

SINGING WHILE FEMALE:
A NARRATIVE STUDY ON GENDER, IDENTITY & EXPERIENCE
OF FEMALE VOICE IN CIS, TRANSMASCULINE & NON-BINARY SINGERS

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ABSTRACT

SINGING WHILE FEMALE: A NARRATIVE STUDY ON GENDER, IDENTITY & EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE VOICE IN CIS, TRANSMASCULINE & NON-BINARY SINGERS

Felix Andrew Graham

This study explored the personal narratives of six AFAB (“assigned female at birth”) singers – three cis and three trans/non-binary performers of varying ages, ethnicities and locales – to understand how their experiences informed their musical, vocal and gender identities and shaped their musical and vocal lives. Using semi-structured interview process, the singers recounted their memories and understanding of significant events in their development, and together, each singer and I explored those recollections through a process of collaborative self-exploration. Emerging themes from those narratives underscored the need for further investigation into the intersection of AFAB voice, singing and gender, as both existing literature and the results of this study suggest a deeper understanding of the issues around gender socialization, normative expectations and voice is

necessary to appropriately and effectively prepare singers at all levels of their musical and vocal education.

Study results found that there are many sources of socially-mediated influences which shape AFAB singers' development of self, their individual and social identities, and their perceptions of their voice – particularly in the context of normative expectations that define gender and gender identities. While all study participants clearly experienced pleasure in musical performance, the narratives revealed a complex web of expectations and influences that contributed significant amounts of anxiety, with both physiological and psychological repercussions, to the performers' lives. The ways in which the singers both fell victim to and addressed these sources of stress suggest many topics for further exploration and discussion within the professional voice and music education community, including the role of expert influence, the development of personal agency and perceived self-efficacy, as well as the need for individualized, holistic approaches to vocal pedagogy.

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No man is an island, and neither was this study: without the assistance and support of a whole community of people, it would never have happened, and I would like to acknowledge their contributions here.

To my participants: Thank you for the incredible gift of your stories. I was and remained immensely moved by your generosity with your time, insight and your willingness to share your stories with me. Without your contributions, there would be no story to tell.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SILENCE

The principal mistake [...] is to assume that we are all participants in the discursive practices that shape our lives, that we all have a voice and are endowed with (sufficient degrees of) discursive agency... This is a mistake because we are not always players in the language-games in which we find ourselves. In many of these games our agency is significantly curtailed and in some cases even denied. If we examine actual practices in their specific social and historical contexts, it is not difficult to find in them speaking subjects who have been objectified in certain aspects of their lives and have to remain silent about them, and even voices that have been silenced completely. [...] We cannot understand how silences are produced and how they can be overcome if we don't critically question what it means to be a participant and to have a voice or to be deprived of it in a language-game. (Medina, 2004, pp. 566-567)

In his critique of inclusive discourse in feminist theory, José Medina (2004) uses a term borrowed from Wittgenstein – the *language-game* – which encompasses all the ways in which humans communicate: not only with words, but with silence and the actions into which silence and speech are woven. This term, Medina suggests, addresses the three principal aspects of linguistic communication – contextuality, performativity and normativity. For discourse to be genuinely inclusive, it must examine the many potential meanings of *silence* within these language-games. “The significance of a silence,” he writes, “can only be understood when it is properly situated, that is, when it is placed in the context of overlapping language-games or discursive practices whose configurations and intersections shape our lives in particular ways” (pp. 563-564).

As I read through his critique, it occurred to me that if we replaced ‘language-game’ with ‘music,’ and ‘speaking subjects’ for ‘musicians,’ Medina’s article precisely

articulates the challenges of gendered inclusion and representation in music and music education – particularly in the context of vocal training and performance.

With just that small adaptation, the opening quote became stunningly significant to me, as both a researcher, performer and voice teacher:

The principal mistake [...] is to assume that we are all participants in the **musical** practices that shape our lives, that we all have a voice and are endowed with (sufficient degrees of) **musical** agency... This is a mistake because we are not always players in the **musical-experiences** in which we find ourselves. In many of these **musical-experiences** our agency is significantly curtailed and in some cases even denied. If we examine actual practices in their specific social and historical contexts, it is not difficult to find in them **musicians** who have been objectified in certain aspects of their lives and have to remain silent about them, and even voices that have been silenced completely. [...] We cannot understand how silences are produced and how they can be overcome if we don't critically question what it means to be a **musician** and to have a voice or to be deprived of it in **music**. (Medina, 2004, pp. 566–567)

Background

Overview

Contemporary research is riddled with examples of gendered exclusion – cases of women denied access to instruments, leadership positions, teaching positions that are traditionally seen as masculine are an undeniable issue that remains problematic well into the twenty-first century; the literature also recognizes instances of men being excluded from feminine-labeled opportunities or derided for their participation therein (Abeles, Hafeli, & Sears, 2014; Coen-Mishlan, 2014; Coulter & McNay, 1993; Gould, 2003; Jagow, 1998; Porter & Abeles, 1979; Pucciani, 1983; Robison, 2017; Roulston & Mills, 2000; Sargent, 2000; Skelton, 2003; Steblin, 1995). Both feminist and gender theory has long understood that

issues of misogyny and gender inequality are not one-sided: any issue that affects women will also affect men and vice versa (Gaffney & Manno, 2011; Kaufman, 1999; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005; Messner, 1997). Further, an inclusive approach to gendered issues is imperative, because “[a]nalyzing both male and female gender norms along a spectrum [...] helps us identify the cultural forces at work that exert pressures on men and women to privilege and perform certain characteristics associated with stereotypical notions of gender” (Gaffney & Manno, 2011, p. 193).

A Curious Silence

Despite this common understanding – that true knowledge of parity requires both sides of the story – here is nevertheless one area of musical and music education scholarship which remains curiously one-sided in its examination of gendered experiences and expectations: while there are innumerable discussions concerning the dearth of boys in vocal music (Harrison, 2007; Koza, 1993), there is very little in the literature addressing the experiences of *girls* in vocal music.¹ In fact, much of the existing body of research which examines the intersection of gender and voice is primarily from either non-musical or ancillary disciplines, such as childhood development (Charles, 1999), linguistics (Baxter, 1999) or education

¹ What a difference an industrial revolution makes! Contrast the ‘where are the boys’ narratives of today with this statement, by John Tufts in a 1723 edition of *An Introduction to the Art of Singing Psalm Tunes*, in Gates (1989):

What a vast Addition would it be to the Pleasure of Singing, if we had more *Female* voices assisting in that Holy Exercise, and the sweet and sprightly Voices of our Children. Women have certainly greater Advantages to attain the Skill of Singing than Men. They have generally good Voices, and more Leisure than Men have; and the Obligations to Praise GOD are as full, and binding. (p. 32)

(Forrest, 2015). Even within that subset, the focus of the interplay between gender/identity and singing frequently focuses on the *listener* or observer's experience of music and musical performance, rather than examine the experiences of the singer and their voice (Allen, 1986; Frith, 1996; Maus, 2011); further, where gender and singing voice do overlap, much of the material is centered on male experiences, see, *e.g.*, Dame (2013) or Fugate (2016). Recent trends in research reflect a growing interest in the changing female adolescent voice, though the focus remains on the physiology and any investigation of psychological state or identity is examined through that lens (Gackle, 2014; Hall, 2010; Sweet, 2015).

In a curious way, the literature seems to make the *performer* silent – a passive conduit rather than an active participant, shaping the music through their experience and identity. This is particularly distressing when we consider that the imposition of *silence* has historically been used as both a direct punishment and a deliberately degrading method of maintaining a social power dynamic. Johnson (2007) suggests that “the struggle over the right to make noise is a very useful way of tracing the history of relations of power since the medieval period,” and gives concrete examples from history – impositions of silence on factory workers or in prisons, for example, or the fact that in “colonial Australia, the singing of songs by convict labourers could be penalized by up to 100 debilitating lashes – enough to flay a man” (p. 116). Silencing is an acknowledged social force in female lives (Patteson, 2013), and music – singing in particular – is a potent tool of resistance.

Representation: A Single Piece of a Whole Puzzle

The assumption of prosperity as the automatic complement to a majority population is understandable, certainly; if vocal music is thriving, despite the perceived lack of boys, then logically, girls must be well-represented in the field, and thus, enjoying certain success. Representation, however, only tells one part of the story. In many career fields where women enjoy improved or greater numerical presence, the balance of power often remain incredibly unbalanced: “[N]umerical equality among professionals is belied by differences in status” (Monroe, Ozyurt, Wrigley, & Alexander, 2008, p. 2) when comparing the positions that male and female employees hold. Further, we need only look at other areas of education to see instances where assumptions of girls’ success do not always give a full (and nuanced) understanding of female students’ experiences. For instance:

“[a] powerful and popular argument has dominated discussions of young people’s academic success for the last fifteen years: girls are thriving in school, while boys are trailing behind [...] This pattern is, in turn, interpreted as a sign that girls now live in a world in which gender inequality has disappeared or perhaps even been reversed.” (Raby & Pomerantz, 2016, p. 68)

Pomerantz’ own study (2016) found that the reality for successful young female learners is far more nuanced and complex than that argument would suggest. Even the most intelligent, highly-achieving female students often face incredible obstacles: “smart girls are not thriving everywhere, and even in the more ideal spaces, some smart girls thrive more than others,” depending on many factors, not the least of which was the ‘discursive culture of [the] school” (p. 81). Many issues, not the least of which is intersectionality – the interconnected nature of social categorizations, including race, class, and gender of an individual or group –

complicate what may seem, at the outset, as an unqualified success. Green (2014), studying issues of gender in music education, believes that this same issue applies to girls in singing as well, stating that

structures of sexual ideology are present *within* the framework of girls *apparently* being advantaged and more successful. [...] [T]here is no conundrum between girls' vocal achievements in school and women's involvement in singing after school. [...] However, this freedom of woman to sing does not represent her release from musical and general cultural definitions imposed upon her by her sex (p. 226).

Listening to Silence

This, then, raises the question: do we *actually* have an accurate picture of female-bodied singers' experiences as musicians? This gap in the literature concerning female performers in vocal music brings to mind Medina's insistence on the importance of listening to *silence* (2004): if discourse about gender in music and music education is to be fully realized and inclusive, we must examine silences from a perspective of open inquiry rather than assuming silence means all is well. Perhaps all *is* well, but without that inquiry, we run the risk of excluding necessary perspectives: "Be wary of those perspectives that present themselves as 'mainstream' and marginalize all others," Medina warns, because, "the imbalance of power can be such that it gives hegemonic status to a single perspective at the expense of all possible alternatives" (pp. 573-574). This study is, at its heart, an attempt to listen to that silence – to examine the experiences of female-bodied singers from the same lens of gender and social valuation that precludes boys from entry, labels singing a "feminine" pursuit and devalues the men who participate therein (Crozier, 1997).

Problem Statement

Musical culture – education, performance, leadership – has come under increasing scrutiny for its inequity of representation and access, often perpetuated by lingering gendered stereotypes. Research has long recognized that inequality for one sex necessarily has consequences for both (Kaufman, 1999; Gaffney & Manno, 2011; Kimmel et al., 2005; Messner, 1997); yet, while gender inequality research in music education, leadership and *instrumental* music has a generally broad focus, critique of gender inequality in *vocal* music remains curiously one-sided – primarily concerned with issues of male identity and representation in vocal music, an area socially labeled as being specifically “feminine” in nature (Crozier, 1997).

Further, because voice-related fields *are* overwhelmingly populated by women (Ashley, 2002; Harrison, Welch, & Adler, 2012),² the nature of the available literature in music education seems to suggest a tacit cultural belief that the ratio of female to male singers is sufficient proof of female equity in vocal music (Green, 2014). Accordingly, research has focused on the issues of men in a female-dominant field, resulting in a discourse and pedagogy that focus heavily on issues specific to male singers (Allen, 1986). However, research firmly demonstrates that numbers alone are an inadequate measure of gender equity: examination of context and

² Despite the overwhelming amount of literature concerning the lack of men in singing, there are no direct quantitative studies which specifically address the ratio of male to female singers. However, representative percentages may be extrapolated from various sources, including a) respondents to studies that poll singing populations – such as Moore and Killian (2000), b) common topics among singing publications that address the imbalance of male to female singers in group situations, c) observations of studio voice teachers, and d) responses to audition calls for vocal roles and ensembles suggest that a 2:1 ratio of female to male voices is a very generous estimate, and 3:1 is more likely. A study by Elpus (2015) found that girls make up approximately 70% of the cohort in high school music programs (vocal, orchestral and band), which seems to support this proposed ratio.

status in a community reveal that higher population numbers alone often bely women's actual lived experience (Momaya, 2010; Monroe et al., 2008; Ridgeway, 1997; Sen, 2001).

Given the role gender plays in socialization, development and education (Halim & Ruble, 2010), the lack of research on female-centric experiences in vocal music raises serious questions about our assumptions concerning gender equality, success and experience in vocal music. Further, this gap of knowledge suggests we may broadly lack an understanding of what it means to *be* a female singer – critical knowledge for music educators. This study, therefore, explores the development and experience of female-bodied singers within the context of gender, seeking to understand how environment, education and experience shape and influence this population's personal, musical and vocal identity.

Research Methodology Overview

Narrative Inquiry: Research as Collaborative Storytelling

When faced with an area where there exists little direct research, the question of “how should I go about this” is a tricky one, particularly where the issue of marginalized voices is concerned. Contemporary critics of social research echo Foucault's concerns regarding knowledge, power and ownership of the dominant narrative, suggesting that “research involves issues of power and that traditionally conducted social science research has silenced, marginalized and oppressed groups in society by making them the passive objects of inquiry” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Further, even when the investigator and participants are members of the

same professional group (such as singers), there remains the potential for misinterpretation or even alienation of the participants: “[S]ystematic social divisions and characteristics,” says Edwards and Holland (2013), “such as class, ethnicity, age, sexuality and so on, cut across gender and create power imbalances between women researchers and their subjects, and restrict the ability to know the ‘Other’ through interviews” (p. 19). Given these challenges, the type of inquiry into personal narrative that this study seeks to achieve necessarily requires an approach that openly acknowledges and addresses these issues.

If “human experience is a narrative phenomenon that is best understood through story” (Garvis, 2015, p. 1), then one such approach might take the form of collaborative storytelling, wherein the we, the investigators, “enter into a collaborative search for meaning with our [participants] and listen to their voices, their narratives and their constructions of reality” (Hartman, 1992, p. 483). This form of investigation – referred to as *narrative inquiry* – has become an acknowledged and respected qualitative method (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Chase, 2003, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Hartman, 1992) – a collaboration between researcher and participant that is a “way of knowing by telling and reflecting” (Garvis, 2015, p. 1), offering an alternative to the traditional ‘theory-and-method’ approach – an “inherently contradictory” attempt to make “something scientific out of everything biographical” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 161).

Narrative inquiry, according to Pinnegar and Daynes (2007), “embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study” (p. 5). Chase (2005; 2012) offers five specific analytical lenses through which to understand lived experiences:

- 1) **Narrative inquiry as discourse** – stories are “a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connected and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (Chase, 2012, p. 58).
- 2) **Narratives as verbal action** – “when someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs and performs the self, experience and reality.”
- 3) **Narratives as a social phenomenon** – stories are “both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances” (Chase, 2005, p. 657).
- 4) **Narratives are context-dependent performance** – stories are “a joint production of narrator and listener,” regardless of whether the narrative occurs in “a naturally occurring talk, an interview, or a fieldwork setting” (Chase, 2005, p. 657).
- 5) **Researcher as Narrator** – researchers “view *themselves* as narrators as they develop interpretations,” where the previous four lenses still make sense when “applied to the researcher as they when applied to the researched” (Chase, 2005, p. 657).

If elevating and amplifying the voices of previously silenced and marginalized voices “have been the primary goals of narrative research for several decades” (Chase, 2012, p. 71), then the use of this approach is both appropriate and particularly useful for this study. Further, the five lenses, as outlined by Chase (2005; 2012) above, inform, shape and direct the conceptual and theoretical

frameworks developed for this inquiry, the interpretation of the relevant literature, the choice of method for data collection and the analysis of the collected data.

Framework

Conceptual. A singer's vocal identity, at first glance, would logically seem to be their voice type, repertoire and ability. Yet, while those are certainly essential components, the personal nature of the voice as an instrument suggests a more complex compilation of factors. Vocal identity may be more properly understood as the lens through which a singer understands themselves as an individual, and through which that individual interprets and performs both their musical and day-to-day experiences.

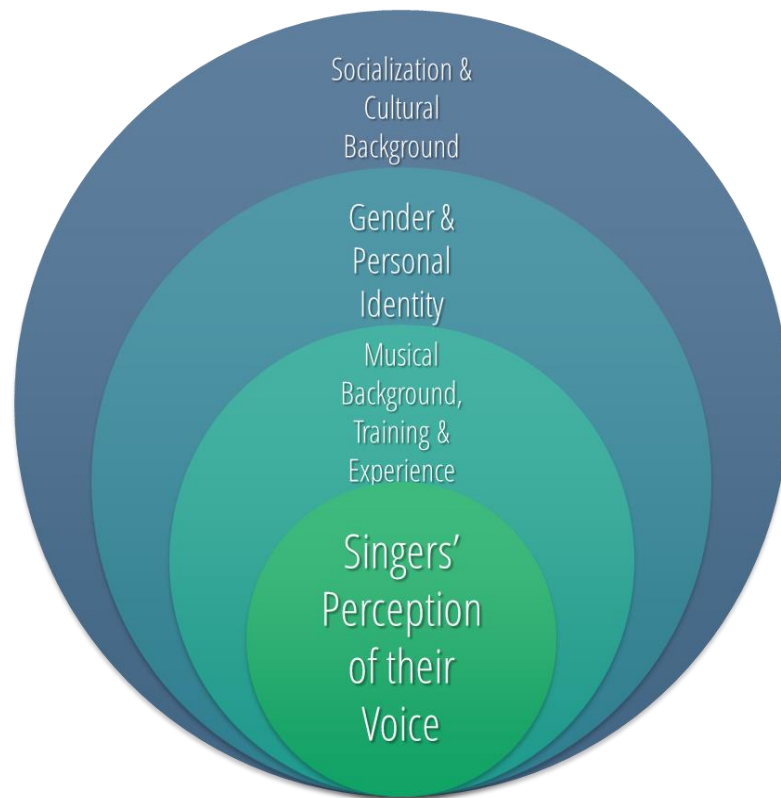


Figure 1. Formation of a Singer's Vocal Identity

Theoretical.

Rationale. If the lens through which a singer understands the world around them is highly personal and subjective, then any attempt to study and generalize that singer's life and experience requires a sophisticated, intersectional framework through which to understand, interpret and extrapolate – particularly when that experience is presented as a narrative in the singer's *own words*. This is especially true when a study participant may not have the background or vocabulary to convey the complexity of a situation, and hence, much of the relevant information an individual communicates is implied or sub-textual.

Further, a researcher's own experience and lens may be as much of a hindrance as it is a help when we are interpreting the words of others. Language, to the Renaissance philosopher, Francis Bacon, is actually an impediment to understanding, because it "impose[s] its own cultural biases, vocabulary and equivocal systems of meaning on our world-view in a manner that veils the world and obscures our perception" (Yovel, 2001, p. 8). A narrative, then, must necessarily be examined and presented such that it avoids – insofar as is possible – or acknowledges the vagaries of the speaker, the interpreter (researcher) and the reader's individual systems of meaning.

Systemic silencing or power imbalance within a population, according to Michel Foucault (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Peters, 2016; Stone-Mediatore, 2003; Yovel, 2001), also requires an examination of *subjugated knowledge* – that is, "knowledges which have been disqualified or silenced by a pattern of institutional filters" (Peters, 2016, p. 243). A full investigation of the experiences of the

disempowered or silenced, in Foucault's philosophy, requires listening to the voices that have been silenced or filtered out of the communal discourse, as well as examine the negative spaces of the dominant narrative to obtain a more accurate understanding.

At the same time, however, the researcher must also be careful not to impose their own meaning on that uncovered knowledge. Genuine representation of the people with whom we observe requires that the researcher "reflect on the extent to which we may unwittingly and well-meaningly disempower our [participants] through our role as 'expert,' through the authority of our knowledge" (Hartman, 1992, p. 483). Avoiding this unintended suppression, Hartman continues, requires that we "enter into a collaborative search for meaning with our [participants] and listen to their voices, their narratives and their constructions of reality" (p. 484). Yet, for the researcher, listening and reporting necessarily requires interpretation and thus, a theoretical framework around a study of this nature must offer a way balance accurate representation with interpretation, facilitating understanding.

Development. Existing frameworks – such as gender and identity theory – offer insight into the "how" and "why" of human development, yet no single discipline gives a full understanding of both the subjugated knowledge under examination here or, more importantly, how it *becomes* subjugated. Thus, to create a framework that would provide a way to connect lived experience with our understanding of how human learning, development and internalization occur, I return to Wittgenstein's concept of a language-game as a constructivist lens – a core principle of narrative inquiry (Yang, 2011). His linguistic framework allows us to

examine an individual's experience and communication of experience through three lenses: *context*, *performance* and *normativity*, highlighting the relationships between the various theoretical knowledges that are relevant to this study (Medina, 2004; Peters, 2016; Yovel, 2001).

Another framework through which the relationship between science and philosophy of personal identity and experience may be explored is William James' theory of Empirical Self – the seminal model for much of current identity and self-theory (Leary, D., 1990; Leary, M. & Tangney, 2014; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2011). Subsequent investigators have certainly expanded on James' initial ideas and modern psychology offers great insight into the scientific nature of consciousness and self-development, but James' concept of Self remains an excellent conceptual image to “understand the ensemble of human functioning” (Leary, D., 1990). “The Empirical Self,” says James, “is all that [one] is tempted to call by the name of *me*. But it is clear that between what [one] calls *me* and what [one] simply calls *mine* is a difficult line to draw” (James, 1890). He continues, trying to define that line, by establishing three *constituents of the Self*: the *material Self*, the *social Self*, and the *spiritual Self* – all of which together encompass one's sense of personality identity.

Both James and Wittgenstein's constructs correlate and/or intersect with significant aspects of how psychological and social science currently understand the acquisition and development of personal identity³, as illustrated in Figure 2 below. Specifically,

³ An overview of identity theory is included in the literature review below.

1. Wittgenstein's concept of **Context**, informed by James' *material Self* and contemporary psychology's concept of *self-narrative* form a lens through which to examine the environments and experiences in which an individual's identity is developed;
2. Wittgenstein's concept of **Performativity**, informed by James' *social Self* and contemporary psychology's *social identity theory* form a lens through which to examine the ways in which an individual's identity is shaped through social performance and interaction; and
3. Wittgenstein's concept of **Normativity**, informed by James' *spiritual Self* and contemporary psychology's concept of *internalization* form a lens through which to examine the ways in which an individual's experiences, beliefs and observations shape and solidify their identity.

This framework, through which I intend to examine both the literature and the personal narratives of the participants in this study, offers the potential for a *holistic account* – a complex portrait which involves “reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges” (Creswell, 2014).



Figure 2. Theoretical framework as a constructivist, interpretive lens.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the musical lives of female-bodied vocalists, particularly through the lenses of personal, gender and musical identity, in order to understand the female singing experience. To that end, this narrative study examined related literature from adjacent fields to gain an understanding of the factors that contribute to creation of a female-bodied singer's identity, sense of self and color their musical experiences thereafter, and, guided by that understanding, collected the narratives of a selection of female and AFAB singers of different ages and career-levels, examining their share experiences through the lens outlined above.

Research Questions

The research questions I formulated for this study fall under Wittgenstein's three-pronged approach of context, performance and normativity and James' Material, Social and Spiritual Selves, as detailed in the theoretical framework above.

Context: *How does a singer's recalled developmental musical experiences shape and inform their musical and gender identities?* This inquiry will examine the contexts – such as family musical interaction, early childhood music making and learning – in which a singer's perceptions of gender and singing are formed.

Performance: *How do a singer's developing personal and musical identities intersect with their recalled musical experiences and inform their understanding of their social and internal identities?* This inquiry will examine the ways in which the performance of gender and identity in their musical experiences informs the singer's perception of self and voice.

Normativity: *How does the singer's understanding and interpretation of their musical experiences inform, influence or intersect with their personal and musical identities?* This inquiry will examine how the normalization (or **internalization**) of a singer's experiences shaped their perception of their voice and singing identity.

Conclusion

"The problem with language," says Yovel, "is not that it does not have the power to represent things, but that its power is almost too strong: it constructs that which is its object" (2001, p. 18). Extended logically to the context of this study, this suggests that if the only language we are hearing is that of men's experiences and needs in vocal music, then the reality of the vocalists' milieu will be shaped by and

responsive to the needs of men. “Power/knowledge,” a concept developed by Michel Foucault (Foucault & Gordon, 1980) denoting the relationship between the two, is a bi-directional state: if power and knowledge are intrinsically connected, then *new* knowledge may also shape (or reshape) reality, as Yovel (2001) describes. Stone-Mediatore (2003) concurs, suggesting that inquiries into the narratives of marginalized individuals allow us to explore “concrete ways that the most disempowered people can use resources in their daily lives to challenge the discourses and institutions that keep them in subservient positions” (p. 126). If we wish to continuously shape and maintain a musical community that is representative and supportive of *all* its participants, we need the words – the voices and narratives – of the female-bodied people in that community, too.

Defining Terms

Throughout this paper, rather than grouping all female-bodied people as “women,” in an attempt to be as inclusive as possible I will be using specific terms to refer to the population whom I am examining. While I recognize the need for the inclusion of trans-women in female-identified groups, this study is concerned with the issues that arise from the gender-socialization and learning in which female-bodied individuals are inculcated.⁴ Terms used are as follows:

⁴ Throughout the interviews, I coined a casual term – *lady-people* – to refer to individuals who were not just assigned female at birth but also received socialization according to the standards for women in society. The term was quite useful, and the interview participants, particularly those with a non-binary or trans identity, often began to use it, themselves.

AFAB (assigned female at birth) – when referring to female-bodied people who do not identify as cis-female, but fall in into various points on the gender binary, which may include transmen, trans-masculine, non-binary and gender queer individuals, etc.

Cis-female/male – when referring specifically to individuals whose assigned sex and gender align.

Girls/women – where cis-female people are the implied population, particularly when discussing relevant literature where “woman” is the most frequently used term, and generally refers to cis-females;

Female/female-bodied – where female socialization and the resulting gendered experience is the relevant to the discussion. This includes both cis and trans individuals.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW: DRAWING THE “NEGATIVE SPACE”

Introduction

The lack of direct literature on this topic holds specific challenges, as the contents of a “negative space” must be recreated from the surrounding knowledge, and thus, meeting that challenge requires the compilation of data from disparate sources into a cohesive narrative. This approach is aligned with Foucault’s concept of *discourse analysis*, wherein the “dominant ways of writing and speaking about a particular topic become set in place over time and require historic tracking to identify who has benefited from a particular discourse, and who has become marginalized as a result of it” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Thus, rather than offering a traditional review of knowledge on the relevant topic, the following is an overview of the corollary literature presented through the theoretical framework as outlined above, offering insight into how a singer’s personal, musical and vocal identity is formed (*context / material Self*), performed (*performance / social Self*) and normalized (*normativity / spiritual Self*).

Related Literature

Context and the Material Self: Formation of Self and Identity

“Self-concept and identity,” according to Oyserman (2001), “provide answers to the basic questions ‘Who am I?’, ‘Where do I belong?’ and ‘How do I fit?’” (p. 499). There are a great many perspectives on identity and concept from the cognitive and developmental standpoints; for the purposes of this study, however, the following

model and definitions will be used: *self*, *self-concept*, *self-identity* (identity) and *social identity* (which will be addressed in the next section).

Constructing the Self. *Self* may be defined as the knowledge of “me” or “I” – or “the awareness of having thoughts” (Oyserman et al., 2011). *Self-concept* is a cognitive structure (Oyserman et al., 2011) – the compilation of “self-relevant knowledge which we use to make sense of our experiences,” as well as “the processes that construct, defend and maintain this knowledge” (Oyserman, 2001). The concept of an “ego identity,” (*self-identity*) the model on which much identity research is based, was originally developed by Erikson (1956), who described it as “certain comprehensive gains which the individual, at the end of adolescence, must have derived from all of his pre-adult experience in order to be ready for the tasks of adulthood” (p. 56). While it was originally used synonymously with self-concept, the model has evolved and currently, self-concept and identity should be understood as complementary but nevertheless distinct, *abstract* mental constructs (Oyserman et al., 2011); *self-image* is the *measurable* compilation of our self-knowledge and identity (Bailey, 2003).

Self-narrative. Of further relevance to this study is the idea of self-concept as *narrative* – stories of the self. Narrative, according to Polkinghorne (1991), “is the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of a plot” (pp. 135-136). Further, structuring experience as a narrative, Polkinghorne continues, “allows the self to be grasped *as* a whole in which the meaning of individual events and actions of one’s life are derived from their relationship *to* the whole” (p. 137) (emphasis added). Garvis (2015) suggests that

narrative may have also value as a tool for understanding how young people internalize the cultural world around them and incorporate it into their personal and social identities:

Narrative can bridge cultural modes of thinking and the ways in which children come to reasons and behave in culture-specific ways. In this way, children's thinking reflects the modes of thinking of those who collectively make up a particular cultural group in which the children collaborate. (p. 1)

This idea of Self and understanding of Self as a narrative is particularly relevant when dealing with qualitative investigation and methods such as interview, as we will be (quite literally) exploring the Self through narration.

Constructing identity. The composition of self has both stable and fluid elements (Oyserman et al., 2011). Generally speaking, we may say that self-concept is (usually) stable, while identity is (usually) flexible, context-dependent and influenced by social interaction. Further, because identity is flexible and contextual, self-identity is therefore multifaceted (Martinez, 2015); the most relevant facets of identity for this study will be discussed in more detail below – examining how “identity is constructed through the musical activities people participate in, through their musical preferences and through their beliefs about what constitutes gender-appropriate musical behavior” (Dibben, 2002).

Social norms and gender or role-based appropriate behavior may be acquired from two specific spheres of influence: normative and informative.

According to Knippenberg (2000),

Normative influences instigates conformity to others' expectations to gain approve or acceptance or to avoid disapproval or rejection. Normative influence requires that the target of influence depend on the source of influence in that the influencing agent needs to possess the ability to administer social rewards or benefits in case the target of influence does not

yield. Normative influence thus is based on (implicit) coercion and, hence, is associated with compliance more than with true internalized acceptance.

Informational influence, on the other hand, is based on the validity of the information provided by the influencing agent or on the persuasiveness of the influencing agent's argumentation, independent of who or what the source is. As a consequence, informational influence is socially independent in that the source of the information is irrelevant (and need not, in fact, be known), and surveillance by the influencing agent is unnecessary to reinforce the influence. (p. 159)

Personality theory. One of the most influential contributors to our understanding of personality and self-development was Carl Rogers (1902-1987), a humanistic psychologist who developed the concept a "person-centered approach" (PCA) to therapy, the hypothesis of which is that "individuals have in themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes and self-directed behavior; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided" (Rogers, 1980, as cited in Lux, Motschnig-Pitrik, & Cornelius-White, 2013, p. 10). While originally considered a psychotherapeutic concept (Lux et al., 2013), the "metatheoretical hypotheses within person-centered theory are both theoretically and empirically supported by positive psychology research and can also be measured using positive psychology indicators" (Proctor, Tweed, & Morris, 2016).

The PCA provides a model of self and personality development, several components of which are useful in understanding how an individual understands themselves. According to this model, individuals have an innate sense of what they need to have a fulfilling life; the difference, for Rogers, between a fully-functioning person (one whose self-actualization is adequate) and a partially or non-functioning person "lies in the social environment in which an individual develops" (Proctor et

al., 2016). *Self-exploration*, within this model, is the “search for meaning within the flow of experiences and the attempt to symbolize it as exactly as possible”

(Cornelius-White, Lux, & Motschnig-Pitrk, 2013).

Concepts, as defined by Lux et al. (2013), relevant to this exploration of self, include:

- A. **Actualizing tendency** – the “assumption that that every being seeks both its maintenance and enhancement. [...] Because humans are social beings, social conditions are essential for the unimpeded unfolding of the actualizing tendency. [...] However, the presence of less favorable conditions may bring about an estrangement from the actualizing tendency, which is regarded as the reason for mental disorders and other forms of maladjustment” (pp. 12-13).
- B. **Primacy of experience** – individuals are influenced by experience and their conscious and unconscious understandings of that experience. According to Rogers, when “a person is functioning in an integrated, unified, effective manner, she has confidence in the directions she unconsciously chooses, and trusts her experiencing” (Rogers 1977, p. 246, as cited in Lux et al., 2013).
- C. **Self-concept** – an individual’s self-concept is a central figure in one’s internal and external processes.
- D. **Self-worth** – according to Lux et al. (2013), “flexibility of the self is constrained by experiences during socialization, namely the **internalization of conditions of worth**. It is assumed that in

accordance with the emergence of the self during childhood, a need for positive regard appears. The internalization of conditions of worth occurs if the person does not receive unconditional positive regard but experiences that positive regard is given merely under certain conditions. In that case, the person integrates these conditions within the self and pursues to meet these conditions. In this sense, conditions of worth correspond to socially mediated principles whose compliance should bring along positive regard by other persons” (p. 14).

- E. **Ideal-self** – “the self-concept which the individual would most like to possess” (Rogers 1959, p. 200, as cited in Lux et al., 2013).
- F. **Self-goals** – goals originating from the *ideal-self*, which “reflect internalized conditions of worth” (Lux et al., 2013) , p. 15).
- G. **Incongruence** – an underlying inconsistency between self-concept and experience. “Anxiety is the result of a discrepancy between experience and perception of the self. Then, a person tends to engage in defensive [processes]” (Ismail & Tekke, 2015, p. 32).

Gender identity.

Overview. While a person’s sex is generally understood to be primarily a function of genetics, *gender* is a far more complicated concept. While gender “refers to the classification of people and human traits as masculine, or feminine” (Maus, 2011), gender also reflects “socially and culturally sanctioned ideas or attitudes regarding idealized gender-specific roles, responsibilities, behaviors, and traits”

(Avery, Ward, Moss, & Uskup, 2017, p. 160). Because these qualities, loosely grouped as gender *stereotypes*, are, in current psychological thought, considered to be prescriptive, deviations from them “are met with various forms of punishment” (Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

Acquisition. Traditionally, there has been both scientific and cultural adherence to the essentialist belief that gender, and thus, gender-roles, are biologically determined; the theory of gender as constructivist (rather than positivist) experience is relatively recent development (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Kessler & McKenna, 1985).¹ Everyone *has* a gender identity, but the question of what it is and how it’s obtained is still under debate; nevertheless, certain basic tents concerning acquisition are broadly recognized in the psychology community. Current research suggests that the acquisition of gender identity starts early in life. According to Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, Colburne, Sen, and Eichstedt (2001), “children have been observed to display toy preferences that are consistent with gender stereotypes as early as 14 to 20 months of age” (Serbin et al., 2001, p. 7). Girls tend to develop knowledge of gender stereotypes before boys, but recognition of gender stereotypes in both occurs by 3 or 4 (Tobin, Menon, Spatta, Hodges, & Perry, 2010). Further, a proposed reconstruction of a self-socialization model based on existing gender identity acquisition research by Tobin et al. (2010) suggests that there are five aspects to gender acquisition: **membership knowledge** (a child’s

¹ Kessler and McKenna (1985) note the difference between gender-role identity (“how much a person approves of and participates in feelings and behaviors which are seen as ‘appropriate’ for his/her gender”) and gender identity (“how you experience your behavior as a female or male related to what gender you feel yourself to be”) (p. 10).

understanding of their membership in a gender category), **gender contentedness** (the child's satisfaction with their gender), **felt pressure for gender conformity** (a child's internalized pressure to conform to gender-typical behavior) and **gender typicality** (the extent to which a child feels similar versus different from others of their gender).

Gender identity acquisition can be understood as have a significant social aspect, as children experience comfort and a sense of safety from seeing themselves to be similar to same-sex others, experience adjustment difficulties when receiving push-back (felt pressure) for gender-abnormal behavior, and incorporate all sources of gender pressure (from peers and parents) into a single understanding of appropriate gender conduct (Carver, 2002; Franz, 2009; Tobin et al., 2010). Further, aside from observation and pressure of and from the people around a child, gender-appropriate behavior and traits are even communicated to children through the child-oriented media to which they are exposed – such as nursery rhymes, fairy tales or song lyrics (Wallowitz, 2004).

Non-conformity. The intersection of gender contentedness, gender typicality/atypicality and felt-pressure is central to a child's psychological well-being (Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004), which suggests that children whose gender identities do not “fit” into the gender paradigms with which they are surrounded may experience issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety or other forms of internalized distress. Gender non-conforming children may have other physical and mental health risks, as well. In a recent study investigating the relationship between gender non-conformity and childhood abuse, Roberts, Rosario, Corliss, Koenen, and

Austin (2012), found that gender non-conformity is “an important indicator of children at risk of sexual, physical and psychological abuse,” as well as “probable PTSD in early adulthood” (p. 414).

Pushback against gender-nonconformance is not limited to the early developmental years, either. A study by Leaper and Brown (2008) into the experiences of perceived sexism in the experiences of 600 adolescent girls found that while 90% of the sample reported having experienced gender-based harassment, “girls who felt less typical for their gender reported experiencing more sexual harassment than girls who felt more typical. Similarly, girls who were low in gender-role contentedness reported more experiences with sexual harassment” (p. 694).

Development & mental health. The influence of gender in a child’s development – both mentally and physically – can hardly be overstated:

Not only can gender identity and stereotyping affect cognitive processes such as attention and memory, but they may also affect behaviors and preferences. Moreover, gender identity and stereotyping can affect how children feel about themselves and how they interact with and view their peers. (Halim & Ruble, 2010, p. 517)

That influence carries into adulthood, and may have particularly weighty consequences for females as they “are twice as likely to be depressed as are men, a difference that holds in both community and clinical samples and cannot be explained by gender differences in help-seeking behavior” (Priess, Lindberg, & Hyde, 2009). The World Health Organization concurs, stating in their summation of the issue that “[g]ender is a critical determinant of mental health and mental illness,” and further,

The morbidity associated with mental illness has received substantially more attention than the gender specific determinants and mechanisms that promote and protect mental health and foster resilience to stress and adversity. Gender differences occur particularly in the rates of common mental disorders - depression, anxiety and somatic complaints. These disorders, in which women predominate, affect approximately 1 in 3 people in the community and constitute a serious public health problem. (n.d., ¶ 8)

Research has linked “high masculinity” with “psychological well-being and lower endorsement of depressive symptoms in adults,” which Priess et al. note may be due to masculinity being “positively associated with self-efficacy” (p. 1533). Self-efficacy has been determined to be a factor in the mediation of anxiety, depression, worry and social avoidance (Tahmassian & Jalali Moghadam, 2011), suggesting that conforming to societally-endorsed gender roles and traits may have a significantly difference consequences for men and women.

Another link between gender and mental health lies in the ways in which gender roles shape how males and females differentially deal with distress. Research examining the link between externalization, internalization, gender and mental health issues, acknowledges a correlation between men and externalization of distress (aggression, impulsive response), as well as with women and internalization of distress (withdrawal, depression) (Dawson, Goldstein, Moss, Li, & Grant, 2010; Eaton et al., 2012; Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Blatt, & Hertzog, 1999), suggesting that there may be a link between the increased risk of depression for females and gender socialization.

Gender traits. Throughout both this literature review and this study as a whole, there are frequent references to “gendered traits” or “gendered qualities” – terms used to describe the essentialist or positivist behavioral tendencies or traits

that have been assigned to one sex or the other and have “an evaluative component,” which is to say, they are not just descriptive, they are prescriptive and valued as “good, bad, desirable, and so on” (Kessler & McKenna, 1985). Current thought among gender/identity psychological investigators suggest that personality traits between genders are not necessarily fixed or inherent to a person’s sex, but rather, a socialized, context-dependent construct with a great deal of “within-sex variability” (Kessler & McKenna, 1985; Stake & Eisele, 2010). Given that traditional discourse surrounding gender focus on the differences between sexes and are often used to “emphasize how women differ from men and use these differences to support the norm of male superiority” (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988), any investigation into gendered experience must necessarily acknowledge and examine how assumptions of gender traits in the studied population influence and shape experience and narrative.

Given that this study is concerned with both historical and systemic expectations and representations of gender, a table of the most commonly referenced positivist gender stereotypical traits – based in part on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Hoffman, 2012) – is included below.

Table 1

Common gender stereotypes.

Feminine	Masculine
Helpless	Efficacious
Passive, retiring	Aggressive, assertive
Dependent	Independent
Warm, caring	Aloof, detached
Weak, gentle	Strong, athletic
Cooperative	Individualistic
Emotional, intuitive	Rational, logical

Feminine	Masculine
Domestic, interested in children	Promiscuous
Accepting	Rebellious
Indecisive	Decisive
Materialistic	Stingy
Responsible	Forgetful
Anxious	Dependable
Communicative	Stoic
Soft, quiet	Hard, loud
Graceful	Clumsy
Beautiful	Rough
Immature, childlike	Mature, self-reliant
Yielding	Firm
Sensitive to others	Strong personality
Retiring, self-effacing	Competitive

(Hoffman, 2012; Kessler & McKenna, 1985; Prentice & Carranza, 2002)

Musical identity.

Formation. The formation of a musical identity is a process which can be understood from multiple disciplines (Dibben, 2002; Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2002), but current literature suggests that it may begin in the earliest stages of infancy (Gracyk, 2004), alongside speech acquisition, through parents' vocalizations, singing of lullabies, etc., a process that Trevarthen (2000) terms "communicative musicality." Once past the initial construct of music as a form of communication, however, musical identity is contextual, shifting to accommodate social needs, mood, age or shifts in personality (Hargreaves et al., 2002; North & Hargreaves, 1999). Generally, the literature acknowledges a difference between musical *preferences* (as listeners) and identities in music (as musicians), though Gracyk (2004) takes substantial issue with this, suggesting that

[m]usical works demand surprisingly complex decisions about identity. In developing the capacity to perceive a musical work in a specific sound event, listeners must learn to distinguish between what is unique to the sounds [...] and [what is unique to] the work itself. (p. 11)

The idea that musical identity is shifting, ephemeral, and thus, more revolves around more than just playing an instrument is a concept with thoughtful potential for the music educator. “An identity is always already an ideal, what we would like to be, not what we are,” according to Frith (1996), and as such,

musical identity is, then, always fantastic, idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits, it is, secondly, always also real, enacted in musical activities. Music making and music listening [...] involve what one might call *social movements*. In this respect, musical pleasure is not derived from fantasy - it is not mediated by daydreams - but is experienced directly: music gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be. (Frith, 1996, p. 123)

This aligns with the idea of a “provisional self,” which Ibarra (1999) describes as “temporary solutions people use to bridge the gap between their current capacities and self-conceptions and the representations they hold about what attitudes and behaviors are expected in the new role” (p. 765), suggesting that musical identity is not only a label, it is a potential tool for self-growth and teacher-guided expansion of an individual’s self-concept.

Vocal identity.

Formation. While a singer has a musical identity, a musical identity is not necessarily the same as a singing identity, as a singing identity revolves around the singer’s *voice* – their musical instrument. While the speaking voice is certainly part of how we identify ourselves, musical vocalization may be an essential part of our self-development, as well: “In music, it seems that singing might be salient in the actual construction, maintenance and performance of Self at various stages of personal, musical and psychological development” (Faulkner & Davidson, 2004, p. 232). According to Cameron, Duffy, & Glenwright (2015), “one’s instrument

provides both a social category and a source of identity, and band members therefore perceive themselves and each other partly through the lens of category-based perception and bias” (p. 828). Considering that the voice is a significant factor in sex and gender signaling (Skuk & Schweinberger, 2014), vocal identity intersects with gender identity, whether the individual would like it to or not.

Gender. Even though girls are reported to be more proficient singing tasks at young ages than boys (Harrison et al., 2012), there are no underlying genetic issues that differentiate the two, and indeed, “boys can become significantly more accomplished in their singing in an appropriate nurturing environment” (p. 30). Harrison et al. (2012) note that the association of femininity with singing is contextual, and has been documented over the past one hundred years, which aligns with J. Gates (1989), whose review of the historical record shows that singing – particularly choral and public singing in general – have not always been gender-inappropriate for men. There are many reasons why the gendering of singing might have occurred, one of which may be sort of biological determinism that led to a gendered aesthetic critique in the 18th century (Gates, E., 1997). Green (2014) suggests that the voice and singing are associated with femininity, specifically because its nature coincides with perceptions of gender appropriateness. To wit,

the voice is the one musical instrument that is completely lacking in technology: it has no links with anything outside the intimacy of the self, and no pseudo-scientific masculine overtones. Its use by women affirms and does not challenge the unsuitability of any serious and lasting connection between women and instruments, women and technology; it also affirms an image of woman as in tune with, or prey to the vicissitudes of nature and the body. (pp. 96-97)

This natural association of the voice with women, however, leads to specific challenges in dealing with gendered expectations and bias in singing. For instance, while certain measures, including blind auditions, have addressed many of the issues of gender for instrumentalists, de-gendering as a way of insuring equity does not work with female *singers*. Aside from the visual element that is often invoked in singing performance (*i.e.*, physical type, presentation, etc.), humans are capable of making unconscious, sophisticated aural judgments and distinctions about other human voices – not the least of which is determining sex based on acoustic and harmonic characteristics of an individual’s voice (Batstone & Tuomi, 1981; Mitchell & MacDonald, 2012; Skuk & Schweinberger, 2014). Forrest (2015) points out that there is a long history of “androcentric bias against the female-sounding voice,” which can disadvantage the female speaker or singer, depending on context and “how aware of personal biases each listener is” (p. 593). Recently, however, there has been dialogue on how much perceptual differences of tone quality, median speaking pitch and phrasing between male and female voices are related to socially-constructed expectations for voice and gender, rather discrete sex characteristics (Jacobs, 2017).

Given the existing body of knowledge concerning gender in music learning and how inanimate instruments are perceived and imbued with gendered qualities (Abeles, H., 2009; Doubleday, 2008; Eros, 2008; Kelly & VanWeelden, 2014; Porter & Abeles, 1979), the experience of a singer, whose instrument is internal and therefore linked to self and identity, could hardly be any less fraught – certainly, the link between pressure/critique of voice and mental health issues in professional

singers has been acknowledged (Sandgren, 2002). Abril (2007), in his investigation of voice, identity and performance anxiety, found that even young children understood their voice and singing as “an intimate reflection of one’s self,” which in turn made young singers feel “vulnerable and exposed in the presence of others” (p. 12). Further, Abril’s research highlights the link between school music experiences and attitudes towards music / singing: “All participants” in his study of singing anxiety “pinpointed a specific incident from their school music experiences, which they related to current singing anxiety” (p. 12). When examined in the context of the strong associations people have concerning gendered vocal qualities (Batstone & Tuomi, 1981), it suggests a potential entanglement of voice, gender and social identity for singers.

Performance and the Social Self

Social identity theory.

Background. Social identity theory is a framework first advanced by Tajfel (1981), since adapted and developed by numerous researchers in the field, which offers insight into why and how an individual creates a social identity that may enhance or deepen their sense of self by participating in “in-groups” (wherein members share commonalities with the individual). The process of developing a social identity is understood to have three phases (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979): 1) social categorization (assigning one’s self an in-group based on the individual’s self-concept; 2) social-identification (adopting aspects of the greater

group identity and internalizing them into one's self-concept); and 3) social-comparison (comparison of the self within the in-group to out-groups).

The role of music is central to one's social identity, even if not a musician, even at a young age: "Music preference [in adolescents] is an important factor in in-group and out-group membership, for self-esteem and the maintenance of positive social identity" (Dibben, 2002). In considering how social identity interacts with our musical selves as musicians, however, we will consider two facets of musical *participation* from a social identity lens: ensemble identity and singing identity.

Ensemble identity. In the intervening years, social identity theory has been re-examined in the context of musical groups, resulting the "ensemble identity," a concept frequently referenced in choral singing (Major & Dakon, 2016; Parker, 2014). Ensemble identity, as synthesized by Major and Dakon (2016), suggests that singers benefit from a strong sense of ensemble identity, experiencing "personal, musical, and social benefits, such as responsibility, self-discipline, empowerment, commitment, and musical development" (Major & Dakon, 2016, p. 109). On the other hand, for singers who "fail to develop ensemble identity, negative perceptions prevail, resulting in increased competition among members, disengagement, reduced effort toward common goals, and attrition" (Major & Dakon, 2016, p. 110). It seems likely that the benefits and challenges of ensemble identity may apply to non-ensemble musical groups, such as the conservatory wherein many classical performers are trained. According to O'Bryan (2015),

In the conservatorium, a student is seeking her place within a smaller constellation of a much larger musical community. This sense of belonging may include the development of a student's relationships between her peers, teachers and other mentors. Belonging to a community of practice may be

crucial to her vocal and mental health, motivation to learn, and general sense of wellbeing. (p. 126)

While the broader community of singers is not an ensemble, *per se*, singing identity within genre is observably strong enough that it is worth considering a singer's development through the lens of ensemble identity, particularly in contexts where singers report experiences of alienation from their vocal and singing identity.

