

# Artistic Expression and Educational Application of Popular Tibetan-style Songs in Rhythm and Blues Singing from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** Popular Tibetan-style songs, which blend Tibetan traditional music with modern pop music, are characterized by pentatonic scales, leaping melodies, and rhythmic vitality. Meanwhile, Rhythm and Blues (R&B) is renowned for its free melodies, strong rhythmic sense, and abundant decorative notes. In recent years, the fusion of the two has increasingly garnered attention, resulting in musical works that combine national characteristics with modern aesthetics. This article explores the artistic expression of popular Tibetan-style songs in R&B performances from a cross-cultural perspective, analyzes the fusion of melodies, rhythms, vocal styles, and emotional expression, and studies its application value in music education. By comparing the core characteristics of both, this article explores ways to enhance musical expressiveness and proposes innovative training methods suitable for pop vocal teaching. This research contributes to promoting the modernization of Tibetan music, while also advancing the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, providing new ideas for the innovation of national music, and expanding the influence of Chinese pop music on the international stage.

**Keywords:** Popular Tibetan-style songs; Rhythm and Blues (R&B); Cross-cultural; Music education; Singing techniques

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research background

In the development of Chinese pop music, the modernization and innovation of national music have always been significant topics. Since the 1990s, popular Tibetan-style songs have gradually occupied an important position in the market, with works such as “Qinghai-Tibet Plateau,” “Tianlu,” and “Taking the Train to Lhasa.” These showcase the rhythmic characteristics of Tibetan music and align with contemporary listeners’ aesthetic needs through modern pop music creation techniques. This type of song is renowned for its melodious and sonorous melodies, freely variable rhythms, and intense emotional expression, possessing distinctive national characteristics and market appeal<sup>[1]</sup>.

On the other hand, Rhythm and Blues (R&B), as an important branch of European and American pop music,

is noted for its strong rhythmic sense, free melodic lines, and abundant decorative note techniques. In recent years, with the development of globalization in music, the influence of R&B has gradually expanded to Asia and fused with different national music, forming diversified styles <sup>[2]</sup>. Against this backdrop, an increasing number of music creators are attempting to combine Tibetan-style music with R&B to create works that retain national characteristics while conforming to modern trends. For example, Han Hong's works combine the resonant sonority of Tibetan music with the rhythmic expression of R&B, while Sa Dingding's "Wan Wu Sheng" fuses Tibetan music, electronic music, and R&B elements, demonstrating a unique cross-cultural style. These attempts indicate that Tibetan music and R&B have strong compatibility, and their combination not only enriches musical expressiveness but also provides a new direction for the modernization of national music <sup>[3]</sup>.

However, current theoretical research and music education practice regarding the fusion of popular Tibetan-style songs and R&B are still relatively limited, mainly focusing on the analysis of musical works, with less exploration of singing techniques, musical expressiveness, and their application in teaching. Therefore, in-depth research on the artistic expression of popular Tibetan-style songs in R&B performances and their application value in music education can not only inspire music creators but also help enrich the modern pop vocal teaching system and enhance students' musical literacy and cross-cultural adaptability <sup>[4]</sup>.

## **1.2. Research objectives**

Based on the perspective of cross-cultural music fusion, this study focuses on analyzing the combination of popular Tibetan-style songs and R&B in musical expression, exploring their mutual influence in melodies, rhythms, vocal styles, and emotional expression, and further studying their application value in music education. Specific research objectives include:

- (1) Analyzing the musical characteristics of popular Tibetan-style songs.
- (2) Discussing the core singing techniques of R&B.
- (3) Researching the artistic expression of popular Tibetan-style songs in R&B performances.
- (4) Discussing the application value of this cross-cultural fusion in music education.

## **2. Musical characteristics of popular Tibetan-style songs**

Popular Tibetan-style songs have evolved from Tibetan traditional music. They not only inherit the melodic structure, rhythmic patterns, and singing styles of Tibetan music but also integrate modern pop music creation techniques, making them more audible and marketable. In terms of melody, rhythm, and singing style, there are many commonalities between Tibetan music and R&B, which enhances their compatibility in musical fusion <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **2.1. Melody and musical scale**

Tibetan music typically employs the pentatonic scale, a common feature in many world musics. The most common modes in Tibetan music are the Gong mode (Do Re Mi Sol La) and the Zhi mode (Re Mi Sol La Do). Its melody is known for being high-pitched and melodious, with a broad range, often used to express the vastness of the plateau and national pride.

#### **2.1.1. Use of pentatonic scale**

The pentatonic scale imparts a simple yet rhythmic quality to Tibetan music. For example, "Tianlu" (composed by Yin Qing) incorporates grace notes and glissandos into its main melody, adding dynamism to the melody. This

melodic treatment is also common in R&B music.

