A comparison of the production of popular music works: the classic pop works of the 1970s century and the reproduction of the classics in the current pop industry---- Take Queen as an example

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Abstract. The aim of this study is to explore the production comparison of popular music works. Taking Queen as an example, by comparing *A Night at the Opera* released in 1975 and *Bohemian Rhapsody: The Original Soundtrack released in 2018*, I have found differences in their underlying production logic and discussed the reasons for these differences. In summary, this study reveals the differences in the production logic between classic pop music and current pop industry's reproduction of them, and provides some constructive insights.

Keywords: Reproduction of pop classics; Queen; *A Night At the Opera*.

1. Introduction

It's been over forty years since Queen formed. Their place in the music industry, glowing performances on stage and those great songs have never been less, but have even shone brighter with the passage of time. What behind their success, and the enduring appeal they still enjoy today, is the logic behind the making of pop music. This article looks at Queen's most acclaimed album *A Night at the Opera* released in 1975, *Bohemian Rhapsody: The Original Soundtrack* released in 2018, and the comparison between them.

2. Queen's most important album: A Night At the Opera

As one of the brightest albums of the 1970s and Queen's most celebrated creation, *A Night at the Opera* was released on 21 November 1975. The album was certainly pivotal in their career, not only in terms of artistic achievement, but also because it was at a point of life and death for the band. As Brian May said, "if A Night At the Opera hadn't been the huge success it was I think we would have just disappeared under the ocean someplace. So we were making this album knowing that its, its live or die [1]".

Despite the commercial success of their former album *Sheer Heart Attract*, released in 1974, Queen were still facing financial hardship due to an unfair contract with Trident Studios, which left them on the verge of bankruptcy and each member in dire straits. This growing frustration led Freddie Mercury to write the resentful accusation "Death on Two Legs", the opening track to *A Night at the Opera.* The band then hired the band manager Jim Beach and John Reid and eventually terminated their contract with Trident Studios. With the exception of "God Save the Queen", which was recorded in October 1974, they no longer used Trident Studios for recording.

As Queen's fourth album, *A Night At the Opera* is already a very different production from their first two albums, Queen *I* and Queen *II*. *Queen I* and *Queen II* are largely a reflection of Queen's experimentation and mastery of contemporary avant-garde rock and heavy metal, which is assured and skillful. Although the first two albums are extraordinary, it is clear that they were still in the exploratory stage: there were too many ideas, and too many melodies and chord change that they wanted to put on the album at this stage, which prevented their ambitious tunes from being represented most effectively. In Queen *I*, it's clear that the band was focusing on intense heavy metal,

while Mercury's distinctive vocal talents, which should have been the Queen's ace in the hole, were downplayed, leaving him under-represented on this album. It was on *Queen II* that he came into his own, and the use of his voice became more diversified and respected, laying the groundwork for what would become one of the greatest rock frontmen of all time. And in their third album *Sheer Heart Attack*, we can find that this band's conscious simplification of the album's production is beginning to have good chemistry, and instead of just hearing a lot of great moments, we find them putting each of their interesting and powerful ideas into individual songs with proper attention and development. For example, the first real pop classic "Killer Queen" of Queen was finally born, which also perfectly showed their humor and sauciness. *Sheer Heart Attack* breaks out of the confines of metal and hard rock and embraces more mainstream genres: while fantasy is still an important part of their sound, they draw more inspiration from everyday life.

Although we can find the Queen influenced by Led Zeppelin in many ways: Brian May's love of thick, distorted power chord riffs from the Jimmy Page school of axe-slinging and 'light and shade' with his iconic handmade Red Special guitar and meticulous multitracking to craft intricate orchestrations. In addition, Queen not only came and went freely between the two mainstream loud rock forms (heavy metal and prog) of that time but also included grand songs composed of multiple parts in their bold attempts, as well as works inspired by or describing fantasy [2]. In terms of song layout, they all put the more rustic arrangements or tunes at the front of the album, with the flamboyant and grandiose songs at the back of the side or the album. But to say that *A Night At the Opera is* a Queen version of *Led Zeppelin IV* would certainly be an understatement of Queen. As Queen had developed their own stylistic identity throughout their first three albums, and these had been maturely expressed in *A Night At the Opera*: the heavy guitars, pop hooks, great sense of humor, and theatrical style with studio wizardry.

