

6-2023

# Transgender Voices in Composition: Exploring the Relationship Between Gender Identity and Music Composition

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## Recommended Citation

Thompson, Andrew, "Transgender Voices in Composition: Exploring the Relationship Between Gender Identity and Music Composition" (2023). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 1373.  
<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1404>

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Transgender Voices in Composition: Exploring the Relationship Between Gender Identity and  
Music Composition

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Music

in

University Honors

and

Percussion Performance

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2023

## Introduction

In modern contemporary music ensembles, transgender musicians lack acknowledgement and the ability to present themselves authentically in roles as both composer and performer. Like people of all gender identities, transgender and nonbinary people often engage in music making activities for a variety of reasons, such as finding a community of peers with similar interests, expressing themselves creatively, or simply improving their own musical abilities. The world of classical music has been classified by gender in various ways for the majority of its tradition, but since choral and instrumental spaces are organized slightly differently, the difficulties transgender vocalists face in musical spaces as a result of their transition is different than the difficulties transgender instrumentalists face. Transgender men who take testosterone experience a drop in their natural vocal range, while transgender women who take estrogen do not experience a similar change in their vocal range and, thus, often engage in voice feminization therapy to train themselves to speak in a higher register that mimics the vocal range of a cisgender woman. Since choral groups are traditionally organized by “male” and “female” voices, transgender vocalists, especially transgender women, are often forced to publicly advocate for themselves in order to be properly represented and respected in the group. While transgender instrumentalists don’t experience the same physical impacts of their transition on their musical skills, navigating musical spaces as a transgender person can be difficult due to the traditionally masculine environment associated with different instruments and styles of music. Historically, men made up a majority of professional instrumentalists, and certain instruments, like brass and percussion instruments, are considered to be especially masculine and are still largely dominated by male players today. The implicit gender roles found in instrumental ensembles can be uniquely difficult to navigate because of the subtle nature of the gendered

environment. Unlike choral spaces, the stereotypes surrounding the gender roles prescribed to instruments are not explicitly stated, so musicians are left to decode these norms and navigate these spaces in the dark. Because of this, I am interested in exploring nuances of the creative process from the perspective of transgender and nonbinary composers writing instrumental music—how do these composers explore their identity through an instrument that doesn't have the capability of enriching the composition with additional meaning through lyrics or text? In this paper, I will explore how the subject matter, compositional process, and reception of a piece is affected by one's transition as a transgender or gender non-conforming person. I will also explore these ideas through my own musical composition for two percussionists. Through this paper and my composition, I aim to discover to what extent transgender people's identities and experiences affect their compositional process by exploring the current scholarly research, primary sources, and synthesizing the existing literature with the experience of composing my own work.

The academic discourse surrounding transgender musicians focuses mostly on the experiences of transgender vocalists, as the heavily gendered space of choir is difficult to navigate as one reimagines their place in the world. The articles "Melanie's Story: A Narrative Account of a Transgender Music Educator's Journey" by Sarah J. Bartolome and "Teaching Transgender Singers Part 2: The Singers' Perspectives" by Brian Manternach detail the way transgender vocalists navigate their participation in heavily gendered choral spaces while they transition, often needing to advocate for themselves to feel represented in the space while simultaneously dealing with the physical changes that transitioning presents. Bartolome's article follows Melanie's journey as a transgender music student to an educator, and depicts the specific difficulties she faced during and after her transition on account of her gender identity. Bartolome describes how Melanie was often misgendered by teachers in choral spaces, from being casually

misgendered in rehearsals to being told she needed to hide her gender identity from audiences while performing. Manternach's article also details the unique experience of being a transgender vocalist through interviews with transgender women and men, which gives a broader spectrum of transgender experiences to learn from—the transgender men interviewed described how hormone replacement therapy limited their vocal range and affected their stamina and control while performing. Relearning how to use their voice in performance is a uniquely difficult experience for transgender vocalists, whether they are retraining themselves in voice feminization therapy or regaining control over their voice in a new register. Subjects in Manternach's article also discussed the importance of the representation and visibility of transgender musicians in classical music—two interviewees mentioned the lack of transgender vocalists as disheartening to them while they navigated their transition, as there were no mainstream transgender vocalists to look up to for inspiration. Instead, transgender vocalists are tasked with providing representation for others, paving the way for a future generation of transgender and gender non-conforming musicians. In both articles, the authors express that support, in the form of emotional support and allyship, from other musicians or peers throughout one's transition was especially important.

