

# Rie's Story, Ryan's Journey: Music in the Life of a Transgender Student

Journal of Research in Music Education  
61 (3) 262–279

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DOI: 10.1177/0022429413498259

jrm.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

This article presents a narrative account of one gender-variant student and his experiences in public school and school music. In the sixth grade, Ryan began cross-dressing and announced that he was gay. While his family was supportive, the school community's response was hostile. Ryan was eventually forced out of public education, ending his participation in the school's accomplished band and choir program. As a homeschooled student, Ryan used composition as an emotional outlet and a means of introspection. Eventually songwriting became a medium through which he could share his feelings and experiences with others. Ryan's story highlights the pivotal role that music can play in the lives of transgender students seeking community and self-expression.

## Keywords

transgender students, critical storytelling, narrative inquiry

“Who do we teach?” For educators concerned with shaping music education into a more inclusive, responsive, and diverse practice, this is a critical question. In the wake of the postmodern critique of education, scholarly consideration of issues relating to gender, sexual orientation, power, and privilege in teaching and learning has flourished. In the subfield of music education, though, this line of inquiry is still emerging. Elizabeth Gould first lifted the veil masking the presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons in music education when she came out as a “middle aged

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lesbian” in an article for *Philosophy of Music Education Review* in 1994.<sup>1</sup> As Gould continued to cultivate a focused queer critique of music education,<sup>2</sup> other scholars joined the conversation obliquely through the portal of feminist studies, critical theory, and musicology.<sup>3</sup>

In 2009, LGBT inquiry in music education marked another milestone with the publication of Louis Bergonzi’s article “Sexual Orientation and Music Education” in *Music Educators Journal*.<sup>4</sup> Addressing practical concerns specific to K–12 music educators, Bergonzi explored the ramifications of heterosexual privilege in music classrooms and posed scenarios for the reader to consider. The emotional and divergent nature of the responses to the editor in the succeeding issue of the journal indicated that LGBT issues troubled music educators across the professional and philosophical spectrum, and signaled a need for further dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, scholars convened at the inaugural Establishing Identity: LGBT Issues in Music Education conference at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 2010 to present papers on “how LGBT issues operate within music education in terms of research, curriculum, teacher preparation, and the musical lives and careers of LGBT music students and teachers.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the unfortunate consequences of LGBT education scholarship is that it often subsumes the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons into one category, essentializing or obscuring the particular concerns of each group.<sup>7</sup> This conflation is problematic because the unique challenges in lived and schooling as a transgender person are not presented and consequently go unaddressed. Social theorists agree that there is a distinction between the sexed body, the social presentation of gender, and sexual orientation. As Bohan and Russell explain, “In this ordering of human experience, gender identity is not causally related to sexual desire, and both are conceptualized as independent of sexed bodies.”<sup>8</sup> For transgender youth, negotiating this interrelated triad of identity can be an exceedingly complex and painful process, often misunderstood by their parents, peers, and community. The lack of understanding contributes to a culture of nonacceptance that too often results in horrific everyday school experiences for gender-variant students. Transgender youth report the greatest amount of physical harm, emotional abuse, and at-risk behaviors of all school populations surveyed in school climate studies.<sup>9</sup> These factors call for specialized understanding and actions on the part of teachers, administrators, and school counselors that are different from those extended to students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

One way to cultivate this deeper insight and to liberate gender variance from the catchall umbrella of LGBT studies is to highlight critical stories that bring forward the local and lived experiences of transgender students. Barone champions this “emancipatory educational storysharing” as a discursive mode of scholarship that fosters moments of epiphany, identification, and understanding.<sup>10</sup> He contends that narrative scholars are obligated to share stories that “promote two particular kinds of activities”:<sup>11</sup>

The first is the introduction to each other of school people (especially teachers to their students) who are locked within the present system of schooling, enabling them to hear, if

you will, each other's heartbeats. The second is inquiry into how schools may be transformed so that the people who live there no longer need to be introduced to each other by external intermediaries.<sup>12</sup>

This narrative account introduces Ryan, a gender-variant student, and offers the story of his journey through middle and high school and his experiences learning music. This story is critical to the burgeoning conversation regarding LGBT issues in music education because it traces the role of in-school and out-of-school music learning in the fraught process of one person's struggle to align his physical self, his social presentation of gender, and his sexual orientation while negotiating a school environment unprepared for his presence.

