

My wonderful, wrong voice

A phenomenological study of two trans individuals' experiences of singing in Swedish higher music educational settings

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Abstract

Global research on the experiences of trans individuals singing within music education is limited and can be considered a blind spot in Scandinavian research. This article investigates two trans individuals' (female-to-male) experiences of singing in higher music education settings during hormone replacement therapy and poses the following questions: How do the participants experience aspects of the singing body in music education settings—as elements they can or cannot change? What impact do these experiences have on the choices made by the participants regarding singing in music education settings? Between 2014 and 2018, four interviews were conducted with one participant and six with the other. These were then analysed using a phenomenological hermeneutical method of researching lived experience. Results show that experiences of gender and/or the singing voice in music education settings exemplify how biological and social aspects are intertwined and in flux, both related to the body's facticity and freedom. These intertwinements do not always align with traditional views of how experienced singers should sound or how singing should be organised in music education settings (such as choirs). Consequently, trans singers in Swedish music education settings might experience gender-affirming treatments such as hormone replacement therapy as impossible to “hide”, forcing them to be open about their transition. This could, in a worst-case scenario, be experienced as discriminatory.

Keywords: singing, trans individuals, hormone replacement therapy, music education, phenomenology

Introduction

This article is based on lived experiences shared by two individuals who define themselves as singers and members/part of the T-group under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, i.e. trans individuals (female-to-male, abbreviated FTM). Perspectives from trans individuals are scarce in the music education literature on LGBTQ+, thus motivating a specific research focus on their experiences in music education. As suggested by Cayari et al. (2021), trans

students might experience the development of their musical skills as challenging (at worst, discriminatory), more so than cis students. This study can be seen as a contribution to expanding the basis for music educators' choices in didactic praxis. As such, trans individuals' experiences should not be treated as homogenous. Silveira (2019) suggests that music education researchers should include multiple perspectives when investigating their experiences. This view is shared by Nichols (2013), who, as one of the first contributors to the field, underlines the importance of "highlighting critical stories that bring forward the local and lived experiences of transgender students" (p. 263). Nichols warns researchers of the risk of diminishing participants' specific experiences by using LGBTQ+ as an umbrella definition of the group (in music education) since it cannot be seen as homogenous.

Of those studies that focus on trans individuals' experiences in music education, most contributions have emerged from English-speaking contexts. As an attempt to build on Silveira and Nichols' suggestion to cite more local and lived experiences and so add more perspectives in research that includes trans individuals' experiences of music education, this study presents results generated within a Scandinavian (Swedish) higher music education context. An anthology published by Routledge that provides an overview of Scandinavian music education research, focussing on gender issues within democratic countries (Blix, Vestad, and Onsrud, eds., 2021), exemplifies how, despite Scandinavian norms of gender-equal policies and attitudes, gender problems found in English-speaking music education contexts also exist in similar contexts in Scandinavia. As de Boise (2023) points out, perspectives from trans individuals are absent from this anthology. Research within the music education field focussing on gender perspectives in Scandinavian countries is relatively new, with more systematic studies being published (Blix, Vestad, and Onsrud, 2021). Scandinavian research perspectives on trans individuals' experiences in music education need extensive exploration, and the present study can be seen as a contribution to this research on trans individuals. There is still little research within the field of music education contributing to investigations of trans individuals' experiences of singing, another motivation for the present study. Cayari et al (2021) note that including trans individuals in choirs, while well-intentioned, might cause discomfort due to gendered associations with vocal range and sections in a choir (SATB) and, consequently, unequal learning opportunities compared to cis students.

Including a gender perspective as a starting point for researching singing trans individuals' (FTM) experiences is motivated by the two participants undergoing gender-affirming treatments during the years that the study took place. During interviews, both participants define themselves as a "boy/man" when talking about themselves in the present, but refer to situations in the past in which they were seen as "girls". Since earlier research presents several gendered conceptions of singing (e.g. Hentschel, 2017; Hall, 2018), a gender perspective can allow the present study to compare results from research in which participants are defined as within groups of individuals who identify as "boys/men" as well as "trans individuals". Considering this, I stress the heterogeneous definition of the participants in this study.

The aim of this article is therefore to investigate two trans individuals' (FTM) experiences of singing in music education settings during hormone replacement therapy (HRT). HRT is a common procedure in gender-affirming treatments for trans individuals transitioning from female to male since one of several effects of testosterone treatment is a lowering of the pitch and timbre of the voice (Graham, 2022). More specifically, this study poses the following research questions: How do the participants experience aspects of the singing body in music education settings—as elements they can or cannot change? What impact do these experiences have on the choices made by the participants regarding singing in music education settings?

Research Overview

The following section will present earlier research that defines singing from three perspectives: as a musical instrument inherent to the body, as a confirmation of the singer's existence, and as gendered (in certain situations).

Singing as a musical instrument inherent to the body

I have previously referred to singing experiences as bodily, existential and gendered as the concept of “the singing body” (Hentschel, 2017), based on the existential phenomenological concept of “the lived body” (de Beauvoir, 2012 [1949]; Sampson, 2008; Young, 2002). From this perspective, the body is seen as the starting point for subjective experiences. Hence, the singing body refers to the individual experiencing singing whether their own or that of others'. In existential-philosophical phenomenology, individuals are defined as a situation in itself, as they are situated. In the present article, the concept of singing situations will be used when referring to the participants' experiences related to the three perspectives of singing mentioned above.

