

# FELIX GRAHAM

## DIVERSITY STATEMENT

Raised in an evangelical fundamentalist community, I was homeschooled throughout my k-12 learning years – an experience that sheltered me completely from the outside world. When I left home at 18, I attended an HBCU where I was often the only white student in my classes and ensembles, as well as various other social and learning experiences. Having had such an extremely sheltered childhood, I was acquiring social skills whilst simultaneously navigating situations wherein my ethnicity and background added an additional layer of complexity to social interactions. In that environment, I learned the importance of finding shared ground, how easily miscommunication or internalized beliefs and expectations can color interactions, and how stressful it can feel to be a learner outside of your cultural or social element.

Two decades after I first stepped into a college classroom, I have once again found myself in positions where my identity sets me apart from the group – this time as a transgender educator and vocalist. Personal experiences with well-meaning attempts at inclusion gone awry, as well as the time I have spent wrestling with my own issues of identity and experience, have given me an invaluable array of tools with which to help and guide my students.

My experiences have also given me the opportunity to reflect, on many occasions, on what diversity and inclusion truly look and feel like, both in the applied studio and the classroom, as well in the larger world of vocal performance. The primary principle I have taken away from these experiences is simple: **creating a truly inclusive environment requires active engagement, rather than passive ideals**. In short, stating that “everyone is welcome” is a fine sentiment, but in practical terms and personal experience, it means nothing. Creating a space where minority learners and voices are not only welcomed but feel comfortable and supported requires constant vigilance and effort on the part of the instructor and institution.

The steps I take in my teaching practice to foster inclusivity and diversity are varied, as I try to adapt to each unique group of students or environments, but a sample of actions and activities I have used in previous teaching experiences might include:

- 1) **creating a sense of shared vulnerability and openness** between students through group exercises and guided discussions;
- 2) **actively encouraging minority students to speak in class**, purposefully including their perspectives and experiences in the discussion – while, at the same, time, attempting to remain sensitive to their discomfort

and making it clear that said students are not (and are not expected to be) representatives of their minority group;

- 3) **purposefully creating and maintaining a supportive atmosphere**, where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and engaging in discussion, whilst simultaneously encouraging thoughtfulness and consideration of others;
- 4) **using materials created by (or even bringing in) experts to address topics which require the perspective of someone from that culture or background** – for instance, bringing in African-American performers, teachers or other experts to discuss relevant topics, rather than attempting to rely on my own understanding and experience;
- 5) **facilitating discussions on appropriation vs. appreciation in art and** other, similar topics; and
- 6) consciously **exposing all of my students to music from outside their own cultural and performance milieu**, through guided discussion, assignments and repertoire.

Outside of my academic work, I also am involved in multiple performance-based projects meant specifically to give minority performers – specifically, queer, trans and female-identified performers of all races, with an eye towards bringing in queer, trans and female-identified performers of color wherever possible. These projects are generally collaborative in nature, with a secondary goal of helping singers navigate their personal and gender identities as performers.

Towards this goal, I founded a performing arts non-profit organization – ODDVOICES NYC,<sup>1</sup> which has produced multiple concerts/shows across genres and has founded a gender-inclusive treble choral ensemble. One previous project was a collaborative pastiche-musical/cabaret, which was written, produced and performed by a cast of female-identified performers. A new cabaret series, premiering in 2019, will present classical music and/or opera in a cabaret environment with gender-blind casting.

In addition to my teaching, performing and direction/producing, my research also focuses on issues of inclusion and identity – examining singing and vocal pedagogy through the lens of gender theory, and focusing on the experiences of female-bodied performers.

Finally, a teacher can only help their students in so far as they have helped themselves. As such, I am committed to expanding my own knowledge, exposure to and comfort with materials and experiences outside of my own comfort zone.

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<sup>1</sup> The name is a nod towards history, where in 1930s New York, “odd” was reclaimed slang for queer, gay or transgender individuals.