

Intersecting Voices on Gender-Affirming Vocal Music Pedagogy

by Ian Widmann

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Approved by:



Date 12/14/2023

Liliana Carrizo
Assistant Professor of Music



Date 12/14/2023

Ryan Raul Banagale
Associate Professor of Music

Land Acknowledgement

As I near the end of my time at Colorado College, it is important for me to both reflect on how our work here is rooted in a legacy of settler colonialism, and to honor, in the words of CC professor Dwanna McKay, the "hundreds of Indigenous Nations who continue to resist, live, and uphold their sacred relations across their lands". Colorado College is located within the unceded territory of the Ute peoples. The earliest documented tribes include the Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, and Cheyenne. An extended list of tribes with a legacy of residence in Colorado is included on the CC website. This act of honoring is especially pertinent to this paper because, even within fields of musicology, education, and queer studies, indigenous voices, and especially trans indigenous voices, continue to be marginalized by the academic institution. I believe one of the most impactful fields of further study on the trans voice will be one that celebrates and centers the experiences of trans indigenous musicians.

Acknowledgements

I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable support I have received throughout the development of this project, both from my Capstone advisor, Liliana Carrizo, as well as the numerous other students, staff, and faculty at CC who have offered their support throughout this process. Your support has meant so much, and I thank you all for being empathetic listeners as we use my work to help improve student experiences at our institution.

The experience of being transgender in the United States brings with it facing patterns of discrimination against gender and sexual minorities. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, 508 bills that restricted the rights of queer Americans were introduced in state legislatures in 2023, as of December 01, 84 of which passed. Additionally, in a recent study in the Journal of Adolescent Health, transgender and nonbinary youth (i.e. those between the ages of 13 and 24) reported higher rates of depressive mood, serious consideration of suicide, and attempted suicide in the past 12 months compared to youth of other gender identities, with evidence to suggest that these mental health disparities result from systemic discrimination within the education system. In many cases, this is a direct result of the aforementioned anti-LGBT legislation (Price-Feeney). As such, it is of the utmost importance for all educators to address how they might better support their trans students.

This is true on a macroscopic level, but it is especially important within the limited context of Colorado College, and even within the Music Department. Perhaps even more important than the broader context of being trans in the US is that there are so many queer and trans people in the department, who often seek out creative and empathetically supportive spaces for safety and comfort, which is important for the students, staff, and faculty to put work into maintaining. It bears mentioning that, at the time of writing this paper, every voice educator in the department has at least one trans person in their studio or choir, whether or not those students have explicitly come out to those educators. The work of supporting trans voice students is not theoretical, as if the vocal music department might have trans students in the future; it is the here and now, and voice educators could implement many of the techniques articulated in this paper in their classroom to immediately improve the experiences of some of their students.

As such, the purpose of this paper is primarily to present suggestions for how voice educators might approach being gender-affirming in their voice pedagogy. This project is organized into three main sections: first, basic background information about trans people and their voices, as well as some baseline considerations for gender-affirming voice educators based on the academic literature available in this field; subsequently, a presentation of how the work of trans voice educator Renée Yoxon might be applicable to vocal music classrooms; and finally, challenges for future researchers in the field.

I. Background Information

Recognizing that there are likely readers who are unfamiliar with the most respectful language for discussing queer people, the first section will begin with a brief overview of some of those terms, which is based on the GLAAD Media Reference Guide. This is not an exhaustive list, but aims to provide enough background to understand the content of this Capstone thesis. First, this thesis uses the word *queer* to denote the people whose gender and sexual identities fall outside of the normative cisgender and heterosexual ones. This is a word with a difficult history, particularly due to its legacy as a pejorative term, though it has been reclaimed by members of the queer community in recent years. The term's use here respectfully acknowledges that legacy, while also drawing from its use as a designation that covers the broad expanse of identities that fall under spectra of gender and sexual diversity. It is also important to make a distinction between sex and gender identity. Sex is the identity assigned to a person at their birth, based on the appearance of their anatomy. In contrast, gender identity refers to a person's deep-seated, internal sense of their gender, which may or may not have anything to do with their sex. This is closely related to gender expression, which refers to how a person externally manifests their

gender identity through societal cues, like names, clothes, and, of course, the sound of their voice. Thus, a transgender, or trans, person is a person whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people can also be nonbinary, meaning that their gender identity falls outside of the binary categories of "man" and woman." The opposite of trans would be cisgender, or cis, meaning a person whose gender identity does match the sex they were assigned at birth.