Sundberg (1986) states that singing requires several parts of the body for voice production, stressing that when singers use their voice in a musical setting, the voice becomes a musical instrument. The singing voice can be seen as individual since it derives from an individual human being's unique physical facticity, such as the dimensions of the vocal tract, the size of the vocal folds and so on. Vitale (2008) expands on the uniqueness of an individual's singing voice, claiming that the voice, seen as a musical instrument, is to be regarded as a unique musical instrument, since it is embodied in its interpreter. Burrows (1980) emphasises that the voice is communicative and personal in that the vocaliser is free to express themselves (vocalise) or not (be quiet). Singing can be regarded as both subjective and intersubjective, as it can be performed individually or in situations shared with others (Hentschel, 2017). In relation to situated aspects of the singing individual, singing can be seen as a skill that is possible to develop (Welch, 2006). The human voice can produce varied singing behaviours determined by age as well as anatomical and physiological factors affected by social and cultural situations.

Singing as confirmation of the singer's existence

Singing can be seen as a way of confirming your existence (and the world you exist in) (Burrows, 1980; Leijonhufvud, 2011). When you sing, you experience a sensual bodily movement, for example in how you hear yourself singing, or how you experience the

roundness of your tongue forming vowels in a phrase. This becomes a confirmation of your existence – when I feel my body (singing), I know that I exist. The singing voice is to be treated as an important part of shaping a singer’s identity, and experiences connected to identity can, for example, include feelings of shame in situations where others define their singing as unsuitable or wrong (Bergesen Shei, 2007).

Gendered singing (in certain situations)

In gender research on music and music education, singing is often seen as a feminine practice, mostly preferred by girls (Hentschel, 2022; Hall, 2018). The perception of the singing voice is often found to be connected to masculinity (dark, low pitch) and femininity (bright, high pitch) (e.g. Hentschel, 2017; Björck, 2011). That said, the voice can operate like a “third space” between body and language, allowing for performative expressions that transcend gendered conceptions of the voice (Jarman-Ivens, 2011). In one of my earlier studies of gender and singing in school, gender was indeed at play in singing situations, but neither present in all situations nor strictly dichotomous (Hentschel, 2017). The results showed that both girls and boys participated in and refrained from singing, although almost all students chose to sing. For the most part, gendered differences between girls and boys in singing situations resulted in students (both girls and boys, but in different ways) often losing out on learning possibilities in singing. One of several gendered conceptions that created problems was a prevalent view that I will call “gender-voice type alignment”, meaning the assumption that someone’s gender is aligned with their voice type. This will be developed in the following section, as it seems prevalent in earlier research into trans individuals’ singing situations as well.

Trans issues in singing situations

Early research contributions to the field consist of investigations of small groups of participants identifying as trans and singers, exploring trans students (Nichols, 2013; Sims, 2017), trans music teachers’ experiences (Bartolome, 2016) music teachers’ conceptions of teaching trans students (Silveira and Goff, 2016), trans (FTM) singers’ changing voices (Constansis, 2008, 2013) and methods for teaching singing to trans students (Gurss, 2018). Most recent research consists of studies on trans singers’ experiences. This is especially relevant to the present study, although there are also examples of trans singing and/or music teachers (e.g. Bartolome, 2016; Sauerland, 2018; Silveira and Goff, 2016; Silveira, 2019).¹ Cayari (2019) sums up the first of two conferences called “Transgender Singing Voice Conference” by stating that the research field is growing, that many educators feel insecure about working with trans students, that trans singing issues are not yet well established and that there is a need to demystify trans experiences in singing. In the following section, relevant research from the field is addressed as 1) views of gender-voice type alignment in trans singing, and 2) a critique of the “one-size-fits-all” concept in trans singing (e.g. Aguirre, 2018; Greer, 2021; Palkki and Sauerland, 2019).

¹ Several of these contributions are summed up in Aguirre’s (2018) literature review of research in the field of trans singing.

Gender-voice type alignment views of trans singers

As mentioned, gender-voice type alignment is prevalent in the field of singing, causing problems for singers in situations when not adapting to cis-gendered norms of singing such as assigning soprano and alto parts to females and tenor and bass parts to males in choirs (e.g. Cayari et al. 2021; Hentschel, 2017). The widely applied “fach system”, which initially classifies choir parts according to an understanding of voices as cis-gendered, can be seen as contributing to the reproduction of the gender-voice type alignment views found in choir singing. As Challacombe (2024) puts it, “while soprano, alto, tenor, and bass are not inherently gendered terms, the fach system carries gendered implications” (p. 96). Marchand Knight et al. (2023) state that while voice sound might appear to be the primary criterion for listeners’ perception and classification, a singer’s (and speaker’s) appearance significantly influences these judgments. Consequently, transgender and cisgender singers who do not conform to voice-body expectations are often excluded from formal singing opportunities such as choirs, which in some cases can cause gender dysphoria. Group singing is and has been largely inaccessible for many trans singers because of gendered and cis-gendered expectations associated with voice type (Pullinger, 2020). The benefits of group singing, such as the potential to enhance the experience of life (for instance, in mental health), are compatible with research showing that trans individuals often suffer from (mental) health issues. As Pullinger states, “transgender people, who might need the benefits of singing the most out of any demographic, are among the least likely to access it” (p. 3). Pullinger notes that the view of men singing low and women singing high does not apply to all trans individuals, often excluding them from singing. When trans individuals avoid communal singing, they become invisible both off the singing stage and on it, sparking an unwelcoming singing environment where trans-exclusionary conventions and attitudes are reinforced. This, in turn, makes it even harder for trans singers to join in singing situations.

