those of the Black transfemme participants in this study. This includes rethinking

traditional vocal classifications, expanding the repertoire to include works by marginalized composers, and creating inclusive spaces where singers of all identities can thrive.

In conclusion, the experiences shared by the participants highlight both the challenges and the transformative possibilities of centering the voices of Black transfemme individuals in the conversation around vocal pedagogy and performance. These stories are a testament to the power of visibility, community, and the importance of inclusive practices that honor the complexity of human identity. This research contributes to the growing body of work advocating for a more equitable and inclusive approach to vocal education, one that fully embraces the diverse voices of singers and empowers them to be seen, heard, and celebrated in their entirety. The insights from this study lay the groundwork for future research and practice, encouraging a shift toward vocal pedagogy that is as diverse and multifaceted as the voices it seeks to nurture.

GLOSSARY ¹⁰⁶

AFAB: An abbreviation for “assigned-female-at-birth,” a term frequently used, often by the transmasculine community, as a self-descriptor. “Assigned-at-birth” serves to imply that sex is without the agency of the individual.

AMAB: An abbreviation for “assigned-male-at-birth,” a term frequently used, often by the transfeminine community, as a self-descriptor. “Assigned-at-birth” serves to imply that sex is without the agency of the individual.

Cisgender: (also styled as *cisgendered* and often shortened to *cis*) describes someone whose internal sense of gender corresponds with the sex the person was identified as having at birth.¹⁰⁷

Dysphonia: occurs when there is an alteration in normal voice quality, which can be due to structural and/or functional causes.¹⁰⁸

FTM/F2M: Abbreviation for Female-to-Male. A term referring to people who identify as men who were assigned female-at-birth. Some trans men reject this term because they have always been male, regardless of sex assignment. (See transmasculine and transgender).

Gender Binary: Recognizes only two genders and regulates behavior within narrowly defined male or female expectations. Enforces the idea that all people assigned male at birth should be man-identified and masculine and that all people assigned female

¹⁰⁶ “Terms & Definitions | Queer Resource Center | Amherst College,” accessed November 3, 2024, <https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/our-community/queer-resource-center/terms-definitions>.

¹⁰⁷ Merriam-Webster, “What Does ‘cisgender’ Mean?,” accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/cisgender-meaning>.

¹⁰⁸ Cindy Neighbors, Muhammad F. Hashmi, and Sungjin A. Song, “Dysphonia,” in *StatPearls* (Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing, 2024), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565881/>.

at birth should be woman-identified and feminine. This system excluded non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals.

Gender Dysphoria: Discomfort and/or distress that varies in intensity, duration, and interval for an individual, extending from the disjuncture between one's conceptualization of their gender and the way their body is. Serves as a medical term and diagnosis in the American Psychological Association's (APA) Diagnostics and Statistical Manual (DSM-5), which contributes to the stigmatization of transgender identities as a mental disorder. Clinically speaking, gender dysphoria is present when a person experiences significant distress related to their gender. The concept of dysphoria, rather than the diagnosis, is employed frequently by the trans/non-binary community to name their experience. Not everyone views gender dysphoria as a mental health diagnosis.

Gender Expression: The way that someone expresses their gender, either consciously or unconsciously. This encompasses everything that communicates our gender to others: clothing, hairstyles, body language, mannerisms, how we speak, how we play, and our social interactions and roles. Most people have some blend of masculine and feminine qualities that comprise their gender expression, and this expression can also vary depending on the social context. There is not always a direct translation between gender identity and gender expression.

Gender Identity: Language a person claims based on their internal understanding of their gender. Also, one's innate and personal experience of gender. This may or may not align with one's gender expression or gender attribution.

Gender Non-Conforming: An identity term for a person who does not conform to cisheteronormative constructs of gender and binary gender roles. This can also be used as an umbrella term to represent gender identity and expression.

Genderqueer: Identity adopted by some trans people who blur the lines of the gender binary or embrace gender fluidity. They may identify as a man, woman, both, neither, or anywhere else on the spectrum.

Heteronormativity: The belief (on an individual, systemic, and ideological level) that straightness and straight relationships are the default and are more “normal” than queerness.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT): A hormone therapy taken by some trans folks to alter the hormonal composition of the body. Some people will choose to undergo a gender-affirmation surgery in conjunction with HRT, and some will not. Some transmasculine people decide to take testosterone, while some transfeminine people choose to use estrogen.

