Mattia Merlini

Progressive and Regressive Rock. Redefining Prog in Postmodern Times

We all know what progressive rock *was*, right? Long bombastic songs featuring loads of Mellotron, Hammond organ, and Moog Synthesizer playing in odd time signatures. But that music should be part of the past, as progressive rock is supposed to be dead since the late Seventies, when albums like *Love Beach* by Emerson, Lake & Palmer hit the market only to be despised by everyone (MACAN 1997:187, STUMP 1997:218). Bands like Yes, Genesis and Jethro Tull weren't really doing much better, while the first King Crimson experience had already ended. But somehow prog is still alive today, though in very different forms – and surely far enough from the British symphonic prog stereotype, that is often mistaken with the totality of the prog phenomenon, as Chris Anderton argues (ANDERTON 2010). Such a 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), but there is also another challenge: let's take a look to the line-up of the 10th edition of the very relevant German festival *Night of the Prog*. It is just one of the many examples suggesting the existence of a duality within prog: if we compare two songs played by two different bands performing in the same festival day, like Kaipa and Pain of Salvation – we can notice that it is possible to be labelled as 'progressive' either if you play music in the style of Genesis and Yes (Kaipa), or if you play music that apparently has nothing to do with that (Pain of Salvation). The fun fact is that if we take into consideration the most popular artists today, more frequently than not they will fall in the latter category. My aim is to try to explain such a duality in contemporary progressive music, and to find out if this can tell us something about how prog, in general, might be conceived by its audience.

My research starts from the bottom layer of the pyramid, which is also the most important one: the audience. I tried to figure out which features of prog were perceived as important for the genre by its fans – and which artists were the most frequently canonized – 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*). This choice was made in the conviction that – using Fabian Holt's terms (Holt 2007:20-21) – the internet is today's 'center collectivity', in which the meaning of prog is constantly negotiated. The results of that survey confirm the presence of a duality within the fandom as well. Let's take a closer look to those results. Strangely enough, to begin with, only 11% of the voters agree (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 believe that prog is now mainly an Anglo-American phenomenon, but then many were unable to mention contemporary examples of progressive music, despite the indications enclosed in the survey, and often only mentioned English or American bands, usually bound to the symphonic style and all but active today. So, the reductive stereotype that suggests an equation between British symphonic prog and progressive music in general has only partially lost its power, and that's probably also why, among bands like Porcupine Tree, Leprous, TesseracT, Devin Townsend, Pain of Salvation, The Pineapple Thief, Anathema and Opeth, we can still find in the canon bands like The Flower Kings, IQ, Spock's Beard and Big Big Train, which follow the English symphonic stereotype in a very strict way, challenging the very concept of progress (Macan 1997:197, Moore 2001:67, Stump 1997:233-235, 254, 265, 277). I found a very similar situation 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 artists signed to labels that are specialized in prog. I also enriched my research drawing elements from pre-existing studies on fanzines (Atton 2001) and forums (Ahlkvist 2011). But how can the act of emulating bands from the Seventies be 'progressive' in any possible way?

One of the features of prog music that was amongst the most frequently mentioned in the survey's open answers is 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 (similar intuitions can also be found in: ANDERTON & ATTON 2011, COVACH 2005:3, FABBRI 2008:106-107, HEGARTY & HALLIWELL 2011:224, 284-285, MACAN 1997:206, SALUENA 2009, SHEINBAUM 2008). But what happens when the beliefs of fans are tested out? In my survey I put two songs comparisons in order to find an answer to that question. The first comparison was a very easy one: electropop songwriter Banks had to be compared with French avant-metal artist Igorrr. Of course, none of the two examples were canonized 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' one, but also meets the expectations concerning other secondary features that seemed to be very important for the fanbase as well, such as unconventional song structures, technical complexity and eclecticism. So, nothing unexpected until now. But what happens when a canonized band like Big Big Train – English and quite derivative of symphonic prog – has to be compared with a basically unknown and not-canonized, 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. Indeed, not even 20% of the fans gave to Vampillia a 'progressive mark' higher than 7 on 9, while the majority of the votes for Big Big Train goes in that direction. Vampillia's peak is on levels 6-7 on 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;

2. Big Big Train's music is clearly derivative;

3. Yet, from the average fan's point of view, they are probably 'more progressive' than a very innovative and fresh band like Vampillia.

