

**General paper**

## WHAT DOES *THE WHO* OWE TO CLASSICAL MUSIC?

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**Abstract.** *The interplay between classical and popular music has been a well-documented phenomenon. The British rock band The Who initially embarked on their musical journey in the 1960s as part of the "British Invasion" without many distinctive elements that set them apart. However, a transformation began as the decade drew to a close, and they achieved commercial acclaim.*

*This paper delves into The Who's second and third stages of their career (1970s and 1980s), marked by the creation of pioneering rock operas like "Tommy" and "Quadrophenia." While the term "opera" in the context of popular music may not align with classical opera conventions, it becomes evident that classical music elements found their way into The Who's repertoire.*

*Examining their harmonic structure reveals a fusion of classical influences, albeit in an altered form, enriching their sound. Additionally, The Who's compositions exhibit a nuanced understanding of musical form, further blurring the lines between classical and popular music.*

*Furthermore, this exploration extends beyond classical music to encompass modern and postmodern elements in The Who's oeuvre, notably the subtle hints of minimalism. This paper aims to shed light on the intricate relationship between classical and popular music, using The Who's evolution as a prime example of how a rock band can draw from classical traditions while incorporating elements of contemporary music, ultimately redefining the boundaries of musical genres.*

**Key words:** *The Who, rock music, rock opera, harmony, minimalism*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to uncover the manner in which elements of classical music found their way into the repertoire of the band "The Who," particularly in what we propose to be termed as the progressive (second) and "Back to roots" (third) phases of the band's

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work. This represents a particular curiosity, considering that the band, in its first phase, did not engage in anything that would characterize it by academic criteria. Several decades have passed since the study of popular music ceased to be a taboo subject in academic circles. Initially, jazz was embraced as a legitimate genre in the realm of scholarly research, and then, as Peter Wicke points out, the "Beatles" received academic recognition for rock music (Wicke 1987, 1). In the following decades, the academic community's primary interest revolved around the "Beatles" themselves and a handful of other groups that showed an inclination towards progressive thinking about music, such as "Pink Floyd," "The Beach Boys," and similar bands.

## 2. 1964-69: "BRITISH INVASION"

"The Who" was founded in London, went through the formative years in the first half of the 1960s, and solidified the default lineup in 1964. This lineup consisted of vocalist Roger Daltrey (b. 1944), guitarist Pete Townshend (b. 1945), bassist John Entwistle (1944–2002), and drummer Keith Moon (1946–1978). "The Who" belonged to the groups of the so-called "British Invasion." It was a handful of British bands led by the "Beatles" and the "Rolling Stones," who, in a way, "conquered" North America as the initial wave of American rock and roll quieted down in the early 1960s.

The creative output of the group can be divided as follows:

1964-69: First phase – "British Invasion" (classic rock);

1969-1973: Second phase – Progressive rock;

1973-1976: Intermediary period;

1978-1982: Third phase – Return to roots;

1982-1996: Hiatus and occasional reunions;

1996-present: Fourth phase – Brand, not band.

However, while the "Beatles" and the "Rolling Stones" were energetic on stage, "The Who" took this to the extreme, displaying unprecedented aggression, both in their songs and in their performances. Even when examining the content of their compositions before 1969, it's evident that, unlike other "British Invasion" bands whose content mainly focused on love and sex, their repertoire was dedicated to violence and a rebellious attitude towards society. Indeed, it's unsurprising that in later years, "The Who" earned the nickname "godfathers of punk," given their influence on the punk rock genre.

Indeed, the band members never gave off the impression of "nice cheeky guys" like "The Beatles." Despite their otherwise virtuoso performances (notably, Townshend with his "windmill" guitar playing and Moon, eccentric yet one of the greatest rock drummers of all time), they often destroyed their instruments. Townshend would smash his guitar on the floor, and Moon would sometimes place explosive devices in his drums, even in live television broadcasts. This aggression then extended to off-stage life, especially with members like Moon, who often ruined their hotel rooms.

