

# Teaching Lucas:

A Trans Student's Vocal Journey from  
Soprano to Tenor

# INTRODUCTION

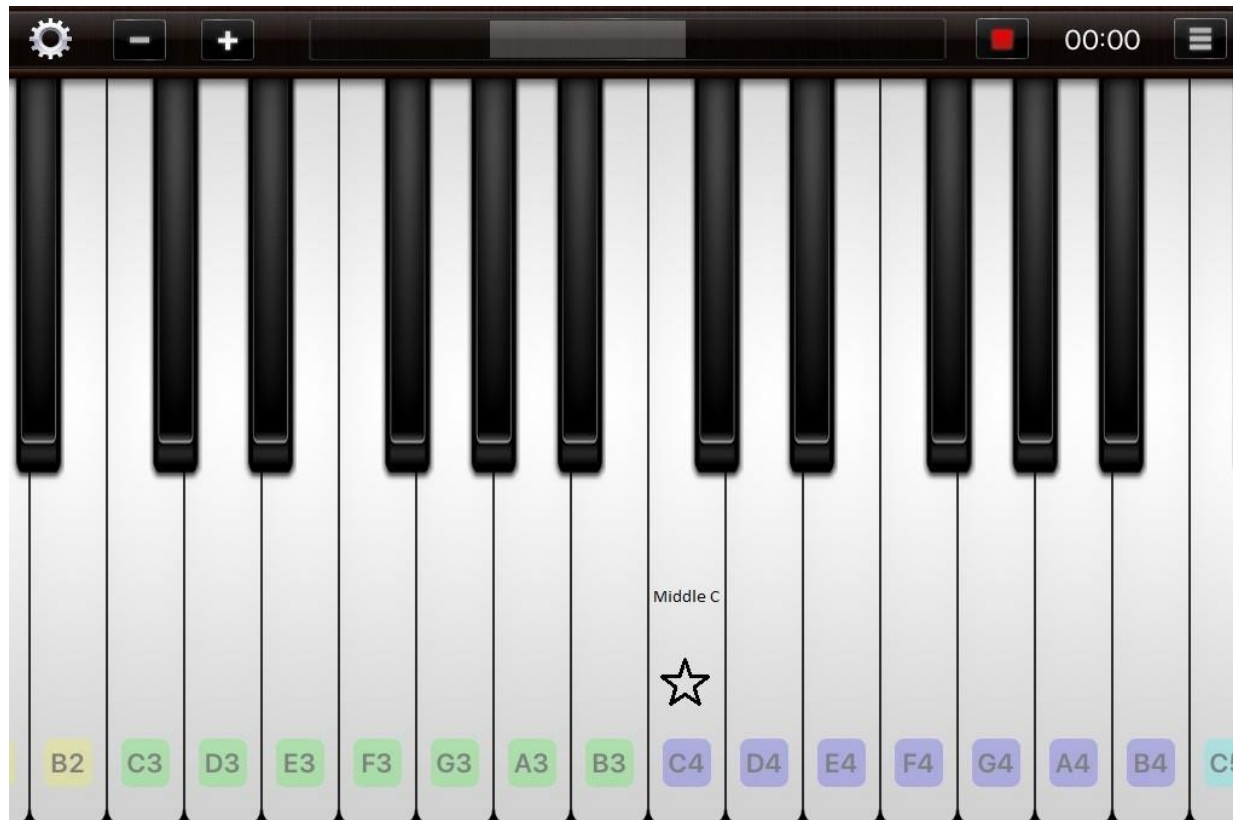
- ▶ The research is based on a chronicle of more than a year of voice lessons and voice changes experienced by a female to male (FtM or AFAB) trans student after testosterone therapy.
- ▶ This is a summary of the data of the vocal changes based on a review of audio recordings of the lessons beginning with the initial testosterone injections and going for 18 plus months after.

# Teaching Transgender Students

## Special Considerations

- ▶ *Pronouns matter.* If you are not certain, ask the individual which pronoun they use for themselves. The use of the correct pronoun shows respect and support and offers a much needed confirmation of their personhood.
- ▶ Male to Female (MtF or AMAB) trans students are a *different pedagogical* challenge. Once the voice has gone through adolescence, there is no hormone therapy that will reverse this process. These individuals may choose to feminize the voice in both speech and singing. Many times a speech therapist may be needed to accomplish this change because fundamental frequency and resonance changes will likely be necessary.
- ▶ Music educators should be *advocates* for our trans students and make the studio and music classes/rehearsals safe spaces. Choose labels that are gender neutral. Use sensitivity in any class that involves gender specific concert attire or accommodations for limited or changing vocal range.

