

“It’s time for our voices to be heard.” The Transgender Singing Voice Conference

Holly Patch

I land at the Philadelphia International Airport on 19 January 2017. Twenty-six months have gone by since my last visit to the U.S. Walking through the terminals, I experience reverse culture shock. Hat stores. Food courts. I am drawn back to the local mall of my hometown in Iowa, which smells the same. My eyes fall on one of these temporary shops. “AMERICA!” it’s called. The store features Inauguration Day memorabilia. You can buy red ‘Make America Great Again’ hats and sweatshirts and life-size cutouts of Hillary Clinton. Seeing Donald Trump’s face on a sign out front catches me in my gut. This is real, and it is happening now. I follow a walkway filled with large, comfortable chairs, each equipped with outlets for charging mobile devices. One woman is wearing a shirt that reads “NASTY WOMAN,” and I do a double take. I smile at her, amused and appreciative, yet incredulous. I am in America. She meets my gaze, and we see each other.

After a connecting flight to Dayton, Ohio, I’m thankful that my hands and feet remember how to drive. I repeat the directions to the hotel out loud to myself cruising down Interstate 70 West so as to not get lost in the memory and fatigue my body and mind are overcome with. After 20+ hours of travel, I reach my hotel safely and head to sleep. I wake up before my alarm and turn on the TV. The countdown clock on CNN says there are 31:34 minutes until their Inauguration Day coverage begins. As the sun rises over the capitol, the sky turns pink and golden. The meteorologist interprets the red morning sky to be an ominous sign. Rain is in the forecast, and there could be lightening. People have begun protesting in the streets. Others are filling into ticketed areas to attend the inauguration events. Everything is commented on as being ‘historic’.

In just a few hours, Trump will be sworn in as President of the United States of America – and Mike Pence, former governor of the state of Indiana, where I am currently, his Vice President. Pence has an anti-LGBT record, including opposition to gay marriage, the repeal of the military’s “don’t ask don’t tell” policy, laws protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination in the workplace, and the Obama administration’s directive requiring school districts to allow transgender students to use bathrooms that match their gender identity. Pence has made statements implying support for conversion therapies and even signed into Indiana state law a bill making “it legal for businesses to cite religious freedom when refusing service to gay and transgender people.”¹ And in his state and on this day, I am attending a conference on “The Transgender Singing Voice.” I have several friends heading to Washington, D.C., protesting and attending the March of Women tomorrow. My friends back in Bielefeld, Germany are currently gathering to demonstrate against Trump. It helps to be active on this day.

1 Liam Stack, “Trump Victory Alarms Gay and Transgender Groups,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 11, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/us/politics/trump-victory-alarms-gay-and-transgender-groups.html>. Accessed April 27, 2017.

Helpful undergraduates on campus pointed me in the direction of the Center for the Visual and Performing Arts (CVPA) at Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana. Before any introductory words were spoken, the conference kicked off with an open rehearsal by the college choirs. Conference organizer and Interim Head of Choral Activities at Earlham College, Danielle Steele, directed them in a rehearsal of music by composer Mari Esabel Valverde, who was in attendance and provided the singers with some background information on the pieces she had composed. Artistic Director of the Trans Chorus of Los Angeles (TCLA), Lindsey Deaton, also took a turn with the singers, working with them on Dalcroze Eurhythmics, exploring movement and kinesthetic learning.

What followed were three days of presentations, activities, and discussions. Powerful firsthand account keynote speeches were delivered by Lindsey Deaton (TCLA) and Laurie Wolfe of the Butterfly Music Transgender Chorus on the intersections of music and voice with their life experiences as transgender women and professionals. Deaton guided us along the trajectory of her musical career, the impact of coming out as transgender professionally and personally. She generously took us through personal accounts of despair to detail the transformative moments that lead to the creation of a new life purpose, one that could additionally give meaning to other trans lives lost tragically, in particular, the death of transgender Ohio teenager Leelah Alcorn.² Working with the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles (GMCLA) and collaborating with organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), Deaton relocated from Ohio to Los Angeles to establish the TCLA, stating determinedly that "It's time for our voices to be heard." From here, Deaton articulated the vision and mission of the chorus, relaying what this means for the singers, how rehearsals are conducted, voicings conceptualized, and performance choices made. Through anecdotes from the chorus, she made a case for singing and performing as a way to "fiercely empower the transgender, non-binary and intersex community" to "use their voices to change the social ecology," and to "save lives."

