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REVIEWS, REPORTS, INTERVIEWS

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***Report on the International Scientific Conference “Project 2021. Towards a Contemporary Understanding of Progressive Rock and Metal”, 19–21, 26–28, May 2021, held online, University of Ottawa, Canada***

The pandemic is not in favour of any scientific symposia and conferences, especially the international ones. Many have been cancelled, while some managed to migrate into the Internet. This was the case of the conference organised by the Project Network for the Study of Progressive Rock, entitled ‘Progressive Rock and Metal: Towards a Contemporary Understanding’ and originally scheduled to take place in May 2020 in Ottawa, Canada. Due to pandemic restrictions, the event was first moved to 2021 to finally, a few months later, offer a fully remote and “virtual” formula; hence the name change to Virtual Project.

Project is a relatively young, multidisciplinary and open research network that gathers researchers from all over the world, joined by their interest in progressive rock and metal genres. Some of the most prominent members of this network are Simon Frith, Allan F. Moore, John Covach, Kevin Holm-Hudson, Phillippe Gonin, Sarah Hill and Chris Anderton – they initiated and organised the first scientific conferences within Project: in Dijon (2014), Edinburgh (2016) and Lund (2018).

The Virtual Project 2021 formula entailed ‘live’ activities as well as asynchronous participation as all presentations were (and still are) available on the conference website<sup>1</sup>. The main part of the event, involving the virtual meetings on the Zoom platform, took place over the last two weekends of May. Such a division was the golden mean considering the schedules of the presenting lecturers – after all, it was the end of the academic year. The presentations were grouped into sessions, with each speaker having 10 minutes to present an abridged version of their paper (surprisingly enough, some speakers still refrained from presenting “live” in favour of playing a pre-recorded video). Usually after three to four presentations, 20 to 30 minutes at the end of each session were spent on questions and discussion. It turned out that the short speaking time was sufficient to present essential points, although it forced the speakers to maintain discipline and a concise manner of speaking.

Since the meeting was truly global in nature (participants from Canada, Europe, China, Japan and even New Zealand!), the number of sessions on each day was reduced (maximum of 3–4 hours) and scheduled at a time that ensured the comfort

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://projectconference2.wixsite.com/website-5> (access: 12.06.2021).

of speakers from different time zones. These sessions were always held in the morning in North America, which was the afternoon in Europe. Lori Burns, a lecturer at the University of Ottawa, made the greatest effort in organising the event. Thanks to her actions and constant vigilance over technical issues, the sessions progressed smoothly and without interruptions.

In line with the theme of the conference, the presentations focused on a variety of past and present perspectives on progressive rock and metal, including the 'classics,' their evolution, stylistic 'branches' and contemporary examples of this meta-genre. The speeches achieved a high scientific level and addressed prominent issues in a visually attractive manner. It may be assumed that the level of complexity of the music in question, its weight and message provoked ambitious and sophisticated interpretations. What is unique to this event is that, despite the fact that the area of research falls within the broad and transdisciplinary current of popular music studies, a considerable number of presentations contained elements of musicological analyses. Genre issues and questions regarding the definition, scope, temporal and cultural frameworks of progressive rock and metal were also frequently raised in the papers and discussions. It was possible to fall under the impression that the main figures of the conference were those involved with Project the longest and known best in the community: John Covach, Chris Anderton, Kevin Holm-Hudson and the organiser Lori Burns. However, almost all of the speakers contributed during the questions (also in writing via the video conference chat) and discussions. It is worth noting that the sessions were open and people "from outside of the conference programme" could attend. Therefore, as many as 30 to 50 people were always present during the meetings.

The papers were grouped thematically and chronologically, which created a kind of historical meta-narrative and, at the same time, a comprehensive revision of over 50 years of progressive rock. The conference began with the keynote speech (*A Half Century of Recording Prog Rock*) by the renowned and respected sound engineer Paul Northfield, who began his career back in the 1970s by producing records of Yes, ELP, Gentle Giant and later also Rush, Asia, Queensryche and Dream Theater. Northfield's descriptions of the differences in the approach to recording between various bands were particularly interesting. The keynote lecture on the second weekend of the conference was given by Sarah Hill (*Women and Progressive Rock: A Fable in Three Parts*), who attempted to examine the stereotype of rock as the world of young, white men, the stereotype that has prevailed for almost half a century. The researcher presented the issue from three perspectives: female fans, stories written by women in the music-oriented press and finally female prog-rock musicians.

