

Analysis of bohemian rhapsody music essay



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“ Bohemian Rhapsody” was recorded by the British rock band queen. Released in October 31, 1975, Bohemian Rhapsody was greeted like a miracle from heaven in the largely barren musical ground of the mid-Seventies. At the time it was produced like most expensive single. Brian May thought of that the track’s main album “ A night At The Opera” as their “ Sgt Pepper”. It was the first time that an opera passage had been combined with a pop record and reached number one place. The song obviously has a very unusual structure and the operatic section was planned to be a lot shorter, but when they got to the studio they decided to make it bigger.

The song was recorded at the Roundhouse studios, located in Wales in particular the “ Rockfield studio 1”. Freddie Mercury is the writer of the song also keyboard player and a lead vocalist in the band. He wrote the song in his flat while he was trying to develop a complex song, which would consist of more than three sections. Using a structure that leans towards a more classical approach, which was in contrast to the contemporary-pop form at that time. According to Brian May most of the song was written in a studio environment, but the rest of the band claim that Freddie had everything in his head before that. Interestingly enough the song hasn’t got a chorus, but just a complex layer of verses and main parts including a ballad verse, an operatic passage, a heavy rock solo and a classical outro.

Queen’s prowess at layered vocal harmonies, dominated by Mercury’s soaring operatics, was second to none, while Brian May’s multitracked guitar orchestrations were arguably the most creative contributions to the instrument since” Jimi Hendrix”. In the studio the band embraced the innovative breakthroughs laid down during the psychedelic and progressive

era's, and took them to another plain. While they relied on but a simple instrumental line-up of Guitar, Bass, Piano and Drums, they played them like they were new inventions and in doing so, delivered a genuinely new, epic slant on rock. Launched into the age of glitter, it was no surprise when Queen's flamboyance earned them a glam rocker tag. Although studio technology played a vital part in the stunning results, what must not be overlooked is the natural tone of May's homemade guitar, his vibrato technique and the use at all times of a silver sixpence in place of a pick. Brian's great strength was in phrasing a part and then double-tracking or harmonizing very accurately.

The title of the song has a powerful rock ideology the word " Bohemian" could be traced to the practice of an unorthodox lifestyle. That could be associated with like-minded people having musical and artistic or qualities.

A rhapsody can be described as music in a one-movement work that is episodic yet integrated, free-flowing in structure, featuring a range of highly contrasted moods, colour and tonality. A burst of sudden inspiration and a sense of improvisation make it freer in form than a set of variations

Bohemian rhapsody was the biggest success in radio and charts for queen. They achieved that with introduction of a video clip to the song that was broadcasted heavily on radio and television. It was strongly influenced by the media hype they created with their experiments previous albums. The public expected to hear such an experimental approach. Queen had a previous attempt in a similar form that was used in the song the " The march of the black queen" which didn't reach the success of " Bohemian Rhapsody." The

band wanted to become famous with that kind of song and they achieved it, because of their musical geniuses.

They band had some attempts to reach popularity with similar songs in structure and form. But they didn't receive the deserved media attention. Freddie needed to write something like that for a long time. With the high standard of contemporary and classical mix of genres bohemian rhapsody clearly represents the album " Night at the opera" and still is one of the most epical contemporary albums nowadays. The recording process took three weeks, and the song was changed many times until the final piece was produced.

The classical genre of opera has invaded nearly all aspects of popular culture. Especially one essential sphere of popular culture that has remained relatively immune to operatic influence is rock music. Even when hearing the song for first time and you didn't know who are queen, the operatic influence and form in the whole album are clearly distinguishable. They are combined in symbiosis with their progressive and experimental hard-rock genre from their previous albums to create something unique that was never heard before on this scale with that kind of success.

The song consists of six sections: introduction, ballad, guitar solo, opera, hard rock, and outro. This format, with abrupt changes in style, tone, and tempo, was unusual to rock music.

Intro part (0: 00-0: 48)

The song begins with a cappella multitrack layered vocals. The tonal centre of this part is in B flat, Although the music video shows that the whole band

is singing at the beginning, Freddie recorded it by himself. The lyrics are questioning if this is the real life or a fantasy, almost like he's dreaming not really aware of what's going on. And then he goes "open your eyes look up to the skies and see. It means to free yourself and realize. When he says "I'm just a poor boy" he's speaking in first person you can feel the tragic character on his voice.

The melody of the voice, doesn't fully represent the true tones sung by Freddie

FIG 1

Analysis of the first part.

Chord functions - In the first bar the song begins with a B flat six chord. Then there is a Cmaj7 which alternates with Bflat6. In the third bar there's Fmaj7 and Cm7 emphasizing on a dominant function with the fa in octaves at fifth time, which resolves in B flat alternating with CM7.

