“To Let it Be Without Pretense”: Canon, Fugue, and Imitation in Progressive Rock 1968–1979

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the use of canonic, fugal, and imitative writing in progressive rock, with special emphasis on the interaction between received models of composition and the apparent trialing and struggles to utilize, appropriate, and reinterpret such models in a popular, commercial, and performance-mediated idiom. While the reception history of progressive rock has hitherto mainly focused on the concepts of “pretension” (the appropriation of elements from the Western classical tradition) and “contention” (the countercultural social critique of cultural, musical, and political establishments), the music considered here illustrates problems of contention not just against the establishment but also within the counterculture itself, through both emblematic qualities of learned writing (surface allusions to counterpoint) and functional applications of received and appropriated counterpoint traditions (structural use of counterpoint).

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Introduction

[1] Recent socio-musicological interpretations of the progressive-rock movement in the late 60s and early 70s may be separated into two main historiographical strands. The first aligns with the informal historiography proposed in music criticism and sociology throughout the 80s and 90s. According to this interpretation, the bands involved were middle-class social agents seeking acceptance from their elders on the grounds of authoritative cultural capital deriving from the appropriation of classical and traditional musical elements (or, in the case of working-class musicians, as striving for increased cultural capital and socio-economic ascent).⁽¹⁾ Such apparent aspirations for cultural accreditation have often been viewed as an anomaly in the so-called counterculture movement, which was otherwise characterized by critique (or outright rejection) of all expressions of reverence for the individual artist, historical conventions, and middle-class values, and a mistrust of powerful institutions and mores.⁽²⁾ Sheinbaum has posited an “inversion of musical values” within the late 60s and early 70s counterculture, suggesting that its dominant musical aesthetic favored simple structures over more complicated ones, repetition over development, and stimulation of the body over stimulation of the mind (2002, 24–27). When viewed in light of such interpretative paradigms, musical elements such as canon, imitation, and fugue are construed by many scholars as somehow inherently in conflict with the cultural context in which progressive rock appeared. This interpretative trope, for many years predominant, may be summed up by charges of “pretension” and “self-indulgence” against progressive rock.

[2] The other main socio-musicological strand of progressive-rock historiography has developed only in more recent years. Writers who subscribe to this view describe progressive-rock groups as speaking from within the counterculture while nonetheless relying on aesthetic and stylistic elements and compositional strategies from the Western classical tradition, and offering at times severe social critique and challenges aimed at the cultural establishment, indeed at the very authorities and institutional cultures by which they were schooled musically and intellectually. Some writers have focused on what Keister and Smith (2008, 435–36) call “the nasty side of progressive rock,” unearthing or rediscovering dissident political, social, and

ethical topoi in the otherwise lofty and abstract lyrics and highly ambitious music of these bands.⁽³⁾ Here the balance of power between high-brow and low-brow is shifted, by claiming—as Keister and Smith do—that it was in fact popular culture that bestowed cultural capital onto the waning tradition of Western classical music, rather than vice versa.⁽⁴⁾ This historiographical strand is held together by “contention,” i.e. tension between the established bourgeois culture and the counterculture. Such an analytical stance interprets contrapuntal writing in progressive rock as a traditional tool handed down from predecessors for ready use, just like any other means of musical expression that can be taught and perfected.

[3] In the following discussion I suggest first that the use of contrapuntal writing in progressive rock occupies a clearly definable and different ground from more general references to Western classical music in the genre such as instrumentation, timbre, large-scale form, motivic development, virtuosity, etc. Contrapuntal writing is a distinct and perennial tradition that tends to eschew the flamboyance and outward grandiosity identified as key elements in earlier discourses of progressive rock (in negative or positive terms, depending on the author); by definition, in this context at least, it is entirely detached from the domain of improvisation.⁽⁵⁾ I will furthermore argue that contrapuntal writing is used in some instances as a deep principle of structural organization, where the contrapuntal devices are at the heart of the song, but that it occasionally also figures as surface allusion with a number of different associative implications. As we will see, the tradition of contrapuntal writing could be simulated or hinted at even when there is little counterpoint proper in the musical structure. These hypotheses have crystallized from analysis of a large amount of progressive-rock repertoire from Europe and North America ca. 1968–1980.

