

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BEATLES' PROGRAMMATIC MUSIC

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### **ABSTRACT**

The 1960s, as well as being the time during which The Beatles existed as a band, was a time marked by rapid social change. Because of this, The Beatles also underwent rapid change at this time as each individual member branched off into their own section of '60s counterculture. George was interested in eastern influences, John (along with the rest of The Beatles) became involved with drugs, and Paul began listening to avant-garde music. These influences are all visible on their album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in their songs "Within You Without You," "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," and "A Day in the Life." The styles of each of these songs radically differ from the others and radically differ from the beginning music of The Beatles from the early 60s. This marked difference elucidates the fact that The Beatles were in the midst of a transition. This transition had many components, but the most important is the change in their music. By the time of the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the sound of the Beatles is irreconcilable with the sound of their first album *Please Please Me*. Whereas their first album followed most conventional norms of rock 'n' roll, the later Beatles albums questioned and held little regard for the traditions of the genre. In the following paper I argue that the most relevant mean by which The Beatles challenged tradition was the way they changed the form, lyrics, and sound of rock 'n' roll. To fulfill this purpose, I will be highlighting this transition through discussion of the albums *A Hard Day's Night* and *The Beatles* (The White Album).

### **BACKGROUND**

An everlasting debate in the music world has revolved around the question of "is music capable of portraying specific ideas, images, thoughts, and notions?" Simply phrased — is music programmatic or is it absolute (having no program at all)? During the Classical Era, composers like Haydn and Mozart wrote absolute music, meaning their music had no program to it; the sole purpose of the music was to fulfill commissions. Usually this meant to write a symphony for the court's orchestra or a concerto for a soloist. These pieces would almost always follow sonata form, giving little freedom for the composer to use new key signatures or material. The format of the piece was all laid out; it was solely up to the composer to come up with the melodies that fit the chords stipulated by the form. Of course, I am oversimplifying this. Regardless, it is clear that this music did not have a program. The title of these pieces was always "Sonata in D Major" or "Symphony No. 94" — never did the title give any programmatic meaning to the piece. On the other hand, composers from the Romantic Era began adding programmatic meaning into their music. An example of this is Franz Liszt who wrote his piano piece *Après une Lecture de Dante: Fantasia quasi Sonata* after reading *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. The form of this piece, *Fantasia quasi Sonata*, shows that Liszt makes use of sonata form, but changes it when necessary in order to properly interpret Dante's description of the seven levels of hell from *The Inferno*.<sup>1</sup> This rejection of formula meant that pieces in the future could take on a different meaning chosen by the composer. Whereas sonata form

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Westerby, *Liszt, Composer, and His Piano Works: Descriptive Guide and Critical Analysis, Written in a Popular Concise Style* (Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1970), 146. *a Popular Concise Style* (Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1970), 146.

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typically depicts a heroic narrative where a struggle leads to success,<sup>2</sup> pieces unbound by these limitations could have vast subject possibilities. Further, programmatic music has become more common over time, which is a trend observed in Beatles music as well.

This progression away from formulaic absolute music towards programmatic, sound-emphasizing music is also relevant in discussion of the way The Beatles' music transitioned. Their beginning music was formulaic in its adherence to normative rock 'n' roll form and chord progressions. Additionally, almost all of The Beatles' early music has to do with girls or love. This starkly contrasts with The Beatles' later music, which only references love around 25 percent of the time. Their later music abandons the idea that rock 'n' roll has to follow specific form and instead takes on programmatic subjects. Because of this, later Beatles music is vastly varied in subject matter, sound, and instrumentation. In fact, the foursome came to value sound over form: "although Lennon and McCartney had started out as fairly traditional songwriters, their later albums were... produced and directed with a degree of effort... that had been reserved for filmmaking – in George Martin's words, they were 'making little movies in sounds.'"<sup>3</sup>

Further, this parallel between The Beatles and the development of classical music becomes even more intertwined in reviews of The Beatles by musicians and musicologists. Even Leonard Bernstein was promoting this band and comparing them to classical artists: "they found themselves hailed as kindred spirits by the likes of Leonard Bernstein (who compared them with Schumann)."<sup>4</sup> This emphasizes that The Beatles transformed rock music into a true art capable of playing on the same field as music of great composers. Because of this, it is clear that The Beatles pushed new boundaries by changing the way people hear and listen to rock 'n' roll. With the Beatles' newfound emphasis on sound superseding the value of form, their music transcended rock 'n' roll tradition and came to embody new ideas and subjects.