Attending to the "small story" is one of many approaches arising from "the narrative turn" in human science research.<sup>13</sup> Forged in a diversity of disciplinary ontological and epistemological orientations, narrative inquiry has emerged (and is still emerging) as a "complex, polyvocal, multilevel, interdisciplinary field with a richness of approaches, theoretical understandings, and unexpected findings."<sup>14</sup> At the heart of this bricolage is "an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them."<sup>15</sup> "Narrative researchers highlight what we can learn about anything—history and society as well as lived experience," Chase explains, "by maintaining a focus on narrated lives."<sup>16</sup>

As a work of critical storytelling, this narrative account is supported by two distinct but interrelated theoretical frameworks. First, in the field of education, Clandinin and Rosiek assert that inquiry into individual experience is inherently "an exploration of the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which the individual's experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted."<sup>17</sup> Second, from the field of psychology, McAdams positions life-narrative research "in the context of discovery" whereby the researcher addresses a problem by examining "psychologically rich and detailed autobiographical stories" in depth.<sup>18</sup> Ryan's experiences serve as a portal to the larger social milieus of schooling and music learning and offer the potential for unique, multifaceted insight into the "large story" of transgender students in music education.<sup>19</sup>

One purpose of emancipatory storysharing is to bring forward the voices of those who are typically unheard in mainstream discourse. Moreover, honoring Ryan's voice and his expertise in his own life narrative is of surpassing importance. Mindful of these two imperatives, I adopted a discursive, emergent methodological process consistent with ethical narrative inquiry and participatory research, an approach that is founded on the "assumption that knowledge, and hence the knowledge creation process, is one basis for power and control."<sup>20</sup>

In narrative methodology, power and control is shared with the participant and necessitates a restructuring of the research relationship. This ideal research relationship is described as "two active participants who jointly construct narrative and meaning," a mutuality with many ramifications for conducting this project.<sup>21</sup> The most significant mode of information gathering was in-depth interviewing, but in a departure from the traditional roles of questioner and respondent, Ryan and I assumed

postures of narrator and listener.<sup>22</sup> According to Chase, making this conceptual shift positions participants as persons “with stories to tell and voices of their own” and alerts researchers to “not only *attend* to the stories that people happen to tell during interviews but also work at *inviting* stories” (italics Chase).<sup>23</sup>

Ryan and I met every Wednesday for ten weeks in a quiet room in the lower level of a college library and talked. I recorded the conversations and then transcribed them verbatim. Participatory research moves far beyond the qualitative practice of “member checking” and strives for the holistic inclusion and empowerment of the participant as a valued partner in the research endeavor, and Ryan embraced his role with serious purpose.<sup>24</sup> He shared photo albums, school records, concert programs, and his entire opus of original songs and spoke candidly about his physical transition as well as his sexuality. He arranged for me to meet and speak with important people in his life, whom I then interviewed. Together we assembled a substantial collection of field texts throughout this lengthy process, and we developed a trusting rapport that served us well as we moved into producing the research text.

Ryan contributed significantly to the process of writing the project narrative. He reviewed the interview transcripts; read, corrected, and discussed multiple drafts of the manuscript; monitored the proposal and abstract submission process for conference presentations and journal publication; and discussed the reviewer responses with me as I prepared revisions. Consistent with the ethics of narrative inquiry and the practices of participatory research, Ryan retained control over how he is represented in the text and how his story is used.<sup>25</sup> In one representative instance, he requested that for each paragraph in the section subtitled “Rie’s Story, Ryan’s Journey,” I alternate his masculine first name with the name he prefers—Rie. Oscillating between the bounded, dualistic distinctions of gendered language creates momentary disorientations in the textual flow that remind the reader of the central tension of the story. In the interpretive section subtitled “Commentary” that follows his narrative, we decided to use only feminine designations because that is how he identifies in the present. Ryan’s continuous, meaningful engagement through all aspects of the study contributes to its verisimilitude and its effectiveness as a critical story.<sup>26</sup>

The presentational form of a narrative text is shaped in the service of the inquiry; it is constructed to effectively convey the knowledge and understanding the study produces.<sup>27</sup> Because the purpose of this research was to produce a critical story, I chose to re-present Ryan’s account as a separate and intact text in which his meanings and intentions were the foremost concern in the retelling. In the Commentary section, I discuss Ryan’s experiences from my perspective as a music scholar and educator. By separating Ryan’s story from my discussion of the possible issues the story raises for music educators, I mean to provide readers with “interpretive space,” textual room in which to contemplate Ryan’s experiences, construct their own meanings, and consider ways in which Ryan’s story might illuminate their own experiences.<sup>28</sup> I do not mean to position Ryan as a representative case nor his story or my comments as “findings” or “results,” for this is not the purpose of critical storytelling. As Bruner states,

