

# Straightforward? Queering High School Show Choir

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## Abstract

Competitive show choir is widely valued in secondary music education for fostering community, artistry, and collaboration. Yet the aesthetic expectations that shape show choir performance and adjudication draw from cultural norms regarding gender and sexuality. The purpose of this philosophical inquiry is two-fold: to problematize the heteronormative foundations of these aesthetic aims and to suggest possibilities for imagining show choir in ways that support broader forms of musical and relational expression. I argue that common performance conventions, such as costuming, partnering, choreography, and narrative design, can narrow the range of identities and expressions that are treated as musically appropriate. Queer theory provides a lens for examining how these expectations become naturalized and for considering alternative understandings of expression that are not limited by binary or prescriptive norms. Rather than proposing a singular corrective, I invite reflection on how attending to queerness may encourage more expansive aesthetic aims in ensemble contexts. Such reflection may support forms of musical experience characterized by greater openness, complexity, and possibility.

## Keywords

Show choir, queer theory, heteronormativity, performance, choral music education

The growing emphasis on social justice in music education is prompting deeper reflection on how systemic advantages and disadvantages shape the experiences of diverse learners. A core principle of this work—equity—centers on fairness and the correction of disparities to create more inclusive learning environments. These efforts not only address past injustices but also aim to lay the groundwork for a more just and equitable future. Social justice, as a critical lens, highlights how dominant norms—or common practices and discourses—in music education, especially those related to gender and sexuality, can conflict with efforts to create more equitable learning environments; while not all dominant norms are harmful, those connected to homophobia and cisgenderism notably challenge the pursuit of equity.

Music educators and scholars explored how assumptions about gender and sexuality influence practices in music education—such as ensemble names, repertoire choices, recruitment, and instrument assignments (Eros 2008; Garrett and Palkki 2021; McBride 2017; Palkki 2015). Such research aimed to challenge gender and sexuality stereotypes and create affirming spaces for LGBTQ individuals in music classrooms, a particularly important yet challenging task in often risk-averse and morally vigilant public-school settings.

Dominant norms regarding gender and sexuality in music education might be even more pronounced in popular secondary and collegiate vocal ensembles like show choirs. As Weaver and Hart (2011) described in *Sweat, Tears, and Jazz Hands: The Official History of Show Choir from Vaudeville to Glee*, a show choir is “a mash-up between a standard choir, a dance team, and a drama club, which competes with similar groups throughout the country” (ix). These groups combine choral singing with energetic choreography, theatrical elements like costumes and hairstyles, dance formations, and formulaic plots. They perform a wide range of music—from pop to Broadway—and compete regionally, nationally, or internationally, where adjudicators assess vocal technique, choreography, show design, and overall effect. Weaver and Hart (2011) observed that show choir adjudication, which originated in the Midwestern United States, has prominently featured “couple-focused choreography” since the 1970s (90). This choreography involves exclusively heterosexual-presenting couples dancing together, with men in tuxedos and women in dresses, typically accessorized with long hair and pearls.

At a 2023 Indiana State School Music Association (ISSMA) competition, I observed the continued prevalence of such conventions: couple-focused

choreography, gendered costuming and stereotypes, and formulaic storytelling. One performance, for example, centered on a male pilot's heterosexual romance set to the *Top Gun: Maverick* soundtrack—an approach seemingly rewarded by judging rubrics. While some show choirs challenge traditional expectations through themes like racial justice or intolerance—for example, Fairfield's Cutting Edge Show Choir's performance about 1930s Swing Kids resisting antisemitism (Clevenger 2013) and Indianapolis's Central Sound's incorporation of Black Lives Matter (Kheiry 2023)—far fewer interrogate the gender and sexuality norms embedded in performance conventions themselves.

School music competitions, including show choir, are deeply intertwined with ideology, shaping the values and perceptions that underpin the work of music educators, as Powell (2023) argued. In his explanation of structuralist philosopher Louis Althusser's work, Powell detailed how ideology manifests through rituals, institutions, and social behaviors, shaping individual identity through these practices. Importantly, ideology functions largely in the background as a set of largely invisible assumptions—what people often perceive simply as “the way things are” (18).

Powell's (2023) analysis addresses ideological forces broadly within school music competitions; when this focus narrows specifically to assumptions about gender and sexuality in show choir, it aligns with the concept of heteronormativity. This concept, first introduced by queer theorists, describes society's widespread adoption of heterosexuality as the default or expected identity (Warner 1993). The term indicated that “heterosexual desire and identity are not merely assumed, they are expected” (Chambers 2007, 665). As an analytical tool, heteronormativity problematizes the dominant role of heterosexuality in society, demonstrating how it becomes so normalized that it is perceived as natural or correct, while also shedding light on the reproduction of behavioral norms and binary gender roles (e.g., man and woman) (Herz and Johansson 2015). These assumptions can be particularly distressing for individuals who do not identify with or conform to such expectations, especially those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ).

*Queering* provides a lens through which to examine how heteronormative thinking in secondary and collegiate vocal ensembles, like show choirs, can be limiting. As a gerund, queering—which has its roots in queer theory—means “to unsettle that which is normalized” (Taylor 2012, 3). The term is not confined to

LGBTQ identities; instead, it challenges prevailing notions of gender, femininity, masculinity, and sexuality in the arts, aiming to disrupt homophobic or heterosexist practices. In this sense, queering is not solely about introducing queerness but about applying queer theory to imagine new and previously unexplored possibilities. Thus, queering may offer a means to deconstruct and reimagine traditional artistic aims in adjudicated show choirs.