Following the general idea of the conference, the first session entitled *Foundations* gathered papers mainly dealing with classic prog rock. John Covach, one of the famous pioneers of popular music studies, presented an interpretation of the canonical genre album *Fragile* (1971) by Yes, centred around the theme of death, which was, as it turns out, often addressed by the band (*'Of Warmth When You Die': Yes, Fragility, and Transformation*). Kevin Holm-Hudson, editor of *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*, which is an important publication for the genre, recalled the political

and economic contexts of the Genesis' album *Selling England by the Pound*, showing the clash between that which is 'old British' and what is new, Americanised.

Chris Anderton, who opened the third session: *Evolutions* and who could be pointed out as one of the most important participants of the conference, gave a total of two speeches. In the first one (*Perpetual Change? Genre, Style and Idiolect in Progressive Rock*), he emphasised that progressive rock has changed and diversified greatly over the last half-century, so it should now be treated as a meta-genre, a network of genres, a musical idiolect and a form of symbolic activities, or even as a "genre field" (after Pierre Bourdieu). Progressive music, altering over time and migrating geographically, became not a mere collection of cultural texts but a way of using the musical material and the network of references, often based on the principle of modernising the past. In the second, concluding presentation of the conference (*Re-evaluating the 'death of progressive rock': critical reception and journalistic narratives in Melody Maker magazine, 1971–76*), Anderton analysed press sources to examine and re-evaluate the widespread view of progressive rock being displaced by British punk. At the same time, the researcher highlighted the role of music critics and magazines in the commercial success of many bands.

Mattia Merlini attempted to redefine prog rock (*Is This Prog? Defining post-progressive as a creative attitude*). He reminded the audience that progressive music may be treated not as a separate genre, but as an attitude, a way of making music. He divided contemporary works within this genre into post-progressive (Steven Wilson, Dream Theater, Opeth, Tool, Anathema, etc.) and neo-progressive (The Flower Kings, Spock's Beard, Big Train, etc.). He explained why some bands are labelled as "experimental" and are not included in the prog rock canon, even though they share many of its features.

Frequently undertaken theoretical and musical analyses, above all concerning the problem of metro-rhythmics, were presented in the sessions *Time & Form* (among others, two papers on the work of Tool: *Rhythmic Hypnosis: A Theory of Rhythm and Meter in the Music of Tool* by Aaron Hunt and *Unity in Tool's Fear Inoculum* by Nicole Biamonte and Jerry Cain) and *Analyzing Complex Structures*, covering harmonics (*Neo-Riemannian Operations and Harmonic Expressivity in Opeth's "The Drapery Falls"* by Patrick Armstrong). In the *Ways of Listening* panel, the nature of auditory reception and perception gained the majority of attention (especially *Evoking and Traversing Elsewhere: Places and Spaces in Progressive Music* by Kimberley Jane Anderson and *Progressive Listening? History, Sublimity, and Resolve in Relation to Howling Sycamore* by Brad Klypchak). The modern form of progressive rock was discussed in papers by Lori Burns and Ryan Blakeley (*Steven Wilson's Hand. Cannot. Erase. (2015): A Contemporary Extension of Progressive Rock*) and the author of this report (*Sins of Unforgetting – Re(tro-pro)gression in Rock and Metal Music*).

The conference programme also made some room for topics as uncommon as cover art (*Theater of Dreams: Visual Narrating in Progressive Metal* by Toni-Matti Karjalainen) and local progressive scenes (e.g., in Montreal – paper by Bruno Coulombe), also those very young ones in the Far East – Chinese (Mengyao Jiang) and Japanese (Akitsugu Kawamoto). Researchers and practicing musicians in one, pianist Hale Fulya Çelikel and guitarist Calder Hannan, also left their mark.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that the conference was attended by three speakers from Poland; apart from the author of the report, these were Leonardo Masi from the University of Warsaw and Dawid Kaszuba, a student of cultural studies at the Jagiellonian University. Kaszuba, probably the youngest participant, used the example of Tool's music to argue that music videos in progressive metal are not only a part of promotion, but also a key element of the artistic strategy, a coherent and meaningful component of the song (*Audiovisual context of progressive metal: Cultural analysis of Tool's music videos*).

In conclusion, the conference proved that progressive rock and metal are elegant subjects for scholarly considerations. Despite the seemingly narrow focus area, quite a few relevant issues, problems and perspectives were touched upon. Some are still waiting for a verdict, especially those related to contemporary subgenres and examples of progressive rock/metal. Although the main objective of the conference was to address the current understanding of the genre, it appears that the topic has not been exhausted. Instead, the discussions proved to be so fruitful and the participants so motivated to act that a decision was made about attempting to change the status of the Project network into an official association. Next conference in the series is planned for 2022, to be held not in a random place, but in Oxford, UK.

*Andrzej Mądro*