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Teaching Popular Music in Higher Education: A Competency-Based Framework for Vocal Training, Ensemble Practice, And Performance Assessment

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ABSTRACT: Teaching popular music in higher education requires a deliberate relationship between technical instruction, genre-sensitive musical understanding, student agency, collaborative rehearsal, and transparent assessment. This article develops a competency-based conceptual framework for university-level popular-music education, with particular attention to vocal training, ensemble practice, and stage performance. An interpretive review integrates scholarship on informal popular-music learning, popular-music voice teaching, project-based music learning, performance assessment, occupational voice care, and music performance anxiety. No teaching intervention, student survey, or learning-outcome dataset was generated. The synthesis identifies four connected competency domains and four curricular tensions: teacher demonstration versus learner agency; notation versus listening-based learning; technical control versus stylistic authenticity; and final performance versus iterative development. The proposed LOOP framework-Listening and analysis, Open exploration, Ongoing ensemble practice, and Performance with reflection-connects intended learning outcomes with teaching activities and assessment evidence. It also foregrounds accessibility, feedback literacy, and sustainable vocal practice as conditions of learning. LOOP remains a conceptual proposal rather than an empirically validated teaching model; future research should examine its feasibility, fairness, and learning effects in actual university programmes.

KEYWORDS: popular music education, university students, vocal pedagogy, ensemble learning, performance assessment, LOOP framework

1. INTRODUCTION

Popular music has become an established part of many contemporary music-learning environments, yet its teaching can be difficult to organise within curricular models built around fixed repertoire, teacher demonstration, and individual technical correction. University students may enter with substantial informal experience in listening, singing, playing by ear, performing in bands, using recording technologies, or learning through online resources. Their starting points can differ widely, and a course must build dependable technique without discarding the musical knowledge students already possess.

The term “light music” is used here in an inclusive sense corresponding broadly to popular and contemporary commercial music. The focus is university-level teaching, particularly courses where singing, stylistic interpretation, ensemble work, and stage practice are combined. The article does not assume that all students are vocalists or that all popular-music programmes follow the same curriculum. Rather, it proposes a framework that can be adapted to programmes of differing size, resources, genre emphasis, and entry requirements.

Green (2002) documents how popular musicians develop through informal learning practices including listening, imitation, experimentation, and playing with others. These practices invite educators to reconsider how musical knowledge is demonstrated and assessed. At the same time, structured higher education has responsibilities for vocal health, inclusive learning, systematic feedback, and transparent assessment. Keskinen et al. (2024) show that popular-music voice teaching is an evolving professional field whose development depends not only on individual teachers but also on institutional and professional support.

This article addresses three questions. RQ1: Which competencies should a university course in popular music cultivate across vocal technique, musical understanding, ensemble practice, and stage performance? RQ2: What tensions arise when informal popular-music learning is organised within formal higher education? RQ3: How can teaching activities and assessment be connected through an iterative framework? The contribution is a course-design model intended to support curriculum planning and future empirical evaluation, not a claim that a particular teaching method has already improved student outcomes.

A competency-based approach is used here to mean that course planning begins with demonstrable forms of musical understanding and practice rather than with a list of topics to be covered. Competence includes not only the ability to perform a task but also the ability to explain a musical decision, respond to feedback, collaborate reliably, and adapt the skill to a new song or ensemble situation. This definition is deliberately broader than a technical checklist. It allows assessment to address both the observable quality of a performance and the learner’s capacity to take increasing responsibility for preparation and revision.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Informal learning and student musical agency

Popular musicians often learn repertoire by listening closely, copying phrases, working out parts by ear, improvising, and experimenting with other musicians. Green (2002) argues that these practices are significant to popular musicians' development and can inform formal educational design. They can support independent learning, aural understanding, and ownership of musical decisions. Nevertheless, informal learning is not a single method suitable for every student. Learners differ in aural confidence, prior ensemble experience, access to instruments and technology, and familiarity with the genre under study.