The purpose of this philosophical inquiry is two-fold: to problematize heteronormative aspects of show choir competitions and to propose the possibilities of queering such practices. First, I explore the role of queer theory within music education. I then problematize rubric-based artistic aims in show choir, which I argue support the reproduction of heteronormativity. Next, I suggest the need to explore queering as it relates to structural elements inherent in show choir. To conclude, I suggest how show choirs might embrace queering in order to disrupt heteronormativity's stronghold to varying degrees, promote social justice aims, and lead to new ways of being musical during performance.

## Queer Theory

Queer theory critically examines the institutional and social constructs of heteronormativity. Emerging in the 1980s, it was shaped by scholars influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1978), particularly his ideas on the social construction of sexuality and its impact on identity. In the 1990s, queer theory gained prominence through a wave of scholarship that sought to challenge and deconstruct dominant societal views on sexuality and gender identity (Butler 1999; Roof 1996; Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1993). Contemporary queer theorists, such as Sara Ahmed and José Esteban Muñoz, expand upon these earlier ideas by focusing on the affective, social, and imaginative aspects of queer experiences and thought.

The influence of queer theory extends across various disciplines, including musicology—including both Eurocentric art and popular music—and music education. For instance, in musicology, McClary (1991) referred to the 1970 edition of the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, a respected text in Western music scholarship, which defined “masculine, feminine cadence” as follows: “A cadence or ending is called ‘masculine’ if the final chord of a phrase or section occurs on the strong beat and ‘feminine’ if it is postponed to fall on a weak beat. The masculine ending is

typically considered the norm, while the feminine is favored in more romantic styles" (9).

She further suggested that departures from conventional endings in classical Western tonal music, where the tonic is delayed, are associated with femininity, as exemplified by Chopin's "Raindrop Prelude." In contrast, traditional conclusions like the final movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*, characterized by a prompt resolution, are often perceived as masculine.

Binaries—entrenched in the analysis of Eurocentric art music—also shape the study of Western popular music. As a grounding tenet of feminist-popular musicology, scholars contended there are a series of binaries associated with gender and popular music (Cook and Tsou 1994; McClary 1991; Whiteley 2000). As part of such analyses, femininity aligns with passivity and openness, simplicity, and emotional expression, while masculinity is associated with directness and definitiveness, musical prowess, and logical thinking (Abramo 2009).

Such binaries reflect broader patterns of heteronormative thinking that have historically influenced musicological discourse and may also underlie traditional approaches in music teaching and learning. Gould (2009) proposed that queer theory might be used to unsettle dominant norms in music education. She critiqued the common linear progression in music education—often structured as a fixed path from beginner to advanced—that privileges a singular “correct” way of learning and performing. To move beyond these limitations, Gould encouraged embracing alternative musical expressions like improvisation, experimental genres, and non-hierarchical practices, which open space for creativity and difference. Moreover, she called for the inclusion of diverse histories and musical traditions, particularly from marginalized and queer communities, as a way to challenge the dominance of a singular, universal musical canon.

Choral music education scholars highlighted the importance of challenging heteronormativity and fostering affirming spaces (Garrett and Palkki 2021; McBride 2017; Palkki 2015, 2024); yet, the concept of queering holds further untapped potential. Beyond challenging heteronormativity, queering encourages a reimagining of assumptions about gender and sexuality—an approach that has yet to be fully explored in shaping artistic goals within ensemble rehearsals and performances. Central to queering is the critical analysis of cultural texts (e.g., films, literature, and songs) to question traditional understandings of gender and sexuality and their sociocultural constructions (Barker and Scheele 2016). This process

can activate a mode of anticipation and possibility, which Muñoz (2019) termed queer futurity: “the not-yet-here, the horizon that we can glimpse but not fully know,” envisioning alternative ways of being and expressing identity beyond current social constraints (1).

More recently, Talbot and Taylor (2023) applied Muñoz’s (2019) queer futurity to music education, focusing on artists like Lil Nas X. Taylor and Talbot argued that marginalized individuals, by living authentically, can create “emancipatory utopias” that counter societal marginalization and internalized oppression, offering new visions of a world in which those voices are not just visible but central to the cultural imagination (46). They further explained, “In past decades when LGBTQ+ visibility was more fraught with danger, some LGBTQ+ individuals recognizing the finite limitations of time—enacted emancipatory utopias by living a life they envisioned rather than waiting for legislative or social approval” (52). Thus, futurity encourages marginalized individuals to envision their present without deconstructing it or waiting for acceptance, as such longing can reflect internalized oppression and homophobia.

In their philosophical examination of queering, Talbot and Taylor (2023) emphasized emancipatory utopias, which invites educators to reconsider not only which stories are told but also where and how these stories unfold. Attending to narrative and space recognizes that dominant heteronormative frameworks operate through both the content of teaching—its histories, cultural scripts, and stories—and the environments in which education takes place. Accordingly, queering music education calls for reimagining both the narratives explored in classes and rehearsals, and the physical and social spaces where education and performance take place.

Queer theorists have offered tools for reimagining both narrative and spatial structures and arrangements (Ahmed 2006, 2019; Roof 1996, 2018). For instance, Judith Roof’s (1996, 2018) analysis of queering narratives highlights how traditional media often follow a heteronormative trajectory—beginning with stability, passing through conflict, and ending by reaffirming heterosexual norms—while queer elements appear only as temporary deviations. In a similar vein, Ahmed’s (2006, 2019) analysis of queering spaces explored how physical and social environments enforce normative expectations, making nonconforming identities feel out of place. In choral music education, for example, a common practice of seating students in gendered rows (e.g., sopranos on one side, tenors on the other)

reinforces binary understandings of gender and musical roles. This arrangement not only mirrors dominant gender norms but also subtly enforces the idea that musical abilities and voices are inherently linked to gendered expectations. These spatial and narrative norms become even more pronounced in show choir settings, where performance style, choreography, and costuming often emphasize traditional gender roles and expressions.

