Operatic Influence On Rock Music

Opera has influenced nearly all aspects of popular culture, including films, radio, television, literature and numerous other media types. However, one important realm of popular culture, rock music, has appeared relatively immune to the impact of operatic, classical music. Several studies have illustrated the impact of classical instrumental music on heavy metal and pop music (Aledort 1985; McClary and Walser 1990; Walser 1992; Covach 1997), but only one seems to truly explore and consider the influence exerted by opera and its conventions specifically on various forms of rock music (McLeod 2001). A conventional assumption is that opera-rock fusions often transgress conventional musical boundaries and often reflect a rejection of traditional cultural boundaries surrounding sexual orientation, gender and class. However, recognizing opera's cross relations with rock is often overlooked. The fusion also offers insights into the blurring of traditional distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art and broadens our understanding of both genres.

Rock music has traditionally resisted opera, a genre often associated with hierarchical divisions of class and high culture, which rock music, traditionally, rejects. Additionally, there is little, it would seem, to be gained by the association of rock with opera. The audience and fans of each genre are often opposites in their tastes and often hesitate or resent the opposing form. A common generalization, fans of rock music typically find opera to be confusing and convoluted, boring, and elitist, while opera fans typically perceive rock as musical simplicity, loud, and chaotic. However, although these two apparently polarized genres of music appear to have both different tastes and ideologies, they actually share a number of things in common.

In spite of seemingly opposing positions on the spectrum of musical style, the aesthetic ideologies and lifestyles of both audiences and performers in opera and rock are surprisingly similar. A few examples of a rock and opera crossover include attention to vocal character, emphasis on extravagant excess, theatrical gam, and general parallels in staging and performance. Opera has traditionally shown a preference for star tenors, counter-tenors or sopranos. Similarly, rock music has a fascination with high-register male vocalists such as Michael Jackson and Paul McCartney, and female pop singers such as Whitney Houston and Celine Dion (site 2). Both are equally successful in conveying a story through a transgressive voice which is able to transcend bodily or emotional constraints (site 3).

Additionally, there are literature accounts of the significance of luxury in opera. Such an account is arguably equally applicable to the excess displayed both in lifestyle and performance of rock music. The irony of all of this is that the rock-star image is comparable to the elitist, prima donna mentality that they originally sought to reject. For example, rock performers slowly became disengaged and self-centered egoists just like, according to their critics, many modern opera stars (site 4).

In the same breath, theatrical glam rockers mimic the pretenses of their operatic high-art rivals. There are many parallels between the two genres in staging and performance, suggesting some influence of opera on rock. This is evident in the visual production, dazzling lighting, and the often extravagant and flashy outfits worn by the performers.

However, despite these commonalities shared by opera and rock, actual rock music never had any direct operatic musical influence. There were ‘rock operas’ and rock and Broadway musicals that employed grand operatic scale and sung dramatic narratives, but still predominately relied on rock or popular music for their actual musical inspiration and, in reality, failed to employ any true operatic vocal tone or musical imitation (site 6). Therefore, although an attempt by rock artists to rite serous vocal art music, none successfully employed any use of traditional operatic vocal characteristics, such as borrowing. It is not until Queen’s 1974 hit single ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’, from the album A Night at the Opera (1975) that there is an interesting glimpse into the transgression of musical, social and sexual boundaries.

Queen was a rock band popular in the 1970s that fused heavy metal, rock, and theatrics. Although they had many critics, Queen composed an elaborate musical display, blending layers of guitar work by Brian May and vocal harmonies by the lead and principal singer Freddie Mercury. The entire group was comprised of vocalist Freddie Mercury, guitarist Brian May, bassist John Deacon and drummer Roger Taylor. Aided by producer Roy Thomas Baker, Queen rose to international fame by the time of release of their third album, Sheer Heart Attack (1974) (cite).

On November 21, 1975, Queen’s fourth album, A Night at the Opera, was released and the group transformed from fast rising stars to a household name. The album was one of pop music’s most expensive productions, estimated to cost approximately $500,000, but was also one of the most popular, far surpassing their previous album’s sales. The album was a critical and commercial success, reaching number 4 in the US and selling over 12 million copies worldwide. To produce the album, the band constructed a sound that was part English music hall, part Led Zeppelin, epitomized by the six-minute-long rock operatic “Bohemian Rhapsody”. The song was Britain’s top single for nine weeks (cite). The multi-part epic took months to construct. It begins as a piano ballad with an acapella vocal harmony before morphing into the song proper with Mercury singing and playing piano both like Mozart and a stomping monster rocker before closing back to a ballad. The song moves though several distinct phases and sonic dynamics, the most famous being the long middle, pseudo-opera section. This was accomplished through an elaborate choir effect created by Mercury, May and Taylor singing their specific vocal parts for countless hours, with over 180 separate overdubs mixed and sub-mixed onto a 24-track master tape to achieve the sonic choral effects described in the liner notes as ‘operatic vocals’. The ground-braking work was later described by Mercury as a ‘tongue in cheek… mock opera’ (Hodkinson 1995, p. 200).

The song parodies various elements of opera in its use of bombastic choruses, sarcastic recitative and distorted Italian operatic phraseology. None of the band members received any extensive classical music training, however, in an interview with May, he talked about how all of the band members were influenced by opera in their youth because it was part of their English upbringing (May 1996, p. 43). The opening acapella group vocals introduce the story and sets the mood. Similarly, in true opera, an overture, defined as an orchestral piece at the beginning of an opera, typically serves a similar purpose. Next comes the equivalent of an aria or lied, defined as a long-accompanied song for a solo voice, characteristic of opera, with piano accompaniment in this case. The ballad, accompanied by broken arpeggios (notes of a chord played in succession) on the piano, narrates the story of a suicidal man confessing to either a murder or his own suicide, and begs his mother ‘to carry on as if nothing really matters’.

This narrative is interrupted by a quick transition to the middle part of the song; the stomping

monster rocker. May’s guitar solo takes a plunge from F to B flat, suggesting a descent into chaos. This middle section is also referred by Mercury as the ‘opera section’. It shifts in both musical style and perspective as the tempo significantly increases and the dynamic level softens as piano and solo voice replace the guitar, bass and drums. There is also an increase in cord complexity as several diminished and flat cords transgress to create an eerily cheerful sound which supports much of the section (Sky 1991, p. 29).

Complementing the operatic eerie tone, Mercury takes on a dark persona, singing ‘I see a little silhouette of a man’ in a parody of a comic opera recitative. “Comic opera” is translated to opera buffa in Italian, a name for an entertaining musical comedy. In contrast, opera seria or “serious opera” is a tragic story. Mercury’s vocal melody transitions from the rhapsodic lyricism of the opening to a more fragmented theatrical recitative-style with static word and repetition. The operatic section ends with the chorus before another quick transition into stereotypical heavy rock music. Here opera and hard rock are directly juxtaposed.