The most important album in the creative career of a band as vibrant and still in its formative years as Queen, *A Night at the Opera lives* up to its name, unfolding like a multi-act drama, one of the most impressive scenes being their lively, humorous, and playful nature. "Lazing On A Sunday Afternoon" and "Seaside Rendezvous" are both short, but full of subtle ideas and wonderful gags. Queen's trademark artifice and eccentricity are on full display here, which manifests Mercury's preference for the interesting high-camp style and vaudeville rock. "Lazing On A Sunday Afternoon" is only a minute or so long, but it showcases Queen's ingenuity through Mercury's playing and singing as if he were improvising on the street and his harmony, Roger's carefully elaborated two ride cymbals and small bells, and May's solo played with three-four guitars. It's a short but very rich piece of life. In "Seaside Rendezvous", Queen's experimental approach to composition and recording is most evident in the way Mercury and Roger use their voices to simulate various wind instruments, and the "tap dance" segment of the second verse is performed by them with thimbles on their fingers hitting the mixing desk [3]. There is a certain exaggerated, mimetic, disguised feel to the Camp style that Freddie Mercury and the other members of Queen bring to the fore. The fact that they are now one of the most famous Queer icons makes this brand of camp more inseparable from Queen's musical expression, which is tied to both mainstream culture and subculture.

Although they have gradually mastered the essentials of simplification and refinement, Queen's collaboration on lyrical production continues to be tacit and rich, with each member contributing (Mercury wrote five songs, May four, Taylor and Deacon one each). Each member's personalities and talents are properly displayed, and every novel idea is treated with respect and care, especially as they have always been big advocates of actively experimenting with different musical elements and recording methods, and are committed to treating the studio as their own laboratory. And in the making of this album, even though Queen was in a bad position at the time and the whole album was tinged with desperation, they still invested very high financial costs to effectively support their artistic pursuits.

In addition to Mercury's vaudevillian take on camp, as mentioned above, Brian May, who is almost equal to Mercury in terms of compositional contribution, is also at home in the mysterious and far-reaching prog rock, folk, and traditional jazz. May fantasized about a cosmic journey and the passage

of love and time with the sci-fi-tinged folk song "39". In May's "Prophet Song", inspired by a dream of a great flood, a stunningly delayed vocal performance is presented - from Mercury and the rising and falling harmonies - and ends further with May's iconic guitar solos to close the show. In addition to this, May used an instrument that Queen rarely uses, a toy koto. As the first track on Side Two, it also acts as a kind of buffer between the two sides of the album, although as the longest vocal track on Queen, the eight-minute piece shows a slowdown that cannot be ignored in terms of the album's coherence, especially when we find it ending with the next song, the famous and later crowd-pleasing chorus The soft rock "Love of my life" is a wonderfully seamless segue. "Good Company" shows his amazing ability to arrange different kinds of guitars and to recreate and adapt classic traditional jazz. In addition to the Red Special guitar, his father's ukulele banjo was also used deftly in it. The other two members, Roger Taylor and John Deacon, also showed excellent performances. "I'm in Love With My Car", a song drummer Roger Taylor a song that drummer Roger Taylor fought for a long time against the rest of the band for its place on Side One, Taylor's Zeppelinesque drums have a very distinctive presence in this hard rock song, especially since it is a song that he wrote and likes very much. Deacon's love letter to his wife, "You are my best friend", is also an excellent ballad piece that is quite difficult to ignore. It's relaxing and elegant in a swing feel. As the second hit of the album, this song, which reflects the songwriting talents of the ever-understated Deacon, was later used as an interlude in many films and TV shows and is an enduring pop classic.

But no matter how good the other songs are, or how good the album as a whole is, the greatest and transcendent scene in the multi-act play *A Night At the Opera* will always be "Bohemian Rhapsody". The six-minute epic suite is a true "Fred's Thing", with Freddie Mercury starting to work out some melody and thoughts of the song in the late 1960s and not having it recorded until 1975, putting all those bits and pieces in his head into a complete work. Although Freddie Mercury has never explicitly explained the piece, it is undoubtedly the one that most connects with Mercury's spirituality, which is why Queen's 2018 biopic is titled "Bohemian Rhapsody". Although it is nearly six minutes long, it is never long or boring because of its rich and beautiful compositions (it includes a cappella introduction, ballad, opera, hard rock, and coda), which are contradictory and struggling but coexist harmoniously in this song. All that sends the listener listeners on a journey of disillusionment along with Queen and the song's protagonist. The complexity of the song's composition and the limitations of recording technology at the time also made recording difficult, with producer Roy Thomas Baker dominating recording sessions, the production team worked together to push the limits of eight generations of 24-track tape with this song. The opera section alone took three weeks to record. And as a great showcase for Queen's artistic talent, the quirky behemoth was a huge hit at the pre-release radio demo and broke the time limit on the length of the released pop single. After its official release, there was no doubt that it dominated the pop charts. After the climax of "Bohemian Rhapsody", the great album came to a close with the May-arranged "God Save The Queen", a magnificent finale to the multi-act drama.

