

In Pursuit Of More Queer-Affirming Vocal Scores (Sheridan Phase):

A summary of an experimentation process looking at alternative ways of preparing ensemble and solo parts for new musicals, with trans inclusivity in mind.

The following process and series of experiments were completed at Sheridan College in Fall 2025.

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Glossary of Terms:

Gender & Sexuality Terms:

Defined by: [The Gender and Sexuality Campus Center](#) (University of Michigan)

Cisgender: A gender identity term for individuals whose gender identity aligns with the gender identity assumed based on their birth-assigned sex. Cisgender people receive benefits that trans and nonbinary do not receive. Abbreviated to “cis”.

Cisheteronormativity: A pervasive system of belief that centers and naturalizes heterosexuality and a binary system of assigned sex/gender when there are two rigid, distinct ways of being: assigned-male-at-birth masculine men and assigned-female-at-birth feminine women.

Gender: A social construct framed by a society’s understanding of masculinity and femininity as related to roles, behaviors, expectations, activities, identities, and attributes. This term is often understood as a binary, however, historically and presently, gender is expansive and dynamic. The key elements of an individual's gender are gender identity, gender attribution, and gender expression.

Gender Binary: A socially constructed gender system in which gender is classified into two distinct and opposite categories. These gender categories are both narrowly defined and disconnected from one another. They are strictly enforced through rigid gender roles and expectations. Further, there is a hierarchy inherent to the classification, in which one gender, men/boys/masculinity, has access to power and privilege and the other, women/girls/femininity, is marginalized and oppressed. These classifications are seen as immutable; those assigned male at birth should identify as men and embody masculinity, and those assigned female at birth should identify as women and embody femininity. This binary system excludes nonbinary, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming individuals. All people are harmed by the gender binary system, but your place within the system determines the degree and quality of harm. The gender binary is weaponized through conquest, colonization, and continued occupation of indigenous peoples’ lands. The gender binary system is inherently violent and foregrounds all gender-based oppression.

Gender Dysphoria: Discomfort and/or distress that varies in intensity, duration, and interval for an individual extending from the disjuncture between one’s conceptualization of their gender and the way their body is. Serves as a medical term and diagnosis in the the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Diagnostics and Statistical Manual (DSM-5), which contributes to the stigmatization of transgender identities as a mental disorder. Clinically speaking, gender dysphoria is present when a person experiences significant distress related to their gender. The concept of dysphoria, rather than the diagnosis, is employed frequently by the trans/nonbinary community to name their experience. Not all trans people experience gender dysphoria, and not everyone views gender dysphoria as a mental health diagnosis.

Gender Non-Conforming (GNC): A term that describes a person whose behavior or appearance does not conform to societal and cultural expectations of what is appropriate for their gender. This term is usually more related to gender expression or gender attribution than gender identity. It is usually used as a descriptor. Although rare, some people do use this term as a gender identity term.

Genderqueer: A gender identity term for people who conceptualize their gender as beyond, existing outside of, or not included within the gender binary. This term is linked to the academic discipline of Queer Theory and carries a political and/or disruptive connotation. As an identity term, genderqueer is sometimes conceptualized as a type of nonbinary identity. Genderqueer is sometimes written as GenderQueer.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT): Also known as HRT, a hormone therapy taken by some trans folks to alter the hormonal composition and physical features of the body. Some people will choose to undergo gender-affirmation surgery in conjunction with HRT and some will not. HRT should be supervised by a medical professional.

Medical Transition: A medical transition may include hormones and/or surgeries.

Non-Binary: A gender identity term for a person who identifies outside of the gender binary. Nonbinary is also conceptualized as an array of genders at some distance from the gender binary. Nonbinary is sometimes written as “non-binary.” A common abbreviation for nonbinary is enby.

Transgender: A gender identity term for an individual whose gender identity does not match or is at some distance from the gender identity assumed based on their birth-assigned sex. For some folks, transgender and/or trans are considered to be umbrella terms.

Transphobia: Fear, hatred, and intolerance of transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming people, or those who break, blur, or transgress assigned gender roles and the gender binary.

Music Terms

Defined by [OnMusic Dictionary](#)

Soprano*: Term used to describe the highest pitched vocal range, usually produced by a female voice, but occasionally produced men's and boys' voices of the soprano range. The range of the soprano is from about middle C to A5 above the treble clef. A professional soprano can typically reach C6 or higher. There are several classifications of the soprano voice that describe the quality from a light to heavy character. They include coloratura, lyric soprano, lirico spinto, and dramatic soprano.

Alto*: A female voice of low range, (usually about G below the treble clef to C in the treble clef) also called contralto. The second highest part of a normal four part chorus.

Tenor*: The male voice which has a range of C3 (below Middle C) to G4 (above Middle C). Sub-categories of this range include tenore di forza, tenore robusto and Heldentenor.

Bass*: The lowest or deepest male voice usually of a range of F2 just below the bass clef to the E4 above middle C. The lowest part in a musical composition.

SATB: An abbreviation used to denote the number of voice parts in a vocal composition. It implies that the composition has one soprano part, one alto part, one tenor part, and one bass part. Common variants of this are: SSATTB (Soprano in two-parts, Alto, Tenor in two-parts , and Bass), SSATB, SSA, TTBB, etc.