A university course can therefore create a deliberate relationship between learner agency and explicit instruction. Teachers may model a vocal or instrumental technique, identify features in a reference track, and then set a task in which students imitate, compare, adapt, and explain the result. Guided autonomy avoids both extremes: a teacher-controlled class where every musical decision is predetermined, and an unstructured environment where students receive too little feedback to correct entrenched technical problems.

Informal-learning practices also need to be examined in relation to unequal prior opportunity. Some students may arrive with years of band experience, access to instruments or recording software, and confidence in learning by ear; others may have developed stronger literacy in notation or conventional one-to-one lessons. Treating one learning history as the standard can inadvertently privilege students who already know the unwritten rules of a programme. A planned combination of reference listening, visual support, teacher modelling, peer practice, and exploratory tasks can preserve student agency while making tacit expectations more accessible. This is an equity-oriented design rationale; its effectiveness would need to be assessed in specific classrooms.

2.2. Professional knowledge in popular-music voice teaching

Keskinen et al. (2024) review how professional knowledge and agency are represented in popular-music voice teaching. Their synthesis supports a broad view of teacher expertise that includes knowledge of vocal function, genre-specific demands, professional practice, and the pedagogical choices through which students learn. In course design, the teacher must be able to explain why an exercise is relevant to a particular song or style and to adapt the exercise when the student's level, physical response, or interpretive goal differs.

Voice care should be embedded in regular teaching rather than presented only as an emergency topic. Morawska et al. (2022) discuss the occupational demands and voice-care needs of contemporary commercial singers. The educational implication is not that teachers should act as clinicians, but that course routines should include sustainable warm-up, sensible workload planning, listening for signs of excessive effort, recovery, and referral to qualified health professionals where necessary. Stylistic exploration should be framed as informed experimentation rather than unmonitored imitation of demanding sounds.

For teaching purposes, sustainability is best framed as an element of professional literacy rather than a separate health lecture. Students can learn to identify when a rehearsal demand requires an adjustment, distinguish productive effort from persistent discomfort, and understand the limits of self-assessment. Morawska et al. (2024), in a cross-sectional study of 412 Polish contemporary commercial music singers, report a heterogeneous group with varied experience, career aspirations, vocal training, and self-reported voice-related difficulties. The study is not a sample of Vietnamese university students and cannot estimate their needs; it nevertheless cautions against assuming that all contemporary singers share the same workload or voice-health profile.

2.3. Project-based learning and performance assessment

Project-based learning can connect curriculum content with an outcome that has meaning beyond an isolated exercise. Tobias et al. (2015) discuss how projects can organise music learning around realistic tasks, skill development, and a product or presentation for an audience. For popular music, a small ensemble set, studio recording, student-led arrangement, or themed performance can require students to coordinate individual preparation, rehearsal, technology, communication, and reflection. Such projects become educationally useful when the process is scaffolded and assessed, rather than when the final concert is treated as the only evidence of learning.

Wesolowski (2012) argues that performance rubrics can make expectations more explicit and document student achievement while acknowledging the subjective dimensions of musical assessment. Effective criteria should distinguish dimensions such as timing, pitch accuracy, stylistic interpretation, ensemble responsiveness, preparation, and reflection. In popular-music contexts, assessment should not equate technical polish with stylistic correctness in every genre; the criteria must be aligned with the learning goals and the chosen repertoire.

A related Vietnamese study addresses the teaching quality of sewing and cutting techniques for fashion-design students (Tran, 2024). Its subject is not music and it cannot serve as evidence about vocal or ensemble learning. It is useful only as a cross-disciplinary example of practice-based technical instruction within a Vietnamese university context, where the quality of teaching depends on connecting skill objectives with learning activities and evaluation.

2.4. Performance anxiety, feedback, and the learning environment

Performance is central to popular-music learning, but performance pressure may interfere with the demonstration of acquired skills. Blair and van der Sluis (2022) found that only a limited number of approaches to music performance anxiety could be readily embedded in routine higher-education teaching, despite a wider literature on the issue. This finding supports the inclusion of preparation routines, low-stakes performance opportunities, reflective feedback, and predictable assessment expectations across a course rather than leaving anxiety management to the final performance week.

