

## 54. The Beatles

### A Day in the Life

(for Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

#### Background information and performance circumstances

- 'A Day in the Life' is the concluding track of the Beatles' 1967 album, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*
- The songs on the album were designed for studio rather than live performance
- Four-track tape technology used in *Revolver* (1965) and *Rubber Soul* (1966) was further developed in this album
- It was a 'concept' album, following the example of *Pet Sounds* (1966) by the American group the Beach Boys – it is a set of songs exploring the theme of loneliness
- Its format is that of a 'show within a show', in which all but one of the songs are 'performed' by a fictitious band
- The impression of 'live' performance is created by the addition of crowd noise, applause and tuning-up sounds at the beginning of the album and by a 'locked groove' (endless looped recording) featuring noises from the post-recording party, at the end
- The musical and stylistic range of the album is huge, ranging from rock songs ('With a little help'), pseudo-vaudeville ('When I'm sixty-four') to experimental ('Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds', 'For the benefit of Mr Kite')
- The musical resources used on the album far exceeded the two guitars, bass, drums and vocals of the Beatles' early recordings, and included keyboards, Indian classical instruments, sound and tape effects, a brass section and a 40-piece orchestra in 'A Day in the Life'
- 'A Day in the Life' stands 'outside' the *Sergeant Pepper* 'performances' on the album, following immediately after the reprise of the title song. The Beatles – not the *Club Band* – are clearly performing it. As such it has the function of a kind of 'epilogue' to the album
- The song is an assembly of two separate units, one by John Lennon with bleak and sardonic material, and the other, more upbeat section by Paul McCartney
- These two sections are connected by an orchestral link, and form a loose ABA (ternary) shape overall.

#### Performing forces and their handling

As a studio-produced track, 'A Day in the Life' was conceived as a rich mixture of timbres and textures, unlike earlier Beatles songs, which focused on what could be done with two guitars, bass, drums and vocals.

### ***Vocal lines***

The verses were sung by Lennon, and are typified by:

- Generally syllabic setting of words...
- ...except for semitonal melismas on 'turn you on'
- Mid-to-high range of the voice in phrases 1 and 3 alternating with lower tessitura in phrases 2 and 4.
- Overall range of a 10th (E to G)
- Highest note (G) occurs at the close of verse 2 and near the end of verse 3
- There are repeated melodic motifs (see 'Melody', below).

Transition 2 (bars 58–67) is also sung by Lennon. This is a wordless vocalise (to the sound 'Ah'), again in the high register.

The middle section is sung by McCartney:

- It is lower in tessitura, gravitating more towards the lower E
- It spans a range of an octave (B to B)
- It has a less reflective quality.

### ***Piano and Acoustic guitar***

- Both instruments have simple chordal patterns in the Introduction and throughout Lennon's verses
- The guitar has strummed quaver chords, while the chords on piano vary in length
- There is little melodic interest in the parts for these instruments...
- ...but the piano plays a kind of fanfare after the words 'House of Lords' (bar 23) and 'concerto-like' chords after 'Albert Hall' (bar 76)

### ***Bass guitar***

This has:

- A more elaborate version of the piano's left-hand part, an example of heterophonic writing
- Much downward scale motion in the verses
- Continuous quavers (all on E, a pedal effect) during orchestral link passages (although these notes quickly become inaudible)
- A more active part in the middle section, with some chromaticism

- Arpeggio shapes in much of the Transition 2 passage (e.g. bar 58)
- A remarkable avoidance of walking bass patterns.

### ***Drums/percussion***

- Verse 1 and the first phrase of verse 2 feature only maracas
- The full kit then enters
- There are frequent tom-tom fills
- There are quaver rhythms on hi-hat and snare, creating a double-time feeling during the middle section.

### ***Orchestral sections***

- These were introduced quite late in the process as a way of filling the gaps between Lennon's verse 3 and McCartney's middle section and between verse 4 and the end
- These two main passages involve a kind of aleatoric (chance) writing, although the performers were given reference points throughout to indicate the rate of progression. The result is an atonal slide, made more powerful by the overdubbing of four takes into the finished mix
- Note also the semibreve octaves in the orchestra that reinforce the bass line during Transition 2.