Intersectionality: The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.¹⁰⁹

MTF/M2F: Abbreviation for Male-to-Female. A term referring to people who identify as women who were assigned male-at-birth. Some trans women reject this term because they have always been female, regardless of sex assignment. (See transfeminine and transgender).

¹⁰⁹ “Definition of INTERSECTIONALITY,” October 28, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intersectionality>.

Medical Transition: A process that involves medical treatments and surgeries to change a person's physical appearance and genitals to align with their gender identity

Non-Binary: A person whose gender identity does not fit within the gender binary or whose gender identity is an act of resistance against the binary. Non-binary people often do not identify as men or women, although some non-binary people also identify with binary genders to some degree, and some use binary pronouns. Many non-binary people identify as trans and/or as genderqueer.

Pronouns: Linguistic tools we use to refer to proper nouns. In the context of gender, pronouns refer to people and are often gendered. Some examples of pronouns include they/them/theirs, she/her/hers, he/him/his, and ze/hir/hirs. Most pronouns are gendered and binary, although there are personal pronouns in many languages that are not gender specific. We use pronouns to attribute gender (see gender attribution). Using incorrect pronouns or assuming them based on appearance is a way to misgender someone (see misgender).

Queer: Reclaimed* derogatory term that is used in a few different ways: a catchall term for the LGBTQ community; a sexual identity term that is often characterized by the incorporation of fluidity and anti-normativity; academic nomenclature to represent prolific postmodern feminist theoretical project centered on sexuality and gender. Simultaneously, it appeared in the academic and organizing circles in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Not reclaimed by everyone.

Transgender/Trans: A term describing when one's gender identity does not align with their assigned sex. Trans people challenge society's view of gender as fixed,

unmoving, dichotomous, and inextricably linked to one's biological sex. The sexual orientation of transgender people varies just as it does among cisgender people.

Trans Man/Transmasculine: someone who identifies as a man but was assigned as female or intersex at birth.

Transnormative: a hegemonic social framework by which transgender people's presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable based on a medicalized binary framework: ¹¹⁰ a set of standards used by both cis and trans people to evaluate the authenticity of a person's trans-ness by putting their experiences and expression of gender in a "hierarchy of legitimacy." ¹¹¹

Trans Woman/Transfeminine/Transfemme: Identity label preferred by some transgender people assigned male at birth (AMAB). Genderqueer and gender non-conforming people who were assigned male at birth and now adopt a more feminine gender expression may also identify as transfeminine/transfemme.

Voice dysphoria: a feeling of distress or unease that can occur when someone's voice doesn't match their gender identity or expression. It can cause people to feel misgendered and can impact their confidence, self-esteem, and overall well-being.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Nova J. Bradford and Moin Syed, "Transnormativity and Transgender Identity Development: A Master Narrative Approach," *Sex Roles* 81, no. 5 (September 1, 2019): 307, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0992-7>.

¹¹¹ Austin H. Johnson, "Transnormativity: A New Concept and Its Validation through Documentary Film About Transgender Men," *Sociological Inquiry* 86, no. 4 (2016): 465, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12127>.

¹¹² "Understanding and Coping with Voice Dysphoria," Connected Speech Pathology, accessed November 3, 2024, <https://connectedspeechpathology.com/blog/understanding-and-coping-with-voice-dysphoria>.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Initial Contact Email to Participants

Subject Line: Research on Trans Singers and their Voices

Hi [Participant First Name],

Greetings from Seattle, WA. I hope that you're doing well!

I'm writing to you to discuss some of my doctoral research on trans treble voices. I'm finishing my degree in Voice Performance at the University of Washington. If you're interested and available, what would be the best way to request/schedule a time to chat or Zoom with you?

If you have questions or would like more information, please feel free to email me.

Kind thanks,

Cee E. Adamson

Appendix B: Pre-Interview Email to Participants

Subject Line: Excited for Our Upcoming Interview! - The Transfemme Voice

Dear [Participant First Name],

I hope this message finds you well! I wanted to express my excitement about our upcoming research conversation on [Day, Date, Time]. The Zoom information is provided below:

Topic: Research Interview #1 [Participant's Initials]
[Zoom coordinates and link]

As we prepare for our conversation, I appreciate the opportunity to learn from your experiences and insights. Your journey in classical music and opera is not only unique but deeply inspiring. I believe your story has the power to educate and resonate with many people in meaningful ways.