Timbre: The quality of a sound; that component of a tone that causes different instruments (for example a guitar and a violin) to sound different from each other while they are both playing the same note.

*Please note these definitions are filtered through a cisheteronormative understanding/lens, and that this will be challenged and broken down in this paper.

Musical Theatre Terms

Defined by Broadwayworld.com/glossary

Cast: the actors taking part in a play, film, or other production.

Golden Age (of musical theatre): During this period, musical theatre took center stage in popular culture, rapidly gaining visibility worldwide and influence on television, film, and popular music. Rodgers and Hammerstein officially launched the Golden Age with their trailblazing *Oklahoma!* in 1943. *Fiddler on the Roof*, which opened on Broadway in 1964, is widely considered the final musical of Broadway's Golden Age.

Musical Theatre: A musical combines spoken dialogue with songs and music to tell a story. Music plays a central role in driving the narrative, often featuring dance sequences and elaborate staging. Musicals are sometimes sung all the way through (with no dialogue), but not always. Popular examples include *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Hamilton*.

Musical Theatre Ensemble: a cast of characters, except for the principals; the grouping of the whole stage picture, involving actors and set; the chorus in a musical, sometimes including soloists; said of acting or a cast in which group interaction and support is more important than individual performances.

Musical Theatre Terms

Defined by berklee.edu

Arranger: An arranger reimagines an existing composition, adapting the instruments, voices, rhythms, and tempo to create a new sound for a piece of music.

Music Director (MD): Working closely with other members of a show's creative team, music directors oversee all musical aspects of a musical theater or opera production, including casting performers, hiring the orchestra, rehearsing singers and orchestra members, and conducting the orchestra in performance.

Contexting of the project:

The following series of experiments occurred between September 8th and October 11th 2025, alongside the development of the musical *SÉANCE* at Sheridan College, as part of Sheridan's First Drafts program (produced by Chris Scholey).

SÉANCE is a new musical co-created by Kelsi James and Griffin Hewitt, with many of the solos and ensemble vocal parts composed by Kelsi James. In *SÉANCE*, there are six characters who are men and six characters who are women (12 characters total); within the show, each character has a solo, and most ensemble songs range from 2-5 part harmony. While at Sheridan, these twelve characters were developed by 19 actors (seven double casted parts), by a cast that included queer and non-queer identifying participants.

As co-creator most focussed on music, Kelsi James came into the process with this leading question:

Knowing that in musical theatre, trans folks are often systemically excluded (largely due to musical limitations / lack of imagination over what voice types correspond with what genders) – how do we create a score for a new musical that is considering of trans folks from the first?

This question led Kelsi James and a group of 12 volunteer student co-experimentors from the cast of *SÉANCE* to explore preparing solos and ensemble music to be singable by several voice types, pursuing transgender inclusivity. This work took place throughout rehearsal and over three dedicated conversations/break out times.

Please note that this research was undertaken by artist-researchers, and not academic researchers, and as such, may not align with academic research guidelines.

Contexting of the leading facilitator/author:

Kelsi James (they/she) is a white non-binary and asexual theatre creator, producer and performer, who works most often from the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh (Vancouver), and from Tkarón:to (Toronto). Kelsi has composed and/or written plays for Sheridan College (First Drafts), Driftwood Theatre, Talk Is Free Theatre, Theatre Rusticle, Coquitlam Heritage, Paprika Festival, Arts Club Theatre (LEAP), Tarragon Theatre (NYPU), Sound Off, Rumble and the frank.

Since 2022, Kelsi has produced and facilitated an annual festival for asexual-spectrum folks and their allies (*art for ace week*). Including performances, workshops and gatherings, the festival happens in partnership with local queer and/or queer allied organizations, previously: Vancouver Pride, Vancouver Public Library, Coquitlam Heritage, Odd Meridian Arts, Dreamwalker Dance, and Shadbolt Centre / Deer Lake AiR.

From Oct 2024-2025, Kelsi facilitated a monthly community choir (“One Night Choir”) with Dreamwalker Dance at Odd Meridian Art’s cultural space, Morrow (Vancouver, BC). In this project, Kelsi learned more about the systemic harm against transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) individuals in traditional choral spaces; as a result, they spent the one year of this project experimenting with alternative and more queer-affirming approaches to choral musical arrangement and facilitation. This work, as well as their work in fostering queer space for *art for ace week*, greatly informed and grounded their process at Sheridan.

Preparatory Discussions:

Concerns with SATB

Though SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) is industry standard for musical theatre – and often considered to be inherently gender neutral (with the argument made that vocal physiology determines voice part, not gender) – feedback from the *SÉANCE* cast, and from Kelsi’s previous One Night Choir experiments, identified that SATB was not achieving the queer inclusivity the creative team had hoped.

Before beginning experimentation, the co-experimentors jammed on the question:

What are the shortfalls of using SATB as default?

