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ARTICLE



## Estill Voice Training and the Gender Non-binary Singer

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### ABSTRACT

While there has been a good deal of recent research about teaching transgender singers, less has been written specifically about gender non-binary singers. When the author was approached by a student who shared that they were gender non-binary, the author examined her pedagogy to make the classroom a more inclusive space. Using a Performance as Research methodology, the author surveyed and recorded verbal interviews with her students and discovered that Estill Voice Training (EVT), the foundation of the voice training in her classes, is built to support inclusivity. In this article, the author, an Estill Master Trainer, shares her journey of working with non-binary students. Definitions and vocabulary of gender identity are discussed and the ways in which EVT supports inclusion in the voice studio are explored. At its core, EVT is free of aesthetic bias and aims to train all voices to sing in all voice qualities, supporting students' identities and natural singing voices. By focusing on anatomy, EVT uses gender bias-free terminology and offers unlimited vocal options. In addition to detailing the ways in which EVT is an ideal model for teaching gender non-binary singers, the author offers other recommendations for fostering an inclusive environment in the classroom.

### KEYWORDS

Voice; singing; Estill; gender; non-binary; pronouns; inclusion

### Introduction

“Everyone has a beautiful voice.” This quote by Jo Estill, founder of Estill Voice Training®, inspires me daily as I work with undergraduate students as the Head of Musical Theatre at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. A few years ago, Gary O. Fuqua Jr.,<sup>1</sup> one of my students, shared that they had embraced the pronouns they/ them. While I celebrated that acceptance of self and worked to make the classroom a safe and inclusive space for them, I began to examine the way I had been teaching singing in my musical theatre classes. Before I share the journey with my students, it is important to clarify a few things.

There has been a good deal of recent research and writings about teaching transgender singers. While this article will be focusing on the gender non-binary singer, much of those writings speak to teaching students all along the gender spectrum. In *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*, writers Liz Jackson Hearn and Brian Kremer give clear research and detailed information about gender, and they begin their book with the following:

It is in our nature as humans to categorize the sensory stimulants we receive into groups we are familiar with. Our ancestors needed to simplify their complex environments to ensure survival, and so separated objects into categories like blue or not-blue, water or not-water, one or the other. We make the same categorizations today about the people we encounter in our social environments. This person is old or young, tall or short, male or female. These categorizations happen immediately and subconsciously and are necessary for us as a species to help process the overwhelming amount of information we receive about our surroundings and encounters. The binary system is not always useful, however; there are innumerable shades of blue, and each is meaningful in describing different objects. The same holds true for gender. Male and female are neither mutually exclusive, nor are they the only options available to describe a person. Gender, just like color, exists and is experienced along a spectrum. (Jackson Hearn and Kremer 2018, xv).

In this same book, the authors give definitions for LGBTQIA+ vocabulary. They define *Gender* as “a set of behaviors, characteristics, gestures, emotional traits, attitudes, and social expectations that are associated with being mostly male or mostly female. Gender is constructed by the societies and communities that perpetuate it and varies between cultures and across time periods” (Hearn and Kremer, 2018, 14). Once we accept that gender is a social construct and consider gender as not exclusively male or female but along a spectrum, we can then begin to discuss the non-binary singer. *Gender Nonbinary* “describes a person whose gender identity or gender expression exists outside the gender binary of exclusively male or exclusively female” (14). Non-binary people can identify with pronouns other than “he/him” and “she/her.” They may use “they/them” or “zie/zim” or other pronouns.

My pronouns are she/her. I am a cis female, meaning that my experience of my gender corresponds with the gender I was assigned at birth. I am not an expert on training gender non-binary singers. This article is adapted from a presentation I gave at the 10<sup>th</sup> Estill World Voice Symposium in 2021, and honestly, I was hesitant to submit to the symposium, because sharing the non-binary experience is not mine to tell. When I mentioned it to my students, though, their enthusiastic response gave me the courage to go ahead. So many of them wanted their voices to be included as I put together the initial presentation, so I set-up a few ways for them to share their experiences. Gary sent me a video on April 2, 2021; I audio recorded a discussion I had with my Musical Theatre Class Voice students on April 30, 2021; and I set-up a Google Form where students could respond anonymously throughout the spring of 2021 to questions about Estill Voice Training (EVT) and gender identity. All of them renewed that enthusiasm by giving their permission for their words to be included in this article.

