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ConcerT: Testosterone and the Transgender Singing Voice

Time magazine's June 9, 2014 cover story proclaimed the arrival of "The Transgender Tipping Point" and highlighted increasing awareness of transgender issues. Despite such growing awareness, real understanding of transgender people's experiences continues to be limited and significant gaps remain in our understanding about the myriad impacts of hormone replacement therapy. For people assigned female at birth (AFAB) who take testosterone, one of the most desired changes is a lower voice. While the voices of transgender people who take testosterone do get lower, anecdotal evidence also suggests that these transitions can lead to problems including a persistently weak, hoarse, or unstable voice. The lack of systematic information on transgender voice transitions makes the decision to start testosterone especially difficult for transgender singers because they can either take testosterone and acquire desired secondary sex characteristics but risk losing functional use of their voice or continue living with a body that does not align with their gender.

In this research-creation project we will (1) conduct a case study on the process and outcomes of the voice transition of an AFAB amateur transgender singer on testosterone therapy (Dr. Agha), and (2) use the data collected in that research as source material and inspiration in devising and curating a community-engaged, interdisciplinary performance. The case study will address the lack of rigorous research on transgender voice transition, especially the effects of testosterone therapy on an adult transmasculine singer. The pedagogical implications of the voice transition process are also largely unknown and first-person reflections on the experiences of voice change as it relates to gender identity and the singing voice are rare and unsystematic. We will collect and incorporate these preliminary findings into an interdisciplinary social justice concert using art song, choral music, documentary film, animation, and storytelling. We intend to situate art song within a relevant social context and capitalize on its unique ability to convey intimate and complex emotions in order to reinvigorate its appeal to present-day audiences and realize its potential to inspire social justice activism. The performance objective is to raise awareness, stimulate informed public discourse, and create empathic connections between the audience and the transgender community. The performance will seek to empower the transgender community directly by documenting and celebrating a supportive transition experience. We will evaluate the collaborative process by conducting interviews and focus groups with community partners and artistic collaborators in the initial creative phase, throughout the process, and post-performance. By partnering with community organizations, assessing the creative process and performances, and using varied media in live performance, our goal is ultimately to effect social progress and change.

Exploring transgender issues is especially timely because, while there is growing media attention, there remains a foundation of transphobia as well as backlash to enhanced visibility (e.g. anti-transgender laws in North Carolina and Texas). It is timely, too, because Dr. Agha's transition has already begun and the window to document this transition and develop a performance inspired by it is time-sensitive. The project will advance critical knowledge in voice science, pedagogy, and research-creation. It will provide opportunities for a Master's level graduate student to learn research skills, participate in an interdisciplinary creative process, and perform, as well as for four undergraduate students who will conduct interviews, and one undergraduate student who will assist with set design. The project's primary output, the performance, will also be key to knowledge dissemination. The audience will include both transgender and cisgender members of the public at large. These groups will benefit from opportunities for enhanced understanding, empathy, and reflection of their own experiences in a public setting. In addition to the performance we will electronically publish a pamphlet summarizing our findings and those from other research on transgender voice transitions. The link will be shared in the program at the final performances, with community organizations, to readers of Dr. Agha's blog, and members of online communities.

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