## Heteronormative Cycles in Competitive Show Choir

In competitive show choir, high school ensembles perform elaborate musical productions that combine choral singing, synchronized dance, and theatrical presentation. These performances often feature themed medleys drawn from pop, Broadway, or rock genres, staged with full costumes, styled hair and makeup, and dramatic lighting. Competitions are most common in the Midwestern and Southern United States and typically take place in school gymnasiums or regional performing arts centers. Ensembles are evaluated by multiple judges across several categories, including instrumental accompaniment (usually a student or adult band), vocal performance, and visual presentation. Each category is guided by a rubric, with scores awarded for aspects such as technique, choreography, stage presence, and overall effect.

Competitions occur at local, regional, and national levels, with groups striving for technical precision, emotional impact, and creativity. Scores determine rankings and might influence an ensemble's reputation, future invitations, and recruitment of new members. Because results can also affect funding, community support, and school pride, show choirs invest significant time and resources into perfecting every detail of their performances to align with both rubrics and judges' expectations. While many ensembles incorporate themes of inclusion—often belting empowering songs like Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" in four-part harmony—these expressions frequently coexist with show choir norms that emphasize visual uniformity often resulting in narrowly defined presentations of gender and sexuality. Directors, parents, and other stakeholders also shape creative decisions, sometimes reflecting broader community values that influence how inclusion and conformity are balanced within performances.

Consider the following scenario: A choral director at a Midwest high school helps prepare their mixed advanced show choir for an upcoming competition. As

the choir rehearses, they learn that a male-identifying tenor will not be able to attend the contest. The director becomes concerned about the unequal number of pairs. A lone, female-identifying alto raises her hand and asks the director if she can quickly learn the choreography in place of the tenor who cannot attend the contest. As the director considers the suggestion, he replies to the alto, “The judges would find that visually inappropriate.”

ISSMA’s (2022) visual rubric, one of three rubrics (instrumental, vocal, and visual) used for show choir adjudication, employs language such as appropriate, which may bias towards heterosexuality, especially in the category of repertoire effect. In other words, scores for repertoire effect in certain shows might prompt questions about what is considered appropriate. For example, in the *Top Gun: Maverick* show I observed for adjudication, tenors and basses performed particular conceptions of gender and sexuality while receiving high repertoire effect scores. The tenors and basses provided athletic movements and military-inspired costumes to deliver the expected mannerisms and dress of what Palkki (2015) suggested as the “tough, strong, muscular, or commanding … standard masculine prototype” (26). Female-identifying performers embodied traditional stereotypes of feminine subservience and passivity through their choreography and stage presence, which featured soft, fluid movements and postures that conveyed attentiveness to their male counterparts (Wood 1994). The ensemble received the highest score in the appropriateness of literature category on the visual rubric.

The earlier scenario and the *Top Gun: Maverick* performance both highlight how vague rubric terms like “appropriate” reinforce heteronormative biases in show choir competitions. In the scenario, the director’s refusal to let the female alto replace the male tenor reflects an assumption that heterosexual pairings are necessary for visual balance. Such bias was also evident during performance adjudication, where male performers were rewarded for embodying traditional masculinity, while female performers were judged on their passive femininity. This division between active masculinity and passive femininity reinforces a binary view of gender, making performances that align with these rigid norms more likely to succeed.

The earlier scenario and the *Top Gun: Maverick* performance might also highlight how ensemble directors, observing the success of certain groups, feel compelled to replicate their strategies in hopes of achieving similar outcomes (Powell 2023). Ahmed (2019) compared approaches like replicating past winners to

following the “well-trodden path” (41). She described a well-trodden path in the following manner: “The more people travel on a path, the flatter and smoother the surface becomes. When something is smoother, it is clearer; the more a path is followed, the easier it is to follow” (41). Consequently, show choirs frequently adopt familiar strategies from past winners, viewing them as logical and justifiable, while vague rubric terms like ‘appropriate’ perpetuate cyclical heteronormative biases that shape which performances are deemed successful.

Further, directors might also pursue artistic aims that reflect the ideologies of the schools and communities represented by each show choir. Bylica et al.’s (2025) research highlighted that community stakeholders—such as parents, administrators, and local ideologies—exert pressure on music educators, which might then also guide show choir performances. This influence is typically not overt but manifests through indirect pressures, such as community expectations and challenging interactions with administrators or parents, which both music educators and show choir directors must navigate as they shape their artistic decisions. Such pressures may lead directors to align their performances with prevailing gender and sexuality expectations, limiting opportunities for more inclusive or subversive artistic expressions that challenge dominant norms.

While the well-trodden path for show choir is perhaps clarifying for the sake of winning competitions, it may also be restrictive. For instance, a director might consider opportunities to experiment with how they portray gender on stage through selection of different repertoire. Songwriter Kate Bush described “Running Up That Hill” as a song that explores “the idea of a man and a woman swapping places with each other, just to feel what it was like, from the other side” (Madden 2022). However, the director who attended the adjudicated event where *Top Gun: Maverick* received high scores may be deterred from choosing the former selection, which allows for experimentation in gender portrayal, and instead inclined to stage the latter, perhaps believing it will lead to a victory.

External pressures—driven by community expectations and competitive standards—undoubtedly influence a director’s decisions. However, beyond these external forces, the structure of show choir as an art form might also reinforce heteronormativity. While directors may feel compelled to align their performances with established norms due to the ideologies of their schools and communities, show choir’s reliance on particular conceptions of gender and sexuality also shapes

the narratives performed on stage. These foundational structures can further limit the performance possibilities for participants.