Until 1969, as part of the "British Invasion," "The Who" was popular, but in the deep shadow of the "Beatlemania" and the popularity of the "Rolling Stones," and apart from very aggressive performances, there was little that set them apart from the average. Distinctive songs from this phase, such as "Pictures Of Lilly," "Kids Are Alright," or "My Generation," did achieve a certain level of commercial success but nowhere near the magnitude of the Beatles' "smash hits" like "I Want To Hold Your Hand," "A Hard Day's

Night," "Yesterday" or "Can't Buy Me Love," which appeared on the charts around the same time. Even if a composition emerged in later years, which, according to some historians, had influences from "The Who" on "The Beatles," such as "I Can See For Miles," likely inspiring Paul McCartney's excursion into proto-metal, "Helter Skelter," "The Beatles" would still manage to leave a much deeper countercultural and certainly commercial impact. It could be said that, unlike their Liverpool peers, "The Who" didn't possess anything to "defend the academic honor of rock music." Or at least it seemed that way.

### 3. 1969–1973: PROGRESSIVE ERA

Although it may seem that the first significant transformation of "The Who" came in early 1969, specific hints existed earlier. Songs, on average, became longer, their structure more complex, and instrumentation and vocalization more subtle. The albums, not unique to "The Who," was no longer just a collection of compositions they wanted to present to the audience; instead, a certain thread and even a concept began to emerge. Arguably, in this regard, the most successful result was achieved with the album "The Who Sells Out" (1967), designed as a kind of self-parody. During those years, they were forced to record jingles and radio commercials to compensate for poor financial results. Indeed, alongside several substantial, arrangement-wise, and in every other way quality contribution, the album is interwoven with pseudo-advertisements for various products.

Additionally, the group increasingly demonstrated a need to explore various genres and forms, and gradually, programmability also took center stage. As early as 1966, at the end of the album "A Quick One," Pete Townshend included a nine-minute song titled "A Quick One, While He's Away," whose theme revolves around a girl cheating on her absent husband with a local engine driver. This song is actually a medley of six unfinished compositions, which many consider the precursor to the rock opera or even a true mini-rock opera, with a typical happy ending where the husband forgives his wife's infidelity. On "The Who Sell Out," they also had a mini-opera called "Rael."

By the second half of the 1960s, Townshend had established himself as the primary songwriter in the group and was responsible for the band's artistic direction. He decided to take it higher during this time.

Creating an album about a young man named Tommy Walker, who becomes deaf, mute, and blind after a childhood trauma and grows up in an environment of abuse with parents who are not particularly interested in helping him, took Townshend almost two years to conceive. Although "Tommy" can be compared to the highly relevant concept albums of that time, such as "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" by "The Beatles" or "Pet Sounds" by the American group "Beach Boys," most music historians agree that it is the first, or at least one of the first, rock operas. The individual compositions are much more integrated than in a mere concept album.

Of the twenty-four compositions that made it into this double LP, he wrote twenty, Entwistle wrote two, Moon wrote one, and one was a cover of an old standard.

When the album was released as a double LP, well before the opera was staged or filmed, the plot was unclear since it had not been published anywhere. However, it unfolds roughly as follows: Tommy Walker, born shortly after World War I, witnesses a traumatic event when his father murders his mother's lover, which renders him psychosomatically deaf, blind, and mute. His parents take him to alternative healers, some of whom drug him.

Tommy finds solace in playing pinball and becomes a champion. Eventually, a doctor tries to help but makes things worse. Tommy is miraculously cured when his mother smashes the mirror, an object with which he is obsessed. He then starts his cult but is eventually abandoned by his followers, retreating inward once more.<sup>1</sup>

To what extent does this opera follow the classical "operatic" structure? It's difficult to say since the limitations of a four-sided LP record constrained the original release.