The learning environment also matters. Wang and Lan (2026) review social support and coping among music students and professional musicians, identifying roles for teachers, peers, family, professional support, and institutional contexts. In a university class, peer feedback can be constructive when students are taught to describe observable evidence, identify a goal, and suggest a next step. It is less useful when feedback becomes personal judgement or comparison without reference to agreed criteria.

Support should be designed into the course rather than reserved for students who disclose difficulty. The systematic review by Mazzarolo et al. (2023) examines teachers' approaches to music performance anxiety and underscores the relevance of teaching practice in this area, while Blair and van der Sluis (2022) identify limitations in the evidence for interventions readily embedded in higher education. Together, these reviews argue

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against assuming that a single breathing exercise, rehearsal format, or motivational message will work for everyone. A course can instead provide graduated performance opportunities, clear expectations, reflective self-assessment, and routes to appropriate support. Such provisions are educational safeguards, not clinical treatment.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design

This article adopts an integrative conceptual review and course-design analysis. The research object is the relationship among intended competencies, teaching processes, rehearsal experiences, and assessment in university popular-music education. The purpose is to synthesise a practice-oriented framework that can be piloted in a real course, not to estimate the effectiveness of an existing programme.

3.2. Source scope and selection

The review combined literature on informal popular-music learning, popular-music voice pedagogy, project-based music education, performance assessment, occupational voice care, and performance anxiety. Sources were retained when their concepts could be connected to one of the article's specified questions about competency development, curriculum design, or assessment. The selection was purposive and interpretive rather than exhaustive: the article does not claim a registered systematic-review protocol, comprehensive database coverage, formal quality appraisal, or a replicable screening count. The source set includes international studies and one Vietnam-based article on practice-oriented technical instruction in fashion design; the latter is used only as a cross-disciplinary point of comparison for teaching design, not as evidence about music learning.

The reference supplied by the user concerning fashion-design technical instruction was considered as a local cross-disciplinary comparator. Heritage-tourism, tourism-governance, start-up, and financial-reporting references in the supplied list do not directly address popular-music teaching and were not used as music-specific evidence. This distinction prevents topical proximity at the institutional level from being mistaken for subject-matter relevance.

3.3. Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, source arguments were mapped to teaching purposes, learner activities, and evidence of competence. Second, recurring elements were grouped into musical listening and analysis, technical and stylistic exploration, ensemble collaboration, and performance-reflection. Third, tensions were identified where a one-sided curricular decision could exclude some students, weaken transfer, or reduce the visibility of learning. Fourth, the elements were arranged into an iterative framework and translated into reviewable course-design questions. The procedure was interpretive and author-led; no inter-rater agreement, psychometric validation, or causal evaluation is claimed.

No new student data, classroom observations, teacher interviews, curriculum documents from a named institution, or assessment scores were collected. The results below are therefore proposed categories and design implications rather than empirical findings about a particular university. The model requires contextual adaptation and testing before its effectiveness can be claimed.

The analysis paid particular attention to transfer and visibility. Transfer concerns whether skills developed in one activity are available in a different musical situation, such as moving from a listening task to an ensemble rehearsal or from a classroom run-through to a public performance. Visibility concerns whether the course collects enough evidence to distinguish conceptual understanding, technical development, collaborative contribution, and final outcome. The framework is intended to help teachers make these connections explicit, while recognising that local curricula, student populations, resources, and programme goals will determine how its elements are implemented.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Four connected competency domains

The synthesis identifies four interdependent domains for university popular-music teaching. The first is vocal and aural competence: students learn how to coordinate vocal production, hear pitch and rhythmic relationships, analyse reference performances, and respond to technical feedback. The second is stylistic and interpretive competence: students understand how genre shapes timbre, groove, articulation, phrasing, diction, and arrangement, while making their own choices. The third is collaborative and creative competence: students rehearse with others, negotiate roles, improvise where appropriate, arrange or adapt material, and solve musical problems. The fourth is performance and reflective competence: students prepare complete sets, manage stage transitions, communicate with audiences, use feedback, and document their progress.

