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Table of Contents

The Warm Rainbow Hug I Didn't Know I Needed
by Whitney Lee Moeller3

Mapping Trans and Gender-Expansive Choirs: Insights from an Organizational Ethnographic Exploration
by Dillon Beede5

Songs for a New South: How a GALA Chorus Is Reclaiming Its Identity as Both Queer and Southern
by Wesley King18

Applying Universal Design for Learning and Queer Pedagogy to Rehearsal Structures
by Saleel Adarkar Menon21

Versatile: Performing Queerness with the Lincoln Queer Choir
by M Joseph Willette31

A Choral Commission: "Song for Our Transforming"
by Donald Callen Freed and Dillon Beede36

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The Warm Rainbow Hug I Didn't Know I Needed

Whitney Lee Moeller

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In the GALA chorus community, there is an abundance of deeply moving stories about the positive impact of affirming choruses on our singers and audiences. As the Artistic Director of an affirming choir, my goal is to facilitate those meaningful experiences for our community. While I always understood the importance of creating a safe space for singers, I did not yet understand how profoundly that same space would hold me as a leader. In pursuing a positive environment for the musicians in my circle, my own calloused heart began to heal.

There was a painful season in my professional and personal life when each setback felt more devastating than the last, steadily fatiguing my spirit. With every blow, I questioned my resilience and wondered how I could possibly endure one more disappointment. I was caught in a perfect storm of financial strain, familial discord, and self-doubt. I looked back over years of hard work, perfectionism, and overachievement with regret. For what? Just as I thought I had found my footing, the COVID-19 pandemic came crashing in like a tidal wave, upending everything once again.

My wife and I both changed jobs multiple times, though I moved the most. I found myself in several toxic workplaces that left my nervous system in shambles. I began praying with desperation that something—anything—would lead us back to stability. I no longer dared to dream of my ideal career; I simply longed for a tolerable work environment and financial security.

The rejections eventually broke my spirit. One position was put on hold due to the pandemic after I had absolutely nailed the interview. When the organization later pivoted to hire a music teacher for remote learning, I eagerly applied again, hoping to be at the top of their list. Near the end of the application, I noticed a change that made my heart stop. The form now required a signature affirming that the organization believes marriage is between a man and a woman. I stared at the screen, connecting the dots. *This was added because of me.*

The words blurred as tears welled in my eyes. Heat rose to my cheeks. Then came an eruption of grief and rage—tears, shouting, and words I won't repeat here.

In many ways, I am still recovering from that season. But I am far stronger today because of my experience with Council Oak Men's Chorale in Tulsa, Oklahoma. When the president of the board called to offer me the position of Artistic Director, I was so giddy with delight that I began pacing the house, phone in hand. I mouthed, "I GOT IT!" to my wife, who grinned and gave me a thumbs up as I continued pacing. The president began sharing important details, and I confessed he might need to repeat them later—I was too excited to absorb anything. That evening brought happy, hopeful tears. I sensed it was the beginning of something special.

I was nervous on the podium. After everything I had been through, a touch of imposter syndrome was understandable. But the singers were immediately warm and trusting. They embraced me fully. It was the warm rainbow hug I didn't know I needed. Over time I have come to the realization that leading an affirming chorus is not only about cultivating musical excellence and belonging for the ensemble members. It also requires allowing oneself to belong in return.

Only a few months after accepting my position, we presented our first successful concert together, followed quickly by our trip to Minneapolis for GALA 2024. I was a bundle of nerves—mostly because I was also nine weeks pregnant.

After seven months of at-home insemination, I was absolutely thrilled. Still, I felt anxious about sharing the news with my choir. Once we arrived in Minneapolis, I knew suspicions would grow. I was opting out of social events and skipping performances and workshops to conserve energy for rehearsals and our performance. When I put on my concert attire, it was noticeably tighter around my midsection than the last time I had worn it. I decided to tell them during our warm-up, just before taking the stage.

They responded with overwhelming support and we carried that joyful energy with us into the performance. Scheduled immediately before the Los Angeles Gay Men's Chorus, the orchestra hall was packed for our seventeen-member ensemble. The sound of the applause nearly knocked me off my feet. It was breathtaking. Standing in that hall, surrounded by affirming ensembles from across the country, I understood that this was bigger than Council Oak Men's Chorale. GALA is a network of resilience. We are all artists insisting on joy in the face of rejection. I have never felt more seen. I look back on this whirlwind experience as the most thrilling and rewarding experience of my musical life.

Managing a full life of teaching, singing, conducting, and parenting is no small task. There were moments when I questioned my ability to navigate pregnancy and postpartum while conducting a tenor-bass ensemble each week, but I found unwavering encouragement from my choir family as they became my greatest cheerleaders. In supporting me, they strengthened the very leadership I sought to offer them.

To any reader who feels hopeless today: your time is coming. There is a chosen family waiting to be found. There is a place where your energy, expertise, and whole self will be welcomed and celebrated. The very resilience forged in heartbreak may one day become the foundation for your greatest joy.

I am profoundly grateful for every moment I get to spend with this loving family of musicians. I cherish these memories and know the friendships formed here will last a lifetime. Today, when I step onto the podium, I do so not only as a conductor, but as someone held by the very community I strive to serve. This is the gift of affirming choral work.

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Mapping Trans and Gender-Expansive Choirs: Insights from an Organizational Ethnographic Exploration

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Abstract

While there has been significant attention to the experiences of trans and gender-expansive (TGX) singers within studio and cis-dominant choral contexts, there has been relatively little examination of TGX choral ecologies. This article, based on a larger organizational ethnography of TGX choirs, shares select findings which explore the interwoven and co-constitutive nature of identity, policy, pedagogy, and community in these spaces. The study used observational, reflective, interview, and focus group data collection methods with six U.S.-based TGX choirs to begin mapping TGX choral environments. Utilizing a post-structuralist lens, the study reveals the ways in which identity, policy, pedagogy, and community intertwine throughout TGX choirs and how these organizations rethink dominant choral practice. It also invites choral musicians to reconsider and reimagine choral practice beyond its cisnormative and heteronormative epistemologies.

Keywords

trans and gender-expansive, choral pedagogy, choral policy, vocal identity, gender identity, community

Introduction

As I settle into position, I can feel the buzz in the room. Singers and directors coming together before rehearsal, some setting up chairs, arranging the room; others handing out and collecting music. Chatter fills the space: salutations; hugs; exclamations; a quiet, confiding word in the corner. The director draws everyone's attention, a warm greeting, and then warm-ups begin.

—Beede, *Field Notes*, 2025

The above vignette represents my experiences during observations across 12 rehearsals in three different trans and gender-expansive (TGX) choral spaces. On the surface, the flow feels familiar to me—nearly indistinguishable from the cis-dominant groups in which I have sung, and its movements resonate with my own choral experiences. However, the reverberations have a different tenor. Below this surface of commonality, there seems to be a different desire that drives this rehearsal and inspires the musicians here. What does it mean to rehearse when one's existence is a political act? How does the structure of an organization support singers? What does pedagogy look like?

The growth in the popularity of TGX choirs is growing despite a current shift in the U.S. socio-political landscape where TGX identities are challenged, at times politically erased, and are more contested than ever. At present there are over 770 anti-trans bills in 43 states in the U.S. (translegislation.com, 2026) and experts at the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security issued a warning that the U.S. has entered the early stages of genocide against TGX Americans (2026). Despite these challenges, there has been significant growth in the number of TGX choirs, both nationally and globally, reflecting broader national trends (Ghorayshi, 2022).

In light of the political tensions in the United States, creating and preserving dedicated spaces for queer individuals is essential. These environments can support artistic growth, education, and personal development, and—most importantly—provide a safe and affirming community (MacLachlan, 2020). Among the most vulnerable to harsh new right-wing policies are trans and gender-expansive individuals (Palkki et al., 2026). TGX choral spaces may serve as a critical site for TGX community, identity development, and for the creation of TGX-focused pedagogy and policy.

In this article, drawn from a larger study (Beede, 2026), I share select insights from observations and interviews with singers and directors of TGX choirs. Scholarship on TGX singing and TGX singers' experiences in traditional cis-dominant choral spaces has grown in the last decade (e.g., Carlson, 2025; Ferrari, 2021; Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Graham, 2018; Graham, 2022; Palkki, 2020; Sauerland, 2022; Sims, 2017; Stapleton, 2024). However, there has been relatively little examination of the TGX choral environment as distinct from cis-dominant choral practice. The purpose of this article is to begin mapping how TGX choirs organize social, musical, and relational practices that support singers' participation, belonging, and identity development. Rather than presenting the findings in a linear typology, I approach them in a rhizomatic fashion through engagement with the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2014). These findings offer a glimpse into how TGX choirs may inform TGX vocal and choral pedagogies while also challenging cisnormative and heteronormative epistemologies embedded in dominant choral practice. The research question driving this inquiry is: How do identity, policy, pedagogy, and community manifest and interact within TGX choral environs?

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The purpose of this study was to examine TGX identities within TGX-specific choral environments. Transgender theory (Jagose, 1996; LeMaster & Stephenson, 2021) and trans-identity theory (Nagoshi et al., 2014) were utilized as frameworks to best situate the study. Data collected in this study were further examined through a post-structural lens informed by the work of Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/2014) rhizomatic thinking.

Transgender Theory and Trans-Identity Theory

Choral spaces have historically organized bodies and voices through binary gender logics, essentializing gender and singing possibilities. Transgender theory provided a framework to examine the lived experience, self-determination, and the material consequences of how gender is recognized, regulated, and voiced within these systems. While it developed alongside queer theory in the early 1990s (Stryker, 2006), trans scholars from the late 1990s onwards (Prosser, 1998; Stryker, 2004) have critiqued queer theory's appropriation of TGX experiences "in the construction of critical heuristics" (LeMaster & Stephenson, 2021, p. 192). For many TGX people, transition represents a deeply embodied and transgressive act that challenges, rather than reinforces, societal norms about gender. Other trans scholars, such as Monro (2000) and Roen (2001), emphasize the necessity of addressing the embodied aspects of trans identities, which queer theory's abstraction of gender categories often overlooks.

Building upon transgender theory, trans-identity theory as proposed by Nagoshi et al. (2014), expands upon the work of Shotwell and Sangrey (2008). Nagoshi et al. explain:

In this model...embodiment is seen as an essential component of the self. Shotwell and Sangrey also explicitly argue for the role of self-construction as a narrative process and that this autonomous aspect of self exists in relation to and in interactions with the social environment. (2014, pp. 86-87)

Nagoshi and their colleagues extend Shotwell and Sangrey's work and add to it a third component: the autonomous self (p. 87). Thus, transgender identity exists in a constant, dynamic interaction between the embodied self, the self constructed from social interactions, and the autonomous self. This framework was especially useful for examining TGX choral spaces because singing places embodiment, social recognition, and agency into direct relation.

Rhizomatic Thinking and Cartography

In their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari lay the foundation for how the reader should understand their thinking and subsequent reading of the text via the rhizome. They call into question the reproduction of knowledge based on the linear, tree-like form which does not create new ideas, but propagates a stable, hierarchical organization. In order to challenge this, they adopt the rhizome as a model. A rhizome is characterized by lateral root growth like that found in ginger or Aspen trees, "Rhizomes do not propagate by way of clearly delineated hierarchies but by underground stems in which any part may send additional shoots upward, downward, or laterally" (Adkins, 2015, p. 23). This model resists hierarchical ways of thinking instead focusing on "the middle" and connections rather than filiation.

As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe it, "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between, things, interbeing, intermezzo," and "the tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and...and...and...'" (p. 25). They lay forth six principles which define their rhizomatic model: (a) principle of connection, (b) principle of heterogeneity, (c) principle of multiplicity, (d) principle of asignifying rupture, (e) principle of cartography, and (f) principle of decalcomania. For the purposes of this ethnographic exploration the fifth and sixth principles (cartography and decalcomania) were my primary focus.

These two principles serve to illustrate the way in which the rhizomatic model produces new knowledge while traditional arborescent forms produce tracings. As Adkins (2015) states, "Cartography is the creation of a rhizome or 'mapping.' This is strictly opposed to decalcomania, which reproduces trees everywhere and out of everything. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this as 'tracing'" (p. 29). Essentially, Deleuze and Guattari argue that traditional formations of knowledge based on tree-like forms merely reproduce knowledge and encourage homogeneity. The non-hierarchical and non-linear connection of heterogenous elements within the rhizomatic model leads to the production of new knowledge.

Methodology

This study employed a blended ethnographic approach informed by principles from organizational ethnographic case study (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020), focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005), and multi-case study design (Thomas, 2011; Halkias et al., 2022). The study involved fieldwork, interviews, and analysis over a nine-month period. My goal was to capture the insights and experiences of TGX singers and directors in TGX choral spaces, which have largely gone unstudied. Identity, within the context of this study, was primarily considered with regard to individuals' trans and gender-expansive identity and their voice. Other identity constructs, such as race, disability, or socioeconomic status, may intersect with the research, but were not the focus of the current study. The incorporation of six U.S.-based TGX choruses (Table 1) made this one of the first national investigations of TGX ensembles, offering a snapshot of their early development and growth as well as their importance to the TGX community.