We would suggest that the opera has three acts.<sup>2</sup> The first act begins with an overture that introduces the themes and motifs of crucial parts of the opera, ending with an old standard, "The Hawker," when Tommy is already bottomless in his closed mental state. The second act starts with the composition "Cousin Kevin," when Tommy's abuse begins and ends with the song "Smash The Mirror," marking his cure. It's worth mentioning the instrumental composition "Underture" (obvious pun in English), which is a sort of anti-climax of the entire opera when Tommy is under the influence of LSD. Finally, the third act begins with the song "Sensation" and concludes with the finale, "We're Not Gonna Take It."

<b>Act 1</b>	<b>Act 2</b>	<b>Act 3</b>
1. "Overture"	1. "Christmas"	1. "Sensation"
2. "It's a Boy"	2. "Cousin Kevin"	2. "Miracle Cure"
3. "1921"	3. "The Acid Queen"	3. "Sally Simpson"
4. "Amazing Journey"	4. "Underture" ( <b>anti-climax</b> )	4. "I'm Free"
5. "Sparks"	5. "Do You Think It's Alright?"	5. "Welcome"
6. "The Hawker"	6. "Fiddle About"	6. "Tommy's Holiday Camp"
	7. "Pinball Wizard"	7. "We're Not Gonna Take It"
	8. "There's a Doctor"	(with "See Me/Feel Me") ( <b>finale</b> )
	9. "Go To The Mirror"	
	10. "Tommy, Can You Hear Me?"	
	11. "Smash The Mirror"	

**Fig. 1** Suggested structure of the opera in three acts

We will mention some more aspects that are intentionally or unintentionally borrowed from classical operatic structure: Crucial is the use of leitmotifs – understood, here the leitmotif should be interpreted in a broader sense as a separate part of the structure of the entire opera, not just a single motif. The opera is tied together by the central two-part leitmotif of Tommy's plea ("See Me, Feel Me"/"Listening To You"). It appears in the overture, then in the songs "Christmas" and "Go To The Mirror," and in the finale, "We're Not Gonna Take It," where it is sometimes referred to as a separate composition. This can be understood in the context of heightened sensuality and overall sensitivity during the psychedelic era, an evident trend that couldn't bypass "The Who," even though, as will be later shown, they did not fully belong to the hippie subculture<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> In this article, therefore, we will not delve into the film or stage version of the opera. However, regarding the 1975 film adaptation directed by Ken Russell, it's worth mentioning that the plot has been somewhat altered, with the most significant change being the shift of the time frame to the post-World War II era (not after the First World War). Consequently, for example, the composition "1921" is now referred to as "1951." This is significant practically as well, as the final scenes, where Tommy forms a sect, are equated with the cults of the hippie era.

<sup>2</sup> Online sources for all audio examples are available in the bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> We appreciate the comments and suggestions from my colleague Jovana Vukosavljević, who also provided her outstanding master's thesis on the album "Dark Side Of The Moon" by the band "Pink Floyd."

Sometimes, particular attention is given to the way the music is performed. Take the song "1921," where the parents (portrayed by Townshend and Entwistle) in thirds persuade the soloist Tommy (Daltrey, who has a contrapuntal relationship to their theme) that he hasn't heard or seen anything – and he opposes them. His voice gradually fades and disappears, symbolizing his entry into the mental state that is the subject of the opera.

We will now, although much briefly, touch upon the second rock opera, "Quadrophenia" (1973), but to do that, we need to go back a few years. By the mid-1960s, Britain was subculturally divided into two groups: the Mods and the Rockers. The Rocker subculture was characterized by a wild style, black leather jackets, motorcycle riding, and violence in daily life. The followers predominantly listened to American rock 'n' roll. Mods followed Italian fashion, rode Vespas and Lambrettas, had tidy hairstyles, and were closely associated with pop art. They listened to blues, jazz, and R&B.

Interestingly, "The Who" belonged to the Mod subculture from the beginning, which is somewhat paradoxical. Although they had the visual appearance of Mods, their music and performances were, as mentioned, extremely aggressive.

