

Summer 2023

## Gender, Self-Identity, and Vocal Music Education: Student Experiences at the University of Puget Sound in the 1990s

Liana Greger

Follow this and additional works at: [https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer\\_research](https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research)



Part of the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Music Education Commons](#), [Musicology Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Greger, Liana, "Gender, Self-Identity, and Vocal Music Education: Student Experiences at the University of Puget Sound in the 1990s" (2023). *Summer Research*. 461.  
[https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer\\_research/461](https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research/461)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in Summer Research by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact [soundideas@pugetsound.edu](mailto:soundideas@pugetsound.edu).

**Gender, Self-Identity, and Vocal Music Education:  
Student Experiences at the University of Puget Sound in the 1990s**

Liana Greger

University of Puget Sound

Summer Research Grant Project

September 20, 2023

## Introduction

Entering collegiate music school as a vocalist was simultaneously exciting and daunting. Despite loving music, I was terrified that I would not fit in amongst the so-called “music kids.” I was just a singer, after all. How could I possibly succeed? Without conscious realization, I convinced myself that my singing was immature—that I was just a silly girl who craved attention—not someone capable of high-caliber musicianship. Unbeknownst to me, I internalized the gendered stereotype that singers (most especially female singers) are not “real” musicians. As a result, I entered college doubting myself and my ability to succeed. My collegiate experiences as a female vocalist have inspired me to critique the intersection of vocal musicianship and gender, interrogating how education systems perpetuate the devaluation of vocal artistry as a feminized art form.

Outside the bounds of instrumental technology, vocalists find themselves in a precarious musical category. As one singer notes in “Negotiating an ‘Opera Singer Identity,’” “You can’t separate your voice from who you are. I don’t believe you can talk about your singing as a separate thing, it’s not like a violin or a pianist, it’s you, it’s human.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, finding a voice is a vulnerable process encompassing the body, mind, and self. The intimacy of vocalizing, combined with the pedagogical reality that intensive voice study typically doesn’t begin until singers reach college, makes the undergraduate music institution a critically important environment for the cultivation of young singers and their musical self-concepts. As vocalists participate in choir, lessons, and/or music courses, they begin to situate their voices, bodies, and identities within their educational worlds.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jane Oakland. “Negotiating an ‘Opera Singer Identity.’” In *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, edited by Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan, (Dordrecht, country: Springer, 2014), 229.

In *Musical Identities*, Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell argue that the social settings in which musical practices occur play an influential role in shaping the self-identities of musicians.<sup>2</sup> “Musical identities” refer to how people perceive themselves regarding their musicianship and musical engagement. Educational power structures mediate musical identities in the undergraduate music school, constructing and constraining what it means to be a musician.<sup>3</sup> Musicianship is a “socially bestowed identity.”<sup>4</sup> As young musicians move through school, their musical identity forms through social comparison and categorization within the educational context. In this way, educational institutions “play a role in reinforcing differences in musical identity. . . the messages transmitted as a result of its organization and practices.”<sup>5</sup>

According to musicologist Bruno Nettl, conservatory-style institutions reflect a patriarchal, European-derived music culture that conceptualizes embodied femininity in opposition to technological masculinity.<sup>6</sup> Vocalists, then, using their bodies as musical entities, are often excluded from masculinist classical music cultures. As young singers compare themselves to peers with visible instruments, who often have had years of formal training and are more familiar with the seemingly objective tool of music notation, there quickly becomes a risk of identity conflict as a wide gap exists between conventional “musician” models and singer reality. Institutional environments largely naturalize an idealized form of Western classical

---

<sup>2</sup> Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, *Musical Identities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Susan A. O’Neil. “The Self-Identity of Young Musicians.” In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Lamont. “Musical Identities and The School Environment.” In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46.

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 3.

musicianship, dominated by histories of Eurological thought and masculinity, that influence voice student experiences in music education spaces.<sup>7</sup>

Music education produces gendered musical constructs that regulate identity boundaries, influencing how vocalists perceive themselves in musical worlds.<sup>8</sup> Students of varying gender identities are impacted by educational structures differently. As my study demonstrates, the experiences of non-female students engaging in the feminized activity of singing often differ from the experiences of female singers, with some overlap. Through musical practice, music education environments shape, produce, and reproduce gendered models of musical participation that ultimately devalue “feminized” musicianship and influence the gendered identity negotiation of vocalists.

Utilizing methods of narrative inquiry based in critical feminist practice, this research examines the vocal music experiences of alumni who attended the University of Puget Sound in the 1990s and participated in choir, voice lessons, and/or music courses. Alumni interviews enable me to examine a historical case study, allowing for socio-cultural evaluation of the 1990s School of Music environment and its effects in shaping the musical identity of young Puget Sound singers. Although participant interviews covered a wide range of student experiences, my inquiry focused on the potential impacts of gender, gendered expectations, and gendered hierarchies in participants’ collegiate musical experiences. Inspiration for this research stemmed from my identity as a Puget Sound Vocal Performance major and my scholarly curiosity concerning the intersections of gender, musical-identity building, and vocal music education.

The findings of this research, as they center a specific case study, do not represent all undergraduate music cultures, nor the University of Puget Sound School of Music today.

---

<sup>7</sup> Dan DiPiero, “Race, Gender, and Jazz School: Chord-Scale Theory as White Masculine Technology,” *Jazz and Culture* 6, no. 1 (June 1, 2023): 52–77.

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 250.

However, by focusing on the unique subjectivity of the Puget Sound School of Music in the 1990s, one can glean insights about broader classical musical cultures at the time. As education scholar Tom Barone profoundly states, the purpose of narrative inquiry, in its subjectivity, is not to search for universal truths about social phenomena but instead to look for multiplicities of truth that “raise significant questions about prevailing policy and practice that enrich an ongoing conversation about education.”<sup>9</sup> Historical narrative inquiry inspires critical engagement with music student stories, encouraging collegiate musical communities to examine the effects of educational structures in daily life. Rigorous critical listening and analysis aided my research and guided my treatment of participant testimony, with the hopes of enriching collegiate music education communities of the future.

A critical feminist approach structures this scholarship and situates voice study within a feminist framework. In music education research, “feminist criticism offers a lens by which to deconstruct the possibility of universal or absolute meanings such as those promoted through ‘common sense’ pedagogy.”<sup>10</sup> Feminist scholarship presents the opportunity to critique social norms—challenging the validity of Western binary dualisms to search for alternative existences beyond constraining power structures. Feminist ethnomusicologies and musicologies stress the importance of polyvocality<sup>11</sup> and embrace subjectivity, questioning the influence of gender and heteronormativity on “the ways we position and interpret groups of people, their behavior, and their works.”<sup>12</sup> Following the feminist scholarship of bell hooks, the inquiry methods I used in

---

<sup>9</sup> Sandra L. Stauffer. “Narrative Inquiry and The Uses of Narrative in Music Education Research.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research in American Music Education*, edited by Marie Colleen Conway, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia O’Toole, “I Sing In A Choir But I Have ‘No Voice!’,” *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 4–5, no. 5–1 (1994 1993), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ellen Koskoff and Suzanne Cusick, *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender*, New Perspectives on Gender in Music (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Ruth A. Solie, “Introduction: On ‘Difference’” In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth A. Solie, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 11.

this study encouraged passion, self-reflection, and engagement in the critique of gender norms in classical voice education.<sup>13</sup>

Gender categories are increasingly recognized as fluid, complex, and dynamic, and have been productively problematized in scholarship and research. I firmly challenge biologically deterministic, binary views of gender, and instead honor sociological understandings that define gender as a social construct. However, it is important to acknowledge that most of the literature on gender and vocal music education takes gender binary views for granted. In this study (especially given the context of the 1990s), those I interviewed often referenced binary gender categories as they reflected on their experiences in the 1990s. As I reproduce these comments in my paper, I am aware that they do not represent the full complexity of gendered realities. I greatly appreciate my interviewee's honest, authentic responses, and their willingness to engage with ever-changing conceptions of gender.

