

# Fostering Trans+ Experiences of Gender Euphoria in Choir

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## Abstract

Choirs are lauded for their psychological, physiological, and social-emotional benefits. For 2SLGBTQ+ people (two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and expansive gender and sexual identities), choir is a place to forge kinship, develop identity, and rally for political action, regardless of whether the choir labels itself as a 2SLGBTQ+ choir. Transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming (hereafter shortened to trans+) singers have limited access to these benefits when they encounter transphobia, misgendering, and gender dysphoria in choir. Previous research on the experiences of trans+ singers has focused on mechanisms of harm. In this article I examine the experiences of five trans+ singers in 2SLGBTQ+ choirs, exploring the choral contexts in which they experience gender euphoria—a feeling of alignment in one's gender. The shared narratives explore how choral participation can support trans+ people's sense of gender euphoria.

## Keywords

Transgender studies, community music, choir, 2SLGBTQ+, minority stress model

The past decade of research on the experiences of trans+ singers in school and community choirs presented troubling stories of gender dysphoria, cisgenderism, and exclusion. Starting in 2013, Jeananne Nichols's narrative inquiry into the experiences of a trans+ and gender non-conforming youth in their high school music program was the first to focus on the unique challenges of being a gender non-conforming student in a music program. Nichols recounted a story of the music classroom being simultaneously a relatively safe place in a dangerous school, a place of creative becoming, and a site of gender policing. The tension of the music class being a safe haven and policed site continued in Palkki's (2020) description of the experiences of three trans+ high school choral classrooms. Clayton's (2020) survey of 2SLGBTQ+ (two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and expansive gender and sexual identities) high school music ensemble graduates suggested that many trans+ youths feel this dualism, with the majority of trans+ respondents reporting mixed feelings on the role of choir in positive social experiences and mental health support while upholding cisgenderist structures in the division of genders and voice types.

Choirs have many gendered elements that can cause distress to trans+ people, such as gendered vocal associations, gendered uniforms, and gendered narratives in repertoire lyrics (Agha 2017; Bartolome and Stanford 2017; Clayton 2020; Rastin 2016). Given the increased presence of trans+ people in choirs, educators and researchers need to critically examine how choral norms impact trans+ choristers. While authors have shared stories of choirs failing trans+ singers, there are fewer narratives of trans+ singers thriving in choir. By reading the forthcoming narratives of gender euphoria from five trans+ singers in 2SLGBTQ+ choirs, choir directors may develop a vision for their choir that goes beyond avoiding harming trans+ singers to supporting their joy.

## Terminology

*Gender euphoria* originated from online trans+ communities in the early 2000s to describe "a joyful feeling of rightness in one's gender/sex" (Beischel, Gauvin and van Anders 2021, 281). Discussions of gender euphoria emerged out of a collective community intention to challenge the narrative that transness is characterized by suffering (Austin, Papciak, and Lovins 2022). Gender euphoria has only recently

entered the lexicon of academic authors (Austin, Papciak, and Lovins 2022; Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2021).

Originating from the field of psychiatry, gender dysphoria describes negative emotions arising from one's sexed characteristics and social perceptions of their gender (Beischel, Gauvin and van Anders 2021). A gender dysphoria diagnosis is often required to access gender-affirming care. The pathologization of trans+ genders positions transness as undesirable and aberrant to the cisgender norm (Beischel, Gauvin and van Anders 2021). Advocates have been campaigning to remove gender identity disorder from the current fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), much in the way homosexuality was removed from the DSM in 1973 (Russo 2017). Gender dysphoria is still a recognized term among trans+ people, reflecting an authentic stressor (Austin, Papciak, and Lovins 2022).

Finding a singular, conclusive definition of trans+ is challenging. In the very first issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, which functioned as a glossary, trans+ or any of its variations was purposefully omitted to allow the reader to engage in meaning-making that serves them (Keegan 2020b). I use trans+ to mean anyone who feels unrepresented by the words man or woman within a social context dominated by colonialism and cisgenderism. This includes but is not limited to transgender men and women, two-spirit and cultural genders, bigender, gender-fluid, agender, and other gender-expansive identities. These identities exist under the 2SLGBTQ+ acronym. Other common variations of trans+ in literature are trans and trans\* (Tompkins 2014). I use a plus sign instead of an asterisk to evoke the same expansiveness of identity that the plus sign does at the end of the 2SLGBTQ+ acronym.

