

Happiness Is a Warm, Paranoid Rhapsody: An Investigation of Multi-Sectional Rock Songs

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis and comparison of rock songs containing multiple (three or more), contrasting sections/parts. Some of these sections could be considered stand-alone compositions, however this paper intends to prove that these individual sections become greater than their sum in context of the entire song. Beginning with Ken Stephenson's explanation of songs whose form falls into the category of compound binary, which he defines as songs that can "be divided into two principal parts," this paper will analyze several songs, using both Brad Osborn's and Mark Spicer's work on form within rock music, referencing their "terminally climactic forms" and "cumulative forms," respectively. The paper will expand upon the ideas these authors present and explore how they can be extrapolated and applied to other songs within the genre. It will also explore how these songs' multiple parts transition effectively, and some of the techniques that are employed to maintain continuity throughout the song. One example focuses on a comparison of the transitional functionality of Brian May's solos in "Bohemian Rhapsody" to the abrupt transitions in "Happiness is a Warm Gun" by the Beatles. In addition to these pieces the paper will also include discussion of the composition "Paranoid Android" by Radiohead as a modern example.

1. Introduction

Irregular forms will always be a point of musical study because they are in and of themselves contradictory and therefore lend themselves to discussion. For something to be considered formulaic, it needs to resemble something well known, but to be considered irregular it has to in some way deviate from expectation. In the canon of rock music, multi-sectional form is considered atypical, because rock music in its origin was typically formulaic relying on some sort of verse/chorus (and sometimes bridge) format. In multi-sectional form artists are given the freedom to take the music anywhere, and without the strain of having to repeat a chorus over and over, some really inventive things can happen.

2. Background

On September 23, 1968 John Lennon and the other Beatles gathered in Studio 2 of Abbey Road to begin recording "Happiness Is a Warm Gun." On October 31, 1975 Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" is released and then goes to number 1 on the British charts. In 1997 the Grammy for the Best Alternative Album went to Radiohead for their breakthrough album *Ok Computer* containing the song "Paranoid Android." None of these tracks follow any conventional rock or pop form, and they each contain various contrasting sections. In his book *What to Listen For in Rock: A Stylistic Analysis* Ken Stephenson provides examples¹ of compound binary form which he defines as a song that, "can be divided into two principal parts."² However Stephenson does not go about categorizing more complex and elongated forms, as well as songs that seem to be made up of much smaller segments juxtaposed.

In the research on ‘irregular’ forms in rock/pop music there are two useful interpretations/models of form; these came from Mark Spicer and Brad Osborn, and their terms are (Ac)cumulative form and Terminally Climactic Form, respectively. Spicer’s term accumulative form is a new take on J. Peter Burkholder’s term ‘cumulative form’ which was initially defined as when “thematic fragments are gradually introduced and developed, only to crystallize into a full-fledged presentation of the main theme in a climactic payoff at the end of the piece.”³ Spicer goes on to specify that one of the most important aspects of his accumulative form is the effect of layering tracks, and introducing them one at a time. Osborn’s Terminally Climactic Form (TCF) he defines as songs that, “seem to be directed toward a single moment of new material at the end.”⁴ He also claims that this new material has a similar effect of a repeated chorus in terms of excitement.

However helpful these models are, they obviously cannot account for all songs that contain forms that could be considered ‘irregular’ (hence the name irregular). Instead, I will use aspects of each of these models in combination to analyze the forms of three songs that fall into the category I call *Multi-Sectional Form*, that is, songs containing multiple, musically contrasting sections, i.e., songs that are through composed. Although each composition is unique, I will be highlighting certain similarities and techniques that each piece utilizes. I will also compare the varying degrees of success these examples have had, as well as where they occurred in the scope of the artists’ careers and how that could have had some influence on the composition.

3. “Happiness Is A Warm Gun” – The Beatles

In the rough acoustic demo recording of this track, released on *Anthology 3*, John Lennon begins at the section with the lyrics “I need a fix ‘cause I’m goin’ down,” and attempts to move into the next section of the song (“Mother superior jump the gun”) but fumbles and exclaims, “Oh shit...wrong chord.” However no other section of the final song (not even the titular section) is present in this early recording, giving one reason to believe that John Lennon most likely came up with those two sections of the song together.

