



# Queering Freedom: Music, Identity, and Spirituality

(Anthology with perspectives from  
over ten countries)

EDITED BY  
KARIN S. HENDRICKS  
AND JUNE BOYCE-TILLMAN

Peter Lang

This is both an unusual and remarkable collection of essays. It manages to shine light from queer theory and practice, and from theology and spirituality, on music performance –sacred and secular–music education, and music history. The essays are highly accessible. They have a truly international authorship and breadth, and they represent voices which deserve to be internationally heard.

— Professor Adrian Thatcher, University of Exeter; author, *Redeeming Gender*

Recognizing and representing that we are intricate musical and spiritual beings, the many voices of this book help us unravel and reexamine the set of modern personal, communal, and institutional connections and tensions among spirituality, sexuality, and music/education so that we may come home to our fullselves.

— Louis S. Bergonzi, Ph.D.

Professor and Head of Music, University of Illinois-Chicago  
Co-Director, *Establishing Identity: LGBTQ Studies & Music Education*  
Symposia (2010, 2013, 2016)


This book is intended to challenge the status quo of music learning and experience by intersecting various musical topics with discussions of spirituality and queer studies. Spanning from the theoretical to the personal, the authors utilize a variety of approaches to query how music makers might blend spirituality's healing and wholeness with queer theory's radical liberation.

*Queering Freedom: Music, Identity, and Spirituality* represents an eclectic mix of historical, ethnomusicological, case study, narrative, ethnodramatic, philosophical, theological, and theoretical contributions. The book reaches an international audience, with invited authors from around the world who represent the voices and perspectives of over ten countries. The authors engage with policy, practice, and performance to critically address contemporary and historical music practices. Through its broad and varied writing styles and representations, the collection aims to shift perspectives of possibility and invite readers to envision a fresh, organic, and more holistic musical experience.

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**Queering Freedom:  
Music, Identity, and Spirituality**



Series Editor

JUNE BOYCE-TILLMAN



PETER LANG

Oxford · Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · New York · Wien

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## Invocation: Queering Freedom

Topics of spirituality and queer theory have a long history as uneasy bedfellows, due in part to the role of various religious traditions in appropriating the former and suppressing the latter. This relationship becomes even more complex when we add the discourse of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, asexual, intersex, pansexual, questioning, and queer (LGBTAAIPQQ)<sup>1</sup> musicians and their allies, who – while making up a substantial portion of musical artists throughout history – have traditionally been subjugated in religious circles as well as mainstream society.

Music scholars have recently become more open to discussions of spirituality in music and education, as pedagogical and societal attention has turned to the socio-emotional wellbeing of children, and as spiritual experience has been recognized as distinct in its own right from any particular religious influence. Meanwhile, the recent liberation of queer identity from a place of condemnation (religious and otherwise) has led to a similar emergence of topics in music scholarship.

Through queer inquiry, we have an opportunity to see spirituality and music anew: As we deconstruct dualisms and culturally-assumed labels, we come to embrace musics and pedagogical methods previously judged as nontraditional, incorrect, mysterious, or strange. We further envision a liberating wholeness in which fragmented or formerly rejected parts of musical experience are balanced, integrated, and even celebrated. In this book we bridge the healing and wholeness of spirituality with the radical liberation of queer inquiry to shift our perspective of possibility, allowing us to envision a fresh, organic, and holistic musical experience that may stimulate the soul of music and education.

1 See Chapter 1, footnote 22.

This book represents an eclectic mix of historical, ethnomusicological, case study, narrative, ethnodramatic, philosophical, theological, and theoretical contributions that engage with policy, practice, and performance. Spanning from the theoretical to the personal, the chapters critically address contemporary and historical music practices to answer the following questions:

- What roles do spirituality and queer theory play in the teaching and learning of music?
- What does history teach us about the relationship between spirituality and queer identity and how might this inform our current practice?
- In what ways do LGBTAAIPQQ issues and spirituality intersect to evoke a more balanced approach to musicking?
- How can the traditional disharmony between sexuality and queer identity be reconciled in studies of music?
- What roles do spirituality and queer identity play in contexts that have a particular religious affiliation?
- Can the spiritual in music be uncoupled from issues around religious indoctrination, control, or censorship?
- How do matters concerning the intersection of LGBTAAIPQQ issues, spirituality, music, and education sit in various cultural contexts, bearing in mind issues of identity construction, both personal and cultural?
- How do political, historical, and ideological considerations or matters of race, class, and gender come into play around notions of the sexual and/or spiritual?
- How are notions of the spiritual inclusive or exclusive in music, especially in areas such as sexual orientation, gender, race, and/or religious affiliation?
- In what ways does a discourse of inclusion extend between individuals, musics, spiritual traditions, and/or educational practices?
- How might intersections of LGBTAAIPQQ identity and spirituality invite us to embrace musics and musical approaches that have previously been judged as inferior, foreign, incorrect, and/or strange?
- What are the possible connections between spirituality and human flourishing, such as moral or personal development or social cohesion, integrity, and transformation?

- What values underpin queer and spiritual approaches to pedagogy? In what ways are they compatible?
- Do intersections of spirituality and queer identity help or hinder the study of other aspects of music?
- What may feminist and queer critical approaches have to contribute to discussions regarding spirituality and music?

The resulting anthology has a wide-ranging approach to these topics. When June was re-reading it, she was reminded of having to write in her first school: "A clear mind and clear writing go together." Some readers may think that this collection is not clear; indeed, it challenges the notion of clarity in a number of contexts and reveals its dangers. Its writing style explores discourses other than the traditional within academia; two chapters are dramatic scripts and others contain song texts and poems.

This book provides a place for authors and readers alike to wrestle with challenging realities that may or may not be easily resolved, often creating more questions than answers. The process of thinking is not always linear. Instead, it sometimes weaves and twists like a spiral, or – much like an elided cadence of Bach – simultaneously connects the act of closure with that of regeneration. As Kerr Mesner suggests in the volume's final chapter, "the process of writing (or reading) ... may have more to teach us than the final product itself."