Cisgenderism is the cultural and systemic devaluation of genders that do not align with a person's gender assigned at birth (Lennon and Mistler 2014). Cisgenderism punishes both trans+ and cisgender people if they are not deemed to be conforming to their presumed gender adequately. One component of cisgenderism is transphobia, a fear and hostility towards trans+ people.

## Research on Trans+ Experiences in Choral Settings

In recent years, choral facilitators have noticed more trans+ people in rehearsals (Agha 2017; Aguirre 2018; Berglin and O'Hara 2020; Finch 2019; Garrett and

Palkki 2021; Hirner 2022; Palkki and Sauerland 2019). While facilitators generally possess positive attitudes towards trans+ singers (Silveira and Goff 2016), they feel ill-equipped to support trans+ singers (Palkki and Sauerland 2019), resulting in responses driven by a fear of offending rather than confident leadership (Finch 2019; Garrett and Palkki 2021).

Trans+ people may abandon or avoid choral ensembles for many reasons. Cis-normative language, including equating vocal sections with genders, can make trans+ choristers feel out of place in the ensemble (Agha 2017; Cayari et al. 2021; Clayton 2020; Rastin 2016). Women's choirs and men's choirs limited to SSAA and TTBB voicing exclude trans+ women and men whose voices fall outside these sections (Finch 2019; Palkki 2020). Gendered uniforms are also a source of discomfort for trans+ singers (Agha 2017; Rastin 2016). In Palkki and Caldwell's (2018) survey on the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ high school choral students, transgender students were less likely to report their ensemble as feeling safe compared to cis-gender sexual minority peers.

The voice can be a site of gender dysphoria, causing trans+ people to feel uncomfortable with their voice (Dale 2021). To mitigate this distress, some trans+ people modify their voice through hormone replacement therapy (HRT), surgery, or vocal training (Aguirre 2018). Individuals taking testosterone HRT will find their range lowering like cisgender boys during puberty (Aguirre 2018). People seeking to raise the register of their voice may undergo vocal feminization surgery or sing in falsetto (Aguirre 2018). These singers require time to strengthen their vocal production and are more likely to experience vocal fatigue earlier in rehearsals (Aguirre 2018). Not all trans+ singers experience gender dysphoria from their voice, with some experiencing dysphoria from external judgments rather than vocal quality (Bartolome and Stanford 2017; Palkki 2020).

## Counternarrative Building in 2SLGBTQ+ Choirs

I turn my gaze to the experiences of trans+ singers in 2SLGBTQ+ community choirs for two reasons. (1.) Since 2SLGBTQ+ choirs have historically been sites of narrative disruption, including gay delinquency and degeneracy (Balén 2017, Hilliard 2002), they may disrupt trans+ narratives of suffering and dysphoria. (2.) Gender is necessary to understand sexuality (Keegan 2020b), meaning 2SLGBTQ+ choirs have been hosting diverse gender performances since their inception, even

if participation were limited to members of a single shared identity, such as a gay men's choir.

Choirs are of particular relevance to the 2SLGBTQ+ community due to their history as visible sites of community and political advocacy beginning in the late 1970s. Since few permanent queer spaces existed in the 1970s, 2SLGBTQ+ choir rehearsals transformed their sites to be temporary queer spaces, providing a sense of safety for those in attendance (Reddy-Best et al. 2022). Congregating in these temporary havens, 2SLGBTQ+ singers began building relationships and developing trusted community networks (Reddy-Best et al. 2022). The act of vocalization plays a key role in the catharsis that participation in a 2SLGBTQ+ choir can provide. By singing, 2SLGBTQ+ choristers could express themselves and be heard in a way rarely allowed in the political climate of the United States and Canada in the 1970s and 1980s (Reddy-Best et al. 2022). During times of emotional turmoil amidst the AIDS crisis, choirs were established communities for 2SLGBTQ+ people to gather and mourn in community (Hilliard 2002). 2SLGBTQ+ choirs have helped construct and re-affirm queer culture by highlighting or commissioning emotionally resonant music to the 2SLGBTQ+ community (MacLachlan 2020; Reddy-Best et al. 2022).