Another aspect of gender-voice type alignment is related to HRT. According to Romano (2018), the voice changes most during the first two years of HRT and, when settled, the voice changes are permanent, often resulting in a full octave drop or more (in fundamental frequency range). Lowering the pitch of the voice has become the “gold standard” (p. 1) for trans individuals (FTM) (Graham, 2022) and, as such, is the primary criterion for encouraging the use of HRT in gender-affirming procedures. Graham points out that the hormonal (voice) changing process is far more complex and uncertain than just adding testosterone and gaining a male voice, as vocal outcomes of HRT for trans singers (FTM) are uncertain. He notes that critical reflections on presenting HRT as a monolithic solution to all trans (FTM) voice issues are absent from research. Graham’s study shows that vocal outcomes for trans singers on HRT vary in relation to genetics, age, delivery method, and sensitivity to the mode of HRT and that larger-scale studies should be performed to further generalise results. Manternach et al. (2017) underline that voice teachers should be concerned if their students engage in HRT since it causes such profound and permanent changes to the voice.

As mentioned, not conforming to gender-voice type alignment can cause problems in the choral/music classroom for both cisgender and transgender students. This can be seen as an incentive to encourage singing/music teachers and choirs to become more aware and inclusive so that music classrooms become safe, welcoming and caring spaces for trans individuals (e.g. McManus and Carter, 2023; Nichols, 2013). Earlier research presents several suggestions for how these “safe spaces” for singing trans individuals can be developed. The main topics of these suggestions are as follows: 1) Develop awareness of trans (singers’) issues (Pullinger, 2020) by, for example, increasing teachers’ knowledge and recommending that they openly support and include trans issues in music teacher education and schools; this could be achieved by using methods to retain and improve trans individuals’ singing ability (Cayari et al. 2021; Constansis, 2013). 2) (Private) communication with trans students can enable teachers to learn their students’ preferred names and pronouns as well as their thoughts on vocal health (for instance if they are on HRT) and their preferred voice part in the choir (Cayari et al. 2021; Lessley, 2017; Miller, 2016; Rastin, 2016; Silveira, 2019). 3) Avoid gendered language for choir names and/or sections (men’s choir, women’s section etc.) and use appropriate names and pronouns (Cayari, et al. 2021; Pullinger, 2020). 4) Avoid gendered dress codes (Miller, 2016; Pullinger, 2020). 5) Rewrite voice parts to suit trans students’ needs and create opportunities for cross-gender voice parts (Miller, 2016). 6) Develop all-trans choirs (Patch and König, 2018; Pullinger, 2020). 7) Using voice classification based on voice type instead of gender is highly recommended (Miller, 2016; Pullinger, 2020). Finally, 8) Cayari et al. (2021) stress the aforementioned importance of representing the diversity of trans individuals in music education. In a recent publication, Challacombe (2024) adds to these suggestions by recommending that choir leaders should practise reflexivity by routinely examining their biases regarding transgender issues, strive to increase intersectional diversity, give space to (re)creating how choir practice can foster positive trans experiences and centre choir practice around the joy of singing rather than perfection.

“No-size-fits-all”

The tendency to treat trans students (in music education) as a homogenous group, applying “one-size-fits-all” solutions intended to accommodate the needs of every trans student, has been widely criticised in recent research (e.g. Aguirre, 2018; Greer, 2021; Palkki and Sauerland, 2019). The recommendation has moved more towards a “no-size-fits-all” view of how to create safe spaces for trans students. This is connected to how trans singers relate to gender-voice type alignment, since there are both trans singers who do align their voice to their gender identity/expression, and those who do not. For some, but not all, the voice can be an important part of gender identity and/or gender expression construction. Palkki and Sauerland (2019) develop this, stating that these kinds of solutions are especially inappropriate when applied to gender-variant students, as no “routine procedure” (p. 81) matches the needs of all students.

Existential philosophical phenomenology

A phenomenological analysis perspective has been used to analyse the participants described lived experiences. According to existential philosophical phenomenology, human bodies can be seen as a situation in itself (factual anatomy/physiology), as well as placed within situations (for example, a choir or a music classroom) (de Beauvoir, 2012 [1949]; Sampson, 2008; Young, 2002). As mentioned above, the concept of “the singing body” will be used in this article when referring to the participants’ experiences of singing, whether their own or that of others, as a musical instrument inherent to the body, as a confirmation of the singer’s existence, and as gendered (in certain situations). When these types of experiences occur, the singing body is both defined as and positioned within a “singing situation”. Situations can be changed, since humans are free to choose their paths in life, although life choices are influenced by what the individual experiences as something that can be changed in a given situation. For example, some aspects can be experienced as something that can be changed (freedom), while others can be experienced as impossible to change (facticity). The individual experience in itself is key to how humans run their projects in life. The narratives presented in the results are based on a selection of singing situations exemplifying how the participants experience aspects of their singing body as freedom or facticity, and how they choose to act in relation to this. The discussion focuses on the consequences of their choices.