### ***Recording /production***

- Four-track technology created a sound that could not easily be reproduced live, with...
- ...use of panning
- An alarm-clock sound is added before McCartney's 'Woke up, got out of bed'
- Overdubbing of three pianos and harmonium on the final E major chord, enhancing the sound to last approximately 40 seconds.

## **Texture**

- Mainly melody-dominated homophony
- Variety is created by aleatoric orchestral sections and stylistic differences between Lennon's and McCartney's material
- Bass and piano left hand play the same basic line throughout (both played by Paul McCartney), but the bass part plays an embellished version, going an example of heterophonic writing.

## Structure

Main points:

- Lennon's material (G major) has a slightly-modified strophic structure – i.e. all three verses use essentially the same material. However, the verses are slightly different in length (details in the table below) because of changes at or near the end of verses 2 and 3. Also note minor changes to rhythm and pitch to provide the optimum setting for each text
- McCartney's (E major) bridge or middle section contributes to an overall feeling of ternary form
- Orchestral and vocal links provide transitions between the different ideas and keys.

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1-4</b>	Overlaps final chord of previous track ('Sergeant Pepper' reprise). Acoustic guitar strums opening sequence of verse with piano and bass joining in
<b>Verse 1</b>	<b>5-14</b>	Five two-bar phrases. Tonality G major, but with hints of modal E minor
<b>Verse 2</b>	<b>15-23</b>	Five phrases lasting 9 bars
<b>Verse 3</b>	<b>24-34</b>	Five phrases lasting 11 bars
<b>Transition 1</b>	<b>34-46</b>	Orchestral slide, merging with the end of verse 3. Pedal E, closing with E major chord at bars 45-46
<b>Bridge/Middle</b>	<b>47-57</b>	Contrasting section: E major, with tighter tempo. Four phrases. Interpolated 2/4 bars create 2½-bar phrase lengths
<b>Transition 2</b>	<b>58-67</b>	Wordless vocalise, with orchestral octaves in cycle of fifths (heard twice). These cycles of fifths move in opposite direction to the usual progression (i.e. C-G-D-A-E rather than C-F-B-E-A)
<b>Verse 4</b>	<b>68-78</b>	Six phrases lasting 11 bars, with the (different) semitonal material from the ends of both verses 2 and 3
<b>Coda</b>	<b>78-89</b>	Repeat of orchestral slide, merging with the end of verse 4. Note the more active drum part. The passage end with an overdubbed E major chord.

## Tonality

- The verses begin in G major, but with more focus on the submediant (E) than is usual and with no use of the dominant chord (D) – so that the harmony here is not 'functional'
- The flattened seventh chord (F) major is employed, hinting at C major
- The verses end on C major chords (but without 'definite' functional cadences)

- Orchestral transitions begin by alternating B and C, and work through an atonal slide to a chord of E major
- McCartney's bridge/middle section is in E major, the tonic (or 'parallel') major of the relative minor of the original G major)
- There are strong hints of the mixolydian mode (note the D major chords), though the dominant ninth chord (B<sup>9</sup>) is used in a more functional manner – alternating with E in bars 56–57)
- The second transition travels around the cycle of fifths twice (further, see the table above). It then returns to G major (with, in functional fashion, IV–V–I in bars 67–68)
- Verse 4 therefore begins in G major
- In the Coda the orchestral slide again works its way up from B–C to an E major chord.

