AREA OF STUDY 2:
Vocal music

Vocal music includes any works that feature singing, from short songs to large-scale pieces for large choirs, with or without accompaniment.

For the purpose of the GCSE exam, the focus in this area of study is on songs for one or more solo voices with instrumental accompaniment. The first set work dates from 1692 while the second is a rock song from 1974, written nearly 300 years later.

Set work 1

Purcell: 'Music for a While'

Period and genre

Mid-Baroque. Solo song (with continuo accompaniment).

Context

Henry Purcell worked in London towards the end of the 17th century and is widely regarded as one of the greatest composers in the history of English music. Although he died at the age of only 36, he composed music for the church, the stage and for important royal occasions, and he wrote many shorter pieces, including songs and instrumental works.

'Music for a While' is **incidental music** – music intended to be performed as part of a play. It is about the power of music and is one of several songs Purcell wrote (probably in 1692) for *Oedipus*, a play by the leading poet of the late 17th century, John Dryden, and the dramatist Nathaniel Lee. It is loosely based on a classical Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* (Oedipus the King), written in 430 BC.

In Dryden and Lee's play, 'Music for a While' is sung to raise the ghost of King Laius from the dead, in the hope of discovering the identity of his murderer (who turns out to be his son, Oedipus). Alecto was a minor deity from ancient Greece who avenged crimes. She was said to have snakes for hair and to torment the guilty with a studded whip. In Dryden's poem, music soothes her fury until she drops the whip and the snakes fall from her head.

Resources

- Solo voice and continuo (harpsichord and bass viol on the Anthology recording).
- Purcell wrote just a melody and an (unfigured) bass part for the song. He did not specify the type of voice, but in the play it was probably originally sung by a male singer with a high voice (either a tenor or countertenor)
- On the Anthology recording the music is transposed from its original key of C minor up to A minor, and is performed by a soprano. The bass part is played on a bass viol (a six-stringed predecessor of the cello) and is doubled by the harpsichordist's left hand. The right-hand of the harpsichord part is an elaborate realisation of the harmony implied by Purcell's bass.

Structure

Purcell constructed the song over a ground bass – a constantly repeating bass pattern above which a melody unfolds. It was a popular device in 17th-century music, especially in pieces by Purcell who was a master of the technique.

The ground in 'Music for a While' is three bars in length and is based on a four-note sequence formed from rising 5ths alternating with falling 6ths. It climbs from the tonic to the dominant of A minor (from A to E, printed in red below):

The ground is heard 12 times in succession, but Purcell avoids monotony by modulating to related keys in the middle (B) section of the song, changing the length of the ground in the process, as shown below:

The opening music, set to the opening words, returns in bar 29 to create an overall ternary form (ABA¹) for the song:

- The first (A) section is in the key of A minor, ending with a modulation to the dominant key (E minor)
- The middle (B) section is characterised by modulations through related keys, and by shortened and lengthened versions of the ground bass

- The final section returns to A minor and is labelled A^1 above to show that the singer on the Anthology recording ornaments the original melody for this repeat and that Purcell extended the ending in order to finish on the tonic chord.

Tonality

The song is in A minor, with modulations to related keys in the middle section, as described above.

The upper notes at the start of the ground bass (E – F – F♯ – G – G♯ – A) form a chromatic scale that sometimes leaves the tonality ambiguous, but modulations are always confirmed by perfect cadences.

Melody

The vocal melody:

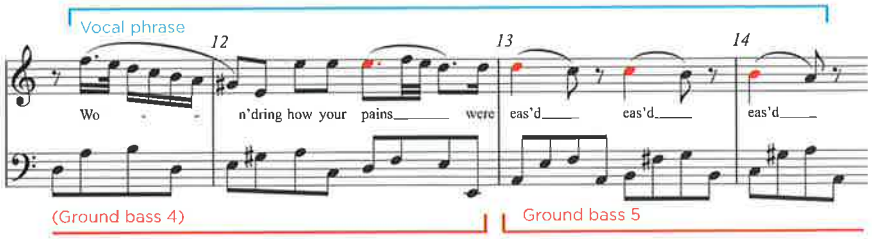
- Combines stepwise movement with occasional leaps
- Contains frequent **passing notes** between chord notes
- Has a **range** of just over an octave, from E above middle C to the F a minor 9th higher (the top G in bar 36 is not by Purcell)
- Incorporates rests for expressive effect
- Includes both rising sequences (e.g. on 'Wond'ring' in bars 10–12) and falling sequences (e.g. on 'eas'd' in bars 13–15).

