

The Transgender Affirming Choral Classroom

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Abstract

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Why does choral music matter in today's ever-evolving field of transgender studies? Choirs are uniquely public, visible, and communal spaces. Choirs are places where identity, artistry, and belonging intersect. As more transgender students enter our classrooms and ensembles, music educators must engage deeply with the pedagogical, linguistic, and vocal needs of these singers. This dissertation is a resource to help "demystify" the vocal and psychological challenges transgender students face and provides ideas for music educators when working with transgender voices in choral contexts. Drawing from research in speech-language pathology, music education, and lived experience, it explores how hormone therapy and vocal anatomy intersect, and how educators can adapt vocal pedagogy to support healthy, affirming singing for transgender men, women, and non-binary students.

In addition, it highlights the critical role of inclusive language, correct pronoun usage, and repertoire choices in fostering safe and welcoming environments. The dissertation addresses the social and emotional challenges transgender students face, as well as the institutional and pedagogical challenges choral educators encounter in balancing inclusivity with vocal technique. Finally, modular exercises with current best practices demonstrate how affirming transgender identities in choral education not only promotes vocal health, but also strengthens the choral community as a whole. This work underscores the responsibility, and the opportunity, choral directors have to shape ensembles into spaces of dignity, affirmation, and musical excellence.

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Dedication

In developing this work, I am deeply aware of the traditions and evolving practices in voice pedagogy that have been shaped across disciplines. This project reflects the wisdom, generosity, and innovation shared with me by many mentors and colleagues along the way. My approach has been informed by the mentorship of Dr. Cee Adamson, the foundational guidance of my own voice teachers, the invaluable insights shared by my transgender students, and the groundbreaking research of the many scholars quoted in this work.

At its core, this work is an offering of both study and lived experience. A program of exploration that seeks to center the voice as an expression of the whole self. While focused specifically on the needs and aspirations of transgender and gender-diverse individuals, it is rooted in the belief that voice work is a journey toward authenticity, resilience, and self-efficacy.

Collaboration, reflection, and deep listening have shaped every part of this process. I am especially grateful to those who entrusted me with their stories, whose courage and creativity have guided and challenged me to grow. It is to them, and to all who seek to find their truest voice, that this work is dedicated.

As this topic is ever evolving, I will be snapshotting what I understand to be the definitions and trends as they apply today. Thankfully, we know more than we ever have, we have more understanding and communicative doctors, and we see much more openness to learning more about our transgender siblings. I will be providing information on the research I have done thus far in foundational voice science, what I have learned about pedagogy that supports transgender singers, and I will suggest a few exercises that can help these siblings feel more comfortable with experimentation along with the rest of the choir.

I have a deep passion for this work; I have trans family members, I have trans family-we-choose members, I have worked and continue to work with an ever growing list of trans students in my voice studio, and out of the many transgender members counted “at large”, I had 5 trans or non-binary singers in Wellspring Ensemble’s last concert (my own community choir), singing in performance in 2025. I now know it is my duty to educate myself to fully include these members and wonderful musicians in my choirs.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Scope

The rise of transgender visibility has necessitated increased support for gender diverse individuals in healthcare and education settings. By examining the therapeutic practices of Speech and Language Pathologists (SLPs) over the past two decades, I will examine how the needs of clients and their treatment has changed. The voice is closely connected to gender identity and, by connecting vocal music education to SLP, I want to better equip myself and other educators with best practices for working with transgender individuals in vocal music classrooms such as choir or voice studios.

Let's begin with a case study of an experience by one of our trans siblings. In "Melanie's Story: A Narrative Account of a Transgender Music Educator's Journey," by Sarah Bartolome in collaboration with Miss Melanie Stanford, a confident young music educator, highlights challenges facing transgender individuals in the field. Using her own experience, Stanford illuminates considerations for educators at all levels endeavoring to cultivate safe learning environments for students of diverse gender identities.¹ "There are nearly 1.4 million people in the United States who identify as transgender," Bartolome explains, "[...]in recent years, the transgender community has entered the consciousness of the American public."² Bartolome details Melanie's experience with finding safe places on campus, fears of public restrooms, and microaggressions such as anti-trans attitudes and use of gender to describe vocal sections, for example, "soprano and bass" as "ladies and men".. "While the anti-trans attitudes and transphobic comments were troubling, the smaller mistakes associated with daily misgendering by her peers and colleagues also insidiously eroded Mel's confidence."³

I'm not too sure how I feel about this new choir director. I observe him as he walks in, suddenly anxious about what he might say today to make me feel uncomfortable. 'Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. Let's split up into sections to work on the Bach. Women,

¹ Bartolome, Sarah J, "Melanie's Story: A Narrative Account of a Transgender Music Educator's Journey," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 207-208, (January 2016): 25-47, <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.5406/bulcouresmusedu.207-208.0025>.

² Bartolome, "Melanie's Story," 26.

³ Bartolome, "Melanie's Story," 37.

stay in here and men, go to Room 114.' I'm frozen in my seat as everybody else begins to move. This year, I am finally living full-time as a female, but I still sing Bass II in the choir. Where do I go? A quick look at my outfit would have me remaining in the room. A bright pink shirt with a white bra strap peeking out, paired with black capris and a simple pair of ballet flats declare to the world that I'm a woman. I look up and the majority of the tenors and basses have already left the room. I begrudgingly stand and make my way to the door. Each step away from the other women in the ensemble highlights how different I am. As the door to the main choir room closes, I see the director moving on, completely oblivious as to how he just made me feel. These are the times when I hate choir.⁴

Melanie's experience is not isolated. It is in supporting these individuals through dysphoria, or the mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity, that health officials, and educators, are called. Closely tied to biology and gender identification is the voice. During puberty the laryngeal framework, including vocal folds, grow considerably, albeit differently in cis-females than cis-males.⁵ Historically the health world has missed the mark supporting this journey, including SLPs. By using literary resources in the field, I will trace changes in the approach to the cultural treatment of transgender individuals and identify resources that help inform the practice today.

Like Melanie's experiences in transitioning through college, we start with the need for building cultural competency of LGBTQ+ individuals back in the early 2000s.

⁴ Bartolome, "Melanie's Story," 126.

⁵ Kim, Hyung-Tae, "Vocal Feminization of Transgender Women: Current Strategies and Patient Perspectives," *International Journal of General Medicine* 13, no. 1 (Feb 2020): 44. <http://dx.doi.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.2147/IJGM.S205102>.

1.2: Tracing Competency in Speech and Language Pathology

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) published Knowledge and Skills requirements in 2004. This list outlined policy requiring culturally and linguistically appropriate services related to sensitivity, advocacy, and service for several communication disorder and diversity areas, including needs of the LGBTQ+ community.⁶ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the primary public health agency in the United States, frames cultural competency as a systemic approach to care that prioritizes equity across diverse populations. It defines “cultural competency” as “the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services; thereby producing better outcomes.”⁷ This expectation permeates all fields of healthcare and is a requirement for all practicing physicians. Unfortunately, eleven years after ASHA’s implementation of the revised Knowledge and Skills requirements, a study came out by Adrienne Hancock and Gregory Haskin that put the pace at which SLP’s adopted these policies into question.

Hancock and Haskin’s study in 2015, a survey of 279 SLPs from four different countries, determined the level of competency within their practice related to LGBTQ+ individuals as simply comfort with individuals rather than knowledge: Participants indicated affirming perspectives toward LGBTQ+ communities and expressed openness to continued learning; however, many acknowledged that this did not yet translate into clinical competence, particularly in the area of transgender voice therapy. This gap between belief and practice is equally significant in choral settings, where directors are often committed to inclusive values but may lack the pedagogical tools to support gender-diverse voices in ways that are both affirming and technically effective. Many other respondents also reported slightly more negative feelings specifically toward transgender individuals compared to individuals who are gay,

⁶ “ASHA Practice Policy,” American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Accessed November 26, 2022, <https://www-asha-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/policy>.

⁷ “Cultural Competence in Health and Human Services,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed November 26, 2022, <https://npi.cdc.gov/pages/cultural-competence#what>.

lesbian, or bisexual.⁸ Turning to a previous board member of ASHA's Multicultural Issues Board, SLP Tedd Masionale used his experience to publish "Ethical Service Delivery to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations: A Specific Focus on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Populations." The negative feelings reported by some of the respondents perhaps stem from societal gender norms and lack of knowledge related to the transgender population.⁹ Masionale suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals often modify their daily activities because of fear of prejudice, and this tendency toward negative feelings related to transgender people specifically increases the burden placed on them.¹⁰

With the groundwork laid, Masionale paved the way for the work of researchers like Melissa Jacob and Steven Cox. With their 2017 publication of "Examining Transgender Health Through the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health's (ICF) Contextual Factors," we find a literary study from the records of the World Health Organization (WHO) and insight into how SLPs can focus their training efforts. Similar to the CDC, WHO is the United Nations agency that connects nations, partners and people to promote health, expand universal health coverage, and champion global efforts to give everyone, everywhere an equal chance to live a healthy life.¹¹ Jacob and Cox reviewed over 154 records to "address the following research question: what environmental and personal factors may influence transgender individuals' physical, psychological, and social functioning?"¹² In total, 41 articles were included in the review, after a selection process to determine eligibility.¹³ Across the data, recurring

⁸ Adrienne Hancock and Gregory Haskin, "Speech-Language Pathologists' Knowledge and Attitudes Regarding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Populations," *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* 24, no. 2 (May 2015): 215, https://doi.org/10.1044/2015_AJSLP-14-0095.

⁹ A conclusion based on the findings of Tedd Masionale in his articles "Overview". Current literature and Internet sources were used to gather demographic information, analyze policy documents related to ethical service delivery, and explore current trends and recommendations for appropriate service delivery with a specific focus on the GLBT population.

¹⁰ Tedd Masionale, "Ethical Service Delivery to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations: A Specific Focus on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Populations," *Perspectives on Communication Disorders and Sciences in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Populations* 16, no. 1 (March 2009): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1044/cds16.1.20>.

¹¹ "About WHO," World Health Organization, accessed December 12, 2022, <https://www.who.int/about>.

¹² Melissa Jacob and Steven R. Cox, "Examining Transgender Health through the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health's (ICF) Contextual Factors," *Quality of Life Research* 26, no. 12 (2017): 3178, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44855948>.

¹³ Eligibility articles and other records were written in English; published after 1999; involved research that was conducted in the United States of America and/or Canada; and discussed physical, psychological, and/or social functioning of transgender individuals.

patterns became evident in both environmental and personal domains, particularly in areas such as family and social networks, education, healthcare access, socioeconomic status, race, and age.

[...] Environmental factors permit an understanding of how the context in which transgender individuals live might impact their health, while Personal factors can be used to explain how individual characteristics are unique and can contribute toward health. The present review suggests that transgender individuals benefit from gender-affirming services, in addition to improved family and social support systems and competent provider care. Familial and social supports are vital to physical, psychological, and social functioning of transgender individuals before, during and after transition. Further, educational training programs (e.g., school curricula or workshops) might provide the greatest benefit toward improving transgender health by increasing the knowledge and cultural competency of professionals working with this population. Given the diversity of gender expression, differences in lived experiences, and potential for enduring persistent ‘double discrimination,’¹⁴ health professionals must be able to approach transgender health using a holistic lens.¹⁵

For Adrienne Hancock, in partnership with experts such as fellow George Washington University professor Linda L. Siegfriedt and David Azul, SLP and professor at La Trobe University, the development of more comprehensive materials using this ‘holistic lens’ for the care of transgender individuals has become career changing for her and across the field of SLP.

In 2020, Hancock and Siegfriedt published “Transforming Voice and Communication with Transgender and Gender-Diverse People.” This evidence-based approach is about people in a transformation process. The book is designed to train SLPs and voice teachers to guide and facilitate that transformation with a collaborative approach; working with the client and their ever-changing needs.¹⁶

¹⁴ ‘Double Discrimination’ in reference to visible intersectional relationships between socioeconomic status, race, and/or age in conjunction with transgender discrimination.

¹⁵ Jacob, “Examining Transgender,” 3184.

¹⁶ Adrienne B. Hancock and Linda L. Siegfriedt, *Transforming Voice and Communication with Transgender and Gender-Diverse People: An Evidence-Based Process* (Plural Publishing, 2020).

Hancock states that, like a race, a runner considers factors that will influence their strategy, and together, runner and coach evaluate distance and path of the course, the runner's capacity to train, as well as perform.¹⁷ This collaboration is crucial in the ASSEMBLE approach, brainchild of Hancock and Siegfriedt.

The ASSEMBLE approach can be used to guide the work of voice and gender. Acknowledgment, Speaker's practices, Sociocultural mediation of meaning-making practices, External Material forces, Biophysiological processes, Listening practices, and Elected professional interventions make up the acronym. Each segment details specific, ongoing and dynamic factors, like our runner and coach example, that form the assessment, self-presentation, lifestyle choices, standards of linguistics, biological components, perceptions, and eventual interventions used to treat the client. As Hancock and Siegfriedt state, "The view of gender as continuously and flexibly constructed is critical in the ASSEMBLE model. We cannot expect nor aim for a single particular outcome of voice training, even at the individual level."¹⁸

In David Azul's article, "Supporting Well-Being in Gender-Diverse People: A Tutorial for Implementing Conceptual and Practical Shifts Toward Culturally Responsive, Person-Centered Care in Speech-Language Pathology", Adrienne Hancock, Tove Lundberg, Ulrika Nygren, and Cecilia Dhejne partner in reviewing SLP and mental health literature to compare the two disciplines' conceptualizations and approaches to professional support for gender-diverse people.¹⁹ In the article, they recognize that Gender Dysphoria, in mental health, is commonly misunderstood as a mental disorder in gender-diverse people, and in most SLP literature, only voice and communication is included.²⁰

¹⁷ Hancock, *Transforming Voice*, 140

¹⁸ Hancock, *Transforming Voice*, 141

¹⁹ David A. Azul et al., "Supporting Well-Being in Gender Diverse People: A Tutorial for Implementing Conceptual and Practical Shifts Towards Culturally-Responsive, Person-Centered Care in Speech-Language Pathology," *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* 31, no. 4 (July 2022): 1574–87, https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_AJSLP-21-00322.

²⁰ The term gender diverse is defined in Azul's article as anyone who does not identify with the gender presumed and assigned to them at birth. Gender-diverse people may position themselves as female, male, nonbinary, genderqueer, bigender, and agender to name some of the options. The authors acknowledge that just as any dimension of human diversity, gender as a category is 'man-made'. Azul et al., "Supporting Well-Being in Gender Diverse People," 1575.

