

Genre-Specific Vocal Techniques for Teaching Vietnamese Popular Songs to Mezzo-Soprano Students: A Pedagogical Approach from Vietnamese Higher Music Education

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Keywords— Vietnamese popular music, vocal technique, mezzo-soprano, vocal pedagogy, popular singing, genre-specific technique, music education, higher music education

Received: 19 Jan 2026;

Received in revised form: 18 Feb 2026;

Accepted: 21 Feb 2026,

Published on: 28 Feb 2026

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Abstract— The increasing presence of Vietnamese popular music in professional performance and higher music education requires vocal pedagogy to address stylistic and technical characteristics that differ from those of classical singing. This study examines genre-specific vocal techniques for teaching Vietnamese popular songs to mezzo-soprano students and proposes a pedagogical approach that combines classical vocal foundations with selected techniques appropriate to popular singing. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Music of Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism and employed theoretical analysis, musical analysis, pedagogical observation, surveys, interviews, expert consultation, and pedagogical experimentation. A corpus of 68 Vietnamese popular songs was examined in relation to melodic structure, rhythm, vocal technique, stylistic characteristics, and performance requirements. The empirical investigation involved nine vocal lecturers, 52 undergraduate vocal students, and 12 mezzo-soprano students with an aptitude for popular music. A four-week pedagogical experiment was subsequently conducted with four mezzo-soprano students, including two students receiving the proposed approach and two students receiving the established teaching approach. The findings indicate that effective popular-singing instruction requires selective adaptation of classical techniques rather than their complete replacement. Particular attention should be given to breathing flexibility, mouth shape and articulation, register coordination, stylistically appropriate vibrato, accent and portamento-like treatment, syncopation, off-beat rhythm, and singing with accompaniment. In the experimental component, the mean performance score of the experimental group increased from 8.45 to 9.05, while the comparison group increased from 8.45 to 8.60 after four weeks. Given the very small experimental sample, these findings are interpreted as exploratory pedagogical evidence. The study contributes a practical framework for integrating genre-specific vocal techniques into professional training of mezzo-soprano students performing Vietnamese popular songs.

I. INTRODUCTION

Popular music has become an important component of contemporary musical culture and professional performance. During the twentieth century, Jazz, Rock, Pop, and related musical forms developed distinctive

musical languages, performance practices, and vocal approaches. In Vietnam, popular music developed through processes of cultural exchange and adaptation, gradually incorporating elements of Western popular music while maintaining Vietnamese linguistic, melodic, and cultural characteristics. The development of Vietnamese popular

songs, particularly after 1975, has contributed to an increasingly diverse professional music environment in which singers are expected to perform across different musical styles. Consequently, the training of professional singers needs to respond not only to general vocal requirements but also to the specific technical and stylistic demands of different genres.

Classical vocal pedagogy has traditionally provided an important technical foundation for professional singer education. Breathing, resonance, articulation, register coordination, vocal health, and systematic vocal exercises remain essential for developing a stable and technically controlled voice. Vietnamese vocal-pedagogy literature has established a substantial theoretical and practical foundation in these areas. However, the technical requirements of popular singing cannot always be addressed adequately through the direct application of classical vocal production. Popular singing places greater emphasis on natural vocal color, speech-related articulation, rhythmic flexibility, stylistically appropriate vibrato, flexible register use, and the individual identity of the performer. Therefore, the pedagogical issue is not whether classical technique should be abandoned, but how it can be selectively adapted to serve the expressive and stylistic requirements of popular music.

This issue is particularly relevant to mezzo-soprano students. The mezzo-soprano voice is commonly characterized by a relatively full and warm middle register and occupies a position between soprano and contralto. In professional training, students with this voice type may possess an attractive natural vocal color and demonstrate favorable musical sensitivity for popular repertoire. Nevertheless, they may encounter particular difficulties when performing songs that require movement into the upper register, coordination between chest and mixed or head-related production, stylistically appropriate vibrato, and rhythmic flexibility. The doctoral study underlying the present article identified difficulties in upper-register production, register coordination, breath management, vibrato, rhythmic patterns, and independent interpretation among students working with Vietnamese popular songs.