Other articles, like "The Benefits of Ensemble Participation for 2SLGBTQ+ Musicians" by Miranda Vivian Clayton highlight the importance of school music classes and community music ensembles for all members of the LGBTQ+ community, highlighting the importance of community and queer spaces. According to Clayton, the most common positive impacts from participating in music ensembles include finding a safe space for self expression where musicians can also make friends with other queer or gender non-conforming people. Since brass and percussion instruments are seen as masculine instruments, the ability of queer and gender non-conforming people to find similar individuals in the group helps create a supportive

community. However, since Clayton's study is a survey, the article does not go into depth about unique personal experiences transgender and gender non-conforming musicians had as a part of their participation in instrumental ensembles. While academic literature highlights the unique difficulties that transgender vocalists face, there is a lack of scholarship addressing how the issues transgender instrumentalists face are similar to or different from these issues.

In order to address this gap in the academic discourse, I decided to interview transgender composers to understand how their creative process and conceptualization of music developed alongside their gender identity. Though I reached out to several different transgender and gender non-conforming composers for this project, I was only able to schedule an interview with one composer. Contemporary composer Sarah Hennies is based in upstate New York and mainly writes for smaller instrumental ensembles—her works focus on a broad swath of sociopolitical issues, including queer and transgender identity. Since Hennies mostly writes instrumental pieces and is a percussionist, a large amount of her compositions include or feature percussion. Hennies' most well-known composition, *Contralto*, is a multi-media work featuring live music and a film that “explores transfeminine identity through the elements of ‘voice feminization’ therapy” and features a cast of transgender women accompanied by a string quartet and three percussionists (Hennies, Bio). Hennies' dedication to using music as a platform to evaluate social issues highlight the importance of activism in music, affecting change through the emotional appeal of art.

In my interview with Sarah Hennies, I attempted to focus on how the compositional process related to one's experience as a transgender person in ways that are unique to instrumental compositions. In her essay “Queer Percussion,” Hennies describes how the act of choosing instruments for compositions and performances feels innately queer to her, as she is

subverting traditional expectations of what an instrument is or how one finds a musical sound as a percussionist in the same way that she subverts unspoken societal norms by being a transgender woman. By working outside the normal constraints of what is and isn't considered musical, transgender artists are able to publicly question and criticize traditional gender roles and other societal structures in their art, and encourage others to do the same. By including aspects of one's transgender identity in one's own music, it begins to fill gaps in academic discourse by normalizing gender non-conformity in classical music.

### **Interview**

My interview with Sarah Hennies focused on her experiences as a transgender woman, and how this affected her compositional process. Throughout the interview process, I sought to explore the ways in which composers use their compositions to convey complex ideas about gender identity and transgender liberation. Commenting on the process of selecting specific percussion instruments for a composition, Hennies spoke to the importance of searching for a specific sound in order to convey one's ideas, rather than searching for a specific instrument and then settling on a sound from the instrument's catalog of possible noises. Similarly, Hennies elaborated that not specifying instruments can be freeing for the composer and performer, as it gives both parties more freedom and, thus, more input into the sonic landscape and emotional quality of the performance of the piece. While these two ideas may seem to oppose each other, using restrictiveness or freedom to heighten creativity allows the composer to hone in on exactly what sound they want to convey a specific idea. Thinking about musical sounds in this unconventional way allows both the composer and the performer to subvert traditional expectations about what sounds or ways of producing sound are musical and expressive. While watching a percussionist use a bow on a woodblock may appear comical on its own, in the