Figure 1:

Variable	Conventional SLP approach	Contemporary MH approach
Assumed cause of poor well-being	• Gender nonconformity • Focus on client deficit • No attention to supra-individual sociocultural forces	• Challenges to well-being overwhelm resources • Attention to client strengths and weaknesses • Attention to supra-individual sociocultural forces
Intervention target	• Gender conformity	• Balance between challenges and resources for well-being
Intervention approach	• Modify client voice and communication to meet universalized gender norms	• Reduce internal and external challenges to well-being • Increase internal and external resources for well-being
Intervention result	• Professionally prescribed ongoing concealment to avoid challenges to well-being	• Capacity to safely disclose gender diversity and approach social interactions assertively supported by internal and external resources

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Translating the columns into rehearsal realities, the “conventional approach” in choir would be forcing singers into fixed SATB identity categories, prioritizing “blend” over singer well-being, or asking singers to conceal discomfort. A choral directors own “contemporary approach” might be flexible part assignments, identity-centered pedagogy, collaborative vocal exploration, and singer autonomy.

As illustrated in the table, traditional SLP approaches often separate vocal function from broader considerations of identity and well-being. Azul et al. challenge this separation, emphasizing the need for more integrated and affirming frameworks. In their words, this requires “a trans-positive, affirmative, norm-critical, strength-based, and person-centered approach [that is] instrumental for ensuring that stigmatization and pathologization of gender diversity and microaggressions are prevented in all aspects of SLP professional practice.”²²

With transgender individuals having to handle microaggressions and discrimination daily, how does speech play a role, and how has speech and language pathology paved a path forward in support of these individuals? In “The Role of f_0 and Formant Frequencies in Distinguishing the Voices of Men and Women,” James Hillenbrand and Michael Clark examine gendered voice and the factors that go into the listeners identification of gender. The voice’s distinct components are, initially, biological in nature. The fundamental frequencies of cis-males are typically slightly less than an octave lower than cis-females due

²¹ Azul, “Supporting well-being in gender diverse people,” 1576

²² Azul, “Supporting well-being in gender diverse people,” 1582.

to the longer and heavier vocal folds.²³ In this study, Hillenbrand and Clark attempted to use pitch shifting methods to isolate formants from fundamentals and change the perception of a listener on what sex they were listening to when listening to speech. The fundamental frequency provides the baseline for vocal pitch, but it is the shaping of formants that ultimately influences how that pitch is perceived through vowel, resonance, and speech characteristics. Because formant patterns are shaped by lived linguistic experience, including dialect and accent, they offer important insight into how identity and environment intersect with vocal production. These relationships are extensively explored in acoustic phonetics literature.²⁴ Within studies of vocal perception, three primary strategies have been used to examine shifts in perceived gender: modifying pitch (fundamental frequency) alone, adjusting resonance characteristics (formants) alone, or altering both simultaneously. Evidence suggests that the most effective approach involves coordinated changes to both pitch and resonance, with approximately 82% of listeners reporting a shift in perceived sex. In contrast, isolated adjustments to either parameter alone tend to produce inconsistent or negligible perceptual change.²⁵

Without the use of synthesizers and pitch shifting in everyday life, transgender individuals look to SLP guidance to help these adjustments shift with them as they align themselves with their gender identity. Singing transexual men have long been advised by doctors on the “unpredictable and irreversible” ways testosterone, the sex hormone responsible for thickening and lengthening the vocal folds resulting in lower fundamentals, affect the voice.²⁶ In his article, “The Female-to-Male (FTM) Singing Voice and its Interaction with Queer Theory: Roles and Interdependency,” Alexandros Constansis challenges the validity of that statement by pointing out three significant transitional elements: how abrupt and large the hormonal dosage is, the generalized care provision for the individual, and the attitudes towards transvocality. The latter statement enforced more by Constansis’ experience that

²³ James Hillenbrand and Michael Clark, “The Role of Fundamental Frequency and Formant Frequencies in Distinguishing the Voices of Men and Women,” *Attention, Perception, & Psycho-physics* 71, no. 5 (July 2009): 1150–1166, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/APP.71.5.1150>.

²⁴ Hillenbrand, “The role of Fundamental Frequency,” 1153.

²⁵ Hillenbrand, “The role of Fundamental Frequency,” 1164.

²⁶ Alexandros N. Constansis, “The Female-to-Male (FTM) Singing Voice and its Interaction with Queer Theory: Roles and Interdependency,” *Transposition* 53, no. 3 (March 2013): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.353>.

“despite FTM persons being warned about the dramatic effects testosterone will have on their voice, [Constansis] had not encountered in 2002-2003 any transman who had been given means to deal with their changing speaking, let alone singing, vocality.”²⁷ Similarly, the findings of Hyung-Tae Kim in “Vocal Feminization for Transgender Women: Current Strategies and Patient Perspectives” in 2020 consolidate the specific procedures for transgender women, mainly that, beyond surgery for reducing length and thickness of the vocal fold to increase the pitch, little can be done to change the physical nature of the vocal tract volume, length, formant tuning, and phonatory pattern. Kim states that voice therapy has been the preferred choice for the fine tuning of feminization or masculinization of the voice.²⁸ The study details new methods of adjusting formant frequency by adjusting the size and shape of the throat (first formant) and the oral cavity (second formant) during speech. Both obtain the effect of increasing the fundamental frequency and increasing the femininity of the voice.²⁹ Similarly, adjustments through opening and elongating the vocal tract and oral cavity bring qualities of masculinity.³⁰

Example 1:

Try it Yourself – Formant Adjustment Only

Using an [e] vowel, sing a lower note with what one might perceive as a masculine tone, and then another one in falsetto. Try to match the space involved and JUST adjust the fundamental pitch. Then change your resonance to sound like what one might perceive as a more feminine sound while in falsetto and then drop back to lower note with similar formants or space. Try not to sound too edgy; err on the side of breathier.

²⁷ Constansis, “Queer Theory” 4.

²⁸ Kim, “Vocal Feminization,” 43-52.

²⁹ Kim, “Vocal Feminization,” 49.

³⁰ Hancock, *Transforming Voice*, 275.

Vocal therapy for transgender individuals is a very complex and nuanced focus. Throughout the last two decades, movement toward both an individualized approach and one that is in constant communication to the changing needs of the client, has helped to strengthen relationships between doctor and patient. Research in redirecting efforts to more holistic paths, examining outside influences, understanding individual goals, and dialing in the science behind masculine and feminine voice has allowed SLP work to better support their clients. Heightened pressure from society on organizations to provide an equitable and high-quality practice have finally seen recent developments in new resource materials and training guides for SLPs who have long been working with these clients even while self-describing as without proper training.

Similarly, more choral classrooms and voice studios are experiencing students looking for guidance on their changing voices during transition with a focus on maintaining a skilled singing voice after transition. While much of the existing literature originates in speech-language pathology and voice science, music education scholars such as Matthew L. Garrett and Joshua Palkki have increasingly centered transgender and gender-expansive students within ensemble pedagogy itself. Their book “Honoring Trans and Gender-Expansive Students in Music Education” is a great primer for beginning the conversation on using music as a safe place to learn about trans and gender-expansive people. From choir dress codes to safe spaces, empowerment to pedagogy, it is a great resource to get you thinking about the wide breadth of things to consider when working with these wonderful students.³¹

While centering the work of Adrienne Hancock and exploring the ideas of Garrett and Palkki, I sought to reimagine the previously discussed ASSEMBLE model through a choral lens. To further clarify this interdisciplinary connection, the following framework was developed to serve as the structural foundation linking the major ideas throughout this paper.

³¹ Matthew L. Garrett and Joshua Palkki, *Honoring Trans and Gender-Expansive Students in Music Education* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Figure 2:

ASSEMBLE in the Choral Classroom

ASSEMBLE Element	Choral Application
Acknowledgement	Validating Identity/Pronouns
Speaker's practices	Speech-to-Singing Transfer
Sociocultural mediation	Gendered Choir Traditions/SATB Assumptions
External Material forces	Audition Systems, Concert Attire, Institutional Policies
Biophysiological processes	Hormone-Related Vocal Changes
Listening practices	Audience/Conductor Perception of Gender
Elected professional interventions	Repertoire Choices, Vocal Exercises, Flexible Voice Placement

In the next chapter, I begin by examining parallels and differences between puberty and transitioning and work to demystify the many ways the voice and its structures change.

Chapter 2: Language, Pronouns, and Inclusivity

2.1: Language Matters

One of the most foundational steps in creating inclusive spaces is learning and using the correct pronouns. Doctors Chelsea Harris, Natalie Blencowe, and Dana Telem, with ties to the National Institute of Health's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion blog, wrote an article in the *Annals of Surgery* titled "What is in a Pronoun? Why Gender-fair Language Matters". They remind us: using someone's pronouns correctly affirms their identity, builds trust, and reduces discrimination. It's okay to ask; what's important is that we don't assume.³² Just as we rehearse diction and phrasing, we must practice precision in our everyday communication.

As choral directors and educators, the language we use in rehearsals and conversations is powerful. It can either affirm or alienate. For transgender and gender-diverse students especially, being addressed with the correct name and pronouns is more than etiquette; it's about identity, belonging and safety. According to Harris et al, affirming language and pronouns are directly linked to improved mental health outcomes. We are not just shaping musicians; we are shaping humans. Their research, though focused on the medical field, is not unlike what I have witnessed in the choral world.

Harris, Belcove, and Telem speak to gendered language in medicine. Not immune to language bias, they speak to documented language used for federal funding award reviews, letters of recommendation, and tenure promotion evaluations. Recommendations often praise women's teaching abilities, and refer to her training. In contrast, male physicians' evaluations focus on their decisiveness, their research, and refer to "his career". Even introductions of women were less likely to contain their title than men.³³

To recontextualize for choral education: Choral music spaces are not immune to linguistic bias either. Although research specific to choral contexts remains limited, patterns observed in adjacent fields,

³² Chelsea Harris et al, "What is in a Pronoun?: Why Gender-fair Language Matters," *Annals of surgery*, 266 no. 6 (2017): 932-933, doi:10.1097/SLA.0000000000002505.

³³ Harris et al., "What is in a Pronoun?," 933.

such as medicine, are readily transferable. Gender bias in professional language, recommendation letters, performance feedback, and institutional assessments mirror that of the medical field. Within choral settings, I have witnessed similar trends emerging in how singers are described and affirmed. For example, female treble singers may be praised for being “supportive,” “blending well,” or contributing to ensemble cohesion, while male or tenor/bass singers are more often described as “strong,” “confident,” or “leading.” Additionally, differences may appear in how singers are addressed or introduced in rehearsal and performance contexts, with some individuals less likely to be acknowledged with the same level of formality, authority, or recognition as others.

These patterns of language, while often implicit and unintentional, reinforce gendered expectations within choral culture. By consistently associating certain vocal or interpersonal qualities with particular gender identities, such as warmth and cooperation with femininity and assertiveness or leadership with masculinity, educators and conductors may inadvertently shape how singers perceive both themselves and one another. Over time, these habits can create tension between singer’s identity and their perceived role within the ensemble. Furthermore, language that minimizes individual contributions or fails to recognize authority and expertise can limit opportunities for leadership and visibility within the group.

The effect of these micro-level interactions, or micro-aggressions, can contribute to inequitable experiences in choral spaces, where some singers may feel less empowered to take risks, claim leadership, or fully own their musical identity. Because these biases often operate subconsciously, they can be difficult to detect without intentional reflection. I have begun to adopt mindful and inclusive language practices that actively disrupt these patterns, ensuring that all singers are recognized, affirmed, and supported equally within the ensemble.

Pronouns reflect identity. In choral environments, (where voice, embodiment, and identity are deeply intertwined), pronoun affirmation can significantly impact a singer’s sense of belonging, safety and agency. In the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Jae Sevelius, Deepalika Chakravarty, Samantha Dilworth, Greg Rebchook and Torsten Neilands wrote an article titled

“Gender Affirmation through Correct Pronoun Usage: Development and Validation of the Transgender Women’s Importance of Pronouns (TW-IP) Scale”. This article supports the mindset that, “social interactions where a person is addressed by their correct name and pronouns, consistent with their gender identity, are widely recognized as a basic and yet critical aspect of gender affirmation for transgender people.”³⁴

Less than half (46%) of transgender and nonbinary young people reported that their pronouns were respected by a lot, most, or all of the people in their lives, according to research through The Trevor Project.³⁵ More statistics from the site are illuminating:

- Among transgender and nonbinary young people, nearly a third (32%) used binary pronouns (“he/him” or “she/her”), 26% used a combination of binary and nonbinary pronouns (“he/they” or “she/they”), and 15% used nonbinary pronouns (“they/them”).
- Among transgender and nonbinary young people who used another pronoun to describe themselves, the most commonly used pronouns were “it/its” and variations of “xi/xe” and “zi/ze.”
- Transgender boys/men (52%) and transgender girls/women (48%) reported higher levels of pronoun respect than those questioning their gender (40%) and nonbinary young people (37%).
- TGNB (transgender and nonbinary) young people whose pronouns were respected had lower rates of past-year suicide attempts (11%) compared to those whose pronouns were not respected (17%), being associated with 31% lower odds of a past-year suicide attempt.³⁶

In short, respecting pronouns is associated with greater well-being and lower psychological distress and is linked to significantly lower rates of suicide attempts among transgender and nonbinary youth. We must think, then, that choral spaces are environments that can either support or harm identity development.

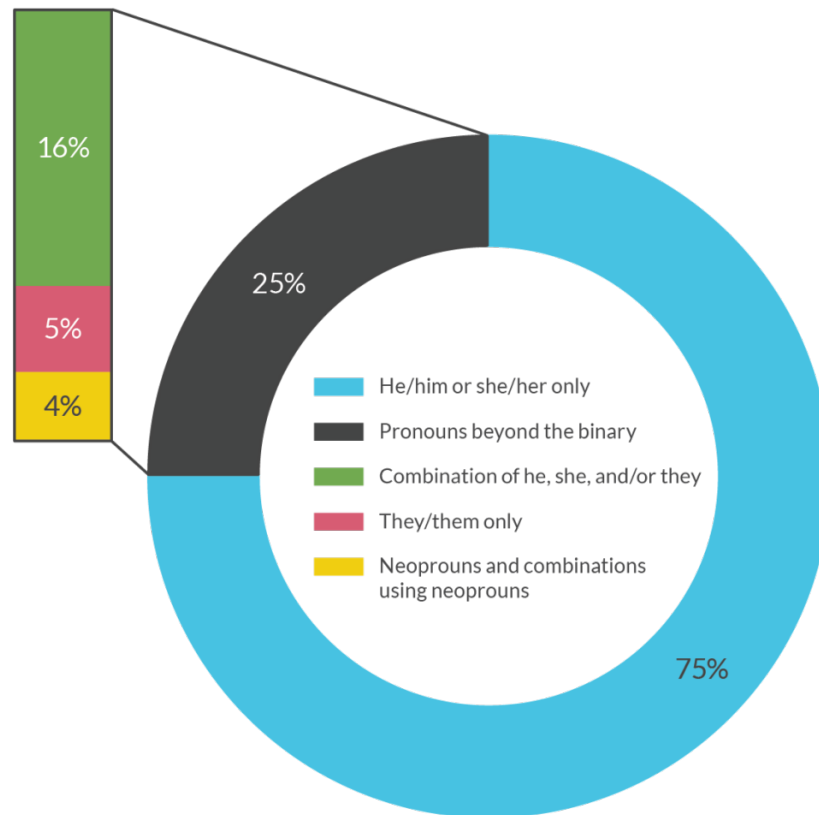
³⁴ Jae M. Sevelius et al, “Gender Affirmation through Correct Pronoun Usage: Development and Validation of the Transgender Women’s Importance of Pronouns (TW-IP) Scale,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17 no. 24 9525 (December 2020): 1 doi:10.3390/ijerph17249525

³⁵ “Pronoun Usage and Mental Health Impacts of Pronoun Respect in TGNB Young People,” The Trevor Project, Accessed March 24, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.70226/KTUU7547>

³⁶ The Trevor Project, “Pronoun Usage.”