Table 1*Participant Choirs*

<i>Chorus Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
TRANScend Ambassadors	New York City, New York	TA
Transcendent Choir of Philadelphia	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	TCP
Trans Chorus of Los Angeles	Los Angeles, California	TCLA
Seattle Trans and Non-binary Choral Experience	Seattle, Washington	STANCE
Phoenix	Aurora, Colorado	Phoenix
New Voices Bay Area TIGQ Chorus	San Francisco, California	NVC

Note. For more detailed portraits of the TGX choirs, see [here](#).

The study developed through three phases which utilized observational, self-reflective, interview, and focus group methods. In phase 0, I focused on connecting with TGX choirs and establishing rapport before engaging in data collection and also distributed informed consent forms. During phase 1, I attended one live, in-person rehearsal observation with TRANScend Ambassadors, Transcendent Choir of Philadelphia, and Trans Chorus of Los Angeles. In phase 1a, two video-recorded rehearsal observations from each of the three observed choruses were gathered by me for further observation and analysis. In phase 1b, I collected one 10- to 15-minute audio self-reflection recording from a singer from each observed chorus. Then in phase 2, I explored the experiences of singers from TGX choirs through six, 60-minute individual singer interviews. For phase 2a, I explored the approaches of TGX choral directors through five, 60-minute individual director interviews. Finally, in phase 3, I engaged participants in three focus groups—two director focus groups and one singer focus group—to address the themes of identity, policy, pedagogy, and community that were revealed in prior phases. In total, the study included more than 25 hours of live and recorded rehearsal data and approximately 15 hours of interview data.

Positionality and Validity

Central to this study were the lived experiences of TGX individuals within choral spaces, a community to which I do not belong. Recognizing the scrutiny often placed on research conducted by those outside the community being studied, it is essential to address issues of both positionality and validity. As a cisgender, queer man, I do not possess the embodied experiences of TGX individuals, and I acknowledge the threads of thinking that question the validity of research performed by non-community members. I echo Talbot (2017) in reflecting on my positionality: “I am both oppressor and oppressed” (p. 8). While I do not fully comprehend the trials and experiences of TGX people, I am acutely aware of how cisgender and heterosexual ideologies have oppressed me as a queer person. This awareness, while not parallel to the TGX lived experience, inspires me to work in solidarity with the TGX choral community.

To enhance the validity of this study, I embedded several validation strategies (Creswell & Miller, 2020) within the research design. These included data collection from multiple and diverse sources; frequent member-checking prior to analytical procedures; and the use of thick, rich description throughout. I also engaged in memo-ing and reflective journaling throughout the data collection and analysis to address my biases, and to self-examine how these may have influenced the research process (Billups, 2022).

TGX Choral Cartography

In the following sections, I present identity, policy, pedagogy, and community not as discrete domains, but as intertwined and co-constitutive elements of the TGX choral environment. This cartographic approach is informed by Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between a map and a tracing (1980/2014), and allowed me to follow non-linear relations and intertwinings amongst identity, policy, pedagogy, and community. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive, linear analysis of the TGX choral space, neatly dissecting it into separate categories; instead, it is to engage in an exploration of these communities—to create a map, rather than a tracing (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980).

Community Ritual

"Have you gotten dinner yet?" a warm voice asks me as I sit in the corner of the room working on my observation notes. The first half of rehearsal for Trans Chorus of Los Angeles has just ended, and I look up from my laptop and notebook to see one of the TCLA singers smiling and inviting me to join in their rehearsal dinner. I close my laptop and notebook and make my way down the hall, where a table has been set up with a communal meal: pasta, meatballs, salads, desserts, waters, sodas. All of this is prepared, set up, and cleaned up every week by Ms. Mary. A deliberate act of community-building. The chorus spreads out through the Connie Norman Transgender Empowerment Center, finding seats on couches, chairs, stools, and even the floor. The center echoes with energized conversations.

—Beede, Field Notes, 2025

This is more than a dinner invitation. It is a ritual of care; a weekly reweaving of community that helps hold the chorus together. Here, music is only part of the story. Just as important are these kinds of rituals that sustain singers outside the score: a shared meal, conversation, camaraderie. They are not incidental, but intentional practices that bind the ensemble together. This meal is just one manifestation of community and care; one of many that I observed and heard about in conversations. Such rituals serve as pillars of many TGX choirs because of the impact they have on members. In a world that continually minoritizes and excludes TGX persons, these gatherings are a source of stability, affirmation, and nourishment.

TCLA's mid-rehearsal meal builds upon a tradition of intentional community care that has been at the group's core since its founding. During my interview with TCLA Artistic Director (AD) Abby Hall, they elaborated further:

So, that mid-rehearsal meal started with the founding artistic director, Lindsey...The whole reason for that meal was, one, we didn't know who in our community was unhoused or homeless, and if they were having a sufficient meal. It's also representing family and community...we need time to break bread, sit and talk with each other. Just sit and kiki for a little bit, catch up with people, because everybody goes about their lives after this rehearsal. That meal is to give you strength to get through from Monday to Saturday. Some of them [chorus members] might go out and have a great week, and some of them might end up being misgendered and having a really shitty week, but they know that on Sunday, they can come here; they can sing, eat, and go home happy. (Director Interview)

It is evident that food and ritual bind the TCLA community together just as much as music does. In fact, Hall has asked the chorus members if they wanted to eliminate the dinner to shorten their Sunday evening rehearsals, a suggestion they adamantly declined. Community is integral to the operations of this chorus; rehearsal is not a purely musical labor, but one that incorporates care and love.

Ritual as Policy

As I observed and collected data on TCLA and Transcendent Choir of Philadelphia (TCP), community time emerged as a prominent theme. The rituals of community operate as soft policy in both choruses; unspoken customs that are integral to each group (Schmidt, 2020). These soft policies are a form of infrastructure for relational experiences in these choirs—born of community needs and relationships—they function as unspoken community contracts or understandings of how the chorus community functions together. TCLA, for instance, has no written requirement for a community meal in their member handbook; while a mid-rehearsal break is discussed, the only mention of a meal can be found in the guidelines and responsibilities of “Fifth Section” members. That this shared meal goes largely unmentioned belies its importance to the organization.

Examining the rituals of TCP through the same lens reveal similar soft policies. As a newly formed chorus in the 2024-2025 season, TCP had yet to develop a membership handbook or policy document. This was at the top of Kociba’s agenda as they prepared for the 2025-2026 season:

This is a goal that I have for this coming season, to have a singer handbook to make decisions on commonly asked questions...the only things that we have in writing are the precedent that we’ve set with every single email that we’ve sent this season. We are aware that that sets a precedent. (Director Interview)

Aspects of TCP’s rehearsals, like “good-news” and “floor time,”—researcher assigned names for aspects of their rehearsal breaks—are thus positioned as potential soft-policy elements that may exist outside of a more formal handbook. These moments of community time may stabilize what might otherwise be tenuous organizational arrangements and may further develop trust and cohesion amongst participants. Through these rituals, an informal governance structure begins to take shape and the labor of emotional connection making is built into the organizational structure. These rituals further substantiate the notion that TGX choral spaces are not just music-making spaces, but communities of care that surpass the music.

Policy Framing Boundaries

In addition to these soft policies, TGX choral spaces that I visited are also sites of hard-policy development. While soft policies often shape a choir’s inner workings and interactions, the hard policies—namely, formal rules and expectations—help to more clearly define the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion of the TGX choral environment.

Attire

All of the TGX ensembles included in this study had some sort of guidelines for their members’ attire during concerts. Most choruses simply stipulated that performers dress in “concert black” as a base, with colored accents that varied by group or concert need. For instance, the policy at TCLA and NVC is for members to wear black bottoms and a top in any color of the trans flag, while TCP opted for “concert black with floral accents” to evoke floral arrangements for their Trans Day of Remembrance memorial concert. The singers in Phoenix had more expressive freedom: “We perform in black with red, yellow, or orange accents,” Bullington, Phoenix AD, explained. “There’s a lot of latitude. Some people wear bright orange pants, and some people wear a tiny hat or scarf” (Director Focus Group 2).

Similarly, TA generally utilize black attire on the bottom, paired with a top in the color of each person’s choice from their branding guide: “Whatever makes you feel particularly good, acceptable in your own personal experience, whatever it happens to be” (Graham, Director Focus Group 2). However, TA goes a step further than the other choirs, having created a “look book” for performances outside of their regularly planned schedule.

These context-specific approaches to attire policy align with many of the recommendations from recent scholars (Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Sauerland, 2018) based on their work with TGX individuals. More importantly, these approaches ground attire policy recommendations within choral settings of TGX individuals. As shown here to varying degrees, choral attire operates as a hard policy within these groups, determining performance eligibility.

Accessibility

Beyond attire, policies can help to define the inclusiveness and accessibility of TGX spaces. STANCE, for instance, had a strict masking requirement for members during rehearsals and performances. STANCE AD Adamson elaborated on this rule during our interview, explaining that all STANCE members—with the exception of Adamson and soloists while they are singing alone—rehearse and perform in a pre-approved face mask, which helps to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 and other airborne illnesses. Beyond the performers, all audience members at STANCE concerts must also be masked. NVC has a similar practice:

We require everyone to prove [COVID-19] vaccination to be a part of the choir. Every indoor event, rehearsals and otherwise, is a masked event. We realize for a number of people in our choir, just us masking was not enough for them to be safe in that environment. So, we had a lengthy, and at times a pretty hard, decision-making process; but ultimately, we decided that any concert that was our concert, that we were putting on from our organization would be an outdoor concert every time. (Director Focus Group 2)

In addition to these masking requirements, accessibility emerged as another area in which TGX choruses may formalize expectations through hard policy. This was particularly evident at TA and its parent organization Transcend Choral & Community Foundation (TCCMF). In response to concerns raised by singers, Graham developed an accessibility and accommodation policy. The document outlines the ways in which the ensembles under the TCCMF umbrella work to support participants who might need special accommodations to be part of the chorus. This document also sets forth expectations for chorus members and their participation in the ensemble, and states what “reasonable accommodations” might look like.

Accommodations and accessibility can also go beyond the physical needs of singers. A number of community choruses, for instance, require their members to pay regular dues. Many of the TGX choruses in this study with such policies, however, provide additional financial support to singers who may struggle to meet this requirement. For their part, TA and TCLA offer scholarships, payment plans, and sliding-scale membership fees to ensure that TGX singers can remain involved in their ensembles. Phoenix AD Bullington elaborated further on his organization’s similar policies:

One of the biggest challenges we have as a group is just the incredible amount of instability in trans people’s lives. So, we don’t have a lot of dues requirements, attendance requirements, those kinds of things, because I do not want to set people up with expectations that they would not be able to meet. Many of our members get their food from SNAP, have rent subsidies, and have Medicaid, so the level of stress and the level of just general distraction and lack of capacity from holding all of those things has made it a challenge for the organization, because our individual members are so under stress and strain. (Director Focus Group 2)

These forms of health-related, financial, and organizational support are critical for TGX persons, who statistically face greater discrimination in employment, housing, health care, credit, and financial aid (Paying an Unfair Price, 2015). They also resonate with recommendations from music education accessibility scholars like Hammel & Hourigan (2017) and Salvador (2013). Here, the ways TGX choral organizations must strive to both meet the community needs of marginalized trans singers and balance their artistic and advocacy goals can be observed.

Voice and Identity

A TGX singer's relationship to their voice can be a complex matter (Challacombe, 2025; Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Graham, 2019; Palkki, 2020). Some, like Kathryn from TCLA, might not experience dysphoria in singing a vocal part that doesn't align with traditionally gendered norms. During our interview, I asked her if TCLA had influenced her exploration of her trans identity. She replied:

I think it's been more of a 'you know who you are and all that. Let's let other people see who you are, too,' as opposed to it being a big influence on who I am...I think it didn't have such a huge influence on me in terms of who I was, but more it allowed me to show other people, you can just be who you are without worrying about all the nuances that society places on you and expectations for who you should be. I think that's been a really helpful part of my development. (Singer Interview)

As we continued our conversation, Kathryn reminisced about her audition and acceptance into TCLA, recalling the joyful feeling it gave her: "...The nice thing was they accepted me as baritone, which was not like most places. Most places you go, 'Oh, you're a woman, you have to sing alto, or at least high tenor or something'" (Singer Interview). Through this dialogue, Kathryn articulated an integrated sense of self in which her gender identity and vocal identity coexist, as she embraces her voice both as a baritone and as a trans woman. She takes pride in her baritone voice, and is excited to use it to contribute to TCLA.

Ellianna, of TCLA, however, described having a slightly more complex relationship with her voice. For her, it was important for her vocal identity to align with traditional notions of gendered vocal parts:

I was auditioning for Abby and a couple other folks [for TCLA], and they do, like, a range check. Abby was like, 'I guess you could sing any part you want, but what do you feel comfortable in?' And I was like, 'Well, I've been singing tenor a lot.' And they [Abby] said, 'Girl, there's an alto in there, you need to let her out.' And I was like, 'Okay, okay, I'll do that.' And just the same way that the shift from bass to tenor had felt, like, freeing—this was that, but even more. It is just the vocal production is such a visceral thing that to me, it feels impossible to disassociate that from identity. (Singer Interview)

Ellianna's story here showcases the way in which she experiences gender euphoria when her vocal identity and her gender identity are in harmony.

