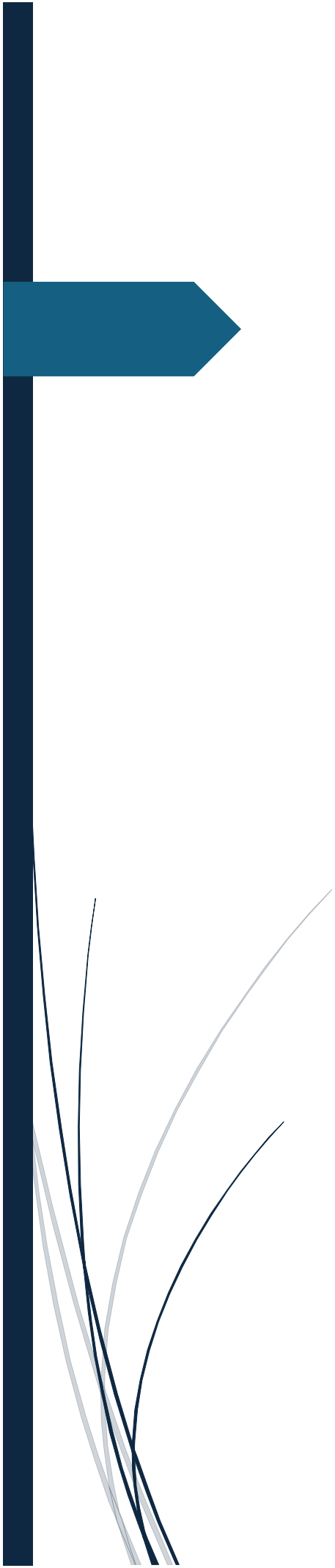




Pop Ballad

Popular Music Teaching Resources Package

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1/ A Brief History and Background of Pop Ballad

What is Pop Music?

- Accessible to general public
- Produced commercially, for profit
- It could include all popular **forms** – rock, country, reggae, rap, and so on

See: Frith, S. (2001). Pop music. In *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (pp. 91–108). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521553698.007>

What is a Pop Ballad?

In the world of pop music, **ballad** is a cornerstone. There is always one of them in top Music charts. While the word "ballad" originally described folk songs that told long stories, by the late 19th century, it became the "sentimental song" we know today.

Ballad isn't a separate genre—it is a **song** defined by its musical and expressive features.

- **Musical features:** A slow tempo, lyrical melodic lines and basic verse-chorus form.
- **Expressive features:** Mostly relate to love, loss, heartbreak and emotions.
- You can find rock ballads, soul ballads, country ballads and even heavy metal ballads.

See: Metzger, D. (2012). The power ballad. *Popular Music*, 31(3), 437–459. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143012000347>

Early History: 1890s – 1950s

The pop ballad has been at the heart of the music business for over 100 years.

- **Parlour Music:** In the late 1800s, songs were written for the growing middle class to play on pianos at home, such as *After the Ball* (1891). These were the primary "pop songs" of the era, sold in the form of sheet music to a massive commercial market.
- These songs were deliberately designed to evoke a shared emotion between singer and audience, bridging the gap between private sentiment and collective connection.
- **The "Great American Songbook":** Between the 1920s and 1950s, professional songwriting teams — including George Gershwin, Rodgers & Hammerstein, and composers from Tin Pan Alley and Broadway — produced "Standards". These were songs so well-crafted and emotionally resonant that they were covered by hundreds of artists, each bringing their own interpretation to the work.
- **The invention of the electric microphone:** This technology allowed artists like Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole to sing with a new level of vocal intimacy, creating a new performance style known as the "crooner" style. Rather than projecting their voices to fill a concert hall, singers could now whisper directly to listeners, using subtle breaths and soft tones to convey deep, personal emotion. This intimate approach fundamentally changed how pop ballads were performed and experienced.

Key Examples:

- Judy Garland, *Over the Rainbow* (1939)
- Frank Sinatra, *Autumn Leaves* (1957)

1950s – 1970s

As Rock and Roll emerged, the ballad adapted rather than disappearing.

- **Swing Influence & Orchestration:** During the 1950s and 60s, ballads often featured a "swing" rhythms and lush orchestral arrangements that heightened the emotion. These orchestral ballads dominated film and stage musicals, where a well-crafted ballad could become a breakout hit and powerful marketing tool.
 - **Nat King Cole, *Unforgettable* (1951):** A perfect example of the polished and orchestral sound.
 - **Film & Musicals:** These orchestral ballads were heavily used in movies and stage musicals. A successful ballad was often served as a promotional tool to turn a film into a hit.

Examples:

- ***You'll Never Walk Alone*** from the movie *Carousel* (1956); ***Moon River*** from the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961).
- Sentimental songs can create a shared emotional bond between the performer and audiences, therefore it becomes common in stage performance and film production.
- Rock bands and artists, such as Elvis Presley and Ray Charles, proved that even "rebellious" singers needed ballads to reach a wider audience and demonstrate emotional depth.
 - **The Beatles, *Yesterday* (1965):** This is a landmark moment. It proved that a rock band could write a beautiful, acoustic-driven ballad with string arrangements, bridging the gap between "pop standards" and modern rock.
 - **Elvis Presley, *Can't Help Falling in Love* (1961):** Showed that the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" could deliver intimate vocal style. The song was a centrepiece of the soundtrack for the movie *Blue Hawaii* (1961).
 - **Ray Charles, *I Can't Stop Loving You* (1962):** Ray Charles blended R&B, country, and pop ballad styles into a massive crossover hit.
- Other artists and groups also produced pop ballads for the commercial market:
 - **Dusty Springfield, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* (1966):** A famous sentimental pop ballad (a cover of an Italian song) featuring a dramatic orchestral arrangement and a powerful, emotional vocal.
 - **The Carpenters, *Close to You* (1970):** This group is known for their incredibly smooth, polished, and radio-friendly ballads.