## **Literature Review:**

### **Voice, Gender, and Music Education**

Vocal performance has long been viewed as a relatively acceptable music practice for women in Western European culture—at least more so than instrumental performance. As early as the sixteenth century, public singing was one of the first ways a woman could make money in music, and continues to be one of the most prominent performance styles available to women today.<sup>14</sup> In the nineteenth century, vocal music education for noblewomen was viewed as a way to enrich cultural prowess.<sup>15</sup> Lasting cultural associations of vocal performance as embodied,

---

<sup>13</sup> bell hooks, "Eros, Eroticism, and The Pedagogical Process," *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (1993): 58–63.

<sup>14</sup> Green, *Music, Gender, Education*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy B. Reich, "Women as Musicians: A Question of Class." In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth Solie, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). 134.

emotional, and non-threatening to femininity contributed to the increased involvement of Western women in vocal music.

Musicologist Ruth Solie writes, “Western thought has been dominated by a series of tightly interconnected binary dualisms,”<sup>16</sup> positioning women as embodied, close to nature, emotional, and primitive, as opposed to men who are viewed as characteristically as cultured, technological, cerebral, rational, and objective. In *Music, Gender, Education*, Lucy Green argues that constructions of the singing woman are historically influenced by these patriarchal definitions of femininity.<sup>17</sup> The female singer, engaging with the physicality of the human form, is quite literally “in tune” with her body. The emotionally expressive repertoires of lyrical song also contribute to cultural associations of vocalicity as adept at serving so-called feminine emotional sensibilities. Binary, gendered associations of vocal performance shape cultural conceptions of singing that construct and constrain the music practices of vocalists.

Historically, the vocal practices of women have not gone uncontested. Writes Lucy Green’s in her 1997 ethnography of British secondary school music programs, “to differing degrees at various times in history, women have been allowed to sing and criticized for singing, admired and disdained.”<sup>18</sup> Lacking the mediation of a physical instrument, singing women are on full display. As such, female vocalists have long been associated with and shamed for sexuality, reflective of patriarchal male anxiety.<sup>19</sup> Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones argue that the singing activities of women are simultaneously a site for women’s empowerment and silencing.<sup>20</sup> The voice, a source of female power, has long been met with a “persistent desire of male artists to

---

<sup>16</sup> Solie, *Musicology and Difference*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>18</sup> Green, *Music, Gender, Education*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, (Cambridge ; Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



control (female vocalists) through...the anxieties aroused by the female voice.”<sup>21</sup> As Green's book amply demonstrates, patriarchal control of female vocality is, then, replicated in music education cultures, shaped by masculinized classical norms.

Conservatory music education systems rooted in Western music cultures produce and reproduce gendered musical constructs that reinforce gender stereotypes, expectations, and assumptions about singing. Green is keen to note that the music classroom acts as microcosmic replication of society.<sup>22</sup> From classroom observations and detailed survey results, Green concludes that all members of the environment participate in everyday interactions in the socio-cultural landscape that naturalize and produce “gendered musical meanings,”<sup>23</sup> reflecting broader gender hierarchies and assumptions about vocalizing.

In one survey, sixty-four teachers out of a sample of seventy-eight reported that girls were better singers than boys, citing girls’ so-called natural sensibilities for vocal performance.<sup>24</sup> One teacher said, “Girls. . . see singing as an extension of their feelings, I believe; something they are more in touch with than boys.”<sup>25</sup> The response from this teacher emphasizes the naturalization of gender stereotypes common in music education discourse. In this case, the social construction of vocal performance as more suitable for girls *produces* the musical reality that boys are often less involved in singing activities due to perceived stigma of singing as “cissy.”<sup>26</sup> Gendering musical practices is potentially harmful. Naturalization processes lend themselves to the production of invisibilized gendered musical hierarchies that place the musical activities of masculinized groups above those gendered as feminine—a replication of the subordination of women apparent in broader society.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>22</sup> Green, *Music, Gender, Education*, 144.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 152

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 154

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 45

## Scholarship Review of Gender in the Choral Context

Choral singing, rooted in Western classical traditions, is not exempt from the influence of gendered musical hierarchies associated with vocal performance. Nicholas McBride and Joshua Palkki assert in their analysis of college choral methods texts that patriarchal structures influence the pedagogy of many American collegiate choral programs.<sup>27</sup> Examining choral methods textbooks, articles, and websites published between 2008 and 2018, McBride and Palkki found that gendered student expectations were pervasive and unquestioned in most texts, positioning femininity as undesirable in the choral space.<sup>28</sup> For example, the authors cite a 2012 article from the *Choral Journal* discouraging the programming of “cute” songs (a code for effeminate) as a way to prevent boys in choir from feeling infantilized.<sup>29</sup> Notably, many texts focused on the recruitment and retention of male students. Texts stressed the importance of appealing to stereotypical masculinity as a method for male recruitment, encouraging the programming of sufficiently “masculine” pieces to mediate potential threats of singing activities on masculinity. Pedagogical texts, the authors argue, reveal misogyny historically rooted in many choral education environments, exemplifying the devaluation of women’s singing activities.<sup>30</sup> Dominant scripts in choral pedagogy literature shape gendered behavioral expectations of choral students that regulate student behavior along cisgender, hetero-normative lines, devaluing “feminine” vocalization.

By focusing on the perennial issue of low male enrollment in choir, the effects of choral education on the lives of girls often go unexamined.<sup>31</sup> Patricia O’Toole’s “A Missing Chapter

---

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas R. McBride and Joshua Palkki, “Big Boys Don’t Cry (or Sing) ... Still?: A Modern Exploration of Gender, Misogyny, and Homophobia in College Choral Methods Texts,” *Music Education Research* 22, no. 4 (2020): 409.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 413

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 416

<sup>31</sup> Joshua Palkki, “Gender Trouble: Males, Adolescence, and Masculinity in the Choral Context,” *The Choral Journal* 56, no. 4 (2015): 30. In this article, the authors cite a study by Kenneth Elpus that revealed that “the

from Choral Methods Books: How Choirs Neglect Girls” addresses the lack of attention paid to girls in choral scholarship, pointing out a naturalized idea that “boys who sing are special and girls who sing are ordinary.”<sup>32</sup> Consistent with the findings of McBride and Palkki, O’Toole affirms that devaluation of feminine vocal performance is common in choral settings and perpetuates gendered musical hierarchies that place women’s singing practices as a less valuable form of musical achievement.

Music education scholar Jill Wilson furthers O’Toole’s claims by challenging the practice of ranking mixed voice choral ensembles as consistently more prestigious than treble voice ensembles.<sup>33</sup> Inherent in this hierarchical structure is the problematic assumption that women’s voices are not as high caliber on their own. Elevation of mixed choirs over treble choirs, coupled with low male choral enrollment, encourages the placement of musically trained female singers with less trained boys. As a result, girls often face higher competition to earn spots in advanced choirs that less experienced boys are fervently recruited for. The hierarchy of choirs communicates to girls not selected for the mixed ensemble (despite often being more qualified than some boys) that they are “leftover”—relegated to the lower-status treble ensemble. Additionally, mixed voice choral repertoire is more studied, composed, and respected—creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of limited opportunities for treble choirs.<sup>34</sup>

Traditional structures of Western choral music are overwhelmingly replicated in the undergraduate music context. Unspoken behavioral expectations prevail in undergraduate choirs, shaping vocalists’ engagement with themselves in the musical space. O’Toole argues that typical

---

male/female balance in high school choral programs nationally has remained constant at 70 percent female and 30 percent male” since 1985.