Great narrative is an invitation to problem finding, not a lesson in problem solving . . . it is about the road rather than about the inn to which it leads. . . . The conversion of private

trouble into public plight [is what] makes well-wrought narrative so powerful, so comforting, so dangerous, so culturally essential.<sup>29</sup>

### **Rie's Story, Ryan's Journey**

Ryan has always known two things about himself—he is musical and he is unapologetically “Rie.” Friends and family struggle to describe this artistic, free spirit who dresses in short skirts and tight halter tops that reveal both an ornate chest tattoo and an Adam’s apple. Faltering in their explanations, they typically fall back to “He’s just Ryan.” Ryan hates the all-too-human practice of categorizing and labeling, but suffers my “how do you identify yourself” question patiently and answers,

I consider myself transgender, though I call myself a cross-dresser because I have never taken hormones. I have never considered SRS [sexual reassignment surgery]. It took me a long time to be comfortable in my skin, and now I am. I have always loved the saying, “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it,” and that is kind of how I feel.

I met Rie in the course of my professional life as a conductor. Rie played the flute in a band I directed, but she was not my student. She projected a funny, fearless persona and I noted her acceptance and popularity with the other band members. I wondered how difficult the gender transition process had been for her, how she navigated the rural midwestern school system in her hometown, and if she had been supported by family, friends, and teachers. I was particularly interested in her experiences with school music, and so I asked her if she would be willing to tell me her story.

Ryan agreed to talk with me and we met regularly throughout the fall and winter to record interviews, pore over scrapbooks, listen to his music, and share a few cups of coffee. Ryan planned what stories he would tell me each week and with each session brought me a personal token of his life. Among the first gifts were handwritten lyrics to a song he had composed in the ninth grade:

Being young I’ve felt so old  
I’ve always done what I’ve been told  
and as the years pass by me  
I have to wonder why  
they’ve lied and tried to make me cry  
while they’ve been killing me inside  
but now I know as I grow old  
I will not be denied  
you will not make me cry  
the grace I’ve gathered, multiplied

“The Flowers,” copyright 2011 by Rie Daisies. Used with permission.

Rie’s earliest memories include listening to her father play the guitar and repurposing spoons and hairbrushes to sing the music of the B-52’s in three-part harmony with her mother and sister. Rie was also aware, early on, that others saw her differently. “Even before elementary [school], even before I knew what it meant,” Rie says, “I was

tagged as a fag, as gay.” “It’s always been obvious,” she shared. “My first day in third grade [I wore] a purple Pocahontas T-shirt and a Blossom hat with a daisy on it . . . so I’ve always been a little fruit loop I suppose.”

As Ryan grew, he was surrounded by music. Ryan’s father composed songs on the guitar and participated in community musical theatre. He and Ryan’s mother, a classically trained vocalist, also performed at weddings and sang for friends. Ryan’s parents encouraged him to pursue his own musical interests, and when Ryan was nine, he received a drum set and lessons for Christmas. The following years, the gifts were a clarinet and then a flute.

Rie’s home was in a small midwestern town where the schools are a source of pride. The community enthusiastically supports the music programs, especially the intensely competitive marching and concert bands. Recently, the citizens approved and constructed a state-of-the-art performing arts complex despite years of economic downturn. Students are recruited out of their general music classes into the middle school band, choir, and orchestra, then rigorously prepared for the demanding high school music program. Rie excelled in her general music classes, so she eagerly joined her peers and signed up for middle school band and choir at the end of fifth grade.

For Ryan, the first day of sixth grade marked the start of a long and arduous personal journey. He began middle school by unapologetically identifying as gay and cross-dressing in a more flamboyant manner that suited his personal taste. Ryan’s inaugural act was to borrow a T-shirt from his best friend, a girl, and proudly wear it to school. The shirt read *Your Boyfriend has a Crush on Me*. This simple act reverberated throughout the hallways and inducted Ryan into an inescapable social strata—Ryan was a target. No one—students, teachers, administrators alike—knew how to respond. Many of the adults in the school adopted a posture of inert silence:

One day I remember specifically we were sitting in class and this kid from across the room . . . had shouted, “FAG!” or something along those lines at me and this teacher was standing right next to me. I looked at her and I said, “Aren’t you going to say anything?” And she’s like, “About what?” I felt completely helpless.

Rie says she could “count her allies on one hand.” The school administrative response was tepid. The guidance counselor regularly talked with Rie and made her office available as a refuge, but did not appear to intervene on Rie’s behalf with the teachers and students to stop the incessant bullying. Some students meted out physical punishment whenever they could, but Rie reports that degrading comments came from “just about everybody”:

It was a nightmare. I wished I was dead every day because I didn’t want to go. The only thing that kept me going was knowing that I would be able to go and play [in band] and I would be able to go and sing [in choir], because that was the one thing that no one could take away from me was my music. I could express myself the most freely through music. So that, to me, was my safe zone because it was my outlet.