Jesse, a TCP singer, presented an example of a vocal identity that has evolved throughout their gender journey:

I think one of the things that's been interesting for me, and one of the things when I first was sort of coming into my identity as a non-binary person, I made a really hard turn to super-masculinity, and it was sort of, like, anything that had any hint of fem I had to reject in order to be, like, 'I don't identify as a woman.' And it's been really enriching to come back around to, 'Actually, that's not for me. I don't identify as a man,' and so it feels very authentic to find aspects of what would be kind of encultured as femininity that feel good to me. One of those things is singing as a soprano, but singing as a soprano in a space where it's like, 'Okay, people who can sing high, come together over here and sing high notes.' I do like the way my voice sounds when I'm singing those high notes, and there's not dysphoria in that now. (Singer Interview)

Here, Jesse speaks of their ongoing relationship with their voice and the ways in which they have struggled with gendered aspects of singing. Jesse grappled with their feminine presentation, and sought to construct a more masculine intrapersonal experience: pursuing a more masculine presentation, and turning away from feminine-coded aspects. Now, in TCP, they are revisiting their vocal and gender identity and reconciling their vocal range, gender identity, and gender presentation—for example, by embracing some of these aspects of "encultured femininity," and enjoying singing in their soprano voice. In this example, the interactions between the embodied self, the socially-constructed self, and the autonomous self from trans-identity theory can be observed.

While Jesse's narrative is one of an evolving reengagement with their voice, Blake's (TA) relational arc revealed a more complex and differently storied engagement. Here, Blake elaborated on his relationship with his vocal identity:

I think I really liked the genders of choral singing...before I knew I was trans, being able to identify not as a gender, but as a soprano. I think in many ways, voice parts become their own identities, and thereby their own genders. And you have ways of knowing it...knowing what to stereotype about a soprano, or what you expect of them. And anything that was expected or stereotyped of a soprano, I liked; I was about that. I was like, 'This is accurate and true. You can say whatever you want about me. It's true and it applies to me, and that's fine and I'm okay with it.' And that was very freeing in a way. So, I think I enjoyed, oddly, the escape from gender that identifying as my voice type provided. (Singer Interview)

As a singer in TA, Blake no longer feels a strong connection to a vocal part like he did before transitioning. This is in large part because of the pedagogical approach Graham uses with TA singers, as Blake explained:

I feel less connected to a voice part now, especially because TRANScend doesn't really use voice parts. So, it's difficult for me to identify as a tenor, or to use that as a sort of a route of identification in the way that I did with soprano. (Singer Interview)

Blake's current disengagement from a fixed voice-part identification may reflect both his personal gender journey and the alternative voicing approach employed in TA. This shift underscores the role of choral pedagogy not merely in accommodating identity, but in actively reshaping how vocal identities are experienced and understood.

Graham spoke to this issue from the teacher/director perspective, providing valuable insight into the effect that voice teachers and choral directors can have on TGX singers:

Teachers do not fully understand, and particularly voice teachers do not fully understand, the longevity or the depth of the impact that they have on their students and their clients, for good or for not good. More specifically, voice teachers have access and have a power in shaping the development of a person internally in ways that even therapists cannot, because voice is part of yourself. It's part of your core identity, it's part of your narrative, and anything that changes your voice changes you as a person at your molecular level. (Director Interview)

Taken together, these narratives reveal that vocal identity is often intertwined with one's overall identity conceptualization. This connection can be seen beyond the TGX choral space, as singers often display deeply rooted identification with a particular voice type; when those concepts are challenged or changed, it can lead to significant cognitive stress. Considering that, the impact of voice teachers and choral directors in fostering their singers' vocal identity should never be discounted.

These narratives begin to illuminate the complex relationship between vocal and gender identities that many TGX singers may have. For some, there is no dissonance between vocal and gender identities, while others may prioritize their consonance; meanwhile, still other individuals may experience the two as an ongoing dynamism that is still in fluctuation.

Pedagogical Orientations

In TGX choirs, pedagogy extended beyond vocal technique to include psychological care, repertoire selection, and lyrical adaptation. A significant concern reflected in each of the directors' pedagogical approaches was the mental or psychological well-being of TGX singers. During our conversations, they acknowledged the web of care that must accompany their directing of a TGX choir, and how that affects their singers' vocal abilities. Kociba (TCP) framed this as a mission to create a supportive environment that valued and encouraged singers beyond their utility to the chorus:

But I think in terms of pedagogy, it's almost a hundred percent about creating an environment of comfort. So, I have singers who are in treble sections right now, and they just started on testosterone a month ago. So, they're looking to me, like, 'Is that okay?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, more altos will come. It's fine.' It's like they're worried that they're going to let down the group if their voice changes, but I'm like, 'That's the point! That's why we're here, so that our voice can do and be what it needs to be'...I think that creating an environment of comfort will always come first in my mind before technique. (Director Interview)

For Kociba, it is clear that an approach built on community and care is essential to their choral pedagogy at TCP. This is a foundation upon which they can vocally co-explore and support their TGX singers. In a similar way, Hall (TCLA) recognizes and focuses on the importance of mindset for their TGX singers. When I prompted them to describe their approach to vocal training in a diverse ensemble of changed, changing, and unchanged voices, they said,

The biggest for us is mental confidence. It sounds crazy because it doesn't deal immediately with the voice, but if your mindset is to hate your voice while it is transitioning...then it is hard to sing because you are going to criticize [your voice] every step of the way. You have to release the voice that you knew and embrace the voice you have now. (Director Interview)

Here, Hall illuminates the singer-centered approach that is essential to their TGX choral pedagogy. For Graham, this pedagogy is not grounded in just community and care, but in a cognitive realm that examines seriously the psychological needs of his singers:

When we talk about this in the context of training in choir, it is not enough to feel, 'I've made a secure environment for my singers.' Your singers have to experience an active process of emotional regulation and practice using their voice in a regulated way. (Director Interview)

Graham's strategy for addressing TGX singers' psychological needs blends aspects of polyvagal theory, window of tolerance, and trauma-informed pedagogy into his TGX choral pedagogy. Though each director approaches this from a different orientation, they all highlight the importance of psychological care of and for TGX singers. Graham utilizes a science-informed lens, while Hall focuses more on a singer's relationship with their voice, vocal identity, and gender identity. Finally, Kociba's lens encourages us to think about the psycho-social needs of choir members from an environmental perspective.

Repertoire Selection and Adaptation

Repertoire plays a pivotal role in the advocacy work of TGX choirs, and the lyrics are more frequently scrutinized to those ends than might be found in cis-dominant choirs. Directors acknowledged that they had to maintain a critical eye toward the challenge level of the music to ensure it remained inclusive of singers' abilities for their TGX choruses. Both Adamson and Kociba cited their use of repertoire for their groups that ranged in difficulty from middle-school to early collegiate and community-college levels. Given their inclusive nature, many TGX choirs attract singers across a broad spectrum of prior experience: from professionals with music degrees to first-time choristers. Directors thus have to select repertoire that balances both musical accessibility and musical interest for all of their members. This approach does create some challenges for more experienced singers. As John from STANCE commented, "In order to be maximally inclusive, we are singing stuff that I realistically could probably learn in a month" (Singer Focus Group).

Compared to the other choruses, this repertoire-selection issue is mitigated in some ways for Phoenix choir because of their practice of writing much of their own music. Over their nearly decade-long existence, the choir has produced eight original pieces and two children's plays written primarily by its members. These customized pieces are often a better fit for the chorus, having been created precisely with their TGX performing body in mind. Similarly, Graham has spent much of his time as AD for TA rewriting or adjusting the music to be inclusive

of his ensemble composition. "I change keys, I flip parts, I compress parts," he commented. "I move things from part to part as is necessary" (Director Interview). Graham's practice aligns with recent recommendations from Hirner (2022) regarding TGX inclusive choral practices through vocal line recombination.

Kociba highlighted another important consideration in the repertoire selection: the character of pieces. As they explained,

My main tool this past season has been the text, so I read the text, and I look for things that can be interpreted as having queer themes...but there are pieces that I have found where the text might point to an unnecessary, antiquated gender role. That's obviously out, because I'm not about that, and I think it would be out of character for us to sing a piece like that. (Director Interview)

Here, Kociba illustrates how TGX choir directors must closely scrutinize the lyrics and character of each piece they consider, ensuring that they do not expose singers to the antiquated or harmful gender roles often portrayed in music (Graham, 2019; Garrett & Palkki, 2021). This sometimes involves considerations related to sacred texts and their theological relationship to TGX identities. Sometimes, lyrical adaptation can help address these issues; with other songs, it ends up being impossible.

Directors' specific attention to language and terminology could be seen in their alteration of song lyrics to better represent their TGX singers. "We started replacing those words with what we would like to hear," Hall explained. "Like, we just did 'Lean on Me,' and instead of 'call on your brother,' I changed it to 'call on each other'" (Director Focus Group 1). Hall's statement resonates with Blake's perspective about choral writing, "It doesn't change the fact that the way that music was written and envisioned was for people in gendered contexts" (Individual Interview). The vast majority of music in print, with the exception of a few pieces written by TGX composers, is written for cisnormative choruses, and the lyrics lend themselves to that context. It makes sense, then, that TGX choirs might freely adjust some words, as Hall does, to better reflect their TGX experience.

Conclusion

Collectively, this early mapping of TGX choral environments reveal the complex interweavings of identity, policy, pedagogy, and community. Community rituals like shared meals become integral policy elements; these policy frameworks also act as guides for how vocal and gender identities are navigated; identity informs the pedagogical decision-making of directors; and repertoire becomes a site where meaning, TGX embodiment, and community converge. These domains should not, and I argue cannot, be separated.

Rather than understanding TGX choirs as adaptations of cis-dominant choral practice, this cartography suggests that they are their own sites of choral knowledge-making. Their practices invite us to reconsider how ensemble structures address singer identity, how policies shape participation, how pedagogy responds to singers' embodied lives, and how community becomes part of musical practice itself. TGX choirs offer more than refuge and representation. They are models for reimagining choral practice beyond cisnormative assumptions about voice, gender, belonging, and musical value.

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Songs for a New South: How a GALA Chorus Is Reclaiming Its Identity as Both Queer and Southern

Wesley King

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"I didn't know we had GALA Choruses in the South." That sentence was spoken to me during my first visit to the GALA Festival in the summer of 2024. I believe what this festival-goer meant was, "The South doesn't seem like a very hospitable place for a GALA chorus." For Nashville in Harmony, where I serve as Artistic Director, it was our first appearance at the festival in our 20-year history. This was one of many performances that marked our twentieth anniversary, and we arrived proud to represent our home. In Minneapolis, surrounded by thousands of queer musicians, it was clear the general consensus about "the South" came from what they had seen in the news or on social media. Still, their dismay stuck with me for the duration of the festival.

When fellow attendees learned we were from Tennessee, their reactions followed a familiar script. The first questions were never about our music, our mission, or our community. They were about the Drag Ban, the anti-transgender legislation, or whichever new legislative disaster had most recently made national headlines. To many people there, "Tennessee" was shorthand for hostility, exclusion, and political extremism. They weren't wrong. The idea that a queer-affirming chorus not only existed in the South but had been thriving for two decades seemed unfathomable.

It was obvious to us that the story people told about the South was incomplete. Yes, we live in a region of the country where harmful laws are passed that disenfranchise our community, but we also live in a region where queer people build community, create art, enact social change, resist erasure, and claim joy in the face of hostility. Nashville in Harmony isn't an anomaly; we are part of a larger, often overlooked Southern movement of LGBTQ+ resilience. I realized we needed to change that perception—not just about our organization, but about the fullness that is the South. We are not defined solely by the legislation passed in our statehouse. We are defined by the people who stay, who sing, who fight, who build, and who refuse to disappear—and if folks in our own organization don't know that, then we have work to do.

When we returned from our fabulous debut with GALA, I floated the idea of a Call for Scores to my board—a simple proposal with a deeper purpose. I wanted to highlight queer and marginalized voices from the South, voices that are too often dismissed, overlooked, or assumed not to exist. I also wanted to reclaim themes we believe are genuinely Southern values: hospitality, resilience, diversity, storytelling, and a stubborn yet almost religious commitment to hope. These values didn't disappear; the loudest and most harmful political narratives from our region overshadowed them.

Tennessee Representative Justin Jones often says, "The South will rise anew." It's a deliberate reimagining of a phrase with a painful history—one rooted in white supremacy and nostalgia for a past that never should have been romanticized. His reframing struck me. It suggested that the South isn't doomed to repeat its worst chapters. It can be rewritten, reclaimed, and reborn by us: the people fighting for justice, dignity, and belonging. Inspired, I named our initiative Songs for a New South. This initiative sought submissions from Southern composers, prioritizing queer and other marginalized artists, in order to showcase the values we believe should represent our place in the South.