"Quadrophenia" explores Townshend's connection to the subcultural divide. Like "Tommy," this double album had a complex plot. At its core is the love story of Jimmy, a mod, and his initially unnamed girlfriend. Seeking validation, he turns to amphetamines, leading to conflicts with his parents and rockers. Jimmy's disillusionment grows when his girlfriend leaves with his best friend, and one of his role models becomes a bellboy. He sets off in a motorboat to a remote sea rock, contemplating his life amid the rain.

In creative and musical terms, there are indications that "Quadrophenia" was conceived with slightly less ambition compared to "Tommy." Firstly, it contains only seventeen tracks, unlike the previous opera, which had twenty-two. Townshend wrote all the compositions this time, with Daltrey being the lead vocalist on almost all of them. Again, there's a first song that can be called an overture ("I Am The Sea"), a recurring theme, as a leitmotiv, links the narrative throughout the opera ("Love, Reign o'er Me"), and an instrumental track "The Rock," which serves as an antithesis similar to "Underture" in "Tommy." It is followed by the mentioned "Love, Reign o'er Me" as the grand cathartic finale of the opera.

To conclude this consideration, from 1973 onwards, Townsend and other "The Who" members never embarked on such ambitious musical projects again (unless we count the mini-opera "Wire and Glass" from the album "Endless Wire" in 2006, where some songs were written back in the early 1970s). However, even though the influence of classical music was most pronounced in this phase, that doesn't mean that it didn't find its way into the group's repertoire in the later stages.

#### 4. 1978 – 1982: BACK TO ROOTS

While many suggest that an important phase in the band's history ended in 1978 with the passing of Keith Moon, we would place the end of the second stage, a progressive era, in 1973, after "Quadrophenia." It is important to note that besides operas, the commercially most successful album, "Who's Next" (1971), was also produced during this stage.

With the sole album that brought original material, "The Who By Numbers," a timespan between 1973 and 1976 could be referred to as an intermediary period. As Townshend put it, its main characteristic is a creative block, a crisis that ended when the band went on a year-long hiatus.

The third phase, starting in 1978 and concluding in 1982 when "The Who" first disbanded, is characterized by a sort of return to their roots. This issue is especially evident in their adherence to the hard rock path, while many other bands significantly softened their sound. Despite impacting punk bands, "The Who" never fully embraced these or "new wave" influences but remained faithful to hard rock, with noticeable touches of funk music. Three albums and three accompanying tours mark this phase – "Who Are You" (1978), "Face Dances" (1981) and "It's Hard." (1982)<sup>4</sup>

Excluding occasional reunions during the 1980s and early 1990s, the fourth phase of "The Who" began in 1996 and continues to this day. Considering the official exclusion of the second drummer, Kenney Jones, the death of bassist John Entwistle in 2002, and the reduction of the group to just two original members, this phase can be called a "brand, not band," given that all other contributors to the group – such as drummer Zack Starkey and bassist Pino Paladino – are external. Interestingly, from 1996 to now, "The Who" has released only two new albums, focusing on tours and stage projects.

However, we will still focus on the third phase of the band. Although the influences of classical music during this period of their creative work were not as overt, they were far from absent. They were just expressed in different aspects. Paradoxically, as the critical quality of the group's discography declined, the impact of classical music grew. In the following, we will consider three aspects: formal, harmonic, and contemporary compositional.

When considering musical form, we would like to draw your attention to the song "Guitar And Pen" from the album "Who Are You." In the eyes of critics, this song may not hold significant value beyond Townshend's introspection regarding creativity. However, when examining its form, two characteristics become apparent. The first characteristic is thematic diversity, which contributes to the musical dramaturgy of the song. The song itself contains six different musical themes that create a total of sixteen different segments. This evokes a clear association with the group's earlier works, not the "grand" operas, but at least with mini-operas.