[Co-experimentor answers, drawn from lived experience:]

1. When learning music, actors are often asked to sit by voice grouping (the sopranos sit together, the altos sit together, etc.) This often creates gender grouping/separation when learning parts. In an all cisgender (cis) room, we commonly have the women and men sitting in different sections to learn their parts. In a room that includes transgender (trans) people but still centers cis people, a trans woman may be learning her part with the men and sitting away from all the other women, etc. There is a foundationally inherent and dysphoric effect of othering that is inevitable.
2. Different vocal groupings and combinations tell different stories. When SATB is considered the default, there may be non-dramaturgically-founded gender groupings on vocal lines because of vocal parts.
3. SATB may not encompass voices that fall outside these definitions, such as voices changing with hormone replacement therapy (HRT) – particularly trans men, trans-masculine and GNC people whose voices are changing on Testosterone.
4. Though SATB may be standard, it does not have standardized ranges:
 - a. SATB means something different in Golden Age era musical theatre than it does in contemporary musical theatre, etc.
 - b. A person’s range/associated vocal part may be different, depending on which style they are singing (belting vs. more Western classical influenced singing, etc.)
5. Often in SATB, melody gets assigned more often to sopranos and tenors, with altos most often on harmony and basses on repetitive basslines – these assumed assignments of melody/harmony have fostered binary-framed dramaturgical implications.
6. In SATB, voices are often grouped together with the intent of “blending” – but just because voices have the same range does not mean they will blend (have the same timbre).

- a. Co-experimentor note: in western-style opera, vocal classification is more about vocal range + timbre (e.g. lyric soprano, coloratura soprano, etc.)
7. SATB vocal parts do not always support the health of the voice; even when a voice can sing healthily in a certain range, many SATB arrangements keep voices in a limited part of their range, inducing strain, over-use and vocal fatigue.
8. There is – intentional or not – a hierarchy of these vocal parts, and prominent stereotypes around what kinds of voices types tell which types of stories. In the co-experimentor’s lived experience:

<p>Soprano Stereotypes (Musical Theatre)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stereotypically expected range: middle C – E5, high C ● A woman or girl who is: a leading character, the innocent (hetero) love interest, an ingenue who needs saving, a princess, white, skinny, needs a man, ditzy, early 20s, rich, higher class (rich or will be soon), a damsel in distress. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Note: a mezzo soprano character is often considered lower status than a soprano character. 	<p>Alto Stereotypes (Musical Theatre)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stereotypically expected range: D3/Eb3 - B5 ● A woman (or sometimes girl) who is: a secondary character, often older and/or comedic: a mother, a mistress, a villain; bitter, ugly, opinionated, opposite of love interest, gender non-confirming (GNC), more masculine, undesirable. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Note: regardless of voice type, systemic racism often relegates artists of colour to these roles and vocal parts.
<p>Tenor Stereotypes (Musical Theatre)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stereotypically expected range: A-B2, up to C5 ● A man or boy who is: a leading man, a prince, a saviour, a heartthrob, a romantic; desirable, attractive, young, white, thin. Variety of roles possible: can be an asshole, or comedic, or gentle and sweet. Often in a dynamic where he is a white man saviour to a woman of colour. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Note: a baritone voice will often be cast in either a tenor or bass vocal part; due to perceived scarcity of lower voices, baritones often are relegated to singing bass. 	<p>Bass Stereotypes (Musical Theatre)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stereotypically expected range: be able to hit a low G, less than octave’s range usually utilized ● A man who is: a villain, older (past middle age) or in a place of authority/power, evil, domineering, controlling, classically influenced, warmer tone than tenor, grounded, anchor, root, less interesting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Note: regardless of voice type, systemic racism often relegates artists of colour to these roles and vocal parts.

Curiosities Surfaced in the Room:

Together, we the co-experimenters became specific and clear about our experimentation interests and goals. We collaboratively generated this list of questions to guide us in our process together:

Our overarching process questions were:

1. How do we prep ensemble vocal parts to be infrastructurally inclusive of trans and gender diverse (TGD) populations?
2. How do we prep solo vocal parts to be infrastructurally inclusive of TGD populations?

Our more specific process questions were:

3. How do we prep for solos to be sung by both trans and cis performers (not waiting for casting to do key changes / rearrangements)?
4. How do we move away from SATB stereotypes in arranging?
5. What vocal grouping possibilities exist outside SATB?
6. If we classify by note ranges instead of by SATB – in what ways is this different from SATB?
7. Are S/T and A/B accurate partners? Could pairing these change the gender division in the room while learning?
8. How do we talk about timbre, without falling into the trap of pushing for one timbre of voice? And how do we identify vocal timbres (in a time conscious way)?
9. How do we introduce consent, encourage artistry in ensemble parts?
 - a. “Some days I want to sing high. SATB feels rigid and fixed.”
 - b. Can we stop putting people in boxes... What happens if we let them choose their own box?
 - c. What happens if people change parts depending on the song?
 - d. How do we honour vocal nuance and range?
10. How do we encourage singers to use lots of parts of their range throughout the show, prioritizing vocal health?
 - a. Recognizing that while performing in one show, artists may be auditioning / working on other shows that may need completely different vocal stylings (and remembering “If you don’t use it you lose it”)
11. Ranges on resumes – does this help us or not? If it does... Can those in casting use this information to assign parts more inclusively?
 - a. Relatedly: Different parts of the range are used differently, have different tones, can be used in different styles – is there a different way we should be repping ranges?
12. How does this inclusivity/rearrangement work translate to established/canon work? How do we keep voicings? How do we respect what came before?
13. Can we build a system of inclusivity that doesn’t rely on the goodwill of the music director (MD)? How can we make the project itself more inherently and systemically trans inclusive?

