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Is This Prog? Defining post-progressive as a creative attitude

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“Is This Prog?”. This is a question so frequently asked in online communities – like the Facebook Group *Prog Snob*, currently counting about 50,000 members – that it has basically become a meme. Originally, the question described very well the sense of uncertainty the average progger feels every time he or she wants to find out whether or not a track can be considered prog. Indeed, nowadays it is very hard to answer to this question by merely listening to the track, as the diversity of contemporary forms of progressive music has made the task of defining the genre even harder than it originally was (MIDDLETON 1990:50-51, MOORE 2001:64, WHITELEY 1992:3). It is not infrequent to find bands as diverse as Kaipa and Pain of Salvation – both Swedish, both ‘prog’ – in the same festival line-ups, and this can of course cause some confusion. In my book *Le ceneri del prog* (MERLINI 2021) I describe this duality using the metaphor of ashes (*ceneri*, indeed). After the supposed death of classic prog in the 1970s, two kinds of ashes floated out of the still burning dinosaur corpse: one was what is usually called ‘neo-progressive’, the other was what some call ‘post-progressive’. The first is a faithful simulacrum of one specific (British and symphonic) incarnation of classic prog; the second is a radical reinterpretation of the original phenomenon, driven by the same original impulse, but leading to very different results, virtually impossible to track. That impulse might be closely related with that ‘attitude’ that more than once (e.g. ANDERTON & ATTON 2011, COVACH 2005:3, FABBRI 2008:106-107, HEGARTY & HALLIWELL 2011:224, 284-285, MACAN 1997:206, SALUENA 2009, SHEINBAUM 2008) could be found in important pages written on prog, and my aim as I started my research work was to find out something more about it, in order to better understand the duality of contemporary progressive music.

In the conviction that internet communities are – using Fabian Holt’s terms (HOLT 2007:20-21)– today’s prog’s ‘center collectivities’ in which the meaning of prog is constantly being re-negotiated, I started my research from the audience, trying to figure out which features of prog were perceived as important for the genre by its fans – and which artists were the most frequently canonised – by posting an empirical survey in strategic locations of the internet, the most important ones being Facebook international groups (like *Prog Snob*) and forums (like *Progarchives*). I also enriched my research drawing elements from pre-existing studies on fanzines (ATTON 2001) and forums (AHLKVIST 2011) and checking out twenty years of line-ups of prog festivals, almost a decade of *Prog magazine* covers, critic’s choices and reader’s polls – not to mention the specialised label’s rosters. Both kinds of ashes were well represented in the results, since among the most frequently mentioned bands I could find Porcupine Tree, Leprous, Tesseract, Devin Townsend, Pain of Salvation, The Pineapple Thief, Anathema and Opeth, but also neo-progressive acts like The Flower Kings, IQ, Spock’s Beard and Big Big Train. Notably, although only 11% of the voters agreed (to a level between 4/5 and 5/5) with the statement «True progressive music died around 1976-1977», and, similarly, only 13% of the voters believed that prog is now mainly an Anglo-American phenomenon, many were then unable to mention contemporary examples of progressive music, despite the explicit indications enclosed in the survey, and often only mentioned British or American bands, usually related with the symphonic style and all but active today. I had to exclude these entries from the previously listed bands, but this is still something that must be emphasised. Finally, I elaborated a synoptic grid aiming at systematising the most recurrent features of prog which were mentioned by the participants in the survey:

Eclecticism	Complexity			Pushing Boundaries		Themes		‘Progress’
	Virtuosity	Rhythmic	Harmonic	Structure	Length	Concept	Profound Lyrics	

What struck my attention while reading the results was the very frequent reference to a kind of *ambition*, an *attitude* towards ‘progress’ that apparently defines prog as a kind of music always willing to push the boundaries of popular music further and further (just as described in the references mentioned above). I actually expected such a result, so I put two song comparisons in my survey in order to find out what happens when the beliefs of fans are tested out. The first comparison was a very easy one: American electropop songwriter Banks had to be compared with French avant-metal artist Igorrr. Of course, none of the two examples were canonised instances of progressive music, but, just as I thought, almost 89% of the fans perceived Igorrr as ‘more progressive’. Igorrr’s music, indeed, is not only more ‘ambitious’ and experimental than Banks’, but also features some of the traits from the grid. So, nothing unexpected until now. But what happens when a canonised band like Big Big Train – British and quite derivative of symphonic prog – has to be compared with a basically unknown and not canonised (yet much more ambitious, eclectic and ‘progressive’) band like Vampillia, from Japan? Well, in this case the ‘progressive attitude’ does not win against canonization and symphonic sound. In fact, not even 20% of the fans gave to Vampillia a ‘progressive mark’ higher than 7/9, while most of the votes for Big Big Train go in that direction. Vampillia’s peak is on levels 6-7/9 (so it is a mild reaction), and their score on very low marks is thrice as high as the one we can find in Big Big Train’s case. So:

