1970s Soft Rock, Baroque Pop, and 'Prog-Lite':

Or, what does middle-of-the- road popular music sound like?

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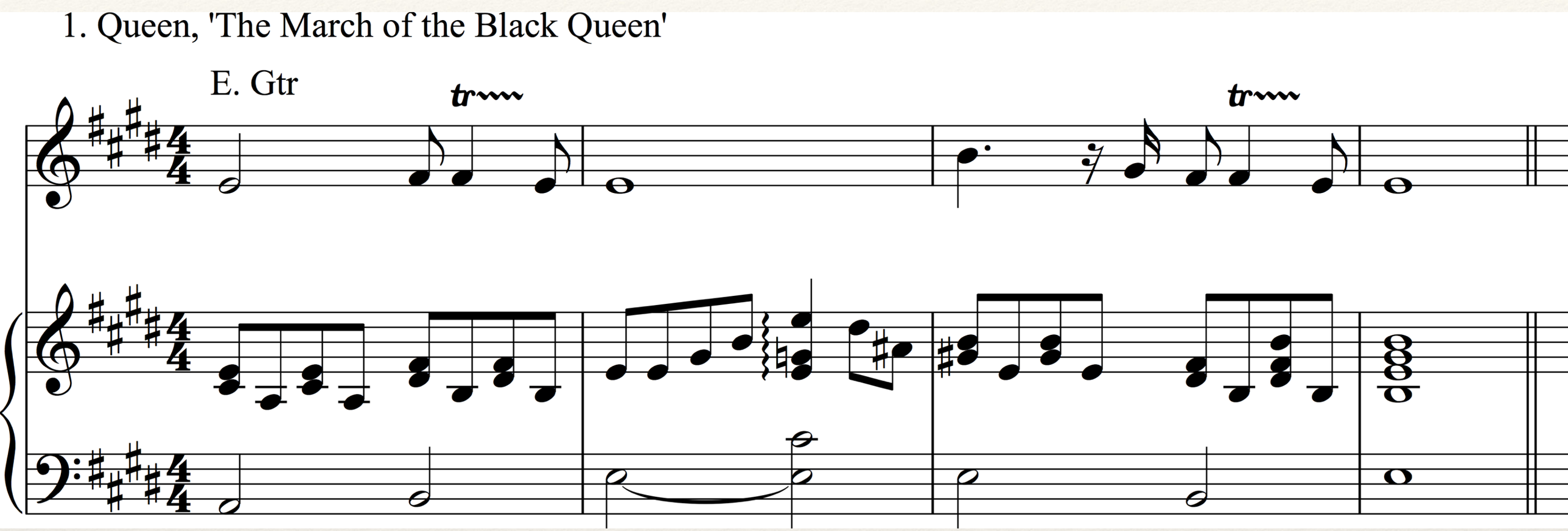
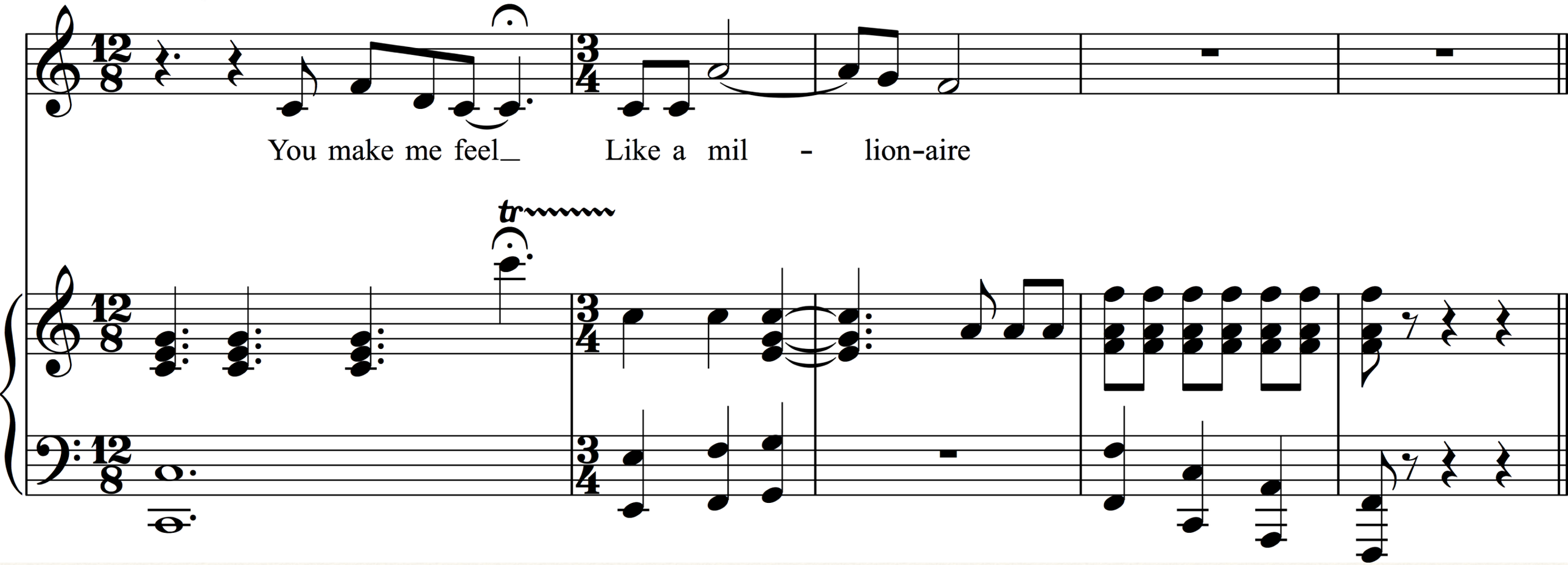
‘Middle-of-the-Road’ Popular Music