## Narrative and Show Choir

The intentional arrangement and interconnection of individual songs to form a cohesive narrative, commonly known as a set, might imply underlying ontological assumptions warranting closer examination. In her discussion aimed at preservice choral music educators, Madura Ward-Steinman (2018) noted that a typical show choir set includes five arrangements per show, with each song fulfilling a distinct purpose. For example, the opener sets the tone, the closing number builds toward an exciting conclusion, and the middle songs—such as ballads—offer contrast and opportunities for novelty (e.g., comedy songs, special small-group features, and so forth).

To this end, Roof (2018) suggested that these narrative structures define the limits of what constitutes a unified story. Within such a narrative structure, a progression unfolds from stability to conflict, ultimately resolving through cause-and-effect relationships—such as intermediate songs introducing tension or uncertainty, eventually resolved by the final song. While various paths are presented as options during the intermediate phase, not all are deemed equal; typically, there exists a singular correct path leading to the desired resolution (Rohy 2018). Consequently, a satisfying resolution fosters a sense of understanding, mastery, or triumph (Roof 1996).

Such narrative structure is widespread in popular media and often seen in Hollywood films, bestselling books, short fiction, and even episodes of *Law & Order* (Chess 2016). Film director Fritz Lang (1948) notably described this narrative structure as leading to a happy ending, characterized by a clear resolution of a problem, typically portrayed as a contrasting obstacle or a wrong choice that must be overcome in the middle. A happy ending is evident from the exposition and entails familiar and predetermined outcomes, including the protagonist achieving romantic success, the antagonist facing just consequences, and dreams that materialize. Additionally, resolutions often hinge on the fulfillment of a heterosexual relationship, or the familiar “boy will get girl” trope (Lang 1948, 27).

In the *Top Gun: Maverick* set, the finale featured a choral arrangement of the iconic song “Take My Breath Away,” marking the resolution after Maverick, the

protagonist, overcomes intense challenges and daring aerial maneuvers, showcasing his exceptional piloting skills and reconnecting with his romantic interest, Charlie. Just before this, the show choir performed an arrangement of Lady Gaga's ballad "Hold My Hand," which conveys a message of unwavering support and reassurance, offering comfort to someone in need. The song does not specify gender, and its focus on emotional vulnerability and solidarity creates a connection that is free from traditional gender roles and romantic expectations. This openness allows for a range of interpretations, including queer readings.

Roof (1996) described such narrative structures that culminate and conclude in heteronormativity as heteronarrative. As Kauffman (2006) elucidated, "The structure of this narrative begins in the heteronormative, the introduction foreshadows homologic—the logic of the ambiguous and perverse—events to come, the middle proceeds in the homologic, and the conclusion ends back in the heteronormative" (1143). In other words, the middle section of such trajectory, akin to songs two, three, and four in a show choir performance, serves to cultivate the tension necessary for a narrative's coherence. For Roof, the conclusion—or the final song in a show choir performance—then returns to the heteronormative, bringing any lingering homologic events and characters back into the realm of heterologic.

Thus, in a heteronarrative structure, homologic events and characters are temporary and delimited. As Kaufmann (2006) discussed, "We can safely enjoy [the middle's] perversity because we already know it will conclude in the heteronormative. We know this not only because of the foreshadowing in the introduction but also because we have experienced the structure so many times before" (1143). Homologic events and characters serve as permissible problems, helping to guide a return to heteronormativity by the end (or in the finale, as showcased in show choir sets). The acknowledgment of non-heteronormative or queer variations is temporary, contingent upon the expectation of their eventual correction; thus, they are viewed as problems to be straightened out and expunged.

## Space and Show Choir

Spaces, both physical and temporal, are not neutral. Ahmed (2006) emphasized that space—both what is included and what is omitted—is not passive but actively shaped by social practices and norms. To this end, she discussed the non-neutrality of objects in space, asserting, "it is not just that I find them there, like that" (58).

In other words, objects in spaces are not simply found there by chance; rather, their presence and arrangement are influenced by social meanings and intentional practices.

Buttons—or musical structures that communicate a definitive ending of a piece—entail familiar and predetermined outcomes as conclusions for individual songs. In show choir, a button refers to an accented tonic sonority at the end of a song, as described by Lin-Manuel Miranda (2018) in a tweet: “BUTTON—a musical theater term for the bump at the end of a song that lets you know it’s okay to applaud. Usually a light cue, linked to an instrumental bump.” This musical “bump” serves as a clear, auditory signal to the audience, signaling the conclusion of a song and offering a moment of finality, often paired with an emphatic, easily recognizable chord or rhythm.

In “Danger Zone,” featured in the *Top Gun: Maverick* show choir set, the final four measures build to a pulsating, subdivided dominant chord, which resolves to a solitary tonic G-minor chord in root position—characteristic of a musical “button.” The song concludes with a cadence featuring a direct and unequivocal resolution, marked by this solitary tonic sonority. Such cadences evoke McClary’s (1991) analysis of gender binaries in music, where dominant, resolute endings are often associated with masculinity, while more ambiguous resolutions are linked to femininity. For instance, a popular song like “Let It Go” from the animated movie musical *Frozen*, which ends with a lingering, unresolved musical gesture, might be seen as less definitive and more emotionally expressive, encouraging the audience to linger in a moment of transition rather than imposing closure. Accordingly, if buttons are not neutral (sonic) objects within temporal spaces, the preference for definitive endings implies the exclusion of more open, unresolved ones (Ahmed 2006). Through McClary’s lens, this exclusion marginalizes traits traditionally associated with femininity—fluidity, ambiguity, and emotional expressiveness—reinforcing a binary that valorizes masculine closure while dismissing more feminine endings.

Given the widespread presence of heteronormativity in show choir, it becomes imperative to engage in queering practices to challenge entrenched gender norms, foster inclusivity, and provide a platform for diverse expressions of identity within the performance realm. Further exploration of queering could offer insights into alternative perspectives on the narrative, as well as the use of temporal and physical spaces in show choir, challenging conventional perceptions and patterns.

