Expanding Definitions of “Woman”: Singing Authentically
Mari Esabel Valverde, Composer, Singer, and Teacher

Session Description

Considering vocal health, mental health, and personal musical aspirations, there is a lot to learn for our community of transgender singers. The process of transitioning into the singer you see yourself to be is not made easy by the narrow yet widely-held expectations for what qualifies as acceptable as “female” in our sociopolitical climate. The gender binary is especially oppressive of singers, but we are the only ones we can hold accountable for our happiness and sense of achievement.

Disclaimers

As gender-diverse persons, it is necessary to preface this entire topic by emphasizing the binary nature of the conversation. For the purposes of this session, transgender women have a binary identity, and as such, our vocal concerns must not be conflated with those of non-binary trans folk. Furthermore, we contextualize this discussion by using the experience of cisgender women for reference, but not necessarily as a model for womanhood or femininity. Last of all, my experience is just one trans woman’s experience. The views shared in this session reflect my opinion and bias. Consider that each trans woman’s experience is valid, and every trans woman deserves the space and time to tell her story.

What is a Woman?

I don’t think you will get any two people to agree. There are as many iterations of womanhood as there are women. Perhaps a more constructive question is: What is the most authentic version of ourselves?

Research on Cis Female Voice Change

The following are my notes from “Adolescent Female Changing Voice: Supporting Singers for A Life of Song” as presented by Dr. Bridget Sweet, Asst. Professor of Music Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, at the American Choral Directors Association National Conference in March 2017.

• There is constant scrutiny of adolescents in voice change.
• “Your voice is not your genitalia. Your voice is your hormones!”
• Health problems manifest when there is a lack of laryngeal closure (full adduction).
• Estrogen-dominant adolescence: Growth in height and width of laryngeal cartilages.
• Testosterone-dominant adolescence: Significant lengthening/thickening of vocal folds and protrusion of the thyroid notch or “Adam’s apple.”
• Analogy for voice change: Strings! “Everyone starts with a violin. At the end of puberty everyone ends up with a viola, a cello, or a contrabass.”
• The same cells that make up your genitalia make up your laryngeal tissue, suggesting cellular-level similarity. Puberty affects all secondary sexual characteristics including the larynx.
• Use the word “singers” to refer to the group of voices. The assigned voice part is an instrument, like a particular function in an orchestra, but does NOT identify the individual instrument. And of course, incorporate “sopranos,” “altos,” “tenors,” “basses,” etc. to refer to sections, not “boys,” “girls,” “men,” and “women.”
• There is so much negativity surrounding vocal changes through adolescence; celebrate the successes!
• On a cellular level, hormones affect the physiology and function of the voice!
• It’s dangerous and cruel to label students by their voices:

Middle school and high school teachers, please do not pigeon-hole your sopranos and altos into those voice types. The adolescence of the voice continues into the 20s. Research says this, and it is potentially destructive, physically and/or emotionally, that young singers identify so boldly with a particular voice classification. Voices change. Male, female, cisgender, trans, genderqueer, non-binary... all voices change!
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Hypothesis

While the irreversible effects of testosterone on cis and trans voices alike are more than evident—lengthening of the vocal folds, which results in lower frequency vibrations, and growth of the resonators, the rib cage and the skull in particular—it is clear that the effects of feminizing hormones on trans voices are insufficiently documented and discussed. Contrary to the widely-held position that MtF hormone therapy does not feminize the voice, I believe that indeed it does; however, as with other aspects of MtF hormonal transition, the changes are more pronounced the younger the person on hormone therapy. For example, after a decade of singing as a tenor, I began my hormone therapy at 23 years and four months, and at age 25, I was singing professionally as an alto. But, I have also been singing since age 11 and had vocal instruction as early as age 13.

I believe there are two factors that play a role in vocal feminization: 1) in the same way the thickness and texture of skin, hair, and nails feminize, the thickness and texture of vocal cartilages feminize; and 2) hormones impede skeletal/bone growth, limiting the size of the rib cage and the skull, which continue to grow through one’s 20s, both of which account for resonance in speech and singing.

Singing as a Trans Woman

There’s no one way to be a trans woman and a singer. We are writing this story together. Having said that, let’s discuss some of the nitty-gritty of singing.

Phonation: Phonation is the creation of vocal sound. Healthy phonation is achieved by full adduction (coming together) of the vocal folds; the air released from the lungs causes them to vibrate. Vocal damage is caused by overuse or inefficient phonation and is indicated [in adults] by air escaping the vocal folds during phonation.

Registration: The range of pitch of speech or singing where one’s voice averages.

Resonance: Resonance is determined by skeletal/bone structure and the dynamic shape of the vocal tract—the tissues and muscles from the lips down to the vocal folds. Note: The perception of one’s gender is more influenced by resonance than by pitch.

Timbre: The quality of vocal sound as distinct from pitch, i.e., tone, color, and clarity.

Voice Classification: Sometimes referred to as Fach, voice classification includes terms such as “soprano,” “mezzo-soprano,” “contralto,” “tenor,” “countertenor,” “baritone,” and “bass.” It is much more applicable to ink on paper than to human beings.

“Technique is technique is technique,” is my go-to phrase when discussing trans vocal pedagogy. At the end of the day, no matter the singer’s gender identity, successful singers are those who master the fundamentals of alignment, breath, phonation, resonance, and articulation. These are the very skills that help transitioning singers through vocal transition with or without hormone therapy. Teach with respect and be open to discoveries in transgender vocal proficiency.

Award-winning composer and openly transgender singer Mari Esabel Valverde has been commissioned by the American Choral Directors Association, Texas Music Educators Association, the Seattle Men’s and Women’s Choruses, and others. She has sung alto in the Dallas Symphony Chorus, Dallas Chamber Choir, Vox Humana, and Exigence Vocal Ensemble (Detroit). An educator, she taught voice at the high school level for four years in North Texas. Her students, many of whom have participated in All-State Choirs and State Solo Competition, are represented in a dozen collegiate music programs in-state and beyond. She holds degrees from St. Olaf College, the European American Musical Alliance in Paris, France, and San Francisco Conservatory of Music. For more information, please visit MariValverde.com.