Ryan thrived in his middle school music classes, gravitating to the challenges presented by the performance-driven band program. “The middle school band program

was pretty serious,” he said. “They are not a joke there, and a lot of the kids that were in it they were serious about their music too, so it wasn’t a time to worry about this or to worry about that, it was a time to worry about our music and playing together.” Ryan forged a small, close group of friends from within this community and relied on their support throughout the difficult school day.

Rie rejects the notion that her sense of safety stemmed from any conscious effort on the part of her music teachers. According to Rie, the band and choir teachers “never brought [my gender expression] up.” She explained, “It was never dealt with because I showed up and I did what I had to do, and I did it well.” She said,

I felt like I had champion teachers in both of them but as far as role models or people you look up to for other purposes, no. For their musical abilities, absolutely. But other than that, I never felt like they were my allies.

By the time Ryan reached the eighth grade, two years of unrelenting and unaddressed harassment had taken its toll. He became a regular visitor to the principal’s office, telling me that “I never tallied [my visits] up . . . but it was more than it should have been and a few good times that I deserved it, for sure . . . but I know there was more than a handful of times that I got in trouble that I didn’t feel it was deserved.” He described one such incident:

This girl came up to me [and] just started spouting off at the mouth. I turned around and said, “You know, I really don’t appreciate . . .” and I [began yelling at her]. We are both going at it, and she smacked me across my face! My glasses flew off and she looked at me with this total look of disdain and [I hear] *crunch!* She smashes my glasses and I lost it! Next thing you know, I am banging her head into the brick wall and friends are ripping us apart. We got sent to the office and the vice principal . . . let us both tell our stories and he sent her back to class. I remember thinking, “Why does she get to go back to class when she is the instigator of this fight?” . . . I ended up getting suspended for three days and I had in-school suspension for a couple of days after that. I knew I shouldn’t have done it. I shouldn’t have fought back like that, but when you are in the situation and dealing with this every day and no one is helping you, there comes a point when you feel like you have to help yourself regardless of the outcome.

By the middle of her eighth-grade year the tension had reached a breaking point. Rie and a friend were chatting about the religious conception of hell. The two young students discussed the premise that if condemnation was a possibility for everyone, then who would be the “first to go”? According to Rie’s account of the incident, she was overheard saying, “I think the jocks and the preps would be the first to go,” and the comment was reported to the school administrators. The Columbine High School shooting tragedy had recently occurred, and school officials were on high alert that other students might be inspired to create similar mayhem. Rie believes that her principal found his opportunity to rid himself of a difficult student and used the comment to justify searching Rie’s school locker, where he found her intensely personal poetry diary. Rie picks up the story:

I get a call one day to go down to the office. I went in and as soon as I walked in, I saw my book of poetry and I lost it. I instantly started bawling because that was my diary—THAT was my diary! For me, my music and my writing have always been my emotional outlet. You know if you are having a bad, horrible, shitty day and you are dealing with people hating you every day and spewing these negative emotions towards you, the things that come out of you are not going to be happy. They are not going to be pleasant sounding or pleasant to read. They are going to be uncomfortable and painful memories written on a piece of paper. [The principal] used that against me. None of [my poems] were like, "I wanna kill you, I hope you are dead!" It was more like, "I hope I am dead! I wish that this would stop!" The poetry [was] angry, angst-filled, preteen stuff.

When the principal confronted Ryan with the contents of the diary, Ryan's response was to run. "I just left," he shared, "I ran all the way home and called my dad and told him to come home."

The next day Rie and her father returned to the school. The principal held firm. Rie was not allowed to attend classes until the school board decided whether she should be expelled. Rie's father responded by threatening to sue and to publicly air the dispute in the media. According to Rie, the confrontation escalated to the point that the principal resorted to threats, stating, "Sir, I know a lot of people in this town and I can make your lives very uncomfortable!"

Ryan's suspension was accompanied by a directive to undergo a psychological examination in order to be considered for readmission. Ryan insouciantly described the evaluation results as "This kid is fine . . . he is a fruit loop . . . but as far as being a threat to the other students or a threat to the school, no." Upon receipt of the results, however, the school still appeared to delay his return to class. Ryan and his family were told that the school board would have to authorize his readmittance, and, as it was now late in the spring semester, the board would not meet again until the next fall. In response, Ryan's parents chose to enroll him in a much smaller school in a village located just outside of his hometown. Ryan says that in spite of the support of family and joining the school band and choir there, he was "so upset and distraught about everything, I just did not give a shit." He continued, saying, "[The teachers] saw it, my parents saw it, I saw it and that is when I went to homeschooling."

