

Classical influences in Freddie Mercury's music

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Abstract: Freddie Mercury's skills as an amazing composer and singer contributed not only to the success of the band but also to the reinventing of rock music in a cultural era marked by the development of many genres and styles. Many of Queen's works are known to a large audience for many generations. Understanding the instruments of creation, the keys and chord progressions, the new techniques of sound processing, the influence of the styles and the essence of a musical composition represents a challenge for any musician, regardless of what kind of music he/she belongs to.

Key-Words: rock music; classical music; Queen.

Introduction

Talking about Queen or Freddie Mercury became trendy again (a movie about him and Queen had been released in 2018 having as a result an aroused interest event to the young listeners ears) but also a reason to elucidate from my own perspective why Freddy Mercury is considered being a genius like Mozart or Beethoven or *the most god of all*². Maybe that is *We are the champions* and *Bohemian Rhapsody* are placed in various tops as the best songs of all times. In addition, this subject arouse interest because there haven't been done any research of this field related to F. Mercury's music in the Romanian musical space, yet.

His contribution to music has given Mercury notoriety and top places in various tops and charts. In 2002, the TV show *The 100 Greatest Britons* ranked Mercury on the 58th place in the top British list. In 2006 *Time Asia Magazine* nominated him as one of the most important personalities of the last 60 years. And it's not the only magazine that puts him on the top spots. In a national Japanese ranking, Mercury is ranked on 52th place among the *100 Influential Heroes* top. In 2008, *Rolling Stone* magazine ranks him the 18th in the top *100 singers of all time*.

Aesthetic and stylistic considerations

Various critics say that many songs of Mercury's repertoire carry multiple influences from different genres and musical styles. These influences are not reflected only in the form or the style of the songs, such as those composed and sang with Monserrat Caballé (*Barcelona album*), but in his entire composing process as well as his excellent vocal and piano performances. Monserat Caballé states in an interwiu about Mercury's voice: *His phrasing was subtle, delicate and sweet or energetic and slamming. He was able to be the right color or expressive nuance for each word*³. It became very obvious that in order to suport and prove these statements we should analyze as many works as possible from his repertoire. By doing this research tends to become a book rather than article.

Therefore, for my present paper I proposed to approach the analysis of a single piece - *The Bohemian Rhapsody*.

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² <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/jan/14/2>, accesat in 12 March 2019

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxEWeqsGbbo>, accesat in 16 March

With a sound that has been described as a combination of hard rock and glam rock, Queen records a thrilling success with *A Night at the Opera* (1975). From this album, the piece entitled *The Bohemian Rhapsody* is written entirely by Mercury and takes the form of a pseudo-opera with an approximate duration of six minutes. This song has reached the top of the UK rankings for nine weeks after launch, being also a success in Europe and the United States.

Before starting the work analyze, I tried launching why Mercury named this work *The Bohemian Rhapsody*. The Rhapsody is an instrumental musical genre from the beginning of the 19th century. The first rhapsody written in 1810 is mentioned in the work *Fifteen rhapsodies* of the Czech composer Václav Jan Tomášek, although in the history of music the first attempt of a *rhapsodie* is mentioned in the 18th century. Starting from a literary creation, the poet and the composer Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart made in 1786 a collection of songs with lyrics and organ accompaniment along with several instrumental pieces, entitled *Musicalische Rhapsodien*.

The term derived from lb. Greek - *rhapsōidos* - which means reciting and represents a free expression of feelings, straight, and maybe exaggerated. So, starting from this meaning, we find that the particularity of this genre consists in the romantic ethos, in the improvisational character of the theme (or the themes), in the multitude of states of various tonalities, in the wide palette of nuances, tempo, or in the free form of the work. This genre, which includes both piano and orchestral type, has been approached by numerous composers, including J. Brahms, F. Chopin, F. Liszt, M. Ravel, C. Debussy, B. Bartók, G. Enescu, G. Gerswin, S. Rachmaninov, R. Vaughn Williams and others.