The domains are not intended as separate courses that only meet at the final concert. A song-based assignment can integrate all four: students listen to references, practise a technical passage, rehearse with an ensemble, and present a version with a reflective account of decisions. Table 1 specifies potential learning outcomes and evidence that could be used to review them.

The four competency domains should be understood as mutually reinforcing, not as a progression in which one must be completed before the next begins. Listening can improve ensemble coordination; ensemble work can reveal limitations in individual technique; a performance can prompt a new interpretation of the source material; and reflection can inform the next listening task. This circularity matters because musical learning often depends on repeatedly revisiting an idea at greater levels of specificity. The proposed LOOP framework formalises that pattern while retaining a distinction between the activity undertaken and the evidence used to judge its educational value.

Table 1. Competency domains and evidence in university popular-music education

Domain	Indicative learning outcomes	Possible evidence of learning
Vocal and aural competence	Coordinate a healthy and genre-appropriate vocal approach; hear and reproduce pitch, rhythm, phrasing, and stylistic features.	Practice logs; short recordings; listening-analysis tasks; reflection on technical feedback.
Stylistic and interpretive competence	Explain and apply genre conventions; relate musical choices to lyric, structure, and expressive intention.	Annotated reference tracks; comparative versions; repertoire notes; interpretive rationale.

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Collaborative and creative competence	Rehearse reliably; listen and respond; negotiate roles; adapt, arrange, or improvise appropriately.	Rehearsal recordings; contribution logs; ensemble peer review; arrangement or improvisation artefacts.
Performance and reflective competence	Prepare a coherent set; manage transitions and stage requirements; use assessment feedback to plan improvement.	Full-set performance; rubric; technical checklist; reflective commentary and next-step plan.

4.2. Four tensions in course design

The first tension is teacher demonstration versus learner agency. Demonstration can make a complex technique audible and visible, but excessive prescription may narrow students' musical ownership. The second is notation versus listening-based learning. Written charts and lead sheets support coordination, while ear-based tasks help students attend to phrasing, sound, groove, and style. Neither should be treated as universally sufficient. The third is technical control versus stylistic authenticity. A technically secure performance may still sound stylistically generic if exercises are disconnected from the repertoire. The fourth is a final performance versus iterative development. A concert offers an authentic goal, but it reveals little about the learning process unless students also receive formative feedback and have opportunities to revise.

The tensions can be managed through an alternating design: model an element, invite students to listen and experiment, rehearse in a small group, present work-in-progress, receive criterion-based feedback, and revise. Assessment should make it possible to see not only the final product but also how the student responded to evidence. Table 2 summarises these balancing decisions.

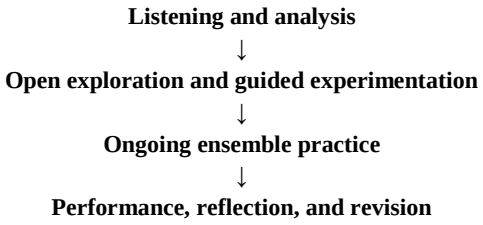
Table 2. Curriculum tensions and proposed balancing strategies

Tension	Risk if prioritised narrowly	Balancing strategy
Demonstration / learner agency	Students copy the teacher's version without understanding alternatives or developing musical judgement.	Combine brief modelling with guided experimentation and student explanation of choices.
Notation / listening-based learning	Written charts dominate learning, or ear-based work becomes inaccessible to students with less prior experience.	Use layered supports: reference listening, charts, slow practice, ear tasks, and peer modelling.
Technical control / stylistic authenticity	Exercises improve isolated accuracy but do not transfer to genre, repertoire, or performance context.	Embed technical tasks in songs and compare multiple stylistically credible solutions.
Final performance / iterative development	The final event dominates grading and formative learning remains invisible.	Assess drafts, rehearsals, peer feedback, revision, and the final performance.

