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Fertilising Deaths. Deconstructing Prog's Death to Understand Post-Prog

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Progressive rock has always been seen as a mainly British phenomenon: all the major classic bands from the genre – like King Crimson, Genesis, Yes, ELP and many others – are British indeed, so it is just natural to think of them as soon prog is mentioned. Nevertheless, this is only a single perspective on the story, and, if we are interested in understanding what prog may be in general, we cannot ignore the alternative tales, especially because they can directly take us in front of some questions that are paramount for locating post-progressive music in the more general frame, a task that seems even more difficult than the definition of classic prog alone, given the variety of contemporary progressive music. If it is true that every historical narration is just a *selection* of facts (CARR 1966) that can sometimes be determined by the will to give ideological claims more credibility (SCOTT 2014), we can always work to deconstruct such narrations using a Nietzschean-Foucauldian genealogical approach (FOUCAULT 1969), or maybe to 'reconstruct' them (SALA 2020), that is to operate a deconstruction without losing the grip on the cultural symptoms that emerge during the operation. In other words, understanding that the narration concerning British prog is just one of the many possible histories to be told is just the first step towards a deeper comprehension of the phenomenon; we need to relocate the discourses that gave credibility to that very narration, to understand what it can tell us about the reasons why that tale – and not others – won a favoured spot within mainstream historiography.

A crucial point for our reconstructive activity is the deconstruction of the idea of the 'death of prog', which supposedly occurred somewhere between 1976 and 1978, depending on the account we take into consideration. According to that perspective, prog would quickly

decline and eventually succumb to punk, a genre willing to take rock back to its roots, the same roots that prog had betrayed with its elitist sophistication. This idea can mainly be found in journalistic retrospectives on prog (e.g. RIZZI 2003, SNIDER 2007), but is also often implied – although not necessarily without any attempt of problematisation – in the classic academic references for the history of prog (MACAN 1997, STUMP 1997, MARTIN 1998). The most generous accounts of this tale generally at least admit the existence of a ‘rebirth of prog’ taking place around 1980-83 (ZOPPO 2011, BARBAGLI 2011, HEGARTY & HALLIWELL 2011) and, once again, set in the UK, where prog came back as a new but weakened version of itself, in the form of neoprogressive music. Anyways, there is always a ‘latency period’ approximately located between 1976 and 1982, in which there is apparently no space for prog at all. I argue that, more than a death, prog underwent a sort of ‘assisted suicide’. Although economic reasons – like the crisis that hit the music industry in the late Seventies (WEIGEL 2017, STUMP 1997, MACAN 1997) – certainly played a part in the whole decadence process, some scholars have already highlighted that it is probably more appropriate to talk about a ‘mediatic death’ (STUMP 1997, BARBAGLI 2011). As a historiographical construct, death of prog is a cultural symptom for at least two factors that seem responsible for its formation: the ‘Anglo-symphonic stereotype’ and the curse of punk critics.

Let’s start with the latter accused element, as it is also the easiest to address. The presence of such a factor is already witnessable in the classic accounts of prog’s history (e.g. STUMP 1997, ATTON 2001, HOLM-HUDSON 2002, HEGARTY & HALLIWELL 2011, WEIGEL 2017). Of course, it is legit for critics to fight against a genre perceived as old and increasingly elitist (FABBRI 2008, SHEINBAUM 2002), but soon the fury of critics hit prog with exceptional power, as journalists were stressing out in a dogmatic way how everything, after the ‘death of prog’, had changed (HEGARTY & HALLIWELL 2011). Soon enough, the old ratings from the magazines were modified retrospectively, since the critics argued that prog classics had not aged well (SNIDER 2007), and meanwhile – as noticed by John Sheinbaum (2002) – there

were cases in which the sections of the 'perfect rocker's manuals' dedicated to what *not* to do looked very much like an accurate list of the main features of prog. The curse of critics was to haunt progressive music for at least two decades, in which that genre was mainly remembered for its flaws, namely the excesses reached by most British bands after 1975, at least according to the judgement of critics. This also helped the Anglo-symphonic stereotype to become stronger and stronger, as the many foreign versions of progressive music – so different in their features and not necessarily in a phase of decadence back then – were basically removed from the common accounts of the rock historiography, and their importance was understated even in the classic academic studies on prog that were to be published in the late Nineties.