The *bohemian* term refers to an unconventional lifestyle, not in accordance with social conveniences. Being a *bohème* means being in the company of people with similar concerns, involving musical, artistic, literary or spiritual activities without establishing permanent links with them. In this context, *bohemians* may or may not be lost, adventurers or nomads.

The use of the *boem* word first appeared in English in the nineteenth century to describe the non-traditional lifestyle styles of artists, writers, journalists, musicians and poor and marginalized actors in major European cities. A more privileged, rich or even aristocratic bohemian circle is sometimes called *haute bohème*. In France, the same term also appeared in the 19th century, perhaps even at the beginning of the 19th century, when artists began to focus on smaller and poor districts alongside the Gypsies already settled there. Bohémien was the common name for the Romani population in France, believed to have arrived in France around the 15th century through Bohemia (the western part of the Czech Republic today) and has a slightly pejorative significance in terms of disorder, or negligence in terms of personal hygiene and conjugal fidelity in their communities. Thus, in the French imagination, a writer or any bohemian artist was easily associated with this community. *The term 'Bohemian' has come to be very commonly accepted in our day as the description of a certain kind of literary gipsy, no matter in what language he speaks, or what city he inhabits.... A Bohemian is simply an artist or littérateur who, consciously or unconsciously, secedes from conventionality in life and in art*⁴.

In this bohemian mood from different corners of the world, artists such as Oscar Wilde, Mark Twain, Enrico Caruso, Isadora Duncan, Henri Matisse, Auguste Rodin, and others, developed their artistic creations. In music, the bohemian spirit and life has been source of inspiration for famous works such as *Carmen* of G. Bizet, where the main soprano declares in the most well known aria, the characteristics of the bohemian spirit: *L'amour est enfant de bohème* (*Love is a gypsy child*), or Puccini's opera, *La bohème* (1896), in the opera with the same title of R. Leoncavallo, *La bohème* (1897). Therefore, it seems that the

⁴ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=bohemian>, accesat in 11 April

rhapsody and the bohemian mood are not only complementary, but also synonymous. How could someone be a rhapsode, if not bohemian? Which genre of music would be more appropriate to express a lot of intense, dramatic, free, colorful, if not a rhapsody? Therefore, the choice of genre for Mercury's work seems to be made quite right to express the content of this piece.

Written more than forty years ago, this masterpiece - *Bohemian Rhapsody*, (with a subject perhaps to the absurd – fantastic limit) is about a boy who killed someone, sold his soul to Beelzebub and wants to know if Scaramouche can make Fandango. Certain clarifications are needed also.

According to Christian theological sources, **Beelzebub** is a demon, a prince of darkness. In some demonological dictionaries he is known as one of the seven princes of hell, the second after Lucifer, known for his powers, and as the prince of flies because he could fly.

Centuries ago, from the early Middle Ages until the end of the Renaissance, in music the devil was symbolized by the presence of *augmented fourth* interval (also called tritone). The composers often avoided using the locrian mode, precisely of the so called *diabolus in musicis* interval.

Beginning with the Romanticism this interval started being used much more freely. It can be found in many musical examples, such as F. Liszt's *Dante Sonata*, where it is suggest the Hell, or as in Debussy's *L'après-midi d'un faune* to introduce a mystical atmosphere.

The symbol of the devil in music was not represented only by using the augmented fourth interval. Sometimes the tempo of a work, the chromatic passages as in Paganini's *Devil's Laughter* Caprice or the constant and the accelerated rhythm were associated with it. Take for example, Stravinski *Devil's Dance* from *The Soldier's Tale*.

The most famous representation of the devil embodied by a character remains that of Mephistotel in *Faust* opera by Charles Gounod.

Similar to Queen, the Rolling Stones, another British rock band was invoking the devil in one of their songs entitled *Sympathy for the Devil*, seven years before the *Bohemian Rhapsody* was written. Also, the same interval can be heard at the beginning of Jimi Hendrix's song - *Purple Haze*, interval which is often used throughout the song. Therefore, this subject which has been used much more easily nowadays by many rock bands has its origins in different contexts all through the history of music. (as an interval, tempo, ancient and modern modes, tuning systems, axis system proposed by Ernő Lendvai, or tritone relations used by Crumb or Britten in their works (for ex. *War Requiem*).