- **Simon & Garfunkel, *Bridge Over Troubled Water* (1970):** A monumental ballad blending gospel, rock dynamics, and pop sensibilities.
- **Joni Mitchell, *Both Sides, Now* (1969):** A folk-influenced approach emphasising intimate storytelling with minimal instrumentation

1970s – 90s

The power ballad emerged in the 1970s, gaining popularity through pop artists like Barry Manilow. Under the influence of rock music, the ballad of this era added intensity and energy that hadn't been seen before.

- The following examples showcase expansive arrangements and powerful vocal techniques — "belting", that heighten the emotional stakes beyond the quiet style of the 50s and 60s.
 - Barry Manilow, *Mandy* (1974)
 - Morris Albert, *Feelings* (1974)

Two Main Characteristics

1. **Musical escalation:** Beginning with minimal instrumentation, the arrangement progressively adds instruments (drums, electric guitars, strings) and increases volume, creating momentum towards a powerful climax.
2. **Expressive:** The music creates a sense of "triumph" or "ecstasy," turning even sad lyrics into an empowering experience.
 - Barry Manilow, *Mandy* (1974): Demonstrates the classic build from solo piano to full orchestral peak.
 - Whitney Houston, *I Will Always Love You* (1992): Features an iconic moment towards the final chorus where the music suddenly stops and then "explodes" with her powerful high note. This transform the sadness into something feel heroic and triumphant.

More features

- **Vocal Virtuosity:** Singers employ belting and high notes to express emotions.
- **Melodic Hooks:** Simple, catchy choruses designed for audiences to sing along, particularly effective in large venue performances.
- **Genre Exchange:** The power ballad borrows the energy of rock to gain "authenticity" and the soulfulness of R&B to create vocal intensity. This blend makes the sentimentality feel more personal and less polished.
- **Soft Ballad:** Not all pop ballads follow the escalation formula but embrace restraint and intimacy instead:
 - George Michael, *Careless Whisper* (1994)
 - Berlin, *Take My Breath Away* (1986)

- Eric Clapton, *Tears in Heaven* (1992)
- These songs focus on sustained intimacy and quiet reflection rather than a climactic and high-intensity conclusion. Therefore, some tracks often feature a fade out, allowing the emotion to linger and gradually diminish.
- The Bangles, *Eternal Flame* (1988)

More for listening

1. Guns N' Roses, *November Rain* (1991)
2. Celine Dion, *My Heart Will Go On* (1997)
3. Elton John, *Candle in the Wind 1997* (1997)
4. Aerosmith, *I Don't Want to Miss a Thing* (1998)

2000s – present

In modern pop culture, emotions are expected to be strong, intense, and immediate. The power ballad provides a perfect musical structure for this "over-the-top" emotional expression. Modern hits continue to utilise the "escalation and uplift" formula, often blending it with digital production, hip-hop beats or indie-pop sensibilities.

- **Adele, *Someone Like You* (2011) & *Hello* (2015):** Adele perfected the art of building emotional tension before releasing it in a powerful climax, connecting with a new generation.
- **Lady Gaga, *Always Remember Us This Way* (2018):** A powerhouse piano ballad that builds into a classic "stadium-rock" climax, highlighting her vocal strength and emotional sincerity.
- **Lewis Capaldi, *Someone You Loved* (2019/2020):** A raw, vocal-heavy ballad that relies on vocal intensity to prove sincerity.

The quiet, gentle pop ballad continues to use sparse arrangements to highlight vulnerability.

- **Norah Jones, *Don't Know Why* (2002):** This track avoids the climactic and high-intensity conclusion by maintaining a mellow, jazz-inflected atmosphere that relies on a consistent and gentle dynamic.
- **Lana Del Rey, *Video Games* (2011):** Introduced a "cinematic" but restrained moodiness in the music video.
- **Billie Eilish, *What Was I Made For?* (2023):** Uses whispering vocals (returning to the "crooner" level of intimacy) to express deep existential sadness, maintaining a consistent dynamic throughout the music, and without any dramatic contrast.

2/ Pop Ballads (Cantopop) and Cover songs in Hong Kong From 1950s to 2000s

Introduction: The Identity of the "Cover Songs" (改編歌)

Cover songs played an important role in the development of Cantopop in Hong Kong. A cover song refers to the practice of adapting foreign melodies—mainly from Japan, the United States, and Europe—and writing new Cantonese lyrics for the local audience.

1950s–1960s:

- **Shanghai Influence:** The music scene was strongly influenced by popular songs in Chinese Mainland, also known as *shidaiqu* (時代曲), brought to Hong Kong by Shanghainese immigrants. Western popular music also had an impact.
- Cantonese Opera (粵劇) was the main form of entertainment during this period.
- Some artists like **Chung CHOW (周聰)**¹ and the **Lotus** (Sam HUI's early band) began writing new Cantonese lyrics for existing Western pop songs. For example:

Original	Cover
Frank Sinatra - <i>Three Coins in the Fountain</i> (1954)	鄧寄塵、鄭碧影、李寶瑩 – 《飛哥跌落坑渠》 (1958)

- During the 1960s, Cantonese popular songs gradually gained popularity.
- **Post-war generation:** Between 1961 and 1966, the percentage of Hong Kong's locally born population increased from 47.7% to 53.8%.² This locally raised generation developed a sense of belonging to Hong Kong, which gradually fostered a growing demand for Cantonese popular music. As this generation came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, Cantopop steadily rose to become the dominant genre of Hong Kong popular music. The facts are listed below:

1970s: The Birth of Modern Cantopop, the rise of local television

- The 1970s marked the rise of modern Cantopop and the growth of local television.
- Living standards in Hong Kong improved during the early 1970s.
- Free-to-air television became widely available, providing shared entertainment across different social classes.
- The TV drama theme song, *A Love Tale between Tears and Smiles* 《啼笑因緣》, by Sandra Lang (仙杜拉) became a major hit.