Initial Brainstorm: Possible experiments:

From these questions and our initial conversation on SATB and its pitfalls, we the co-experimentors brainstormed the following experiments to support our research:

1. Prepare alternate keys for solos. Identify the timbre which is necessary for the sound of the character. See how this might exist in multiple voice types.
2. For ensemble parts, identify what vocal lines are singable in a majority of voices, in one specific voice type, in multiple voices types (with octave flip). See how this challenges traditional SATB.
3. Experiment with other ways to separate/group voices, e.g. by:
 - a. Vocal timbre/tone/quality
 - b. Musicianship/skill with harmony
 - c. Health of voice
4. Experiment with other ways to delineate parts in notated music, e.g. by:
 - a. Numbers
 - b. Ranges
 - c. Difficulty of line
 - d. Character timbre
 - e. High middle low
5. Look into what's happened previously with:
 - a. Stunt casting key changes / with gender bent shows (eg. the 2018 gender-bent production of *Company* on the West End)
 - b. Scores that come with multiple key options (eg. *Seussical Jr*, as licensed by Musical Theatre International)
 - c. Trans inclusion in historically cis shows (e.g. the 2025 Carnegie Hall production *Drowsy Chaperone: In Concert*)

Experiments

Experiment #1: Assigning Parts By Number (Song: *The End*)

Informed by focus questions:

- How do we prep ensemble vocal parts to be infrastructurally inclusive of TGD populations?
- What vocal grouping possibilities exist outside SATB?
- How do we introduce consent, encourage artistry in ensemble parts?

Context: The song *The End* from *SÉANCE* is a group number with three ensemble vocal parts, and no solo lines.

Experiment: For this song, Kelsi James experimented with the ensemble parts: instead of assigning parts by SATB, they numbered each vocal line, and had folks volunteer for what line they wanted to be on.

Results/Feedback: The group was still sitting in SATB groupings. Taking volunteers on the spot for parts meant that folks were not necessarily sitting beside folks who were singing the same parts as them; this made it harder to hear and learn their parts.

Experiment #2: Assigning Parts By Timbre (Song: *Amplification*)

Informed by focus questions:

- How do we prep ensemble vocal parts to be infrastructurally inclusive of TGD populations?
- How do we identify timbres (in a time conscious way)?
- How do we move away from SATB stereotypes in arranging?
- For ensemble parts, identify what vocal lines are singable in a majority of voices, in one specific voice type, in multiple voices types (with octave flip). See how this challenges traditional SATB.

Context: *Amplification* is a song from *SÉANCE*. It is a melody sung by one tenor voice, which gets echoed by the ensemble (in a two part split: melody + a higher harmony line). Kelsi James originally composed an SA (harmony) / TB (melody) two part split, assuming the TB part was too low to be sung by SA.

Experiment: Kelsi James asked the full cast (including both the co-experimentors and other cast members not part of the experiment group) to listen to the solo line sung by the character Albert, identify tone / timbre, and then we used our findings to play with the arrangement in music rehearsal.

Results/Feedback: From listening to the melody, the group identified that a rich, authoritative and confident quality was very important, and was achieved through a lower and more chest-dominant sound in all singers' voices.

We discovered that the tenor line (melody) was actually singable by the altos, with an octave flip and some minor adjustments. All voices moved to the melody line, except the sopranos who stayed on the harmony line.



Fig. 1 (original melody)

In Fig 1., the first D on “Louis” was too low for the altos and basses down the octave; we fixed this by offering the option of flipping just that note up the octave. Interestingly, we discovered that not all the Ds were too low; the D three measures later (“e-ver faint”) was okay, because it was so light and fleeting in the melody line. We were delighted to discover just how little adjustment was needed to make the tenor line singable by other voices.

alto/tenor range voices in same octave, altos w/ D up the octave (basses can be down the octave and do the same)

Lou - is, our inst - ru - ment, hears the first tones, how - e - ver faint, we be -

Fig. 2 (adjusted melody)

Kelsi James updated the sheet music to reflect different possible voicings for the melody line, and added Fig 3. as the accompanying music note for this song.

Amplification

Albert +
All (except Isabelle)

SÉANCE

Ensemble parts divided into melody and harmony. Preference for melody dominant sound, with rich hearty voices.

Note: quality for ensemble singing; open vowels, robust, status, confidence

Fig 3. Music note

Results/Feedback: Something we were surprised to learn –

We noticed something inherently misogynistic ingrained in our ears – as we played with how to achieve the rich, authoritative sound we wanted, our impression was that lower voicings sounded the most powerful (i.e. the altos sounded more powerful when we dropped them down the octave). The soprano harmony part on its own initially sounded more delicate and submissive to the more “powerful” ATB part; because this is not the story we wanted to tell, we worked on adding a robust quality to the singing style of the harmony line.