In the summer following Rie's disastrous eighth-grade year, she discovered Prism, a support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teenagers. Located in a larger metropolitan area, the group was designed as an open forum where LGBT students could meet and simply talk. Rie's mother took her every week. "I saw other people had been through the same things . . . they had witnessed this occurring in their own lives and not only could they sympathize, they could empathize," Rie marveled. "[It] was the first time that I had ever had that." Rie smiled broadly as she remembered that pivotal summer and the first time she attended the annual Pride Rally. She laughed, "I thought I was out and proud before, but there I was on the steps of the capital screaming, 'We're here! We're queer!'"

Ryan described his ninth-grade year as "the time that everything came together." His parents found a local church that provided a homeschool program. Ryan was

uncertain how he would be received by a community that is known for being socially conservative but was pleasantly surprised by the church's welcome. His most profound sorrow was that he was not enrolled in any school music program and says that because of this, he "had no desire to move forward" and was "stuck in the moment." The church did have a piano, Ryan noticed, and he asked if he could play it. The administrator, sensing the importance of the request to Ryan, made a deal with him. If he arrived with his schoolwork completed and did well on the weekly exams, he would be allowed to play the piano for as long as he wanted. Ryan seized the opportunity.

To maximize her time, Rie arrived every Thursday with her assignments in order and raced to complete the weekly tests. She instructed her mother to pick her up at the last possible moment of the day so she could spend hours exploring the piano. "I knew the basic note layout, the structure of the instrument and I was sure I could learn how to play it," Rie explained. She bought a songbook of Tori Amos tunes, her favorite recording artist, and began to teach herself. When it got too frustrating to read both the treble and bass lines together, Rie decided to create her own songs by combining her poetry with tunes she composed playing by ear. A whole new world of composition opened to her. She confided that songwriting "made me feel like I wasn't crazy." "I was really dealing with some demons," she shared, "I blamed everybody and I had no outlet."

That was the time of me really trying to get to know myself through my songwriting. . . . I knew how other people perceived me, but I never sat down and had a heart-to-heart with myself. That was my way of doing it. I look back and a lot of those songs are a lot more personal, and they let on a lot more than my songs that I have written now do.

Ryan described songwriting as a "way to make people listen." "They didn't have to look at me, they didn't have to deal with me," he declared, "but they damn sure had to listen to me." He performed for his family, friends, and the weekly Prism gatherings.

I became a proactive person at that point. To me that was sweet justice . . . to be able to have my say heard, maybe not by everybody, but by some people. And people were listening, and the reason they were listening was because I had a medium to speak my mind through—and that was my music. That gave me the strength I guess to be able to be outgoing and to be a personable person because before this I was mean and nasty and I didn't want anything to do with anybody. I was bitter, very bitter.

Although Rie found great personal satisfaction in writing and performing her own music, she still missed being a part of an ensemble. "There is something to be said," she commented, "about playing in a group, playing with other people, working together towards one goal." She decided to take advantage of the state law that allows home-schooled students to enroll in "nonessential elective courses" at their local public schools, and registered for band and choir at the small village school she had attempted to attend just after expulsion from her hometown school. Days free of harassment but full of music were perfect for Rie. "Freshman year was a lot of fun," she raved.

Ryan was dedicated to the school's band and choir, but he was not willing to compromise his gender expression. He insisted on singing alto instead of tenor in the choir and chose feminine-styled concert clothing. He says that over time, the music teacher learned to "roll with it," and that the two developed a warm relationship marked by mutual respect. Ryan was allowed unrestricted access to the music library, was encouraged to explore the solo repertoire for flute and clarinet, and was given some teaching responsibility with the younger students. "He really made me feel special," Ryan shared. Acknowledging that the school band program did not provide the level of musical challenge that Ryan was seeking, the music teacher suggested that he try out for the Metropolitan Youth Symphony. Ryan took the challenge seriously, first auditioning on flute. When he did not get in, he reauditioned on clarinet and made the orchestra, playing third clarinet and bass clarinet.

One of Rie's personal strengths is the ability to create a small community of friends among her peers who accept her for who she is and are willing to support her no matter the social cost. Her best friend, who lent her the infamous T-shirt in the sixth grade, is still a significant part of her life today. Rie deeply loves her friends and professes an abiding loyalty to them, a commitment no doubt forged in the crucible of her schooling years. In her tenth-grade year, however, that small group of friends endured an unimaginable tragedy.