Singing identity. The role of the physical voice in the perception of gender is undeniable (Batstone & Tuomi, 1981; Fraccaro et al., 2010; Skuk & Schweinberger, 2014). Yet, while voice (as a concept of agency within a situation) appears frequently in sociological literature, the role of an individual's *physical* voice seems to be a neglected concept in gender theory. According to Schlichter (2011), this is surprising, because

vocal acts, such as interpellation and speech acts, constitute a network of theoretical nodes in [Judith] Butler's reflections on the material production of subjects and identities. And yet, her theory of gender performativity and the consecutive deliberations about the matter of bodies do not account for voice as sound, nor do they acknowledge the mediation of vocal acts through sound technologies. (p. 32)

Butler's focus on the visual aspect of gender theory, Schlichter argues, has an unintentional effect of silencing the individuals that gender theory seeks to emancipate. This is, she suggests, particularly egregious because of the inherently "transgressive character of the singing voice" (p. 34). Forrest (2015) concurs, suggesting that consideration of "sonorous voice" (as opposed to discursive voice) is inextricable from issues of gender, pointing out that the "androcentric bias against the female-sounding voice, if not checked or countered, disadvantages each female-sounding speaker" (p. 593). Johnson (2007) argues that ignoring the power of

imposed silence (in marginalized populations of all types) remains a curiously neglected area of discourse: “Foucault’s work has led to a fixation on scopic regimes, an obsession with surveillance and ‘The Gaze’. Strangely little has been made of this complementary but sometimes contesting dynamic: the politicisation of sound and the attempts to silence the subordinated orders.”

This form of silencing – the lack of acknowledgement of the role the physical voice plays – reflects Medina’s concept of and concern regarding “polyphonic silences” (2004). Johnson (2007) believes the role of the physical voice cannot be overestimated:

The power of what is spoken lies as much in the voice as in the words, in what is heard as much as in what is understood. What someone says is perhaps of secondary importance to the vocal presence: whose flesh does not tingle at the sound of Hitler’s voice, even if we don’t speak German? (p. 120)

Without considering the physical aspects of the voice, one lacks a fully-realized image of identity. If speech acts are an essential part of gender performance, then the expression of gender surely carries over into singing.

Perhaps the most important aspect of singing and developing a singing identity lies in the ability of vocalizing to shape, heal or transform the singer themselves. Both Grape, Sandgren, Hansson, Ericson, and Theorell (2002) and Patteson (2013) acknowledge the power of singing as an agent of personal change for females, and Patteson (2013) noted, particularly, that each of the eight women in her case study “articulated her belief that the development of her singing voice was [an] important step in overcoming silence and reclaiming power in their life” (p. 189). Singing may also be a powerful *physical* experience for females as well: while the psychological benefits of choral singing for both sexes has been acknowledged, a

large-scale study of choral singers from Australia, England and Germany found that female singers from the sample had stronger experiences of well-being from singing than the male participants, and were more likely than men to agree that “singing makes them feel happier, makes their mood more positive, helps improve wellbeing and health, and helps them relax and deal with stress” (Clift, S., Hancox, & Morrison, 2012, p. 250).

Normativity and the Spiritual Self

There are many ways in which gender and social behavior, perception and expectation are normalized into a person’s self-concept and identity: observation of caregivers and peers, peer response to normal/abnormal gendered behavior, authority response to normal/abnormal behavior, curricula (both open and hidden), performance assessment, representation and curated experiences of media (Charles, 1999; Donze, 2016; Ewing Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011; Koza, 1992; O'Connor, 2006). Some of these methods of enforcement, such as gendered behavior observation and modification, have already been addressed above as they coincide with the acquisition of gender identity. The following areas, while not comprehensive, represent the aspects most relevant to the investigation of a singer’s identity and experiences.

Music as a gendered experience.

Overview. While the literature is clear that there has always been a gendered component to music in the western tradition, the way in which gender and music interact is not fixed, suggesting that “generalized cultural polarities are useless in

understanding taste choices, or the gendering of musical participation” (Dibben, 2002, p. 121). How gender is enacted in music is, therefore, contextually specific. One example particularly illustrates the complexity of interpreting gender norms and conditions in music: Historically, women’s participation in western *professional* musical pursuits (including training, composition and formal performance) has been severely constrained (Dibben, 2002). Yet, while current social conditions have changed, and there is a broad social perception that “participation in music in Western cultures is now apparently equally available to men and women,” at the same time, “discrepancies still exist” (p. 121). Singing is considered a feminine pursuit, and in popular music, singers in bands are overwhelming female, but at the same time, “the stereotype that accompanies the singer’s role is characterized not just by extraversion, but also a brashness colored by emotional instability and interpersonal difficulty. [...] vocalists appear to carry more negative “baggage,” from a social-perceptual sense, than other band members” (Cameron, Duffy, & Glenwright, 2015, p. 827).

This concept of a female presence in music – even in music criticism – as being emotionally-centric is echoed in an essay by Woodford (2001) on feminist critique of gender and power in Western music and music education. Woodford suggests that the feminist critique by feminist musicologists such as Susan McClary are, essentially, emotionally-based and reject abstract reason, stating that “many radical feminists are suspicious of the concept of abstract reason, which is assumed to be patriarchal. To their way of thinking, abstract reason is a masculine construct that ignores the bodily and emotive and is thus inimical to female freedom and

identity” (p. 66). That this is problematic in his reckoning is clear, for directly Woodward suggests that solutions to issues of equity in music require *reason*, rather than emotional ideology:

What is needed if students are to contribute to public discourse about the nature and value of music, and, to the extent it is possible, to develop their own musical voices - if they are to rise above mere self-interest and the uncritical acceptance of ideology while learning to work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect - is the development and exercise of public reason. (pp. 78-79)

The merits of Woodford’s critique are outside the scope of this review, but it is worth acknowledging that his continual reference throughout the essay to female critics of gender hegemony in music as “radical feminists” and suggesting that their critiques form a kind of “political extremism” (p. 79) reflect a certain adherence – even if it is unwitting – to the perception of the female presence in music critique to be emotional, and therefore, reflect instability and a lack of cool – presumably male – reason. The consideration of subconscious (or overt) insertion of gendered stereotypes in musical discourse will appear in other areas of this literature review.

Gender and aesthetics in music.

Overview. Even as women have gained more traction in music, gendered obstacles and standards presented themselves at every turn. Hinely (1984) notes that even as female singers and instrumentalists began to gain acceptance as performers, they consistently ran into objections in the form of gendered critique: certain instruments or types of music were “unladylike;” women weren’t strong enough to play male instruments; training and experience were reserved for men who were to be the breadwinners for their families and thus there could be no room for women. Gates, J. T. (1989) describes an example of the obstacles pioneering

female musicians faced in his discussion of gendered aesthetics in the context of the 19th century composer, Ethel Smyth. “Sexual aesthetics,” according to Gates, was a response to the emergence of female composers at the end of the 19th century, and, “fearing that this trend would lead to the feminization of music,” music critics “developed the double standard of sexual aesthetics – a system of gendered criteria for the critical evaluation of women’s music” (p. 63). Tick (1995) concurs, suggesting that sexual aesthetics were both a direct application of sex-trait positivist thought and pushback against the inclusion of women in music.

Composer Camille Saint-Saens provided a model for this standard of aesthetics in 1885, suggesting in an essay that “women, in their misguided attempts to imitate and compete with male composers, overcompensated for their femininity by producing music that was too boisterous” 1997, p. 64 Another proponent of gender aesthetics in music was American composer Charles Ives, who was outspoken in his admiration of what he saw as “masculine” music and intensely derogatory of the “feminine” and “effeminate” in music (Tick, 1995). In this gendered aesthetic, feminine qualities were associated with beauty – things which were small, smooth, delicate, passive and quiet, while male qualities including roughness, jaggedness, heaviness, hard and loud; the masculine was the Sublime and associated with power, while Beauty was imperfect and weak (Lochhead, 2008). Early 20th century composers and music critics often catalogued male composition and performance by how “effeminate” their music was perceived to be; Mozart and Chopin, by virtue of beauty and delicacy, were devalued and degraded for their

innate effeminacy, while Beethoven and Bach were praised for their masculine, powerful compositional style (Green, 1997; Tick, 1995).

The idea of “male creative superiority” and the reverence for what were considered masculine musical traits and outright rejection of the “feminization” of music and these critiques – many of which came to the fore in the 19th century – carried well into the 20th century, most likely as a response to the influx of females into the musical sphere (Green, 1997). In this gendered approach to musical aesthetic, both female compositional output and female performances were subjected to misogynistic critiques of the supposed feminine aesthetic therein; the most scorned of which seems to have been the perceived “sentimentality” of anything a woman touched, due to the perceived innate emotionality of the female psyche (Tick, 1995). One example, which sums up the 19th century view of female characteristics in music and the women who wrote it, may be seen in the following review of a symphony by composer Amy Beach:

The symphony of Mrs. Beach is too long, too strenuously worked over and attempts too much ... Almost every modern composer has left a trace in her score [...] There is no gainsaying her industry, her gift for melody ... and her lack of logic. Contrapuntally she is not strong. Of grace and delicacy there are evidences in the Siciliana [*sic*], and there she is at her best, “but yet a woman.” (*Musical Courier*, February 23, 1898, quoted in Tick, 1995, p. 344)

Aesthetics and performance. While the majority of this type of critique was directed at composers, female performers were also viewed through this lens of gendered aesthetic and this may still be observed in modern culture (Migdalek, 2015), though this may be contextual from person to person, as “how individuals come to read, appreciate, and respond to art forms as music is influenced by one’s enculturation” (p. 198). Further, Migdalek (2015) suggests knowledge and

intellectual resistance to gender stereotypes may conflict with one's internal *feeling* of what an artist or observer may have internalized through their lifetime of socialization, which is of particular interest when considering the effects of gender stereotypes and aesthetics on performers, as "Cultural understandings of gendered styles" can impact "an individual's sense of the aesthetic, and, in practical terms, on how and what one might censor/deny oneself from embodying" (p. 199).

In response to the cultural belief of gendered qualities in music and music performance, Sergeant and Himonides (2014) undertook a study to "acquire empirical evidence to test the validity of claims of gendered properties of music and music performance" (p. 5). One group of "musically experienced listeners" were asked to listen to extracts of classical music and judge the sex of the artist performing; "musically cognizant listeners" were given the same set of extracts and asked to rate the performances' emotional valence² on a scale of musical characteristics associated with gender: adagio vs. prestissimo, controlled/objective vs. sensitive/emotional, calm/reflective vs. stressed/dramatic and mild/submissive vs. assertive/masterful. The results found that musically-sophisticated listeners were unable to determine the sex of performers by aural characteristics of the performance alone. The researchers concluded that "if gendered perception of music is a reality, the perceived properties are subjectively imposed on the musical message by the listener "through the listener's appropriations' and are primarily related to the tempo of the music" (p. 13).

² The characterization and categorization of specific emotions.

Despite the lack of empirical evidence concerning the innate gendered aesthetic qualities of music, Green (2014) suggests that these ideas are still being tacitly or even directly conveyed to children, often by music teachers themselves – many of whom may even cognitively reject the concept of gendered differences in music.

Music education.

Overview. Music education may, in and of itself, be a gendered experience that is fraught for both boys and girls (Green, 1997, 2014; McCarthy, 1999). Green (1997; Green, 2014), suggests that gender is both taught and navigated through music by how teachers' internal perceptions of the gender-appropriateness of genre, repertoire and instruments play out in instruction and the students' own enforcement of stereotypical gender behavior. Certainly, previous research in other fields have found that teachers themselves may perpetuate gender inequities or offer pushback to less gender-conforming students (Leaper & Brown, 2008) and Green (2014) offers this succinct statement of the problem:

Although on the face of it girls do better than boys at music in schools, there is a hidden agenda existing at the interstices of pupils' behavior and teachers' perceptions, which partly explains, and partly perpetuates the exclusion of women as a large group from the highest ranks of the musical world. (p. 92)

While there is evidence that the perception of gendered instruments has shifted, allowing girls more access to previously masculine-typed instruments (Abeles, H., 2009; Abeles, H. F. et al., 2014), the social consequences for young male singers doesn't appear to have significantly improved (McBride, 2016; Nannen, 2017). Singing is still seen as "feminine," and, according to Freer (2012), "the strongest determination of masculinity appears to be the avoidance of femininity"

(p. 13). Indeed, one of the primary solutions to young mens' reluctance to be involved in secondary vocal music programs seems to rely on removing females from the environment altogether in a "separate-sex but equal" approach (Smirl Jorgensen & Pfeiler, 2008; Zemek, 2010).

Smirl Jorgensen and Pfeiler (2008) provide their motivations for their championship of same-sex ensemble; for instance: young men are "confused" and struggle with intonation because of the female voices in a choir, that young male singers need more time and attention because of changing voices and that young men and women in the same space distract each other.³ The reported efficacy of sex segregation in choral education in the literature is mixed, however, with conflicting findings (Zemek, 2010) and support for segregation of the sexes in musical class environment is mixed (Ashley, 2010). While the focus of research is primarily on its efficacy in training and preparing choirs, little study has been done on the peripheral effects of sex-segregation, raising questions as to the role such experiences may play in the development of a young singer's ideas about gender appropriateness, gender roles and the association of gender stereotypes with certain kinds of musical experiences.

Training. While little literature currently exists on the topic, it is worth noting the potential influence of gender on students in the applied voice studio. Vitale (2008) suggests that aspects of vocal instruction may be communicated –

³ All other issues concerning same-sex segregation, this approach raises questions about the potential alienation of young singers whose gender identity may not comfortably fall into one or other of the gender binary paradigms.

consciously or unconsciously – non-verbally. This suggests that an instructor’s own gender performance has the potential to affect a student’s internalization of gender and the voice, and one potential areas of research might include the effect of cross-gender training on vocal identity.

Materials. In 2007, Hawkins undertook a study to investigate potential “covert bias and symbolic, or stereotypical, representations of males and females,” through which “social values and attitudes are transmitted” to young learners via printed vocal curricular materials in secondary educational materials. Previous studies, such as Koza (1992; Koza, 1993, 1994), and Kruse, Giebelhausen, Shouldice, and Ramsey (2014) found significant inequality in a variety of primary-level music education materials – such as stereotypical descriptions of gendered behavior or traits, poor representation of girls in illustrations and song lyrics with gendered or even misogynistic overtones or implications. When Hawkins (2007) examined two commonly-used high school choral textbooks – one directed for male voices and one for female voices of the same age and musical ability, as it “allowed a unique opportunity to study what types of information boys were presented in their songs in comparison to what girls learned in their text, published by the same press.”

Using a sex role personality trait inventory, the context of the two texts were analyzed for representation, gendered traits/linguistic bias and minority representation – and the results were, perhaps unsurprisingly, in alignment with prior studies. The results that both texts contained many examples of bias or neglect, including:

- 1) **invisibility of women** – domination of male characters which “perpetuates the belief that men are more important in society than are women either in fictional or non-fictional form;”
- 2) **female stereotypes and linguistic bias** – texts frequently used terminology which “reinforce beliefs that girls are only valuable for their appearance and for exhibiting a non-aggressive personality;”
- 3) **male behavioral stereotyping** – “sexual bias [that] socializes men to believe, unfairly, that they must not exhibit any feminine trait,” teaching boys that “they must be assertive, non-emotional and that they must be heterosexual;”
- 4) **minority underrepresentation** – for the texts to be used fairly in a typical American classroom, a teacher would have to “supplement their choral curriculum with a variety of multicultural music.”

(Hawkins, 2007)

These findings suggest that gender bias and representation in music education texts has not progressed as much as might be expected in the nearly 25 years since Pucciani’s (1983) review of sexism in music education materials. At the very least, it must be acknowledged that Hawkins’ fears that current vocal curricular texts may not yet meet the minimum Title IX guidelines of 1972 is cause for serious concern for music educators. All other issues of gendered issues in the choral education literature aside, if girls are more likely to participate in vocal music in secondary school settings, it is certainly reasonable to expect that the materials used would be representative and supportive of that population.

Hidden curricula. The hand-in-hand nature of applied instruction and personal / musical development suggests that the voice studio may be an area where a singer's personal and musical identities are forged and normalized. Thus, an examination of what a singer learns about the broader world and their place in it as musicians in their musical education is worthwhile. While the issue of bias in curricula is an oft-discussed topic in educational circles, a more recent and relevant addition to this dialogue is the concept of *invisible curricula*. If, as Shockley, Bond, and Rollins (2008) suggest, "we define the word *curriculum* broadly to mean all of the things that give a person his or her unique personality," then, necessarily, "it also includes an individual's tastes and preferences that are **conspicuously or inconspicuously** shared with everyone with whom they come into contact. (Shockley et al., 2008, p. 182) (emphasis added). Consequently, the "unseen curriculum is a critical aspect of formal education because it affects who students actually become" (Shockley et al., 2008, p. 182).

Though research on hidden curricula has focused on classroom teaching, it is worth examining the idea in the context of applied instruction, as well. If "teachers teach who they are, then their hidden inner curriculum directly influences the students they teach" (Shockley et al., 2008, p. 183). The close, personal nature of applied instruction offers many instances where the instructor's personal experience and bias may severely impact a singer's learning and developmental experience – for better or worse (Demorest, Kelley, & Pfordresher, 2017; O'Bryan, 2015).

Assessment. There are studies in the literature which suggest that there may be identity or gendered aspects to the assessments and critique a singer experiences over the course of their training (Davidson & Da Costa Coimbra, 2001; Kokotsaki, Davidson, & Coimbra, 2001; Schloneger; Wapnick, Darrow, Kovacs, & Dalrymple, 1997). This is particularly relevant in cases where a singer or their voice may not conform to normative standards, considering the entanglement of a singer's self, vocal identity and psychological well-being (Kokotsaki et al., 2001; O'Bryan, 2015; Sandgren, 2002). Indeed, Chong, 2000) found that "self-reported statements on perception and evaluation of their voice, singing ability and experience indicated that the singer's subjective perception may be a significant predictor for self-esteem" (p. 96), which suggests that the feedback a singer receives concerning their voice has the potential for significant personal impact. This raises many questions about the impact of the traditional model of formal vocal instruction at a collegiate level, where a singer regularly receives faculty jury and applied instructor feedback even though "there is not a great deal known about the formative effects of summative jury feedback on actual student improvement" (Parkes, 2012).

Representation and curated media experiences.

Representation. The issue of representation of females in media is a recognized issue (Collins, 2011). Representation, Dibben (2002) argues, "create the possibilities of what we are, constructing places from which individuals position themselves" (p. 127). Not only are women *under-represented*, when they are portrayed, "it is often in a circumscribed and negative manner" (Collins, 2011). This raises the question of how female representation in media directly affects female

musicians. While female musicians (singers and instrumentalists both) have far greater access to avocation and professional musical participation, issues of gender inequality stubbornly persist. Female musicians are routinely paid less than their male counterparts, experience career interruptions due to family responsibilities, and face difficulties in accessing positions of musical leadership (Bennett, 2008). Some of this may be due to a continued lack of representation of females in various facets of music performance and learning – sometimes because of gender bias, but occasionally as a side result of well-intentioned attempts at creating gender-blind curricula (Scott & Harrassowitz, 2004).

Wehr (2016) notes that one of the primary sources of discouragement to women entering the field of jazz is tokenism and the overall lack of representation of women in the field – particularly the lack of female jazz educators, while McKeage (2016) notes that a lack of visible role models and mentors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in jazz. Women's role in jazz has historically been limited to that of the "decorative" singer of the band – even iconic singers such as Ella Fitzgerald have had to carefully balance appearance and gender appropriateness ("a feminine image") over the course of their career (Scott & Harrassowitz, 2004). But while lack of representation in roles other than "lead singer" seems to be central to both Wehr-Flowers (McKeage; 2006), it should also be noted that the prospect of playing solos and improvisation seem to be formidable obstacles as well. This may relate to females' self-perception of lower self-efficacy, lack of encouragement and lack of training in improvisational skills (McKeage, 2016; Wehr, 2016; Wehr-Flowers, 2006).

Davies (2001) notes that the problem of representation in rock music has multiple implications for women: primarily male journalists, writing for a presumed male audience, write about male performers – tending to “either ignore women entirely or to treat them in an extremely sexist way” (p. 302). Davies continues, noting that even when images of women appear in the music press on a par with male artists in frequency, *how* they are portrayed is considerable different: highly sexualized, feminized, with a focus on their appeal to heterosexual men. The discourse surrounding gender equality must recognize that while quantity is necessary, the *quality* of representation is equally important: Visibility is a good first step, but, as multiple researchers point out, all representation is not equal (Davies, 2001; Dibben, 2002; Donze, 2016), raising questions about the efficacy of representation that underscores prescriptive gender and sex norms.

Mediation. The role of mediation and/or taste manipulation in popular music has been acknowledged in the literature (Donze, 2016; Humphreys, 2013; Millar, 2008); it is, therefore, worth examining through the lens of gender and gender representation. Mediated representation may well play a key function in the gendered aspects of identity formation or reinforcement, as research has indicated that seeing gender portrayals “has an effect on individuals’ real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2006). As noted previously, what we see is what we do. Further, while there remains a broad perception of expanded representation of females in music, Dibben’s (2002) exhortation to examine the context of representation become particularly relevant when considering the idea of curation or mediated experience, as “promoters and

image makers of the music industry are extremely influence on young people” (Ashley, 2010).

Donze (2016) notes that “the ability of listeners to make *their* symbolic constructions of race or gender collectively valued depends on the degree to which mass-market producers recognize and discursively amplify these constructions” (p. 340), and there is evidence that amplification has a significant effect on perceptions of gender in music. (Millar, 2008) gives a heart-breaking list of instances of gendered exclusion. For instance, Rolling Stone’s 100 most influential and significant artists of all time only included 10 women, and out of that, two (Aretha Franklin and Madonna) made the top 45; the magazine’s compilation of the 500 greatest songs of all time only include 55 songs by women, six which of which made it to the top 100. Predicting record sales based on Rolling Stone’s assessment of male/female artists would suggest that there were 9:1 ratio of male to female album sales; the actual ratio is 2:1. This kind of perceptual discrepancy Millar directly ascribes to two factors: 1) predominantly male representation on critic panels (in the case of Rolling Stone), and 2) listener bias towards male performers and perceived-masculine musical genres. Listeners, according to Donze (2016),

are not an undifferentiated “mass society” but rather form orientations to practice and trajectories of life course patterned around important aspects of identity such as gender, race, sexuality, and class. The ability of listeners to make *their* symbolic constructions of race or gender collectively valued depends on the degree to which massmarket producers recognize and discursively amplify those constructions. (p. 340)

This is a point of particularly interesting, as multiple authors (Abramo, 2009; Dibben, 2002; Donze, 2016; Green, 1997; Millar, 2008; Nannen, 2017) offer

examples of ways in which female and other minority voices are devalued, excluded or silenced.

In summary, there is clear evidence that curation by production companies, promoters, critics and other gate keepers directly results in female performers and genres being perceived as being lower-status by male listeners⁴ (Donze, 2016; Millar, 2008). Further, when female performers *do* manage to make themselves heard in masculine genres, the literature notes that this is often achieved by adopting stereotypical behavior or contribute misogynistic cultural ideals through their lyrics and performances (Danaher, 2005; Donze, 2016).

Conclusion

Identity is multifactorial. A singer's identity is formed from many disparate parts – many of which may, on the surface, seem to have no connection whatsoever, but when examined in-depth, may be traced to many of the same source(s). Self-concept is a complex intersection of experience, observation, peer and parental influence, and the level to which a singer's self-perceptions and preferences are genuinely personal choices, rather than acquired as part of a larger bundle of societally-dictated gender-appropriate behavior, is difficult to discern. While the labels of personal, gender and social identity can provide an individual with a sense of belonging, community and individual purpose, the literature nevertheless recognizes the negative potential on personal development in the way society

⁴ Interestingly, research on gender bias in listeners found that women were much more likely to value both genders equally in genre and performance preferences.

dictates that those labels must be interpreted and performed – particularly in the case of gender identity (Eaton et al., 2012; Egan & Perry, 2001; Ewing Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011; Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

Music is (still) gendered. Our collective understanding and experience of music-making and listening continues to be significantly biased – filled with gender stereotypes, proscriptive gender roles and gender inequality, particularly for female-bodied musicians (Ammer, 1980; Donze, 2016; Green, 1997; Miller, D., 2012; Oware, 2007; Roulston & Mills; Wehr, 2016; Wehr-Flowers, 2006). Females have historically faced significant barriers to participation, devaluation and pushback in the face of their entry to male-dominated musical spheres, but now, as then, they continue to work around the system, forging their own paths and persevering in the face of silencing and opposition (Davies, 2001; Fried Block, 2001; Gould, 1992; Haruch, 2010; Hinely, 1984; Jagow, 1998; Lochhead, 2008; Pendle, 2001; Scott & Harrassowitz, 2004; Whiteley, 2000). Singing and the teaching of singing has long been relegated to lower status as a “feminine” art, and remains filled with stereotypes and gendered obstacles; while feminist investigators such as McClary, Koza and Green (Green, 1997, 2014; Koza, 1992, 1993; Reitsma, 2014) have clearly elucidated the areas in which female singers and female musicians suffer from individual and systemic gender bias, research concerning the intersection of gender and music and voices remains almost non-existent.

Breaking gender boundaries. Nevertheless, while the collective experience of gender identity enforcement – particularly as it pertains to music – is objectively restrictive, we must also acknowledge the one exceptional tool that works against

normativity: *music itself*. “Music's power,” says Masterston (2016), “lies in its ability to symbolically express personal and cultural feelings: love, triumph, anger, melancholy,” and through that power, “helps shape the culture in which it exists” (p. 26). Further, music allows us to access a kind of social imagination, offering a preview of potential new paradigms (Frith, 1996) that allow both society and the individual to explore what a different or more ideal experience *could* be, “arous[ing] in the listener imaginings in the form of fictional worlds that may indeed have the quality of actual emotional experiences” (Spsychiger, 1995). The power of singing and singing training, through the personal nature of the vocal instrument, offers potential for an individual’s personal development, allowing females a way to resist proscriptive gender roles and behavior (Grape et al., 2002; Patteson, 2013). Frith (1996) sees music in general as a pathway to an ideal, but for Holman Jones (2010), the storytelling of singing a song creates a utopian space: “Here,” she says, “the world as imagined possibility is spoken, danced, told, played and sung in all of its contingency, limitation, concrete history, and hopefulness” (p. 268).

While Frith offers his observations concerning social imagination in the context experiencing music as a performer, the potential freedom of music through performance has been noted in other research (Danaher, 2005), Goldin-Perschbacher (2008) and Holman Jones (2010) go further, suggesting that the performer’s experience of transgression through their music extends itself to the listeners themselves – a circular experience that highlights the importance of developing young singers who *do* push boundaries and explore ideals through their performance and repertoire.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY: RESONANT THREADS

Introduction

Given the role gender plays in socialization, development and education (Halim & Ruble, 2010), the lack of research on female-centric experiences in vocal music raises questions concerning gender equality, success and experience in vocal music. This gap of knowledge suggests we may broadly lack an understanding of what it means to be a female singer – critical knowledge for music educators. This study, therefore, explores the development and experience of nine female-bodied singers within the context of gender, seeking to understand how environment, education and experience shape and influence this population's personal, musical and vocal identity. The research questions which guided the formation and execution of the study cover the three-faceted approach outlined in chapter one, namely: context, performance and normativity:

1. **Context:** *How does a singer's recalled developmental musical experiences intersect with and inform their musical, gender and vocal identities?*
2. **Performance:** *How do a singer's developing personal and musical identities intersect with their recalled musical experiences and inform their understanding of their social and internal identities?*

3. **Normativity:** *How does the singer's understanding and interpretation of their musical experiences inform their perception of their voice and singing identity?*

This chapter will cover the study's methodological approach, review of the pilot study, instrumentation, participant selection and sample, the collection of data and its analysis, ethical concerns and limitations of the study, and finally, a reflection on my role as researcher in this particular research topic and environment.

Approach and Method Selection

When a study – as is the case for this inquiry – examines the “life world of a human being as it is experienced individually [...] instead of an objective reality,” then, according to Fink (2000), it requires a “method of research with an interpretive approach – a qualitative research method.” Qualitative methods, says Jamshed (2014), are “considered to be suitable when the researcher or the investigator either investigates new field of study or intends to ascertain and theorize prominent issues,” and may be inductive in nature – both circular and evolving as new information is learned. Personal interviews where participants relate their lived experience – seen as a form of discourse between researcher and participant – are an essential aspect of narrative inquiry (Garvis, 2015). In keeping with that concept of narrative inquiry, this study utilized the narrative interview protocol, which Kvale and Brinkman (2015) describe as a space where “the Felix can ask directly for stories, and perhaps together with the interviewee, attempt to structure the different happenings recounted into coherent stories” (p. 155).

Further, this type of interview allows the participant a chance to reflect on their experiences, something Rogers' person-centered theory terms *self-exploration* – “the search for meaning within the flow of experiences and the attempt to symbolize it as exactly as possible” (Lux et al., 2013).

While multiple qualitative approaches were considered for this study, the unique nature of personal experience suggests that we look closely at individual stories before we can make external generalizations to the broader population and collect useful quantitative data. Even this preliminary examination may be useful for understanding the contexts around singing and gender however, for, according to Clandinin & Rosniek (2006), narrative inquiry is more than just the stor(ies) of individuals. It is

an exploration of the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individual's experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted - but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquirers study an individual's experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others. (p. 42)

Role of the Researcher

Pre-Understanding: The Value of Insider Research

In narrative inquiry, the researcher holds an active, acknowledged role in the collaborative process – a constructivist, rather than a passive positivist, approach (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Garvis, 2015; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Yang, 2011). According to Chase (2012), the researcher also serves as narrator, creating stories from their data “in ways that are both enabled and constrained by the social sources and circumstances embedded in their disciplines, cultures and historical moments,”

a situation that “opens up a range of complex issues about voice, representation, and interpretive authority” (p. 66). While this study certainly meets the “pragmatic ethical attitude of design,” to wit – working from “the conviction that the research carried out is [...] not exploitative – that is, we study people to better understand them and the society in which they live” (Josselson, 2007), it is nevertheless important to acknowledge my own lived experience as a musician – not even as a potential source of bias, but as a necessary requirement to even *conduct* the study.

As an AFAB singer, teacher and researcher, my experience in the world of vocal music provides both investigative and analytical benefits: 1) my experience allows me insight into what is “storyworthy” (Chase, 2012); 2) my experience and personal presentation (as an AFAB person) immediately confers validity and credibility to my both my participants and my audience (Chase, 2012; Stake & Eisele, 2010); 3) as a singing teacher, my experience establishing rapport and trust with my students potentially allows me to build strong researcher-participant relationships, which in turn “affect the quality of the data generated” (Garvis, 2015); and 4) my lived experience offers more legitimacy to my interpretation as an authoritative voice (Chase, 2012). Further, the use of portraiture in narrative research explicitly acknowledges the role of the investigator in the process. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), the researcher is “seen not only in defining the focus and field of the inquiry, but also in navigating the relationships with the subjects, in witnessing and interpreting the action...” (p. 13).

While the literature offers a useful framework for understanding the role of the investigator in qualitative research, it does not fully capture the nuances around

research concerning the population investigated in this study. If one were to consider researcher-subject entanglement as a complete impediment to the process, research in this field would be near-impossible: it takes a certain amount of insider knowledge of the process and the experience to know what questions need to be asked (Smetherham, 1978). This type of knowledge, sometimes referred to as “preunderstanding” (Coghlan, 2007) or “role-related knowledge” (Smetherham, 1978), allows insight not only into theoretical but lived experience within the organizational world, including an immediate understanding of related jargon, which topics are taboo or potentially intimate: “When they are inquiring they can [...] draw on their own experience in asking questions and interviewing, and be able to follow up on replies so obtain richer data” (p. 296).

Further, the small, often insular, professional world in which singers move creates a set of circumstances wherein the accuracy and/or reliability of the participants’ reports is directly correlated to the researcher’s own position and experience in that world (Smetherham, 1978). In my experience as a voice teacher, there are specific qualities or qualifications necessary for singers to feel confident in sharing their intimate thoughts and experiences around being a singer. Early in the time-line of this inquiry, I realized that a strict, hands-off and distanced form of inquiry would not be conducive to creating the environment of trust necessary for participants to engage fully, and found myself drawn to Chase’s (2012) description of “researcher as narrator.”

When effective, identity-centered research cuts into the core of the human experience, with all its hopes, dreams, successes...as well as its failures,

disappointments and inherent flaws. And humans, as the literature tells us, are remarkably reluctant to share vulnerabilities without there being a sense of shared vulnerability. Actively participating in the research as an insider with, as the saying goes, “skin in the game” creates an atmosphere much more likely to create that necessary trust. Smetherham (1978) offers insight on this dynamic:

...[R]espondents were seemingly far more prepared to share private knowledge with one whom they see as personally and equally involved in their world. Thus, one's personal participation in proposals about the coming year's allocation of finance, what subjects are to be offered as alternatives to what in the option groups, provide a shared common identity. In this way the participant observer is able to build up a substantial profile regarding aspects of the actor's hidden performance that are only ascertained with considerable difficulty-if at all- by the outsider. And even then in perhaps a quite different way. (p.100)

I realized that I – *personally* – had to be present. Not just me-as-researcher, but me-as-singer, with all my own hopes and dreams, yes, but also my fears, failures and flaws. To adequately illuminate the precarious nature of the world into which this study examines, I offer an illuminating narrative of my own experience.

Personal Reflection: The Imperative of Trust

As a young singer, I came to New York to live and perform in “big city.” To my dismay and surprise, I found myself living in the smallest village imaginable. I came here immediately after receiving my bachelor's degree, looking for anonymity in which I could be a musician free from the expectations of people who *know* you. Here, I could be anything – anyone – I wanted to be; there would be no well-meaning family or neighbors piling unrealistic expectations on me, and at the same time, no family or neighbors to tell me I “thought I was better than them” because I

performed classical music. When I arrived, however, my newfound freedom in anonymity only lasted about six weeks – about as long as it took me to get my first audition. For, shortly thereafter, I ran into someone else who'd been at the audition on the train, and they waved at me, greeting me with “Oh, you're that singer from Tennessee [the director] was talking about!”

Maybe it's just a coincidence, I thought as I went on my uneasy way, but no – it only got smaller from there. There were no six degrees of separation between members of the classical singing community in those days – perhaps three or four, at that time. These days, with the immediacy of the internet and social media, it would be surprising if the degree of connection between any two singers is further than two: even if one doesn't know the singer themselves, it's likely one will know their coach, their teacher, their *repiteur*. Everyone has sung for the same people, heard the same horror stories about this or that production, auditioned for a young artist program to the curdling tones of that *ghastly* out-of-tune piano in Studio A. For better or worse, one is bound to one's colleagues by the bonds of an intimate sphere of professional influence.

While the world of musical theatre is larger, the connections are still just as close – and the same holds for voice professionals in general. Even outside of New York, the circle of voice teachers, researchers, academics and administrators is tightly-knit and certain names are recognized regardless of the continent on which you happen to be. It is hardly surprising, then, that out of the nine singers who participated in this study, I had connections – in some way or another – to all but three...and one of those three was a student of a singer whom I'd already

interviewed. Though the sampling method used snowballing – “a process in which contact is made with participants appropriate for your research through whatever access route you can find, and through these first participants you are introduced to others of similar/relevant characteristics for your research” (Edwards & Holland, 2013) – in an attempt to find singers with whom I, as researcher, had no vested interest, even community-wide calls for participants yielded performers who had some knowledge of me as a singer/researcher...and for good reason.

In a community this small, it is not too extreme to suggest that trusting the wrong person with details of one’s personal experience and opinions can have a significant effect on one’s career. Absolute trust becomes an absolutely essential component of the researcher-participant relationship – particularly when the investigative lens turns towards more sensitive topics, such as vocal or career struggles, relationships with members of the community, or even feelings or memories concerning professional experiences a singer has had. Even *in camera*, there remains a sense of risk to speaking openly: for all a singer knows, the Felix might have personal relationships with the directors, coaches or teachers whose influence can shape the singer’s career.

By having personal connections and interactions with/to these singers, I not only received their stories, I entered their stories, too. “You know how it is,” one singer said to me in their interview, shrugging and giving that familiar look of combined resignation, humor and frustration common to the purgatory that is life in the music industry. And I laughed and nodded, because, yes, I *do* know how it is. I’ve spent more than twenty years as a professional classical singer – a career track

begun long before I had any academic aspirations. Months, years, spent in the endless circle of auditions, the frustrations of pay-to-sing programs and the sense of indentured servitude that often accompanies young artist apprenticeships, not to mention the fact that the frustrations are usually only magnified after you get the gig – it’s hard to explain why one would willingly endure that to someone who *isn’t* a singer. The rewards are perhaps even harder to explain than the frustrations – there’s very little that’s tangible in this field, certainly not weekends off, benefits and annual vacation. The pay-off, frequently, is far more spiritual than physical and to a certain extent, it is impossible to understand why singers would continue to pursue a career so fraught, if one hasn’t experienced that sort of spiritual fulfillment that singing can give for one’s self.

Challenges of Insider Investigation

As I spoke with each of the nine singers who participated in this project, I could see myself in their narratives, sometimes even finding new interpretations of my own experiences. In the role of participant-investigator, I have unprecedented access to nuance that I might not otherwise have. At the same time, however, that close entanglement of self and participants calls for a delicate balance of what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) describes as “self-possession and selfless, disciplined reporting of others’ lives” (p. 95) in the researcher-narrator. This fine balance is the core of ethical qualitative/narrative research.

The challenges of narrative research generally concern the ways in which that balance may be disturbed. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) note there exists the

potential for conflict or tension between participants' and my respective historical narratives. Further, narrative inquiry requires that the researcher "question personal assumptions about the normal, healthy, or desirable," as "unexamined biases and prejudices may be injurious to participants both at the site of data gathering, when attitudes are easily transmitted non-verbally," and "at the time of write-up, when, now physically distant from the participant, the researcher's values saturate the presentation" (Josselson, 2007).

Instrumentation

Pilot

Prior to this proposal, a pilot study was undertaken to explore the study concept and assess the prospective interview protocol. While this study focused on the female experience, because I am attempting to draw a "negative space," it was necessary to include a male perspective in the pilot – both to determine whether the male singer's experience aligned with the literature, and to compare and contrast with the female singer's experiences in similar environments.

Two classical singers – one male (Reuben, age 59) a tenor who sings both concert music and opera and one female (Allison, age 43) a soprano who sings primarily opera¹ – were selected from the immediate community of classical singers in New York City. The criteria used for selection were: a) age – singers needed to be old enough to have experienced the full development of their voice; b) experience –

¹ Both singers were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and are used here.

singers needed to have had significant performance experience over time; and c) genre – singers needed to perform primarily classical vocal music. The selection of two classical singers, however, was not merely an instance of a sample of convenience (given that my own background is primarily classical). For the purposes of this study, the goal was to study how a male and female singer interpreted and experienced similar repertoire and environment – hence genre, age and location needed to be similar. Once singers were selected and agreed to participate, they were sent a consent form outlining the purpose of the study and requesting permission to record the interviews. Two interviews were then conducted – one online via Zoom, a video conferencing platform, the other in person, and both were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to both participants, who reviewed and approved the use of their contents in the pilot study.

The results of the initial inquiry found that the singers' reported experiences aligned to concepts from the literature, and certainly validated the efficacy of both the protocol and the theoretical framework as an interpretive lens. Both Reuben and Allison received significant pushback when they did not align to the culture gendered norms around voice and voice usage, suggesting the presence of considerable social discomfort with the “transgressive character of the singing voice” (Schlichter, 2011, p. 34). Both participants faced considerable critique and/or rejection when they found themselves in opposition to those gendered behavioral norms, causing significant psychological and physiological distress. Further, their experiences suggested that the negative effects of that pushback were alternatively mitigated or amplified by their vocal training and interactions with vocal

instructors, highlighting the power of expert influence on how the singers received and internalized (or externalized) outside critique.

While the limitations of the pilot were significant, examination of those limitations offered insight into potential issues that might arise in a larger study. Of immediate concern is the potential for researcher bias to affect all aspects of the study process – particularly sample selection and interpretational lens, an issue which became clear throughout the process of the initial study.

Further, while qualitative interviews offer useful insight into research themes and illuminate potential areas of conflict, the results cannot be reliably generalized to the broader population of singers without an expanded, more carefully selected sample. For instance, in the pilot, both participants had atypical vocal instruments, struggled technically and perform in a genre that is particularly open to scrutiny due to its centuries-long traditions and performance practice. Though age, genre, voice type and experience will all considerably influence a singer's experience, age is perhaps the more significant immediate issue for this study, considering the changes in societal perception of gender since Reuben and Allison's childhoods (1960s and 1970s, respectively). While my own childhood experiences (1980s) and vocal issues within classical music generally aligned with Reuben and Allison's, I have observed shifts in gender perception of even between my decade and theirs. As such, it seems likely that subsequent generations would experience an even larger shift.

The limitations of the pilot suggested several adjustments for this iteration of the study:

1. The comparative issues between the male and female singer indicates that a more comprehensive study of female experience was necessary before the conversation can broaden to include the male lens in a meaningful way. To address this issue, this study focused solely on AFAB singers.
2. A broader range of ages in the participants potentially offers a wealth of information about changing trends and experiences, thus the study was expanded to include participants from a range of age groups.
3. A broader selection of participants will shed light on whether the technical and physiological issues that both Allison and Reuben experienced are likely to be more broadly representative of the singing experience, rather than representing the bias of my personal (both performing and teaching) lens. Hence, the sampling method was expanded to search for participants outside of my immediate milieu as a voice teacher, because the teachers and studios with whom I interact tend to focus on vocal habilitation,² as do I.
4. Small adjustments were made to the protocol, both to accommodate the expanded sample and clarify areas that the pilot interviews suggested might need follow-up questions.

² Specifically, the retraining of singers who have experienced medically-diagnosed physiological or functional voice issues.

Protocol

The instrument, changed slightly from its original form in the pilot study, is attached hereto in Appendix A. Based on my communications with female-bodied singers, discussions of gender behavior with academic peers and clients, examination of related literature and experiences from my own past, I developed an interview protocol which addressed four areas of individual experience: musical background, singing experience, gender identity and voice. The protocol was divided into sections that correspond directly with the research questions, and were shaped specifically to probe the “socially and culturally sanctioned ideas or attitudes regarding idealized gender-specific roles, responsibilities, behaviors, and traits” (Avery et al., 2017) as they pertain to, intersect with, and shape the singer’s musical and vocal experiences and identity.

While the primary approach of the study was not specifically conducted through the lens of feminist theory, the questions are nevertheless crafted with that lens in mind, with the intent of drawing the participant’s recollection and attention to gendered intersectionalities – particularly the “embedded gendered inequalities and power” (Edwards & Holland, 2013). While this could be argued as leading the interviewee, the approach was used as it seemed likely that many participants might lack the extensive vocabulary and intimate understanding of the sociological frameworks and concepts to clearly articulate their experiences. The rationale for this was confirmed in the pilot: Allison, the female participant, stated directly that prior to the interview, she hadn’t expected that she would have much to say or

discuss about gender in the context of singing. Yet with each successive prompt, she spoke fluidly and extensively about the intersection of gender with her experiences.

Finally, due to the personal nature of sharing experiences, I anticipated the need for an improvisatory and/or conversational aspect to the interviews, and thus, questions were created as a loose guide, rather than a hard protocol. In practice, this approach served well: some participants were able to seemingly anticipate the questions and were able to speak of their life and experiences with little prompting, making for a more conversational experience, while others needed the more structured approach of Felix questions, prompts and discussion.

Sample

Overview. Using purposeful sampling, nine participants were selected from the immediate community of classical and musical theatre singers from three different career and/or experience levels: **emerging** – ages 18 to 29; **established** – ages 30 to 40; **experienced** – ages 41+. The criteria used for selection were: a) **age** – singers must be old enough to have experienced significant development of their voice and have received professional-level training; b) **experience** – singers need to have had performance experience appropriate to their age and experience level; and c) **genre** – singers needed to perform primarily classical or musical theatre vocal music.

Sample size. While this sample is rather smaller than a quantitative approach might require, “a very large number of respondents can be expected to hinder the researcher’s ability to get “in-depth” and miss the opportunity of getting

an understanding of each respondent” (Fink, 2000). As it turned out, this sample sized proved to be quite large for my purposes. The participants were exceptionally generous with their time, speaking in depth about their lives, which gave me an exceptional range of data from which to draw – too much to be accurately represented here. The sample was narrowed to *six* participants, so that each participant could be represented in depth.

Genre. Musical theatre and classical music are primarily an acoustic performance art – that is, microphones are used only for amplification of the natural tone and performers will be expected to audition and often perform in an acoustic setting. As such, these singers represent “unmediated voices,” instruments which are not filtered through any audio technology. This is a distinct consideration, considering the massive difference in expectations between acoustic and digitally filtered or produced voices and musical genres. Because “a great number of voice scholars do not account for sound technologies but prefer to present the voice as a medium of an unmediated body” (Schlichter, 2011, p. 46), it follows that the study of *mediated* voice necessarily must include an examination of the role and effect of such mediation on the voice and the singer’s perception of their voice. While mediation is certainly a potential focus for further research, it is beyond the scope of this study; as such, sampling was targeted towards singers with a history / background of primarily acoustic singing.

Selection method. Once the criteria for participant selection was chosen, word-of-mouth and snowballing were the primary method of participant recruitment. I first identified appropriate online communities, such as Facebook

groups dedicated to singers or voice professionals in general, wherein either I was already a member, or had colleagues who were members and could speak to the potential reception of said communities to my call for participants. Secondly, I curated a list of performers, teachers and other colleagues with access to various communities of singers, including small clusters of trans-identified singers – not only in New York, but throughout the United States. Due to the small potential sample population (*i.e.*, trans-identified assigned-female-at-birth professional singers), I also spoke directly to other professionals in the field for direct recommendations for potential candidates.

Once these target communities were identified, I sent out inquiries to each – providing a description of the study and the parameters for participation for the communities to which I had access, asking other colleagues to post my call for participants to groups in which I was not a direct participant, and sending the same information to my curated list of contacts. When potential candidates identified themselves – either directly or through recommendations from colleagues, I contacted them directly – explaining the purpose of the study, verifying eligibility, and providing a copy of the Informed Consent document to clearly demonstrate the parameters of their involvement. Final selection of participants, once eligibility and availability were confirmed, was made on a first-come, first-serve basis. Thus, the variety of the final sampling generally reflects the variety of candidates who were recommended to me or presented themselves in response to my call for singers, rather than any overt attempt on the part of the researcher to choose a diverse range of candidates.

Procedures and Data Collection

Once singers were selected and agreed to participate, they received a consent form outlining the purpose of the study, participation requirements and requesting permission to record the interviews. Individual interviews were scheduled, taken in a mutually-determined semi-private location and audio-recorded. Considering the personal nature of the interview topic, confidentiality was stressed and consent orally acquired prior to recording to reassure participants who might otherwise feel uncomfortable sharing (Fink, 2000). At this time, pseudonyms were assigned to each singer, which will be used henceforth in this study to protect the participants' anonymity. These steps were particularly important as participants who are active, professional performers may feel reluctance to "name names" or give details about their experiences, which could expose them to potential career backlash. Such narratives are essential to this study, for the participants offer what Kvale and Brinkman (2015) term an "oral history, where the topic goes beyond the individual's history to cover communal history" (p. 155).

After the initial interviews, follow-up communications were sent, requesting any further commentary or additions the participants wished to add. Recordings were then sent to a professional academic transcription service, after which, I reviewed the transcripts the service produced – due to the specialized nature of the discussion, transcripts had to be heavily edited to correct terms of art and other misunderstood figures of speech. Participants were given the opportunity to view and add any clarifications or corrections they deemed appropriate. Transcriptions

were then loaded into the nVivo software program for coding, visualization and analysis.

Analysis

Challenges. It is fair to say that the analysis of the data I collected was perhaps the most challenging aspect of this study. Narrative inquiry is, according to Clandinin and Huber (2010), a relatively new lens in social science, and there remains no single clear path – or even a clear logic tree – to determine which approaches are suitable for a particular study. There are many potential approaches to qualitative analysis, many of which are useful methods of dissecting and examining the building blocks of a person’s life at a micro level. If, however, narrative inquiry is “a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), then a micro-examination seems to miss the forest for the trees. Indeed, Clandinin and Huber (2010) state that narrative inquirers must resist the temptation to “dissect and disassemble” peoples’ experiences when one begins the analysis process.