[4] How can the incorporation of contrapuntal elements into progressive rock be situated socially in the contexts of 60s and 70s counterculture on the one hand, and the pedagogical and artistic traditions of Western classical composition on the other? Keister and Smith have drawn attention to the fact that “progressive rock found its strongest following among—but was not limited to—the hippie counterculture during the late 1960s/ early 1970s that opposed both elite and mainstream popular culture” (2008, 448). While contrapuntal writing, along with many other idiosyncrasies of progressive rock, steered clear of associations with mainstream commercial culture, it was certainly susceptible to the charge of elitism leveled against progressive rock with ever greater intensity from the middle of the 70s onwards.⁽⁶⁾ No socio-musicological model seems to fit well in our case, even if some come closer than others. It is difficult to explain contrapuntal writing primarily as aspiring for cultural accreditation, in spite of its associations with erudite and technically complex music, since counterpoint was not part of the middle-class appreciation of symphonic and operatic music. In contrast, the use of elements typical of the nineteenth-century symphonic poem could more readily be fueled by such aspirations, as has been pointed out by several authors (Spicer 2000, 77–78; Holm-Hudson 2002, 111–13). This also the case with some twentieth-century orchestral music and Anglican Church music (Macan 1992, 102–3).

[5] Conversely, contrapuntal writing in progressive rock can hardly be seen as contending with the establishment, since it constitutes a commonplace and perennial level of received aesthetics and fixed strategies, connected to craft, learning, tradition, and moderation—unlike, for example, the rhythms and harmonies of east-European modernists, Stravinsky, or Ginastera (or late-Romantic symphonists, for that matter), which have been evoked by some progressive-rock bands. A critique of the aesthetic ideology of such modernist appropriations could possibly be made (see Keister and Smith 2008, 437–38), but is the same true of traditional counterpoint? This incorporation of a highly *institutional* practice into popular music seems to signify a discernible urge to incorporate this historically significant aspect of Western music into a new era of musical amalgamation of low-brow and high-brow. It was a common notion in the counterculture at the time that Western art music and commercial popular art music were poised to evaporate as separate entities, and that the more ambitious post-*Sgt. Pepper* acts—such as the bands discussed here—were the new synthesis from which future mainstream music would proceed.⁽⁷⁾ I ultimately argue that the use of contrapuntal devices is best understood as an appropriation of received compositional models that partly represented contention within the circle of progressive-rock listeners, i.e., a point of controversy within the counterculture movement itself (where listeners would not naturally expect, or favor, conservative musical features). The appropriation of models that had served many different earlier styles and idioms in Western music constituted an implicit claim that progressive rock was the new classical music, for which reason it also offered a challenge to bourgeois musical conceptions. The appropriation is, moreover, an aesthetic and technical contention against other composers and musicians of all earlier times, based on the inherent possibility of competition in fixed compositional models.⁽⁸⁾

Queries Regarding the Use of Polyphonic Devices in Progressive Rock

[6] A number of questions present themselves when examining contrapuntal devices in progressive rock as appropriations of Western historical polyphonic practice. These can be summed up as follows:

- i. To what extent are composers and performers of progressive rock intentionally and consistently utilizing canon, fugue, and imitation as structural elements, and to what extent are they merely hinting at surface manifestations of the same? (For distinctions and definitions, see below.)
- ii. Which techniques and types of canon, fugue, and imitation are utilized structurally versus hinted at by surface manifestation?
- iii. What seem to be the compositional factors surrounding the conception and working-out of canonic, fugal, and imitative writing?

iv. How has the music been received by audiences and critics?

[7] The present study thus aims to examine the repertoire in question both from the viewpoint of “why did they do this?”—a query both sociological and historical—and “how is it done?”—a query guided by music theory and analysis. In relation to the first query, I will summarize previous research concerning the historical and sociological peculiarities of progressive rock, to provide context for the analytical readings of selected examples I present in relation to the second query.