The many ornaments in the soprano and right-hand harpsichord parts are not by Purcell but have been added by the performers, following the style commonly used in Baroque slow movements. They include:

- **Upper mordents** (indicated by 𝆑, e.g. in bar 11)
- **Lower mordents** (indicated by 𝆒, e.g. in bar 11)
- **Appoggiaturas** (indicated by a note printed in small type in e.g. bar 5)
- **Slides** and **grace notes** (e.g. the notes in small type in bar 6)
- **Trills** (indicated by ***tr*** above the vocal stave in bar 13)
- **Arpeggiation** (indicated by the wavy line in e.g. the last bar of the song).

Apart from the appoggiatura (which usually takes at least half the value of the note that follows) these decorative notes are usually very short. For example, the upper mordent consists of a rapid wiggle from the printed note to the note above and back, while the trill consists of a rapid repeated alternation of the printed note with the note a step above. The arpeggio sign indicates that the notes of the chord are played in rapid succession, from low to high, instead of sounding together.

As in many of his ground bass songs, Purcell avoids predictability by sometimes continuing the vocal phrase beyond the end of the ground so that the two parts do not always end their phrases together:



(The notes in red above are suspensions, explained below.)

Word setting and word painting

- The word setting is mainly **syllabic**, but Purcell uses a **melisma** for the words 'wond'ring' (= wondering) and 'eternal'
- Purcell frequently repeats words in the text, such as 'Music' at the start, 'all' in bars 7–9 and 'drop' (sung nine times in succession in bars 23–25).

The many examples of word-painting in this song include:

- The rising chromaticism and eerily angular outline of the ground bass, suggesting the spirit of Laius rising from his bones
- Six repetitions of 'all', separated by rests, to suggest a multitude (bars 7–9, with even more repetitions in the final bars of the song)
- Melismas to illustrate the contemplative nature of 'wond'ring' (bars 10–11)
- A suspension to create a harsh discord on 'pains' in bar 12 (E in the voice clashes with the accompanying chord of D minor), followed by...
- A chain of suspensions in bars 13–14, where the resolution of each dissonance onto a warm consonance repeatedly occurs on the word 'eased'. These dissonant notes are shown in red in the example above
- The words 'free the dead' in bars 16–17 are set to one of the few ascending phrases in the song, and are in the more cheerful key of G major
- The word 'eternal' in bars 19–21 is set to long melismas that keep winding around the same few notes to portray the everlasting nature of death
- Purcell repeats the word 'drop' on quaver off-beats nine times in bars 23–25, to suggest the snakes dropping away from Alecto's head.

Rhythm and dynamics

The music is in simple quadruple metre ($\frac{4}{4}$ time).

The rhythm of the ground bass is entirely in quavers, creating a steady tread known as a **walking bass** that doesn't cease until the final bar of the entire song.

The vocal part follows the rhythm of the words and is written mainly in quavers and semiquavers, with **syncopation** for the off-beat notes on 'drop' in bars 23–25. Tied notes and dotted rhythms appear in the right-hand harpsichord part. In common with much music written before 1700 there are no dynamic or

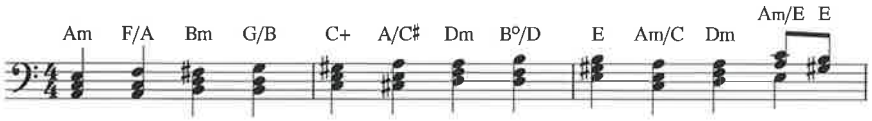
expression markings and no tempo is specified – decisions on these matters were left to the performers. The nature of the **lyrics**, along with the continuous quaver pulse of the ground, suggest that the music is counted in quavers, eight to the bar, which will result in a slow tempo.