context of Hennies' *Contralto*, the unique technique carries a special weight and meaning to both the performers and the audience. To convey specific emotions in performances, Hennies mentioned the importance of the musician using their body to create physical movement, which visualizes emotion for the audience and can create the impression of effort or struggle in a performance. Especially for a transgender or nonbinary person who may have difficult or complicated feelings about their physical appearance, using one's own body as a part of musical expression can be a freeing experience, where societal expectations are subverted or completely ignored in performance to truly express oneself. Just by existing in society, transgender and nonbinary people's bodies are scrutinized and judged, so using one's body in performance to highlight difficulties and struggle is especially meaningful for transgender and nonbinary musicians. Cisgender musicians can better relate to the experiences of transgender people when performing works by them, as it allows them to better understand how gender non-conforming people may conceptualize and use their body differently than cisgender performers.

While discussing her compositional process, Hennies spoke about feeling like she was inventing a "new thing" every time she composed, and how she attempts to give the musicians freedom in their performance to not have to imitate a specific sound, but rather to create their own interpretation of the sound as they perform. This idea of invention in composition and performance is similar to a transgender or nonbinary person's creation of their own identity—one has the freedom to create something uniquely theirs, influenced by the things around them but not attempting to recreate an image of something that already exists, and instead paving the way for their own unique vision. While discussing the implications of creating art that deals with gender identity, Hennies mentioned how she is often categorized as "the trans composer" even when her compositions deal with different themes. Hennies described the inevitability of



categorization: “by virtue of the fact that I’m doing it, it’s trans art.” While it may be difficult to escape certain thematic interpretations from the audience as a transgender composer, through my conversation with Hennies, it became obvious just how important representation for people of all gender identities in music is. Though it can be constricting to be defined as a composer by only one aspect of one’s identity, the existence of transgender musicians will be normalized over time. As more transgender and nonbinary composers and musicians create more music dealing with the complex and multifaceted nature of their lives, people may begin to recognize that art is innately influenced by every aspect of the creator’s life—art is influenced by one’s experiences, opinions, and identity, and while it is impossible to separate these factors from the art, it is also impossible to distill a person down to only one aspect of their identity. Therefore, if more transgender and nonbinary composers write music, whether or not it deals with their relationship with their gender identity, then maybe their music will be recognized as complex and multifaceted, and not blindly categorized as transgender music.

The subjects discussed in this interview highlight the importance of transgender and gender non-conforming representation in music. Topics like physicality while playing, instrumentation, and establishing one’s identity as a composer are not specific to transgender musicians, but are familiar ideas that have been reinvisioned or used in a new way to reflect the composer’s relationship with their gender identity. For example, a transgender musician makes artistic decisions to reflect the music in their body differently than a cisgender musician would, heightening elements of the music that may relate to feelings of gender dysphoria or self image that are unique to one’s experience with their gender identity.

Similarly, the format of a recording, specifically whether there is a video component, can affect the way musicians perform a piece—musicians may highlight elements of the performance

in their physicality that are not expressed in an audio-only recording, causing them to make different musical choices to reflect the same idea in a new way. The unbending nature of certain elements of performance forces musicians to be flexible in as many aspects of their playing as possible, to adjust to new settings and situations seamlessly. It is the musician's job to make sure their performance communicates their vision of the art in a way that is comprehensible to the audience, whether or not the visual component is included in the performance. Like transgender and gender non-conforming people, musicians are tasked with molding themselves to fit any situation and provoke a desired reaction from the audience around them.