Wolfe also took us along her biographical trajectory, illuminating how political climate, song, and identity have intertwined in her life experiences. She shared what it meant to have been a member of the Butterfly Music Transgender Chorus of Boston, as an out 64-year-old transgender woman, saying that "to be able to get together with other trans people" gave them "a reason to be ourselves and find our voices by focusing on the chorus. We were in joy! The only time I'd gotten together with trans people before then was to organize to protest legislation or to honor our dead." She stressed how important it is to have fun, community, and friendship, and that the chorus gave them "a reason to be and enjoy ourselves." She also gave examples of how, even when safe space has been established, trans singers can experience difficulty really hearing their own voices. Several times throughout the conference, this was referred to as "dysphoria." Wolfe noted that it is tough and takes time to overcome this. She encouraged singers to "let go of expectation" in which "voice is denied the space to be itself," emphasizing that, instead, "it's about creating the frame that holds us." This sentiment was also iterated by composer and singer Valverde, herself transgender, who said that while there might initially be dysphoria, it is possible to learn to harness and "own your own power." Having been able to transition at an earlier age and under different circumstances, she

2 Regarding Pence's controversial position on conversion therapy, *The New York Times* reported that "President Obama called for an end of conversion therapy for minors in 2015 after a 17-year-old transgender girl, Leelah Alcorn, killed herself after leaving a suicide note that talked about her time in conversion therapy" (Liam Stack, "Mike Pence and 'Conversion Therapy': A History," Nov. 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/us/politics/mike-pence-and-conversion-therapy-a-history.html>. Accessed April 27, 2017).

exemplified and spoke of how age is another important factor affecting the transgender singing voice. These firsthand accounts were effective in contextualizing the diverse experiences, difficulties, and successes of as well as the needs, wishes, and potential for transgender and gender non-binary singing.

Informational workshops on allyship and legal rights were led by Lane Banister of the Indiana Youth Group and Kit Malone of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Lane Banister pointed us to alarming statistics regarding rates of transgender youth experiences of harassment at school, suicide, homelessness, family rejection, and harsh disciplinary treatment. They led us in discussions about what measures allies and especially educators can take to better support their LGBTQ students, pointing out legal protections and model policy examples. In addition to giving some pointers on etiquette, Malone outlined current legal matters affecting trans people. First, she detailed the current state of the Gavin Grimm lawsuit against the Gloucester County School Board. Transgender teenager Gavin Grimm of Virginia was simply seeking to use the boy's bathroom just like other boys at his high school. The school board intervened a few weeks later in 2014 enacting a policy denying him this use, requiring students to use bathrooms aligning with their "biological gender." You can read his words about his experiences in his *The New York Times* op-ed piece³, and to trace the legal proceedings, please visit the ACLU's website⁴.

President Trump's election has had a direct impact on this case. Just one month after coming into office, his Departments of Justice and Education rescinded the Title IX guidance introduced by the Obama administration clarifying protections for transgender students. In light of this, the Supreme Court has denied a hearing of Grimm's case. He will graduate from high school without a ruling and without permission to use the boy's bathroom. Both Lane Banister and Kit Malone had voiced their worries about the impact a potential reversal of the guidance by the Trump administration would have on arguing for transgender rights. While this has since proven to be a setback, advocates remain active in pursuing legal action. Grimm was recently named one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People. This push and pull regarding transgender rights is indicative of the current political and cultural divisiveness in the U.S. The political situation did not go lost on participants at this conference. Danielle Steele specifically addressed the political climate in her opening remarks, and her tone was one of resolve. We were there to actively work together on a topic that fuses artistic and social justice pursuits. It is important to acknowledge the various ways one can be critical, including creative and joyful endeavors.