The musical characteristics of Vietnamese popular songs also create specific technical requirements for singers. Analysis of 68 songs in the doctoral study showed that the repertoire is predominantly associated with Pop and related popular idioms and requires flexible phrase shaping, syncopation, off-beat accents, sensitivity to accompaniment, stylistically appropriate vibrato, accentuation, portamento-like connections, and flexible treatment of registers. Performance requirements extend beyond vocal sound production to include movement,

stage behavior, microphone use, and individual interpretation. These characteristics indicate that a popular song should be approached simultaneously as a musical text, a vocal-technical task, a rhythmic task, and a performance problem.

Previous Vietnamese research has contributed important knowledge concerning vocal pedagogy, musical genres, Vietnamese popular music, and performance skills. Studies by Nguyễn Trung Kiên (2001) and Hồ Mộ La (2008), for example, provide foundations for systematic vocal development, while research on Vietnamese popular music has addressed its historical development and musical characteristics. Research has also considered performance skills in popular-song singing and the teaching of Vietnamese songs to specific voice types. However, the literature reviewed in the doctoral study suggests that there remains a relatively limited body of research focusing specifically on the systematic adaptation of vocal techniques for mezzo-soprano students performing Vietnamese popular songs. In particular, the pedagogical relationship between classical vocal foundations and genre-specific techniques requires further practical clarification.

Accordingly, this article focuses on the technical dimension of teaching Vietnamese popular songs to mezzo-soprano students. Rather than treating popular singing as a simplified form of classical singing, it examines how selected vocal techniques can be reorganized according to the stylistic requirements of the repertoire. The study addresses three questions: (1) What vocal and rhythmic characteristics of Vietnamese popular songs create specific technical requirements for mezzo-soprano students? (2) How can classical vocal techniques be selectively adapted to address these requirements? and (3) What changes are observed when genre-specific techniques are incorporated systematically into the teaching process?

The purpose of the study is therefore to develop a practical framework for genre-sensitive vocal training. The proposed framework emphasizes five interconnected areas: breathing and articulation, register coordination, vibrato and expressive treatment, rhythmic flexibility and accompaniment-based practice, and the transfer of technical skills into individual performance. The article also presents exploratory evidence from a four-week pedagogical experiment comparing the proposed approach with an established teaching approach.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Vietnamese popular music as a distinctive pedagogical repertoire

The dissertation's literature review distinguishes between a broad or traditional understanding of light music and modern popular music associated particularly with Jazz, Rock, Pop, and related forms. In the present article, Vietnamese popular songs are considered primarily within the modern popular-music tradition, with particular attention to Pop-oriented repertoire used in professional vocal education. This distinction is pedagogically important because popular singing should not be understood simply as a technically easier form of classical singing. Its musical language, rhythmic organization, vocal color, articulation, and performance conventions create specific learning requirements.

Research on Vietnamese new music provides a historical and cultural foundation for understanding this repertoire. Tú Ngọc et al. (2000) document the development and achievements of modern Vietnamese music, while Vũ Tự Lân (2008) discusses the characteristics and development of Jazz, Rock, and Pop. Thân Văn Trọng Bình (1996) examined Vietnamese popular songs from 1975 onward, and Nguyễn Thị Phương Hoa (2021) addressed the formation and development of Vietnamese popular music. Together, these sources support the view that Vietnamese popular music constitutes a distinctive field of musical practice shaped by interaction between international popular-music languages and Vietnamese cultural and linguistic characteristics.

2.2. Vocal pedagogy and the mezzo-soprano voice

Classical vocal pedagogy provides important foundations for professional singer development. Nguyễn Trung Kiên (2001) emphasizes systematic vocal training, while Hồ Mộ La (2008) addresses breathing, resonance, articulation, register coordination, and other fundamental aspects of vocal technique. These foundations are directly relevant to popular singing because a professional popular singer still requires stable breath management, accurate pitch, coordinated registers, clear diction, and healthy vocal production.

