1970s Soft Rock, Baroque Pop, and ‘Prog-Lite’:
Or, what does middle-of-the-road popular music sound like?
‘Middle-of-the-Road’ Popular Music

❖ Synonymous with or closely related to: ‘easy listening’ (Scott 2004), ‘prog-lite’ (Holm-Hudson 2005), major label ‘pop’ (Stanley 2014), ‘corporate’ rock (Covach 2003), ‘smooth’ music and ‘yacht rock’ (Crumsho 2006)

❖ The ‘large listening space’ between between the ‘somewhat intellectualised course of progressive rock’ and ‘pop’ (Moore 2012)

❖ 1970s artists: Queen, ABBA, Eric Carmen, Elton John, Billy Joel

❖ Classical training: Freddie Mercury (Grade 5/6 piano), Eric Carmen (piano/violin), Elton John (Royal Academy of Music)

❖ What compositional strategies define their work in the 1970s?

❖ How do they land ‘in the middle’?
1. Queen, 'The March of the Black Queen'

E. Gtr

2. Queen, 'The Millionaire Waltz'

You make me feel like a millionaire
3. ABBA, 'S.O.S', Introduction and Pre-Chorus
Classical Music Figuration

- Cadential trills: ‘The March of the Black Queen’, ‘Millionaire Waltz’
- Descending thirds: ‘S.O.S’
- Rapid arpeggios: ‘In the Lap of the Gods’, ‘Death on Two Legs’
- Quotation: ‘Never Gonna Fall in Love Again’, ‘All By Myself’, and Rachmaninoff
- A lack of specificity in the borrowing; reference to a general classical style, cf. specific idioms/composers (see Covach 1991)
If I only had the words to tell you
If you only had the time to understand
though I know it wouldn't change your feelings
and I
know you'll carry on the best you can
‘Contour-Rich’ Melodic Construction

- Balanced, arch melodies: ‘If I Only Had the Words’, ‘Tomorrow is Today’
- Sequences: ‘Goodbye Yellow Brick Road’ [Elton John]; ‘The Winner Takes It All’ [ABBA]
- Infiltration of sequential melodic elements into hard rock: ‘Now I’m Here’
5. Queen, 'Now I'm Here'

whatever came of you

Sight

Ooh whatever came of you

and me

America's new bride to be

and me

America's new bride to be
Rich Harmonic Language

- Influence of the Beatles
- Voice-leading patterns: ‘Mamma Mia’
- Modal mixture: ‘All By Myself’
- Extensive secondary dominants: ‘Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters’, ‘Border Song’
- Confluence of harmonic features: ‘Killer Queen’
Descending bass

E♭ Gm/D E♭7/Db Ab/C Abm/Cb E♭/B♭

BVss Ooh

Built in___ a-re-me-dy___ for Krus-chev and Ken-ne-dy for a-ny-time an in-vi-ta-tion

Ascending harmonic sequence

Ab/B♭ B♭7 G Cm B♭7 E♭

you can't de-cline___ Ca-vi-ar___ and ci-ga-rettes Well versed in e-ti-quette Ex

D♭7 Gm F B♭ Dm Gm Dm

She's a kil-ler queen___ Gun pow-der ge-la-tine
Between Formal Convention and Experimentation

- In progressive rock: multi-sectional songs, non-recapitulating sections, irregular patterning of episodes
- Non-song-like forms in MOR pop
- ‘Funeral for a Friend’: a triple theme-and-variations? Or a passacaglia-derived form?
- Three distinct sections: overture—march—Lloyd Webber pastiche—march (return)
- Departure-and-return narrative; see also, ‘Millionaire Waltz’, ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’
- Or, ‘episodic song forms’: extended verse-chorus structures (‘Burn Down the Mission’, ‘Levon’ or ‘Tiny Dancer’); addition of extra material to a verse-chorus/AABA template (‘Bat Out of Hell’, ‘Scenes From An Italian Restaurant’, ‘Love of My Life’)

The Pop Middleground


- ‘Prog-lite’ - suggests a retreat from progressive rock

- Or, a partial elevation from the pop song?

- Middleground from below (cf. classical tradition; Chowrimootoo 2016)