The process of analysis became something of a narrative journey for me, in and of itself, reflecting my changing understanding of how best to understand the experiences participants had shared with me. I originally began with a traditional approach, using the coding system I had used – albeit loosely – for my pilot study. This particular set of codes examined for conflicts, influences, points that stimulated or stifled changes in the singers’ lives – all noteworthy and useful. I soon came to

understand the problematic nature of this approach: aside from the unwieldy nature of that kind of close analysis of nine different lives, it reduced these singers' lives to mere data points, dissecting them and placing value on the qualities *I* valued. I realized that this approach was, rather ironically, imposing the same kind of silence I was seeking to remove. A well-meaning sort of stifling, but stifling, nonetheless. Clandinin and Huber (2010) caution narrative-focused inquirers, noting that analytical deconstruction into a pile of codes undermines the whole point of the method of inquiry, by "directing attention away from thinking narrative about experience." Instead, they suggest working with artistically-minded approaches such as metaphor, collage, word imagery, etc., to "show the complex and multi-layered storied nature of existence" (p. 12).

Of further complication was the lack of access to the participants to co-create detailed portraits. The ethics of responsible reporting in qualitative research requires that the investigator attempt to present as much of the participants' authentic voice – rather than the authoritative voice of the researcher – as possible (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The use of response validation – a chance for research participants to "participate in data analysis and the re-created of their lived experiences" (Midgley, Danaher, & Baguley, 2013, p. 30) – has long been an important aspect of qualitative reporting, nevertheless the population examined in this study poses particular challenges to that. Not only were several of the respondents not local (and hence, this project was already a significant investment in their time), but the vicissitudes of being a professional singer mean that available time is both generally seasonal and unpredictable. Interviews were collected the

late spring and early summer – just after the end of the college semester and performance season, but analysis and writing didn't begin until the performance season was already back in swing and the study participants were engaged by the demanding schedule of any professional musician. Faced with that reality, the question became: what is the most responsible way to report these narratives?

First analysis and stance: resonant threads and the naturalistic approach. Once I gave up my insistence on trying to follow the conventional methods of analysis and reporting, however, the data seemed to open up – following Clandinin and Huber's (2010) suggestion of using metaphor – in the manner of the Red Sea before the Israelites. As a performer with a background in music and theatre, I began to think on the context of an opera or even a smaller chunk of artistic material, like an aria. What do these things have in common? An *arc*. There is a beginning, a “once upon a time.” There is a journey, a quest. There are conflicts. There is resolution...or perhaps not. Some stories are an Italian opera, full of high emotion, bloody battles, and a satisfying conclusion; others are Russian dramas, with complex emotions, thwarted dreams, and dissatisfaction or complications that continue long after the curtain falls. If I started looking at these stories through that lens, I wondered, what would I see?

The answer, in brief, was “acts.” In each individual narrative, I found contained scenes, dramatic arcs, some satisfying operatic resolutions...and a few Russian plays, too: stories that were still unfolding, which had not yet reached a “happily ever after.” With this approach in mind – a process may be more formally defined as establishing “resonant threads or patterns” as described by Clandinin,

Lessard and Caine (2012) or “narrative threads” (Clandinin, 2013) – I begin to look for story *shapes*. Several such threads immediately emerged – first from within individual narratives and then across the narratives as a whole. In a case of life imitating art, I found that the shapes quite consistently matched the traditional five-act dramatic structure (most familiarly found in Shakespeare’s works):

1. **Exposition** – early childhood experiences, the path that led them to choose singing as a life path;
2. **Rising Action** – formative experiences, the experiences that shape their musical and vocal identities;
3. **Climax** – conflicts arise, often between internalized perceptions/external expectations and the reality of a singing career. Things reach a peak, something must give;
4. **Falling Action** – choices are made to mitigate the aggravating issues, while ways of navigating the world are learned;
5. **Denouement** – conflicts are resolved, or, in the case of the Russian play model, left unhappily resolved, and participants reflect on their experience and next steps.

(Freytag & MacEwan, 1894)

This first analysis of the collected narratives – the search for “resonant threads” – was guided by the naturalist perspective as described by McAlpine (2016), wherein the investigator’s focus is on

rich descriptions of the content of people’s stories about significant issues. So, data serve as a resource to ask: What experiences has this person had? What do these experiences mean to him or her? What complicating actions and evaluative aspects are highlighted? (p. 35)

The goal of the naturalistic approach in narrative inquiry is “keeping a story intact by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes across cases” (Reissman, 2008, p. 53). The use of the five-act dramatic structure is, in this case, a useful tool which allows us to examine the narratives on their own, yet still observing the similarities of “resonant patterns.”

Second analysis and stance: narrative interpretation and thematic examination. Only after the details of each participants’ individual story arc were uncovered and presented in a narrative format, focusing as much as possible on using their own words rather than my interpretation thereof, was I then able to go back and search for the meta-narrative – the emerging themes. Thematic analysis is defined by McAlpine (2016) as an approach in which findings are organized and considered by thematic material, rather than by individual narratives. Themes (and contrapuntal narratives) were then examined through the lens presented in the theoretical framework and considered in the context of the literature. My narrative interpretation (McAlpine, 2016) was thus only created after presenting the singers’ own narratives, and is – in a large part – a presentation of the mutually-derived “symbolism [that] captures the implicit meaning within the flow of experiences” (Lux et al., 2013). This allows for a more naturalistic and, hopefully, authentic portrait of the participants’ narratives.

Coding. Practically speaking, this approach towards analysis involved multiple readings of the transcripts to familiarize myself with the texts. Through NVivo, I then began to mark “complete” narratives – *i.e.*, a chunk of text, varying in length, that represented a complete narrative about an event, an idea, or generally,

any story that resulted from or through a line of questioning. These narratives were then separated into the three major categories derived from the theoretical framework: context, performativity and normativity. At this point, I also highlighted quotes or narratives that seemed to be either instrumental in the singer's development or particularly poignant.

For the first analytic approach, the search for resonant threads, I pulled the marked sections from each of the singers' individual narratives into separate documents, grouped by the three major categories as noted above. I then began to develop a "chronological arc of *meaning*" (McAlpine, 2016, p. 36) from each singer's individual narratives.³

Once the first analysis was complete, I returned to the data to examine it for thematic material, and for this, several techniques were used. To begin coding, I created four major categories of topics: Experience and Training, Gender and Identity, as well a General/Other topic to cover ideas that didn't fall neatly into one of the prior three narrative categories.

³ As opposed to strict chronology of experience, which Fraser (2004) asserts may be an artificial order, in that it often clouds the path of meaning which the individual either experienced or was attempting to communicate.



Figure 3. Sample word cloud created from frequency queries on interview transcripts.

Word frequency. To determine which words and ideas, if any, seemed to be recurrent across the narratives, I queried for word frequency across all the transcripts, removing “functional” text (conjunctions, determiners, names, etc.). From those results, I created word clouds (such as in Figure 3, above), looking for any significant words that recurred from text to text. I noted that certain words that recurred simply due to their frequency in the protocol (such as gender, voice or

singing), which reduced their significance. Other words from phrases used frequently as conversational idioms, *e.g.*, “you know,” or “I feel like,” were also disregarded. From the remaining list of words, I examined the sections of the transcripts where a high frequency word was used, and noted which words produced thematic material of interest to the study.⁴ The results were then either coded into existing topics, or the words themselves incorporated into the coding system as topics.

Evolving topics. I started out with only a small selection of codes, but as I reviewed the transcripts, I found multiple topics that recurred frequently enough as to be significant and required a separate code. Eventually, through multiple readings of each interview, a comprehensive topical coding system emerged. Some topics, such as schooling or experiences in lessons, were simply narrative topics; others, such as mental health, experiences of emancipation or examples of intersectionality, were more abstract concepts. From this system of codes, I was able to follow how specific thematic material threaded its way through each of the individual narratives.

Institutional Review Board

No aspect of data collection commenced prior to review and approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Teachers College, Columbia University. The study was granted Exempt status on February 18, 2018, and assigned Protocol

⁴ Some examples of ‘interesting words’ that stood out to me from this process: pretty, beautiful, required, expected, loudness, understand, sensed, boys/men, mom, dad, anxiety.

Number 18-236; a copy of the approved Informed Consent and Participant's Rights form given to participants is attached hereto as Appendix B.

Ethical Considerations

Having considered the potentially sensitive topics the protocol addressed, and acknowledging the concerns outlined above, steps were taken to both protect the participants' to the extent possible, and to maintain a sense of trust. I purposefully took time and care to establish a personal rapport with each singer from the beginning of the process, taking extra care to fully communicate the implemented confidentiality measures, as well as explain how the collected data would be used. I verbally (either orally or textually) explained the Informed Consent and Participants' Rights form – forms approved by the Institutional Review Board – prior to their signing the forms. Further, in each interview, verbally explained consent, the right to decline to answer, and encouraged each participant to ask for appropriate support if the experience became uncomfortable. Verbal consent to record each interview was acquired before each interview began. Once data was collected, it was stored on a password-protected drive on my personal computer, and in cases where transcriptionists were used, the transcription service used was cognizant of academic and research-related confidentiality requires, and appropriate measures to maintain the data were taken.

The steps taken were taken as an attempt to address the potential ethical concerns in qualitative and interview-based research noted by Merriam (2015), describes as the “protection of subjects from harm, the right to privacy, the notion of

informed consent,” as well as understanding and addressing the “both the risks and benefits to the informants” (p. 262).

Trustworthiness

The field of qualitative research recognizes multiple concerns of rigor in reporting research data, namely: 1) credibility, 2) external validity by transferability, 3) reliability by dependability, and 4) objectivity by confirmability (Anney, 2014). A brief acknowledgment of challenges faced by this study’s participant population was touched on briefly above in the discussion of data analysis.

Research from a multiplicity of sources, as synthesized by Anney (2014), offers a wide array of remedies; those of which are relevant to this particular study are listed and their application illustrated below.

1. **Credibility**, or confidence in the truth of the findings, is established through techniques such as:
 - a. **Prolonged Engagement** – immersion in the participants’ world: As an insider-researcher, my familiarity and trustworthiness are established via my existing experience, knowledge and reputation in the community.
 - b. **Peer Debriefing** – peer feedback and scholarly guidance: This study was formally reviewed, with feedback provided by both members of my dissertation committee and professional mentors, as well as informally by peers in my field.

2. **Transferability**, or the degree to which results can be transferred into other contexts, is established through technique such as:
 - a. **Thick Description** – a thorough detailing of methodology and contexts: a full accounting of the parameters, instrumentation and context of this study has been included in this chapter.
3. **Dependability** – or the stability of findings over time, is established through techniques such:
 - a. **Audit Trail** – accounting for all research activities to demonstrate how data was obtained and analyzed: raw data, transcriptions and all relevant documentation has been maintained, should the need to examine them arises.

Chapter IV

RESULTS: ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Introduction

The following chapter will present the individual narratives of the study participants. To present the “resonant threads” (Clandinin et al., 2012) that ran throughout each of the singer’s interviews, the narratives are outlined in the traditional, five-act story-play structure: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Dénouement – a literary approach which allows for “low inference accounts that represent participant experience” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 36). As previously detailed in the Methodology chapter, these narratives are not portraits, as defined by Lightfoot-Lawrence (1997). Nevertheless, in the interest of providing a clear image of each singer, I have included a brief biographical sketch of each participant.

Editing, Presentation and Member Checking

As the singing world – as previously elaborated on – is small, I have chosen to remove as many potentially-identifying references, such as teacher and institution names and certain descriptions, in the interest of maintaining confidentiality. In certain cases, I have summarized experiences where the inclusion of direct quotes might compromise the singer’s anonymity. Any names used for the participants in these narratives are assigned pseudonyms.

While, as mentioned previously, most of the participants were unavailable to work closely with me as I developed these narratives, I was nevertheless able to

perform a certain amount of member checking, essential to accurate reporting in narrative research (Midgley et al., 2013). Throughout the narratives, there are certain instances where facts or opinions presented were clarified or expanded upon by the participants in private conversations (including direct conversations and text-based chat); this is particularly true of Liana’s narrative, where they graciously clarified many points and provided further information that allowed me to more appropriately represent their experiences.

In the interest of succinctness, quotes from transcripts have been lightly edited for clarity, as well as removing extraneous interjections. In certain cases, there were times when implied meaning – through tone, sarcasm, gesture or reference to shared experience – would be missed by simply reporting the text as is, I have taken the liberty of editing to clarify and accurately represent the *meaning* of the interchange. In the interest of transparency, where it was practical or possible, the added words, edits or clarifications have been bracketed.

Cast of Characters

For ease of reference, included below is a reference table of the participants, their age and gender identity, as well as a brief assessment of their background and experience. In an attempt to present a multi-dimensional portrait of each performer, the “Representative repertoire” included in the table is a piece of music that the singer has performed which illustrates their voice type and musical preferences. These pieces were either musical selections that the individual mentioned as having

significance for them in their interviews or were pieces the singers chose themselves in response to my request for a representative musical clip.

Table 2

Study participants.

Name	Age	Gender & Voice	Details
Alice	52	Cis-female, soprano	White (“describes self as WASP), from upper middle-class home in New Jersey. Attended a performing arts high school and studied music at college in NYC. She had early success as a musical theatre performer, but took a hiatus in her mid/late 20s. She is now singing again and runs her own voice studio in the NYC area.
Brooke	33	Cis-female, soprano	Representative repertoire: “Tecum principium,” from <i>Dixit Dominus</i> (G.F. Handel) Taiwan-Chinese American, from middle class home in San Diego. Performed musicals in high school, but studied classical voice in college. Struggles with technique consistently, but has made progress since coming to NYC. She currently performs but is unhappy with her career and its progress.
Cody	20	Trans-masculine soprano, pre-transition	Representative repertoire: “Zerfleisse, mein herze,” from <i>St. John Passion</i> (J.S. Bach) Jewish-American from an upper middle-class orthodox home in New Jersey, with a father who is hearing-impaired and a mother who is a successful theatre director. Cantoring and the practice of his Jewish faith are important to him. Currently finishing up undergrad degree in music at a private university in NYC, but unsure of future career path due to medical transition.
Drew	32	Genderfluid/non-binary, mezzo	Representative repertoire: “Soul of a Man” from <i>Kinky Boots</i> (C. Lauper) White ethnic background, from working-class home in Texas, family actively religious and involved in church music-making. Struggled with depression and anxiety growing up,

Name	Age	Gender & Voice	Details
			exacerbated by gender identity & sexual orientation, as well as family issues. Studied classical voice in college and at major American conservatory for graduate studies, but currently performs musical theatre and runs their own voice studio in NYC.
Kristina	39	Cis-female, mezzo	<p>Representative repertoire: “Telephone Wire” from <i>Fun Home</i> (J. Tesori)</p> <p>Born and raised in a rural Denmark on a farm, active in communal theatre and music-making through her teenage years. Studied musical theatre in Denmark, London and New York. Struggled with a voice injury after an illness, coming to NYC as part of her journey of recovery. Currently performs and teaches between NYC and Denmark.</p>
Liana	27	Non-binary. soprano	<p>Representative repertoire: “Aldonza” from <i>Man of la Mancha</i> (M. Leigh)</p> <p>Black-creole from middle-class home in Texas, active in church music from a very young age. Attended a private catholic college in Texas for undergraduate music studies, followed by a major American conservatory for graduate work. Currently performing actively in Texas.</p> <p>Representative repertoire: “Seguidilla” from <i>7 Canciones populares españolas</i> (M. de Falla)</p>

Alice

Biography

Alice is a Caucasian, cis-female singer and voice teacher in her early 50’s, currently living in New Jersey – an early bloomer, musically, who took time off to rediscover herself and deal with her struggles with anxiety and overall well-being.

While her repertoire currently is primarily classical concert music, and she still actively sings, her professional focus prioritizes her teaching over her singing. Though teaching voice is a significant portion of her musical life at this time, she is nevertheless enjoying a newfound joy in performing as the result of the intense personal development she's undertaken.¹

Act I – Exposition: “That Little Girl Can Sing”

“I always sang.” Alice’s story began with an intensely musical and artistic early life – filled with different kinds of music making with parents and grandparents.

Felix: Were you raised in what you'd call a musical or artistic environment?

Alice: Definitely. There're no professional musicians in my family except for my brother and I. My brother is a drummer but my mother is an artist. She is a playwright. She was a printmaker when I was growing up and it's very much – there are a lot of painters in my family. [It's] pretty much assumed that you were created brilliant. [laughs]

Felix: Okay. Do you recall your parents having sang to you or with you?

Alice: Not so much. I remember my mother used to read Shakespeare to me apparently when I was a baby. I don't remember that but there was always music. My biological father sang. I do remember singing with him. He used to sing and play harmonica and mouth organ when he drove. He had a 38 Chevy, he would drive – he would drive and play his mouth organ and sing and I would sing with him. He played ukulele and that type of music and [there was] always music playing. I started taking piano when I was seven. I started singing, I don't even remember when. I always sang.

¹ The interview with Alice was the first in the series, so my approach in many of the following interviews was influenced by my experience with her.

It was startling to me, then, when a moment later, she told me that there was no 'formal' music in her young life!

- Felix:** Would you say those first six years that your mother or your father was more active in your musical life?
- Alice:** I would have to say my father, musically and my grandmother, my father's mother. Again, there was nothing formal. It was lots of just singing folk songs in rounds and singing while she cooked...
- Felix:** That's formal. That's formal music.

“I remember singing with him.” One influential figure in her musical life emerged early in the interview – a man whose presence would quietly linger throughout her life: her father, who split with her mother when she was six, and died shortly thereafter. In her earliest memories, “there was always music,” she tells me, and he figured firmly in the center of that. He sang, and she recalled singing with him. “He had a 38 Chevy, he would drive. He would drive and play his mouth organ and sing and I would sing with him. [...] he played ukulele and that type of music and always music playing.”

After her biological father (he of the harmonica and the '38 Chevy) died, she would carry around a tape recorder that he had given her prior to his split with her mother and his subsequent death. “I used it for years,” she says, describing how this became a tangible link between her and father. “I taped everything. Conversations. People didn’t know I was taping them.” This tape recorder became, in some sense, a replacement for his absence in her musical life:

One time in this house in [...] New Jersey. We lived in for a very short time. I put that tape recorder on and I said I'm going to sing every single song I know and I sang through every Christmas carol, the national anthem, every Simon and Garfunkel song, every single song I knew. I had that tape somewhere. I doubt you can hear it anymore. I remember going back and

listening to it once I was an adult and going, "Oh my goodness, that little girl can sing."

Alice's mother remarried, and while she has nothing but good things to say about the step-father who embraced her as his own, after the re-marriage her childhood takes on a different kind of atmosphere altogether. When I ask about their relationships, she laughs, telling me, "It's very good. Musical? No." A Polish immigrant, he supported her musical life and attended the theatre as a patron of the arts but lacked musical interest and ability of his own. Without anyone to step into that formative musical environment, Alice feels that the early absence of her father had continuing consequences well into her professional career – particularly in the context of her struggles with performance anxiety, which she acknowledges partially stems from wanting to sing for her absent father. She acknowledges that this necessarily causes anxiety, "because I'm trying to do something that is beyond the scope of being a human being."

"I'm a singer, this is what I'm going to do." Alice's first contact with theatrical performance made an immediate impression; when I ask her what came to mind when I ask for a vivid early musical memory, she doesn't even hesitate:

The first time I was ever on stage, I was probably five or six and it was a musical adaptation of Winnie the Pooh. I was the little baby bear. I remember sitting on the stage with whoever. It must have been the mother bear or something and another– There were two of us that were little big bears and sitting there. I distinctly remember yelling, "Oooh! This is really cool!"

Alice's musical ability was recognized early, and her parents were committed to providing her with a comprehensive musical education. She tells me that she had piano lessons throughout her young life, and that she even attempted many other instruments – here, she laughs, adding that "none of them stuck." Singing was

always love at first sight for her, and she knew quite early in life that this was something she wanted to do professionally. She recalls:

When I was 13, I went away to summer– It was 12 or 13, I went away to a performing arts camp in the summer and sang and did shows for the first time really. A teacher that I had there, a voice teacher, spoke to my parents at the end of the summer and said, "You need to get her voice lessons. She has a voice." That was when I started formally studying... "This is okay, I am a singer, this is what I'm going to do."

Act II – Rising Action: "I Was Trying To Be Smaller, Lighter"

"I was always known as the soprano." Alice wasn't just developing a musical identity at an early age, either – even before her first "I'm going to be a singer" moment, her vocal identity as a "high voice" had been internalized and embraced. Even the growing awareness of gender and sex divides that becomes apparent at puberty didn't shake her view of her vocal self: "I was always known as being the soprano," she says. "I always had a high voice," and by then, "it was definitely already cemented."

What, though, did being "the soprano" mean, for her? Even from just what I knew of her at that point, she struck me as someone who has very clear ideas about herself, her voice and her capability. Was this an early trait or something she acquired over the years? I didn't even have to ask. She seemed to have a real sense about areas in her self-history that require further examination, for, later on in the interview, she returned to that theme: What does being a "good" singer, being a "good soprano" mean for her?

Felix: What I'm curious particularly here is you're saying that you felt that [there were standards to be "good"] in your early years of your teen years. I'm wondering how you might have articulated it when you were a teenager.

- Alice:** What singing good meant?
- Felix:** Yes.
- Alice:** Beautifully. For me, it was singing beautifully.
- Felix:** Did anybody ever communicate to you that beautiful was the adjective, the *objective*?
- Alice:** I just was always validated for that. It was always like, "You've got blue eyes and your beautiful voice." It was always just— Still in the town I'm living now it's like everybody knows me in my town because I sing it publicly... People often think I know them and it's, "Oh, you have a beautiful voice. Oh, Alice, she has a beautiful voice".

“Loud wasn’t appropriate.” Beauty is always subjective, of course, but for Alice, beauty meant more than just an attractive voice. “I was trying to be smaller, lighter,” she explains. Smaller and lighter, she continues, meant pretty, and *pretty* meant feminine. Delving into this further with me, Alice comes to realize that being pretty and feminine and musical was a way to distinguished herself both from her brother (“absolutely my mother’s favorite!”) and her domineering mother, too. After she describes an aggressively overachieving mother who seemed to be both supportive and toxic and highly preferential to her son, I ask:

- Felix:** Do you think that some of your need to be a pretty singer, to be a perfect singer was a way to establish that you had value in your family?
- Alice:** Oh, yes. Definitely.
- Felix:** "I may be a girl but see, I have this."
- Alice:** "I can do this." My mother doesn't sing. She's not the pretty one. Those were not her roles. She's the smart one. She's the political scientist. She's the print maker. She's the play writer. She's the extroverted. She's—
- Felix:** She's all the things that you [weren't allowed to] be.
- Alice:** I'm [also] a cook. I was an athletic dancer. I do all stuff that she doesn't do.

The need to distinguish herself from her mother and societal expectations for what “pretty” and “feminine” meant magnified the growing divide between her sense of self/identity and the reality of her instrument. Physically, she was small,

delicate...but her voice was not, and in this, she was learning an uncomfortable social lesson: being loud wasn't appropriate. Being loud, in fact, is still an issue she observes in teenage girls, decades later:

- Felix:** Did you feel like being loud was a problem? That being like a pretty girl and then being a loud pretty girl was a problem?
- Alice:** Yes. [And] I see that with my students now. They don't want to be loud. That's one thing, I am loud and I want them to be loud. I want them to feel like if they want to be loud, they can feel loud.
- Felix:** Where do you think you learned that loud wasn't appropriate?
- Alice:** I don't know. Because my mother's very loud. [laughs] That's probably where. I mean much of my dealing with her has just been I won't get in the ring.
- Felix:** Were the girls around you when you were growing up loud?
- Alice:** Yes. I don't know. They were always the dancers and actors. I tended to always to like big personalities.
- Felix:** Right. [As you said], singing, dancing, acting were ways of getting attention for you. But thinking of the broader population, outside of the music and the theater, were the girls as loud?
- Alice:** No.
- Felix:** Okay. Were you loud in class or was this-?
- Alice:** No. I was quite introverted.
- Felix:** You had very mixed messages then?
- Alice:** Yes.

Singing, we discovered, was a socially acceptable way for her to get attention, but even with singing, there were limits on how loud she could be before she began to receive pushback. The disconnect between the size of her voice and her physical person would cause issues for her, for years to come, for she notes that when addressed her eating disorder and her weight stabilized, her breath support and singing in general began to improve.

“Touch me, see me, feel me, heal me.” Mixed messages continued to be a theme throughout her young musical life. On one hand, it provided intense validation, made her visible to a world which seemed to ignore her otherwise, and

gave her a tangible link to her deceased father; on the other hand, by middle school, it was already becoming a source of torment. As a self-described “shy, awkward girl,” getting up and performing felt particularly vulnerable for her. One early incident remains particularly vivid in her memory – the first time she really understood what that being a soprano brought her attention, but also, attention meant being *noticed*...and in ways she’d never imagined.

My school had a huge music department – it was a public school that might as well be a private school. Very affluent, lots of arts, lots of music. The jazz teacher put together these phenomenal spring/winter concerts...there were auditions for solos and I got the solo from Tommy, “Touch Me, See Me, Feel Me, Heal Me.” It was really high, and this was the first time it was like, “This is [being] a soprano.”

I remember the dress I was wearing, I remember the melody, the song leading up to it in the melody in my mind. I was so nervous, so nervous, shaking, sure everyone could see me dripping sweat, but still singing. The validation of that, the applause afterwards, and that I did something that really blew people away.

That was the 7th grade, awkward... to sing “Touch Me, See Me” was like the thing I was identified by for years after that. Guys making fun of me for that... walking down the hall singing in a high, squeaky voice.

I don’t think my teacher talked to me [about it]... When I was in middle school, this whole culturally sensitive thing... it just didn’t exist. I don’t think it even crossed anybody’s brain.

Unaware of the sexual nature of the piece, she had seen it as a challenge to sing and had enjoyed the public validation of having performed something difficult; the boys around her saw the underlying sexual context and she was immediately tainted by that. “Touch Me, See Me” was a label that would follow her throughout high school.

Act III – Climax: “I Don’t Want to Do This Anymore”

“I knew I had to sing.” Alice certainly had the drive to sing, to perform – and she received success quite early in her musical life. By her teenage years, she was performing professionally, but she began to lose her way even before she made it to college:

I'd always had this split between, "Am I going to do classical music, or am I going to do musical theater?" I wanted to sing classical music and that was what my voice was most suited to, but I kept getting work as a theater performer and who can turn that down? I was always on the fence about that, and I don't love musical theater like people who would– like you need to, to live in that world.

I knew I had to sing. I knew I wanted to perform. I knew that there was nothing else I wanted to do, but I was a high school student. I wasn't in love with musical theatre but I didn't want to do opera. I didn't know... how do you even know at that age? You just don't know.

She tried to find some way to split the difference, trying to balance her personal and vocal needs/preferences with the demands and realities of the professional world and higher education:

Trying to find a college program where you're going to get to do both [musical theatre and opera] was really– They didn't exist. I ended up going to NYU as a voice major, and after my freshman year transferring the Galeton School. Basically, creating my own double-major of theater and music, studying with a teacher privately outside of school. Really creating my own– Which in some ways was ideal, and in other ways left huge gaps in my education.

Though she worked professionally as both a singer and actor from her teens throughout her twenties, her balance between expectations, needs, desires and realities hovered on a knife edge – she only needed the tiniest nudge to lose her balance.

“This is the only thing I do well at all.” To anyone on the outside, looking in, Alice’s professional life must have seemed like an overwhelming success. Blonde, tiny, pretty, with a beautiful voice – she was working constantly. Even though at one point, she’d gone back to grad school to get a masters degree in classical voice, she was still working:

I was in that process and auditioning and working as an actress and doing TV work and soap work, singing wherever I could sing. I got cast in the first national tour of Into the Woods and went out on the road for a year and came back from that, and did some other regional stuff, some small roles. A lot of small workshops of new works, I seemed to do more of that than anything. Then I got cast in European tour of Ken Hill Phantom of the Opera. I went and did that for six months.

Things were unraveling beneath the apparent success, however, because after she finished the tour, she tells me, “I came back and did a little bit more and some local things and some workshop-y things and a couple of recitals and then I said, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore’.”

One of the contributing stressors went back to her very early struggles with her conflicts between her body, her voice, and the expectations both she and the world at large had around that. The stress of that constant battle had devastating consequences for her body, her mental health and eventually, even her ability to perform.

At that point I had struggled with an eating disorder for many years. I was very underweight, which was really rewarded as a musical theater performer. I was very petite and cute and blonde and was constantly being asked if I tapped and not being taken seriously. People said, “Where does that big voice come from?” The voice didn’t match the body. I felt so pigeonholed into something I didn’t want to be.

When I ask about the origins of the eating disorder, she tells me it was a combination of many factors we’d talked about to that point:

- Felix:** Do you feel like the eating disorder and the singing [issues] were intertwined?
- Alice:** I do. I did feel very much that I was trying to please people, [to be] an idea of who I thought I was expected to be.
- Felix:** Do you think some of that was related to the expectation that this is what a girl is supposed to do?
- Alice:** As comes to weight and appearance, *absolutely*. Yes.

The disconnect between what she was and how she perceived herself was very poignantly described in a short-but-memorable recollection:

When I was in the trenches of this eating disorder. I had a roommate, a good friend, and roommate, who was also a singer. Leah was everything I wanted to be but could never be. She was this tiny, Catholic, devout good girl...and I was so not.

It was always like she was the one that everybody revered, and I always felt like second fiddle to her. I always felt like a bull in the china shop around her. Which really is crazy because I was never that person, but I felt like this big lumbering awkward person around her. Like my voice felt too big, everything felt like too much. My hair was big and it was all felt like too much.

My parents [didn't understand]... They were like, "Why are you so smitten with her?" I was a little in love with her. And I could never *be* her.

Her sense of not being "enough" extended to her physical instrument, as well. Her catch-as-can education had left her without a solid technique – "I struggled with flexibility, technical stuff and breath... that often felt like it was due to my size. If I were bigger, I'd also have had better breath control."

Even aside from that, though, she was dissatisfied with her instrument itself:

It just didn't do what I wanted it to do. I couldn't take control of it or do what I wanted with it. I wanted to sing more effortlessly. I've always wanted to have more flexibility. I wished that came more easily. I wanted the showiness of it, that wow factor.

In addition to her own uncertainty and her issues with how she was perceived in the world, Alice also struggled with intense – but unpredictable – performance anxiety. "It's always been something that has eluded me by via how it

would appear and then sometimes just might not be there at all," she tells me. She had taken a course to try to get a handle on it, but, as she points out, "My main way of handling it for a long time was to completely avoid it."

"You've got to shit or get off the pot." Alice was struggling, barely keeping her head above the emotional waterline. On top of the anxiety, the uncertainty, the perfectionism, there was a thread of frustration about how she was being received by the industry. "I think I wasn't taken seriously," she says. "I think my voice wasn't taken seriously. I don't think— I did not feel like I was taken seriously. It felt like a catch 22 because that was the work I was getting. I couldn't separate myself from the professional image that you're selling." Certainly, just being *in* the industry could feel toxic at times:

- Alice:** I've never been raped, or never been viciously assaulted, but like every woman I know, I've been harassed, casting directors being inappropriate, I've been in all those situations, and again, I feel like now I would be like, "What the fuck are you doing?" But, when I was 25 and I wanted that job, I was paralyzed with sort of neediness and regrets.
- Felix:** Do you feel like the kind of casting taking advantage was taking advantage of your vulnerability?
- Alice:** Absolutely. Yes, oh yes.
- Felix:** When you put yourself out there and you're saying, "Please hire me," that's not a very powerful position, and I think those are particularly egregious cases. Not that any case of assault, or whatever, is not egregious but—
- Alice:** Taking advantage of somebody in that position.

To that point, she had managed to balance all of these struggles well enough to at least maintain an active – and by all appearances, successful – performing career. The final nudge that sent her over the edge, however, came from her acting coach:

...it was actually an audition and a call back for a production of Oklahoma, I don't remember where, I took it to my acting teacher and I was so over the whole thing. I didn't want to do it and he basically said, "You got to shit or get off the pot. If you're going to do this, do it. Nobody has twisted your arm." And I went, "You know what? I've lost all my love of this. I can't do this." I stopped and I didn't sing.

I didn't sing again for about six years, at all.

Act IV – Falling Action: "What Am I Waiting For?"

"No, I've got to trust this." For those six or so years, Alice filled her life with other things – culinary school, marriage, children...but the urge to sing eventually returned, and with the inevitable stops and starts, she began to take cautious steps back towards music, trying to address the gaps in her technique, in her self-perception and anxiety-management skills. Though she would eventually reach her destination, there were still frustrations and obstacles to overcome:

I'm thinking about one teacher whose name I don't even remember. An older woman who had been teaching for a very long time who was recommended to me by a male singer and friend of mine, who I regard very highly, who loved her. I couldn't connect with this teacher and I kept saying– This was when I first came back to singing and I had to look for a teacher and I kept saying, "No, I need to trust this, I need to just– I need to go in and be trusting, be open," and every lesson I would cry.

I would start crying and I would feel like nothing I knew how to do, was right. She kept, and she would be like, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no...." Everything I was doing, she basically told me, "You are doing everything wrong, you need to break it all down, and start over." I was in my mid to late 30s and it just didn't feel right. It took me a few months studying with her before I went, "You know what? This is just not the right place for me."

Fortunately, she would eventually find better teachers – "[I was] feeling vulnerable about getting into this again at this later age – well into my 30s, and wondering, should I really be doing this again? I responded much better to teachers– the couple of teachers since then who were completely supportive of that."

Curious about that, I inquire further:

Felix: It seems like a lot of [this] was relative to the fact that your voice and identity were a little unstable at that time and so you didn't have enough confidence in who you were at that time to say, "No, thank you?" Does that seem accurate?

Alice: Yes. Now, I would be like, "No."

“Changing entirely is safer than failing.” Finding the right teachers and coaches for herself was a positive step in her recovery of her singing life and identity, but there were other important milestones – places where now, looking back, she can see the shifts that occurred.

There have been a few pivotal things that I've done, over the years, trainings and things that I've done that have really shifted my thinking in – three or four of them, in particular. One was classical, Julliard's continuing ed, that was on performance anxiety. I don't remember the name of the woman who taught it, but she was a psychotherapist, specializing in performance anxiety for classroom musicians. It was a phenomenal class that really made me look at where the anxiety was coming from, and some real concrete ways of dealing with it. That was really the first shift.

I remember that one of the real problems with the class was that, and she mentioned this early on, she said, "We're going to have x number of lecture ones and then, x number of classes where you get up and you perform." She said, "This is the problem with this class is that, people tend to not want to perform." And sure enough. There were a very small handful that actually stuck it out, because everybody who's debilitated by anxiety, they didn't even come.

I did go through with it, I did sing in there, and there were some real techniques, and it was a combination of preparation, visualization, really using visualization and audiation, as part of your preparation to seeing yourself do it, going through the motions. That has been something that I have incorporated into my own preparation in teaching, that's been enormously helpful.

According to Alice, the next shift came when she completed

the OperaWorks Intensive with Ann Baltz, two years ago, [which] changed my life. Significant, incredibly validating, step out of your box, and just do it, that really shifted me. It was about ownership, really. I was there as a teaching artist, so I was there as a singer, in the teaching artists that were

there, it was understood you were there as a teacher, but you were there for yourself.

It just gives me shivers thinking about that program, how incredibly wonderful it was, and how she starts off the beginning with this opera, aria marathon, where everybody has to get up, and everybody's freaked out, everybody's nervous and she said, "This isn't the moment where you have to prove you're good enough to be here. You're here. We chose you all. You are good enough to be here."

There was a whole lot of just freeing, a lot of improv, and stepping out of the way you think things should be done, and then, some more going into fears, what are things that you are most afraid of? That judgement voice just keeps saying the same shit. If you can start to turn around, and just go, "Yes, what else?" After a while, it runs out of steam.

"You're going to see how much of a fraud I am." The primary tool she received from those pivotal experiences was the gift of introspection.

Alice: It was really the first time I looked at, and we touched on earlier, what am I doing this for? Am I doing this for my dead father? You're going to have anxiety issues if that's what you're doing. And really looking at, "What are my expectations of why am I doing this?"

Felix: You said you were able to link some of the issues with your anxiety with specific things... Were there other revelations that you had, if you feel comfortable sharing that?

Alice: I think it was also a level of preparation that I often avoided, this perfectionist-procrastinator, thing.

Felix: Right. If have to you work on it, it means you're not good.

Alice: I'm so debilitated by the whole thing, that I'm not doing work, and somehow, it's just going to magically happen, but I can't look at it right now, and I'm getting distracted with a million other things, and having this looming, like this exam that I've got to prepare for, but I'm not doing it, and that's just feeding the anxiety.

The running dialogue inside her mind, when she was on stage, was a litany of conflicting desires: "You're going to see that how much of a fraud that I am. I don't know what I'm doing. Wanting to that open, and vulnerable together, at the same

time.” And this anxiety, she found, was a thread that ran through her entire performing life:

I think that that is a large part of why I stopped. That I have this whole– I lost my love of it and I didn't want to do musical theatre – blah, blah, blah, blah, blah- but I think I had so much perfectionistic anxiety about it that getting out this and changing entirely was safer than failing.

I can see now, I know now that when the anxiety has been the case is when I have all kinds of other stuff about who I am and why I'm doing this craft and this particular performance rather than just the performance. [For instance,] When I'm doing this for my father, then I'm going to have anxiety because I'm trying to do something that is beyond the scope of being a human being.

Act V – Dénouement: “It’s Part of My Dharma to Be Somebody for These Girls”

“My voice was so much bigger than I was.” The culmination of Alice’s journey was a topic that we discussed in a variety of contexts – her current satisfaction, what got her there, and her regrets about the journey. Reflecting on the traits and issues that both helped her gain a handle on herself, she notes how her perceived lack contributed to her derailment.

Felix: It seems to me that, while your vocal progress, your confidence, your dealing with your anxiety is a continuing process, it is specifically and directly related to you having agency and ownership of it.

Alice: Yes.

Felix: Would you say that in your early singing experiences that you felt you had agency?

Alice: No, I didn't.

Felix: Why do you think that is?

Alice: I didn't trust myself. I didn't know enough. I think too, going back to my college. My training has never been your traditional attempts, it's been eclectic. I'm very aware of the knowledge I don't have. Particularly in the classical music world, it can just be filled with condescension, and snobbery, and things are done a certain way. I don't have that. I felt embarrassed and apologetic, like I had to hide that for a long time.

Though the mental work she did was clearly the largest piece of the puzzle, she does acknowledge a relationship between her physical self and her singing, noting that she is “considerably heavier now than I was when I was in high school, and I can handle my voice. There’s a definite cut-off, when my weight goes below a certain amount, I don’t sing as well.”

When talking about her current self, she is very clearly a much happier, more self-actualized person. Now, her voice and her person *match*.

Alice: I feel for me it's been the age thing more because when I was in my teens, my 20s, my voice was so much bigger than I was. Now I feel like it wasn't really until I was in my mid to late 30s and really through my 40s that I started to really sing well. I felt like I owned my voice and I don't give a damn about so many things.

Felix: You used a really interesting word. You said you felt like that was when you started to sing well. How would you define singing well?

Alice: Like it was in my body. I wasn't struggling to handle this thing that felt really unruly and unpredictable, like, “Okay. I own this now.”

Felix: It was a sense of almost like coming into yourself in a way?

Alice: Yes.

Felix: Do you feel that that was related to technical changes at all or just self-perception?

Alice: Both.

“I’m aware of the knowledge I don’t have.” Alice chalks up much of her current satisfaction as a singer to her journey to become a teacher, as well – it’s given her insight into what her natural gifts are, as well as where she needed to improve.

I’ve had some really, really good teachers. I’ve also had some, when I look back on it now as a teacher, teachers who did not know what they were doing and were making it up as they went on. I think that they were lucky to have me because I did an awful lot of stuff naturally. A lot of things came easy to me. I see that with students of mine. There are students that are easier to teach. There are students that you really got to show them everything.

As a teacher, I came to teaching through that, always having been a performer, though not with any background in pedagogy. My first students, my goodness, I just couldn't- Learning to articulate things that just came naturally to me like, "What do you mean you don't know how to do this?" That was a really, really steep learning curve for me. I don't know if I really started to value what I was able to just do until I started teaching.

Though she now performs regularly – albeit casually, she nevertheless sees her primary place in the world as a teacher – reaching out to vulnerable young girls, like she once was, gives her a sense of fulfillment.

I feel it's part of my dharma. My mission is to be somebody for these girls. I wish I'd had somebody like me at their age telling me, "It's okay. It's okay. Make noise and hurt and, you know, it's okay. It's okay. You're made to be in the world. Just be a *person*."

Brooke

Biography

Brooke is an Asian-American cis-female singer of Chinese descent in her mid-thirties, a professional who performs primarily in the operatic genre. Though she was born in Pennsylvania, she spent most of her formative years in California, attending college first in California and then Arizona, finally making her way to New York after grad school to pursue performance full-time. She speaks some Mandarin, but her ethnic heritage does not currently play a large role in her personal or professional life. Though she is still pursuing singing in New York, she is currently struggling with her career path and the role singing plays in her life.

Act I – Exposition: “Music Was Kind of There”

“That was something they did with their friends.” For Brooke, though she considers her childhood environment to have been musical, her early musical experiences weren’t interactive with her parents (or her sibling – an older brother):

We did piano lessons growing up. There was a Chinese community that would offer different– You would go to Chinese school which included language lessons and history, but also they had a performing arts component. We would dance.

Though her parents sang, she doesn’t recall singing have been a part of her home life – there was always a social component to their artistic interaction:

Felix: Do you recall your parents having sung specifically to you or with you?

Brooke: That's a really good question. I guess my initial answer would be no. I don't have memories of it. Music was kind of there. They like do karaoke with their friends, and my brother and I both played instrument growing up. I know my Mom really likes to sing. She was in a choir when she was in school.

Felix: Music was around you, but not necessarily an interactive thing between you and you parents.

Brooke: Yes, not a family activity that we necessarily did together. When I was in the performing arts stuff to the Chinese school, my Dad was part of it also. There's a picture of us both being part of a performance together, but that was something that we did through the school. That wasn't a day-to-day regular activity.

Felix: Would you say that your Mom or your Dad was more active in music in world?

Brooke: I just remember they'd do the karaoke singing, which they did together, but that wasn't– my brother and I did not do karaoke with them. That was something that they did with their family friends.

Felix: Did they play music at all?

Brooke: I think so. I think they did play music. They had cassettes and CDs. They did play. We did hear music.

Felix: You learned all of- to read music and stuff at your music school or piano lessons?

Brooke: Piano lessons.

Though her parents weren't necessarily making music with her, they were clearly involved in her musical learning – her mother especially. When asked about her mother's engagement, she tells me:

I know she loves music, and I know that she never got to study music in the way that she wanted to when she was growing up. She was involved in music through school, but - but it was something she was only [allowed to have] as a hobby or something she was developing on her own. I think it just [her parents] not having money for that, so when it came to me and my brother, she very much wanted us to have those things. She would drive us to our lessons and would be in the lessons with us. She was very involved. She would take notes during the lessons about what the teacher was saying and what I should be working on and practicing.

Her mother's engagement was mostly in vain, however, because though Brooke enjoyed it at first, she found that she wasn't really enthusiastic about it:

I didn't really like to practice. I'd pull the muscle in my arm and use that as an excuse to not play piano anymore. I was like, "I can't." Then I picked up violin instead. With violin it was the same thing, she would take me and- my brother picked up violin also. She would take us to a lesson history lessons and she'd be there with us in the lesson. I remember that I did not enjoy practicing, but I was in a youth orchestra which was fun. I liked that.

Act II – Rising Action: “I Want to Sing”

“I can't belt, I guess I can't do this.” Though she wasn't predisposed towards instruments, Brooke's interest in singing was much more immediate. While she took general music and eventually choir at her elementary school, though, her real enthusiasm for singing didn't really kick in until one particularly formative moment:

Somehow, I got a hold of my parents' Phantom of the Opera CD. It was just the highlights [but] that really took singing from this vague school activity until something that I really enjoyed doing and wanted to do specifically.

It was at that point that the idea of singing professionally really took hold in her imagination:

Even back in elementary school, I wanted to do musicals. I wasn't necessarily even interested in opera. I know [Phantom] has the classical legit feeling to it, but I was interested in *musicals*. I wanted to be that type of... I wanted to be a Broadway performer. Now I had absolutely no idea what it would take to achieve that and I realized that I was not actually a natural belter.² Few people are, but there were people at my school who were or had lessons and [learned how to] do it.

[pauses and laughs]

I did not learn it.

She was, nevertheless, determined to sing *something*; when asked if she'd considered other musical (or non-musical paths), her answer was an emphatic no. "I wanted to sing," she says, "even though I had no idea what that practically meant, career-wise." Despite a lack of a clear path, she took the opportunities that came her way, such as her high school musical productions:

I was in the Ensemble for *Sweet Charity*. Then they did *Leader of the Pack* and I had one song sort of thing. We were supposed to do *Fiddler on the Roof* and I actually got cast as one of the daughters but then *Fiddler* was apparently coming into with like a national tour, so we were no longer allowed to do *Fiddler*. I was the mother in *Once on This Island*.

Even with that experience, however, she considered her lack of natural belting ability to be a barrier to pursue that type of career – "I was like, 'Well, I guess I'm not really going to be [on] Broadway...'" When I ask about options like legit or even traditional musical theatre like *Fiddler on the Roof*, things that required more of a legit soprano voice, she said, "It didn't occur to me. Even what I knew about musicals very much started seriously with *Phantom of the Opera* and just like other

² She refers here to specific styles of vocal technique, where 'legit' or 'legitimate' singing refers to things with either a more naturalistic or even classical style, and belting refers to the array of more contemporary sounds found in modern musicals, pop and rock.

Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals,” something she chalks up, in part, to her cultural background.

I think because my parents are from Taiwan, we did not listen– I knew Sound of Music, but I did not know Carousel. I didn't know the other rich history of musical theater that exists. At that point I was like, "I can't belt, I guess I can't do this." That's when I became more a "classical singer" but still no lessons, no idea what I was doing and no idea technically what I was doing. Also, no idea of what that career path would even look like. When it was time to apply for schools, I didn't really know what I was doing with schools or applications either.

“I didn’t even know what technique was.” Her lack of direction and understanding of an appropriate musical path was an issue she returned to multiple times over the course of the interview – and some of it, she traces directly to her professional training. “I went to an undergrad that did not have a big vocal program,” she tells me. “Looking back, it was just a joke in terms of there were only a handful of people who were coming out of that program with actual ability to go and sing, to pursue it professionally.”

Not surprisingly, she struggled with the technical aspects of her voice, noting that she couldn’t even advocate for herself in college, couldn’t seek out better help, because,

in undergrad, I didn’t even know what technique was. I knew [it was something I had to have] but I didn’t know what it was or how it was practiced or attained. I just knew that my middle and low registers- like I can sing. I have quite a bit of chest voice, but if I'm trying to sing classically, the middle voice and the chest voice- or the middle register and low register were not strongly there, they were not coming together. I did not understand how to mix the two, to like bridge the gap, no.

I don't think I ever thought about the passaggio and how to navigate through that. I don't recall that ever talking about going through that place and how it might resonate differently or how [to adjust] or how much of that flip [I need] to go into that higher flip. I don't recall any discussion of that. That's what I mean when say I did not know what technique was.

Her lack of appropriate training, also unsurprisingly, led her to more and more frustration with both herself and singing in general. After undergrad, "I was like, 'Well, I know I'm not good of a singer to do anything with this,' so I just stopped singing for a while. It was pain avoidance. Not wanting to face an issue, so... I just stopped singing."

"I was so very happy to be taking lessons again." Not singing, Brooke found, was even worse than singing poorly. "I was very unhappy at my jobs," she told me, and after a series of different career twists and turns, "I thankfully got a job that turned out to be very stable and consistent, which allowed me to have the money to take voice lessons again." Now, back on the horse after her initial fall, she started pursuing music in earnest.

I started studying privately. I did community theater – Secret Garden, Saigon Ensemble. Then I did –I think they're considered like a regional theater – in the Saigon Ensemble, again. I was a super for the opera, for Butterfly. I auditioned for the [San Diego] opera chorus and I got in. Then I was in Turandot.

At first, she was thrilled, but life intervened:

I remember– I started taking lessons with someone. I was very so happy to be taking lessons again, but then she was like, "I'm moving but I'm going to refer you to this other teacher who was a male." I remember going to him for my first lesson and I cried because I wanted so badly to be singing.

I told him at the lesson, "I want to apply to grad school." It was within a year– He told me later on, "How am I going to prepare this girl for grad school auditions in this amount of time?" Which was crazy, [but] he really did a lot to help prepare me. Then I auditioned for grad school, [got in] then I moved to Arizona [to attend] grad school.

Her initial experience at grad school was positive, and she felt as if she was moving forward:

The teacher that I studied with was supposed to be a good teacher, asking around and my teacher asked around. The first year was good. Actually, after my first year, I won a few competitions. I got some good feedback the summer after my first year, because I did a summer program. I had done the summer program before going to grad school and I did the same summer program after the first year of grad school. The people have heard me before and they were complimentary.

Her second year of grad started well – “I got a few really nice opportunities,” she tells me, but almost immediately thereafter, things began to derail again.

