

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement

Curtis Reynolds // M.F.A. // 2022

My late parents, Jeff and Karen Reynolds, instilled in me a sense of rooting for underdogs. My father worked for a non-profit that helped small businesses in small towns get on their feet. (No small task in the era of Walmarts swooping into rural Nebraska communities.) My mother was a K-12 vocal music teacher who spent many (contractually unobligated) hours helping underserved students get into honor choirs.

Even with such positive examples, it wasn't until I was across the country sitting at my first a cappella concert at New York University that I realized that I had grown up with people who only looked like me, went to the same church as me, and had similar amounts of (average yet comfortable) money as me. Many moments of reckoning and debilitating observation later, I wonder which words are left to be said.

I come back to the realization that words or even formal academic statements cannot possibly address all of these homogenized, inequitable, and exclusive disparities. Instead, we must incorporate meaningful actions and behaviors into our personal and pedagogical lives.

Just as I believe teachers can explicitly train intrinsic qualities like motivation, intention, and mindset, we can also guide student artists to be empathetic and responsible citizens of the world. Our studio is a place that celebrates each person regardless of background, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, political affiliation, physical or mental ability, or any other identity category.

In our studio, we:

- **acknowledge that our industry and artform are historically racist.** While we aspire to create a progressive and inclusive performance space, we must first understand that musical theatre's origins include minstrelsy and the general degradation of non-white performers. Progress cannot be made without acknowledgment.
- **legitimize all types of singing, not just "legit" qualities.** Using words like "legit" to refer to a lofty, Western classical sound essentially "delegitimizes" other styles. Classical singing is a style of singing, not a rite of passage. A neutral voice is cultivated to gain access to a myriad of vocal colors, classical posture being one of them.

- **decolonize repertoire selection.** It is unacceptable, even in an academic setting, for non-BIPOC and non-Latinx singers to work on material that was written for and about the experience of those specific communities. Conversely, students of color are actively encouraged to seek out repertoire that moves past their cultural experiences. This is not a two-way street. Much of the musical theatre canon was written specifically for white performers and it is time for everyone to have an equitable seat at the table.
- **incorporate many genres into vocalises.** We recognize that voice training has long been filtered through a Western classical (white) lens, even when training non-classical artforms. In addition to these traditional diatonic exercises, students are introduced to blues scales, rough vocal effects, and other musical concepts that are sometimes overlooked or even frowned upon.
- **honor gender identity through the use of neutral language.** We do not impose gendered sounds in the studio. While we establish an understanding of what has been traditionally interpreted as feminine and masculine vocal qualities, we also explore the whole instrument without placing binary labels on sounds.
- **value individuality rather than “fitting in” to industry stereotypes.** Training in academic institutions often changes to reflect respective changes in the industry. However, transformation can (and must) also come from institutional training telling the industry what change looks like. From imaginative casting to unlimited vocal colors, we can cultivate the world we want to see.