

Enhancing the Teaching of Vietnamese Popular Songs to Mezzo-Soprano Students: Evidence from a University Music Program in Vietnam

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Abstract— Vietnamese popular music has become an important component of contemporary musical life and is increasingly present in professional vocal education. However, the teaching of popular songs to mezzo-soprano students may be constrained when classical vocal techniques and conventional teacher-led approaches dominate the curriculum. This study examines the teaching of Vietnamese popular songs to mezzo-soprano students at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism and develops a practice-oriented instructional approach. The study draws on theoretical analysis, observation, surveys, interviews, expert consultation, pedagogical experience, and a small controlled teaching experiment. The empirical component included nine vocal lecturers, 52 vocal students for broader contextual assessment, and 12 mezzo-soprano students with an aptitude for popular music; the experiment involved four students divided into an experimental group and a comparison group. The proposed approach combines selective classical vocal foundations with popular-music-specific training in breathing, mouth shape, register transitions, vibrato, accent and portamento-like treatment, syncopated rhythm, rhythmic flexibility, movement, and student creativity. After four weeks, the experimental students improved from an average score of 8.45 to 9.05, while the comparison group increased from 8.45 to 8.60. The findings provide practice-based evidence that genre-sensitive and learner-centered instruction can improve the expressive and technical performance of mezzo-soprano students singing Vietnamese popular songs. Because the experimental sample is very small, the results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than statistically generalizable.

I. INTRODUCTION

Popular music has become an established part of contemporary musical culture. Jazz, Rock, Pop, and related forms developed strongly in Europe and North America during the twentieth century, while Vietnamese popular songs developed through processes of cultural exchange and adaptation. In Vietnam, popular songs existed in the South before 1975, but the post-1975 period can be regarded as an

important stage in their wider development across the country. Vietnamese popular songs combine elements of Western popular-music language with Vietnamese musical and linguistic characteristics and have subsequently become an important part of performance and musical education.

The growth of popular music has also changed the requirements of professional vocal training. Vietnamese institutions that provide professional vocal education

increasingly train singers who work across classical, folk, and popular styles. Yet the pedagogical transition from classical vocal training to popular singing is not straightforward. Popular singing requires technical flexibility, rhythmic responsiveness, an appropriate relationship between natural voice and trained voice, stylistic vibrato, clear diction, register management, and an individual performance identity. A student may possess a naturally attractive voice but still encounter difficulties with high notes, register transitions, rhythmic patterns, or stylistic interpretation if the teaching approach is primarily based on classical vocal production.

This problem is particularly relevant to mezzo-soprano students. The mezzo-soprano voice occupies a position between soprano and contralto and is commonly characterized by a warm and relatively full middle register. In the context examined in this study, many students with mezzo-soprano voices demonstrate attractive natural vocal color and a good response to popular music, but they may have difficulty extending the upper range, coordinating chest and mixed/head registers, producing a stylistically appropriate vibrato, and maintaining flexibility in popular rhythmic patterns.

Previous Vietnamese scholarship has provided substantial foundations for understanding popular music, vocal pedagogy, musical genres, and professional vocal education. Works on Vietnamese new music have documented historical development and stylistic characteristics, while vocal-pedagogy studies have explained breathing, resonance, articulation, register, and other fundamental techniques. Studies of popular music have also examined Rock and Pop, their rhythmic characteristics, performance conventions, and historical development. However, the literature reviewed in the doctoral study indicates a more limited body of work specifically addressing how Vietnamese popular songs should be taught to mezzo-soprano students. In particular, the relationship between popular-song characteristics, genre-specific vocal technique, and active student creativity remains insufficiently developed in Vietnamese pedagogical research.

The present article therefore extracts and consolidates the most practice-oriented findings of a doctoral dissertation on teaching Vietnamese popular songs to mezzo-soprano students at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The article focuses on three linked questions: (1) What characteristics of Vietnamese popular songs are pedagogically important for mezzo-soprano students? (2)

What problems characterize current teaching and learning practice? and (3) Can a genre-sensitive teaching approach combining vocal technique, rhythmic training, interdisciplinary learning, and student creativity improve performance outcomes? The purpose is not to reproduce the dissertation in condensed form, but to present a coherent journal article centered on the pedagogical problem, evidence, intervention, and observed outcomes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BASIS

2.1. Vietnamese popular music as a pedagogical object

The dissertation's review of literature identifies two broad meanings of light music: a traditional or broad sense of light music and modern popular music associated particularly with Jazz, Rock, Pop, and related forms. For the present study, Vietnamese popular songs are understood primarily through the modern popular-music tradition, especially Pop-oriented songs suitable for professional vocal training. This distinction matters pedagogically because the vocal and rhythmic demands of contemporary popular singing cannot simply be treated as a lighter version of classical singing.