Methods

The two participants were chosen as a convenience sample (Patton, 2001). Both were in their early twenties when we initiated the study. To maintain confidentiality, the participant names “Sam” and “Erik” are pseudonyms created by me. I was introduced to Erik by chance in a non-work-related situation and in our conversation, we came up with the idea of researching his experiences of singing in music education settings during HRT. As we started our interviews, he put me in touch with Sam, who was asked to join the study as well. The material for the study was produced through individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), in which each participant talked about their experiences of singing situations. The interview questions were orientated on what they defined as meaningful since our last interview, their current state of mind, and thoughts about the future. For example, to start the interviews, I would ask the participant, “Can you tell me about your experiences of where you are in the process?” As the study focused on what aspects of their situations the participants experienced as possible to change or not, I would ask “Is this something you have actively tried to change or not?”. I interviewed Erik six times and Sam four times during 2014–2018 in sessions that lasted 20–60 minutes. In total, each participant was interviewed for six hours. All interviews were performed in Swedish and citations selected for the article were translated by me.

Before initiating the interviews, both participants were thoroughly informed about the aims and scope of the research study, the nature of the data to be collected during the interviews, and the ethical procedures governing the handling, storage, and use of this information. They were made aware that the collected data would contribute to the

production of a scholarly article. Furthermore, participants were assured that strict measures would be taken to preserve confidentiality and anonymity and that all identifying information would be treated with the utmost discretion to protect their privacy. The participants gave both oral and written consent to their participation in the study. The information gathered for the study is not considered sensitive, according to Swedish research ethics (Swedish Research Council, 2017). In contrast to Palkki (2020), who states that many trans students come out openly in middle/high school, only one of the two participants in this study was openly identifying as trans during the study and had revealed this identity to only a few selected individuals. This entailed having to exercise ethical caution regarding the circumstances of our interviews, as well as being thorough in explaining ethical considerations of participating in the study. A further point to consider during the study was that it was impossible for me, as a non-trans person, to fully grasp the participants' situations, and my role was to interpret what they shared in interviews. As such, the phenomenological perspective chosen for this article only makes it possible for me to investigate the participants' lived experiences as they present themselves to me, rather than as they are actually lived. There is of course a potential risk that my interpretations, as a non-trans person, are biased by my own experiences. As a phenomenological and reflexive researcher, I try to keep this in mind when performing the analysis, by "bracketing" (*epoché*) my preconceptions of aspects relating to the study (van Manen, 2016). I also often asked the participants if they could confirm or correct my interpretations of their descriptions in or after the interviews.

Phenomenological hermeneutical analysis

The results were analysed by a phenomenological hermeneutical method of researching lived experience (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004). The analysis was performed in four steps, following Lindseth and Norberg's suggestion of using naïve reading and structural analysis. In the following section, I present the phases of analysis.

Naïve reading

I read all the transcribed interviews from both participants and colour-marked themes that stood out as related to the research questions in the text (naïve reading).

Structural analysis

- 1) The themes were formulated on post-its and sorted to create a structure of the empirical material (meaningful units or themes).
- 2) I performed a three-phase condensation of the themes. a) The themes on the post-its were compared to the naïve reading. b) The themes on the post-its were compared for similarity and difference and sorted anew, with some being separated and others grouped together to create main themes, themes and sub-themes. c) The main themes, themes, and sub-themes were compared with the naïve reading to validate their content again, although this time the validation was performed first on the material from Sam and then Erik. This decision was made with the idea of

creating two narratives (Sam, Erik), based on varied experiences of the same themes.

- 3) The main themes, themes and sub-themes were summarised and reflected on in relation to the research questions and contexts of the study as well as to earlier research, to interpret the phenomenon as a whole.
- 4) The two narratives were created and written in a phenomenological hermeneutical way, meaning, “in everyday language as close to the lived experience as possible” (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004, p. 151).

Sam's story

Even though I think that wow, I can hit all the notes and it's really fun and the best feeling ever, I don't feel like “wow, this sounds great”. It's more like “I know this”.

Sam tells me he has almost twenty years' experience in (choir) singing, since he has been singing soprano in classical choirs from the age of five. He is a skilled sight reader with a highly developed sense of pitch, has a four-octave range and sings soprano in a semi-professional competitive youth choir where he is also a frequent soloist. Sam describes himself as “a singer in full control of his voice”, telling me that he has always loved the feeling of being able to sing however he wants. However, he has been struggling with the notion of his voice not aligning with the perception of him as a male and is about to start HRT in the following weeks.

A voice that triggers gender dysphoria

I felt so “not correct” if I sang in a high pitch, I didn't even want to sing. It felt really hard because it only reminded me of how wrong I was.

In September 2015, during the first of four interviews, Sam talks about what led him to practise changing his voice before starting HRT. As the above quote shows, he felt that his voice, before he changed it, reminded him of not aligning with gendered notions of how a male voice “should” sound. Sam's soprano voice has sometimes caused others to misgender him as female, which led him to start practising lowering his range, making his voice sound darker. Now, some weeks away from starting to take HRT, he seems hopeful of gaining a voice that aligns with his gender, anticipating that his voice range will shift down somewhat and possibly be suitable for singing tenor in the choir. However, he describes an anxiousness about losing control of his singing voice, hoping he will gain the same control over his voice after the major changes that HRT causes initially. Sam also talks of how he experienced a great sense of loss when he realised that, no longer having a soprano voice, he would soon be unable to sing the highest parts of Handel's *Messiah*. Even though Sam feared losing control of his singing voice and mourned the loss of his soprano voice, he chose to go further and initiate the HRT to gain a voice that aligned more with his gender.