# Pitch Labels

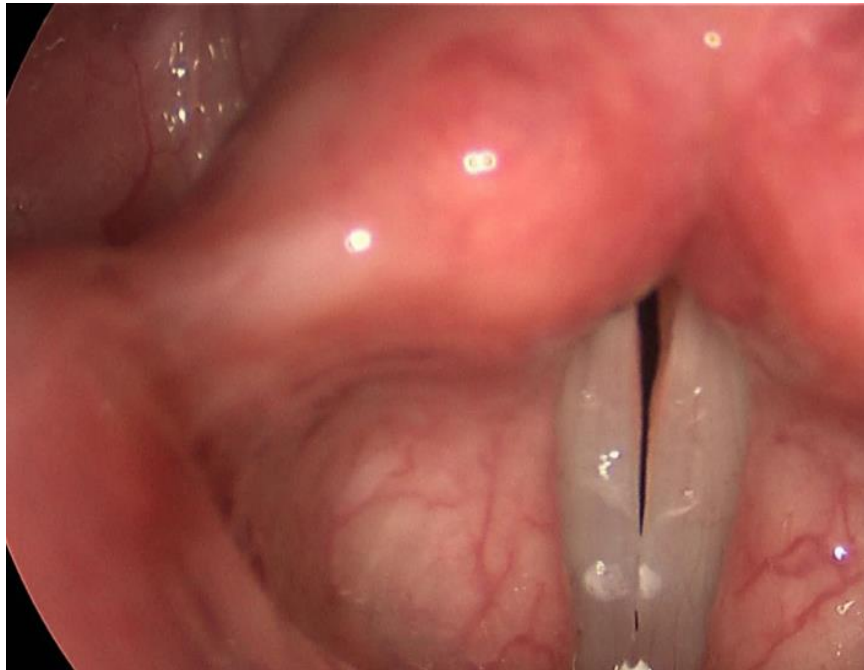
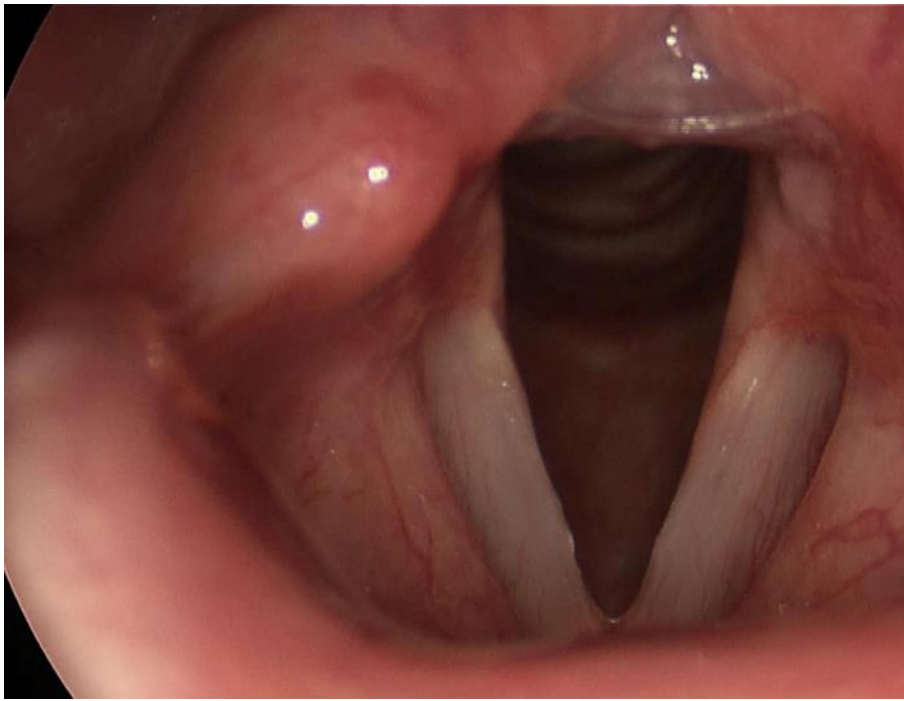


# Range and Characteristics of Lucas' Pre T soprano

- ▶ Soprano quality - Bb<sub>3</sub> to Eb<sub>6</sub>  
(flute above C#<sub>6</sub>)
- ▶ Full Chest voice - E<sub>3</sub> to C#<sub>4</sub>  
(weak below G<sub>3</sub>)
- ▶ Primo passaggio mix weak from Bb<sub>3</sub> to E<sub>4</sub>
- ▶ Secondo passaggio Eb<sub>5</sub> to G<sub>5</sub>