After lunch on the second day of the conference, vocal practitioners and choral directors spoke about "Inclusive Programming: Incorporating Trans-Friendly Repertoire into Your Choral Program." Notions of vocal categories according to Western music are delineated in gendered ways. Vocal categories have been prescribed, or are at the very least perceived to have gender assignment: sopranos and altos are women's voices; tenors and basses are men's voices. When it comes to these transgender choruses, established choral pieces must either be transcribed or rearranged to match

3 Gavin Grimm, "Gavin Grimm: The Fight for Transgender Rights is Bigger than Me", *The New York Times*, March 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/opinion/gavin-grimm-the-fight-for-transgender-rights-is-bigger-than-me.html>. Accessed April 27, 2017.

4 American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), "G.G. v. Gloucester County School Board", updated: March 6, 2017, <https://www.aclu.org/cases/gg-v-gloucester-county-school-board>. Accessed April 27, 2017.

the vocal ranges of the singers, or new kinds of pieces must be created and performed. Given that gay choruses have become well established, transgender choruses have taken a lead from them in terms of trying to figure out how to voice new pieces of musical literature. Choral practice and pedagogy often reinforce the gender binary, although attempts are currently being made to de-gender the choral classroom and vocal literature (by, for example, speaking of voicings – voice 1, 2, 3, etc. and referring to these voices rather than saying ‘ladies’ and ‘gentlemen’ when giving directions). William Sauerland, countertenor and choral director, presented his doctoral research work in music education on the programming of voicings in choral works and de-gendering repertoire. Steele presented further approaches to deconstructing gender in the class room. Deaton added that she does not concern herself too much with the “left side of the page,” but instead “gets to the music.” Valverde discussed how being transgender herself has influenced how she composes and structures each voice part.

Later in the afternoon, the focus turned toward individual transgender singers, and Steele offered and led by demonstration a few vocal exercises that could be used as warm-ups for trans singers. Transgender singers might report gender dysphoria in their singing experiences, as several singers at the conference expressed. A singer might perceive themselves as having a certain voice type, while their range, tessitura, and sound clearly indicate another voice type. It can be distressing, for example, for a transgender woman to have the voice type of tenor or bass, traditionally male voice types. The singer might not even be aware of the discordance, might not be able to hear that their voice does not fit the parameters of the desired voice type. Some transgender men who begin testosterone treatment, especially those who had previously found success with and liked their singing voice, might experience feelings of loss, as the hormone rapidly begins to change their voice and they must adjust to these changes and develop new techniques to control their sound production. While the individual has an enormous amount to gain with such gender affirmative changes, they might also incur certain losses, such as that of their previous singing voice. For some people, this effect of testosterone on the voice is enough to forego the treatment that might otherwise have a lot to provide. Vocal practitioners at the conference were clearly interested in promoting vocal health above all.

With a masterclass performance by tenor Alexander Michael Reeves with his Western Kentucky University teacher, Julie Lyn Barber, D.A., attendees were able to directly observe how a voice teacher and transgender student could work together. They spoke of their experiences, as a young transgender singer and as his voice teacher, in training his voice throughout transition, which included taking testosterone. Transitioning from soprano to tenor, Reeves remembers thinking, “My voice doesn’t sound like mine anymore.” He pointed out, however, how other aspects of transitioning had made his training as a musical theatre singer much easier. Barber talked in depth about her pedagogical philosophies and practices. She encourages students to play around with different aspects of the voice, understanding that ugly sounds can also be useful and that making noise is productive. Students can learn to give themselves the permission to do so, to dare to do so, and such an approach seeks to break free from binary ways of evaluating an experience as either having lived up to or failed an expectation. Barber drew particular attention to the language being used in lessons. She suggests talking about vocal colors to help singers give themselves permission to make sounds without making self-judgements. She recommends teachers have their students talk

about the voice type they *sing* (e.g., “I sing tenor”) rather than the voice type they *are* (e.g., “I am a tenor”) as a way to help singers identify less with (gendered) voice categories. Together, these two demonstrated how it is possible to work with what a singer has rather than to try to get them to be something else.