Texture

- Homophonic texture (melody and accompaniment)
- The elaborate harpsichord realisation sometimes creates counterpoint with the vocal part, including some short imitative points, such as in bars 9 and 11 (in which the accompanist's right-hand part anticipates the descending scales in the vocal part, so that the singer appears to be imitating the accompaniment).

Harmony

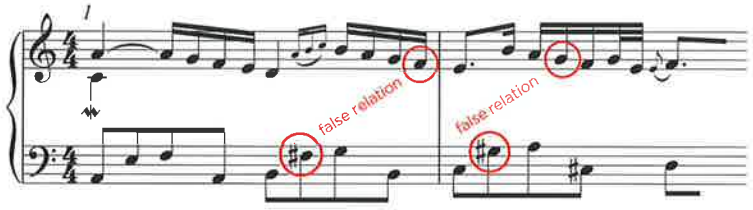
The chord progression dictated by the ground bass mainly consists of alternate root-position and first-inversion triads:



The + symbol indicates an augmented triad (the interval from C to G♯ is an augmented 5th) and ° indicates a diminished triad.

Similar chords are used even when Purcell transposes and extends the pattern in the middle of the song. Variety comes from the changing layouts and decorations provided by the harpsichordist, and in the different passing notes and suspensions introduced into the vocal part.

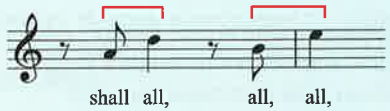
The realisation contains examples of one of the fingerprints of 16th- and 17th-century English music. Called a **false relation**, it consists of two different forms of the same pitch occurring in different parts together or in close proximity. In the example below, the notes F♯ in the left hand and F(♮) in the right hand of bar 1, form a false relation, as do the notes G♯ in the left hand and G(♮) in the right hand of bar 2:



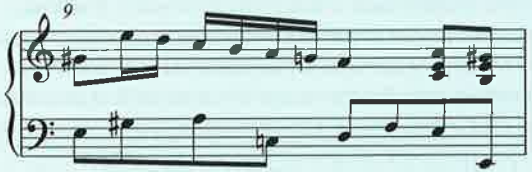
Another feature of 17th-century English harmony occurs on the third beat of bar 23, where the chord of A major instead of A minor on 'snakes' forms a **tierce de Picardie** – a major tonic chord ending a cadence in a minor key.

Test yourself

1. What type of instrument is a bass viol?
   i. Woodwind ii. Brass iii. String iv. Percussion v. Keyboard
2. In which century did Purcell live?
3. The structure of 'Music for a While' can be represented by the letters ABA^1. What name is given to this form?
4. Name ***two*** ways, other than lyrics, in which the B section of this song differs from the A sections.
5. What are the ***two*** main types of word setting in vocal music?
6. Name the device shown by the bracketed notes.



7. Name ***two*** types of ornament used in 'Music for a While'.
8. Give ***three*** examples of word painting from 'Music for a While'.
9. What name is given to a note that is held over from a previous chord to form a dissonance and that then resolves by moving to a note of the new chord?
10. What is incidental music?
11. Circle ***two*** notes in the example below that form a false relation.



Answers: See page 69

Set work 2

'Killer Queen' (from the Queen album *Sheer Heart Attack*)

Context

The rock group Queen was formed in London in 1970–71 by four college students, all of whom would go on to write hit songs for the band:

Freddie Mercury	(lead singer and pianist)
Brian May	(lead guitar and backing vocals)
Roger Taylor	(drums and backing vocals)
John Deacon	(bass guitar)

'Killer Queen', a song about a high-class prostitute who enjoys eating caviar and drinking Moët and Chandon champagne, was written by Freddie Mercury and is a track from Queen's third studio album (and first major success), *Sheer Heart Attack*, released in 1974.

Freddie Mercury (1946–1991) was the stage name of Farrokh Bulsara, born to Persian parents on the island of Zanzibar, East Africa. From the age of eight he was sent to an English boarding school in India, where he learnt the piano and played in the school's rock and roll band. When Mercury was 17, he moved with his family to Feltham in west London. He studied at Ealing College of Art, but already his thoughts were turning towards a career in music.