Finally, 1 in 4 LGBTQ youth use pronouns or pronoun combinations that fall outside of the binary construction of gender.

Figure 3:



Although 75% of youth use either he/him or she/her exclusively, 25% of LGBTQ youth use they/them exclusively, a combination of he/him, she/her, or they/them, or neopronouns such as ze/zir or fae/faer.³⁷

³⁷ The Trevor Project, "Pronoun Usage."

2.2: Pronouns and Inclusivity

The University of Maryland's guidelines on inclusive language highlight that some words we may still use, or grew up hearing, are no longer appropriate. Terms like "preferred pronouns" imply optional respect, (the term "preferred" itself means it is perhaps optional, so we replace "preferred" with "personal"), while others reinforce harmful binaries, such as "ladies and gentleman".³⁸

The work of inclusivity isn't a checklist; it's an ongoing process of learning, listening, and adapting. Amy Agarwal's article from EngenderHealth calls this "learning to live in the grey areas."³⁹ This resource reinforces that language evolves and so must we. We should avoid outdated or binary-centric terms; stay curious and open to learning; and remember that language is a living, evolving tool.

The idea of "correct" and "incorrect" or "right" and "wrong" would certainly make things easier, but unfortunately, that is not how language works. Language is always evolving and, when we are talking about people, the affected population's preferences should take precedence and individual preferences may contradict group norms and standards. But perhaps most importantly, the concept of absolutes perpetuates the idea that being inclusive and respectful is a simple, impersonal task, when the exact opposite is true: language is deeply personal.⁴⁰

Inevitably, we will make mistakes as we navigate full classrooms while trying our best to get through the content. I've seen it happen; directors announcing soloists before they start the next piece and in their hurried introduction, misgendering the student; a simple mistake that might have huge mental consequences for the student, just before they sing. Now, that might be an extreme case, but even in lower

³⁸ "Good Practices: Inclusive Language". University of Maryland, Google. Accessed November 24, 2024. <https://lgbtq.umd.edu/good-practices-inclusive-language#:~:text=Instead%20of%20%22feminine%2Ffemale%20pronouns,%22%20please%20use%20%22intersex.%22>

³⁹ "Five Questions with Amy Agarwal, EngenderHealth's Principal Writer, Editor, and Designer." EngenderHealth, Accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.engenderhealth.org/article/five-questions-with-amy-agarwal-engenderhealths-principal-writer-editor-and-designer>.

⁴⁰ "Five Questions with Amy Agarwal"

stress moments in rehearsal, we are bound to fail. Agarwal and The Trevor Project align about what to do^{41 42}:

1. Mistakes happen. Whereas language is constantly evolving, mistakes are the constant.
2. Address the mistake with three simple steps:
 - a. Acknowledge the mistake
 - b. Sincerely and swiftly apologize
 - c. Commit to doing better in the future
3. No one is perfect, and the only true failure is the refusal to learn and improve

While these steps provide a helpful guide for responding to mistakes, they do not eliminate the need for intentional practices that reduce harm in the first place. As mentioned before, in choral spaces, where vulnerability and self-expression are central, language matters deeply. The way we address our singers shapes their sense of safety, belonging, and willingness to engage. The following strategies offer practical ways to approach pronoun use and identity-affirming language with greater clarity, care, and intention in rehearsal.

⁴¹ “Five Questions with Amy Agarwal”

⁴² The Trevor Project. “Understanding Gender Identities and Pronouns.” Accessed March 24th, 2026.
<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-gender-identities-and-pronouns>.

2.3: Pronoun Use and Identity-Affirming Language in Rehearsal

Following the above research and my own experience, here is a rapid-fire strategy list that will guide your thinking as you enter rehearsals with diverse gender identities. Please see Appendix 2 for a quick reference guide.

Example 2: Avoid Assumptions (Name and Pronouns Are Not Guessable)

Strategy

Do not assume pronouns, voice part, or identity based on appearance, voice, or name.

How to Implement

- Include pronouns in introductions (when appropriate and optional)
- Model sharing your own pronouns first
- Use names until pronouns are known

Why

- Assumptions can lead to misgendering and harm
- Every singer deserves to be seen and addressed accurately
- Establishes trust from the very first interaction

Example 3: Use Gender-Neutral Language in Rehearsal

Strategy

Replace gendered ensemble language with neutral, inclusive alternatives.

How to Implement

- Use section names or part numbers instead of “ladies/men”
- Say “this section” or “treble” or “lower voices” instead of gendered groupings
- Refer to “voices” or “singers” rather than gender categories for addressing the full group

Why

- Choral spaces are often structured around gendered assumptions
- Neutral language reduces unnecessary dysphoria
- Keeps focus on music, not identity categorization

Example 4: Seek Consent for Identity and Public Identification

Strategy

Allow singers to control how they are identified in rehearsal and performance spaces.

How to Implement

- Use a first rehearsal survey that is confidential and informative in different situations. See Appendix 6 for a model survey⁴³
- Ask privately: *“What name and pronouns would you like me to use here?”*
- Clarify if this differs across contexts (rehearsal, program, family presence)
- Respect confidentiality when needed

Why

- Identity disclosure is not always safe in all environments
- Consent-centered practice builds psychological safety
- Supports autonomy and dignity

Example 5: Recognize and Respect Diverse Identities

Strategy

Acknowledge that not all singers identify within a binary framework.

⁴³ Developed by Michael McKenzie et al. for “Voices for Social Justice: Educational Resources” and the University of Washington, University Singers. This choir is a mix of new and intermediate singers exploring a wide range of styles. The example survey covers confidentiality agreement, pronoun usage in differing spaces, musical goals, and more.

How to Implement

- Normalize they/them and other pronouns
- Avoid framing voice parts as inherently gendered
- Stay open to how singers describe themselves

Why

- Gender identity is diverse and personal
- Binary assumptions can exclude or alienate singers
- Inclusive environments support fuller participation

Example 6: Embrace Ambiguity (Ask When Unsure)

Strategy

When in doubt, ask respectfully rather than avoid or guess.

How to Implement

- Use simple, direct language:
 - *“Can you remind me of your pronouns?”*
 - *“How would you like to be addressed?”*
- Ask privately when possible

Why

- Mistakes happen, but avoidance often causes more harm than asking
- Clarification shows care and intention
- Builds a culture of openness and respect

Example 7: Lead with Curiosity, Empathy, and Intention

Strategy

Approach all interactions with a mindset of learning and care.

How to Implement

- Listen without defensiveness
- Thank singers for corrections
- Adjust language quickly and without drawing excess attention

Why

- Affirmation fosters confidence and creativity
- Choir is a vulnerable, expressive space
- Students are more likely to engage when they feel respected

Example 8: Repair Mistakes Simply and Respectfully

Strategy

Acknowledge and correct errors without over-apologizing or spotlighting the singer.

How to Implement

- Brief correction: “-sorry, they- let’s take that again”
- Move on without making it a major moment or about you
- Follow up privately if needed

Why

- Over-apologizing can increase discomfort
- Quick repair maintains rehearsal flow
- Demonstrates accountability and respect

Example 9: Normalize Pronoun Use as Part of Ensemble Culture

Strategy

Integrate pronoun awareness into everyday rehearsal practice.

How to Implement

- Include pronouns in rosters (when voluntarily shared)
- Model correct usage consistently
- Gently reinforce among ensemble members

Why

- Normalization reduces stigma
- Creates a shared culture of respect
- Ensures all singers feel seen and heard

Example 10: Quick Guide: Identity-Affirming Rehearsal Culture

A simple guide to carry into rehearsal:

1. Introduce with openness (names, welcome students to use pronouns if they wish)
 2. Use neutral, inclusive language consistently
 3. Check in privately when needed
 4. Respond to mistakes with quick, respectful repair
 5. Center empathy, curiosity, and flexibility throughout
-

Chapter 3: Demystifying Vocal Science in the Transgender Individual

3.1: Key Insights for Choral Directors – FTM Introduction

For choral directors, FTM (traditionally “female to male”, but I will use it as “transmasculine” to embrace the spectrum of genders) transition is perhaps more tangible than MTF (or “transfeminine”). When a transmasculine singer begins HRT (hormone replacement therapy), their voice will lower in pitch due to thickening and lengthening of the vocal folds, much like a cisgender male at puberty. We should take a moment to remember the importance of medical advances in recent years.

Particularly, the introduction of bioidentical or biocompatible body regulating chemicals in the early 1990s form a contrast to the earlier inadequate or harsh forms of hormonal administration. These recent hormonal developments have made the Female-to-Male singing vocality more accessible and manageable [...] the accessibility and manageability of the final vocal result appears to be reliant on the method of hormonal initiation: gradual vs. abrupt. However, there is the need to mention that in cases of unsuccessful vocal transition the provision of voice and communication therapy can help the transmale singer significantly.⁴⁴

Singing transgender men are often faced with being told their change is unpredictable and irreversible and that changes in their vocality “may be significantly detrimental to vocal performance.”⁴⁵ This previous view has more recently been challenged with research going into three major elements: the method of hormonal administration, the generalized care for the individual, and the attitudes towards transvocality (or the transgender voice and its perceived masculinity vs. femininity).

⁴⁴ Richard K. Adler, Sandy Hirsch and Michelle Mordaunt, eds., *Voice Therapy and Communication for the TG/TS Client*. (Plural Publishing, Inc., 2012).

⁴⁵ Gorton, Nick R., Jamie Buth and Spade Dean. *Medical Therapy and Health Maintenance for Transgender Men: A Guide for Health Care Providers*. Lyon-Martin Women’s Health Services, 2005. 59.

Interestingly enough, the UK and Europe administer hormonal treatment in transmen differently than the US. Europe tends to begin with the highest recommended intake with the generalized notion that it will produce testosterone levels that are able to effect maximum masculinization of the voice and body within the minimum possible time. The US, however, takes a more individualized approach. The high dosage does not allow time for adjustment and, as such, may be susceptible to long-term adverse health effects.⁴⁶ It should be said that lower dosages have also been associated with medical bias AGAINST the trans community, indicating “doubts about the integrity of transgender individuals and the authenticity of gender dysphoria as a diagnosis [...] may lead some members of the medical profession to withhold treatment or prescribe inadequate doses of cross-sex hormones on safety grounds”.⁴⁷

Abrupt hormonal administration is a by-product of insufficiently individualized care for transpeople worldwide. Through the Gender Recognition Act 2004⁴⁸ in the UK, specialized “treatment” went from a single-choice questionnaire, where the expectation would be to mark the right “heterosexuals” box in order to obtain hormonal or other transitional support, to more relevant care; however, this has not necessarily enforced a change in attitudes among mainstream care providers. Discriminative or judgmental attitudes are still prevalent.⁴⁹

Lastly, despite trans men being warned that testosterone would change their voice dramatically, researcher Alexandros N. Constansis met no one that had been offered vocal support or training to help manage those changes, especially not for singing. People assumed that testosterone would automatically lower the voice to a satisfactory male range without needing training. This is an oversimplification and not always accurate. Researchers suggested that voice evaluations and counseling before HRT would be needed to help trans men understand what to expect and how to prepare. Despite evidence, the assumption

⁴⁶ Constansis, “Queer Theory,” 3.

⁴⁷ Andrew Levy, Anna Crown and Reid Russel, “Endocrine intervention for transsexuals,” *Clinical Endocrinology* 59, no. 4 (2003): 416.

⁴⁸ Gender Recognition Act (GRA), London, 2004, Ch. 7 has been defined as an “Act to make provision for and in connection with change of gender.” [p. 1] Online: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/introduction>.

⁴⁹ Constansis, “Queer Theory.”

that testosterone is “enough” continued likely because people didn’t understand the complex factors that influence how a trans man’s voice develops.⁵⁰

When Constansis, a trans man himself, was transitioning in the early 2000s, no research was available about how testosterone affects singing, only speaking. He had to pioneer this path himself. Since no FTM singing research existed, Constansis turned to studies on pubescent boys’ voice changes, such as those by John Cooksey (*Working with Adolescent Voices*), to find guidance. Taking testosterone slowly in an effort to mimic the gradual hormone shifts of teenage boys, Constansis hoped this would allow smoother, more controlled voice development. According to Constansis, some trans men who use low-dose testosterone may struggle to visibly “pass” as male, which can lead to social stigma or discrimination, which are major concerns in trans healthcare debates.⁵¹

Constansis accepted these risks, because his priority was protecting and developing his singing voice, not necessarily rushing to “pass” quickly. He created his own vocal training methods, building on techniques he already knew, since no standard method existed for singers like him.⁵²

Below, I examine what I believe to be some key insights in what to know before working with the FTM transgender individual:

- 1. Testosterone causes irreversible structural changes in the larynx.**
- 2. Vocal instability is a major transition phase challenge.**
- 3. Post-HRT, singers may experience loss of range and flexibility.**
- 4. Gender-affirming vocal pedagogy includes exploring hybrid timbres.**
- 5. Voice training post-transition is highly individual.**

Let’s examine each of these separately.

⁵⁰ Constansis, “Queer Theory.”

⁵¹ Alexandros N. Constansis, “The Changing Female-To-Male (FTM) Voice.” *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008): <http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>

⁵² Constansis, “The Changing Female-to-Male (FTM) Voice,” Pedagogical notes 1 and 2.

3.2: Key Insights for Choral Directors – FTM

1. Testosterone causes irreversible structural changes in the larynx.

Perhaps one of the more challenging topics to understand are the effects of hormones on the voice. In Virginia Zamponi’s article “Effect of Sex Hormones on Human Voice Physiology: From Childhood to Senescence”, Zamponi and her colleagues present a literature review describing the influence of these hormones on the voice. Though this is primarily for puberty, it gives key information on how transition is, and isn’t, effected later in life.

The endocrine system is a network of glands that produce the sex hormones testosterone, estrogen and progesterone among a number of others, testosterone being the biggest contender for the maturation of males and estrogen and progesterone for female maturation.⁵³ As the body matures from childhood, significant modifications of the voice organ take place. From a vocal perspective, changes in the singing voice are closely tied to the physical growth of the larynx, vocal tract, and vocal folds. While all voices undergo development, those experiencing testosterone-driven puberty typically encounter more noticeable shifts. The larynx begins relatively small and high in the body, but as hormones influence growth during adolescence, the vocal folds lengthen and thicken and the larynx descends—contributing to the significant changes in range, timbre, and stability often associated with the changing voice.⁵⁴

During puberty, measurable anatomical differences emerge in the vocal mechanism. On average, vocal fold length increases to approximately 1.6 cm in testosterone-influenced development, compared to about 1.0 cm in estrogen-dominant development, with corresponding differences in overall vocal tract length (roughly 16.9 cm versus 14.1 cm). These changes are largely associated with a secondary descent of the larynx, a hallmark of pubertal development. At the cellular level, vocal fold tissue contains

⁵³ Virginia Zamponi et al., “Effect of Sex Hormones on Human Voice Physiology: from Childhood to Senescence,” *Hormones* 20, no. 4 (2021): 691-692, doi:10.1007/s42000-021-00298-y.