Scope of Study and Delimitation of Works

[8] The following progressive-rock tracks, chronologically ordered according to release date, all feature structural uses of fugue, canon, or imitation. The analytical discussions in the second half of this essay will draw on these songs in an attempt to answer the questions outlined above.

[9] Without laying claim to complete coverage, this list is the result of careful examination of tracks released by around one hundred of the main exponents of the progressive-rock movement in Europe and the United States, with close to one thousand tracks considered in total.⁽⁹⁾ Literal renditions of pre-existent works (e.g. versions of J.S. Bach’s fugues, such as Egg’s 1970 rendition of the BWV 565 fugue) have been excluded, since this is a different, albeit related, area of study. It may surprise some readers to find that two of the most prominent and celebrated progressive-rock acts, Genesis and King Crimson, have no entries here, and that the influential band Yes is represented merely by two examples.

The Socio-musicological Context of Contrapuntal Writing in Progressive Rock: An Apollonian Turn

People that say music is just controlled music, and art is just landscapes and things... aren’t right, because it’s other things as well. They’ve got all these rules; rules of how to live, how to paint, how to make music—and it’s just not true anymore. They don’t work; all those rules. You can’t apply them, because it means then that you’re assuming that you know it all. You know, [uses his hands to divide the past, present, and future] primitive man, us, and something else. And WE don’t know it all yet . . . They’re talking about things that are a bit new you know. And they’re talking about things which people don’t really know too much about yet. (McCartney 1967)

[10] This remark by Paul McCartney, made early in 1967, at the height of his success with the Beatles, is very illustrative of what Roszak termed the counterculture movement of the 60s. From the perspective of musical historiography, it is primarily important as a case of attempted prophesy for what is to come. In the interview, McCartney mentions “psychedelic freakout,” “far out,” and “weirdo” music, implying some sort of “Zukunftsmusik”: a new advanced stage, free of the conventional and received principles of compositional techniques and form. The key factor seems to be expression without the inhibition of rules. It is at the same time both a social and a cultural contention (see also Chander 2008). Camille Paglia has interpreted 60s music (which she seems to hold as the pinnacle in the history of rock) as a predominantly Dionysian paradigm, stressing the qualities of individualism, spontaneity, energy, passion, rebellion, and demonism (Paglia 1992, 18–20). McCartney’s comments and the interpretation of this culture as Dionysian point to Cream, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Traffic, Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd, and a number of other acts coming to the fore in 1966–68. His statement also reminds us in a remarkably clear way, however, that nobody in 1967 could have possibly imagined that popular music was soon to take an Apollonian turn towards meticulously planned, composed-out, and regulated music, often drawing explicitly on principles from institutional and historical traditions. Thus the progressive-rock movement, which rose to cultural prominence less than a year after McCartney’s remarks, seemingly contradicted everything he anticipated in the music of the future. In its more far-reaching guises, this Apollonian turn inspired bands to explore one of the aspects of Western musical traditions that had seldom before then been assimilated into popular music, and would seldom be thereafter: linear melodic counterpoint.

[11] John Covach has stressed that progressive rock tends to borrow from classical music in a way much more connected to how that music was understood in the establishments that promoted such music (symphonic halls, opera houses, etc.) than to how it is understood by musicologists and music theorists (1997, 8). This results in a mixing of styles and idioms that would be considered distinct by scholars, but probably not by most coeval listeners. Covach’s observation points to stylistic allusions as emblems that could be recognizable to a listener reasonably familiar with the most celebrated works in the Western classical tradition. While Covach’s assertion is certainly valid as regards fugue and fugal expositions, it is questionable whether canonic structures integrated (or even hidden) within a song structure could be understood in that way, since such compositional techniques are generally absent from the symphonic, orchestral, and chamber repertoire known to non-specialist listeners. In such cases, we must look for another model of addressing matters of intentionality behind compositional choices.