A Night At the Opera is the crown jewel of Queen's career, and its success underscores the fact that Queen has surpassed all other bands in the history of rock, in terms of group and individual creativity, in terms of recording experimentation and technique, and in terms of commercial appeal and challenge to mainstream aesthetics, to become the true kings of the genre, and will remain untouchable in history. The band has become a true Queen.

3. Production of Bohemian Rhapsody: The Original Soundtrack

Queen's musical biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* was released in 2018. It was directed by Bryan Singer, written by Anthony McCarten, and distributed by 20th Century Fox. Queen members Brian May and Roger Taylor also served as consultants on the film. It focuses on the life of lead singer Freddie Mercury, played by Rami Malek, and the band's formation in 1970 through to their 1985 Live Aid performance at the original Wembley Stadium. *Bohemian Rhapsody* was a huge success on release, and despite mixed reviews from the industry, it was welcome by audiences and became a huge box-

office success. It set all-time box office records for the biopic and drama genres and won numerous awards.

Since the film's release, Queen has once again risen to the forefront of pop music, with Mercury's legendary and controversial life attracting more discussion and new fans. "Bohemian Rhapsody" was officially the most popular song of the 20th century - as of December 2018, the single had surpassed 1.6 billion global streams across all streaming servers [4]. On 19 October 2018, the soundtrack of the movie was released by Hollywood Records and Virgin EMI Records, on CD, cassette, and digital formats. As an OST for a movie, it was a commercial success. Globally, the album peaked in the top 10 of the 25 Albums chart, with a total of 45 weeks in the UK top 10, making it one of Queen's best-selling albums for over 40 years. It debuted at No. 2 on the Billboard 200 chart in its 18th week. It was also the sixth best-selling album on the UK year-end chart of 2019. This OST has been certified Platinum in several countries including the UK, Australia and Japan [5]. Thus, with the modern re-production and packaging of the modern pop industry, through the release of biographical films and film OSTs, Queen has been back in the public eye in a different light than usual.

At present, most scholars only study the recording of this film soundtrack and its connection to Queen's original albums represented by *A Night At the Opera* from a general perspective. We have not yet found a comparative study completely based on music. Therefore, this paper will take music as the starting point for comparative study.

The most obvious difference from a musical perspective is in the song selection. As the most powerful support to depict the iconic rock band's movie image, Bohemian *Rhapsody: The Original Soundtrack* includes Queen's most well-known greatest hits, which are intricately woven into the plot and expression of the film, such as "Love Of My Life", "Killer Queen", "Another One Bites The Dust", and "Under Pressure", among the beloved classics. It is worth mentioning that it opens with the "20th Century Fox Fanfare" arranged by guitarist Brian May, showcasing his unique guitar riff and perfectly setting the tone for this story about Queen and Freddie Mercury on the big screen. What sets this OST apart is not only its inclusion of numerous live audio recordings, but particularly those extracted from Queen's energetic performances at the 1985 Live Aid charity concert. This performance marked a resurgence in interest for Queen after years of decline, reminding people of the charismatic band that could drive them wild, just as they would soon lose Freddie Mercury in his battle against AIDS. It was a particularly heart-wrenching moment for fans. At the same time, we're also treated to early live renditions of classics like "Keep Yourself Alive" from Rainbow Live in 1974, "Fat Bottomed Girls" from Paris Live in 1979, and "Now I'm Here" by Hammersmith Odeon in 1975. However, the standout track is undoubtedly the sing-along rendition of "Love of My Life" from 1985's Live in Rio. The cheers and choruses from the crowd were truly immersive. Furthermore, there are a few surprises thrown in, such as the inclusion of Smile's "Doing All Right," a band that May and Taylor were in before they officially met Mercury, which has been resurrected on this OST.

Bohemian Rhapsody: The Original Soundtrack is designed for a broad audience and not just for collectors, so it includes only a few live audio tracks that have never been officially released. Despite the significance of Live Aid both in the film and in reality, some performances from Queen's this concert are missing, such as "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" and "We Will Rock You." In fact, even part of "Radio Gaga" was omitted from the film to ease the producers' concerns about its length. However, this soundtrack boasts the full live audio of "Radio Gaga" [6]. Although some fans may find the selection disappointing, it does offer a balance with popular tracks like "Another One Bites the Dust", "Under Pressure", and other unreleased live cuts, along with a few songs created specifically for the movie.