FIG2

FIG2 , second bar - Gm which is the parallel minor of B flat. Bflat, acts as a III mediant and then goes to the other mediant on VI function

FIG3 second bar goes to Cm and then to the subdominant IV Fmaj and on forth time modulates to Bmaj

(FIG4) the harmony moves chromatically through Bflatmaj and A for the first two bars resolving to Bflatmaj and in the fourth bar eventually goes to IV subdominant Eflatmaj moving through Bflat with a third in the bass.

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FIG5 First bar diminished C# which acts as a subdominant moves to the dominant with a fifth in the bass Fmaj following a classical cadence that resolves to Bflat on the third bar. The harmony is in arpeggio, with octaves on G and F, which could be interpreted as a sixth chord Bflat6

Ballad (0: 49-2: 37)

FIG6 This part of the song is repeated twice in a verse. Everything is the same except for the lyrics. Second bar goes to the VI mediant Gminor moving through II Cm and stays there until the third time, first bar on figure6 when it goes to the dominant F. The movement, I > VI > II > V can be characterized as a chain of fifths root-motion. The arrangement is quite bare in the first verse. There's piano and bass played, but no guitars or backing vocals. The introduction of drums is retained until the beginning of the second verse, entering along with the double tracked rhythm guitars.

FIG7

Following the verse sequence the same passage Bflat-> Gminor

FIG8

And here's an interesting alternated cadence which changes the whole structure of the verse with Cm7 that passes through augmented B and reaches stability in the subdominant Eflatmaj-5 that leads to the dominant Fmaj-3bass and the semitone movement in the bass on third time changes the function to minor and the G predisposes to Eflatmaj-> Bflatmaj-3.

The similarity between the two parts of the section is easily distinguishable. The first has a more straight-ahead progression, but the second one is a variant.

FIG9

C minor -> F minor -> Bflatmaj that act as a dominant to Eflatmaj, The transition of a key shifting doesn't seem that obvious, partially using a modulation that is executed smoothly and it's difficult to detect. On the other hand, the tonal center of the part steps along the new key.

FIG10

First volta begins with the tonal centre of Eflatmaj which moves to dominant V Bflatmaj and then to the VI mediant Cminor moving through a minor subdominant Amflat. This function suggests of a melodic major scale with flattened VI and VII, which resolves to Eflatmaj. And the same sequence repeated with a Eflat diminished -> Fminor7 to leads the harmony to the second verse in this part with two bars in Bflatmaj.

FIG11

Second volta is entirely a guitar solo that leads to the next part of the song.

Chord functions:

First bar Eflatmaj-> third beat Bflatmaj-3 > second bar Cminor and third bar Fminor.

Guitar solo (2: 37-3: 03)

The band builds up intensity that reaches the peak and culmination in this part.

(figure) First bar Bflat7 -> second bar Eflatmaj -> third beat Gminor-5, fourth bar is in Cminor, fifth bar in Fminor, sixth bar is moves through Dflatmaj, dflatmaj with c in bass and Bflat minor. Brian recorded his own version of Freddie's melody instead copying it.

FIG12

The solo is in a mixolydian scale, because the scales from Bflat to Bflat have an A flat alteration a flattened seventh that is necessary for the eflatmaj. The harmony in the last bar of the solo changes chromatically as it the key changes to A, which is is a drastical change. The operatic segment enters immediately as May's solo abruptly concludes

Opera (3: 03-4: 08)

FIG13

The choir effect was created by having May, Mercury, and Taylor sing their vocal parts continually for ten to twelve hours a day. Multi track layered vocals that mimic a wall of sound can be heard throughout this part.

According to Roger Taylor they had sufficient vocal qualities to accomplish that. Freddie was good in the middle of the range, Brian had a powerful low voice and Taylor was singing the highest tones. They have used a 24track tape machine to record all these parts in a three weeks period.

This part of the song is strongly operatic. It hasn't got a clear measurement and even though it begins in A major with clear chromatic pattern that goes D major, A major, A diminished, and back to A major that is repeated twice and then continues with the subdominant move -

FIG13

D major, A major, D major, A major, A diminished, A major, D major, A major. On "thunderbolts" it shifts to D flat major with a flat in the bass, A flat major followed by a C major with fifth in bass and E major that suggests a very classical culmination of the phrase rarely used in rock music. Many of the lyrics in this part are phrases of the Qu'ran.

The word "Scaramouch" means "A stock character that appears as a boastful coward."

FIG14

Fig cannot be characterized with a tonal centre Freddie and Taylor are repeating a chromatic phrase in octaves, which resolves in another wall of layered vocals. The word Galileo was used for Brian May who was interested in astronomy and Galileo Galilei was a famous scientist. Magnifico means magnificent in Italian.