Because of the proximity of Ryan's hometown to the village where she attended school music classes, Ryan was able to maintain ties with his friends from middle school. One of these friends was Chrystal, an athletic, African American girl who quietly came out to Ryan as a lesbian in the eighth grade. Ryan encouraged her to attend Prism with him and says that they "truly bonded." "We used to say that we were the same in completely opposite ways," he remembered fondly. "She was a cross-dresser also, just, you know, female to male, but you see in school it wasn't an issue because she was just a tomboy."

With Rie's encouragement, Chrystal came out to her family and began to live more openly as she entered high school, a decision her peers predictably responded to with harassment and social isolation. She began dating a girl from Rie's high school band whom Rie characterizes as "one of those bi-curious, doesn't really know what the hell they are, type of girls." The relationship was a disaster and Chrystal was deeply hurt. What came next was devastating:

Chrystal killed herself. She was black, she was a lesbian, she was getting used, and she went to [this large high school] where she got shit for being black and a lesbian and she was dealing with this crazy girlfriend, and she ended up committing suicide.

In their grief and desire to bring something positive from something so unspeakably awful, Chrystal's family reached out to Rie, and together they worked to create a local support group modeled after Prism. Their vision was to create an open, nonjudgmental forum for all youth to provide care, support, and assistance for "challenges that appear hopeless." They first attempted to organize through Chrystal's high school but to no avail. The principal who presided over Rie's expulsion in the eighth grade was

now the superintendent of schools, and he unceremoniously rejected the proposal. A local church whose pastor was also a licensed child and family counselor and therapist welcomed the group and volunteered to help lead the sessions. “Friends of Chrystal” still meets today, the second Thursday of every month.

Ryan is critical of the education he received as a homeschooled student and contends that the school officials who blocked his return to school “stole my education from me.” He completed his high school homeschool requirements at the end of tenth grade and at sixteen years of age obtained his high school degree. Ryan then embarked on the journey that many young adults make—leaving home, working for a living, building community, and finding new dimensions in romantic relationships. He is now in his early twenties and works as the office manager for his father’s company. Through it all, he continues to chart his course through songwriting and to find those who will listen. His MySpace page continues to get hits, recording over 12,000 total plays by visitors to his site, and he has expanded his online media presence to Facebook, YouTube, and ReverbNation.<sup>30</sup> In 2011, he was invited by recording industry executives to record a demo of his songs for marketing, and at the time of publication, Ryan was preparing to appear as part of a panel of transgender young adults and share his personal story to raise funds for a shelter serving homeless LGBT youth in New York City.

As our interview sessions drew to a close, I invited Rie to offer some advice or insight to the music education professionals who would read her story. “What would you like to say to those who teach music?” I asked. She thought for a moment, took a breath, and answered:

I think that people should remember that music, whether you are playing something of your own or somebody else’s, [whether] Beethoven or Rie Daisies, it is a form of self-expression, it is a form of release. I think people should remember that and keep in mind that music isn’t the only way people express themselves, music isn’t the only way people release things from themselves, that sometimes people need more. They need more room to express themselves. I think that more people should give that room, give that space to somebody, to say, that’s who you are. Go with it. You do you. Play your music and play it well, but be yourself.

### *Commentary*

One of the purposes of critical storytelling is to “to make palpable and comprehensible the pain and cruelty of isolation inflicted on the . . . people who are the students, teachers, and administrators enmeshed in our institutions of education for the purpose of locating the source of that pain and provoking educational reform.”<sup>31</sup> As I considered the ways in which I might retell Rie’s story to an audience of music educators, I wished to avoid perpetuating the meta-narrative of violence and victimization that routinely accompanies accounts of gender-variant students in American schooling. Nonetheless, it would be disingenuous to fail to acknowledge that these issues are significant. The demands of daily survival were a constant source of tension for Rie. She faced continuous harassment, both verbal and physical. She avoided school

restrooms, explaining that she was not allowed to use the girls' bathroom and was too afraid to use the boys' facilities. She could not trust the adults in the school to intercede when she was threatened or even to refrain from harassing her themselves. There is much in Rie's story that confirms the worst experiences of gender-variant students in schooling, but there are also illuminating moments that challenge that meta-narrative. She describes specific ways that personal musical engagement and participation in school ensembles can be sources of important support for transgender students.

When Rie chose to live openly as a gender-variant person on the first day of middle school, she marked herself as different, and her classmates responded by rejecting and bullying her. Transgender students routinely report that upon coming out, they are subjected to verbal harassment, physical torment, relational aggression, and social isolation.<sup>32</sup> This adversarial relationship to peers interferes with more than the transgender student's education; the aggressive treatment also precludes development of social networks and denies transgender students the opportunity to forge meaningful friendships.