### A HARD DAY'S NIGHT

Premiered in 1964, the album *A Hard Day's Night* consists of songs from the soundtrack of their movie of the same title. Interestingly, although this is The Beatles' third album, it is the first to solely feature music written by the four men. All of the thirteen songs on this album were composed by the Lennon/McCartney songwriting duo. Further, every song is about or written to a female love interest. This consistent musical subject demonstrates The Beatles' initial adherence to the norms of rock 'n' roll that had been set by Elvis and Chuck Berry. Not only this, but every song on the album is in 4/4 meter, which is the time signature of most songs of non-classical genre. This is another example of how early Beatles music follows the absolutism of their predecessors. In the upcoming paragraphs I will further investigate this lack of deviation from the set "rules" of the rock 'n' roll genre by discussing form, lyrics, and sound.

The most notable way in which this album is indicative of traditional rock 'n' roll norms is its adherence to the formula of "absolute" rock music. This use of formula was not something that The Beatles were unaware of. In Steve Turner's book *A Hard Days Write*, Turner mentions that "Paul admitted that ["I'm Happy Just to Dance With You"] was a 'formula song.'"<sup>5</sup> This means that the form, lyrics, and sound of this song were all taken from the normal formula of rock 'n' roll. Specifically of interest to me is the chord progression. The song begins with an introduction in C# minor, the relative minor of E Major. Eventually, it leads to an E Major chorus, then another verse is sung that starts in C# minor and finds its way home to the tonic E Major. This is a fairly simple chord progression of c#m: i-iv-V7 to EM: I-V7-I-iii-ii-V7-I. This repeats twice and then finishes with a final repetition of the minor phrase. The analysis of

<sup>2</sup> Susan McClary, "Narrative Agendas in 'Absolute' Music: Identity and Difference in Brahms's Third Symphony," In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 340.

<sup>3</sup> Elijah Wald, *How The Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 242.

<sup>4</sup> Wald, 234.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Turner, *A Hard Day's Write: The Stories Behind Every Beatles Song* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 49.

this chord progression is similar to the sonata form that Haydn and Beethoven used. The first step is to introduce a theme in one key, then have a secondary theme in another key, develop those two themes (key in this area differs), and then finish the piece with a recapitulation of the first theme. The similarities between these two “absolute” genres are striking. In both cases, the composers are given a formula of what chords to use and what subject to write about. A main difference, however, is that Classical composers were more willing to use and explore different time signatures than The Beatles (and their contemporaries) who mainly stuck with 4/4, duple time (aside from Lennon who enjoyed this exploration of time signatures).

“I’m Happy Just to Dance With You” also epitomizes rock ‘n’ roll’s obsession with love because of its title and subject. In my research I used *The Beatles: Complete Scores* to analyze the lyrics of songs from *A Hard Day’s Night* in comparison with songs from *The Beatles*. I recorded how many times each song uses the words “Love,” “I,” and “You.” In order to do this fairly, I did not count repeats of full verses or choruses. I did, however, count repeated lines of the same phrase. Basically, in order to replicate my study, one would need to count the words in each song as if the repeat signs do not exist. I found that on average the word “love” is used 3.92 times per song, the word “I” is used 13.08 times per song, and the word “you” is used 8.69 times per song. Each time these words were used, they were in reference to a girl, written to a girl, about love, or about romantic feelings. To reiterate this, there is no song on this 1964 album that is not broadly written about love and romance. This emphasizes that this music followed a formula that stipulated this certain program within the lyrics.

Finally, the sound on *A Hard Day’s Night* is indicative of traditional rock ‘n’ roll ideals because of its instrumentation, vocal harmonies, and lack of individuality. A song I would like to focus on for this discussion is “When I Get Home,” the eleventh song on the album, because it demonstrates almost every aspect of The Beatles’ adherence to their normative rock ‘n’ roll sound. The most noticeable part of this song’s sound is its instrumentation. John Lennon sang lead vocals and played rhythm guitar, Paul McCartney sang harmony vocals and played bass, George Harrison sang harmony vocals and played lead guitar, and Ringo Starr played drums. This was the comfortable instrumentation that The Beatles used on the majority of their beginning music. Although the lead singer changed on some songs, the rhythm instrument assignments remained consistent: Ringo on drums, Paul on bass, and George and John on lead and rhythm guitar. Further, the vocal harmonies heard at the beginning of the song are a defining characteristic of early Beatles music. This harmonization demonstrated their togetherness as a band and presented them to the world as a group rather than a lead singer with backing.<sup>6</sup> On later albums this harmonization almost completely vanished, which shows that The Beatles began investigating new sounds that would lend more easily to the program of their new music. Whereas every song on *A Hard Day’s Night* has a similar program and sound, the songs on *The Beatles* widely vary in program and, therefore, demand the use of new sounds. This is not a new idea – the classical music world has used this principal since programmatic music advocate Franz Liszt. Liszt, along with his contemporaries, believed that the subject of a piece should shape the form, rather than the form determining the piece.<sup>7</sup>