4.3. The proposed LOOP framework

The four domains are organised through LOOP: Listening and analysis, Open exploration, Ongoing ensemble practice, and Performance with reflection. Listening and analysis establish reference points and a vocabulary for discussing sound. Open exploration allows imitation, experimentation, variation, and student choice within a clear task. Ongoing ensemble practice connects individual skills to timing, communication, collaboration, and arrangement. Performance with reflection provides an authentic audience context and turns feedback into the next cycle of learning.

Figure 1. The iterative LOOP framework



LOOP is iterative rather than strictly sequential. A performance may reveal a rhythmic weakness that sends students back to listening analysis; ensemble rehearsal may prompt a change to the arrangement; reflection may show that a chosen vocal effect is not sustainable and should be adapted. The framework encourages teachers to treat such revisions as evidence of learning rather than as failures of initial planning.

LOOP can also inform task differentiation without fragmenting the shared ensemble goal. A student with stronger aural skills might lead a reference-track analysis; another might document form and harmonic cues; a vocalist might test phrasing alternatives; and an instrumentalist might compare groove options. Roles can rotate so that specialisation does not become fixed status. The common deliverable remains a coherent group performance, but each participant's contribution is visible through a combination of individual and collective evidence. This approach is consistent with project-based learning's emphasis on authentic tasks, collaboration, and products or presentations for an audience (Tobias et al., 2015).

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Table 3. Operational questions for applying LOOP

Element	Teaching question	Minimum course evidence
Listening and analysis	What can students identify about groove, form, phrasing, timbre, and arrangement in selected references?	Structured listening notes; class discussion; student annotations.
Open exploration	What can students imitate, vary, or create after hearing and analysing the reference?	Short experiments; alternate takes; student rationale; teacher feedback.
Ongoing ensemble practice	How do students coordinate roles, timing, cues, dynamics, and communication?	Rehearsal log; work-in-progress recording; peer feedback; arrangement notes.
Performance, reflection, and revision	What does the performance reveal, and how will students use feedback to improve?	Performance recording; shared rubric; reflective statement; documented next step.

4.4. A possible course progression

The framework can be translated into three overlapping phases. An orientation phase builds common language through listening, low-stakes diagnostic tasks, goal setting, and discussion of vocal-care routines. A development phase integrates repertoire work, focused technique, collaborative rehearsal, and formative performances. A consolidation phase asks students to produce a coherent set or performance project, document revisions, and reflect against previously stated learning outcomes. The phases should not be interpreted as a tested sequence or a fixed semester plan; a course may revisit all four LOOP elements every week.

Assessment can be distributed across a portfolio rather than relying on the final performance alone. A possible portfolio includes reference-track analysis, evidence of targeted practice, an ensemble contribution record, a work-in-progress recording, the final performance, and a reflective commentary. The balance among these elements should match the course level and credit weighting. Transparent criteria reduce ambiguity while leaving room for legitimate differences in repertoire, interpretation, and artistic identity.

A practical assessment design can combine criterion-referenced judgements with narrative feedback. Criterion-referenced judgement makes expectations public and supports comparison against stated outcomes; narrative feedback explains how a musical decision functioned in context and what revision could improve it. In performance-based subjects, numerical marks alone may obscure the difference between an accidental error, a persistent technical weakness, a deliberate interpretive choice, and a problem caused by ensemble coordination. A reflective portfolio gives the teacher a place to document those distinctions, although the workload and reliability of such assessment need to be considered when teaching large cohorts.

The design challenge is one of constructive alignment: intended outcomes, practice activities, and assessment criteria should refer to the same forms of competence. If a course states that collaborative musicianship matters but grades only the solo performance, students receive conflicting incentives. If stylistic interpretation is an intended outcome but the rubric rewards only pitch accuracy and volume, assessment may narrow the curriculum in unintended ways. Rubrics can improve transparency when they specify dimensions and performance descriptors while allowing assessors to consider the musical whole (Wesolowski, 2012). They should be reviewed for clarity, relevance to the selected repertoire, and the possibility that one genre convention may be mistakenly treated as universal.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Theoretical contribution: connecting informal practice and formal accountability

The proposed framework reframes popular-music teaching as a designed relationship between listening, experimentation, collaboration, performance, and reflection. It draws on Green's (2002) account of informal popular-music learning while recognising the need for explicit instruction and assessment in university settings. LOOP does not attempt to institutionalise every informal practice as a rule. Rather, it makes the educational conditions visible so that students with different prior experiences can participate and develop.