Act III – Climax: “I Didn’t Know How and No One Showed Me the Way”

“I was very, very confused.” Brooke’s second year at grad school began with illness. “I got sick,” she said, “and things derailed because I didn’t take a break – I was in school, had rehearsals,” and between that and the teaching approach of her then-current teacher at the school, “things really went awry. I felt like I really made progress my first year, but by the end of the second year I was very, very confused.” Much of her confusion seemed to stem from the ideas the various people around her had about what her voice *should* be. “Something that followed me around,” she told me, “was that when people would hear me, they’d think I was a coloratura. They would think I could access high E’s and F’s.”³ Before she’d begun serious training, back in undergrad, she’d been able to touch a high E. “Back,” she says, with understandable bitterness, “before I knew what the fuck I was doing.”

³ A coloratura refers to a high-lying soprano voice with a great deal of agility, access to a very high whistle register and usually, a rather bright vocal timbre. Coloratura sopranos typical sing roles like Lucia from Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* or the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s *Magic Flute*. In the case of musical theatre, that type of voice might sing traditional/legit soprano roles such as Luisa in *The Fantastiks*, or Carlotta in *Phantom of the Opera*.

Because of her lack of a settled technique, people would hear the forced brightness in her voice, and, she said, “I think they thought I should be able to access [those high Fs], and I actually never could. I don’t blame my teacher because I never actually could.” A moment later, she added, “When I say I couldn’t, I mean I didn’t know how to and no one ever showed me the way.” That inability concerned her, but she didn’t really know what else to do, and no one offered a different path:

That was bothering me in my second year, but in school, in that environment, in that contained environment, I was getting positive feedback. Then that summer, I did a summer program, and also went back to San Diego and saw my old private teacher. The feedback I got from both my old teacher and the summer program, who had no interaction with each other at all, was very, very similar.

It's like, "Wait, what? Why did no one in my school environment give me this feedback?" In school I was not getting this feedback. That's been the frustrating thing – I don't know where things went wrong because I did make it progress in my first year of grad school. I was singing very, very forward and bright and that was the sound at school that they thought was my sound and that what I should continue pursuing.

Clearly, though, it *wasn't* her sound, for her technique only got worse. “It felt very tight and uncomfortable at the top. I had a lot of tension, a lot of tongue tension and a lot of jaw tension. That had decreased some at grad school because someone had finally noticed it, but it didn’t really get better until much later, after I’d moved to New York.”

Act IV – Falling Action: “Things Have Been Changing, Shifting”

“Now, the repertoire is not an issue.” The key turning point for Brooke, vocally, was coming to New York. There, she found the right teacher – someone who was able to help her understand what, exactly, technique meant, how to work on it, and more specifically, addressed her frustrations with the omni-present vocal

tension. As a result, she now feels a lot more confident in her understanding of her voice. "Working with [him] has been hugely helpful," she notes. "I do feel like my technique has improved the past few years."

One of the biggest points of improvement for her recently was finding that the repertoire she struggled with in grad school was no longer nearly as challenging. "I worked on [*Zerfließe, mein Herze*]⁴ with my coach and the teacher and they were not like- They were like, yes, this is great for you, but it's like so strange how that now it's like, it really is easy. Now the repertoire is not an issue." Even more telling was that her teacher began giving her larger, more demanding repertoire: "[He's] acknowledged that my voice is filling in," she says, "and [working with him] has giving me more stamina, so last year, he gave me more interesting [repertoire] last year - more exciting pieces for auditions and competitions. He believed in me, which is nice."

Through five years of work with this teacher, her voice and repertoire are now a good match, and rather than the forced brightness that she learned in grad school, she's found that her vocal color has also changed.

That was something that my teacher in Grad School said, "Okay. You have a voice and a look that match." I am getting older but I can still read young and I can physicalize young on stage yes. Recently, working with [my current teacher], my voice has gotten a little darker but it still sounds quite young, but it still is not a dark voice. It's gotten darker than what it was before. Yes, so I think that I look like a soubrette type and that's stuff that I could get cast in.

⁴ From J.S. Bach's St. John Passion.

“I don’t consider myself very lush.” Though her struggles with technique were the primary obstacle for Brooke, issues around gender also contributed (and continue to do so) to her career struggles, albeit in ways one might not immediately expect. The intersection of gender with singing wasn’t something she was ever overly required to examine, likely in no small part due to the fact that she aligns beautifully with both cultural expectations for femininity and her performing/vocal type – something which surprised her when I pointed it out:

- Felix:** Do you think that some of the fact that the people don't question your voice in the context of your gender comes from the fact that, let's face it, you're very pretty. Very slim and feminine–
- Brooke:** Thank you, because I don’t feel the same.
- Felix:** When I think of the quintessential beautiful woman with a beautiful voice, you are literally what comes to my mind.
- Brooke:** That’s a huge compliment. Thank you.
- Felix:** I just look at you and I’m like, if I was that good at being a girl–
[laughter]
Because you seem so comfortable in navigating it and because you are soft-spoken and because you do have this beauty, I wonder if some of the ease with which that's accepted is because you fit into a very specific cultural narrative of what a female voice and a female person should be.
- Brooke:** Yes. Though I actually don't consider myself very pretty. I've been putting on weight over the past few years and so I'm trying to slow that down.
- Felix:** You're still a very slender girl.
- Brooke:** Sometimes I feel confident and sometimes I don't. I don't even know how much I put myself out there in situations where I'm interacting with people I don't know.

She also acknowledges that other aspects of her voice allow her to navigate through certain gendered expectations, noting that “unless I’m trying to be perky, I feel like my speaking voice is on the lower side, and that's not something that I do consciously or unconsciously but I think maybe that helps people take me more seriously because I'm not speaking in a girlish way.”

Where her observations and frustrations with gender have been in other areas of expectations, like the pressure to be a “perfect” singer. “Being a soprano was just such a big part of [my gender identity],” she tells me. “It’s so much of what I think about. A lot of my expectations for myself are related to being a soprano.” And being a soprano, she pointed, is a precarious business:

I feel like as a soprano, you need to be put together. I don't remember who said this to me, it was years ago. It's like, you should always be prepared because you never know who you're going to run into as a singer. That statement, you could say that about many aspects of life in many industries, but that statement had been made specifically about being a singer. You never know.

I think just being a female singer or being a soprano in opera is very competitive and if you're a male, you don't have to be flawless. As a soprano, you have to sing well and you have to have the right look and you really just need to fulfill whatever preference that table of people has, they can pick and choose, so in that sense yes, I feel like being a soprano has contributed to my frustration. I just feel like it's not good enough. I feel like I'm not good enough to compete with everyone else who's out there.

And the opera world, she said, certainly has some expectations about how a woman, a soprano, should sound:

There was a review in which they were describing man's performance or singing and they used ‘muscular’ – their singing or the performance was muscular. Of course with women it's lush, shimmering. I don't consider myself very lush. When I'm going into an audition, I feel like it's important for me to be positive and perky, not like disgustingly perky but friendly and happy to be there.

I feel like I need to show what great energy I have but not too much energy, but not like annoying energy. It's like the right balance. Make just the right amount of- Respond to questions with just the right amount of conversation. Not answering just like yes or no, but also not going off on a huge tangent telling a story but engage them just enough.

And the pressure to be successful doesn't just come from one source, either.

She tells me that

part of it is how I grew up and knowing that there are high expectations that other people have and that I have. [But also], as a woman, now there's this attitude of I'll just go out there and get it. Now there's this idea of, well, just be you. Just like, be you and do what you want and somehow the success will flow.

There's this brand of female empowerment and feminism that is really difficult to balance, where it's all about the here and now and just you just go, go, go, be successful and do your thing and own it and be amazing, be yourself and be amazing and be— Somehow you are already fabulous and flawless and you don't have to change. Not that these are all bad things, but it's just such an emphasis... [It makes you feel like a failure if you can't be those things].

“Judgy, judgy, judgy.” The lack of a settled technique, the stresses of expectations and frustration took an emotional toll on Brooke – emerging first as personal insecurity:

Brooke: I don't listen to myself a lot. I know the right thing to do is for me to record my lessons and then go back with some. I used to do that. I don't do it anymore. I think born out of frustration and fear, I just don't want to hear it. I don't want to listen.

Felix: There is a fine line between obsessively listening and listening to observe, not to judge – and that's hard.

Brooke: I'm very judgy.
[laughs]
Very judgy, I don't want to go to rehearsal anymore. There have been times where it's like, there used to be this competition I would do, like my crunch time I would record myself and I'd be like, "This is awful. Like, why did I listen?" because then that would make me feel not confident about the preparation I was doing

After the insecurity came persistent performance anxiety – “Like constant, all the time.” Both during the act of singing and being a singer in general, too.

Brooke: I have anxiety that is associated with my singing. For example, I don't practice enough because I've stopped making it a priority/I'm busy doing things and sometimes when I'm not busy, but I no longer make it a priority and I feel guilty, so I just don't do it correctly. It's a cycle. I have anxiety about my schedule about being very busy, which translates to feeling stressed when I do have something to prepare for, I feel like

I'm not prepared well enough because of my schedule and because I'm not making it a priority to prepare, because I have my full-time day job and then I also run this organization, and I have a relationship and we have a dog, so... [laughs]

Felix: I love the dog addition.

Brooke: Yes, because he's a big responsibility too. I have some anxiety in my lessons when I feel like my "voice" isn't working that day for whatever reason like allergies, or I'm just tired, or if I feel like I have not put in enough work on my own and I'm coming into this lesson for it, and so, therefore, it's not the most effective way to have a lesson.

Act V – Dénouement: “Being A Singer Really Does Not Bring Me Much Joy”

The culmination of Brooke’s journey has yet to come. Though we speak a great deal of her current frustrations, much of the conversation revolved about her uncertainty and dissatisfaction with her career and vocal experiences to date.

“**I wish I was better.**” Recently, Brooke performed in a concert I produced and directed, where she stepped in and sang both in the ensemble and as a soloist. I was struck at the time at how beautiful her singing was, and how much her voice had changed since the first time she and I had sung together – nearly five years ago, right after she’d come to New York. I comment on that, wondering aloud whether she enjoyed her voice, and/or thought it was as beautiful as everyone around her seemed to. After some thought, she responds:

Brooke: Although that's such a hard question the thing is I think a lot of my feelings about my singing voice are tied to "I wish I was better".

Felix: Where do you think the ‘I wish I was better’ comes from though?

Brooke: Because I don't feel like I'm a successful singer with success, with a very narrow traditional definition of success being used. The few times that I've won a couple of competitions and that was very exciting and very validating, that hasn't happened in years.

Felix: Well, you have to sing in them to win them.

- Brooke:** Yes, but my lack of confidence is why I don't even try. People have told me I have a pretty voice. So I'm glad, I just wish it was better.
- Felix:** You said better – can you quantify better?
- Brooke:** I wish I actually got more singing opportunities.
- Felix:** So that has nothing to do with your voice necessarily.
- Brooke:** Yes. And the next thing I was going to say was, well really, who knows what the reason is for someone not casting me or not picking me.
- Felix:** Out of curiosity, has it occurred that perhaps loving your voice unconditionally would make you feel a lot more excited to audition and put yourself out there?
- Brooke:** Yes and I know that.
- Felix:** So I guess my question is why– and I don't mean this in an accusatory way but–
- Brooke:** –why then don't I get accepted [laughs]
- Felix:** No – why don't you love your voice? What's the–I mean, from my perspective, you've got a beautiful easy voice that I would stab somebody in a dark alley for.
- Brooke:** Because I think I take it very personally that I have not made more concrete progress in my singing career.
- Felix:** Even though we know it's incredibly difficult for a lighter voice to do anything [in this industry].
- Brooke:** Yes. Because I am very judgy and I see it as competition and that, "Well I didn't get picked."

“I don't really know what my path is anymore.” Anxiety, uncertainty, feeling as though she is not competitive in the industry – all those issues continue to contribute to Brooke's frustration, and she tells me that she has doubts about her professional path, particularly due to the lack of satisfaction she's found:

Being a singer really does not bring me much joy. Why continue to pursue this and to continue put myself in these situations or to hold myself to these expectations when the process is not enjoyable?

Even [producing small opera productions]...⁵ having the ideas and yes, actually having the event occur, brings me joy, but the day to day of it and the conflict that comes with it does not bring me joy. No joy, and even continued

⁵ Brooke had just finished a year-long production product which, while successful, she still found very stressful.

headache after the show has wrapped up. It's like, why? I started it as something that was supposed to bring joy. That was one of the ways where I was trying to explore how to be an artist without [anxiety], how to be an artist in other ways than just being a performer.

I don't really know what my path is anymore. I haven't given up on wanting to audition, but I have not been auditioning very heavily. I didn't really apply to a lot of stuff. Last year was a very busy year for me I was performing a lot, and then this season almost nothing, which in my mind it's like the first thing I do is judge myself for not be good enough to get cast in things, but really it's probably has more to do with me not making it a priority to apply and audition and put myself out there. A lot of the things that I'm doing this season are things that I'm creating or organizing for myself, which has its own type of satisfaction, but it's not the same type of validation that I get when someone else picks me.

“I know my growth didn’t happen in a vacuum.” Despite her

dissatisfaction, though, Brooke recognized that both her voice and her

understanding of her voice have objectively improved:

Felix: Do you feel like your technique or technical issues have been pretty much resolved?

Brooke: Not completely but I am definitely happier with where my technique is now than even a year ago. I think because my knowledge of technique has been [improving]... My teacher in grad school did talk about technique, my private teacher in San Diego did talk about technique and in working with those two teachers, I did feel that I was making discoveries or improvements, but my understanding of technique or how my voice works, I feel like it's just so different now that I feel like work that I've done on technique represents a very small amount of time, if that makes sense.

I know that my learning and my growth didn't occur in a vacuum. I know it all led up to this, but I feel like this is not a technique that I've been working with and refining for a long time, even though it is, because I'm me, I didn't get a new body or new cords one day. I know it has been a progression. I feel like my voice has changed so much or my technique has changed so much that I feel like I've only been working on my technique for a little.

Still, she still finds herself to be caught in a state of professional limbo,

unsure of herself and where to go next. “What's going to happen next?” she wonders

aloud. "I'm stuck in this. I'm proud of the things that I did get to do. I try not to look at rejection and I'm trying to move on. The bigger issue for me is, what am I doing next? where do I go from here? ...which I don't have the answer to."

Cody

Biography

Cody is a trans-masculine singer, just turned 20, completing his undergraduate degree in music in New York City. Born into a modern Orthodox Jewish family, his participation in the music of his religious tradition is very important to him, and his musical identity is strongly influenced by cantorial music. His transition has not yet included taking hormone replacement therapy, and he struggles with the reality of having a high soprano instrument vs. the lower, masculine-dominant repertoire that more closely represents his gender identity. As he is still in a very current state of personal development, his story is told primarily in the present tense because it is still unfolding.

Act I – Exposition: "Singing Was a Form of Speech"

"The Beatles were very big in my house." Cody's musical life began with the sort of convergence of challenge/gift that has seemingly defined his life, to date. Born into a bilingual family (English and Hebrew), an early speech impediment made singing an integral part of his development. His father being hard of hearing, Cody's mother was primarily engaged in helping him with his speech issues – taking him to the therapist, working with him...but also, singing to and with him. "Singing," he tells me, "was a form of speech for a while." Because of the hearing loss, his father

couldn't sing as much, but he played instruments – primarily piano, which Cody remembers him playing very well.

One early memory demonstrated how his mother used music in a practical way in raising him:

- Cody:** I can, because I have a video, and that's embarrassingly on my Instagram. When I was three years old, I was running around the kitchen with my mom. We were working on Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds. This is what she was having me sing too, because I would just run off unannounced as a toddler and they would know where I went. To hear that I was around, she would just start the line and I call back the rest of it, but also-
- Felix:** Singing is a method of radar?
- Cody:** Yes. Radar and communication, and it was typically– it was mostly either the things I was learning in Jewish Preschool or Beatles' songs. The Beatles were very big in my house. That was the staple.

Cody took formal music lessons at an early age, as well – piano and violin at five, with voice lessons coming later, when he was twelve.

“We understand you’re doing music.” Cody’s interest in pursuing music began quite early, although it took some time to convince his parents that this was the path he intended to follow. He tells me that he

first considered going into music professionally, seriously, when I was about 10. Then I got my parents on-board when I was about 16. Once they saw like my commitment to the chorus, that I had done throughout high school, they were like, "Okay, we understand you're doing music." They wanted me to double major in an academic subject. Then when I got to college, I tried to double major in music and theater, and I wasn't allowed to do that either, so I just studied music.

Though he’s still in college, he still intends on pursuing music professionally after he graduates, but not necessarily as a singer. “As a teacher, writer, composer, that kind of thing,” he tells me. “I don't know yet if I'll be able to do vocal music. I don't know what my voice is going to land on. I'm currently not making that the top

job choice.” As Cody intends to begin hormone replacement therapy once he graduates, it’s difficult for him to make plans concerning his voice, though the desire to sing remains:

I would love to be a musical theater performer. That would be lovely. I just don't know if it's practical. But that would be the one that I would pursue professionally. Because back in the day, and this was a high school thing. I was pushing myself so far, to conform, that I was trying to be Callas. I literally came to school in gowns sometimes, because I was trying to be straight up Callas.

Act II – Rising Action: “I Grew Up Listening to Men Sing”

“High timbre is associated with femininity.” As Cody’s mother was a musical theater director, his exposure to the world of the performing arts made him aware of the gender divide in singing at a very early age. “I must have been about six when I really thought about it [very] hard,” he said. “It was a little disheartening because the primary singers I heard at home would be Elton John, Ben Folds and Paul McCartney. I grew up listening to men sing, but then in real life, for other things, it was like, ‘Oh, it’s a girly thing to want to sing.’” He recalled a particular example:

There was always a lack of guys. My mom would direct theater at summer camp and she started as music director then became the director-director, but she would always talk about having to have girls play boys because there weren't enough boys that sang. That was just something that continue for a long time that I've noticed in school and everywhere.

The associations of femininity with singing made him very uncomfortable with performing publicly quite early, as well – an issue that foreshadowed his gender identity issues to come.

Cody: In spaces for talent shows and things, people would overhear here that I was saying, "You should do this", and I would always say no. I was very shy and guarded about singing in

public. I still am. When I've had pieces in high school that I need to practice for my recitals, I would make my entire family leave the house in order to practice.

Felix: Why was that?

Cody: It's also part of why I switched from the violin to the cello. High timbre's associated with femininity and I'm just like, "No."

Felix: That was really uncomfortable from the beginning?

Cody: Yes.

Felix: Was it something that you noticed around you as well, or was it just something kind of internal or personal?

Cody: It was internal, personal, but I always also noticed myself just more comfortable with low instruments, low voices, just all of that. I just have more of a draw to that.

"I'm the exact same as these boys." Cody's early struggles with the navigation of his gender and identity through singing continued through his religious practice. Though traditional Judaic liturgy has different musical contexts for men and women, there was always an appeal for Cody, and he tried to find ways in which to be involved – both in terms of religious practice and musical participation. He had a Bat Mitzvah originally, but a Bar Mitzvah in 2017, as well, and has learned to sing portions of the liturgy that were available to him, such as that *Haftarah*, which has no gender restrictions.⁶ Other attempts to participate, however, were sometimes met with puzzlement:

Cody: One of the things that I did a lot of was Jewish choral music in high school, in middle school, and there's a large prize set on being a tenor. That's the cantorial kind of voice, and I would be very competitive and try out for all those solos up the octave without even thinking about how that's obviously different, because I just saw myself as the same as those tenors. That is of very large part of my background.

Felix: How was that received?

⁶ The practices of participation and gender in the Judaic liturgy is complex and varies between denominations. The examples described here reflect my own understanding of Cody's experiences, and may not necessarily reflect other practices.

Cody: With a lot of confusion, especially because the way that I was presenting in public still I had long hair, I would have to wear long sleeves, long skirts, and so people were very confused by the fact that in my brain I was like, "I'm the exact same as these boys."

The differences between societal expectations for male and female voice were made very clear to Cody in a liturgical context as well – further alienating him from his own voice.

Cody: When I was younger and everyone had high voices, because there were a lot of boys in the soprano section in middle school and elementary school chorus, it didn't feel like an anomaly to me. With age, and with the shifting of what is the norm, has raised red flags over time.

Felix: Can you give me an example?

Cody: I would say that the example of the bar mitzvah, at that point, where there's the adulthood time. You have the aggressive amount of voice cracks, when you go to a bar mitzvah. Whereas, at a bat mitzvah, especially if it's a bat mitzvah where there is any singing involved on the part of the person having the bat mitzvah, you're expected to sound beautiful, and, "That was wonderful." But with the guys, it's usually like, "That was a very heartfelt speech." Because the guy is busy sounding like a mess. That's altered my perception because there are things that are expected at a certain point in time, from people.

Though there is not, as yet, a clear place for Cody as a cantorial (liturgical) singer, participating musically in his faith is still important to him, and he is looking for places that provide a space for him:

I'm not abandoning [it], but at the same time, it's evolved over time. I also do love– my favorite is the Friday Night Service. If I ever have the range where I can comfortably sing the Friday Night Service, I will be very happy because the people, who lead it at this school in the egalitarian tradition. They have an alto do half of it usually, and then half of it be like a guy who's like maybe a baritone or a tenor. I struggle with the baritone, tenor part. But when I try to do the alto stuff down the octave, because I'm on the men's side and I don't want to get in trouble, it's just [uncomfortable] and then Saturday morning I have no voice.

Act III – Climax: “I’ve Had to Be Very Creative”

“It doesn’t always feel like a compliment.” As Cody cannot begin his hormonal transition until her graduates from college, his voice is still a high soprano, with a bright timbre – something that complicates his feelings around singing and his voice. Due to the predominance of bright, upper partials in a female voice as it ascends, he feels very uncomfortable with singing in a higher register, particularly past a certain level of loudness...even aside from the gendered nature of the repertoire he is usually assigned by his teachers.

The way that I feel toward singing is very wrapped up in perception of gender and I realize that at times I can divorce those two things but when it is presented to me as a gendered character I struggle with it. One of the times that I was able to overcome that impressively was last spring when I got to sing one of the pieces from Carmen and I have loved Carmen ever since I was a very small child so I was super excited. I wore a red suit and [even though] my teacher looked at me like I had two heads, that was a way I was able to divorce myself from the material.

Being able to separate himself from the gendered aspects of the music also allows him to sing with less anxiety as his discomfort around the conflict between his voice and his identity affects how (as well as how frequently) he is able to sing in public.

Aside from the anxiety it creates around his singing, the femininity of his singing voice creates social awkwardness, as well:

There are times where even though people know [about my trans identity] – They hear me singing then afterward misgender me as result of having heard my singing. They attribute certain words that are typically gendered feminine to my voice, that then make me uncomfortable. When people use the word "pretty," I'm like, "I get that. That's supposed to be a compliment. I'm trying to receive it as a compliment, but it doesn't always feel like a compliment.

At the same time, he understands how that kind of vocal misgendering happens:

It's very easy for people to want to neatly categorize things, especially with regard to voice, because you are assessing aesthetics and sound. You often tie those things together when it comes to music. I get the want to do that. I try to avoid having that level of judgment on others, because I would like to think that they weren't doing it to me, but I know it's there... I can feel it.

"I still get in trouble for it all the time here in college." The complexities around "loudness" are an on-going issue for Cody, as well – and one that contributes to his anxiety and discomfort:

Felix: You've mentioned this previously, but I'd like to go back to that. You mentioned that you have a sizable voice. It's high. It tends to be loud. Are you comfortable with it?

Cody: Kind of, not always. I tend to be very reserved in rehearsal, and then, when it's time to perform, I have to perform. But after, in rehearsal, I will always get yelled at for not having been loud enough. That is not even a technical issue, that's a confidence issue.

Felix: Why do you think that is, though? Where do you think that comes from?

Cody: That comes from a place of a lack of self-confidence, overall. I also know that that this could also apply to cis-women too – trying to know your place and if you don't fit in, not wanting to be visible, audible, super, super noticeable. It's not in my nature to want to be belty, as it were. It just happens when I get out of my own way.

Felix: You feel like some of that reticence, or that feeling, comes directly from gender expectations?

Cody: Absolutely. That comes from more socialization as female, than it does of my current acknowledgment of identity. Because dudes being loud is kind of like a generally accepted thing, but lady people being loud is seen as bossy, as scary, as intimidating, and not in a good way. That's a deeper internalized thing, versus the surface things of not wanting to come off as too feminine. I will correct affectations, that's an undoing of socializations, and going in the opposite direction to try to hyper-masculine it.

This isn't a new phenomenon for him, however; in one conversation, he tells me that loudness has been a running theme in his life.

- Felix:** Do you recall around what age the hesitancy about being loud became a thing, or where you noticed, "Okay, this is a thing we don't do?"
- Cody:** I would say probably when I was about 13 or 14. Now, because when I was in sixth grade, I was very loud and unapologetic about it. This was me, back then. I told my chorus director that if I did not get a solo in the concert, my dad is a lawyer, and I will sue him. [laughs] I was 11, but also–
- Felix:** Making friends. [laughs]
- Cody:** I was making so many friends. That was the last of me being like that. I have not been like that since.
- Felix:** Do you think you just became aware? What do you think was the catalyst?
- Cody:** There was being aware, but that was a rough year, in terms of personal life stuff that was going on, with friends and family. I dialed back a lot about my personality, when I was in sixth grade.

He also sees his religious and cultural background as having played a significant role in his discomfort around loudness.

Absolutely [it had an effect]. I didn't internalize it until much later, because it wasn't just a thing that I cared about as much as my sister did. When we were in elementary school, we had to go on field trip to a little town, all very, very Orthodox Jews. We stayed over there, we went to the synagogue there.

We [the girls] were in a completely separate room, with some sort of intercom, to be able to hear, but we were shushed every time that you made an audible sound. She [understood immediately], that day. Her reaction was, "I'm never going to stop being loud." I didn't understand it till later.

Unfortunately, being loud is an issue that still causes him grief in his day to day life:

- Cody:** Hell, I still get in trouble for it all the time here in college. Even professors that use my pronouns, they still use things like bossy, or assertive, or any of that to refer to me in theory class, when I Hermione Granger up that place, being like–
- Felix:** Do you see them use the same terms with cis male students?

Cody: No. These are younger professors, they don't misgender me, but there's still a lack of connecting in the brain to view me as a guy. I will always be a different kind of guy than a cis guy. I know that.

The word inappropriate gets used a lot, as well. My adviser had a meeting with me. She basically was just like, "Just be very quiet, and graduate, and get out into the world and make a difference, please." She's like, "I can't help you while you're here. Just keep your head down."

Act IV – Falling Action: “That is Time I Cannot Get Back”

Though Cody's journey is still unfolding, he still has regrets about his experiences with singing in his life and education so far. "I would have liked to put my foot down," he tells me, regarding waiting to go on hormone treatment till after college. "It was not my choice to not go on hormones until after college. I would have put my foot down. And that is time I cannot get back, but it is time that was not wasted, because I have worked. I would have taken that time back, to do it, and get training under a college program while taking hormones, because I'm jealous of people that do."

He's also aware of how his personal discomfort can, at times, collide with his musical experiences and he notes that there's been times when comments from his teachers about his musicality felt like personal commentary, rather than a critique of what he was doing musically. Still, he can see where the disconnect lies:

Most of the time I'm pretty objective about things that are music-based because I'm very focused on objectivity and music. [But that] really frustrates some of my teachers because I also – I'm hesitant about things like improvisation and rubato, I'm just like, "This is what was on the page let's respect that", and then they're like, "That's not how this style works." My current teacher likes to joke about it: "You sing like a string player" and I'm like, "You're not wrong."

Cody understands that where he's at now is a kind of educational and musical limbo, since he can't really develop his adult voice until his hormonal transition has begun. He is, however, trying to create as many opportunities for himself, and take as much initiative as he can, to be prepared for that eventuality:

I know that I am very much a work in progress right now, but I know that my past vocal training is still – I'm not throwing it out the window just because it's not directly what I will be doing forever. I do appreciate the fact that there have been teachers that have tried to give me male repertoire in the correct key.

But it's still a challenge, and I acknowledge that. I know that there's been more sensitivity in the last year or so, with respect to my gender in relation to my training. It's not all the way there, and it's going to continue to progress from where it is, right now.

I would say that I've had to be very creative in my college career, in the time that I've put my goals for myself on hold, to receive this training. I do not know how that will affect things going down the line, but I know that, for now, what I have done has been just sort of a stop-gap measure, to keep singing, while I wait.

Act V – Dénouement: “People Want to Neatly Categorize Things”

Cody's recognizes that he's made progress with his singing, but he continues to struggle with the disconnect between his technical achievement and the reality of his (feminine-sounding) instrument:

When I'm being objective, on days where I can be objective about the quality of it, I can say that I am happy with where it has gotten to – as a singing voice. The fact that it is *my* singing voice? Not so happy. As a thing that I have crafted and worked on, as an instrument, if I thought of it the same way I think of my cello, I'd be stoked. Very very proud, from a technique perspective. From a voice-belonging-to-me perspective, less so.

Several weeks after his interview, Cody shared some of the thoughts he'd had since the interview:

I hadn't considered just how toxic my masculinity had become in things but now I see that and I get it but feel some guilt as well. Hearing it out loud gives

it room to resonate. I still feel disenfranchised by the art form at times and feel like I should be able to do what I love and be myself.

I find myself being a more vocal self-advocate these days and hope to progress. I refuse to abandon myself or my love of music in this journey... My gender doesn't make a difference to my passion for the art.

Drew

Biography

Drew is a gender-fluid, non-binary identified Caucasian singer and voice teacher in their early thirties who both actively pursues a performing career in musical theatre and teaches voice privately. Originally from Texas and now living and working in New York City, they are the first in their immediate family to attend college and pursue a professional career stemming from their studies. Though they've struggled with their identity and sexuality, particularly about the expectations of gender in the context of their performing career, they have recently found success in a musical niche which allows them more freedom in personal authenticity.

Act I – Exposition: “There’s No Self-Consciousness About It, We’re Just Singing”

“They’re both really theatrical people.” Like Alice, Drew didn't consider their early environment to be musical, though she described a great deal of informal music making from the earliest ages.

- Felix:** Were you raised in what you call a musical, or artistic environment?
- Drew:** No. Neither my parents were musicians or in the arts, at all. They're both music lovers. All pop music. There was not any art music being played. No one played an instrument in my

home. They were always playing the Beatles, K.D. Lang, whatever. Those are the big influences in my life. They're both really theatrical people. My dad always makes up songs, and that sort of thing. Very expressive people, is the way I put it. I started singing in the children's choir at my church when I was about six.

- Felix:** Do you recall your parents having sung to you or with you?
- Drew:** Both. All the time. Nonstop. My dad, there was a song for pooping. There was a song for wee-wee. There was a song for getting on car trips. There was a song for evening prayer, for dinner. It was just very un-self-conscious. My dad is the type of guy who, when you're driving, he'll just sing a sign. He'll just be like, "Taco-cabana," or whatever. Always singing.
- Felix:** Very familiar. My dad would make up silly songs, and it was just understood, at some point, that you get to make up songs [as you go along]. That was it. That was the point.
- Drew:** We're singing. There's no self-consciousness about it. We're singing.

Though her parents were equally strong singers, they tell me that her father was more active in singing and making music with them, but that there was also a consistent dialogue around why that was.

My mom put on music all the time, and she sang a lot too. She was a very un-self-conscious singer. At least the party line at home, was that dad was the better singer, even though my perception, still to this day, they're both equally good singers. My mom is not just as confident. Was [that] ever stated out loud? Yes. All the time. My dad would never say that. My dad would be like, "Oh, whatever. I'm not a singer." That sort of thing. My mom would always be like, "Your dad's the one with a beautiful voice. Your dad blah, blah, blah." That's just her way, as well. She would also be like, "Your dad is the smart one. I was just smart enough to marry him." How seriously did I take it? Not seriously, but that was said, all the time.

Despite the noted difference in levels of participation, however, Drew still recalled instances of their mother's musical engagement, as well:

I remember laying in the bath tub being probably four or five, and my mom singing Paul McCartney songs, like it was all, "Hands across the water, hands across the sky," and then she would segue to "Little little gypsy, get around, get around," so she would do the whole montage with me, and make it really magical, and we always sang in the bath. Bath time was always time to sing.

“I’m enjoying this incorrectly.” Drew’s memories of childhood music making were vivid and detailed, but not always happy – reflecting the confusion around music-making that would follow them well into their adult life. These memories seemed to significantly involve their father in various ways. In one such story, because their father was a TV director, there was a family video camera in their home, which recorded some of her early music making as a child in the 80’s. In one such instance, their mother had setup the camera while Drew played with a neighborhood child. Their mother put on a *Wee Sing* tape of patriotic songs,⁷ and had them march in circles for the camera, singing “You’re a Grand Ol’ Flag.”

We had gotten halfway through the song, and I was having just like the best time, and then, my mom went, “Oh, Dee-Dee, where’s your flag? Where’s your flag?” and then, I realized everybody else had a flag, and it was a flag song. And I immediately just burst into tears. Because I have OCD, and I didn’t know it at the time, but my brain was like, “This is wrong! I’m supposed to have a flag. I’m enjoying this incorrectly.”

Another musical memory also involved the ‘correctness’ in doing musical things. Drew’s mother and her side of the family were Catholic; their father and his family were Methodist. Drew was raised Catholic, and though their father never converted (to Catholicism), they received some mixed messages about his status as a Christian:

At the time, I was probably four or five, and I understood that my dad was not Catholic, that he was different. But it was fine – there was no statement that that was a problem, but I didn’t understand the difference of being a

⁷ The “Wee Sing” (www.weesing.com) series was a line of music books with tapes for kids to sing along. Each set had a theme – “Wee Sing Silly Songs.” “Wee Sing Around the World.” This particular edition was “Wee Sing America.” The Wee Sing series was influential in Drew’s early life, as well as my own and other study participants, too.

Catholic and being Christian. I thought, I'm a Christian and he's not what I am, so he's not a Christian.

But, we had a We Sing Christian tape, and one of the songs was, "I am a C-, I am a C-H-, I am a C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N." I memorized on the tape where that song came, in the track listing, because I was so uncomfortable being around my dad when that song was on, because it felt like, "I'm this and you're not, and I don't want to make it awkward for you." I would literally, in the middle of the song before it, go into my bedroom, and act like I was doing something else, and then wait, because I couldn't hear, so I would wait until it was probably over, and then, come back out because like, I didn't want to make him more uncomfortable.

"No one will understand." Though Drew had affirming, positive (and musical) experiences at home, their entrance into the social world marked the beginning of their struggles with gender and identity.

I'd gone to the preschool, and it was my first time in like a social setting in that way. And it was very not structured – more like Mother's Day Out than a really good preschool. The boys would all run around in a circle playing Star Wars, they would have like guns and stuff and chase each other. The girls were expected to either play kitchen or play with these dopey little people dolls, that were too [infantile], they weren't sophisticated enough. They weren't Legos, they were for toddlers.

I was also so disturbed by the fact that it was so gendered, that the boys are doing this, the girls are doing that? I remember I tried to play with the boys and I was beat up. I was pushed, like the boys physically rejected me from that. When I played with the girls I just felt like, "This is stupid." And I remember there was one little boy who would like to play with the big Legos, and I remember just sitting next to him and being like, "We can be the same way. We are the same." Just looking for some place to belong.

That day, we went out on the playground, I remember going to the back, by the fence, sitting under these trees, sitting on this wooden railing and just heaving. I didn't understand why, but I was just so alone. I felt so empty and I felt like everything was fucked up, beyond repair. Some kids came out and were like, "What's wrong, what's wrong?" And I just remember telling them, "You won't understand."

"No one will ever understand." That was the beginning of that.

Act II – Rising Action: “These Are My People, This is It!”

“It gave me a tremendously satisfying role to play.” Musical performance was something that Drew was involved in heavily. By ninth grade, they tell me, “Yes. I had already been singing at church and been cantoring at church. I started cantoring at children's mass when I was nine. And so, I had been solo singing from a very young age, and I had started doing theater outside of school.”

Theatre became an important part of Drew's life, as it gave them a place to retreat from their feelings of gender non-conformity. “I started doing musical theater outside of school,” they recalled. “I joined this group called ‘Kids Acting’ the summer before eighth grade. That was life-changing. I had been so unhappy, my whole childhood, I'd been depressed.” At theatre camp, though, they immediately found a place that gave them a sense of personal, gender and sexual identity:

The first day there was this group of kids that had done the camp, a number of times. They were all running to each other like, “Oh my gosh, you're here.” It was boys and girls all playing together, and a lot of the boys were very flamboyant. Some of the girls were more masculine, and it was just all different types of kids.

They built a human pyramid and this one boy, very gay guy, got on the top. He had long, curly blonde hair, and I just remember sitting there going, “This is my people. This is it.” So excited.

Once I started doing that, that was how I found out about the word bisexual, and instantly was like, “Oh well that's me. I didn't know that that was a thing, but obviously, yes.” I have never been in the closet, but I heard that word right as puberty was hitting, so it was good timing.

From that point on, Drew's musical and theatrical life blossomed. “When I got to high school, I sang in choir,” they tell me. “I was the choir president my senior year. I was first year all-state, junior and senior year. I kept doing theater outside of school and playing all the ingenue new roles.” Their place in the performing arts

provided a comfortable, reassuring identity, with which they could navigate the world:

Drew: It gave me a tremendously satisfying role to play. In middle school, I remember there was a day when I was singing "I Dreamed A Dream" for something. Everybody had to get up and sing their solo, and these really popular girls – they all stayed afterward and were like, "Wow, like, you're such a good singer, like wow," and I was like "Thanks," [laughs] I remember going, "This is great. This is a way that they will like me and not mock me."

Felix: So it was social currency?

Drew: It was social currency. It was a way to be in the world.

"I'd learned that love was transactional." Like Brooke, Drew wanted to sing professionally at an early age (12) but had no real understanding of what that would entail. The difference for Drew was that their desire to pursue a performing career had an element of emotional desperation to it:

When I was in fifth grade, I had a solo on "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" in my elementary school choir. We had two performances, I nailed the first one and the second one, my voice cracked at the very end. I walked right off the stage, and out of the auditorium. The principal followed me and comforted me, gave me a little purple cup of water and was like, "It's okay, nobody's perfect," and I was just like, "You don't understand. I have to be the best singer in the world." Because I'd already, by that point, learned that love was something transactional and that you had to earn love, and singing was how I got social approval. So it was like, "Well no one will ever love me if I fail." That was how that operated for many years.

Similarly, when Drew graduated high school and was choosing a college, their need to be perfect influenced their decision making:

When I was in high school I'd always done musical theater, but I wanted to be the best singer I could possibly be. To me, it felt like the idea of going to a musical theater school was like buying a solid gold trailer, and I'd rather just buy a house. I decided I wanted to school for opera, because I just wanted to learn the real shit. So it wasn't because I loved opera. Ultimately, for me, it was the right thing, I have no regrets, but I had never even seen an opera and I [went] to opera school.

“This was very osmosis learning, no one was saying that.” While music and theatre were providing Drew with a kind of identity during adolescence, they were also learning that the gender differences they observed socially applied – in certain ways – to singing, as well. “It felt like singing was feminine,” they said, thinking back. “There was this sense that it was something beautiful and light. Yes, I thought of it as a feminine thing. I always associated it with a sense of clarity and purity and ping. Ringing a beautiful bell... very feminine and very poised. Graceful.”

With a father who was so active in their musical life, though, that contrast between singing as a feminine quality and their own experience was stark. Drew explained their perception of the situation:

I definitely understood that he did not sing in public. [Singing] was something that was at home. And I think I probably asked it, at some point, in high school, or college, “Why didn't you ever join a choir? Why didn't you ever learn to play an instrument?” Because my dad, his brother is a good singer, and sings in the church choir and stuff. And, certainly my dad's family, no one else is a musician like I'm a musician, a professional musician, but some of my uncle Robert's kids also like, learned to play guitar. I think it was generally regarded that singing was more sissified? And that men played instruments, and that was the way things were. This was very osmosis learning. No one was saying that.

The idea that instruments were for boys and singing for girls played out in ways that caused Drew a lot of resentment.

Getting into puberty, there was kind of a growing sense that boys were learning guitar and piano. My brother started taking piano lessons when he was seven, and I wanted to take piano lessons, but I didn't get piano lessons, because I was already good at something. I was already a singer. So that was like, “You don't get both.” I wasn't taking singing lessons but it was sort of like, “He needs this, and you don't need it,” so that felt unfair, but it definitely felt gendered. It definitely felt like, “He gets this because he's a boy.”

Act III – Climax: “I Didn’t Feel Like Myself”

“It was something you got good at.” Playing a role continued into adulthood for Drew, not unlike what they’d done in high school, only now, more complex and with far higher stakes – both career-wise and for their own mental health. Performing femininity, in particular, took on a special weight:

I got very good at it. I was very competitive. When I was in college, in Texas, I got good at being the cool hippy girl, and then, I moved up to New York, and suddenly there are these opera girls, where they were wearing Chanel, and one of my teachers pulled me aside, and very rightly, was like, "You need to start dressing better, because you look like a hobo. I understand you look cool, but in this industry people will judge you really hard core, so you really need to learn how to dress really well."

Femininity – something Drew learned from their mother – was “a secret weapon,” something that could get you things.

When I present as cis-gendered, it makes me feel bad. But I will still wear that skirt tomorrow because it worked. I will trade on that, and I think that that is something else that my mom really trained me to do. I don't think she's necessarily a cis-gendered person [herself], entirely, and so her explanation of all this was very transactional. She wasn't like, "It'll feel so good. It'll feel so great," she was like, "People will really like it if this." I have a nice face. I have a pretty face, and I know how to put on makeup really well. I look like a hot woman.

I also have really thick hair, and for a long time it was this sense of, "It would be wrong of me, it would be ungrateful of me to waste those feminine wiles." For a while, I had this hairdresser that was like, "I'm never going to cut your hair." When I first started dating my husband one of the first things I did was I cut my hair to here, which I'd never done, because my mom had told me my whole life, "You will always regret it if you cut your hair short." These messages were drilled into me. Any kind of masculine expression was something that I would regret, regret, regret.

Not only was it a way to get things, for Drew it was armor: if they were perfect and feminine enough,

no one will hurt me. For me, I had this huge abandonment fear, for a very long time. I had to play the good little girl. That was my role, was "good girl."

Those two things were inextricably linked, that goodness, innocence, and sweetness, the sense that people could read your mind, and that if you were thinking something wrong, that they would know, and that you would be bad.

To be clear, Drew wasn't *happy* in that role, but it was working for them – “The problem is I was so good at doing it. I was so good at singing beautifully and pretty in that way, I didn't question it. I was good at it. I was succeeding. Clearly, nothing was wrong. I felt like I belonged. I felt safe. I wasn't seeking authenticity at that time. I was seeking approval and I got what I wanted.”

That façade of femininity worked well enough for Drew throughout college but once they graduated and decided to leave Texas to pursue a high-level music career, it was no longer an asset. Coming to New York changed the game.

“Hope this is what they wanted.” There was no single “a-ha” moment, or climax that one could point to as the point where things changed – for Drew, it was the culmination of many things. To begin with, they moved to New York to attend Manhattan School of Music (MSM) for their graduate studies. There, surrounded by cis-female singers who had a clearer sense of self, Drew realized that their façade of femininity was no longer useful: “At MSM, that did not get me as much and I finally [started to understand]... People kind of went, “Okay” but it didn't make a big splash because there were so many women there that were genuinely hyperfeminine, that me doing it was just one of many.”

Though they credit MSM with having given them a solid musical education, their experience with vocal training there was lacking. While it brought them awareness of what they didn't know (regarding technique), they felt the actual issues weren't addressed. They recall struggling with breath, with the physicality of

singing, particularly in the context of gender-related discomfort around their body. "I remember in the lessons [at MSM], my teacher would be like, "Can't you feel X, Y, Z?" I felt nothing. I felt stuff on my throat and stuff on my mouth, but anything below there, it might as well not exist.

At the same time, they were becoming dissatisfied with singing opera – in part because "I knew what I didn't know, conscious incompetence. I wasn't happy with that, when I first transferred up here. All the other girls who [had] been singing in opera since they were kids [while I was] singing Phantom of the Opera. I just did not sound as authentic as them. That did not make me happy." After they graduated, they left classical performance altogether:

There [was] no money in it and it [wasn't] fun. I've never done auditions season as an opera singer...the minute I left MSM, I stopped auditioning, I immediately took one look at the minimum Broadway salary and I went, "Well, that's real money, I'm doing that." because—[singing opera] was very half-hearted and I was always happy with [musical theatre]. The minute I made the decision I knew that that was right. [I realized that] I wanted to be in an industry where there was still stuff being written that saw a large commercial audience. I just knew that this is my industry and my home.

Finding a better musical fit was a positive step, but more important was finding the right teacher, someone who could help them understand *why* things weren't working:

When I graduated, I started studying with [their current teacher], who was recommended to me by my opera director at MSM, because I went to her being like, "You actually understand me, who should I study with?" And she was like, "It was not nepotism, but my husband." I was like, "Great."

Their new teacher was "a very accomplished opera singer and musical theater singer," but more importantly,

his lessons were so different from any of the voice lessons I've ever had, because he was just very straight forward, and like not freaky-outy. He was

just like, "All right, just do it again. Hold on, fix your tummy. No, that wasn't any good. Try it again." I felt respected and seen. And so, I worked with him for three years. I sang Caro mio ben for three years. And then, one day he was like, "All right, you've got it figured out." And I was like, "Great." And I did, and I knew I did.

They were starting to get on track vocally, at least, but something still felt *wrong* to Drew:

I started singing, and I felt really good. I started teaching at that point, but again, nothing was really coming together. I didn't feel like myself, I would look at my book, and I'd look at my audition clothes, and I would just go, "Hope that this is what they want." I eventually just got so bitter, and so jaded and so, "Blah. This business is stupid." I was in denial- I did not have a sense of myself, at all.

"How clear does my body need to be?" Their vocal issues were resolved, they were performing well, but something wasn't right and they began to understand that something fundamental was very wrong. The moment of understanding that Drew's gender identity had not been resolved came

in a workshop that I was in about a year and a half ago. It was a show that I'd done several iterations of. We had two performances. The first performance, I wore this black dress, and literally the entire time I was on stage, I was having a panic attack. The entire time. I could not think about the performance, I was just trying to hold it together, and not run screaming off of the stage. I got home and freaked out and cried, and I was like, "I have to wear something different tomorrow. I have to wear something different."

Then I put on these tight black jeans, and a sexy black tank top. Awful. I cried then, too, because it was still gendered in that way, and I still felt like "Ugh." It was after that there was a feeling of, "How clear does my body have to be? How much do I have to torture it for me to accept that this isn't what it wants? Why do I have contempt for myself?" Why do I judge it and go, "It's stupid if I feel that way. It's silly."

Knowledge was the first clear step towards acknowledging their authentic self, but there were barriers to acceptance that wouldn't come down until several months later.

I had a very formative experience in an acting class, last February, that was associated with me accepting my gender. I came in, kind of at the end of my rope, is the way I'd put it. I got up and sang "I Miss the Mountains" from *Next to Normal*, and I don't know if you're familiar with that song, but I just lost my mind, and left everything. I was like, "Hit the floor. Hit the wall," and everyone was [shocked] - but it was amazing. It was this total watershed moment.

The class ran for four weeks, and in the third or fourth week, I sang "Tiny Dancer." The teacher was like, "This is very good, but, I'm curious why you chose this song. There are so many songs that would show off your voice. Why this one?" It was the first time that I said in front of people, I said, "Well, I don't always feel comfortable singing material written for women, because I don't only feel like I'm a woman on the inside. I feel like I'm a non-binary person, who's just a person." It was the first time I ever said it out loud.

The final "aha" moment followed, that summer.

[The teacher of that class] recommended me to this theater that cast me as Big Allison in *Fun Home*. And I went and did that project over this past summer and it was totally life changing, because it was the first time, ever since I was in high school, that I didn't have anyone to dress for. I didn't have to dress for my students, I didn't feel the obligation to dress a certain way for anybody. Because I literally had to put on clothes to not be naked, go to the theater, change into other clothes, and then do my job. There's such freedom.

Doing *Fun Home* forced me to look myself in the face and go, "You need to stop trying to come up with other reasons why you feel the way you feel. You're a non-binary person," I heard the word for the first time probably a year ago. The more I talked to my trans friends, and I was like, "It's almost like a mathematical proof, if I'm not a woman because I've got a vagina, then why am I a woman?" Because it's pretty much been the only reason.

When I got back to New York, I went to [the acting class] to work on *Telephone Wire*, to work on it as an audition cut. I started doing it and- I sang it a few times as myself, and then the teacher was like, "Okay, now I want you to do it again as Bruce." I started crying, because it really was like "You want me to do it as myself?" is how it felt.