In our discussion, we'll explore various aspects of your vocal and identity journey—looking at the emotional impact of your experiences, the relationships you've built with teachers and mentors, and how you personally define success in your singing career. I aim to create a supportive, open environment where you can share your story freely and comfortably.

Before the interview, I will share a consent information sheet outlining the research's purpose, how we'll handle the data, and your rights as a participant. The document also explains how your responses will be used and reinforces your voluntary participation. For your convenience, I've included a link to the information sheet [Consent Information via Google Drive link].

Please let me know if there are any specific topics you'd like to discuss or have any questions beforehand. Thank you again for your willingness to contribute your voice to this research. I'm looking forward to our conversation!

Most sincerely,
Cee E. Adamson

Appendix C: Consent Information Sheet

Information About A UW Research Study

The Transfemme Voice: Exploring the Lived Experiences and Vocal Identity of Black Transfemme Treble Voice Singers

What is this study about?

You are being asked to participate in a research study about the lived experience of professional-level Black, transfemme* treble voice singers in classical music and opera. It is up to you to decide whether you want to participate. If you decide to enroll, you can stop participation at any time.

*Transfemme is an abbreviation of Transfeminine, defined as, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity is partially or fully feminine and differs from the sex the person was identified as having at birth.

"Transfeminine." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transfeminine>. Accessed 17 Sep. 2024.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to:

1. Complete a pre-interview meeting
2. Participate in an online interview via Zoom for 60 to 90 minutes
3. Review your interview transcripts via email for 10 to 15 minutes
4. Participate in a group online interview with other participants via Zoom for 60 minutes [optional]

What will happen to the information you provide?

The information you provide will be "on the record." so that we can identify you in publications resulting from this research.

However, if you wish to remain anonymous, your name will not be linked to your comments. We will not include your name in any quotations, reports, or findings. Instead, we will use a pseudonym of your choosing and will omit or obscure any identifying details to protect your privacy. We will store the data with a code instead of your name. We will keep a list that links the code to your name and will store it securely and separately from the data.

In all cases, we will store audio and video recordings and any electronic or printed transcripts in encrypted files or in a locked, secure location for five years after the publication of this research, after which all files will be destroyed.

What can you do if you want more information?

Talk to the study team. Cee Adamson is the lead researcher at the University of Washington for this study and can be contacted at adamsonc@uw.edu or (301) 246-2490. You may also contact Dr. Carrie Shaw, Research Supervisor and Artist in Residence, at cshaw2@uw.edu.

Talk to someone else. If you want to talk with someone who is not part of the study team about the study, your rights as a research subject, or to report problems or complaints about the study, contact the UW Human Subjects Division at hsdinfo@uw.edu or 206-543-0098.

Appendix D: Post-Interview Email with Participant's Interview Transcript for Review

Subject Line: Interview Transcript - The Transfemme Voice [Participant's Initials]

Hi [Participant First Name],

I hope that you're doing well!

It was great speaking with you for this research interview. You offered such a wealth of information and perspective about this topic. I loved hearing these portions of your story and your journey.

I look forward to our subsequent conversations.

I am writing to send you a copy of our interview transcript for your review. Due to the nature of this research, this information is for your eyes only. Please let me know if you have any questions or if substantial points need to be changed/corrected.

If you need to make any significant changes to your text portion of the document, please send me those changes/corrections. On the left side of the document, you will find 'line numbers' that you can refer to should you send me changes. If you'd like, I'm happy to hop on a brief call should you rather clarify anything with me that way; otherwise, an email response is OK.

My timeline for this portion is one week, so I must receive any significant changes by Day, Date, and Time].

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions or if you have access issues.

Many kind thanks,

Cee E. Adamson

Appendix E: Tona Brown Biography

Tona Brown, a renowned American violinist and mezzo-soprano, has left an indelible mark on the international stage as the first transgender woman to grace the prestigious Carnegie Hall. Beyond this groundbreaking achievement, she holds the distinction of being the inaugural African American transgender woman to perform for a sitting American president.

