

Recommendations on inclusion of trans and non-binary people in the choral sector

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The choral sector is very inclusive in many ways, but also still has plenty of room to grow. In the field of gender equality and inclusion, there are many areas that all need different approaches. In this document, we will focus on the inclusion of trans people (those with a gender identity that does not match their sex assigned at birth) and non-binary people (those who do not identify with the binary definition of gender, i.e. a binary division between men and women).

Language

Problem: Voice groups are often referred to with gendered language: sopranos and altos are referred to with terms like ‘women’, ‘girls’, etc, while tenors and basses are referred to as ‘men’, ‘guys’, etc. However, if there for example is a trans woman with a bass-voice in the choir, she will be grouped with the basses, but not feel called on when a conductor refers to her voice group with ‘men’. Or if a non-binary singer is part of the sopranos, they will not feel referred to when the conductor mentions the women. This practice of gendered language is found not only in reference to voice groups, but also persists in other topics. Gendered language might prove distressing to people who are questioning their gender identity, or who do not feel comfortable with a binary definition of gender.

Recommendation: An easy adjustment is to not refer to voice groups with gendered words, but to simply call them with their names: sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses. It might feel like a mouthful sometimes, but it will create a safer environment for singers who might not fit the gender traditionally associated with their voice group. Other terms that could be used include front- and back-row, upper and lower voices. Furthermore, in English it is common to use they/them pronouns when referring to a mixed group of people. Using these gender-neutral pronouns ensures that everyone feels included. Many languages are actually inherently gendered but have evolved to also have gender-neutral words. Each language is different and therefore has its own challenges. We encourage you to dive into gender-neutral ways of using your own language!

Dress codes and room divisions

Problem: Some other more practical areas in which trans and non-binary people might not feel fully comfortable in the choral sector, is the way in which dress-codes and room-divisions during choir trips are approached. In both, the standard is often that there is one for men and one for women: women should wear dresses, men should wear suits; girls take these rooms, boys take the others. For people who do not fit into either of these categories, i.e. who are not a man nor a woman, these categorisations do not work, and might be a source of distress.

Recommendation: The more practical topics, such as dress-codes and room divisions, basically require the same approach of trying to uphold a gender-neutral view. There is no need to specify

which gender needs to wear which types of clothes, a choir can simply state they want their singers to wear formal black clothes (for example). They can even offer some specific examples, but not mention that the women can wear a dress and the men a suit, but that anyone can choose both these types of outfits. Regarding room divisions, it is good to offer mixed rooms, possibly combined with rooms for men and rooms for women. For some people, these divided rooms do not feel comfortable, and offering them the choice to sleep in a mixed room might be helpful.

Repertoire

Problem: Repertoire is also a field that requires attention. Many lyrics of songs perpetuate a certain binary and often misogynistic world-view, which might not pose the best example for those engaging with the music.

Recommendation: We recommend being mindful of harmful stereotypes perpetuated in choral repertoire. Lyrics might present an outdated or non-inclusive perspective, which does not create a safe atmosphere for everyone. Conductors could discuss the lyrics with their singers, include their singers in the selection of repertoire, or even rewrite lyrics.

Conclusion

The choral sector can only be a safe space if it is truly a safe space for all. By making a few adjustments in our language, policies, and approaches, we can ensure a more welcoming and inclusive atmosphere for everyone, including trans and non-binary singers.

In general, it is important to have open communication between conductors, singers, and organisations. You might not know that your fellow singer identifies a certain way, so offering space and being flexible are key in creating a safe and welcoming space for them.

Because, after all, if everyone feels safe and comfortable, the music will be better!