¹ The romanisation of 周聰 varies across scholarly sources. While some scholars use "Chau Chung", the form "Chung Chow" is more widely adopted in academic literatures.

² Chu, Yiu-Wai, *Hong Kong Cantopop: A Concise History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017, 28–29

- TVB gradually shifted its focus to Cantopop.
- Sam HUI (許冠傑), widely recognised as the 'God of Cantopop', played a pivotal role in promoting Cantopop during the 1970s.
 - His music was influenced by Western pop and rock music, including artists such as Elvis Presley.
 - The song *Games Gamblers Play* 《鬼馬雙星》, the theme song of the Cantonese film of the same name, used rock rhythms and Cantonese lyrics. It achieved great commercial success.

1980s: The "Golden Age" of Covers

- Cantopop became a dominant cultural product of Hong Kong.
 - Record companies relied heavily on cover versions of foreign hit songs.
 - Many popular songs were adapted from Japanese, American, and other Western pop music. For examples:

Original	Cover
Kikkawa Kōji 吉川晃司 – <i>Monica</i> (1984)	張國榮 – <i>Monica</i> (1984)
Madonna – <i>Into the Groove</i> (1985)	梅艷芳 – 《點都要愛》 (1985)
Anzen Chita 安全地帶 – <i>Wine Red no Kokoro</i> (1984)	譚詠麟 – 《酒紅色的心》 (1984)

- Cantopop became a multibillion-dollar industry with extensive fan bases across China, Japan, and Southeast Asia.
- Local bands (e.g., Beyond, Tat Ming Pair 達明一派) emerged. They focused more on original compositions and socially conscious lyrics rather than standard love ballads.
 - 達明一派 – 《石頭記》 (1987)
 - Beyond – 《再見理想》 (1986)

1990s: "K-Songs" and Standardisation

- Jacky Cheung (張學友), Andy Lau (劉德華), Leon Lai (黎明), and Aaron Kwok (郭富城) dominated music, film, advertising, and popular culture.
- In 1995, Commercial Radio Hong Kong (CR2) launched a campaign to broadcast **only original local songs** (本地原創曲). This policy reduced the use of cover songs and aimed to support local composers.
- The influence of karaoke grew. Record labels produced more "K-Songs" (K 歌), which were ballads with simple melodies designed to be easy to sing in karaoke settings.
 - 張學友 – 《每天愛你多一些》 (1991)
 - 鄭伊健 – 《友情歲月》 (1998)

2000s: The New Era of Icons and Market Shifting

During the 2000s, a new generation of artists appeared at a time when the local music market was shrinking and the popularity of digital music was rising.

For example:

- **Sammi CHENG**: known for both emotional ballads and energetic dance tracks influenced by Japanese and Korean music.
- **Kelly CHEN**: represented a modern and cosmopolitan image that appealed to urban audiences.
- **Eason CHAN** 陳奕迅: became one of the most important singers of the 2000s. His songs covered a wide range of topics and musical styles.
- **Joey YUNG** 容祖兒: achieved a great commercial success. She consistently achieved high record sales, with several albums reaching **Platinum** and **Double Platinum**³ status. Her 1999 debut EP "EP 1" sold 130,000 copies and set a record for a newcomer by staying on the IFPI sales chart for 23 consecutive weeks—a record that remains unbroken today (Apr 2026). Furthermore, her debut hit "未知" was a cover of Jennifer Paige's hit "Crush," highlighting that cover songs remained a powerful tool for launching new stars.
- **Twins**: Their success in music, film, and advertising created a cross-media business model.

As local album sales declined, many artists began producing Putonghua-language albums to access the markets of China.

Suggested reading:

Chu, Yiu-Wai. *Hong Kong Cantopop: A Concise History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017. Wong, Jum Sum (黃湛森). "The Rise and Decline of Cantopop: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music (1949–1997) 粵語流行曲的發展與興衰：香港流行音樂研究 (1949–1997)." PhD thesis, The University of Hong Kong, 2003.

³ Under the IFPI Hong Kong certification system (established 1977), **Gold Disc** status requires sales of 15,000 units, while **Platinum Disc** requires 30,000 units and **Double Platinum** requires 60,000 units. <https://www.ifpihk.org/en/rules-of-ifpi-hkg-gold-disc-award>

3/ Song Structure

Contrast and Refrain

1. The Importance of Contrast

- **Melodic Contrast:** Verses usually have limited range in melody, while the chorus moves to a higher register with more expandable melodic leaps.
- **Rhythmic Contrast:** The chorus typically adopts a different rhythmic approach to the verse, making it more distinctive and memorable.

♩ = 100 Celine Dion, My Heart Will Go On (1997)

Verse



Ev - ery night in my dreams, O see you, I feel__ you. That is how I know you go_ on.

Chorus



Near far where ev - ever you are,__ I be-lieve that, the heart does, go_ on.____

- **Dynamic Contrast:** Verses are often quiet and intimate; choruses are loud and powerful.

2. The Power of the Refrain

The refrain is the part of the song that recurs. It is the part people remember, sing along to, and share emotion. In pop ballad, the refrain is referred to as the Chorus, a section that is repeated and emphasised.

The Two Big Frameworks: AABA & Verse-Chorus Form

1. The "AABA" (32-Bar) Form

This is a song structure that commonly found in Tin Pan Alley songs as well as American standards. It is also known as Tin Pan Alley form or 32-bar form.