The volume further challenges the notion of the binary divisions that characterize so many areas of Western culture – male/female, gay/straight, right/wrong, sacred/secular – and calls us to embrace diversity, particularly in the Chapter, "Tempered Bodies, Tempered Voices: Giving Voice to Queer Creation" by Stephanie Budwey and Sean Glenn. The collection invites us to embrace paradox rather than collapse it into a false and exclusive unity, as articulated in the Chapter, "Schubert and Ambiguity: The Art of Embracing Death" by Karin Hendricks.

Many of the chapters set out how a Christianity, which has at its heart the paradox of a God who is both many and one (the Trinity), has through much of its history embraced the unity and pathologized the diversity. Bertram Schirr has shown how the search for a good unison sound from a church congregation has denied the brokenness of the body of Christ; Stephanie Budwey and Sean Glenn have shown how the oft-cited unity

underpinning the tonality of Western music contains the dilemma of the Pythagorean comma and the several solutions created to deal with it; the harmony at the heart of the universe is not as certain as many theorists have asked us to believe. Chapters such as these call us to embrace an apophatic view of the Divine – a way of uncertainty, a contentment with not knowing. Time and time again the dangers of clear theologies are set out in the narratives of the lives of people who could not fit within the clear outlines of a faith tradition. Many of the chapters explore a “spiritual but not religious” position.

In the literature on music and religion, music is often used as a metaphor for the Divine; in this book music is both a metaphor for and an experience or expression of the spiritual. In the Chapter, “Throbbing Dissonance: An Ethnodrama on Identity, Experienced Through Cello ‘Wolf Tone Theory,’” the two are intertwined very intricately. “Nothing to Say: Anarchy and the Subversive Potential of Silence in the Music of John Cage” sees the possibility of his piece 4’ 33” as an expression of Cage’s hidden sexuality.

This book does not embrace a single definition of spirituality (Boyce-Tillman, 2016, pp. 25–79). Many of the chapters are concerned with its *Intrapersonal* dimension, a sense of empowerment, self-realization – a union of being and doing experienced as a new sense of aliveness (Bateson, 1972). This often leads to such virtues as hope and confidence. There is a sense of coming home – a realization of a true identity (Jorgensen, 2008, p. 280). Open-mindedness and curiosity replace fundamentalisms of all kinds, leading to creativity. Paradox is celebrated within the self and the wider society (Clarke, 2008). Transformation and change occurs (Boyce-Tillman, 2007, 2009). Evan Kent and Kerr Mesner describe this powerfully in their own stories; and in “‘Every Person’s Voice Matters’: The Lived Theology of a Teacher of Transgender Singers,” Amanda Rice explores the story of Danielle Steele. Transformation is often related to the *Interpersonal* dimension, especially in belongingness; this is very clear in the two chapters on Queer singing groups by Catherine Pestano and Amelia Pitt-Brooke and Hussein Janmohamed; Tawnya Smith’s “Belonging in Moments: A ‘Becoming-Out’ Ethnodrama As Told Through Spiritual, Social, and Musical Reflections”; and in André de Quadros’s work in prisons in “Nurturing Vulnerability in Imprisoned Manhood: A Spirit Journey.”

The *Extrapersonal/Ethical* dimension is apparent in the cultural examination of various cultures such as “Overcoming Masculine Spirituality: Critical Analysis of Japanese Music Practice” by Koji Matsunobu and Mike Kohfeld’s analysis of the Santería tradition in Latin America. Ockie Vermeulen’s chapter on the dilemmas of “En Route to Inclusive Language Use in the Afrikaans Church Hymn: The Heterosexual White Man as God” ends with a powerful critique of hegemonic heteropatriarchy. In “Gaga Spirituality” Karin Hendricks envisions an alternative way.

The *Metaphysical* dimension – a sense of the transcendent – appears both in connection with the Intrapersonal and Interpersonal but also in a challenging of traditional views of the Divine as set out in the teachings of a faith tradition. The role of a religious *Tradition* features highly in many chapters. June Boyce-Tillman identifies what the Christian church has embraced and what it finds difficult or impossible. Personal relations with a faith tradition and all the dilemmas encountered feature highly in “Queering the Space: Community Music Work with LGBTQ Groups,” “Cor Flammae and Queering Choral Music: A Mixed-Voice Canadian Perspective,” “Belonging in Moments: A ‘Becoming-Out’ Ethnodrama As Told Through Spiritual, Social, and Musical Reflections,” and “Thrice Blessed: Jewish, Gay, and a cantor.” The *Christian Narrative* – often reworked – appears in many quotations from the Scriptures. June Boyce-Tillman bases her thinking on Galatians 3:14 and many biblical quotations reworked appear in the ethnodrama by Tawnya Smith, while indigenous, Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim narratives are explored in other chapters. The place of these in educational contexts is explored, particularly in André de Quadros’s “*What’s a Music Teacher to Do? An Exploration of Opportunities and Obstacles to Personhood and Music Within and Towards the Muslim World.*”

This is a book that calls all of us in a variety of ways to explore the stories in which we have been enculturated both religiously and culturally. The struggles of many of the people who have been honest enough to offer their stories to this volume are at present seen to be at the margins. But they call the dominant culture to explore a wider freedom for everyone – to embrace and celebrate diversity in spiritualities, politics, and musics, culturally and personally. They call us to queer our own freedom and widen our horizons.

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12 “Every Person’s Voice Matters”: The Lived  
Theology of a Teacher of Transgender Singers

Although we do not always discuss each of the pieces that make us up as human beings, we are the sum of our various parts, and each of these parts informs what we do, whether consciously or unconsciously. I teach with the knowledge that I am teaching the whole self, not just the musical self.

— DANIELLE M. COZART STEELE

It was a bright, September day at the beginning of the 2012 school year. Choral conductor Danielle “Dan” Steele gathered up her music after a rehearsal with the concert choir she led at Earlham College. Although she was fairly new to her job, the day had held nothing unexpected for Dan – at least, so far. Attendance issues and upcoming uniform fittings were on her mind as she headed to a local coffee shop to meet a student who had “something to tell [her].” Dan’s tall, lanky, first-year student had thick, wheat-blond hair that fell past the shoulders and a calm, practiced demeanour. Each movement or placement of the hands seemed carefully considered. However, it was the student’s choice of words, the guarded but intent eyes, and the studied patience of someone who has long considered what they want which Dan noticed most. As the student’s narrative unfolded, she understood that her own reactions in that moment were crucial. That afternoon, Dan learned these visible details and actions were the sign of something previously unspoken: the student’s desire to begin a gender transition.