A voice like a new hair colour

By the time of the second interview, in April 2016, Sam has been taking HRT for some time. He is relieved that his voice has become darker, so dark in fact that he no longer has to exert himself to produce a darker sound with the strategies he used before taking HRT. He describes his voice as “with a different colour”, comparing it to hair dye. “It’s still my hair, but with a different colour”. He no longer worries about being misgendered by others. Although relieved, Sam has experienced several negative singing situations as a result of his changed voice. Just after starting HRT, he tried to sing at a choral Christmas concert but found it impossible, as his voice was either too low or too high to fit the soprano or tenor parts. He could not hit any of the notes and felt insecure about whether he would be allowed to switch to a more suitable choir part, resulting in his mimicking his singing during the concert. After the concert, he decided to quit singing in the choir, feeling that he could not contribute, and did not experience any joy at participating. He describes feeling like a failure compared to before, as if he had lost his singing skills altogether. He also tells me that during this time it felt unnecessary to participate in the choir as long as he did not know where or when his new voice range would settle. He tells me about the last time he sang:

So, I just stood by the ocean in the middle of the night and sang at the top of my lungs. No one was listening, and I didn’t care about how it sounded; I just sang and sang. And then, after that, I didn’t sing again.

One and a half years of silence went by, but now, some weeks before our second interview, he has started to sing again. Sam says that he really wants to resume singing in the choir again, aiming to sing tenor – mostly because he thinks the choir will not expect him to drop as far as from soprano to bass. Even though his voice has darkened, he hopes it will darken more. But most of all, he wants to take control of his voice again.

A voice like a shaken piano

It’s like you’ve shaken a piano. Like, my voice is the keyboard, and when you shake it all the keys fall out and place themselves in a totally random order. And you assume that the keyboard is in its regular order, and you press a key, but the sound that comes out doesn’t match at all. So, whichever key you press, another random wrong note comes out.

By the time of the third interview, in January 2017, Sam has started getting to know his voice. He describes it as “starting over”, after his singing voice was in total disorder for a while (see above quote). The disorder was experienced as a total lack of control, with the singing technique Sam was used to adapting to produce certain notes not working at all. He tells me that the years he spent not singing were really hard and felt like “not breathing”. He says that the feeling of starting over feels like a loss of his singing skills. Sam is now practising and experimenting with his singing technique to find out what he should do to learn how to sing the notes he wants to sing. He sings a lot and has rejoined the old choir, although now singing bass. It was a difficult first step, but a proud moment as he decided to come back to the choir. After realising the tenor part was too high for his new range, Sam felt relief when settling on bass. “Now I know where I should be, what I

want to do, and what I should invest in”, he tells me happily. Although seemingly settled in the choir, he describes a worry that other conceptions of how his voice sounds are based on wrongful assumptions of his singing skills being impaired. Sam has also started taking a music course in Swedish higher music education (HME) and writes music where he adapts the vocal parts to the range of his voice, to create a sense of control. He wishes for even more security in his singing voice later on.

A reclaimed voice

During the final interview with Sam in June 2018, I find him happy and at ease talking about his singing. Sam says he has been “working on becoming comfortable with his voice as an instrument”. He is taking more music courses at HME, although he never tells any of the teachers what he is going through. Sam talks eagerly about how important it has been not to be hard on himself during the more insecure parts of the voice-changing process. He says that he would not have been able to practise at all if he had not allowed himself to “fail” and let the process take its time. Looking back, Sam describes the process of resuming singing after his silent period as taking several steps back, like running a marathon after several years of bed rest. When I bring up the loss of his soprano voice described in the first interview, he says that he still misses it but is no longer sad about it:

I can’t describe how wonderful it feels to sing the highest soprano parts, to really sing like you break glass. But at the same time, I’m so happy that I can use my voice in the way that I can now.

Sam still writes music adapted to his vocal range but has increasingly started composing more challenging vocal lines, since he wants to develop his singing even further. He is set on continuing to do so for life.

Erik’s story

My voice means a lot to me since I love to sing. And because of that, I want it to be as durable and good as possible. [...] I have been singing all my life.

Erik has just started HRT as we conduct the first of six interviews, in October 2014. He has been singing solo since he was five or six years old and is an experienced composer. Mostly positive about going into the voice-changing process caused by HRT, he nonetheless expresses some nervousness about having no guarantee of how his voice will sound while and after the voice settles. He wishes for a more “masculine voice”, which for Erik means a darker, wider, mellow, stable voice in the low voice range – in contrast to a feminine voice, described by him as a beautiful, airy, and bright voice in the high voice range. Erik has just started taking a music course in HME in Sweden. He is very passionate about his singing and plans to arrange studio sessions in the future to record his songs.

A voice just starting to sound good

The thing is, that I had already planned to contact (name removed), that famous musician, I had my plan... and if I hadn’t started going on hormones, I would have contacted them

to collaborate on something. Because my voice was just starting to sound great! But then I thought, the risk of using hormones is that I have to start all over again. That my voice, and all these years that I've been singing, disappear, really.