But Rie did something else that infamous fall day when she wore a controversial T-shirt on the first day of school: she also joined the school band and choir—a decision that would prove equally as transforming as her wardrobe choice. From within the ranks of her school's music ensembles, Rie found a group of friends who would support and sustain her through the difficult middle school years and a larger cohort of musically minded peers who did not harass her as the students of the larger school body did. As a homeschooled high school student, the school band provided both the musical and social engagement that Rie felt was otherwise missing from her life.

Morrison contends that school ensembles are cultural worlds unique to themselves. He notes, "Students take math. Students enroll in science class. But students *become members* of the choir; they *join* the band; they are *in* the orchestra" (italics mine).<sup>33</sup> A defining feature of culturally cohesive school music ensembles, as viewed through the theoretical lens of Lave and Wenger's "communities of practice," is the mutual engagement of the participants in a shared practice.<sup>34</sup> "Each participant in a community of practice," writes Wenger, "finds a unique place and gains a unique identity."<sup>35</sup> He continues:

Mutual engagement does not entail homogeneity, but it does create relationships among people. When it is sustained, it connects participants in ways that can become deeper than more abstract similarities in terms of personal features or social categories.<sup>36</sup>

Rie's experiences are consistent with Wenger's observation. The common goal of musical excellence superseded the differences, even the most dramatic ones, between the individual members of the school ensembles. Within her community of musical practice, Rie held the social currency of ability. Her inclusion in the community of band and choir was founded upon her musical identity and afforded to her a sense of self-worth and accomplishment that was denied to her by the rest of the school community because of her gender identity.

Even though Rie had secured a place of belonging in the school music programs, she still had no support as a transgender person. It was not until Rie discovered Prism,

a weekly gathering for LGBT students, that she was able to forge the social connections with other transgender youth that she desperately needed. For a person whose gender identity had been contested, and even denied, for many years, the recognition, support, and understanding she experienced at Prism was a welcome affirmation. The group's importance to Rie was no more evident than in her response to the suicide of her friend Chrystal. While Rie could have responded to this tragedy with anger and bitterness, she chose instead to champion a Prism-like student group within the same school system from which she was expelled.

While many transgender students experience grave social and familial rejection, Rie was fortunate. She had the support of her parents as evidenced by her father's defense of her against an intractable school administration and her mother's diligence in taking her to Prism meetings every week. She had the support of other LGBT youth in Prism with whom she could identify and confide. And she was a member of a school music community that provided a safe space in the school day and validated her self-worth as a talented musician. Clearly, without the support of her parents, Prism, and the school band and choir, Rie would have floundered during her middle and high school years. Rie's story demonstrates that school music ensembles can serve as an important component in a framework of support for gender-variant students in their schools and communities.

The ensembles were not only a place of belonging, but they afforded an opportunity for musical engagement that was an important emotional outlet for Rie. When she was denied access to the school band and choir, Rie found ways to continue be musical on her own. I carry an image in my mind of her sitting at an old upright piano in a church Sunday school room. There are no music educators here, save for Rie herself. There are no method books, no metronomes, no CD players—just a young person with some basic musical knowledge, a piano, a Tori Amos songbook, and a lot on her mind.

Rie describes her early attempts at songwriting as an intense internal conversation. "That was a time of really trying to get to know myself . . . [having] a heart-to-heart with myself." Seated at the piano, she found ways to fuse her poetry writing and music into a personal expression, releasing many feelings and thoughts that had been bottled inside. Through songwriting, Rie grappled with her pain, her anger, and her growing understanding of her gender identity. As I listened to the collection of songs she shared with me, I marveled at the fearlessness with which she peered into her own soul and gave voice to what she found there.

Eventually Rie grew confident enough to share her songs with her friends, family, and the LGBT community. She equated performing her own songs with "having [her] say heard," and much to her delight and satisfaction, she learned that people wanted to listen. "Being heard" after years of being misunderstood was profoundly transforming for Rie. She credits the positive reception of her music as the impetus to begin moving past her disappointment and bitterness to become a more open and caring person.

"Composing," says Joyce, "is an embodied act. When composing, we are not only composing a thing, we are composed in the process: we compose ourselves."<sup>37</sup> From her first attempts at creating melody and lyric, to performing her songs for family and friends, to developing a loyal fan base by sharing her music online with a wider audience, Rie's composition served not only as a creative outlet but as a means of authoring self.

