

LISTENING TO CLASSIC ROCK MUSIC

THROUGH-COMPOSED SONG FORMATS

Stairway To Heaven (Led Zeppelin–1971)

This song is considered one of the most popular and influential pop/rock songs of all time. Surprisingly, it is about twice as long (8 minutes) as most “hit” songs and its format does not at all fit into a verse/chorus blueprint.

The song is in three distinct sections:

- A slow, folky acoustic section with a lengthy instrumental introduction and two verses. There are also Classical/Renaissance inflections due to the use of wooden recorders.
- A slightly more intense middle section with predominantly electric instruments and some jazz elements which also has two verses before adding drums and two more verses.
- A final, very intense and climactic rock-style section (all electric & drums) with a guitar solo and one verse in a different poetic meter.
 - There is a very short, somewhat-recapitulative coda with just acapella voice reciting the last line.

The song is not only notable for its through-composed, progressive format, but for its carefully-handled dramatic and textural arc. In terms of stylistic influences, folk, classical, jazz and heavy-rock/blues genres are represented in what are considered to be well-sculpted transitions. In this sense, the song encapsulates the band’s songwriting and recording peak, as well as a chronological summary of the various styles that popular music sought to blend.

Similarly, the song was written at a time when the hard-rock genre was well established (particularly by Led Zeppelin). For the song to have woven many styles together, which culminates with a hard-rock texture, was a further advancement of the style and format for the band and for popular music as a whole.

One element that binds the three sections together is the consistent key of A-minor, although *natural* and *modal* variations are distinctly used. Also, the first and second sections feature an arpeggiated guitar part.

Much has been said about the lyric content, with a clear emphasis on antiquity and metaphor, as well as a reference to the book *The Lord of the Rings* (itself an homage to antiquity and fantasy—which the band had referenced in other songs). If nothing else, the vague and seemingly metaphorical nature of the words invokes non-specific references—making the song all the more enigmatic and subjective.

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Stairway To Heaven lyrics and formal diagram:

(Instrumental Introduction) a a b b'

There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven (a)
And when she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for (a)

And she's buying a stairway to heaven (b)

There's a sign on the wall but she wants to be sure
'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings (b')
In a tree by the brook, there's a songbird who sings
Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven (a)

First section:

a a b b' a (a-trans)

- Acoustic/Folky/Classical
- Noteworthy for the two verses not aligning with the a a b b' a pattern

(Transition) (a)

It makes me wonder (c-refrain)

There's a feeling I get when I look to the west
And my spirit is crying for leaving (d-**outgrowth of "b"**)
In my thoughts I have seen rings of smoke through the trees
And the voices of those who stand looking (d)

And it makes me wonder (c)

And it's whispered that soon if we all call the tune
Then the piper will lead us to reason (d)
And a new day will dawn for those who stand long
And the forests will echo with laughter (d)

(Instrumental refrain, followed by drums introduction) (c)

If there's a bustle in your hedgerow, don't be alarmed now,
It's just a spring clean for the May queen (d'-**same music, different singing**)
Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run
There's still time to change the road you're on (d')

And it makes me wonder (c)

Your head is humming and it won't go—in case you don't know
The piper's calling you to join him (d')
Dear lady, can you hear the wind blow, and did you know
Your stairway lies on the whispering wind (d')

Second Section:

c d d c d d,

c d' d' c d' d' (trans)

- Overlaying electric instruments in the first two verses
- Adding drums in the next two verses
- A very regular, alternating two-part (refrain/verse style) pattern (c & d d)

(Transition)

(Guitar solo)

And as we wind on down the road
Our shadows taller than our soul
There walks a lady we all know
Who shines white light and wants to show
How everything still turns to gold
And if you listen very hard
The tune will come to you at last
When all are one and one is all
To be a rock and not to roll

And she's buying a stairway to heaven

Third Section:

- Rock-style, all electric with guitar solo
- The phrases and chord progression are significantly shorter as compared to previous sections

Coda:

- Acapella