Unfortunately, 2SLGBTQ+ choirs have a long-running history of serving only a fraction of the community. Racialized, low-income, disabled, and trans+ 2SLGBTQ+ people are historically underrepresented in queer choirs, with the average participant of a 2SLGBTQ+ choir being white, middle-class, non-disabled, and cisgender (Balén 2017, Reddy-Best et al. 2022). In the United States and Canada, many 2SLGBTQ+ choirs tend to promote assimilationist politics, such as appealing to the legitimacy of their musical skills and normalcy as members of society (MacLachlan 2020), which may further alienate multiply marginalized people who have less access to normativity than the average choral participant described above. Not all 2SLGBTQ+ choirs ascribe to assimilationist politics or engage in intersectional coalition building, though they are largely motivated by a desire for social change to the benefit of 2SLGBTQ+ people (MacLachlan 2020).

Regardless of whether they participated in choirs designated for the 2SLGBTQ+ community, choir membership offers gender and sexual minority singers improved positive self-image, connection to a similar-identity community, and support for their mental health (Clayton 2020; Hilliard 2002). Gender and sexual minority singers exist across choral contexts, making the maintenance of affirming

choral communities the responsibility of all choral directors, whether or not their ensemble is designated as a 2SLGBTQ+ choir.

## Self-location

I conducted this inquiry as a settler on Turtle Island, living on the stolen lands of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Attiwonderonk peoples. As a white settler, I inherit the powers my forebears used to impose the colonial gender binary on Indigenous peoples. I have a background in Western musical traditions, having pursued an undergraduate degree at an institution where music implicitly meant Western classical music. My whiteness and musical background set me up to continue imposing systems of oppression that devalue Indigenous ways of being and crafting. While undeniably violent towards Indigenous peoples, I find colonial gender systems stifling in terms of self and creative expression. I wish to explore what exists beyond the systems of power I have been conditioned to perpetuate. My first foray into experimenting with what exists beyond this hegemony was learning about the lives of trans+ musicians and the way they, like myself, find joyous musical self-expression while unlearning colonial gender norms.

This work was a part of my first research project as a master's student. I am now a second-year doctoral student, looking back on my efforts with more knowledge of research procedure, ethics, queer theory, and trans studies than I had when I first spoke with these singers in May of 2022. I find myself critical of the follow-up questions I did not think to ask and the way I could have worked with the singers more collaboratively. In trying to be a "good academic," I appealed to an institutional ethics system that asks for objectivity and prizes distance from those with whom I conducted my inquiry. My initial research proposal included supporting their choral communities in person, such as assisting in sectional rehearsals, singing with the choir, or providing administrative support to the choir. I wanted to have a reciprocal relationship that could extend beyond the time limit of my research project, but this was not approved by the ethics board. As a result, I have not directly communicated with the singers since I presented my research at my master's capstone presentation in August 2022. I have continued to communicate with a choir director who supported my project, and I arranged a piece of choir music that the singers wanted to perform.

## Establishing A Theoretical Approach

In queer theory, discussions of sexuality tend to take precedence, and gender takes a back seat (Stryker 2004). While transgender studies gained academic legitimacy by attaching itself to queer theory, scholars often define it by its points of difference from queer theory (Keegan 2020a). Despite queer theory and transgender studies both concerning themselves with the (re)production of gender and sexuality, their treatments of subjects are starkly different. In transgender studies, trans+ people act as self-narrating subjects, while queer theory de-centralizes the subject and is less concerned with individual identity (Keegan 2020a). Transgender studies can serve as a critique of queer theory, which tends to focus its vision on sexuality and obscure the material reality of those oppressed for their gender and sexuality (Keegan 2020b; Stryker 2006). In using transgender studies I aim to denaturalize cis-genderist practices foundational in the development and maintenance of classical choral traditions and to centre the materialization of trans+ embodiments as understood through the stories of trans+ choristers.