It consists of four sections, each for eight bars long. The "A" section is the main section, the core melodic line of the song, although there might be variations particularly in the last A section.

How it works:

- A (Verse 1): 8 bars, lyrics that end with/contain the "title line" (Refrain)⁴.
- A (Verse 2): 8 bars, same or new lyrics that end with/contain the "title line".
- B (The Bridge): It introduces a contrasting melody, shifts in harmony, and a different dynamic level, offering a moment of departure before returning to the familiar theme.
- A (Verse 3): lyrics in this final section bring us back home to the "title line".

In AABA, the melody stays the same in every "A" section, but the lyrics can change almost completely.

Example: Beatles, *Yesterday* (1965)

Structure	Lyrics
Intro	[short guitar intro]
A	Yesterday All my troubles seemed so far away Now it looks as though they're here to stay Oh, I believe in yesterday
A	Suddenly I'm not half the man I used to be There's a shadow hangin' over me Oh, yesterday came suddenly
B	Why she had to go, I don't know, she wouldn't say I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday
A	Yesterday Love was such an easy game to play Now I need a place to hide away Oh, I believe in yesterday
B	Why she had to go, I don't know, she wouldn't say I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday
A	Yesterday Love was such an easy game to play Now I need a place to hide away Oh, I believe in yesterday
Ending	[humming the end line]

The title line of this song is "yesterday"

⁴ As noted by music theorist John Covach in *Form in Rock Music: A Primer*: "The AABA form is usually associated with the 32-bar form... each A section is a verse that concludes with a **recurring line of text** and music called a **refrain**." He further clarifies: "Note that a **refrain** is part of **the A section**, while a **chorus** is a section of the song in its own right."

♩ = 88

A

Beatles, *Yesterday* (1965)

Yes - ter - day, all my trou - bles seemed to far a - way

now it looks as though they're here to stay, oh, I be - lieve in yes - ter - day

B

Why she had to go I don't know she would - n't say.

I said some - thing wrong, now I long for yes - ter - day.

Example 2: Louis Armstrong, *What a Wonderful World* (1967)

Structure	Lyrics
A	I see trees of green Red roses too I see them bloom For me and you And I think to myself What a wonderful world
A	I see skies of blue And clouds of white The bright blessed day The dark sacred night And I think to myself What a wonderful world
B	The colors of the rainbow So pretty in the sky Are also on the faces Of people going by I see friends shaking hands Saying, "How do you do?" They're really saying I love you

A	I hear babies cry I watch them grow They'll learn much more Than I'll ever know And I think to myself What a wonderful world
Ending	Yes, I think to myself What a wonderful world

2. The Verse-Chorus Form

This is the dominant popular music structure of present day. The refrain is the chorus, which also called the “hook”. The lyrics in the chorus are identical, so that audiences can sing along when it recurs.

Below is a common framework used in pop ballads. Note that this is not a rule but a general practice.

Section	Length	Remarks
Intro	Various	Usually instrumental, set the tone and momentum of the song.
Verse 1	8 bars	Start telling the story
Pre-chorus	4 bars	Some songs might skip this section. This is a transitional section that builds tension and anticipation; prepares for the chorus.
Chorus	8 bars	Also named "hook". This part is meant to be the core of the song. Same lyrics every time!
Verse 2	8 bars	Adds more details to the story, same melody but different lyrics.
Pre-chorus	4 bars	Same melody, lyrics sometimes different
Chorus	8 bars	The hook returns with identical melody and lyrics.
Music Break	8-16 bars	Instrumental solo, giving a break, sometimes it adopts the harmony from verse.
Bridge	4-8 bars	A one-time emotional revelation or climax. The harmony is usually distinct, providing significant contrast to the verse and chorus. This section serves to build tension for the final return of the chorus.

Chorus	8 -16 bars	This is the highest energy moment of the song, where variation and ad libs can be found here for the final expression of the song. The final chorus after the bridge, is sometimes repeated for emphasis.
Outro	Various	An instrumental concluding passage.

Summary

Generally, in AABA, the **same melody carries different lyrics** (except for the refrain line). In Verse-Chorus, the **refrain (the chorus) carries the same lyrics and melody** each time.

4/ Glossary

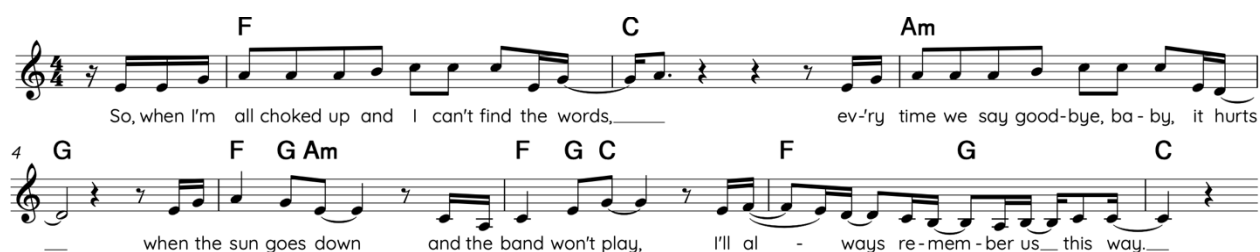
Belting: A high-intensity vocal technique where a singer carries their "chest voice" into a higher pitch range. In ballads, this is often used to signal emotional urgency and raw sincerity.

Broadway: Refers to the theatrical tradition of American musical theater. In Broadway musicals, songs often focus on character development and dramatic storytelling. This tradition has had a significant influence on the structure and delivery of the pop ballad.

Crooner: A style of singing made possible through the use of electric microphones, characterised by a soft, intimate, and conversational delivery. It emphasises a private connection between performers and listeners.