- 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’?

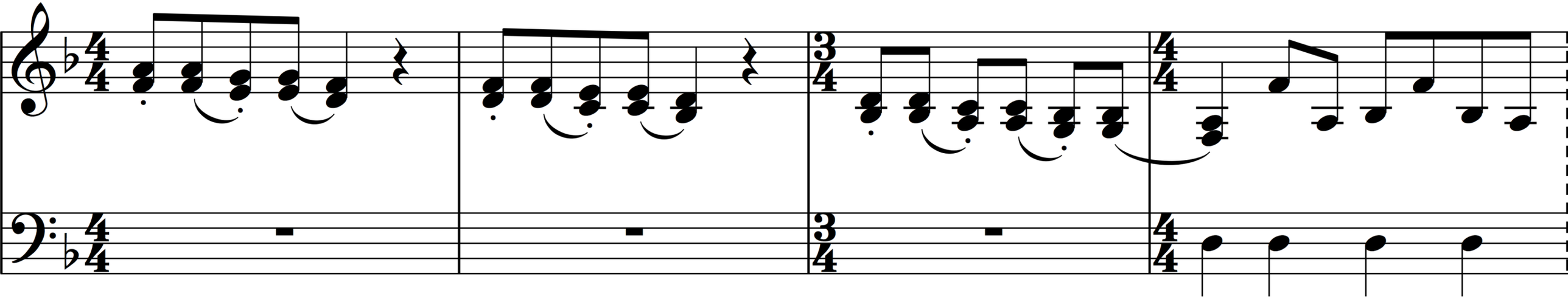
1. Queen, 'The March of the Black Queen'