<sup>32</sup> Patricia O’Toole, “A Missing Chapter from Choral Methods Books: How Choirs Neglect Girls,” *The Choral Journal* 39, no. 5 (1998): 9.

<sup>33</sup> Jill M. Wilson, “Preferences of and Attitudes toward Treble Choral Ensembles,” *Research and Issues in Music Education* 10, no. 1 (September 1, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> O’Toole, “A Missing Chapter from Choral Methods Books.”16.

choral ensembles are shaped by masculine modes of classical music that are naturalized and invisibilized, obscuring the impact of hegemonic educational discourses that sustain gendered musical hierarchies.<sup>35</sup> As O’Toole claims, when prevailing educational discourses perpetuate a narrow image of what it looks like to be a choral singer, those discourses become a part of individual singers’ subjectivities, influencing how singers align and evaluate their musicianship according to dominant norms.<sup>36</sup> Asserting that choirs often focus most on producing an aesthetic product, O’Toole argues that choral pedagogy can value and promote masculine coded “legitimate” musical skills (such as music theory knowledge and sight reading) over feminine coded musical knowledge “such as social skills or love of singing.”<sup>37</sup> As such, singers within ensembles find themselves oriented towards models of choral musicianship shaped by masculine cultures of technical musical dominance, which makes engaging with alternative visions for choral education based on emotional musical embodiment all the more difficult to envision.

Gendered themes in these examples of choral scholarship were supported by the interview findings in my study. Looking back to the 1990s, gendered patterns in choral education encourage critical reflection on how past gendered cultures reverberate to potentially affect the collegiate environments of today.

### **Context of Study: The University of Puget Sound**

The University of Puget Sound is a collegiate institution primarily serving undergraduates in Tacoma, Washington. Puget Sound is “unique in offering a comprehensive music program within a nationally recognized liberal arts college” and emphasizes a rigorous,

---

<sup>35</sup> O’Toole, “I Sing In A Choir But I Have ‘No Voice!’”

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

conservatory-like music curriculum.<sup>38</sup> In the 1990s (and today) Puget Sound offered students of all majors opportunities to engage with voice study. All students could audition for choral ensembles, including the Adelphian Concert Choir, Madrigal Singers, University Chorale, the Tacoma Civic Chorus (eventually replaced with the treble choir, Dorians), and Vocal Jazz.<sup>39</sup> Outside of ensembles, students could also sign up for individual voice lessons with assigned private teachers. The University Opera Theater program and student-led vocal groups provided additional performance opportunities for students.

In the traditional academic space, students could sign up for various music theory, music history, vocal pedagogy, choral conducting, and language diction courses.<sup>40</sup> As the School of Music is situated within a liberal arts university, students in the 1990s often followed diverse study pathways. Although many School of Music students were music majors (with specifications in performance, music education, general studies, and music business to name a few), students also had the option of minoring in music or participating in courses, lessons, and ensembles without any major or minor designation. Majors and non-majors alike were able to audition for vocal scholarships, which allowed a wide variety of students to participate in voice programs.

Bruno Nettl writes, “The ‘music’ in schools of music always means, exclusively or overwhelmingly, Western classical music.”<sup>41</sup> Based on a Western conservatory model of music education, the Puget Sound School of Music in the 1990s focused on classical music. Curricular design stressed the importance of a prescribed music theory course set, supplemented with studies in music history, ensemble participation, and rigorous individual instrument study. With a

---

<sup>38</sup> Music | University of Puget Sound, University of Puget Sound, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://www.pugetsound.edu/academics/music>.

<sup>39</sup> *University of Puget Sound Bulletin, 1990-2000* (1990), Catalogs, Office of the Academic Vice President, RG 02, University of Puget Sound Archives & Special Collections, Tacoma, Washington.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Nettl, *Heartland Excursions*, 3.

classical orientation comes influence of European cultures that stress rigor, adherence to structure, and hierarchy. As clarified by musicologist Dan DiPiero, conservatory-style music curricula often “fit inside a Western epistemology that prizes logic, objectivity, and structuralist thinking, particularly when appropriated by Western institutions.”<sup>42</sup> The influence of masculinist European conservatory cultures, combined with the fact that the 1990s School of Music faculty was overwhelmingly male-dominated in numbers,<sup>43</sup> brings gendered concerns in the 1990s School of Music culture into question.

### **Context of Study: The 1990s**

The 1990s were a pivotal time in American history regarding issues of gender and gender consciousness. The third-wave feminist movement began in the 1990s and “emphasized an intersectional approach to feminism, as it made connections between different social justice issues.”<sup>44</sup> Growing up in the wake of 1960s organizing, Generation X feminists engaged in a feminism for the next generation. Third-wave feminists were influenced by the rise of academic feminism in the 1970s and crafted a multi-vocal movement acknowledging interlocking oppressions faced by diverse groups of women beyond white-middle-class feminism.<sup>45</sup> Ignited by the infamous cases of Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky, third-wave feminists also focused on issues of sexual harassment, sexual rights, and reproductive justice.

The 1990s, despite being an era of “girl power” and significant global progress for women, were also a time of increased sexualization of women in the media. In *90s Bitch*, Allison Yarrow writes, “I was utterly shocked by what I found while investigating 90s narratives about

---

<sup>42</sup> DiPiero, “Race, Gender, and Jazz School,” 60.

<sup>43</sup> *University of Puget Sound Bulletin, 1990-2000* (1990)

<sup>44</sup> Ariella Rotramel, “Third Wave Feminism,” In *The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia*. Edited by Marilyn J. Coleman & Lawrence H. Ganong, (Sage Publications Inc., 2014).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

women. The decade is barely considered history. It was supposed to be the modern era, with doors flung open to unprecedented advancement for women and gender equality.”<sup>46</sup> Instead, sexualization of women was deeply embedded in 1990s cultural dialogues and rarely questioned. Heteronormative models of female beauty and sexuality prevailed as weight-loss culture and body shaming proliferated in television and entertainment.<sup>47</sup> Cultures of education also perpetuated gender ideals, where young girls learned that looks mediated social respect, worth, and esteem.<sup>48</sup> 1990s girls (and girls of today) continued to be subject to conflicting expectations: “Be beautiful, but beauty is only skin deep. Be sexy, but not sexual. Be honest, but don’t hurt anyone’s feelings. Be independent, but be nice. Be smart, but not so smart you threaten boys.”<sup>49</sup> Gendered expectations of 1990s America abounded, affecting the experiences of women in the context of this study.

### **Acknowledgement of Positionality**

Positionality is critical in affecting the interpretations and results articulated in this paper. I am a cisgender woman who is a current vocal performance major at the University of Puget Sound. The genesis of this project was ignited by my experiences as a female voice undergraduate. Coming from the specific institutional background of Puget Sound, I have extensive lived knowledge of the structure and functioning of the modern institution. My experiences at Puget Sound shaped my lines of inquiry and provided me with increased relatability to interviewees. However, as a sociology and anthropology minor and a Generation Z liberal arts student, I am used to frequent engagement with issues of gender and sexuality in a

---

<sup>46</sup> Allison Yarrow, *90s Bitch: Media, Culture, and the Failed Promise of Gender Equality*, First edition. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018), xvii.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 271

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 274

way that differed from interview participants. Looking back, many alumni noted how there were different understandings of gender and sexuality in the 1990s. In the hustle and bustle of college life, gender was not typically a method through which participants actively viewed their college experiences; issues of gender were not as openly discussed.