Act IV – Falling Action: “It Was a Personal Quest”

“This isn’t about approval.” That moment marked a genuine transition, personally and professionally for Drew. “My auditions have really changed,” they tell me. For one thing, their performance anxiety has dramatically decreased:

I used to experience it all the time, in auditions. A bit part of it was how I was dressed. I have made a huge change in my life. I just don't dress that way anymore when I audition, ever, and that has cut out three-quarters of it. I get a little nervous. That's just more garden-variety nerves, like, "Here we go," but all the anxiety, now that I'm thinking about it, I'm like, "Is there anxiety associated with my identity and gender stuff?"

Teaching, reading psychological-related texts and reflection have all helped Drew understand their own experiences more clearly, especially in terms of unpacking their identity – the reading in particular.

That was a big before and after for me. When I was in Texas, I was so concerned with playing a role in every aspect of my life that [my gender] was just a layer upon a layer. It's sort of hard to tear it apart. When I got to New York, I found out that everyone is much more real and authentic here. I learned that at the beginning at MSM... [that performing] is about expressing yourself. It's not about approval.

"I never yelled. I never roared." One of the areas where voice, gender and mood issues entangled for Drew was in *how* she used her, and that led her to reflect on the role of anger in her singing. Though they'd been singing musical theatre for some time, they had always sung repertoire that required legit or even mixed voice belting. "I was very happy with that," they tell me, but then,

about three years ago, I started trying to do a high belt, which I'd always felt like topped out at B flat and I just couldn't get past B flat and it would just feel like I wasn't hitting something right. I'd feel my larynx pull up and just went, "Well, that's just not my voice type." I heard from a lot of people, "It's a voice type. It's a voice type."

For a long time, Drew just assumed that they didn't have that "voice type."

I had started teaching at the New York film academy and I had seen a bunch of girls who otherwise had lots of problems in their voices. They're 19 years old, they don't know what they're doing and they're belting D's and E flats and I'm thinking, "Well, if they can do it, it can't be rocket science." I started working on it, but there was just a huge, huge taboo in my body and it's anger.

Belting, they realized, represented *anger*. "Absolutely anger," they tell me.

The feeling of a roar the feeling of a yell. I never yelled. I never roared. I began working on it just myself. I decided to teach myself how to do it. It was a challenge, a personal quest. It was really the first thing that I ever- one of the first things I did for myself as a singer that was really just for me. It wasn't because I wanted to impress someone or because I felt like I had to. And I did. Now, it's something I do all the time. Now, it's part of my portfolio. It's part of my package. It's part of what people want me to do.

Act V – Dénouement: “I’m Going to Just Do My Thing”

Reflecting on their journey, Drew searched for words to explain themselves and their gender identity – particularly in the world of musical theater, that doesn’t always immediately embrace people who don’t easily fit into a type.

I’m biologically female, assigned female at birth. I identify as genderfluid, non-binary. A non-binary, woman-bodied person. I know that sounds weird, but it’s just functionally how it plays out in the world, especially in show business.

Despite the challenges that surround navigating their identity, they’re finding that they are *more* successful than ever before. For their voice to really become authentic, to reflect their individuality, they had break free of expectations – both around what their voice should be and what *they* themselves should be.

I feel like I spent years and years and years trying to be the singer that I thought I was supposed to be and then, when I finally went, "No, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to just do my thing." It's not like that's not somewhat calculated [either]. Once I started seeing that [it worked]... I booked my first regional theater gig because I was convincingly butch and no one else was. After that, I was like, "If being myself is also a good business move, then why the fuck not? Why would I ever wear heels to an audition again?" If liberation comes with the price of getting to be yourself, then "Yes."

Kristina

Biography

Kristina is a Scandinavian cis-female singer and voice teacher in her late 30's, who began her career as a musical theatre singer, but has since shifted to a

singer-songwriter style of indie-folk/rock, often performing her own music. Born in Denmark, she studied the dramatic arts in both Denmark and England, but after having sustained vocal complications, she stepped away from performing and came to New York in search of a different career path. A set of serendipitous circumstances in the US led her back to singing, however, and as she discovered a healthier approach to performing for herself, her interest in teaching also grew. She travels back and forth between the US and Denmark a fair amount, and though she still resides here, she is considering returning to live in Denmark, where her family still lives. Because she has experienced both Danish and American musical culture, during her interview, she often compared and contrasted American and Danish musical and cultural experiences.

Act I – Exposition: “I Would Beg My Mom to Sing it Every Night”

“You had to do a weird animal sound and I loved that one.” Kristina grew up on a small island in Denmark – a very rural area that, from what she tells me, seems to have been isolated from any sort of urban culture, Danish or otherwise. Though there were aspects of the broader Danish traditions – “It’s a choir culture. You go to a school, you are in a choir. There’s no getting around it. – there were also musical traditions that seemed to be at the center of a small, rural, close-knit community.

Kristina's family were very musical, and her parents, she tells me, even met while performing in a community theatre musical show,⁸ where they played two lovers opposite each other. Her earliest memories are of music and musical engagement.

Kristina: I remember having a favorite song to go to sleep, a Danish song that was my favorite and I would beg my mom to sing it pretty much every night. There's also a lullaby book that everybody has for their kids called, *The Little Ones Sing*. It's so cute, it's very cute and on the outside. There's a little girl, I think it's a girl. Actually, I think that's gender-neutral because it's a child with white blonde hair and you can decide what it is but I, of course, decided it was a girl because I was a girl but really, you can't tell. I had the favorites, they were marked and my mom insisted we rotate it.

Felix: Did you have a descending order of preference?

Kristina: No, I don't remember that. I don't remember. I just remember there's one very particular one which had animal sounds in them, where it goes sort of like... [humming], like you had to do some weird animal sound and I loved that one.

Her parents were very musical, but she points that that this needs to be interpreted differently, when thinking about cultural context. Music making was a broader part of the community, she tells me, a social skill more than an artistic one. For example, in the case of her parents,

despite them being very musical and to some degree artistic, they were farmers and not artists. They were not artists, but they did art. They were creative people. My mom is still in the choir. It's not considered art, it's more like a community event.

⁸ She described this type of performance as a kind of simplified musical theatre, meant for community performance – something akin to a *singspiel*, with music and text interspersed, and archetypal themes. As she puts it, "There's always a love affair, there's always some kind of magic flute, but it's made simple enough that normal people can do it."

Though her mother was primarily involved in her earliest music making, as she got older, her father became more predominant in her musical memories.

In my younger years, my mother as in like the good night part, I remember her being the more active but my father was the better singer. As I got older, it was more him and then I was opted into their community theater events and those weird fuss like, magic flute-like plays and things and was always— We would have rehearsals at our house because we had a huge farm there was lots of room and the rehearsals would be there, three times a week in the winter.

There was always all these weird people and they don't understand why I chose to live in this field but there it was, right there that's where it came from. It was always all of the outsiders in the community, they were not, they were the pillars of the community but they arranged these things and it was all just for fun, there was no money changing hands all just— [that's what people did] instead of watching TV, which there wasn't really much TV to watch because there was one television station.

"He was considered the best." Her father figured predominantly in her musical development throughout her formative years, in part because he was, to some degree, the homemaker in their family. She recalls him being sensitive, very musical and caring, in general.

He was the nurturer in my family, meaning, he played mom's role and mom played the bringing in the bacon, because she had a job at a pharmacy and was outside the house doing a job that brought the money in. My dad was like this farmer and then he became a plumber when we moved off the farm in. He was always kind of like the one who made that lunches to go and drove me around for my paper route. He was the nurturer by far. The one who cooked all the meals in the house. He was a great cook.

And then there was the music. It was clear that her father had a very formative presence in her musical development, and even her own vocal identity, I asked about more about him – his music and his voice. She tells me:

He was a great singer. He had this really high tenor. Beautiful timbre. [He] was greatly admired for his singing. I sometimes think he was probably an artist at heart somewhere.

When I ask if she considers his a traditionally masculine voice, she is emphatic:

- Kristina:** No. No. No, a very- though in the tradition in Danish, sort of like when you look at someone in his era when he grew up in the '40s and '50s. The Italian- those art singers, Italian singers.
- Felix:** That was the vogue?
- Kristina:** That was in vogue- that was a thing. He had that voice. Was that traditionally masculine? No. He didn't have like a burly kind of sound at all. He didn't have a powerful voice. It was very beautiful.
- Felix:** Keeping in mind that I am coming to this from the perspective of an American, I'm trying to understand your culture as we go along... Was his being admired as a singer because he was different in that regard?
- Kristina:** Yes, I think so. Yes. He would be the person because of his status in the community who would lead group singing. He was considered the best. Because he was- it was special and he was different but still a part of everything.

“There was a magic in it.” Kristina realized that she wanted to pursue singing professionally at a young age, in part because her musical experiences gave her a sense of being included and of having a place in the world.

- Kristina:** When I was 13, 14, I turned 14 in that summer, [the community had] gotten more ambitious in this group and they put up an amateur production of *Annie Get Your Gun*. I was roped in as one of the sisters to Annie there. I was taller than Annie, the person playing Annie but who cares. I remember the magic of it, which I would say I actually haven't really experienced since because you can't replace your first time ever, there's only one first time. It was so magical and it was an outdoor space. That was really special.
- Felix:** What was special about it?
- Kristina:** I don't know, it was liberating. I think that I felt really free to be me but at the same time really free too and included. Free to be me but included in belonging. I was me and everybody was being them but we belonged together. That was the magic in it. That was exactly the magic in it.
- Felix:** That it was a chance for you to genuinely be yourself and that that was okay and accepted?
- Kristina:** Yes. I felt fully alive and fully accepted which I would say is not what my childhood was like. I would say that's a hard thing to

get by in any case, feeling fully alive, and messy, and chaotic, and emotional, and blah and at the same time, completely accepted and belonging. I think that's hard to get but that's what I strived for and I still strive for, I still want that experience. That's what I'm looking for. It's what I try to get my students to understand. I try to do it myself when I'm performing. That's the feeling I want.

When I inquire further, she explains that despite her parents' warmth and a living in a close community, her childhood was still fraught – in part because she had two very disparate experiences with connection and community when she was at home, vs. when she was at school. At school, she had status, but nevertheless felt removed from her peers:

- Kristina:** I was top dog kid [in a] small community. My first school there's maybe there's only one class of each year, 14 students average in each year for six years. That's a very small school. In Denmark in my generation, that was the size of the schools, not unusual. Everybody knew my name, everybody knew my family's name. [My family] had status. Not rich status but cultural status. My great-grandfather was in parliament.
- Felix:** There was a level of remove between you and the other kids?
- Kristina:** Yes, but positive removed, not bullied removed, positive removed as in, "You're better than us, more than us." I was always elected to student council blah, blah, blah, I was the smartest girl in the class.
- Felix:** Removed is still removed.
- Kristina:** Removed, absolutely. Removed then at the same time from my family because I was the youngest child in my extended family. I got bullied in my family but not at school.
- Felix:** At school you're the big but at home, you're the little?
- Kristina:** Yes.

At home, her immediate family was supportive, but she struggled with her extended family – people whom she couldn't avoid, because of the insular nature of where they lived.

- Kristina:** I have 10 cousins and they were a lot older than me because my mom is also the youngest by far. They were 10 years older than me, all of them. When they were teenagers, I was ripe for

the picking to be bullied. [I was] constantly trying to be a part of it because I really wanted to play with them and they were constantly pushing me out of whatever they were doing. It was very physical bullying. They were pulling me under this shower and trying to cut my hair. There wasn't a lot of psychological games in it. It was physical bullying and my grandmother was my protector, she would constantly, "Leave her alone." She was so good because I was, of course, her favorite because I was the youngest. I had these adorable little white curls, I was cute.

Felix: Would you say that they were just bullying you because you were the youngest or was it because you were different from the others?

Kristina: I think that there was that aspect to it, the youngest was a big part of it. This is what the story goes, I was hysterical as a baby. I was crying 24-7 and I still think I am. I've learned how to put it into singing.

I was in one of these firecracker kids, you gave me a little push and I exploded. They loved seeing that. Who doesn't love seeing that? I mean if you're a bullier- let's see if we can get her to ignite. Like that was the game. Of course, I ignited. Then in about third grade, I learned- I actually remember the moment when I decided, I'm just not going to show my emotions today. I am going to shut the fuck up and eat it. Then they stopped. I haven't been bullied since.

Act II – Rising Action: “I Got Obsessed with High Notes and Sounding Feminine”

“If I were a guy, I’d be great.” While Kristina sees differences in the cultural values around singing between American and Danish cultures, she nevertheless soon discovered that singing – particularly professionally – is a different experience for girls than for boys. In her mid to late teens,⁹ she

Kristina: I noticed that it's much harder but it's the same with acting. It's much harder. It was much harder getting into the school. It was much harder because there is that many more women- it's like half, double the amount of women at least to the amount of

⁹ She notes that Danish education differs from the American system in that there are only nine years required, and then an additional two to four year, which Americans might consider 'high school,' are similar to an undergraduate program. These may be practice-oriented (vocational) or academic (liberal arts).

men that applies for any given job. Anything you would audition for, getting into the schools, everything. I've often actually thought if I were a guy- let's just say I were a guy, that would be great. I would have been able to get all those parts. It would have been easier to get into school because with my skill level, I would have been a really good male singer. As a woman, I was sort of like a mediocre kind of a- not mediocre that's probably- I did get into the school. It's an elitist kind of thing. The amount of competition was double the amount for the guys.

Felix: Even though there's not necessarily a stigma for men (because it is an act of social currency) it's still something that professionally is still associated with women?

Kristina: Yes. Especially, in the theater compared to say the music because that's different. There it's more even. Like if it was music business as opposed to theater business. The music business, all those guitar-playing rock singer guys, that's cool. That's really cool. There's a lot more men doing that.

“I wanted the non-messiness of it.” This realization had a significant effect on Kristina and how she viewed – and used – her voice. This, she tells me, was when started to understand that her voice had value in the world. “I think that's when I got more obsessed with the higher notes things,” she tells me. “Wanting to sound feminine and pure and beautiful and elegant and all these [things] from a head voice-y type of perspective. That was also the training I was receiving from one singing teacher.” At the same time, she was also studying with a woman who was a Scandinavian gospel singer, whose perspective was on singing was more from the gospel tradition, rather than the head-voice dominant “bel canto” style of her other teacher.

Kristina: In those years, I had a total clash in those two realms and somehow, the higher notes business won. Whatever that means but that was the preferred aesthetic. I was experiencing that that was the correct way as opposed to what the other one.

Felix: Why was that the correct way, why was that appealing to you?

Kristina: I don't know.

- Felix:** It sounds like there's a lot of what's associated with traditional femininity associated with that.
- Kristina:** Yes. In a way, I think maybe this could be that– I haven't really actually thought about this, it's hard to say. That's how my dad sang from a male perspective in this higher, beautiful tone. I was a big fan of this Norwegian singer called Sissel who is a crossover artist. She has a really beautiful voice, she's the *Titanic*, remember the *Titanic* where there's all these really esoteric, high, beautiful pure sounds on top of the soundtrack? That's her.
- I was a big fan of hers in my teenage years there. I wanted that purity, I wanted the non-messiness of it. I had a lot of admiration for it and I also experienced my family who had that admiration for it. My father's own way of singing was very much about achieving that tone in a male voice granted.
- Felix:** In a way, you saw – 'there's a lot of competition about this, this is very much a female thing. What can I emulate that's going to give me power?' Your dad was a source of power in singing. You associated what he did with what would get you status and power?
- Kristina:** Yes, I think that's pretty accurate. I think that's a good way of analyzing that.

Embracing those vocal qualities gave Kristina a sense of power, but it wasn't without complications.

- Kristina:** Power and yet I felt somewhat disconnected from it when I was doing it.
- Felix:** Because it was a tool... it wasn't you, it was [just] a tool?
- Kristina:** I definitely didn't associate myself very much with it, I was desperate to associate myself with it. I tried really hard to associate myself with it but I couldn't. I wanted to go play soccer.
- Felix:** I have very similar issues with femininity that I tried very hard to associate myself with it because that's what you do and that gives you currency, that gives you power, that gives you a way to navigate in a world that is male-dominated.
- Kristina:** Yes, because that's the assertive power and you can't nurture your way to. Again, be passively achieving power, it's very hard to do.

“Now, it’s not currency. What do I do?” Up until twenty, Kristina studied music in Demark, where, in retrospect, she wasn't receiving appropriate vocal training – “Let me just say that small island life does not make great vocal coaches

move there” – and, looking for more, she moved to London to work with a noted vocal coach there. Though her experience in his studio would be one of the factors in her vocal struggles later, she credits him with having given her some genuinely useful training.

Technically it was actually– I still use some of the things. He didn't explain science or technique or anything, but the techniques he used are really good. I actually really loved taking lessons with him.

What went wrong in it was the identity stuff. He was running off his method on me and I loved it because it made it feel right, it made it feel correct. I can do this exercise, now I can do it. It gave me the idea that singing had some kind of thing that could be checked off. It made it a very objective thing. I could be measured. I could be approved from a measuring stick as opposed to from the subjective measuring stick of how it felt to do it.

I loved it because it gave me some kind of firm feeling of, I know what I'm doing. That was just complete– That's so not right. [laughs] Now I know that was not right, but then, I loved it and I do think some of the things he taught me was completely correct, technically.

She notes that her teacher did see how she was internalizing that, and tried to help her, but she wasn't ready to hear what he had to say.

Kristina: He did and I have a really vivid remembrance of it because he did see it. He saw I was doing that. At the same time, what do you do? He didn't take responsibility in that. He told me the story about Whitney Houston. I totally didn't hear it at the time, but I still remember the story. I remember the moment in his living room where he was teaching with all of the music– And trying to get me to understand nobody cares whether it's right or wrong, that there's an identity that we want to see [when someone sings]. He used Whitney Houston as an example of somebody who is showing their identity when they sing. Though she's really not right or wrong. She's probably doing thousands of things wrong. That was his way of saying it. It's authenticity.

Felix:
Kristina: Yes, authenticity, and he was so adamant about it and it just flew right over my head. I didn't even hear it, but though I do remember the story, so he must have triggered something in me and my subconscious was listening and going, "Listen, honey." I didn't. Because at the time I had completely stopped

listening to my subconscious. I had trained that since third grade.

And at first, it didn't seem to matter, because she was finding success. She was performing, traveling, and then, when she applied to the Danish Academy of Dramatic Arts – very competitive with limited space, she got in. “I got into musical theater school with the Sarah Brightman sound,” she tells me. “Whatever you want to call that. Which at the time was a currency and a valid– People admired that. There was money in it.”

It didn't matter, she was getting on fine... until all of the sudden, it *did* matter.

I went to London and I got training in that voice that I thought I wanted and I got way better at it. [Then] I got into musical theater school and then I discovered that that isn't currency because at that particular school, what everybody wants to sing was Jesus Christ Superstar. [And] now it's not currency. What did I do? I just changed again to what was the currency and how fucked up did I get my head by doing that?

Act III – Climax: “Things Happen in New York”

“No one was building me back up.” Kristina's experience at the Danish Academy was where the anxiety began. Aside from her issues around her identity and authenticity, the environment into which she stepped had its own challenges. Because education is state-subsidized, as she describes it, “that means that society has to have a need for whatever you decide to– What you want to do. This is fair. It's paid for by everyone. [But] if you want to be an actor or in musical theater, you can apply to the state schools. There are twenty-four students every year. Those twenty-four people, they're divided over four schools.” Twenty-four students...from a population of five and a half million. “It's a very limited opportunity. It's like getting

into Juilliard. It's that hard. There's a big filtering system so it's really prestigious to get into the school, when you get into the school, you get your equity card.”

Getting in was an achievement, but once she got there, the experience wasn't ideal. In part, because of her experiences with her cohort, but also because the school itself was new and the program was, essentially, still experimental:

That school was very new because there had been no musical theater school in Denmark. There were actually more students in that one because it was in a test thing, so we were twelve. Two dropped out during the course of the three years. Very small group with very, very poor group dynamics.

Though you're kind of like the selected few, you're still not at all necessarily nurtured. There was definitely a level of just nurture [lacking] in that conservatory program simply because they were new, and then we were just a very odd group of people to put together.

Competition and insecurity and envy and all of it in like- [sighs] It was not a pretty sight, man. I look at the year before me and the year after and they're not like that. They didn't have it. It was just us. I don't know, it's just- Group dynamics is difficult.

Given her background in a small, rural community, a lack of a solid group identity was incredibly stressful for Kristina. She describes her cohorts, telling me,

Kristina: It's like there were too many drama queens, I would say, from my now perspective, and that created a lot of conflict because they loved conflict. They thrive on it. They would constantly be creating conflict instead of creating coherency, where coherency would have helped all of us.

Felix: Particularly if you've come as, you mentioned, from a social environment where community and coherence together is a very important part of identity.

Kristina: Yes. Oh my God, yes.

Felix: That must have been very disturbing for you.

Kristina: I just fell apart. That's what led to- The pile of it led to-

Felix: All the things.

Kristina: All the things. Yes. The level of unhappiness, the level of not feeling like I had a centered self at all. I had no identity.

And with the unhappiness and lack of nurture came anxiety – both in her daily life and performance. “I was fine and I had a sense of something when I went in,” she tells me. “By the time I left, I was debilitatingly anxious about opening my mouth. It filtered into my entire existence. I started out with a sort of acceptable anxiety, I think, but I went through those auditions then, all of the sudden, it was there.” Kristina thinks that the anxiety came from a combination of her lack of a strong identity, as well as going into the conservatory environment without anything solid, any core of self, to grasp onto.

It was not rational– There was no other reason for it... I [just] felt completely pulled apart. Something in the process was so self-destructive, and I wonder about that particular part, the self-destructiveness in that because there isn't– I don't think this particular conservatory program would say this is what they do. whole idea of let's– Like the Marines, "Let's break you down so we can build you back up."

I think that was where it went wrong, and I think when I look at the other people who've gone to that school, who were in other years, graduated with other peers, they did get built back up. Then, nobody was building me back up. They just broke me down. [laughs]

“I had an operation and I thought I was never going to sing again.”

Struggling with anxiety and identity, Kristina had managed to keep her head above water – singing, performing – in school and elsewhere, but that came to an unexpected when she was twenty-five. “I sang a show [with] laryngitis,” she tells me.

I was in *Nunsense*, and I played the black woman, because no black actors. I sang that gospel number at the end. I belted some really high notes with laryngitis. Then, I didn't have the option to rest. That was in my third year of school, and in Denmark, in the conservatory program.

That was the last six months of the conservatory program. As a part of that, you are apprenticing, and getting paid in a gig somewhere, at a There was a three-week run. [I was] in the entire three-week run, because I didn't have the option to not do it. I didn't perceive it to be an option. There would have been no show. I got up in the morning, I banged my voice to be able to go on

stage and sing the show, went home with no voice, did the same thing again, three weeks.

Then after that, came all of the exams for musical theater school... I don't remember any of that. I don't remember anything, because by then, I was so thoroughly depressed, and upset, and anxious, and God knows what.

As if that weren't enough on its own, she was dealing with a great deal of personal loss at the same time. "The catalyst," she says, "was that I lost four very important people in my life. Three to death, and one was my romantic partner, who left me in the middle of me losing three. There was really kind of grief, with the last three months of the conservatory program, at the same time. Plus the show, plus I couldn't rest. There was no rest, I probably should've taken those six months off, [laughs] and just gotten over the grief of losing my grandfather, my best friend's mother, my uncle, and my three-year boyfriend." Even had Kristina been in good mental health, in a supportive conservatory program, it seems unlikely that she would have escaped that kind of perfect storm unscathed. "If that happened to me now, I would still be shattered," she tells me.

She graduated, left the world of performing altogether, and got a job on a private yacht as a stewardess. "After my conservatory program," she recalls, "my rebellious side is what kept me alive, let's keep that straight. Without that, I would be dead many times over from just not having the will to live." Traveling the world for six months was an emotional and physical break for her, but there were signs that something wasn't right, vocally – she would lose her voice from simply talking too much while dehydrated. But how *much* was wrong wasn't clear until her third time visiting New York during her work as a stewardess:

I saw *Wicked* on Broadway, a third row in the middle, with Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth, it was fucking amazing. In the middle there, I sat there, and I was going, "What the fuck." It was like- "Why am I not doing this?"

Singing, at that point, had been so far from her mind that she hadn't really even tried vocalizing since she'd graduated. "I was so happy to be done with it," she tells me. *Wicked* was something like a wake-up call, stirring the desire to sing again. She began trying to vocalize, but she was unable to use her voice.

I was like, "*Fuck.*" I quit the job, I tracked down the only odontologist who really does the work on singers [in Denmark] – I called home to talk to the old principal, at the musical theater school, got [the doctor's] number, called him, went home. He didn't even look in my throat. He was an amazing. He looked at me, like this, and I bawled for an hour, before he even looked into my throat, and saw the polyp.

That, she says, was when "I recognized, finally, that something was wrong, functionally wrong, not just wrong with me, that I was just no longer talented. I had a polyp on my voice and had an operation... and I thought I was never going to sing again."

"I had used the last ten years trying something that hadn't worked out."

At that point, Kristina had reached the age where the voice start maturing – "There's something about it... [the larynx] stops being able... you can't get away with lifting your larynx the same way anymore," as she puts it. Without technique, without having addressed the issues that led her to that point to begin with, surgery had removed the polyp but it couldn't fix everything else. Accepting that she would never sing again, she set about trying to find a new career path.

Kristina: Not wanting to sing anymore was what brought me to the US being in search of a dream. I was in search of something new to believe in and have purpose with because I had lost all of that in my trauma and I was traveling the world. I'd lived in a suitcase for a year and a half on a boat, I was sort of like, "I'm

going to go to New York and see what happens because I need a new direction."

Felix: Well, things happen in New York.

Kristina: Things happened there, and I hadn't lived there, but I'd been there and it was an interesting place. I didn't have a real relationship with it yet but it started out as, 'I'm going to go there for three months, I'm going to live in an apartment and not a closet and I'm going to just try and see if I can somehow figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life.' I was 27 and I had used the last 10 years trying to do something that didn't work out.

Felix: What was the thing you were doing that didn't work out?

Kristina: Musical theater.

Felix: What brought you back to singing here? How did that come back about?

Kristina: That's an interesting question because, of course, I went here thinking I'm going to do something else. I [didn't] know [what it was], I was open to whatever it could be. I was like, I'm going to meet some people and something will happen. Of course, the people I met were actors.

Felix: Of course. Do you feel like that choice to come here was kind of your subconscious way of getting you back?

Kristina: Yes. Absolutely.

Felix: Subconsciences are sneaky like that.

Kristina: My subconscious—yes, my intuition sent me here for sure, I wasn't consciously aware but absolutely.

She'd made it to New York, where her true journey to become a singer would begin.

Act IV – Falling Action: "I'm Doing It From My Centered Self"

"I know who I am and I sing from who I am." After her operation, Kristina had done a little vocal rehabilitation – the brief amount available to her with the therapist, but even though she'd given up on musical theatre, she was still curious to see if she could recover her voice. Now in New York, her path to singing didn't begin with singing at all. "...It came as I started meeting actors," she tells me. "Four random people, the first four people I met, told me to go to the Esper Studio," an

internationally-recognized school of acting in New York City. “I came back to [singing] through acting. I was in the Esper Studio, going there for acting, which just taught me so many life skills that I wish somebody would have taught me when I was sixteen, instead of twenty-six or twenty-eight.” At the same time, she’d run into and begun working on singing with both a voice teacher and a speech specialist – work that, as she describes it, was both healing and reprogramming.

That, she says, began “a process of reconnecting all of the parts of me back to my voice, which has taken ten years. The idea of, first of all, understanding who I am and not being ashamed of it, and then starting singing from there, and then getting better at singing than I ever was from there.” And while she believes she’s resolved most of her anxiety she issues, she states that the reason for that is because “I know who I am, and I sing from who I am. I’ve worked hard at it, it’s not like I just solved the problem.” She goes into further detail about that experiencing, noting that

Kristina: My confidence level with singing is now from real as opposed to where it was from before, which was from this idea that there’s a right and wrong... It is no longer an objective– I have no objective measure. Often, I’m singing off key, but I don’t care. [laughs] I have no anxiety about anybody objectifying my–

Felix: Because you’re doing it for you.

Kristina: Yes, and I’m doing it from my centered self. I feel like my technique now comes from my centered self, whereas before I felt it didn’t.

Though she feels she’s found herself and she’s confident in who she is, the experience of discovery did leave some emotional scars.

Felix: You used the word ashamed earlier...

Kristina: Yes. I was totally ashamed...

Felix: Why do you think that is? You said ‘[ashamed] of yourself.’ Is that related to your musical self or your personal self, or?

- Kristina:** The split-up self. I would say, if I should say something I'm ashamed of right now, and that I'm still ashamed of that that happened.
- Felix:** I mean, that's how we–
- Kristina:** Yes. That's the shame, the not being able to handle it.
- Felix:** Right. Feeling like that there was something essentially wrong with you that you weren't able to process this and move through and find what you needed.
- Kristina:** Exactly. In a way that I should have been somehow able to take it. I feel like I should have.

“That’s why I don’t do it anymore.” Reflecting on how she ended up where she did, Kristina related her disjointed identity to the several sources, all of which were related her gender and the expectations that come with being a woman – and particularly, being a woman in musical theatre. I ask her to speak more about this.

- Felix:** The impression that I get is that at one point in your life, you were trying to be all of the things that were expected of you–
- Kristina:** Yes. Without connecting it to anything inside of me. Yes.
- Felix:** –and that that gendering was part of that.
- Kristina:** Absolutely, yes. I've always thought that that Julie Andrews song from *Victor/Victoria*, the *If I were a man*. I've always thought that was a brilliant song, because it's so true. That was definitely my experience when I was pursuing theater.

And gender expectations in musical theater begin before a singer even opens their mouth. As she points out:

You're typed out at auditions before you even do anything. That's why I don't do it anymore. I look like I should sing those, the nice people, because I look nice. I look like I– Not that I am a nice person, but I look like one. I look like I should sing Kelli O'Hara or Marin Mazzie or somebody. [That's not where my voice is comfortable] and I don't like it... They're too... *something*... for me.

“Too something,” I find out, means that the high femininity (and often, high femme sexiness) does not feel authentic:

- Kristina:** It doesn't feel original to me. It doesn't feel like it come– It is to them.
- Felix:** Because it's an identity issue. That's not the kind of woman that you are. It doesn't fit who you see yourself as.

- Kristina:** No, [it doesn't fit]. In musical theater, I could either become that or– it's fun when [her musical theatre coach] would talk about this, "You have these long legs, you should do like the Ulla in *The Producers*." Or, "You should have that showgirl thing, the sexy *Chicago* thing." I'm like, "That's so not who I am either." That's even less what I am. Those are kind of my options. Meanwhile, I'd sing Aldonza,¹⁰ and not with that [legit, soprano, feminine] voice, but in my belty voice, the way she probably would sing if she's a whore somewhere in Andalusia or wherever it takes place in Spain.
- Felix:** You see your brand of femininity as being more associated with your belt, with taking power, with agency?
- Kristina:** Yes, absolutely. Without sexuality.
- Felix:** Your agency is not related to your sexuality?
- Kristina:** No. I think that's a big thing that musical theater expects you to have if you're going to have agency. The *Wicked* role, the Elphaba, was the first role I saw, who had the agency without the sexuality. It does have a little sexuality in there, but it's mostly without sexuality.
- Felix:** Was that discomfort with that aspect of agency through sexuality something you always felt or was this part of your self-discovery?
- Kristina:** That was part of the self-discovery, I think. Because I have played both– Actually, all of the spectrums of those. In *Nine*, I've played both the– At school, we did *Nine* and I played the wife, which is super sexy. Then I've also sung *In A Very Unusual Way*.
- Felix:** At some point the sexy characters felt okay because it wasn't 'you'?
- Kristina:** Right. I sang a lot of sexy roles. I have no problem with it, but I also don't identify with it at all. It was like playing a role as opposed to being authentically inside of something.

Social expectations around sexuality and women in musical theatre were something Kristina felt she had to conform to, to have a place in the industry.

"Theater has a sexual element to it," she says, but

I've also played – in straight¹¹ theater – I found more roles where you can both be sexy and have agency and be smart. Because that's really who I am.

¹⁰ From *Man of La Mancha*.

¹¹ e.g., non-musical plays.

Yes, I'm a very multifaceted identity, but mine is more balanced, and it's important for me that it's balanced. Whereas to some people, they identify with one part of themselves very much, and I don't. I needed to have a balance. I think that's where musical theater just didn't provide that. No, because it's not about balance, it's about archetypes. Then, of course, that has changed somewhat. Today, I could totally play Jessie Mueller's role in *Waitress*. [Roles like that] didn't exist when I was in musical theater.

“I felt I should sound the way I look.” These days, in addition to her non-musical theatre work, Kristina sings primarily her own music – a kind of indie folk/rock that allows her write and sing about the things that are meaningful to her. One of her favorite themes is the inclusivity that she felt as a child, that made her want to perform music in the first place.

Kristina: That's a big thing I care about, and I write about it a lot. Actually, the thing I talked about in the beginning, where I experienced that magic of, "I belong but I'm me," that's what I write about.

Felix: Because that was the defining moment for you, that was what made your life, is feeling, "Okay, finally there's a place where I'm me, and I am included in the group."

Kristina: It was right at my first experience of identity. Do you really have a lot of identity feelings when you're a kid, kid before you are a teenager? When you become a teenager, that's a whole new thing. That is what I care about, I care about people being individuals, but accepted in a sense of community. I write about that.

Felix: Do you do it through the lens of romance, at all?

Kristina: No, there's very little love song, in my repertoire. There's some protest song to it. The guy I play in a band with, he writes similar types of songs, it's very little romance.

Felix: It seems like, in a way, you're rejecting all of the traditional tropes for women.

Kristina: Yes. It doesn't interest me at all. I don't have interest in that. It's melancholic optimism, is what we call it.

Her rejection of musical theatre as a genre that she could / would sing in seemed quite resolute, and I asked her about that.

Felix: Do you think that gender expectations had something to do with your reluctance to do anything but the indie thing?

- Kristina:** Yes, probably. Because I could never really get behind it. I couldn't actually fulfill that expectation. My own authentic self, I couldn't put that in there.
- Felix:** You felt the pressure to be that.
- Kristina:** To be able to, yes. I felt like that I should sound the way I look. That was the expectation. Like, "Why don't you sound the way you look? Why can't you just fucking sound the way you look? Why can't you act and sing the way you look?"

Act V – Dénouement: “If You Love Living in New York, You’re Rebellious”

“There’s no commercial value in it.” Aside from performing her own music, Kristina spends a large part of her time teaching. “I started teaching,” she tells me, “because I wanted to teach people the way I would have liked to have been taught.” If she’d had someone who had addressed her issues during her formative training, she wonders what might have changed for her: “The identity thing that happened to me in my mid-twenties, I should have had that resolution or revolution or evolution in my teenage years. If I had been smarter or had had some different guidance or whatever, everything could have been different.”

Throughout the interview, she notes at several points that identity is one of the primary things that she addresses with her students – especially her female students – right away. The dialogue she’s had around the expectations around gender for women have been revealing. There is, she says, a cost to rejecting the typical mold for how a woman should sound and perform.

- Kristina:** I have a student who we talk about this a lot because she likes those really raw rock voices. Like Axl Rose, and Leonard Cohen, and Tom Waits...messy male voices. She likes Nina Simone. Same kind of (vocal) thing, just with a woman, but she's the only woman. Maybe not completely, but [it's rare]. Therefore, we've talked about it a lot.
- I don't want to have a messy voice, so it doesn't matter to me, but it matters to her that there are not a lot of female role

models for doing what they do that have then made it big enough that we know them. They do exist in the more obscure punk rock stuff.

What we talk about a lot in that is that women always try – and I think I fall into this somehow, but I don't think of it as trying to do that – we try prettify, to make it smoother and more easy to take in, to somehow make it a little not offensive and a little sexy and a little easier to accept and a little—[mimicking rising intonation] *Yes?* We're always slightly apologizing or slightly angling to get some manipulating or something.

Felix: Because that's how women are expected to navigate the world, is by manipulation rather than asking for what you want?

Kristina: Right. They're covering things up with nicety, whatever you want to call it. She's like, "I don't want to sing like that. I want to have that thing that the guys have. That must be possible."

Felix: Messy is a male prerogative.

Kristina: Right. We talk about it a lot. We do find that it's possible to find those people, other than Nina Simone, but it's much harder to do. It's an interesting thing to get at. I found Jennifer Holliday when she sings that, *And I'm telling you*. There is no nicety there. She's fucking scary. That's why women don't do it, because we don't want to be scary. We're always going the other way around like–

Felix: Scary is dangerous.

Kristina: Yes. That's what we perceive it to be. Is it really? That's at least what we've perceived it to be.

Felix: It's what we've been taught that it is.

Kristina: Yes, that it is. Yes.

Felix: Right. That if you are dangerous that–

Kristina: That you'll be burned on the stake.

[laughs]

Felix: Also, there is the thing that even the female singers who are messy, usually are required to do it through a lens of sexuality. The Madonna/Whore. If you can be a Madonna [archetype] and feel authentic, then be beautiful. But if you want to be messy, if you want to be here, then clearly you are outside of society, you are inappropriate. You have to be sexual because that's the only way that it's possible. Nina Simone was not sexy. She got a lot of pushback from it. There's a cost.

Kristina: There is a cost there. I think that [that kind of women's music] does exist, but it doesn't ever make it to popular culture because it doesn't fit the narrative, and people don't– There's no commercial value to it.

“I had to get a lot of anger out.” The thing that Kristina credits with having given her the impetus to change was New York itself. “Everyone here,” she tells me, “is rebellious. If you love living in New York, you’re rebellious, because otherwise, you wouldn’t live here. I think that’s [both] necessary to live here and *why* you live here.” And that, she continues, is why she’s considering leaving and returning to Denmark.

I feel like I've had all of my problems solved, by rediscovering myself, and rebelling against the things I didn't want to be, and somehow, have come back to a new thing that I'm willing to now want to try out again, in a different setting, because now I've solved all the problems I had here, to keep growing.

I definitely think [loudness and rebellion] is what New York has taught me. Also, meeting people, role modeling, different ways of being [in New York]. I've also done activities here that have helped with that, like acting school, and shows. There would have also been some growth in Denmark. The problem was, the community in Denmark is 2,000 people, you have no declared anonymity, so you can't really change. You go into that one way, and that's the way you have to stay.

The relative anonymity of such a big city with such a rebellious and drama queen type culture has been very helpful to me, to reconnect with who I am.

Liana

Biography

Liana is a non-binary classical singer of Creole and African-American descent in their late twenties, originally from – and currently living in – Texas. Navigating life as a classical singer of color has been a complicated process for them, and the combination of stress and untreated mental health issues during their graduate studies at a prestigious conservatory derailed their musical career progress for some time. While they’ve struggled with intersectionality of race, gender, singing

and mental health issues for much of their life, they feel as though they have finally reached a place of vocal and emotional stability where they can continue to pursue performance opportunities.

Act I – Exposition: “I Can’t Remember a Time that I Didn’t Sing”

“It was a way we connected as a family.” Liana’s early life was surrounded by both familial and community music making. “Singing,” they tell me, “was always a thing. It was a way we connected as both as a family and singing in family reunions. Everybody sang together at home and in church and just– It was the way we bonded was music, singing.” And while their mother was the more active music maker, their dad also participated:

- Liana:** My dad was dragged into it when he married my mom. My mom's family is much more musical than my dad's.
- Felix:** Is he reluctantly participatory?
- Liana:** He's cool with it now. It's just not something that he grew up with. Looking back, I think he was always kind of apprehensive but he's, as long as I can remember, has been a part of the choir and been active in our church musicalness and always encouraged me, but my mom sang with me.

As church-goers, Liana and their family were highly involved in liturgical / congregational music making – one of their most vivid early memories recalls one particular instance of their parents’ engagement in their church’s musical functions:

Christmas, in the Southern Baptist Church, is a spectacle. It is just a giant thing, and there is always kind of nativity play musical things. I remember my dad, who only sings a little bit....I didn't know he was a part of the Christmas program, so we were in the choir and there was like full nativity thing on the floor and readings and whatnot. My dad comes down the aisle at some climactic point that I was probably half asleep for, who knows? Comes down the aisle with a fake guitar, singing like Jeremiah was a bullfrog. It was very good. I just remember every– I've never seen him interact musically, and I was just like, "What are you doing dad? What's happened to you?" He was great.

They recall singing in in the same Christmas program, and the communal expectation of singing:

Later in that same event, I was contracted to sing with my mom, same Christmas time. It was just like, "Hi, it's going to be surprising and you're going to be musical." [laughs] "Sing for the Lord, it's Christmas." Surprise singing. I was, "Yay." Just having that community, whether you expect it or not... [that] music was very much my upbringing.

In a later, follow-up conversation, they tell me that their time in the church choir was one of the best parts of their childhood, noting that "Everyone sang and I loved singing and I got to sing with everyone. Some of my best memories from childhood were singing in choirs. I didn't [necessarily] enjoy the church stuff – I remember feeling like I didn't fit in when I was about 6 or 7 - being told that I wasn't lady-like, and I played too hard – but I enjoyed the singing."

"I can't imagine doing anything else with my life." Liana's desire to be a singer first surfaced as a young child, but the real decision to pursue it professionally came later, in their late teens:

As an itty-bitty person, when they asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Because that's a terrible thing to ask a child, I would always say, "I want to be a singer, blah, blah, blah, blah." Seriously professionally considering it, high school. Late high school, senior year in high school when I had my giant existential crisis on, "What do you want to be? For real though. You're about to be an adult, what do you want to be?"

I had this giant-like, probably hormone-induced distress of, *I can't imagine doing anything else with my life!* which is ridiculous because I do lots of stuff. But at the time, I was like, "No, I need music in my life or I will die." [laughs] [I guess my thought was] "Well, I'm good at this and why not do it? I love it and I need it in my life." That was senior year.

As Liana's voice is a high, light (coloratura) soprano, their repertoire now is primarily classical – "I like to sing other styles, but that's not what I get paid to sing. Money," they tell me, laughing, "is who you are." Their entrance into classical music

was something of a gradual process, however, and not something they immediately or even consciously chose:

It was definitely not conscious. Even to this day, it's not really that conscious. I like to sing and I'm good at it. I always have been, and I wanted to be better at it. You go to school and that's the focus. That's the way they teach you, to just think classically and you continue to pursue a classical education without any focus and you hold on to doing opera just because that's, in my experience, that's just how things work. I didn't have a problem with it.

There was really no impetus for rebellion, as it were, from like classical musical authorities. I was like, "I'm fine with this." It's not necessarily what I came into it wanting, but I just wanted to sing. Whatever I was singing was fun. Like, "I'm cool with this."

That gradual entrance into classical music was somewhat at odds with their high school experience, however. They remember a particular incident:

I remember it as eighth or ninth grade or so, and I'm in geometry – [something] totally not music-related and there's this [white girl] there who I actually didn't know very well, but she says, "I want to be an opera singer when I grow up," blah blah blah. I was just like, "Nobody does opera. What's wrong with you? Nobody likes that. That's a stupid thing to want to do."

I belittled her in the middle of class, where my ADD behind was definitely not focused on geometry. I'm looking back at this, "Look at yourself, look at your choices, you jerk." No, this was not an intended path, [laughs] but here we are.

The image of opera as something that "White People Did," was something they'd internalized by then, and I wondered how they managed to ease their way into the genre, thinking in the context of that specific, high-school incident. They tell me

I already didn't fit in. In most aspects of my life, I didn't fit in. I was the weird person who was super into anime and randomly sang in the halls and I had a random weapon collection. Looking back, I'm like, "What were you doing teenage child?" I was already weird. In every social interaction and academic interaction, I was always the only black person, was often the only femme person. I was already used to being the weird one who didn't fit in gender-wise or race-wise. Going to a field that was already heavily white-dominated,

[associated with being] White, was uncomfortable, but not in uncomfortable the way I wasn't already often exposed to.

While their experiences with race and singing would become more and more complex as time went on, being in a primarily white-associated genre had a certain comfort for them. "To an extent," they tell me, considering it, "it was kind of liberating. I was just like, 'Well, I'm the only black one here.' I mean, yes, I have to be the black representative, but also who are you going to compare me to?"

"Everyone sang in church, but femme folk sang more." Liana's experience of a gender divide in singing came early:

Everybody sang but femme folk tend to sing more. It was expected. Everyone sang in the church. The church sang hymns, but there were more women in the choir. That was always kind of a thing. It was forever terrible to get basses and tenors. Because especially in our youth choir, there just weren't that many teenage boys who were really that interested in singing. They were dragged into it, but there were always girls who were like, "Yes, that's what I do. I sing all the time." To an extent, everyone was expected to play along, but people who are actively working we're mostly femme folk and chicks and women.

Their understanding of the implications around that would not come till later – initially, they simply saw it as something that was, for all practical purposes, irrelevant to them and their singing. When I asked if seeing less male-bodied people around them singing affected their understanding or perception of singing for themselves, they tell me

Not initially. I'm really competitive. Yes, sure. This was pre- me knowing what my gender was and/or wasn't, but at that time I was just like, "I'm better than you and I'm going to do that thing and I'm going to be awesome." It didn't matter what voice part I'm going to be awesome at, I'm going to be better than you. A little competent, a little competitive there. Just a little bit. I noticed it, but more than anything, I was just like, "That's because they're weak. Guys aren't doing it because they are incompetent. That's unfortunate for them."

Once they reached college, however, that all changed.

Act II – Rising Action: “I Was the Diversity”

“Women don’t sing that way.” Liana arrived at college – a small, private college in Texas – and immediately, began to receive messages about gender.

Sometimes, the delivery was overt and intended to be personal.

I remember in undergrad, I was there for my jury, I was super stressed out, like you do, and I sing my pieces and I’m super memorized, they ask me questions about the composers and history and blah, blah, blah – all the crap that I was terrible at. I go on, I do the thing...and the first thing out of the male panelist mouth was, "How much do you weigh?"

What? I say how much I weigh and he's like, "That's a really good weight. You are a great shape for your vocal fach. Don't gain any more weight." I'm standing there thinking, "[expletive], how was my singing? Do you have any comments? What are we talking about? How is this relevant?"

Sometimes, the delivery was covert, or framed in terms of what might be appropriate for a cis-woman in the context of musical performance:

My undergrad teacher was this adorable feminine woman person, and while it was never [her actively saying], this is what you do, this is how you are, but there were expectations on how you dress, how you act, and how you present yourself in musical settings.

I could easily say, "Well, no, this is just how anyone would present themselves." For some of it, [sure], but a lot of micromanaging things were on how a *soprano* is supposed to look, and a *soprano* is supposed to dress, and a *soprano* is supposed to act. I was told never to wear pants, sopranos wear dresses. "You're not a mezzo, you're not a guy, you don't get to wear pants to performances."

Open toe shoes are unacceptable. No prints, no print dresses. Tread softly... [Then, I was thinking], "Surely, dudes don't have to put up with this." Literally, it's just "Show up, don't wear wrinkled shit, have on shoes, and you're fine. [laughs]

There were other expectations, meant to be, and thusly, internalized about what appropriate femininity sounded like – not just vocally, but in terms of repertoire, too. The impressions they took away, they tell me, were

Women are supposed to have sweet voices. They're supposed to be beautiful. I like singing beautifully, and I think beautiful healthy singing is not a female thing, that's an everybody thing, [but] it definitely limited my choices in repertoire.

There's just certain things that I remember trying to pick repertoire. Bringing things I love and things I enjoy that I'm an activist about Intersectionality, and race and gender politics, and just all sorts of things together has always been my schtick. I have a group that does that now, but even when I was a baby singer, that was the thing I was interested in. I was working on recital music, and [I wanted an LGBTQ recital, where I wanted to sing things from a male perspective. I wanted to sing music where the poetry was not from a woman's perspective.

I remember being told that I couldn't sing this rep because I wasn't a man, and I was like,

"Why not? It's written for a tenor, it works well with my fach, I like the poetry, I'm connected with the music making. I don't understand why this isn't something–"

"Well, that's just not something that women do."

"But men do that shit. Like, *Winterreise*. That's something people straight up do. Why not?"

I remember being told [by a male colleague], "That's not something women do.' [Men's music] about the love of *women*." I'm like, "First off, you presume my ass is straight. Second, there's a lot of assumptions being made here. Mind your business."

I had teachers say that same crap, but not quite as pointedly. There's certain levels of bombastitude, is that word? that I wasn't able to do.

I wanted to sing heroically [laughs]. I like being beautiful, but I want to give a powerful message that isn't about being wronged by the one you love or raped, or something. I want to sing about war. I want to sing about anger. I want to be angry, not mad sing angry, but justified anger. I feel like in shows anytime you get to be angry as a soprano, it's because you're having some sort of mad scene.

The messages they received about appropriateness in singing also extended to *how* a woman is supposed to sing.

Not talking like a strictly mechanical way because yes, people's voices work differently, but we were talking about earlier bringing a lower voice mechanism up. I was like, "Why do dudes get away with doing this higher?" I like mixing as much as anybody else. I understand that they're mixing too, but why do I have to mix high voice in earlier? We're singing the same [kind of] rep.