# Laryngeal images Pre T

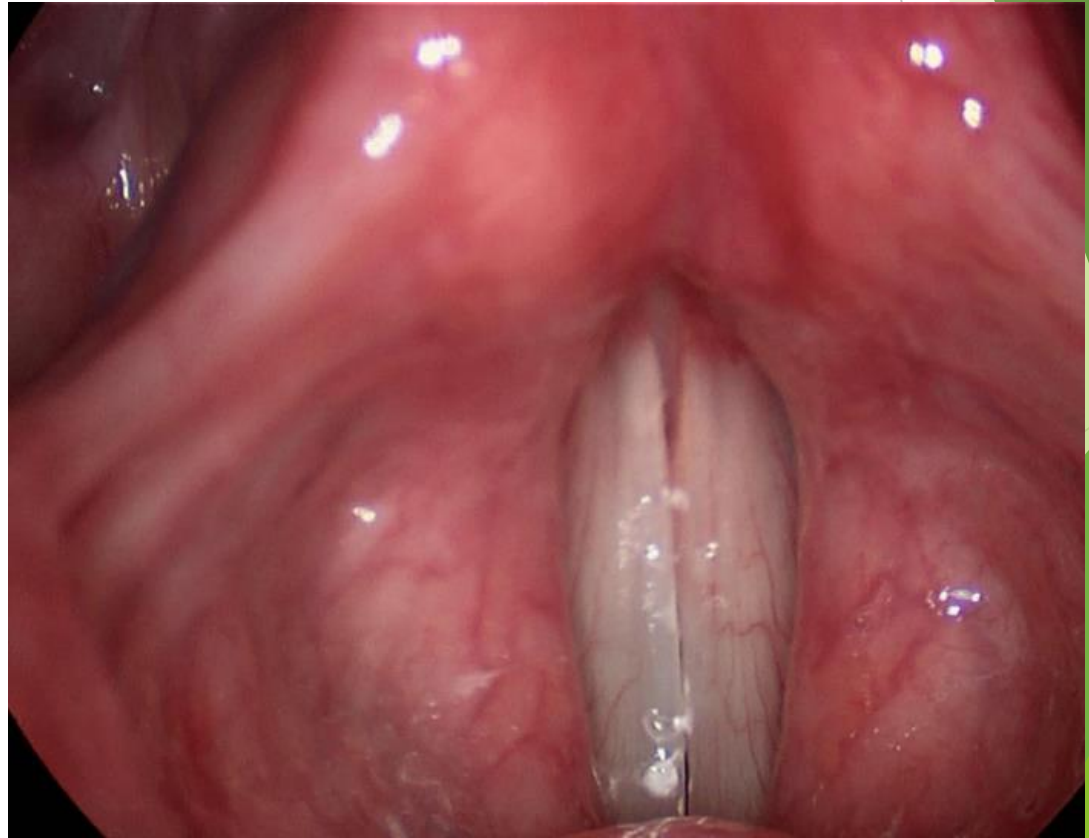
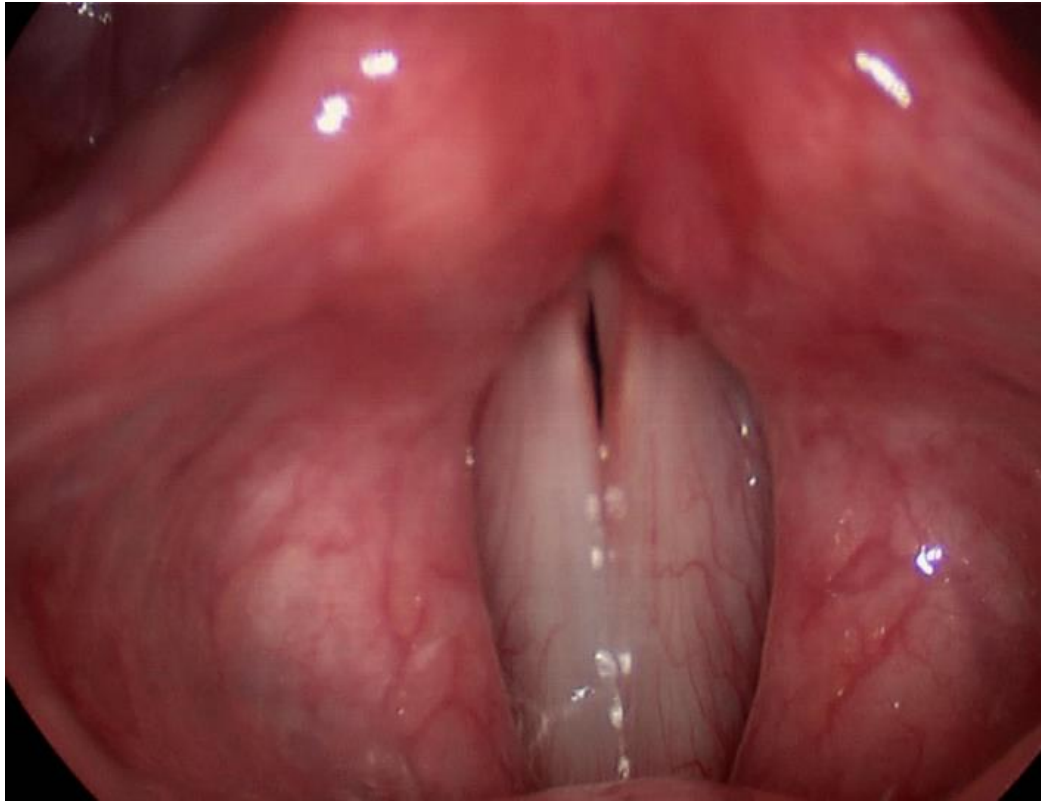