Through sensitive questioning, I attempted to encourage participants to engage with questions of gender and vocal music education in ways that allowed them to affirm or deny whether gendered elements were a part of their experience. Interviewees came to individual conclusions about the salience of gender, patterns of which I attempt to illuminate in this write-up. My being a young woman affected how participants of differing backgrounds spoke with me. For example, women and self-identified queer men often adopted a more casual manner of speech with me, whereas the men I interviewed who were straight or did not mention their sexual orientation often used a tone of formality. As my positionality mediates the interpretation of participant testimony, I do not intend to claim universal truths about gender, voice study, and collegiate music education at Puget Sound in the 1990s. Instead, I aim to understand ways gender was potentially salient in participants' experiences, fending off ahistoricism in recognizing my 21st-century position.

## **Research Methodology**

Participant interviews were conducted primarily over Zoom video communications software, with the exception of three interviews conducted over the phone. Zoom meetings and phone calls were recorded with participant consent and uploaded to my secure Rev.Com account for transcription. Rev.com is an transcription service that uses AI to create word-for-word transcriptions of audio files. To ensure accuracy, I also edited transcripts myself. I analyzed



interviews individually, noting key quotes, patterns of experience, and themes. At the end of each analysis, I created interview summaries to conceptualize takeaways from each conversation. Next, I tracked interview results across the data set to uncover findings and (dis)continuities across the sample. Conclusions, notes, and key quotations were shared with my research advisor to challenge potential bias.

Each interview typically lasted one hour—the shortest being half an hour and the longest being two hours. Interviews were semi-structured and began with questions concerning participants' involvement in the Puget Sound School of Music, their memories of the school culture, and their memories of the choral environment. Depending on the participant's answers to initial questioning, inquiry was specified to encompass personally relevant elements of experience, including personal self-concept, stories from college, perceptions of music curricula and more. Interviews focused on aspects of gender in alumni voice experiences, as well as perceptions of how the collegiate educational environment shaped their musical identities. Participants responded to questions surrounding their definitions of musicianship, their experiences in choir, voice lessons, and music courses, and their relationship with gender regarding their vocal music experiences.

I contacted participants through snowball sampling, along with assistance from the University of Puget Sound Office of Alumni and Parent Relations. Potential participants were contacted based on their status as alumni of the University of Puget Sound who participated in choir and/or voice lessons at the institution sometime between 1990-1999. My research advisor, Dr. Gwynne Brown, was an invaluable resource due to her status as an alumni who sang in the Adelpian Concert Choir from 1993-1995. Dr. Brown's partnership and knowledge provided a jumping-off point and a sounding board for conclusions.

## Demographics

The final sample consisted of twelve Adelpian Concert Choir alumni who attended the University of Puget Sound between the years 1987 and 2001. In addition to the core sample, one former School of Music Director and one current School of Music voice faculty member were interviewed. The core sample represented all years of the 1990s, with 50% of the sample graduating in the late 1990s (between 1997-2000), 33% of participants graduating in the mid-1990s (1994-1996), and 17% of participants graduating in the early 1990s (1990-1993). The gender composition of the sample (all participants identified with cis-gender categories) was 50% female and 50% male. Although it was not a question directly asked, 25% of the sample identified themselves as being LBGTQIA+. Of the participants, 50% were music majors (five vocal performance majors, one music education major), and 50% were non-music majors. Out of the five vocal performance majors, four were sopranos, with one tenor. In total, the choral voice part designations of the sample were 42% sopranos, 8% altos (one alto), 25% tenors, and 25% bass/baritones. In addition to choir, 75% of the sample also participated in individual voice lessons. Finally, 92% of participants were white—reflective of the whiteness of the institution.

## Findings and Discussion

In “Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems,” educational theorist Etienne Wenger argues, “In a social learning system, competence is historically and socially defined.”<sup>50</sup> Models of “competence,” what it looks like to be a successful, acceptable student in the musical space—are subtly perpetuated through everyday interactions in the educational environment. Wenger states that individuals participate in a dynamic relationship between themselves and their

---

<sup>50</sup> Etienne Wenger, “Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems,” *SAGE Social Science Collections* 7, no. 2 (2000): 226.

social contexts. Students develop self-identity within their communities through engagement, imagination of self within the community, and alignment of their behaviors to community expectations.<sup>51</sup> Alumni in this study participated in individual processes of identity negotiation within the musical space that contributed to various senses of belonging in the vocal music sphere.

Interviews with alumni revealed that the social learning context of the 1990s Puget Sound School of Music perpetuated a hierarchy of musicianship that placed a Western, gender-normative form of masculine musical participation at a high competence standard, devaluing and/or fetishizing forms of traditionally feminine, embodied musical practices and forms of vocal performance that caused degrees of self-conflict in the musical identity negotiation of feminized vocalists (feminized meaning women students and students who did not fit into traditionally binary expectations of masculinity). As Wenger argues, if the distance between social expectations and perceived self-competence is far, one learns they do not quite belong.<sup>52</sup> In this sample of interviews, voice students who did not fit into unspoken (and sometimes spoken) expectations for gendered musical participation often felt a disconnect between themselves and their musical identities.

It is important to note that multiple cases of sexual harassment were filed with the University of Puget Sound Title IX office against members of the School of Music faculty in the 1990s. A 1990s culture of sexualization, especially female sexualization, transferred to the environment of the School of Music. Multiple female interviewees reported that they were made to feel directly uncomfortable or threatened by male music faculty members. Some male interviewees reported hearing rumors and stories about the sexual conduct of faculty towards

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 227, 228

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

female students. The culture was “intense” and “underground,” says Henry. While these cases are critical background for the analysis presented in this study, this research focuses more on the ways in which gendered attitudes and behaviors were more generally widespread, visible, and impactful on the lives of voice students. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that in the 1990s School of Music, sexual harassment acted as a darker, more violent manifestation of misogyny unmistakably in the background of many participant’s recollections.

### **Gender Expectations as a Mediator of Belonging in the Choral Context**

Henry was a member of the Adelphian Concert Choir and Madrigals Choir, and participated in voice lessons and music theory classes at Puget Sound.<sup>53</sup> Although Henry entered college as a Music Education major, he quickly realized that he did not want to pursue a musical career. Henry acknowledged that while he felt confident in his tenor voice, he felt less musically talented or dedicated than some of his peers. Over the course of the conversation, Henry revealed sometimes feeling out of place in the choral environment. Despite loving the choir, Henry often questioned, “Am I really welcome here? Can I really be my full sense of, you know, who I am? And I was, and I would, but there were moments of not feeling fully part of the, ‘in’ part of the choir.” Henry clarified that being one of the only out gay men in the ensemble contributed to feelings of displacement. Henry states, “It wasn’t unsafe, but it wasn’t just really visibly affirming [for queer people].”

Multiple interviewees spoke about the prominence of traditional forms of heterosexual masculinity in the choir, modeled by a male choir director and imitated by male students. A pressing issue reported by various participants was a choral culture of female objectification. Henry noted that the choir director, “In ways that are very gendered and very heteronormatively

---

<sup>53</sup> All names here and henceforth have been changed to protect identity.

gendered, like, would interact differently with women than with men, right?” Feeling alienated by the heterosexual culture and ethically not wanting to objectify girls, Henry reported anxiety about “navigating masculinity in the appropriate way in choir.” Straying from the typical heterosexual masculine model, Henry felt that he did not receive the same directorial mentorship that some of the other male members of the choir received. Henry wondered, “I don’t know if I can, like, sing well enough or put forth the right image” to be fully accepted in the choral space.

Traditional gender norms prevailed in choral education at Puget Sound in the 1990s and shaped students' perceptions of who belonged within the vocal music education context. Gender expectations were a mediating factor in student evaluations of their own musicianship. In Henry’s case, lack of identification with a heteronormative, masculine gender expectation limited mentorship by the male director. By extension, Henry further questioned his ability to sing “well enough” to compensate for his queerness in the choir space. In this case, musical identity and gender expectations intertwined, impacting Henry’s orientation toward his singing in the choral community.