An important element of identity development for trans people is the process of transitioning, or bringing their gender expression into alignment with their gender identity. This is a complex process, but it can broadly be split into three categories: medical transition, legal transition, and social transition. Medical transition refers, of course, to the medical aspects of transitioning, which often includes a psychiatric diagnosis of gender dysphoria in order to gain access to gender-affirming health care. This care can include hormone replacement therapy (HRT), which involves administering hormones to a trans person to bring their anatomical characteristics more in line with their gender identity, and, in the case of children and adolescents, often involves administering puberty blockers in order to postpone the puberty process without actually administering testosterone or estrogen. Medical transition can also, in some cases, involve gender-confirmation surgery. Legal transition, while still being difficult to undertake due to complicated and often discriminatory legislation, is a little simpler to explain; this mainly consists of a trans person changing their name and sex or gender marker on legal documents like their passport or driver's license. Social transition, then, refers to the process of a trans person coming out to their loved ones, changing the name and pronouns they are using in their various circles, and dressing differently, among other elements.

The human voice very much straddles the medical and social elements of transition. In North American English, there are a broad range of characteristics that affect how we gender the voice, which include, but are not limited to, elements like pitch, timbre, resonance, and inflection. However, these characteristics are deeply affected by anatomical factors, with the most prevalent one being whether or not the person in question has undergone cis male puberty (Hearns, 2018, 88). This is a process which involves the irreversible lengthening and thickening of the vocal folds, causing a drop in pitch, frequent voice cracks, and an emerging adult falsetto register separate from the modal register, among other elements (Fisher, 2020).

This "cis male voice change" dramatically affects how a voice educator might approach teaching a transgender singer. In the case of a trans man, undergoing HRT (that is to say, taking testosterone to masculinize the voice) generally affects the voice similarly to the cis male voice change, almost resembling a second puberty. So, many vocal music teachers of trans men observe that their students' voices drop the octave or so that adolescent cisgender male voices drop, with former sopranos often settling in a tenor range, and former altos often settling in a bass-baritone range. As part of this process, these voices tend to expand their timbres to include a range of frequencies and registers more typical of a male voice (Sims, 2017). Also similar to the cis male voice change is that the voice change can either be a gradual process over the course of many months, or it can appear to happen almost overnight (Hearns, 2018, 90). In terms of supporting these students in the classroom, educators can frequently pull from support strategies that have already been built for supporting cis adolescent men through puberty, such as choosing choral repertoire with voicing that can allow a trans man with a dropping male voice to switch between voice parts as necessary, or choosing vocal warm-ups that allow those men to experiment with changes to their larynx's muscle memory for specific pitches (Fisher, 2020).

Another consideration for the case of trans men involves the recognition that body-shaping garments like chest binders affect the singing voice. Because these garments are designed to compress a trans man's breasts, alleviating their gender dysphoria by making them appear more masculine, they also pose challenges for respiration in singing because they restrict the movement of the ribcage and diaphragm. Thus, in the case of supporting a trans man who chooses to wear these garments, a voice educator may need to be prepared to discuss with the student whether they might consider removing their binder for vocal music classes, or suggesting the use of a binder that is less restrictive to the torso (Hearns, 2018, 77).

The case of a trans woman in transition is, in contrast, pretty different from that of a trans man. Unless a trans woman is prescribed puberty blockers early in adolescence, which is becoming more difficult for trans youths to access due to discriminatory legislation ("Mapping Attacks on..."), they will undergo the male voice change during puberty, just as any other person assigned male at birth. As already mentioned, this process is irreversible. As such, a trans woman looking to feminize their voice must rely more closely on social transition to express their gender through the voice, rather than on anatomical changes, as HRT will not meaningfully change the sound of the larynx. Strategies for helping a trans student with the social transition of their voice will be discussed in more detail in the second section, but as a start, some potential support strategies for voice teachers could include helping a trans woman student through the process of changing the resonance or timbre of their voice, or by teaching them to more effectively use their falsetto register in order to sing an alto part in a choral setting (Hearns, 2018, 99).