FIG15

At the second bar and then it returns to the previous pattern of chromatic melody accompanied by rapid changes in harmony as it follows from the third bar B major, B flat major, A major, B flat major

FIG16

The same chord sequence as in the previous bar is repeated. On the second bar in the chorus section the harmony progression changes to:

Aflatmaj, Eflatmaj, Eflat diminished, and goes the back to Eflatmaj, which seems to be the same chord sequence as in used in the beginning of the operatic part, Dmaj, Amaj, Adiminished, Amaj therefore the tonal centre should be Eflatmaj. The whole sequence repeated once again in the third bar.

FIG17

Aflatmaj and Eflat in the first bar resolve to Fmaj and Bflatmaj accompanied with the melody. At the third bar there's an intro to the solo part of narrator who's negotiating for his life continues in a chromatic movement: Aflatmaj, Eflatmaj-3, Fsharp diminished and Fminor-7. The absence of minor chords is quite drastic, but not unexpected for acapela passage.

FIG18

The first two bars follow the harmonic sequence Bmaj, Bflatmaj, Amaj, Bflat this movement is chromatic in semitones gradually reaching the dominant Bflat and resolves in Eflat at the third bar. " Bismillah" is one of those words taken from the Qu'ran and it literally means " In the name of Allah." In this part clearly the narrator is struggling to save his life, but the judges are not going to let him go. The whole message is repeated once again.

FIG19

On the phrase “ will not let you go” there’s a strong accent as if it’s been chopped to impose an authority expression. Also taylor plays on the floor tom in quavers as if he’s banging the judge’s hammer. The lyrical phrase “ let him go” is in Eflatmaj and suggests that someone is also pleading for his innocence. “ We will not let you go” is in Bflat emphasizing on a dominant function.

FIG20

The whole harmonic sequence is repeated once again to dramatize the struggle and negotiation, until it reaches another layered wall of vocals.

FIG20

In the second bar the harmony changes to Gflat7. On the pharese “ No no no” there’s a chord progression Bminor, Amajor, Dmajor, Dflatmajor, Gflatmaj

FIG21

, Bflatmaj dominant chord and resolving in Eflatmaj. With the narrator in solo, who’s moaning and whining with the phrase “ mama mia.” Bflat on “ let me go” resolving to-

FIG22

Eflatmaj, Aflatmaj, and Dmajor, Gminor in the second bar moving towards Bflat on the third and staying on a dominant chord for the next four bars.

FIG23

And changing the pulsation to triplets until finally resolving to Eflatmajor

Hard rock (4: 08-4: 55)

This part begins with a solo intro performed by May that ends in Fminor. It has a rather aggressive and angry approach compared to the dramatic previous part.

FIG24

The harmony on the verse follows the chord sequence: Bflat7, Eflat7-5, Bflatmaj, Eflat

Fig25

Bflat in the first bar and then a pause of 2 beats for the voice in Dflat Brian plays on it. The verse sequence repeats, but

FIG26

On the phrase " die" goes to Aflatmaj, Fminor and Bflatmaj on " Oh baby" and then again Fminor on " can't do this to me baby"

FIG27

Bflatmaj followed by Fminor with a seventh this time. The sequence is repeated twice until reaching -

FIG28

Eflatmajor in the first bar followed by an instrumental solo, gradually slowing down and decreasing the velocity.

Outro (4: 55-5: 55)

The song returns to the pace and form of the intro part. The guitar is playing along with the vocals “ Ooh ahh.” There’s a second guitar melody played as a second voice that was recorded with a different amp. Lyric wise the phrase “ Nothing really matters” appears again from the beginning of the song and is accompanied by an arpeggiated piano that is suggesting a resignation and dramatic images with the usage of minor chords. At the very end of the song there’s a sound of a big gong that is emphasizing on the completeness of the whole song structure.

Roy Thomas Baker recorded the song using just a single microphone on the snare, U67 or U87 on the toms and overheads. An AKG D12 was used on the bass drum. John Taylor’s bass was recorded via direct input into the desk. They have also recorded the bass with a cabinet to pick up the air movement with Electrovoice 666 and Neuman U67. Freddie’s piano was miked up using two Neuman U67 in a stereo pair and a shure vocal microphone for his voice. Brian may used Vox AC30 amp (backless) they also set up some microphones behind the amp and near the wall to capture some ambience and the full spectrum of the guitar sound. While the first three albums had been made using a 16-track equipment, “ Bohemian Rhapsody” benefitted from the 24 track technology.

Harmonic analysis referenced to a simple score of the piece provided by lecturer.