### **2.1.2. Melodic ornamentation**

Tibetan melodies often use ornamental techniques such as grace notes and glissandos, which resonate with R&B melodic treatments.

## **2.2. Rhythm and groove**

Tibetan music features a rich variety of rhythms, ranging from free rhythms (such as in chanting-style folk songs) to regular rhythms (such as in dance songs). Its rhythms are predominantly based on 2-beat and 4-beat systems, emphasizing natural groove, which aligns with R&B's rhythmic characteristics.

### **2.2.1. Use of regular rhythms**

In popular Tibetan-style songs, the use of regular rhythms gives the music a more contemporary pop feel. For instance, “Laundry Song” employs dotted rhythms, enhancing the musical groove, similar to R&B's rhythmic patterns, making the music more rhythmic and groovy. “Taking the Train to Lhasa” combines modern electronic music rhythms, particularly emphasizing R&B's groove characteristics in the chorus, giving the music a more modern edge.

### **2.2.2. Syncopation and groove**

Syncopation and dotted notes are widely used in Tibetan music rhythms, which are also key features of R&B music. For example, “Song of the West Sea” (sung by Dao Lang) uses syncopation to make the melody more dynamic, similar to R&B's groove characteristics. In R&B music, common rhythmic patterns include backbeat emphasis, off-beat rhythms, and rhythmic layering. These features are gradually being incorporated into the rhythmic treatment of modern Tibetan-style songs, giving the music a more contemporary and international quality.

## **2.3 Singing style**

The singing style of popular Tibetan-style songs has a distinctive national character, with unique features in resonance placement, timbre use, and technical processing.

### **2.3.1. Chest voice resonance**

Tibetan singing emphasizes deep chest voice resonance, a characteristic highly consistent with the powerful chest voice use in R&B singing styles. For instance, Han Hong is renowned for her deep chest voice resonance. In “Tianlu,” her singing fully utilizes chest voice resonance, making her voice more full and powerful. Similar R&B singers like Beyoncé also often use chest voice resonance to enhance the intensity and appeal of their songs.

### **2.3.2. Vibrato and decorative notes**

The use of vibrato in popular Tibetan-style songs differs from that in R&B. In Tibetan music, natural vibrato is common, usually used at the end of notes or in emotionally intense sections to enhance the musical hierarchy. R&B's melodic vibrato, on the other hand, is more decorative, often used between multiple notes to make the melody more fluid. In Han Hong's singing of “Tianlu,” her use of vibrato at the end of long notes resembles the decorative end-note treatment commonly used by R&B singers <sup>[6]</sup>.

The similarities in these musical characteristics provide possibilities for the fusion of popular Tibetan-style songs and R&B, making their integration in singing techniques, musical expression, and teaching practice have great potential for development.

### **3. Compatibility of R&B singing techniques and Tibetan style**

Tibetan-style pop songs share numerous similarities with R&B in singing techniques, especially in chest resonance, glissando, minor pitch variations (Kan'er sounds), and rhythmic groove. The fusion of the two has high feasibility. R&B singers often emphasize a singing style with strong rhythmic sense, utilizing abundant decorative notes and flexible pitch variations. These characteristics are also present in Tibetan music singing techniques. Therefore, combining Tibetan-style pop songs with R&B singing techniques can enhance the expressive power of music and provide singers with a broader artistic space <sup>[7]</sup>.

#### **3.1. Chest resonance**

Chest resonance is an important technique in both R&B and Tibetan music singing, enhancing the thickness and penetration of the voice, making the singing more infectious. Alicia Keys employs deep chest resonance in "If I Ain't Got You," making her timbre fuller and enhancing the emotional tension of the song. Similarly, Han Hong uses chest resonance in "Tian Lu," making the high notes of the song more powerful and awe-inspiring. This resonance method strengthens the thickness of the voice, echoing the deep timbre in R&B singing style <sup>[8]</sup>. In singing training, R&B's diaphragm control techniques can be borrowed to maintain the stability of the voice in the high register, while combining the open resonance cavity of Tibetan music to improve the penetration of the timbre <sup>[9]</sup>.

#### **3.2. Glissando and Kan'er sounds**

Glissando is one of the important singing techniques in R&B, enhancing the fluidity of the melody and making the connection between notes more natural and smoother. Kan'er sounds (minor pitch variations) in Tibetan singing are similar in expression to glissando, adding a sense of flexibility to the melody. For example, "Ajie Gu" (sung by Zhu Zheqin) combines Kan'er sounds and decorative notes, making the melody more rhythmic, which is very similar to the soft glissando used in R&B music. In R&B singing, Mary J. Blige often uses glissando to enhance the emotional expression of the song, a technique that is equally applicable in Tibetan pop song singing, enhancing the smoothness of the melody. In singing instruction, glissando exercises can be used to help students master the naturalness of pitch transitions, while combining Kan'er sound practice from Tibetan music to enable them to more flexibly control pitch variations during singing <sup>[10]</sup>.

