

Earlham College's transgender singing conference aims to help make music more inclusive

[Audrey J. Kirby, Richmond Palladium-Item](#) Published 11:46 a.m. ET March 26, 2019



Faculty member Danielle Steele leads choral students at Earlham College's Center for Visual and Performing Arts. (Photo: Supplied)

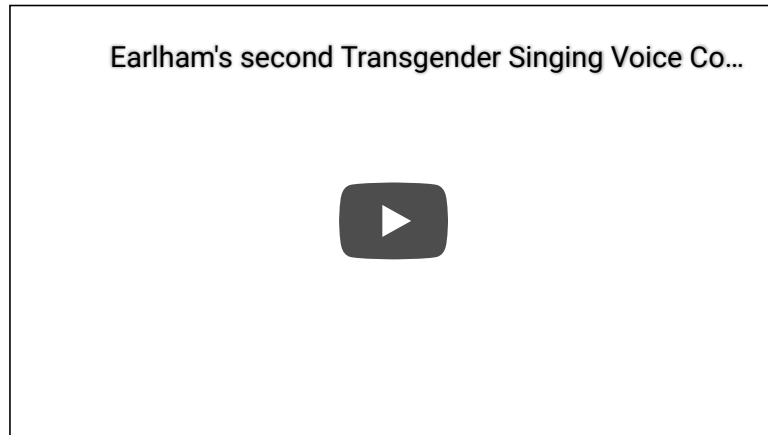
RICHMOND, Ind. — In her years as an educator and leader in music, Danielle Cozart Steele noticed a void that needed to be filled.

She said there's an assumption that the music world is a safe space for those who identify as transgender and non-binary. Under the surface, however that might not be the case. Early on in her work, there were very few, if any, resources in regards to best practices for transgender and non-binary music students.

These students might have to sing songs with which they don't identify or songs that don't represent them, further making them feel marginalized or isolated. Not to mention, they could face bullying. And they aren't necessarily guaranteed their name or pronouns will be respected by their music teacher.

So, Cozart Steele helped start the Transgender Singing Voice Conference, the second of which will take place March 30 and 31 at Earlham College. The two-day workshop will gather voice instructors, educators and medical professionals who serve the transgender and non-binary singing community and provide hands-on experience for singers.

To Cozart Steele, the voice is inherently personal, which is why she is so passionate that everybody has the opportunity to not only express themselves but also feel welcomed in the process. "The voice resides in the body, and so to produce the voice ... a piece of your soul or a piece of your identity comes out with that vocal production," Cozart Steele said. "There's nothing between you and the sound."



Alexander Reeves, who will speak and perform at the conference this weekend, has been singing since he was 12 years old and started hormones five years ago, right before his freshman year of college. He began auditioning as a soprano, the highest of singing voices, but soon struggled to control it.

"When I started college, I had about five notes that I could sing. That's what all my range was," Reeves said. "And when I had auditioned, I had about three octaves. It was because my voice was changing, and I had no control over it.

"So when I started, I was in a theater program, and I wasn't getting cast. I wasn't getting roles because nobody, including myself, really understood the mechanics of my voice and how it was changing."

Reeves said he was fortunate to have had a voice teacher who actually attended Earlham's first Transgender Singing Voice Conference with him two years ago.

"Not everybody is that lucky," he noted.

During the event Reeves will share his story and show how having access to knowledgeable sources helped him progress as a singer. He's now a tenor and he loves it. He'll play attendees a clip of himself singing before he started hormones, then he'll perform live.

This year's conference aims to educate and produce new research, collaborations and networking opportunities for transgender and non-binary singers. Organizers also have collected more than 30 submissions of music that is by, for or about the transgender or non-binary community.

With a significant number of people in the United States who identify as transgender — 1.4 million adults as of 2016, according to a study reported in The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/01/health/transgender-population.html>) — Cozart Steele continues to see the need for more research and resources. She expects 100-150 people at this weekend's conference, including graduate students who she says likely know someone who is transgender or non-binary, or who are themselves, "and they're eager to see this scholarship advance." She welcomes anyone interested to attend.

Registration for this weekend's conference is free for students and anyone for whom cost is prohibitive, \$50 for eligible young professionals and \$100 for all other professionals.

For more information on the conference, visit earlham.edu/about/transgender-singing-voice-conference (<http://earlham.edu/about/transgender-singing-voice-conference/>).

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