The finished version of the song, formally, is made up of four contrasting sections, which are shown in the table below. “Happiness is a Warm Gun” was one of the most rhythmically interesting/complex songs the Beatles ever wrote; although some of this can be attributed to the sectional nature of the song, it is worth exploring how the rhythm varies from section to section⁵. The first melancholy fingerpicking section is in standard $\frac{4}{4}$ time entirely, with the exception of the fifth bar, which is in $\frac{2}{4}$, and the penultimate bar of the section which is a bar of $\frac{5}{4}$ (the extra two beats of the $\frac{2}{4}$ bar were added to match the lyric “She’s well acquainted with the touch of the velvet hand like a lizard on a windowpane,” and the $\frac{5}{4}$ bar coincides with “A soap impression of his wife, which he ate and donated to the National Trust.”) The song then moves into a bluesy $\frac{3}{4}$ section with irregular phrasing. The first phrase is made up of three measures, while the following two phrases are four bars each⁶; this pattern is played twice, once as an instrumental, the second time with lyrics. Coming then to the third section, “Mother superior jump the gun,” even more complex rhythmic concepts are introduced. First there are two quick bars of $\frac{3}{16}$ (over the lyrics “Mother superior jump the gun”) followed by one of two endings; either a bar of $\frac{2}{16}$ or a bar of $\frac{3}{16}$. So one iteration of the sequence that happens three times is as follows⁷:

$\frac{3}{16}$ $\frac{3}{16}$ $\frac{2}{16}$ $\frac{3}{16}$ $\frac{3}{16}$ $\frac{3}{16}$

The final section, the one that marks the arrival of the title of the song, is accompanied by a return to the $\frac{4}{4}$ we had in the beginning; then after becoming comfortable in that meter, all instruments switch back to the $\frac{3}{4}$ feel, except for the drums, which stay in $\frac{4}{4}$ to add irregular accents against the three pattern. After twelve bars of $\frac{3}{4}$, or for Ringo, four bars of $\frac{4}{4}$ plus an additional $\frac{2}{4}$ bar, they return to the standard $\frac{4}{4}$ groove for four measures before a ritardando and fermata. Lennon then breaks this pause with the word “gun” and leads us out with an additional five measures of the doo-wop groove. The song is built in a similar fashion to Spicer’s accumulative form in that there is “a climactic pay-off” at the end.

Table 1. “Happiness Is a Warm Gun” form chart

| Section | Lyrics | Time |
|---------|------------------------------------|-------|
| A | “She’s not a girl who misses much” | 0’00” |
| B | “I need a fix” | 0’45” |
| C | “Mother superior” | 1’12” |
| D | “Happiness is a warm gun” | 1’35” |

4. “Bohemian Rhapsody” – Queen

“Bohemian Rhapsody” is one of the few songs in history to reach the number 1 spot in the British charts twice: once upon its release in 1975, and then again after the death of Freddie Mercury in 1991. It subsequently made it to the number 2 spot on the American charts after its inclusion in the film *Wayne’s World* (1992). Much of the material that has covered the form of this track has been meticulous and well done. To get a better view of the overall structure of the piece I would like to incorporate Nick Braae’s formal diagram:

Table 2. “Bohemian Rhapsody” form chart⁸

| Section Group | Section | Tonal Centres | Time | Description |
|---------------|---------|---------------|-------|---|
| I | A | Bb | 0’00” | A capella and piano ballad introduction |
| II | B | Bb-Eb | 0’48” | Verse I |
| | B | Bb-Eb | 1’48” | Verse II |
| | B’ | Eb | 2’35” | Guitar Solo |
| III | C | A-Eb | 3’03” | Opera Section |
| IV | D | Eb | 4’08” | Hard-Rock Section |
| V | E | Eb-F | 4’55” | Instrumental/coda |

The first section begins with an acapella choir, consisting entirely of overdubs of Freddie Mercury’s voice, it is then joined by the lead vocal (also Freddie Mercury) which proceeds to set up the narrative of the “poor boy” we will be following over the next five minutes. While “Happiness is a Warm Gun” succeeds in using multi-sectional form to create a variety in lyrical content, “Bohemian Rhapsody” manages to tell one story over the course of several different musical scenarios. In fact although the song is sectional, there are many elements that recur throughout the course of the song.