Alumni who did not feel a personal conflict with gender expectations did not mark gender as a salient factor in their educational experiences. Alumni who fit into gender expectations often adopted a more secure sense of musical identity. For example, Will, a cisgender male, non-music major tenor who participated in Adelphians, Madrigals, and voice lessons, stated, “I don’t know that I ever felt like the odd man out.” Raised by a music teacher, he reported feeling secure in his musical identity. From a young age, Will possessed a general attitude of confidence when entering new social environments. “My perspective,” says Will, “is I’m gonna assume some level of familiarity with the people that I’m playing with, even though

I've never met them.” Will continued, “You have to show up with a certain confidence and openness, and that's kind of the attitude that I've always brought into most things.”

Owen, a cisgender male baritone and non-music major who sang in Adelpians and took voice lessons, also reported, “I never had any thoughts in terms of my connection to music and my gender identification.” Later in the conversation, Owen mentioned, “I don't feel the choir was an unsafe space for folks who didn't identify as straight or folks—that identify differently. It may not have been overarchingly embracing, but I think it was a safe space.” Despite being a non-music major and one of the only members of color in the ensemble at the time, Owen felt loved and accepted by the choir. I do not intend to claim whether or not the 1990s choral context was safe or unsafe for students who existed beyond heteronormative gender ideals. However, it is interesting to note the difference in feelings of belonging from those who felt their gender and sexual identities were congruent versus incongruent with the unspoken expectations in place.

### **Gendered Musical Hierarchies: “Top of the Food Chain”**

Nathan, a tenor vocal performance major, reported feeling like he was “having a very different experience” in the voice program than some of his peers. Courted by music faculty to attend the University, Nathan felt a strong sense of “wantedness” and was secure in his belonging. Nathan reflected, “I fell into a place where I was being treated like someone.” There was an attitude of, “We need you. We need you specifically, and we're going to challenge you.” As a tenor performance major, Nathan keenly noted his identity as a male singer influenced his vocal opportunities. Being a male singer imbued Nathan with a “specialness,” as Patricia O'Toole might put it, that heightened his musical value in the educational space.<sup>54</sup> Reflecting on college, Nathan noted the presence of unspoken musical hierarchies that he benefited from. For

---

<sup>54</sup> O'Toole, “A Missing Chapter from Choral Methods Books,” 9.

example, empowered by a sense of agency, Nathan founded an extracurricular singing club with his friends. “I can't imagine that I would have felt that I could go in that direction or in those kinds of directions if I felt in any way that I was not at the top of the food chain,” Nathan said. His gender as a male singer influenced his treatment in the vocal music space, placing his “uniqueness” high on a gendered musical hierarchy that bolstered his identity formation and access to musical opportunities.

Identifying as a cisgender man, Nathan felt shielded from cultures of faculty sexual misconduct that he knew some of his female classmates were experiencing. Nathan reported that some of his female classmates seemed to struggle with their musical identities and sense of belonging resulting from misconduct. There seemed to be the question for some female students, “am I here because of that?” or am I valued for my musicianship? Nathan's identity as a cisgender man protected him in this particular cultural environment from unwanted sexual attention, allowing him to focus his efforts on building an agential music identity. Grateful for his education, Nathan mused, “That place really, really shaped a lot of my confidence—It really showed me how to have agency to ask for those kinds of things in my life.” Nathan’s experience in the Puget Sound voice program conveys the duality of music education as a simultaneously loving, foundational center of growth influenced by unequal, gendered musical structures.

### **Body Image and the Singer Identity:**

“I used to be, oh my god, like maybe 80 pounds heavier. And so, I even, I mean, I was just never, like, the ingénue, right?” –Lila

“I was kind of petite and curvy, so I wasn’t like the ingénue style. Like, so, you know, like in theater, I was always the second.” – Madeline

“I didn’t feel like I was the pretty girl at the time, you know? And so I—there—I think

there were some challenges around—I mean, I was pretty Plain Jane.” – Dana

When asked how their gender identities impacted their college voice experiences, Lila, Madeline, and Dana all gave responses concerning their physical appearances without prompting. Unspoken expectations for bodily appearance played a great role in the self-identity building of young female singers, who compared themselves to an ideal “ingénue” performative body.

Lila (a non-music major) identified with bodily struggles, especially relating to her “alto” voice part in the Adelpian Concert Choir. Her low voice, coupled with a body she believed was not thin enough, made her feel “big with the gruff—like, oh, I’ve got the low voice. So I remember feeling very—not feminine, you know?” Lila later continued, “I would've given anything to be a size zero with this beautiful, lovely soprano voice. Like anything!—I mean, it was really painful.” In this case, perceived distance from an ideal gendered standard of what a vocalist should look and sound like—a woman who is thin, demure, and high-voiced—prevented Lila from feeling she could be totally confident in her musical self. Lila’s experiences with bodily struggles indicate the presence of gendered expectations for singers' bodies, perpetuated within the music education environment of the time.

In the context of the 1990s, interviews revealed the saliency of the gendered body in providing unequal access to musical opportunities, resources, and respect. Multiple interviewees, men and women alike, reported the differential treatment and targeting of certain “attractive” members of the choir (specifically women) by the director. Henry recalled a “wall, the beautiful blondes in the front row.” Madeline also mentioned, “It seemed to me that the prettier, more feminine, more demure people sometimes had more opportunities presented, let's put it that way. Many of them were also very talented! I don't wanna denigrate that at all.” Emily, a vocal



performance major, corroborated this claim, noting that she thought girls with the biggest breasts often got chosen for solos. In noting these observations, I cannot and do not intend to make claims about the favoritism tendencies of any specific individuals. Rather, by recognizing substantial patterns in participant perspectives, I wish to think critically about broader, heteronormative, gendered cultures imposed upon singers in the 1990s music education space. Given this pattern of responses, it appears that the appearance of female vocalists mediated access to musical opportunities, which limited, by extension, opportunities for musical identity development in regard to gendered bodily subjectivity.

It is important to note that this specific case is influenced by sexualization cultures of the 1990s that fetishized skinniness, dieting, and weight loss culture for women.<sup>55</sup> In 1995, the CDC reported that girls were twice as likely as boys to think they were overweight, and 40% of girls in the first through third grades wished to be thinner.<sup>56</sup> Diet cultures and female body shaming represent the effects of a patriarchal male gaze that affected the self-concept building of women in the 1990s. Speaking about growing up in the 1990s in Newport Beach, Lila says, “Your commodity was how pretty you were.” Lila explained that expectations for beauty “extended to college” and that there was “this idea that like, I have to be pretty to be liked, to be respected to be—and what does pretty mean? And that means to be skinny and that means to, you know, fit into the right things and to be, like, desired frankly, you know? And then that gets really confusing.” As Lila eloquently stated, looks and expectations of “femininity” acted as a mediator determining whether a woman received respect, creating the prime environment for identity confusion. Implications for the vocal performance sphere, being a uniquely embodied practice,

---

<sup>55</sup> Yarrow, *90s Bitch*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

were that evaluations of a female vocalist's musical competence were, in part, mediated by her so-called ability to present an "acceptable" performing body fit for the stage.

In an audience review of vocal performance major Madeline's role in a University of Puget Sound Opera Theater production, Madeline recalls the comment, "Oh, she's got a real stage presence. You know, if she loses a few pounds, she'd probably do really well." With frustration in her voice, Madeline exclaims, "I was healthy, I was fine! And I, yeah, I felt really judged—And so in that way, I, both as a woman being reduced to an object not by your value, not by your quality of your performance. Not by your quality of musicianship, but by your appearance."