1. Prog is all about ambition, innovation, pushing boundaries and progress – like Vampillia;
2. Big Big Train’s music is openly derivative;
3. Yet, from the average fan’s point of view, BBT are ‘more progressive’ than Vampillia.

This situation tells us that the question “is this prog?” would most likely be answered with a steady “yes” in the case of Big Big Train, but not so much in the case of Vampillia, although there *is* something in their music that fascinates the progger. Could it be that ‘progress’, which is also the only element from the set of features that would probably miss from Big Big Train’s song, if we analysed it?

I needed to understand something more about that 'attitude', so I put neo-progressive aside for a while, since it was apparently easier to define and understand as a nostalgic revival of prog (though I will come back to this issue later). Then I went back to the grid and chose and analysed ten songs by some of the post-progressive bands mentioned above and coming from the survey. My aim in this phase was to witness in the musical material the features fans themselves seemed to cherish the most. I made this not in order to bring an ontological conception of genres back in the game, but in order to tie together two parallel aspects of the 'genre world': music and the discourses around music. I believe that the two things must be linked together, if we want to understand how music motivates discourses and how discourses adjust our relationship with music. However, as you may well imagine, no song from my selection featured all of the characteristics, and no single feature could be found in every single song. These results confirmed that the only possible *fil rouge* for post-progressive music was the already mentioned attitude towards progress and pushing the boundaries of popular music. Maybe there was a reason why so many people in the survey mentioned it as the most relevant feature, and actually it is somewhat true that every song from my selection was trying to explore the music's affordances in very different but conceptually similar ways. But here new problems arise. In fact, if we accept the idea that post-progressive, as living legacy of classic prog, grounds its values in an attitude of that kind, how can we differentiate it from a more general experimental attitude? How can we draw the line separating prog from generic experimental popular music, that tries to bring music to the next level as well (MARTIN 1998:99-127)? And what about all that 'limbo' music – like Vampillia – that is conceptually very similar to prog, but is only seldom canonised (I am thinking of much post-rock and post-metal music, but also some kinds of alternative and even dance music)? We need to better understand what is so special about the progressive attitude, and to do so I will now present the final stage of my research work, in which neo-progressive gets back in the game, taking new company with it: postmodernism.

I am aware this may sound like a dangerous entry in an inquiry that is already complicated enough, yet I argue we can read the two fundamental breeds of contemporary progressive music through postmodern lenses, and specifically using the concept of 'simulacrum' (BAUDRILLARD 1981, FRANZINI 2018:151-153, GAMBLE 2005:305, JAMESON 1984). Thus, I elaborated a model based on five simulacra-types. Without delving too deep into the matter – which would require a presentation of its own – the important thing is that two of those simulacra-types describe neo-progressive and post-progressive respectively pretty well. The first one is what I call 'type-C simulacrum', which is an *integral* simulation of a genre from the past that adds nothing new to it, though it superficially yet unironically keeps the original ambition of the genre. Which is the same thing that would happen if a type-B simulacrum, an illustrative example of which might be synthwave – a kind of 'retrofuturistic' and hauntological (DERRIDA 1993, FISHER 2012, REYNOLDS 2011) music that integrally simulates a certain kind of electronica typically connected with sci-fi and horror films in the 1980s, focusing on the pleasure of nostalgia and vintage (PANOSSETTI 2013, REYNOLDS 2011) – would be considered as 'futuristic' and fresh today as it was the simulated genre in from 1980s. Neo-prog integrally simulates British symphonic prog from the 1970s, pretending that playing such a music today is as innovative as it was back then – or at least, just for the fact of being labelled as 'progressive', it falls into contradiction. This is why I will also call this music 'regressive' from now on. It is a result of a revival operation triggered by the supposed death of classic prog in the late 1970s, which is still being emulated today. The myth of prog's death, created by critics willing to follow the popularity of punk (ATTON 2001:29, HEGARTY & HALLIWELL 2011:165, HOLM-HUDSON 2002:8-9, SHEINBAUM 2002:23, STUMP 1997:161), paradoxically enough, helped its rebirth to take place not even a decade later, because prog was something to save, to bring back to its roots, and so the first neo-progressive (or regressive) bands sought to re-create that very sound employing only little signs of modernisation.