## Queering Narrative

Queering narrative and narrative structures actively challenge the prevailing dominance of heterosexual and binary perspectives within mainstream media and contemporary culture. By adopting more adaptable and open-ended formats, queer narrative structures might have more potential than heteronarratives to capture the fluidity and complexity of sexuality and gender identity. As Roof (1996) aptly articulated, “It is impossible to think about narrative without engaging ideologies of sexuality” (24). As such, it is crucial to understand the common qualities of queer narratives as presented in songs, plays, and albums and to recognize the ideologies of sexuality that they may represent.

Roof (2018) proposed queering narrative structures by integrating mid-story events whose purpose is unclear or seemingly ambiguous. Such suggestions encourage audiences to engage further with narratives by requiring them to experience an entire artistic work before fully grasping the intent behind mid-story events. For example, in the musical *Fun Home*, adapted from Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir, several songs in the middle of the show are presented as independent, self-contained moments that defy reduction to mere events in a linear chain. Consequently, *Fun Home* invites the audience to piece together its varied middle songs, akin to flipping through snapshots in a family photo album, to shed light on Alison’s coming-of-age and her intricate relationship with her closeted father, Bruce.

In the pivotal middle song “Ring of Keys” from the musical, Alison uses nuanced metaphors to explore her queer experiences, implying the song has a profound significance that is not instantly apparent. For instance, the lyrics “I knew that look, it was the one I’d seen in my own eyes” capture Alison’s admiration for the older queer woman’s appearance and demeanor. While Alison’s admiration is integral to the moment, more direct or straightforward lyrics might not fully convey the profundity of recognizing oneself mirrored in another’s gaze—a realization that transcends mere attraction to encompass a deep understanding of oneself. Moreover, the song’s role in Alison’s journey of self-discovery and coming of age gradually unfolds, prompting the audience to contextualize it with other snapshot-like songs to understand its significance as a whole fully. Rather than offering straightforward resolutions for mid-story events, incorporating ambiguous outcomes encourages audiences to experience Alison’s full story within the broader

context of the show before assigning meaning to the individual song, thus avoiding its reduction.

Queer narrative structures could also occur in standalone songs not tied to a specific context like a musical. Ahmed (2019) might further describe such tendencies as queer lingering, challenging the conventional expectation of linear narrative progression and singular interpretations. As she expressed, “Queer use: we linger; we do not get to the point” (206). For instance, an emotionally intense and introspective pop song about an ungendered breakup might not offer a clear resolution of moving on or reconciliation. Instead, it lingers on feelings of liberation and uncertainty, inviting listeners to interpret the character’s journey through the lyrics in their own way.

Additionally, queer lingering might be considered in relation to overarching narratives. The promotion of queer lingering might take the form of leaving certain plot threads unresolved, lingering on moments of uncertainty or complexity, or presenting multiple possible interpretations of events without definitively favoring one over the others. Tony Kushner explored queer lingering to great effect in his play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. Kushner explained, “People shouldn’t trust artists, and they shouldn’t trust art. Part of the fun of the art is that it invites you to interpret it” (Bernstein 1995, 59). In the play, Kushner refrained from providing clear-cut conclusions, allowing uncertainties like the fate of characters grappling with illness or personal beliefs to persist. Instead of closure, the narrative dwells on moments of complexity and moral dilemmas, challenging audiences to grapple with existential questions and diverse perspectives.

Further, throughout the play, the character of Prior Walter—a gay man living with AIDS in 1980s America—experiences visions and engages with supernatural beings, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. These encounters can be interpreted as symbolic representations of his inner turmoil and spiritual journey, but Kushner refrained from definitively favoring one interpretation over others. This approach invites audiences to engage deeply with the play’s themes and characters, encouraging diverse perspectives on the meaning and significance of each scene. Through queer lingering, Kushner challenged traditional storytelling norms by embracing uncertainty and open-endedness, encouraging audiences to consider the multifaceted nature of identity and reflecting on the complexities and ambiguity inherent in real-life challenges.

Queer narrative structures often resist linear storytelling by weaving together seemingly unrelated artistic works under broad thematic umbrellas, treating each piece as a distinct episode rather than a sequential chapter. While traditional concept albums typically follow a unified, linear narrative or emotional arc, Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* queers this form by rejecting straightforward progression in favor of an episodic, non-linear structure that explores identity, freedom, and self-expression across multiple interconnected songs and visuals. Rather than presenting a single, cohesive story, the album offers a series of self-contained narratives that illuminate different facets of these themes. For instance, "Make Me Feel" centers on sexual freedom and fluidity with its vibrant, funk-infused sound, while "PYNK" highlights femininity and empowerment through bold imagery and symbolism. Though the tracks share recurring motifs—such as vivid colors and defiance of normative expectations—they resist fixed plot progression and linear cause-and-effect storytelling, instead offering a mosaic of experiences and perspectives that embrace ambiguity and fluidity. In doing so, *Dirty Computer* extends the work of Ahmed (2019) and Roof (2018) by illustrating how queering narrative not only challenges but actively reconfigures normative frameworks through alternative, non-linear modes of storytelling.

Show choir performances have the potential to embrace queering narratives by integrating open-ended themes that challenge traditional structures. Typically shaped by competition standards and ideological expectations, their linear approach emphasizes clear resolutions and fixed roles, often reinforcing heteronormativity. A queered approach could reimagine performances around expansive concepts (e.g., identity, freedom, and so forth), instead of adhering to a rigid storyline with a defined arc. Rather than following a linear progression from conflict to resolution, a show choir performance could incorporate a series of loosely connected musical pieces that explore a theme from multiple angles, allowing for more fluid interpretations of gender, relationships, and experience. This would shift the focus from delivering a neat, conclusive ending to offering an emotionally resonant, thought-provoking experience that encourages reflection and multiple interpretations, much like how queer narratives allow for the complexity and nuance of identity to emerge without demanding closure.