Research on Vietnamese new music emphasizes that the development of popular music has involved interaction between Western musical languages and Vietnamese cultural and linguistic materials. Tú Ngọc et al. (2000) provide a broad historical account of Vietnamese new music, including popular styles, while Vũ Tự Lân (2008) discusses Jazz, Rock, and Pop and their musical characteristics. Thân Văn Trọng Bình's research on Vietnamese popular songs after 1975 and Nguyễn Thị Phương Hoa's work on the development of Vietnamese popular music further support the view that popular music should be considered a distinctive musical field rather than merely a simplified form of classical repertoire.

2.2. Vocal pedagogy and the mezzo-soprano voice

Classical vocal pedagogy remains an important foundation for professional singing. Nguyễn Trung Kiên (2001), for example, describes the mezzo-soprano as an intermediate female voice characterized by a warm and full middle register. Hồ Mộ La (2008) similarly emphasizes systematic training in breathing, resonance, articulation, register coordination, and vocal health. These foundations are valuable for popular singing, but the dissertation argues that they should not be transferred mechanically to popular-song performance.

The pedagogical issue is therefore one of adaptation rather than rejection. Classical techniques can provide a technical base, while popular singing requires a different balance among vocal freedom, speech-like articulation, rhythmic placement, register use, vibrato, and expressive individuality. Peckham (2006) and Porter likewise emphasize practical exercises involving vocal flexibility, blending, vibrato, articulation, and stylistic control. The present study uses this principle of selective adaptation: classical technique provides a foundation, but popular-song instruction should be organized around the stylistic requirements of the repertoire.

2.3. Genre-specific learning and learner creativity

The theoretical framework also draws on active and competency-oriented approaches to music education. The dissertation adopts a learner-centered perspective in which students are encouraged to become active, self-directed, and creative performers. Rather than asking students to reproduce a teacher's interpretation, the teacher guides students to identify musical problems, compare different performances, formulate interpretive ideas, test solutions, and develop an individual performance identity. This approach is consistent with contemporary active-learning principles discussed in Vietnamese pedagogical literature (Nguyễn Lăng Bình & Đỗ Hương Trà, 2018; Nguyễn Thị Tố Mai, 2019).

On this basis, the article conceptualizes effective teaching of Vietnamese popular songs to mezzo-soprano students as an integrated process involving four dimensions: vocal technique, rhythmic and stylistic competence, performance competence, and creative agency. These dimensions should be taught in interaction rather than as isolated skills.

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 dissertation's field investigation included four groups of participants. Nine vocal lecturers participated in the lecturer survey; 52 undergraduate vocal students participated in a broader survey of learning conditions; 12 mezzo-soprano students with an aptitude for popular music participated in

the focused student survey; and university/faculty managers and experienced practitioners were consulted through interviews and professional discussion. The focused survey and pedagogical intervention were therefore embedded within a broader institutional assessment.

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, review of teaching and learning products, and pedagogical experimentation. Mathematical statistics were used as a supporting method for organizing and comparing the survey and experimental results.

The dissertation analyzed 68 Vietnamese popular songs by well-known or widely recognized Vietnamese composers and performers. The repertoire was selected as a pedagogical corpus for examining themes, musical language, structure, modes, melody, rhythm, vocal technique, and performance practice. The songs were primarily in the Pop style and were considered suitable for undergraduate mezzo-soprano training. The selection also allowed for transposition when necessary to accommodate individual vocal ranges.

3.3. Experimental design

The pedagogical experiment used a comparison-group design involving four mezzo-soprano students: two students in the experimental group and two in the comparison group. The groups were checked before instruction to establish broadly comparable initial performance levels. Both groups studied the song *Đâu phải bởi mùa thu* by composer Phú Quang, with lyrics by Giáng Vân. The experimental teaching lasted four weeks.