This leads us to the second accused factor: the 'Anglo-symphonic stereotype'. My main reference here is a paramount article in which Chris Anderton (2010) reports how the widespread conception of prog as a typically British music characterised by a certain set of features (e.g. complexity, sophisticate arrangements often featuring orchestral sounds obtained via Mellotron or actual acoustic instruments, fantasy lyrics, references to classical, jazz and folk music) is indeed quite reductive and incapable of describing the variegate nature of progressive music – since it is actually only describing a particular incarnation of prog: British symphonic prog. This is not only true when taking all the non-British prog that was produced simultaneously to the 'golden age' of symphonic prog into account, but also when talking about the music that has been considered 'progressive' after the supposed death of prog. In facts, even the most famous prog bands from the Seventies entered a new creative phase in the Eighties (SHEINBAUM 2008), and it is often difficult to understand what their music, or that played by new acts such as Kate Bush or Peter Gabriel, might have to do with classic prog. In one sentence: the Anglo-symphonic stereotype needs to be deconstructed because it prevents us to better understand the 'many-headed beast' (to use Anderton's words) that prog is. Although such diversity was already addressed in the seminal

pages on progressive rock written by Richard Middleton (1990) and Sheila Whiteley (1992), the association we can find there between the variety of prog's features and the variety of counterculture's manifestations can help us only to a certain extent. Indeed, in the same years Allan Moore ([1993] 2001) emphasised how the association between prog and counterculture can sometimes be problematic, and if this is true when only taking classic prog into account, try to imagine what would happen if the object of our research were progressive music in general. In addition to this, the relationship with counterculture tends to justify the idea of prog's death, thanks to the chronological coincidence with the sunset of hippie culture, at the end of the Seventies. Maybe for such reasons, Bill Martin (1998) later proposed a looser association of prog with counterculture, arguing that prog basically borrows from counterculture the prerogative of 'having a project'. This characterisation, located somewhere between Adorno and Existentialism, is surely a step forward, but is still too ideologically connotated, and becomes even more problematic as it takes the 'Englishness' of prog back in the game. The same can be said of the intuition by John Covach (2005), that tries to associate prog with a certain 'hippie aesthetic' willing to push forward the boundaries of rock, by doing so binding together the two main references for early studies on progressive rock: classical music and counterculture, both characterised by a certain kind of ambition. Although it seems somehow true that 'ambition' is a common feature for prog, the concrete contexts referenced in this conception (classical music and counter-culture) do not make much sense for the majority of contemporary progressive music, and once again point back to the Anglo-symphonic stereotype (although symphonic prog is not the only kind of prog referencing classical music or counterculture). Other conceptual tools are needed to evade from the crystallisation of symphonic prog's features with the help of a meta-characterisation of prog.

Such tools can start to emerge as we try to set the ideas of death and rebirth of prog apart, in order to consider the phenomenon as a somewhat organic (and on-going)