## Singer Profiles

Erika<sup>1</sup> (they/them) is a white twenty-year-old nonbinary singer who recently moved to a major metropolitan area for university. They describe their voice as princess-like and take joy in the tone of their voice. Erika joined their choir to make friends and continue their musical engagement after singing throughout their years in high school. They chose a 2SLGBTQ+ choir to connect with other sexual and gender minorities. Having grown up in a small town, their 2SLGBTQ+ role models were mostly relegated to media and the internet, not people they could form an interpersonal connection with. Along with the choir's core 2SLGBTQ+ ensemble, Erika also participates in a trans+ choir led by the assistant director of the organization.

Jay (they/them) is a white thirty-four-year-old genderfluid singer with thirteen years of experience singing in choirs. Jay sings in the same 2SLGBTQ+ choir and trans+ ensemble as Erika. Alongside their experience as a chorister, Jay previously facilitated a 2SLGBTQ+ choir. Throughout their time as an ensemble leader, Jay broadened the range of their voice to support choristers by singing in



their own octave. Jay is very interested in trans+ musicality, including the tone of trans men and transmasculine singers and musical works written by trans+ people.

Jessica (she/her) is a white thirty-year-old trans woman in the same choirs as Erika and Jay. She sings soprano in the choir, a register she worked hard to develop. Throughout our conversation, Jessica was especially drawn to the themes of belonging and community. Being a part of the 2SLGBTQ+ choir and trans+ ensemble has empowered her to find community offline and offered her a space to fit in. Describing herself as introverted, Jessica finds the in-person community a valuable part of her life, even if she does not participate in some of the choir's typical louder, busier social events. Her favourite songs in choir explore the idea of belonging, particularly "You Will Be Found" from the musical *Dear Evan Hansen*, which the choir sang that semester.

Ryan (he/him) is a forty-year-old trans man singing in the same two ensembles as Erika, Jay, and Jessica. Aside from choir, he enjoys bonding with the local 2SLGBTQ+ community through a trans+ swim club. Ryan spent many years singing in different ensembles, primarily in densely populated urban areas. With a high-stress job as a lawyer, Ryan takes great joy in choir having no purpose other than to come together and make the world more beautiful. He enjoys singing uplifting, joyful music. At the time we spoke, Ryan had his fingers crossed that the trans+ ensemble would sing music from the Backstreet Boys, finding great delight in a lighthearted portrayal of the image of masculinity projected by boy bands in the 90s and 2000s.

Jaye (he/him) is a forty-one-year-old transmasculine singer in two 2SLGBTQ+ choirs, neither of which included the aforementioned singers. Jaye shared openly about the role of choir in his mental health, speaking candidly about his experiences with depression. He joined the ensemble he currently sings in before transitioning and went through many transition milestones while in choir. Jaye loves singing low notes that make his chest rumble. Since speaking with Jaye, I regularly quote him when explaining gender euphoria. He put the feeling concisely, saying, "It felt like I was coming home to my body."

## Participant Voices

At the time of the interviews, all five of the singers were currently involved in 2SLGBTQ+ choirs in Southeast Ontario. Each discussion aimed to understand how



they experienced gender euphoria in choir to better advise choral leaders on how to support trans+ singers. Some elements were identified as singers' favourite traits of their ensembles, while others were cited as elements they longed for in choir.