Fade Out: A studio technique where the volume of a song gradually decreases to silence. In ballads, this often suggests that the emotion is ongoing. The absence of a clear, final note can imply that the feeling is lingering or unresolved, rather than reaching a definitive conclusion.

Hook: A musical or lyrical phrase that stands out and is easily remembered. While it typically refers to the chorus in modern ballads. In terms of melodic shape, the hook often features a dramatic leap in pitch and energy that contrasts sharply with the verse. Its primary function is to make the track "stick" in the listener's mind. [Example: Lady Gaga's *Always Remember Us This Way* (2019)]



Parlour Song: A type of popular sheet music intended for home performance in the 19th century. These songs were the ancestors of the pop ballad and focused on shared, sentimental themes. [Example: *After the Ball* (1892)]

Refrain: A repeated line or section of a song (often the chorus) that provides a melodic and emotional anchor. In ballads, the refrain often contains the song's primary emotional "hook".

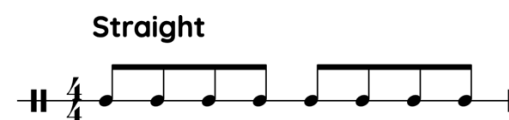
Sentimental: A cultural and musical emphasis on triggering deep emotional responses, such as pity, sympathy, or nostalgia. It is the core "emotional engine" of the pop ballad.

Swing: rhythmic style of jazz and popular music from the 1930s and 40s, characterized by a long-short pattern. While ballads are typically slow, the "swing era" influenced the phrasing and orchestral arrangements of sentimental songs.

In notation, swing feel is rarely written out as triplets; instead, music is notated in straight rhythm with the marking "*Swing*" indicated at the top, or achieved through metric modulation. This is a practical convention that simplifies the score while leaving the rhythmic interpretation to the performer.



Straight: A rhythmic feel in which notes are played exactly as written, with equal, even duration. In contrast to swing, where pairs of notes are performed with a long-short pattern, straight rhythm gives music a precise, unembellished pulse. Most contemporary pop ballads are performed in straight rhythm.



Tin Pan Alley: A name for the New York City music publishing hub centered on 28th Street from 1885 to the 1920s. It functioned as a cultural barometer, commissioning and distributing sheet music that mirrored the public's temperament and current events. While the physical location eventually moved to the Brill Building, the term remains synonymous with the industrialisation of popular song standards.

5/ Song Analysis 1

Billie Eilish, *What Was I Made For?* (2023)

5.1. Background

What Was I Made For? is a melancholic pop ballad characterised by a simple harmonic language and clear song structure. The intimate vocal style highlights themes of existential uncertainty alongside a sense of gentle hope.

The song was commissioned for the Hollywood film *Barbie* (2023) after Billie Eilish and her brother Finneas were shown a rough cut of the movie. The track received significant critical acclaim, earning the Academy Award for Best Original Song, Song of the Year at the Grammy Awards, and a Golden Globe Award.

5.2. Instrumentation

The track is a minimalist pop ballad that prioritises atmospheric mood and intimate texture over traditional pop dynamics.

- **The 'Felt Piano' Foundation:**
 - The core of the song is a soft, upright piano.
 - Finneas utilised a felt piano (where a layer of felt is placed between the hammers and strings), which softens the attack of each note and emphasises subtle mechanical sounds.
 - This creates an intimate 'living room' and warm atmosphere that reflects the vulnerability expressed in the lyrics.
- **Subtle Orchestral Layering:** While the piano remains the primary instrument, the ambient texture is achieved through careful layering, which includes:
 - **Mellotron Strings & Organ:** These instruments provide a vintage tone and a slightly unstable warmth.
 - **Vibraphone & Electric Bass:** These deepen the low-mid register without creating a strong rhythmic groove that might distract from the vocal line.
 - **Percussive Restraint:** Kick drum is mixed at a very low level so that it is felt more than heard. It blends with the bass and functions as a subtle pulse rather than a dominant beat.

Meanwhile, Billie Eilish's vocal delivery not only carries the melody but also as an expressive timbral element.

- **Signature Close-Microphone Delivery:** Billie Eilish is known for her distinctly intimate, breathy vocal tone.
 - By recording with the microphone placed very close to her mouth, she captures fine details such as breath sounds and subtle articulations.
 - Creates a strong sense of closeness and immediacy.

- Her style blends modern, airy pop with classic vocal jazz or "crooner" styles, allowing for soft, emotional, and melodic interpretations.
- **Layered Vocal Texture:** Instead of using vocal doubling for power, multiple soft takes are layered and mixed, creating a delicate and almost "ghostly" effect.
- **Intimacy through Dryness:** The main vocal is notably "dry" (lacking heavy reverb), which prevents the listener from feeling any distance from the vocal tracks.

Pop music often emphasises contrast between sections (for example, a powerful chorus and a softer verse). In contrast, this song intentionally avoids a dramatic crescendo. The chorus contains neither orchestral swell nor heavy beat drop. This creates a sense of suspension, musically reflecting the theme of uncertainty and the feeling of "waiting" to find out what one was made for.

5.3. Structure

The song follows an **AABABA** structure. While it is rooted in the classic AABA framework, it incorporates an additional verse–chorus cycle to create a more extended narrative flow and emotional development.

Intro

The song starts with a short piano introduction. It establishes a repeating two-bar chord pattern. Billie hums a melody over the piano before the lyrics begin.

♩ = 78 **Intro**

C Em F C Em F — Verse 1

p Mmm, _____ mmm, _____ I used to float,

The A sections (The Verses)

These sections function as verses. While the melody remains consistent for each time, Billie slightly adjusting her breath control and timing—to prevent the repetition from sounding static.