The comparison group received the established teaching approach: memorizing the melody, classical-style vocal exercises, working phrase by phrase, correcting technical problems, and following teacher guidance on interpretation. The experimental group received the proposed genre-sensitive approach. Students prepared the song independently before class, studied its content and musical characteristics, and developed initial ideas for interpretation. In class, classical vocal exercises were used selectively as a foundation, followed by popular-music-specific exercises involving vibrato, syncopated and off-beat rhythms, different popular styles, and singing with accompaniment. Students also analyzed differences between classical and popular

vocal production and were encouraged to listen critically to different singers and construct their own interpretations.

3.4. Assessment

Performance was assessed using criteria developed specifically for professional vocal students singing Vietnamese popular songs. The assessment considered vocal quality and technical control, register use, stylistic characteristics, rhythmic flexibility, vibrato, and interpretive creativity. The pre- and post-intervention scores were recorded on a 10-point scale. Because the experimental sample contained only four students, the analysis in this article is descriptive. No claim of statistical significance or population-level generalization is made.

IV. RESULTS

4.1. Current teaching and learning conditions

The institutional investigation identified a central tension between the increasing presence of popular singing in the students' musical interests and the continued dominance of classical-oriented vocal training. The dissertation reports that the curriculum and teaching practice remained strongly influenced by classical vocal education. This provides important technical foundations, but it may not fully address the specific demands of popular songs. Some lecturers used classical techniques extensively when working with students who were naturally suited to popular music, and the dissertation observed that overly rigid application of classical production could reduce the natural qualities that make a student's popular-music voice attractive.

The student survey also revealed a cluster of practical difficulties. Mezzo-soprano students generally had favorable natural vocal qualities and good musical sensitivity, but difficulties remained in upper-register production, mixed/head voice coordination, breath management, stylistic vibrato, rhythmic flexibility, and independent interpretation. In some cases, students relied strongly on imitation of well-known singers. This can produce an apparently successful performance while limiting the development of an individual artistic identity.

The findings suggest that the problem is not a lack of technique in a general sense. Rather, it is a mismatch between the technical system being emphasized and the stylistic requirements of the repertoire. Popular singing requires students to transfer technical control into a less rigid and more rhythmically responsive performance environment. Consequently, the teaching process needs to move from

technique as an isolated objective toward technique-in-performance.

4.2. Pedagogical characteristics of Vietnamese popular songs

Analysis of the 68-song corpus identified several characteristics directly relevant to teaching mezzo-soprano students. 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 is not limited to sound production: movement, stage behavior, microphone technique, and individual interpretation contribute to the final result.

These characteristics lead to a pedagogical principle: students should learn a popular song simultaneously as a musical text, a vocal-technical task, a rhythmic task, and a performance problem. For example, a high note should not be taught only as a vocal-range problem; the student must also consider register coordination, vowel shape, breath management, dynamic intention, rhythmic position, and the expressive function of the note. Similarly, vibrato should not be applied uniformly. The student should learn where vibrato supports the phrase and where a cleaner or more speech-like sound is stylistically preferable.

4.3. Proposed teaching measures

4.3.1. Adjusting vocal curriculum content

The first measure is to adjust selected vocal-course content so that popular singing is represented explicitly rather than treated as an occasional extension of classical training. This does not mean eliminating classical technique. Instead, classical exercises should be used proportionately as a technical foundation, while additional learning time is devoted to the specific demands of popular repertoire. Curriculum content should include genre-specific breathing, articulation, register transitions, vibrato, rhythmic exercises, accompaniment-based practice, performance movement, and creative interpretation.

4.3.2. Systematic training of popular vocal technique

The second measure is a structured sequence of technical training. Mouth shape and articulation are practiced to achieve a free and natural sound rather than an

unnecessarily elevated or covered classical sound. Breathing is trained for stability and flexibility. Register exercises address transitions between chest, mixed, and head-related production, especially when mezzo-soprano students move into higher passages. Vibrato is practiced selectively, with attention to speed, amplitude, entry point, and stylistic appropriateness. Accent, portamento-like connection, and rhythmic release are practiced through short patterns before being transferred into songs.

4.3.3. Rhythmic and accompaniment-based training

A third measure focuses on rhythm. Students practice syncopated and off-beat patterns, then apply them to different popular accompaniment styles. The dissertation specifically proposes exercises using varied popular styles and accompaniment, including slow ballad-like, waltz, and slow-rock patterns. This training helps students coordinate voice, body, and accompaniment rather than treating rhythm as a secondary component.