However, the transfer of classical technique into popular singing needs to be selective. The dissertation emphasizes that the technical foundation should be retained while the balance among natural vocal production, articulation, register use, vibrato, rhythm, and expressive treatment is adjusted to the repertoire. Peckham (2006), for example, provides practical approaches to vocal flexibility and stylistic control. The theoretical position adopted in this study is therefore one of adaptation rather than

opposition: classical training establishes technical capacity, while genre-specific training determines how that capacity is used in performance.

For mezzo-soprano students, this adaptation is especially relevant because the voice is commonly associated with a strong and warm middle register while requiring careful coordination when moving toward higher passages. The study consequently treats register transitions not simply as a range-extension problem but as an integrated technical and stylistic problem involving breathing, vowel and mouth shape, resonance, register coordination, dynamics, and expressive intention.

2.3. Genre-specific technique and active learning

Genre-specific technique refers in this study to the systematic adjustment of vocal and musical skills according to the characteristics of the repertoire. In Vietnamese popular-song performance, such skills include flexible breathing, speech-related articulation, selective vibrato, rhythmic placement, syncopation, off-beat accents, accompaniment awareness, movement, and individual interpretation. These elements should not be taught as isolated exercises; they need to be transferred into complete musical phrases and songs.

The pedagogical framework also draws on active and competency-oriented approaches. Nguyễn Lăng Bình and Đỗ Hương Trà (2018) and Nguyễn Thị Tố Mai (2019) emphasize active learning and competency development in Vietnamese educational contexts. Applied to vocal education, these principles encourage students to prepare repertoire, identify technical and expressive problems, compare alternative interpretations, test solutions, and gradually develop independent artistic decisions.

On this basis, effective teaching of Vietnamese popular songs to mezzo-soprano students is conceptualized through four interconnected dimensions: vocal-technical competence, rhythmic and stylistic competence, performance competence, and creative agency. The teacher remains responsible for technical guidance and correction, but students are increasingly required to understand why a particular technical choice is appropriate and how it contributes to musical expression.

III. METHOD

3.1. Research setting and participants

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Music of Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The research focused on undergraduate professional vocal students, with particular attention to mezzo-soprano students whose vocal aptitude and repertoire preferences were oriented toward Vietnamese popular music.

The field investigation involved several participant groups. Nine vocal lecturers participated in the lecturer survey; 52 undergraduate vocal students participated in a broader survey concerning learning conditions; and 12 mezzo-soprano students with an aptitude for popular music participated in the focused student survey. University and faculty managers and experienced practitioners were consulted through interviews and professional discussion. These groups were used to establish the broader pedagogical context before the focused intervention.

3.2. Research design and data collection

The study employed a combination of theoretical and empirical methods. Theoretical methods included analysis, synthesis, and comparison of literature and musical materials. Empirical methods included pedagogical observation, questionnaire surveys, interviews, expert consultation, analysis of teaching and learning products, and pedagogical experimentation. Mathematical statistics were used as a supporting method for organizing and comparing survey and experimental results.

A corpus of 68 Vietnamese popular songs by well-known or widely recognized Vietnamese composers and performers was analyzed. The corpus was examined in relation to themes, musical language, structure, modes, melody, rhythm, vocal technique, and performance practice. The songs were primarily associated with Pop and related popular styles and were considered suitable for undergraduate mezzo-soprano training. Transposition could be used when necessary to accommodate individual vocal ranges.

3.3. Pedagogical experiment

The pedagogical experiment involved four mezzo-soprano students. Two students formed the experimental group and two formed the comparison group. The groups were assessed before instruction and showed closely comparable initial performance levels. Both groups studied the same song, *Đâu phải bởi mùa thu*, composed by Phú Quang with lyrics by Giáng Vân. The intervention lasted four weeks.

The comparison group received the established teaching approach, which included memorizing the melody, classical-style vocal exercises, phrase-by-phrase work, technical correction, and teacher-led guidance on interpretation. The experimental group received the proposed genre-sensitive approach. Students prepared the song before class, studied its content and musical characteristics, and developed initial interpretive ideas. Classical exercises were retained as a technical foundation but were followed by popular-specific exercises involving vibrato, syncopated and off-beat rhythms, different popular styles, and singing with accompaniment. Students also

compared classical and popular vocal production and listened critically to different singers before developing their own interpretations.