Erik seems upset that the voice-changing process caused by HRT will possibly “erase” his previous singing knowledge, and that he has to start “all over again”. His frustration becomes even more visible when he tells me that he has been practising singing several hours a day for some years now. However, he is not planning to stop practising now. Even though Erik is not really sure whether it is good to practise singing during the voice change, he is set on trying it out for as long as he can. Erik thinks that the voice, seen as a part of your identity, is an experience of how you perceive yourself. Consequently, it is important for Erik to attain others' feedback on how they perceive his identity and his voice since he is in the process of “building his identity”. He often wonders if others reflect on how his voice sounds since it started to sound “uneven” once he initiated HRT.

A not yet fully formed voice

When I talk with Erik for the second interview, in December 2014, he tells me that his voice has become mellower and with a wider range, he experiences numerous voice cracks, it is hard to hit the right notes and his higher range is less available than before. He is hopeful that his voice is changing in the direction he wished for, but at the moment, he is not at all satisfied with it. Erik wants his voice to sound “as different from what it was before as possible”. The situation has become tense since he is about to go into rehearsals for the final concert of the music course at HME in a few weeks. He has chosen to rap, as he perceives it—being less dependent on pitch—as easier and contributing to a rough and masculine vocal quality. Erik tells me that when rapping, he stops worrying about the possibility of others' misgendering him based on how his voice sounds. However, he still worries about how the audience will perceive him and his voice:

I can't really ask someone to not judge me for the voice I have at the moment... but I have an urge to ask, like, you know that I won't sound like this forever? But at the same time, it feels like I sink even more if I would ask that. Even though they might know that you're going through this process, it's like, at the same time you have to convince them that it always sounded like this. It's really annoying. Because you want people to see you as what you want to become, as you want to be.

Erik describes a complex situation in which he thinks the audience expects him to be a convincing artist on stage, but at the same time, he struggles with the fact that he cannot perform as he used to, or as how he imagines to sound in the future. But he still has to perform convincingly, since it is a professional concert. He also tells me that he worries that the audience may reflect that his voice sounds like a teenager's, considering that the other performers' voices sound adult.

A voice becoming what it should be

By the time of the third interview, in May 2015, Erik has become more comfortable with his voice. It has darkened and has become more stable, although it still cracks on the

higher notes. He says he feels more secure than during the concert at the HME course, and he has told some of the teachers that he is trans and taking HRT. Continuing to another music course in HME, he still practises singing and performing his own vocal music.

I've been waiting. Like, what will I have, what will that be like? And it's good to sing and talk a lot, because then you know, you learn about your state. Now this has happened.

It is apparent that Erik's attitude towards using the voice for talking and singing during the voice-changing process caused by HRT is the same as it was at the start. He uses his singing sessions as opportunities to explore how his voice sounds at that moment, identifying changes and trying out solutions. Erik seems more hopeful than at the previous interview, again talking about going into the studio to record his songs as he had planned before initiating HRT. He records himself at home and listens to his singing, much more satisfied with how his voice sounds now. However, Erik wishes his voice to "work" as before but with his now darker, mellower, stable voice in the lower voice range. He describes these features as how his voice "sounds", a logic he will explain more thoroughly in his last interview. Erik also tells me that he has altogether stopped worrying what others think of his voice since he is now sure that his voice sounds so convincing that he will no longer be misgendered. This has not happened in a long time.

A voice like a muscle

When I talk with Erik for the fourth interview, in October 2015, a year after our first interview, he comes across as happy and satisfied. He feels that his voice has settled and that he can sing more playfully than before. He feels freer to use his voice in different ways. Although he finished the course at HME, he still sings and writes music regularly, and plans to go into the recording studio soon.

To go through a voice-changing process singing, of course, you can do that! But sure, it will sound terrible in the beginning. But I think that if I hadn't done it... it's like a muscle, right? The voice is like a muscle. If you don't exercise it regularly, it will be even harder to sing.

The above quote again demonstrates that Erik's view of practising singing during the voice-changing process caused by HRT is central to his singing. Even though Erik was initially uncertain of how suitable it is to practise singing during a process like this, he continues to do so since he finds it useful for navigating the features of his changing voice. Drawing from Erik's satisfaction with how his voice settled in accordance with all his wishes at the start of HRT, we imagine a situation in which Erik's voice did not change. Erik says that it would have been really hard if that had been the case, since he thinks he would have been at even greater risk of being misgendered. These thoughts about how the voice and identity are connected to others have been expressed by Erik before, as well as worrying about and being misgendered on the basis of how your voice sounds. However, he considers this a thing of the past, since he let go of his worries when his voice darkened and mellowed.

A familiar and changed voice

Erik is still as satisfied with his voice by the time of the fifth interview in April 2016. The voice has even become a little more stable than when we talked the last time. Although Erik sometimes wonders if there has been any change in his voice, when listening to recordings of the sound of his voice, he becomes convinced that voice has indeed changed.

I really like what I'm hearing in my head. And I feel like, I sound like this all the time now. But it was a long time ago that I recorded myself singing and listened to it.... and sometimes I wonder, is there really any difference from before? But it is, really, it sounds like me, and nothing like in the past.

Erik concurs happily that his voice sounds very different from what it used to, which was what he wished for in the beginning. He also finds that his voice does not need the same attention to warming up as before, and that he can trust his voice to sound good all the time. Erik also states that he would love to perform in front of an audience again. The chance to perform at concerts (as a part of coursework) is no longer available to Erik since he chose to conclude his HME studies. Also, even though Erik practises singing and writes music regularly, he has yet to enter the recording studio.