However, the structuring of the material fascinates us the most. It represents a significant departure from Adorno's idea in his text "On Popular Music" that popular music lacks the same power and value as classical music. This is demonstrated in cases where the form organically emerges from the musical core or motif, and it is proven that details are irreplaceable and not routine.<sup>5</sup> When we look at the broader picture, it's evident that this song has a three-part ABA structure, which isn't very common in popular music. Part A introduces four new themes, part B presents two (and develops some of the previous ones), and A1 is a true reprise with some modifications.

There is also an argument to consider "Guitar and Pen" as a sonata form. The introduction and the first two verses serve as a sort of motto. The first verse is the first theme; the chorus is a bridge. The second verse, the instrumental transition to the third verse, and the third verse together form the complex of the second theme. The latter instrumental transition serves as a codetta, followed by the development section. The fourth and fifth verses are two episodic themes. The chorus, instrumental transition, the sixth verse, and another instrumental transition bring a proper development section (with the

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<sup>4</sup> Both commercially and critically, "Who Are You" experienced great success, and this was not overshadowed by the fact that just a few weeks after its release, Keith Moon suddenly passed away. "Face Dances" received limited recognition, with the standout being the band's last No. 1 hit, "You Better, You Bet," while "It's Hard," except for the composition "Eminence Front," faced both commercial and critical setbacks.

<sup>5</sup> Once again, we thank Jovana Vukosavljević for the comments.

existing material). Then, there's a recapitulation of the motto, the first verse, and a combination of the second verse and the chorus, representing the recapitulation. Finally, there's a coda based on the material from the instrumental transition.<sup>6</sup>

One aspect worth noting is using the basic harmonic model, tonic-subdominant-dominant, but in reverse order: D-S-T. Of course, it would not have been possible without prior awareness of the "correct" direction. It's worth mentioning that the "reversal of the model" was not unfamiliar to classical music composers either. It could be encountered in Romantic works, such as César Franck's organ compositions, primarily in harmonic sequences.

Moreover, "The Who" is not the only band from that era that uses this model in such a way. The reverse model is evident in the song "Hard Way" by the fellow British Invasion band "The Kinks." However, it is characteristic of "The Kinks" to omit the third from the chords in this case (thereby removing the minor/major distinction of the key). Instead, they employ the so-called "power chords," which consist of empty fifths with a doubled root tone.

The early attempt to "reverse" the model is evident in arguably the most significant commercial hit of "The Who," "Baba O'Riley" from the album "Who's Next," where Townshend swapped the positions of the dominant and subdominant in the song's verses, resulting in the model T-D-S. Very similar to "The Kinks," Townshend employs the same model with "power chords" in the song "Sister Disco" from the album "Who Are You," using the model D-S-T.

However, this way of thinking reaches a kind of culmination in the title track of the same album, namely, during the verses (see fig. 2). Townshend also uses the D-S-T model in this song, this time with thirds (clearly establishing A major as the primary key). Afterward, he enriches it with a sort of tonicization of C major through chromatic third-related harmony (the tonic of A major briefly becomes the tonic of C major), to which he adds the dominant of the temporary key, and then (once again, through chromatic third-related harmony) returns to the dominant of A major.

A Maj: D                      S                      T                      C Maj: T                      D

**Fig. 2** The piano part (harmonic background) in the song "Who Are You" is provided based on auditory analysis and available data on the chord progression.

When considering harmony, we have mentioned models several times, primarily those fundamental to a composition. They are often repetitive, especially during verses, which is not uncommon in pop-rock music. However, at a certain point, "The Who" took this to an extreme, as is the case in arguably the group's biggest hit, "Baba O'Riley."

Townshend's interest in electronic music dates to the early 1970s when "The Who" began using various synthesizers. This started to yield results with the album "Who's Next,"

<sup>6</sup> The proposed full analytical scheme is presented as Fig. 3.

featuring the famous opening sequences in the song "Baba O'Riley" and in "Won't Get Fooled Again."