3.4. Assessment criteria

Performance was assessed using criteria developed for professional vocal students performing Vietnamese popular songs. The assessment considered vocal quality and technical control, register use, stylistic characteristics, rhythmic flexibility, vibrato, and interpretive creativity. Scores were recorded on a 10-point scale before and after the intervention.

Because the experiment included only four students, the analysis is descriptive. The study does not claim statistical significance or population-level generalization. The numerical results are interpreted together with qualitative observations of students' vocal production, rhythmic execution, stylistic characteristics, and individual interpretation.

IV. RESULTS

4.1. Technical problems identified in current teaching and learning

The institutional investigation identified a tension between students' growing interest in popular singing and the continued dominance of classical-oriented vocal training. Classical training provided valuable technical foundations, but the dissertation found that it did not always address the specific demands of popular repertoire. In some teaching situations, classical production was applied extensively to students whose natural voices were better suited to popular music, potentially reducing the natural vocal qualities that contribute to a convincing popular performance.

Mezzo-soprano students generally demonstrated favorable natural vocal qualities and musical sensitivity, but several recurring technical difficulties were identified. These included upper-register production, coordination between chest and mixed or head-related registers, breath management, stylistically appropriate vibrato, rhythmic flexibility, and independent interpretation. Some students also relied strongly on imitation of well-known singers, which could produce an immediately recognizable style but did not necessarily support the development of an individual artistic identity.

The findings indicate that the central pedagogical problem is not an absence of vocal technique in general. Rather, it is a mismatch between the technical system emphasized during training and the stylistic requirements of the repertoire. The teaching task therefore needs to

move from technique as an isolated objective toward the integrated use of technique in musical performance.

4.2. Technical characteristics of Vietnamese popular songs

Analysis of the 68-song corpus identified several characteristics with direct implications for vocal training. First, the repertoire is stylistically diverse but strongly associated with Pop and related popular idioms. Second, melodic and rhythmic organization often requires flexible phrase shaping, syncopation, off-beat accents, and sensitivity to accompaniment. Third, vocal interpretation involves stylistically appropriate vibrato, accentuation, portamento-like connections, and flexible treatment of registers. Fourth, performance extends beyond sound production to movement, stage behavior, microphone technique, and individual interpretation.

These characteristics suggest that technical instruction should begin from the musical demands of each song. A high note, for example, should not be approached only as a question of vocal range. The student also needs to consider register coordination, mouth shape, breathing, dynamic intention, rhythmic position, and the expressive function of the note. Similarly, vibrato should not be applied uniformly throughout a song. The singer needs to understand when vibrato supports the phrase and when a cleaner or more speech-like sound is more appropriate to the style.

4.3. Proposed genre-specific vocal techniques

4.3.1. Breathing, mouth shape, and articulation

The first technical area concerns the coordination of breathing, mouth shape, and articulation. Breathing remains a fundamental foundation of professional singing, but popular-song performance requires flexibility because phrases often follow speech-like patterns and rhythmic accompaniment. Students therefore need to coordinate breath support with the actual phrase structure rather than applying a uniformly sustained classical approach.

Mouth shape and articulation should support a free and natural sound. The aim is not to reproduce an unnecessarily elevated or covered classical sound, but to maintain clarity, flexibility, and intelligibility while preserving vocal health. Short exercises can be used to establish appropriate articulation before the technique is transferred into complete phrases.

4.3.2. Register coordination

Register coordination is particularly important for mezzo-soprano students. The proposed approach retains systematic register training from classical vocal pedagogy but changes its application according to popular-song requirements. Students practice transitions among chest,

mixed, and head-related production, especially in ascending passages. The purpose is not simply to increase range but to achieve a controlled transition that preserves the natural character of the popular singing voice.

Register work is combined with vowel shape, breathing, dynamics, and rhythmic position. In this way, an upper note is treated as part of a musical phrase rather than as an isolated technical target.

4.3.3. Vibrato, accent, and portamento-like treatment

Vibrato is treated as a stylistic resource rather than an automatic feature of every sustained note. Students practice differences in vibrato speed, amplitude, onset, and expressive function. The goal is to develop the ability to control vibrato according to the musical context.