The conversation that evening – in which the student disclosed her female gender identity and her intention to transition to live as female – is one that many transgender people rehearse and imagine, but which they



cannot fully control. The moments after coming out are shaped by the will of the hearer at least as much as they are by the person disclosing. In the case of a disclosure from student to teacher, the differential in power makes the vulnerability of coming out even more pronounced. In such a situation, the familiarity, receptivity, and empathy of the teacher can positively impact the experience of the student coming out. Ideally, those attributes will lead to support and recognition rather than rejection or reprisal.

For many teachers, some of the deepest values affecting such reactions come from their spirituality and religious worldview. These influences are important whether the educator works in the public K-12 setting or at a private college, a state university, or in a religious setting. Religious influences are woven into daily life, not constrained within the private sphere (Moore, 2014). This may be especially salient in relation to matters that have been publicly framed in terms of “morality,” as is the case for American conversations about both gender identity and sexuality. Whether acknowledged or not, conscious or not, explicit or implicit, religious values are likely to be at play. As suggested by the work of McDermott and Blair (2012), research indicates that in the United States, religion may be a key factor in the formation of beliefs regarding these topics. For these reasons, Dan’s attitudes, spirituality, and theological convictions, and the ways in which they influence her as an educator, are consequential for her work with students who are transgender or gender nonconforming. Dan’s beliefs were shaped by myriad, often opposing forces. These beliefs affected her initial conversation with her student Charlotte [a pseudonym], and they have guided each decision since then.

In this chapter, the authors co-construct a biography of Dan as a cisgender choral conductor who strives to act in solidarity with her transgender students. The text is not a hagiography that uniformly praises Dan’s actions, but rather an attempt to consider the ways that one cisgender professional has been influenced by religious experiences and values to act against prevailing professional and cultural norms. (In this chapter, we avoid the noun “ally,” in line with the critiques of McKenzie, 2014. Instead, we strive to use verbal phrases such as “acting in solidarity” which emphasize teachers’ current and ongoing *actions* in support of their marginalised and minoritized students.) Because religious influences can justify the range of

human actions "from the heinous to the heroic" (Moore, 2015, p. 1), we ask: What religious experiences and perspectives have shaped Dan's attitudes towards sexuality, gender, and queerness? How have such experiences and perspectives informed her attempts to support transgender and gender nonconforming singers? How were these religious convictions developed, and how do we see them reflected in her current work?

Dan has agreed to explore these religious influences in depth to create a biography within a participatory-inquiry framework. Why this collaborative approach? Dan felt a collaborative exploration would help her tease out long-forgotten experiences, find subconscious motivations in her actions, and help her re-examine critical, formative moments in her life. Familiar with Mandi Rice's writings and approach to lived theology as informed by queer theory, Dan felt their joint efforts could provide a more "true" version of the story. As the Quaker elder Parker Palmer has observed, the soul is like a wild animal. To find it, "the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out" (Palmer, 2004, p. 58). This co-authored chapter attempts to investigate Dan's inner life in the way that two friends walking together in a dark wood might look for a shy nocturnal creature. Moreover, the friendship in this chapter is not just metaphorical: the two authors have known each other for years after becoming acquainted while working at the same Quaker-affiliated college.

The less visible co-author, Mandi Rice, is a scholar of religion, a practicing Episcopalian, and, like Dan, a white cisgender woman raised in the Midwestern United States. Unlike Dan, Mandi identifies as queer and has long ties to transgender friends and communities. She brings those lenses to this work, in addition to her academic influences from portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) and lived theology (Marsh, 2016). Mandi's perspectives help to clarify and contextualize Dan's lived experiences in congregations and in the classroom. Together, the authors hope that this chapter creates "embodied obligation" (Povinelli, 2016, p. 142) for other cisgender teachers to teach in solidarity with trans and queer communities.

The themes included in this chapter were developed through interviews between the two authors, as well as analysis of primary sources including Dan's essays, papers, and emails. In the story that begins this chapter, Dan's values led her to attempt to welcome her student as best as she could. With

her student's permission, Dan later recounted their conversation in a presentation at the 2016 LGBTQ Issues and Music Education Conference at the University of Illinois:

I sat across from Charlotte [pseudonym] as she announced her intention to begin transitioning from male to female. "Will you support me?" Charlotte asked. She wanted assurance that my classroom would be a safe place for her. "Of course," I said. "Tell me what you need." (Steele, 2016)

Dan's narration of this event focused on the actions of her student. As she recalls it, Charlotte *announced*. Charlotte *asked*. Charlotte *wanted assurance*. These verbs carry the momentum and agency. In contrast, Dan recalls that she herself simply sat, listened, and made a response that she hoped would reinforce the agency of her student: "Tell me what you need."

When Dan recounts this important first conversation with Charlotte she mentions that it never occurred to her to do anything but "jump into the deep end with both feet." She had never taught a transgender student (nor, to her knowledge, ever had a transgender friend, colleague or neighbour). She was truly unaware what issues or challenges she and Charlotte might face together. Why leap in, then? Our inquiry explores which life experiences, specifically those informed by religious encounters and institutions, cultivated Dan's instinctive approach to affirm, empower, and explore with her student. In this chapter, religion is viewed as multifaceted and multivocal. It is neither inerrant nor completely iniquitous. In some Christian contexts, Dan learned valuable moral and professional lessons; at other points, her development was shaped by reaction against the religious forces that did violence to her and to others.

Since her pivotal conversation with Charlotte in the early 2010s, Dan has learned from Charlotte and from other transitioning singers about their needs and hopes for their singing voices and choral experiences. Their answers have prompted the next questions in Dan's research, the reshaping of her choral programme, and the pedagogy she has developed as a private voice instructor. She has now coached a number of transgender and gender nonconforming singers in her college choirs, in clinics around the country, and as a consultant to the all-transgender choral ensemble in Boston, Massachusetts, formerly known as Butterfly Music Transgender Chorus.