I get it. There's some things I have to do just as a soprano, but what's so funny is that the same criteria just don't necessarily translate outside of classical stuff. These are the rules I was told for being a classical singer, [and sopranos are always understood to be a woman]. The rules just really don't translate outside of academia. I sing however the fuck I want to, when I sing pop music or gospel rock.

They go on to clarify further about the use of chest voice for female-bodied singers in classical music, noting that the interplay of gendered expectation got tangled up from legitimate technique. Specifically, in

navigating my chest voice. I've definitely had statements along the line like, "Don't sing like a man, you need to sing like woman like women don't sing that way." [What was meant was that] I was bringing way too much weight up from the bottom and in hindsight, yes, I feel like that wasn't conveyed well, because I [took it to mean] I'm not singing in appropriate way.

Further, the intersectionality of culture, identity and vocal training made unfortunate messages being conveyed to them about their racial background and life experiences in singing:

Which was also problematic because [having a lot of weight in the bottom voice] was a cultural way of singing I was used to. Singing with a lot of roundness and gospel feel. That made me think I was alto for the longest time, so I only sang in the basement. Having teachers be like, "No that's not what we do," made me feel personally traumatized because I was like, "But that's what I do, that's something I value in myself and you're saying that I am wrong because I'm doing that?" And now, I've internalized that I am wrong at doing the things that I thought I was good at.

“I can’t be the representative of all blackness.” If confusion and expectations around femininity and voice weren’t enough, being a person of color in a traditionally white-associated field came with its own set of complications. In their undergraduate study – a small, religious private college – they were very much on their own. Literally,

I was the one, I was the diversity. It's so funny. Recently I went back to my undergrad. I started looking through the music department pamphlet and I'm like, "I know some of these people. Why the hell is David on the piano? He plays the guitar. Why is Adrian over there on the– She plays flute. Why is she holding a– What is happening?" Then I'm realized, "They picked all the black and brown people that they had in any capacity in the department and one of them to be in this picture."

They’re pretending they have racial diversity, but they’re literally just throwing people to the picture. They're like, "You’re not a music major, but get in the picture. You on there, come on," which is just hilarious to me because it's just this is not the representative of reality, anyone's reality.

While perhaps some of their experiences were simply the result of ignorance, there were occasions where it took on a much more uncomfortable tone:

One of my undergrad teachers was super creepy, not my voice teacher but the choir director. He really liked black women. *Really* liked black woman. He had this giant ridiculous crush on Leontyne Price." Everyone was compared to Leontyne Price if they were black or even [slightly of color], at all.

This was particularly confusing for them, because, being a Catholic school, the chorus sang a lot of straight toned liturgical and early music, which Liana says, “I automatically translated to being ‘hollow white music,’ because that had been my experiences with it.” Yet at the same time, the same director was asking for what translated to his idea of a “black soprano sound.”

I was really confused because [in choir] he wants me to sing this super pure sound and then we get to opera or anything else and he’s like, "You need to sing more like Leontyne." What the fuck does that mean? What are we talking about? I'm thinking, wait, "You want me to sing this hollow white music in

this hollow white way but also we're fetishizing black people in the same breath?"

This kind of dual expectation left Liana frustrated and confused. "I couldn't be the representative of all blackness and also– I couldn't live up to [those expectations]. I didn't know what he wanted from me."

"It was my wall of self-bolstering." Besides the stew of external complications which Liana was experiencing around gender and race, their own internal issues were compounding things, as well. Things that they'd been able to manage till that point became much less so as they approached the professional world. Expectations were raised, and with them, stress also intensified. The imbalance of their mental and emotional health

was definitely something that was brewing well in advance to college. My self-esteem was absolutely tied to being good at things and being, if not the best then being on the best's heels – 100%. That was in every aspect of my being at the time. I was so ridiculous as a youth. I had this wall of vanity – legit, that's what I called it, was a wall of vanity. It had all of my photos for whatever group I was in, choir and track and whatever.

I had all my photos and all of my medals or ribbons or whatever meticulously measured out. I was like, "This is my wall of vanity," but really it was my wall of self-bolstering. Every aspect of my extracurricular life was devoted towards feeling like I was good enough. Music was absolutely no exception.

I realize now so much of my competitiveness was directly related to that. I was just like, No, I need to be acknowledged and I need to feel validated and people to think I'm good enough. I'm going to do that by better, and being smarter, and being more vocally beautiful because those are things within my control, whereas being black is not in my control, and being a femme person is not in my control, but I can be the best damn person I can be at these things, and then maybe people will like me.

Act III – Climax: "I Can't Be Free And Beautiful When I'm Afraid"

"It was a dark time in my training." Towards the end of their undergraduate training, the mounting pressures, expectations and complications

were taking their toll. Liana was dealing with the general issues of being a female bodied singer, being a black singer in a particularly white genre – something that made Liana’s need to prove themselves more intense

Not being a [cis-male], I was never going to have the assumed benefit of the doubt that I know what I’m talking about, or that I’m going to be capable. While I wasn’t a girl [either],¹² I still was lumped into the, “Well, I assume you’re going to be a fuck up category,” that I feel like all none-men always are.¹³ To an extent, that affected my musical life, but it really just affected everything.

Not being a man meant that I had to try harder to even gain respect, and then being black meant I had to try even harder. You can only live in an environment where you have to try four times as hard to even get the same amount of respect, and not become some sort of mentally unhinged.

The intersectional nature of Liana’s experience meant that even things that might not necessarily have been bad or wrong in other contexts carried weight. The language of singing and talking about singing is intrinsically gendered, and hence, comes with implications that the speaker might not even intend or understand.¹⁴

Felix: I feel like for you, [when your teachers talked about singing], there was the added complication of race – when something like ‘We don’t do that, dear’ comes from a white teacher, it means something completely different.

Liana: Yes. [You think] “Who is the ‘we’ we’re talking about?”

Felix: Yes, exactly right. If we examine it, it’s possibly what a teacher might mean when they say something like that is not that we don’t “do this.” Perhaps, [what they’re trying to say is that] what you’re doing here is not the healthiest way to access your voice or not the healthiest or most efficient way to do whatever [singing task] you’re trying to do.

¹² Liana identifies as being non-binary or agender – while they were assigned female at birth, their internal experience of gender is neither specifically masculine or feminine.

¹³ i.e., anyone who isn’t a cis-male.

¹⁴ An example of this might be the words “alto” or “soprano,” which specifically imply that the singer is female-identified. Modifiers must be added to indicate that the singer *isn’t* a woman. *e.g.*, “male soprano.” For a more comprehensive discussion of this, see Graham (2018).

Yet talking about it in terms of, 'this is just something we don't do', that's really invalidating. I can't imagine that wasn't stressful for you.

Liana: Yes. That was a rough time. It was a dark time of my training.

"Everyone's so good, why am I here?" When they graduated and made their way to a highly respected conservatory for grad school, some things got better – such as the level of diversity:

Felix: What was your experience around your ethnicity there? Was it a direct hindrance, a neutral thing, a positive?

Liana: I don't feel like it was a direct hindrance. Being a black face in a white place is never really a positive thing – it's mostly just distressing. To be fair, I was too anxious with every other aspect of my life to be too stressed out by the fact that I was only one of a handful of black people. The percentage of black people at [that conservatory] when I was there as much higher than I was used to.

Liana: The ratio there actually improved. My class had twenty-four people in it and there were three [other] black people in it, which were black men. It doesn't happen that much in classical music in any capacity. In the program in general and other degrees, 60 people total and maybe 10 of which were black.

Unfortunately, other things got much, *much* worse. To begin with, the conservatory Liana attended was

fucking cut-throat. I was a big fish in a small pond at a private Catholic school and then going off to a big conservatory, first time on an airplane and flying, going to a place I've never been, in a cold, terrible, gloomy city I've never been to. [The city] was terrible.

Having all this general pressure of being a high voice, plus you're around some phenomenal people, who are bad asses. So you already don't feel confident, and then impostor syndrome [kicks in] like, "Why am I here? I shouldn't be here. Everyone's so good, why am I here?" [Not to mention], having 80 billion hours' worth of work all at once.

Was it really stressful? I wasn't great. I was so used to being good at everything, which sounds ridiculous, but I wanted to be good at everything. I was used to being good at anything and I was not good. I wasn't the best. I wasn't even mediocre, everything was a struggle. Everyday there was some new shit that I was not prepared for and didn't feel comfortable doing and I

knew I would be expected to be at a certain level that I would not be at. Every day was [hard]. I didn't want to get out of bed, I didn't want to go.

Being alone in a new city, a city with a climate and a culture that wasn't their own, became a weight that was nearly unbearable for them.

It was cold and fucking shit and snowing and I didn't want to deal with this and I just didn't have the friends or a support system. It was just terrible. I don't know how I got through that without medication.

And on top of all that, this new level of professional expectation had another, completely unexpected side effect. They tell me:

Prior to formal education, music had always been *fun*. I'd been good at it. It was something I enjoyed doing. I got to be in communion with people and it was socially engaging and emotionally uplifting. It was great.

Formal education takes that from you, you don't get [to be with] people, which sounds ridiculous, but the further you go, the less you actually interact with people. You're in a practice room forever. You were always in rehearsals before, but now, they're not emotionally and socially engaging.

Then there's the competition. For Liana, there was no time to step away and recover, or take time to get themselves back on track. At the conservatory, they say,

it's like, you need to be doing [everything that's expected of you], otherwise you're fucking dumpster fire and they're like, "we're just going to call your understudy." As I got higher in academia, the level of expectation went higher and I just didn't have the tools to address it and so everything was anxiety-inducing and everything was stressful.

Perhaps they could have handled everything, right up until where, as they realized, "music stopped being enjoyable and [an emotional release]. Music itself became its own giant anxiety monkey on my back."

"I had nothing to ground me." Anxiety was the thing that would finally bring Liana to the end of their rope. Aside from all the emotional weight they had to carry, the anxiety was affecting their ability *to* sing.

It's not easy to sing when you were having a panic attack, or everything in your neck and thorax is clenched in preparation for a fight like. Singing shouldn't be a battle. When it [became a battle] for me, I lost a lot. I lost my authentic life. I was not living my most authentic voice. It was strident and it was harsh and it was tough.

There's this expectation of freedom and beauty and I can't be free and beautiful when I'm afraid that I'm going to get decked for not being perfect. The physical ramifications of anxiety on me absolutely negatively affected my singing.

The competition around their particular voice type – a high, light coloratura soprano – created its own anxiety, too. They tell me,

You blink wrong and there are twelve coloratura sopranos right behind you in the same rehearsal, absolutely ready take your spot right then. Then there's the stupid performative thing – I'm supposed to be pretending to be womanly, right? I'm also supposed to be pretending to be a good musician. I'm not doing either well. And literally, I could be replaced for not doing [whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing] correctly at any moment. Ahhhh, anxiety.

The mental health issues that Liana had begun experiencing in high school were intensified by their stress and anxiety and were becoming completely unmanageable.

Felix: Do you mind just sharing about [your mental health experience]? How did you come to be diagnosed?¹⁵

Liana: No, I don't mind talking about it. I'm a mental health activist in Houston. I will always talk about my experiences. I have quite a few diagnoses: I have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder type two, generalized anxiety disorder, binge eating disorder and something else that I'm forgetting right now. How do I forget my own diagnosis. Anyway that's– ADD, [laughs] ADD yes. That's how I forgot it. [laughs]

The diagnoses came, not ironically – too ironically, after grad school. That was a dumpster fire but I got very great training even though I was miserable and totally not stable as a human.

¹⁵ Given that mental health issues can be both personally sensitive and socially weighted, I've chosen to include the entirety of this conversation here, including their assent to speaking about it. Because of that, rather than presenting this as a compiled narrative, I prefer that this stand in as close to their exact words as possible.

I came back [home] and suddenly life was so much harder than everything else. I didn't have the structure from school. I didn't have job prospects. I had all this debt. It was also the summer that my grandma was killed.

I had suddenly so many areas of struggle and strife and just explosive distress that I literally had nothing to ground me. [laughs] I really had nothing to ground me. I was just a hot dumpster fire. When I finally did get employment, I was taking two-hour lunches and going home and crying. I was doing all of this work all the time and I couldn't get rehearsals and everything was just really bad.

Girlfriend at the time was like, "Maybe you should go get help" so I go and I'm really depressed, "Doctor, doctor, I'm really depressed". I do testing and he's like, "head's up, by the way. You have anxiety and ADD,"

"No, I don't",

"Yes, you do,"

"No, I don't,"

Then I'm like "Do I have anxiety?" Everyone, all [the people around me] at the time were just, "Yes, you do".

I'm like, "I was unaware."

With a diagnosis, Liana was able to get appropriate care, including therapy, which allowed them to consider their experiences to that point and understand how things had gone the way they'd gone.

I was learning coping skills and I [realized], I was not well adjusted, and I didn't know how to interact with humans in stressful situations. There was a lot of reflecting on music and how those experiences did not abate that anxiety at all in any capacity.

Act IV – Falling Action: “I’m the Black Queer Elephant in the Room”

“There’s no trans enough.” There were many aspects to Liana’s recovery and return to singing – the first of which was medical care and appropriate medication. Another was examining their gender and accepting and adapting to what they would come to understand themselves to be their gender identity. “I actually would say [I identify as] agender,” they tell me, “but non-binary tends to be

a little easier to explain. Gender [for me] is a vague shrug at the end of the day." I ask Liana to explain a bit more about how they came to that, and they tell me:

I am a queer person. I'm all up in that LGBTQ rainbow life. So, I'm hanging out with my friends and I- Somehow or another end up hanging out with a bunch of trans friends for a long time. It just happens that way. Everyone's super affirming and everyone's actively using everyone's pronouns, and I was like, "I'm an ally, I'm going to be super supportive and blah, blah, blah." I have all my friends and I'm actively defending people and their identities and actively being super extra accepting, like you do.

After a while of chilling around people who are cool with gender – [They talk about gender like], “non-binary, none, man, woman,” check mark that's it. I was just like, "Maybe I can think about this too." On the down low, I'm thinking, "I don't know, the way they're describing themselves seems a lot the way I describe myself." But [at the same time, thinking], I don't get to do that. I don't want to co-op trans-ness or to think, "Am I trans enough?"

That was the thing. For the longest time I was like, "Yes, I feel this way, but I'm not going to say anything about it because other people have more rights to being- feeling validated than I do." I just remember one of my friends who's also non-binary, we were talking and I was like [whispers] "Hey, can you use they/them pronouns for me?"

They're like, "Sure, yes, whatever." I'm like, "No, I'm sorry, it's such a big deal." Then they were like, "It's not a big deal at all. This is fine." One day they said, "There's no trans enough, you're trans enough. You don't have to feel like you don't get to claim what's accurate for you." So I'm like, [gasps] "I can just not worry so much?" They were like, "Yes, you don't have to worry so much. It's fine." [I started] sobbing, excited sobbing, yes.

With the shift of identity came a shift of their professional life, as well.

Felix: How did you reconcile your voice and vocal training with the shift of gender identity? Was it just like not even a thing or was it something you had to work through or?

Liana: It really wasn't a thing, my voice has always been an aspect of myself before any shift of my identity. I was singing before I knew the differences in race actively knew how to articulate it, obviously I saw them. I was singing before I found out that I was bi and I was singing before I found out- I would always sing, that's been a constant throughout all of my identity discoveries.

It didn't shift just because my gender was different than I thought surprise you and so no my voice never was a point of

contention internally. I'm very satisfied with my voice as an aspect of me. There is no dysphoria around my voice.

Felix: Do you feel like your gender identity, your voice and your repertoire align?

Liana: Yes, in so far as I sing it well, they align. I don't know that 'me as a person singing it' necessarily align but that's because 'me' is involved. If I were a floating larynx, then it would probably align better but that's only because music is made, but people are human, infallible and assholes sometimes. Yes, my voice aligns well with the genres I sing. My personality may or may not.

“Why be pretty when you can be beautiful.” Another aspect of Liana’s development as a singer has come from examining the internalized beliefs around gender and voice that they learned from their educational experience.

Felix: You’ve used the word pretty a lot over the course of this interview and particularly in that your voice is or needs to be or you wanted it to be it's that you're pretty. First, why 'pretty'? and second, do you think that has anything to do with perception, your place in the world how people receive you, or your intersections with other aspects of who you are?

Liana: I use pretty or beautiful just because I feel so much of my training was around how beautiful sound or having a pretty presentation of musicality, that's not limited to any gender in my academic and training, it was no everyone we're all striving for a beautiful sound.

Felix: Right. But there's a difference between beautiful and pretty. I'm pretty sure your teacher would never have described a dude's voice is pretty.

Liana: No. Probably not.

Felix: It may be that they would have, but speaking from my experience, pretty is a very gendered word.

Liana: Yes. I strove for pretty when I was younger because that's what was expected. Sounds like beautiful became a target when pretty was no longer competitive enough [laughs]. I was like, "Why be pretty when I can be beautiful."

Felix: Was that associated with the therapy that you were having with your switch in gender identity?

Liana: Yes, therapy definitely helped me navigate that whole "I'm a worthwhile human being regardless of what I sound like but also, I sound like a badass." I don't really know when that happened but it did and I'm super happy for it. I wasn't aware of how much I used pretty until you mentioned it.

- Felix:** I ask because that's a been very prominent theme and [humans] don't really do things randomly. We do things because they make some kind of logic in our brain – they're how we have internalized or feel or how we've learned to talk about a thing, right? For me, the fact that pretty comes up a lot leaves me with questions.
- Liana:** Yes, I would agree with that, definitely.

The intersectionality of Liana's experience of race and gender in singing leads me to inquire further about how their understanding of the vocal expectations for female-bodied people exists in the context of their racial / cultural identity.

- Felix:** Something you mentioned before was the intersection of what a Black woman or what Black femininity is supposed to look like. Where does 'pretty' fall in that?
- Liana:** Pretty is expected. You want to be pretty, you want to sound pretty... "Your beauty is your power." I've heard that before. Pretty was a means of protection, pretty was a weapon, pretty was a way you could navigate the world. So being pretty was important and so I wanted to be pretty – if not visually because I couldn't rectify [looking] girly. Once I was a teenager, where girly and pretty didn't have to be the same thing, that was great. Then I settled on cute. Cute was an easier one to deal with.
- There's a certain level of courageous separation to want beauty over pretty, but that doesn't mean I don't remember that I'm supposed to be "pretty". Yes, I could see that coming up a lot because it's not like my new revelation of confidence has been my whole life experience. I grew up with expectations and they still are here, they still color how I view myself and other people view me unfortunately so yes, I strive for beauty but I understand pretty is a thing.
- Felix:** Would you say then that pretty has more to do with external expectations while beauty is what you want internally to be?
- Liana:** I would agree with that yes.
- Felix:** The intersection of that with your ethnic and cultural background...Does that complicate things?
- Liana:** It's complicated and I think it's funny because I am not straightforward. I have no aspect of my identity that's straightforward for anyone and so I can't pretend to be easy or convenient for anyone.
- So I walk into this often two-dimensional portrayal of opera and it's just like, "Well, here I am." I'm the black queer elephant in the room and even if I don't say shit you can't ignore me. I

definitely don't fit what was expected when this was written or even what's expected in current performance practice, but here I am.

“I’m going to stick out.” Navigating the world professionally as a black, queer non-binary soprano presents certain challenges to moving ahead in a classical-based singing career. Liana’s *fach* is generally associated with high femininity. I wondered how they managed that in the context of auditioning. They tell me:

That's a great fucking question. I'm still working on it. [laughs] I'm mostly just like, "Be myself," which sounds super trite and ridiculous, but I have visible tattoos. I have visible piercings. I'm kind of crass and I have natural hair and I can't pretend to be something I'm not. I mean, I can. I do, because I want employment, but even when I present in a super feminine fashion, I am really mindful of how much space I take up or don't take up and I'm really polite, even still, I'm going to stick out. Either just because of race or just because of experiences and [my own] internalized perception of "I don't fit in here."

I'm going to feel and likely be the odd person out. So I mostly just cheat because I'm super charming. I have actively used that, over the years, and honed it into a sharpened blade to smooth over my failures as a woman. [laughs]. I'm cute and adorable and like, "Oh my God." I don't know. How I navigate it in the wild is just hope for the best.

“Do what your voice does, not what’s expected of you.” Given their experiences in undergrad, another area where Liana has had to reflect is around the expectations of what a black soprano ‘should’ sound like.

I always had a certain tone quality expectation which I was always just like— People are like, "Black people have richer, warmer sounds." I'm like, "Great, I'm glad that we all got together and made that a thing."

That actually fucked me up for a while because I thought, okay, "I'm going to sing as richly and heavily as I can." But I'm a coloratura. [laughs] That had to stop.

Untangling that brought them to what was, perhaps, the most important revelation they could have had about their singing:

Do what your voice does, not what you expect people to do. That's a reoccurring thing in my life. *Do what your voice does, not what is expected of you.*

Act V – Dénouement: “There’s No One to Tell Me I’m Wrong”

“The dumpster fires were mostly extinguished.” Despite their complex and stressful journey to reach the point they’re at in their singing career, Liana has very positive things to say about their voice and training. They tell me, “I am incredibly happy. I'm very satisfied with where I am vocally. I was not satisfied with the emotional intelligence gleaned from those degrees or lack thereof. But the actual physical mechanics of being a bad ass [singer]? That, I'm happy with.”

Though there have been issues with their technique, they feel as though the primary issues have been addressed and that they’re in a good place, vocally.

Like anybody else I had areas that were dumpster fires...lower passaggio, hello. I do feel the dumpster fires were mostly extinguished. A lot of the residual vocal shenanigans are actually mental shenanigans because I didn't put myself out there because I was anxious and nervous that people wouldn't like me, but 60% of singing is mental as far as I'm concerned.

Their anxiety has improved:

It used to be more frequent than it is now. I have generalized anxiety disorder, which has since been diagnosed and medicated, thank the lords. I'm less anxious now, though [confidence about music-making in general] and not feeling like I'm a competent musician is still a major source of anxiety in my life but nowhere to the degree of where it falls in school.

“I know myself better than you do.” Looking back at their training and experiences in singing, Liana reflected on what they wish they’d done different, telling me

I just wish I was more resilient when I was training because so much of it I was just like, "Oh they're right because they are professional and I'm just doing it wrong. I'm just woman, I'm wrong. I'm just singing wrong, I'm just having my experiences in past levels wrong, I should be doing what they're saying."

Now I'm just like, "No. I will acknowledge what you're saying to me but I know myself better than you do." I wish I had that resilience back then. It would have helped me navigate a whole bunch of gender and race shit a lot better.

Conclusion

These narratives have offered candid images of the complexities of gender and race in music, as well as glimpses into the frustrations and joys of a professional performance career. Many times, throughout the interviews, they generously offered their vulnerability – and in doing so, beautifully illustrate the costs and rewards of musical artistry. Even in spoken word alone, there was an astonishing range of artful vocal expression and intensely beautiful moments of communication. Many of the moments that they freely shared with me were intensely emotional and intimate and I feel incredibly privileged to have been given the opportunity of reliving these memories and experiences with them.

Though each of the singers came from diverse cultural backgrounds and span a range of ages and identities, there are many remarkable similarities in their paths and experiences. The following chapter will address those recurring themes in more detail, examining the cultural influences in play that might be the source of these similarities of experience.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION: THEMES AND VARIATIONS

Introduction

After examining the individual narratives, teasing out the resonant threads, I returned to the collective data, where I utilized multiple techniques to examine emerging and diverging thematic material. Previously, I had marked individual “chunks” of narratives from each of the interviews – interchanges which represented a complete event, idea or story. Now, the coding process was extended, using more traditional qualitative analytic methods.

Analysis Review

Word frequency. To determine which words and ideas, if any, seemed to be recurrent across the narratives, I queried for word frequency across all the transcripts, removing “functional” text (conjunctions, determiners, names, etc.). From those results, I created word clouds, looking for any significant words that recurred from text to text. From the remaining list of words, I examined the sections of the transcripts where a high frequency word was used, and noted which words produced thematic material of interest to the study. The results were then either coded into existing topics, or the words themselves incorporated into the coding system as topics.

Evolving topics. While I started out with only a small selection of codes, as I reviewed the transcripts, I found multiple topics that recurred frequently enough as to be significant and required a separate code. Eventually, through multiple readings

of each interview, a comprehensive topical coding system emerged. Some topics, such as schooling or experiences in lessons, were simply narrative topics; others, such as mental health, experiences of emancipation or examples of intersectionality, were more abstract concepts. From this system of codes, I was able to follow how specific thematic material threaded its way through each of the individual narratives.

The thematic material was then examined through the lens outlined in the theoretical framework (see Chapter 1). The results of the analysis are presented below in the context of the research questions, with the intent of illustrating how the thematic material addresses the research questions. This analytic approach leans directly on the a presentation of the mutually-derived “symbolism [that] captures the implicit meaning within the flow of experiences” (Lux et al., 2013, p. 14). This allows for a more naturalistic and, hopefully, authentic portrait of the participants’ narratives.

Each section will introduce a thematic element, present the relevant experiences from each of the participants, then discuss the results in the context of the related literature and comparing or contrasting to my own lived experiences as an AFAB singer.¹

¹ It should be noted that due to the intersectional nature of human development and experience in general, analysis will frequently be considering many of the same sections of narratives from each singer’s story, albeit from a different lens.

Table 3

Reference table of study participants.

Name	Age	Gender & Voice	Details
Alice	52	Cis-female, soprano	White (“describes self as WASP), from upper middle-class home in New Jersey. Attended a performing arts high school and studied music at college in NYC. She had early success as a musical theatre performer, but took a hiatus in her mid/late 20s. She is now singing again and runs her own voice studio in the NYC area. Representative repertoire: “Tecum principium,” from <i>Dixit Dominus</i> (G.F. Handel)
Brooke	33	Cis-female, soprano	Taiwan-Chinese American, from middle class home in San Diego. Performed musicals in high school but studied classical voice in college. Struggles with technical consistency but has made progress since coming to NYC. She currently performs but is unhappy with her career and its progress. Representative repertoire: “Zerfleisse, mein herze,” from <i>St. John Passion</i> (J.S. Bach)
Cody	20	Trans-masculine soprano, pre-transition	Jewish-American from an upper middle-class orthodox home in New Jersey, with a father who is hearing-impaired and a mother who is a successful theatre director. Cantoring and the practice of his Jewish faith are important to him. Currently finishing up undergrad degree in music at a private university in NYC, but unsure of future career path due to medical transition. Representative repertoire: “Soul of a Man” from <i>Kinky Boots</i> (C. Lauper)
Drew	32	Genderfluid/non-binary, mezzo	White ethnic background, from working-class home in Texas, family actively religious and involved in church music-making. Struggled with depression and anxiety growing up, exacerbated by gender identity & sexual orientation, as well as family issues. Studied classical voice in college and at major American conservatory for graduate studies,

Name	Age	Gender & Voice	Details
			but currently performs musical theatre and runs their own voice studio in NYC.
Kristina	39	Cis-female, mezzo	<p>Representative repertoire: “Telephone Wire” from <i>Fun Home</i> (J. Tesori)</p> <p>Born and raised in a rural Denmark on a farm, active in communal theatre and music-making through her teenage years. Studied musical theatre in Denmark, London and New York. Struggled with a voice injury after an illness, coming to NYC as part of her journey of recovery. Currently performs and teaches between NYC and Denmark.</p>
Liana	27	Non-binary, soprano	<p>Representative repertoire: “Aldonza” from <i>Man of la Mancha</i> (M. Leigh)</p> <p>Black-creole from middle-class home in Texas, active in church music from a very young age. Attended a private catholic college in Texas for undergraduate music studies, followed by a major American conservatory for graduate work. Currently performing actively in Texas.</p> <p>Representative repertoire: “Seguidilla” from <i>7 Canciones populares españolas</i> (M. de Falla)</p>

Framework Review

The thematic analysis in this chapter is presented in three main categories, following the three lenses outlined previously in Chapter 1: context, performativity and normativity. These lenses are drawn from the theoretical framework built from a synthesis of the work of Wittgenstein, James and modern identity theory.

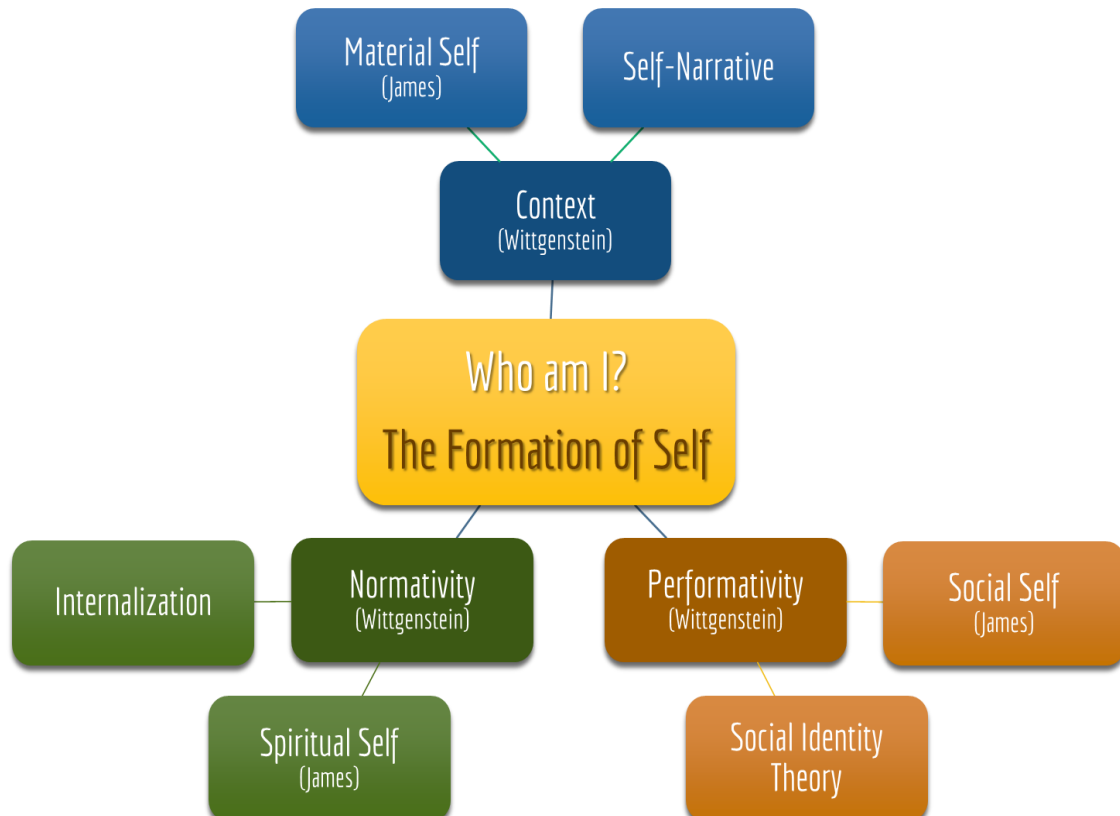


Figure 4. Review of theoretical framework.

Context

Research Question

How does a singer's recalled developmental musical experiences intersect with and inform their musical, gender and vocal identities? This inquiry will examine the contexts – such as family musical interaction, early childhood music making and learning – in which a singer's perceptions of gender and singing are formed.

Musical Identity

According to Dibbon (2002), a musical identity is “constructed through the musical activities people participate in, through their musical preferences and

through their beliefs about what constitutes gender-appropriate musical behavior.” This section will examine the early musical experiences of the participants, looking for commonalities between singers.

We sing together: Modeling musiking. In his provoking text on the meaning of music, Small (1999) coins a term – “musiking” – or, more specifically, music as a verb “to music” – to describe the interplay of music and music making as a part of the social fiber of human interaction. “To music,” he says, “is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (p. 9). In describing this lens for examining musical meaning, Small says that the “fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do” (p.8). One of the first themes to emerge as I considered the narratives as a whole was the role of this idea of “musicking” in the development of the study participants. By musicking, I mean the informal musical experiences in which singers participate: a kind of social experience which shaped their identities and perceptions of the role of music in their lives...sometimes outright, sometimes indirectly.

Analysis. For Alice, musiking was the way she remembers connecting to her deceased father – something that gave her a tangible connection to him after his early death. She recalls singing with him as he drove around, singing with him as he played a harmonica, singing with him while he played a ukulele. “I don’t even remember when [I started singing],” she recalled “I always sang.”

For Cody, music was something that allowed him to *speak* – he notes that he had early speech issues, for which he had speech therapy, and that his mother used singing to and with him to encourage him to speak. A charming illustration of another practical use for singing was the way she used music to keep track of him as a toddler. “I would just run off unannounced as a toddler,” he told me, “and they would know where I went, [but] to hear that I was [still] around, she would just start [singing a] line and I [sang back] the rest of it.”

Drew also had music surrounding them constantly as a child. Their parents had music playing constantly, their father sang with them, and by six, they’d already joined a kid’s choir at church. Their early memory is filled with musiking of some sort or another, even if at times, the experiences themselves weren’t necessarily positive – as was the case in the flag-waving incident, where they remember bursting into tears because, as they put it, “I’m enjoying this incorrectly!”

Kristina’s parents participated both in informal musiking with her, as well as more formal community musical productions. She recalls, very early in life, having a favorite Danish song that she would beg her mother to sing to her every night. Another memory was having a lullaby book with a variety of songs in it. Her favorite, she recalled, was a “very particular song which had animal sounds in it – like you had to some weird animal sound, and I *loved* that one.” Once she was old enough, she, too, participated in the community music-making – an environment in which she had the sort of formative experiences that made her want to sing professionally.

Liana also experienced music as a communal activity, though for them it was through their church – singing in the choir, in the Christmas program, and even just together, as a family. “It was the way we bonded, singing,” they said. “I can’t remember a time I didn’t sing.”

In this, however, Brooke had a very different experience. While her parents participated in music, it was in the context of it being an adult activity, karaoke, which they did with their friends – not singing for the sake of singing. Music was played around the home, she does recall having heard cassettes and CDs, but music was – initially, for her – something she observed, rather than participated. Given that Brooke’s experience with and relationship to her singing is very different than the other participants, I question whether this might have had some sort of influence on her musical identity. On the other hand, while there wasn’t singing, she recalls that her mother was very active in making sure that she and her brother had musical training, taking them to piano and violin lessons, as well music history classes and youth orchestra. Thus, while the musical activities in which she participated were formal, there was nevertheless still music around her.

Discussion. In the introduction to this section, I referenced Small’s (1998) work, where he offers the term “musiking” – the idea that music is an activity, a verb rather than a noun. In one lecture, he describes musiking as a way of making meaning, that by making music together, we are creating relationships:

We do not just *learn about* those relationships, but we actually *experience* them in all their beautiful complexity. The musiking empowers us to experience the actual structure of our universe, and in experiencing it we learn, not just intellectually but in the very depths of our existence, what our place is within it and how we relate and ought to relate, to it. [...] As one scholar has said, ‘In ritual, doing is believing. By dramatizing abstract,

invisible conceptions, it makes vivid and palpable our ideas and wishes, and the lived-in order merges with the dreamed-of order' (Small, 1996, pp. 4–5).

While Small's illustration is metaphysical, I believe it also has application to the physical, as well. With musiking, particularly as children, we are exploring identity – we are exploring how to *be* in the world, how to *be* with other people. Aside from the practical aspect of childhood music making – the transmission of knowledge, or music as a way of *knowing* (Levinowitz, 1998), it seems clear that musiking in childhood is also an essential part of creating a child's musical identity. All of the study participants gave very clear, detailed memories of musiking, even quite early in their childhood, suggesting that these experiences were a significant part of their *self-narrative* (see Garvis, 2015; Polkinghorne, 1991). The role of early music-making in a family environment is acknowledged in the literature (Trevarthen, 2000), suggesting that "these types of communication enable the infant to engage in practices which allow an emergent sense of self to develop" (Davidson, 2008, ¶ 10).

One of the most pivotal moments for me as both a musician and music educator was the point in which, looking back at my childhood musical experiences, I realized how much passive and/or informal musical learning shaped me, my musicality and my musical identity from as early as I can remember. Even little things, like the bright red and white plastic ocarina-style toy or blowing on glass bottles with different liquids to see how the sound might change, are crystal clear in my own mind. My informal musiking – on my own, with my family, in social environments – were a significant aspect of my musical learning. Listening to each singer talk about their musiking experiences, I was struck by how vivid their early

musical memories were, as well; how they all spoke of those little musical moments with fondness, pleasure – even wistfulness. This was musiking before music became complicated.

More curious to me, however, was the fact that some didn't even recognize their experiences as music making at all. For others, they only recognized their early musiking as "real" music-making because it happened in a specific social or institutional setting. Even the singers who are active voice teachers tended to downplay their earliest music experiences; when I asked Drew if they'd grown up in a musical environment, the answer was "no," followed by detailed memories of complex and intentional musiking with their parents. Alice, also a teacher, said that her home was artistic, but followed up with, "there was nothing formal. It was lots of just singing folk songs in rounds and singing while [grandmother] cooked..."

These kinds of responses brought Small's concept of "musiking" back to mind – these illustrations suggesting that even within the music education community, "music" is conceptualized as existing only in formal contexts – lessons, performances, school. Yet, literature has found that "children who [experience] richer musical environments [are] considerably more developed in their music behaviors" (Levinowitz, 1998). Much of what makes a good singing – intonation, ear, pitch matching and recognition – is learned during early childhood; indeed, purposeful singing has been reported as young as twelve months, and pitch matching even earlier, by three or four months old (Levinowitz, 1998). Further, vocal play – demonstrated in these singers' lives by parents making up songs with their children, and including sound-making as a fun part of their daily activities – is

a significant aspect of vocal and musical development (Hedden, 2012; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017).

One final note of curiosity – aside from Cody and Brooke, the others reported their fathers being more active singers in their musical memory than their mothers. Given the cultural gender bias around singing and the resulting hesitancy of men in singing, it raises questions around the role of male musical involvement in the development of these singers. Literature suggests that children learn pitch matching and accuracy more easily from higher, female voices than lower male voices (Hedden, 2012), and while these anecdotes aren't quantitatively significant, it does open potential paths of inquiry for the future, concerning the role of masculine vocal models and father-daughter musiking.

Theme. For most of the performers in the study, one or more of their parents/caregivers were consistently engaged in music-making activities with the singer in their early childhood. Musical engagement was primarily vocal – singing together, improvising songs, playing vocal music, along with communal singing, such as church or school.

Variation. Brooke's experience was different from the others, in that her parents did not engage with vocal musiking with her, and her father was not involved in her musical development at all. Her mother, however, was active in taking her to instrumental lessons, making sure that she practiced appropriately, and enrolled her in performance ensembles from an early age.

Gender and Vocal Identity

The acquisition of a child's gender identity – even solely in the context of music – is a complex concept, with a great deal of variation from child to child. The literature recognizes multiple sources of influence, including observation of and gender pressure from parents and peers. Gender-appropriate behavior and traits may even be communicated to children through the child-oriented media to which they are exposed – such as nursery rhymes, fairy tales or song lyrics. Given that the human voice is a significant factor in sex and gender signaling (Skuk & Schweinberger, 2014), vocal identity and gender identity intersect – so closely intertwined that separating the two is difficult. As such, I will be examining them in tandem, examining the interplay between gender and voice/singing in the singers' formative experiences.

I was known as the soprano: Voice and gender. A theme that stood out in the narratives was the struggle around vocal identity; even the cis-women in the study struggled with the intersection of their voice and gender appropriateness. Voice and singing are associated with femininity, specifically because its nature coincides with perceptions of gender appropriateness – to the extent that that “male femininity associated with their engagement in the gender-incongruent activity was perceived as an indicator of homosexuality” (Harrison et al., 2012, p. 4). Specifically, associating with singing is not simply female-sexed, it suggests that the participant must naturally possess the supposedly “inherent” traits associated with femininity. Green (2014) notes that “the voice is the one musical instrument that is completely lacking in technology: it has no links with anything outside the intimacy of the self,

and no pseudo-scientific masculine overtones. Its use by women affirms and does not challenge the unsuitability of any serious and lasting connection between women and instruments” (pp. 96-97). The experiences of these singers, however, seems to suggest that once a female voice becomes an instrument – something more than just a *voice* – questions of appropriateness suddenly become relevant. In short, it seems as though a singer’s voice must also fit the societal standards of gender-congruence.

Analysis. For **Alice**, there was no question that her voice was central to all facets of her identity. By the age of around eleven, she knew that singing was a significant part of her self-concept:

I know once I got to be middle school age, I very much developed like, "This was what I did. This was what people expected of me. I sang and I danced and I was cute." It was never expected of me to excel academically. That was my parents' domain.

And it went further than just being a singer – she was a *soprano*. “I was always known as being the soprano,” she recalls, “since I always had a really high voice. [By middle school], it was definitely already cemented.” With being a soprano came expectations, most notably that she would naturally both have a beautiful voice and sing beautifully. It wasn’t so much that she was told that her voice and singing had to be beautiful, but

I just was always validated for that. It was always like, "You're blue eyes and your beautiful voice." It was always just– Still in the town I'm living now it's like everybody knows me in my town because I sing it publicly... People often think I know them and it's, "Oh, you have a beautiful voice. On Alice, she has a beautiful voice.”

It’s clear, even at this point, that Alice’s voice was a significant part of and how she understood her gender identity.

Brooke's development of a vocal identity was a much subtler thing, and something which really didn't seem to come till much later – once she'd started training formally. Her *singing* identity seemed to develop long before she gained a real awareness of her voice. The one aspect of early vocal identity that stands out is her conflict around belting and musical theatre. She enjoyed musical theatre a great deal and recalls that her desire to be in musical theatre started in elementary school. Not being a natural belter, though – and with no guidance from a teacher – she felt that she was limited by her own voice. The primary aspect of her voice to develop was a dissatisfaction with its capabilities.

Cody's awareness of voice and singing as a feminine thing came quite early, noting that he seemed to have become aware of the division by the age of six. At a very early age, he understood that “Oh, it's a girly thing to want to sing.” He was very uncomfortable high timbre in general, choosing to switch from the violin to cello because the cello felt more masculine to him, tone-wise. Having a very high-lying, bright voice was (and to an extent, still is) uncomfortable for him because it doesn't fit into his self-concept, and is often is a source of misgendering for him:

There are times where even though people know [that I identify as male] – They hear me singing then afterward misgender me as result of having heard my singing. They attribute certain words that are typically gendered feminine to my voice, that then make me uncomfortable.

Drew struggled with gender typicality and conformity from a very young age, and their development of a kind of vocal identity came when they realized that their voice could help them navigate the world – and in particular, the world of femininity. They had started singing in public quite early – “I started cantoring at children's mass when I was nine,” they recall. “I had been solo singing from a very

young age, and I had started doing theater outside of school.” But it wasn’t until middle school that they understood their voice could be a tool, for them:

[Singing] gave me a tremendously satisfying role to play. In middle school, I remember there was a day when I was singing "I Dreamed A Dream" for UIL or solo and ensemble, or something. Everybody had to get up and sing their solo, and these really popular girls– Sarah, I was so attracted to Sarah. They all stayed afterward and were like, 'Wow, like, you're such a good singer, like wow," and I was like "Thanks," [laughs] I remember going, "This is great. Because this is a way that they will like me and not mock me."

Kristina initially seemed to model her voice and vocal identity after her father – not only because she idolized him, but because she saw how his voice was a source of status and power. He was admired for it, it gave him status in the community. Once she hit puberty, however, her awareness of the gender divide shifted how she began to think to about her voice and singing. “I think that's when I got more obsessed with the higher notes things,” she recalls, “wanting to sound feminine and pure and beautiful and elegant and all these from a head voicey type of perspective.”

She found a vocal model, a singer named Sissel, whose sound matched what Kristina felt was an appropriate representation of femininity:

She has a really beautiful voice, she's the Titanic, remember the Titanic where there's all these really esoteric, high, beautiful pure sounds on top of the soundtrack? That's her. I was a big fan of hers in my teenage years there. I wanted that purity, I wanted the non-messiness of it. I admired it, and my family had that admiration for it, too.

In retrospect, she thinks that she may have been drawn to that because Sissel represented a female version of what she admired in her father’s voice. She noted that “my father's own way of singing was very much about achieving that tone, in a male voice, granted.”

Liana's vocal identity did not seem to take on gendered qualities until they began training formally around her late teens. Till that point, it had been something that was central to their social/community identity, or – due to the fact that they could sing multiple parts and had a natural affinity for singing – a source of personal pride. They recall having been very competitive, and that their voice played a role in that, but throughout the interview, they never referenced gender in the context of their voice *until* they got to college.

Discussion. A further discussion of gender traits and the female voice will be addressed in the *Normativity* section that follows, but issues around gender appropriateness must at least be acknowledged here, as well. The focus of this section, however, will primarily consider the role of voice in a singer's *self-concept* – *i.e.*, the compilation of “self-relevant knowledge which we use to make sense of our experiences,” as well as “the processes that construct, defend and maintain this knowledge” (Oyserman, 2001, p. 499). In this section and the discussion to follow elsewhere, it is helpful to keep in mind that identity development and understanding of social / gender norms comes from two spheres of influence: normative vs. informative (*see* Chapter 2, Context and the Material Self). Normative influence is generally active (implicit coercion), while informative influence is generally observational (validity of the source) (Knippenberg, 2000).

Within this framework, I posit that a great deal of the influence the participants' received concerning their intersectional gender-vocal identity was an amalgam of both types. While “normative influence” is associated with coercion, it should be noted that the negative associations western society tends to correlate

with coercion do not accurately describe how normative coercion frequently occurs. To wit, coercion may take the form of positive reinforcement of normative behavior (Kahn, 2009; Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, & Steinfeldt, 2011), as we can see in the singers' narratives.

Alice noted that her vocal identity was something developed early because she received praise for it – “I was just always validated for [my] blue eyes and beautiful voice.” As such, before she even reached middle school, she understood that “I sang, I danced and I was cute.” This, she said, “was what people expected of me.” Not surprisingly, there were implied – or even explicit – gender norms entangled with all of the singers' experiences of informational and normative influences. This intersection runs so deep that, as previously mentioned, it becomes difficult to entangle the two.

The observational aspect of identity development also played a significant part of the singers' development. Hogg and Reid (2006) describe an individual's group identit(ies) as adhering to *prototypes* within the group. This means that

information about the prototype and who is most prototypical can be gleaned by simply observing how people behave—what they do, how they dress, what they say, and so forth. Such information can also be intentionally communicated nonverbally through gestures and expressions or verbally by actually talking about what is and what is not normative of the group (p. 14).

An example of this can be seen in Kristina's experience – she observed her father's prototype (an exception to traditional masculinity, who holds group value by having vocal qualities that were unusual and special), then looked for a female model of that same prototype, which she found in the singer Sissel. Drew's experience was similar; they noted that their mother specifically modeled ideals of feminine

gender ideals (both in appearance and behavior, as well as vocally), and played the music of female singers she considered to be ideal models of female voice and feminine singing.

Research has acknowledged the role of gender typicality in a child's identity formation, as well as the risks associated with non-conformity (Roberts et al., 2012; Yunger et al., 2004), and we see this played out in the experiences of Cody and Drew. Though neither of them felt particularly comfortable with the vocal/gender prototypes to which they were expected to conform, they nevertheless received praise for the aspects of their voice that *did* conform appropriately. Drew seemed to feel a sense of gender atypicality in all aspects of their early childhood, but eventually came to see conformity as a way to move through the world, to the detriment of their mental health – an experience which aligns with Rogers' idea of *incongruence*, a discrepancy between experience and perception of self, as a source of anxiety (Ismail & Tekke, 2015).

Cody felt the same pressures but seemed to resist the pressure to conform. But, while both Drew and Cody's religious backgrounds were a source of much of this pressure, the difference of response may be related simply to changing social norms around gender identities: Drew is over a decade older than Cody, and Drew's awareness of the possibility of a trans identity did not come until adulthood, whereas Cody seems to have been aware from a much earlier point in his life, perhaps even prior to adolescence. This difference may potentially be observed in how push-back for atypicality affected them – Cody experiences anxiety, but to my knowledge, has not been diagnosed with a mood disorder. Drew, on the other hand,

struggled with depression and anxiety throughout their early life, though it wasn't diagnosed and treated until much later.

One aspect that seemed to hold true for all the participants was that their awareness of the gender associations around singing were either noticed or became more pronounced around the age of puberty – generally, from eleven to thirteen years old. Some, as with Drew in the example above, noticed that singing was not appropriate for men a very early age, but true awareness of what singing meant in the context of gender generally always seemed to come later, when sex differences became more apparent.

This may also be influenced by the fact that prior to adolescent, children tend to play with groups composed of their own sex (Archer, 1992); however, this may also be attributed to the fact that the onset of puberty represents a significant cognitive and identity developmental point, wherein individuals become more aware of their contextual situation, and a greater development of cognitive capacity for abstraction and inference (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1992), indicating that they may have simply reached a point where they are capable of making broader inferences about the implications of the gender role-based observations they'd made previously.

Theme. For most of the singers in this study, gendered expectations around voice led them to actively attempt to shape themselves and their voices to match the socially-influenced prototypes presented to them – something that had a deleterious effect on their later lives, which corresponds to Rogers' definition of incongruence and its relation to anxiety and destabilizing of self (Lux et al., 2013).

