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“On the Road Again”: Traveling with Transgender, Non-Binary, and Gender Expansive Singers in Your Ensemble

By Melanie E. Stapleton

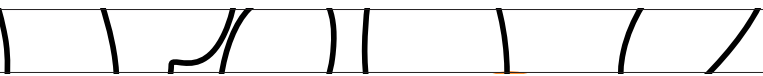
I still remember the palpable excitement I felt in middle school when my future high school choir director came to talk to us about what we could look forward to if we enrolled in high school choir. Admittedly, I was already biased from my upbringing. My dad’s side of the family cherished music in all its forms, particularly singing, so much so that my aunt had studied vocal performance at the Manhattan School of Music, and our traditional family singing of the blessing, “God is Great” before dinnertime often ended in a variety of four-part harmonies. But what really helped to solidify my enrollment decision was the director’s discussion of choir trips.

Every year the ensemble got to go on a trip, annually alternating between “big trips” and “small trips” to ensure they wouldn’t become too cost prohibitive. While these trips naturally included choral performances, I was more excited about the prospect of riding rides at Disney World while my friends were stuck in geometry class.

It’s impossible for me to separate the experience of being in a choral ensemble from the thrill of a new geographical adventure. As I transitioned from high

school choir student to an undergraduate music education student and finally became a choir director in my own right, choir trips were a foundational part of the process. These trips were not only fun, but instrumental to my musical, professional, and personal growth. In the trips I took with my high school choir, I experienced live mariachi music for the first time in San Antonio, Texas, and discovered the myriad styles of music performances present in Branson, Missouri. Professional skills like being punctual to call times and being reliable were repeatedly instilled in me. Travelling with other adolescent humans taught me how to be more courteous and empathetic toward my peers. There were unintended life lessons along the way as well, such as finally learning how to whistle whilst on the bus, or discovering that one errant chili dog can wreak inadvertent chaos. I would not be the same person I am today without those trips.

However, as the only out transgender person in all of my choral ensembles over the years, I repeatedly had to navigate hurdles that my cisgender colleagues did not. Trans issues were not readily visible or distinguishable from the larger LGBTQ+ issues in the mainstream,



particularly while I was a high school or undergraduate college student. My cisgender directors, like many others, did not understand or anticipate these hurdles because they never really had to address them before. This led to multiple instances where I was implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, discouraged by directors from participating in these incredible trips, such as being told in college that people would find me “disgusting” simply because I existed as a transgender woman. These experiences fortunately did not prevent me from going on these trips that I enjoyed so much, but rather furthered my desire to effect change in the choral and music education worlds so that other cis directors would stop attempting to discourage their transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive singers (TGE) from going on trips.

Over the past few years, I have created resources¹ and presented lectures on working with TGE music students across the United States in locales ranging from major cities and universities to rural school districts and community ensembles. One of the most common questions I still receive from many choir directors centers around the “right way” to include a TGE singer, particularly one who is a minor, on choir tours and overnight trips. Unfortunately, there simply isn’t just one “right way.” My motto when it comes to working with TGE singers and musicians is “Every situation is different and contextual.” What works for one TGE singer might not work for another. This is especially true considering the recent rapid rise of anti-trans legislation. In 2023, 589 pieces of legislation targeting TGE people were introduced in the United States. At the time of this article’s writing, eighty-five of those laws have passed, with approximately half of the bills still undecided.² This means that many directors are operating under a variety of legal circumstances and have to navigate their own specific contexts to find what works best for them and their singers. Even in the TGE community, discourse around this subject is ever evolving, with TGE directors favoring different options based on their own paradigms and beliefs. It would be imprudent to declare one option as the “best” or “right” option. What follows is an examination of the pros and cons of different potential options for a director to consider as well as some universal guiding

principles about trips with TGE singers to keep in mind so that directors can make the best decision possible for their singers.