Along with her students, she is continually working to establish best practices for vocal pedagogy and choral instruction with transgender singers making hormonal and/or surgical transitions. Dan applies these practices in her own classroom and advocates for their adoption by other teachers. At Earlham in January 2017, Dan organized and hosted the first Transgender Singing Voice national conference; the event brought together music professionals (both transgender and cisgender) from all over the world in a collaborative conference centred on the unique needs of transgender singers. She has also pursued a doctoral degree at Teachers College, Columbia University specifically to further the scholarship on vocal pedagogy with singers who are transgender or gender nonconforming.

While we will focus on religious influences, there are of course professional competencies and attitudes that also shape Dan's work. She developed approaches to train her transgender students based on the traditional *bel canto* training she received at Butler University and University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. Dan is also versed in research in the field of speech-language pathology, citing Richard Adler, Anita Kozan, Shelagh Davies, Joseph Stemple, and Ingo Titze's work as informing her approach. And yet, beyond these professional sources are a variety of religious and spiritual convictions that also shape Dan's approach. Though these latter would rarely appear on a CV, they form a foundational worldview that can hardly be restrained to the "private sphere."

## Strong, Loud and Proud

Dan Steele's career as a music educator is profoundly shaped by her earliest training in music: singing from the pews of her family's First United Methodist Church in Alexandria, Indiana. The younger Steele sat next to her mother Nancy every Sunday; she memorized the lyrics and harmonies to dozens of songs, absorbing them during tens, if not hundreds, of sing-throughs. While the rest of the church sang the melody, Nancy coached her daughter to sing the harmony. To tunes such as "Let There Be Peace on

Earth" and "Here I Am, Lord," Dan learned to listen to the voices around her while holding a harmony line that was buoyed by her mother's confident vocal leadership. In that way, the church helped her develop from a young age both her musical skill and an appreciation for the supportive and special *not-melody*, the alto line.

These experiences also embedded in her an understanding that collaboration in a religious or musical setting does not necessarily require conformity: in fact, it might be improved by her independent streak. While Dan's congregation was largely white and semi-rural, the congregation spanned social, economic, theological, and political differences. That heterogeneity was not obvious to her as a child, but the congregation's encouragement of her singing was clear:

Being the only person singing the harmony part is like marching to the beat of your own drummer ... It taught me that I could be working *with* other people in a collaborative, cooperative manner but that I didn't have to do the same things that they did. And I could do what I did ... strong, loud and proud.

Here we see the extent to which lessons in music are also deeply intertwined with Dan's formation in the church, and with the character traits that her family and the wider congregational community permitted and fostered. Singing harmony gave Dan a clear sense that she could hold her own. The fact that these lessons took place within the church sanctuary created the feeling that this form of counterpoint was not only permitted but was in fact a holy activity.

Such expression of difference, however collaborative, was not always received well by others outside the church walls. Dan recalls performing in an outreach show for children, and her part required that she sing harmony. At the end of the performance one of the children pointed out her "mistake": she had not sung the melody. The child believed the melody was the only real and valid part of the music.

The co-authors of this chapter see in that anecdote a tie to queer theory, which "calls into consideration how some ways of thinking and being are conceptualized as normal, natural, and taken for granted, while others are interpreted as deviant, unusual, and worthy of stigmatization and marginalisation" (Cragun & Sumerau, 2015, p. 821). For the young child, it was

the melody that was normalized and valued, and singing the harmony was understood as not simply different, but *wrong* – a fault to be condemned. To a musically literate adult, this worldview can be understood as naïvely absolutist. However naïve, it reveals a human tendency to categorize and rank, to establish firm “rights” and “wrongs,” which is comparable to the ordering of sexual and gendered reality. Some are affirmed in their performance, while others are corrected for their “faults.”

With this awareness, grounded in her musical and ecclesial background, Dan has become a teacher who is willing to question and violate certain social habits. Moreover, she expects to eventually find community as she does so, like she once found singing the harmony part alongside her mother. She looks to music teaching colleagues like Randall Allsup who, in his 2016 book, *Remixing the Classroom*, asks: [W]hen and how can a community violate establishment norms and contexts? What are our obligations to traditional norms if they are embedded with meanings that contradict local or even broader humanist values?” (pp. 4–5)

Singing the harmony, doing something different from the rest of the singers, needing to hold one's own – this is not unlike what Dan's transgender singers must do as they go through vocal transition. Part of this is mechanical: Their vocal ranges may be shifting or unreliable, or situated across multiple voice parts. Becoming comfortable doing something different from the rest of the ensemble, then, is a necessary skill for transgender singers to learn. As an adult, Dan plays a coaching role similar to the role her mother once played, often singing next to her transgender singers to help buoy and stabilize their voices.

Dan notes that two voices, when singing at the same frequency, naturally amplify one another. She sees this as a metaphor for a teacher's other actions in solidarity with their transgender students in the classroom. It's about more than just singing, although she sees great value in the raised confidence she sees in her transgender singers as they begin to vocally integrate into the ensemble. Dan also rewrites voice parts, sometimes multiple times in one semester, to accommodate the changing voices of her singers. (Though we have only mentioned Charlotte, Dan has subsequently worked with a number of transgender and gender nonconforming students.) She has found that her singers are more able to participate more fully this way,

using whatever portion of their register is available to them at that time. They also become more adept at sight-reading, able to navigate between voice parts on the fly as needed. Dan's early experiences within the church developed in her the sense that these unique forms of participation could in fact strengthen one's musical knowledge and one's confidence. It became "thrilling" to help other singers follow this irregular path, she says – a musical and intellectual challenge for all.

