

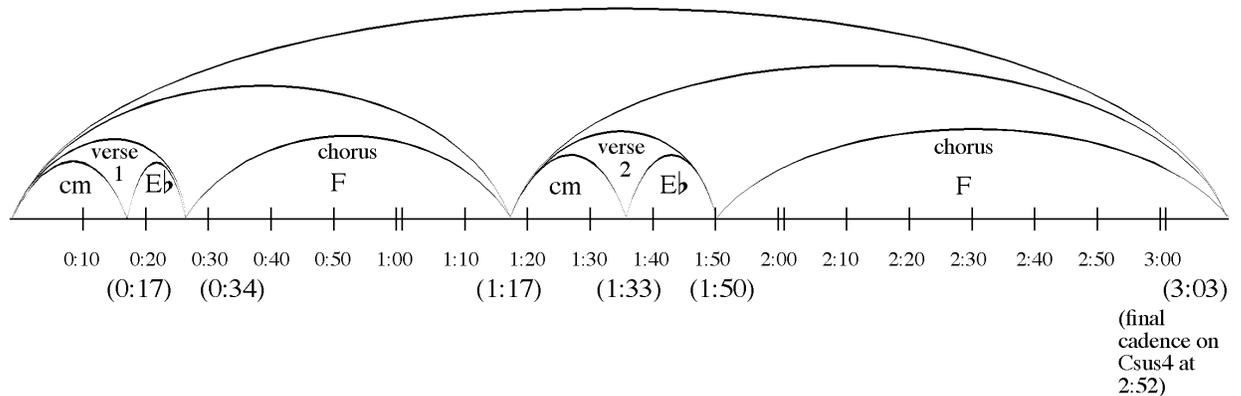
Web Feature 12.3

Motivic parallelism in Queen's "We Are the Champions"

We have examined how a motive may be used to give unity to the musical surface, both in notated composition and in improvisation, through devices such as inversion and sequence. A motive heard on the surface may also be found in different time spans, such as governing the structure of an entire phrase or successive keys in an overall tonal structure. The term **motivic parallelism** is used to describe this kind of multilevel unity.

Queen's 1970s rock anthem "We Are the Champions," beloved in sporting arenas around the world, offers a prime example of melodic parallelism. The song is unusual for its lack of an introduction and for Freddie Mercury's unaccompanied vocal anacrusis with the line "I've paid my dues. . .". Even when the accompaniment enters the sparse texture (bass and piano) helps to put those first three notes (G – B \flat – C) in sharp relief, along with the fact that he sings those three pitches in that ascending gesture—scale degrees 5, 7, and 1 in C natural (Aeolian) minor—four times. The guitar enters with chiming arpeggios as the key changes to E \flat major, the relative major of C minor, on the line "and bad mistakes. . .". Mercury's vocal line sequences upward accordingly, again emphasizing the scale degrees 5, 7, and 1 in E \flat major (B \flat – D – E \flat). A few heavy rock-band punctuations and operatic choral shouts later, we arrive at the famous chorus ("We are the champions, my friend. . ."), which is in F major.

Now, it is time to take a "wide view" of what we have just described. The three-note figure undergoes a tonal (as opposed to real) transposition with the move from minor to major, but it is significant that the same scale degrees are represented in both vocal lines, with an interval pattern of an ascending (minor or major) third followed by an ascending (minor or major) second. As we consider the three tonal areas of the song (Web Example 12.5), we see the same intervallic relation of the opening three notes (m3 followed by M2) is played out across the keys, from the opening to the chorus: C minor, then up a minor third to E \flat major, and then up a major second to F major.



Web Example 12.5. Queen, “We Are the Champions,” tonal overview diagram.

As if all that were not interesting enough, there is also an interesting reversal of contour involving this opening three-note figure once the chorus is reached. The chorus opening “We are the champions” is made up of a three-note *descent* (F – E – C, the F elaborated with a lower neighbor), that is effectively a retrograde (backward) version of the earlier E \flat major-key ascent. As the chorus reaches its climax (“No time for losers. . .”) Mercury’s vocal partially cycles twice through the three-pitch descending figure A – F – B \flat (a permutation, or reordering, of B \flat – A – F; notice that the rotation ends with those three notes, in order, on the words “for losers,” a melodic gesture recalling the childhood “nyah-nyah” playground taunt) before turning to the *minor* form of this descending figure (“’cause we are the champions. . .”), B \flat – A \flat – F. The last notes of the chorus, “. . . of the world!”—heard, again, unaccompanied the first time through—are E \flat , C and F, a reordering of the song’s opening minor-key three-note motive as well as, specifically, the three key areas of the song.

Clearly, then, “We Are the Champions” is saturated with various forms of this three-note motive—transpositions, retrogrades, and even some rearrangements of the same distinctive figure. But more than that, the ascending three-note figure has also been lurking in the background the entire time. When a motive is found in multiple levels of the composition, motivic parallelism is the result.