Terminology to Know

While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the entirety of LGBTQ+ and TGE related vocabulary,³ I believe it’s necessary to distinguish a few terms that are often conflated when discussing TGE people, specifically the difference between someone’s Assigned Sex at Birth (ASAB) and their gender identity. ASAB is simply the sex you were assigned by medical professionals when you were born; genitalia is typically the main distinguisher informing whether “Male” or “Female” is written on a birth certificate. Though sex is often reduced to this male/female binary, there are a multitude of physical, hormonal, and chromosomal variations found in humans (especially when considering the existence of those who are intersex), suggesting that sex, like gender, is less of a binary and more of a spectrum.⁴

Gender identity is someone’s internal sense of who they are, separate from one’s external features or their ASAB. Most individuals’ ASAB and gender identity line up. These people fall under the label of “cisgender” and represent a majority of the population. The term “transgender” is used as an umbrella term for those whose ASAB and gender identity do not line up in some way. There are many different identities that can fall under the transgender umbrella, and while some are comfortable identifying with the “transgender” or “trans” designator, some opt to use other terms that best match their own identity. I utilize the abbreviation TGE throughout this article as an attempt to universally include both those who identify as transgender, as well as those who use other terms for their identities.

Many people conflate gender identity with sexual orientation, which refers to who someone is attracted to. This has led to a common misconception that if somebody is TGE it instantly means they are also gay, lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual. Research suggests that this is not the case, that gender identity and sexual orientation are “weakly correlated constructs” at best.⁵ Or, to put it in layman’s terms, who you *are* in terms of

your gender more than likely has little to no impact on who you *like*.

Guiding Principles of Travel with TGE Singers

Before we examine the positives and negatives of various rooming options, it is best to operate under a few guiding principles that will assist you in planning your trips. These are not a fully comprehensive list, but I believe they are some of the most important considerations to consider.

Every decision about a TGE singer should be made with the singer, not for them.

TGE singers, regardless of age, will have the best understanding of what makes them comfortable or uncomfortable. Any decisions or issues that the conductor-teacher encounters should be shared openly and honestly with the singer, so that they have a comprehensive understanding of the limitations the director is operating under. There may be times when the director is unable to be fully transparent due to policy constraints, but often there are ways to still give a sense of the general barriers being faced. Outside of a very few specific outlying scenarios, it is never okay to make a decision about the TGE singer's rooming without their input, even for seemingly innocuous or small matters. Including parents or guardians in these discussions may be a requirement for TGE minors, but it is not okay to "out" a TGE singer to their family without consent. This action not only takes away the singer's autonomy



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but could also put them at risk for experiencing negative outcomes such as the creation of a hostile living environment, rejection from the family unit, or even homelessness.

Familiarize yourself with the current legislation in your own area as well as the area(s) to which you are traveling

As choir directors, we already have a large number of plates that we have to keep spinning. It is not realistic for you to know every single city, state, and federal policy when it comes to topics that involve LGBTQ+ and TGE people (including school district/school-level policies). However, when planning a trip, it is essential for you to understand what laws are currently active, particularly with the current rise of anti-trans legisla-

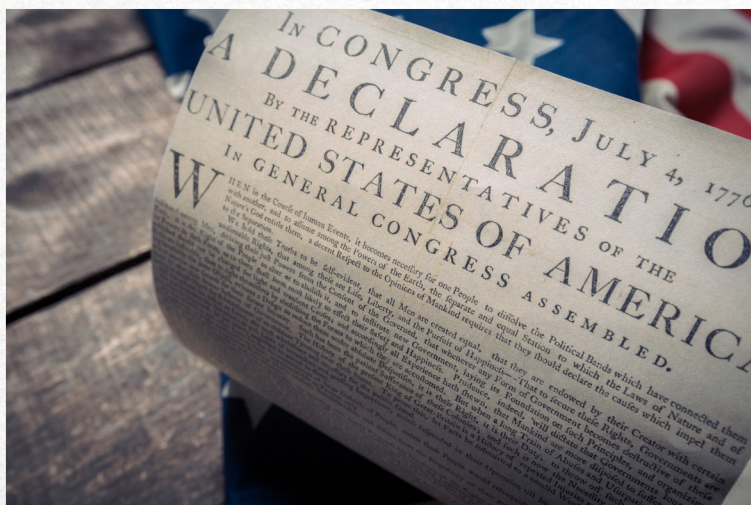
tion. It's important to make a concerted effort to know what bathrooms TGE singers are legally allowed to use, whether there may be a risk to singers who have gender-affirming medication such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or pubertal blockers (some states have banned or have attempted to ban gender-affirming care for TGE youth), or if a TGE singer could face repercussions for living authentically while in public. For example, early in 2023, Tennessee passed an anti-drag performance bill that was worded so generally that some could interpret it as restricting TGE people from existing in public while being their authentic self. This bill was struck down by a federal judge as unconstitutional, but the Tennessee Attorney General released a statement saying the state would eventually attempt to appeal the ruling.⁶

Given the myriad safety concerns, it is your responsi-

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bility to identify where you will be traveling and to take the initiative to find out what laws are currently on the books. While as directors, we never anticipate there to be legal issues on trips for our singers, particularly for such benign matters as medications or rest stops, it is always best to be prepared.