But what about post-progressive? It is another simulacrum, as possibly every contemporary musical genre is, according to an integralist postmodern perspective. But this kind of simulacrum is very different from the previous one and is what I call 'type-D simulacrum'. In this case, simulation is not integral, yet *eclectic*. Just as in regressive, irony is absent from the simulation activity, and a certain ambition is present as well, but this time for good reasons, since this kind of music *actually* aims at creating something 'new' – though starting from already known basic elements. This is the same mechanism that was employed by classic prog artists in the late 1960s to give birth to the first incarnations of progressive rock... just applied to different starting elements – as John Sheinbaum (2008) somewhat already understood from the cases of late Rush and Yes. Here is why we can see post-progressive joining a continuous process of evolution which was actually never stopped by anything like the death of prog, which was in many cases safe and sound outside of England. The possibility of a neo/post duality – not necessarily referred to prog, and not necessarily using these prefixes – is also theorised by Jennifer Lena when she writes about the two possible paths that genres follow once they have reached their creative pinnacle: either the traditionalist revival, or a renewed avant-garde strain (LENA 2012: 47, 52).

So, now we have (post-)progressive and regressive. They are both breeds of progressive ashes, but one of them is nostalgic and more faithful to the surface of the most successful among many forms of progressive rock (British symphonic prog), while the other one is more faithful to its original philosophy and attitude, and so it is the only one being *literally* progressive today. Both are defined as 'prog' by the community for very different reasons and authenticate themselves via values which are often not the same at all. So, now that we have some more elements concerning the distinction between the two ashes, it is time to get back to the other important distinction, which should further characterise the way in which the progressive attitude works: the distinction between progressive and experimental. To summarise my view on this point, I can present three statements:

1. Progressive music tries to push the boundaries of popular music *without breaking them*, as opposed to much experimental music. To understand this, we can easily associate reformism to progressive, and revolution to experimental, as two radically different ways of moving forward, in politics as well as in music.
2. Progressive music promotes a horizontal differentiation of the output of every single artist, which is not necessarily *that* valuable within experimental music communities. Styles can vary greatly from album to album, which is not necessarily the case with experimental popular music.
3. Progressive music can be located within the frame of postmodernism and understood as a kind of simulacrum. It is part of the game's rules to recycle styles in a creative way (as I said earlier: it works as an *eclectic* simulacrum) and to search for something new inside what is already known (just as happened in classic prog), while experimental music often tries to play with completely new sounds and musical languages.

Finally, one last statement must be dedicated to the 'limbo' genres I mentioned before: I think here the initial question "is this prog?" will only find answers that are very arbitrary. There is really not much, from an analytical perspective, differentiating 'legitimate prog' from these liminal kinds of music, which I suppose might be perceived as closer to prog than other kinds of music because they often share with it the use of the same type of eclectic simulacrum, thus facilitating the intersections between genres that Franco Fabbri theorised in his classic essay on musical genre (FABBRI 1982:52). They are similar «manners of making music», to use Quintero Rivera's terminology (QUINTERO 1998:22). According to Quintero Rivera, indeed, genres can be conceived as manners as well as mannerisms. In the context of this dichotomy, neoprogram would fall into the latter category, as it adheres to a specific and concrete musical model, while post-prog understands prog as a manner of making music, thus adapting that manner to different musical contexts. Many examples of limbo music might be as well a part of classic prog's legacy, a product of that manner. And here is where

the other features from the grid might become useful again: the more 'limbo music' incorporates such features in its common musical vocabulary, the easier it will be legitimised by the prog community. I hope now it is clearer what I mean by 'progressive attitude', despite the huge amount of information involved, and that this research of mine will somehow be of some help in the task of locating prog music and discourses within a better-defined map.

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