The use of electronic music wasn't foreign to other bands either. Excluding earlier experiments (which were closer to concrete music), it is considered that "The Beatles" were the first to successfully incorporate it in 1969 within the album "Abbey Road," where they, with the help of several experts, implemented the "Moog" synthesizer. Considering how Townshend approached synthesizer programming, this creation resembles minimalistic music, which was gaining momentum during those years.<sup>7</sup>

However, another example of how Townshend applies minimalist elements in electronic music is the introductory sequence of the song "Eminence Front," considered by critics as one of the last significant compositions by "The Who" from the critically panned 1982 album "It's Hard."

The characteristic of this song (and not just this one) is the typical minimalist harmonic staticness. The tonic chord of F minor runs throughout the entire synth sample - regardless of the additional part enriching this uniformity with melodic figures. When the electric guitar kicks in, a different chord appears on the note C# (the lower chromatic mediant). This monotonous shift between the tonic and the lower mediant persists almost throughout all the verses and refrain, except during the instrumental bridge when it briefly shifts to G# major. We should emphasize that the synth sample maintains the F minor chord throughout this time. This creates a contrapuntal movement that gives the impression of bi-chords and even polytonality.

## 5. BRIEF CONCLUSION

While the connections between popular and classical music increasingly garner attention from analysts, "The Who" continues to remain somewhat in the shadow, in this context, of significantly more successful rock brands such as "The Beatles," "Pink Floyd," "The Beach Boys," or "Queen."

From our perspective, future research will involve a more in-depth analysis of operas and other albums, both from the band's golden era and later periods. This will involve formal analysis and harmonic and stylistic/genre research. In any case, we hope this work will intrigue and encourage other researchers to delve more profoundly into the subject of "The Who" in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> As Jovana Vukosavljević observes in our e-mail correspondence, in addition to the influences stemming from classical music, there is also an impact from avant-garde and neo-avant-garde musical practices.