The next name heard in song is **Scaramouche** which is an archetypal character in the commedia dell'arte, a buffoon who always manages to get away from the sticky situations in which he invariably get, usually at the detriment of someone else. The original name **Scaramuccia** means also skirmish.

In music, Scaramouche is related to only two musical works. The first is bearing the same name written by J. Sibelius in 1913 and is an incidental music for a tragic pantomime by Poul Knudsen, while the second one is a suite for alto saxophone or clarinet and orchestra written by D. Milhaud and entitled Scaramouche op. 165b, also for two pianos (the arrangements being made by the composer himself). The last one is very suggestive to reflect the Scaramouche's behaviour.

Another name we hear in the song is **Fandango** and refers to a lively, temperamental Spanish dance, usually in ternary meters, 3/4, 6/8, with traditional accompaniment of guitars, castagnets or palm beats (palm in Spanish). Fandango can also be sung and danced. The form of the voice singing fandango is usually bipartite: it has an instrumental introduction followed by variations (variaciones). This pattern typically follows the copla structure - which consists of four or five octosyllabic lyrics (coplas) or musical phrases (tercios). Occasionally, the first

copla is repeated. It seems that fandango comes from *Cante*, which is a type of flamenco music with different musical forms. The meter and some rhythmic formulas make fandango similar to *bolero* and *seguidilla*. Other names specifically heard in the opera section are Figaro (perhaps alluding to Mozart's work), Galileo Galilei (the famous astronomer) and Bismillah, which means in Arabic *in the name of Allah*. All these names indicate Freddy's interest in music, literature, art in general, science and religion.

The Rhapsody has been by specialists associated to the genres of progressive rock, symphonic rock, hard rock and progressive pop. The song is extremely unusual for a popular single in which there is no choir, combining distinctive musical styles and containing lyrics that avoid conventional love-based narratives with allusion to murder and nihilism. The pop music expert Sheila Whiteley suggests that *this rhapsody by its title strongly draws on the ideology of contemporary rock, the individualism of the world of bohemian artists, stating the romantic ideals of rock art.* (Whiteley Sheila, 2006, 451). Commenting on the bohemian character, Judith Peraino said: *Mercury wanted to be a fake work, an imitation, something out of the norm of rock songs, and follows a certain dramatic logic: overlapping vocal choirs alternate with solistic areas, emotions are excessive, plot is confusing* (Judith Peraino, 2006 p. 252)

This musical form to write a song like a suite with style changes, tonalities and tempo was unusual in most pop and rock music but common in progressive rock. The genre reached its artistic and commercial apogee between 1970 and 1975 in the music of British bands like *Jethro Tull*, *Da Genesis*, Emerson, *Lake & Palmer (ELP)*, *Gentle Giant*, *Van der Graaf Generator* and *Curved Air*. The music of progressive rock has been characterized by dramatic contrasts, frequent changes in tempo and rhythmic character from one section of one composition to another. Genres have mixed rock with classical music, structural features and compositional practices, as well as classical musical instruments. Queen embraced progressive rock as one of their multiple influences. *Bohemian Rhapsody* parodies many different elements of the work by using bombastic choirs, the phraseology specific to the Italian belcanto - fluent, cantabile melodic lines, the use of relatively high registers, and agility in reaching them. An embryonic version of this style was used in Mercury's previous compositions for *My Fairy King* and *The March of the Black Queen*.

The musical form of the *Bohemian Rhapsody* is very complex following the structure of a suite. The piece includes several sections of different musical styles with distinct thematic elements and rhythmical and metric structures specific to each section during its six-minute period. These include the chapter of the capella, the ballad, the guitar solo, the vocal segment with operatic elements, the hard rock part, that is why the song ends in heavy metal style with the extremely short replay of all musical motifs earlier.