Experiment #3: Identifying timbre

Informed by focus questions:

- How do we prep ensemble vocal parts to be infrastructurally inclusive of TGD populations?
- What vocal grouping possibilities exist outside SATB?
- How do we move away from SATB stereotypes in arranging?
- How do we identify timbres (in a time conscious way)?
- Can we build a way that doesn't rely on the goodwill of MD?
- How do we talk about timbre, without falling into the trap of pushing for one timbre of voice?

Context: Halfway through our workshop process, we did a full read of the current draft of Act 1 & Act 2 of *SÉANCE*, with all songs sung.

Experiment: During this read, Kelsi James asked the co-experimentors to complete the worksheet (Fig. 4), taking down note of vocal timbre / what feels integral for how this character sounds. This was done with the intent of using the findings to pick alternate keys for each of these solos.

Result: Through this work, we generated a word bank for vocal quality (all data [HERE](#), and in Fig. 5). This experiment gave us a better understanding of which characters' voices sit in a lower timbre, which in a higher timbre, which characters have a heartier voice vs. a lighter voice – this dispelled internalized biases and assumptions around who should have what voice types, and clarified the storytelling.

Discussion: We reflected that our assumed vocal qualities for these characters were in many cases different than what we actually noticed in listening – e.g. some of the male characters had more of a gentle and light tone than what may have been stereotypically expected, etc.

We also reflected that articulating and identifying tone and timbre is HARD, and not something we (as primarily performing artists, and not MDs and vocal teachers) are often asked to do.

As we identified what feels crucial to a character's sound, we discussed the difference between timbre –which may be caused by vocal physiology– and vocal texture, which may be created with vocal technique and acting intention. Kelsi James, as composer, received this experiment as musical dramaturgy; they learned so much about each song and what is revealed about each character through both the melodic line, and where said melodic line is placed in the actor's range.

FOR RESEARCH GROUP:

As we muse on other possible voice types that may suit these characters, but may require key changes, invitation to jot down any thoughts you may have, re: vocal timbre / tone:

Light? Airy? Soft? Gentle? Subtle? Delicate? Robust? Hearty? Imposing? Overpowering?
Status? Class? Power? Style?

#1 - Preface (Albert)	#2 - Painting #1 (Guy)	#3 - Mmhhh (Abbott)
#4 - Couldn't Be Me (Giselle)	#5 - Speeches (Thomas)	#6 - Something In The Water (Jaqueline)
#7 - Freedom (Simon)	#8 - Circus (Pero)	Act 2 - Grief That Is Neater & Freedom Reprise (Isa.)
Act 2 - Raise Them (Delia)	Act 2 - Do It Yourself (Charlotte)	Act 2 - The Living (Louis) p.

Fig. 4. Readthrough Worksheet

CHARACTER NAME	ALBERT	GUY	ABBOTT	GISELLE	THOMAS	JAQUELINE	SIMON	PERO	ISABELLE	DELIA	CHARLOTTE	LOUIS
CHARACTER'S ASSUMED GENDER	Man	Man	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Woman	Woman	Woman	Man
CHARACTER ARCHETYPE	The Author.	The Artist.	The Professor.	The Host.	The Politician	The Journalist.	The Soldier.	The Psychic.	The Ghost.	The Devout.	The Donor.	The Instrument.
VOCAL QUALITY / TIMBRE	boisterous gentle full light smooth	soft confident flowy dreamballet	imposing status gentle annoyed	power robust not subtle imposing opinion strong hearty	imposing power robust overpowering	soft airy decided status deliberate	imposing judging hearty	coaxing imposing robust hearty power	soft airy sad delicate chills simple beautiful	delicate deliberate airy	status not subtle imposing robust	soft light delicate
	lyrics floaty airy dream-like pondering yearning introverted like a violin/strings	light melodic repetitive	grounded stem restricted controlled warm earthy	grounded powerful speech-like smug confident assured resonant	fact stem stubborn precise scheming	gentle inquisitive ambitious unsure	hollow warm resonant yearning textured		sweet loving needy soft delicate yearning sorrowful airy breathy withheld	meticulous specific airy grounded	confident present forward groovy full round	haunting airy sweet naive open delicate seeking bargaining begging
	light softly heady gentle airy delicate	gentle delicate warm light	strong hearty grounded powerful higher class	grounded robust powerful deep	authority grounded upperclass dark	light airy dark gentle delicate	dark grounded warm robust	powerful robust strong grounded hearty	subtle robust delicate commanding light soft ghostly	grounded powerful commanding light soft		airy delicate soft gentle
	high status commanding gentle delicate	light imposing	imposing powerful hearty	assertive & Juliet style overpowering	marching class: high bass	soft		strong powerful brassy			brassy powerful sassy	
	gentle storytelling airy caring	style soft expensive hip swaying / rocking	subtle secret	powerful frustrated robust grounded	powerful imposing overpowering	in control imposing subtle	strong scared soft	power taking over all	heart wrenching soft strong	gentle forboding elder knowing	confident imposing gritty	soft knowing wanting
	preaching full whole reciting conjuring bold opera not subtle	lullaby bridges of madison light dreamy	delicate driving forward patter middle upper class pop feel	powerful building hearty planning	formal strong start soft middle powerful	start / light low class game feel hunting		fun strong storytelling most power folk	airy innocent light 2000s slow song soft sad	soft delicate subtle power	strong non chalant pop/rock	waves of emotion ghostly R&B
		sultry gentle	robust light/dark mix	power frustration	robust boastful	light haunting forward placement	soft restraint	haunting reminiscent	solemn mix	assertive rich full tone	powerful driven/cocky	somber chest/head mix
		slight "drunk"	full	full	imposing	chest/head mix	commanding	gentle	conflicted	full chest rich but nasally tone	ramble/frantic	
		gusto	fearful	subtle	light/dark mix		rageful	haunting				
		gentle soft captivating subtle	imposing warning CCM hearty strong powerful not overpowering	powerful robust imposing strong confident	high status strict robust imposing strong	curious low status subtle light bounding	confident power hearty soft	overpowering strong loud imposing	soft gentle yearning delicate	gentle soft airy	strong confident CCM	agile CCM strong soft
		reciting very light	waltz beautiful		powerful opposites	light vs dark darker	suspicious detective	light delicate	powerful rich	rich storytelling chest grotesque	wishing now forward	chesty light dark push and pull vocally
			gentle dark poetic				ghostly airy	declarative older	delicate soft delicate underlying hate/sorrow	flow		
		light sparkly (contrasting powerful stance) bright	subtle delicate	dramatic		powerful	suspicious	gentle	intense	completely devastating	eery	HEARTY LIGHT
		Decisive vulnerable soft, delicate	full/hearty powerful high class	powerful decisive high class	rich subtly defiant manipulative	light soft inquisitive	hearty rawness	powerful robust	gentle delicate loving	subtle caring gentle	high class robust powerful	gentle truthful