⁵⁴ Zamponi. “Effect of Sex Hormones,” 692.

androgen receptors that respond to increased testosterone, contributing to both the lengthening and thickening of the folds.

Although all voices undergo some degree of change during this period, the extent varies: voices shaped by estrogen typically lower by a few semitones, while testosterone-driven changes often result in a drop closer to an octave.⁵⁵

Figure 4:

Voice modifications during puberty

	Mean vocal fold lengths	Mean vocal tract length	Mean voice deepening
Females	1.0 cm	14.1 cm	3–4 semitones
Males	1.6 cm	16.9 cm	1 octave

Before mutation occurs, the voice becomes flat and occasionally hoarse and breathy. During the mutational period, uncertain intonation, sudden alterations in pitch, and falsetto-shifts occur. After the mutational period, the slow process of maturing the voice quality, finally reaching the typical adult voice timbre and range, happens. Since we already did a little peek into the voice, let's review a few key terms. The voice, as opposed to being a pure tone or sine wave, has many layers. The most obvious one we hear is the pitch of someone's voice which we called the fundamental frequency. The more subtle layers are overtones and vocal formants, which are like the resonating sounds that would bounce around the body of the violin.

Carolyn Hedges-Simeon, a biological anthropologist who researches sex differences in speech and the voice found that testosterone (T) does a very successful job at bringing the voice into the average cis male range, but they found that T didn't fully masculinize the more subtle sounds of the vocal formants.

⁵⁵ Zamponi, "Effect of Sex Hormones," 692.

As she says, this underscores the need for more treatment options and that, when it's a priority, the voice needs to be more closely monitored. In short, an open consideration of adding voice therapy techniques within a treatment plan (and within our rehearsal) is important since T won't do the job all by itself.

Two key acoustic characteristics of speech independently contribute to a masculine-sounding 1) fundamental frequency (f_0) of vocal fold vibration, relating to voice pitch, and 2) the spectral structure of speech formants, which give identity to vowels and thus speech content, but also reflect vocal tract length (VTL).⁵⁶

Though T during transition can mimic vocal fold changes as in puberty, sometimes reaching typical f_0 values like those of cismen, not all individuals experience enough f_0 lowering to reach the typical range of cismen. After a year on T, the voice typically will have reached its final f_0 regardless of dose regimen. Not surprisingly, between 12 and 16% of individuals are not fully satisfied with their vocal transition.⁵⁷

Studies of experimentally manipulated speech reveal that listeners rely on more than just f_0 when making judgments of speaker gender. When f_0 is artificially lowered to the range of cismen (using software), listeners can correctly identify ciswomen speakers as women. When f_0 and formant frequencies are altered to the same perceptual degree, listeners appear to rely more on formant information when making judgments about speaker body size, masculinity, and physical dominance.⁵⁸

While salivary testosterone levels, (T levels collected and found in saliva), were not significantly linked to estimated vocal tract length (VTL), the *duration* of testosterone therapy was. Longer time on T was associated with longer estimated VTLs, suggesting a possible long-term relationship between hormone therapy and vocal tract configuration. That said, this pattern may also reflect the passage of time since transition rather than T alone: Trans men may gradually and implicitly learn to adjust their vocal

⁵⁶ Carolyn R. Hodges-Simeon et al., "Testosterone Therapy Masculinizes Speech and Gender Presentation in Transgender Men," *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 1 (2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-82134-2>.

⁵⁷ Hodges-Simeon, "Testosterone Therapy," 2.

⁵⁸ Hodges-Simeon, "Testosterone Therapy," 2.

tract, even without formal voice training. More clinical research is needed to clarify how testosterone dosage, biological availability, and speech outcomes interact over time.⁵⁹

The implications here are that while their voices might lower significantly, a major focus of training in therapy, and by extension our choirs, is the manipulation of the vocal tract and its associated formants.

2. Vocal instability is a major transition phase challenge.

The most problematic of the gender transition stages appears to be the period of initial voice change. This stage is commonly characterized by instability, crackling, and an overall ‘uncertainty’ of the sound. Similar to adolescent male singers, FTM individuals need guided support through this destabilizing phase to avoid vocal injury and encourage healthy habits. As recommended, the results of this rapid change can only be remedied by the introduction of good vocal habits during the changing period.⁶⁰

Just like with teenage boys, voice training during testosterone transition is crucial. A choral director’s role in helping build technique and confidence cannot be overstated.

3. Post-Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), singers may experience loss of range and flexibility.

“Post-HRT” does not refer to completion of therapy and stopping of T injections, rather the stabilization after major vocal transitions and later stages of hormonal adjustment. Transmen may lose some of their previously existing flexibility or high register after testosterone. Acknowledge and respect vocal limitations that may emerge, especially in their upper registers. Voice part assignments may need adaptation.

4. Gender-affirming vocal pedagogy includes exploring hybrid timbres.

⁵⁹ Hodges-Simeon, “Testosterone Therapy,” 6.

⁶⁰ Constansis, “*Queer Theory*.”

Constansis re-defined concepts such as ‘hybrid voice’ and introduced terms such as ‘hybrid vocal persona’, not strictly male or female. Because little to no classical or art song repertoire has been written specifically for transmasculine voices, singers are often asked to perform music that only partially fits their vocal needs. Even when the written range appears appropriate, repertoire composed for cisgender voice types can be technically demanding or potentially harmful for singers navigating a hybrid vocality.⁶¹ In choral settings, this has important implications for repertoire selection and voice placement: directors may need to move beyond traditional SATB assumptions and acknowledge the legitimacy of a “hybrid” voice part. Choral directors may consider affirming vocal gender identity through timbre-based and role-adapted repertoire choices rather than traditional binary voice-part labeling. Doing so allows for more flexible repertoire choices, healthier singing, and a rehearsal culture that prioritizes vocal sustainability over rigid categorization.

In our own classrooms, Constansis notes: Transmasculine voices differ from cisgender male voices not only in range, but in how timbre and vocal function behave across that range. While a singer’s sound may resemble a baritone, the voice often does not respond like a typical baritone in terms of power, clarity, or consistency, particularly at the upper and lower extremes. Timbre may shift across the range, sometimes moving from a bass-like quality into something closer to a tenor-baritone, due to physiological factors that cannot be “trained away” through traditional technique alone. For choral directors, this reinforces the limitations of applying standard SATB categories to transmasculine singers and strengthens the case for acknowledging hybrid or role-based voice parts. Relying solely on cisgender vocal labels can be misleading musically and dismissive of a singer’s lived gender experience. Instead, more flexible, singer-affirming terminology, ideally chosen in collaboration with the singer, allows for healthier voice use, clearer expectations, and more inclusive repertoire decisions.⁶²

⁶¹ Constansis, “Queer Theory,” Section 10.

⁶² Constansis, “Queer Theory,” Section 13.

Constansis re-defined concepts such as “hybrid voice,” and I have expanded these options with a few more ideas. These possible descriptive terms for transmasculine voices (by timbre and role, rather than fixed range) might include:

Hybrid baritone

Baritone-leaning voice

Tenor-baritone hybrid

Low voice (transmasculine)

Flexible low voice

Variant tenor

Middle voice (role-based choral part)

Custom or singer-identified voice part (e.g., “low/middle line”)

Again, it is important to make sure that these terms are decided upon in collaboration with your singer, as there is a chance of “othering” the individual if care is not taken.

5. Voice training post-transition is highly individual.

William Sauerland, in his book *Queering Vocal Pedagogy*, first advocates for trans singers by quoting Lorain Sims, a scholar with articles focused on trans singing. Sims notes that “teaching transgender voice students is not so different than teaching any student... [C]hoose repertoire that will help them grow as musicians in the genre that is appropriate and encourage[s] them to find the means to become communicative, artistic, and stylish performers”.⁶³

Sauerland continues, however, with the added nuance of the trans singer. Knowing that T alone is not sufficient, training after the voice has settled is very important but must be tailored to the individual. In Lal Zimman’s 2012 dissertation, *Voices in Transition: Testosterone, Transmasculinity, and the*

⁶³ William Sauerland, *Queering Vocal Pedagogy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 26.

Gendered Voice Among Female-to-Male Transgender People, Zimman mentions an increasingly common mentality among those undergoing transition based on those participating in Zimman's study: "Because he identifies strongly as a fem man, it is particularly important to Dave to make space in society for male-identified people whose voices fall outside of the expectations for heteronormative cis masculinity."⁶⁴

According to Zimman's study, because the vocal changes associated with testosterone therapy are understood as physiological rather than expressive, they are not seen as limiting an individual's authentic self. Much like transmasculine individuals distinguish between their physical bodies and their internal sense of masculinity, testosterone is viewed as providing access to a vocal baseline similar to that of cisgender men. With access to a lower, more traditionally masculine pitch range, transmasculine speakers may feel less pressure to modify stylistic aspects of their speech, allowing them to maintain a sense of authenticity while also aligning with socially recognized markers of gender.⁶⁵

Similarly, Meg LaRose, author of *Trans*Vocal: Documenting Gender Subjectivity Through Changing Vocality*, contextualizes their own experience and research to bring appreciation for "non-normal" vocalizations. In exploring current language surrounding gender, voice, and transition, LaRose aims to show the problematic ways we may inadvertently harm our transgender students. LaRose had self admittedly, and mistakenly, assumed that medical transition was only for binary transgender individuals and, "Once I encountered other non-binary, trans* individuals on YouTube who wanted to transition in some form or another, things began to click."⁶⁶

In LaRose's first two years of a contemporary voice program at MacEwan University, they were marked by frustration as prior classical training shaped a persistent feeling of vocal mismatch. Adapting to new techniques required reworking long-established habits, though this process did not diminish the

⁶⁴ Lal Zimman, "Voices in Transition: Testosterone, Transmasculinity, and the Gendered Voice Among Female-to-Male Transgender People." (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 2012), 113-116, https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/graduate_thesis_or_dissertations/tx31qh68h.

⁶⁵ Zimman, "Voices in Transition," 113-116.

⁶⁶ Meg LaRose, "Trans*Vocal: Documenting Gender Subjectivity Through Changing Vocality" (MA diss., Carleton University, 2022), 3, doi: 10.22215/etd/2022-15157

value of classical foundations. Exposure to contemporary styles, on the other hand, ultimately increased vocal flexibility and expanded the range of expressive possibilities. Early on, this sense of “incorrectness” seemed tied to the contrasting timbral expectations across classical, jazz, and popular genres. By the third year, greater technical control allowed for more deliberate and confident timbral decisions. In general terms, classical singing emphasizes a resonant, rounded tone with a naturally produced vibrato suited for acoustic projection, while jazz and contemporary styles—often supported by amplification—favor a broader spectrum of vocal colors, including more nasal and speech-like qualities.⁶⁷

This all boils down to what we can call Voice-Related Gender Dysphoria or Voice-Related Gender Euphoria. Naomi Cooper, Nadine Manion and Scott Harrison discuss this topic in their *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* article titled “Scoping the Literature of Transgender Singing: Experiences and Pedagogical Insights in Choral Contexts”: “Within choral contexts, this phenomenon can occur when individuals are able to sing within a vocal range, voice parts, timbre, or specific repertoire that aligns with and affirms their gender identity.” This gender euphoria would serve to encourage participation in choirs for transgender individuals.⁶⁸

As potential pedagogical guides, choral directors should be conscious of how repertoire can be used as an ongoing tool for supporting the ever-changing voice. Highly individualized approaches to vocal training are necessary particularly for transmasculine performers. In short, here is what to strive for and what to avoid.

Example 11

3.3: Strive and Avoid: A Brief Summary – FTM

Strive for:

- Treat voice change like (but not identical to) male puberty

⁶⁷ LaRose, “Trans*Vocal,” 2-3.

⁶⁸ Cooper, Naomi, Nadine Manion and Scott Harrison. “Scoping the Literature of Transgender Singing: Experiences and Pedagogical Insights in Choral Contexts.” *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* 12, (2024): 82. <https://acda.org/archives/6223>.

- Comfort includes: range, tessitura, timbre, and even participation style.⁶⁹
- Expect cracking, instability, range loss
- Adjust repertoire frequently
- Ask identity-based questions
 - “*What range feels comfortable today?*”
 - “*What sound feels like you?*”
- Be flexible with voice parts
 - Tenor today does not mean tenor next semester
 - A singer three months on T vs. two years on T may need completely different repertoire and expectations⁷⁰
 - Some singers may prefer nontraditional placement
 - Even when pitch lowers successfully, singing function may lag or degrade⁷¹
 - Standard choral binaries (SATB) often fail to reflect actual vocal function in trans men⁷²
- Normalize inconsistency and experimentation
 - Voice fluctuation is expected, NOT failure
 - Poorly informed pedagogy can silence or sideline trans singers⁷³
- Support timbral diversity
 - Directors should normalize timbral diversity rather than “correct” it⁷⁴
 - Not all trans men will sound like cis bass-baritones, and that is okay!
 - Some may prefer lighter timbres, mixed qualities, or non-binary vocal identities⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Cooper, “*Scoping the Literature*,” 82.

⁷⁰ Erin Hannon, “Understanding the Effects of Hormone Treatments on the Transgender Singer: A Pedagogical Study and Voice Studio Guide” (DM diss., University of Kentucky, 2024), 45, https://uknowledge.uky.edu/music_etds/246

⁷¹ Graham, Felix. “To T or not to T: the Transmasculine Singing Voice on Hormone Replacement Therapy.” *Voice and Speech Review* 16, no. 2 (2022): 180-99. doi:10.1080/23268263.2022.2038349.

⁷² William Sauerland, *Queering Vocal Pedagogy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 26.

⁷³ Emerald D.H. Lessley, “Teaching Transgender Singers,” (DMA diss., University of Washington, 2017), 31, <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/40272>.

⁷⁴ LaRose, “Trans*Vocal,” 2-3.

⁷⁵ Zimman, “Voices in Transition.”

Avoid:

- Forcing immediate reassignment to “male sections”
- Expecting rapid stabilization after testosterone
- Treating vocal cracks as lack of skill
- Correcting toward a “standard male tone”
- Ignoring the emotional/identity side of voice change

3.4: Choral Rehearsal Strategies for Transitioning FTM Voices

Following the above research and my own experience, here is a rapid-fire strategy list that will guide your thinking as you enter rehearsals with FTM transitioning voices. See Appendix 3 for a quick reference guide.

Example 12: Dynamic Voice-Part Flexibility (Not Fixed SATB)

Strategy

Allow singers to move between sections (e.g., alto – tenor – baritone) as their voice changes.