A voice split between change and continuity

At the last interview with Erik in January 2017, he tells me more about what has and has not changed in his voice during this process. In an earlier interview, he talked of how the sound of his voice was the main feature that had changed. As he suggests that we listen to a segment from a recording of his first interview for comparison, he takes his reasoning further.

It's not how I sing, how I hit the notes that has changed, I do it in the same way. It's how it sounds when I sing and where I start singing, that's the difference. So it's like, half of my soul changed, and the other half stayed the same.

Erik seems to define a difference between how to sing and how singing sounds, and that the change he has experienced has been of the latter (how it sounds). For Erik, this is experienced as his soul both changing and not changing at the same time.

Discussion

In the section below, I will sum up the results by relating them to the earlier research presented in the background section and analysing them in relation to concepts of existential philosophical phenomenology.

Sam's singing situations

Looking at Sam's singing situations in the narrative above, he views his singing voice as a musical instrument (Sundberg, 1986) and finds himself a skilled singer with almost twenty years experience of singing and therefore very aware of how his singing works (similar to

how a musical instrument embodied in its interpreter according to Vitale, 2008). Sam sees his singing voice as a skill possible to develop (Welch, 2006). Nevertheless, he has no specific knowledge of how to adapt to the voice changes he experiences during HRT. He is curious about how his voice changes, also when he practises singing. Sam never tells his teachers at HME that he is trans (FTM) or that he is on HRT, which prevents teacher guidance and/or communication.

Sam describes two contradictory feelings of using his high-pitched voice. Firstly, he experiences his voice as “wrong” as it seems to allow others to misgender him. Secondly, he experiences his voice as “wonderful” for singing the highest soprano parts in a choir. In this case, it is possible that the feeling of being “wrong” when singing in a high pitch is connoted with gender-voice type alignment as well as others’ perceiving the individual’s (singer’s) identity as inappropriate or wrong, thus causing shame (Bergesen Shei, 2007). The “wonderful” feeling of singing in a high pitch can be associated with a non-gender-voice type alignment view in which this kind of singing could create wonderful sensations for any singer, trans or not. Sam stresses that the changes caused to his voice by HRT are not an impaired singing ability, but rather a situation in which his singing “settings” are in flux, like shaken piano keys. He sees his singing voice as affected by unavoidable changes in his individual, unique physical features (Sundberg, 1986) caused by HRT. Sam changes his voice even before he initiates his HRT to make it sound darker, and when his voice settles during treatment it grows even darker. Sam’s voice now aligns with gendered conceptions, and he is no longer misgendered, which caused him suffering in the past (Hentschel, 2017). Sam has always seen his voice as something he can change, as freedom and not facticity. When the voice change caused by HRT becomes too much to handle, Sam chooses to become silent (Burrows, 1980). The situation is painful for him, like “not breathing”. Sam’s experience may reflect that of many trans singers, who become excluded from choir singing which traditionally builds on gender-voice type alignment when assigning parts (Cayari et al. 2021; Pullinger, 2020). Sam experienced uncertainty over which part to sing, partly because he was unsure whether the choir leader would allow him to shift to another part. Apart from that, he stated that he could not hit any of the notes and felt like a failure, being unable to contribute to the choir.

That said, there is also another possible explanation for Sam’s decision to stop singing. His initial quote suggests that his view on singing is very much based on the feeling of knowing how to sing. When Sam’s voice started changing so dramatically, he experienced the loss of feeling like a skilful singer. He knew that his singing would not sound as good as before, and so became silent, although, when he starts singing again, he finds a way to adapt to the situation he is in. Instead of going back to the choir too early, he starts by singing his own music, whose vocal parts are written in accordance with his settling voice. Even though he has no help from teachers with this, it does raise the possibility that teachers could (re)write voice parts to suit trans students’ needs (Miller, 2016). Sam seems to view the changing aspects of his settling voice (mainly the sound and ability to hit correct notes) as facticity (unalterable) and placed in a situation where he is free to become silent or adapt what he sings to enable him to feel like a skilful singer. In short, during the

process of going through HRT as a trans singer, Sam experiences his singing voice as facticity and freedom at the same time.

Returning to the research questions of how aspects of the singing body are experienced and the consequences these experiences have for the choices the participant makes for themselves in the singing situations, Sam's story reveals several aspects of the lived body (singing body) that appear as freedom or facticity (de Beauvoir, 2012 [1949]; Sampson, 2008; Young, 2002). As Sam views his singing voice as something he can change (freedom), he often chooses to sing. But faced with a situation where his voice-changing process becomes too hard to handle, he seems to (temporarily) define his singing voice as something beyond his ability to change (the shaken piano), and in consequence, his singing voice becomes a facticity. At the peak of this situation, Sam chooses to be silent. He experiences negative feelings of loss and failure and stops singing, limiting himself to being unable to confirm his existence through singing (to himself and to others) (Hentschel, 2017; Burrows, 1980; Leijonhufvud, 2011). In Sam's own words, he does not feel like he is breathing during this period, since singing is such a vital part of him. After one and a half years, when Sam's voice starts to settle and he has practised singing for a while, he chooses to start singing in a choir and join HME. Sam seems happy and set on singing for life. Within Sam's singing situation, his singing voice is mostly seen as something that can be changed. It is possible to see that some parts of Sam's story relate to gender, as he talks of the feeling of "being wrong" as a negative experience stemming from being misgendered because he does not conform to the gender-voice type alignment view. That said, Sam's singing situations seem to be defined more by experiences of feeling, or not feeling, like a skilled singer. To summarise, Sam experiences his singing body as both freedom and facticity, depending on the given circumstances.