Although Queen were part of the succession of British male groups that followed in the footsteps of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, by the early 1970s rock had diversified into various sub-genres, including progressive rock (sometimes called art rock) which was a major influence on Queen's earliest work. However, the band is now known for the range of its musical styles, from piano-based pop and songs that evoke 1950s' rockabilly and 1920s' vaudeville, to power ballads and hard rock numbers, all presented in well-crafted arrangements with expert production techniques, and often featuring vocals in four-part **close harmony** and **overdubbed** guitar parts. Their best-known track is the six-minute long *Bohemian Rhapsody* (1975), but they are also remembered for sing-along anthems such as *We Will Rock You* and *We Are the Champions* (both 1977).

Date and genre

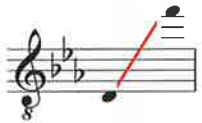
'Killer Queen' was written in 1974 and is a rock song.

Queen adopted a style of performance popular at the time that is known as glam rock. It involved male performers with big hairstyles, dressed in flamboyant clothes with glitter and wearing boots with platform soles. Presentation included a large drum kit mounted high on a platform called a drum riser, state-of-the-art stage effects such as smoke, dry ice, fireworks and elaborate lighting. Despite all this, Queen were particularly interested in the use of studio effects, even though some of these were difficult or impossible to recreate in their live performances. Although synthesisers were available at the time, Queen did not use them until the 1980s.

Resources

Lead vocal, piano and most of the backing vocals (including the overdubbed three- and four-part harmony in the chorus) are all performed by Freddie Mercury. Mercury overdubbed the piano part with the same music played on a 'honky-tonk' or 'jangle' piano, in which tacks in the hammers create a tinny, retro effect.

Freddie Mercury was famed for the quality and range of his voice, with its ability to glide effortlessly between high tenor and falsetto (listen for falsetto in bars 11–13). In this song he covers a range of two octaves and a 3rd:

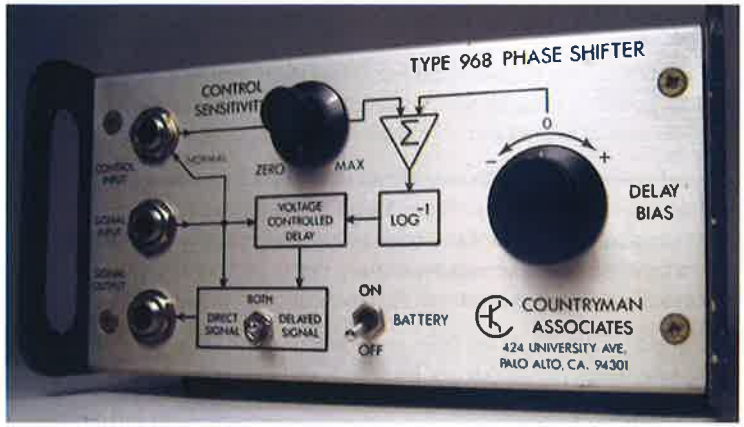


Brian May played guitar (again with much overdubbing to produce the parts marked Gtr 2, 3 and 4 in the score). Roger Taylor played drums and John Deacon played bass guitar. Much of the bass guitar part doubles the left hand of the piano part and so is not shown separately in the Anthology score, but listen for features such as the prominent descending bass-guitar scale in bar 38.

Listen for two additional percussion instruments: a triangle (heard on the first beat of bar 29) and windchimes (struck on the word 'you' in bar 68).

Like most pop and jazz, 'Killer Queen' was not originally written in music notation. The score in the Anthology was made by writing down what is played on the recording – a type of score known as a **transcription**. It includes several special signs and abbreviations:

~~	e.g. bar 7	**Vibrato** – continual small fluctuations of pitch to warm the sound of a note
8va----	e.g. bar 19	**An ottava sign** – a direction that the notes sound an octave higher than written
	e.g. bar 26 and bar 28	**Tremolo** – a rapid repetition of a note, indicating a cymbal roll in bar 26 and a snare drum roll in bar 28
	e.g. bar 30	**Pitch bend** – a small slide in pitch away from a note and back again
	e.g. bar 34	**Slide** – a smooth glide in pitch from one note to the next
P.M.	bar 69	**Palm Mute** – damping the strings with the side of the hand while plucking to produce a very dark, dry sound



A Countryman Phase Shifter

Queen enthusiastically embraced the latest studio technology in their recordings. In 'Killer Queen' sound engineer Roy Thomas Baker reported that the distinctive sound on the words 'laser beam' in bar 17 was produced by a Countryman **Phase Shifter**, a device that had appeared on the market only a few months before the recording.

