

The Korean Wave: Cross-Cultural and Pedagogical Perspectives in K-Pop

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This article introduces readers to the musical, cultural, and linguistic foundations of Korean pop music (K-pop) by exploring its historical development, vocal aesthetics, and unique pedagogical considerations. Through the lens of K-pop singer and voice teacher Jamon Maple, whose artistic journey spans K-pop, gospel, R & B, and Western classical styles, the article examines cross-genre technique, the role of language in vocal identity, and approaches for helping students perform with authenticity. Practical strategies are offered for navigating K-pop vocal production and performance practices, equipping singing teachers to meet the needs of a diverse and evolving student population.

WHAT IS K-POP?

Korean pop music (K-pop) is a musical genre from South Korea that features flawlessly produced tracks, catchy hooks, multilingualism, synchronized choreography, visually striking live performances and music videos, fashion trends, and idol-fan culture. While the aesthetic foundations are rooted in the sounds of pop, R & B, and hip-hop, K-pop writers draw on a diverse array of influences, including traditional Korean music, dancehall, euro-pop, new jack swing, salsa, and soul.¹

K-pop can be divided into four distinct “generations” that mark the key phases in its evolution. The first generation (1992–2002) began with Seo Taiji and Boys, whose fusion of Western popular music styles with socially conscious lyrics broke new ground in South Korea’s music scene.² Groups like H.O.T. and S.E.S. helped to formalize idol group dynamics and cultivate early fan culture.³ The second generation (2003–2012) was marked by the emergence of professionally trained idols, including TVXQ and BoA, who were instrumental in advancing the genre’s expansion into Japan.⁴ Similarly, the influence of the Korean Wave (*hallyu*) driven by acts like Girls’ Generation, BigBang, and 2NE1, helped cement K-pop’s widespread popularity across Asia.⁵ The third generation (2012–2019), led by groups such as BTS, Exo, and Blackpink, expanded the genre’s global presence by addressing deeper themes such as mental well-being and societal challenges, while strategically using social media to cultivate transnational fandoms.⁶ In the fourth generation (2019–present), groups such as ITZY, TXT, and Stray Kids have explored genre experimentation, digital innovation (such as virtual concerts), and an increased focus on individual artistry.⁷

A central factor in K-pop’s global appeal is its cultivation of fan culture. Hybe Corporation’s Weverse exemplifies this approach, serving as an all-

in-one digital hub that integrates social media, streaming, and retail functions to enable direct artist–fan interaction.⁸ With a global user base exceeding 65 million, Weverse enables the company to monitor global consumption patterns, inform strategic decisions, and sustain engagement across linguistic and cultural boundaries.⁹ This emphasis on direct-to-fan engagement dates back to BTS’s 2013 debut, when producer Bang Si-Hyuk (then at Big Hit Entertainment, now Hybe) prioritized online interaction over traditional media, launching the group’s YouTube channel and social media presence prior to their first live performances.¹⁰ These strategies helped cultivate a devoted fanbase that played a pivotal role in BTS’s international rise to prominence.

Historically, artists seeking success in the world’s largest music market (the American music industry) have been expected to adopt English-language lyrics.¹¹ However, K-pop intentionally celebrates the Korean language alongside English, Chinese, and Japanese, giving it a broad appeal.¹² Driven by global interest in K-pop and the broader hallyu wave, Korean language learning has surged in North America. In the United States alone, university enrollment in Korean language classes rose 78 percent between 2009 and 2016, and the language learning app Duolingo quickly drew hundreds of thousands of new learners after launching Korean courses in 2017.¹³

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before the establishment of South Korean democracy in the 1980s, previous authoritarian regimes often suppressed cultural expressions deemed incompatible with national values, particularly foreign influences, which were perceived as threatening to Korean identity.¹⁴ This changed after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when the South Korean government reoriented its economic policies to support cultural exports in an effort to bolster global credibility and soft power.¹⁵ The government’s shift in economic policy helped catalyze the international rise of K-pop. Major entertainment companies such as SM, JYP, and YG Entertainment began to develop a highly structured system dedicated to scouting and intensively training aspiring K-pop idols.¹⁶ This system emphasized the long-term development of artists, requiring trainees to undergo multiyear instruction in singing,

dance, media, and languages.¹⁷ Selected individuals are then promoted as solo artists or members of a group, where they might be assigned a role such as lead vocalist, dancer, rapper, or *maknae* (youngest).¹⁸ Trainees and idols are held to strict behavioral standards, similar to the Motown model created by Berry Gordy in the United States.¹⁹

