



Gender Neutral Voice Pedagogy: It's Not Just for Transgender Singers Anymore!

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You may wonder why I chose this topic. Though most of my writings and presentations have been aimed toward teaching transgender and non-binary singers, I have come to believe that all singers should have teachers who understand the need for creating safe spaces and genderinclusive learning environments. My presentation at ICVT 2022 presented ideas about how to move toward a more inclusive, gender-neutral voice pedagogy for all singers.

Language, like gender is fluid. We need to be mindful of language and make gender-inclusive choices. For English speakers consider that you should use everyone, people, folks, folx, etc. instead of ladies and gentlemen or you guys. Use young people, kiddos, etc. instead of boys and girls. Use humankind instead of mankind, parent instead of mother or father, child instead of son or daughter, spouse instead of wife or husband, siblings instead of brothers or sisters, server instead of waitress or waiter, firefighter instead of fireman, etc. Can you think of others? What challenges exist in other languages?

For Voice Pedagogy, our ideas about voice as it relates to gender may have changed, yet most of the current vocal pedagogy texts used in college classes today still refer to male voices and female voices. Are we simply perpetuating this idea for the next generations of voice teachers? I think we can agree that vocal folds do not have genitalia. I think we can also agree that hormones can have a profound effect on vocal folds. Are we limiting all our students by having gender labels and gender expectations in our pedagogy? As I pondered this idea of limiting our students, I reflected on my own experiences. I hope you will indulge me in a brief personal history that is related to this topic.

I reviewed personal audio recordings to confirm my memories. As a child, I had a robust low voice and used Mode 1 most of the time. As a preacher's kid, PK, I was in church often and we also sang at home. I did not study voice early, but being surrounded by singing, by age nine, I was using both low and high voice in a more balanced way with a demonstrated use of both Mode 1 and a mix as the pitches rose. At some point, I bought into the "fact" that it would be more appropriate for me to use only my high voice, only Mode 2. I recognize that this was likely due to the influence of my dear mother, may she rest in peace. She had a mission when I was a child to make me be more "lady-like". One of the things she said often was "Shush! Loraine! Your voice carries!" Even though I disliked hearing that phrase, I wanted to please her and behave in a manner that represented what I was "supposed to be". Ironically, I did not escape the everpresent use of gender and voice because throughout my high-school years, my voice was described as sounding like a "boy-soprano".

I am certain that you can imagine how out of balance my voice was concerning registration. However, my high school chorus teacher loved this voice, so I received even more encouragement to sing in that way. When I finally decided to major in music, this made voice study in college frustrating. I needed a voice teacher who would listen to my whole voice and not allow me to abandon part of it to fit into a light soprano voice ‘role’ just because of my gender. I was discouraged from using Mode 1. The primary instruction I remember was about breath support. The tone didn’t improve much in my undergraduate studies because as you well know, breath support cannot correct a registration issue. I got better at blowing harder, but the tone just got louder, and vibrato was almost non-existent.

As a voice teacher, I have often said that I’d like to offer a rebate on my early teaching, but I do not blame my early teachers. I worked on my voice for many years and with several other teachers and had many successful singing opportunities. Now I am a full professor in the School of Music at Louisiana State University. I wasn’t ruined. It all worked out. However, I think I would have found my voice sooner if the early limitations were not imposed upon it. It goes beyond the scope of this article, but I can assure you that post menopause I have plenty of Mode 1 now.

So, what are we to do as voice teachers? What about singers whose voices are not gendertypical? Consider the examples below. A Brazilian student asked me about ciswomen who sing in the baritone range, which he reported was common in Brazil. He sent me a [YouTube link for Zélia Duncan](#) singing “A Deusa da minha rua.” I loved this voice on first hearing, but it is not typical for a ciswoman to sing in that range. She descends to a strong C₃ on the 2nd pitch. I encourage you to check out the link. It may be culturally common in Brazil, but what about elsewhere? Do you vocalize your ciswomen down into that range?