Cisgender and transgender musicians use the same tools to create music, but transgender musicians are tasked with using these tools to communicate their unique experiences with self image and gender identity as a transgender or gender non-conforming person. This is similar to the concept of "queering" a space, which refers to the act of creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ people which is "predicated on a queer revolution ... and the becoming-revolutionary of the queer" (Conley, 25). The act of queering a space is often done informally, in order to create a safe space for LGBTQ+ people in a society where individualism is valued over community. For example, music ensembles like orchestra, choir, or marching band serve as a queer space for young LGBTQ+ musicians that "fosters personal growth, collaboration, and connection" (Clayton, 36). By continuing to create music in an unapologetically queer way, transgender and gender non-conforming musicians can begin to carve out the space for a welcoming and supportive environment for their self-expression by "queering" the classical music world and inviting more innovations in composition.

### The Compositional Process

In response to the research I conducted for this paper, I wrote a new work for percussion duo entitled *Transgressions (Body + Soul)*. My composition is inspired by the act of performance and deals with feeling pressure from society to perform a specific way, especially in regard to music performance and the performance of one's gender identity. The very act of performing requires that artists are vulnerable with their audience, and open themselves up to the reactions of those around them. Through this composition, I explore the nuances of performance, and compare and contrast the different kinds of performance that people engage with daily. My composition is written for two players: player one on vibraphone and a two-octave set of tuned metal pipes, while player two plays marimba. I intentionally arranged the instrumentation of player one to feature two different metal instruments with inherently different colors and timbres, in order to create a feeling of separation between the two main voices throughout the piece. I also chose the tuned metal pipes as they are an instrument the performer has to construct themselves, creating a melodic instrument out of metal pipes originally made to hold electrical wiring. This process is analogous to the experience of constructing one's own identity as a transgender person; living in a society where resources for transgender people are hard to come by and difficult to obtain forces transgender people to personify a do-it-yourself spirit and co-opt resources for transgender self-realization. Each transgender and nonbinary individual's experience is slightly different, yet the identity that is shared between those individuals bonds them together and creates a community that is very important to its members; individual tuned pipes may have slightly different color or timbre of sound from other pipes in the set, but when they are used together as one instrument, the pipes blend and create a cohesive sound that both blends with and contrasts the vibraphone. My main inspiration for the piece derives from my

review of the literature, talking with transgender composers, and listening to their music, as I've listened to many works by transgender performers and composers about their complex and nuanced experience as a trans- or gender non-conforming person that have inspired me to imagine what my experience with gender identity would sound like. *Transgressions (Body + Soul)* deals with the contrasting forces that become glaringly apparent as one travels down the path of self-acceptance as a transgender or gender non-confirming person in a cisgender world. I attempt to highlight a dichotomy between two contrasting forces in as many aspects of the music as possible, including instrumentation, form, harmony, and timbral differences between the both the vibraphone and metal pipes, as well as between the two players. As this is my first venture into composing a work of music, I have tried to keep the composition relatively short and straightforward, so that the message of the piece is not lost amongst complicated passages or dense, complex harmonies.

Since this was my first time composing a piece of music, my compositional process was full of trial and error. I began writing my composition after I had already interviewed Sarah Hennies, so I tried to use the knowledge I gained from that conversation to my advantage while I was composing. It was helpful to be able to play through what I was writing, to see if certain physical constraints concerning moving between the vibraphone and metal pipes affected the character or mood of the music. It was also helpful to record ideas down as I wrote them, so that I could arrange a rough edit on my computer and listen through what I was imagining in my head. This was especially helpful, as my perception of how things were supposed to sound and how they actually sounded were substantially different. It also allowed me to make edits and changes to the music easier, and being able to rearrange certain sections to try out different ideas helped me have a clearer idea of what I wanted the journey of my composition to be. Since I

added the composition as an element of my project later in the year, I expect to continue to edit my piece throughout the summer before I premiere it at my senior recital in the fall. In my recital, this piece will serve to question the status quo that upholds cisgendered perspectives as the norm in classical music. Especially since most of the most popular composers in percussion repertoire are cisgendered White men, this piece will remind the audience of the diversity of voices and ideas represented in classical music. While I still expect to deal with elements of trial and error as I continue to revise my composition, the interview I conducted with Sarah Hennies has equipped me with the resources to help me organize and direct my ideas, especially since this is my first venture into composing a work of music.