Have a plan for bathroom and dressing rooms for every planned stop—and do your best to prepare for the unplanned ones as well.

Pre-planning bathroom and dressing room logistics is especially important when traveling in states that have, or will soon have, active laws that prohibit TGE people from using the bathroom that match their gender identity instead of their ASAB. For any stop in your itinerary, you should make sure that your TGE singers will have a place to take care of bathroom or clothes-changing needs. This may entail specifically choosing venues, restaurants, or gas stations that have gender-neutral, single-stall, or family bathrooms. Or perhaps it means having somebody ensure that a gendered public bathroom or changing space is empty before the TGE singer goes in—though this is a notably unsubtle and potentially embarrassing option. Sometimes, no action is needed at all, as sometimes TGE people can exist without others in public realizing their identity. As the first guiding principle states, try to make sure you privately create a plan with your TGE singer ahead of time for various stops. This will allow the TGE singer to navigate these stops with discretion and dignity.

Be aware of any pertinent emergency information as needed.

No director wants to have an emergency situation occur while on a trip. Life doesn't always adhere to this plan, and sometimes emergencies happen. For TGE people, emergencies, particularly the medical ones, can be fraught with potential challenges. Often, the name or pronouns that a TGE person uses do not match the name or gender listed on their legal documentation or health insurance. Make sure to prepare yourself by knowing what name/gender is listed on these documents and be ready to discretely educate first respond-

ers or medical professionals about the correct way to refer to your singer. You may need to step in as their advocate until their emergency contact arrives or can be reached.

There are also multiple states that have passed legislation that allow religiously affiliated hospitals or doctors to deny care based on religious beliefs.⁷ It may seem hypothetical or hyperbolic, but being denied medical treatment because of gender identity is a very real possibility for TGE people. While this situation is one that will most likely be dealt with by the singer's emergency contact, there is a chance you may encounter this, especially if the contact is temporarily unreachable. Try to consider how you would handle this event if it were to occur.

Examining the Pros and Cons of TGE Rooming Options

There are multiple options available when it comes to the rooming assignments for TGE singers. Each of the following options have their own pros and potential cons attached to them, many of which are dependent on your specific context. The following list of rooming options is not exhaustive, but I believe it accounts for the majority of contexts and offers a realistic and pragmatic lens to rooming for our TGE singers. It is imperative that you weigh these options with your singer to determine the best solution. Typically, I work with the TGE singer to determine their rooming placement/assignment first before I open rooming selections for other students. This allows them to be with friends or peers they will feel safe with and minimizes the risk of being in a private room where they could be harmed emotionally or physically.

I should also preemptively note here that many parents, guardians, or administrators still view rooming through an antiquated heteronormative lens, in which “impropriety” typically only occurs when sexes are mixed in a room. This means that some believe, regardless of a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, if somebody was Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB) and they are in a room where the others were Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB), there is inherently something wrong or improper about this because “men” or “boys”

can't be trusted to be alone with "women" or "girls" in private without something romantic or sexual in nature occurring. While this can be true for cisgender, straight people, it does not take into account the existence of those who are LGBTQ+ (including TGE people). Be prepared to have a greater probability of receiving complaints of "impropriety" when those with differing ASABs are placed in the same room by these parents or guardians, despite the reality that "improper" behavior is not bound by ASAB.

Rooming Option #1: The TGE singer rooms with friends based on gender identity instead of ASAB. (Ex: A trans girl rooms with other girls)

Pros: This is typically a preferred option for TGE singers. Their gender is affirmed, they are treated similarly to their peers, they still get to have the social experience of rooming with others, and they're not excluded.

Potential Cons: Some students or parents may express discomfort or levy accusations of impropriety, and there may be legislation or policies—particularly for choral educators—that prohibit this option. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, FERPA (for those to whom it applies to) may forbid you from disclosing aspects of a choral student's transgender status, including their medical history, birth name, or ASAB.

Rooming Option #2: The TGE singer rooms with friends based on ASAB instead of gender identity. (Ex: A trans girl rooms with cis boys)

Pros: This can circumvent any additional steps of disclosure, or for educators, having to contact administration since the ASABs in the room will "match up." The singer still experiences the social elements of being with other members of the ensemble and the director will more than likely not have to navigate parental anger since this is the cisnormative and heteronormative "standard."

