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Reinterpret – Revive / Revamp – Resurrect!

A Theoretical Model for Understanding Postmodern Prog

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The stylistic variety of contemporary progressive music is challenging, from both theoretical and sociological perspectives, because it makes it hard to understand why people happen to appreciate so many different kinds of music, and whether the concept of "music genre" remains useful at all to understand musical phenomena nowadays. Not only is contemporary prog often very different from much music heard in the 1970s and labelled as such, but there are also very diverse strains of music sharing the same label today. I call the two biggest families of contemporary prog "neo-progressive" and "post-progressive" (Merlini 2021). The first is obsessed with keeping the old semblance of (symphonic) progressive music alive to this day; despite little changes, most music by bands like The Flower Kings, Big Big Train, early Marillion and Beardfish (to name a few) is the closest one can get to classic prog, today. On the other side, the second strain – post-progressive, as exemplified by bands like Leprous, Ulver, Porcupine Tree and most progressive metal bands – can sound very different from the original progressive prototype, but is still labelled as such and shares the core of prog's aesthetic ideology with the original bands from the 1970s.

On this fundamental distinction, I have built a theoretical model to interpret the duality at the core of contemporary progressive music, and in this presentation I would like to present it to you and then apply it to genres that are not very close to prog but may share a similar evolutionary trajectory. So, could this framework be adopted to understand the current state not only of progressive music, but also of other genres that showcase complex relationships with their musical roots?

Prog: Modern or Postmodern?

Progressive music could be interpreted both as the last breath of modernism (e.g. Stump 1997) and one of the first utterances of postmodernism. Andrew Goodwin (1991) and Giles Hooper (2012), for instance, have opposite ideas on the value we can assign to the act of mixing highbrow and lowbrow musical material – as typical of progressive music. Is it a postmodern attempt at putting high and low at the same level, or is it a way to elevate rock music to the level of contemplative art music? And what about the emphasis on authenticity and creative ambition? And if modernism and progressive thought and politics are often seen as two faces of the same coin, is then the idea of a postmodern prog bound to be an oxymoron? I would rather say that the very idea of a precise distinction between modernism and postmodernism is, to some extent, an oxymoron. According to philosopher Elio Franzini (2018), postmodernism can be seen as something that is subsumed into modernism, as its exacerbation, or even as its limit and crisis. The first incarnations of prog music were born in an age of transition from the modern to the postmodern, so it is not surprising that we can find elements of both in it – and even more so if we speak of contemporary prog.

Central in postmodern aesthetics is the idea of remixing pre-existing elements (Jameson 1984): since everything possible has already been done, one can only find new combinations of known material. The postmodern concept of "simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1981), as well, can be associated with many kinds of contemporary music, including prog. Inspired by these concepts, in my previous research on progressive music (Merlini 2021), I have offered a model constituted by five different kinds of simulacra: some rely on integral simulation – meaning that they focus on one specific kind of pre-existing music and try to revive it – while others rely on eclectic simulation – meaning that they put together kinds of music that were originally not conceived to stay together. There are several other factors that contribute to the subdivision into five types of simulacra. Here are some questions we could ask ourselves about music that could fit into the scheme: is the simulated material treated ironically or not?

Is there a message that goes beyond – or even against – that of the original material? How much are the modern values of originality and creative ambition emphasised? For instance: vaporwave, synthwave and neo-progressive music are all examples of integral simulation, but I have classified each of them under a different type of simulacrum.

Synthwave is the most straight-forward integral simulation of music from the past: synthpop and soundtracks from action and horror movies from the 1980s are the main references, and most synthwave music only wants to create new exemplars of this music from the past (Merlini 2023). This is what I call a "type-B" simulacrum. Vaporwave and other "hauntological" genres are instances of "type-A" simulacrum: there is an integral simulation of past music (which mostly appears in a sampled form), but there is also a novel reflection on it. Sampled music is often distorted not only to create a sense of nostalgia, but also to give substance to vaporwave's critique of consumerism (Glitsos 2018, Nowak & Whelan 2018). My "type-C" example is neo-progressive music: while it is not much more than a reproduction of past music – there is also a superficial observance of the original aesthetic ideology. Despite being the most conservative kind of contemporary progressive music, neo-prog seems to ask the listeners to take the music seriously, as "truly progressive" music, although there is nothing really "progressive" in replicating music from half a century ago.