### **THE BEATLES (THE WHITE ALBUM)**

With its premiere in November 1968, *The Beatles* marked a new era for The Beatles and their listeners. Every song on this double LP in some way strays from the normative conventions of rock ‘n’ roll that had been the source of The Beatles’ fame. At the simplest level, this betrayal usually manifested itself in the instrumentation or the subject of songs. In fact, only nine of the thirty songs on the album were about love. This new freeness of subject allowed the rest of the songs to take on completely unique meanings. No two songs on this album are alike – even the songs that have to do with love are not alike. Because these songs have unique meanings, they also make use of unique sounds to create a program. Moreover,

<sup>6</sup> Steven D. Stark, *Meet the Beatles: A Cultural History of the Band That Shook Youth, Gender, and the World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 132.

<sup>7</sup> David Larkin, “The First Cycle of Tone Poems,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Youmans (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61.

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the form and chord progression of these songs drift away from established guidelines of the genre in order to further adhere to these programs. In the following paragraphs I will discuss songs from this album, dubbed *The White Album* due to its white covers, to demonstrate how the form, lyrics, and sound of these songs are program driven rather than form driven.

When I observed the songs on *The Beatles*, I found that their time signatures stood out the most. This occurred mainly because many songs have mixed meter or are written in triple meter rather than duple meter. There are three songs with this idea of mixed or triple meter that I would like to highlight. The first is "Blackbird," a program driven Paul McCartney song. Ostensibly in 4/4 time, this song slyly incorporates 3/4 and 2/4 bars to match the text.<sup>8</sup> To the regular listener, this change of time causes some chords to feel misplaced when the downbeat of a measure is not where it is expected to be. The changing meter illustrates that the form of the song is made in order to emphasize the words. Another example of this is John Lennon's "Happiness is a Warm Gun." Interestingly, this song makes use of duple and triple meter with one middle stretch of music changing meter almost every measure with time signatures that include 4/4, 5/4, 12/8, 9/8, and 10/8.<sup>9</sup> Particularly of interest to me is a pair of 9/8 and 10/8 bars that repeat three times with almost identical rhythmic notation aside from the extra eighth note in the 10/8 bar. While I am unsure as to why it was written in this way, it is important to note that this is not seen in most (or any) prior rock music. My final example of changes in time signature is "Savoy Truffle," written by George Harrison about his friend Eric Clapton's love of chocolate.<sup>10</sup> In certain sections of the song, Harrison catalogues with a sense of stream of consciousness the different kinds of chocolates that came in a box made by Mackintosh's Good News Company. To accomplish this, he often changes the meter to fit the names of the dessert into a certain beat/bar. This change in meter emphasizes the program of the piece and makes clear that Harrison wrote the piece with programmatic intentions that rejected the normative form that rock 'n' roll had taken on years ago.

Furthermore, the lyrics of songs on this album are representative of a highly individualized band that relied on lyrics as a way to tell personal stories and portray messages to the public. The reliance on love and women as the subject of songs is no longer featured on this album (only around nine of the thirty songs on this album are about love interests or romantic feelings). Additionally, upon my analysis I found that on average the word "love" is used .97 times per song, the word "I" is used 4.53 times per song, and the word "you" is used 6.6 times per song. It is significant to note that most of the uses of "I" and "you" are not in reference to romantic situations. In comparison to the usage of these three words on *A Hard Day's Night*, it is obvious that, contrary to the popular *Rubber Soul* song, the word is no longer love.

Not to be misunderstood, there are still songs on the album that are written to people, however, these songs are clearly intended for specific friends and acquaintances of The Beatles who are not necessarily love interests. One example of this is "Dear Prudence," which is written to Prudence Farrow, a woman who was at Rishikesh with the Beatles, but "by jumping straight into deep meditation.... [a]llowed herself to fall into a catatonic state."<sup>11</sup> The Beatles thus wrote this song because they were concerned about Prudence and her obsession with meditation. Because of this, it is obvious that The Beatles changed rock 'n' roll tradition because this song does not discuss a girl in a romantic light. Another example of this is "Sexy Sadie." Although the title of the song would seem to be of romantic nature, the lyrics are far from it: "She made a fool of everyone, Sexy Sadie... However big you think you are."<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, these lyrics are not even about a girl – they are about the maharishi from Rishikesh. After the Beatles travelled to India to study meditation with him, they realized the maharishi was a fraud and wrote this song about the experience. Because this song is about a certain person, its lyrics have

<sup>8</sup> The Beatles: Complete Scores, transcribed by Tetsuya Fujita, Yuji Hagino, Hajime Kubo, and Goro Sato (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 1993), 122-5.