Variation. Brooke, a singer whose voice and appearance naturally fell in line with the archetype of feminine voice, did not seem to experience the same distress as the others. Nevertheless, there were clearly expectations around voice type that have caused – and continue to cause – anxiety and dissatisfaction with herself and her voice. Brooke’s recollection of her past experiences and development was not as complete as the others, something that she jokingly suggested might explain her current dissatisfaction. While there’s certainly no way to suggest with any certainty that this might be the case, it is nevertheless telling that the singers who struggled with their identity early are now much happier, while her experiences seems to be the mirror opposite.

Summary

How does a singer’s recalled musical experiences intersect with and inform their musical, gender and vocal identities?

Identity formation for the singers in this study seems to have been a complex, intersectional process, wherein both normative and observational influences played a significant role in how the participants perceived themselves, their voices, and their musical place in the world. Early musical experiences, both with informal “musiking,” and more formal community or educational music-making, stimulated an early love for music, as well as provided vocal models that affected their later development.

Performativity

Research Question

How do a singer's developing personal and musical identities intersect with their recalled musical experiences and inform their understanding of their social and internal identities? This inquiry will examine the ways in which the performance of gender and identity in their musical experiences informs the singer's perception of self and voice.

Social and Singing Identity

As above, with vocal / gender identity, a social and singing identity are so closely intertwined that it is impossible to tease the two apart. As such, I will address the two together from two perspectives: first, singing as a social currency, where the performers understood their voice and singing as something with power – something positive for them at the time, even if the long term consequences might not necessarily be desirable; and second, singing as a source of anxiety – situations in which singing had negative consequences...often because of its previous role as a kind of currency for the singer.

A ticket to ride: Singing as social currency. *Cultural capital* was a term created by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s (Winkle-Wagner, 2010) to refer to what we might now describe as *privilege* – but more broadly represented all of the cultural knowledge and assets (tangible or otherwise) that contributed to an individual's position in society. Cultural capital, however, refers more broadly to education and class status, rather than social standing. *Social currency*, a neologism

that is used both to describe social media value (for an individual) and branding (for a product or company), seems to be a better description of what singing provided for the participants of this study. Of all the participants, only Cody was born in the internet age, so I use the term to refer to all forms real-life social standing and social power. In this section, I will examine singing a form of *social currency* – both how it figured into the singers’ social identity, and its effect on the participants.

Analysis. Alice understood the social value of singing from a very early age. Socially, she was known as “the soprano with a beautiful voice,” something that gave her distinction and something that gave her a clear, recognizable label. Singing – though more specifically, singing *well* – was a way in which she established value, distinction and respect in a high-achieving, perfectionistic family. Singing was a way to separate herself from her mother, a woman with a domineering and over-achieving personality. In her social circles outside of the home, singing was a way for an otherwise shy girl to be loud, to gain (positive) attention for herself. Singing as a way of being noticed eventually backfired on her, however.

It’s difficult to understand the role singing played, socially, for Brooke. She herself noted that she hasn’t spent a great deal of time reflecting on her experiences as a singer. “I know that's something that I just don't tend to do a lot,” she acknowledged, “so these questions are really interesting because I don't feel like I'm lying, but it's like, I don't know the answer so I answer into the best of my ability.” It’s clear that singing had a social component – she mentioned drama club and choir, performing in musical in high schools. And it’s also obvious that singing had a very meaningful place in her life – the time she spent away from singing was a very

unhappy time for her, and she worked hard to be able to study again and engage in. So, while it seems safe to say that she had some type of social singing identity, it's difficult to determine what it might have looked like or how she used it.

As with Brooke, the image of the role Cody's voice played in his development years is hard to discern, albeit for different reasons. The complications of his gender uncertainty, religious faith and the discrepancy between his self-concept and his voice make it difficult to unravel the role of his voice. While in a sense, it appears he used his singing to navigate being female-bodied/voiced in high school ("I was pushing myself so far to conform, like you were talking about, I was trying to be Callas. I literally came to school in gowns sometimes, because I was trying to be straight up Callas."), when it came to his voice as a reflection of himself, he had a far more conflicted relationship. Where others were able to get attention from their voices, he hid. It nevertheless seems to have been something play some sort of role in his attempt to conform and fit in to the environment around him.

Drew recognizes their own use as a form of social currency, though for them it was a more complex experience than it was for Alice, simply because of Drew's own gender discomfort. For them, there was an intersection of safety, conformity, social navigation *and* social currency:

Felix: So in a way, your singing became the way you negotiated not feeling comfortable anywhere else?

Drew: It gave me a tremendously satisfying role to play. In middle school, I remember there was a day when I was singing "I Dreamed A Dream" for something. Everybody had to get up and sing their solo, and these really popular girls all stayed afterward and were like, "Wow, like, you're such a good singer, like wow." I remember going, "This is great. Because this is a way that they will like me and not mock me." It was social currency. It was a way to be in the world.

Later, when they made it to college, their singing still played a role as a form of social currency, though at that point, it revolved around both attention *and* gender conformity:

Yes, it was social currency. I mean, the problem is I was so good at doing it. I was so good at singing beautifully and pretty in that way, and I still am. I was good at it, I was succeeding. Clearly, nothing was wrong. I felt like I belonged. I felt safe. I was not seeking authenticity at that time. I was seeking approval and I got what I wanted.

Due to the variations in culture and the kind of rural community in which she lived, Kristina observed the value of singing as social capital first, rather than working it out for herself, like Alice and Drew. For her, she saw immediately how her father's beautiful voice, his singing, set him apart from the community, giving him status and power of a sort. When, around the age of puberty, she began to craft a social identity for herself around singing, she returned – perhaps subconsciously – to the model her father had provided: high, beautiful, pure and, for her, *feminine*. Singing was a way to perform femininity, while still maintaining a kind of masculine power. And singing perfectly beautifully was also a way to distinguish herself in a field where she saw there was a lot of competition, even as a teenager:

Kristina: I think that's when I got more obsessed with the higher notes things, wanting to sound feminine and pure and beautiful and elegant. I wanted that purity, I wanted the non-messiness of it. I had a lot of admiration for it and I also experienced my family who had that admiration for it. My father's own way of singing was very much about achieving that tone – granted, in a male voice.

Felix: [If I'm understanding this correctly], you saw there was a lot of competition around singing, [that singing] was very much a female thing. "What can I emulate that's going to give me power?" Your dad was a source of power in singing. You associated what he did with what would get you status and power?

- Kristina:** Yes, I think that's pretty accurate. I think that's a good way of analyzing that. I just haven't thought about it before but yes, I think that could totally be the influence to that.
- Felix:** This raises the question... this is something my therapist has talked about... Which is, that if you [as a child] are looking for power and you see that [men around you] are projecting power through [their masculinity], that is [something to emulate] to get your own power.
- Kristina:** Absolutely. Power and yet I felt somewhat disconnected from it when I was doing it.
- Felix:** Because it wasn't you, it was a tool?
- Kristina:** I definitely didn't associate myself very much with it, I was desperate to associate myself with it. I tried really hard to associate myself with [femininity] but I couldn't. I [actually] wanted to go play soccer.

Kristina eventually found out that the thing she had emulated – this idea of high, beautiful, pure singing – was no longer a currency for her:

I will say this about this particular thing: I went to London and I got training in that voice [the pure, high soprano] that I thought I wanted and I got way better at it. I got into musical theater school and then I discovered that that isn't currency because at that particular school, what everybody wants to sing was Jesus Christ Superstar, now it's not currency. What did I do? I just changed again to what was the currency and how fucked up did I get my head by doing that?

For Liana, singing was less of an external form of currency, so much as a shield for themselves. Feeling as though they didn't fit in – in a follow-up conversation, they told me, "I don't really think people liked me in high school" – they clung to singing as a king of armor, something that held a place of honor on what they called their "Vanity Wall."

I had all my photos [for whatever group I was in, choir and whatever] and all of my medals or ribbons meticulously measured out. I was like, "This is my wall of vanity," but really it was my wall of self-bolstering. Every aspect of my extracurricular life was devoted towards feeling like I was good enough. Music was absolutely no exception. I realize now so much of my competitiveness was directly related to that. I was just like, "No, I need to be acknowledged and I need to feel validated and people to think I'm good enough."

If they couldn't fit in, then they could use their voice as something prove that they had a place, that they had value, too.

Discussion. Currency wasn't a theme I went in with in mind. It hadn't even really occurred to me. It was only as I listened to the singers talk that I realized the role singing played, even in my own life. It became something I asked about when I saw examples of it occur, and interestingly, it wasn't a concept I had to explain – the singers who were able to speak about it understood immediately what I meant.

For myself, as a young musician in the southern United States, singing itself wasn't the objective, it was *what* I sang – singing classical music gave me a kind of elite status, and also elevated my class standing: one cannot be a redneck and sing opera. This was something that held true after I came to New York, as well. People who would otherwise make very negative judgments on people from the south saw my profession as a mitigating factor. Once again, one cannot be a redneck and sing opera. Liana had a similar experience, wherein opera was, for her, a way to transcend being a non-conforming black woman (prior to their transition), and then, post-transition, as a way to navigate the world as someone whose social position can be precarious, due to complications around race and gender.

Considering this theme through the lens of the research around performers and performing identity, several interpretations emerged. Firstly, a study by Mihajlovski (2016), an attempt to validate the frequently-cited results published by Kemp (1996), found that musicians – even as young as 13 – tended to fall higher on

the introversion scale than the general population.² For the singers who self-identified as being very introverted (Alice and Cody), their experiences suggests that singing might have provided a social identity that gave them access to an in-group in a way that circumnavigated their discomfort in social situations.

Secondly, and this seems to be the more prominent explanation, for singers who felt as though they were at least somewhat excluded from in their adolescent social circles (Alice, Cody, Drew and Liana), singing was a way to gain in-group access, or at least some kind of approbation and admiration. According to Newman, Lohman, and Newman (2007),

it is not surprising that a growing body of evidence suggests that people are healthier and happier when they experience social belonging. Conversely, exclusion and social isolation are perceived as painful and are associated with a variety of negative affective experiences including anxiety, depression, anger, and shame (p. 241).

We see that acted out particularly in Drew's life, as they note that their exclusion and lack of belong as a child was a source of stress throughout their life – and that singing specifically caught the attention of the high-status girls in their school. Given that all four recall feeling like an outsider, to varying degrees, it seems like that singing played a significant role in giving them a kind of social armor, a way to be acknowledged even if they didn't quite fit in. This aligns with the literature, which acknowledges that

youth who are not well-liked by peers have fewer options for friendships and group membership. Those rejected youth who continue to seek group

² NB: In Kemp's study, his interpretation of Introversion was that of what he called "Musical Inversion," which did not correlate with shyness, timidity or lower self-confidence. Contrary to that, however, this study did, in fact, find a significant correlation with the traditional social traits of introversion.

membership tend to be part of smaller cliques comprised of other rejected youths. ... [W]ithdrawn-rejected youths have the greatest difficulty finding supportive friendships and the greatest likelihood of being victimized by peers. This makes it difficult for them to learn and practice effective social skills within peer relationships so that their social standing within the larger peer group could improve. (Brown, 2004)

For young singers who may be more prone to introversion and trait-anxiety, group membership may be difficult to obtain, leading them to seek ways in which to use their musical gifts to gain status and even self-esteem. For, according to Hogg and Abrams (1988),

social identity (group membership) is an important source of self-esteem, so it is not improbable to suppose that individuals with few evaluatively positive social identities or simply with a relatively threadbare repertoire of identities will invest a great deal of energy in their maintenance. They will cherish what identities they have, fiercely preserving their positive aspects via-à-vis outgroups and engaging in pronounced ingroup/outgroup differentiation. (p. 66)

Considered through that lens, it seems likely that the 'singer' label was a significant source of social and personal armor for the study participants. For Kristina, singing gave her a sense of a social identity, a way to move through the world, and bolstered her poor sense of self-concept. For Liana, singing was something that gave them a sense of worth, and they, once again, articulate this quite clearly:

I had this wall of vanity... It had all of my photos for whatever group I was in, choir and track and whatever. [...] I was like, "This is my wall of vanity," but really it was my wall of self-bolstering. ... I was just like, I need to be acknowledged and I need to feel validated and people to think I'm good enough. I'm going to do that by better, and being smarter, and being more vocally beautiful [...] and then maybe people will like me.

This mirrors my own childhood experiences, as well. As a homeschooled child with no social exposure other than the evangelic church my parents attended,

music was the only way in which I had to gain group value. If I couldn't be accepted, then at least I could have an identity that gained a certain amount of admiration and approbation. I had multiple non-conforming strikes against me, but my obvious musical ability gained me a grudging respect among my peers.

Using a singing identity as a form of self-esteem and belonging, however, seems potentially fraught with complications that can have serious negative consequences later in life. According to Rogers' theory of self, a lack of self-worth is internalized during a person's formative years, when they do not "receive unconditional positive regard but experiences that positive regard is merely given under certain conditions. In that case, the person integrates these conditions within the self and pursues to meet those conditions" (Lux et al., 2013). If one's voice is the source of one's acceptance, confidence and self-esteem, any threat to the voice or singing identity becomes a threat to one's sense of self. Rejection as a singer also takes on new weight, as the rejection that comes as a normal course of being a professional musician, suddenly becomes a referendum on the singer's personal and social worth, as we will see in more detail in the section to come.

Theme. For the majority of the participants, singing provided an entrée into social circles, gaining them a certain level of respect from their peers and bolstering their sense of self and self-worth. Singing, as currency, was used (in essence) to 'buy' their way into groups and to gain peer approbation.

Variation. Once again, Brooke is the outlier here. Though it's clear that singing was a significant part of her social identity – she was involved in multiple

theatre groups, choir and other musical-social activities, but we lack a sense of how that played out in her life as a teenager.

All roads lead to anxiety: Mental health and the singer. The connection between musicians and performance anxiety is acknowledged and much effort has been made to understand it; it's hardly surprising that every singer who participated in this study reported high levels of anxiety. What was intriguing was that the issues they described went deeper than necessarily just the context of performing. One singer acknowledged an eating disorder; another was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and bipolar. Another struggled with obsessive compulsive disorder and clinical depression and anxiety. Yet another, though they never mentioned a diagnosis, reported experiencing anxiety simply around just *being* a singer.

The literature acknowledges links between musicians and a higher incidence of trait anxiety, as well as linking performers with high levels of neuroticism and emotional sensitivity. Though some portion of this association may simply be chalked up to performance careers attracting a certain personality type, Lehmann et al. (2007) note that "research also suggests that an anxious personality results from an accumulation of certain life experiences" (p. 152). This analysis examines the experiences of the performers and considers the contexts and experiences which might be factors in their mood disorders or general performance anxiety.

Analysis. Alice talks about the overwhelming anxiety that colored her performances, her self-perception, her enjoyment of performing, as well as the influences in the performance world that contributed to her development of a voice

disorder. As we have already discussed, her early experiences led to anxiety around performing – in particular, she believes that the reasons she went into singing in the first place were contributing factors. When she did a workshop on performance anxiety, later in life, she recalls:

Also, it was really the first time I looked at, and we touched on earlier, what am I doing this for? Am I doing this for my dead father? You're going to have anxiety issues if that's what you're doing. And really looking at, "What are my expectations of why am I doing this?"

I think it was also a level of preparation that I often avoided, this perfectionist-procrastinator, thing. I'm so debilitated by the whole [business of singing], that I'm not doing work, and somehow, it's just going to magically happen, but I can't look at it right now, and I'm getting distracted with a million other things, and having this looming, like this exam that I've got to prepare for, but I'm not doing it, and that's just feeding the anxiety.

There were also the issues around her experience in the performance world itself – being harassed, inappropriate behavior on the part of casting directions. She felt that people took advantage of her vulnerability, noting at the time that she was “paralyzed with neediness and regrets,” and unable to stand up for herself. She also noted that the environment of musical theatre itself contributed to her struggles with both anxiety and the eating disorder she developed, telling me, “I had struggled with an eating disorder for many years. I was very underweight, which was really rewarded as a musical theater performer. I was very petite and cute and blonde and was constantly being asked if I tapped and not being taken seriously.”

When the pressure and anxiety pushed her to the breaking point, she left the business completely.

Alice: I didn't sing again for about six years. At all.

Felix: Do you feel like the eating disorder [and] the singing things were intertwined?

Alice: I do. I did feel very much that I was trying to please people, an idea of who I thought I was expected to be.

Felix: Do you think some of that was related to the expectation [around] what a girl is supposed to do?

Alice: As comes to weight and appearance, absolutely. Yes.

Drew also talked about serious issues with generalized anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, and how performance anxiety was intensified by their gender issues and the stress of their life at home. Drew's brother has Asperger's Syndrome, and the messages they received around their brother, as well as how they were taught to hold in emotions, caused for a great deal of distress in the developmental periods of their life:

Drew: I struggled for a long time, with feeling anger toward my brother, because I was not allowed to. That was very clearly prohibited, from a very young age. The first time it was overtly said to me like, "He is different from other children and you cannot ever be mean to him," when I was about five, six. It was pretty hardcore suppressed, and then, repressed for a long time.

Felix: I can't imagine that not creating resentment.

Drew: I mean, it would have, if I had been allowed to feel my feelings, but I didn't even feel anger, really, until I was about 27. That was when I first had my reemergence of my anger.

The issues around their brother combined with their own mental health needs, which prevented them from getting treatment. They recalled that they had a lot of things going on, mood-wise – "Un-diagnosed OCD, and un-diagnosed depression, and all this stuff that was not being treated, because my brother was the one who was allowed to have problems, but not me." They certainly felt that their disconnect from their emotions and their body had an effect on their singing, technically, noting that for a long time, they were unable to access much of their vocal weight because the physical disconnect and resulting lack of breath support

had resulted in a permanently high laryngeal position. They struggled with belting because, as they noted, belting felt like anger.

The gender issues were also wrapped up in all of that, making it difficult to separate cause and effect; however, once medicated and receiving appropriate care, gender and gender presentation became the primary source of their performance anxiety. Once they began to embrace their new identity, and dress for themselves, rather than in the ways that female-bodied singers are expected to present, they found that much of their anxiety resolved on its own:

Drew: I used to experience [anxiety] all the time, in auditions. A part of it was how I was dressed. I have made a huge change in my life. I just don't dress that way anymore when I audition, ever, and that has cut out three-quarters of it. I get a little nervous but I would not call it anxiety. Just more garden variety, like, "Here we go," but all the anxiety, now that I'm thinking about it, is associated with my gender stuff. I said this to my husband just the other day, after the audition, "The only thing I'm not nervous about is the singing."

Felix: It seems to me, and this is my perception, so correct me if I'm wrong – the anxiety you experienced while performing was more directly related to yourself and how you were perceived, and how you were presenting, and how you received, rather than necessarily your voice or your performance.

Drew: Yes. *La voce* is [just] fine.

When I asked **Kristina** if she'd ever experienced anxiety while singing – a standard question from the protocol, she stared at me, then broke out in laughter for a good amount of time, saying, "Oh my God, is that... is that even a *question*?" When she'd recovered, she articulated the issue, noting that some of it seemed to stem from her lack of a strong core of identity – an unstable self-concept, but that the environment in which she was in certainly contributed.

Kristina: I had terrible stage fright. In that process, I started out with sort of acceptable anxiety, I think, but I went through the

- [filtering auditions for the conservatory], then all of a sudden it's there. I was fine and I had a sense of something when I went in. By the time I left, I was debilitatively anxious about opening my mouth. It was really, really, really terrible. Outside of performing, I had anxiety. It filtered into my entire existence.
- Felix:** Do you feel like some of the anxiety– I think the answer is clear, but I want to get this right on the record. That some of that was related to your identity issues or your sense of the personal self?
- Kristina:** That was where it came from. Because it was not rational– There was no other reason for it, and I felt completely pulled apart.
- Felix:** Powerless in a way, perhaps?
- Kristina:** Yes. Something in the [conservatory] process was so self-destructive.

That on its own was a lot, but the stress of the conservatory, the loss of her grandfather, her uncle, and breaking up with her long-term boyfriend, were additional emotional burdens that would eventually contribute her developing a polyp on her vocal folds and losing access to her singing voice for a significant period of time. Recovery, for her, would involve time, distance from her current environment, and a process of self-discovery to build up her sense of self and create a self-concept that wasn't dependent on others' approbation or validation.

Liana also struggled with their mental health, both in the context of singing, and in their outside life, as well. Like Kristina, when I asked the standard question about whether they'd experienced performance anxiety, they laughed, wondering if I was joking. "How am I supposed to address this? Yes, underline, capitalized, bold, italics?"

Their issues with mental health began as far back as their teens, that they can recall, and would have probably always been a source of stress for them. Singing, and then their conservatory experience, intensified it, most likely the primary factor

in their eventual break-down. After that breakdown, they were diagnosed, officially, with generalized anxiety disorder, type two bipolar disorder, binge-eating disorder and attention-deficit disorder. They acknowledged that the steps they've taken to manage their mental health has resulted in improvement:

It used to be more frequent than it is now. I'm less anxious now, though music and music making and generally feeling like I'm a competent musician still is a major source of anxiety in my life and profession, but nowhere to the degree of where it falls in school. Yes, but less is my answer.

The contributing factors for their anxiety seemed to be a combination of traits/genetic predisposition, and environment and experiences. Being a minority in a predominantly-white field, a lack of a support system while in a highly competitive conservatory environment, a self-concept that was wrapped up in their singing – there's so many factors at work that causation can really only be narrowed to 'a series of mitigating factors.' Nevertheless, their lack of a strong self-concept seems to have contributed and compounded their issues with mental health. As noted in the previous section, 'being the best' at singing was a significant part of how they defined themselves and their personal mythology. Being 'better' was also a way for them to shrug off the stress of being a minority. They needed to be acknowledged and validated, and

I [was] going to do that by better, and being smarter, and being more vocally beautiful because those are things within my control, whereas being black is not in my control, and being a certain person is not in my control. But I can be the best damn person I can be at these things, and then maybe people will like me.

When they came to an environment where not only were they not the best, there were significant costs to even the smallest misstep – they inevitably lost hold of their sense of self. Recovery, aside from meds, required therapy as well as “a lot of

reflecting on music and how those experiences did not abate that anxiety at all in any capacity.”

Brooke and Cody both talked about intense anxiety, as well, though not necessarily a pathological experience, as with the other participants.

For Brooke, it seems to revolve around her lack of direction, her uncertainty about her voice and her prospects as a musician. She noted that as she’s gained more confidence in her voice and her singing, that the performance anxiety itself has lessened, but she still feels a great deal of discomfort around singing itself. “It doesn’t bring me joy,” she told me. Though she thinks that growing up with a constant sense of high expectations is certainly a contributing factor, she also believes that a constant sense of frustration around singing is the primary source of her current anxiety.

She noted a correlation between her anxiety and being a soprano in general.

The level of competition is such that,

as a soprano, you have to sing well and you have to have the right look and you really just need to fulfill whatever preference that table of people has, they can pick and choose, so yes, I feel like being a soprano has contributed to my frustration. I feel like I need to show what great energy I have but not too much energy, but not like annoying energy. It's like the right balance. Make just the right amount of- Respond to questions with just the right amount of conversation. Not answering just like yes or no, but also not going off on a huge tangent telling a story but engage them just enough.

Summing her whole experience up, she told me, “I think a lot of my feelings about my singing voice are tied to ‘I wish I was better,’ because I don't feel like I'm a successful singer with success, with a very narrow traditional definition of success being used.”

For Cody, his anxiety is quite clearly tied into his gender struggles and the perception that his voice doesn't match his gender identity. While there's a performance aspect to it, he experiences anxiety simply during the act of singing itself,

sometimes to the point where I have like literally had to stop. Notably, it was last semester when I was practicing the La Boheme aria, I completely lost it. I was like I cannot keep – She was asking me for more in the high register notes. I was like, "I'm giving you a lot and hearing myself is making me uncomfortable", and so I literally had to stop for a bit. High resonance can sound very – Especially very high resonance can sound super shrill especially if they're your own because you don't hear the part [that's not shrill].

It's clear, talking to him, that some of his anxiety almost certainly revolves around the lack of a stable self-concept. In part, he is quite young and still struggling with how he is seen in the world, as well as the baggage around gender – particularly gender in the context of his religious practice. Having observed him performing on multiple occasions, I've observed that he seems to experience performance anxiety intensely in situations where the focus is on him solely, where his performance of gender is under scrutiny. Once he begins hormone therapy and his voice begins to change, it may be that his anxiety will subside.

Discussion. As is made obvious by the singers' interviews, performance anxiety and anxiety in general are, or have been, significant sources of stress for all six participants. This reflects my experiences as a singer as well – having struggled with both trait anxiety, an intense sense of perfectionism, issues with vocal instability and an entanglement of self-worth, self-concept and singing all contributed to my not-insignificant battles with performance anxiety.

Overview. Obviously, a full discussion of performance anxiety and/or mental health in the context of music and vocal performance is both beyond the scope of this study and examined far more deeply elsewhere in the literature (see, .e.g., Sandgren and Ericsson (2007), who offer a thoughtful examination of performance anxiety in classical singers). This discussion, therefore, will focus primarily on the intersections of gender, personality or experiences in the singers' narratives. To provide context for that, however, I will a brief overview of the relevant contributing factors to performance anxiety that commonly reported by singers in the literature – many of which are either covered explicitly or implied in all the study participants' narratives (Coon & Mitterer, 2008; Kenny & Osborne, 2006; Papageorgi, Hallam, & Welch, 2007; Sandgren, 2002; Sandgren & Ericsson, 2007).

A. **Pre-disposition or susceptibility** – trait anxiety or other mental health states which can contribute to situational anxiety: Drew and Liana both noted early instances of struggles with mental health, suggesting that there may have been biological or situational factors which contributed to their anxiety around singing.

B. **Personality** – temperamental variances such as introversion: The majority of the performers in this study perceived themselves as having had personality traits that likely contributed to their anxiety, including childhood introversion, difficulties with socialization and gender non-conformance.

C. **Perfectionism** – high personal standards, perfectionist views or sensitivity to evaluation by others: This is a commonality between *all* of the performers in this study, Brooke included. High internal and external standards, using accomplishment to obtain approbation and social standing, and – such as in

Alice's experience with trying to sing for her deceased father – trying to please in situations where there can be no validation or approval given.

D. **Previous experiences** – someone who has experienced poor or embarrassing performance experiences will fear future performances, seeing them as potential failures: there are several instances of this in the singers' narratives, but the most significant comes from Alice's story, which will be discussed in detail below.

E. **Poor self-efficacy** and **negative self-concept** – a person's beliefs concerning one's capacity to perform tasks: this is a common thread throughout the narratives, as well. Milder examples are found in Brooke and Drew's experiences around belting, while other narratives, such as Kristina, Liana and Alice, offer more intense instances of *incongruence* between self-image and ideal self, resulting a sense of personal inauthenticity or lack of capability.

F. **Limited exposure** or **experience** – higher arousal due to lack of performance frequency: this doesn't seem to be as relevant to the study participants, most likely due to the fact that all of them have been performing for some time. This one exception to this might be Cody, who has yet to enter the world of professional performance.

G. **Gender** – female performers seem to be more susceptible to performance anxiety and hence, perceive the presence of an audience as threatening: Regardless of current gender identity, all of the participants of the study were AFAB and socialized in their developmental years as female. The question of sex vs. gender is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, to the

extent that gender traits are social and contextual, it seems likely that the socially-defined feminine traits would still be relevant even for the singers who do not identify as female – something that their narratives bear out.

H. **Vocal instability** – specific to singers, the fear of vocal loss, instability or fluctuation significantly contributes to anxiety in professional singers: The mature singers reported some kind of experience of vocal instability as a contributor to their anxiety, often related to a lack of or poor understanding of vocal technique. All of the singers reported a reduction of anxiety when their voice stabilized, suggesting that this is a significant contributor to singer stress, something which is born out in the literature.

Further insight.

Previous experiences. Alice's experience with singing a solo from the musical *Tommy* – “See Me, Feel Me” – was a devastating moment for her as a young singer. Assigned a solo, whose context she didn't understand, in the context of a high school show, the sexual undertones to the lyrics completely passed her by...until after the performance, when she became an object of ridicule. The music itself, the performance, the applause for having accomplished something difficult – all of that was very validating for her. The music itself had empowered a teenage girl, at point in her life where she was, in her own words, “shy and awkward,” but the response of the boys around her had exactly the opposite effect. She points to that incident as the time where she began experiencing performance anxiety.

While we know that prior experiences of stress and anxiety make one more prone to performance anxiety, incidents like this may go even deeper. A study by

McCabe, Miller, Laugesen, Antony, and Young (2010) on the relationship between peer victimization (teasing, specifically) and adult anxiety found a significant relationship between childhood teasing and adult experiences of anxiety disorders. This suggests that incidents such as Alice's could indeed have lasting effects, particularly in cases where the teasing around their voice or performance isolates them or reduces their social status in a group. Another study by Miller, J. L. and Vaillancourt (2007) found that a history of covert victimization (such as social exclusion or gossiping) reflected higher levels of perfectionism in college aged girls – something that I observed in Alice's story as well.

Diminishing returns. Music as play, as a way of social connection, and personal pleasure, was something that seemed to diminish when music became a professional aspiration for the study participants. The loss, or even the lack, of that joy seems to play a significant role in how satisfied and/or happy a performer is with themselves and their voice. While for some of the participants, it was an implicit part of their narrative, Liana beautifully articulated the problem – chalking up their lack of joy in singing as one of the major contributors to their breakdown in/after grad school. Prior to that point in their life, music had been a social endeavor, a way to express themselves and connect with other people. Once there were professional expectations, Liana's enjoyment decreased significantly:

Formal education takes that from you, you don't get people, which sounds ridiculous [but] the more you go, the less you actually interact with people. You're in a practice room forever. You were always in rehearsals, but [now] they're not emotionally and socially engaging.

There is research that suggests the more professional-track training a musician receives, the more anxious they become. One study on performance

anxiety found that “anxiety did not appear in pupils ... only in students and in adult professional musicians, being proportionally more pronounced as levels of musical knowledge (musicianship) and experience (age) increased” (Mihajlovski, 2016).³

Discussing the intersection of artistry and anxiety in opera singers, Sanders and Ericsson (2007) note:

In a study about the experience of well-being professional opera singers were found to be clearly achievement-oriented during a singing lesson, and they reported elevated levels of discomfort validated by physiological markers in contrast to amateur singers who derived more joy, self-expression and less stress during the singing lesson (p. 3).

Marginality. Gender non-conformance, and the resulting social push-back, has long been acknowledged as a source of depression and anxiety in the general population (Leaper & Brown, 2008; Yunger et al., 2004). Despite the fact that the majority of the singers in this study actively chose music performance as a way to gain social standing, it may very well be that their musical identity was a contributing factor to their outsider or non-conforming status, to begin with.

Lehmann et al. (2007) note that singers

tend to be less conforming to societal gender stereotypes. This psychological androgyny may reflect the fact that musical involvement requires from all performers qualities that are, according to conventional labeling, both masculine (*e.g.*, self-sufficiency) and feminine (*e.g.* emotional sensitivity). (p. 181)

It should be noted that this should not be understood as saying that musicians choose to become socially non-conforming, merely that the emotional qualities and personality traits that are conducive to musical achievement are often

³ In this case, pupils refers to young students who are only pursuing music casually.

in opposition to the ‘socially mediated principles’ of gender appropriateness, perceived as being ‘deviant’ to the population at large. If “group belonging provides young people with a sense of definition, purpose, meaning, worth, and social control, all of which contribute to positive mental health” (Newman et al., 2007), then finding one’s self on the margins would most certainly be a central contributor to both performance anxiety and anxiety or depression in general.⁴

Further, this may be an area where gender is specifically a component.

According to Newman et al. (2007),

some research has shown that adolescent girls value group membership more than do boys and are more highly identified with their peer groups than are boys. Adolescent girls have a greater number of friends than do boys, they expect and desire more nurturing behavior from their friends, and experience more empathy, more self-disclosure, and less overt hostility in their friendships than do boys. (p. 243)

Given that five of the six participants reported instances – or perceptions – of being marginalized, or excluded, this suggests that there is necessarily some entanglement between a sense of acceptance, performance and anxiety or other mental health issues.

Singing as self. As noted in the previous section, the singers’ self-examination revealed an entanglement of singing and voice with one’s self-worth – a significant source of stress for the participants. Here, again, Rogers’ theory of self provides a

⁴ As a damned-if-you-damned-if-you-don’t sidenote, there seems to be no way for women to win at the conformity game: Steinfeldt et al. (2011) suggest that conformance to gender norms *also* has potentially negative side effects, particularly for women. They specifically note that conformity with feminine gender norms is linked to disordered eating issues; while one instance isn’t incontrovertible proof of concept, it’s interesting to note that Alice, perhaps the most cis-normative singer of the group, struggled with an eating disorder, which she directly linked to her attempts to conform to societal ideals of femininity.

helpful framework with which to understand their experiences from a developmental point of view.

The first applicable concept here is the idea of the *actualizing tendency*, which is the “assumption that that every being seeks both its maintenance and enhancement. [...] Because humans are social beings, social conditions are essential for the unimpeded unfolding of the actualizing tendency.” Unfortunately, the “presence of less favorable conditions may bring about an estrangement from the actualizing tendency, which is regarded as the reason for mental disorders and other forms of maladjustment” (Lux et al., 2013, pp. 12–13). We can see a variety of sources of estrangement in the singers’ narratives – expectations around gender and race, parental or familial factors, gender non-conformance or personality traits.

The second concept is *self-worth*, where, “in accordance with the emergence of the self during childhood, a need for positive regard appears. The internalization of conditions of worth occurs if the person does not receive unconditional positive regard but experiences that positive regard is given merely under certain conditions. In that case, the person integrates these conditions within the self and pursues to meet these conditions” (Lux et al., 2013, pp. 12-13). For all of the singers, we can see this in action in how their voices became sources of positive regard – particularly so in the intersection of voice and social conformance. The ability to sing conferred value, but the conformation of their voice to social circumstances, gendered expectations and what the singers perceived as the modes of singing that were highly desired became an essential part of their perceived self-worth. Or, as L Lux et al. (2013) puts it, “in this sense, conditions of worth correspond to socially

mediated principles whose compliance should bring along positive regard by other persons” (p. 13).

The larger problem resulted from *incongruity* – when the singers’ voices, abilities, or personal identities no longer conformed to those socially mediated principles, and there emerged an underlying inconsistency between the singer’s self-concept, their understanding of self-worth, and their experiences. For instance, when Kristina’s internalized way of singing (high, pure, light, head-voice-y) was no longer attractive or serving her well, anxiety resulted because of this new “discrepancy between experience and perception of the self” (Ismail & Tekke, 2015, p. 32).

We can see this playing out in all of the singers’ narratives in some form or another. For Alice, she observed that her crisis of self and resulting anxiety was rooted in her attempts to please everyone around her, as well as her attempts to conform to the social expectations for a female performer. For Brooke, it was the break between the needs of her career and her lack of training and ability. Cody saw it in both the conflict between his ideal self (the idealized self-concept the individual wants) and the cultural and familial expectations, as well as between his voice and his ideal self. For Drew, it lay in the conflict between ideal self and society, as well as the desire to receive positive regard and social acceptance. Kristina experienced in the context of trying to create a social and vocal self that would fit into the community around her, resulting in an instable self-concept. And for Liana, their incongruence was multi-factorial: voice, race, gender, self-worth and the expectations around classical singing all contributed to their anxiety.

Theme. All of the singers in the study experienced anxiety, both in the context of performance and of self and social acceptance. Social influences and environment played a significant role in their experiences, particularly as social comparison is how “we learn about ourselves and obtain confidence in the veracity and utility of our beliefs. That is, we are motivated to make social comparisons in order to be confident about our perceptions of ourselves, other people, and the world in general” (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 32).

Variation. The sources for the singers’ experiences of *incongruence* were all varied, and in most cases, multi-factorial. It’s difficult to point to a single source as the cause of stress or anxiety; their issues resulted because of a complex confluence of events, traits and socially mediated principles.

Summary

How does a singer's recalled musical experiences and their surrounding culture intersect with and inform their gender, personal and vocal identities?

Exposure to socially mediated principles of gender appropriateness around voice, singing and self seems to have had a significant influence on both the singers' understanding and performance of gender in the context of singing, as well as influencing their desired *ideal-self*. Singers' formative social experiences in school, particularly during the period of adolescent development, shaped their perception of singing and voice as a tool for social acceptance and as a source of positive self-regard. *Incongruity*, the inconsistency between self-concept and experience, became a significant source of performance anxiety, generalized anxiety, depression and overall stress for the participants – often having a significant impact on their singing and their musical career.

Normativity

Research Question

How does the singer's understanding and interpretation of their musical experiences inform their perception of their voice and singing identity? This inquiry will examine how the normalization (or **internalization**) of a singer's experiences shaped their perception of their voice and singing identity.

Norms are shared patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior, and in groups, what people do and say communicates information about norms and is itself configured by norms and by normative concerns (*e.g.*, Hogg & Tindale, 2002). This communication can be indirect—people infer norms from what is said and done—but it can also be direct: people intentionally talk about, or nonverbally signal, what is and what is not normative of the group (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p. 8).

Gendering Voice

High, light and beautiful: The timbre of femininity. The role of vocal attributes – timbre, pitch, loudness, even word choice – in how we assess a person's sex/gender is not insignificant (Sei, Judd, & Blair, 2006). Large-scale studies, as far back as the 1930s, have studied the assumptions and stereotypes we make about individuals, based on their vocal cues, alone (Batstone & Tuomi, 1981). With that in mind, the following section will examine the traits and qualities that the singers in this study internalized or observed in the course of their development, with the goal

of understanding how social expectations and standards affect the ways in which the participants understand (and use) their voices.

Analysis. For **Alice**, the messages around appropriate feminine vocal traits were given, received and internalized at a very young age. Before puberty, she knew that she was a soprano – which meant that she had a very high-pitched voice, and that her voice was beautiful. By her teens, she had learned that singing “well” meant beauty, that she had to sing beautifully, and by contrast, singing beautifully was not something boys were interested in being.

- Felix:** I'm wondering how you might have articulated [what singing well] when you were a teenager.
- Alice:** Beautifully. For me, it was singing beautifully.
- Felix:** Did anybody ever communicate to you that beautiful was the adjective, the objective?
- Alice:** I don't know. I just was always validated for that. It was always like, "You're blue eyes and your beautiful voice." Still in the town I'm living now it's like everybody knows me in my town because I sing publicly... and it's, "Oh, you have a beautiful voice. On Alice, she has a beautiful voice".
- Felix:** Did you as a teenager think that boys needed beautiful voices?
- Alice:** No.

Beautiful, at that point, also meant *light*.

- Alice:** I'm trying to think of a word to describe what I was trying to be... I was usually trying to be lighter actually. Especially at that age. I was trying to be smaller, lighter.
- Felix:** Why do you think that is? Because that was pretty?
- Alice:** Yes. That's female. [And that was] coming down from my mother too.

In short, before she even reached her mid-teens, she understood that she needed a high, beautiful voice, but that it also had to be small. *Light. Pretty.*

In terms of voice and gender matching, once again, **Brooke** stands out from the rest of the participants. As a slender, attractive young woman with a soft, light,

beautiful voice – very gender-stereotypical – she didn't receive push-back for being too loud. She is aware, however, of how her speaking voice is an asset to her:

Unless I'm trying to be perky, I feel like my speaking voice is on the lower side, and that's not something that I do consciously or unconsciously, but I think maybe that helps people take me more seriously because I'm not speaking in a girlish way. I've been told that I have a really nice speaking voice.

She also knows that, particularly in the context of auditions, she has to use her voice *appropriately*:

When I'm going into an audition, I feel like it's important for me to be positive and perky, not like disgustingly perky but friendly and happy to be there. I feel like I need to show what great energy I have but not too much energy, but not like annoying energy. It's like the right balance. Make just the right amount of conversation. Not answering just yes or no, but also not going off on a huge tangent telling a story but engage them just enough.

Because of his gender identity, **Cody** is struggling with the ways in which voice is inherently gendered in our culture. Because his voice fits the feminine paradigm well – high, beautiful, light – the compliments he receives become a form of misgendering:

There are times where even though people know [about my gender] – they hear me singing then afterward misgender me as result of having heard my singing. They attribute certain words that are typically gendered feminine to my voice, that then make me uncomfortable. When people use the word "pretty," I'm like, "I get that. That's supposed to be a compliment. I'm trying to receive it as a compliment, but it doesn't always feel like a compliment."

He noted that he first really became aware of the expectations around femininity and voice at the age of puberty. Prior to that, he had been, as he put it, "very loud and unapologetic about it. In sixth grade, I told my chorus director if I did not get a solo in the concert, my dad is a lawyer and I would sue him." Once he

reached the point where voices began to change, though, the pressures of voice appropriateness were something he began to internalize.

For **Drew**, the connection between voice and femininity came early, as well, noting that one of the things she intrinsically understood was that singing was *ladylike*. Good singing, in particular, was pure, beautiful. “It felt like singing was feminine,” they recalled. “There was this sense that it was something beautiful and light. Yes, I always thought of it as a feminine thing. I always associated it with a sense of clarity and purity and ping.”

Their struggle with belting was, in no small part, because it went against everything they had learned about what singing should be like, for a feminine voice.

Drew: My mom and I have talked a lot about this. I actually credit my mom with a lot of the beautifulness of my tone because she had really clear values where, as a listener from a young age, she always stressed voices that were very smooth. She made me listen to Linda Ronstadt, Carol King, Joni Mitchell and K.D. Lang, and that is who I am. She always really valued purity and clarity in a voice, and belting isn't about purity. Belting isn't about clarity.

Felix: Well, it's interesting because at the very beginning, you had said that one of the things that you had picked up and learned was that singing as a girl thing was about purity and clarity and so forth—

Drew: Ringing a beautiful bell. You want it to be like Charlotte Church.

Felix: From your earliest time then, your model of singing was this was an act of femininity?

Drew: Very feminine and very poised. Graceful.

Felix: Right, so very much associated with the appropriate female behavior?

Drew: [Charlotte] Church singing. Yes.

Kristina, too, internalized the understanding that ideal female singing was pure, beautiful, high. Soprano-ish. Head-voice-y. This has been comprehensively discussed in previous sections, but it should be noted that Kristina's adult voice, her

natural voice, is a light/lyric mezzo. Beautiful, certainly, but not what might immediately strike the ear as being *high*. In its natural timbre and weight, it's much more appropriate for the repertoire she sings now, than the highly feminine ideal which she pursued through her mid-twenties.

Liana's experience with voice and gender was, unsurprisingly, complicated by the intersection of race and cultural expectations.

Felix: You mentioned before the intersection of what a black woman or what black femininity is supposed to look like and where does pretty fall in that.

Liana: Pretty is expected like you want to be pretty, you want to sound pretty, your beauty is your power. I've heard that before. Pretty, it was a means of protection, pretty was a weapon, pretty was a way you can navigate the world.

Given that their natural voice is high, light and quite naturally beautiful, the pushback they received on that front was not as intense, perhaps, as it was for others. Nevertheless, "pretty" was certainly a concept that they internalized – so much so that their use over the course of the interview was notable, as the interview progressed.

Perkiness is also something Liana received direct messages about. "I had a half a year where that was a thing. It's like, "No, you can't introduce yourself like that. You have to speak higher. You have to have inflection in your voice." They reported multiple instances of going to auditions where the discrepancy between their speaking voice and singing voice was remarked upon – the implication, as I understood it, being that auditors assumed [Liana] didn't have a clear concept of their vocal type.

Discussion.

Racial stereotyping. Liana's experiences in their undergraduate vocal and musical training were filled with racial stereotyping – all uncomfortable, but others had a more lasting effect. They recount having a choral / opera ensemble director whose commentary and expectations felt fetishizing and othering. That caused a certain amount of confusion for them between how the director expected them to sound (*i.e.*, a stereotypical percept of a black soprano voice) vs. how he expected them to sing in ensembles (*i.e.*, with a white-associated, straight-tone high church style). Stereotypical expectations about black singers in the vocal world at large had a more penetrating effect:

I always had a certain tone quality expectation which I was always just like– They're like, "Black people have richer, warmer sounds." I'm like, "Great, I'm glad that we all got together and made that a thing." That actually fucked me up for a while because [I thought], "I'm going to sing as richly and heavily as I can." But [I'm] a coloratura.

Literature on voice stereotyping has found that individuals make choices, judgements and react based on vocal cues – particularly in the case of gender, where studies have found that listeners make assumptions concerning femininity based on vocal characteristics (Sei et al., 2006). Though literature around racial stereotyping in classical voice is currently sparse, it seems likely that not only would such influences in an educational environment have an impact on the minority students being target, it would also have a deleterious effect on those students' peers, as well.

Gender stereotyping. The role of vocal timbre and pitch in sex/gender cuing in western culture has long been acknowledged in the literature (Skuk & Schweinberger, 2014). As early as the 1930s, large-scale studies were examining

the impressions and assumptions people make from vocal cues (Batstone & Tuomi, 1981). Impressions and assumptions around gendered voice are reflected not only in the literature (Sell et al., 2010), but also in the growing public discourse concerning bias against female-identified vocal qualities (see, *e.g.*, Garber, 2012).

The intersection of gender and voice is an almost-prototypical example of how socially determined ideals around appropriateness play out in society. While many vocal expectations are stereotypes that are generally considered to be rooted in biology and sex, it is becoming clear that “difference” far more culturally defined than a biological imperative. According to Dunn and Jones (1996),

Since both language and society are structured by codes of sexual difference, both the body and its voice are inescapably gendered. This is not to say that voices possess intrinsically masculine or feminine qualities. Indeed, recent work by feminist anthropologists and socio-linguists has demonstrated that there is no single satisfactory explanation – biological, psychological or social – for the differences between male and female voices. Rather, vocal gendering appears to be the product of a complex interplay between anatomical differences, socialization into culturally prescribed gender roles, and the contrasting possibilities for expression for men and women within a given society (p. 2).

That there might be socially mediated principles around ideal vocal stereotypes and appropriate vocal use for female-bodied singers is hardly surprising, but the literature is unexpectedly light in this area. A study by Batstone and Tuomi (1981) examined the qualities that men and women felt represented a “feminine voice,” while Sei et al. (2006) examined vocal characteristics and stereotypes, these studies were performed in the context of the speaking voice. Studies concern masculine preferences for feminine voice suggest that there is an element of sexual selection, in that men perceive characteristics of youth (high pitch, bright tone) to be more attractive (Puts, Doll, & Hill, 2014).

It's clear that all the participants received very clear communications concerning the ideal feminine singing voice – specifically, qualities such as high, light and *pretty*, as well as perky and clear and beautiful, were the qualities that seemed to be universally prized. One recent study concerning identity in young female opera singers inadvertently spoke to this as well – the singer in the case study experienced discomfort in accepting that her instrument was not the high, light, flexible type that she desired. According to the investigator in that study (O'Bryan, 2015), the singer “felt at first that light, flexible voices are more beautiful than heavier ones, so her transformation required both a resolution of conflict concerning what constitutes beauty in operatic singing and acceptance of her new sound and singer identity” (p. 129). This mirrors the experience of the singers in this study – all of whom, aside from Brooke (who naturally had that high, light, traditionally feminine voice), struggled with the desire to meet the expectations around femininity vs. their natural instrument and authentic sound.

This is a particularly interesting result, given that there is evidence that in terms of cultural perception in the broad world, there is a marked preference for more “masculine” voice types for women in leadership or business positions (Garber, 2012), suggesting that there may be context-specific ideals or preferences for feminine voice. A study by Levitt and Lucas (2016) supports this idea, finding that different voice qualities in female voice had different connotations...which varied between men and women. Their results left them to conclude that, voice qualities “appear to be learned associations, used for either linguistic or social

signaling purposes, which suggests that the ways in which they influenced listener judgments [...] might be different for members of other linguistic groups” (p. 29).

It can be reasonably inferred that that conclusion might hold true for singing as well, with different vocal qualities deemed to be preferable or feminine based varying based on musical context and cultural associations and preferences. In the case of this study, the general preference reflected in their experiences was overwhelming for “pretty,” an adjective with a great deal of context-dependent definitions.

Expert influence. The role of “experts” – the teachers, directors, casting directors, *etc.* – was a subtle, yet undeniable, influence on the singers’ understanding and internalizing of vocal norms...as well as their later rejection of said norms. While the scope of the role of these guiding figures was not a topic deeply investigated by this study, it was nevertheless significant that all of the participants recalled instances where the expert guides in their musical lives either covertly or overtly communicated, validated or enforced gendered stereotypes or socially mediate standards of appropriateness.

The role of the expert in the development of identity is acknowledged in the literature. According to Crano (2000),

[w]e have learned that sources that possess greater expertise, competence, confidence, and other socially valued traits typically induce greater influence than those that do not.

By the same token, we have learned that target individuals who lack expertise, competences, and confidence or who in some other ways perceive themselves to be subordinate or inferior to an influence source will prove more susceptible to the source’s (socially supplied) information (pp. 73-74).