The same kind of ambition can be found in post-progressive music, but here we find ourselves in the realm of eclectic simulation, which characterizes the last two simulacra-models. The difference between "type-D" and "type-E" simulacra is basically that while both reference various kinds of music, the first does so in a "serious" way, while the latter is more ironic. In this sense, the first is more reminiscent of modern values, while the second is eminently postmodern. While I argue that post-progressive is more easily associated with "type-D", there are kinds of music that could be loosely considered progressive and fit into the "type-E" model – and this might foster perceived connections between otherwise unrelated genres, that share with post-prog a similar kind of simulative model.

Theoretical references

Of course, one more ingredient that defines how different genres employ these models of simulation is the aesthetic ideology behind what is being produced. This is not always equally explicit or central – especially in an age where the musical omnivore (Peterson & Kern 1996) seems more and more commonplace – but it is something useful if we want to understand why certain communities gather around certain kinds of music, and not other ones. In previous research of mine (Merlini 2021), I have argued that music potentially qualifies as "progressive" from the perspective of the genre's "centre collectivity" (Holt 2007) when it employs a "reformist" tendency towards pushing the boundaries of pre-existing genre formal rules, as opposed to the "revolutionary" tendency employed by experimental genres. This has historically been done in several ways: by incorporating elements drawn from art music, by employing uncommon instruments, by stretching the length of the songs, and so on. Such an ideology cannot stop evolving, because what can be seen as boundary-breaking today is bound to become standard in a few years. In this sense, it is not strange to witness the same formula at work in music that has sonically not much to do with classic Genesis or Yes, but that came out just after the supposed death of prog (Merlini 2022), as it was with artists like Kate Bush and Peter Gabriel. Even less surprising is the fact that few dared to call them "progressive" back in those days, since the new mainstream ideology of rock stigmatised prog as a major mistake in rock's history (Sheinbaum 2002). Prog also resisted as a revivalist genre in the 1980s (Anderton 2016), with the first neo-prog bands gaining international visibility, but was able to overtly come back in a new guise only in the mid-1990s, when its curse had become light enough to allow a handful of metal bands to proudly claim (or to just accept) the label of progressiveness for themselves. As we have seen, these different strains of music share a connection with the original genre ideology and style, but employ different simulative practices to keep it alive in the present day. Where can we place this kind of dualism in the existing theoretical framework?

If we follow the by-now classic genre theory by Franco Fabbri (1981, 2012), it is not strange that examples of music that are stylistically quite different can share the same label. After all, a genre can have more than one style and is not only characterised by stylistic "conventions" (Fabbri 2012), but also by broader socio-ideological, economic, semiotic and behavioural rules. Yet Fabbri's theory has been criticized by scholars like Simon Frith (1996) and Keith Negus (1999) for its supposed excessive rigidity, for its emphasis on what a genre prescribes more than on what a genre allows in terms of mutation and evolution. Trying to define genre in a more flexible way, Negus quotes Angel Quintero Rivera (1998), who makes a distinction between manner and mannerism in an attempt to explain the stylistic versatility of salsa music. A manner is a way of making music, an attitude, an aesthetic ideology that provides a more or less general approach that can lead to very diverse musical outputs, while mannerisms are specific musical configurations (crystallised manners), a style that has been historically connected with a genre and can be reused to evoke that same genre in new music. You know where I am heading: post-progressive reinterprets prog by keeping its manner alive; neo-progressive resurrects it via broad exploitation of its mannerisms.

But there is more! Jennifer Lena (2016) has studied genres from a socio-economic perspective, showing that most of them tend to follow a trajectory that includes four archetypical stages, in which the genre can be described as: avant-garde, scene-based, industry-based and traditionalist. Basically, a genre usually begins as a niche phenomenon, then becomes better and better known, up to the point of becoming something relevant in the industry. Then, the traditionalist phase begins: after being "contaminated" by the industry and its strict rules, some artists try to take the genre back to its purest, scene-based roots, thus preserving its cultural identity from the forces of commerce. But there is another possibility: new blood can rise against traditionalists, with the aim of preserving the "creative spirit" of the old genre instead of its semblances, thus fostering a reset of the cycle and the birth of a new avant-garde genre (to some extent derived from the first).