### *Gender Recognition and Minority Stress*

Societies with colonial binary gender structures have been taught to maintain a flawed gender construction by partaking in cisgenderist gender performance and policing the gender performances of others (Butler 1990, 2004; Feinberg 1997, 1998). Individuals in these societies are taught to scrutinize gender performance with the ease and readiness of speaking a mother tongue. In this way, learning trans+ affirming behaviours is comparable to a second language. Erika used this analogy when explaining the process of cisgender choristers adopting trans+-affirming behaviours. Erika assisted their peers as they did when teaching the ensemble French pronunciation to a holiday song in the previous semester, as Erika had spoken French since childhood. All participants acknowledged a learning curve for trans+ people and allies, just as there was a learning curve for the ensemble to learn a song with French lyrics. They understood that many cisgenderist and gender-policing habits are not intentionally malicious and take time to replace. While the origins foundations of cisgenderism is fundamentally violent (Feinberg 1992, 1997, 1998), the singers I spoke to demonstrated compassion and non-judgment to their peers who enable its survival that adds nuance to those embodying cisgenderism.

In my discussions with the singers, they all spent more time exploring how cisgenderism was unwittingly perpetuated than describing displays of outright aggression and hostile transphobia. While I did not ask the question explicitly at the time, this may suggest that trans+ people in 2SLGBTQ+ spaces are more concerned with microaggressions from potential allies in their communities than the occasional staunch transphobe. The 2SLGBTQ+ community is not a monolith and has a history of oppressive intra-community dynamics disadvantaging trans+ people and—thought less frequently recognized—bisexuals (Feinberg 1997; Weiss 2003, 2011). Trans+ people have been calling to address intentional and unintentional cisgenderism perpetuated by cisgender sexual minority peers in the 2SLGBTQ+ community and unite in a shared fight for liberation (Feinberg 1997;

Weiss 2003). The singers I spoke with seemed far more invested in maintaining the momentum in building coalitions with potential allies in their choirs than drawing attention to detractors who were only ever spoken about in the abstract, with Jaye being the only one to ever mention blatant displays of transphobia. The cisgenderism the singers were concerned about was the unexamined biases of their peers and choral leadership, who seemed otherwise invested in coalition building.

Cisgenderist assumptions are not always predictable. Erika recounted that a director guessed a singer's dead name—a person's name before transition—when trying to remember the singer's name. While not malicious, this misstep indicated underlying cisgenderist assumptions and could have triggered gender dysphoria for the dead-named individual as well as signaled to other trans+ people in attendance that they must legibly perform gender for a cisgender viewer to validate them (Pino and Edmonds 2024). While external validation is not necessarily required to experience gender euphoria, Erika, Ryan, Jay, and Jessica all described this incident as impeding their capacity to experience gender euphoria within the site of the choir.

The ongoing scrutiny of cisgenderism contributes to trans+ peoples' experiences of minority stress. The minority stress framework explains poorer mental health outcomes in marginalized people as resulting from the ongoing trauma of their marginalization (Austin, Papciak, and Lovins 2022, Tan et al. 2020). Both Erika and Jaye recounted experiences that can be interpreted through the lens of minority stress, with Erika describing physical health symptoms and Jaye describing mental health symptoms.

Gender euphoria has a complex relationship to minority stress. In Will Beischel, Stéphanie Gauvin, and Sari van Anders' 2022 study on community understanding of gender euphoria, participants did not position gender euphoria in opposition to gender dysphoria, but instead understood them as inextricably intertwined. While gender dysphoria is an element of minority stress for trans+ people (Austin, Papciak, and Lovins 2022), trans+ people do not experience gender euphoria at the exclusion of gender dysphoria or as an antidote to gender dysphoria. However, several interpersonal experiences that elicit gender euphoria among trans+ people are the inverse of interpersonal causes of minority stress, and experiences of gender euphoria can reduce the overall burden of minority stress (Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2022).

*Easing Minority Stress*

Using a trans+ person's chosen name or correct pronouns can spark gender euphoria, an experience noted both in literature and by all the singers I spoke with (Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2022). For both Erika and Jaye specifically, situating themselves in the affirming communities of their respective choirs worked to both ease the burden of minority stress and create a setting in which they could experience gender euphoria. Likewise, Erika stated

I was a person, a singer who struggled a lot with vocal tension. I would sing, and my voice would physically give out on me.... I would get headaches.... [M]y throat would give out on me. I would have ... acid reflux.... [I]t was a mess because I was a mess, and I didn't know that I was a mess. So as I've learned more about myself and I've become more comfortable with myself and my voice and my singing, I've actually gotten better as a singer, and that is very euphoric for me because I'm healing and I'm growing and it is a physical and auditory reminder that I'm healing and that I'm becoming the person that I was supposed to be and not the person that I have to be because of social pressure.