The evaluation of Madeline's performance based on her appearance represents a larger pattern in vocal music education culture substantiated in vocal performance research. Examining the development of classical singers' identities, scholar-artists Jane Davidson and Daniela Coimbra conducted a study with assessors of classical singers in a conservatory, examining what "characteristics were identified as being critically important for a 'good'" solo voice performer.<sup>57</sup> Davidson and Coimbra found that judges greatly emphasized young singers' appearance in their assessments, often ranking the singer's physical appeal as just as important (or more so) than musical skills such as vocal control, timbre, range, and intonation. Girls in the study deemed to have failed so-called proper physical appearance assessments were described as "puppet-like," and "matronly," and their overall performance ability was ranked lower than girls who were deemed "charming" or "sweet."<sup>58</sup>

Unique to vocal performance is the physical body in which the instrument lives. Like classifications of human-made instruments, singers are similarly assessed, evaluated, and

---

<sup>57</sup> Jane W. Davidson. "The Solo Performer's Identity." In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2002), 106.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

deemed as “instruments” based on adherence to gendered bodily expectations. If an instrument sounds like a cello but does not have the physical properties of a cello, it is, therefore, not a cello. The danger comes when transferring the same instrumentally dominated criteria to a human body. Determinations of whether a vocal performer is a truly good singer, in that regard, are not just based on a student’s vocal abilities, but rather a “package” presentation based on gendered characteristics that are supposed to “match” a vocal sound, causing potentially distressing self-identity negotiation in young feminized singers.

Kelsey, a vocal performance major in the Adelpian Concert Choir, recalled her college experience with love and fondness. “I always remember feeling there was this sort of sense of community and fun...” Kelsey reminisced, “And ‘we’re gonna get through this together.’” In expressing admiration and awe of her colleagues in performance, however, Kelsey explained experiencing bouts of imposter syndrome. “There was sort of a sense of that—like, am I?—Okay—I’ve got a—I don’t belong here!” Even once she became a section leader, Kelsey questioned her abilities. “I think always in the back of my mind you’re like, you know—am I worthy of this position?”

Madeline echoed Kelsey's sentiments, stressing the impact of unspoken expectations. “I always felt like I had to try harder,” Madeline said. “I always felt like I was always in danger of falling behind. Behind what, I don’t know.” Madeline explained,

I always had kind of a feeling of running just behind the mark. Because there's always somebody who's doing something better than you are. And it doesn't—it shouldn't reflect on you, but as we talked about, the voice is a very personal instrument. Because it is about you. It's not like, you know, you don't just see somebody walking around campus, you know, with the Euphonium or whatever. Right? You know, nobody's hauling a piano around on their back. But you know, there's an expectation, and whether it's implicit or explicit, whether I was putting it on myself or what, there—I always felt like there was, in some ways, I wasn't gonna be able to catch up. And that was okay, but it wasn't

The human singing voice is an incredibly personal instrument that is, quite literally, close to home. No matter where you go, your voice lives with you. Opening oneself up to vocal performance entails a subjection of the voice, and by extension, the body, and personhood, to evaluation. Vocal performance is incredibly vulnerable, made more so when performing means having your musical worth compared with an “ideal” gendered image. The naturalization of gendered expectations upon the bodies of vocalists is problematic. By doing so, vocalists who perceive themselves and their voices to be “wrong” are blinded from the reality that cultural and educational systems continue to perpetuate gender standards of vocal musicianship. Looking at the experiences of vocal performers in the 1990s encourages reflection on the historical gendering of vocal performance practices and the potential impact on music education spaces today.

### **“I had become a musician”: Music Theory, Cerebralism, and Masculinity**

Sitting with four other vocalists in her music theory class, Emily, a soprano vocal performance major and gifted piano player, remembers her professor handing out copies of a Beethoven Sonata to the piano students, excluding Emily and her friends. “You could tell he thought I was just a singer,” Emily said.

His entire attitude toward me changed the day that a trombonist or something didn't show up to play the Beethoven Sonata... He's like, “Anyone, can anyone play this? Anyone?” And so this girl's like, “Emily could do it!” And he was like, “HA ha ha, Miss Emily.” And of course, I was like, yeah, I'm sure I can come sight read this, thank you very much! But I was super nice, and I went up and I sight-read his Beethoven Sonata, and I got done, and you could just tell, like, immediately I had become a musician. Because I was not just a singer.

Emily's experience with differential treatment in the 1990s music classroom indicates an instrumental approach to music theory education that often underestimated the musical brains and skills of vocalists.

Musicologist Dan DiPiero posits that music theory classrooms often reinforce “any patriarchal, competitive culture that might exist.”<sup>59</sup> Given the feminine coding of vocal performance, it makes sense that the so-called “emotional” vocalist brains would be assumed to be less competent in a cerebralist, masculine-dominated educational setting. Many voice alumni in this study reported feeling “terrified” of music theory courses, known for their high drop-out rates and academic rigor. Nathan remembers that out of the six vocal performance majors who entered in Nathan's year, only four graduated due to the intensity of the academics. Dana recalls, “There were two freshman music theory classes and, you know, they started the year full with thirty, thirty-five people (in each class). And we ended first semester with like twenty people and then second semester with like ten, you know, and that's true of both classes. And then they combine it. So like, the way the theory teachers I felt like saw their job was to weed out people and to make it hard to graduate.”

Music theory classes have a powerful hold on vocalist's perception of themselves as competent musicians. Passing theory is a form of cultural capital in the music education space, acting as a student's proof of musical legitimacy. However, vocalists do not enter the theory classroom on an even playing field. Due to a delayed onset of musical study (vocalists cannot truly begin intensive training until an anatomically mature singing age), vocalists often begin college with less theory experience than instrumentalists. Compounded with a masculinist hierarchy of music education that often unwittingly perpetuates gender stereotypes of vocalists being emotionally oriented versus cerebral—some vocalists in the 1990s received differential

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 66.

treatment in the music theory classroom. By lacking acknowledgment of masculine institutional cultures that foster a “weeding out” culture of music theory, vocalists who struggled were in danger of internalizing the negative self-concept that they were “bad” students versus recognizing barriers to their success in place.

Dana, a vocal performance major, was interested in composing and eventually published compositions post-college. Despite this, Dana said, “I only started calling myself a composer a few years ago. Like, I had to—it took me to have a professional orchestra do my piece before I was like—Dana, yes. You <laugh> you are a composer!” Dana explained further that her experiences in music theory class “made me think I couldn’t compose.” Dana clarified that in the 1990s, there was “very much a cerebral orientation. Very academic. Um, yeah. Like there just really wasn’t really a place for it, the emotional. It’s very clinical.” Dana went on “There was, ‘this is the way that music’s done’ and there wasn’t really room for anything else.”

Laughing at the irony, Dana recalled an assignment where students had to compose using atonal twelve-tone theory. “I just, like, threw (notes) on a page cuz they were—I had no emotion at all. And he’s like, ‘This is excellent work, Miss Dana.’ Um, but <laugh>, but anything that I put any emotion to was (called) Schmaltz.” Discouragement of (feminine) emotionality and sentimentality in the 1990s music theory classroom caused Dana to believe that she did not have what it takes to be a composer, when in fact her emotionally led compositions led to future success. Looking to the past, one recognizes the impact of music theory education on the musical identity-building of vocalists. Moving forward, educators must continue to look for ways to validate traditionally feminine-coded emotionality in the music classroom beyond masculine norms.

Feminist scholar bell hooks argues that embracing passion, subjectivity, and embodiment within the classroom powerfully challenges Western mind/body dualisms that plague educational spaces.<sup>60</sup> In “Eros, Eroticism, and The Pedagogical Process,” hooks says that Western classrooms often prioritize the strict cultivation of the mind as separate from the body, failing to note the impact of student embodiment on learning outcomes. Especially for vocalists, who are used to an intense engagement with bodily practice, the incorporation of embodied learning techniques might be beneficial for vocalists (and all students) in the music theory classrooms of the future.

