

Facilitating the Empowerment of Transgender Voices Through Singing

Alexander Pullinger, London, UK

London-based countertenor, singing teacher and LGBTQ+ advocate Alexander Pullinger was funded by youth music charity Sound Connections to research a pressing issue within classical music, one which has profound implications for organised singing and society as a whole. The following is a summary of his paper, 'Facilitating the Empowerment of Transgender Voices Through Singing: A case for the removal of cisgendered expectations in Western classical singing, and the creation of trans-positive singing spaces'.

Key terms:

- **Cisgender** (or '**cis**'): anyone who is not transgender (from Latin *cis*, meaning 'same')
- **Transgender** (or '**trans**'): anyone whose gender does not match the gender they were assigned at birth (from Latin *trans*, meaning 'on the other side of')
- **Sex**: often refers to a person's body type or anatomy; can describe their hormonal make-up
- **Gender**: an individual experience of maleness, femaleness, a combination of both, something else entirely, or none of the above
- **Assigned at birth**: the process of a doctor declaring a baby's gender based on its external genitalia (a working definition of sex)
- **Non-binary**: anyone whose gender is not exclusively male

or female

- **Gender expression:** how a person outwardly expresses their gender (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, makeup, mannerisms, etc depending on societal or cultural contexts)
- **Voice type:** 'a group of voices with similar vocal ranges, capable of singing in a similar tessitura, and with similar vocal transition points'; mostly the product of sex hormones

Singing is well known to help with mental health issues, social isolation, and a sense of disconnection from the body. These difficulties disproportionately impact the transgender population. In my work as a freelance singer, I have seen that transgender people encounter significant barriers to accessing singing, originating primarily from entrenched, cisgendered expectations about voice type ('men sing low, women sing high'). For instance, in choral singing, we frequently hear of 'men's voices' (tenors and basses) and 'women's voices' (sopranos and altos). These expectations lead to highly gendered and/or cisgendered singing environments, in which voices are both divided along gendered lines, and expected to belong to people with a particular body type. However, voice type is mostly a product of sex hormones, and is not defined by gender, so assigning a gender to the voice does not make logical sense – even if it might seem simpler to do so. As a result of these expectations, an activity that could really benefit transgender people is largely unavailable to many of them. Those who do manage to access singing may find the environment to be inhospitable or unsafe, to the point where they have to leave and do not return.

There are examples of openly transgender singers who are highly successful, but these are rare. Recently, BBC News

described transgender opera singer Adrian Angelico as 'one of the few trans male opera singers in the world'. He revealed that opera helped him to realise he was transgender (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-57275103>). This is a testament to the tremendous potential of singing to empower transgender people. However, the rarity of openly transgender classical singers in prominent positions, coupled with the available evidence, does indicate that there is not yet widespread acceptance among the public or within singing institutions. A significant number of those who achieve success, such as Adrian Angelico, have only come out after becoming established. During that time, they were perceived to be cis by the institutions that trained them. He and other transgender opera singers such as Lucia Lucas and Holden Madagame recall their initial concerns that transitioning would end their careers.

Crucially, this highlights the fact that many transgender people are not out, because of fear of discrimination and attack. Therefore, there may be many more transgender people in our choirs and having singing lessons with us, who do not feel able to be open about who they are, and understandably so. As we can see, cisgendered expectations within the genre can and do have a significant impact on whether or not transgender singers feel they can work without facing negative consequences. Such expectations also prevent many transgender people from accessing singing lessons, auditions and organised singing environments in the early stages, opportunities that would provide the encouragement and experience needed to reach the top level. It is not possible to tell if someone is transgender by looking at them, so singing spaces need to be made trans-inclusive regardless of any assumptions about who is present. This will not only improve trans access to singing, but will also have a positive impact on cisgender singers as rigid expectations around gender are eased.

Below are some practicable strategies to make singing environments more trans-inclusive:

1. Raising awareness in singing teachers and music directors

It is vital that singing teachers and music directors develop trans-awareness, and do not place a burden on the transgender student or colleague for education about gender identity. A key resource is *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices* (Jackson Hearn and Kremer). The high price of this text (around 120 euro) may be prohibitive for many individuals, so it falls to institutions to obtain copies for their libraries.

2. Use of language

The use of gendered language in rehearsals immediately dictates how the group relates to voice types. To cisgender singers with higher voices, being referred to as 'ladies' will probably not be noticeable to those who do identify that way. But for those who do not, for example transgender men, it can be profoundly distressing and invalidating. The same applies to transgender women with lower voices being referred to as 'men'. Further to this, choirs described as 'for men' or 'for women' have the potential to deter non-binary singers altogether, as well as those who have a voice type more typically associated with a different gender. All this can be avoided by referring to singers by voice type or grouping, eg sopranos/tenors/upper voices/lower voices, etc.

3. Concert dress codes

Concert dress codes are typically divided along binary, gendered lines (eg black trousers and jacket for men, black skirt and blouse for women). This can be distressing and alienating for many transgender people, who might not conform to cisgendered expectations; by definition, a binary, gendered dress code excludes non-binary identities, and those who don't feel comfortable

in dresses or trousers. One solution is to have the same clothing options, without indicating that any particular combination is for men or women. This gives singers the freedom to choose clothing that is appropriate and comfortable, while adhering to the dress code.

4. Auditions

At present, auditions largely take place under the assumption that auditionees of a certain voice type will also be a certain gender. This is a potential barrier to transgender people who will often have a voice type the audition panel might not be expecting. As CN Lester suggests, members of the panel may also have absorbed prejudices against transgender people, as held by wider society. To minimise the impact of these prejudices, blind auditions for the first round would be a helpful approach

(<https://www.nationaloperastudio.org.uk/news/taking-to-the-stage-life-as-a-trans-opera-singer>). I should stress that singing spaces must be made accommodating to transgender people *before*, and not after, they have been encouraged to apply. This is because, otherwise, a well-intentioned openness to transgender applicants could unwittingly invite them into the transphobic, and potentially unsafe, environment they sought to avoid in the first place.

To some, the idea of overhauling all classical singing environments for the benefit of a small minority might seem extreme. However, removing oppressive restrictions on the most vulnerable benefits all of us. It will bring diversity of lived experience (meaning richer musical offerings), and foster greater compassion. Ultimately it will allow all of us the freedom to express ourselves without being bound to rigid gender norms about what we can wear, whose voices can be heard, and whose stories can be told.

The full paper can be found here.

A condensed version is available here.



Alexander Pullinger was a choral scholar at New College Oxford (2007-10), where he was also LGBT Officer. He completed a Master's in Voice at Trinity Laban (2014) and since then has been singing freelance in the UK and internationally. Over the course of his singing career, Alexander has found that his trans and non-binary colleagues and mentees have encountered major obstacles to accessing group singing, voice lessons, and singing as a profession. He has worked to raise awareness within institutions (BBC Symphony chorus, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Cathedral Organists Association and others) and is dedicated to working for practical change within the world of classical singing. He acted as vocal consultant on a film about gender transition and singing (*Down There The Seafolk Live*, BFI Flare 2020). He recently presented 'Empowering Young Transgender Voices Through Singing' at the Music and Drama Education Expo in London (September 2021), based on his earlier research for Sound Connections. www.alexanderpullinger.co.uk – [@alex_pullinger](https://twitter.com/alex_pullinger)

Head picture: Chaque homme porte la forme entiere de l'humaine condition © Eve Lomé