### To Conduct is to be a Prism

Dan held her first professional conducting position with the choir at her childhood church. Just sixteen years old, she stumbled through learning what it meant to be a conductor. Through trial, error, and elders' guidance, she learned the importance of everything from rehearsal plans to gesture to thoughtful programming. She was buoyed along by the loving (if "sometimes cantankerous") older members of her choir, especially the feisty and opinionated alto section of which her mother was a part. Her mother served as the support system for Dan's musical learning, becoming her music librarian, helping her to figure out how to program the music appropriate to the liturgical calendar, and assisting her with developing first-time job skills like professional punctuality. (Despite being in a career where keeping tempo is a crucial skill, she says that neither she nor her mother have ever quite conquered this genetic flaw, the slow inner clock.)

Dan developed a set of flexible expectations while working with a choir whose average member was a musical amateur, retired, and in their mid-fifties or older. By default, she began working with aging voices in a context that emphasized participation and accessibility. She supported an environment of community belonging as well as the crafting of a moving vocal performance. Additionally, the Christian values of this congregation shaped her approach of inclusion. To effectively guide singers who often had trouble controlling their instruments, whose voices were changing in

unpredictable ways as they aged, Dan had to learn two important skills: to be adaptable from one rehearsal to the next, and to programme music that welcomed a variety of ability levels, both physically and musically. This training during her teenage years would come to serve her well when she began incorporating transitioning singers into the mixed-voice choral ensemble at Earlham, as issues common to aging singers (i.e., unpredictable onset or diminishing vocal range) are also challenges faced by many transitioning singers, regardless of age.

Dan’s early work as a conductor also connected her with a voice and conducting teacher who happened to be a deeply religious evangelical Christian. She would spend hours with Dan engaging in lively debates about contemporary moral issues and religion. While they did not share positions on those hot-button issues, Dan valued her teacher’s compassionate, people-centred approach to her lived faith. As Dan recalls, this teacher believed homosexuals were living in sin. This teacher would also have fought tooth and nail for their inclusion in the evangelical Christian community, as she considered herself also a sinner (in the ways in which mortals fall short of the glory of God through lust, avarice, sloth, etc.), and felt all sin was equal in the eyes of the Lord.

Despite their differences, Dan never once felt judged or spiritually unsafe in this woman’s presence. Her teacher was an exemplar of understanding when Dan faced a tumultuous time in high school and “needed an ear.” She knows that her teacher supported each of her teenage students, gay or straight, in this way, helping them to navigate the complexities of their high school years. This woman’s lived faith exemplified acceptance – and an acceptance based on deep engagement across differences, rather than intentional avoidance of them. Her teacher’s attitude had a profound effect on Dan and countered some of the harmful effects of the fundamentalist religious views she encountered during high school. Through conducting lessons, Dan formed a deep bond that changed her sense of what a teaching relationship could be.

As Dan applied these lessons to her leadership to her church choir, she learned the importance of *connection* in developing the full potential of an ensemble. In the conversations that led to this chapter, she used a metaphor that encapsulated her understanding of herself as a conductor:



For me, what was really always the *most* important was not my gesture but rather forming a connection with the choir that was deep enough that I became simply a facilitator of them making sounds. I've always felt that a conductor should be a prism and the choir members are light. So, the prism without light shining through it looks like a piece of glass. Light without a prism to shine through is invisible. Together they make this beautiful spectrum.

The prism as Dan defines it functions entirely through reciprocal relationship: neither the light nor the prism is functioning most vibrantly if it is not aligned in participation with the other component. Similarly, she found that the most important alignment was not simply her physical position or gesture but rather her affective and connective alignment with the choir. No matter how beautifully she "move[s her] arms," the gestures are unsatisfying if they are not used to facilitate the choir's best work. (And Dan's conception of "best" seems to stretch beyond the artistic excellence.) She ends the phrase, though, with an emphasis on the *correct* relationship. When properly arranged, the prism and the light "make this beautiful spectrum." The same is true of the conductor and the choir. She affirms that even voices that might have seemed limited can, with the right instruction and affective connection, contribute meaningfully, even substantially, to an ensemble in more ways than initially seemed possible.

### Sensitivity to Exclusion

As she aged, Dan's faith was shaped by several new religious communities in addition to the familiar United Methodist congregation. She participated in a youth group at the nearby evangelical Church of the Nazarene. She attended a high school where the majority of the student body belonged to the Church of God, a denomination with international reach, which was headquartered a dozen miles away in Anderson, Indiana. Every summer she enrolled at a music-themed church camp run by the Disciples of Christ. These communities, though all based in the same region of Indiana, communicated dramatically different ideas about God and faith.

At the Disciples of Christ camp, directors counselled her that “a faith that lacks questions and searching is stagnant – keep asking, keep looking for answers, keep listening for that still, small voice.” In contrast, at the Nazarene church, Dan recalls being “verbally excoriated” for asking questions that made it seem as if she doubted God. These experiences sharpened Dan’s perceptions that religious speech could be controversial and that not all communities were willing to tolerate the controversy.

Within the Nazarene youth group, Dan had first-hand experience with a type of Christianity she later called “abusive.” For example, perceived immodesty in young women’s dress, or physical contact between young men and women, would lead the youth pastor to “explode” at the offending teens, including Dan. Once, she came to the youth group hangout room while wearing a spaghetti-strap top and long skirt. She was publicly reprimanded and made to cover herself before being allowed to enter the space. “Female shoulders, it seems, were offensive in the sight of the Lord,” she jokes, though her comment can’t obscure an underlying pain at the experience. The message about her body and character had lasting impact.

The same emphasis on holiness and sexual purity characterized the take-away messages Dan remembers from the youth minister’s day-to-day preaching and ministry. She recalls:

During a lecture at an event he titled “Super Sex Sunday,” he told us we shouldn’t go out on a date alone before marriage and it was encouraged that your first kiss would be on the altar [at your wedding]. Of course, these were all rules for heterosexual people. Never mind being gay or trans – those existences weren’t even *reality* for this man.<sup>1</sup>

Due in part to her age, Dan absorbed these messages about purity and holiness as part of her embedded theology – the “beliefs and values instilled

1 However, it is important to remember that Dan herself was not deeply informed about transgender people and their needs until she met Charlotte. While a different religious leader might have helped Danielle form that awareness at an earlier stage of her life, this youth pastor’s influence was to marginalise and make invisible people who were not heterosexual or cisgender. This invisibilizing, while not actively violent on its face, is still an expression of cultural violence (see Galtung, 1990). For Dan, that pastor’s insistent sidestepping of LGBTQ issues only made her more focused on that community and the “continual injustices visited upon it by mainstream religion.”

throughout childhood” – without the critical tools to engage in theological discourse about them (Doehring, 2015). She does not mention the word “God” in her recounting. However, because the speech was made by someone with religious authority who claimed to reflect the word or will of God, his points felt as if they carried more authority than ordinary human opinion. Dan was deeply influenced by the more restrictive beliefs at the Church of the Nazarene. This manifested as experience of spiritual confusion and disconnection from the divine.