## Queering Space

Queering a space means actively reimagining and reshaping it by challenging the dominant social and spatial orders that dictate how bodies are positioned and move within it. As Ahmed (2006) explained in her discussion of queer phenomenology, “A queer phenomenology … reveals how social relations are arranged spatially, how queerness disrupts and reorders these relations by not following the accepted paths” (1). This process shows how norms—especially heteronormative ones—make some bodies feel at home while others feel out of place. Queering space opens new possibilities for identity and interaction by challenging normative spatial logics and creating alternative ways of inhabiting and experiencing space that better reflect diverse and marginalized identities.

Building on this, I propose considering performance space in show choir through a queer lens. The ways in which performers navigate and are positioned onstage may not simply reflect innocuous artistic choices; rather, they often express underlying ideologies that make certain movements and formations appear natural or correct. These staging practices can align with dominant norms of music education, reinforcing expectations that privilege particular bodies and marginalize others. Just as performance environments can reinforce heteronormative assumptions, they can also be reimagined to reflect queerness. Queering space in show choir might involve embracing fluidity, disorientation, and subversion—challenging traditional spatial logics and fostering environments that support a broader range of gendered and sexual expressions.

Fluidity, a central aspect of queerness, plays a crucial role in disrupting traditional norms. In classroom settings, the concept of queering space is exemplified by flexible learning environments. For instance, classrooms with movable furniture and adaptable layouts challenge fixed seating and teacher-centered designs. By allowing students to rearrange their surroundings based on learning needs and preferences, these environments embrace fluidity, supporting diverse learning modes while disrupting hierarchical spatial arrangements and fostering collaborative, inclusive interactions among students and educators. Although these concepts have not yet been applied to show choir performance spaces, a shift from staging rigid formations like the V, which typically place more experienced dancers at the front, to more circular and amoebic arrangements with greater adaptability

and spontaneity could queer these spaces by embracing fluidity and openness while challenging traditional hierarchical staging.

Queering spaces through fluidity alone may not be enough; it might also require embracing disorientation. Ahmed (2006) argued that expanding the possibilities for marginalized bodies to inhabit these spaces—allowing bodies to extend into that space in previously unconventional ways—necessitates disrupting established patterns of orientation, or rather, inducing disorientation. If “being ‘orientated’ means feeling at home, understanding one’s position, or having certain objects within reach,” then experiencing disorientation may facilitate access to alternative approaches or new fields of action that might, at first glance, seem awry (1). Disorientation should not be perceived as negative or disempowering; instead, unsettlement unveils new opportunities for reimagining spatial dynamics and social relations.

As such, disorientation might be one point of entry for considering alternative modes of engagement within spaces. For instance, consider the phenomenon of flash mobs, where groups of people suddenly converge in a public space to perform a brief and seemingly spontaneous musical act before dispersing. These events disrupt the conventional use of public space, challenging established patterns of behavior and interaction. Experiencing disorientation in such situations can prompt participants and observers to challenge and rethink their assumptions about the traditional uses of spaces and who should be present in them. This process of questioning can promote a more inclusive acceptance of diverse approaches to interacting with and occupying space, a perspective that holds particular significance for understanding gender and queerness.

To achieve such unsettlement, queering space may also require actively challenging deeply ingrained, normative perspectives on gender and sexuality entrenched within spaces, emphasizing the need to disrupt and redefine how spaces are utilized. Ahmed (2019) described such objectives as queer uses of space, which refers to using things in ways other than how they were intended. To illustrate queer use, Ahmed (2019) suggested considering a bird nesting in an out-of-use postbox.

Typically, a postbox is used for sending and receiving mail with the expectation that the letter will be reliably delivered. Ahmed (2019) noted that users place letters in the postbox confidently, trusting they will reach their destination without delay. This repeated process establishes a clear understanding of the postbox's

intended use. However, when a postbox falls out of use, it may be repurposed by a nesting bird. This unconventional use of the postbox—originally for mail—demonstrates queer use, subverting its original function. Similarly, flash mobs exemplify queer uses of space by transforming environments in ways that challenge their intended purposes, thereby questioning normative structures.

Yet, it is important to avoid conflating the concept of queering space with establishing a queer space. Queering space involves actions that provoke new insights into how individuals relate to or position themselves within their environment, which is distinct from the concept of a space exclusively or predominantly oriented towards queer individuals. For example, consider Fire Island, a historically queer space off the coast of Long Island, New York. While it has long been a sanctuary for LGBTQ+ individuals seeking refuge and community, its establishment as a queer space also implies a certain homogeneity that can inadvertently lead to the development of new normative boundaries within its community. It is through queering spaces, by unsettling the normative alignments between bodies and spaces, that individuals can begin to reconfigure the spatial dynamics and create openings for alternative modes of bodily engagement and expression.

Embracing subversion as part of queering space can go even further in accommodating queer lives. For instance, consider a conventional vending machine, typically used for dispensing processed snacks and drinks. Reimagining it as a “Community Vending Machine” that offers free items like books by queer authors, handmade pride flags, or resources for LGBTQ+ support transforms its usual function. This repurposing not only challenges the vending machine’s traditional uses but also creates a space for cultural expression and community support. By reimagining the use of everyday objects, as discussed by Ahmed (2019) with the postbox, ordinary elements can be adapted to more effectively reflect and support diverse identities.

This concept of queering space holds particular significance within the realm of show choir, where performances are often shaped by competition rubrics that reward traditional, heteronormative portrayals of gender and sexuality. These rubrics, while providing structure, can inadvertently reinforce biases and limit the potential for more inclusive representations. Additionally, external pressures from community stakeholders, such as parents and school administrators, might influence directors’ artistic decisions, pushing them toward conforming to dominant gender norms and expectations. As a result, opportunities for directors to

experiment with alternative, more diverse portrayals of gender and sexuality are often constrained by the need to meet both competitive and community standards.