Erika directly ascribed their vocal tension and worsening physical symptoms to their lack of self-awareness and self-acceptance. Instead of recounting what vocal exercises or tea blends eased their symptoms, Erika attributed their healing to their own evolving sense of self after moving to a metropolitan area and joining an explicitly 2SLGBTQ+ community through their choir membership.

Like Erika, Jaye directly credits his choral involvement for improvements in his mental health. Jaye had been grappling with depression for many years, his mental illness often impeding his ability to feel socially connected. He stated

I have depression, and when things are really dark, having that consistency of going to choir every week or having somebody offer to pick me up, to take me to choir every week, and then drive me home and make sure that I'm okay, you know. And just having people like, just continue to, I guess, show up, and be like, "Yeah, you can be sad here. You can be quiet here, you can be, you know, really depressed here, and just come and breathe and sing, and maybe that'll help a little bit." And so, I think it really is a space where people can do that. And for me especially, it has been a really kind of healing space.

Jaye's story of emotional catharsis in choir culminated with an anecdote of his first solo. After having seen him through emotional lows, his choral peers were there to witness him sing a passage that Jaye found physiologically, psychologically, and socially fulfilling. Describing the gender euphoria of singing a low rumbling passage, he recounted: "It felt like I was coming home to my body, and having other

people also experience me coming home and then celebrating that home that I was feeling.”

Even with all of the singers describing encounters with cisgenderism in their 2SLGBTQ+ choirs to varying degrees, they consistently identified their choral homes as being more hospitable than the world outside the rehearsal rooms. Jay said: “I think that when you navigate the world as a nonbinary person, there are so many spaces that are just not designed with you in mind.... I think what makes it special is just that it reflects a space that doesn’t necessarily exist in a lot of other places and lives of the choir members.”

While still potentially susceptible to cisgenderism, their choral homes provided a base from which trans+ singers could develop peer networks. Marginalized people find peer networks particularly important, as same- or similar-identity communities provide a layer of protection from minority stress (Tan et al. 2022). Jessica felt a unique connection to their peers within their 2SLGBTQ+ choirs, specifically the trans+ ensemble, important if difficult to articulate: “There’s definitely some like natural understanding there.... I guess makes it a bit easier to bond.”

Trans+ community connections offer unique benefits for trans+ people that are not present with cisgender peers. In trans+ community settings, trans+ people can begin to collectively unpack what negative experiences result from cisgenderism instead of individual shortcomings (Shrock, Holden, and Reid 2004). One cited shortcoming of trans+ community connections is the frequent discussion of trans+ marginalization (Schrock, Holden, and Reid 2004), but gathering at choir may mediate this concern by having an alternative primary interest. Jay shared their appreciation for the visibility of the trans+ ensemble, saying, “I think having ... ensembles that are just trans voices can be like, so powerful because so often you just don’t hear or see those people.”

While many members find performing significant, none are required to perform, accommodating trans+ singers uncomfortable singing in the trans+ ensemble in public. The low-demand nature of the trans+ ensemble made participation more accessible for singers early into their identity exploration, in unsafe circumstances, or experiencing vocal instability due to medical transition. Ryan and Jay said more people above the age of forty had come out as trans+ and experimented with different pronouns, citing the visibility of the trans+ ensemble and accessible participation as supporting this wave of gender exploration.