#### **3.3. Rhythmic groove**

R&B music emphasizes syncopation and backbeat (emphasis on the second and fourth beats), which align well with the rhythmic sense in Tibetan music. In "Xi Yi Ge" (Laundry Song), the emphasis on syncopation makes the melody more dynamic, similar to the groove characteristics of R&B music. In singing instruction, rhythm decomposition exercises can be used to teach students R&B's off-beat techniques, combined with Tibetan music's dance rhythms, making the rhythmic sense of the song even stronger <sup>[11]</sup>.



## **4. Artistic expression of Tibetan-style pop songs in R&B singing**

The fusion of Tibetan-style pop songs and R&B is not only reflected in melody and rhythm but also in the enhancement of singing techniques and musical expressiveness. By integrating different musical elements, the singing style can be enriched, making the work more layered and artistically infectious<sup>[12]</sup>.

### **4.1. Fusion methods**

#### **4.1.1. Melody fusion**

Combining the pentatonic scale with the blues scale allows the melody to retain its ethnic characteristics while also possessing a smooth feel. For instance, some R&B works utilize the pentatonic scale in their main melody, while Tibetan music also frequently adopts the pentatonic scale. Therefore, the melodic styles of the two have natural compatibility.

#### **4.1.2. Rhythm processing**

Adding syncopation to Tibetan music makes it more in line with the groove characteristics of R&B. For example, the electronic drum processing in “Zuo Shang Huo Che Qu La Sa” (Taking the Train to Lhasa) gives it a more modern rhythmic feel, a technique that can be borrowed for the arrangement of more Tibetan-style pop songs<sup>[13]</sup>.

#### **4.1.3. Vocal interpretation**

Combining the chest resonance of Tibetan music with the nasal resonance of R&B enriches the timbre. For instance, R&B singers like Amy Winehouse often use slight nasal resonance in their performances, while some singing styles in Tibetan music also emphasize nasal resonance. This combination can create a more personalized timbre effect. Through these fusion methods, the artistic expressiveness of Tibetan music can be further broadened, enabling it to have wider dissemination in the global music market. Meanwhile, in pop music education, these cross-cultural fusion methods can improve students' singing skills and cross-style adaptability<sup>[14]</sup>.

## **5. The value of music education and cultural popularization**

### **5.1. Cultural inheritance and innovation**

The combination of Tibetan-style pop songs and R&B not only promotes the innovative development of ethnic music but also contributes to the preservation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. By incorporating R&B's melody processing, rhythmic groove, and singing techniques, Tibetan music can gain wider recognition in the modern music market while maintaining its unique ethnic charm. For example, Sa Dingding's “Wan Wu Sheng” successfully combines Tibetan music with electronic music elements, making it a cross-cultural musical work with global influence and providing a new direction for the modernization of ethnic music.

### **5.2. Application in music education**

In the field of music education, the fusion of Tibetan-style pop songs and R&B provides a new practical path for vocal music teaching. Firstly, cross-cultural vocal training courses can be conducted to teach students the conversion between the pentatonic scale and the blues scale, rhythm pattern intensification exercises, and resonance adjustment training to expand their singing skills. Secondly, in chest resonance training, works such as “Tian Lu” can be used as teaching materials to train students to combine R&B's timbre processing methods with the powerful resonance foundation of Tibetan music, making the singing more layered. Finally, improvisational

singing training can draw on R&B's free interpretation mode, combining Tibetan melodies for improvisational singing to enhance students' musical expressiveness and adaptability to different musical styles <sup>[15]</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

Tibetan-style pop songs and R&B have strong compatibility in terms of melody, rhythm, and singing techniques. Their fusion not only expands the modern development path of ethnic music but also enriches the expressive forms of pop music. Tibetan music's pentatonic scale, broad melody, and chest resonance complement R&B's blues scale, syncopation, and decorative note techniques, providing a technical foundation for their combination.

In the field of music education, integrating the two through cross-cultural vocal training, chest resonance training, and improvisational singing training can enhance students' singing skills and cross-cultural adaptability, providing new ideas for pop music teaching. Additionally, this fusion contributes to the international dissemination of Tibetan music and plays an active role in the preservation and development of intangible cultural heritage, gaining it wider attention in the global music market. This research not only provides theoretical support for the innovative development of ethnic music but also offers practical guidance for modern music education, with broad prospects for future research and application.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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