<sup>9</sup> The Beatles: Complete Scores, 356.

<sup>10</sup> Turner, 170.

<sup>11</sup> Turner, 151.

<sup>12</sup> The Beatles, "Sexy Sadie," recorded August 1968, track 22 on *The Beatles*, Apple Records. compact disc.

much more meaning and intent behind them as opposed to the formulaic love lyrics in *A Hard Day's Night*.

I would also like to point out that there is a newly placed importance on the lyrics of the songs from *The White Album*. A prime example of this is Paul McCartney's "Why Don't We Do It In the Road?" where the rhythm instruments completely stop playing during the first line of music. The only important sound in that moment is the words, which is indicative of a change in the process of composition in which the lyrics and sound are more important than the form. There is also use of recitative song type on this album, which is a style in which the accompaniment exists solely to follow the singer, provide the singer with pitches, and give a quiet backdrop for the soloist to sing on top of. The use of this style is most prevalent in the opening of "Honey Pie."<sup>13</sup> In this introduction, the only instrument playing with the singer is the piano, aside from some interjections from the guitar. Further, the piano's only role is to quietly play the melody along with the singer. Because these two instruments operate in homophony, it is clear that the accompaniment's main purpose is to emphasize the lyrics.

This discussion of form and lyrics illuminates the idea that The Beatles strayed from conventional norms on *The White Album*. The unique programmatic aspect of each song gives a new meaning to the rock 'n' roll genre by allowing for new sounds and by giving new meaning to the sounds. No longer did The Beatles cling to traditions of the genre; rather, they made art that challenged previous notions:

The album was an early example of the reject of constant principles, determination to transgress... The strategies utilized by the Beatles include bricolage (...quotations from earlier styles and periods), fragmentation (paradox...), pastiche (imitation of another work, genre, or artist), parody (imitation for comic effect), reflexivity (self-conscious reference...), plurality (the absence of a single preferred reading), irony, exaggeration, anti-representation (the deflection of attempts to define "reality"), and meta-art (the admission that all art is constructed).<sup>14</sup>

This quote demonstrates that this album was a turning point for The Beatles in which they took on a cavalier attitude towards the rock genre. They were still using past conventions of the genre, but they used these conventions in ways that changed how they sounded and how audiences received their lyrics. For example, "Back in the U.S.S.R." employs many of these strategies, including fragmentation, pastiche, plurality, and irony. The main element of irony in the song comes from the fact that the Beatles incorporate the style of the Beach Boys into a song about the USSR. This juxtaposition of carefree beach music and serious cold war fears results in a parody of the light style that the Beach Boys had popularized.<sup>15</sup> Elements of this style that are found in this song are the lighthearted drum and guitar parts along with the accompanying vocal part that depicts the contour of a wave by moving between two pitches slowly.<sup>16</sup> The element of plurality comes into play with the title. When this song was made, England was encouraging consumers to buy products made in the UK with the "I'm Backing Britain" campaign.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the title pokes fun at the slogan by using it in support of their Cold War enemy – "I'm backing the USSR."

Because the music on *The Beatles* is driven by text and sound rather than form, the instrumentation becomes increasingly complex and varied. In many of these cases, The Beatles were truly writing art music that completely strayed from norms of rock 'n' roll. This was especially true of songs that lacked the original Beatles instrumentation of two guitars, a bass, drums, a lead singer, and harmonizing singers. One example of this is the last song on the album called "Good Night," which is

<sup>13</sup> Turner, 526.

<sup>14</sup> Cambridge 120-1

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 514-5.

<sup>16</sup> The Beatles, "Back in the U.S.S.R.," recorded August 1968, track 1 on *The Beatles*, Apple Records. compact disc.

<sup>17</sup> Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005), 309.

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best described by this word Steve Turner uses in his discussion: "schmaltzy."<sup>18</sup> Terrence J. O Grady describes the accompaniment of the song as "a lush orchestral texture in an extraordinarily commercial arrangement and reeking with sentimental minor seventh dissonances."<sup>19</sup> No Beatles song before this (aside from "A Day in the Life") had ever had such a large orchestral backing with 12 violins, 3 violas, 3 cellos, double-bass, 3 flutes, clarinet, horn, vibraphone, celesta, and harp.<sup>20</sup> Further, there are no guitars, bass, or drums on this song. It is completely not of the rock 'n' roll genre and is almost indicative of Cole Porter and George Gershwin.