How to implement

- Let singers “double-sing” (e.g., try both alto and tenor lines)
- Offer “home base + option” (primary section and alternate)
- Normalize switching week-to-week

Why

- FTM voices are nonlinear and unstable
- Pitch may drop faster than control develops
- Prevents strain and embarrassment
- Supports identity and vocal health simultaneously

Example 13: Range Mapping Warm-Ups (Daily Check-In)

Strategy

Begin rehearsal by helping singers map their current usable range (not their theoretical range).

Exercise

- Five note descending patterns on [u] or [o] or [i], where [i] is often the easiest to fully close vocal folds, but may vary from person to person.
- Gentle sirens (glissandi) from mid-to-low-to-mid

- Ask: “*Where does it feel easy today?*”

Why

- Testosterone causes day-to-day variability
- Range is often fragmented during transition
- Avoids forcing yesterday’s voice onto today’s instrument
- Builds self-awareness and autonomy

Example 14: Crack-Normalizing Exercises

Strategy

Actively normalize vocal breaks instead of correcting them away immediately.

Exercise

- Sliding glissandi intentionally *through* the break
- “Yodel” or flip exercises (chest to head and back again)

Language to use

- “*Cracks are information, not mistakes.*”

Why

- Voice cracking is register re-coordination, not failure
- Reduces shame
- Encourages healthy coordination instead of suppression

Example 15: Tessitura-First Repertoire Adjustments

Strategy

Choose or adapt repertoire based on comfortable tessitura, not just range.

Practical options

- Reassign inner lines (tenor/baritone hybrid lines)

- Use divisi to create flexible parts
- Lower keys when possible

Why

- Many FTM singers have:
 - Lower pitch capability
 - BUT limited stamina/control in that range
- A singer may have the note but not sustain it safely
- Tessitura matters more than extremes

Example 16: Speech-to-Singing Bridging

Strategy

Use speaking voice as a foundation for developing singing tone.

Exercises

- Speak text, then lightly pitch it
- Chant with slow progression toward singing
- Use conversational tone as baseline

Why

- Speaking voice often stabilizes before singing voice
- Helps align identity and vocal production
- Especially helpful for singers seeking authentic masculine tone without strain

Example 17: Resonance Exploration (Not “Darkening” the Tone)

Strategy

Encourage exploration of resonance rather than forcing a “male” sound.

Exercises

- “ng” hums then opening to vowels
- Forward resonance (mask) vs. dropped larynx exploration
- Compare “bright vs. dark” without judgment

Why

- Forcing “dark/baritone tone” can:
 - Increase tension
 - Cause vocal fatigue
- Masculinity does not equal darkness
- Let singers find their version of resonance

Example 18: Fatigue-Aware Rehearsal Design

Strategy

Build in rest and rotation for transitioning singers.

How

- Alternate singing vs. marking
- Allow partial participation
- Avoid long passages in unstable ranges

Why

- Testosterone transition often causes:
 - Reduced stamina
 - Increased vocal fatigue
- Protects against injury
- Signals that health is more important than output

Example 19: Private Check-Ins (Consent Based)

Strategy

Have brief, optional 1:1 check-ins about voice comfort.

Questions

- *“How is your voice feeling today?”*
- *“Anything you want adjusted in rehearsal?”*

Why

- Comfort zones vary widely
- Builds trust
- Avoids public spotlight or dysphoria

Example 20: Flexible Assessment and Auditions

Strategy

Adapt expectations during audition periods.

Options

- Allow octave displacement
- Evaluate musicianship, not just tone
- Offer alternative assignments (section leader, small ensemble)

Why

- Vocal instability doesn't mean a lack of skill
- Keeps singers engaged during unstable phases
- Prevents attrition

Example 21: Language Matters (Micro-Pedagogy)

Replace

- *“Sing like a tenor”*
- *“Use a more masculine tone”*

With

- *“Find the most comfortable resonance”*
- *“Let’s explore what feels sustainable”*

Why

- Gendered language can create dysphoria or pressure
- Language shapes vocal identity as much as technique

Example 22: Quick Guide: Rehearsal Model

A trans-affirming rehearsal flow:

1. Check-in and range mapping
2. Gentle coordination warmups (with cracks allowed)
3. Section flexibility during repertoire
4. Frequent rest and optional participation
5. Affirming, non-gendered language throughout

My Mantra:

You are not “training a voice into a category.” You are supporting a voice while it becomes itself.

Chapter 4: Demystifying Vocal Science in the Transgender MTF Individual

4.1: Key Insights for Choral Directors – MTF Introduction

For choral directors, figuring out how to fit a transfeminine singer into the treble sections can be tricky. Common misconceptions about gender and section choice, a focus on the ideal feminine voice, range restrictions, and worry about choral blend are all factors I address in this section. For transfeminine singers, although HRT yields positive results on the mental and emotional wellbeing of transgender individuals and provides other physical adjustments⁷⁶, the voice is only mildly affected by the use of estrogen and progesterone and instead is reshaped through technique, identity, and perception. That process must be guided, not assumed, in the choral classroom.

In Hyung-Tae Kim's article "Vocal Feminization for Transgender Women: Current Strategies and Patient Perspectives from the International Journal of General Medicine" in 2020, Kim reminds us that much of the growth of the vocal folds and vocal tract happens at puberty and is most affected by testosterone:

Generally, transgender women have grown their phonatory organ significantly after puberty. Such growth impacts on gender difference of voice pitch and quality. During puberty in males, the laryngeal framework, including vocal folds, considerably grows and downward located. It is associated with vocal tract elongation and vocal tract volumetric expansion [...] Although sex differences of the larynx are not prominent in infancy, they can have significant morphometric changes of the larynx due to testosterone at puberty in males.⁷⁷

Studies of speech and resonance indicate that listeners tend to perceive gendered vocal differences less through vocal tract length alone and more through how space is shaped within the tract, especially in the pharynx. Although some differences in oral cavity size exist, it is the resulting resonance characteristics that carries the greatest perceptual weight. This has important implications for voice work:

⁷⁶ Hannon, "Understanding the Effects of Hormone Treatments," 10.

⁷⁷ Kim, "Vocal Feminization," 44.

feminization strategies must prioritize how sound is shaped and filtered, not just how high or low it is produced.

From a pedagogical perspective, this places articulation, and particularly tongue position, at the center of the work. Small adjustments in tongue placement can meaningfully shift the size and shape of the vocal tract, influencing resonance, hyoid position, and overall timbre. Encouraging a more forward tongue position and subtly reducing oral and throat space can help shift the resonance profile toward one more commonly associated with feminine speech patterns. These changes are most effective when paired with pitch adjustments at the level of the vocal folds, allowing resonance and pitch to function together rather than in isolation. Kim also discusses surgical interventions aimed at altering fundamental frequency through changes to the vocal folds.⁷⁸

Perhaps you can see a bit of a dissonance in how we might coach our cis female singers versus our transfeminine singers. Language like elevating the larynx to shorten the vocal tract while also lifting the tongue to shrink the oral cavity seems like poor pedagogical advice to singers unless you are looking for a very specific sound. Again, those suggestions were made for speech adjustments and are only part of the story, so using these methods at best will not get desired results and at worst, can cause more tension and fatigue. This does, however, highlight the need for safe, comfortable, transfeminine-affirming experimentation and manipulation of those structures to explore and strengthen the voice.

What emerges from this discussion is a fundamental mismatch between clinical descriptions of vocal feminization and the realities of healthy singing pedagogy. While speech-based strategies emphasize measurable adjustments to pitch, resonance and vocal tract configuration, these approaches do not easily translate to sustainable or expressive singing. The efforts of Danielle Cozart Steele in her 2019 article “Speech-language Pathologists with a Vocal Music Background: Exploring Impact on the Training of the Transgender Voice” and Matthew Mills, Gillie Stoneham, and Ioanna Georgiadou in their article “Expanding the Evidence: Developments and Innovations in clinical practice, training and competency

⁷⁸ Kim, “Vocal Feminization,” 43-52.

within voice and communication therapy for trans and gender diverse people” suggest that voice feminization is not a fixed set of physiological targets but a dynamic, individualized process shaped by comfort, identity, and functional efficiency.^{79 80}

For choral directors, this distinction is critical. The goal is not to engineer a “feminine” sound through prescriptive manipulation of the vocal mechanism but to support singers in developing a voice that is both authentic and technically sustainable within an ensemble context. This requires moving beyond assumptions about range, tone, and section placement, and instead engaging with the singer as an individual whose vocal development may not align with traditional choral frameworks.

In other words, the question is not simply *where* a transfeminine singer fits within the choir, but *how* choral pedagogy itself must adapt to support a wider range of vocal identities. The following insights address some of the most persistent misconceptions and pedagogical challenges, offering practical considerations for directors seeking to create affirming and musically effective choral environments:

- 1. Hormones do not feminize the voice; training does**
- 2. Pitch alone does not determine a “feminine” voice**
- 3. “Lightening” the voice can become unhealthy, if forced**
- 4. Vocal dysphoria can be triggered by choral settings**
- 5. Vocal feminization is cognitively demanding**
- 6. Blend expectations can conflict with vocal goals**
- 7. Success is defined by the harmony of voice to singer, not acoustics**

Let’s examine each of these separately.

⁷⁹ 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): 373–91. doi:10.1080/19443927.2019.1640781.

⁸⁰ Mills et al., “Expanding the Evidence,” 328–42.

4.2: Key Insights for Choral Directors – MTF

1. Hormones do not feminize the voice; training does

For transfeminine singers, vocal change is behavioral and technical, not hormonal. A common misconception is that, once someone starts estrogen, their voice will gradually become more feminine. As I mentioned earlier, the clinical and pedagogical research by Hyung-Tae Kim and Cooper, Manion and Harrison⁸¹ shows that estrogen does not reverse the vocal fold thickening or lengthening, nor any change in the vocal tract. Therefore, we must support active technique development.

Feminizing the singing voice is different from feminizing the speaking voice, thus techniques used in speech therapy do not always translate directly to singing. One might incorrectly assume that someone having completed voice therapy for speech will have a matching singing voice, and that just isn't the case. Steele emphasizes that “for broader vocal exploration of identity through voice and the benefits of self-expression, character, and gender role exploration, they might turn to a teacher of singing [...] Approaches to the speaking voice via the singing voice can help unlock the vocal mechanism of a client where other approaches have been unsuccessful”.⁸² Anita Kozan, in her chapter “The Singing Voice” within the 2012 book *Voice and Communication Therapy for the Transgender/Transsexual Client: A Comprehensive Clinical Guide*, continues that “for some [transgender] clients, work on singing provides the gateway to finding a healthy vocal range for their speaking voice”.⁸³ Where a non-singer might not immediately associate certain qualities of the voice with gender, Kozan states they develop faster if addressed through singing.

⁸¹ Cooper, “*Scoping the Literature*,” 79.

⁸² Steele, “Speech-Language Pathologists with a Vocal Music Background,” 375-6.

⁸³ Anita J. Kozan, “The Singing Voice.” In: *Voice and Communication Therapy for the Transgender/Transsexual Client: A comprehensive Clinical Guide*, ed. R.K. Adler, S. Hirsch, and M. Mordaunt (Plural Publishing, 2012), 413-458.

2. Pitch alone does not determine a “feminine” voice

Kim’s research highlighted how perceived femininity, if desired, depends on resonance, timbre, intonation, and articulation, not just pitch. These are all adjusted by the structures of the larynx, vocal tract, oral cavity, etc. Not all transfeminine singers will go through with surgery on the larynx either. I will talk more on surgery itself later, but for now, though research is being done on different methods to get better results, Kim recommends waiting until past the age of 30.⁸⁴ The invasive and challenging surgery has long healing times, low satisfaction rates due to small pitch increase (one report described that only 50% of patients were satisfied after surgery)⁸⁵, and possible damage to the cricothyroid muscle which can significantly reduce pitch range.⁸⁶ Surgery is not a simple fix for achieving a feminine singing voice. In contrast, some feminization surgeries (e.g., glottoplasty and the methods described in Kim’s research) can affect range, flexibility and vocal strength. There is a potential for stiffness and loss of dynamic range as well.

3. “Lightening” the voice can become unhealthy, if forced

Attempting to feminize tone by making it overly breathy or thin can lead to inefficient phonation. Though increasing breathiness is a part of the spectrum of vocal qualities explored in speech, and even in choirs, to achieve a more feminine sounding voice, Sarah Schneider addresses some pitfalls with this method in her chapter “Applying Flow Phonation in Voice Care for Transgender Women, Nonbinary, and Gender Nonconforming Individuals”, within the book *Voice and Communication in Transgender and Gender Diverse Individuals*.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Kim, “Vocal Feminization,” 45.

⁸⁵ Yang, Caroline Y., Andrew D. Palmer, Karen Drake Murray, Toby R Meltzer and James I. Cohen. “Cricothyroid approximation to elevate vocal pitch in male-to-female transsexuals: results of surgery.” *Ann Otol Rhinol Laryngol* 111, no. 6 (2002): 477–485. doi:10.1177/000348940211100602

⁸⁶ Kim, “Vocal Feminization,” 45.

⁸⁷ Schneider, Sarah L., “Applying Flow Phonation in Voice Care for Transgender Women, Nonbinary, and Gender Nonconforming Individuals,” in *Voice and Communication in Transgender and Gender Diverse Individuals: Evaluation and Techniques for Clinical Intervention*, ed. by Mark S. Courey et al., (Springer, 2023), 68.

Exploring the relationship between airflow and vocal quality, resonance, vocal intensity, vocal flexibility, and intonation patterns in the context of gender affirming voice care can help increase awareness of the role that variations in airflow play in voice production. When balanced airflow is not achieved, a person may have limited access to altering other vocal variables. People can sometimes develop imbalanced phonatory airflow and muscle activation that leads to voice quality changes, vocal fatigue, discomfort, or even pain associated with voice use.⁸⁸

4. Vocal dysphoria can be triggered by choral settings

Group singing (especially SATB structures) can intensify dysphoria for transfeminine singers. This can occur when a singer is not in a voice part that they identify as, or as I have experienced sometimes with my own community choir, Wellspring Ensemble, I would even say that not all transfeminine singers want or need high voice parts. These students might identify as transfeminine but not mind singing baritone or tenor. In my experience, affirming their gender expression doesn't always mean moving them to soprano or alto. Joshua Palkki's interviews with a student, Sara, show nuance in how each student might perceive their placement. "I'm a girl and I'm a bass and I own that," Sara says. Palkki explains that Sara identified her teacher as a role model in several capacities, including for his outward support of her gender identity, her vocal development, and her voice part assignment.⁸⁹

Some students may prefer mid-range singing, flexible or nontraditional parts, or mixed or androgynous vocal qualities. As choral directors we should be monitoring our timbre expectations, pressure we put on singers when addressing blending, and comparisons with cis voices.

⁸⁸ Schneider, Sarah L., "Applying Flow Phonation in Voice Care for Transgender Women, Nonbinary, and Gender Nonconforming Individuals," in *Voice and Communication in Transgender and Gender Diverse Individuals: Evaluation and Techniques for Clinical Intervention*, ed. by Mark S. Courey et al., (Springer, 2023), 68.