In terms of considerations that apply more broadly to voice pedagogy, rather than to specific students with specific gender identities, there are numerous strategies educators might use which could help them be more gender-affirming in their practice. For clarity, these

considerations are presented in the following table, whose contents are primarily based on ethnographic research by authors like Palkki, 2020, Silveira, 2016, and Sims, 2017, who have collected recommendations for voice educators based on feedback provided by trans students in vocal music programs at their schools.

Table: Considerations for Gender-Affirming Vocal Music Educators

Potential consideration	Recommendations for pedagogy
Gendered terms in rehearsal language	Replace terms like "men's choir" and "women's choir" with terms like "treble choir" or "tenor/bass choir"; refer to students by voice part rather than gender.
Part assignments (in choral or dramatic productions)	Allow students to choose if they wish to sing a part assignment to match their gender identity (i.e. a trans woman singing an alto part in their falsetto register); or, if they wish to stick with their existing voice part, support them in owning that their voice part does not necessarily need to match their identity (i.e. a trans woman continuing to sing tenor or bass in their modal register). Allow students to elect to sing dramatic parts that more closely match their gender identity (ex. pants roles).
Performance dress	Still prepare students to dress professionally, but allow them to wear gender-affirming clothes (so trans men could wear slacks and a shirt, and trans women could wear a dress or skirt).

Repertoire choice	Consider avoiding lyrical content and choreography or dramatic productions that portray heteronormative situations, particularly romantic ones.
Societal norms in education	Discuss openly with trans students about how the voice classroom is affected by outside forces; for example, many K-12 choir teachers are the point person for organizing field trips for events like All-State choir, which means navigating room assignments at hotels and universities, or potentially needing to sign permission slips using a legal name rather than the student's real name. So, the teacher must be prepared to advocate for the use of the student's correct name and pronouns outside of the classroom, or for the student to be roomed with another student of their identified gender rather than the sex they were assigned at birth.

II. Renée Yoxon: Exploring the Trans Voice

In the following section, this thesis will narrow further into discussing the work of Renée Yoxon, an accomplished non-binary voice teacher who has created a series of online courses for trans students and voice educators looking to support trans students. Much of what has already been covered here has been specifically about trans people's singing voice, but an important element of gender expression through the voice comes through the speaking voice; after all, this is the voice all people use the vast majority of the time. As has already been alluded to, gender expression through both singing and speaking are fundamentally pretty similar processes, with a

large chunk of how gender is perceived and expressed coming through shared elements of the voice, such as pitch, resonance, and inflection. This idea is discussed at length in Yoxon's online course for trans students, "Trans Vocal Exploration: Feminization, Masculinization, and Voice Beyond the Binary," which uses these musical elements to inform students about how they can develop their speaking and singing voices into something they can learn to love. This paper's evaluation of this course seeks to demonstrate how this course's pedagogical tools could be applied by vocal music teachers in their classroom.

The way that students are meant to engage with this course can broadly be split into three sections: first, the "voice audit," second, the course modules, and third, practice. The voice audit consists primarily of the student getting to know their voice, and setting intentions for how they want to change their voice. This process begins with listing out different modes of speech that the student frequently uses, going through the list and saying a few sentences in each speaking mode, and then taking notes on how they react to each mode. So, as an example, the student might take a phrase like "how are you doing today?" and speak it aloud as they might say it excitedly to a friend, comparing this to how they would greet a coworker at an early morning work shift. Then, as the student reflects, perhaps in a journal, they might think about how their pitch is much lower in the second mode of speaking, and how their inflection is much less energetic. Alongside this, they can reflect on what their intentions for their voice change are; some prompts for this that are suggested by Yoxon include "What do I expect will be challenging for me about masculinizing/feminizing my voice?" and "How can I bring a sense of curiosity and play to my voice practice?" In terms of applying this step to the vocal music classroom, after the student has done this work on their own and brings it to a voice lesson, a private teacher could jump in as a sounding board for the student's thoughts that they have expressed in their journal,

and help them reflect on the emotions caused by their voice, as an empathetic outside observer who is already familiar with the student's voice in a singing context. This process could also slot in with pedagogical strategies that vocal music teachers already use, such as goal-setting exercises that teachers already implement with their students, and which ask the student to reflect on the qualities of their voice that they want to work on.