Fig. 5. Worksheet Data

Experiment #4: Multiple keys for solos

Informed by focus questions:

- How do we prep solo vocal parts to be infrastructurally inclusive of TGD populations?

Context: During the workshop period, 19 actors workshopped 12 roles. Seven roles were double casted, and several of these were played by two actors of different genders and different vocal ranges.

Experiment: In collaboration with music director Athena So, Kelsi James played with multiple keys so that each actor had a solo that sat well in their voice and also sounded like the character. Kelsi James and the co-experimentors also spent a session testing out different keys together, and reflecting on our findings.

Results: Counter to our assumption, there was no standardized set of semitones to translate one song from one voice type to another. We learned that where the song is placed in the vocal register of the actor has dramaturgical implications, and must be considered when transposing (ie. if a song is in a really hearty part of an alto's voice originally, if we transpose it for another vocal part, we want it in a really hearty part of their voice too). We learned that negotiation of vocal registers within a song tells a different story than staying in the same register.

Show specific examples:

- Our con-artist psychic Madam Pero sings a song called *Circus* (in F minor). The role was workshopped by actor Annelise Forbes, who has a wide range but most often sings Soprano 1. To maintain Pero's power when transposing for a bari voice, we moved it down five semitones (to C minor). Anything higher sounded too light.
- Our power hungry politician Thomas sings *Speeches*, originally written by Kelsi James in G minor, which didn't quite sit right in either of the workshop actors' voices. We needed a heavy, powerful, authoritarian sound, and moved it around to find this in both actors' voices: this turned out to be two semitones down for NC's bari voice (F minor), and up three semitones for Sarah-Michelle Petit's mezzo voice (Bb minor). We learned to fight the assumption that lower means more masculine – when we raised the key to put it in a more core place in Sarah-Michelle's voice, we achieved more strength for the character.
- Our intense, laser-focussed journalist Jaqueline sings *Something In The Water* (D minor). This song sat intentionally high in the voice of the actors Tara McFarlane (sop) and TC; when we tried lowering it, we agreed that we were unintentionally adding confidence and steadfastness to the character's sound – which we did not want. We mused that lowering the key might be helpful for a reprise later, when the character has undergone transformation and gained more confidence. To maintain the vulnerability in Jaqueline's musical storytelling for a bari voice, we put the song up three semitones and then dropped it down the octave (F minor).

This process allowed Kelsi to complete a score with multiple keys for each solo, supporting future casting of both TGD and cis performers for these songs, with no extra musical adjustment or labour needed.

Note: Even outside of this experimentation, almost every song that Kelsi James and Griffin Hewitt brought in shifted 1-3 semitones, 1) for singability and sustainability for the actors, and 2) to sound more like the characters as we got to know them better.

Feedback: The process really keyed us into musical dramaturgy. Kelsi James found it hugely beneficial as a part of the workshopping process, and will continue to include this in their composing process going forward. (and to say – a transposing keyboard made this process very easy!).

Results:

Offering the cast the option to come onto a vocal part if they wanted it / if it felt good in their voice gave more agency and allowed voices who may never usually be assigned a vocal part like that a chance to choose it. It also gave an opportunity for voices who were feeling they were doing too much of the same on their assigned part to choose something else (either for reasons of musical interest, or vocal sustainability).