K-pop performances at times blend elements of South Korea’s traditional culture within the contemporary pop framework. Composers may incorporate instruments such as the *jangu* (hourglass-shaped drum), *gayageum* (a plucked, stringed instrument), *piri* (double-reed bamboo oboe), or *taepyeongso* (double-reed wind instrument with a metal bell).²⁰ Alternatively, songwriters may include identifiable musical markers from Korea. A notable example can be found in Agust D’s song “*Daechwita*,” which draws on musical traditions such as the Korean military march and motifs from *gugak* (national music).²¹

Costume design plays a central role in the visual dimension of K-pop, and some artists have found ways to acknowledge their Korean roots by wearing clothing inspired by the traditional *hanbok* dress, *cheollik* military uniforms, and a style of Korean jacket called *jeogori*.²² They have also incorporated traditional patterns like *dancheong* and, as seen in one of Blackpink’s Coachella costumes, the ten symbols of longevity (*Sipjangsaeng*).²³

ACCESSIBILITY IN K-POP

In 2024, the group Big Ocean made its debut as the first K-pop group entirely comprising hearing-impaired artists. Like other K-pop groups, they showcase complex choreography, polished pop vocals, and rap; however, their performances are distinguished by the integration of hand signing.²⁴ This has created an interesting rapport with their fans, known as “*pados*” (Korean for “wave”), who have embraced learning signs from Korean Sign Language (KSL), American Sign Language (ASL), and International Sign (IS) in order to deepen their connection with the group.²⁵

To meet the precision demands of K-pop performance, Big Ocean uses high-tech rehearsal tools like vibrating smartwatches and flashing lights, which act as metronomes.²⁶ These devices provide rhythmic and visual cues, supporting synchronization when audio

alone is not sufficient.²⁷ Additional technologies used by the group include Bluetooth-enabled hearing devices for direct music streaming, an app that checks pitch accuracy, and AI voice conversion, all of which support their voice training and performance.²⁸

JAMON MAPLE ON EMBRACING THE LANGUAGE OF K-POP

Jamon Maple is a US-based artist who has had a remarkable journey to becoming a K-pop artist and writer. Originally from Beaumont, Texas, Maple started singing in church at the age of five. He says, “My family [was] pretty religious: we were in church three, four times [a] week. So, that’s really where I got my musical foundation . . . singing gospel, singing R & B, singing jazz. I grew up listening to everything, absorbing everything.”²⁹

A trip in middle school to see a production of the opera *Carmen* at Houston Grand Opera was a pivotal moment in Maple’s musical journey, where he was amazed to learn the singers performed without amplification. Describing Western classical music as his “first love,” Maple went on to earn degrees in classical voice, where his favorite subject was diction. He credits his undergraduate study of Romance languages with laying the foundation for how he would later embrace the Korean language.

When I moved to New York, I made some Korean friends. They became my best friends and they introduced me to the culture, the food. I’d never really experienced any Korean culture at all. Fast forward a couple years, I was at my friend’s place. He plays me “Wild Flower” by Park Hyo Shin. It’s one of the most beautiful songs [with] a huge high C in it. As a tenor, it blew my mind.

What was fascinating for me was that this was a Korean singer singing in Korean. I thought, this is in the style of the music that I grew up listening to. The music that I feel just so connected to. I had never made the connection [between R & B and K-pop], and [also] this sort of classical connection. I’ve always associated singing in a foreign language with opera. I never made the connection that I could sing in a foreign language and it’d be in a non-classical style. Korean became my new language.³⁰

What followed felt nothing short of miraculous. On a seemingly ordinary afternoon at New York University, Maple heard a Korean song he recognized being played

on a piano in a nearby practice room. After a spontaneous interaction with the student at the keyboard, he joined in singing, and the impromptu performance was recorded. In a surreal turn of events, the video went viral in South Korea overnight. Within a week, Maple was performing on Korean television for the first time, launching an unexpected journey into the K-pop world driven not by strategy, but by joy and curiosity. He says, “I think this opportunity showed up from a love of the craft, just singing in Korean. I wasn’t thinking like, oh, this is a really niche market. It was just pure, unadulterated excitement to explore something new.”³¹