What began as a programming idea quickly became so much more. The process sparked conversations within the choir about what we wish people understood about the South—about the queer Southerners who stay, who build community, who create art, and who refuse to surrender their home to the forces trying to define it without them. Members shared stories of growing up here, leaving and returning, or choosing to stay despite the political climate. We talked about the tension between love of place and frustration with its politics, and how those feelings can coexist without canceling each other out. Those conversations opened the door to something unexpected: healing.

Our mission at Nashville in Harmony is to use music to build community and create social change. Our Songs for a New South project has been one of the most powerful ways we have worked to bring that mission to life. In a region that has often - and unfortunately justly - been associated with bigotry and intolerance, it was important to us to not only reframe and reclaim true Southern values like community and hospitality, but to do so by elevating the voices of LGBTQ+ composers in that same region and creating a music project where marginalized voices could rise up and be heard to affect change. (J.T. Landry, Marketing Director)

As we explored what it means to be Southern—and what it could mean—we reframed our own histories. We began to see the South not only as a site of struggle but as a place where queer joy, creativity, and resistance have always existed. We began reclaiming traditions, language, and cultural touchstones that had been weaponized against us. In doing so, we softened some of the resentment we carried toward our home.

The way that the South is portrayed in the media is not necessarily the South I grew up in. It is portrayed as this ruby-red conservative place, and while there is some truth to that, it doesn't tell the full story. I am Southern. Loving with curiosity first or loving with hospitality first is a Southern value. Inclusivity and diversity are Southern values. What I have learned about the community that surrounds me is that my people have always been here. And we're still here. (Rev. Liz DeWeese, Alto 2 Section Leader)

Songs for a New South became more than a call for compositions. It became a call to ourselves: to tell our own story, to honor our roots, and to imagine a South that rises anew—not in the shadow of its past, but in the light of the people—queer people—who are shaping its future. The Call for Scores yielded some fabulous compositions by Southern composers, including David Walters of Georgia, Nicole DiPaulo of Tennessee, Jeremy Smith of Alabama, and Matt Herman of Kentucky. Walters, who placed first in our Call for Scores competition, wrote a beautiful setting of "When I Rise Up," a text by African American poet and Harlem Renaissance playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson. Other works in the collection included an arrangement by our former Artistic Director of Holly Near's "Singing for Our Lives," and two personal compositions - one featured the Harvey Milk quote, "Hope will never be silent"; the other based on words shared by Elliot Page at the 2014 Human Rights Campaign conference (see Appendix A).

We took this concert on the road, carrying our message across state lines and into communities that rarely see themselves reflected in mainstream queer choral spaces. Over the season, we presented four concerts in three Southern states—Tennessee, Alabama, and Kentucky. Each performance felt like a small act of cultural diplomacy. We weren't just singing; we were showing up as living proof that queer Southern artistry is vibrant, present, and unafraid. At each concert, with audiences ranging from 60 to 400 in attendance, we heard testimonies from Southerners who said this is what they want the South to be known for. They wanted the South to be a place for all people of all walks of life. The music made and the conversations had in those communities planted seeds, and in the year since that concert tour, two LGBTQIA+ choirs have sprung up in the communities we visited.

Alongside the tour, we recorded an album that will premiere this summer—a permanent record of the stories, sounds, and reclaimed values that shaped Songs for a New South. It's more than a musical product; it's a

testament to the composers, singers, and communities who trusted us with their voices. It’s also a way of saying that, we are here, and we have something to contribute to the national conversation about queer choral music. We did not, however, want this to be a one-time project. We wanted it to become a platform.

That’s why we’re building a consortium of queer Southern composers on our website—a growing, living archive that highlights the creators who call this region home. Our goal is to replicate this process periodically, offering new opportunities, new collaborations, and new stories that reflect the complexity of Southern queer life. This will be our contribution to the broader choral landscape: a sustained commitment to lifting up voices too often ignored or underestimated.

Through this process, we discovered something essential about ourselves. Touring, recording, commissioning, and curating forced us to articulate who we are and who we want to become. It pushed us to claim our identity not just as a chorus from the South, but as a chorus shaped by the South—its contradictions, its beauty, its tensions, and its relentless capacity for reinvention. In the end, Songs for a New South became more than a concert cycle. It became a musical reintroduction to the South itself: not the South people think they know, but the South we live in, love, challenge, and continue to transform.

Appendix A

Composition List

<i>Title</i>	<i>Composer</i>	<i>Poet</i>	<i>Voicing</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Contact</i>
<u>We Deserve Love</u>	Wesley King	Elliot Page, Wesley King	SATB divisi	3:47	itswesleyking.com
<u>The Walls</u>	Jason Shelton	Jason Shelton, with poets from the chorus adding their own texts	SAB	10:45 (includes chorister poems between each verse)	jason@portaraensemble.com
<u>Hold Me</u>	Don Schlosser	Donika Deshawn Ross	SATB	4:23	donschlosser610@yahoo.com
<u>When I Rise Up</u>	David Walters	Georgia Douglas Johnson	SATB divisi	5:47	david@dwaltersmusic.com
<u>Singing for Our Lives</u>	Holly Near; arr. Don Schlosser	Holly Near	SATB divisi	3:05	donschlosser610@yahoo.com
<u>Pledge of Peace</u>	Nicole Elyse DiPaolo	Alexander L. Posey	SATB	2:57	ndipaolo.musicaneo.com
<u>I Shall Not Live in Vain</u>	Matthew Herman	Emily Dickenson	SATBB	3:40	wku.edu/music/herman
<u>Carter Family Canticles</u>	Jeremy Smith	The Carter Family	SATB divisi	8:12 (three movements)	jeremysmithcomposer.com
<u>Hope Will Never Be Silent</u>	Wesley King	Harvey Milk	SATB divisi	3:20	itswesleyking.com

Wesley King is the Artistic Director and Conductor of Nashville in Harmony. He was hired during the COVID-19 pandemic and grew the choir, which had dwindled to 43 members, back to 120 members strong. Under his leadership, the organization has grown to also include a 70-member Pride Marching Band and an 80-member SSA chorus. He holds a Bachelor’s degree in Vocal/Choral Music Education from The University of Alabama, an MDiv from Lexington Theological Seminary, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Public Administration and Policy from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. He is a published composer and arranger as well as an academic writer.

Applying Universal Design for Learning and Queer Pedagogy to Choral Rehearsal Structures

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Abstract

Individuals participating in choral rehearsals bring varied relationships to voice, identity, participation, and ensemble traditions. Because choral singing is an embodied and communal art, GALA choral educators may seek pedagogical approaches that support queer, trans, nonbinary, and gender-expansive singers without singling out individuals in the name of inclusion. In this article, I put Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into conversation with queer pedagogy as complementary frameworks for reconsidering choral rehearsal design. I situate UDL within its roots in disability advocacy and accessibility while distinguishing its emphasis on proactive design from queer pedagogy's interrogation of assumptions that have become normalized within educational spaces. Together, these frameworks invite directors to ask when gender and other forms of classification meaningfully support musical and pedagogical goals and when they unnecessarily constrain participation. I draw from choral and music education literature, queer pedagogy, disability studies, and my own practice to examine applications in rehearsal structures and participation, vocal pedagogy and voice classification, and repertoire and interpretive design. Ultimately, I argue that queering rehearsal design does not require abandoning the structures of collective music-making but reconsidering when and how those structures shape who can participate within them.

Keywords

queer pedagogy, universal design for learning, LGBTQ, choral pedagogy, rehearsal design

Introduction

Those who participate in choral rehearsals engage in deeply embodied work. Singers negotiate breath, resonance, posture, language, identity, and expression, while building community within a collective musical environment (Menon, 2026a). Choirs can become profoundly affirming spaces for community and self-expression, particularly for singers who experience belonging through collaborative artistic practice (Gregoire, 2025; Parker, 2023). At the same time, some inherited choral structures may carry assumptions regarding voices, bodies, presentation, and participation that may not fully account for the multiplicity of singers who enter rehearsal spaces (Palkki, 2017). Specifically, such assumptions may create environments in which LGBTQ+ individuals feel discrimination, distress, and alienation (Winfree, 2025).

Taken-for-granted structures may reinforce practices that minoritized individuals, including those within the LGBTQ+ community, may find exclusionary (Menon, 2026a). Directors may use gendered language such as "men" and "women" (Palkki, 2017), organize structures around binary presentation (e.g., concert attire and ensemble branding) (McKiernan & McNickle, 2023), or presume relationships between vocal range and gender identity (McKiernan, 2021). Such practices might represent unexamined assumptions held by directors, but they may also persist through inherited traditions that have become commonplace within choral practice. Regardless of their origin, taken-for-granted practices shape both the musical and social experiences of singers within ensemble spaces. For instance, when choir directors assign voice parts using a binary method, they implicitly communicate assumptions regarding which bodies and identities belong within specified vocal spaces. Similarly, concert attire and timbral

ideals might constrain choristers' bodily comportment and personal expression (Hess, 2012; O'Toole, 2005). As such, common practices may exclude some individuals within a choir.

According to their mission statement, GALA Choirs seek to support queer, trans, nonbinary, and gender-expansive singers through community, artistry, and advocacy (GALA Choruses, 2026). However, inclusion efforts sometimes remain limited to individualized accommodations rather than broader structural reconsiderations of rehearsal design. An accommodation can provide an important response to a singer who encounters a barrier; however, it does not necessarily address the rehearsal structure that produced that barrier or anticipate that other singers might encounter it differently. In this article, I argue that Universal Design for Learning (UDL), when placed in conversation with queer-informed pedagogy, offers a productive framework for designing choral rehearsals that might better anticipate singer variability and expand pathways for participation. Specifically, I consider how these frameworks can help directors identify barriers within their own contexts and design multiple pathways toward shared musical goals.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Queer Pedagogy

UDL emerged from disability studies-informed educational frameworks that sought to move beyond retroactive accommodation models and toward proactive educational design (Meyer et al., 2014). Rather than treating learner difference as deviation from a normative student model, educators can use UDL to anticipate variability from the outset by designing multiple pathways for engagement, representation, and action or expression (CAST, 2024). These three principles provide a practical structure for considering where barriers to participation may occur. Multiple means of engagement address how learners enter, sustain, and find purpose within learning; multiple means of representation concern how learners encounter and make sense of information; and multiple means of action and expression consider how learners interact with and demonstrate their learning (CAST, 2024). Educators might implement UDL to anticipate that variability will exist and to examine whether the design of a learning environment unnecessarily privileges or constrains learners.

Importantly, UDL's roots remain connected to disability advocacy and accessibility work. Meyer et al. (2014) located barriers within individual learners and the interaction between learners, curricula, and their environments. They advocated shifting the responsibility of access from the individual requesting an accommodation toward the educator designing the learning environment. For example, rather than waiting until a singer cannot access a rehearsal activity and then devising an exception, a director might consider in advance which elements of the activity are necessary to its musical goal and which can be made flexible. For example, if the musical goal of a sectional is independent part learning, singers need not necessarily move repeatedly between rehearsal spaces to accomplish it. A director might instead organize sectionals at the beginning of rehearsal or bring sectional leaders to singers to reduce physical barriers. In using UDL within this article, I aim to avoid detaching the framework from its origins in disability studies. Nor do I suggest that disability, queerness, or gender diversity constitute equivalent forms of difference. Instead, I draw upon UDL's design orientation while maintaining the distinct histories and experiences from which these frameworks emerge. I consider how UDL's emphasis on expanding participation within choral spaces might inform more inclusive practice.

Within music education, researchers have increasingly explored how UDL may support broader forms of musical participation and accessibility (Evans, 2024; Hammel & Hourigan, 2017; Hess, 2023). Hammel and Hourigan (2017), for example, encouraged music educators to begin with students' individual strengths and needs rather than allowing diagnostic labels to determine expectations for musical learning. They advocated for a label-free approach that asked teachers to adapt musical environments, materials, and instructional practices in ways that increase access while maintaining meaningful musical goals. More specifically within choral education,

Evans (2024) translated UDL principles into ensemble practice, demonstrating how directors can provide varied means of accessing instruction and participating in choral learning without presuming that all singers will engage with rehearsal information in the same way. For example, if a conductor wants to implement solfege and hand signs into their rehearsal, they might model them by rote while also displaying a visual graphic of the signs. They may also describe each sign using a mnemonic device to create multiple ways of engaging with the learning goal. Such practices have the capability to increase participation and access.

At the same time, scholars have given critical attention to what educators mean when they claim to anticipate variability with UDL. Hess (2023) cautioned that efforts to predict learner difference can reproduce limited conceptions of disability when educators imagine in advance which forms of variability matter and how disabled students will participate. Her critique is particularly important for my application of UDL to queer choral pedagogy. In this article, I suggest practices that directors can utilize to create more flexibility, such that singers need not conform to a singular presumed relationship among body, identity, voice, and participation.

Scholars have similarly used Queer pedagogy to examine assumptions that become normalized within educational spaces, but by shifting attention away from individual difference and toward the systems that define certain identities, bodies, and ways of participating as normative in the first place (Britzman, 1995; Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Kumashiro, 2002; Shlasko, 2005). Rather than focusing exclusively on the inclusion of marginalized identities within existing structures, one might use queer pedagogy to ask how those structures come to be understood as natural, inevitable, or neutral. Bryson and de Castell (1993), for example, resisted approaches that insert queer identities into otherwise unchanged educational structures, while Shlasko (2005) positioned queering as an active practice of questioning how normalcy itself becomes constructed and sustained. In this sense, choir directors can use queer pedagogy to examine who is included, and how participation is organized and valued within educational spaces (Gould, 2013; Nemi Neto, 2018).

