Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom

Rational educators can create similar arrangements in which trans students can be successful and comfortable vocally, socially, and visually. In concert settings, such careful standing arrangements may be less crucial visually if all students wore gender-neutral uniforms.

Uniforms. Regarding uniforms, Skyler said, “In a perfect world maybe uniforms would be gender neutral.” Uniforms did not prove to be a challenge for Jon as he navigated his gender identity in high school choir. Things were less smooth for Skyler, who seemed to settle a bit by agreeing to wear the uniform meant for their assigned birth sex. In the changing gender landscape of the twenty-first century, choral teachers may need to decide whether or not some of the traditional choir uniforms (e.g., dresses and tuxedos) best honor the gender identity of all students. The U.S. Department of Education states, “Some schools have policies that allow transgender students to dress consistent with their gender identity [...] Washington State Guidelines encourage school districts to adopt gender-neutral dress codes that do not restrict a student’s clothing choices on the basis of gender.”

Choral teachers may explore a “concert black” approach in which every singer dresses in all black within specified guidelines to ensure that all outfits are school appropriate. Perhaps in the future, choral teachers could employ fashion designers to create gender-neutral choir uniforms.

Rehearsal language. Choral music educators can refrain from using blatantly gendered language in rehearsal. Choral teachers should refer to sections, not genders. Trans singers who do not feel a strong sense of connection between their voice and gender may experience this even more often, as evidenced by Sara’s insistence that her teachers not refer to the tenor and bass sections as “men.” In addition to honoring trans students by carefully choosing words in class, Mr. Ames (Sara’s choir teacher) demonstrated how rehearsal language could influence other subsets of the LGBTQA community:

I try to keep any analogy I’m using sort of gender-neutral as well—when we’re talking about a piece dealing with love, I try and say, “a person you might have feelings for” as opposed to the stereotypical boy loves girl or vice versa. I do this also because we have a gay student in our chorus, and probably more that I’m not aware of. I try really hard to be as neutral as I can when using examples or analogies.

All choral teachers should bear in mind what kinds of examples they use and what those examples say about gender-sexual diversity.

Honor choirs. State choral associations and music education organizations will need to explore their honor choir audition policies. At the time of this writing, this author has interfaced with choral officials in various states. On May 28, 2016, there was a change made to a large Southwest state’s honor choir policy, which had previously not allowed females to audition as tenors and forced students to audition for a voice part that matched their assigned birth sex. These restrictions have now been abolished. Jon’s choir teacher was instrumental in having honor choir policies changed in his state in the Northeast. Referring to the previous requirement that the state music educators’ association (MEA) ask for students’ gender on the application process, Mr. Mullins said that after consulting with an MEA lawyer, “They took that out completely. At the Region level we’re not even asking for gender anymore, because there’s no need.” State officials will need to consider state education law and policies while examining how they run their honor choirs—including considerations about ensemble types (e.g., the large Southwestern state referenced previously changed “women’s choir” to “treble choir”), voicing, and uniforms.

Rooming assignments. Similar to discussions about name changes and choir names, dialogue regarding rooming arrangements on overnight choir trips should be carefully approached when considering transgender students. Most importantly, the choral teacher can have a dialogue with the trans student to see how they feel about their rooming situation. According to the “Dear Colleague Letter,” “A school must allow transgender students to access housing consistent with their gender identity and may not require transgender students to stay in single-occupancy accommodations or to dis-
close personal information when not required of other students.” 37 Conversations with supervising adults may be required, especially if the trans student is not widely “out.” Choral teachers should also consult with their administration and school district policies.

Conclusion

Are we at a transgender “tipping point” in choral music education? That question remains a complex one with an elusive answer. What is clear, however, is that gender issues and transgender rights have come to the forefront of political and educational discourse. As noted by Kathleen E. Rands who uses ze/hir pronouns in the opening quote, transgender students exist everywhere—including in school choral programs. It is my hope that this article will add to the ongoing discussion about how to include and honor all gender identities in the choral context. The experiences of the three students in this study illuminate new issues for consideration and multiple possible paths forward. Hopefully in the future, choral conductor-teachers are not afraid to traverse these paths. As Mr. Mullins, Jon’s choir teacher, said:

If it’s not an issue for you yet, it will be. It’s not a matter of if; it’s a matter of when. So yes, we should be having these discussions and laying the groundwork now so that when you do have a trans student, you’re not wondering what the hell you’re supposed to do.

As Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, Lisa Ruzzi, Connie Dimedio, and Jeane Stanley write: “Recognize how the work you are doing now will help other children in the future... You must be willing to spend the time and effort, and know you are making a difference.” 38

NOTES


8 Ibid.


10 Genny Beemyn, personal communication, July 27, 16.

protected regardless of the new executive order by the Trump Administration pertaining to access to restrooms and locker rooms. California Education Code permits students to use facilities consistent with one’s identity.”


15 All names associated with the dissertation study are pseudonyms.


17 L (lesbian), G (gay), B (bisexual), T (trans), Q (queer, questioning), and A (asexual). This is the way that I have chosen to represent sub-populations of gender-sexual diversity. When used in other forms (e.g., LGBT), I am quoting the acronym used by another author in an effort to accurately represent their writing. I have chosen these seven letters (representing eight terms) because at this juncture, I consider it a fairly comprehensive representation of the many facets of the non-cisgender and non-heteronormative population. I am aware of the fact that these letters are not all-inclusive. For a quick primer on LGBTQ issues in the music classroom, see: Paparo, Stephen. “The ABC’s of Creating the LGBTQ-Friendly Classroom.” *National Association for Music Education (NAfME)*, August 18, 2016. https://www.nafme.org/abcs-creating-lgbtq-friendly-classroom/.


19 As an example, in December 2014, a concerned high school choir teacher posted the following in a choral director group on Facebook: “Recently, one of my sophomore sopranos came out to me as transgendered [sic] and would like to identify as male. Since then, I’ve switched out that student’s choir dress for a vest and black dress shirt (male concert choir outfit), and of course, I have switched to using male pronouns when addressing this student in order to support him. However, I need guidance on what part I should have him sing” (social media, December 2, 2014). The teacher went on to explain that the student desired to sing tenor and had been “practicing low.” He very much wanted to switch voice parts. This teacher’s reaction is encouraging—she immediately was understanding and supportive about pronouns and concert dress, and she was trying to do the best thing for her student. What is not encouraging—and quite frightening—were some of the responses to this post, including the very first reply: “Tell him there is such a thing as a boy-soprano. Then, tell him you didn’t wake up one morning and decided [sic] to be a choir director; you went to college to learn the difference between a soprano and a tenor and that he has to sing soprano” (social media, December 2, 2014, emphasis added).


and Emerging Practices for Supporting Transgender Students.”


Palkki, “Gender Trouble.”


Many thanks to my friend and colleague Andrew Minear, who came up with this idea.