To me, this sounds very much like a general description of classic progressive rock, imploding and then finding new life in two different ways of taking it back to the world, exemplified by neo-prog and post-prog. It blends perfectly not only with Quintero's ideas, but also with Fabbri's theory which, despite the critiques, actually addresses the possibility that new genres have to spring out of old, decadent genres, thus becoming a new avant-garde strain (Fabbri 1981: 54). Moreover, Lena mentions "innovation and hybridisation" (2016: 52) as factors that can revamp old genres and bring to a new avant-garde. This leads me to the last stage of my reflection, integrating my five types of simulacra into this broader theoretical context and applying this same framework to the evolution of other genres.

Two Examples

When Lena exemplifies her model, she chooses an example that can seem very distant from prog: that of punk. In her description, after the heydays of punk, traditionalists sought to preserve the original form of punk music by defining it as a specific style developed in a specific period, and then emulating it over and over again. As opposed to this attitude, other musicians conceived punk music as something that can be found at the core of any kind of music based on the Do It Yourself (DIY) aesthetic and on the transgression of musical and cultural norms (Mankowski 2014). The latter approach was adopted by post-punk bands like The Cure, Killing Joke, Joy Division and Bauhaus. The connection between these bands and classic punk is not necessarily self-evident when one listens to their songs, but there is a deep connection that goes beyond that and justifies the adoption of a similar genre label – in a way, post-punk can be seen as the prosecution of the "failed revolution" of punk (Hesmondhalgh 1997). "Innovation and hybridisation" are included in post-punk, for instance, by incorporating electronic elements like synthesisers and drum machines – both strictly excluded from punk purist aesthetic. Just like in the case of prog, we could say that on one side we have an example of integral simulation (in this case a "type-B" or "-C"

simulacrum), while on the other we can witness eclectic simulation (in this case a “type-D”). In this sense, Lena’s concepts can be read from a postmodern perspective, explaining the crossroads between resurrection and revamp in terms of different kinds of simulation.

We can try to apply the model to one last genre: black metal. Focusing on the second wave of black metal – perhaps the most famous one, mostly set in Norway during the 1990s – the genre has often been associated with Satanism, corpse paint, lo-fi production and criminal acts perpetrated by some of the members of the so-called “Inner Circle” of black metal (Moynihan & Søderlind 1998). Yet, in black metal ideology, Satan is primarily the symbol of an alternative to Christian cultural colonisation – it is no coincidence that Norse pagan gods are also recurrent figures in black metal lyrics and iconography. In this sense, there is much more in common between black metal and neofolk than there is between the former and other kinds of metal (Granholm 2011). One of the first hybridisations of black metal with other genres was indeed in the direction of neofolk (e.g. Ulver’s first two albums), but later on there were even more contaminations that ultimately led to “post-black metal” genres. Take, for instance, the so-called “blackgaze” subgenre – Alcest being among the most representative bands. Of course there are musical similarities with the original black metal phenomenon, like the occasional use of screaming vocals and blast beats, but there is also a lot of hybridisation with shoegaze, post-rock and post-punk. The ideological continuity is granted by the surviving interest in taking the listener into traditional, pagan or magic worlds, sometimes also stressing out nationalist values and emphasising the use of national languages over English (French, in the case of Alcest). Musical borrowings play a big part in the construction of this kind of dreamy aesthetic, that is not so common in “TRVE” black metal. This movement is once again paralleled by a traditionalist counterpart, represented by countless bands with illegible logos infesting virtually every extreme metal festival poster. The same concepts I have employed earlier find their application here, as well: integral and eclectic simulation; traditionalism and new avant-garde; mannerism and manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while some advancements in the systematisation of my model still need to be made, I think that there are good reasons to think that such a framework could provide useful interpretations of the processes that underlie the development of music genres in the post-modern age, and also explain relationships between genres and subgenres that seem to have not much in common but employ similar simulative models. Postmodern genres can emulate both the style (mannerisms) of single previously existing genres (integral simulation), and the attitude (manner) that originally inspired those same genres, looking for new ways of embodying them in freshly borrowed stylistic features that may come from afar (eclectic simulation). Whether such a genre is going to work is up to what listeners expect: are they more interested in new music that sounds like their favourite artists, or in new music that adapts the same mindset and abstract values to the music of today? And I would like to answer with one last question: do we really have to choose?

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