After this voice audit, the second step mentioned was for the student to actually do the modules in Yoxon's online course. These modules consist of instructional videos where Yoxon explains key concepts, before asking the student to engage with workbook activities and voice exercises to help them explore the aspect of the voice that is the focus of each module. They begin by guiding the student through topics of how to effectively warm up and how the human vocal anatomy works, then they take a deep dive into pitch, resonance, vocal fold mass, and inflection, discussing how those various elements can be manipulated to gender the voice. One example of an exercise could include asking the student to make a sound, such as an *ah* vowel, then to make that sound transition from a dark, chest-voice sound to a bright, head-voice sound. The student will likely recognize in this example that darker sounds tend to read as masculine, while brighter, more heady sounds tend to read as feminine, and the student can once again reflect on these observations. In applying these modules to a voice classroom, the voice teacher would mostly be there to encouragingly hold the student accountable to doing these modules at their own pace. This is also a space where the teacher could bring in their existing expertise on the singing voice, and how different elements of the voice are affected by different elements of the vocal anatomy, in order to help the student grow both the speaking and singing voice in tandem.

Following these modules, the final step of the vocal transition journey as it is laid out in Yoxon's course is lots of practice. As might be expected, the biggest challenge in learning to do this work is to practice consistently, in all modes of speaking. Thus, in the final module of the course, Yoxon provides a practice schema for staying consistent, even if this practice can only be for a few minutes a day in the privacy of the student's home. Much of this practice is designed to be done through play, such as a set of Cognitive Load Games developed by Yoxon, which are crafted to both be fun for the student to engage in, but also to distract them from thinking only about specific production elements of their voice, in order to practice their target voice in a more authentic space. This is another potential space for the teacher to continue being a part of the student's voice exploration. One example of these games is "Animal Alphabet," a word association game in which the student names an animal for every letter of the alphabet in their target voice. The idea here is for the student to practice voice production elements like timbre and resonance so that they become automatic, because their cognitive load is being taken up by naming the animals. In an ideal scenario, this game is played with a partner who participates in the game with the student, which is the role that a voice teacher would fill in this case. This style of practicing the target voice could continue over time for as long as the student is interested in practicing their speaking voice with their teacher, and could be included as part of the regular vocal warm-up for the day. As these examples have demonstrated, there are plenty of ways that the independent work that Yoxon's course expects of trans voice students could be implemented in a vocal music classroom by a teacher who is willing to understand the intentions of Yoxon's exercises. In fact, this partnership between teacher and student would likely benefit the student more than simply working through Yoxon's course materials on their own, as the teacher could use their existing expertise on the student's voice in order to help that student explore their

gender expression even if the teacher has limited knowledge of trans voices themselves, because of the teacher's existing knowledge of musical elements of the voice. Of course, the teacher could engage with Yoxon's teaching training programs to learn more, but this is not strictly necessary for them to be an empathetic supporter of a trans voice learner.