4.3.4. Interdisciplinary integration

The fourth measure connects vocal learning with related courses, especially stage-performance technique and solfège. Stage-performance training supports movement and presentation, while solfège strengthens rhythmic competence and musical reading. Such integration is important because

professional popular singing is an interdisciplinary performance activity. The singer must coordinate voice, musical timing, movement, microphone use, and communication with an audience.

4.3.5. Active learning and creative interpretation

The fifth measure uses discovery and problem-solving approaches. Students are asked to study the song before class, identify its musical and expressive characteristics, listen to different performers, compare interpretations, and propose their own solutions. During lessons, students can listen to teacher corrections applied to peers, discuss alternative solutions, and evaluate the relationship between technique and expressive effect. The aim is to shift the student from imitation to conscious artistic decision-making.

4.4. Experimental outcomes

The pre-intervention assessment showed that the two groups were closely matched. Vũ Minh Thư scored 8.5 and Nguyễn Thị Thảo scored 8.4 in the experimental group, producing a mean of 8.45. Vũ Thị Trà My scored 8.4 and Đào Thị Quỳnh Anh scored 8.5 in the comparison group, also producing a mean of 8.45. The dissertation therefore considered the groups sufficiently comparable for the teaching experiment.

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. The observed difference is consistent with the intended pedagogical effect, although the sample is too small to support inferential statistical testing.

Qualitative performance descriptions 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. After 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, with vibrato and individual interpretation still needing 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 qualitative differences correspond with the numerical pattern and support the value of combining technical training with genre-specific interpretation.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings point to a central pedagogical distinction between having a trained voice and being able to use that voice stylistically. Classical vocal training can provide essential foundations in breath, pitch, resonance, articulation, 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. Therefore, the most productive approach is not a replacement of classical pedagogy by popular pedagogy, but a purposeful rebalancing of their roles.

This conclusion is consistent with the broader 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 popular-oriented singing. Research on Vietnamese popular music similarly demonstrates that Pop and Rock have their own rhythmic and performance conventions. The present study extends these insights into a concrete pedagogical model for mezzo-soprano students.

The experimental results are particularly relevant because the strongest observed gains were not simply in numerical scores but in the qualitative dimensions that are difficult to capture through conventional technical assessment: creative interpretation, rhythmic flexibility, register coordination, and stylistic vibrato. This suggests that popular-singing pedagogy should evaluate students not only on pitch accuracy and vocal power, but also on whether technical choices serve the musical style and whether the performer develops an individual artistic voice.

The integration of related courses is another important implication. Popular performance is inherently multimodal: sound is coordinated with movement, visual communication, accompaniment, and stage behavior. When vocal teaching is isolated from performance and rhythmic training, students may acquire fragmented skills. Connecting

vocal lessons with stage-performance and solfège courses can help students transfer technical knowledge into complete performance situations.

At the same time, the experimental evidence must be interpreted cautiously. Four students participated in the intervention, and the two-by-two group design does not provide sufficient statistical power for generalization. The results are therefore best understood as an exploratory pedagogical demonstration. Further research should involve larger samples, multiple institutions, longer intervention periods, blinded or multiple-rater assessment, and more systematic quantitative measures of vocal and performance development.

VI. CONCLUSION

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

The study proposes a genre-sensitive teaching approach built around five interconnected measures: adjusting selected vocal-course content; systematically training popular vocal technique; strengthening rhythmic competence through syncopation and accompaniment; integrating vocal learning with stage-performance and solfège-related learning; and using active, discovery-oriented methods to develop student creativity. The four-week experiment showed a descriptive mean improvement of 0.60 points for the experimental group compared with 0.15 points for the comparison group, accompanied by qualitative improvements in register coordination, rhythmic flexibility, vibrato, and individual interpretation.

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 in particular, effective instruction should help them preserve the attractive natural qualities of the voice while developing controlled flexibility and stylistic awareness. The proposed approach may therefore serve as a

practical reference for professional music-training institutions seeking to strengthen Vietnamese popular-song education.

Because the experimental sample was very small, the findings should not be treated as statistically generalizable evidence. Future studies should replicate the intervention with larger and more diverse student populations and use standardized performance rubrics and quantitative analyses. Such research would help establish stronger evidence for genre-specific vocal pedagogy in Vietnamese higher music education.

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