The *Bohemian Rhapsody* has a relatively simple tonal plan: B flat major, E flat major, A major, and F major with a metric structure of 4 beats. It begins with an introduction, followed by a ballad played at piano and sang also by Mercury, then a solo guitar leads to an interlude with opera influences followed by a hard rock part that ends with the coda segment.

Intro (0: 00-0: 55) 55 seconds

The introduction debuts with an *a capella* fragment in B flat major. The text begins with a question: *Is this real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, No escape from reality.* After 20 seconds, the text is also accompanied by the piano, the melodic idea is modulated in E flat major and Freddie's voice is distinguished from either solo or alternate singing with the other voices. The soloist presents himself as "*a poor boy*," who doesn't need sympathy "*I need no sympathy*" because everything "*easy come, easy go*" followed by "*Little*

tall, little low (stereo heard in the right side *little high*, while the *little low* comes from the left). The chromatic passage on "easy come, easy go" suggest a dream atmosphere.

The end of this section is marked by the entrance of the bass and piano accompaniment made by cross-tones registers in B flat major. (*Open your eyes, Look at the skies and see, I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy, Because I'm easy come, easy go, A little high, Little low, Anyway the wind blows, does not really matter to me, to me.*)

Example 1

Ballad (0:55 - 2:40) Mom, just killed a man"

This section has two strophes dominated by Freddie's soloist part with both the voice and the piano. The section is developed in B flat major. The debut of this section is marked by cross registered of piano accompaniment along with John Deacon's guitar. Throughout the section, the voices are evolving into a gentle harmonic relations supporting Freddie's passionate solo. Following the lyrical content of the lyrics, this part is considered by certain musical critics as a confessional section.

Example 2

The solist announces a separation by saying that "he has to go" and is preparing to "deal with the truth," admitting "I do not want to die / sometimes I wish he was never born" (*Goodbye Everybody, I've Gotta Leave you all behind and face the truth*). After this verse it comes the guitar solo. In the middle of the section (min. 2.49), Taylor's drums come in and a downward chromatic passage leads to a temporary modulation at E flat major (a subdominant modulation).

In both strophes Mercury uses falsetto to sing some high sounds and at min 2.09, on the piano strings sheets and metal elements are laid deliberately. During in the same period, in the United States and Europe composers like J. Cage, G. Crumb, K. Stockhausen and Bartók explored the same techniques in their compositions called *extended piano techniques*.

Guitar Solo (2:40 - 3:05)

In the middle of the section (min. 2.49), Taylor's drums come. A downward chromatic passage leads to a temporary modulation to E flat major. Towards the end of the ballad section, the track records an increase in intensity by the intervention of a solo guitar (also E flat major).

Exemple 3

The segment continues to increase as the bass descends setting the new key tonality – A major. The text suddenly stopped at min. 3:03, marked by a fragment with chords in staccato preparing the beginning of the next section.

Opera (3:05 - 4:10) *Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do a fandango?*

For making this sections the band needed at last three weeks. The technology present at that time allowed the use of multi voice tracking record 24 bands of tape. At the same time, avant-garde composers such as Edgar Varèse, Pierre Schaeffer, K. Stockhausen, Piere Boulez, or Xenakis were exploring with interest another approach of classical music, the electronical music. A rapid series of rhythmic and harmonic changes introduces a pseudo-opera section that contains most of the voice recording. The lyrics describe the solist's descent into hell. Lyrical references in this passage include *Scaramouche*, *fandango*, *Galileo Galilei*, *Figaro*, *Beelzebut* and *Bismillah*, as rival factions fighting against the author's soul.

