

# Creating Choirs that Welcome Transgender Singers

By Jane Ramseyer Miller



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Fifteen years ago, Jan Michael (alto) approached me to share that s/he identified as transgender<sup>1</sup> and was beginning his physical transition by taking testosterone. I was clueless about the process of voice transition for a trans\*<sup>2</sup> man but suggested that we do a range check every few months. Within a year, to my amazement, Jan's voice moved seamlessly from alto through tenor and eventually settled at a solid B2. Aside from learning to read a new clef, he experienced relatively few vocal issues in the process. A year later, another singer in my chorus transitioned; this time, however, his process was complicated and included vocal fatigue, hoarseness, and serious difficulty singing. I was fascinated by the experience of these singers and felt helpless to address the vocal issues that arose.

I began reading on this subject and talking to vocal experts and finally found one who had actually coached transitioning singers. Out of these conversations, my chorus, One Voice Mixed Chorus (Minnesota's lesbian,

gay, bisexual, transgender, and allies chorus), hosted the world's first Transgender Voices Festival held in St. Paul, Minnesota, in April 2004. The day-long event included vocal workshops for transitioning voices, individual voice coaching, workshops exploring identity and voice, and training for voice teachers and conductors. A few trans\* singers flew in from both the west and east coasts, and out of the event in 2004 we birthed TransVoices, a new Minnesota chorus for transgender singers.

Through these experiences and years of reading and conversations with trans\* singers, I have come to understand that there are both similarities and differences to transitioning voices for cisgender<sup>3</sup> boys in puberty. But perhaps more importantly, I began to understand that voice is incredibly important to transgender people. The pitch of someone's voice can determine whether or not they "pass" as their identified gender. Because transgender voices do not always match outward gender expression, trans\* people may be silenced from speaking or singing out of fear or embarrassment.

Singers who take testosterone as they transition from female to male (F2M) experience a voice transition

much like the transition of boys during puberty. For cisgender boys in puberty, the vocal folds both lengthen and thicken, producing a lower range. An F2M individual who takes testosterone as an adult experiences a thickening of the vocal folds, lowering the pitch of the voice, but their vocal chords do not lengthen. Similar to the process of puberty, is it helpful if F2M singers sing gently and consistently through the transition.

The situation is particularly sensitive for a person transitioning from male to female (M2F). While taking synthetic estrogen creates physical changes for a trans\* woman, it does not significantly affect voice range for a singer who transitions later in life, and there is disagreement among voice professionals regarding whether taking estrogen can reverse the thickening of vocal folds. It is certainly true that the younger a singer is when she begins taking estrogen, the more likely that her voice range will move upward through a thinning of the vocal folds. M2F individuals can train their voice to speak at a higher pitch, and singers may sing in falsetto, although this process requires a skilled singer and voice teacher.

As conductors, we may audition a singer who has wanted to live as a

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woman her whole life and has finally transitioned. But unless she's lucky enough to be a countertenor or has the finances to undergo vocal adjustment surgery, singing in a treble range is likely an unrealistic goal. You can support her by listening to her voice and helping her sing in a range that is healthy for her.

In One Voice Mixed Chorus today, around 10 percent of my singers identify as trans\* or gender-queer. Our bass section leader is a trans woman with a rich B2 range. Several cisgender women sing in the tenor section because that is their most comfortable range. I have a variety

of genders in every voice part, so as a conductor I simply refer to my singers by voice (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) rather than by gender (men, woman, boys, girls, ladies, gentlemen). I also ask any guest conductor or clinician working with my chorus to also refer to voice parts rather than genders.

There are many ways that we as conductors can make simple changes to ensure that as we create beautiful music, we are also creating choruses where people of all gender identities feel safe and welcome.<sup>4</sup> I asked several trans\* singers to help me create a list of twelve tips for making a chorus more welcoming:

- 1) When posting for singer auditions, keep language about voice parts gender neutral.
- 2) In the audition setting, ask new singers their preferred pronoun, especially if a singer presents with an ambiguous gender.
- 3) Invite all singers to audition for any solo that fits their vocal range.
- 4) If a singer shares that they are transitioning via testosterone, ask when they started and how the transition has affected their vocal range, etc. It will typically take 12-16 months for an adult singer's voice to settle to a consistent range and can take up to two years to stabilize.
- 5) Assign voice sections for each singer dependent on their voice range and voice color rather than gender. If a singer is transitioning, check their range every 3-4 months and assist them in moving to a new vocal part as needed.
- 6) You may encounter a trans\* woman who wants to sing alto or soprano. However, unless she's lucky enough to be a countertenor or has the finances to undergo vocal adjustment surgery, singing in a treble range is likely an unrealistic goal. You can support her by listening to her voice and helping her sing in a healthy range and voice part.
- 7) Post signs for gender-neutral



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bathrooms in rehearsal and concert spaces. Educate your chorus and audience regarding the protocol and importance of gender-neutral restroom space. (See <http://www.mydoorsign.com> for sign options.)

8) Use gender-neutral language in rehearsal and insist that all section leaders and singers also follow these same guidelines.

9) Invite trans\* and gender-nonconforming individuals, artists, speakers, composers, and songwriters as a guest artists in your concerts.

10) Ask that your guest artist and musician contracts use gender-neutral language when working with your chorus.

11) Examine requirements mandating gender-specific concert attire. Forcing singers into gender-specific (or incongruent) clothing may be seen as a public devaluing of identities and communicates indifference to the spectrum of gender identity and expression.

12) Adopt a gender-neutral language statement for your organization. (See an example at: <http://galachoruses.org/files/gala-gender-neutral-statement.pdf>.)

**Jane Ramseyer Miller** is the artistic director of One Voice Mixed Chorus and the artistic director for GALA Choruses. More about One Voice at: [www.OneVoiceMN.org](http://www.OneVoiceMN.org).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, transgender people are individuals whose gender expression or gender identity differs from conventional expectations based on their physical sex. The word “transgender” or “trans\*” is an umbrella term often used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences. Transgender people can be gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, or anything in between, just like all other people. Sexual orientation is different from gender identity and cannot be assumed about anyone. For more information about transgender

voices, explore the GALA Choruses Resource Center. [www.galachoruses.org](http://www.galachoruses.org)

<sup>2</sup> The use of the asterisk (trans\*) stems from common computing usage where it represents a wildcard used to search multiple derived words from a prefix.

<sup>3</sup> Cisgender is a term that refers to a person whose self-identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth (i.e., not transgender).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the topic of gender, see: Joshua Palkki, “Gender Trouble: Males, Adolescence, and Masculinity in the Choral Context,” *Choral Journal* 56, no. 4 (November 2015): 24-35.

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