## A Problem of Narrative Framing

One possible problem in writing narratives is that despite authorial intentions to preserve complexity, the textual framing can exclude significant events or impart an illusion of resolution. Narrative packaging fosters intelligibility by stratifying the research text into a bounded form, but it also can erase the potent ambiguity of lived experience. From a large and messy data record, I wrote “a” story of Rie’s life in middle and high school, but not “the” story, an impossibility from the postmodern perspective.<sup>38</sup> I framed this narrative as a critical story for a primary audience of music educators, limited my telling to those aspects of the data record that fit within those specifications, and imposed a sharp chronological compression to the events.

Richardson points out, however, that lives “are not plot lines” and that “everyday life experiences are not organized around . . . the life history.”<sup>39</sup> She continues:

Rather, people tell stories about events in their lives; the meaning of the event changes through the invocation of different implied narratives. Not all events, further, are stuffed into the same narrative. A life may have a “plot line,” but not everything lived—nor everything of import to the person—fits neatly into “a” plot. We are not characters. Our lives are not morals. They are not even ethnographic narratives.<sup>40</sup>

Barone states that educational storysharing should foreground essential dilemmas and “persuade readers to contribute answers.”<sup>41</sup> Rie’s story, as packaged and presented thus far, offers the opportunity to consider ways in which music educators can support gender-variant students as they negotiate the challenges of living openly in school, and affirms the unique role of music in the construction of self. But there is more to Rie’s story, and it speaks to the complexity of her lived experience even as it lies outside of the textual boundaries of this narrative’s focus on her musical experience.

During her ninth-grade year (the first year she was homeschooled), Rie often sneaked out of her house to meet a boy she was dating. The young man was a juvenile offender and on probation. Their relationship was sexual and carried on in secret. Rie would wait until her parents had gone to sleep, then rendezvous with him in a nearby park. On one particular night, he was waiting with a gun and a bottle of cheap alcohol. He had been drinking. “I was scared,” Rie shared. “I knew this wasn’t okay and things weren’t right.” Unsure if he meant to harm her, himself, or them both, Rie reasoned with him until he was calmer and persuaded him to go home. The next day, she abruptly ended the relationship. “In retrospect, I could have been nicer in how I broke up with him,” Rie mused. She told a few friends about their midnight trysts and the dramatic dissolution, and they in turn told a few others; the story spread like wildfire throughout the community.

A few days later when Rie arrived at the village school for band rehearsal, the young man was waiting for her:

I was walking through the tunnel that leads you right to the school . . . and he just came at me from behind. He hit me in the head about fifty times. Nobody stopped it. There were male teachers standing there. Nobody did a thing about it. They let it happen. The one person who tried [to help] was my friend, [a girl] about 5’2”, a tiny little thing. She is the one who got

pulled out by the guys. They pulled her out so she wouldn't get hurt. He beat the shit out of me. Finally, after he had worn himself out, they grabbed him up. They are all holding him down on the ground, and I looked at him and all I could think is, "You have hurt me so bad physically, I am not going to let you know how bad you hurt me mentally," so I spit on him, I smiled, and I skipped away.

This story is crucial in this narrative because it portrays Rie as more than a two-dimensional character in an article and depicts her daily life as a compendium of hits and misses in her struggle for a fully realized self. Rie's account at this difficult point, at its most morally murky moment, offers readers the opportunity to test their own convictions, to seek their positionality within the text, to explore their identification with Rie, and to refine their insight into the responses of her peers, her parents, and her teachers. Over the course of this study, Rie has described a panoply of persons with power and their intercession, or lack thereof, on her behalf. Some remained silent, some supported her quietly, and some openly defended her. Some treated her as troubled, and others treated her as a troublemaker. Some welcomed her openly, and others chased her away. Without the story of the trysts and the beating, this narrative is a safe and easy moral tale; with this story, the narrative becomes, as Bruner says, "so dangerous, so culturally essential."<sup>42</sup>

Rie challenges the music educators who would read her narrative to remember that some people "need more room to express themselves." Rie experienced her band and choir classrooms as just that—sites at which she could express herself, places of momentary freedom in which music provided a means of escape from the pressures of a hostile school environment. And she asks for more; she asks to be seen in wholeness and to be granted the space to express herself as openly in her everyday life as she has experienced in her musical life. What is it that music educators know and have enacted in their classrooms that can be offered as potential solutions for the difficulties that transgender students experience in their schools? Music educators are full citizens in the world of education, and we have much to contribute to the ongoing conversations regarding safe schooling and social and emotional learning.

Rie viewed this project as an opportunity to be heard. I viewed the project as one answer among an infinity of responses to the rhetorical question, "Who do we teach?" Scholars have critiqued the relevancy of the current practices of music education and called for change. I posit that meaningful change will happen as we listen to the voices of our students, engage their lives in all of their complexity and daily approximations, and become open to what may be learned in the process.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Submitted January 24, 2012; accepted November 8, 2012.