Lyrically, several lines of the song are repeated at different times in different sections, one that stands out, is the line “any way the wind blows.” This line is said on three occasions, it is finished with the line “doesn’t really matter to me” on the first occasion, establishing the main character’s apathy and overall outlook on life. The second time the line is repeated however the context is very different, first of all it is not sung by the lead vocal, it is sung by a background vocal. This line is referential to the beginning not only in lyrics but timbrally as well, it comes as an interruption of the full voice that the story is being told in, and is reminiscent of the beginning section in which the line was first sung. During this iteration the line falls in between the lyrics “Mama, ooh” and “I don’t wanna die,” this emotional plea not to die establishes that the character has found something that does in fact “matter.” This departure from the

character's initial standpoint is further supported by the fact that this time the line is sung in a different key, E-flat. When this line returns as the last lyric to the song it is in yet another key, this time F, although this last time the line follows the lyric, "Nothing really matters to me," giving the impression that the main character has come to term with his own mortality, or perhaps his apathy has advanced to full on nihilism. The repetition of this lyric acts as a trail of breadcrumbs that helps guide the listener through a series of different musical landscapes.

5. Points of Comparison

The first example that connects these two songs comes in measure five of both songs. Both songs begin with 4 bars that are texturally different from the rest of the section that follows. In "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" the first four bars feature John Lennon's voice and a fingerpicked electric guitar, and by the downbeat of bar five all other instruments have entered and the texture remains consistent throughout the rest of the section. In "Bohemian Rhapsody" the first four measures (as far as I perceive, though they are somewhat rubato) are acapella and at bar five the piano enters to accompany the choir of Freddie Mercury. Three bars later the lead vocal enters with the lyric, "I'm just a poor boy." This effective use of layering gives both songs room for development on a musical idea and doesn't overwhelm the listener right away. Spicer mentions layering at the beginning of songs typical of songs that follow his accumulative form, he refers to it as a "technique of building up a groove gradually from its constituent parts."⁹

Both Spicer's and Osborn's models place a lot of importance on a big, climactic moment at the end. The question that needs to be raised here is, what moment of "Bohemian Rhapsody" is the most climactic? Certainly there is an argument to be made that the operatic middle section is the most intense section, with its imagery of thunderbolts and lightning. This section ends, however, with an ascending sequence on the word me, the last sustained note of this series being Bb or scale degree five in the key of Eb, giving the effect of a V-I cadence, making the release into the "hard-rock" section intensely gratifying. Mercury is quick to employ this trick again moving from the hard rock section into the final instrumental and coda section, this time it is made even more dramatic by the use of a ritardando beforehand and the return of the slower tempo.

The last section of "Happiness is a Warm Gun" is arguably the most climactic and would make the argument to align this song with Brad Osborn's terminally climactic form. Once again this form relies on "a single climactic moment only at the song's ending."¹⁰ Beginning at 1:35 the final section takes up almost half of the song's entire runtime, and bears the closest resemblance to a chorus (more than any other section) in the entire song, with its repeated lyrics and chord sequence, backing vocals, and recitation of the song's title. Another climactic effect added to this section is the use of the ritardando and fermata before Lennon's high sustained note on "gun" occurring at 2:22, at this moment all other instruments cut out to focus all of our attention on the strain in Lennon's voice, but this in turn gives a concluding effect to the last five bars when the instruments re-enter along with the background vocals accompanying the sustain. This effect is mirrored at the end of the hard-rock section in "Bohemian Rhapsody" with the ritardando of the ascending piano line, culminating in the sustained "Ooh." However it is this sustained note that serves the accompaniment function, while the ascending guitar melody holds the listener's attention. This use of ritardando to build up the most climactic moment is useful in songs of this style because it provides a new dramatic way to enter a section, which is key when the form of your song relies on each section being compelling; however this manipulation of time can be used in other ways.

6. "Paranoid Android"— Radiohead

Released as the lead single for *Ok Computer* (1997) "Paranoid Android" made it to number 3 on the British charts. According to the song's author, Thom Yorke, "Paranoid Android" was inspired by the formal structure of "Happiness Is a Warm Gun."¹¹ It follows a multi-sectional form as well, containing four sections although only three are musically distinct, I've created my own form chart below:

Table 3. “Paranoid Android” Form Chart

| Section | Sub-Sections | Time | Lyric |
|---------|------------------------------|-------|--|
| A | Acoustic guitar intro | 0'00" | |
| | Verse 1/Chorus | 0'18" | “Please could you stop the noise/What’s that?” |
| | Verse 2/Chorus | 1'07" | “When I am king/ What’s that?” |
| B | Instrumental | 1'57" | |
| | “Gucci Little Piggy” Section | 2'20" | “Ambition makes you look pretty ugly” |
| | Guitar Solo | 3'04" | |
| | Decrescendo | 3'27" | |
| C | Slow Choral Section | 3'34" | “Rain Down” |
| B' | Coda | 5'36" | |