Queering space in show choir could present a means to challenge these limitations. The result is a performance that reimagines the entire structure of show choir competitions, not just through the music or song selection, but through every element: the way performers interact, move, and engage with each other and the space around them. For example, instead of following prescribed gendered movements—where women might traditionally perform more delicate, fluid movements and men perform more rigid or masculine choreography—directors might create opportunities for performers to engage in more fluid and dynamic movement styles that defy gendered expectations. This could also extend to how performers interact with the space itself—stepping off the stage into the audience or using the space more interactively—creating an environment where the boundaries of traditional gender roles are not just questioned, but redefined.

## Queering Show Choir

As Gould (2009) observed, any attempt to introduce queer movement into a social practice, such as music education, is met with both overt and covert forces of “straightening,” a process that is self-imposed and externally enforced by both heterosexual and homosexual bodies (60). She described that such straightening is driven by a need to maintain order and avoid disruption of the established norms that guide behavior and performance. Thus, the act of queering a narrative or a space, whether it is in choral music education or any other field, involves a concerted effort to step away from the predictable “straight line” that society imposes (65). She further explained, “queer movement requires effort; indeed, it is hard work ... stepping away from the straight line is difficult” (Gould 2009, 65). In the context of show choir, where performances follow established rules, external pressures reinforce these norms, and narratives tend to be formulaic, queering the space and narrative would involve more than just defiance. It would require a deliberate reimagining of how bodies, music, and interactions are structured.

Show choir is deeply influenced by heteronormative expectations that govern not only the performance of gender and sexuality but also the very form of the performance itself. As Gould (2009) suggested, these “straightening interventions” serve to preserve stability within the practice, making it difficult for queer

expressions to flourish without being “straightened” back into conformity (65). The challenge of queering show choir, then, is twofold: it involves both the desire to embrace alternative modes of expression and the effort required to maintain a deviation from the norm, all while navigating external pressures to conform.

By queering the space and narrative of show choir performances, new possibilities arise for how performers engage with music, each other, and the audience. This process goes beyond simply critiquing norms; it seeks to transform performance by preventing queer movements from being assimilated back into the norm and instead disrupting the binary gender structures, heterosexism, and identity-based hierarchies that dominate traditional performances. The suggestions for queering the narratives and spaces focus specifically on two areas: narrative conclusions and spatial interactions. Given the range of external pressures—such as community expectations and competition rubrics—these suggestions offer both subtle shifts and more radical changes. They also account for varying levels of resistance to these changes, emphasizing flexibility and the need to avoid establishing new normative lines.

### *Narrative Conclusions*

To queer the narrative structure of show choir, ensembles can embrace non-linear and fragmented storytelling methods that reflect the complexity of queer experiences. Traditionally, show choir performances are structured with a clear beginning, middle, and end, culminating in a final, cohesive narrative. A queer approach, however, might involve disrupting this linearity by integrating songs that stand alone yet create unexpected thematic connections when juxtaposed (Ahmed 2019; Roof 1996, 2018)

Incorporating a song “Why Am I Like This?” from the *Heartstopper* soundtrack into a show choir performance can illustrate this approach. The song, with its title ending in a question mark, exemplifies a queer approach to narrative closure (Ahmed 2019). Lyrics like “I'll be there in the corner thinking right over / Every single word of the conversation we just had...” along with its unresolved musical conclusion—a deceptive cadence—invite the audience to engage in an ongoing exploration of identity and sexuality, rather than offering a definitive, traditionally masculine resolution (McClary 1991).

Students could take this concept further by reinterpreting and recomposing songs through queer principles. They might start by selecting songs that have a

degree of ambiguity or introspection, like “Why Am I Like This?”. By rearranging the musical components—such as altering the song’s structure, adding or omitting verses, or changing the orchestration—students can create a version that emphasizes open-endedness and invites diverse interpretations. For example, they could extend the song with additional sections that explore different facets of the themes presented, or remix the song to highlight its emotional complexity, thereby avoiding a tidy resolution. While not all conclusions are inherently heteronormative, ending with a song that resists traditional narrative closure—like one that poses a question rather than offering an answer—challenges the impulse toward finality. This approach provides space for ambiguity and complexity, reflecting the ongoing exploration of identity and emotional experience (e.g., queer lingering), and subtly queering the performance by resisting the pressure for a definitive, predictable conclusion.

### *Interactions and Exchanges*

Queering the spatial dynamics and interactions within show choir performances involves reimagining how both the performance space and the performers themselves engage with it. Traditional staging often reinforces rigid gender and sexual norms, with elements like choral risers physically elevating performers to reflect these hierarchical structures, positioning them based on predetermined roles. Risers often dictate who is visible or important, reinforcing heteronormative and gendered expectations of performance—such as placing male-identifying singers in the back or elevating female-identifying singers to the front. As Ahmed (2006) suggested, space is “sticky,” meaning it shapes and enforces societal norms, including who belongs where (47). To queer the space, show choirs could remove these fixed elements, opting for more flexible, open layouts that allow for dynamic, spontaneous interactions among performers.

For example, Sara Bareilles’s ballad “Gravity,” with its themes of personal empowerment and resistance to emotional pull, offers a potent opportunity for queer interpretation, challenging normative relationships and embracing alternative expressions of identity beyond traditional heteronormative romantic narratives. By queering the space during such a performance, show choirs could remove rigid formations like V’s or gendered positioning that might traditionally guide who is visible in certain moments. Without risers and fixed spots, performers can move freely across the stage in response to the song’s emotional depth, allowing the

music and the performers' responses to make decisions and determinations about the song's movement. This openness transforms the performance from one defined by prescribed spatial norms to one where movement is fluid, reflecting both the song's thematic exploration of personal struggle and the performers' unique expressions. This freedom to move—and the absence of gendered, hierarchical staging—allows the space to reflect the song's queerness, creating a performance that embraces flexibility, inclusivity, and emotional resonance without being constrained by conventional roles or positions.