In 2006, Brown embarked on a transformative journey as a featured artist in the “Tranny Road Show,” a multimedia tour group spotlighting transgender talents that traversed from Florida to Canada. Her vocal prowess caught the attention of the White House, leading to her selection to perform the National Anthem for former President Barack Obama at the 2014 LGBTQ Leadership Gala Dinner in New York City—an honor that solidified her status as the first transgender artist to receive such recognition.

Tona Brown’s musical journey extends to various platforms, including the 2011 Out Music Awards and a remarkable performance at the Weill Recital Hall of Carnegie Hall in 2014. Her involvement in the full-length documentary film, “For Which We Stand” (2015), further showcases her commitment to LGBTQ and straight artists.

Notably, Brown’s talents shine on screen as well, with her recorded opera performance for Shenandoah University’s 2021 production of “Suor Angelica,” where she portrayed the role of La Zia Principessa. Additionally, she took on the lead transgender role as Hannah After in Laura Kaminsky’s opera “As One,” performed with the Lowell Chamber Orchestra in the fall of 2021 under the direction of Orlando Cela.

As an advocate for transgender issues and the arts, Tona Brown is a sought-after speaker, captivating audiences with her insights primarily on the east coast. Her commitment to breaking barriers extends to her online TV series, “Conversations with Tona Brown,” where she addresses trans issues and shares her experiences. Beyond her performances and advocacy, Brown generously imparts her knowledge through masterclasses on Transgender Voices for the Virginia National Association of Teachers of Singing, and she provides private lessons through her company, Aida Studios.

Offering words of encouragement to transgender youth, Brown emphasizes the importance of self-worth, urging them not to be deterred by others’ doubts. She stands as a powerful inspiration, proving that with determination and resilience, one can achieve their dreams despite societal obstacles related to identity. Tona Brown’s multifaceted contributions to music, advocacy, and education showcase her as a trailblazer and symbol of triumph over adversity.

tonabrown.com

Appendix F: Breanna Sinclairé Biography

A native of Baltimore, Maryland, and a graduate of CalArts, Breanna received her Masters from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and was the first transwoman of the opera program, under the pedagogy of Ms. Ruby Pleasure. Operatic performances include *Carmen*, *La Calisto*, *The Old Maid and The Thief*, *The Magic Flute*, *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, *Platée*, and *West Side Story*, as well as Meredith Monk's *Songs of Ascension* at REDCAT, and Zachary Sharrin's *Time Bodies* at MOCA.

Outside of opera, Sinclairé has enjoyed a variety of performance opportunities with LGBT and other nonprofit organizations throughout the nation — most recently the Gay Men's Choruses of Washington, D.C. and San Francisco. She made her debut at the Walt Disney Concert Hall with the Los Angeles Gay Men's Chorus. Other performances include Americans for the Arts, Washington, D.C. and Toronto Pride Festivals, SF Trans March, Fresh Meat Trans and Queer Arts Festivals, Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club, LinkedIn's LGBTQ Employee Resource Group speaker series panel discussion (alongside civil rights leader Cecilia Chung), Janet Mock's Redefining Realness book tour, and the Transgender Law Center's SPARK! anniversary celebration.

Breanna also made her debut as a guest artist for the Gay Men's Chorus of DC in Durufle's Requiem performing "Pie Jesu" at Church of the Epiphany. She was among Out magazine's 2015 "OUT100" list of LGBT heroes. She was the first transwoman to perform the National Anthem at a professional sporting event for the Oakland A's, SF Giants, and San Francisco Deltas. She made her debut with SF Symphony on December 31, 2018 as the first trans singer to perform with the orchestra.

breannasinclair.com

Appendix F: Cee Adamson Biography

In the distinguished sphere of classical music, Cee E. Adamson (she/they/Mx.) stands as a beacon of versatility and excellence, seamlessly weaving together her roles as an opera singer, voice teacher, choral director, arts administrator, and student affairs practitioner with grace and passion. As a mezzo-soprano, Cee occupies a fluid place as an operatic talent, capable of treading the beguiling and liminal space between the countertenor and mezzo-soprano, and her vocal versatility has been well showcased in roles as Oberon in Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Giulio Cesare in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, The Sorceress in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and tragic and comic roles from Mercedes in *Carmen* to Florence Pike in *Albert Herring*. Cee was also requested to appear as a featured supernumerary in Glimmerglass Opera's production of Philip Glass's *Orphée*.