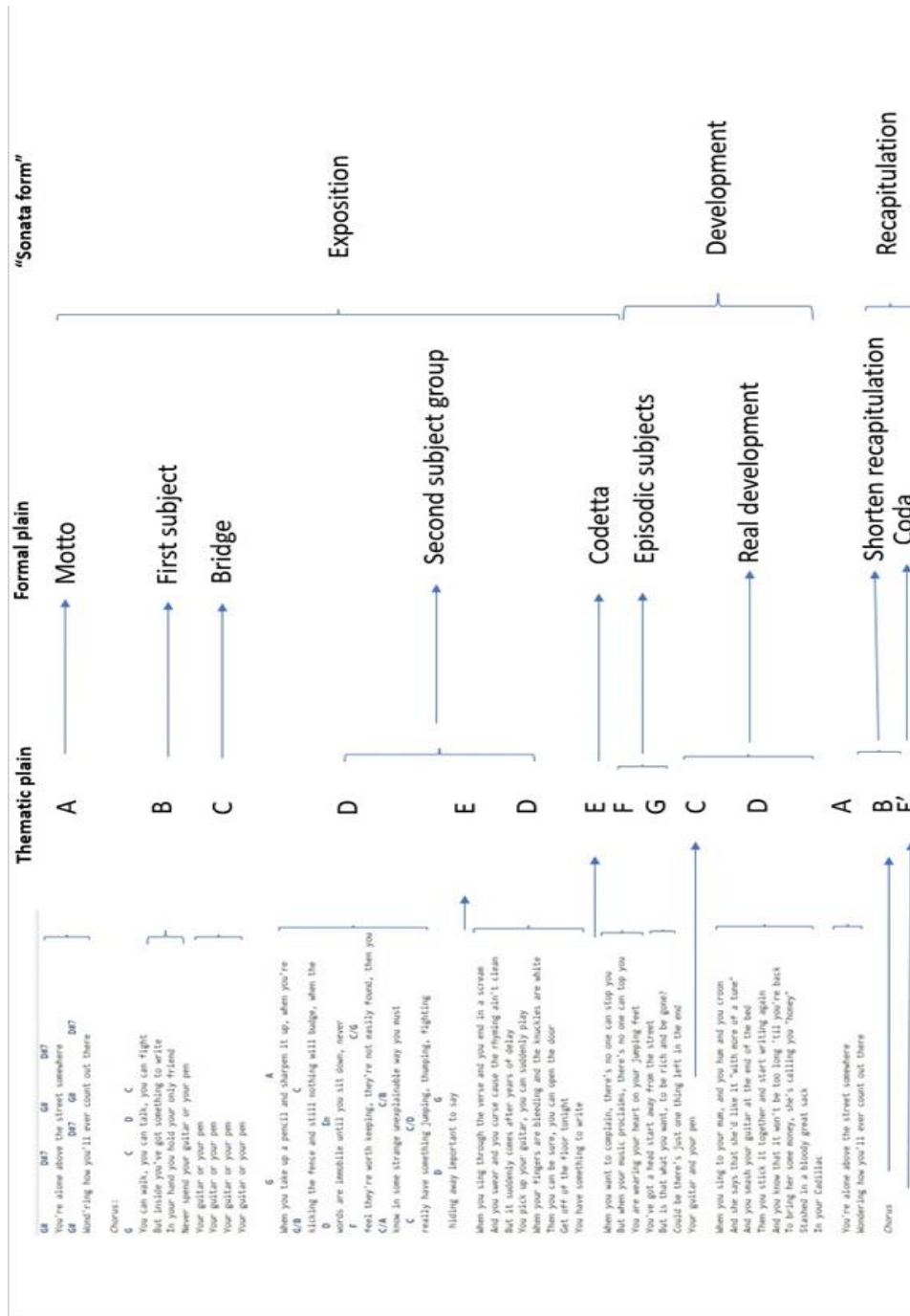


Fig. 3 The proposed analytical scheme for the song "Guitar And Pen" as a sonata form

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## ŠTA GRUPA „HU“ DUGUJE KLASIČNOJ MUZICI?

*Igra između klasične i popularne muzike dobro je dokumentovan fenomen. Britanski rok bend, „Hu“ (The Who), prvobitno je krenuo na svoju muzičku avanturu šezdesetih kao deo šireg pokreta, "Britanske invazije", bez mnogih distinktivnih elemenata koji bi ih izdvajali. Međutim, kako je decenija odmicala, te su postizali komercijalni uspeh, počela je transformacija.*

*Ovaj rad istražuje drugu i treću fazu karijere The Who (1970-e i 1980-e), obeležene stvaranjem pionirskih rok opera kao što su "Tomi" ("Tommy") i "Kvadrofenija" ("Quadrophenia"). Iako termin "opera" u kontekstu popularne muzike možda ne odgovara klasičnim operskim konvencijama, postaje jasno da su elementi klasične muzike našli svoj put u repertoar ove grupe. Posmatranje njihove harmonske strukture otkriva spoj klasičnih uticaja, iako u izmenjenom obliku, obogaćujući njihov zvuk. Dodatno, kompozicije grupe „Hu“ pokazuju nijansirano razumevanje muzičkih oblika, zamagljujući granice između klasične i popularne muzike.*

*Ova istraživanja idu daleko izvan klasične muzike da obuhvate moderne i postmoderne elemente prisutne u opusu izabrane grupe, kao što su suptilni nagoveštaji minimalizma. Cilj ovog rada je da osvetli složen odnos između klasične i popularne muzike, koristeći razvoj grupe „Hu“ kao primer kako rok bend može crpeti iz klasične „tradicije“, uključujući elemente savremene muzike, i na kraju definisati granice muzičkih žanrova.*

Ključne reči: „Hu“, rok-muzika, rok-opera, harmonija, minimalizam