# Laryngeal images after 1 year







# Audio files of speech changes



## Lessons After T - Months 1-2

- ▶ Soprano quality remained largely unchanged until weeks 7-8.
- ▶ Weeks 7 & 8 - The speaking voice was noticeably lower. The singing voice quality changed rapidly from mezzo soprano to a tenor in these two weeks.
- ▶ By the end of month 2, the chest voice was present from  $C_3$  and was able to turn over with vowel modification to  $Ab_4$ .

## Lessons after T - Months 3-6

- ▶ Tenor quality became more reliable. The head/falsetto voice was weak and this range was extremely limited.
- ▶ Repertoire choices were limited in range from  $D_3$  to  $G_4$ . Modification of most vowels was necessary at  $Eb_4$ .
- ▶ The choral assignment to the tenor section was a good choice because the alto range was difficult with unreliable head/falsetto notes.

# Soprano/Tenor comparison after 6 months



## Lessons after T - Months 7-12

- ▶ The tenor quality continued to improve and gained reliable range from  $B_2$  to  $Ab_4$ .
- ▶ The head/falsetto became more reliable and developed a mezzo soprano range with a countertenor timbre.
- ▶ Tenor quality and tone realized by the end of the first year.

# Soprano/Tenor Comparison after 18 months



# Countertenor after two years





# Conclusions - Range and Quality changes

- ▶ The chest voice range increased and the soprano range was drastically diminished. Falsetto/head production was unavailable for a while, but is a viable option in limited range. Tenor production was the preferred timbre through year two. Voice dysphoria then motivated more work as a countertenor.
- ▶ After a year and a half with testosterone, the singing voice seemed to be somewhat settled and may be trained like any tenor. There may need to be minor acoustic adjustments due to higher than average formant frequencies.
- ▶ If an F2M trans singer had a lower range before testosterone, you might expect the result to be a high baritone voice.

# Lucas's Ranges

Pre T Soprano Range \_\_\_\_\_

Counter Tenor Range \_\_\_\_\_

Tenor Range \_\_\_\_\_

A2 C3 E3 G3 B3 C4

D4 E4 F4 G4 A4 B4 C5 D5 E5 F5 G5 A5 B5 C6

# Selected Resources

- ▶ Richard K. Adler, Sandy Hirsch, and Michelle Mordaunt. *Voice and Communication Therapy for the Transgender/Transsexual Client: A Comprehensive Clinical Guide*. Plural Publishing, 2012.
- ▶ Liz Jackson Hearn and Brian Kremer. *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*. Plural Publishing, 2017.
- ▶ Brian Manternach, Michael Chipman, Ruth Rainero, and Caitlin Stave. *Teaching Transgender Singers. Part I: The Voice Teachers' Perspectives*. *Journal of Singing*, September/October 2017, Volume 74, No. 1, pp. 83-88.
- ▶ Brian Manternach. *Teaching Transgender Singers. Part II: The Singers' Perspectives*. *Journal of Singing*, November/December 2017, Volume 74, No. 2, pp. 209-214.
- ▶ Josh Palkki. [https://acda.org/files/choral\\_journals/PalkkiJu-Ju17.pdf](https://acda.org/files/choral_journals/PalkkiJu-Ju17.pdf) and <http://www.queeringchoir.com/>
- ▶ Loraine Sims. *Teaching the Transgender Students*. *Journal of Singing*, January/February 2017, Volume 73, No. 3, pp. 279-282.
- ▶ Loraine Sims. *Teaching Lucas: A Transgender Singer's Vocal Journey from Soprano to Tenor*. *Journal of Singing*, March/April 2017, Volume 73, No. 4, pp. 367-375.


