



Harmony, Texture, and Timbre in Popular Culture:

Undergraduate Edition

UTSA's Music Theory Club



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Methodology

The subjects consist of 30 college students, of various music degree concentrations, ranging from ages 18 - 26.

These students were asked in a survey the following questions:

- What genre of music do you listen to most?
- What is your favorite song at the moment?
- What kind of music do you feel most affected by?
- Who is your favorite artist?
- Why are they your favorite artist?
- What's your age?
- What's your major?

After gathering this data, IRB-approved theory club members analyzed the harmonic, textural, and timbral structures of the first verse, chorus, and bridge of 7-8 randomly assigned songs from the survey. We then compared our findings to the subject's description of the music in order to assess if there is any correlation between taste and trends in the music. Musical observations were then compiled into a database for teaching topics within the music theory classroom.

Analysis

Our study focuses on harmony, timbre, and texture in popular music. We believe that incorporating these topics into the theory classroom helps students expand their vocabulary and facilitates the transition from the music we hear daily to the traditional art music genres studied in class.

Each student researcher analyzed 7 or 8 songs from the survey using a standardized template. This template includes the three main topics for each song, as well as any other potential teaching points identified. Scan the QR code to access our database, which contains our comprehensive analysis of the 30 songs included in the survey.

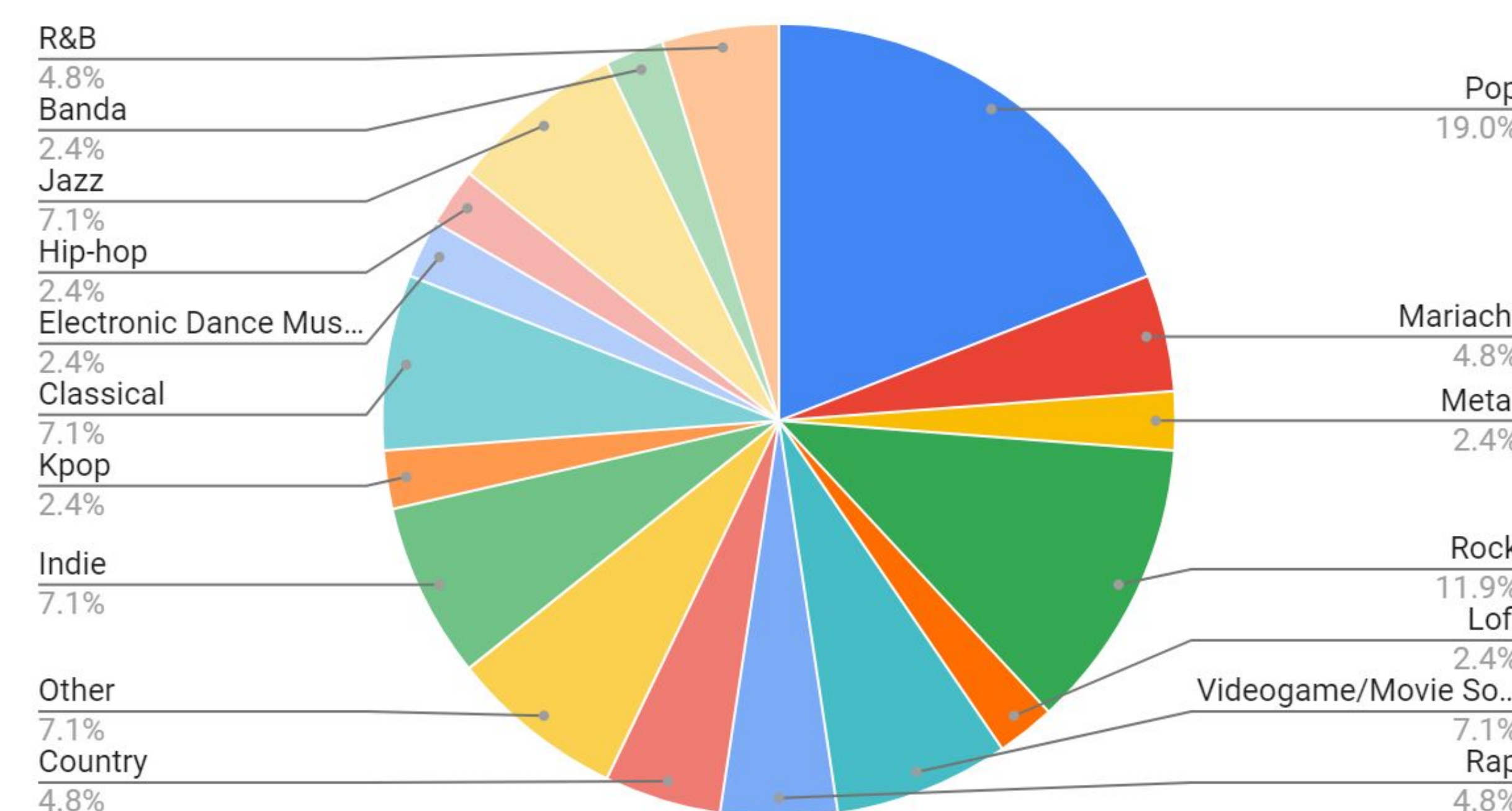


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Abstract

The purpose of this study is twofold: 1) to compare the way students describe their favorite music with observable musical parameters such as harmony, texture, and timbre, and 2) to develop a database of current music that can be used in the theory classroom to study harmony, timbre, and texture. We seek to contribute to a growing body of work that debunks stereotypes such as popular music is too simple and therefore not productive to study within the music theory curriculum. However, we believe that musical fluency is strengthened when students study a variety of music styles. Our study identifies the music students enjoy, how they describe it, and analyzes correlations and discrepancies between these observations. In so doing, we articulate areas of study that can bolster listening experiences through analysis. These include developing terminology and listening skills focused on harmonic progressions, texture, and timbre in pop music. Sometimes as educators we assume that a song that's popular is good for analysis because everyone in the class will know it, but for music students that may not always be the case or a genre they enjoy, so this study seeks to find some trends in the kind of music college musicians are listening to.

Genres Mentioned in Survey



Spotify Playlist



Apple Music Playlist



#	Title	Artist
1	My Yoke Is Heavy	Daniel Johnston
2	Derecho de Nacimiento (feat. Los Macorinos)	Natalia Lafourcade, Los Macorinos
3	Liquid Swords	GZA
4	august	Taylor Swift
5	Stick Season	Noah Kahan
6	Tired	beabadoobee
7	The DJ Is Crying for Help	AJR
8	Windmill Way	Matt Griffin
9	Climax	USHER