III. Challenges for the Future

As this project comes to a close, numerous challenges for the future present themselves, as opportunities for future research in the field of trans vocal music pedagogy, as well as opportunities for readers to consider how they might support their own trans students moving forward. In terms of academic scholarship, one of the most important opportunities for growth for all of the disciplines and perspectives that have been a part of this project is that the vast majority of research focuses on white queer students' voices, so it is critical that more emphasis be placed on the voices of students of color, and how their racial, ethnic, and other cultural identities intersect with their queerness and musicianship. There are certainly applications for research specifically related to pedagogy here, such as by bringing this work into conversation with culturally-responsive teaching methods. For example, ethnographic research focusing on students of color who speak English as a second language could demonstrate ways that teachers could better support trans voice students whose experience with gender expression through the voice has been filtered through how other languages gender elements like pitch and inflection, because the work that has already been described mostly applies to North American English. Another avenue for further scholarship could be in surfacing the voices of trans indigenous vocal musicians. Queer indigenous communities have been making efforts to reconnect with gender identities that exist outside of the western male/female binary, which were destroyed by settler

colonialist practices, and it would be effective to consider how vocal music practices could be a part of that reconnection, before discussing how teachers could bring that perspective into the classroom with an attitude of respect and appreciation.

Apart from this, considering that most readers of this paper are likely affiliated with Colorado College, part of this paper's purpose is to open up dialogue about supporting trans students in the music department, as well as throughout the community at large. To this end, the appendix of this paper includes a repository of resources about the trans voice. Designed to make some of the academic writing and pedagogical tools that are out there more accessible to the students, staff, and faculty of the college's Music Department, this resource will hopefully be a part of calling our community into supporting the trans students who are currently a part of the department, as well as those who will continue to study at the college for years to come.

Works Cited


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- Yoxon, Renée. "Trans Vocal Exploration." Renée Yoxon. Last accessed December 12, 2023. <https://www.reneeyoxon.com/trans-vocal-exploration-ecourse>.

Appendix: Trans Voice Pedagogy Resource

The following pages contain the voice pedagogy resource that I developed as part of this project, in order to make some of the academic writing and pedagogical tools mentioned in this paper more accessible to the reader. This resource also exists at the following link, where I hope the resource will continue to be a living document that I can add to as I continue my own journey of thinking about trans voice pedagogy: <http://tinyurl.com/5csve7zt>.



trans voice
pedagogy
resources





basic information about queerness:

Of course, when it comes to actually supporting students, it's probably best to just ask individuals what words they used to describe their identity. But these resources can be a good start!


- [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#)
 - This page was put together by advocates at GLAAD (a media advocacy organization) to provide journalists and authors with some basic background and best practices for discussing queer and trans people, and is a good place to start for learning how to respectfully talk about queerness!
- Hearn, Liz, and Brian Kremer. *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*. San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2018.
 - I'll return to this book later in this resource guide, but among the many resources it contains is an opening chapter on vocabulary for talking about queerness, written specifically for voice educators. The book is available in CC's music library, on the music ed shelf.
- [Wikipedia's Gender Identity Manual of Style](#)
 - This one's a bit more niche, but if you find yourself doing any kind of academic writing about trans people, I have personally found this page helpful, specifically in how to navigate writing about a trans person who has changed their name, in cases where it is necessary to refer to their deadname. This is one of those moments where academic resources don't contain the right kind of information, so we need to turn to community-created resources instead.





resources from renée yoxon:


There's plenty of goodies on [Yoxon's website](#), but I'll link to a few of the pages that I have found most helpful. For the purposes of this page and my presentation I have stuck to the resources on their website that aren't locked behind the paid courses, but if you'd like to take a look at those things, I have access to some of them and would be happy to share in-person!

- [Free eBooks, Workbooks, and Worksheets](#): includes workbooks on voice practice games, vocal anatomy, journaling prompts, and more! (other practice resources are available through the courses)
 - [Courses](#): a link to sign up for courses offered by Yoxon
 - [Trans Voice Teacher Directory](#): a directory of voice teachers who have taken Yoxon's trans voice alteration teacher training, many of whom offer lessons remotely
 - [Trans Voice Exploration Scholarship Page](#): a page for a scholarship program to help pay for Yoxon's courses
 - [Instagram](#): a link to Yoxon's Instagram page, where they frequently post clips from their webinars
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books and academic papers:

Here are a few books and papers that I think would be the most relevant to trans voice students and their teachers. Other resources are available in my paper's works cited page, but these ones are likely the most useful from a practitioner's lens.