This alternative way of learning parts did not require as much additional time as we had feared. Commonly, parts are taught with everyone in the room and everyone listening as each vocal part learns their line; in this process, folks were less idle / less often listening, and more often learning. This way of working, instead of adding time, nestled nicely within the time already allocated.

Sonically, our experience was that having blended voice types on each part lended colour and depth to the sound.

Feedback:

This experiment of opting in and choosing parts fed into the other experiments with vocal part assignment. In debriefing this experiment and its precedents, Kelsi James asked the co-experimentors for their feedback with these alternative ways of being assigned or volunteering for parts, and heard this:

In *SÉANCE*'s score, cast members were bouncing around in their ranges – and it was fun! Every artist knows their own voice best, and best understands what is vocally sustainable for them. Giving artists the opportunity to try different parts and choose what they wanted to do and didn't want to do not only gave them more agency, it also reduced gender dysphoria and kept voices healthier.

The researchers reflected that in traditional SATB arranging, voices are often overusing a limited part of their range. One co-experimentor shared that a traditional tenor part he sang in a previous project – though within his range – became vocally fatiguing over time. Other co-experimentors shared similar experiences of their own and of their friends from working on other shows.

Our four week workshop ended with a week of staged readings; the consensus was that actors felt their parts were vocally sustainable, and that they were not experiencing vocal exhaustion.

CONCLUSION

TGD inclusivity is not just who gets casted. A trans or gender diverse person's experience throughout the process – including during music rehearsal – is equally as important as their visibility on stage in performance (if not more important).

The most unexpected findings of our inquiry had to do with how intersectional the problems – and possible solutions – of traditional musical theatre vocal arranging are. Traditional SATB parts not only often enforce cisheteronormativity, but also often enforce racial and patriarchal biases. We also learned that traditional SATB voicings may risk vocal fatigue and injury, and have large dramaturgical implications that often go unconsidered.

These findings would have been worth pursuing and sharing even if the “only” discoveries were how to move towards a safer room for TGD musical theatre performers. It was a bonus – and perhaps an inevitable result, considering the well-documented linked roots of colonialism and transphobia – that testing new models for vocal arranging with TGD inclusivity in mind also brought us models that were more feminist, decolonial, physically sustainable, consent-forward, anti-racist, and just suited to better storytelling overall. As trans folks have been saying for ages – transphobia hurts everyone.

We are not the first to pursue this line of inquiry, and we are not the only ones turning our minds to this. Though we were largely contained to *SÉANCE* for this phase of inquiry, in future iterations of experimentation, we would turn our attention to the work that has preceded us:

- We are curious about musical adaptations for revivals with genderbent casts (e.g. London's 2018 gender-bent *Company*) and revivals with trans casts (ie. the 2025 Carnegie Hall production *Drowsy Chaperone: In Concert*) – what are they doing for solos? For ensemble parts?
- As more TGD folks are finally featured in leading roles on Broadway, we are curious about score adaptations (if any) for revivals/established shows (e.g. Angelica Ross, Jinx Monsoon and Alex Newell in Broadway's *Chicago* (2022, 2023 & 2025 respectively), MJ Rodrigues in Pasadena Playhouse's *Little Shop of Horrors* (2019), Tomás Matos in *Hadestown* on Broadway (2022), Alex Newell in Broadway's *Once On This Island* (2017), Dylan Mulvaney in Broadway's *Six* (2026) etc.).
- We are curious about shows that already provide multiple keys in their canon scores (e.g. *Seussical Jr* (alternate keys for the Cat) as licensed by Music Theatre International, *13 the musical* (alternative keys for Evan, for pre and post puberty), as licensed by Music Theatre International) – what practices are they using?

In future iterations, we would also prioritize bringing the conversation into community with our peers, and grounding this work in deeper research of TGD experiences in musical theatre, as well as past and present models of music arrangement/facilitation. We are interested in discussing our findings and next steps with those who are already engaged in this work, and/or who are being impacted by current cis-centered practices.

This is a conversation for composers, arrangers, MDs, directors, licensors, casting agents, performers, researchers and more. (One of our co-experimentors suggested that this work might also be interesting for coders: could it be possible to create a generator that supports us in creating different arrangements for different voices that still support the harmonic and dramaturgical intent of the piece?)

Our research happened within a larger process of rehearsal, workshopping and writing. Systems change is big, but we are proof that it is possible to make big discoveries within a single (5 week) workshop process. It is possible to pilot a new music model, within the hours already set aside for music rehearsal. There is a wealth of knowledge and curiosity within the people in our rooms; it is up to us to lean in, learn big, and share our findings in community.

New models are within reach.