Interestingly enough, Henry explained that one professor did try implementing embodied techniques in the 1990s theory classroom, with positive results for himself and other vocalists. Meeting in the concert hall instead of a typical classroom, students in this professor’s class “would use our bodies as we did (sight-singing). Like, we would ground ourselves and find C and we would, like, every class... he’d have us, like, use our hands to kind of get into a space in a place...” Henry continued, “we all thought it was totally weird and hokey, and some of the more traditional students made fun of it. But some of us were like, ‘well, I would not be good (learning) in the traditional way, so I’ll give this a shot.’” Despite explaining that this professor’s methods were somewhat laughed at by some of the teachers and students, to Henry, embodied methods “helped, like, disrupt that, you know, the binaries between the vocalists and musicians and that kinda stuff. It was more accessible, in direct ways too.” While this professor or his methods do not represent an ideal teaching model<sup>61</sup>, it encourages the brain to stretch the imagination of what a transformative, inclusive music theory education could look like.

---

<sup>60</sup> bell hooks, “Eros, Eroticism, and The Pedagogical Process,” *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (1993): 58–63.

<sup>61</sup> In fact, this teacher was yet another faculty member accused of sexual misconduct with students and made one of the study participants directly uncomfortable. Patterns of sexual misconduct indicate a broader, systemic culture of faculty sexual misbehavior in the Puget Sound School of Music in the 1990s.

**Perspectives of Musicianship— What does it mean to be a “real” musician?:**

The further I got into the research process, the more I began to question: What does it mean to be a musician? Conceptions of musicianship are critical in shaping the identity of young vocalists, who compare themselves to dominant models to determine who they are and what they can be. As a standard interview question, I asked participants, “Did you feel like a musician in college?” Further, I pressed, “What was your personal definition of musicianship? Were musicianship and vocalism separate in your eyes, or intertwined?” I was surprised at the variety of responses I received, in patterns which correlated with major status and musical involvement.

Interview data revealed that the identity of “musician” was less salient for those who were not music majors. Most non-major singers (Owen, Henry, Bella, Lila, and Phillip) did not identify as musicians at all. The only exception was Will, who grew up in a music-teaching family. Important to note was that for most participants, being a “musician” was not simply an activity but rather an internal essence and drive. Participating in choir or voice lessons was not enough to make non-majors feel like musicians. Many non-majors felt they lacked intrinsic qualities, dedication, and skills needed to claim the “musician” identity. Most non-majors even explained that they did not see vocalists and musicians in the same category.

Non-major soprano Bella said, “I thought of myself as a vocalist, not so much as a musician. I think if you asked me, you know, ‘Are you a musician?’ I would have a hard time saying yes to that question. Even though obviously I have an instrument and I use it to create music <laugh>. Um, but it feels, it feels different to me. And it also feels like, um, I guess I feel like it's cheating.” Non-major bass, Phillip, expanded, “I feel like the musician (over the vocalist) requires a lot more dedication and effort.” This is not to say that Bella or Phillip perceived their vocal performance peers as less dedicated or musically talented. Rather, these comments indicate



personal identifications with musicianship, as they felt that they did not work hard enough to consider themselves musicians. Musicianship to majors and non-majors alike entailed dedication that non-majors often felt they could not claim.

Another barrier blocking non-majors from feeling like musicians was their perceived deficits in musical skills as vocalists. Henry laughed, “I think singers sometimes have more in common with actors than they do other musicians.” Later, he continued, “We tend to be terrible musicians as vocalists. Right? Like, <laugh> I think about all the instrumentalists who could, whose rhythm was better, who could count better, who had a better sense of tone. You know, singers, we just like to emote, but that's not exactly—right? So I feel like—I think there's a tension in my mind at times between being a vocalist and being a good musician.” Bella also corroborated Henry’s view of vocalists being more like actors, citing insecurity about not playing an instrument. “I definitely didn't feel like a musician in the same way that I think I would have if I played an instrument. I think being a vocalist, again, it felt to me more of an extension of (acting) performance. Whereas if I'm, you know, working on something with an instrument, it feels like I'm a musician.”

Interestingly, Henry and Bella’s comments normalize instrumentalists' greater adeptness at “hard” musical skills. “Hard” musical skills (such as sight-reading of rhythm and pitch) refer to expressions of technical musicianship that are considered objective and require masculine-coded precision. Henry and Bella's comments reproduce an ideology that conflates execution of hard musical skills with instruments and soft emotional skills with voice. Gendered musical ideologies fail to recognize the equal potential of instrumentalists and vocalists to execute technical performances. Additionally, the idea of innate musical sensibilities ignores the socializing influence of gendered music education structures that value “hard” masculine

instrumentalism over so-called “soft” feminine vocalism. In reality, an excellent musical performance requires a performer to possess both technical and emotional fluency. Bella’s and Henry’s responses (along with others) indicate a masculine-technical ideology of musicianship was prized in the 1990s classroom, impacting the ability of many non-majors to see themselves as capable of “true” musicianship.

Adam, a music education major and Adelpian, was unique in the sample because his primary instrument was not voice, but strings. Being active across departments, Adam possessed a musical orientation that differed from many of his vocalist peers. “Instrumentalists tend to focus on pitch and rhythm,” Adam explained. “My brain just tends to go to the analytical portion of it.” Referencing his teaching methods, Adam said, “The point is that we have a piece of music, we need to perform it the way it’s supposed to be performed... But the college choral experience seems to be also tied up in, you know, feeding the soul and those sorts of things, which I don’t want to discount. It’s just not my focus.” Earlier in the conversation, Adam clarified, “I’m less about, you know, like—I love to—I love hugs, but I don’t let the hugs get in the way of my singing. You know? And that, that sort of mentality. So I have always had the instrumentalist approach to singing.” The word “hugs” by Adam acts as a metaphor to reference the emotional aspects of singing in a choir.

In his memories from college, Adam was adamant not to discredit the work of vocalists. Adam believed firmly that “I don’t think I could separate the singing from the rest of the music making.” However, as an instrumentalist, Adam reported struggling with the embodied, emotional aspect of vocal performance in college. Adam remembered people saying “‘Oh my gosh, I had this surreal experience performing this piece.’ And I’m just thinking like, ‘Man, I messed up this note, this note, this note, and this note.’ I—my brain is out of that, I’m just

immediately critical of everything that I did wrong instead of seeing the bigger picture.” Adam’s orientation towards “hard” musical skills influenced his participation in vocal music and caused him to struggle to connect with the “heart” element of singing that many other interviewees discussed.

Adam does not represent the whole population of instrumentalists, nor do I intend to make concrete claims about the “instrumentalist orientation.” Adam’s comments, nonetheless, reveal an intriguing difference in the musical orientations of vocalists and instrumentalists in this study, suggestive of differential musical cultivation in the collegiate environment. Adam, in his testimony, identified strongly with a cerebralist orientation to music that reflects a gender binary of classical music that associates cerebralism with masculinity and instrumentalism. This is not to say that Adam himself represents a gender binary, rather that Adam’s instrumental sensibilities reflect the influence of gendered music education environments that shaped his musical identity. There is nothing inherently wrong with a cerebralist orientation to music—the issue comes when the prioritization of cerebralism obscures the value of emotionality and embodiment (critical to vocalism) in music-making.

The responses of interviewees indicate a narrow definition of musicianship present in the 1990s School of Music, structured by gendered musical cultures, that placed masculine, instrumental, “hard” skill musicianship over emotional musical engagement. In saying this, I do not suggest that embodying emotions alone is enough to be a proficient vocalist. However, gendered hierarchies that place “hard” musical skills strictly in the purview of instrumentalists devalue the immense cerebralism and technical musicianship of singers, perpetuating the stereotype that singers are not “real” musicians.