In addition to the extensive use of **overdubbing** to produce the multiple guitar tracks (all played by Brian May) and four-part vocals in the chorus (all sung by Freddie Mercury) there is **reverb** on the lead vocal, but not on the backing vocals (so the latter sounds as tight as possible, aided by treble boost and compression) and carefully controlled **distortion** on the solo guitar part. Note the use of a **wah-wah** effect in the guitar parts of bar 62. Sounds are carefully panned in the stereo mix (listen for 'anytime' in the backing vocals being **panned** hard right in bar 19 and similar places, and for the stereo separation of the overlapping guitar parts in bars 55–6 and at the end of the song).

Structure

'Killer Queen' is in verse-and-chorus form, as shown in the table, below. The small superscript numbers indicate beats (so 2^4 means bar 2, beat 4).

The section labelled 'instrumental' in bars 23–26 of the Anthology is merely a four-bar link from the end of the first chorus to the start of the second verse The guitar solo in bars 44–61^3 replaces the voice in the second part of Chorus 2 and the first part of Verse 3 and would more usually be described as an instrumental:

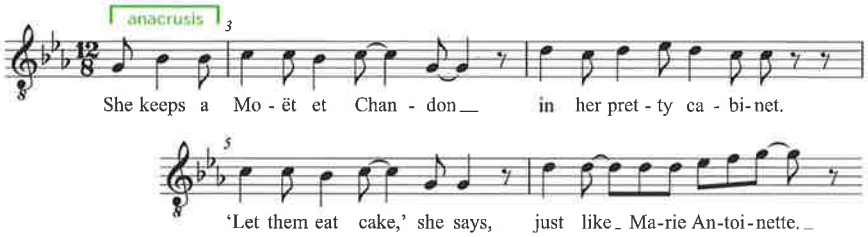
Bar 2^3	0:02	Verse 1	
Bar 14^4	0:27	Chorus 1	
Bar 23	0:44	Instrumental	
Bar 26^4	0:51	Verse 2	
Bar 38^4	1:15	Chorus 2	**Guitar solo** (Bars 44 to 61) (1:25 to 2:00)
Bar 51	1:40	Verse 3	
Bar 69^2	2:16	Chorus 3	
Bar 79	2:35	Outro	

The six finger-clicks that set the tempo and overlap with the start of the vocal are just a lead-in – they are too insubstantial to be called an introduction.

Melody

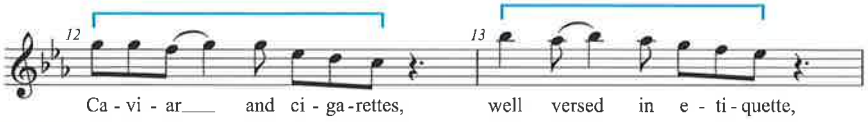
- The melody initially moves by step and small intervals, but the leaps get progressively wider (e.g. a rising 6th in bars 6–7 and 10–11, and a rising octave in bars 20–21).

- The verses start with a two-bar vocal phrase that is repeated with its ending changed to finish on a climactic top G rather than on C:

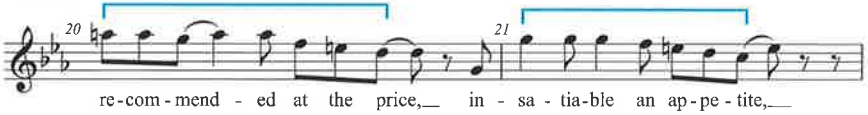


- To avoid predictability, the next phrase is extended to five bars by the insertion of a $\frac{6}{8}$ bar (bar 10).
- Bar 12 is repeated in a modified rising **sequence** to form Bar 13. The same **falling-5th motif** is used in the chorus, where it forms a modified falling sequence in bars 20–21:

Verse 1



Chorus



- Notice the use of **portamento** on the word 'queen' in bar 15.
- Unusual phrase lengths occur again in the chorus, where its eight bars are structured as five bars followed by three bars.
- The chorus is followed by a four-bar instrumental bridge (or link).
- Every verse and chorus begins with an **anacrusis** (known as a pickup in pop and jazz), as shown in the first example on this page.

