

up singing in the high baritone range. I believe a male who is transitioning to become a female will experience less change vocally than a female. Certain vocal therapy approaches can help male voices become more feminine. Options vary greatly depending on the individual.

Ensemble names such as men's choir and women's chorus make it challenging for students who may not identify themselves in that manner. Better choices would include treble choir or bass choir, both of which associate vocal ranges of singers with clef sign designations, not the gender of the singer. Other options might include titles associated with the school mascot, a city landmark, or a nearby river.

7. Be supportive

Your choirs are most likely diverse groups of individuals who need your support and encouragement. If one of your students comes out to you, respond with kindness and openness. Don't act surprised. Ask a few questions, e.g., "How did you come out? Are you happier? What has changed for you?" Be positive. That person is sharing a precious secret with you. You can act like it's no big deal, celebrate their courage, and support their decision.

Kevin Fenton came to my university recently for a choral workshop. He told a special story about what singing in choirs can do for people. A student of his had created an ecumenical cantata. People from all different denominations were involved. One of the singers, a minister, was an outspoken opponent of homosexuality. At the rehearsals and performance, the minister sang next to a man Dr. Fenton knew to be openly gay. Neither man knew anything about the other. They were there to enjoy the music and create a special "moment." The performance was highly successful and the men enjoyed each other's company.

Music has the power to unify us, no matter what our cultural differences or sexual orientation may be. Music brings people together for common goals. I believe we must work together to ensure that this sublime and uplifting bond not be broken by students' fears of being themselves (i.e., LGBT) in our choirs. All students should be able to come to our choir rooms and find them to be safe places to sing, to thrive, and to belong.

Recommended Reading

Louis Bergonzi, "Sexual Orientation and Music Education," *Music Educators Journal* 100, no. 4 (June 2014): 65.



If you sit down at set of sun and count the acts that you have done, and counting, find one self-denying deed, one word that eased the heart of him who heard, one glance most kind that fell like sunshine where it went, then you may count that day well spent.

—George Eliot

Sing Out Loud: Empowering Women's Choirs

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(Used with permission of
Massachusetts' *Mass Sings*, January 2014)

It is my privilege to teach at an institution where the women's choir is the premiere choral ensemble—Mount Holyoke College, the first all-women's college established in the United States. It is also my alma mater.

I direct three choirs of varying sizes and ability. During my student days, I enjoyed singing, at one time or another, in all three ensembles. It wasn't until I attended graduate school that I became aware of how often, in a co-ed institution, the women's choir is regarded as a second-class citizen in a choral program. While I understand that this secondary status is not necessarily intentional, it is a serious and ongoing problem. As choral educators, we must begin thinking about the messages we are sending women.

Are we empowering them through language, programming, and healthy vocal development, for example, or are we furthering gender stereotypes that would make women believe they are indeed less capable, less productive, less worthy of being recognized for quality work and outstanding effort?

Language Matters

Language is a powerful tool for establishing relationships and defining identity, both of which are integral to a choir's success. Language is also linked with social progress.

Consider the role that language has played and continues to play in the Civil Rights Movement. In this same vein, we need to monitor the manner in which we address female members of our choirs.

If you conduct an SATB ensemble, address your male and female singers using terms of equality, such as men and women, gentlemen and ladies, or guys and gals. Too often I hear conductors address the tenors and basses as guys or men and the sopranos and altos as girls.

While I understand that the intention behind this gesture may be one of gentility, the conductor who uses these terms is doing the female choir members a disservice. Before giving pitches to begin singing, the conductor is setting up a dichotomy—the solid, dependable “guys” and the dainty, dependent “girls.”

Whatever the makeup of your ensemble, be wary of employing the terms “girls” or “ladies” in addressing sopranos and altos. Addressing the women with the term “women” is easy enough. With it come associations of empowerment and self-sufficiency *a la* Rosie the Riveter, a productive and essential part of the United States work force in the Second World War.

If you have transgender members singing in your ensembles, use language that is even more inclusive—singers, sopranos, or altos, for example. We identify ourselves as choral musicians because we believe in the power of communal singing. We cannot accomplish this if we do not make our ensemble members feel that they are part of a fair and inclusive community.

Down with Unrequited Love and Flowers

One of the challenges facing women's choirs is the lack of engaging, great repertoire. One can only program Holst's *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* and Poulenc's *Litanies a la vierge noire* so many times.

This present lack presents an exciting opportunity for conductors of women's choirs to be adventurous in their programming, not just by exposing their students to different genres, eras, and cultures, but also through gaining new perspectives.