When speaking of the significance of the trans+ ensemble, Ryan connected the joy ensemble members experienced in choir to the concept of joy as a form of resistance. In academia and popular media, conversations about trans+ people are focused on characterizing lives of suffering (Shuster and Westbrook 2024). The purpose of highlighting joy is not to obfuscate the detrimental impact of cisgenderism on trans+ people or to suggest that trans+ struggles can be overcome through individualistic pursuits of happiness, but to add depth to trans+ narratives (Shuster and Westbrook 2024). Recent movements have paid more attention to experiences of joy in marginalized communities, despite Marxist concerns that dwelling on positive feelings in the short term will inhibit lasting social change (Shuster and Westbrook 2024; Westbrook and Shuster 2023). In Laurel Westbrook and Stef Shuster's 2023 interviews on trans+ joy, participants spoke about how trans+ joy meant connecting to the trans+ community and with other communities, engaging in coalition building that Feinberg (1992, 1997) deems necessary for revolution, countering Marx's warning that lingering on positive feelings is counter revolutionary. In a social climate that frames trans+ people as doomed to suffer, if they are to exist at all, displays of trans+ joy serve as a counternarrative and a call for a world free from cisgenderism and its interconnected systems of oppression.

### *Intersectional Diversity*

Ryan and Erika discussed the importance of diversity beyond gender and sexuality within choir. Erika said

Having a community that is not necessarily binary and has so many people from so many different walks of life and from different ... parts of [the city], some people even come in from different cities to go to [our choir] and that kind of highlights how important that this choir is to them. Different life experiences, different races, different languages, different experiences. Like some people are immigrants or have parents who are immigrants. So having the very people, a community that has a very fluid expression, a very fluid experience on life that isn't just you go to school, you get a degree, you get a job, you get married to the opposite sex, and you have two and a half kids. This is not that. And it's very open and just diverse. Because when I was going to school, I felt like I was the only person that was experiencing the thing that I was experiencing, and I felt very isolated and very alone. So, having other people who have similar experiences to me but also have completely different experiences to me is very validating and very special.

For Ryan and Erika, the presence of other marginalized people signalled to them that they, whether impacted by the same axes of marginalization or not,

would find acceptance in the choir. In Anzaldúa et al. (2022), Noël Archambeault emphasized that diversity in choral ensembles necessitates not just the presence of minority singers, but having their opinions and ideas shape the ensemble. In our interview, Jaye suggested that to promote gender diversity in choir, a simple act such as refusing to compromise on the importance of correctly gendering trans+ singers can encourage others to adopt trans+ affirming behaviours. Anzaldúa et al. (2022) stress the importance of going beyond holding diversity as a value and making a strategic plan implemented in choir.

The physical site of the choir was noted by multiple singers from the trans+ ensemble when describing accessibility. The 2SLGBTQ+ choir, located in a major metropolitan area, was carefully chosen to be near public transport, have gender-neutral washrooms, and be wheelchair accessible to support its diverse member base. The singers I spoke with expressed awareness of disabled peers' accessibility concerns in a way I, as a physically disabled person and mobility aid user, personally found atypical, particularly given that none of them disclosed a disability. Trans+ adults report disability at twice the rate of cisgender adults (Smith-Johnson 2022), which may make them more aware of the experiences of disabled people due to higher instances of disability within their same- and similar-identity communities. A heightened awareness of accessibility concerns may also come from a shared drive for the intersectional coalition building trans+ liberation strives for (Feinberg 1992, 1997, 1998).

### *(Re)Creating*

Since the vocal designation of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass were constructed to describe cisgender voices, some ensembles elect to change these section names. Alternative designations can include numbers or adjectives like high, middle, or low. While soprano, alto, tenor, and bass are not inherently gendered terms, the fach system carries gendered implications (Knight, Sares, and Deroche 2023). Jay said other choristers expected them to sing soprano or alto based on their appearance, initially questioning their tenor membership. While none of the choristers voiced dislike of the fach labelling system, Jay suggested that changing section names to reflect vocal range rather than gender performance may benefit all choristers.



Alternatively, the singers I spoke with acknowledged that some trans+ people find the identity of soprano, alto, tenor, or bass to be gender euphoric. Jessica described her membership in the soprano section as gender euphoric. In the trans+ ensemble, choristers could change sections on a term-by-term basis. This approach accommodated both transitioning voices and those experimenting with their voice to find a gender euphoric style of performance. Facilitators encouraged singers whose range fell between two sections to go up or down an octave, enabling them to stay in a comfortable voice range without changing sections.