A relentless pursuit of artistic growth and expression has marked her journey as an opera singer. From her early days honing her craft in conservatories to gracing international stages, Cee has consistently captivated audiences with her powerful performances and nuanced interpretations. Moreover, she brings a profound authenticity to each character she embodies, leaving audiences spellbound in her wake. Mx. Adamson is a visionary choral director who has transformed vocal ensembles into beacons of musical excellence. Cee's meticulous attention to technique and precision fosters a deep emotional connection in her choirs, resulting in authentic performances that resonate with audiences and performers.

Cee's talents extend far beyond performance. As an arts administrator, she is a driving force behind the scenes, tirelessly cultivating the next generation of artists and administrators. Her roles in higher education and student affairs provide her a platform to inspire and mentor aspiring musicians, instilling in them a passion for the arts and a commitment to excellence that resonates throughout their careers. Cee advocates for arts education, leads innovative programs, and fosters collaborations within the arts community. She is dedicated to the transformative power of music, enriching lives for generations. Throughout her journey, Cee has remained steadfast in her dedication to using music to uplift, inspire, and unite. Her contributions to classical music as a performer and mentor demonstrate her commitment to artistic excellence and belief in the arts' transformative potential.

Cee is completing the Doctor of Musical Arts in Vocal Performance at the University of Washington, where she studies with Dr. Carrie Shaw and is undertaking Choral Conducting as a secondary proficiency area with Geoffrey Boers and Giselle Wyers. Before attending the University of Washington, Cee studied at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama (UK), where she earned a Master of Music and a Master of Performance degree and was designated a Guildhall Artist. Her other education includes coursework towards the MBA in Leadership & Legal Studies from Northern Kentucky University, the Advanced Artist Diploma and Master of Music from Shenandoah Conservatory at Shenandoah University, and undergraduate degrees in music, theatre arts, accounting, and management from Franklin Pierce University.

Appendix G: Dr. Janaé Collier Biography

Dr. Janaé Collier, affectionately known as Dr. J', epitomizes the spirit of academic innovation and personal wellness. With her roots firmly planted in the vibrant city of Pittsburgh, she has crafted a career that intertwines her passion for health communication and higher education. As the Associate Director of the Michigan Research & Discovery Scholars (MRADS) at the University of Michigan, Dr. J' is at the forefront of molding the next generation of global researchers. Her role in MRADS is a testament to her commitment to creating an environment that nurtures future forward thinking and interdisciplinary research.

Dr. J's academic journey is a blend of communication expertise and health education. Holding a Bachelor of Arts and Masters of Arts in Communication, with a specialization in health communication, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Health Education, specializing in counseling and wellness in higher education, she has always been at the intersection of communication, health, and education. Her time at the University of Cincinnati was marked by significant contributions as an academic coach and assistant residence director, where she developed innovative tools like the exam prep countdown for the Learning Commons and the Academic Recovery Plan for the Residence Education And Development department.

Her transition to Syracuse University highlighted her skills in overseeing STEM Residential College living-learning communities. Achievements like being named staff member of the year and earning the Student Affairs Divisional Outstanding Assessment Award reflect her academic leadership excellence. Dr. J's certification as a Dave Ramsey Financial Master Coach broadens her expertise, merging financial wellness with academic success.

Dr. J's mantra, "Accept Help. Give Hope. Welcome Happiness," reflects her drive to cultivate wellness across the eight health dimensions. Her holistic approach encompasses not just academia but also mental, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. As a toddler's parent, her values of faith, health, family, safety, security, and fun strongly influence her work. Dr. J's experiences, from being the youngest in her family to serving as an academic coach, have made her a compassionate, proactive individual. Her life includes thrill-seeking adventures, international travels, and cherished family moments, contributing to her high energy, infectious smile, and zest for life. This makes her not just an academic leader but also a life enthusiast.

As a life coach, Dr. J offers tailored sessions that cater to each client's unique aspirations. She aids individuals in achieving harmony between health and life goals. Drawing from her education and experiences, she supports others in navigating complex life paths, helping them uncover a deeper self-awareness. Dr. Janaé Collier's scholarship bio is not just a chronicle of her commitment to academic excellence, personal growth, and holistic wellness. Her evolution from contributor to coach highlights her dedication to empowering others toward an optimal life.