Each verse concludes with the title phrase “*What Was I Made For?*” This phrase serves as the theme of the song, and hinting that this song is based on traditional pop music.

Verse

Verse 1 *Intro*
I used to float, now I just fall down, I used to know but I'm not sure

Verse 2 *Verse 1*
Tak-ing a drive, I was an i - deal looked so a-live, turns out I'm not

Verse 3 *Music Break*
When did it end? all the en-joy - ment I'm sad a-gain don't tell my boy

Verse 4 [Finale] *Chorus*
Think I for-got how to be hap - py, some-thing I'm not but some-thing I can

Verse 1
now what I was made for, what was I made for? Tak-ing a drive,

Verse 2
real just some-thing you paid for, what was I made for? 'Cause

Verse 3
- friend, it's not what he's made for, what was I made for? 'Cause

Verse 4 [Finale]
be, some-thing I wait for, some-thing I'm made for

The B Sections (Chorus)

In traditional AABA form, the “B” section typically functions as a bridge. In this song, however, the “B” section refers to the **chorus**, which demonstrates several modern pop characteristics:

- It is preceded by a pre-chorus.
- It uses identical lyrics in each occurrence.
- It moves into a slightly higher vocal register.

Despite these features, the chorus is less dramatic than that of a typical modern pop ballad. Additional vocal layers are introduced subtly in the background to create gentle contrast before returning to the verse.

Verse Pre-chorus Chorus

what was I made for? 'Cause I, I, I don't know how to feel,

but I wan-na try, I don't know how to feel, but some

day I might, some day I might

Music Break

A short instrumental passage occurs after the first chorus. This section remains minimal and soft in its dynamics. It reinforces the melodic material of the verse, provides a reflective moment and strengthens the song's traditional pop character.

The musical score for the Music Break section is written for Vocal and Piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The Vocal part begins with the lyrics "some__ day I__ might__" and is marked with a "Chorus" bracket. The Piano part begins with a "Music Break" bracket and features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, marked with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The score continues with a vocal line for "Verse 3" with lyrics "Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, When did it end?" and a corresponding piano accompaniment.

Verse 4 and Ending

In the final section, the song returns to verse materials, reflecting traditional pop form. However, the lyrics shift from the questioning *"What Was I Made For?"* to the more declarative *"Something I'm Made For."* This lyrical change suggests a tentative sense of acceptance.

Musically, however, the song avoids a conventional feeling of tonal resolution. The melody repeats with a sense of closure but concludes on the **supertonic** (the second scale degree) rather than the **tonic** (the home note). This harmonic suspension leaves the song intentionally unresolved, effectively mirroring the lyrical theme of an unfinished search for self.

The musical score for Verse 4 and Ending is written for a single melodic line. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score begins with "Verse 4" and includes the lyrics "Think I for-got__ how to be hap - py, some-thing I'm not__ but some-thing I can__ be, some-thing I wait__ for__ some-thing I'm__ made__ for__". The score concludes with an "Ending" section, marked with a double bar line.

5.4. Harmony

The Core Loop: The song primarily moves through a simple but effective chord progression: **C - Em - F**. This repeating pattern establishes a stable harmonic foundation and reinforces the song's minimalist character.

Sectional Transitions: While the main loop provides the structural basis, each verse and chorus conclude with a variation in which **Am replaces the C chord**, resulting in an Am–Em–F progression. This subtle change introduces a slightly darker tonal color while maintaining overall coherence.

Absence of dominant: The core loop does not include a traditional dominant chord (such as G or G7). The absence of the dominant contributes to the song's restrained and suspended harmonic atmosphere.

Verse 1

I used to float, now I just fall down, I used to know but I'm not sure

Verse 2

now what I was made for what was I made for? Tak - ing a drive,

Chorus

I don't know how to feel, but I wan-na try, I don't know how to feel,

but some day I might, some day I might

The musical score is written in 4/4 time. Verse 1 consists of two lines of music. The first line has chords C, Em, and F. The second line has chords F, C, Em, and F. Verse 2 consists of one line of music with chords F, C, Em, and F. The Chorus consists of two lines of music. The first line has chords C, Em, and F. The second line has chords F, C, Em, and F. The lyrics are written below the melody.

The use of ii-V-I: The dominant function appears **only** in the pre-chorus, where a ii-V-I progression (Dm-G-C) is introduced. This progression creates a clearer sense of harmonic direction and effectively **connects the verse to the chorus**.

The musical notation shows three sections: Verse 2, Pre-Chorus, and Chorus. Verse 2 has a melody in 4/4 time with chords F, Am, Em, F, Em. The lyrics are "what was I made for?". The Pre-Chorus has a melody with a Dm chord and the lyric "'Cause I,". The Chorus has a melody with chords G, C, Em, F, C, Em. The lyrics are "I don't know how to feel, but I wanna try,".

Unresolved Ending: A similar ii-V motion is suggested at the end of the song; however, the final tonic chord is omitted. As a result, the harmony remains unresolved, avoiding a conventional sense of closure.

In the final moment, the melody ends on the supertonic (the second scale degree), this creates a sense of harmonic suspension, the song withholds a complete feeling of arrival.

This sustained suspension leaves the listener in a state of gentle tension. The harmonic design closely reflects the lyrical theme of an unfinished search for identity, as the music itself avoids providing a fully resolved answer.

The musical notation shows two sections: Verse 4 and Ending. Verse 4 has a melody in 4/4 time with chords F, C, Em, F, C, Em, F. The lyrics are "Think I forgot how to be happy, something I'm not but something I can be, something I wait". The Ending has a melody with chords C, Em, F, Am, Em, F, Am, Dm, G7. The lyrics are "for something I'm made for something I'm made for".