Since then, Maple has appeared on the popular South Korean singing competition programs *Fantastic Duo* and *I Can See Your Voice* and released a single in Korea titled “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” Maple has also cowritten numerous songs with composer Kang Dong-Yoon which have been featured in Korean television dramas. He maintains private voice studios in New York, South Korea, and China, and is a sought-after clinician, frequently offering cross-genre workshops including one titled “K-Pop for Foreigners.”

Maple’s connection with K-pop goes beyond language and style to include the similarities of lived experience between Black Americans and Koreans.

There’s this word called *han* in Korean. It’s basically about the struggle that Koreans have been through with being occupied by so many neighboring countries. They say in Korean, when you have *han* in your music, that it’s special. It’s almost like a soulfulness that’s just embedded into the music, into the sound of the singer. I sort of relate it to the African American spiritual, which was born out of slavery, born out of struggle. I think that’s also just another really interesting aspect of what draws me as an African American to Korean music is that sense of camaraderie when it relates to cultural struggle.

A question I get a lot when I go to Korea (is), “How do you get soul in your voice?” Everyone wants to know that. A lot of us become singers because we’re looking to fill some hole in our lives, we’ve experienced some trauma. Some of it is just a God-given, universal gift. But some of it is also, I think, struggle. The struggle of being human, and the struggle of trying to find your place in the world.³²

Maple was recently invited to perform his original Korean-language song “We United” for the thousands in attendance at a government event hosted by South

Korea's Peaceful Unification Advisory Council (PUAC), an organization chaired by the sitting South Korean president. As possibly the first Black American foreigner to sing an original Korean-language piece at such a high-profile gathering in South Korea, Maple's performance carried a powerful message of peace for Korea and the world—one that resonates deeply during a time of political uncertainty.³³

I never imagined I would be here, but I'm so grateful. I consider myself more of a cultural global music ambassador, someone who's able to build cultural bridges through music, through artistry. And I think it's so important because I've always held . . . a deep belief that we're all connected, we're all one. Music unites us, (it's the) universal language that connects us all.³⁴

PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS

When training across genres, Maple focuses on a few key aspects of the student's development. He first works to facilitate increasing vocal strength and stamina using singing techniques designed to allow voices to comfortably project without amplification. Training in chest (mode 1) and in head (mode 2) is essential for all singers. His training approach focuses on expanding the singing range to at least two octaves, increasing vocal flexibility, and developing efficient breath management, with the goal of finding "freedom in function."

Understanding stylistic differences across genres is also essential. As Maple notes, what distinguishes K-pop from Western popular music is the Korean language: "It's a pop vocal, just in Korean." He emphasizes that part of his mission is to help singers inhabit diverse styles authentically and highlights the importance of homing in on the student's natural aesthetic preferences when it comes to style.

What have they been listening to all their lives? What is their natural aesthetic when it comes to style? How do we mitigate any tension surrounding that without stripping them of what feels like them stylistically? Accentuating the strengths and sneaking up on the weaknesses . . . without them feeling like they're changing their identity as a vocalist and as an artist.³⁵

When working with students from different countries, Maple notes that their native language can present unique considerations. Since language is deeply tied to

identity, encouraging students to sing in their first language can strengthen emotional connection and support artistic growth.³⁶ A teacher's awareness of how vowels and consonants function in that language can help them to reveal and address certain technical challenges more efficiently. At the same time, Maple emphasizes the many commonalities shared by singers across cultures, regardless of background.

IN THE STUDIO

At its core, K-pop vocal delivery is rooted in the sound of contemporary pop, R & B, and hip-hop music. Here are some key elements to consider when working with students in the genre:

Active Listening

Have the student mark in the sheet music what they hear in the vocal in terms of registration, ornaments, dynamic shifts, articulation, phrasing, and riffs. What is the vibe or mood being created? How does the vocal delivery support that vibe? Is the phrasing conversational, rhythmically energized, or lyrical? What is the rhythmic foundation or groove?