The concept of this questioning is not new and didn’t originate with me. Robert Edwin in his article, “Culture vs. Science in Voice Pedagogy” in the *Journal of Singing*, September/October 2020¹ mentions two singers who sing with voices that are not typical to cultural gender norms: Stephanie Blythe and David Saballa. If you were fortunate enough to attend the Las Vegas NATS national conference a few years ago, you would have witnessed Stephanie Blythe, a fabulous mezzo soprano also demonstrated using acoustic strategies to sing in the tenor range in the conference recital. Could this be as simple as picking up and learning a different instrument? I encourage you to check out this phenomenon at this YouTube link of Stephanie Blythe² where she performs as Blythely Oratonio, her drag king persona, using a remarkable tenor voice. Or listen to David Saballa as “Mary Sunshine” in *Chicago* at this YouTube link of David Saballa.³ Many of his beautifully sung tones resemble the sounds made by cisgender mezzo sopranos. In his article, Robert Edwin asks the astonishing question: “Can all men be, by nature, sopranos and altos as well as tenors and basses? And can all women be, by nature, tenors and basses as well as sopranos and alto?”⁴

The problem is how we label voices. If you consider the usual definitions of voice labels in most dictionaries, at least one of the entries will contain a gender marker. My question to you is why do we need this? Can we not merely use the labels soprano, mezzo soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, or bass to mean a type of voice with a certain range and timbre of any gender? For example, a soprano saxophone does not have a gender. It would certainly be more inclusive and less cumbersome to use these labels without any qualifying gender. Choirs might then see any gender in any section without any awkwardness. Opera or musical theater auditions would make it possible to consider anyone who can sing the role, regardless of presentation of gender, as a possible candidate for casting.

Beyond correcting how we label voices; we must change the way we teach to make voice pedagogy classes gender neutral. You will likely have transgender and non-binary students in your voice pedagogy classes. You will find that some things you may say in class might not be inclusive for these students. Sometimes, these folx are triggered by reading assignments when the text does not use inclusive language. I am not advocating getting rid of the textbooks, but a gentle disclaimer or discussion would certainly help to include everyone. An explanation that this book uses gender specific labels, which usually refer to cisgender people. You could discuss that the text was written before considerations about the non-inclusive use of heteronormative and cisnormative language was common.

I decided to see how easily this could be demonstrated by having a student review the three primary texts I use for pedagogy classes. My student was a non-binary first year student (notice this is more inclusive than freshman) who uses they/them pronouns and had work hours assigned to me. I suggested a quick perusal of each book, not a detailed study and asked them to comment on anything they noticed that was not gender neutral or gender inclusive. They had no trouble at all finding many examples in the texts that I provided. They noted: Not all sopranos use she/her pronouns. Not all tenors use he/him pronouns. Voice type does not equal gender, baritone does not equal he/him, women does not equal high voice, tenor/baritone/bass does not equal male or men, soprano/mezzo does not equal female or woman. They also marked multiple examples where the size of larynx and vocal folds were being related to whether they belonged to men or women. They observed that the “highest register” was differentiated as falsetto for men and whistle voice (or head or falsetto) for women. They found many examples where there were terms like; male voice, male passaggio, female lower voice, women and countertenors, strategies preferred by women and men, passaggio events for male voice types, male range, women and treble voices, etc.

I believe you see my point. We can all do better to be inclusive. We can, with a bit of concentrated effort, use gender neutral language every day until it becomes habit. We do not need to limit the voices that we teach based on our preconceived notions of gender and voice. This way we will instruct the next generation of singers, voice teachers, and pedagogues to be truly inclusive.



¹ Robert Edwin, “Culture vs. Science in Voice Pedagogy,” *Journal of Singing*, September/October 2020 Volume 77, No. 1, pp. 81–83.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2V49sSxvc4>.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sB6PToTKb8s>

⁴ Edwin.