Dan continued to conduct, and through the music at her United Methodist church she found theological language that provided her with “refuge and meaning.” The songs to which she related did not contain overt messages about sexuality, purity or politics. Hymns provided a way to encounter the divine without the “baggage” that caused her spiritual struggle. Music, she realized, was a place where she still felt safe, a place where she still belonged, a place that made her feel welcomed and whole. She recognized that music might be a refuge for others as well. From the very beginning of her career, this realization influenced her musical decisions, from pedagogy to programming.

With twenty years’ more life experience, Dan is now capable of framing this experience as one that encouraged her empathy with transgender students, who also suffer from hearing religious denunciations of their gender and sexuality. While she is clear that her students who are queer and transgender have distinct and “more difficult” experiences, she says, “I bring these experiences up to highlight what I, like many of my students, have gone through, and why spiritual healing is so important.” Knowing that her students hear messages that condemn their bodies and their spirits, Dan says, “There’s a part of me that’s really aggressive in the intersection of all of these things, music and spirituality and activism and teaching.” Her experiences with certain forms of Christian judgment have caused her to reject that youth pastor’s theological and moral message and to actively oppose it in her adult life.

It wasn’t just encounters with this youth pastor that spiritually and musically shaped Dan. There were myriad and opposing forces at work. In the 1990s the AIDS crisis in the U.S. was just barely under control (CDC, 2001). The musical *Rent* with its overt themes of homosexuality and sexuality had become a recent Broadway sensation (Brantley, 1996). At the

same time in Alexandria, Indiana, the "first" gay student outed himself at Dan's high school (Young, 1997). When his parents kicked him out, Dan's family took him in. She also began to experience herself the stigmatization felt by many in the LGBTQ community. Having recently cut her hair short, she was seen by several classmates to be a lesbian (though she does not identify as such). Dan was verbally and physically bullied, once being pushed down the stairs and called a "faggot." She remembers that the students who derided her were athletic, academically accomplished, and known to attend local churches – in short, what her teachers might have called "the good kids." Once again, she found that those who were seen to be righteous behaved in ways that she experienced as violent. Being the target of their enforcement caused her to question these norms. Dan began to wonder if the "strange, closed version" of Christianity with which she was growing up, and its focus on sex and sexuality, could be where these overtly homophobic ideas found fertile ground to take root.

Dan continues to challenge the ideas and systems she encountered in her youth while also finding purpose in her adolescent trials.

Even in the horrible stuff, I learned some critical coping tools along the way that I could then pass along [to my students]. So it's not just the good stuff that makes up my philosophies. It's all the dirt and gravel and skinned knees in between.

Here Dan uses the strongly tactile metaphor of skinned knees, the kind of everyday injury that, though painful, is also a common occurrence during a child's growth and development. This language frames the emotional and physical violence she experience and witnessed as a type of pain that was characteristic of the past, and which has been used for growth.

Dan's language of "coping tools" also points towards her consciousness of resilience, the "successful adaptation despite challenges and threatening circumstances" (Garmezy & Masten, 1991, p. 159). These coping tools came with a price. The hard lesson imprinted on Dan was this: there is a need for radical empathy as part of everyday living. Although she still flinches when she recalls the overwhelming sense of hatred she experienced from classmates, this has made her more likely to stand unapologetically with her students. She is also unwilling – almost unable – to isolate herself from evangelical Christian communities, although they are not now her primary religious home.

Because Dan is not the target of transphobic slurs or threats, she feels responsible to continue dialogue with fellow cisgender people who have a different worldview about sexuality and gender – especially other music teachers. So, she works with state-level music organizations in Indiana, Tennessee and Ohio, is a frequent guest speaker at conferences, and regularly takes calls from cisgender music instructors who call with questions about their transgender students. Without such dialogue Dan fears “a quick and frightening backslide in our progress on social issues.” To continue these conversations across lines of difference, resilience is crucial.

Dan’s troubled and complex relationship with Christianity might seem, then, to be the last place that she would find strength; however, the Bible occupies a special place on her bookshelf. Its spine is broken from use, its pages water-stained from years of enduring church camp humidity and the northern Indiana heat. Stuffed with letters and notes from camp friends and current campers, its pages are highlighted and filled with writing, questions, observations, and a sense of begging God for understanding.

Dan doesn’t consider herself a Christian, but a follower of the ideas of Christ. She considers him a “radical and controversial” figure in terms of “human rights work.” Implicit in this is a sense that Jesus’ true message is a challenge to act in ways that are different from what is *easiest*. She says,

He asked us to do the hardest thing and we still find reasons not to get there ... The most necessary thing seems to be the hardest: Love thy neighbour as thyself ... I wish more people actually followed [Jesus’] teachings.

She seeks refuge in certain communities of faith, including the Quaker community at her academic institution, and she values their focus on social justice and equity as core parts of their faith.

### Programming for “The One”

Aware that religion can foster exclusionary attitudes, Dan began to look for who else was being excluded and what would help them to connect again. This concern shaped her intentions in religious settings, and also in

her secular classroom as well: as she moved through her career she began to wonder how she could help promote resilience through classroom experiences and community (as discussed by Bockting, Miner, Swinburne Romine, Hamilton & Coleman, 2013).

Starting with her time at Alexandria First United Methodist Church, Dan got a chance to program music that was specifically aimed at reaching someone who didn't connect to traditional Christian language and symbols. What Dan discovered was that people with varied, even opposing, religious leanings could find common ground in a musical setting. "Had music not been the medium, some of my choir members may never have spoken to one another," Dan says. Seeing this potential for unity or bridge-building changed how she thought about musical programming for the rest of her career.