THE CO-EXPERIMENTORS

Makoto Ashley (He/Him) is a Jamaican-British actor, singer, as well as a music artist under the name Traverse A. Sol, who works in Toronto and Oakville! Makoto is interested in the exploration of deep character work, and the intricate blend of fiction and historical realism within theatre! Aside from theatre, Makoto is currently working on finishing his EP, along with an original soon after! @travvvsol on instagram

Allyah is a performer, composer, and choreographer from the GTA and currently is in her 4th year at Sheridan College studying Musical Theatre performance. With extensive background in dance, classical piano, and singing she looks forward to what comes post-graduation. Allyah currently works as a composer for illadvised gaming co., and scores film with her latest release to Spotify, and all streaming platforms titled Blood Money. Additionally, she attended Wexford Collegiate School for the Arts in their musical theatre program. One of her mottos in life is: "Teamwork makes the dreamwork"! Follow on instagram @haylla4

Annelise (She/Her) is a multifaceted artist born and raised in Hamilton Ontario. Annelise is passionate about Canadian works, her first theatre experience being the workshop of Pollyanna with Young St Theatricals. She also performed in The Hockey Sweater (Segal Centre), Levels the Play (Toronto Fringe), Seancé (Theatre Sheridan) and the workshop of Way Out There (YES Theatre/Theatre Sheridan). Some recent roles include Leisl in The Sound of Music, Jasmine in Beehive (Drayton Entertainment), and The Witch in Into The Woods (Theatre Sheridan). Annelise thanks her family and loved ones for their endless support. You can follow her on Instagram, @annelisekfor.

Angelica Gicale (she/her) is a Filipino-Canadian multidisciplinary artist and has lived all over, experiencing various different cultures, languages and traditions from Memphis, Tennessee, Timmins, Ontario, Edmonton, Alberta, Doha, Qatar, and now she currently resides in Oakville, Ontario. Growing up around so many cultures has greatly shaped how Angelica sees the world and how she creates in her artistry. Angelica is drawn to stories that are layered and honest, stories that reflect the beauty, uneasiness, and richness of living and experiencing life through different lenses. Her training at Sheridan College has expanded her creativity and pushed her beyond her limits to hopefully become an inspiration for upcoming artists.

Kelsi James (they/she) is a white queer and asexual theatre creator, producer and performer, who works most often from the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh (Vancouver), and from Tkarón:to (Toronto). Kelsi is particularly interested in: the intersection of theatre and community gathering, queer accessibility and inclusion, and low-barrier, joyful music-making. @kelsilindajames

Tara McFarlane. No bio available.

Frankie McKay (She/They) is an emerging actor from Calgary, Alberta. Frankie has a passion for discovering all of the interesting ways the performing arts can make an impact. They were

elated to have had the opportunity to contribute to research that is intended to make theatre spaces more inclusive, and hope to continue doing work towards that. She is primarily a performer, but also dabbles in creating and workshopping new work.

Sebastien Moccio. Sebastien Moccio is a writer and performer hailing from the Niagara region, Ontario. Being born into a musical family, he was always surrounded with the power of music and has been inspired to create art in any ways he could for as long as he can remember. Sebastien is always excited about new work, especially the ones being created in Canada.

Chris Otchere. No bio available.

Sarah-Michelle Petit (she/her) is a queer actor, singer-songwriter from Montreal, Quebec, currently in her final year of the Honours Bachelor of Music Theatre program at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario. Her work in her music centres on storytelling through music and performance.

Dillon Strasser-Einish (he/him). Is an Indigenous-Canadian emerging artist originally from his reserve in northern Quebec, Kawawachikamach. He is proud to represent his Naskapi Nation in the arts. When Dillon isn't performing, he's also a writer and is currently working on a new musical!

Mea Tonet is a performer who proudly hails from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. She is in her final year of studies in the Honours Bachelor of Music Theatre Performance program at Sheridan College. Mea is passionate about writing, workshopping, directing, and promoting Canadian content on stage. Otherwise, you can find her exploring the city with a box of Mike and Ikes in hand.

Emily Venturino (she/her) is a multidisciplinary performer born and raised in a small Northern Italian town called Cigliano, VC. She moved at the age of 17 to do an exchange year in Langley, BC where she graduated and was pushed to apply for performing post-secondary programs in Canada. She then uprooted her life and moved to Ontario to pursue a career in Musical Theatre. Having had the privilege of experiencing so many places and cultures has deeply influenced her approach to performing. Her journey from that small town to the last 4 yrs at Sheridan have challenged her and shaped her to be a committed and driven artist.

SÉANCE First Drafts 2025 Cast List:

ABBOTT: Dillon Strasser-Einish, Mea Tonet
 ALBERT: Makoto Ashley, Sebastien Moccio
 CHARLOTTE: Emmy Edgett, Angelica Gicale
 DELIA: Allyah Dickie, Aimée Gordon
 GISELLE: Frankie McKay
 GUY: Luka Lars-Novak, Emily Venturino
 ISABELLE: Jenna De Villier
 JAQUELINE: TC, Tara McFarlane
 LOUIS: Olivier Ouellet
 PERO: Annelise Forbes
 SIMON: Chris Otchere
 THOMAS: Nathaniel Cadougan, Sarah-Michelle Petit

SÉANCE First Drafts 2025 Team

Director: Margot Greve
 Music Director: Athena So
 Stage Manager: Garrett Guymer
 Co-creators: Kelsi James & Griffin Hewitt
 Dramaturge: Nathaniel Hanula-James
 Copyist: Haneul Yi
 Theatre Sheridan Producer: Chris Scholey

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