Erik's singing situations

Like Sam, Erik sees his singing voice as a musical instrument and his singing skills as something that can be developed. Through Erik's years of singing experience, he has insight into how his singing works as a musical instrument embodied in its interpreter. Erik, like Sam, is upset over the loss of feeling like a skilful singer, pausing his plans to collaborate with musicians and record his songs in the studio. Like Sam, Erik also has no specific knowledge of how to adapt to the voice changes he experiences during HRT. Unlike Sam, Erik chooses to sing even when his voice changes peak, expressing himself through singing during the whole process (Burrows, 1980). For Erik, the ideal voice would be a "masculine voice" – in contrast to a "feminine voice" or, as Erik puts it, "as different from how it was before as possible". This relates to research showing how singing is surrounded by conceptions based on gender-voice type alignment, in particular, corresponding with Graham's (2022) description of the "gold standard" for trans singers undergoing HRT. Like Graham, Erik is aware that there are no guarantees for attaining that kind of voice when undergoing HRT, which concerns him initially. Like Sam, Erik has been experiencing situations where he has been misgendered on the basis of how his voice sounds, making him feel "wrong" (compare with "voice shame" in Bergesen Shei, 2007). Gradually, though, Erik's voice seems to fall in line with everything he wished for,

leaving him feeling very satisfied. Erik, like Sam, writes music adapted to his singing needs in accordance with his settling voice. As Erik chose to share that he was trans (FTM) going through HRT with some teachers at HME, he enabled teacher guidance and/or communication.

As in Sam's story, there are several aspects of the lived body (singing body) that appear as freedom or facticity in Erik's story. Erik views his singing voice as something he can change (freedom) and sings through the whole process. He makes it possible to confirm his existence through singing (to himself and to others). Like Sam, Erik is bothered by the loss of feeling like a skilful singer and chooses not to collaborate with a professional artist at the beginning of HRT. He also chooses to rap instead of singing vocals at the concert at HME and writes music that fits his changing voice. Erik's choices can be seen here as adaptations (freedom) based on a conception of the changes of the voice as impossible to change (facticity), and so, like Sam, Erik seems to experience his singing voice as facticity and freedom at the same time. Although Erik never chooses to be silent, he chooses to adapt to the surrounding situation to feel like a skilful singer. Erik's story relates to gender, as he talks of his singing voice in relation to his own and others' expectations and actions in accordance with conceptions based on gender-voice type alignment. To summarise, Erik, like Sam, experiences his singing body as both freedom and facticity, depending on the given circumstances.

Conclusion

The human voice goes through several changes throughout life, regardless of gender and gender identity. As Welch (2006) underlines, humans can produce varied singing behaviours determined by age as well as anatomical and physiological factors affected by social and cultural situations. I may therefore conclude that all individual voices are in a constant state of change, making a monolithic view of the human voice impossible. Returning to the first research question posed in the introduction - "How do the participants experience aspects of the singing body in music education settings—as elements they can or cannot change?" - I find that, given the theoretical perspective of this article, humans can exist in several situations at once, as exemplified by Sam and Erik when they show us that a trans individual's (FTM) singing voice during HRT can be experienced as both alterable and impossible to change at the same time. This confirms what earlier researchers have underlined, namely that trans singers should not be treated as a heterogeneous group, but as individuals. The result of this article tells us that just as the singing voice can be experienced as both alterable and impossible to change, so can gender. The experience of gender and/or the experience of your singing voice can both be seen as situations where both biological and social aspects are intertwined and in flux, both related to the body's facticity and freedom. Consequently, every human lived body is experienced subjectively, in its own way and right.

Returning to the second research question - "What impact do these experiences have on the choices made by the participants regarding singing in music education settings?" - I suggest that the conception of gender-voice type alignment does not allow for processes

like Sam's or Erik's (or for gender fluidity) since gender and the singing voice are seen as facticity. Traditional views of choir singing dictate that if you are female, you sing soprano or alto, and if you are male, you sing tenor or bass. But what of Sam or Erik? As Sam told me, he chose to leave the choir since he was unsure where to stand or what to sing when he had undergone a part of HRT. Applying gender-voice type alignment as a basis, an inclusive choir leader could allow a trans singer to change from soprano to bass, for example, after the transition. But in doing this, the conception of gender and singing is only confirmed as facticity, reducing the freedom to choose. Sam and Erik identified as skilled singers, but the lack of information on singing during HRT meant they had to navigate their changing voices alone. This can be seen as an example of how HME failed to include trans issues in education: knowledgeable vocal or music teachers could have offered Sam and Erik more strategies for singing during the process instead of leaving them to find out for themselves.

Considering Sam's story, I question whether it is possible to transition as a trans singer in a choir based on voice-gender alignment without having to share this with others in the choir (as it would be visible by seating arrangements, dividing of parts and suchlike). At worst, not being able to decide on when or with whom you share your transition could be experienced as discrimination. In Sweden, all inhabitants have the right to be protected from discrimination on the grounds of sex and transgender identity or expression (Discrimination Act, 2008:567, section 4). Moving away from voice-gender alignment and a one-size-fits-all view of singing practices would not only create safer, more caring spaces for trans singers (McManus and Carter, 2023) but for all singing individuals in HME and other music settings.

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Biography

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