After my conversation with Gary, I began to re-think how I had been teaching my musical theatre classes. Was I using gendered language? Was I asking students to play into gender stereotypes? Was I being gender inclusive? As I put my course content together for Musical Theatre Class Voice, a year-long course for freshmen where we learn the foundations of EVT, I looked at the content through a new lens.<sup>2</sup>

## Estill Voice Training

Jo Estill was a professional singer, and once she was hired as a research associate at the Upstate Medical Center of the State University of New York at Syracuse, she set out to answer the fundamental question, “How am I doing this?” (Steinhauer, Klimek, and Estill,

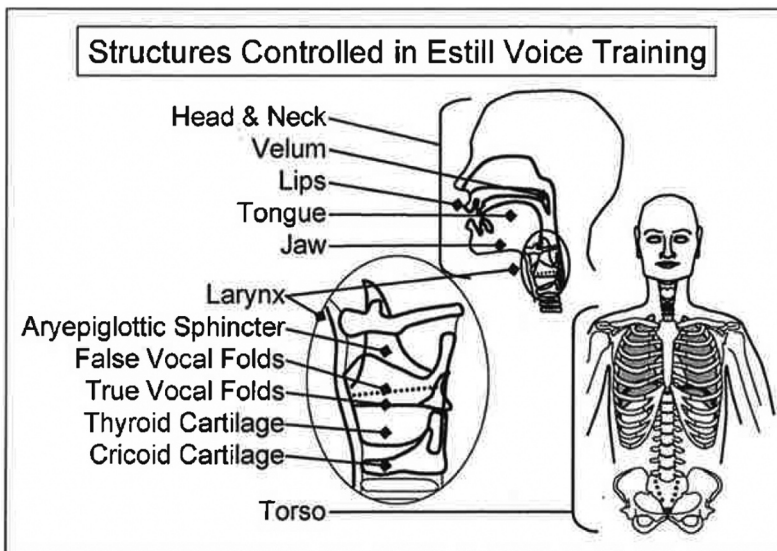
2017, 2). Over the course of several years, she worked with Raymond H. Colton, Eiji Yanagisawa, and other researchers to study acoustics, perception, anatomy, and physiology, and she eventually posited that voice users could develop control of the vocal mechanism through the study of its parts. She then developed Estill Voice Training (EVT).

Jo Estill believed that the beauty of the voice “is revealed by understanding the moving parts of the voice and how to control them. In Estill Voice Training there are 13 moving parts with options that contribute to voice quality (timbre)” (Steinhauer and Klimek, 2019, 354). These parts include the true vocal folds, false vocal folds, larynx, thyroid cartilage, cricoid cartilage, aryepiglottic sphincter, velum, tongue, lips, jaw, head/neck and torso, with multiple options and conditions for each part. See [Figure 1](#). These parts are explored in Level 1 workshops in EVT. Estill also defined six vocal “recipes” to enable the study of specific voice qualities including Speech, Falsetto, Sob, Twang, Belt and Opera which are explored in Level 2 EVT workshops. For further study of EVT, I encourage readers to see the *Voice and Speech Review* article “Vocal Traditions: Estill Voice Training” or *The Estill Voice Model: Theory and Translation* by Kimberly Steinhauer, Mary McDonald Klimek and Jo Estill.

I realized that EVT in many ways is an ideal vocal method for inclusivity. The model is built to celebrate and train all voices with a focus on science and anatomy. As McKenna Shaw (she/her), one of my students, said in our class discussion, “None of it is explicitly gendered.” EVT does the following.

### **No Aesthetic Bias**

“Estill Voice Training is student-centered and free of aesthetic bias. Any non-abusive voice quality is accepted and nurtured” (Steinhauer and McDonald Klimek 2019, 357). Because of the bias-free nature of EVT (Estill 2021), so much about the method and language



**Figure 1.** Structures controlled in Estill Voice Training (Estill et al. 2019).

supports all identities, including race, gender, and cultural background. Gary shared in the video they sent that, “Estill has definitely shown me that my voice has many, many colors [. . .] It’s given me variety. I think that’s what is so exciting. Especially me as a non-binary person.”