Apart from selecting music that is more tailored to the current audience, in terms of song arrangement, most of the tracks on this OST are 2011 remastered versions, except for a few live performances and songs specifically re-made or produced for the movie, with only "I Want To Break Free" using the 2018 remastered version. In the re-recorded "Doing All Right" from the original Smile singer Tim Staffell, a suite is revived that evokes the spaced-out sound of the 1970s and early Zeppelin, complete with hippie harmonies and a pastoral midsection that culminates in headbanging [7]. The

"movie mix" of "We Will Rock You" on this OST combines the studio version with a live recording. Additionally, there is a new version of "Don't Stop Me Now" with a new guitar line, a clearer guitar solo reminiscent of Brian May's live performances, and a fading outro that gives the whole arrangement a more cinematic and narrative quality.

In these aspects, we can see the differences between OST and the original albums in terms of production.

4. Comparison of production logic behind A Night At the Opera and Bohemian Rhapsody: The Original Soundtrack

Although times are changing while the technology of music production and mediums of distribution are evolving, the logic behind the production of each album - especially those that are entirely self-expressive by the creators and are later rediscovered after the end of a legend - still holds a certain comparability: the self-expression of the creator and the packaging and expression of the creator. This can be fully exemplified in *A Night At the Opera* and *Bohemian Rhapsody: The Original Soundtrack*.

In the production of an album, in addition to the creation of the songs, the selection and order of the tracks also reflect the creator's ideas. In *Bohemian Rhapsody: The Original Soundtrack*, we can see that the 22 selected tracks are more like a repackage of Freddie Mercury and Queen's rock spirit, making them more acceptable to the modern entertainment industry. In terms of listening experience, this is smoother, without so much high-intensity contrast, and does not require the audience to repeatedly listen or fully understand the music style, creative ideas, and ideological core behind the pieces to fully integrate into it. Perhaps the audience only needs to have some basic understanding, or have watched the popular biography movie, to be easily drawn into the story. The producers of the OST spliced most of Queen's elements from the increasingly mature stage to the final breakthrough into something that is more pleasing to the public. However, it is regrettable that the initial two albums of Queen's exploration phase, *Queen I* and *Queen II*, only "Keep Yourself Alive" and "Doing Alright" from *Queen I* were included, respectively, in the form of a 1974 live version and a remake with Tim Staffell, while *Queen II* and its power and ambition were ignored (*Queen II* had the band's first British hit "Seven Seas of Rhye"). As mentioned in a music review by Rolling Stone, "it's a fun, mostly un-retouched tribute to the group's musical genius [8]". This treatment in the OST means that Queen's growth process has not been fully revealed, but rather it is more like only selecting the most legendary and story-filled segments to construct a legendary rock band icon. The selection of tracks weaves a beautiful and blood-stirring story, giving the "music never dies" spirit, which although cliché, still easily moves people, so that with the help of Queen's fame and feelings, a good music commercial marketing campaign can be easily achieved.

So it is obvious that although the OST tries to include songs from all of Queen's years of creation and capture every fragment belonging to Queen from each original album, it is still not as strong in style as the original albums. Due to some attempts at detailed processing and commercial considerations, it inevitably weakens the styles of different stages of Queen, blurring the bold novelty and ambition originally belonging to *A Night At the Opera*. During the creation of *A Night At the Opera*, Queen's own creative concept was very free, exploring and growing step by step, daring to break through all constraints, whether they were from the first three albums or from the record company. Although they were at a crucial turning point for survival, through their superb musical intuition and aesthetic taste, as well as their creative techniques for climaxes, they bravely and meticulously made the band's creation move towards a more mature stage, combining experimentalism and commercialism, challenging the acceptance of the masses on the basis of mainstream aesthetics, and successfully creating such an absurd and exaggerated hard rock legend masterpiece. However, compared with this, the production of the OST turns Queen into an icon that can be accepted by the public, a star that everyone can pursue, created by the modern entertainment industry to become a modern entertainment idol. It can be said that they are singing while being

confined in the cage of the modern entertainment industry. These two logics are different. And becoming a modern entertainment idol is obviously not Queen's intention itself. And due to Freddie Mercury's early death, the tension of Queen's image between the ever-present past and the actual present will inevitably continue to exist.

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