conception of music. After all, if we take a closer look to the situation of progressive music during the 'latency period', we will discover the existence of many alternative tales that are usually relegated to the most external borders of the progressive history, due to their poor resemblance of the symphonic mannerism. Kosmische Musik, Zehul or Rock Progressivo Italiano are among the most famous national declinations of progressive rock, which continued producing very inspired music without significant interferences caused by the supposed death of prog. An extreme example is that of Rush, since the Canadian band actually released their most famous albums from 1976 onwards, but relevant bands, many of which released their most important albums during the latency period, could be found basically everywhere in the world (e.g. East West Family Band, Aerolit, Area, Eloy, José Cid, Kaipa, Tangerine Dream, Picchio dal Pozzo, Klaus Schulze, Samla Mammas Manna, Focus, Kraftwerk, Ekseption, Locanda delle Fate, Magma, Ashra, Ange, Dün, Goblin). Of course, new bands were also born during the latency years, some of which were already related with prog in a loose way in Edward Macan's (1997) historic account of prog, when he addresses symphonic pop and AOR (e.g. Alan Parsons Project, Electric Light Orchestra, Kansas and Journey). Sometimes is not even necessary to leave the UK to find bands – old and new ones – still capable of pushing prog forward (e.g. U.K., National Health, Kate Bush, Peter Gabriel, Gong, Pink Floyd, new King Crimson). Many prog masters moved away from the symphonic sound, trying to treat new musical sources in a way that could be linked with their previous aesthetics, in some ways. John Sheinbaum (2008) has convincingly argued that often the same principles of 'sophistication' and 'ambitiousness' that can be found in classic prog songs are also to be found in some hit songs released by former symphonic prog bands like Yes in the Eighties. If all of this was not enough, most of the bands that were soon to be labelled as 'neoprogram' were formed during the latency period and were often associated with heavy metal events, labels and artists (ANDERTON 2016), waiting for the right moment to emerge as a revival of the symphonic progressive sound. And, although the progressive

metal label was not widespread until the Nineties, Jeff Wagner (2010) has pointed out that prog and metal crossed their paths very often from the very beginning, and possibly even more frequently from the latency period onwards. It was probably only due to the long-lasting curse cast by the critics on prog that the time was not right to openly speak of 'progressive metal' already in the Eighties. So, there was no real latency period, if not – maybe – just for symphonic prog, which is only one of the possible versions of progressive music.

So, it should be clear by now that it makes no real sense to talk about prog's death. Indeed, from the ashes of prog – still warm and full of life – two main ways of approaching progressive music and its historiography were born. On the one side there was neoprogram, a mostly British simulacrum of symphonic prog that was perfect – in the reductionist perspective promoted by the Anglo-symphonic stereotype – to fit within the 'official' narration as a reborn but weakened version of prog. On the other side there were artists that would probably have been seen as the natural prosecution of prog's evolution, if only the narrative of its death had not changed everything. Such artists knew very well that symphonic prog was just one single demonstration of progressive rock's potential, and that prog could be seen – instead of as a *mannerism* – as a *manner* of making music, to use Quintero Rivera's terminology (QUINTERO 1998). Faithful to such a spirit, those artists applied what we could call the 'progressive attitude' to new musical sources, not very appealing to those who identified progressive music with symphonic prog only, yet more capable of escaping from the destructive curse of the critics. This music – that I call 'post-progressive' – is as much a son of postmodernism as neoprogressive is, but it works according to a very different simulative paradigm (BAUDRILLARD 1981, GAMBLE 2005). While neoprogram is a pure (nostalgic) revival with only few new features (ANDERTON 2016), post-prog is not a mono-thematic simulacrum, yet an eclectic one, radically trying to shift from the symphonic style, although not really changing the rules of the progressive game. What those rules are all about is something I shall not discuss here (see Merlini forthcoming), but it would not have been possible to even think

about a comprehensive solution to such a problem if we had not deconstructed the idea of prog's death – with all of its main implications.

From this account it should be clearer how the critics and Anglo-symphonic stereotype 'conspired' against progressive, motivating the community's discourses about the death of prog. Although a rigorous historiographical deconstruction, as theorised by Michel Foucault (1969) would not try to tie back together the disassembled pieces of discourse into a new and maybe more comprehensive narration of progressive music, I think that at least trying to understand what kept the very diversified kinds of music together under the same label might help us to better understand what that 'manner of making music' (QUINTERO 1998) could be about. Now that the Anglo-symphonic stereotype does not have to put any prejudice on our theorisation work, and now that we think of neoprogressive as nothing much more than an integral simulacrum of symphonic prog, we can try to better define prog starting from post-progressive music, which can now be understood just in the terms of 'progressive' music. After all, symphonic prog was only a single incarnation of what prog ultimately is. Taking all other incarnations into account is the only way to understand which elements – if any – tie together the discourses of communities, labels, event organisers, artists and critics. So, this is only the beginning, although for now we have to pretend it is the end.

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