To queer a pedagogical practice is to examine assumptions that have become naturalized, question the norms that govern participation, and consider alternative possibilities (Shlasko, 2005). In choral settings, queer pedagogy can help choir leaders question how they organize systems of participation including voice part assignment, timbral expectations, repertoire, concert themes, physical placement, attire, and expressive conventions. Although normative structures might serve practical and musical purposes related to efficiency, they may also communicate assumptions regarding whose voices, bodies, and identities are expected within ensemble spaces (O'Toole, 2005). For example, a director may use queer pedagogy to question why a tenor/bass sectional is described as a "men's sectional," whether gender is relevant to the musical task, and what assumptions the terminology communicates about the singers expected to occupy those parts. Indeed, queering part assignments requires directors to question whether vocal range and timbre should function as evidence of gender and to consider the implications of organizing singers as though they necessarily do.

Importantly, queer pedagogy encourages educators to distinguish between structures that meaningfully support artistic and pedagogical goals and those that persist primarily through convention or habit (Nemi Neto, 2018). For example, specific gender categories may meaningfully shape repertoire interpretation, vocal identity, community formation, and artistic expression (McKiernan & McNickle, 2023). Rather than erasing gender as a meaningful aspect of musical experience or elevating a single model of participation as ideal, queer pedagogy invites educators to create space for multiple ways of being, singing, and participating within ensemble communities.

Although UDL and queer pedagogy share an interest in expanding participation, I do not understand them as interchangeable frameworks. They offer different points of entry into rehearsal design. Queer pedagogy provides a critical lens through which directors can identify and interrogate norms. Directors can use queer pedagogy to

ask questions like: Why has this rehearsal structure come to seem natural? Does the rehearsal presume certain identities or invisibilize some? When does gender meaningfully contribute to the musical task, and when does it merely organize participation? Directors can use UDL as a complementary design process. Once directors identify a potential barrier, they can ask what the musical or pedagogical goal requires, what forms of variability they can anticipate, and whether multiple pathways toward that goal can be designed from the outset. In this sense, queer pedagogy helps directors recognize what might need to be reconsidered, while UDL provides principles through which reconsideration can become proactive rehearsal design.

The relationship also works reciprocally. Hess's (2023) critique reminds educators that even well-intentioned attempts to anticipate variability can establish new assumptions about which differences matter. Queer pedagogy therefore continues to trouble the categories through which directors imagine singers, while UDL provides a means of translating that critical inquiry into flexible structures for participation. Bringing UDL and queer pedagogy into conversation may offer more than their shared commitment to inclusion and encourage directors to consider accommodation as intentional rehearsal design. Throughout the remainder of this article, I place these frameworks together to invite choral educators to consider how they design rehearsal environments and how those designs shape musical participation. In practice, I use this synthesis to ask four related questions: What is the musical or pedagogical goal? What variability might singers bring to the task? Which elements of the existing structure are necessary to that goal, and which reflect convention? Where might another pathway expand participation without compromising the musical purpose? In the examples that follow, I aim to illustrate how these questions can inform rehearsal design.

Moving from Theory to Practice

The intersection of UDL and queer pedagogy raises practical questions for choral directors. One such question is: When does gender meaningfully shape musical experience, and when does it function primarily as a mechanism for organizing participation? I have pondered this question in relation to my own rehearsal design because it moves my thinking beyond debates about whether gender should matter and instead asks how gender operates within musical contexts.

I began my queer-informed UDL approach from the premise that gender may be highly salient in some musical moments and irrelevant in others. For example, when I programmed repertoire centered on women's empowerment, queer intimacy, masculinity and emotional expression, or gendered historical experiences, the choir engaged diverse gendered perspectives in significant ways. Similarly, I found that trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer singers in my choirs were navigating vocal transition or identity affirmation, and some experienced voice classification and rehearsal participation as deeply personal matters connected to safety, dysphoria, or affirmation (Constansis, 2008; Garrett & Palkki, 2021). In these contexts, attending to gender may be central to musical engagement.

At the same time, choral structures that shape choral participation may rely upon assumptions about gender that are not necessarily required by the musical task at hand. Specifically, leadership opportunities, musicianship expectations, expressive capacity, and rehearsal contributions do not depend upon gender identity. Likewise, assumptions about masculinity or femininity may reflect cultural expectations of gender as performance (Butler, 2013) rather than fixed musical truths. A queer pedagogical lens encourages directors to distinguish between structures that support musical and expressive goals and those that persist primarily through convention.

When directors take conventional practices for granted, they can become restrictive because they remain unexamined. As I mentioned earlier, binary voice sorting, rigid attire expectations, gender-policing humor, or assumptions that voice parts correspond to gender identity may unintentionally create friction for singers whose

identities or embodiments do not align with those expectations. Because such practices are often inherited rather than intentionally designed, they can be difficult to notice. Rehearsals function as educational spaces as well as musical ones, therefore, the structures we adopt can communicate messages about belonging and legitimacy.

In the following sections, I use the combined lens of UDL and queer pedagogy to examine several dimensions of rehearsal design in which assumptions about gender, participation, and belonging emerged from extant literature as my own experiences. I begin with rehearsal structures and participation design, arguing that participation itself can be organized through multiple legitimate pathways. I then consider voice classification and vocal pedagogy, contending with issues of identity, embodiment, and musical function. Finally, I explore repertoire and interpretive design, focusing on how directors can create multiple avenues for learning without minoritizing historically and culturally specific experiences. Across these domains, I question how choral structures are designed, whom they serve, and what possibilities for participation they make available.

Rehearsal Structures and Participation Design

If UDL encourages educators to anticipate variability and queer pedagogy encourages individuals to examine how participation becomes normalized, then rehearsal structures become an important site for inclusive design. Rehearsals establish soft policies (Jones, 2009) regarding attendance, participation, leadership, movement, communication, and membership within an ensemble. Consequently, decisions that may appear logistical often shape how singers experience belonging and agency within a choral community (Menon, 2025a).

A queer-informed UDL approach invites directors to view participation as something that can occur through multiple legitimate pathways rather than through a single model of ensemble membership. In my own work with a community-based LGBTQ+ choir, we attempted to add multiple avenues for choral participation. While performance remained an important aspect of the ensemble's mission, participation was not defined exclusively through public performance. Individuals could participate as non-singing members, attend as rehearsal members without performing in the concerts, or participate fully in concerts as performing members. Attendance expectations applied only to those who intended to perform, while others could engage with the musical and social life of the ensemble in ways that aligned with their interests and goals.

Although we implemented this participation structure in response to practical and community-oriented concerns, it also reflected core principles shared by UDL and queer pedagogy. UDL encourages educators to provide multiple pathways into participation rather than assuming a single mode of engagement (CAST, 2024; Meyer et al., 2014). Queer pedagogy similarly questions assumptions that position one form of participation as more legitimate than another (Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Gould, 2013). In this instance, we questioned whether public performance needed to determine who could legitimately participate within our community. Rather than asking singers to conform to a singular model of membership, directors can design rehearsal structures that recognize different relationships to performance, community, learning, and musical growth.

The organization of rehearsal time offers another opportunity to anticipate variability. In community ensembles, singers may arrive with different physical capacities, schedules, learning preferences, and social needs. Using UDL and queer pedagogy, directors can examine whether the rehearsal sequence itself creates avoidable barriers to contend with them. In my choir, we scheduled sectionals at the beginning of rehearsal rather than requiring singers to relocate midway through the evening. This decision emerged from conversations regarding mobility and accessibility, but it also reduced unnecessary movement between spaces and provided greater predictability for singers. We also concluded sectionals with a break before transitioning into full ensemble rehearsal, allowing singers time to regroup socially, physically, and cognitively before engaging in larger-group work.

The director's communication similarly shapes ensemble culture (McKiernan & McNickle, 2023). Phrases such as "ladies sing here" or "the men take this section" often function casually, yet they can also reinforce assumptions about who occupies particular sonic spaces. Instead, directors can refer to voice parts, or use gender neutral language (e.g., you all, choir, friends) to maintain clarity while reducing unnecessary gender. In this case, queer pedagogy might expose an assumption that UDL alone might not. When directors use language like "tenors" or "lower voices," they communicate the necessary pedagogical information without ascribing gender to the musical task.

Transparency in planning can also support participation. For singers whose voice part varied across repertoire, I regularly distributed detailed rehearsal schedules in advance identifying which pieces we would rehearse in each sectional so that singers could attend the sectional that corresponded to their voice part.

I also maintained flexibility within the physical organization of the ensemble. Although singers generally rehearsed in designated voice-part areas, I did not assign fixed seats within those sections. Singers could sit with friends, change locations within the section, or move to another section when their repertoire assignments changed. I also varied sectional combinations across rehearsals, pairing different voice parts so that singers encountered different social and sonic relationships rather than rehearsing exclusively within the same sectional groupings. Since singers may join choir for several reasons, including social interaction (Menon, 2025a; Menon & Salvador, 2026b), these choices preserved the musical usefulness of sectional organization without requiring the section to function as a fixed social unit (Redacted, 2026). Such configurations may encourage broader musical listening while reducing the social rigidity sometimes attached to sectional identity. Importantly, flexibility should not become another normative expectation. Some singers strongly identify with stable voice-part structures or traditional sectional communities, and predictability may itself provide meaningful access or belonging. A queer-informed UDL approach therefore seeks to expand options rather than prescribe a singular model of participation.

Vocal Pedagogy and Voice Classification

Scholars have complicated conversations regarding queerness and choral singing when discussing voice classification and vocal pedagogy (Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Nichols, 2022). A queer-informed approach should not deny embodied vocal realities or oversimplify voice science (Sauerland, 2022). However, directors can distinguish between vocal function and gender identity. For many singers, voice classification can serve as a social and educational experience through which they come to understand how their voices relate to their identity and musical participation.

Voice parts are musical classifications rather than identities, yet singers often experience voice placement socially as well as musically (Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Nichols, 2022). Research involving trans and nonbinary singers suggests that voice classification can significantly shape feelings of belonging within ensembles (Palkki, 2020). Consequently, directors navigate multiple considerations simultaneously, including vocal health, ensemble needs, singer agency, and the meanings singers attach to voice parts.

A queer-informed UDL approach shifts the focus from assigning singers to predetermined categories toward designing classification processes that anticipate variability in how singers relate to their voices. Some singers may view voice parts primarily as musical designations and prefer to be placed wherever their voices function most effectively. Others might experience voice classification as closely connected to identity and gender affirmation. Rather than assuming a singular relationship between voice and identity, directors can create opportunities for singers to articulate their own goals, experiences, and preferences. Queer pedagogy can help directors question the presumed correspondence between voice part and gender, while UDL can help translate those presumptions into a placement process that does not require directors to predict how an individual singer

will understand that relationship.

In my own practice, voicing singers became opportunities for conversation as much as assessment. While range, tessitura, and vocal function remained important considerations, these meetings also created space for singers to discuss previous musical experiences, personal goals, motivations for joining the ensemble, and any concerns related to voice classification. For some singers, these conversations included discussions of pronouns or identity. For others, they focused exclusively on musical aspirations. These vocal placement activities helped to create conditions in which singers could share information relevant to their participation as they chose. Such an approach reflects UDL's emphasis on anticipating learner variability while also recognizing that singers arrive with different relationships to voice, identity, and ensemble participation.

Language similarly shapes how singers understand vocal development. Directors can use non-gendered pedagogical language when discussing registration, resonance, and timbre. Rather than associating chest voice or vocal weight with masculinity, directors may frame these qualities in musical and physiological terms. During a warm-up sequence, for example, a director might describe a desired sound as "grounded," "resonant," or "warm" rather than "more masculine" or "more feminine." These shifts may help separate vocal function from cultural assumptions about gendered sound. In a rehearsal of Renaissance polyphony, for example, singers might explore varying degrees of vibrato, brightness, or vocal weight while discussing these choices in relation to style and ensemble goals rather than gendered expectations. Non-gendered language can provide multiple conceptual pathways into vocal technique, aligning with UDL's emphasis on representation while reducing the likelihood that singers interpret vocal instruction as commentary on identity.

Voice classification itself may benefit from flexibility. Some singers may prefer to explore multiple ranges across different contexts or repertoire. Others may desire stable placement because it supports vocal comfort, community connection, or identity affirmation. A queer-informed UDL approach should not presume that fluidity is inherently preferable to stability. Instead, directors can remain responsive to the varied ways singers experience voice-part membership, and how voice classification relates to their goals. For singers navigating vocal transition, for example, flexibility may become particularly important. Tessitura changes, endurance variability, or shifting resonance patterns may require ongoing adjustment (Constansis, 2008). In these moments, prioritizing communication, agency, and singer comfort may help reduce unnecessary anxiety or identity friction within rehearsal spaces.