The student-teacher relationship, then, comes primed with the ability to significantly influence a singers' beliefs and behavior concerning gender, voice, and appropriate modes of being in those contexts. As a primary example of this, Liana reported that the stereotypical "black female sound" that their director consistently remarked upon and encouraged caused them to directly modulate their voice to match the desired sound, trying to achieve that ideal "warmth" – something that was unhealthy, even antithetical, to their naturally bright, high-lying, coloratura-inclined instrument.

Theme. All of the participants received messages concerning what an ideal, feminine singing voice sounded like – a set of expectations that created conflict for those whose voices did not necessarily conform to that ideal, or where the voice ideal conflicted with the singer's vocal/singing *ideal-self* (e.g., Cody or Drew).

Variation. While Brooke understood implicitly that feminine and pretty were feminine vocal characteristics, she felt no push-back for her voice – likely since her natural instrument fell within the desired characteristics for feminine voice. While Liana also received clear messages about vocal appropriateness, they were also filtered through racial expectations, as well, all of which had a perceptible effect on how they used their voice.

Sing out, Louise: Loudness and the female voice. While the messages the singers in this study received about the expectations for female voice had a significant impact, the intersection of the demands of being a professional and being female-bodied resulted in messages around loudness that caused a fair amount of stress for all of the participants. "Loudness," says Karpf (2011), "certainly seems to

be judged differently depending on the sex of the speaker. Talking loudly is considered an act of aggression in women, but in men no more than they're entitled" (p. 62). Not surprisingly, the natural loudness that comes with having a resonant voice suited for singing – trained specifically *for* loudness – is a complex experience for female-voiced singers.

Analysis. Alice understood that loudness was an issue and noted that she experienced a great deal of frustration beginning in her teens, being small and pretty, with a voice that was, as she described it, “so much bigger than I was.” Getting to heart of why bigger and louder was a problem was, as with many of these deeper issues, something that required some reflection and drilling down to get to the heart of the issue.

Felix: Did you feel like being loud was a problem? That being like a pretty girl and then being a loud pretty girl was a problem?

Alice: Yes.

Felix: Why do you think that is?

Alice: I see that with my students now. They don't want to be loud. I am loud and I want them to be loud. I want them to feel like if they want to be loud, they can feel loud.

Felix: Where do you think you learned that loud wasn't appropriate?

Alice: I don't know, because my mother's very loud. [laughs]

Felix: Were the girls around you when you were growing up loud?

Alice: Yes. I don't know. They were always the dancers and actors. I tended to always to like big personalities.

Felix: Right. We know that the reason you went into music, dancing, acting was because you wanted attention. You wanted to be notice... but thinking of the broader population, outside of the music and the theater, were the girls as loud?

Alice: No.

Felix: Okay. Were you loud in class or was this-?

Alice: No. I was quite introverted.

Felix: You had very mixed messages there.

Alice: Yes.

Felix: You were a quiet and a good girl in class but when we go [sing], now that's where we can be big and loud and have attention. So singing, [if I understand you correctly] then, was a socially

acceptable way for you to get attention. Does that seem accurate?

Alice: Yes. [laughs]

Her struggles with loudness and appropriateness, with being constrained but at the same time a performer with a sizeable voice, left their mark. And, having had to expend a great deal of time and energy dealing with the anxiety that accompanied these messages, she now feels that it's part of her life's work to be a model, a teacher, for other teenage girls who might be struggling with that, too. She told me, "I feel it's part of my dharma and my mission, to be somebody for these girls. I [wish I] had somebody like me at their age telling me, 'It's okay. It's okay. Make noise and hurt and you know, that's okay.'" You're made to be in the world, just be a person. I think that there is so much pressure [on girls]."

Brooke had the mirror experience of this, but it's no less frustrating for her. With a naturally light, beautiful voice, she seems to have navigate the expectations of femininity around that with a certain amount of equilibrium. "I can't say that I consciously sing with a smaller voice or a smaller sound in order to fulfill expectation or an assumption," she told me. "I was being told, you have a small voice. You are one of those lighter voices. I heard that quite regularly, all the way up until coming to New York and studying with [my current teacher]."

Not being loud enough was, for a time in her professional life, a liability, something that caused her a certain amount of frustration. And it wasn't for lack of trying, she told me.

I was trying to sing louder. In one of the summer programs I did, we were having a rehearsal in the theater and the music director is at the back of the theater. I'm running through some blocking with someone on stage and literally, she asked me, "Are you marking?" No, I'm not marking. That's just as

loud as I could sing. I didn't have a technique, I didn't have the technique to sing louder. Now, my technique is better, my voice has filled in a little bit more.

She still wondered if there might be more sound available to her in the future. "Is there another like the next gate of breath support or resonance, or something that can be unlocked for me to have a bigger sound? Maybe? Probably."

Cody's relationship with loudness was also complex – something he chalks up to both gender norms as well as their religious culture. He recalled one instance of going on a field trip where he attended a very Orthodox synagogue with his older sister: "We were in a completely separate room, with some sort of intercom, to be able to hear, but we were shushed every time that you made an audible sound. I didn't internalize that until much later, but she did, that day." Now, he struggles with being loud enough in musical contexts... and being *too* loud the rest of the time.

Felix: You've mentioned this previously briefly, and I'd like to go back to that: Being loud, how does that feel for you? You mentioned that you have a sizable sound. It's high. It tends to be loud. Are you comfortable with it?

Cody: Kind of, not always. I tend to be very reserved in rehearsal, then I have to perform. [Afterwards], I will always get yelled at for not having been loud enough. "That is not your piano, that is not your mezzo-forte." That is not even a technical issue, that's a confidence issue.

Felix: Why do you think that is, though? Where do you think that comes from?

Cody: That comes from a place of a lack of self-confidence, overall. I also know that there is a sense – this could also apply to cis-women too – trying to know your place and if you don't fit in, not wanting to be visible, audible, super, super noticeable. It's not in my nature to want to be belty, as it were.

Felix: You feel like some of that reticence, or that feeling, comes directly from gender expectations?

Cody: Absolutely. That comes from more socialization as female, than it does of my current acknowledgment of identity. Because dudes being loud is kind of like a generally accepted thing, but lady people being loud is seen as bossy, as scary, as

intimidating, and not in a good way. That's a deeper internalized thing, versus the surface things of not wanting to come off as too feminine.

Felix: Do you recall instances when you were younger, whatever way you saw that being loud or being heard was inappropriate?

Cody: Hell, I still get in trouble for it all the time here in college. Even professors that use my pronouns, they still use things like bossy, or assertive, or any of that to refer to me in theory class, when like I Hermione Granger up that place, being like–

Felix: Do you see them use the same terms with cis male students?

Cody: No. They don't misgender me, but there's still a lack of connecting in the brain to view me as a guy. I will always be a different kind of guy than a cis guy. I know that. The word *inappropriate* gets used a lot, as well.

Drew's struggles with loudness revolved around the fact that for them, louder sounds – like belting – felt too angry, too uncomfortable, something that they had shut down and locked away. For them, appropriate femininity meant a beautiful tone, a clear, head-voice dominant sound, but even within that paradigm, their inability to connect to their voice in an authentic, genuine way – a way that was outside of their perception of appropriately feminine singing, meant that they couldn't access their full voice. Instead, their singing was light and shallow, resulting in their being given inappropriate repertoire: though they would consider their voice a sizable mezzo now, in grad school, they were being assigned the light soubrette repertoire, because they couldn't inhabit their voice appropriately.

There was also a cultural component to **Kristina's** experience with loudness – coming from a culture where quietness is valued and being loud or angry is not valued by the community. As she put it, “Nobody is angry in Denmark.” For her, coming to New York was an essential factor in her development; it gave her permission to step away from her constraints and what was appropriate for her –

vocally and behaviorally. For her to discover her genuine voice, to find some kind of balance, she had, as she put it, to have her rebellion.

- Felix:** You came to New York to be rebellious?
- Kristina:** Yes. Everybody here is rebellious. If you love living in New York you're rebellious, because otherwise, you wouldn't live here. I think that's necessary to live here, and the reason why you live here.
- Felix:** Do you think that coming to a society, in New York, in general, that encourages rebelliousness, and pushing back, and loudness... that being in that environment was what allowed you to find—
- Kristina:** Yes, I think, and meeting people, role modeling, different ways of being. [...] I definitely think the New York thing is what has taught me. The problem was, the community in Denmark is 2,000 people, you have no anonymity, so you can't really change. You go into that one way, and that's the way you have to stay. The relative anonymity of such a big city with such a rebellious and drama queen type culture has been very helpful to me, to reconnect with who I am.

Liana's experience was also complicated by the intersections of race and culture with gender – the expectations around black femininity and loudness were problematic but singing also gave them an acceptable way to *be* loud.

Oh, my God, that was a problem. I'm not a quiet person. I don't have the biggest voice in the world, [but] I'm a very rambunctious person and not even in singing, I'm just a loud person. I talk loud. I laugh loud. I've always had the pushback for being too loud. You're talking too much, you're taking up too much space.

There was actually a certain freedom in classical music, because it was like, wait, no, we're actually training to use my body enough to have a present sound. That was really nice but that was not the case for most of my life and singing. I was singing too loud.

In a context of church, where everybody was singing too loud, that was great. But at choir or at school, [loudness] was a thing. "You're singing too loud, you need to blend, you need to be like— Which should be a part of it," which is great, I get that. But in my head, I was like, "I'm being too much."

Through classical music, Liana found a way to navigate the expectations and social discomfort of loudness:

- Liana:** Loud became a choice, as an artistic choice. It seemed less shunned or less of a problem because I had a context that I could package it in. There's a certain amount of respectability that comes with classical singing, so even if it was all just loud it was, "It's beautiful."
- Felix:** Right. In the same way that classical music makes you not a redneck, classical music also makes you not a loud black woman.
- Liana:** Yes. Exactly that.

Discussion. The second significantly influential source of vocal norms for the study participants also concerns appropriate voice use, but, in this case, concerns the confluence of expectations for feminine voice vs. the professional expectations for female-voiced singers. Voice and loudness is an issue with status, class, race, gender and even occupational standards and expectations (Dunn & Jones, 1996; Johnson, 2007; Karpf, 2011; Silva, 2015). And, as we can see in the narratives of the singers in this study, female-voiced performers are situated in the center of the intersection between gender, occupation and even race.

Gender stereotypes in western culture create a kind of mythology around the differences between male and female, assigning social meanings and associating power and authority (or lack thereof) with these (mostly) arbitrarily gendered qualities. "Not surprisingly," say Dunn and Jones (1996), "these myths have served to reinforce patriarchal constructions of the feminine" (p. 3).

Discussing her investigation into gender and voice (albeit through the medium of radio), Ehrick (2015) notes:

Thinking historically about gendered soundscapes can help us conceptualize sound as a space where categories of "male" and "female" are

constituted within the context of particular events over time, and by extension the ways that power, inequality and agency might be expressed in the sonic realm—in other words, tuning in to sound as a signifier of power. Although many of us have been well-trained to look for gender, I consider what it means to listen for it. (¶ 4)

That loudness is a kind of power is impossible to deny – Johnson (2007)

points out that the “right to impose silence [has] increasingly defined the relationships of power,” and, he suggests, “the struggle over the right to make noise is a very useful way of tracing the history of relations of power since the medieval period” (p. 116). Silencing “subordinated orders” [of society] is, Johnson claims, a way of establish order, control and even class value.

It is clear from the singers’ narratives that loudness, whilst expected and even desirable on stage – particularly in operatic contexts, was not desirable or rewarded in broader society. It’s hardly surprising that the singers who struggled with belting – Drew, in particular – wrestled with the discomfort of simply how *loud* (and, for that matter, how *not pretty*) belt sounds are. For them, the loudness and aggressive feeling of belting represented anger and roaring and pushing back. Alice experienced intense anxiety around the fact that her voice didn’t ‘fit’ – she was small, blonde, pretty...and her voice was loud, not as flexible or controlled as she wanted. “My voice,” she said, “was bigger than I was.” Cody, even as a transmasculine singer, reported that he “still get[s] in trouble for it,” at his progressive, feminist-aligned college. This aligns with my own experiences – as a naturally loud child who was encouraged by their parents to be musical and to take up space, I experienced a great deal of pushback for my loudness when I ventured out into the broader world.

It is also clear, however, that claiming loudness has been a vehicle for personal emancipation for all the singers in the study. Even for Brooke, who struggles to *be* loud, learning how to access more sound, vocally, was a significant part of her journey. Kristina noted that she needed to come to New York, a place notable for its loudness and opportunities to *be* loud in everyday life, to have the space and freedom to explore her authentic voice. Embracing, claiming, and inhabiting the “transgressive character of the singing voice” (Schlichter, 2011, p. 34) in all of its permutations – loud, messy, unrestrained, angry, roaring, beautiful, ringing, clear... and yes, even *pretty* – is an act of self-liberation, and we see its results in the profound changes the participants were able to make in their own lives.

Theme. Most of the singers in the study experienced lifelong messages concerning the appropriateness of their voice and loudness. Internalizing those messages resulted in anxiety, vocal instability and restrictions on the types of sounds the singers felt empowered to make – even contributing, as in Alice’s case, to her stepping away from singing altogether for a time. All of the singers experienced some kind of crisis point (described by Feinstein (1998) as “the problem in [their] narrative”), generally resulting from internal-external conflict around their internalized normative expectations, forcing a recalibration of their perceptions and beliefs, revitalizing their *actualizing tendency*.

Variation. Unsurprisingly, Brooke is the outlier here, albeit not so much in opposition to the others’ experiences but as the other side of the ‘loudness’ coin. Her lack of volume or vocal weight has been a professional impediment to her,

suggesting that, as is the case in so many issues around gender appropriateness, no one escapes unscathed. Even she, however, experienced crises around her voice which required her seek out new paths of training and guidance.

Summary

How does the singer's understanding and interpretation of their recalled musical experiences inform their perception of their voice and singing identity?

Internalization of the social norms around voice and gender, particularly those centered around gendered vocal appropriateness in both their day-to-day and singing lives, created significant amounts of internal/external conflict for the singers in this study. Many normative expectations were communicated to the participants in subtle ways that affected them profoundly but were so deeply rooted in their psyches that they were only able to recognize the source of their conflict after a crisis in their singing life that required them to engage in significant *self-exploration*. Active rejection of these internalized social norms resulted in greater self-actualization and improvement of both the singers' vocal function as well as their mental and physical health.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION: SILENT NO LONGER

The Search for Authenticity

Author, researcher and public speaker Brené Brown has famously said, “If you trade your authenticity for safety, you may experience anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief.” That quote, on its own, could sum up the experiences of the singers in this study. Faced with pressures from family, peers, educators, music professionals and even the world at large, participants attempted to conform – trying to make their *ideal-self* fit both the demands of a professional singing path and the one-size-fits-none narrative of appropriate femininity.

The results were universally unsatisfying. Anxiety, depression, an eating disorder, grief, and, perhaps less catastrophic but nonetheless devastating – stress, worry, dissatisfaction and, in some cases, the loss of singing completely. Only in claiming agency for themselves, and breaking away from expectations, were these performers able to reclaim their voices and their joy in singing. For some, they’ve recovered themselves completely and are completely satisfied with where they are currently; others, like Brooke and Cody, are still searching, though they’ve nonetheless made progress on their journey.

Exploring, claiming and finally, thoroughly embracing their authentic selves brought them not only greater personal happiness, it made them better singers: technique improved, performance anxiety was reduced, and they were able joy in

singing, delighting in their voices. Setting aside appropriateness, stereotypes and career-influenced expectations brought the kind of authenticity required to survive in the musical world.

Summary

This study explored the personal narratives of six AFAB singers – three cis and three trans/non-binary performers of varying ages, ethnicities and locales – to understand how their experiences informed their musical, vocal and gender identities and shaped their musical and vocal lives. An initial semi-structured interview protocol was initially developed and used in a pilot study that examined the experiences of two participants. After reviewing the pilot study results, the protocol was revised, the method refined, and the criteria for participant selection determined. Word-of-mouth and snowballing were the primary method of participant recruitment and nine singers were initially chosen to participate. Once the participants had reviewed and signed the informed consent materials, which documented the guidelines of participation and study methods, individual interviews were scheduled, then taken in a mutually-determined semi-private location and audio-recorded. Confidentiality was stressed, and consent orally acquired prior to recording; additionally, pseudonyms were assigned to each singer to preserve anonymity.

During the semi-structured interview process, the singers recounted their memories and understanding of significant events in their development, and together, each singer and I explored those recollections – a form of collaborative

self-exploration, a concept defined by early psychologist Carl Rogers as a “search for meaning within the flow of experiences and the attempt to symbolize it as exactly as possible” (Lux et al., 2013, p. 13). After the initial interviews, follow-up communications were sent, requesting any further commentary or additions the participants wished to add. Once transcribed, participants were given the opportunity to view and add any clarifications or corrections they deemed appropriate. At this point, I chose to narrow the sample to six participants, rather than nine, to allow for more in-depth representation of their experiences. Transcriptions were then loaded into the nVivo software program for coding, visualization and analysis.

For the first analysis, the data was reviewed, and individual narratives, chunks of text, varying in length, that represented a complete narrative, were marked and loosely coded into the three categories suggested by the theoretical framework (context, performativity and normativity). From this, I was able to tease out *resonant threads* (Clandinin, 2009), or the *shapes* of stories – presenting the narratives in a five-act structure to preserve the “chronological arc of *meaning* in an individual’s experience[s]” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 36).

Once I analyzed the individual narratives for those resonant threads, I returned to the data as a whole to examine the primary emerging themes – the commonalities between the participants’ narratives that suggested broader cultural or social influences. A second coding of the data was undertaken – a process which included word frequency analysis and an evolving topical coding structure that reflected the recurring thematic material discovered in the transcriptions. Once

coded and reviewed, the commonalities were then considered through the three-lensed theoretical framework of understanding and related literature, attempting to understand the role of those influences in the singers' lives.

The results of this study suggest that there are many sources of *socially mediated influences* (Lux et al., 2013) which shape AFAB singers' development of self, their individual and social identities, and their perceptions of their voice, particularly in the context of gender appropriateness. While the singers clearly received pleasure in performing, the narratives revealed a complex web of expectations and influences that contributed significant amounts of anxiety and stress in the performers' lives. The ways in which the singers both fell victim to and addressed these sources of distress suggest many topics for further exploration and discussion within the professional voice and music education community.

Conclusions

Revisiting the primary research questions which guided this study, we can see clear patterns of similarity between all the singers' narratives.

Context

How does a singer's recalled developmental musical experiences intersect with and inform their musical, gender and vocal identities?

Identity formation for the singers in this study seems to have been a complex, intersectional process, wherein both normative and observational influences played a significant role in how the participants perceived themselves, their voices, and their musical place in the world.

Early musical experiences, both with informal “musiking,” and more formal community or educational music-making, stimulated an early love for music, as well as provided vocal models that affected their later development. Many of the participants’ early memories demonstrate how children’s early experiences with family and community are absorbed into their self-concept; this corresponds with the concepts put forth by Garvis (2015) and Polkinghorne (1991) concerning *self-narrative*. Specifically, a child’s experiences are internalized as “stories” that both explain who the child believes themselves to be and reflect the cultural and communal beliefs and modes of thinking in the milieu in which they grew up.

The experiences of the singers, particularly those who struggled with a trans identity, suggest that there is considerable conflict in individuals whose perceived or communally-assigned identity does not correspond to their internal self-concept – or, more specifically, that adhering to the *ideal-self* each singer felt they *should* have resulted in an unstable self-concept (Lux et al., 2013). Pursuit of the gendered *self-goals* that stemmed from the culturally-determined *ideal self* (Lux et al., 2013) seems to have uniformly resulted in internal discomfort, yet, in cases where they were unable to conform to standards of gender-appropriateness, the pushback they received was equally upsetting. This aligns with the literature, which suggests that *gender incongruity* can be a source of psychological stress (Yunger et al., 2004).

Performativity

How do a singer's developing personal and musical identities intersect with their recalled musical experiences and inform their understanding of their social and internal identities?

Exposure to socially-mediated principles of gender appropriateness around voice, singing and self seems to have had a significant influence on both the singers' understanding and performance of gender in the context of singing, as well as influencing their desired *ideal-self*.

Singers' formative social experiences in school, particularly during the period of adolescent development, shaped their perception of singing and voice as a tool for social acceptance and as a source of positive self-regard. There were many instances in the narratives where, particularly as adolescents, the performers specifically used their voice or their singing ability as a form of *social currency*, which they were able to trade for inclusion in peer *in-groups*. This aligns with the Dibbans' (2002) assertion that music often plays a role in in-group acceptance and a positive social identity. While there were positive outcomes from this use of musical social currency, there were many occasions where there were negative consequences in the long-term, particularly in cases where the singer's self-confidence and self-esteem were linked success in their musical career. There is little commentary in the literature on the implications of the early use of a singing identity for social success in individuals who pursue professional careers; however, these singers' experience suggest that further study is warranted.

Incongruity, which Rogers' defines as the inconsistency between self-concept and experience (Ismail & Tekke, 2015), became a significant source of performance anxiety, generalized anxiety, depression and overall stress for the participants – often having a significant impact on their singing and their musical career. In many of the narratives, the singers were able to trace the source of their performance anxiety and mental health issues back to incidents in their developmental experiences. Many of these incidents align with the factors that Sandgren and Ericsson (2007) pinpoint as causes of performance anxiety; however, while fear of failure and vocal malfunction certainly played a role in the participants' anxiety, the reported experiences suggest that singer anxiety likely results from a complex confluence of events, traits and socially mediated principles.

Normativity

How does the singer's understanding and interpretation of their musical experiences inform their perception of their voice and singing identity?

Internalization of the social norms around voice and gender, particularly those centered around gendered vocal appropriateness in both their day-to-day and singing lives, created significant amounts of internal/external conflict for the singers in this study.

The expectations around normative appearance and behavior seem to have started very early; the singers' narratives suggest that these pressures continue on even into their current professional experiences. The messages concerning appropriateness were often overt, but the participants also reported many instances

of *inferred* norms (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Hogg & Tindale, 2002). While there are certainly instances of overt pushback for non-conformity, the singers' narratives suggest that *positive reinforcement* of normative behavior (often in the form of receiving praise or validation for singing in gender normative ways) was one of the most powerful sources of normative coercion (Kahn, 2009; Steinfeldt et al., 2011).

Many normative expectations were communicated to the participants in subtle ways that affected them profoundly, yet were so deeply rooted in their psyches that they were only able to recognize the source of their conflict after a crisis point in their singing life that required them to engage in significant *self-exploration* (Lux et al., 2013). Active rejection of these internalized social norms resulted in greater self-actualization and improvement of both the singers' vocal function as well as their mental and physical health.

The singers' experience reveal instances of the power of the *invisible curriculum*, suggesting that discussion in the literature concerning the potential transference of culturally-mediated ideas of appropriateness and normative values, particularly around gender, has considerable merit (Demorest et al., 2017; Green, 2014; Shockley et al., 2008).

Pedagogical Implications: The Intersection of Intersectionality

The Joy of Musiking: Casual Music Making

The importance of casual music-making – or musiking, if you will – in a singer's musical development and the maintenance of their musical selves even as established professionals cannot be overstated. The participants' narratives clearly

demonstrated that early exposure to vocal music, parental engagement in musical improvisation and play, and communal musicking all contributed significantly to the singers' musical capacity, desire to improve and later, their pursuit of musical career paths. Communal music-making, in particular, offered a source of personal and social well-being, vocal satisfaction and emotional self-soothing – something that has been clearly documented in the literature (Clift, S. M. & Hancox, 2001; Davidson, 2008; Einarsdottir & Gudmundsdottir, 2015).

The role of singing for personal satisfaction once a singer has embarked upon a professional track (even in the earliest stages), however, is underrepresented in the literature and its further study might offer insight into singer satisfaction, as well as new perspectives for music educators on potential sources of anxiety management or even avenues of learning.

Don't Do As I Say: Expert Advice and Hidden Curricula

The role of the expert in the development of these singers was both overt and subtle, at the same time. A thread that emerged out of the narratives was how literally the singers took experts' instructions or advice or – as in some cases, even off-hand commentary – to heart, and the impact that had. The power an expert (such as a teacher) has over what a student believes is correct, socially appropriate and career-enhancing is significant:

[we] have learned that sources that possess greater expertise, competence, confidence, and other socially valued traits typically induce greater influence than those that do not. By the same token, we have learned that target individuals who lack expertise, competences, and confidence or who in some other ways perceive themselves to be subordinate or inferior to an influence

source will prove more susceptible to the source's (socially supplied) information. (Crano, 2000, p. 73)

In other words, teachers teach and students learn, but the question here is, *what* are they learning? It may not be what we think.

While much of the interview content concerning the singers' studio experiences was not included here – many of those narratives had identifying characteristics which would certainly have compromised the participants' confidentiality – there were troubling accounts of studio experiences that suggest room for reflection on the standard practices and language used in the vocal pedagogy community. Certainly, studio teachers were central in the singers' vocal development – both for better and worse. Aside from issues clashes of instructor and singer personality or improper technical training, however, more troubling were the unexpected or unintended messages that were unwittingly conveyed to the singers.

Often, reinforcement of gendered or racial stereotypes or expectations were conveyed – sometimes directly, sometimes in the guise of career advice. By contrast, the intent of the teacher was lost, or misunderstood, by the singer themselves. This is illustrated in Liana's story, who struggled with the primarily white cultural norms around opera and classical music, and the ways in which normative messages were conflated with actual sound technical advice. The following excerpt illustrates the myriad of ways in which intent, content of a teacher's commentary was complicated by the singer's reception of the commentary:

Felix: Making music is such a personal thing that it gets hard to talk about it without a feeling like [the conversation] is personal. I think in the course of that, sometimes the things teachers say

or students say, get interpreted or internalized in a completely different way than the teacher or student intended because of that. Can you think of any instances where you walked away with a different message than what your teacher might have been trying to send?

Liana: Yes. Navigating my chest voice. I've definitely had statements among the line like, "Don't sing like a man, you need to sing like a woman, women don't sing that way." Just bringing way too much weight up from the bottom and, in hindsight, yes, some women do sing that way, but I feel like that wasn't conveyed well, because [rather than understanding it as a technical issues, I internalized it as] 'I'm not singing in an appropriate way'.

Which was also problematic because that was a cultural way of singing I was used to. Singing with a lot of roundness and a gospel feel, so having teachers be like, "No, that's not what we do," I was personally traumatized because I was like, "But that's what I do, that's something I value in myself and you're saying that I am wrong because I'm doing that?" Now, I've internalized that I am wrong at doing the things that I thought I was good at. Great, go team.

I just wish I was more resilient when I was training because for so much of it I was just like, "Oh they're right because they are professional and I'm just doing it wrong. I'm just a woman, I'm wrong, I'm just singing wrong, I'm just having my experiences in past levels wrong, I should be doing what they're saying." Now I'm just like, "Well, no, I'm valid and I will acknowledge what you're saying to me but I know myself better than you do." I wish I had that resilience back then. It would have helped to navigate a whole bunch of gender and race shit.

Felix: If we can talk about function more than gender, in terms of singing, it's a lot easier because singing from a bottom-up way and singing in chest voice are not synonymous. Singing bottom-up bringing weight up is not good for anyone, male or female. That's unhealthy. But there are many ways to sing in chest voice and saying don't sing like a man is ultimately unhelpful.

Liana: Right [laughs].

Felix: The thing is because the language that we use in singing is so intrinsically gendered that it becomes very hard to talk about it without it having implications that maybe people weren't intending. I feel like for you, there's the added complication of race of- 'We don't do that, dear' comes from like a white

teacher that has much it means a whole lot of different things does that make sense?

Liana: Yes. "Who is the we we're talking about?"

Felix: Yes, exactly right. Really, that's an issue of language again. When we talk about technique, it shouldn't be "we don't 'do' this." It should be "what we're doing here is not the healthiest way to access your voice" or even, "This is not the healthiest and most efficient way to [sing certain repertoire]." Talking about it as "this is something we don't do" is really invalidating. I can't imagine that wasn't stressful for you.

Liana: Yes. That was a rough time. It was a dark time of my training.

While miscommunication around technique and the mechanics of singing can cause significant problems on its own, more worrisome are the instances in which taste, cultural norms the teacher has learned, or any other of the myriad aspects of individuality, which are internalized by students as concrete knowledge. One instance of this can be seen in Liana's experience with the educator who frequently spoke about his tastes, or his perception of what a black female voice should sound like. This (as well as experiences of the other singers) corresponds with the concept of the *hidden curriculum*, which suggests that a teacher's methods "also [include] an individual's tastes and preferences," which are then "**conspicuously or inconspicuously** shared with everyone with whom they come into contact. (Shockley et al., 2008, p. 182) (emphasis added).

As noted in Chapter 2, the "unseen curriculum is a critical aspect of formal education because it affects who students actually become" (Shockley et al., 2008, p. 182), and we see this played out again and again in the singers' narratives. Those results suggest that personal reflection on the part of the educator concerning the tastes, attitudes and cultural norms they bring into the studio is imperative. For, if

“teachers teach who they are, then their hidden inner curriculum directly influences the students they teach” (Shockley et al., 2008, p. 183).

Anxious to Succeed

The singers’ experiences with anxiety suggest that this is an area in which voice students may be underserved by the music education community and institutions. Many studies on performance anxiety have noted the need for deliberate and purposeful discussion around anxiety and appropriate methods for its management. A communal examination of

the maladaptive coping strategies related to vocal functioning within the framework of music education could offer suggestions about how to improve the singers’ abilities to cope with the pressure to develop and perform on a consistently high artistic level. It seems as if the singers do not know how to effectively deal with their feelings of performing at an inferior level – regardless of whether these beliefs are accurate or not. It appears as if they have difficulties in finding reliable strategies that would give them confidence and satisfaction from their artistic work, but instead they experience fear of bodily malfunctioning (and associated fear of failing) (Sandgren & Ericsson, 2007, p. 3).

This observation aligns with the singers’ experience, though their narratives suggest that singers’ anxiety is a more complex, multi-factorial issue than solely a fear of vocal malfunction and failure.

Further, the lack of appropriate education (as described Sandgren & Ericsson) seems to have had intense, lasting and cumulative effects on the singers throughout their careers, suggesting that early intervention would prevent a lifetime of stress and struggles around anxiety. Though especially relevant for AFAB singers, vocalists of all genders would benefit from a holistic focus on performer

health – addressing not only vocal and physical health, but mental self-care and, if appropriate, professional intervention and care.

One Size Fits No One

The singers' experiences do offer positive insights, as well. The range of ages of the participants suggest that advances have certainly been made in the vocal pedagogy and general music education communities concerning issues around identity, bullying, and in particular, the level of knowledge around voice science. Alice, the oldest of the participants, noted that her own teaching had benefited from the available of science-based literature and information:

I've had some really, really good teachers. I've also had some, when I look back on it now as a teacher, teachers who did not know what they were doing and were making it up as they went on. Which I think used to be a lot more common. There wasn't stuff like those NYSTA courses. I studied with teachers for years and I don't think they could have told you anything anatomical or acoustic.

I came to teaching always having been a performer, though not with any background in pedagogy. My first students, my goodness, I just couldn't— Learning to articulate things that just came naturally to me, like, “What do you mean you don't know how to do this?” That was a really, really steep learning curve for me. I don't know if I really started to value what I was able to just do [vocally] until I started teaching.

There are still areas in which our students would be well-served by communal reflection on the standards and practices of vocal pedagogy – particularly in addressing the individual (both personally and in the context of a professional career), not just the voice.

Multiple participants reported having no understanding in their early musical training what a professional career as a singer entailed, as well as feeling

inadequately prepared, even after their collegiate training. This seems particularly relevant to the current musical landscape, where singers require “a learning experience that is musically inclusive and likely to produce multi-skilled and adaptable graduates who are self-monitoring and self-directing in their learning, able to function across a range of activities that can constitute a portfolio career” (Lebler, 2007, p. 205).

Others reported instances where they felt belittled, ignored, looked down upon, or simply *not heard* in their studio training. It is notable that all the singers reported that they had no particular gender preference in potential teachers¹...their only qualifying criteria were that the teacher respected them and their autonomy, explained technical concepts clearly, did not condescend, and *listened* when the student tried to communicate about their voices.

Singers Are Doing it for Themselves: On Agency and Self-Reflection

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the common thread throughout the narratives was the role of agency in singers’ personal and musical development. While the impetus for change was internal, the external role of supportive educators was a significant aspect of their progress towards self-actualization and authenticity. This suggests that teachers – and particularly, studio teachers – can actively assist their students in acquiring agency, bolstering their sense of self-efficacy, even in adulthood.

¹ Though it should be noted that the importance or value of having a teacher who could model for their voice was not completely discounted, either.

The beliefs that singers acquire and internalize as being important for their success or ability at singing, are much more difficult to change once they've been internalized, and hence, that is where the primary focus of this study lay.

Nevertheless, the singers' narratives suggest that even if unhealthy norms are internalized, they *can* be changed, though it requires great deal of effort. Crano (2000) notes that

[w]e have learned that beliefs of relatively little importance or of low vested interested, are easy to influence but have few implications for behavior, whereas those have important personal consequences are resistant but not impossible to change, and when they do change, they are strongly directive of action. (p. 73)

The methods used in this study gave me a new awareness of the effectiveness of dialectical learning in applied voice – particularly when pursuing a holistic approach towards singer education. In speaking with the participants, constructing narratives together brought each of them new insight into their experiences and how they were affected by events in their musical lives. To quote each of the singers directly, "I never thought [my experience] like that until you mentioned it." This form of dialectical exploration directly corresponds with Rogers' concept of *self-exploration*.

Singers certainly should be urged to seek professional counselling where appropriate – voice teachers are not therapists, even if studio instruction often feels that way! Nevertheless, exploring a singer's musical experiences and perceptions of their singing self and their voice could offer a path for the singer's vocal and musical actualization. Further, encouraging singers to reflect on their on-going experiences

and perceptions through narrative² allows performers a method of maintaining their mental equilibrium around their singing and vocal instrument. For, according to Bamberg (2011, p. 79), a sense of personal satisfaction occurs when “we are continuously urged to seek out *the problem* in our narrative – the [problem] that is causing our lack of fulfillment and the suffering that comes in its wake.” Further,

grounding ‘the problem’ in [...] previous events, often reaching back into childhood experiences, and establishing a narrative connection that has led to the problem, not only is said to enhance self-reflection but is regarded the first step in a healing exercise that is supposed to free the narrator of ‘the problem’ and the suffering it causes. Narrative self-reflection, in conjunction with narrative self-disclosure, are taken to form the cornerstones of a narratively grounded approach to a rationally-reflexively monitoring of selfhood. (p. 79).

In this manner, singers maintain an awareness of potential issues – the emotional or even vocal stumbling blocks that lie in wait, ready to pounce when performers experience those vulnerable moments of which a singing career is treacherously filled.

Recommendations for Further Research

It goes without saying that there is room for further investigation into the intersection of AFAB voice, singing and gender. This sample and the results, while small and certainly not generalizable, nevertheless clearly demonstrates that there are larger societal factors influencing the experiences of female-bodied singers. That six singers, of varying racial, religious, cultural and musical backgrounds, from ages

² *i.e.*, dialectal examination.

20 to 52, all had similar experiences around gender and voice suggests broader, cultural issues at work, rather than singular anomaly. As research on the issues of male-bodied singers continues on apace, the community would be equally served by more investigators examining the female experience. If, as previously noted in the literature, singing *is* primarily the domain of AFAB vocalists, then surely, it behooves the vocal community to train and support them to the best of our cumulative ability. Both the existing literature and the results of this study suggest that we cannot teach effectively or prepare singers appropriately without a deeper understanding of the issues around gender socialization, expectations and voice.

One particular pitfall that future studies of this nature will no doubt wish to consider is that of timing. As previously noted, the way that the scheduling worked out for this study ended up limiting my window of access to the participants, simply due to the vicissitudes of singers' schedules. Taking care to ensure that the periods of engagement with participants fall when the performance season is lightest will no doubt allow for richer engagement and further insight.

There are so many potential avenues of investigation in these singers' narratives, that suggesting new directions would likely miss many potentially rich areas of inquiry. There is ample room in this topic for a broad array of lenses – not only gender-based inquiry, but vocal pedagogy, feminist thought, and identity-oriented psychology, as well. This is truly an interdisciplinary topic, and I look forward to the scholarship that emerges.

Reflection

Though the roots of this study were firmly grounded in my own experiences as an AFAB singer – both my musical life prior to transition, and now, as a transmasculine performer and educator, I was struck at how much my own story was mirrored back to me by the participants. So often, in the course of an interview, one of us would say, “Ohhh, that sounds familiar,” with accompanying nods of recognition, knowing sighs, energetic affirmations – there was no one in the study with whom I lacked shared experiences.

Music in general and singing, particularly, fulfilled some deep needs for me through my formative years: it wasn't just an identity, it was a way to be in the world. It was a way to make sense of the conflicts I felt, and perhaps more importantly, a way to escape the stressful environment in which I developed. Homeschooled, raised in an evangelical fundamentalist church, and living out in the rural south, I struggled with gender, social acceptance and nascent queerness. Singing was my stress valve, my safest form of personal expression, and a source of emotional comfort. I sang at church, I sang at home. I sang at whatever community functions I could attend. I sang to my horse...and despite his objections to that, he was a far kinder critic than many I've had since then.

Against all traditional expectations, I was raised to be loud. To “sing out,” and to make noise when and where I felt like it. It was a freedom that I now realize many AFAB people – particularly those in similar environments – don't have. Loudness, whether it was in the form of singing, playing the piano for hours, or simply using whatever was at hand for percussion practice, was the thing that kept me alive; it

kept me focused, kept me on track. It was only when I went to college to study music formally that singing became a source of stress and anxiety for me; suddenly, I was in a world where loudness came with many qualifications, and now, away from my insular childhood world, “loud” was no longer a virtue nor an asset. Now, almost overnight, I was *inappropriate*.

Sitting there, listening to the participants talk about their formative years – how singing fulfilled more than just a desire to make music, how they found themselves through singing, how learning to *be* a healthy singer was a lifetime process – there were moments that were intensely emotional for me. It was if I’d gone back in time: first, to my own uncomfortable teenage years, struggling with my circumstances and identity, then to my young adulthood, where I struggled with gendered expectations, the loss of my musical joy and, yes, my identity *still*. Only this time, it was a journey made with someone there to acknowledge and listen and say, “I understand. I felt that way, too. And it will get better.”

Like Alice and Drew, working through my struggles with gender, anxiety and singing is what led me to teaching initially. And the more I worked, the more I taught, the more I saw and understood how my experiences with gender, with loudness, with being *appropriate*, was something that even modern girls were still struggling with. As my practice (and my identity) shifted, and I began working with more trans and non-binary AFAB folks, it was clear that many of the messages female-bodied people receive from birth don’t go away just because their identity has shifted. Helping the singers in my studio learn to be loud, to embrace their voices with all the imperfections, to find joy in being imperfect, has been a way for

me to contribute and repay all of the people who helped *me* embrace my voice and my entire self, and who taught me both how to fail, and to be okay with failure. This study is, in part, a continuation of that work – only in this aspect of my work, my desire is to reach more than just the singers in my immediate social circles.

Medina's (2004) call to action in the struggle against silence has lingered with me as this study progressed. He reminds us that

in order to fight against the marginalization and silencing of voices, we have to constantly bring to light the *diversity* of symbolic perspectives inherent in discursive practices; we have to *recognize and empower marginal voices* that have become disadvantaged. (p. 276)

By elevating the study participants' voices and sharing their stories with the community, I hope, as he suggests, to "recognize and empower" other AFAB singers, as well as shine light on the kind of experiences and contexts that create conditions that lead female-voiced singers, like those in the study, to anxiety, discomfort and away from their authentic voice and self. Once again, if we replace the spoken with the sung, Medina's critique is a perfect summation of the challenge before us as a community:

We can [recognize and empower marginalized voices] by creating *musical* spaces in which all voices can be expressed in a positive way and can gain recognition and social acceptance. We must do everything we can to provide every *singer* with the opportunity and the power to [...] critically intervene in [cultural practices] and call into question their normative structure. In short, we need to fight *musical* disempowerment with *musical* empowerment, silence with *song*. (Medina, 2004, p. 577)

While it's important for those of us with a more prominent place in the communal discourse to speak up for those whose voices are silenced, I would like to conclude by simply letting the participants speak for themselves. There is nothing I can say that would be more potent than to repeat Alice's own words:

I feel it's part of my dharma and my mission is to be somebody for these girls. I wish I'd had somebody like me at their age telling me, "It's okay. It's okay. Make noise and hurt and," you know, "it's *okay*. You're made to be in the world, just be a person."

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Hello, I'm Felix Graham – thank you for speaking with me today. [consent / explanation of potential risks and benefits]. Do you consent to being recorded? As we discussed, I'm going to be asking you some questions about your identity, your background, and your singing experience, as well as your perception of your voice. If at any time, you feel uncomfortable – either in answering a specific question, or with the interview itself, you may decline to answer or ask to end the interview itself. Do you have any questions about this process?

.....
 To start with, I'd like to ask you some basic questions about who you are. May we begin?

Could you give me:

- 1) your name and age,
- 2) how you'd prefer to be addressed, and
- 3) which pronoun you'd like for me to use?
- 4) Your sex and gender;
 - a) If not cis-gender: Could you tell me a little more about your gender identity?
- 5) How would you describe your ethnicity or cultural origin?
- 6) Finally, where are you from?

Thank you. Now I'd like to ask some questions about your childhood experiences.

BACKGROUND PURPOSE: How might childhood experiences influence perception of gender and singing?

- 7) Were you raised in a musical / artistic environment?
 - a) If no: How did you come to the field of music?
 - b) Do you recall your parents having sung to or with you?
 - i) If yes: Would you say that your mother or father was more active in making music with you?
 - ii) Could you share a particularly vivid musical memory from your childhood?
- 8) As a child, do you recall ever having observed or sensed that *singing* was more commonly associated with one gender or another?
 - a) If yes: Could you give me an example, or tell me more about that?
 - i) Do you recall around what age you might have become aware of this division?

- ii) Did that realization affect your feelings on singing for yourself?

Is there anything that you feel might be relevant to your background or personal identity that you'd like to share with me before we go on?

SINGING PURPOSE: What is the subject's singing experience, and does that inform their perception of their personal identity?

- 9) What level would you use to describe your singing experience? (Professional, semi-professional, avocational, amateur?)
- a) If professional, when did you first consider going into music/singing professionally?
- 10) How would you classify your voice? (i.e., soprano, tenor, etc.) and what kind of music do you generally perform?
- a) Could you tell me a little about how you came to sing in [that genre]? Were there other musical paths that you considered?
- 11) How long have you been singing?
- a) When did you first start taking lessons?
- b) Have you primarily worked with a voice teacher of one sex or the other?
- i) Do you have a gender preference when working with teachers, coaches or accompanists? If so, why?
- ii) Do you feel like your teacher's gender has affected your perception of your own gender or voice in any way?
- c) Are you satisfied with the vocal training you've received to date?
- i) If no: Could you tell me more about that?
- 12) Making music is such a personal thing, that it's sometimes challenging to talk about what a student is doing without it feeling personal, and sometimes we say as teachers or students may not come across the way we intend. So, thinking about mixed messages or issues of communication you may have experienced over the course of your vocal training: looking back at your vocal study, can you recall any instances where you feel like you might have taken a different message from what your [music] teacher was telling you, vs. what your teacher was attempting to say?
- 13) Have you ever experienced anxiety while singing?
- a) If yes: How often?
- b) If yes: Do you feel that there are aspects of your identity that might affect the frequency or intensity of your performance anxiety?
- 14) Have you ever felt that your gender or gender identity has influenced your singing in any way?
- a) If yes: Could you tell me more about that?

15) Have you ever experienced any situation where you felt that your voice was being assessed or evaluated for gendered qualities, or because of your gender?

a) If yes: Could you tell me more about that?

Is there anything about your singing experience, in the context of your personal, gender or sexual identity, that you'd like to add?

ORIENTATION PURPOSE: Does the subject's experience and perception of gender intersect with their voice / perception of their voice? If so, how?

Now, I'd like to ask you some questions about gender, and how it applies to your perception of your voice.

16) Have you ever observed any specific characteristics of a person's voice that seem to be associated specifically with one gender or another?

a) If yes: How do you perceive these characteristics being received or valued by broader society?

b) Could you give me an example of a vocal quality associated with *your* gender that has been noted or discussed – either in the media at large, or in your professional or personal life?

17) You've stated that you identify as [gender]. Do you feel that your voice is, in some way, a significant part of *your* gender identity?

a) If so: Are you comfortable with how it represents you and your gender presentation? Why/why not?

i) If transgender: Can you tell me a little more about how your voice intersects with your gender? How do you reconcile your voice and vocal training with the shift of your gender identity?

b) If no: Why do you think that is?

18) Do you feel that any of these perceptions concerning gender and voice have (either now or in the past) affected your own assessment or perception of your voice?

a) If yes: Could you tell me more about that?

19) Do you feel that your voice fits your chosen genre/repertoire well?

a) If yes: Can you tell me more about that?

b) If no: Why do you think that is?

VOICE RESEARCH QUESTION: Does the subject's perception of both their voice and their identity intertwine?

Now, I'd like to talk a little about how your voice, specifically. I understand that our perception of our voices can change from day to day, so these questions are generalized. However, if there are specific occasions where your experience varies from the norm, do feel free to tell me about that.

- 20) Have you always been happy – or satisfied – with your singing voice?
- 21) Have you ever felt as though you were struggling with technical aspects of your voice?
- a) Why / when / how?
 - b) Do you feel those issues have been resolved?
 - c) Did or do you feel those issues affected your identity or your sense of identity in any way?
- 22) Looking back, is there anything you would do differently – either w/r/t your voice or your singing?

CONCLUSION

Thank you so much for your time. Before we go, is there anything you'd like to add to what we've already discussed, or something else concerning your experience you'd like to share?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

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Protocol Title: Gender, Identity and the Experience of Female Voice

Participation Consent

Principal Investigator: Felix Graham, Doctoral Candidate
Teachers College

(347) 236-5927, fag2104@tc.columbia.edu

INTRODUCTION

You are being invited to participate in this research study called “Gender, Identity and the Singing Voice.” You may qualify to take part in this research study because you are over 18 years old, have received extensive professional training in music, and identity as a singer – either professionally or avocationally. Approximately ten people will participate in this study and initial participation will require between one and two hours of your time and take the form of an initial and a follow-up interview to be scheduled at you and the researcher’s mutual convenience. You may also choose to participate in journaling of your day-to-day musical experiences, but this is not required for participation in the study.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

This study examines the experiences of vocalists who were assigned female at birth (“AFAB”), to determine how a singer’s voice, education, performance experience and personal identity interact and inform each other. The purpose of this study is to understand the social, gender and educational contexts that shape AFAB singers’ perceptions of their own voice, and influence their vocal/music experiences. By participating in this study, you will be sharing stories about your musical education, vocal training and performing/musical career.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by the principal investigator. During the interview, you may be asked to discuss your voice in the context personal identity (including potentially sensitive questions concerning gender, sexual orientation and past experiences with

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performance anxiety). The interview will be audio-recorded. After the audio-recording is written down (transcribed) the audio-recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate. The interview will take approximately forty-five minutes to an hour and a half, and will take place at a mutually central location, at a time that is convenient to you. A follow-up interview will be scheduled – either in-person or online – to collect further information or insights you have wish to share.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

You may also choose to participate in journaling of your day to day experiences as a singer or observations concerning your voice and identity. You choose to do this electronically or physically (*i.e.*, pen and paper). You will be asked to collect your thoughts and reflections, which may be done on a daily basis, over the course of two weeks.

You will be given a pseudonym or false name/de-identified code in order to keep your identity confidential in the collected data.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life while taking routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel embarrassed to discuss issues concerning personal identity; **however, you do not have to answer any questions or divulge anything you don't want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.** The principal investigator is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name and keeping all information on a password protected computer or locked in a file drawer.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Potential benefits to participants which *may* result from participation include a greater

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understanding of your own vocal development and issues relating to bias or exclusion due to gender in their singing career. Participation may benefit the field of teacher education to better understand the best way to train voice professionals.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You will not be paid to participate; there are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?

The study is over when you have completed the follow-up interview. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you haven't finished and you may choose to continue with the study by participating in further tasks - all of which you may leave at any time.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY

The investigator will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio-recording will be written down - either by the principal investigator, through electronic voice recognition software or via a professional transcriptionist (in which case, your interview will be anonymized prior to transcription) and the audio-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. Regulations require that research data be kept for at least three years.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?

The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the principal investigator.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

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In addition to the initial and follow-up interview, which are required to participate in this study, you may also choose to participate in the additional activity.

JOURNALING

____ I would like to participate in this activity and give consent for the Principle Investigator to collect the reflections I will record over a period of two weeks.

____ I do not wish to participate in this activity.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING

Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don't wish to be recorded, you will not be able to participate in this research study.

____ I give my consent to be recorded

 Signature

____ I **do not** consent to be recorded

 Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

____ I consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College

 Signature

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York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his or her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study

Print name: _____
Date: _____

Signature:

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