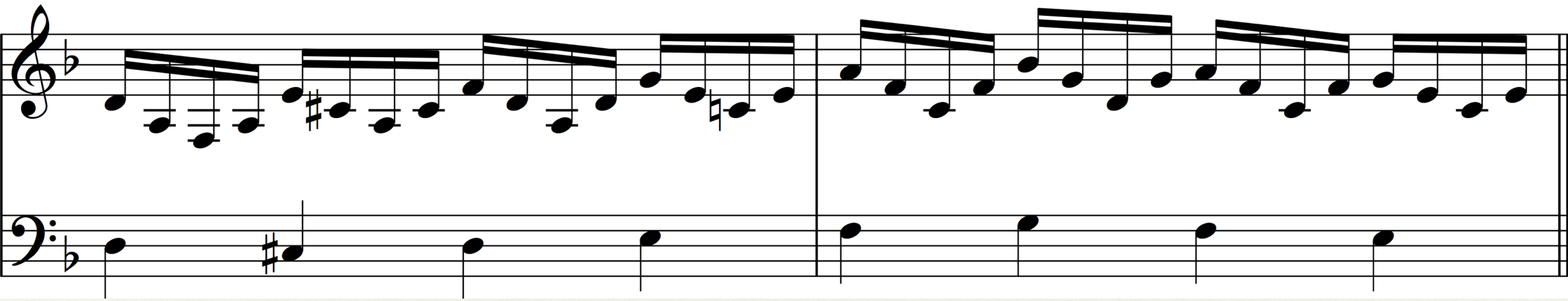


2. Queen, 'The Millionaire Waltz'



3. ABBA, 'S.O.S', Introduction and Pre-Chorus

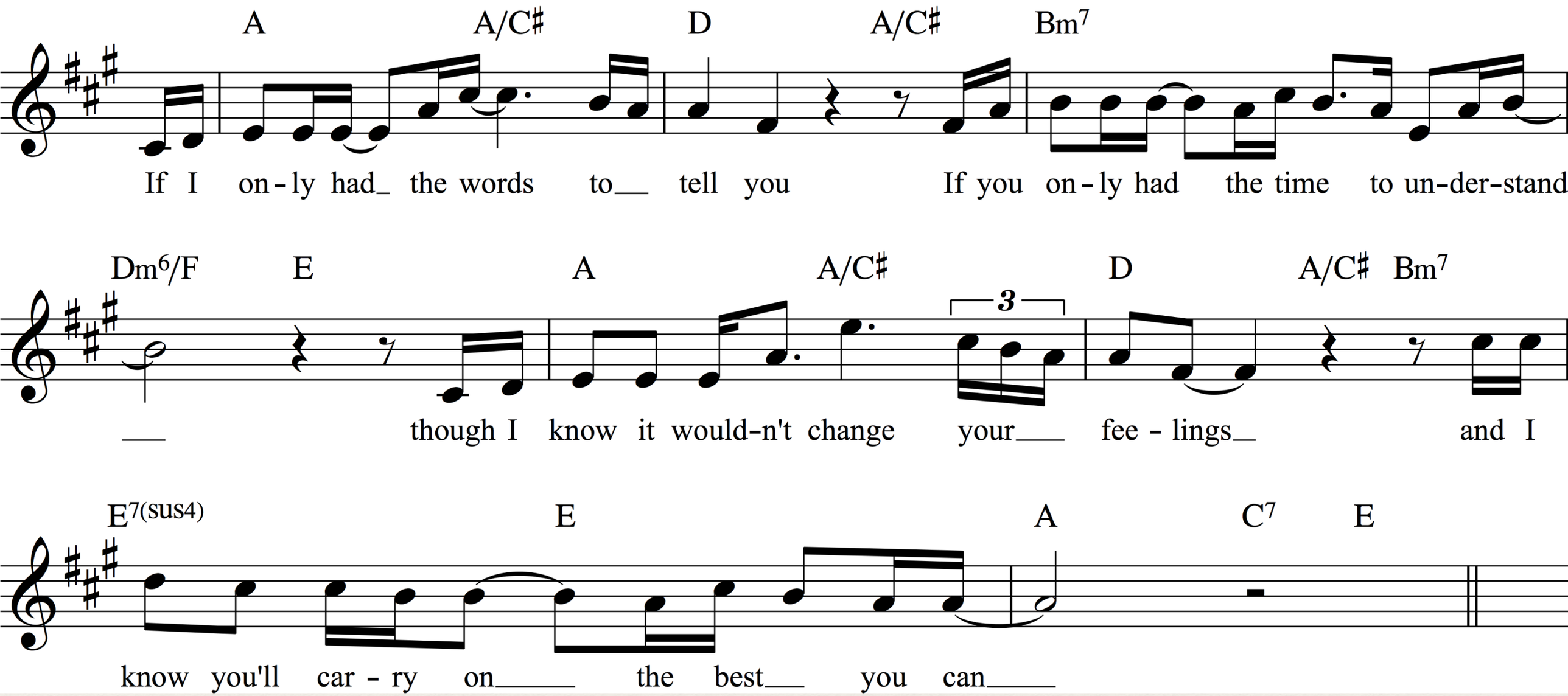




Classical Music Figuration

- 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)

4. Billy Joel, 'If I Only Had the Words'



‘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'

what - e - ver came___ of you___

Sight Ooh___ what - e - ver came___ of you___

___ and me___ A - me - ri - ca's___ new bride___ to be___

___ and me___ A - me - ri - ca'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/D♭ A♭/C A♭m/C♭ E♭/B♭

BVs

Ooh

Lead

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

A♭/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

D7 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

- General consensus: progressive rock *elevated* pop songs (Sheinbaum 2002; Moore 2003; Lundberg 2014; Palmer 2015; cf. Keister and Smith 2008)
- ‘Prog-lite’ - suggests a retreat from progressive rock
- Or, a partial elevation from the pop song?
- Middleground from below (cf. classical tradition; Chowrimootoo 2016)