6/ Song Analysis 2

Eason Chan, 《K 歌之王》 (2000)

6.1. Background

《K 歌之王》 is a representative Cantopop ballad that demonstrates many of the typical characteristics of the genre, including the use of instrumentation, harmony, and structure. Lyrically, it refers to other well-known Cantopop songs by mentioning song titles and selected lines, highlighting the strong interconnection within Hong Kong popular music culture.

The song uses “singing” as a metaphor for emotional expression. At the time of its release, karaoke (KTV) culture was flourishing in Hong Kong, serving as a significant venue for emotional expression and social interaction. Composed by CHAN Fai-young (陳輝陽) with lyrics written by Albert LEUNG (林夕), the song was first released in Cantonese in 2000 and later in Putonghua in 2001. It received major music awards and strengthened Eason Chan’s position in the Cantopop industry.

6.2. Instrumentation

The track follows a typical Cantopop arrangement consisting a piano, guitars, electric bass drums, and strings, and additional instruments including a harp and synthesizer playing pads. The song begins with a simple piano introduction and gradually builds into a fuller arrangement, a common technique in Cantopop to increase emotional intensity.

Section	Intro	Verse 1	Pre-chorus	Chorus	Music Break	Verse 2	Chorus	Verse 3 (half)	Outro
Main Instrumentation	Piano and flute	Piano						Pno. only	Piano
		Strings							Strings
					Drums and bass				soft perc. loops
Dynamic Level	Medium	Soft	Soft	Medium	Medium	Medium	Strong → Strongest	Soft	Soft

Piano: The piano serves as the primary accompaniment throughout the track, providing harmonic support and establishing the mood. It remains the main accompanying instrument from the introduction to the first musical break.

Drums and Bass: These instruments enter during the musical break, creating a shift in energy after the chorus. In Cantopop, the drums and bass are typically crucial for elevating the dynamics and overall energy of a track. They work together to provide the rhythmic groove and harmonic foundation. The groove follows a standard pattern commonly found in Cantopop arrangements.



The following excerpt shows the drums and bass of the chorus (2nd time after Verse 2).

Chorus

♩ = 77

Chords: D F#m/C# Bm F#m/A G Em7 G A

Voice: 相 信 一 世 一 生 這 膚 淺 對 白 來 吧 送 給 你 叫 幾 百 萬 人 流 淚 過 的 歌 如 從 未

Electric Bass: *f* ride

Drum Set: *f* ride

Strings: String arrangement is a defining characteristic of Cantopop, providing harmonic depth and highlighting key moments. In this track, the string section takes the lead during the musical break and outro.

Synthesizer: The synthesiser is used to play "**pad**" sounds, which serves as a background layer to thicken the overall texture and blend with the acoustic instruments.

Guitar and Harp: These instruments are used minimally, primarily playing **broken chords** to add details and rhythmic varieties without dominating the arrangement.

6.3. Structure

The song utilises a variation of the traditional **verse-chorus structure**. While a standard pop song typically follows a ‘verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus’ pattern, this track replaces the final chorus with a shortened version of the verse. The final verse functions as a closing section that gradually reduces the musical energy to conclude the song.

The structure of the song is listed below:

Intro	Verse 1	Pre-chorus	Chorus	Music Break	Verse 2	Chorus	Verse 3 (half)	Outro
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Intro

The introduction directly adapts the piano intro of the well-known Cantopop song 《約定》 (1998) by Faye WONG. In addition to adapting the piano introduction, the song includes ambient sound effects at the beginning.

"K 歌之王"

♩ = 77

Voice

Piano

mf

Gmaj7 F#m7 Gmaj7 A 我只

"約定"

♩ = 80

Piano

mf

Amaj7 G#m7 Amaj7 B A/C#

The A sections (Verses)

The verse appears three times, with the final occurrence being shortened. While the harmony remains largely the same, the verses differ in terms of lyrics, the ending melody, and the sections that follow.

The first verse is followed by a pre-chorus, the second verse leads directly into the chorus, and the third verse is shortened to half its original length before moving into the outro.

Verse 1
我唱得不夠動人 你別皺眉 我願意和你 約定至死 我只想嬉戲唱遊

Verse 2
我唱出心裡話時 眼淚會流 要是怕難過 抱住我手 我只得千語萬言

Verse 3
我只想跟你未來

1
到下世紀 請你別嫌我將這煽情 奉獻給你 還能憑什麼 要是愛

2
放在你心 比渴望地老天荒更簡單 未算罕 有誰人又相信 一世一生 這膚淺對白

3
浸在愛河 而你那呵欠絕得不能 絕絕到溶掉 我

The B Sections (Pre-Chorus and Chorus)

The pre-chorus in this song appears only once, serving as a link between the first verse and the chorus. It is omitted during the second repetition, where the music proceeds directly from the verse into an extended chorus section.

Pre-chorus
還能憑什麼 擁抱若未令你興奮 便宜地唱出 寫在情

Chorus
歌的性感 還能憑什麼 要是愛不可感動人 俗套的歌詞煽動你 惻忍 誰人又

Although the harmonic structure and lyrics remain largely identical, there are subtle differences between them. The chorus can be divided into two sections (Rehearsal marks **A** and **B**):

- The first half ([A]) is identical in both choruses, while the second half ([B]) varies.
- The second chorus features a two-measure extension, resulting in a longer duration that pushes the music toward the song's emotional peak.
- These extended measures use the harmony and musical phrasing of the preceding two measures.

[A] Chorus

Chorus 1

誰人又相信一世一生這膚淺對白 來吧送給你叫幾百萬

Chorus 2

誰人又相信一世一生這膚淺對白 來吧送給你叫幾百萬

1

2

1

2

1

2

[B]

1

2

1

2

Music Break

1

2

高峰都因我動容 無人及我你怎麼竟然說K歌之王是我

Music Break

The music break in this song is led by a string ensemble consisting of violin, viola, and cello. The melody is borrowed and varied from Miriam YEUNG's song 《再見二丁目》 (1997).

