

The Routledge Handbook of Progressive Rock, Metal, and the Literary Imagination

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Progressive rock and progressive metal music define themselves by being “more” than just rock and metal, fusing the sounds of genres and threading together layered literary references in a characteristically ostentatious way. This hefty, 400-page-plus volume explores the rich inter-textual, inter-medial, and inter-cultural translations that progressive rock and metal musicians engage in as these genres’ “literary imagination.” Across thirty-five chapters in five sections, the collection offers useful frameworks for further comparative analysis of literary adaptations and a wealth of historically and geographically diverse case studies. Since the editor’s introduction is freely accessible on the publisher’s website and summarizes all chapters, my review will not repeat their excellent overview.

From a variety of disciplinary perspectives, the volume’s chapters answer a single question: “how are narratives and fictions translated into the works of progressive rock and metal artists and bands?” (1) The interdisciplinary ambition of the project is realized by contributions from music historians, theorists, and ethnomusicologists, scholars from social, religious, and literary studies, as well as scholar-practitioners. Further thoughtfulness is evident in the diverse career stages and geographic origins of the authors. While the volume’s detail and price target a scholarly audience first and foremost, fans may also be interested in—and able to follow—many of the analyses, which guide listening with helpful tables and graphs,

sidestepping academic debates and technical jargon. Yet appreciation for technicality comes with the terrain, and the sophisticated music theoretical tools employed by *Ciro Scotto* may well appeal to *Dream Theater* fans. Measured by how well the chapters answer the research question, the collection is a resounding success, even if the prioritization of close readings and analysis of musical texts and paratexts over historical, generic, and media contexts comes with some limitations.

The editors and contributors make a strong case for the continuity between progressive rock and metal. Both aspire to broaden the worlds of sound, image, and text, preferring the esoteric over the exoteric and the metaphorical over the literal, and choosing to address the world symbolically. I was struck by a curious asymmetry between the contextualization of progressive rock and metal, respectively. Chapters on metal music generously analyze bands that are, at most, proto-progressive metal, such as *Black Sabbath* and *Helloween*. But progressive rock's antecedents in psychedelic and acid rock, as well as key transatlantic exchanges, do not receive equal attention: "hippie spirituality" and "psychedelic counterculture" feature as sources, but neither bands nor albums come into extended focus. Given the volume's literary focus, I found the absence of *The Doors* and *Jim Morrison* particularly striking, given that they pioneered extended song forms and eclectic philosophical-poetic references. As a result, progressive rock appears cut off from the politics and movements of 1968 and univocally British in origin, more so than in the earlier monographs of *Macan* (1997) and *Martin* (1998). If this represents a genuine shift in the memory and media environment in which progressive rock is received, it begs to be theorized.

The concept of the "literary imagination" does a lot of work in unifying the collection, but I found it stretched by the intermedial imagination evident in the case studies. The editors take a broad view of "literature" and draw on *Derek Attridge's* (2015) reception-oriented definition to level the wall dividing "popular" and "high" literature. *Attridge's* focus on reading prioritizes language and engagement with primary sources. Similarly, the editors advocate for analyzing concept albums as multimedia objects but prioritize works of art over the frames that make them legible. Often, however, artists and authors work with adaptations and popularizations that draw on ephemeral mass (and now social) media to imagine words into sounds and images—in short, what many scholars would term an "imaginary." However, these mediators can be difficult to identify, and scholars must posit speculative direct links between primary sources and adaptations. A notable positive exception is *John Covach's* chapter on *Yes*, which undertakes a painstaking archaeology of the bookstores and bowdlerizations that fed into the band's lyrics. In other chapters, I found historically contingent media (like record sleeves and booklets) taken for granted, despite streaming partially displacing them. Given the volume's ambitious historical scope and focus on intermedial translation, attention to changes in the infrastructure that scaffolds imagination matters.

I found chapters that question straightforward continuity and address the tension between the literary imagination and its changing media particularly stimulating. For example, *Richard Worth's* chapter on *Gentle Giant* situates close analysis in a particularly rich and changing media network. The band's synthesized medievalism blended blues harmony, film soundtracks, and *David Munrow* and *Thomas Binkley's* imaginative if anachronistic recordings of medieval music. Taken out of

this original context, however, we learn that the clavinetts now point towards the sounds and sights of late 1990s video games. This shift towards technostalgia is also evident in Owen Coggins's chapter on the progressive black metal band Remmirath, which blends theosophy, traditionalism, and esoteric UFO beliefs with the sounds of the retro video game *Space Invaders*. This very online, ambiguously right-wing collage recalls the 1980s revivalist "synthwave" aesthetic. Patrick Armstrong and Lori Burns's chapter on a short story that was adapted into a multimedia progressive rock album, which was then adapted into a video game, expands the literary frame of the volume into truly transmedial territory. Moreover, their "hauntological" framework captures a shift in the worldbuilding of progressive rock and metal. Earlier bands conjured utopian and dystopian scenarios that society might progress towards by drawing on mass media science and fantasy fiction. On the other hand, some modern artists conjure worlds haunted by past potential and ideas, often embodied by obsolete media. What is progressive in a present that struggles to imagine a future, good or bad?

For me, the ambivalent politics of the "progressive" in progressive rock and metal emerge most clearly in chapters that look beyond the UK-US center, to the prog-periphery. Mengyao Jiang shows how Chinese musicians use Daoist notions of circular time to critique the state-enforced pursuit of economic modernization, particularly its detrimental effects on the environment and gender relations. This temporal contradiction pairs well with Israel Holas Allimant and Sergio Holas Véliz's chapter on Los Jaivas, who forged Latin music into a progressive rock aesthetic that embraced Indigenous "ana-chronism" against both Pinochet's conservative dictatorship and Marxist notions of historical teleology. Akitsugu Kawamoto convincingly argues that the superimposition of traditional and modern elements in post-Meiji Japan created a fertile matrix for the import of Western progressive rock. These stimulating chapters powerfully show how post-coloniality and authoritarian rule complicate simple notions of progress and individualism, and with it, the appropriation of Western progressive rock and metal discourses.

In sum, then, this volume makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how progressive rock and metal bands conceive their music as literature. Thanks to the efforts of the editors and contributors, we have learned a great deal about the sources that inspire progressive rock and metal's literary imagination. But what is the source of this literary imagination? The wealth of sources used, and their translation into music and multi-media constellations, is documented and interpreted in tremendous detail. Where the volume left me dissatisfied, it did so because the close-up perspective of its chapters made me crave higher-level theorizing—a desire that, I hope, is shared by other scholars.

References

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