⁸⁹ Joshua Palkki, "My voice speaks for itself": The experiences of three transgender students in American secondary school choral programs," *International Journal of Music Education* 38, no. 1 (2020): 126-146, doi:10.1177/0255761419890946.

Similar to the FTM section of this paper, a few ideas I have of possible descriptive terms for transfeminine voices (by timbre and role, rather than fixed range) might include:

Hybrid alto

Alto-leaning voice

Soprano–alto hybrid

Variant soprano

Upper/middle voice

Flexible treble voice

Role-based choral part (e.g., “upper line,” “inner treble line”)

Again, it is important to make sure that these terms are decided upon in collaboration with your singer, as there is a chance of “othering” the individual if care is not taken.

5. Vocal feminization is cognitively demanding

Above and beyond anything the singer might be going through (environmental factors, political factors, home life, social constructs, etc.), the transfeminine singer must also consciously manage pitch, resonance, articulation, and airflow in very different ways than cis singers. Once trained, it doesn’t just become automatic. This constant multitasking and monitoring can lead to fatigue or reduced musical focus in class. I often catch myself getting excited and moving quickly in rehearsal, and I can only imagine the experience all my singers are having trying to execute what I want them to do, let alone my transgender singers who must constantly have mental bandwidth on managing the factors above. In short, as directors, we can create more space for processing time and freely revisit instructions or musical passages, all choir members have the chance to succeed.

6. Blending expectations can conflict with vocal goals

Traditional choral blend may pressure singers to sing in uncomfortable ways. I have been in choirs that prioritize blend over individual sound. This approach could pressure singers to, for example,

lower their pitch uncomfortably, darken their tone through unnecessary manipulation of the vocal structures, and suppress feminine qualities in their possible speech goals. These concepts are further supported by Dillon Beede (2025), who investigates pedagogical and policy frameworks within a trans and gender-expansive choral ensemble, highlighting performer perspectives and exploring how such structures contribute to identity formation.⁹⁰

7. Success is defined by the harmony of voice to singer, not acoustics

In short, a “successful” voice is one that feels authentic to the singer, not one that meets external acoustic standards. As Mills, Stonham, and Georgiadou emphasize, voice and communication work with transgender individuals must prioritize authentic expression and individualized goals within a community rather than striving toward a singular, prescriptive outcome.⁹¹ As a director, I find my role switching from correcting to collaborating with all my singers. Instead of guiding singers toward a fixed ideal, such as the singular concept of a “feminine” voice, I find myself facilitating exploration, helping singers navigate resonance, range, and timbre in ways that align with both their identity and vocal health. This shift requires attentiveness not only to sound, but to the lived experience of the singers in front of us, allowing pedagogy to remain flexible, responsive, and affirming.

With that in mind, the following section offers a concise set of strategies, what to strive for and what to avoid, as directors work to support transfeminine singers in the choral rehearsal space.

⁹⁰ Dillon E. Beede "Transformational Choral Spaces and Trans-formational Experiences," *Visions of Research in Music Education* 47, no. 6 (2025): 134, <https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/vrme/vol47/iss1/6>.

⁹¹ Mills et al., “Expanding the Evidence,” 328–42.

Example 23:

4.3: Strive and Avoid: A Brief Summary – MTF

Strive for:

- Treat voice development as skill-building, not passive change
 - Expect intentional coordination, not automatic change
 - Allow time for processing between speaking and singing voices
- Ask identity-based and goal-oriented questions
 - “*What sound feels most like you?*”
 - “*What feels sustainable right now?*”
 - “*Do you want this to feel closer to your speaking voice or different?*”
- Center vocal function and comfort
 - Voice placement should prioritize tessitura, ease, stamina, and vocal response rather than pitch range alone
 - Encourage exploration of forward resonance and vowel shaping
 - Build sound that is clear and efficient, not artificially light
- Be flexible with voice parts and expectations
 - Recognize hybrid vocality. Transfeminine voices may not align cleanly with cisgender soprano and alto categories, especially in terms of passaggio, weight, and timbral consistency.
 - Use affirming, collaborative language
 - Work with singers to identify terminology that reflects both vocal function and gender identity (e.g., *hybrid alto*, *variant soprano*, *middle/upper voice*).⁹²
 - Some singers may prefer:
 - Mid-range singing

⁹² Constansis, “Queer Theory.”

- Mixed or androgynous timbres
 - Flexible or nontraditional roles
- Singing range may not align with identity goals immediately
- Choose repertoire with flexibility in mind
 - Overlapping ranges
 - Optional divisi
 - Octave flexibility
 - Adaptable voicings to support varied voices
- Normalize experimentation and cognitive effort
 - Feminizing the voice can feel like multitasking (pitch and resonance and articulation)
 - Progress may feel nonlinear and mentally demanding
 - Give space for:
 - Marking
 - Repetition
 - Gradual coordination
- Support vocal authenticity over choral uniformity
 - Blend should not override vocal identity and comfort
 - Allow for timbral variation within sections. Transfeminine voices may retain lower harmonics or experience register transitions that differ from cisgender norms; these are not deficiencies and should not be “corrected.”
 - A “successful” voice is one that feels congruent, not just acoustically matched
- Encourage healthy, sustainable tone production
 - Aim for balanced phonation, not breathy or suppressed tone
 - Reinforce that strength and clarity does not equal masculinity
 - Feminine sound can still be resonant, vibrant, and supported

- Remember that voice placement might evolve
 - Vocal coordination, confidence, and technique may change over time, especially with training or therapeutic work

Avoid:

- Assuming hormones will change the voice
 - Estrogen does not feminize vocal folds post-puberty
- Over-focusing on pitch as the primary goal
 - Higher pitch does not equal more feminine
 - Pitch without resonance work often feels inauthentic
- Encouraging excessive breathiness or “lightening”
 - Can lead to inefficient phonation and vocal fatigue
 - May reduce clarity and stamina
- Forcing placement into treble sections
 - Placement should be affirming AND functional, not symbolic
- Treating speech training as sufficient for singing
 - Singing requires different coordination and flexibility
- Prioritizing blend over comfort
 - Traditional choral ideals can conflict with identity
- Ignoring cognitive and emotional load
 - Voice work may involve
 - Dysphoria
 - Fatigue
 - Self-monitoring

While transmasculine singers navigate a changing instrument, transfeminine singers are often building a new coordination from an existing one, requiring not only technical guidance, but space for exploration, identity alignment, and sustainable vocal development within the ensemble.

4.4: Choral Rehearsal Strategies for Transitioning MTF Voices

Following the above research and my own experience, here is a rapid-fire strategy list that will guide your thinking as you enter rehearsals with MTF transitioning voices. See Appendix 4 for a quick reference guide.

Example 24: Resonance-First Approach (Not Pitch-First Thinking)

Strategy

Prioritize resonance, timbre, and efficiency over simply raising pitch.

How to Implement

- Use forward resonance exercises (“ng” to open vowel)
- Encourage bright, clear vowels rather than breathy tone
- Explore resonance shifts without prescribing a single “correct” placement

Why

- Feminine perception depends more on resonance than pitch
- Higher pitch alone does not produce a gender-congruent sound
- Prevents strain from pushing into higher range prematurely
- Supports sustainable, healthy tone production

Example 25: Pitch Exploration Without Pressure

Strategy

Allow singers to explore higher pitch ranges without forcing permanence or consistency.

How to Implement

- Use gentle ascending five-note patterns
- Allow octave flexibility in repertoire
- Normalize adjusting pitch based on comfort

Why

- Pitch change is learned, not automatic
- Over-effort leads to tension and fatigue
- Encourages gradual, sustainable development
- Reduces anxiety around “getting it right”

Example 26: Resonance and Timbre Exploration (Not “Lightening” the Voice)

Strategy

Encourage exploration of vocal color without defaulting to breathiness.

Exercises

- “ng” hums opening to [e] then [a]
- Alternate bright vs. dark vowel production
- Alternate between a spoken, then sung tone comparison

Why

- Excessive breathiness can lead to inefficient phonation
- Feminine tone does not mean weak or airy tone
- Supports clarity, stamina, and vocal health
- Allows singers to find authentic timbral identity

Example 27: Speech-to-Singing Integration

Strategy

Use speaking voice as a bridge to develop singing coordination.

Exercises

- Speak text then chant then sing
- Match speaking pitch patterns to melodic contours

- Use natural speech inflection as a starting point

Why

- Speaking voice often feels more identity-aligned
- Builds continuity between speech and singing
- Reduces disconnect between vocal identities
- Supports authenticity in musical expression

Example 28: Cognitive Load Awareness (Multitasking Support)

Strategy

Recognize and accommodate the mental effort required for vocal feminization.

How to Implement

- Break tasks into smaller steps (pitch OR resonance, then combine)
- Allow marking during complex passages
- Repeat short sections rather than long runs

Why

- Singers may be managing pitch, resonance, and articulation simultaneously
- High cognitive load can lead to fatigue and frustration
- Supports more effective skill acquisition
- Encourages confidence and retention

Example 29: Flexible Voice-Part Placement (Not Assumed Treble Assignment)

Strategy

Collaborate on section placement rather than automatically assigning soprano/alto.

How to Implement

- Offer multiple placement options (e.g., primary part and secondary, etc.)

- Allow singers to try different parts
- Revisit placement regularly
- Build hybrid vocal parts where possible

Why

- Identity is not the same as voice part
- Range and comfort may not align immediately
- Prevents strain and dysphoria
- Supports both musical success and personal affirmation

Example 30: Efficiency-Based Tone Building (Not Aesthetic Imitation)

Strategy

Focus on ease and efficiency rather than copying a “feminine sound”.

Exercises

- Sustained tones at mezzo-piano
- SOVT (Semi-Occluded Vocal Tract) exercises like straw phonation, lip trills, puffer fish, and humming. These focus on flow of air and allow for resonance work simultaneously.
- Gentle onset patterns (“mee”, “hee”, “who”)

Why

- Efficient phonation reduces fatigue
 - Prevents habits that compensate for gender norms (breathiness, tension)
 - Builds a sustainable vocal foundation
 - Supports long-term vocal health
-

Example 31: Fatigue-Aware Rehearsal Design

Strategy

Build in rest and flexibility to prevent vocal and cognitive fatigue.

How

- Alternate singing and marking
- Limit extended high tessitura passages
- Provide optional participation moments (singing drone for tuning, clapping rhythms, snapping cut-offs)

Why

- Feminization work can be physically and mentally demanding
- Fatigue often leads to inefficient phonation
- Protects vocal health
- Signals that wellbeing is prioritized

Example 32: Private Check-Ins (Consent Based)

Strategy

Offer optional, individualized support conversations.

Questions

- *"Is it okay if we talk a little about how your voice is feeling in rehearsal lately?"*
- *"What feels comfortable for you right now?"*
- *"Would you like feedback on your voice today, or would you prefer I just support you where you are?"*
- *"Is there anything you want adjusted in rehearsal?"*
- *"Are there moments in rehearsal where your voice feels especially comfortable or uncomfortable?"*

- *“Have you noticed any changes in your voice that you want me to be aware of?”*
- *“What parts of your range feel most reliable right now?”*
- *“Would you like to explore different octave options or voice parts?”*
- *“Are there ways you’d like your voice or sound to feel that we can support in rehearsal?”*
- *“Would it be helpful to check in regularly, or just as things come up?”*
- *“Do you feel like you’re having to push or adjust in ways that don’t feel sustainable?”*

Why

- Vocal goals and comfort levels vary widely
- Builds trust and rapport
- Avoids public pressure or dysphoria
- Supports individualized pedagogy

Example 33: Flexible Assessment and Participation

Strategy

Adapt evaluation and participation expectations.

Options

- Allow octave displacement
- Assess musicianship beyond tone (clapping rhythms, spoken rhythmic text showing memorization, musical knowledge questions)
- Offer alternate roles (small ensemble, leadership)

Why

- Vocal coordination may still be developing
- Skill is not the same as current vocal output
- Keeps singers engaged
- Prevents discouragement or withdrawal

Example 34: Language Matters (Micro-Pedagogy)

Replace

- *“Sing like a soprano”*
- *“Make it lighter/more feminine”*

With

- *“Find a tone that feels comfortable and sustainable”*
- *“Let’s explore resonance options”*

Why

- Gendered language can create pressure or dysphoria
- Encourages exploration rather than imitation
- Supports identity-aligned vocal development

Example 35: Quick Guide: Rehearsal Model (MTF)

A trans-affirming rehearsal flow:

1. Check-in and gentle vocal exploration (pitch and resonance)
2. SOVT and coordination warmups (efficiency first)
3. Resonance and pitch exploration exercises (no pressure)
4. Flexible repertoire work (octave and part options)
5. Frequent rest, marking, and cognitive reset points
6. Affirming, non-gendered language throughout

My Mantra:

You are not “training a voice into a category.” You are supporting a voice while it becomes itself.

Chapter 5: Exercises and Experimentation of the Voice for Choral Rehearsal

Lastly, I have compiled, through research and experience, a vocal exercise bank for transgender singers. Each exercise states if it is for FTM or MTF or both, provides instructions on how to do it in rehearsal or practice, adds adjustments I would suggest in case the singer would like modular options for various vocal conditions that day, and explains how the exercise can help build the transgender voice. Many of these might not be new to a seasoned director, but to reframe these “vocal builders” for inclusion of all voice types is the goal. After experimenting with modifications to these exercises, it is my hope that directors would be inspired to adjust and modify their own exercises with intention for their singers.

In some exercises, I have suggested particular vowels which might center a particular function of the voice. For instance, when working on onset, the [i] vowel often helps the vocal folds fully occlude leading to an easier start of the sound and a clearer tone production. If that isn't the aim, but you wish to use the exercise, substitute another vowel. For example, if the music you are working on enters on an [a] vowel, working the onset of that vowel specifically would be beneficial.

Furthermore, in a 2018 study at the University of Washington, Dr. Geoffrey Boers was inspired by the work of Kenneth Bozeman in his book “Kinesthetic Voice Pedagogy 2: Motivating Acoustic Efficiency”.⁹³ Boers developed an accessible, at-a-glance vowel chart that provides singers and educators with a quick reference for understanding effective vowel shaping and modification across both treble and bass vocal ranges. In thinking about what vowels might work best in each register, you can use the chart to adjust for range with each repetition for maximum efficiency.

One of the most enjoyable moments in my research and private teaching involved experimenting with perception.