In the introduction of the piece, the vibraphone establishes the theme and the metal pipes act as a fragmented echo of the vibraphone (figure one), while the marimba gradually phases between different rhythms, subtly shifting where the audience hears the rhythmic center of the music (figure two). While player one experiments with sonic timbre and identity, player two undercuts the journey of player one by creating an unstable, constantly changing foundation. I didn't want the changing rhythms to disrupt the melody, so the marimba is constantly phasing from one rhythm to the next; by phasing, the marimba allows the energy to continue moving forward while still creating tension by constantly altering the pulse.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Metal Pipes, Vibraphone, and Marimba, in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The score consists of four measures. The Metal Pipes part has a few notes in the first measure and rests in the others. The Vibraphone part has a melodic line in the first measure, marked with a forte (f) dynamic, and rests in the following three measures. The Marimba part has rests in the first three measures and a rhythmic pattern in the fourth measure, marked with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Marimba part is annotated with 'Phase to next rhythm ...' and a double bar line with a repeat sign.

Figure One: *Transgressions (Body + Soul)* m. 1-4

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system, labeled with a measure number '6' at the beginning, consists of four measures. The bass staff contains eighth-note triplets, while the treble staff contains whole rests. The second system, labeled with a measure number '10' at the beginning, also consists of four measures. The bass staff contains eighth-note triplets, and the treble staff contains whole rests. Both systems include the annotation 'Phase to next rhythm ...' above the bass staff. The first system has three triplets in the bass staff, and the second system has three triplets followed by two quintuplets.

Figure Two: *Transgressions (Body + Soul)* m. 6-13

In the middle section, player one explores how the timbre of the pipes and the vibraphone interact, joining the two instruments into one sound (figure three), while player two takes charge of the melody and further distorts the theme (figure four). While the middle section is very consistent in its pulse, the marimba builds harmonic tension as the section goes on, creating more and more dissonance until a sudden explosive ending. The marimba leads the audience into the final section, playing an aggressive ostinato pattern that distorts the pulse and creates an uneasy, lopsided metric feel (figure five). In the beginning of the final section, the meter suddenly shifts from 4/4 to a pattern consisting of three measures of 6/4 and one measure of 3/8; while this pattern could have been notated completely in 3/8, the three measures of 6/4 establish a stable quarter note foundation that is quickly turned around by the 3/8 measure. As rhythmic and harmonic tension builds to the end, the marimba's ostinato pattern changes to alternating measures of 4/4 and 3/8, even further obscuring a regular pulse from the audience. While the marimba plays, the metal pipes vary the original theme from the introduction until it is nearly unrecognizable while the vibraphone takes on an accompanying role, descending through chords until all three instruments are grounded in three different tonal centers, building tension to the

end of the piece when all three instruments suddenly play in unison (figure six). After spending several minutes listening to both players increase tension, the sudden unison ending is jarring for the audience; being able to hear the timbres of all three instruments working together instead of fighting against each other feels like a sudden revelation about community, solidarity, and support. After spending the performance highlighting the difference between the three instruments, the unison ending reminds the audience that these differences can be used together to create something new and meaningful that would have never existed if not for the unique differences between the instruments.

49

Pipes

Vib.

Mrm.

Figure Three: *Transgressions (Body + Soul)* m. 49-52

73

Pipes

Vib.

Mrm.