Accent and portamento-like connections are introduced through short technical patterns and subsequently transferred into songs. These techniques help students create expressive continuity while avoiding excessive or mechanically applied effects. Their use should remain subordinate to the character of the repertoire and the intended expression of the phrase.

4.3.4. Rhythmic flexibility and accompaniment-based practice

Rhythm represents one of the clearest areas in which popular singing differs from a purely classical training model. Students practice syncopated and off-beat patterns and subsequently apply them to different accompaniment styles. The dissertation proposes work with varied popular patterns, including slow ballad-like, waltz, and slow-rock contexts.

Accompaniment-based practice requires students to coordinate voice, body, and instrumental rhythm simultaneously. Rather than treating rhythm as a secondary issue after melody has been memorized, the proposed approach places rhythmic placement inside the technical learning process. This helps students develop the flexibility necessary to enter, sustain, release, and accent phrases in relation to the accompaniment.

4.3.5. Integration with stage performance and solfège

Popular singing is an integrated performance activity. Vocal technique must therefore be connected with movement, stage presentation, microphone use, musical timing, and audience communication. The study proposes closer integration between vocal instruction and stage-performance training.

Solfège and related musical-reading activities also have a supporting role, particularly in strengthening rhythmic competence and musical understanding. Integration among these areas can reduce fragmentation in

training and help students transfer technical knowledge into complete performance situations.

4.3.6. Active learning and individual interpretation

The final component is active learning. Students are asked to study the song before class, identify its content and musical characteristics, listen to different performances, compare interpretations, and propose their own solutions. During lessons, they can observe and discuss technical corrections made to peers and evaluate how technical choices affect musical expression.

This approach aims to shift students from imitation toward conscious artistic decision-making. The teacher

remains an expert guide, but the student gradually becomes responsible for explaining and testing interpretive choices. In this sense, technical competence and creative agency are developed together.

4.4. Experimental outcomes

The pre-intervention assessment showed that the two groups were closely matched. The experimental group consisted of Vũ Minh Thư, who scored 8.5, and Nguyễn Thị Thảo, who scored 8.4, producing a mean of 8.45. The comparison group consisted of Vũ Thị Trà My, who scored 8.4, and Đào Thị Quỳnh Anh, who scored 8.5, also producing a mean of 8.45.

Group	Student	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
Experimental	Vũ Minh Thư	8.5	9.1	+0.6
Experimental	Nguyễn Thị Thảo	8.4	9.0	+0.6
Comparison	Vũ Thị Trà My	8.4	8.7	+0.3
Comparison	Đào Thị Quỳnh Anh	8.5	8.5	0.0
Mean – Experimental		8.45	9.05	+0.60
Mean – Comparison		8.45	8.60	+0.15

After four weeks, both experimental students improved to 9.1 and 9.0, respectively, giving an experimental-group mean of 9.05. The comparison-group students achieved 8.7 and 8.5, giving a mean of 8.60. The experimental group therefore showed a descriptive mean gain of 0.60 points, compared with 0.15 points in the comparison group. This numerical pattern is consistent with the intended pedagogical effect, although the sample is too small to support inferential statistical testing.

Qualitative observations provide additional information. Before the intervention, the experimental students were described as relying mainly on chest-register production, having incomplete mixed-voice coordination, imitating famous singers, and lacking flexibility in popular rhythmic patterns. Following the intervention, Vũ Minh Thư demonstrated clearer upper notes through mixed-voice use, greater creativity, more flexible rhythmic treatment, and softer, more appropriate vibrato. Nguyễn Thị Thảo demonstrated stronger popular-music stylistic character, improved vibrato, more appropriate interpretation, and an emerging individual singing style.