## Harmony

- The chords used in the introduction form a I–III–VI<sup>(7)</sup>–IV (G Bm Em<sup>(7)</sup> C) progression which is repeated and decorated to form the first part of the verse, arriving on II<sup>9</sup> (Am<sup>9</sup>) by use of a passing Cmaj<sup>7</sup> chord (IV–IV<sup>7</sup>–II<sup>9</sup>)
- The second half of the verse begins as the first, but then heads flatwards by a fifth from the C chord to the flattened VII chord (F major), a common modal inflection in rock music
- A plagal cadence leads into verse 2 (note the quaver D – hinting at the 'missing' chord V?)
- The stepwise, descending bass line, spanning a minor seventh from tonic to supertonic, creates some unusual inversions – IIIc (second inversion) in bar 5<sup>3</sup> (beat 3) and seventh chords in third inversion in bars 6<sup>3</sup> and 7<sup>3</sup> (VI<sup>7</sup>d and IV<sup>7</sup>d respectively)
- The bridge/middle section also uses the chord of the flattened VII chord (D)
- Otherwise, the bridge alternates between tonic and dominant ninth (B<sup>9</sup>)
- The second transition section outlines a cycle of fifths (the bassline descending by fourths) from C to E twice (C–G–D–A–E) as previously shown
- There are few conventional cadences in this song.

## Melody

- The melodic style is diatonic/major/pentatonic by turns, but with little or no sign of blues influence (flattened thirds/sevenths)

- Most of the melodic shapes are disjunct, favouring leaps between harmony notes (3rds/4ths)
- Verses are made up of elaborations and variations on three ideas presented in the first two phrases of Verse 1:

a	Bars 5–6: alternating upward 3rds and 4ths from a central B. Ambiguous tonality/pentatonic feel
b	Bar 7: stepwise (conjunct) from G to B, followed by stepwise 4–3–2–1 shape in G major
c	Bar 8: strong upwards fifth (for word setting – ‘made the grade’)

The second half of verse 1 uses the ideas in the pattern a, b, b, a pattern that allows the *melody line* of the verse to end on the tonic G, perhaps in agreement with the definite statement of the words ‘I saw the photograph’.

- At the end of verse 2 two new ideas are introduced:

d	Bar 22 <sup>1–3</sup> : a semitonal pattern, descending initially from B to A sharp. The A sharp is a lower chromatic auxiliary note
e	Bar 22 <sup>4</sup> –23 <sup>2</sup> : ‘aspirational’ rising second-inversion arpeggio shape, ascending to the highest note of the vocal line (G).

- Motif ‘e’ allows verse 2 to finish an octave higher than verse 1 – by an octave (for ‘House of Lords’)
- Motif ‘d’ becomes important later, as it is inverted and repeated to form both the melismatic ‘turn you on’ and the overlapping slow orchestral trill that begins the transitional sections
- Motif ‘e’ precedes motif ‘d’ in verse 3 (bar 31) and is rhythmically augmented
- Verse 4 uses elements of the endings of verses 2 and 3, one after the other
- The middle section (or ‘bridge’) consists of two 2½-bar phrases (x,y), which are then repeated to give the overall pattern x,y,x,y
- The main interval here is the 3rd, both major and minor, which creates both a triadic and a pentatonic feel in the first phrase
- Repetition is used in the second and fourth phrases of the middle section.

## Rhythm, metre and tempo

- Two tempi are used: around 77bpm for the verse, changing to 82bpm for the bridge/middle section, where the predominantly quaver pulse gives the feel of a much faster 164bpm

- The accompanying piano and acoustic guitar present a very clear 4/4 pulse in the verses, using mostly crotchets and quavers with very few syncopations
- This allows the vocal line to 'push and pull' the beat with both anticipatory and retarding syncopations
- The majority of vocal phrases in the verses begin on the second quaver of the bar (see bars 5, 7, 9, 11, 13)
- The solidity of the chordal accompaniment allows the drummer considerable freedom in his fills, which are often syncopated and use smaller subdivisions of the beat, such as triplet and sextuplet semiquavers
- The most 'conventional' rock rhythms (bass drum on beats 1 and 3, snare on 'backbeats' 2 and 4) occur sometimes in the verses, and are also present in the first orchestral transition section
- The accompaniment to the bridge section is enlivened by the use of the cross/additive rhythm  $\varepsilon. \varepsilon. \varepsilon. \varepsilon. \varepsilon \varepsilon$  in bars 48-49 and 54-55.