### ***Focus on Anatomy***

In the anonymous Google form I created, one student responded by writing, “Estill focuses on biology that is not sex-exclusive—by allowing students to understand how the muscle and cartilage that shapes the voice functions from a purely scientific perspective, students are able to gain a clear insight into how their voice works as an individual, not merely as a binary-gendered person.”. EVT allows us to look at the function of the voice without focusing on gender. As student Abigail Coats (she/her) put it simply in our class discussion, “We all have the same larynx.”

### ***All Voices Can Learn to Sing in All Qualities***

Some vocal qualities have traditionally been associated with particular genders such as “falsetto” for men and “belt” for women. By creating “recipes” in these qualities, Jo Estill removed the gender-bias and made every voice quality achievable for every voice. This concept is one of the most powerful pillars of EVT that my students respond to so enthusiastically. As McKenna shared in class, “It never says, ‘ok, females need to sing like this. Males need to sing like this.’ [. . .] It’s very, ‘all voices can do all the things.’ So, it doesn’t matter what your gender identity is.” Estill empowers all singers to explore every vocal quality.

### ***Gender-Neutral Language***

Many of my students respond positively to the language of EVT. One student wrote anonymously, “EVT is more gender inclusive in its universal use of vocabulary. For example, instead of deeper-voiced students being told to use ‘falsetto’ or students with a higher-pitched voice being told to use ‘head voice’ or ‘chest voice’, this can all be addressed by using more technical, gender-neutral language like ‘thick or thin true vocal fold body cover.’” Abigail said the following in our class discussion:

The true vocal fold body covers alone are very inclusive. Everybody can do thin folds; everybody can do thick folds and so on . . . Where I trained in high school, it was always like, ‘women have a chest voice and a head voice and then men have their chest voice and their falsetto’ and that’s it . . . all these very specific gendered expectations. But with Estill it’s very, ‘ok, this is falsetto quality and we’re all going to sing in falsetto.’

### ***Unlimited Options***

One of the opportunities of working with gender non-binary singers is exploring what it is that they want to achieve with their voice. Often, my gender non-binary students are looking to develop more ease within their natural and unique singing voice, but in some

cases, my students are drawn to the unlimited options offered in EVT. Sometimes they are interested in exploring voice qualities that some might stereotypically define as feminine such as “softness, breathiness, or sweetness” which could be achieved through thinning or stiffening the true vocal body mass, playing with more tilt in the thyroid cartilage, or raising the larynx. Sometimes they might want to explore stereotypically defined masculine vocal qualities by lowering the larynx, thickening the mass of the true vocal folds, or raising the velum for a darker or more assertive sound. Again, though, these options allow for the gender stereotypes to be removed. As Gary said, “You can use different figures [...] to describe how you want to present your voice.” They went further with idea, saying, “I can take each of these figures and make my own recipes.” Training with EVT can allow students to define their own voices, which is truly empowering.

### **Inclusive Classroom Practices**

All of this made my job so much easier. EVT is already set-up to be non-gendered, so the method itself supported the inclusive space I wanted to create in the classroom. When teaching musical theatre singing, however, I was struggling with and continue to struggle with finding language that is free of gender bias. For instance, I may have started class with, “Good morning, guys.” Or if we were working on a song in class, I may have said something like, “Men, sing down the octave.” I realized that while EVT itself made it easy to approach the singing training in a gender-bias-free way, there were several things I could do as an instructor to make my classroom more inclusive. Here are some of the other things I began to consider.

#### ***Give Pronouns***

I have now added my pronouns to my e-mail signature, and at the start of each school year, we encourage students to share their pronouns. I will be honest that using the plural “they/them” pronouns took some time to make a permanent part of my vocabulary, but it is necessary to recognize each other by our pronouns. We should be careful, however, not to require people to share their pronouns, as that may make someone who is not “out” or is not ready to share their pronouns uncomfortable. Instead, the idea of inviting students to share their pronouns seems more sensitive.

#### ***Be Aware of Gendered Language***

This is one area I still struggle with. As I mentioned earlier, I used to call groups of students, “guys” all the time. I have replaced that word with “folks,” although I still make the occasional mistake. I find that I most often use gendered language around describing sound and vocal qualities. I have started including discussions about style and character, and what professional expectations students may encounter in certain vocal qualities. I also remind students that they always have a choice.