In addition to rethinking physical space, show choirs can also disrupt the boundaries between performers and the audience. By incorporating interactive elements, such as inviting audience members to participate in certain segments or interact with performers, the traditionally rigid distinction between performer and spectator is blurred. This kind of engagement challenges the expectation that the performer's role is to entertain, while the audience's is to passively watch. As Ahmed (2006) explained, bodies move within space, but space moves them as well in a "two-way" approach (10). Involving the audience in the performance queers the space by breaking down hierarchical roles, transforming the performance into a collaborative, fluid exchange where both performers and audience co-create the experience.

Costume design also plays a crucial role in queering the spatial dynamics of show choir performances. Traditional costumes often reinforce binary gender norms; instead, incorporating designs that blend or defy these conventions can be transformative. For example, costumes that merge traditionally masculine and feminine elements—such as sequined jackets with tailored pants or dresses with androgynous cuts—can challenge normative gender presentations. Allowing performers to select or design multiple costumes throughout the season, which could reflect various identities and expressions, further supports fluidity and inclusivity. This approach encourages performers to embody diverse aspects of their identity and resist fixed, normative portrayals.

By rethinking both the physical space and the interaction between performers, audience, and costumes, show choirs can disrupt traditional hierarchies and foster a more inclusive and fluid performance environment. This queering of space challenges heteronormative assumptions about who belongs where, and opens up new possibilities for performers to co-create their roles and identities in real-time,

creating a performance that is not only more collaborative but also more reflective of diverse identities.

## Conclusion...

Queer theory encourages a shift not just in practice, but in how one relates to narrative, space, identity, and performance (Ahmed 2006, 2019; Roof 1996, 2018). In competitive show choir, this reorientation proves especially challenging: the focus on uniformity, precision, and precedence leaves little space for the ambiguity and fluidity central to queer ways of being. As a result, attempts to queer show choir have been scarce, perhaps confined to cautious or broad discussions. Moreover, LGBTQ+ students, educators, and adjudicators continue to face disproportionate scrutiny, with fears of perceived indoctrination or deviance frequently projected onto their identities; thus, the work of queering show choir cannot be left solely to them (McBride 2017; Paparo and Sweet 2014). Reimagining show choir through a queer lens—one that embraces multiplicity, ambiguity, and expressive freedom while resisting reductive categorization—entails both structural transformation and a reconceptualization of collective engagement.

Muñoz (2019) offered compelling insight for this reimagining through his concept of queer futurity, which he described as a hopeful orientation toward what is possible but not yet realized. He described that “Queerness is not yet here;” that “We are not yet queer ... But we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (1). This sense of the “not yet” is not a failure, but a call to imagine otherwise—to engage in a sustained, collective project of envisioning futures where queerness is not merely included but centered. Muñoz reminds that this work is powered by both critique and affective forces like hope and joy. In this way, queer joy becomes an act of resistance: it disrupts the flattening effects of normativity and enlivens the potential for transformation within shared performance. In the context of show choir, queer joy is not incidental; it is a vital force that propels new forms of expression and belonging.

Queering show choir, then, is not just about revising the present but about worldmaking—crafting performance spaces that resist fixed identity categories and normative scripts. It asks show choir students, directors, adjudicators, and stakeholders to look critically at the deep structures of the genre: Why must all singers dress the same? Why must movement be militaristically synchronized?

Why must narrative choices often center conventional gender roles or heteronormative themes? Drawing from Muñoz's (2019) vision, this reimagining insists that show choir can become something else—something more expansive, more expressive, and more just. Show choir educators might experiment with gender-neutral or individualized costuming, or include repertoire that tells queer and trans stories. Adjudicators might value emotional risk or vulnerability alongside technical accuracy. Directors might invite students to shape choreography or interpretation in ways that reflect their lived identities, rather than subsuming them under a unifying aesthetic. These are not just surface-level changes; they signal a shift toward imagining a different kind of performance culture—one where queerness is not simply allowed, but generatively centered.

In this sense, queering show choir is an act of collective persistence and radical imagination. It resists the belief that tradition is fixed, and it refuses the assumption that excellence must mean sameness. Muñoz (2019) reminds that hope and joy are not naïve—they are essential to survival and change. Queer joy, expressed through collaboration, improvisation, or emotional fullness in performance, becomes a force of resistance against structures that constrain. While this project is difficult, unfinished, and often met with hesitation, it keeps open the horizon of what show choir might become—not only a space where queer people are present, but a space transformed by queer ways of feeling, moving, and making meaning.

## About the Author

Brandon Magid (he/him/his) completed his PhD in Music Education at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music in 2024, with a minor in choral conducting and a focus on philosophical research. He also holds a Master's degree in Music Education from Indiana University and dual Bachelor's degrees in Music and Theatre from Loyola University Chicago. Previous to graduate studies, Brandon taught high school choir, musical theatre, and music appreciation in New York City public schools. Most recently, he served as Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre and Choral Director at Ohio Northern University, and he is currently a visiting music director in the musical theatre program at Indiana University. His research focuses on antiracism, queer theory, and social and epistemic justice in music education. He has presented at the American Educational Research Association, Big Ten Academic Alliance, Desert Skies, MayDay Colloquium, and the Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance conferences, and his writing appears in *Music Educators Journal* and *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. [www.doctormagid.com](http://www.doctormagid.com)

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