Internalizing a narrow perception of musicianship limited the self-identity building of young vocalists (especially non-majors) in the case of this study. Lila stated, the school “would’ve been a great place for me to grow.” However, the attitude was “This is your role and you’re gonna stay in this role.” Dana concurred that the School maintained “very much this classical paradigm that like, “this is the box you fit into and you must obey these rules.” And I obeyed those rules for a while and then I didn’t. <laugh>” Gendered stereotypes of voice are potentially harmful, and it is necessary to challenge gendered musical cultures to prevent the limitation of student potential.

**Conclusion:**

American culture in the 1990s sexualized women and reinforced gender binarism and heteronormativity. Educational discourses in the Puget Sound School of Music at this time reproduced these tendencies, valuing masculine-coded traits and activities over those coded as feminine and devaluing the embodied musicianship of vocalists, especially those who did not fit into hierarchical gender expectations. Although the 1990s represents a specific case study, gendered musical hierarchies are still present (albeit differently) in the School of Music today. Until collegiate communities address gendered cultures in music education, vocalists will continue to be at risk of devaluation and limitation. Looking to the 1990s provides a reflective distance allowing one to see the effects of music education and gender more clearly. Challenging gendered devaluation of vocalism is critical in bolstering the self-identity of young vocalists, who need to know that their musical pursuits are, indeed, worthy of respect.

**Acknowledgements:** I am incredibly grateful for my professors and mentors in the University of Puget Sound School of Music, who have nurtured my love of vocal performance and have challenged me to think critically about music education practices. Thank you to all of the alumni who shared their stories with me—this study could not exist without you! Thank you to Dr. Gwynne Brown for her *endless* support and passion, the Puget Sound voice department, Jane Connelly at the Puget Sound Archives, Arts and Humanities Librarian Wendy Spaček, Dr. Dawn Padula, Professor Jennifer Utrata, the Experiential Learning Department, and my family and friends!

## Bibliography

- Collins, Gail. *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present, 1st ed.* New York: Little, Brown and Co, 2009.
- Crutchfield, Will. "Vocal performance in the nineteenth century." In *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, edited by Colin Lawson, 611-642. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Davidson, Jane W. "The Solo Performer's Identity." In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, 97-113. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Dibben, Nicola. "Gender Identity and Music." In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, 117-133. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- DiPiero, Dan. "Race, Gender, and Jazz School: Chord-Scale Theory as White Masculine Technology." *Jazz and Culture* 6, no. 1 (June 1, 2023): 52–77.
- Duncan, Michelle. "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004): 283–306.
- Dunn, Leslie C., and Nancy A. Jones. "Introduction." In *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, edited by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, 1-13. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Dunn, Leslie C. "Ophelia's Songs in *Hamlet*" music, madness, and the feminine." In *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, edited by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, 50-64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Gerson, Kathleen. *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. New York: Oxford University Press,

2020.

Green, Lucy. *Music, Gender, Education*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Harrison, Scott D., and Jessica O'Bryan. "Prelude: Positioning Singing Pedagogy in the Twenty-First Century." In *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, edited by Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O'Bryan, 1-9. Dordrecht: Springer, 2014.

hooks, bell. "Eros, Eroticism, and The Pedagogical Process." *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (1993): 58–63.

Kemp, Anthony. *The Musical Temperament: Psychology and Personality of Musicians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Kingsbury, Henry. *Music Talent and Performance: Conservatory Cultural System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

Koskoff, Ellen, and Suzanne Cusick. *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender*. Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Lamont, Alexandra. "Musical Identities and The School Environment." In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, 42-57. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Lawson, Colin, and Natasha Loges. "The teaching of performance." In *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, edited by Colin Lawson, 135-168. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Lawson, Colin, and Robin Stowell. "The future?" In *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, edited by Colin Lawson, 817-833. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2012.

- MacDonald, Raymond A. R., David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell. "What are Musical Identities, and Why Are They Important?" In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, 1-20. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Magnat, Virginie. *The Performative Power of Vocality*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2020.
- Manning, Jane, and Anthony Payne. "Vocal performance in the twentieth century and beyond." In *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, edited by Colin Lawson, 752-777. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- McBride, Nicholas R., and Joshua Palkki. "Big Boys Don't Cry (or Sing) ... Still?: A Modern Exploration of Gender, Misogyny, and Homophobia in College Choral Methods Texts." *Music Education Research* 22, no. 4 (2020): 408–20.
- Mitchell, Helen F. "Perception, Evaluation and Communication of Singing Voices." In *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, edited by Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O'Bryan, 187-199. Dordrecht: Springer, 2014.
- Musgrave, Michael. "Performance in the nineteenth century: an overview." In *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, edited by Colin Lawson, 577-610. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- "Music | University of Puget Sound." Accessed July 26, 2023.  
<https://www.pugetsound.edu/academics/music>.
- Nettl, Bruno. *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Oakland, Jane. "Negotiating an 'Opera Singer Identity'." In *Teaching Singing in the 21st*



- Century*, edited by Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan, 221-233. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014).
- O’Bryan, Jessica. “‘We ARE Our Instrument!’: Forming a Singer Identity.” *Research Studies in Music Education* 37, no. 1 (2015): 123–37.
- . “Habits of the Mind, Hand, and Heart: Approaches to Classical Singing Training.” In *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, edited by Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan, 21-34. Dordrecht: Springer, 2014.
- O’Neil, Susan A. “The Self-Identity of Young Musicians.” In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A. R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell, 79-96. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- O’Toole, Patricia. “A Missing Chapter from Choral Methods Books: How Choirs Neglect Girls.” *The Choral Journal* 39, no. 5 (1998): 9–32.
- . “I Sing In A Choir But I Have ‘No Voice!’” *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 4–5, no. 5–1 (1994, 1993): 65–76.
- Palkki, Joshua. “Gender Trouble: Males, Adolescence, and Masculinity in the Choral Context.” *The Choral Journal* 56, no. 4 (2015): 24–35.
- Pope, Rebecca A. “The diva doesn’t die: George Eliot’s *Armstrong*.” In *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, edited by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, 139-151. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Reich Nancy B., “Women as Musicians: A Question of Class.” In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth Solie, 125-146. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Schindler, Margaret. “The Conservatorium Environment: Reflections on the Tertiary Vocal

- Setting Past and Present.” In *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, edited by Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan, 353-366. Dordrecht: Springer, 2014.
- Serra-Dawa, Sofia. “The Teacher-Student Relationship in One-to-One Singing Lessons: An Investigation of Personality and Adult Attachment.” In *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, edited by Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan, 201-220. Dordrecht: Springer, 2014.
- Shepherd, John. “Difference and Power in Music.” In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth A. Solie, 46-65. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Solie, Ruth A. “Introduction: On ‘Difference’” In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth A. Solie, 1-20. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Stauffer, Sandra L. “Narrative Inquiry and The Uses of Narrative in Music Education Research.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research in American Music Education*, edited by Marie Colleen Conway, 163-185. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Treitler, Leo. “Gender and Other Dualities of Music History.” In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth A. Solie, 23-45.. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- University of Puget Sound, *University of Puget Sound Bulletin, 1990-2000* (1990), Catalogs, Office of the Academic Vice President, RG 02, University of Puget Sound Archives & Special Collections, Tacoma, Washington.
- VanWeelden, Kimberly. “Demographic Study of Choral Programs and Conductors in Four-Year

Institutions in the United States.” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 156 (2003): 20–30.

Wenger, Etienne. “Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems.” *SAGE Social Science Collections* 7, no. 2 (2000): 225–46.

Wilson, Jill M. “Preferences of and Attitudes toward Treble Choral Ensembles.” *Research and Issues in Music Education* 10, no. 1 (September 1, 2012).

<https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.ups.edu:2443/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=15328090&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA314348748&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs>.

Yarrow, Allison. *90s Bitch: Media, Culture, and the Failed Promise of Gender Equality*. First edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 2018.