There are a few things that Radiohead does to pay homage to their inspiration, most notably their use of mixed meter in the B section. In order to give the song a disjunct feel they switch between $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$; first having eight measures of $\frac{4}{4}$ time then following it with 3 bars of $\frac{3}{4}$ plus an additional bar of $\frac{4}{4}$ (that could be counted as $\frac{3}{4}$). Radiohead also displays its mastery of layering in this song, at the beginning of each section they will introduce the entire chord sequence once and then they begin to cycle back through adding lyrics. In the case of the C section it contains four repetitions of the same sixteen bar chord sequence, with a new layer added each time. The first time through, all we hear is the choral part, the next time Thom Yorke’s lead vocal is added, singing “rain down.” The third iteration features the addition of a falsetto vocal countermelody, and the final time yet another vocal layer is added this time with additional melancholy lyrics, concluding with “God loves his children.”

On the other hand there are several things that sets “Paranoid Android” apart from the other two examples we have looked at, the most apparent and pressing of these is pacing. In the other two examples we looked at, both began relatively slow and then as they developed the tempo increased, but at the end of both songs, to give a sense of closure they returned to the opening feel. “Paranoid Android” is the inverse of this, it begins with the manic, faster tempo of the two in the piece, building to a slower middle section, and then returning to the opening tempo. However, it is not the return of the very beginning acoustic verse material, Radiohead chooses instead to go with the irregularly timed B section, adding to the overall ‘paranoid’ aesthetic of the song; although, this inversion of pacing does not change the impact of the multi-sectional form. The opening tempo of a multi-sectional song sets up an expectation for the entirety of a piece, and the (often drastic) change of tempo comes as a surprise to the listener, drawing them in and by extension makes the composition effective.

7. Conclusion

From the inclusion of polyrhythm, to the creation of an entire opera by the voices of three men; multi-sectional forms allow artists to cast off the standards of form and explore entirely new creative grounds. Understanding that a song is multi-sectional can give the listener insight into how a song was composed, and perhaps into the collaborative nature of its creation. What makes multi-sectional rock songs unique is the variety of methods employed to maintain interest throughout the composition, such as mixed meter, multiple tonal centers, or manipulation of the tempo. These devices

are not typically found in the genre of rock/pop music, but in the context of multi-sectional form they are a necessity, and are combined in an effort to make an overall compelling and cohesive work.

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9. Zak, Albin. "Rock and Roll Rhapsody: Pop Epics of the 1970s." *Expression in Pop-Rock Music*, 2nded., ed. Walter Everett, 345-360. <Form>

9. Endnotes

1 Some of the examples listed include the Beatles' "Hey Jude," Derek & the Dominoes' "Layla," and Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven."

2 Stephenson, Ken. "Form." *What to Listen for in Rock: A Stylistic Analysis*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), 141.

3 Spicer, Mark S., (Author). "(Ac)Cumulative Form In Pop-Rock Music." *Twentieth-Century Music* 1.1 (2004): 29-64. *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*. 29.

4 Osborn, Brad, "Subverting The Verse-Chorus Paradigm: Terminally Climactic Forms In Recent Rock Music." *Music Theory Spectrum: The Journal Of The Society For Music Theory* 35.1 (2013): 23

5 Information on the rhythm and timing of "Happiness Is A Warm Gun" was taken from Koskimäki, Jouni, (Author). "Happiness is...a good transcription: Shortcomings in the sheet music publications of Happiness is a warm gun." In *Collected Work: Beatlestudies 2: History, identity, authenticity. Series: Research reports: University of Jyväskylä, Department of music, No. 23* Published by: Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän Yliopisto, 2000. (AN: 2000-43130), Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän Yliopisto, n.d. *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*.

6 In Koskimäki's comparison of differing transcriptions, one version has this section notated as a bar of 9/8 followed by two bars of 12/8. This system would be played twice.

7 This is where I stray from Koskimäki's interpretation, he counts this section as 2 bars of 6/16 with either a bar of $\frac{1}{8}$ or 4/8. I feel having two bars of $\frac{1}{8}$ is more conducive to counting the bassline.

8 This chart was adapted from Braae, Nicholas, 2015. "Sonic patterns and compositional strategies in Queen's Bohemian rhapsody." *Twentieth-Century Music* 12, no. 2: 182. *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*, EBSCOhost.

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