Something is not working, as I intuitively stated at the very beginning of my considerations. So, let's try to split the contemporary prog canon into two: neoprogressive and post-progressive. Neoprogressive is a term used since the Eighties to designate bands like early Marillion, IQ, Pendragon, Pallas and such, which 'revived' symphonic progressive rock, soon to be followed by many other bands around the world, like Spock's Beard, The Flower Kings and Änglagård (ANDERTON 2016). Big Big Train can be included in this tradition. On the opposite, post-progressive is characterized by the application of prog's original impulse and philosophy to any musical material that is different from the one used in the Seventies (e. g. metal, electronica, pop and so on), as happens in the music of Kate Bush and Peter Gabriel, but also in progressive metal and other subgenres. Let's focus for a moment on this kind of music exclusively. I chose ten songs from the post-progressive 'canon' (the same suggested by the survey and the other already mentioned sources) and analysed them, trying to find inside of them the features fans themselves seemed to cherish the most. As you may imagine, no song featured all of them and none of the features was present in all of the songs… except for one: the already mentioned attitude towards progressing and pushing the boundaries of popular music. So, maybe this is *really* the most important feature in post-progressive – in discourses and in music itself – and if we keep neoprogressive out of the frame everything seems to work fine. Except for the fact that it actually doesn't. In facts, other problems arise: how can we draw the line separating prog from generic experimental popular music, that seeks to bring music to the next level as well (MARTIN 1998:99-127)? And what about all that 'limbo' music – like Vampillia – that is very similar to prog but is only seldom canonized (I am thinking about 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. This is where to further characterize the distinction between post-progressive and neoprogressive can be of some help. And this is also where postmodernism gets in the game.

In facts, I argue we can read the two fundamental breeds of contemporary progressive music using postmodern lenses, and specifically using the concept of 'simulacrum' (BAUDRILLARD 1981, FRANZINI 2018:151-153, GAMBLE 2005:305, JAMESON 1984). There is a model based on five simulacra-types that I elaborated for the occasion. I cannot linger on it here, but the important thing is that two of those simulacra-types describe neoprogressive and post-progressive respectively pretty well. The first one is what I call 'type-C simulacrum', and it is characterized by 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 contexts in the Eighties, focusing on the pleasure of nostalgia and vintage (PANOSETTI 2013, REYNOLDS 2011) – would be considered as 'futuristic' and fresh today as it was the original genre in the Eighties. Neoprog integrally simulates symphonic prog, yet it still pretends to be as innovative as it was in the Seventies, aiming to the title of 'progressive'. This is why I will 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 Seventies, 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 just a handful of years after its supposed date of death, because prog was something to save, to bring back to its roots, and so the first neoprogressive (or regressive) bands sought to re-create that very sound with only little modification. And the progressive sound *par excellence* was of course the sound of English symphonic prog (ANDERTON 2010), just as the stereotype dictated.

But what about post-progressive? It is another simulacrum, as possibly every contemporary genre is, according to postmodern theories. But this kind of simulacrum is a very different one, and it's 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 to create something new, and often manages to get there too. The basic elements are nothing new, yet the final results often are. This is the same mechanism that was used by classic prog artists in the late Sixties to give birth to the first incarnations of progressive rock… just applied to different starting elements (SHEINBAUM 2008). Here is why, aware of the fact that there was never such a thing as prog's death, which we can easily deconstruct, I can also call post-progressive just 'progressive'. The possibility of the neo/post duality is also theorized by Jennifer Lena when she writes about the two possible paths that genres follow, after they have reached their pinnacle: either the traditionalist revival, or a renewed avant-garde genre (LENA 2012: 47, 52).

So, now we have progressive and regressive. They are both continuations of progressive rock, but one of them is nostalgic and more faithful to the surface of the most successful amongst many forms of progressive rock (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. And, having defined the content of progressive attitude, are now able to characterize prog in opposition to experimental:

1. Progressive music tries to push the boundaries of popular music *without breaking them*, as opposite 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 that is not necessarily *that* valuable inside experimental music communities.

Styles vary greatly from release to release, which is not necessarily the case with experimental popular music.

3. Progressive music is indeed closely related to postmodernism and in particular to the concept of simulacrum. It is part of the game's rules to recycle styles in a creative way and to search for something new inside what is already known, while experimental music often tries to play with completely new sounds and musical languages.

About the 'limbo' genres, the situation is simple enough: there is actually no real difference between them and 'legitimate prog'. I just argue that such music is often perceived as closer to prog than other kinds of music because it shares with it the use of the same simulacrum-type. 'Limbo' genres are other postmodern kinds of music involving eclectic simulation, and this facilitates those intersections between genres that Franco Fabbri theorized in his classic essay on music genre (FABBRI 1982:52). They are similar «manners of making music», to use Quintero Rivera's terminology (QUINTERO 1998:22). Here is where the other features from my initial research on prog come back in: the more limbo genres incorporate such features in their common musical vocabulary, the easier they will be legitimized by prog communities as part of the progressive canon. So, now we should have a clearer idea of how the map of this intricate region of popular music looks like. Relations and positions of progressive, regressive, experimental and limbo should now be better defined, and so I hope that another small step towards the understanding of progressive music has been taken.

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