Repertoire and Interpretive Design

Directors can use repertoire to tell stories about relationships, communities, and identities. Many choral texts include gendered narratives, assumptions regarding romance or family, and culturally embedded expectations regarding expression (Hawkins, 2007; McBride & Palkki, 2020). A queer-informed UDL approach asks directors to consider whose experiences become visible through programming and how singers are invited to make meaning from the repertoire they perform. Programming works by queer and trans creators or centering minoritized experiences can expand representation, but repertoire can also queer a concert program by placing those experiences in conversation with canonical works and exposing assumptions about gender, relationships, and identity that might otherwise remain unexamined. UDL extends this inquiry by encouraging directors to create multiple pathways through which singers can encounter and interpret those stories without requiring a singular relationship to them. Repertoire and interpretive design therefore operationalize what directors program, which stories enter the rehearsal room, and how rehearsals can shape the engagement.

Importantly, directors should not endeavor to neutralize all gendered meaning within repertoire. Some repertoire rooted in women's empowerment, queer advocacy, same-sex intimacy, or gendered historical

experience may derive artistic power precisely from those identity-centered contexts. For example, Gwyneth Walker's work for treble choir, "I will be earth," has text written by May Swenson, an American lesbian poet. Acknowledging this context allows the choir to engage in a same-sex romantic text where gender is a salient feature. On the other hand, my choir performed Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill" and discussed changing all the pronouns gender-neutral ones. Instead, we discovered that the song itself was a feminist commentary on inequity and that keeping gendered pronouns enhanced the meaning and context of the song (Pantano, 2025). I use these examples to complicate the assumption that removing gender is necessarily more inclusive. Queer pedagogy instead asks directors and singers to consider what gender is doing within a text before deciding whether it constrains or contributes to its meaning.

Interpretive flexibility becomes particularly important when choirs rehearse music with texts that presume specific relationships, identities, or experiences. In many choral settings, directors provide narrative frameworks that guide singers toward a shared understanding of a text. While this practice can support expressive cohesion, it can also unintentionally narrow the range of experiences singers bring into rehearsal. A queer-informed approach does not necessarily reject shared interpretation. Rather, it encourages directors to question when an interpretation depends upon heteronormative or binary assumptions that the text itself does not require. Queer theory is particularly useful here because it shifts the question from whether LGBTQ+ singers can identify with an existing narrative toward how that narrative became presumed to be heterosexual, cisgender, or otherwise normative in the first place.

In practice, this may involve offering multiple interpretive entry points into repertoire. During rehearsal discussion, directors can acknowledge varied relational readings of texts rather than presuming heterosexual pairings or binary gender assumptions. In a rehearsal of a love song, for instance, a conductor might invite singers to consider multiple forms of longing, intimacy, companionship, grief, or care rather than assigning a fixed romantic narrative. For example, Robert Lucas Pearsall's Victorian funeral madrigal "Lay a Garland" features text which says: "Her love was false, but she was firm." During a rehearsal on this music, one singer assumed that the subject of the comment did not express true love, yet she never cheated. Another singer interpreted the word love as a noun referring to the subject's partner, where they were unfaithful while she remained true. Interpretive flexibility aligns closely with UDL's emphasis on engagement because it allows singers to connect personally with repertoire through different pathways.

Interpretive design can also occur at the level of the concert program itself. As opposed to isolated works, many choir directors organize repertoire around themes, essential questions, historical narratives, or broader artistic concepts that invite audiences and singers to make connections across pieces. These larger programmatic frameworks shape how individuals understand repertoire and can create additional opportunities for meaning-making. A queer-informed UDL approach encourages directors to consider concert themes that allow for multiple forms of engagement and representation. For example, a program centered on love might include romantic, familial, communal, spiritual, and aspirational forms of connection rather than assuming a singular model of intimacy. Similarly, themes such as resilience, belonging, transformation, or memory can create space for singers to encounter repertoire through varied personal and cultural experiences. By attending to the relationships among pieces rather than only the meanings within individual works, directors can design concert experiences that invite multiplicity while maintaining artistic coherence.

Programming decisions remain important because repertoire shapes whose stories become visible within ensemble life (Menon et al., 2026). Scholars and practitioners have increasingly encouraged choral educators to expand the range of voices represented in concert programming, including queer composers, trans composers, and repertoire that reflects diverse experiences of embodiment and identity (De Quadros, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018).

Expanding representation can recontextualize and queer canonical literature and invite directors to consider how programming choices communicate experiences that may otherwise be peripheral or absent.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have argued that choral participation can be shaped by how directors design the structures through which singers rehearse, use their voices, interpret repertoire, and participate in collective music-making. Practices surrounding membership, rehearsal organization, voice classification, vocal instruction, and repertoire may appear customary or merely logistical, yet each establishes conditions through which singers encounter ensemble life. While a choir director may take these structures for granted, they are the product of pedagogical choices that can be reconsidered, revised, and redesigned when their existing forms are not necessary to the musical goal they serve.

I put queer pedagogy and UDL into conversation to offer complementary means for critiquing such structures. Queer pedagogy can encourage directors to identify and question assumptions about bodies, voices, gender, identity, and participation that have become normalized within choral practice. UDL can encourage directors to anticipate variability and design multiple pathways toward shared musical and pedagogical goals. Together, these frameworks might help directors to consider what a musical task actually requires, which elements of its existing structure serve that purpose, and where greater flexibility might expand participation.

Practical constraints might also shape implementation. Ensemble traditions, repertoire demands, institutional policies, acoustical realities, and available resources may influence what directors can realistically enact within their contexts. Formal institutional policies as well as less explicit ensemble expectations may also constrain the choices available to directors and singers (Jones, 2009). For this reason, I aim to avoid universalizing the practices I described throughout this article. A flexible seating structure that supports one ensemble may undermine the acoustical needs of another; fluid voice-part placement may support one singer while another finds affirmation or security in stable placement. Instead, I offer this article as a provocation and a process for examining what a structure accomplishes, whom it presumes, where it creates barriers, and which aspects might remain open to reconsideration.

Queering rehearsal design involves remaining attentive to when gender and identity meaningfully contribute to musical experience and when inherited assumptions unnecessarily determine how singers are expected to participate. When directors anticipate variability, question assumptions that have become normalized, and remain attentive to the diverse ways singers experience ensemble life, they may create greater possibility for access and participation.

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Versatile: Performing Queerness with the Lincoln Queer Choir

M Joseph Willette

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Abstract

The Lincoln Queer Choir was more than just a community ensemble of LGBTQ+ musicians in Lincoln, Nebraska; it was a queer community and a queer space itself which was embodied in the group through membership, repertoire, venues, rehearsals, and performances. Though now disbanded, the Lincoln Queer Choir held a unique position that not only boldly promoted queer community in queer spaces, but also boldly inserted queerness into normative spaces to normative audiences. The Lincoln Queer Choir demonstrated that the Midwest is capable of fostering queer community despite the perception and history of the region as being politically isolating. This article compares the author's experiences of two of the Lincoln Queer Choir's final performances and examines the way that the ensemble navigated distinctly different audiences while still communicating queerness and maintaining their identity as a queer ensemble.

Keywords

LGBTQIA+ organizations, queer choruses, community

I stand on the relatively small and heavily scuffed stage at Das Haus in Lincoln, Nebraska, surrounded by approximately forty other members of the Lincoln Queer Choir as we settle in for our scheduled performance at Star City Pride. "Das" (as it is affectionately referred to by its clientele) is divided into two distinct spaces. The bar area features small gray tiles on the sticky floor, and is compact with black leather lounge chairs on a raised platform across from the long wooden service area. The club space is where the main attraction takes place: the dark and feebly lit room (except for the bright spotlights aimed towards the stage) contains tall tables with not enough chairs, as well as the thirty foot wide stage upon which my friends and I stand. From the stage a runway extends about fifteen feet perpendicularly into the club area, and more performers squeeze their way through the crowd to this T-shaped space.

It is June, Pride Month, and the noisy bar is filled to the brim with folks in glimmering rainbow attire to celebrate the occasion. Many individuals are wearing very little clothing, and there are occasional glints of leather straps and metallic buckles from the crowd and on stage. My personal attire fits in well with the crowd and the ensemble itself; I am wearing the shortest pair of shorts I have ever donned in my life, as well as a leather harness, leather boots, and a shirt that declares in large, bold letters "I HEART SODOMY." There is an abrupt shift in energy as the loud, thumping club music is replaced with the live keyboardist playing the introduction to "Me in the Mirror," the group's queer take on the iconic track by Michael Jackson. Upon hearing the opening riff, the bar erupts in cheers and the conductor cues our first entrance.

Star City Pride, June 8th, 2024

Nearly three weeks later, I am with the same group under a large gazebo in Stransky Park, readying to perform for the Stransky Summer Concert Series along with Lincoln's other LGBTQIA+ ensemble, Star City Chorus, who had performed the first set. The park is a popular location for weddings, as well as photography for special

events. It is located in the relatively wealthy neighborhood of Irvingdale in south Lincoln, and features a large stone water feature and well maintained children's playground. The audience here is much different than that at Das Haus. The Summer Concert Series is popular with families in the area, and the expanse of grass and playground equipment in front of the gazebo is filled with children and their caretakers. Our attire is much different for this performance, with the group wearing non-uniform casual summer clothes and a smattering of queer pride accessories. My attire is much tamer as well; my baseball cap with a brightly embroidered rainbow has done a poor job of keeping the sweating off of my face, but my black shorts (with a conservative six inch inseam) and white shirt is otherwise nondescript. Our setlist contains the same music in a slightly different order, with the live keyboardist's sound projected through a couple of amps that face the crowd. A powerful monitor tinkles the piano in the group's face and Jeem, a local singer-songwriter with a flexible and soulful voice, weaves their way to the front of the choir to polite applause.

Stransky Park Summer Concert Series, June 27th, 2024

The two concerts outlined above were fairly standard performing events for the Lincoln Queer Choir. The Star City Pride event was reflective of (semi-)private concert spaces where the choir typically performed two or three times in a standard season. These events were often in adult spaces to audiences that were almost exclusively queer, and were frequently paired with other decidedly queer modes of performance such as drag. The Stransky Park Summer Concert Series event was representative of the explicitly public appearances of the choir, which accounted for three or four of the choir's concerts in a season. With events spanning both highly public and relatively private spaces, the choir was unique in its navigation of these spaces and its overall presentation to the communities it engaged with. With this paper, I sought to examine how the choir functioned as both a queer community and a queer space in and of itself, and how the ensemble embodied a versatile spectrum by performing queerness across a multitude of spaces through its membership and repertoire.

A Brief History of Queer Performing Ensembles

The Lincoln Queer Choir was just one of many community music ensembles that have been established in the United States since the Stonewall Riots in 1969 (History of GALA Choruses, 2024). Stonewall is often considered the most prominent retaliation against state forces of violence by lesbian, gay, and transgender people in the early days of the gay rights movement. In the foreword to *The Stonewall Reader*, queer novelist Edmund White describes the snowball effect of the Stonewall Riots. He details how "...the sexual revolution, Black Power, and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations had shown the efficacy of protest," and that "Because of the Stonewall uprising, people saw homosexuals no longer as criminal or sinners or mentally ill, but something like members of a minority group. It was an oceanic change in thinking" (White, Baumann, 2019, pg x-xii). Queer music ensembles became established as the visibility of queer people grew and a broader queer community came into national focus (The San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus|Our Story, 2026). The Stonewall Chorale, originally the Gotham Male Chorus, was established in 1977 with the explicit goal of connecting queer people with one another through music, the first of many queer performing arts ensembles across the United States, Canada, and South America (The Stonewall Chorale|About, 2026). Queer region bands were also establishing themselves during this time, and the Pride Bands Alliance (formerly the Lesbian and Gay Band Association) along with GALA Choruses (the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses) now associate themselves with nearly 250 ensembles (Pride Bands Alliance, 2024).

The Midwestern United States is no exception to the increasing number of queer performing ensembles. Examples include Windy City Performing Arts in Chicago established in 1983 (Windy City Performing Arts,

2025), the River City Mixed Chorus of Omaha, Nebraska established in 1984 (River City Mixed Chorus, 2025), and the Heartland Men's Chorus in Kansas City, Missouri established in 1986 (Heartland Men's Chorus, 1986). The Midwest serves as a particularly illuminating region in its representation of communities across rural and urban populations, socioeconomic classes, and racial and ethnic groups as reflecting the average person in the United States and their ideals (Manalansan IV et al., 2015). Such representation, however, overgeneralizes midwestern and queer lived experiences. Nebraska specifically has a close connection with the politics of queerness (namely homophobia): Nebraska Senator and Senate Minority Leader Kenneth Wherry (1892-1950) was an early instigator of the Lavender Scare and a proponent of McCarthyism, (Adkins, 2016). Additionally, Nebraska Congressman Arthur L. Miller (1892-1967) authored the notorious Sexual Psychopath Law in 1948 that imprisoned gay men for up to twenty years for acts of sodomy. The unique juxtaposition of vibrant queer communities (in the form of queer choruses) settled in what may be considered an uneasy and hostile isolated setting makes the existence of queer music ensembles especially interesting to examine.