### **Include Inclusive Listening Examples**

As we learn about different vocal qualities in Musical Theatre Class Voice, I play listening examples. I have always included male and female examples that demonstrate different voice qualities, but I started to look for some additions to my examples to include non-binary singers. For instance, Sam Smith's "Stay with Me" is a masterclass in options for true vocal fold mass. I do not need to point out to the class that the singer is non-binary, but I feel it is important to be more inclusive in the examples I share.

### **Include Multiple Keys**

For different voice qualities, I have the students sing 30 seconds of the same song. Since it is a musical theatre class, all the songs are from musicals. Some examples are "In a Simple Way I Love You" from *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road*, and "We're Off to See the Wizard" from *The Wizard of Oz*. I had always provided multiple keys for "Give my Regards to Broadway" from *Little Johnny Jones* which we sing as we are exploring the belt quality, but I have begun to include multiple keys for all the qualities we explore.

### **Consider Prompts**

As I work with students in achieving certain vocal postures and conditions, I will use imagery or ideas not related to anatomy. In response to the Google Form, one student anonymously wrote, "Continue the use of gender-neutral language and ideas (like 'laugh' or 'cry') in order to help students achieve certain Estill conditions." This got me thinking about the prompts I suggest. Are they gendered? When I encourage students to "cry" in order to avoid constriction in the false vocal folds, am I favoring a "feminine" cry sound? My solution has been to include more varied prompts with an awareness of avoiding gender stereotypes.

### **Discuss Song Selection**

In Musical Theatre Class Voice, since we all sing the same songs, this is not too much of an issue. The songs are sung mostly by male and female identifying characters in the musicals they come from, but because we are not concerned with the context of the musical in Musical Theatre Class Voice, that has not posed a problem. In my other musical theatre performance classes, though, this is a major discussion. Gary shared in their video, "I don't like to limit myself to gendered songs." In some of my performance classes, students choose material themselves. In those cases, I give them clear parameters as far as dates and style, but they can then choose material that speaks most to them. In Gary's case, they performed songs sung by male-identifying characters such as "Lonely House" from *Street Scene* and female-identifying characters such as "Raunchy" from *110 in the Shade*. In classes where I assign material, such as our scene study class where students work on duets and trios, I will have discussions with students about the kinds of roles they are interested in exploring before I finalize the assignments. For a deeper discussion into choosing repertoire, I would again suggest reading *The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices*, or "Twenty Things Transgender Performers Want You to Know" in

the *Musical Theatre Educator's Alliance Journal* by Gwendolyn Walker. In her article, Walker discusses collaborating with students on choosing repertoire, recommending a conversation such as, "We need to find a song that achieves this dramatic or vocal objective. Can you listen to these and see if any of them would work for you? If not, feel free to find your own music that achieves the objectives we discussed" (Walker 2021, 38–40).

## Conclusion

I have learned so much from my non-binary students, and there is so much more we can do beyond these suggestions to be more gender inclusive. I have not even touched on how difficult the journey can be for a non-binary singer. One student shared anonymously:

EVT teaches us to be more in touch with our voices and bodies—something that can be quite scary when you're still figuring things out. Even later in the journey, it can still be difficult to truly feel at home in your own body and with your own voice. However, EVT in particular can grant a student more power and agency when it comes to using the voice as an instrument.

Gary also discussed how empowering EVT could be for so many singers, saying that it could, "be extremely helpful to people who are transitioning; extremely helpful to people that are also like me, that want to broaden their horizons with their voice. Because it's helped me, definitely." I am so grateful to my students for being patient and courageous and for sharing their experiences. I am grateful to be a part of the Estill Voice International community, a group of vocal practitioners committed to inclusivity. And I am grateful to be continually inspired by Jo Estill's words: "Let your spirit sing. Let it all hang out. Your voice is beautiful. Believe!" (Steinhauer, Klimek, and Estill 2017, 30).

## Notes

1. The participant's name is used with permission.
2. This article uses a Performance as Research (PaR) methodology to explore Estill Voice Training and gender non-binary singing. Oram (2015) discusses PaR and how it applies to voice studies. This article uses action research with PaR to explore how this topic relates to my specific classroom. The methodology combines student interviews, surveys, and personal qualitative observation from my classroom experiences.

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor



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