Choral conducting became a way for Dan to offer new approaches to spirituality and to use music to create an intentionally "inclusive" space. She remembers consciously programming music to get her choir thinking outside the box. The results? "Suddenly, we were engaged in conversations [about the music and issues it brought up] where everyone's guard was down." She also took the opportunity to program secular musicians whose music had spiritual messages. Two examples, "Bridge Over Troubled Water," by Simon and Garfunkel and James Taylor's "That Lonesome Road," both have deep spiritual messages without explicitly mentioning theology, hot-button topics, or concrete political issues:

[In this creative programming,] what was important to me was reaching the person who had never been reached, who felt isolated and alone. Lots of traditional church anthems and hymns are great, but there are definitely some for whom those hymns would immediately serve to make them feel uncomfortable or excluded. Years ago, I wouldn't have been able to articulate this, but the idea [then and now] was that music can be a form of social justice, an impetus for change.

Guided by her spiritual value of inclusion, Dan searched for a way to enact the Christian message by reaching beyond Christian religious language.

This idea of programming to reach "the one" – the person who is excluded, lonely, disenfranchised, perhaps even scared – is fundamental in Dan's current program at Earlham College. Her practice began with

sensitivity to music selection and now goes deeper. After Charlotte disclosed to Dan that she was transgender, Dan expanded her efforts to make the choir a hospitable place for “every single” member. With the support of the director of choral activities, William (Bill) Culverhouse, Dan and Bill began changing choral policy to make sure that their only out transgender student could participate. The pair adapted classroom language to be gender neutral (as discussed in Bayne 2016; and Day-Vines, Wood, Grothaus, Craigen, Holman, Dotson-Blake & Douglass, 2007), updated dress code policy to reflect evolving ideas about gender diversity and presentation, and gave additional scrutiny as they vetted their repertoire.

During Charlotte’s second year in Dan’s choral programme, Charlotte became a member of the Women’s Chorus. This changed the way Dan viewed repertoire that she had always considered standard for a women’s ensemble. Aware that a programme of love songs reflecting gender and sexual normativity might make Charlotte (and others) feel awkward or excluded, she consciously branched out in her search for literature for the Women’s Chorus. She remembers that the resulting repertoire felt empowering for all of members of the chorus. “They were tired of singing about flowers and snowflakes, or singing insipid love poetry that insinuated they were weak, unintelligent, or nothing without a man.” (Dan’s eye roll suggests that she, too, was tired of such literature.)

Two-part pop tunes were replaced with music by, about, and for women, featuring messages of strength and empowerment. The entire tone of the choral program changed in that year, Dan says. Today, the Women’s Chorus is a thriving ensemble with a vested interest in advancing the music of living women composers. It has been an inspiring change for Dan, bringing her and her students into touch with vibrant, dynamic women (cisgender and transgender) – composers, arrangers, ethnomusicologists and directors from around the United States.

Although Dan and Bill initially changed the choral programme to fully welcome one student, it didn’t take long for word to spread that the choral department was actively affirming to transgender students. One by one, students came out to the directors or to other members of her choir.

By 2017, Dan estimates that fifteen to twenty percent of the choral programme was populated by singers who were transgender or non-binary. Dan couldn't have predicted that outcome. She did know, however, that the changes would be critical for Charlotte's wellbeing.

"I got to change an entire choral programme to serve *one* person," says Dan, with a touch of fierce pride. "At other institutions, I've seen small, nominal accommodations on behalf of transgender singers, but there was also resistance to any accommodations that would result in a sea change for their department." At Earlham, however, it was different. Dan attributes this to the fact that the institution was founded by Quakers and still honours principles such as peace and justice, respect for persons, integrity, and community.<sup>2</sup>

"My perception of how Quaker values are lived at Earlham is the idea that every person's voice matters," Dan says. This position is deeply theological, based on the Quaker conviction that there is "that of God" in everyone which manifests as an "inner spirit of Truth." Within this worldview, prominent at the college, a transgender student who transitions is not simply responding to a desire or a mental health need, but expressing a part of their spirit and a deeper truth about the divine.<sup>3</sup> To exclude such a student from any community is to deny part of the divine Truth that would otherwise be accessible. Such exclusion would be, furthermore, at odds with the college's stated values of respect and community.

Looking around her, Dan is inspired by Quakers whose practice is to say, "Who is the most affected by this situation? *That's* the voice we have to prioritize." That suggests a religious value on conversation and listening – exactly the value that Dan put into action during her first pivotal talk with Charlotte.

2 Though this chapter uses the common name "Quakers," the group is known formally as the Religious Society of Friends.

3 Of course, all religions are internally diverse; there are also branches of U.S. and international Quaker thought in which homosexuality, gender fluidity, and gender transition are not accepted.



## Fully Integrated – or Close

In late December, 2013, most Earlham students and faculty were fully engaged in preparations for final examinations and papers. Ninety minutes' drive northwest, a rural congregation was gathering for its Sunday morning worship in the local Lions Club. Despite the snow that morning, Dan and a number of her Earlham College students bundled into vans and headed to meet the congregants, all former members of the United Methodist church in which Dan was raised and began her conducting career.

Dan's church briefly made the news that season when a member of the church, a cisgender gay man, was denied employment as the choir director because of his sexual orientation (Wilkins, 2014). In the end, to support the choir director, eighty percent of the congregants left the church, which is why they gathered in the Lions Club. Dan recalls the level of depression some long-time members felt about moving out of the vaulted church with its floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows: "Some people had been members for sixty and seventy years. They were losing their home." Although Dan was well outside of that age range, her parents were long-time members and her grandfather had once pastored the church. In many ways this represented the loss of their family spiritual home.