Figure Four: *Transgressions (Body + Soul)* m. 73-77

Figure Five: *Transgressions (Body + Soul)* m. 87-92

Figure Six: *Transgressions (Body + Soul)* m. 116-117

Through this project, I was able to observe the compositional process of a few transgender and gender non-conforming musicians, as well as make my own first attempt at composing a work of music. Though the tools and processes are largely the same for transgender composers as they are for cisgender composers, the subject matter and finished project is very different between the two groups. As Sarah Hennies pointed out, any music that a transgender composer writes is immediately labeled as transgender music, while cisgender composers' music is not defined by the composer's gender identity. While it is important to recognize that transgender individuals have vastly different experiences from cisgender people that affect the way they understand and interact with the world, it is also important to recognize that



transgender composers are not defined solely by one aspect of their identity and to interact with their work in a way that honors the complexity of the individual. It is crucial to engage with transgender artists' work in a way that acknowledges many facets of their identity, as it awards them the same treatment that cisgender composers are automatically awarded. Future study from scholars in the field of contemporary classical music should address this gap in academic discourse surrounding transgender composers to help acknowledge this issue, as more exposure for transgender and gender non-conforming musicians will help normalize their existence. Though my composition is specifically about my experiences as a transgender musician, I was influenced by many life events and facets of my personality that are completely separate from my gender identity. It is important to understand that composers are influenced by many different things, so that one can appreciate the finished product as a whole while still recognizing the complexity of influences on the art.

### **Conclusion**

As this was my first venture into the compositional process, I learned a lot not only about creating music, but also about my own experiences as a transgender person. Creating a new work of music and creating a new identity for oneself in one's own body are extremely vulnerable processes that help people understand themselves more deeply, as they both require enough confidence and trust in oneself to boldly display the completed project for the world to see. One of the biggest conceptual differences between composing music and my experiences as a transgender person was the idea of audience—the physical realization of my own gender identity, while observable to those around me, is something I've carefully cultivated only for myself, with no concerns as to how others may perceive or misconstrue the image I have of myself in my head. However, with a work of music that lives separately from me, I found it more difficult to

focus only on my perception of the work, and spent a lot of time concerned with how the audience will perceive my piece, wondering if my intentions were clear enough to an audience that didn't yet exist. While this sort of thinking is important for a composer, since a published work of music will exist in many different forms and interpretations through the slight variations in individual performances, I realized while composing that the most important perception of my work is my own. Focusing on my own perception of my work and editing my piece based on my own reactions made the compositional process much more fulfilling than my initial process, where I attempted to predict how the audience would react. Composing in a way that honors one's own musical tastes is the most meaningful way to create.

While there may be similarities between transgender and non-binary composers' compositional processes due to their non-traditional gender identities, it is equally important to recognize how composers' different life experiences and individual personalities affect their musical works. In future projects, further interviews with transgender and non-binary composers will help to paint a broader picture of how gender identity impacts individuals' creative processes differently. For example, since I only interviewed one composer, the varied perspectives of people of color, disabled people, and non-binary or gender non-conforming people are markedly absent from this paper. It would be useful to conduct a survey of a broad swath of transgender and non-binary composers and artists in order to get more responses as to how one's compositional process evolved as they transitioned; a survey format where respondents are able to freely respond to a set of questions may yield more results than the one-on-one interview process I adopted, though it may be more difficult to verify the validity of these responses, as the participants in the survey may not have as much experience or credibility as more well-known and established composers.

Visibility and representation are powerful tools for transgender and non-binary liberation. Through art, gender non-conforming people can both express themselves and make political statements that empower themselves while raising awareness of the issues that plague the LGBTQ+ community. Especially in the current political and social climate, where transgender rights to healthcare and access to public spaces like bathrooms are being legislated away, it is vital for transgender representation to become normalized, in order to highlight the people whose rights to existence are being stripped away from them. Art that highlights the beauty and complexity of the transgender experience might not stop this legislation from happening, but the strength and resilience of all queer and trans people highlights the importance of support and community. The function of art is to provoke critical thought and meaningful conversations about the framework of society; if queer and trans voices are uplifted in art, they can prompt discussions about LGBTQ+ rights in meaningful ways. Transgender and non-binary composers are the key to the future of classical music, pushing boundaries and creating innovative, evocative music that champions the liberation of all marginalized peoples.

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