- Hearn, Liz, and Brian Kremer. *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*. San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2018.
 - This book is by far the most comprehensive resource in this field. It was written by experts in the trans voice, and at least one of the authors is trans themselves! It is written for vocal music educators, and does an excellent job of not assuming the reader has any prior knowledge of voice teaching or queerness, while also being in-depth enough to be useful to a voice teacher with extensive experience. It also provides plenty of specific examples of warm-up and repertoire material relevant to the trans voice. This book is available in CC's music library, and usually sits on the music ed shelf in the back.
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 - Hirsch, Sandy. "Combining Voice, Speech Science, and Art Approaches to Resonant Challenges in Transgender Voice and Communication Training." *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups* 2, no. 10 (2017): 74-82, doi:[10.1044/persp2.SIG10.74](https://doi.org/10.1044/persp2.SIG10.74).
 - I didn't actually wind up citing this one in my paper at all, but this is an eBook that provides another training approach to trans voice alteration, from a speech-language pathology perspective. It was available through CC's login in spring 2023, but was no longer available as of submission of my capstone in December 2023, but it's another resource with a lot of potential, based on what I was able to read of it in the spring.
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books and academic papers, pt. 2:

- Palkki, Joshua. "'My Voice Speaks for Itself': The Experiences of Three Transgender Students in American Secondary School Programs." *International Journal of Music Education* 38, no. 1 (2020): 126-146, doi:10.1177/0255761419890946.
 - This is an ethnography of three trans students in secondary choral programs, which discusses their experiences, then uses those discussions to inform suggestions for teaching practice. It's a pretty quick read, and I highly recommend it as a primer for learning more about this topic, as well as for a short discussion with meaningful recommendations for pedagogy. Palkki is also one of the most prolific researchers in the field of the trans voice, and many of his other articles have useful information for people interested in this stuff.
- Sims, Loraine. "Teaching Lucas: A Transgender Student's Vocal Journey from Soprano to Tenor." *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 4 (2017): 367-375.
 - Another ethnographic paper, this one discusses a teacher's experience with guiding a singular trans man through his transition, and also includes numerous suggestions for warm-up material and teaching methods that Sims used while teaching this student.
- Bos, Nancy. "Forging a New Path: Transgender Singers in Popular Music." *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 4 (2017): 421-424.
 - This is another paper I didn't end up citing in my paper, but it's mostly made up of a list of trans singers in popular music (as the title suggests), as well as a short blurb about their singing style. This could be a great resource for teachers looking for repertoire and role models for trans singers!
- Aguirre, Ryan. "Finding the Trans Voice: A Review of the Literature on Accommodating Transgender Singers." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 37, no. 1 (2018): 36-41, doi:10.1177/8755123318772561.
 - Not much to say here, other than that this was one of the most comprehensive literature reviews I could find on this topic, and could be a great jumping off point for future research in the field.





miscellaneous:

- acousticgender.space
 - This is an app developed by a Master's student at Brown University, which takes a recording of spoken English language and tracks its pitch and resonance over time, then plots it on a graph, to visualize how those elements of the voice impact how the voice is gendered. This can really get into the detailed weeds, but could be a useful tool for a student practicing their target voice.
- [Jeremy Dutcher](#)
 - Dutcher is a two-spirit Wolastoqiyik composer and singer, who preserves the Wolastoq language in his music, and whose music exists at the intersection between trans and indigenous identities. He is an excellent starting point for examining the music of queer and trans indigeneity!
- Mademoiselle. "Voice Tips for the F-to-M." *The Gateway*, October 1979.
 - This is one of a few primary resources I came across of trans people writing about their voice change in magazines by/for trans from a few decades ago. It, like many other resources, contains suggestions for trans people looking to bring their voices more in line with their identity. It's maybe not that practical of a guide for the modern era, but I personally found it interesting to look at historical examples of this work. The article is available on Gale's Archives of Sexuality and Gender, which is a database available through the library.
- Phillips, Melanie Anne. "Transgender Tips: Developing a Female Voice." *Cross-Talk*, April 1996.
 - Another primary source document about the trans voice change; I found this series of articles particularly relevant because the series is split into similar categories as Yoxon's courses on the trans voice. This one is also available on Gale's Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