One song that exemplifies this new emphasis on sound is "Piggies." With its commentary on society, "'Piggies' contributes the most obvious satire on the album in its attack on the corporate establishment (among others) set elegantly for harpsichord and string ensemble."<sup>21</sup> This song involves satire because although the subject is said to be "piggies," it is obviously directed at highbrow society due to its sound. By using the harpsichord, George Harrison is taking advantage of the fact that the instrument connotes the Baroque Era, a time of unnecessary lavishness and emphasis on royalty. Because of this, the instrumentation of the piece delivers a purposeful meaning. In no song from *A Hard Day's Night* does the instrumentation add meaning to the music; it is only there to provide a foundation. This new interpretation of instrument use is due to The Beatles' newfound emphasis on program.

Finally, I would be doing a disservice to John Lennon if I did not discuss his avant-garde work "Revolution 9." This piece is completely unlike any other Beatle composition before it; it is not even rock. Nevertheless, it epitomizes the Beatles' search for individuality within their music. This song is a result of Lennon's experimentation in concrete music, which had been used in the past by Pierre Schaeffer and Karlheinz Stockhausen. This piece has no regard for formal conventions and is rather a collage of tape recordings from seemingly unrelated sources such as Sibelius' Seventh Symphony, exam tapes from the Royal Academy of Music, and a mellotron played backwards.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the scorebook does assign a  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature to the piece,<sup>23</sup> which indicates that Lennon has not abandoned all elements of musical form. Overall, this song reflects a questioning of every capacity of popular music tradition, especially in regard to form, lyrics, and sound.

### DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

In many respects, The White Album shows a clear departure from the traditional values of rock 'n' roll that *A Hard Day's Night* embodies. On the most basic level, the form of the songs on the later album is completely different from the 4/4, verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus form of songs from *A Hard Days Night*. One of the first Beatles songs to ever stray from duple meter is *Rubber Soul's* "Norwegian Wood." However, this song still maintains the general rock 'n' roll form ideal of four beats per measure. In The White Album, songs with mixed meter abandon this ideal by changing the subdivisions of beat counts in each measure and even using meters that mix duple and triple feels. Most rock bands would feel uncomfortable exploiting time signature in this way, but The Beatles were unafraid to do so.

The cause of The Beatles' new exploitation of form is their new reliance on programmatic music. Based on my previous definition of "absolute" rock music, it is clear that the music on The White Album differs greatly because it is no longer formulaic in its lyrics, texture, and instrumentation. The lyrics of songs from *A Hard Day's Night* all have to do with love in some capacity and are all written to or about a girl. However, this girl is never named as a specific person, so she could be anyone. This connected The Beatles to their female audience more because listeners could pretend that The Beatles are singing about them. On The White Album, in contrast, most songs about people are about specific subjects whom The Beatles knew such as Julia, Martha, Sadie, Prudence, Bill, and Rocky Raccoon. This demonstrates the

<sup>18</sup> Turner, 172.

<sup>19</sup> Terence J. O'Grady, *The Beatles: A Musical Evolution* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 152-3

<sup>20</sup> MacDonald, 294.

<sup>21</sup> O'Grady, 154.

<sup>22</sup> MacDonald, 290.

<sup>23</sup> The Beatles: Complete Scores, 814.

newly programmatic purpose of Beatles' songs because never before had the songs been so clearly personal.

Finally, the sound of the White Album is distinctly different from that of *A Hard Day's Night* for many reasons. Namely, the music element of vocal harmonization that made The Beatles so famous is for the most part absent on this album. Rather, background voices are used to further the program, which was discussed earlier in reference to "Back in the U.S.S.R." Because of the programmatic importance of the thirty songs on The White Album, they each have a specific sound that accentuates their subject. For this reason, most of the songs have unique instrumentations. For example, the blues song "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" uses three different guitar players in addition to tambourine and string bass, while the Gershwin-esque song "Good Night" relies on harmonic instruments along with violin, viola, and cello. The 1964 Beatles never would have imagined using wind instruments in this way to promote programmatic meanings in their rock music. Because of this, their 1968 music truly pushes the boundaries of rock and even questions the definition of rock 'n' roll. The Beatles' deliberate betrayal of formula and insertion of personality into their music truly revolutionized the rock genre and paved the way for later artists to create artistic masterpieces.

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