10	The Gambler	Kenny Rogers
11	Zoltraak	Evan Call
12	Tek It - Sped Up	Cafuné
13	Grass	Will Paquin
14	Earthmover	Have A Nice Life
15	Soy lo prohibido	Luis Miguel
16	Spite	Omar Apollo
17	Love	Keyshia Cole
18	Slow It Down	Benson Boone
19	Bubble Dream	Chon
20	Lately It Feels Alright	Kid Bloom
21	Naacho Naacho (From "RRR")	Vishal Mishra, Rahul Sipligunj, M....
22	Drive/Threw	mauve
23	Run Your Mouth	The Marias
24	don't wanna break up again	Ariana Grande
25	Elegy, Op. 15	Herbert Howells, Helen Callus, Ve...
26	Carry You	Martin Garrix, Third Party, Oaks, ...
27	Sadness	Donovan
28	The Prophecy	Taylor Swift
29	Espresso	Sabrina Carpenter
30	Borderline	Tame Impala

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Conclusion

Popular music in the classroom offers ample opportunities for exploration. The survey responses covered a wide range of genres, allowing us to analyze various forms, harmonies, instrumentation, and textures.

The biggest challenge and learning experience from analyzing pop music was developing the appropriate language to describe the diverse sounds we encountered, from acoustic to electronic instruments. Comparing each club member's song analysis and the additional teaching topics sparked the most engaging discussions.

We found that conducting this survey and individual student led analysis could work for a "flipped classroom" experience. Making the students decide which aspects of the songs they're analyzing are worth teaching or how this song may be used as an example in the theory classroom.

Reflections/Takeaways

Knowing that, although anonymous, our classmates and possible friends were the ones to select the songs for our analysis created a much more judgement free, compassionate approach to our listening and analysis. We all have our opinions of artists, and genres we do or don't like but finding the complexity of all the songs answered in the survey we were able to earn an appreciation for each song and sometimes find an understanding for why it may be someone's favorite song.

Out of all 30 responses, 9 gave conflicting responses to which music they listen to most compared to which music they feel most moved by, there was no common genre among those 9 answers. Because we were surveying music majors most club members assumed a very wide range in responses so these weren't too surprising. However whenever someone didn't respond with a specific genre for what music they're most affected by, and all reasons for picking their favorite artists it always had something to do with the lyrics or emotion the music evokes. This tied perfectly with our research as oftentimes what makes a song have a certain emotion or feeling excluding lyrics is Harmony, Timbre, and Texture.

For all 4 researchers, we agreed that the harmonic analysis was the most challenging of the 3 topics we chose to address in each song. The chords for pop music didn't function in the same way chord progressions we learned about in part-writing and aural skills, often-times the melody didn't follow the functional dissonances we're accustomed to studying and that made more complex chords than the triads we often practice finding in art music.

However, in challenging ourselves to analyze chord progressions and schemas that we hear day to day but hadn't paid attention to before, it forced us to find new ways of listening, including listening for texture and timbre changes to identify chord changes/qualities as well.