The rest of the song follows a similar pattern, with small changes in the melody to accommodate different words and some extra detail to provide variety. Changes are a little more extensive in the guitar solo, which replaces the voice in the second part of chorus 2 and the first part of verse 3. The outro is based on the link that follows the choruses.

- The word setting is almost entirely syllabic, with occasional spoken text (shown by x-headed notes, e.g. in bar 38).
- The backing vocals sometimes include **vocables** (nonsense syllables, such as 'ooh' in bars 8–11 and 'ba, ba, ba, ba' in bar 18).

- There is little word painting, other than the upward slide to emphasise the sarcastic use of 'queen' in the chorus, the phaser effect to make 'laser beam' sound unworldly two bars later and the climactic top notes and busy drum part for 'absolutely drive you wild' in bars 66–67.

Rhythm

- Most of the song is in compound quadruple metre – four dotted-crotchet beats (= 12 quavers) per bar – giving the rhythm a **swing** feel.
- The tempo is moderately fast, at 112 dotted-crotchet beats per minute.
- There is frequent use of **syncopation** (e.g. the tied notes in bars 3, 7, 8 etc).
- Each verse and chorus begins with an **anacrusis**.

Tonality

The song is in E♭ major but the tonality is sometimes ambiguous. Verses start in C minor and choruses are in B♭ major, but both quickly modulate.

However, the song does end with a perfect cadence in E♭ major and it fades out on the tonic chord of that key.

Harmony

- Mostly root position triads with occasional inversions and 7th chords. Chords are mainly diatonic, with occasional chromatic chords (e.g. A♭m in bar 9).
- Some use of expressive dissonance (e.g. G above a chord of $B♭^7$ in the lead vocal of bar 11, resolving to the chord note of F).
- Short **tonic pedal** in C minor at the start of each verse and a **dominant pedal** (F in the key of B♭) in the instrumental links following the first two choruses.
- Freddie Mercury's multi-tracked backing vocals in bars 15–17 and elsewhere produce a succession of **parallel harmonies** in three and four parts.
- **Descending chromatic scale** from tonic to dominant of E♭ major in lead guitar, bass guitar and piano left hand in bars 7–9.
- **Circle of 5ths** progression in bars 20–21 (A – Dm – G^7 – C).
- Guitar parts in bar 55 produce **bell chords** (in which notes are sustained in downward succession instead of being played together).

Texture

- **Homophonic**, gradually increasing in density from a very light-textured start.
- **Chordal** texture for the vocals at the start and end of the chorus.
- Guitar parts in parallel 3rds in the link following the first chorus (bars 23–26).
- Brief contrapuntal fragments in the accompaniment (e.g. in bar 62, where guitar 4 imitates the lead vocal, and during the fade-out).

Test yourself

1. Name a hit by Queen, other than 'Killer Queen'.
2. Name the instrument that plays throughout most of 'Killer Queen' but that does not have a separate part shown in the Anthology score.
3. What is an anacrusis?
4. Complete this sentence: In $\frac{12}{8}$ time there are _____ dotted-crotchet beats per bar.
5. How are the x-headed notes ( ) in the score of 'Killer Queen' performed?
6. What is the technical name for a vocal slide in pitch, such as that heard on the word 'queen' in this song?
7. The sign ~~~~ in the score shows where the lead guitarist uses vibrato. What is vibrato?
8. Name the vocal technique used by Freddie Mercury to sing the highest notes in 'Killer Queen'.
9. What name can be used to describe the chord progression A – Dm – G^7 – C?
10. What are vocables?
11. Why are the following described as parallel chords?

Answers: See page 70