When I first began teaching at Mount Holyoke, I frantically worked to educate myself about the breadth and depth of repertoire for women's choirs. I was disturbed to find that much of the repertoire contained texts centered on unrequited love

or picking/giving flowers.

While both of these subjects offer valid insights into the human experience, they speak to antiquated expectations of what a women's choir can and should be singing. Professional female ensembles such as Norway's Cantus, directed by Tove Ramlo-Ystad, and Boston's Lorelei Ensemble, directed by Beth Willer, serve as inspiring examples of what women's choirs can program and commission.

I believe we directors should program music that features women at work. Use *kulning*, a semi-improvisational music indigenous to Sweden that imitates herding calls. Women traditionally sang this music while they were tending their cattle. In addition to offering a view of women that is not hearth-centered, *kulning* also teaches vocal independence through improvisation.

Why not program works that present women in unconventional roles? “The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish,” composed by Robinson McClellan, a living composer, features a text by the Irish poet Eavan Boland. The text speaks about the Irish myth of the Selkie. In it, a seal is transformed into a beautiful woman. In Boland's poem, however, the story is reversed so that the woman turns into a sexless, cold fish, and, as a result, feels liberated.

I do hope you will consider programming music that breaks down gender stereotypes and creates space for new views and progressive perspectives.

Women Should Sound Like Women

Always encourage and teach your women's choirs to sing with a full, well-connected, vital tone. Too often, especially in the United States, women are taught to speak (and sing) like little girls. The movie *In a World...* (2013) illustrates this point quite clearly. I highly recommend it.

Vocalises present a fine opportunity to shape the sound of your choir through healthy vocal technique and appropriate vowel modification. In addition, the use of folk music is an effective way of teaching women how to sing with connection.

My interest in women's music has taken me to two fascinating locations to study folk music: the Republic of Georgia in the Caucasus area between western Asia and Eastern Europe and the French island of Corsica in the Mediterranean Sea. Our Mount Holyoke choirs perform works from these two countries often.

Georgian music from the Svaneti region transfers quite well to women's voices. The music sits low in the female range

and requires a well-grounded, centered physical stance and a well-supported chest voice. After I have taught our singers how to sing this music authentically and in a healthy manner, the sound can be utilized in more traditional women's repertoire, especially when a vibrant, rich timbre is required.

Letting my students know that big, powerful sounds are achievable and within their reach with consistent practice boosts their morale and gives them ownership of their voices.

Final Thoughts

Stigmas attached to women's choirs need to be addressed and laid to rest through proactive, well-informed teaching. Women's choirs should not be a dumping ground, the leftover choir for females who did not make it into the premier SATB ensemble.

In addition, a women's choir should not be a testing ground for graduate conductors. Conductors of women's choirs should not be pigeon-holed and relegated to the musical background. Rather they should be taken just as seriously as the conductors of SATB ensembles.

Such prejudices will take time to overcome. Right now, you can and should begin building a women's choir that takes pride in its work, one that fosters progress rather than negating it. Through appropriate language, wise programming, and dynamic, healthy vocal development, you are encouraging your women to sing out unapologetically with individual and collective empowerment.



By three methods we may learn wisdom. First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

—Confucius

Recruiting Boys into Choirs — Techniques That Work

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Missouri's *MCD A Reporter* Spring 2014)

January has flown by. The MMEA state conference has come and gone, and student enrollment conferences for the fall 2014 semester are quickly approaching. Besides having MSHSAA Large-Ensemble and Solo & Small-Ensemble festivals looming, many of us are thinking about one thing: choir auditions!

If your school district is like mine, administrators are hyper-focused on numbers. Why? The number of students enrolled dictates staffing. How can we increase our choir's numbers? More specifically, how can we retain and recruit more young men?

It's no secret that our culture has convinced young men that singing is not a manly trait. No matter how passionately you disagree with this idea, go to your school lunch room and speak with five to ten guys about singing in choir. Chances are you will quickly hear statements such as "I'm not a choir guy;" "I cannot sing;" or "choir is for girls." A table of guys might just stare at you and offer no response to your question.

The following methods have proven to be beneficial not only to my choral program but to those of a number of my colleagues. Some of the approaches have been shared by other teacher friends. Many ideas can be utilized to recruit boys as well as girls. Although I am writing from the perspective of a high school teacher, many of these strategies are equally effective for middle school choral directors. The first step is getting guys to walk through the door into the choir room.

Target Group: Middle School Boys

Provide joint concerts with the middle schools that feed into your school. This strengthens both programs. The more opportunities middle school kids are given to see what is in store for them in the future, the better.

Use area churches that have decent acoustics. Consider including/inviting elementary students, thus providing them opportunities to hear middle and high school ensembles. These