Performing Versatility

Turino (2009) theorized a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing the role of music as a community building force that is helpful in understanding the activities of the Lincoln Queer Choir. Turino discussed how aspects of musical events outside of the "music itself" contribute to community and participation. Similarly, the Lincoln Queer Choir utilized both participatory and presentational modes of music performance depending on the setting and audience, embodying a sense of versatility that was critical to understanding the choir's navigation of public and private spaces.

Public performances of the choir reflected a standard presentational mode of music making. Turino described presentational performance as "...situations where one group of people, the artist, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing" (Turino, 2009, p. 26). The repertoire was presented to the audience in a detailed performance that was varied and contrasting in its timbre and form. Much of the audience was interested in the ritual of the social event, and the distinction between artists and audience was evident. The Lincoln Queer Choir's performances at the Stransky Park Summer Concert Series and similar concert events were very representative of this form of music making. In these normative spaces, audiences witnessed the performances in a distanced manner, divorced from the act of music making. These events were valuable to the greater Lincoln community in the visibility that the ensemble brought to the general public. Few other groups or organizations in the city were both explicitly queer in nature and actively presenting queer art across public spaces. This positioned the ensemble as a liaison between the queer community and the broader Lincoln community.

Gay bars and clubs exist as semi-private spaces for the queer communities they foster (Handhardt, 2016; Mienke, 2016). In the United States, gay bars are often seen as the forefront of queer liberation and central to queer community (Handhardt, 2016). The general public may be invited to enter the space to partake in queer culture through high profile drag performance, brunch, karaoke, or bingo, but those who attend these events rarely seek these spaces out unless they are invited or advertised to. In this way, gay bars have a semipermeable social boundary, and still function essentially as private spaces for queer people (Johnson, 2016).

Queerness was a critical aspect that shaped where the Lincoln Queer Choir performed and rehearsed. The Lincoln Queer Choir rehearsed at Das Haus and had performances in the bar regularly because it was a gay bar. The founder of Lincoln Queer Choir used the location as a space to scout potential members and disseminate information about concerts and rehearsals. As described at the beginning of this paper, the queer community

responded to the choir with the exuberance and excitement of seeing a “family member” giving a spirited performance.

The choir’s presentation and overall demeanor was much more relaxed when in queer spaces like Das Haus compared to public spaces like Stransky Park. It is only in these queer spaces that the choir engaged in what Turino referred to as *participatory music making*. Turino defined participatory music making as “...actively contributing to the sound and motion of a musical event through dancing, singing, clapping, and playing musical instruments...community singing...in bars” (Turino, 2008, p. 25–28). While he was likely not referring to organized groups with organized concerts in these spaces, one may extend the logic that Turino would still consider this as participatory performance. He defined participatory performance as “...a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinction, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role”

During performances at Das Haus, the bar was often invited to join in on the songs from the crowd. Following “Me in the Mirror”, the concert continued with “Rainbow Connection” by Paul Williams and Kenneth Ascher from the Muppet Movie, “Chosen Family” by Rina Sawayama, and finally Cyndi Lauper’s “True Colors.” Indeed, every song after the opening number involved the people in the bar singing along. Many tunes in the ensemble’s repertoire were well known pop songs that have connections to the queer community. Sawayama wrote “Chosen Family” specifically as a queer anthem, and the song is fairly explicit about this in its lyrics. “True Colors” was not directly tied to the gay rights movement, however Cyndi Lauper later leaned heavily into the song’s adoption into the queer community and later established a non-profit, True Colors United, that supports LGBT youth experiencing homelessness. “Me in the Mirror” and “Rainbow Connection” were appropriated by the queer community due to their depictions of being true to oneself to achieve a higher state of being. Many audience members linked arm-in-arm; this connection of the ensemble to the audience, the audience to the music, and the cumulative community to the space created a powerful atmosphere that dissolved the boundary of the proscenium.

The Impact of the Lincoln Queer Choir

Meinke described the queer community as “a community of people, identical to other American citizens except for the objects of their affections...united by its shared oppression and came together...not to “fit in” but to build their own community for themselves within the enveloping context of American society” (Meinke, 2016, pp. 1–3). Queer community is the overarching factor that made these performances distinct. The choir was not only comprised of queer people but also *performed queerness* through its membership, repertoire, and performance venues. These characteristics of the choir were a welcome reflection of the people for whom they were performing. More accurately, it may be described as performing *with* them through participatory music making. The music reflects the queer community as much as the performers. Some explicitly queer songs such as “Chosen Family” and other tunes that were later appropriated into queer culture such as “True Colors” have a close association with queerness that are projected back onto the audience. Such songs demonstrate a connection of values, artistry, and ultimately identity. Additionally, the queer choir whose members were often frequent patrons of the bar effectively mirror the queer community itself. With these factors compounding upon one another, it is no wonder the metaphysical space between choir and audience becomes so thin and permeable.

The Lincoln Queer Choir is not the only queer ensemble in the city. The Star City Chorus was founded the same year as the Lincoln Queer Choir, and the organizations are similar in that they perform music at community events and designated concerts, and perform music that has queer connotations. The distinguishing characteristic between these ensembles is that Star City Chorus’s members include performers as young as fourteen years old. The locations in which they can perform in are inherently more restrictive than that of the Lincoln Queer Choir, as

venues such as Das Haus are legally prohibited to individuals eighteen years old and younger. However, it may be because of this refuge of the adult venue that the Lincoln Queer Choir was able to foster such a connection with their community. Demonstrably, the Lincoln Queer Choir was a unique asset to both queer community and the city of Lincoln at large.

Conclusion

The Lincoln Queer Choir disbanded after the performances described here due to personal matters in the founding director's life. Its members (including myself) were largely absorbed into the Star City Chorus. The Lincoln Queer Choir demonstrated versatility through the music they performed, the venues where they performed, and the audiences they performed for and with. The choir demonstrated versatility through unique performances in both public and private performance spaces, the performers themselves, and even the clothes the members wore. Their connections with different audiences informed drastically different performance atmospheres, and the choir navigated these spaces tactfully, without sacrificing their identity as a queer performing ensemble. In fact, their visibility as a queer performing ensemble, and especially an amateur community group, was a powerful demonstration of the deep roots of Lincoln's queer community.

The Lincoln Queer Choir embodied versatility through its performances that were either participatory with other queer people, with the patrons of Das Haus merrily singing along, or presentational to the community at large, such as in the park in front of families that may have never heard of a queer choir before. This ensemble reflected the idea queer ensembles can exist and even thrive in spite of extensive historical attempts to criminalize its members. This choir was one of hundreds of ensembles that demonstrate that queerness can be a powerful force that connects us to other queer musicians around the world.

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Dr. M Joseph Willette (b. 1997) is a composer and educator currently residing in the bustling city of Lincoln, Nebraska whose work unabashedly centers queer spaces, culture, and community. Delicate timbres, rich sonorities, and driving club beats capture the intimacies, ecstasies, and tribulations of the human experience, and Joey (they/them) explores these themes in their eclectic catalogue that ranges from wind ensemble to opera to the electro-acoustic avant-garde and beyond. Recent projects include collaboration with the Lyric Opera of Kansas City and No Divide KC on "Working Hard & Hardly Working", an operetta exploring queer vulnerability (libretto by Luke "Skipper" Harbur).

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A Choral Commission: “Song for Our Transforming”

Donald Callen Freed and Dillon Beede

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Abstract

The commissioning of a new work is always an exciting prospect for a chorus. Choral commissions can be a celebratory affair, meant to commemorate a milestone, while at other times they may serve as a memorial. For Harrisburg Gay Men’s Chorus (HGMC), our 2025 commission, “Song for Our Transforming,” with Nebraska-based composer Donald Callen Freed, served as a stepping-stone. Since the pandemic, our chorus has gone through a handful of updates and changes, some in response to weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, and other changes in response to the changes we have seen in our region and the greater LGBTQIA+ community. This spotlight article highlights the new work Freed composed for HGMC’s 2025 holiday show, “Radiance of the Rainbow: Holy, Queer, and Divine” titled “Song for Our Transforming.” As Donald and I share, his commission, dedicated to the trans and gender-expansive community, is also representative of HGMC’s ongoing transformation as we approach our 40th anniversary during the 2026-2027 concert season.

Keywords

choral commission, TGX, analysis, director perspective, community

Snowflakes gently tumble down as they lay a tranquil blanket over a small church in the Cumberland Valley of Central Pennsylvania. The stained-glass windows glow; a chorus of voices ring throughout the church. Strains of disco, chant, musical theatre, and poetry can be heard from within; there is a sacred quality as spoken and musical word comingle. This is Harrisburg Gay Men’s Chorus’s holiday show “Radiance of the Rainbow” where poetry and song are woven together to enfold and comfort the queer musicians and audience in attendance. Each color of the Progressive Pride Flag is accompanied by a poem or narrative, highlighting the strength, beauty, and perseverance of the LGBTQIA+ community. A singer from the chorus steps up to the podium and reads, “Pink, baby blue, and white represent our transgender family. They flutter like a promise written in the sky. They are the colors of the trans flag and reclaim what was once assigned without consent, transforming them into symbols of chosen truth.” Then piano begins, the chorus breathes together and sings, “Is this the sunrise or the sunset? Either way the sky has the same colors...”

The commissioning of a new work can be an exciting prospect for a chorus. Choral commissions can be a celebratory affair, meant to commemorate a milestone, while at other times they may serve as a memorial. For Harrisburg Gay Men’s Chorus (HGMC), our 2025 commission with Nebraska-based composer, Donald Callen Freed (DCF), served as a stepping-stone in the ensemble’s growth and evolution. Since the pandemic, the chorus has gone through a handful of updates and changes, some in response to weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, and other changes in response to the changes we have seen in our region and the greater LGBTQIA+ community. This spotlight article highlights the new work Freed composed for HGMC’s 2025 holiday show, “Radiance of the Rainbow: Holy, Queer, and Divine” titled “Song for Our Transforming.” As we share, Freed’s commission, dedicated to the trans and gender-expansive (TGX) community, is also representative of HGMC’s ongoing transformation as we approach our 40th anniversary during the 2026-2027 concert season. As a co-authored

article, we (Donald and Dillon) offer our two perspectives of “Song for Our Transforming,” first from the composer’s viewpoint; sharing how the piece came to be created and its structure. Then we share the director’s perspective and the song’s impact on HGMC singers with insights from TGX chorus members.

Composer’s Perspective

As a composer (DCF), I always begin with the text, perhaps being a bit more exacting and connected because the text is my own. The text guides my creation of rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic structures. I was approached after writing this poem by Dillon Beede, Artistic Director of the Harrisburg Gay Men’s Chorus (HGMC) to set it to music for TBB chorus. The balance seemed correct for such an ensemble, and I looked forward to the challenge. I had originally written the poem in November 2024, where it was used in the program for the Omaha Transgender Day of Remembrance. At that time, I had not planned a musical setting.

I shared the poem with Dillon in December 2024, and he discussed the idea of a musical setting for a small (ca. 30 voices) TTBB choir. The poem is as follows:

Song for Our Transforming

Is this the sunrise or the sunset?
 Either way, the sky has the same colors—
 the pinks, the blues, purples, oranges, and crimsons—
 all the variants, if only for an instant,
 over the brown horizon.

We are longing for such a horizon,
 the warmer, the other side,
 where we are free to be of our own destiny,
 not of a lifestyle but a life,
 a life of all the colors should we choose them,
 to the pinnacle of the sky,
 the apex of our being,
 and back again.
 It should be our life and no one else’s,
 to have and to hold from this day, period.

Is our sun setting or rising?
 The colors are all infinitely the same,
 but the wondrous shapes they make through space
 are over a trillion times more than powerful.

The poem is one of trans and gender expansion. Indeed, it could also be titled Song for Our Trans-forming because it indicates how being LGBTQIA+, especially trans and gender-expansive, is a transformative process that can take years. Some persons may have it easier, “like poof, this is who I am; get over it,” but they seem fewer and farther between. “Song for Our Transforming” was chosen as the poem’s title because transforming is a verb, indicating a continuing process, rather than “transformation,” a noun which identifies a more finite, finished act.

The poem is rich in imagery, including references to colors found in the pride flag and relating them to nature, indicating that TGX identities are a normal part of existence and have been forever. The second stanza amplifies this imagery, especially in “all the colors should we choose them,” “to the pinnacle of the sky, the apex of our being, and back again,” expanding the horizons of trans and gender-expansiveness even further. The final stanza emphasizes that this swirling interplay of colors makes us “even more than powerful,” stating that there is strength in our transforming and multitudinous gender diversity.

Admittedly, I am a cisgender gay man writing about the trans and gender-expansive experience. There are three items in my background that contribute to a sense of openness in general, and about gender in particular. The first is my mother, Mary Louise Callen Freed (1926-2005), who was among the first women to receive the M.A. in anthropology from the University of Nebraska and exposed me to Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality, including traditions now associated with Two-Spirit identities, and a broader experience of sexuality in the late 1960s (Freed, 2011). I did exploration and reading in this area in high school and college, before and after coming out.