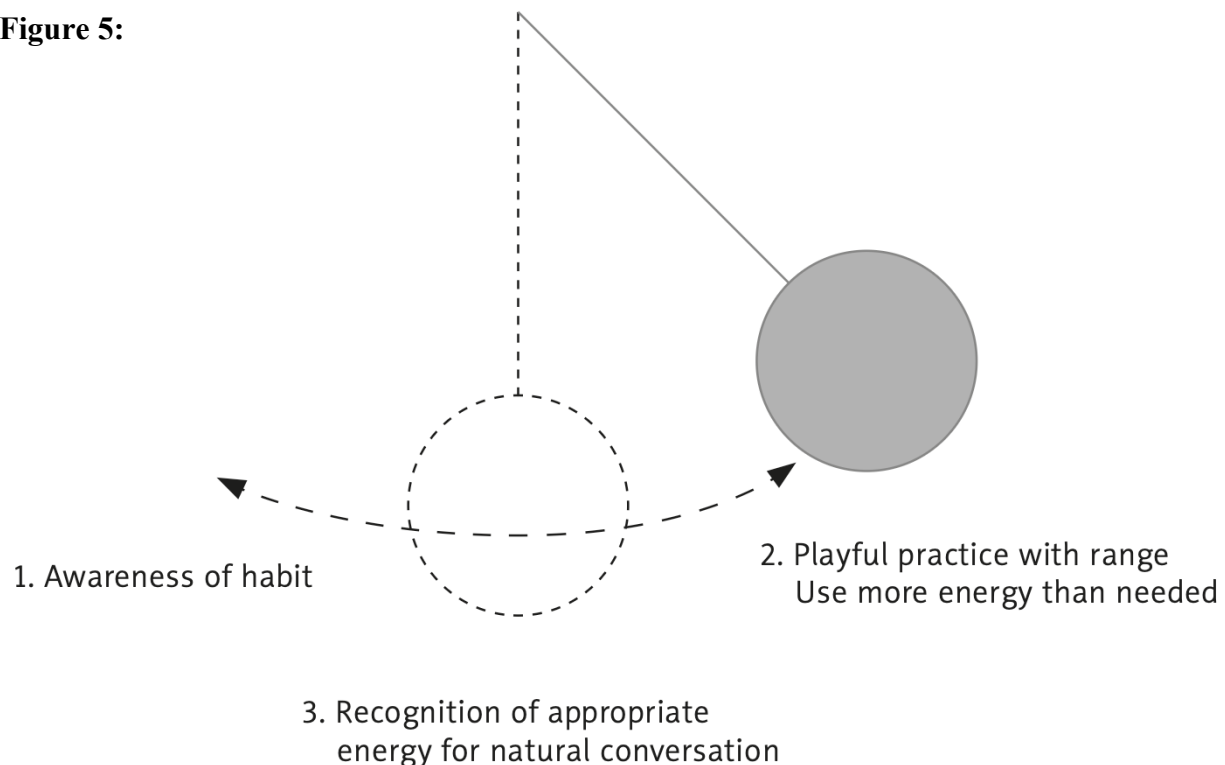
Before you begin an exercise, I want to push the importance of play. Look at the pendulum here from *The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People* by Matthew Mills and Gillie Stoneham. View experimenting with the voice as the pendulum movement. You start by noticing a habit, explore playfully

⁹³ Kenneth Bozeman, “Kinesthetic Voice Pedagogy 2: Motivating Acoustic Efficiency” (Inside View Press, 2021)

by putting more energy into the behavior in your practice, then settle into what feels natural and appropriate for you. Experiment with speech first then chant then singing in many different ranges. This kind of play might feel a bit performative; pushing the extremes of vocal perception (overly feminine or masculine sounding voice, almost like a character voice) but this model allows for this kind of play. Think of it like “range” and “tessitura” where tessitura is the more comfortable place the voice likes to sit. We need to know the scope of the instrument in all its capacities before we can then settle into what the individual finds most comfortable.

The use of the term performative normally has negative connotations. Where the extreme over the top sounding character voice is likely not the goal of most singers, it is an important and positive step in this kind of experimentation. The student can have agency to decide for themselves what feels performative in the sound they just made. Performative aspects might be the contrived tone or exaggerated flow of the line. The time with experimentation, however, might find the phrase in a more comfortable range, and natural intonation as the pendulum swings back.⁹⁴

Figure 5:



⁹⁴ Matthew Mills and Gillie Stoneham, *The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People: A Practical Guide the Creating and Sustaining Authentic Voice and Communication* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017), 51.

Figure 6:

Vowel Resonance Chart
Pitch Specific

(balmy)	a	æ	(honneur)	ɑ	(bot)
(bet)	ε	Λ	(but) æ	(hölle)	ɔ
(bait)	e	ə	(bird) ø	(peu)	o
(bit)	ɪ	γ	(schützen)	ʊ	(book)
(beet)	i	y	(über)	u	(boot)
(bit)	ɪ	γ	(schützen)	ʊ	(book)
(bit)	ɪ	γ	(schützen)	ʊ	(book)
(bait)	e	ø	(peu)	o	(boat)
(bet)	ε	ə	(bird) æ	(hölle)	ɔ
(bat)	æ	Λ	(but) æ	(honneur)	æ
					(bat)

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The choices I make generally follow this framework: [i] and [æ] vowels encourage forward resonance and efficient tone. [u] and [o] generally stabilize low to mid registration. [a] and [ε] vowels open the vocal tract with the lowest tongue position and encourage a lower larynx.

For those interested in a more comprehensive understanding of these techniques, I recommend consulting the work of the following singing voice scholars, whose contributions bridge vocal pedagogy, performance practice, and voice science:

Figure 7: Selected Singing Voice Pedagogy Resources

Author	Title / Resource	Type	Focus Area
Tyler Todd Kimmel	<i>Choral Arts Games</i> (Dissertation), Chapter 3: Vocal Pedagogy Applications ⁹⁵	DMA Dissertation	Choral pedagogy, applied vocal techniques, ensemble-based learning
Jo Estill	<i>Estill Voice Training Level One: Figures for Voice Control</i> ⁹⁶	Training System/ Framework	Voice science, functional control of vocal structures, technical pedagogy
Kari Ragan	<i>A Systematic Approach to Voice: The Art of Studio Application</i> ⁹⁷	Book	Evidence-based vocal pedagogy, studio voice teaching, functional training
William Sauerland	<i>Queering Vocal Pedagogy: A Handbook for Teaching Trans and Genderqueer Singers</i> ⁹⁸	Book	Trans-inclusive pedagogy, gender-affirming voice practices, equity in teaching
Liz Jackson Hearn	<i>The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices</i> ⁹⁹	Book	Trans voice pedagogy, practical strategies for teaching transgender singers

See Appendix 5 for a quick reference to the Vocal Exercises and Coordination Strategies below.

Example 36: SOVT Reset (Straw/Lip Trill Work) (BOTH)

Strategy

Use SOVT (semi-occluded vocal tract) exercises to reset coordination and reduce strain.

Exercise

- Straw phonation (in air or water) on sustained pitch. Focus on making bubbles the same size or if you are in the air, a consistent air flow.
- Lip Trills on 1-3-2-4-3-5-4-2-1 / do-mi-re-fa-mi-so-fa-re-do then open to vowels changing every two notes [i] [e] [a] [o] [u] exploring resonance.
- Glide gently through range

⁹⁵ Tyler Todd Kimmel, “Choral Arts Games: A Case Study Exploring Theater Arts Environments and Methodology in Secondary Choral Rehearsals” (DMA diss., University of Washington, 2024). <https://hdl.handle.net/1773/52132>

⁹⁶ Jo Estill, *Estill Voice Training Level One: Figures for Voice Control* (Estill Voice International, LLC, 2022).

⁹⁷ Kari Ragan, *A Systematic Approach to Voice: The Art of Studio Application* (Pural Publishing, 2020).

⁹⁸ William Sauerland, *Queering Vocal Pedagogy*. (Rowman & Littlefield 2022).

⁹⁹ Liz Jackson Hearn, *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices* (Plural Publishing, 2018).

Adjustments

- Limit range to 3-5 notes for low-energy days 1-3-2-7-1 / do-mi-re-ti-do
- Use only mid-range if extremes feel unstable
- Short bursts instead of sustained phonation

Why

- Balances airflow and vocal fold closure
- Reduces tension and fatigue
- Effective for both instability (FTM) and inefficiency (MTF)

Example 37: Range Mapping Glides (Daily Check-In) (BOTH)

Strategy

Establish the *usable* range for the day, before singing repertoire.

Exercise

- Gentle sirens (low-mid-low or mid-high-mid)
- Five-note descending patterns on [u] or [o] focusing on gentle flow of air, ease of sound, sliding through the pattern
- 5-3-4-2-1 / so-mi-fa-re-do

Adjustments

- Stop before strain – do not test limits
- Use smaller intervals/shorter phrase if voice feels fragmented to focus on ease of breath 3-2-1 / mi-re-do

Why

- Voices may vary daily (especially FTM)
- Prevents forcing range
- Builds self-awareness and autonomy

Example 38: Register Bridging (“Yodel”/Flip Exercises) (FTM/BOTH)

Strategy

Normalize and coordinate register transitions.

Exercise

- Alternate chest to head voice quickly
- Glide intentionally *through* the break

Adjustments

- Slow the exercise if coordination is difficult
- Use smaller pitch intervals
- Avoid any extreme ranges to reduce strain

Why

- Supports register re-coordination during testosterone changes
- Reduces fear of cracking
- Encourages flexibility

Example 39: Forward Resonance Activation (“ng” to vowel) (MTF/BOTH)

Strategy

Develop forward resonance without tension or forced placement.

Exercise

- Sustain “ng” then open to [e], then [a]
- Focus on a gentle switch from “ng” to vowel maintaining resonance, or using it as a chance to explore different resonant sounds
- Repeat on patterns with 3 to five notes

Adjustments

- Keep pitch mid-range to avoid strain
- Use humming only on fatigued days
- Have all individuals explore different open vowels simultaneously. Each voice is different and might find other vowels easier in certain ranges. Ask questions like, “*What feels easier?*”, “*What feels sustainable?*”, and “*How might we use this information to inform other vowels?*”

Why

- Supports brighter resonance associated with feminine perception
- Encourages efficient tone without breathiness
- Builds resonance awareness

Example 40: Speech to Chant to Sing Progression (BOTH)

Strategy

Bridge speaking and singing voices for coordination and identity alignment.

Exercise

- Speak phrase naturally in time
- Add pitch contour (chant or sing-song style approximating the vocal line, no focus on actual pitches)
- Focus on ease of effort while still maintaining resonance (not theatrical or overly dramatic)
- Transition to singing

Adjustments

- Stay in speaking range, if singing feels unstable
- Use slower tempo for coordination

Why

- Aligns vocal production with identity

- Reduces disconnect between speech and singing
- Particularly helpful for both FTM (new coordination) and MTF (identity alignment)

Example 41: Descending Stability Patterns (FTM)

Strategy

Develop control in newly emerging lower range.

Exercise

- Bridging an octave, sing 5-8-1 / so-do¹-do on [no], or [nu], connect each note with breath rather than any breaks
- Start mid-range and move downward gradually
- Focus on landing lightly on the lower octave, less weight

Adjustments

- Limit to comfortable pitches only
- Use quieter dynamics to avoid pressing
- Add slides between pitches to focus on connecting to breath/air flow (Like a trombone slide)

Why

- Supports safe access to lower notes
- Prevents forcing chest voice
- Builds coordination gradually

Example 42: Light Onset Coordination (“mee/ee”) (MTF/BOTH)

Strategy

Encourage clean, efficient vocal onset.

Exercise

- Comfortable repeated pitches on: [mi-mi-mi] then [i-i-i] with space between each onset.

- First, have them just sing each pitch separated but with no breath in between. This ‘sets’ the voice in place for the repeated pitches
- Next, have them breathe between each pitch to build understanding for coordination of pitch set up
- Can include patterns with 3 to 5 notes with light articulation, same onsets

Adjustments

- Slow tempo for clarity (cognitive load awareness)
- Use softer dynamics to avoid tension
- Alternate between [mi-i-mi-i] to more fully work function of coordination

Why

- Prevents glottal attacks or extra air leaking (better coordination of folds)
- Supports clarity without heaviness
- Useful for reducing breathiness in MTF voices

Example 43: Sustained Tone Check (Efficiency Monitor) (BOTH)

Strategy

Assess ease and efficiency of phonation.

Exercise

- Sustain pitch (5-8 seconds) at mezzo-piano
- Vary the vowels to find what works that day
- Ask “*Does this feel easy?*”

Adjustments

- Shorten duration if fatigued
- Use mid-range pitches only

- If stabilization is tricky, have them slide between two notes a half step apart. Sometimes subtle motion can help the student engage the air differently

Why

- Identifies tension or inefficiency early
- Builds stamina safely
- Encourages self-monitoring

Example 44: Resonance Contrast Exploration (MTF/BOTH)

Strategy

Explore vocal color without prescribing a single sound.

Exercise

- Alternate “dark” vs. “bright” vowels on shorter single pitch, breathing in between
- Alternate same vowels on sustained pitch, slowly morphing from one to the other. (I use a spectrum and slowly rotate my hand from one to another)
- Listen for changing of overtones
- Compare tone quality across repetitions

Adjustments

- Keep exercise short to avoid fatigue
- Use speaking voice as baseline if needed

Why

- Builds awareness of resonance choices
 - Avoids rigid or forced tone goals
 - Supports identity-driven sound exploration
-

Example 45: Octave Connection Slides (BOTH)

Strategy

Integrate registers into a unified voice.

Exercise

- Slide 1-8-1 / do-do¹-do on [o], [e]
- Work up through passaggio gently, taking note of sticky areas and tone shifts
- Have the individual work to maintain their own sound, but similar in each register

Adjustments

- Reduce to smaller intervals (5th instead of octave)
- Slow the glide for control
- Switch to SOVT for easier coordination

Why

- Encourages smooth register transitions
- Builds coordination across range
- Reduces “break” sensation
- Supports individual vocal health rather than a “blended ideal”

Example 46: Agility Patterns (Light and Flexible) (BOTH)

Strategy

Restore or build vocal flexibility.

Exercise

- On a single vowel, sing 1-2-3-2-3-4-3—2—1 / do-re-mi-re-mi-fa-mi—re—do (moderate tempo)
- Focus on consistent ease and coordination, while articulating pitches
- Add dynamics in various ways (swell to the 4th scale degree, or start soft and crescendo all the way to the final pitch) to encourage phrasing

Adjustments

- Slow tempo significantly for unstable voice
- Use fewer notes if needed 1-3-2-7-1
- Maintain single, softer dynamic to avoid strain
- Alternate between sliding the pitches and articulating them to avoid fatigue and build understanding of function

Why

- Improves coordination and responsiveness
- Prevents rigidity (common in both transitions)

Example 47: Comfort Check Scale (Self-Assessment Tool) (BOTH)

Strategy

Center singer feedback in vocal work.

Exercise

- Sing short pattern (align with your repertoire)
- Rate comfort (1-5)
- Adjust accordingly

Adjustments

- Can be done silently (internal reflection). Sometimes I have them place their hand on their chest with the number they choose so only I can see at a quick glance
- Use very small patterns for fatigued days
- Take note of key. This might be an indicator for section swapping, hybrid parts, or adjusting the key of the song

Why

- Reinforces autonomy and awareness

- Aligns with identity-centered pedagogy
- Encourages sustainable technique

These exercises are not prescriptive solutions, but adaptable tools designed to meet singers where they are on any given day. Across both transmasculine and transfeminine experiences, the common thread is variability of range, coordination, identity, and comfort. As such, the most effective use of these exercises lies not in rigid application, but in responsive, student-centered adaptation. When approached with flexibility, curiosity, and care, these strategies can support not only vocal development, but also the creation of rehearsal spaces where all singers are empowered to explore, grow, and be heard.

