



Pearson

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

(For component 3: Appraising)

Background information and performance circumstances

'Killer Queen' was written by Freddie Mercury and featured on **Queen's** third studio album ***Sheer Heart Attack*** released in November 1974.

Freddie Mercury was born Farrokh Bulsara on 5 September 1946 in Stone Town, Sultanate of Zanzibar (now Tanzania) and grew up in India, where he was educated at St Peter's Boys School and took up the piano at the age of 7. At the age of 17 his family moved to Middlesex, England.

Queen was formed in London in 1970 with singer Freddie Mercury, guitarist Brian May, drummer Roger Taylor and bassist John Deacon. *Sheer Heart Attack* and ***A Night at the Opera*** (1975) brought them international success.

'Killer Queen' was the first single from the album and it is one of the few songs where Freddie Mercury wrote the lyrics first, which are about an upper-class prostitute.

'Killer Queen' reached number 2 in the British charts and provided them with their first top 20 hit in the US, peaking at number 12 on the Billboard singles chart.

The song won Freddie Mercury his first Ivor Novello Award.

Performing forces and their handling

The vocal part is performed by Freddie Mercury and is a high male voice – **tenor**.

'Killer Queen' uses lead and backing vocals, piano, overdubbed with a honky-tonk (jangle) piano, four electric guitars, bass guitar and drum kit. Guitars and vocals are overdubbed to create a richer colour.

The guitars use techniques such as **slides, bends, pull-offs** and **vibrato**.

The song uses plenty of recording techniques and effects including **multi-tracking, EQ, flanger, distortion, reverb, wah-wah, panning** and **overdubbing**.

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There may be other interpretations which are also valid and any such differences would not be considered errors, or require any updates to the guides.

Melody

- The text setting is mainly syllabic.
- The backing vocals use a mixture of words and vocalisation (e.g. bars 8–9) to the sound ‘ooh’ and bar 18 to the sound ‘ba’.
- The melody starts mostly conjunct with small leaps of a third or fourth.
- Bars 7 and 8 show an altered descending sequence.
- The verse and chorus combine conjunct and wide angular leaps in the melodic line.
- Leaps often feature a rising major sixth (e.g. bars 6–7). There are some exceptionally large leaps such as an octave in bar 62.

Structure

‘Killer Queen’ is in **verse–chorus** form.

Bars 2 (beat 3)–14 (beat 3)	Verse 1	<p>Unusual start with six finger clicks (which are heard throughout) leading into verse 1. Melody starts on the upbeat, anacrusis. The voice is accompanied by short, detached chords played by the piano before the bass and drums enter at the end of bar 6. Tonally unstable, opening in C minor but quickly shifting. We have a descending sequence in guitar 1 bar 7. Backing vocals enter in bar 8 using vocables.</p> <p>Bar 11 lead vocal uses falsetto.</p> <p>The first phrase is four bars in length, however, the second phrase has been extended by the addition of a 6/8 bar (bar 10) to five bars in length.</p>
Bars 14 (beat 4)–22	Chorus 1	<p>While the chorus is eight bars in length, the phrasing is 5 + 3. Having apparently cadenced into B \flat major, the key moves to D minor then C major before shifting in parallels to a circle of fifths then another slide to B \flat.</p> <p>Lead and backing vocals sing together in harmony creating a four-part texture (bar 15).</p> <p>Backing vocals use vocables (bar 18).</p> <p>Portamento slide on the word ‘Queen’ bar 15.</p> <p>Change of EQ and addition of flanger on ‘laser beam’ bar 17.</p> <p>Backing vocal ‘stabs’ bar 18.</p>

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Bars 23–26 (beat 3)	Instrumental	Guitar 1 and 3 play in thirds using slides and vibrato.
Bars 26 (beat 4)–38 (beat 3)	Verse 2	As verse 1 with the addition of four-part backing vocals (bar 31), drums enter early (with drum roll) with guitar 2. As before, bars 31 to 33 has an inner chromatic descending pattern. Main vocal uses spoken text for dramatic effect (bar 38). Bass guitar develops its line from verse 1 by using pentatonic and chromatic scales (bars 37 and 38).
Bars 38 (beat 4)–43	Chorus 2	As chorus 1. However, the chorus has been cut short using the first five-bar phrase, leading directly to...
Bars 44–61 (beat 3)	Guitar solo	Guitar solo, which starts off mimicking the lead part of the chorus (see bars 20–21) before expanding into three part guitar solo (see bar 23). The chord sequences uses a descending pattern between bars 44–47 (see bars 20–21). At bar 48 guitars 3 and 4 use imitation against guitar 1 before coming together in bar 50 to create three-part texture. At bar 51 the harmony returns to the verse chord sequence, with the original melody, embellished above. The solo goes back to guitar 1 until bar 55 where guitar 2 and 3 again use a hocketting effect before coming together. The harmony is extended with a repeated imperfect cadence for two bars leading into...
Bars 61 (beat 4)–69 (beat 1)	Verse 3	Unusually this is only seven and a half bars long. The first part of verse 3 is an extended variant of bars 12 and 13. Three-part guitar ‘response’ to vocal line on beat 3 at the end of bar 62. Word-painting of the words ‘absolutely drive you wild’. The climax of the piece is at bar 67 on the word ‘wild’. With the vocals singing very high in four parts followed by a response from the band.

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Bars 69 (beat 2)–78	Chorus 3	Similar to previous choruses but with the addition of a guitar solo.
Bar 79–End	Outro	Music fades at the end over a chord of E ♭ major, although the harmony suggests a repeated IV–V–I cadence, therefore fading on the subdominant with guitars 1 and 2 playing in thirds and imitation between guitars 3 and 4.

Texture

- The main texture is **homophonic**.
- Use of **imitation**.
- Use of **layering**
- **Three-part texture** during guitar solo.
- Use of **panning** (e.g. bars 42-43 backing vocals)
- **Antiphonal** (e.g. bars 67-68)

Harmony and tonality

- The song is in **E♭ major**.
- Opening in C minor and closing on an E ♭ major chord, the tonality is ambiguous at times. There are many passing modulations, strengthened by perfect cadences but often followed by parallel shifts, moving to a new key.
- Most chords are in **root position**.
- Some chords are in **first** or **second inversion**.
- There is some use of dissonance (e.g. bar 30).
- **Seventh chords** (e.g. bar 4).
- **Circle of fifths** (e.g. bars 20–21).
- Use of **altered** and **extended chords** (e.g. F¹¹ bar 47).
- Pedal used bars 27–30.

Tempo, metre and rhythm

- **Moderato** tempo with a dotted crotchet pulse of 112 beats per minute.
- The time signature is mainly in 12/8 **compound quadruple** time.
- **Swung** feel
- It does occasionally insert a bar of 6/8, which has the effect of extending the phrase length.
- Every verse and chorus start with an **anacrusis** (upbeat).
- **Syncopation** is frequent throughout (e.g. bars 44–46).
- **Triplets** in bar 18.

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