The situation provided Dan with a chance to see how far her childhood church had come in its affirmation of LGBTQ people. Though she does not remember ever hearing sermons that preached against homosexuality, there had not been supportive sermons, either. The conversations had been sidelined to the adult Sunday school class, run by her father, David Steele. As a young college student, Dan came as a guest to speak about her support of LGBTQ people and faith. "That class, begun in 2001, might have sparked the beginning of a shift in attitude that later became fully LGBTQ-supportive," she reflects. By the time she and her students visited in 2013, Dan saw the congregation taking real losses in order to support the choir director. The very same semester that she moved further into her support for transgender students in her professional context, she saw loved ones and longtime acquaintances taking their own risks within their spiritual community. (LGBTQ and LGBTQ-supportive members of the

church were physically barred from entering the worship space while the welcoming pastor looked on, flocked by a Sheriff's deputy. The then-bishop of the Indiana United Methodist Church, Michael Coyner, officially closed the church in 2015.)

As Dan recalls, "When I told my [Earlham] choir about what was happening, 30 of my choir members got up on a Sunday morning during finals week and drove through the snow an hour and a half to go surprise these people at my church." Her recounting of events doesn't include any sense of debate or question on the part of the students. Instead, her narrative constructs a scene in which the naming of the problem leads directly to collective action. In a way, it's very similar to Dan's own instantaneous affirmation of Charlotte and her needs.

The students arrived for the 9 a.m. choir rehearsal before the service, joining the former members of the Methodist church's choir, many of whom had sung under Dan's leadership during her time as choir director at the church. There were tears and hugs, and then there was a lot of joyful noise. Dan recalls the trip as one during which students communicated to the church members, through their presence and their singing, "We see what you're doing and we love you." In this way, the church's activism was a catalyst for the students' expression of love.

Dan also notes that the group included Charlotte as well as several other students who would later come out as transgender or non-binary. She says of the congregation,

This group of people, who didn't know any of my students, so many of whom had never [knowingly] met a transgender person before, immediately started using the right gender pronouns [and never called into question their manner of dress or presentation]. And they sat down and shared a table [fellowship time] together ... that was amazing.

As Dan tells it, the students were welcomed immediately in the worship service and at the table (both the Table of Christ as well as the literal table). The presence of these students provided another occasion for the former church members to take a stand on the place for LGBTQ people within the church.

Dan says that day epitomized for her the kind of connections she feels throughout her life since she has begun working actively in support

of her transgender students. These connections happen not only between the communities she values, but also between aspects of herself:

Earlham has continually given me this sense of self-confidence and power when it comes to my teaching which is also step-by-step in line with my activism. I feel like for the first time in my career I'm a whole person. I can be an ally and an activist to my LGBTQ and non-binary students. I can be a spiritual human being. I feel fully integrated for the first time in my adult life. Not just professionally but *period*. I feel fully integrated as a human.

Dan sees this in the ties between her professional life and her church community, and between her personal values and her expressions of activism in the classroom. It seems in fact that working in support of her transgender students has made her even more aware of her spirituality. Furthermore, it has connected her more deeply with her students and with the religious community in which both her musical talents and spiritual sensibilities were first formed.

## Conclusion

While this participant biography outwardly appears to tell the story of one life, it is simultaneously the record of communities that helped to shape and strengthen the values that are now at the centre of Dan's work. At her mother's side and amid a congregation of fellow Methodists, she learned to sing a stubborn and independent harmony and to perceive beauty in that difference from the community norm. As a young church choir director, she learned to value voices that were aging and unpredictable, and to facilitate beauty through her relationship with her singers. Her experience of religious harm at the nearby Church of the Nazarene deepened her resilience and her empathy for others in the crosshairs of religious condemnation. It also re-emphasized the importance of programming music that can reach people's spirits even when traditional religious language is experienced as violent. Now working in a Quaker-influenced educational environment

that values “that of God” within everyone, Dan has found professional and ethical support as she applies these lessons in a choral environment that welcomes and encourages transgender singers.

Finally, Dan’s relationship with a compassionate and conservatively religious music teacher helped develop her commitment to staying in conversation with other cisgender people, even across political and theological difference. While many faith communities intend to foster love, compassion, and care for others, not all of those faith communities express love in a way that is affirming to their transgender congregants or fellow citizens. Rather than disregarding Christianity entirely, Dan is among those who draw on religious resources to seek justice alongside transgender people (Christian and otherwise), and who continue the difficult and taxing conversations with those in their own faith communities (McGeorge, Carlson, & Toomey, 2014).

It is in the polyphony of the many voices that one encounters what is real. If a choir director gives in to the temptation to eliminate inconvenient voices – this applies both to singing voices and to points of view – she simultaneously undermines her students’ opportunities to learn and grow. Dan feels it is imperative, then, to take her discipline to task and grapple with the difficulties of doing so. The lived experiences of those who bring non-“normative” perspectives add to the choir’s ability to more deeply and authentically encounter the music as they are presented with perspectives that might be different from their own. The very essence of choir is a diverse community creating aural spectacle. Dan says, “If we remove all ‘difference,’ either figuratively or literally, from a choir, we become monotone, less nuanced, less expressive.” In this statement, she refers not only to welcoming non-“normative” perspectives but also the aural presence of a uniquely transgender vocal sound. It is precisely in the blended richness of the varied and distinct voices that a choir becomes truly aurally (and for Dan, spiritually) beautiful. For her, this leads to the imperative to incorporate those diverse, perhaps even challenging, voices: to find the training, repertoire, choral formation, and tone colour that allows for all voices to contribute to the beauty of the whole.

At the very end of the co-authors’ conversations for this chapter, Dan revealed that she had once seriously considered becoming a minister and

pursuing an M.Div., the academic degree in religious ministry. Instead, after feeling pulled between her religious convictions and her love for music, she enrolled in a master's programme in music at the University of Cincinnati. That path led to her career as a music educator and, eventually, to a mutually-educational relationship with Charlotte. Though her professional title does not say so, Dan still quietly considers her work to be a form of ministry – doing that which God has called her to do in the world. While she may not make these conversations explicit in the classroom, her faith profoundly shapes her work there:

I do feel called by God to do this. But I don't want to encounter another "me" [someone who has been harmed by religion] and accidentally damage them by talking explicitly [in my classroom] about faith. I don't want people to think I am proselytizing. So, to me, my ministry is more effective if I do the work ... of being a welcoming teacher.

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