Attendees learned about “biologic/natal gender differences in voice anatomy/physiology and voice characteristics” from an informative presentation about “Medicine Meets Music” by voice pathologist and singing voice specialist Erin N. Donahue, B.M., M.A., CCC-SLP. She outlined the three subsystems of the voice: resonance, phonation, and respiration, with resonance being that “which makes you sound like you.” She discussed the effects and outcomes of hormonal therapies on the voice, options for voice modification, and the large variability for transgender clients. The goal of her work is to help transgender clients find “their truest voice” that matches their personality and feels authentic. She also commented on the usefulness of pathology in helping to get things covered by medical insurance. Participants, especially transgender singers themselves, voiced how resources and access to such services are lacking.

A session on techniques for “Reclaiming Your Body, Reclaiming Your Voice: Using Alexander Technique and Fitzmaurice Voicework to Combat Gender Dysphoria and Free the Voice” had participants on the floor, partaking in exercises. Voice and dialect coach and theater artist and educator Diane Robinson, who works with transgender clients in her studio, the Chicago Voice Center, and for The Voice Lab in Chicago, worked with participants on presence and demonstrated some ‘tremor work’ techniques of Fitzmaurice Voicework, through which the autonomic system of the body is activated and individuals can become aware of and consequently work through tension blocks in their body. Robinson specializes in transgender voicework and is collaborating with speech language pathologists and singing voice instructors to provide support and resources for transgender and gender non-binary clients as well as to advance the state of scientific knowledge in this new field. Also through example, Alexander Technique teacher, choral conductor, and voice instructor Meagan Johnson demonstrated how such techniques incorporate body and mind in a nonjudgmental and freeing way.

The conference concluded with an inspiring panel discussion by those of us pursuing research in new directions regarding the transgender singing voice – from fields of LGBTQ musicology, ethnomusicology, gender studies, public education, choral conducting, public health and prevention sciences, and theatre performing arts. The conference was successful in bringing active participants in this new field together. Conversations over coffee and bagels with other conference attendees and presenters helped me to cope with culture shock and jetlag, but more importantly, taught me a lot about the state of activist and scientific work on the transgender voice, the needs and wishes from the transgender and gender non-binary (musical) communities, and the tenacity for life enacted by singing.

Coming from gender and queer studies, from the academic and (de)constructivist world, and certainly due to moving through the world as a cisgender person, I was surprised to hear so much talk of ‘dysphoria’. What is vocal gender dysphoria, and does it need to be pathologized? Or rather, how could sociological gender studies research contribute to this conversation? By focusing on the experiences that specifically transgender singers are faced with on account of the restrictions placed

on the legitimacy of the sounds they produce vis-à-vis the perceived discord or irritation between the sounds they are capable of making and the sounds that are expected to emanate, it is possible to investigate how gender is operationalized. My doctoral research project on experiences of singing by transgender and gender non-binary singers is a return to materialism within sociological gender studies. How can studies on the physiological voice, inherently gendered, contribute to bringing back home the body to lived gendered experiences and subjectivities? At this conference, I came to see gender studies here as transdisciplinary. It moves among and between disciplines of music, medicine, pedagogy, somatic studies, social studies, legal studies, and social justice, just to name a few.

After a pleasantly exhausting whirlwind weekend, after exchanging contact information and saying goodbyes, the conference came to an end, and it was time to hit the road and then the skies back to Germany. I had the opportunity to get to know a new friend even better over a dinner of Mexican food before we both drove off to our respective airports. My final night was spent at a motel near the airport. The receptionist told me she was worried about losing her seasonal work. The TV in my room did not receive any news stations. Instead, there were a few channels dedicated to crime docudramas and televangelism. I switched off the TV and slept every last minute I could before my travels began again. The American Midwest was just as I'd remembered it. People were as nice and polite as they come. What had changed since my last visit was this new sort of underlying anxiety. What was this new 'historic' presidency going to mean for America? What was it going to mean concretely for people's lives, for trans lives, in America? In spite of the uncertainty, I know I am not alone in saying I left this conference stronger, with a sense of determination and belief in the power of voice. The voices I had the privilege of hearing over these days changed, inspired, and energized me. Above all, this conference was life-affirming. To sing is to survive.

Holly Patch

Interdisziplinäres Zentrum für Geschlechterforschung (IZG)

Universität Bielefeld

holly.patch@uni-bielefeld.de