Potential Cons: The singer's gender is not affirmed, they may feel extremely uncomfortable or out of place being

with others of a different gender identity (it is more of a quasi-social inclusion instead of full inclusion), and others in the room may feel uncomfortable. There still may be claims of impropriety (particularly from those who conflate sexual orientation and gender identity) and this option may violate the law/policy in more liberal areas that have protections in place for TGE people.


Rooming Option #3: The TGE singer has their own room for the trip (with the financial difference paid by the choral program not by the singer/singer's family).

Pros: The singer gets to have their own private room, there is no worry of potential bullying, discomfort, or accusations of impropriety, and the director does not have to have any conversations with other parents (choral educators do not have to get administrators involved).

Potential Cons: The singer may feel isolated, alienated, or excluded, other students or parents may say that it's "unfair" when they find out, the director has to navigate the financials of making up the cost difference for the solo room (it is not ethical to charge a student extra because of their gender identity), and the singer misses out on a social element of the trip.

Rooming Option #4: The TGE singer rooms with a family member in the choir or with their parent or guardian, who helps chaperone the trip.

Pros: The TGE singer isn't alone in their room, there will be no accusations of impropriety, and it will minimize the chance of others saying it's "unfair," since rooming with family—especially parents—isn't always considered fun. The director does not have to have any conversations with other parents (choral educators do not have to get administrators involved), and there's a built-in chaperone for the trip.



Potential Cons: The TGE singer may feel isolated or excluded from their friends and peers, rooming with siblings or family can create its own unique challenges that do not arise with non-family members, and the singer may feel embarrassed about the situation. The director may also have to navigate the cost difference for this option as well.


Rooming Option #5: The TGE singer rooms with others who are TGE or LGBTQ+ identifying.

Pros: The TGE singer still gets to experience all the social benefits and elements of the trip, they will be with other people like them, the room will more than likely feel safe and welcoming, there might be no cost difference to worry about, and parental conversations may be easier because of the similarities in situations.

Potential Cons: Students may feel alienated or “othered” from the rest of the choir; there could be accusations of impropriety; parents, guardians, or administrators could express discomfort at having a room just for LGBTQ+ students; and the director may encounter law/policies that prohibit this option. The director may also have to navigate a cost difference depending on the number of people in the room.

Conclusion

You may have noticed that nowhere in the rooming options provided is an option for the TGE singer to not go on the trip. I do not believe it is ethical to discourage, dissuade, or forbid a singer to have the same experience as the rest of the ensemble simply due to their gender identity. Most TGE singers already have to deal with discrimination and marginalization in their lives. As their choir directors, it is our responsibility to take the initiative and put in the extra work that is needed. Educating yourself and working with your TGE singers to develop a plan that meets their specific contextual needs will ensure that your trips are successful adventures for *all* of your singers and not just *some*. TGE singers deserve to have the chance to sing in new places

with their friends, learn new skills, and make treasured memories. It’s up to you to help make that happen. 

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NOTES

- ¹ Melanie E. Stapleton, “Teaching Transgender Students in the Music Classroom,” accessed December 27th, 2023, www.blurringthebinary.com
- ² Trans Legislation Tracker, “2023 Anti-Trans Bills Tracker,” accessed December 27, 2023, <https://translegislation.com>
- ³ PFLAG, “PFLAG National Glossary,” <https://pflag.org/glossary/>
- ⁴ Dillon E. King, “The Inclusion of Sex and Gender Beyond the Binary in Toxicology,” *Frontiers of Toxicology*, no. 4 (2022), doi: 10.3389/ftox.2022.929219
- ⁵ Roi Jacobson and Daphna Joel, “An Exploration of the Relations Between Self-Reported Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in an Online Sample of Cisgender Individuals,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 47, no. 8 (2018): 2407, doi: 10.1007/s10508-018-1239-y
- ⁶ Caroline Anders, “Tennessee Drag Ban is Unconstitutional, Federal Judge Rules,” *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2023, accessed December 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/06/03/tennessee-drag-law-unconstitutional/>
- ⁷ Jo Yurcaba, “More than 1 in 8 LGBTQ People Live in States Where Doctors Can Refuse to Treat Them,” *NBC News*, July 28, 2022, accessed December 27, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-health-and-wellness/1-8-lgbtq-people-live-states-doctors-can-refuse-treat-rcna39161>