The second influence was my mother’s aunt, Irmis Johnson (1900-1995), who grew up on a Nebraska farm next to mine and eventually became a journalist for the American Weekly from 1941-1962 in New York. In 1952 she wrote articles on the transformation of George to Christine Jorgensen (Alon Lischinsky (2026) Involuntary celebrity: the outing of Christine Jorgensen, *Celebrity Studies*, 17:2, 277-290). This is further chronicled in Joanne Meyerowitz’s *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Harvard University Press, 2001, 64-65), and by Christine herself (*Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967). My late partner and I discussed this extensively with Irmis in her New York apartment in 1988.

The third is the influence of more contemporary transgender persons since 2018, my close relationship with my cousin, who is a trans woman, coming out three years ago, and many singers in the River City Mixed Chorus (LGBTQ+ and GALA), Omaha, for which I am tenor section leader. While I am not transgender, trans people have been part of my life for nearly fifty years.

I have identified as a gay composer, particularly of choral and solo vocal works, for the last 35+ years, and have had works published by Moon of Hope, Tetra Continuo, and Yelton Rhodes (now Subito Music Press). Most works are featured on my own website. My catalogue features choral and vocal works, and works by gay poets, that have been performed by other GALA choruses, the College Music Society, universities, and high schools. “Song for Our Transforming” was premiered by the Harrisburg Gay Men’s Chorus in December 2025.

Structure

The work comprises 102 measures and takes approximately 6:10 performance time. The structure may be analyzed as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Brief overall structure of “Song for Our Transforming” (6:10)

Section	Form	Measures	Characteristics
1	A	1–19	4/4; Moderato, 1 st and 2 nd themes
2	B	20–42	Ascending melody and two-pt. counterpoint introduced
3	B1	43–51	Continued 2-pt. counterpoint expanding to 3 pt.
4	Transition (piano)	52–56	From 4/4 to 9/8; faster tempo; based on original accompaniment figure in diminution
5	B2	57–71	Fugal w/slight alterations; a cappella
6	A1	72–94	Based on 1 st theme but extended; return to 4/4, Tempo I
7	A2	95–102	1 st theme + codetta

There are basically two main parts with a transition, followed by a codetta at the end.

Musical Analysis

“Song for Our Transforming” goes back and forth between accompanied and unaccompanied sections with discrete entry after unaccompanied passages to facilitate pitch adjustment if necessary, and to allow for emotional breathing space in the transition from one section to another. There is a contrast between the even rhythm of the voices at the beginning and at the end which indicate complexity of TGX issues (Figures 1, 6). The duration of the piece is circa 6:10.

Figure 1. Contrast between even and syncopated rhythm, especially in accompaniment

The musical score for "Song for Our Transforming" features four staves: Treble (T.), Baritone (Bar.), Bass (B.), and Piano (Pno). The key signature is D major (two sharps). The vocal parts (T., Bar., B.) have lyrics: "Is this the sun - rise _____ or the sun - set? Ei - ther". The piano accompaniment (Pno) features a complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand, with syncopated rhythms and a steady eighth-note pattern in the left hand. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *f* (forte), and articulation marks like accents and slurs. The piano part starts with a 5-measure rest in the first staff, followed by a series of chords and moving lines. The vocal parts enter with a 7-measure rest, then sing the lyrics. The piano accompaniment provides a rhythmic foundation, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a steady eighth-note pattern.

Of course, some of these compositional techniques are inserted consciously, but often the compositional process is organic and intuitive, based on what sounds well and what is possible with the ensemble as defined by the artistic director. There is also a compositional instinct based on years of experience by the composer. These techniques are composed and written as felt first, and only then subjected some to analysis.

The fugal section is identical in rhythm, but a few pitches and harmonies have been altered. It comes to an end on a fortissimo iii chord in second inversion, suggesting the ongoing transformative and emphatic quality of TGX lives. This is followed by a *lunga* fermata, a moment of contemplation before the first piano theme returns us to the ending section (Figures 2, 4, 5, 7).

Figure 2. Text painting: rise and fall of musical and textual elements (occurs throughout) (See also Figures 4, 6, 7)

The musical score for Figure 2 is set in D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. It begins at measure 16. The vocal parts (T., Bar., B.) and piano accompaniment (Pno) are shown. The lyrics are: "on - ly for an in - stant, o - ver the brown hor - i - zon." The tempo is marked "Tempo I". The piano part includes a dynamic marking of *mp* and the instruction "Play". The score features various musical notations, including eighth notes, quarter notes, and a triplet of eighth notes in the vocal parts, and a triplet of eighth notes in the piano part. The piano part also includes a fermata over the final chord.

The resulting harmonies go in and out of dissonance and consonance, such as may be found in a TGX person's struggle (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Two-part counterpoint, often switched between voice parts

Figure 3 shows a musical score for a choral piece. The score is in D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. It features three staves: Tenor (T.), Baritone (Bar.), and Piano (Pno.). The Tenor part has a whole rest in the first four measures. The Baritone part has a melody with triplets. The Piano accompaniment has a rhythmic pattern with triplets. The lyrics are: "We are long - ing for such a hor - i - zon the warm - er, the o - ther side, We are long - ing, we are long - ing."

Text painting, especially the rise and fall of lines according to the text, is ever present (Figures 4, 6, 7).

Figure 4. Text painting, second example

Figure 4 shows a musical score for a choral piece. The score is in D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. It features three staves: Tenor (T.), Baritone (Bar.), and Bass (B.). The lyrics are: "pin - na - cle of the sky, the a - pex of our be - ing, and back a - gain." The music features a rising and falling melodic line in the Tenor part, with a crescendo and decrescendo marking.

Counterpoint in two parts appears initially at bar 20, expanding and contracting to bar 51. There is a transition from 4/4 to 9/8 beginning with the accompaniment figure introduced at bar one. Then an unaccompanied fugal section occurs, indicating both unity and variety of each individual transforming (Figure 5).

8

55 *cresc. poco a poco*

T. *We are long - ing for such a hor - i - zon, _____ the*
cresc. poco a poco

Bar. *We are long - ing for such a hor-*

B.

for rehearsal only

Pno

58

T. warm - er, the o - ther side, where we are free to be of our own

Bar. - i - zon, the warm - er, the o - ther side,

B. We are long - ing for such a hor - i - zon, the

Pno.

cresc. poco a poco

Theme 1 returns, measure 74, with variant (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Return of Theme I and more text painting

The musical score for Figure 6 begins at measure 74, marked with a piano (*mp*) dynamic. It features four staves: Treble (T.), Baritone (Bar.), Bass (B.), and Piano (Pno). The key signature is D major (two sharps). The vocal parts (T., Bar., B.) all sing the same lyrics: "Is our sun set - ting or ris - ing? The". The piano accompaniment (Pno) provides a harmonic and rhythmic foundation, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a moving bass line. The score is presented in a standard musical notation format with a common time signature.

This final section, based on the introductory theme, takes that thematic and text material and extends it. The piece ends on a M7 chord, indicating a triumph in transformation, but also of lingering or unresolved challenges (Figures 7, 8).

13

86

T.
make through space _____ are _____ o - ver a tril - lion times more than

Bar.
make through space _____ are _____ o - ver a tril - lion times more than

B.
make through space _____ are _____ o - ver a tril - lion times more than

Pno

Figure 8. Codetta; ending on major seventh chord; transgender life can be bright yet dissonant

Song for Our Transforming

15

Misterioso $\text{♩} = 66$ *mp*

98

T.

o - ver a mil - lion times more than

Bar.

o - ver a mil - lion times more than

B.

o - ver a mil - lion times more than

Pno

101

T.

pow - er - ful.

Bar.

pow - er - ful.

B.

pow - er - ful.

Pno

45

Discussion

The more difficult middle section of the piece, faster, contrapuntal and interweaving, is a metaphor for the variety of trans lives that are complex and develop at different times. These lives finally arrive in a consonance, albeit an unexpected one, that we can begin to comprehend, or so I hope. The same is true of the final section, this time on a major seventh chord with the 7th in the tenor, again indicating that something dissonant is also consonant at the same time—incomplete completeness, or complete incompleteness, if you will. The upward passages that occur in the a cappella sections are related to the senses of anticipation and hope in our transforming, or trans-forming.

The poem and the music are designed to be not only transforming but also trans-forming: forming a new reality not only through the word, but also through the musical elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, and ascending scale passages and motives.

Director's Perspective

When Donald shared his poem with me in 2024, I was struck by its scale; bringing together the deeply personal queer experience with the cosmos. The music also has an intimate but celestial quality—what I imagine an astronaut might feel in a quiet moment alone looking at our planet from outer space. The first and last stanzas best capture this ethereal quality while the longer middle stanza pulls performer and audience into the more intimate and yearning perspective. The piece was embraced by the chorus as the poetry and music connected with members across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

While the majority of HGMC is composed of primarily queer cisgender men (approximately 75%), they were able to connect to the piece personally as it reflected aspects of their own lived experience. It also served as an opportunity for these individuals to better understand and sympathize with the experiences of some TGX individuals. More importantly, trans singers in the chorus especially connected with the piece. One trans singer shared:

...it was a realization that even though the trans experience is very lonely and isolating, even if you surround yourself with other trans people because everybody has such an individual journey, just to know that somebody is able to [DBd1] [FD2] understand that and capture it in musical form was significant. And then also finding out that it's not even a trans person that wrote the song...it's nice to know that even though the trans journey can be very isolating and that even though somebody doesn't fully understand it, they can see what's happening and it closes that gap. It doesn't feel as lonely because of that. (Blake, TGX singer in HGMC)

This piece provided an opportunity for shared narratives and perspectives between the cisgender and TGX singers in HGMC. The universal themes of being seen and belonging were essential for these conversations in our chorus and invited singers to be seen, belong, and find their place in our chorus and in a chaotic world. Another trans singer shared:

I just really felt that through the lyrics of the poem and also through the music, you can feel the expressiveness and the love that we as trans people deserve to feel included...and so I think that the song is meaningful and it feels really good to be part of a chorus where we can sing music that's composed just for us. (Rowan, TGX singer in HGMC)

This visibility and centering of TGX identities has been especially important for HGMC as it continues to grow and embrace a new identity in its forthcoming 40th anniversary in 2027. This commitment to a more expansive TTBB choral experience is reflected in our new vision statement, "We dream a world that embraces and celebrates LGBTQIA+ voices." TGX identities have become more visible both nationally as well as within our

chorus. This visibility has also been accompanied by more contestation of TGX identities within our U.S. political sphere. During this period, GALA choruses should be using our artistic and musical gifts to uplift TGX and BIPOC voices in defiance of individuals who would like to see them silenced. Our mission, “We create musical experiences that embolden our community toward social progress. Like notes in a well-tuned chord, our voices unite to amplify our role as a leader in celebrating the LGBTQIA+ community of Central PA” speaks to this as well. Works like Donald’s, which embrace and uplift the TGX experience are essential in strengthening the community bonds of our chorus as well as to share with our audiences.

“Song for Our Transforming” was more than a new addition to HGMC’s repertoire; it became a musical expression of the chorus’s own becoming, of the community we are continuing to build. In rehearsing and premiering the work, we musically embraced our TGX siblings, recognizing their struggles as central to the work of the LGBTQIA+ community, standing in solidarity, and developing deeper bonds of care. This commission marks both a reflection of where the chorus has been and a gesture toward who we are becoming: a chorus committed to amplifying LGBTQIA+ voices in Central Pennsylvania through music that honors complexity, celebrates transformation, and makes space for lives still unfolding.

Conclusion

As we have shared, choral commissions can be a significant opportunity to celebrate and look toward the future for a chorus. “Song for Our Transforming” is a moving work that should be considered for inclusion in other choruses programming, especially to uplift the voices of TGX singers. While this work was composed for a small GALA chorus, the intimacy and delicate quality of the fugue-like sections are well suited to ensembles of this size. However, because of the message of the text, a chorus that is much larger should also consider the work if they are able to negotiate its contrapuntal quality. Freed’s composition has captured a pivotal moment for the Harrisburg Gay Men’s Chorus. As the chorus looks to the future and continues to grow and expand, we acknowledge and celebrate the ways in which our TGX siblings are so essential to the queer community. Songs like Freed’s, among other songs by TGX composers like Mari Esabel Valverde and Michael Bussewitz-Quarm, are essential repertoire for choruses that proclaim to be open and affirming for TGX singers. The music we commission, rehearse, and perform creates opportunities for singers to encounter each other’s experiences, to reflect on who has been marginalized within our communities, and for singers to see themselves clearly recognized and celebrated in what we sing.

Video performance of “Song for Our Transforming” as performed by HGMC, December 2025:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/6arws25sqikk5dkkqzp0d/Song-For-Our-Transforming-HGMC-2025.mp4?rlkey=mt0ju8wbj8lrseIra0r424ke&dl=0>

Full copy of music available at donaldcallenfreed.com

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Dr. Donald Callen Freed is a published and self-published choral composer and vocal musician. His works are published by Subito Music Press (formerly Yelton Rhodes, Tetra Continuo, Moon of Hope, and on his website, donaldcallenfreed.com). He teaches at Iowa Western Community College and was previously head and professor at Sul Ross State University (TX). He has also taught at Hastings College (NE), the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Peru State College (NE). He holds the following degrees: BM, Nebraska Wesleyan University; MM and PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is also Tenor Section Leader of the 160-voice River City Mixed Chorus, Omaha.

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