# Read more about it

Scott McCoy, Associate Editor

VOICE PEDAGOGY

## Teaching Transgender Students

Lorraine Sims



Lorraine Sims

**T**HE 2016 NATS NATIONAL CONFERENCE IN CHICAGO included a session titled "Coffee and Conversation for the Teachers of Transgender Students." Presenters Nancy Bos and the author thought a handful of interested teachers would appear for the 8:00 a.m. session, but were pleasantly surprised when more than a hundred people were in attendance. Clearly there is much interest in this topic, and that is why the author was invited to write a report for this column on some of the salient points that were discussed.

Because gender terminology may not be familiar to everyone, it seems a logical place to begin. Transgender individuals are as diverse as any population, so attempts to categorize may miss the mark. However, the basics include the terms cisgender and transgender. Cisgender means that the gender assigned at birth is in agreement with an individual's gender identity; transgender means that there is a disagreement. Transgender is an adjective, so using the term "transgendered" is incorrect. Adding an "ed" ending to an adjective is generally reserved to describe a feeling or emotion of a person. Nor is "transgendered" a verb form, therefore neither would be appropriate. One can say a transgender man or trans man, but not a transgendered man. I can say that I am Lorraine Sims, a cisgender woman and I prefer the pronouns she/her/hers. A female-to-male transgender man (FtM) may prefer to use the pronouns he/him/his and a male-to-female transgender woman (MtF) may prefer to use the pronouns she/her/hers.

Some transgender people do not identify with either binary gender designation and may say that they are gender fluid and prefer the pronouns they/them/their. Other terms like third gender or gender queer may come up. There are also other created pronouns that are not yet in wide-spread usage, such as ne/nem/nir and others. The teacher's job is to ask students which name and pronouns they prefer and then to make every effort to use them. It may be challenging, and sometimes a student in transition may present as one gender sometimes and as another at other times. Be patient with the student and with yourself as you work through this together. It is a sign of disrespect to disregard the request of any individual to be called what they wish. It goes beyond the scope of this discussion, but nevertheless appropriate to mention here that gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same thing. Sexual orientation for transgender individuals can be as diverse as it is for cisgender individuals.

One area of great interest, but also of some confusion, is the role of hormone therapy in these transitions. Hormone therapy is a personal decision

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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017 279

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Lorraine Sims



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### INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF HISTORY

**P**LEASE NOTE THAT BOTH STUDENTS DISCUSSED in this article have given permission for me to use all personal data included here. An open, honest communication is crucial for developing understanding.

When I first met Lucas, he was a soprano with another name. He was not one of my regular university voice students, but enrolled with me in 2012 for summer voice. I remember that I was impressed with the natural beauty of the voice even then. He possessed strong musicianship skills with a genuine musical nature and somewhat of a perfectionist personality. He was determined to work on a Debussy piece that summer that gave both him and his pianist much difficulty. I really do not remember what other repertoire we worked on then, but I smile when I think about how many repetitions of that Debussy song I heard.

Time passed and this student changed majors to something other than music for a while. As is often the case, the call to return to music was strong, and he had since become a student of one of my doctoral teaching assistants. It was during this time that I received an email:

Dr. Sims,

It's funny, I almost told you this in the previous email I sent you about course scheduling, but chickened out last minute and deleted everything. Melanie, however, has convinced me that you are a trustworthy/supportive faculty member to talk to about this, and that telling you would be a good idea, so here goes:

I'm changing my name soon, to Lucas . . . I'm transgender, and thanks to some incredibly supportive friends, I'm finally working up the courage to start living that way. I'm still mostly closeted, and only a handful of close friends outside of the trans community know this about me, but there you have it. I may not be able to get the name change court order for another 1-3 semesters, though, depending on how my financial situation plays out, and in the meantime, some of my professors may end up needing some faculty confirmation that this is indeed who I am.

Anyway, in other news, I hope you're having a good weekend. If you made it this far down the email, thanks for hearing me out. It means a lot.

Lucas<sup>1</sup>

The other student, Melanie, was my first transgender student, not female to male (FtM) as Lucas, but male to female (MtF). For a voice teacher these

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MARCH/APRIL 2017 367

# Contact and Acknowledgements

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- ▶ Special thanks to my LSU colleague, Dr. Melda Kunduk for the laryngeal images and to Lucas for being such a great student and willing accomplice!