Exemple 4

According to Freddie Mercury - from his biography signed by Lesley-Ann Jones - the four characters are a figurative representation of the four members. *Scaramouche* - it can be Mercury, Galileo related with B. May (he graduated astrophysics, mathematics and physics at *Imperial College London*) Roger Taylor (the drummer) associated with Beelzebub, and J. Deacon represented by Figaro, the main character in one of Mozart's opera or rather the animated character of Pinocchio's cartoon (especially watching the movie *Bohemian Rhapsody* we discovered that Freddie loved cats, and in my opinion John's expression brings

more with the curious and playful attitude of little cat, Figaro). While the basic rhythm of the song is maintained, the dynamics varies greatly from bar to bar. Moreover, the persistent rhythmic formula is the fandango-specific one. The section is dominated by Mercury's voice, accompanied by a piano and a chorus with several voices supported by drums, bass, piano, and tympani. The effect of the choir was created by May, Mercury and Taylor singing their vocal parts repeatedly, resulting in 180 separate voices. These were then combined into successive submixes. According to the drummer, Roger, he sang the most acute notes, having a tenor voice, May sang in the lower register, and Freddy in the medium register. The section ends with a coral fragment with the lyrics *Beelzebut has a devil set aside for me!* "On a B flat major chord the drummer Roger Taylor ends with a falsetto sang on a B flat from the fifth octave.

Rock (4:10 - 4:55)

The opera section leads to a rock interlude with a guitar repeated accompaniment (called *riff* - the equivalent of the ostinato in the classical music) followed by three ascending passages performed by B. May.

The image shows a musical score for a guitar riff and piano accompaniment. The guitar part is in E-flat major, indicated by the chord symbol 'E♭' and a fretboard diagram above the first measure. The piano part is in B-flat major, indicated by the chord symbol 'F7' and a fretboard diagram above the second measure. The guitar part consists of a series of ascending eighth notes, and the piano part consists of a series of ascending eighth notes. The score is labeled '84' in the bottom left corner and 'Solo' in the middle of the first measure.

Exemple 5

It seems that this section is also written by Mercury. His intervention with the piano in B flat major and ritardando prepares the end of this part and the beginning of the next tone, the conclusion.

Outro (4:55 - 5:55)

The conclusion is made up by ascending passages with notes that seem to be part of a mixolydian mode on B flat and is interpreted by Freddie; the melody reiterates the tempo and the introduction form - originally played in E flat major and its followed by a short series of modulations, returning to C minor final section *nothing really matters*. Mercury's motifs *nothing really matters again*, accompanied by piano arpeggies, suggesting both resignation (in a minor tonality) and a new sense of freedom in the vocal ambitus. After the verse *nothing really matters* is repeated many times, the song finally ends in E flat major followed by F major.

Example 6

The final lyrics *any kind of wind blows* is followed by the quiet sound of a tam-tam, which dissipates the tension across the song.

Conclusions

In addition, the content of the highly elaborated lyrics, the multitude of styles approached, the ways of connecting these parts, the tonal plan, the intertwining the vocal / instrumental techniques (the cantabile parts, falsetto – specific classical style singing), classic instruments, modern instruments, sound tracks, extended piano techniques (with papers, coins, metal boxes, liquids) all of this elements prove that the *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a musical masterpiece that combines exceptionally the singer, piano interpreter and composer Mercury's qualities. About the *Bohemian Rhapsody* Mercury himself says: *It's one of those songs which such a fantasy feel about it. I think people should just listen to it. I think people should just listen to it, think about it, and then make up their own minds as to what it says to them... Bohemian Rhapsody didn't just come out of thin air. I did a bit research although it was tongue-in-cheek and mock opera. Why not?*⁵ (Jamie Davies)

Exceptionally Freddie Mercury, as a unic singer, pianist and great composer contributed not only to the success of the band, but also to the rock music revival in a diverse cultural era (avant-garde) marked by the development of many genres and musical styles. Numerous works of the Queens are known today by a numerous and diverse audience, constituted of different generations, highly appreciated for the musical, literary and artistic, works which will remain in the posterity along with that of other art innovators. Understanding the composition techniques and process, the influence of rhythms, motifs, overlapping voices, timbrers, harmonique relations, tonalities, new techniques of sound processing, styles and genres influences, finally, understanding the vision and the purpose of the musical work, represent a challenge not only for a musician who desires the subjective knowlege of a work or a composer but also for understanding in an objective way how some composers brought their contributions to art, in generally.

⁵ Jamie Davies in <https://brianmay.com/queen/rcjun93/rcjun93.html>.

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