Breath Efficiency and Coordination

The singer's relationship to the breath will change depending on the demands of the piece. Help the student explore efficiency of breath for speechlike delivery, lyrical phrasing, belt, and rap. The breath may also be used to add timbral color, to highlight an expression of emotion, or rhythmically.

Resonance

How do the soft palate, tongue, lips, jaw, larynx, and pharynx interact to create appropriate resonance choices? Focus on exercises that enhance soft palate awareness, tongue flexibility, articulatory freedom, closed and open vowels, and laryngeal flexibility. Singers may have sensations of "fronted" resonance from vibrations conducted to the nasal cavity, cheekbones, and lips, as they emulate the bright, youthful, and clear tone that is typical of the style.

Registration

Singers should strive for balanced registration and

facility in chest register and head register. Work to strengthen them separately, coordinate flexibility of movement between registers (top to bottom and bottom to top), and help the student learn to execute smooth transitioning through the middle voice as well as hard registral shifts (yodel).

Belt

Contemporary belt is used at the most emotionally intense moments in a song. Engage in exercises which help the student produce a controlled call in chest register as a form of heightened speech. Select exercises and songs which allow for a gradual increase in demands around range, strength, and stamina over time.

Diction and Articulation

The vocal delivery is speech driven. Typically, a casual approach to diction is favored. Text delivery in up-tempo selections may be percussive, and songwriters often lean into syllabic delivery to support the strong rhythmic underpinnings of a song.

Ratio of Straight-Tone to Vibrato

Singers should learn to sing with ease and pitch integrity, with and without vibrato. In up-tempo pieces, vocal delivery primarily incorporates straight-tone, and reserves vibrato for the final notes of phrases. Vibrato appears more prominently in ballads.

Onsets and Offsets

Help students discover how to execute different types of onsets. Vocal onsets are mostly clean, but occasional breathy, glottal, and fry onsets (including the “creaky door” onset where the singer combines fry with a glide into the initial note) are also stylistically appropriate. Offsets are mostly clean but fall-offs and fall-ups may be added for effect.

Riffs

Create agility exercises based on pentatonic and blues scales (as well as Mixolydian and minor scales) to help students develop their comfort riffing and adding ornaments in R & B-influenced pop. Accompany exercises with piano chords that reflect the typical harmonic progressions found in pop and R & B music.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

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Get Off the Page

Unlike in some other genres, in contemporary commercial styles, singers have artistic license to play with what is written melodically and rhythmically. Keep the catchiest part of the song (or “hook”) intact.³⁷

Audio Technology

Since K-pop is highly produced, teachers can help students improve microphone technique and confidence when using external and in-ear monitors. They can also familiarize students with terms from contemporary music production such as “auto-tune,” “compression,” “reverb,” “sidechaining,” “slapback delay,” “voice doubling,” and “vocal stacking.”

CONCLUSION

Maple states, “No matter the style, no matter the language, no matter the culture . . . everybody is looking for more vocal freedom and release and the ability to say what they want to say as an artist.”³⁸ This philosophy lies at the heart of cross-cultural inquiry in voice pedagogy. Regardless of who our students are or where they come from, they seek greater vocal flexibility as a means of serving their artistic expression. This is a powerful reminder that, despite our differences, we share far more in common.

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Zipporah Peddle (she/her) performed nearly three thousand performances as lead vocalist in Cirque du Soleil's top-selling production show, *O*. She has appeared in musicals, concerts, cabarets, new musical workshops, tours, and recitals, at venues throughout the United States and Canada. She currently serves as an assistant professor on the voice and vocal pedagogy faculties at Boston Conservatory at Berklee. Previously, Peddle served on the theater faculty at Missouri State University, where she created a series of CCM-style and pedagogy courses for the BFA musical theater program. She has led private voice studios in Boston, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Toronto, and provides masterclasses on musical theater and CCM style and pedagogy. She has presented her

research at NATS, PAVA, and the Voice Foundation conferences and has appeared as an invited speaker for organizations including NATS, the Voice Foundation, and the University of Southern California. Peddle holds an MM in vocal performance from the University of Nevada, Las

Vegas, and a BM from Memorial University, located in her beautiful home province of Newfoundland, Canada. She is a PAVA-recognized vocologist (PAVA-RV). <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7858-2284>



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