Chapter 6: Implications Beyond Transgender Pedagogy - Reconsidering Choral Excellence

This research has changed me as a conductor, teacher, and musician in ways I did not fully expect when I began this project. What started as an attempt to better understand and support transgender and gender-diverse singers gradually became a broader reflection on what it means to create truly healthy, affirming, and human-centered choral spaces.

In my own rehearsals at Shoreline College and with Wellspring Ensemble, I have become much more aware of how powerful language can be. Small habits I once barely noticed now carry much more meaning to me. I no longer address ensembles as “ladies and gentlemen” or separate singers by gendered assumptions. Instead, I use section names, voice parts, or simply “singers” and “folx.” While these adjustments may seem small on the surface, they have changed the feeling of the room in meaningful ways. Rehearsals feel less rigid, less anxious, and more welcoming for many singers.

This work has also made me more thoughtful about vulnerability in rehearsal spaces. Singing is deeply personal. Choir asks people to make sound with their bodies in front of others while navigating confidence, fear, identity, fatigue, and self-expression all at once. Because of this, I have become far more intentional about how I correct singers publicly, how I check in privately, and how I navigate moments of discomfort or uncertainty. I have learned that the way we teach matters just as much as what we teach.

Over time, I have noticed enormous changes in ensemble culture because of these shifts. As I have tried to model empathy, flexibility, and care, singers have begun supporting one another differently as well. There is more trust in the room. More openness. More patience. More listening. Increasingly, singers have described these ensembles as feeling “safe,” both musically and emotionally. That has been one of the most meaningful outcomes of this work for me.

My understanding of voice parts and vocal identity has also changed dramatically. I no longer view SATB categories as fixed boxes in the way I once did. Working with transgender singers has reinforced how individual and fluid voices really are. Increasingly, I allow flexibility and self-placement within sections, especially during periods of vocal transition or fatigue. In some cases, this has meant

creating hybrid lines or adapting expectations to better fit the singer in front of me rather than forcing the singer to fit the system. What I once may have viewed as exceptions, I now see as opportunities for growth in our pedagogy.

Importantly, these ideas have improved my work with all singers, not just transgender individuals. Greater awareness of fatigue, tension, resonance exploration, and vocal sustainability has made my rehearsals healthier across the board. I now build in more opportunities for experimentation, rest, flexibility, and self-awareness. The same tools that support transgender singers often benefit adolescent voices, aging voices, singers recovering from burnout, and singers simply trying to better understand their instrument.

Perhaps most importantly, this research has changed how I define choral excellence itself. For much of my training, excellence was often connected to uniformity: blend, precision, consistency, and the minimization of difference. While those elements still matter to me artistically, I no longer think they are enough on their own. I now believe excellence also includes trust, belonging, authenticity, flexibility, sustainability, and the ability for singers to fully inhabit their own voices without fear.

At its best, choir should not ask singers to disappear into the ensemble. It should allow them to be fully human within it.

As transgender and gender-diverse singers continue to enter our classrooms and ensembles, I believe choral educators are being invited into an important moment of reflection. This work is not simply about accommodating a small population of singers. It is about rethinking the assumptions we carry about voice, identity, leadership, and artistry. In many ways, transgender-affirming pedagogy has helped me become a more compassionate, flexible, and responsive teacher for everyone in the room.

Ultimately, I believe the future of choral music depends not only on the sounds we create together, but on the kinds of spaces we choose to build while creating them.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Glossary of LGBTQ+ Terms

Adapted from the Human Rights Campaign Glossary (2026)

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>

Ally

A term used to describe someone who is actively supportive of LGBTQ+ people. It encompasses straight and cisgender allies, as well as those within the LGBTQ+ community who support each other (e.g., a lesbian who is an ally to the bisexual community).

Asexual

Often called “ace” for short, asexual refers to a complete or partial lack of sexual attraction or lack of interest in sexual activity with others. Asexuality exists on a spectrum, and asexual people may experience no, little or conditional sexual attraction.

Biphobia

The fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, people who love and are sexually attracted to more than one gender.

Bisexual

A person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one gender, though not necessarily in the same way or to the same degree.

Gay

A person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to people of the same gender. This term may be used by individuals of various gender identities.

Gender Binary

A system that categorizes gender into two fixed options—male and female—often assuming alignment with sex assigned at birth and traditional gender roles.

Gender Dysphoria

Clinically significant distress that may occur when a person's gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth.

Gender Expression

The outward presentation of one's gender identity, which may include behavior, clothing, voice, or physical characteristics.

Gender-Expansive

A term describing individuals whose gender identity or expression extends beyond traditional binary expectations.

Gender-Fluid

A gender identity that is not fixed and may shift over time.

Genderqueer

Genderqueer people typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity and often, though not always, sexual orientation. People who identify as "genderqueer" may see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories.

Homophobia

Fear, discomfort, or prejudice toward people who are attracted to the same gender.

Intersex

A term for individuals born with variations in sex characteristics (such as chromosomes, hormones, or anatomy) that do not fit typical definitions of male or female bodies.

Lesbian

A woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women; may also be used by some non-binary individuals.

LGBTQ+

An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, with the “+” representing additional identities.

Non-binary

A term describing individuals who do not identify exclusively as male or female; may include a range of gender identities.

Outing

Disclosing someone’s LGBTQ+ identity without their consent, which can have serious personal and social consequences.

Pansexual

A person who may be attracted to individuals of any gender.

Queer

An umbrella term for identities and orientations outside of heterosexual and cisgender norms; historically used as a slur but reclaimed by many.

Questioning

A term for individuals who are exploring or unsure of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Same-Gender Loving

A term used by some individuals, particularly within Black communities, to describe attraction to people of the same gender.

Sex Assigned at Birth

The classification (typically male, female, or intersex) given at birth based on physical anatomy.

Sexual Orientation

A person's enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to others; distinct from gender identity.

Transgender

An umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity or expression differs from expectations based on their sex assigned at birth. Transfeminine and Transmasculine are variations that embrace gender fluidity.

Transitioning

The process some transgender individuals may undergo to live in alignment with their gender identity, which can include social, medical, and/or legal changes.

Appendix 2: Identity-Affirming Language and Rehearsal Strategies (Quick Reference)

Strategy	Key Practice	Implementation (Quick Actions)	Purpose
Avoid Assumptions	Do not assume pronouns, voice part, or identity	Share your pronouns first (make it optional); use names until confirmed; invite pronoun sharing	Prevents misgendering; builds trust from first interaction
Use Gender-Neutral Language	Replace gendered ensemble language	Use “singers,” “voices,” “treble/lower voices,” or section names instead of “men/women”	Reduces dysphoria; keeps focus on music, not identity
Seek Consent for Identity	Let singers control how they are identified	Ask privately about name/pronouns; clarify context (rehearsal vs. public); respect confidentiality	Supports safety, autonomy, and dignity
Recognize Diverse Identities	Acknowledge non-binary and varied identities	Normalize they/them pronouns; avoid gendered voice assumptions; follow singer language	Promotes inclusion; avoids alienation
Ask When Unsure	Clarify rather than guess	Use simple questions; ask privately when possible	Shows care; prevents harm from assumptions
Lead with Empathy	Center curiosity and care in interactions	Listen without defensiveness; thank corrections; adjust language quickly	Builds trust, engagement, and expressive freedom
Repair Mistakes Simply	Correct errors briefly and move on	Quick correction (“—sorry, they—”); avoid over-apologizing; follow up if needed	Maintains flow; demonstrates accountability
Normalize Pronoun Use	Make pronouns part of ensemble culture	Include in rosters (optional); model consistently; reinforce gently	Reduces stigma; creates shared respect
Quick Rehearsal Guide	Keep core practices in mind	Open with inclusivity; use neutral language; check in privately; repair quickly; center empathy	Supports consistent, affirming rehearsal culture

Appendix 3: Key Insights FTM (Quick Reference)

Strategy	Key Practice	Implementation (Quick Actions)	Purpose
Dynamic Voice-Part Flexibility	Allow movement between sections	Double-sing parts; assign “home base + option”; normalize weekly shifts	Prevents strain; supports changing voices and identity
Range Mapping Warm-Ups	Daily check-in of usable range	5-note descending patterns; gentle sirens; ask “What feels easy today?”	Builds awareness; avoids forcing unstable range
Crack-Normalizing Exercises	Treat breaks as part of development	Glissandi through breaks; yodel/flip exercises; normalize verbally	Reduces shame; supports coordination
Tessitura-First Repertoire	Prioritize comfort over extremes	Reassign lines; use divisi; adjust keys	Supports stamina; prevents vocal fatigue
Speech-to-Singing Bridging	Use speaking voice as foundation	Speak → chant → sing; use conversational tone	Aligns identity and sound; builds stability
Resonance Exploration	Explore, don’t force tone	“ng” hums; compare resonance spaces; avoid “darkening” language	Reduces tension; supports authentic tone
Fatigue-Aware Rehearsal	Build in rest and flexibility	Alternate singing/marking; allow partial participation	Protects vocal health; reduces injury risk
Private Check-Ins	Offer consent-based support	Ask brief 1:1 questions; adjust as needed	Builds trust; avoids public discomfort
Flexible Assessment	Adapt evaluation expectations	Allow octave shifts; assess musicianship; offer alternatives	Maintains engagement; prevents attrition

Language Matters	Use non-gendered instruction	Replace gendered cues with functional language	Reduces dysphoria; supports identity
Quick Rehearsal Model	Structure affirming rehearsal flow	Check-in → warm-ups → flexible sections → rest → inclusive language	Creates consistent, supportive environment

Appendix 4: Key Insights MTF (Quick Reference)

Strategy	Key Practice	Implementation (Quick Actions)	Purpose
Resonance-First Approach	Prioritize resonance over pitch	“ng” to vowel exercises; encourage bright vowels; explore placement options	Supports gender perception; prevents strain
Pitch Exploration Without Pressure	Explore pitch gradually	Gentle ascending patterns; allow octave flexibility; normalize adjustment	Reduces tension; supports sustainable development
Resonance & Timbre Exploration	Explore tone without breathiness	“ng” → [e]/[a]; compare bright/dark; speech vs. singing tone	Builds clarity and stamina; supports authentic tone
Speech-to-Singing Integration	Bridge speech and singing	Speak → chant → sing; match speech contours to melody	Aligns identity and sound; reduces disconnect
Cognitive Load Awareness	Reduce multitasking strain	Break tasks into steps; allow marking; rehearse in short sections	Improves learning; reduces fatigue
Flexible Voice-Part Placement	Collaborate on section placement	Offer multiple parts; allow experimentation; revisit regularly	Prevents strain; supports identity and comfort
Efficiency-Based Tone Building	Focus on ease, not imitation	SOVT (straw, lip trills); sustained tones; gentle onsets	Builds healthy, sustainable technique
Fatigue-Aware Rehearsal	Build in rest and flexibility	Alternate singing/marking; limit high tessitura; optional participation	Protects vocal health; reduces fatigue
Private Check-Ins	Offer individualized support	Ask consent-based questions; adjust based on feedback	Builds trust; supports personalized pedagogy

Flexible Assessment	Adapt evaluation expectations	Allow octave shifts; assess musicianship; offer alternate roles	Maintains engagement; prevents discouragement
Language Matters	Use non-gendered instruction	Replace gendered cues with functional language	Reduces dysphoria; supports identity
Quick Rehearsal Model (MTF)	Structure affirming rehearsal flow	Check-in → SOVT → explore → flexible repertoire → rest → inclusive language	Creates consistent, supportive environment

Appendix 5: Vocal Exercises and Coordination Strategies (Quick Reference)

Strategy	Key Practice	Implementation (Quick Actions)	Purpose
SOVT Reset	Reset coordination; reduce strain	Straw phonation (air/water); lip trills (1-3-2-4-3-5-4-2-1 patterns) then add vowels; gentle glides; limit to mid-range or short bursts on low-energy days	Balances airflow & closure; reduces tension; supports all voices
Range Mapping Glides	Establish daily usable range	Gentle sirens (mid-focused); 5-note descending patterns on [u]/[o] (5-3-4-2-1); stop before strain; reduce to 3-note patterns if needed	Prevents forcing; builds awareness & autonomy
Register Bridging	Coordinate vocal registers	Chest–head alternation (“flip”); glides through break; slow tempo; reduce interval size if unstable	Reduces fear of cracking; builds flexibility
Forward Resonance Activation	Develop efficient resonance	Sustain “ng” → open vowels; mid-range focus; hum on fatigued days; explore multiple vowel options	Builds resonance clarity; avoids tension; supports individualized tone
Speech → Chant → Sing	Bridge speech and singing	Speak phrase → add contour → sing; stay in speaking range if needed; slow tempo	Aligns identity & voice; improves coordination
Descending Stability Patterns	Develop lower range control	Bridging the octave (5-8-1) on [nu] or [no]; start mid-range; use light tone; add slides for connection. Land lightly on bottom note	Supports safe low-range access; prevents forcing
Light Onset Coordination	Encourage clean onset	“mee/ee” repeated pitches [mi-mi-mi]; separate then connect; soft dynamics; slow tempo	Improves clarity; reduces breathiness/tension
Sustained Tone Check	Monitor efficiency	Sustain pitch (5–8 sec); vary vowels; ask “Does this feel easy?”; shorten or add half step-slides if needed	Identifies tension early; builds stamina safely
Resonance Contrast Exploration	Explore vocal color	Alternate bright/dark vowels; morph between tones; compare repetitions; keep short	Builds awareness; supports authentic tone choices

Octave Connection Slides	Integrate registers	Slide 1–8–1; slow through passaggio; reduce to 5ths; switch to SOVT if needed	Smooths transitions; reduces breaks
Agility Patterns	Build flexibility	Short scalar patterns; moderate → slow tempo; simplify patterns; alternate articulated vs. sliding	Improves responsiveness; reduces rigidity
Comfort Check Scale	Center singer feedback	Sing short pattern aligned with your repertoire; rate comfort (1–5); adjust range/key/pattern; allow silent check-ins	Builds autonomy; supports sustainable technique

Appendix 6: A Model Welcome Questionnaire for First Rehearsal¹⁰⁰

Welcome to choir! We're so glad you're here!

All of this information helps us get to know each of you better and set us up for a great quarter of music-making! The information you share is **confidential** and you're always welcome to update your responses at any point in the year.

We're excited to learn more about you and the ways we can support you in **USingers!**

About You:

The name I like to be called in class:

How I want my name printed in the concert program:

Pronouns: (*If you chose to leave these blank, we will use gender-neutral pronouns and language)

My pronouns to use one-on-one*:

The pronouns I would like to use in class and on campus*:

Musical Snapshot:

My favorite song that I am listening to right now:

My experience with choir is:

I like to sing (circle one):

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

I don't know yet

Goals and Motivation:

My musical goal this year:

I joined this choir because:

Support and Wellbeing:

Things that help me when I get nervous:

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