“再見二丁目”



原來過的很快樂 只我一人未發覺 如能忘掉渴望歲月長衣裳薄

This section is also joined by the drums and bass, which establish the groove and provide a renewed sense of energy.

Music Break "K歌之王"

The image shows a musical score for the 'Music Break' section of the song 'K歌之王'. The score is for a string quartet (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello) and includes parts for Electric Bass and Drum Set. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 77. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines. Above the staves, the chords D, G/D, A/D, D, D, G, A, and D are indicated. The string parts (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello) are marked with a dynamic of *mf* and feature triplet markings (3) in some measures. The Electric Bass part is also marked with *mf*. The Drum Set part is marked with *mf* and features a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The score is transcribed by Taishun Tse.

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Electric Bass

Drum Set

strings transcription by Taishun Tse

Ending

The ending is also a musical quotation from Maggie FU's 《絕》 (1999). By utilising the same ending as Maggie FU's hit, including a drum loop aligned with a string arrangement, the song pays tribute to another iconic Cantopop track of the late 1990s.

Outro "K歌之王"

The musical score for the ending of 'K歌之王' features four staves. The top staff is for Strings (lead line) in G major, showing a melodic line that ends with a sustained chord. The second staff is for Piano, featuring a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The third staff is for Electric Bass, providing a steady bass line. The bottom staff is for Sfx and Kick drum, with a wavy line indicating a sustained effect and a kick drum pattern.

6.4. Harmony

Canon in D progression

The song predominantly utilises the **Pachelbel's Canon in D progression** (I-V-vi-iii-IV-I-IV-V). This is arguably one of the most common harmonic sequences in global pop music, particularly within the Cantopop genre.

Verse 1

The musical score for the verse of 'K歌之王' is shown in G major. The chord progression is: I (D), V (A), vi (Bm), iii (F#m), IV (G), I (D/F#), ii (Em7), V (A). The lyrics are: 我唱得不夠動人 你別皺眉 我願意和你約定至死 我只
想嬉戲唱遊到下世紀 請你別嫌我將這煽情奉獻給你

The verse uses this progression extensively. Although it does not end with the traditional IV-V turnaround, the ii-V substitution is functionally interchangeable. Furthermore, the ii-V-I cadence used here is a fundamental progression in pop music, reinforcing the song's accessibility and generic familiarity.

Descending bass

The chorus uses a similar chord progression but incorporates a change in the bass line to demonstrate a common variation of this 'Canon in D' sequence: the use of a descending bass line.

Chorus

誰人又相信一世一生這膚淺對白來吧送給你叫幾百萬人流淚過的歌如從未

聽過誓言如幸福摩天輪才令我因你要呼天叫地愛愛愛愛那麼多將我

漫天心血一一拋到銀河誰是垃圾誰不捨我難

過分一丁目贈我

- the harmonic foundation is maintained while the bass moves stepwise (scale degrees: 1-7-6-5-4-3-2-5) through chord inversions.
- This technique adds a sense of linear motion and emotional weight to the progression without departing from the core harmonic structure.

Descending bass progression

Chord

Bass

descending bass

A different harmonic approach in the pre-chorus

While the melody remains in D major, the arranger employs a different harmonic approach in this section. The first phrase begins in G major (the subdominant), while the second phrase adopts a B minor approach (the relative minor of D major), leading the harmony back to the primary key of D major for the chorus.

Both phrases incorporate descending bass line features. However, while the first phrase follows a diatonic progression, the second phrase adopts a chromatic approach, heightening the emotional tension before the chorus.

Pre-chorus

D⁷ G D/F# Em⁷ D G D/F#

還能憑什麼擁抱若未令你興奮便宜地唱出寫在情

Em⁷ A F#⁷/A# Bm A#⁺ D/A G#m⁷(b⁵) Em⁷ G

歌的性感還能憑什麼要是愛不可感動人俗套的歌詞煽動你惻

A

忍

7/ Song Repertoires

Western Pop Ballad			
1	<i>(They Long to Be) Close to You</i>	1970	The Carpenters
2	<i>Bridge Over Troubled Water</i>	1970	Simon & Garfunkel
3	<i>Take My Breath Away</i>	1986	Berlin
4	<i>Eternal Flame</i>	1988	The Bangles
5	<i>I Will Always Love You</i>	1992	Whitney Houston
6	<i>Because You Loved Me</i>	1996	Celine Dion
7	<i>My Heart Will Go On</i>	1997	Celine Dion
8	<i>Don't Know Why</i>	2002	Norah Jones
9	<i>You Raise Me Up</i>	2003	Josh Groban
10	<i>Someone Like You</i>	2011	Adele
11	<i>When I Was Your Man</i>	2013	Bruno Mars
12	<i>Hello</i>	2015	Adele
13	<i>Always Remember Us This Way</i>	2018	Lady Gaga
14	<i>Shallow</i>	2018	Lady Gaga & Bradley Cooper
15	<i>Someone You Loved</i>	2019	Lewis Capaldi
16	<i>What Was I Made For?</i>	2023	Billie Eilish
Canton Pop Ballad			
17	《啼笑因緣》	1974	仙杜拉
18	《酒紅色的心》	1984	譚詠麟
19	《點都要愛》	1985	梅艷芳
20	《約定》	1998	王菲
21	《K 歌之王》	2000	陳奕迅
22	《單車》	2002	陳奕迅
23	《櫻花樹下》	2008	張敬軒
24	《囍帖街》	2008	謝安琪
25	《一人之境》	2019	林家謙

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