The framework also connects technical work to repertoire. Contemporary popular-music voice teaching requires attention to genre-specific knowledge and professional practice (Keskinen et al., 2024). If vocal exercises are detached from stylistic goals, students may struggle to transfer them into songs. If style is taught only through imitation, students may lack the vocabulary to diagnose and regulate their own technique. A balanced course moves between explanation, demonstration, listening, trial, rehearsal, and reflective comparison.

5.2. Practical implications for university instructors

Course designers should define learning outcomes in terms that students can demonstrate: for example, analyse a reference performance, deliver a chosen phrase with a stated stylistic intention, coordinate reliably within an ensemble, respond to feedback, and prepare a complete performance responsibly. Each outcome should be supported by an activity and a form of evidence. A project or performance becomes more than a showcase when the course documents its developmental stages and the choices students make.

Teachers should also consider accessibility and prior-experience differences. Listening-based tasks can be supported by annotated materials, reduced-speed examples, peer modelling, and clear criteria. Students who are inexperienced with public performance may need a gradual sequence of low-stakes presentations before a high-pressure event. Blair and van der Sluis (2022) point to limits in the generalisability of interventions for music performance anxiety, so a course should not assume one universal solution. Regular, supportive feedback and clearly explained assessment processes are plausible curricular safeguards, though their effects need empirical evaluation.

Implementation should be evaluated not only by the quality of the final concert but also by the distribution of learning opportunities. Relevant questions include whether all students had a meaningful musical role, whether feedback arrived early enough to shape revision, whether the rubric reflected the taught material, and whether students understood the criteria before assessment. These are especially important when cohorts differ in prior performance experience. A Vietnamese study of practice-oriented technical instruction in fashion-design education provides a contextually

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relevant but discipline-specific example of attention to teaching quality and skill development (Tran, 2024). Its implications are limited to the general design of applied teaching; empirical evidence from music classes is required to establish the applicability of any parallel.

Voice-care awareness belongs in the course infrastructure: warm-up routines, reasonable rehearsal intensity, hydration and rest guidance in general terms, access to appropriate advice, and clear boundaries around health-related concerns. Such guidance should not become unsupervised clinical advice. The intention is to help students understand that artistic progress and sustainable practice are connected, especially when course requirements include repeated singing or demanding stage work (Morawska et al., 2022).

5.3. Limitations and future research

LOOP has not been evaluated in a real course. The article contains no student-level data, comparisons between teaching methods, or evidence of learning gains. The framework also needs adaptation for instrumental majors, production-focused courses, songwriting, and programmes emphasising specific genres. Future research could pilot LOOP across different class sizes and student experience levels; examine the reliability and fairness of performance rubrics; collect student and teacher reflections; and analyse whether iterative practice portfolios improve students' ability to transfer skills into live performance. Comparative studies in Vietnamese higher education could also test how local resources, curriculum structures, and access to rehearsal facilities shape implementation.

6. CONCLUSION

University teaching of popular music needs to connect technical skill, genre understanding, student agency, ensemble collaboration, stage practice, and reflective assessment. The synthesis identifies four competency domains and four recurring curriculum tensions. The proposed LOOP framework-Listening and analysis, Open exploration, Ongoing ensemble practice, and Performance with reflection-offers a way to align outcomes, teaching activities, and evidence of learning.

LOOP should be treated as a conceptual design aid rather than a validated teaching intervention. Its practical value depends on adaptation to student needs, repertoire, learning resources, and institutional conditions. Empirical work is required before claiming improvements in student performance, engagement, or vocal health. The immediate contribution is a transparent course-design structure that allows musical experimentation to coexist with structured feedback and educational accountability.

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