Jessica, Erika, and Ryan shared that they found singing queer(ed) repertoire meaningful, mentioning uplifting, hopeful, and celebratory songs. Songs may be queer in their inception or be queered in their reinterpretation when performed by a queer musician or musicians (Krell 2013, Talbot and Taylor 2023). For example, Ryan eagerly suggested songs from The Backstreet Boys and N'SYNC as possible repertoire for the trans+ ensemble. He said his transness brought new life to and subverted normative masculinity that dominated the 1990s and early 2000s. Alternatively, Erika took an active role in queering a piece of music when performing Barbara Streisand's "He Touched Me," changing the song to "She Touched Me" to express their queer attraction.

When repertoire contained heteronormative or cisgenderist language, facilitators and choristers changed it to better represent the diversity of the ensemble. These adjustments required creativity on the part of the facilitator, who adapted the lyrics in ways authentic to the composer's intention while honoring the diversity of the ensemble's membership. Facilitators could also engage the choir to collaboratively generate lyrics they collectively find appropriate.

## Reflections and Action

Six months after speaking to Jay, Erika, Ryan, Jessica, and Jaye, I founded a 2SLGBTQ+ in Kingston, Ontario called Spectrum Voices. I was and still am a young choral facilitator, both in age and facilitation experience. The conversations I had with the singers were more prominent in my mind than any course I took in my formal music education. In the interviews, I took away several practices from my interviews that other choir facilitators might adapt across different sites of practice.

### 1. *Practice Reflexivity*

I started a journal to write in after rehearsals. While being trans+ myself, I was still taught to uphold a musical tradition built on a silent foundation of cisgenderism. Planning a way to routinely check in with your biases might be helpful for other choral facilitators hoping to nurture gender euphoria. I am adamant that reflexivity helps avoid situations such as the unforeseen deadnaming of a chorister.

### 2. *Foster Intersectional Diversity*

Making choir membership available by donation instead of a required fee has greatly increased participation, especially among singers who have disclosed one or more disabilities. Connecting with other organizations through community gatherings has allowed our choir to build relationships with political, Indigenous, and anti-colonial groups who are not specifically 2SLGBTQ+. Other choir directors might seek out relationships with other organizers who do work outside of music or with the same targeted demographic as their choir to broaden their reach and exposure to varying viewpoints. My intent in fostering intersectional diversity is to welcome a broader range of genders and gender expression into the choral space and form coalitions necessary for trans+ liberation.

### 3. *Making Space to (Re)create*

(Re)creative actions can range from small to big, from singer-initiated to facilitator-initiated. On the small, singer-initiated side, having supplies for nametags at every rehearsal allows singers the chance to regularly update their names and pronouns with as much or as little fanfare as they want. On the larger, facilitator-initiated side, repertoire choices and language substitutions can be made collectively and dialogically. One challenge of facilitating a larger ensemble, which I do not have the experience or answers to advise for, is making the time and space for dialogical decision making. In dialogical repertoire selection and language adjustments I aim for singers to embody music that spurs gender euphoria and to feel reflected in the music they sing, just as Ryan felt when singing music from boy bands.

#### 4. Centering Joy Over Perfection

To clarify, improvement in musicianship skills is compatible with personally and socially significant experiences of joy and can provide singers competences necessary to engage in fulfilling music making. Recalling how Erika healed their vocal tension, older adults found a venue to express their gender in new ways, or Jessica forged meaningful community connections, it is important to remember why we gather together to sing.

### About the Author

Ren Challacombe (they/them) is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. Their research interests include the experiences of gender minorities in music education and the facilitation approaches of marginalized music educators. Ren graduated with a Master of Arts in Community Music from Wilfrid Laurier University in 2023, earning a Gold Medal in Academic Achievement. In September 2023, Ren founded Spectrum Voices, a 2SLGBTQ+ and allied choir in Kingston, Ontario. They currently serve as the choral director of Spectrum Voices, which is in its second year. In their spare time, Ren enjoys developing choral arrangements of folk songs.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> All interlocuters provided chosen names under which they would like to be known for the project. These may or may not be pseudonyms as the interlocuter's digression.