The comparison-group results were also positive but less pronounced. Vũ Thị Trà My demonstrated a reasonably appropriate mixed voice but retained some classical tendencies in upper-register production, while vibrato and individual interpretation still required refinement. Đào Thị Quỳnh Anh showed popular-music

characteristics but retained some stiffness in vibrato, some classical vocal tendencies, and less fluent rhythmic execution. These observations correspond with the numerical pattern and support the pedagogical value of combining technical training with genre-specific interpretation.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings point to a central distinction between possessing a trained voice and being able to use that voice stylistically. Classical vocal training can provide essential foundations in breathing, pitch, resonance, articulation, register coordination, and vocal health. However, popular singing places greater emphasis on stylistic flexibility, rhythmic placement, natural vocal color, speech-related articulation, selective vibrato, and individual interpretation. The findings therefore support a pedagogical model in which classical technique is retained as a foundation but its application is purposefully rebalanced according to the repertoire.

This interpretation is consistent with the literature reviewed in the dissertation. Nguyễn Trung Kiên (2001) and Hồ Mộ La (2008) emphasize systematic technical development, while Peckham (2006) provides practical approaches to vocal flexibility and control. Research on Vietnamese popular music identifies distinctive characteristics of Pop and Rock, including rhythmic and

performance conventions. The present study brings these strands together by translating them into a practical training framework specifically for mezzo-soprano students.

The experimental findings are relevant not simply because the numerical scores increased, but because the observed changes included dimensions that conventional technical assessment may not fully capture. Register coordination, rhythmic flexibility, stylistic vibrato, creative interpretation, and individual performance identity all improved in the experimental students. These observations suggest that evaluation of popular singing should extend beyond pitch accuracy and vocal power to consider whether technical decisions serve the musical style and whether the performer develops an individual artistic voice.

The findings also highlight the importance of treating rhythm as a technical component rather than as an additional musical skill. Syncopation, off-beat placement, accompaniment awareness, and rhythmic release require the singer to coordinate voice and body with the instrumental context. Systematic rhythmic practice can therefore help students transfer vocal technique into actual performance rather than maintaining a separation between technical exercises and repertoire learning.

Another implication concerns interdisciplinary learning. Popular performance is inherently multimodal: vocal sound is coordinated with movement, visual communication, accompaniment, microphone use, and stage behavior. Connecting vocal instruction with stage-performance and solfège-related learning can help students integrate fragmented competencies into a complete performance. This is particularly important for higher music education, where the goal is not merely to produce technically competent singers but performers capable of independent artistic decisions.

At the same time, the evidence must be interpreted cautiously. The experimental intervention involved only four students and used a two-by-two group design. The observed difference between the groups cannot therefore be treated as statistically generalizable evidence. The experiment is better understood as an exploratory pedagogical demonstration that identifies promising instructional mechanisms for further investigation. Future research should involve larger samples, multiple institutions, longer intervention periods, multiple or blinded assessors, and more systematic quantitative measures.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined genre-specific vocal techniques for teaching Vietnamese popular songs to mezzo-soprano students in higher music education. The findings indicate that students may possess strong natural vocal qualities and musical sensitivity while nevertheless experiencing difficulties in upper-register coordination, breathing flexibility, stylistic vibrato, rhythmic execution, and independent interpretation. These difficulties are associated partly with a teaching context in which classical vocal pedagogy remains dominant while the specific requirements of popular singing are not always addressed systematically.

The study proposes that classical vocal technique should not be rejected. Instead, it should function as a technical foundation that is selectively adapted to the stylistic requirements of Vietnamese popular songs. The resulting approach emphasizes breathing and articulation, register coordination, vibrato and expressive treatment, rhythmic flexibility and accompaniment-based practice, stage-performance integration, and active development of individual interpretation.

The four-week pedagogical experiment showed a descriptive mean improvement of 0.60 points for the experimental group, compared with 0.15 points for the comparison group. Qualitative observations also indicated improvements in register coordination, rhythmic flexibility, vibrato, stylistic character, and individual interpretation among the experimental students. These results provide exploratory support for the proposed genre-sensitive approach, while the very small sample prevents statistical generalization.

The principal pedagogical implication is that Vietnamese popular singing should be taught as a distinct performance practice while retaining the technical foundations of professional vocal education. For mezzo-soprano students, effective instruction should preserve the natural qualities of the voice while developing controlled flexibility, rhythmic responsiveness, stylistic awareness, and individual artistic identity. Further research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to establish stronger empirical evidence for genre-specific vocal pedagogy in Vietnamese higher music education.

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