Appendix H: Interview Questions

Personal Identity and Voice

1. How would (do) you categorize your voice? (inside and outside of the typical classification or fach system?)
2. Do you believe that your voice plays a role in how others perceive your gender identity, and if so, how?
3. What emotions do you associate with your singing and speaking voice, particularly in relation to your trans identity?
4. Have you ever considered parts of yourself, of your trans identity being an asset or maybe an inhibitor?
5. What is your opinion about being black (or a person of color), trans, and a treble voice user in the world of classical singing/opera?

Career and Professional Experience

1. How did you discover your singing voice?
2. How was your singing training? Early? College? Professional?
3. What professional role models/examples have influenced your singing?
4. What are your dream career goals or operatic roles?

Voice Development and Training

1. What role has community or peer support played in your vocal training as a transgender woman?
2. How would you advise someone (teacher, coach) to work with your voice?
3. How would you advise someone (composers, librettists, other artists) to create or adapt works for your voice?

Impact of Transition on Voice

1. Did you experience a hormonal transition? If so, what impact, if any, do feminizing hormones have on your body?
2. Have you ever sought out speech therapy to aid your transition? (Albeit singing or otherwise)
3. What advice would you give to other transgender singers who are considering or undergoing a hormonal transition?

Teacher and Mentor Relationships

1. What qualities do you value most in a voice teacher or mentor, especially in relation to your identity?

2. How has mentorship played a role in your development as a singer?
3. How supportive have your voice teachers or mentors been in understanding and assisting with the unique challenges faced by trans women treble singers?
4. What information would you have liked/would like for your voice teacher to know?

Emotional Impact and Success

1. How do you define success in your singing?
2. Can you describe a moment where you felt particularly proud of your voice and identity? What made it significant?
3. Who was the first person to make you go into a tailspin about your voice? What did they say, and how did you receive/perceive it?
4. What advice would you give to other transgender women who are pursuing a career in singing?

Closing Questions /Wrap-up

1. What has been the most rewarding aspect of your journey as a transgender singer?
2. If you could share one key takeaway or message for those who may be listening to your story, what would it be?
3. Is there anything we haven't covered today that you feel is important to share about your experience or your voice?

Appendix I: Determination of Exempt Status



DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

September 5, 2024

Dear Cee E Adamson:

On 9/5/2024, the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (HSD) reviewed the following application:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	The Transfemme Voice: Exploring The Lived Experiences and Vocal Identity of Three Transfemme Treble Voice Singers
Investigator:	Cee E Adamson
IRB ID:	STUDY00021235
Funding:	None

Exempt Status

HSD determined that your proposed activity is human subjects research that qualifies for exempt status (Category 2). This determination may or may not be based on the Limited IRB Review process.

- This determination is valid for the duration of your research.
- This means that your research is exempt from the federal human subjects regulations, including the requirement for IRB approval and continuing review.
- **Depending on the nature of your study, you may need to obtain other approvals or permissions to conduct your research. For example, you might need to apply for access to data or specimens (e.g., to obtain UW student data). Or you might need to obtain permission from facilities managers to approach possible subjects or conduct research procedures in the facilities (e.g., Seattle School District; the Harborview Emergency Department).**
- HSD does not make determinations on behalf of other institutions. If other institutions are involved in the research, they may need to make their own determination or they may decide to be guided by our determination.

Only certain types of changes to exempt research require that you submit a modification in Zipline. For information about what changes require a Modification, refer to the guidance on [Exempt Research](#). If you are unsure if your proposed changes require a modification, contact your [HSD team](#) before preparing the modification.

HSD does not review or approve consent plans and consent materials for exempt research. Researchers are still responsible for providing subjects with information about the research prior to their agreement to participate. Refer to the guidance on [Exempt Research](#) for details about what

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information should be provided. You may wish to use the optional [Exempt Consent Template](#) as a guide.

Thank you for your commitment to ethical and responsible research. We wish you great success!

Sincerely,
Malaika Schwartz
IRB Administrator, Team A
206-616-1929, malaika@uw.edu