Canonic Writing

[12] Jethro Tull’s “Round” (1968) and Caravan’s “Asforteri 25” (1970) are examples of a type of canonic structure that is essentially based on voice exchange without permutations or levels of transposition. “Round” is essentially a three-part structure with ostinato accompaniment. While the two motives have similar endings, they have complementary contours and

rhythm (see **Example 1**). “Asforteri 25” also takes leave of the stylistic surface manifestations of the round (see **Example 2**). It is difficult to establish a distinction of intention or poesis (the creative process of writing the music) between appropriations of Western canonic idioms on the one hand, and layered music without such intentions on the other. On the immanent level (what is there for one to hear), however, the Caravan song is quite removed from any historical contrapuntal idiom. The manner of presentation hints more at canons for children and amateurs than at canons that appear as structural elements in composed-out songs: in the former cases, entries start one at the time, and then either fade out or drop out, as they would in a canon where the parts are not made to halt on a fermata. This presentation without sectional form in both examples suggests an intended simplicity of sound resembling the popular English round or catch, a low-brow bourgeois entertainment from the 1600s onwards.⁽¹⁰⁾ Both songs, however, have ostinato parts that are independent of the canonic parts (like the “pedes” in a round). In the Jethro Tull example the imitative writing is integrated into coeval “vernacular” styles of music drawn from blues and folk-rock, while in “Asforteri 25” the imitation is not stylistically “masked” in the same way.

[13] These examples, in which the canonic structure essentially constitutes the entire song, are of less interest in trying to understand the wider significance of counterpoint in progressive rock (both as regards emblematic properties and compositional-structural ones) than those in which counterpoint is used in a limited section or a confined layer of a song. A distinction could be made here between cases where canonic structures are rooted in deep harmonic and voice-leading structures of the song, and where they occur as superimpositions over structures apparently composed in relation to only one of the canonic parts. Such a distinction is illustrated by passages from Yes’s “And You and I” (**Example 3**) and Gentle Giant’s “As Old as You’re Young” (**Example 4**). The distinction can be made both in relation to how much the canonic parts affect the entire texture (and not only the main melodic parts) and in relation to the independence of the canonic parts (whether or not any of the canonic parts could be removed, and whether the remaining part(s) relate equally well to the non-canonic parts). The passage in “And You and I” involves only surface harmony whereas that in “As Old as You’re Young” affects the structural level of the entire texture to a greater degree.

[14] In “And You and I” the first entry is more harmonically stable than the second, and is therefore perceived as predominant. The first entry begins on a fifth over a static bass note and its first five notes are consonant, whereas the second entry begins over a descending bass line and has a dissonance on its second note. The phrase structure also signals this subordination: the second entry in the middle voice of Example 3 is interrupted and realigned with the first entry to make a cadence and the time interval between the entries is shortened.⁽¹¹⁾ This is an instance of imitation in sectional, phrase-bound structure, rather than a canon in a cyclical structure. “As Old as You’re Young” (Example 4) has a structure that is cyclically repeated, without realignment of the parts or cadences appended in order to break the canonic structure.

[15] In addition to being equally rooted in the harmonic context of the non-canonic parts, the parts in “As Old as You’re Young” were probably conceived *ab initio* as a pair, which is doubtful in the case of “And You and I,” where the irregular time distance of the entries appears to be tailor-made for the canon. The latter case thus may be said to be a surface element of imitation, used only at one point in the song and primarily, I would argue, emblematic in its presentation.⁽¹²⁾ This interpretation is also a response to its compositional context: a sudden change in instrumentation (from guitar, bass, drums, and multiple voices with Leslie effect to voices and acoustic guitar accompaniment only) and in the role of the two canonic voices as the main rhythmic guides of the section lend the impression of an exposition, which is not at all the case in “As Old as You’re Young.” There, the canon is fundamentally central in the song, but it is utilized as a development strategy, since the first refrain of the song features only one of the parts (the top part in Example 4, in A Mixolydian rather than G Mixolydian). The effect of this canon at the unison, with both parts sung and phrased in identical manner by Kerry Minnear’s voice, is in fact one of *Melodieschichten* (resultant voice leading in a Schenkerian sense) between one group of notes (G3–D4) and another (D4–G4). I experience it not as notated above, with two-measure phrases alternating between the canonic parts, but rather as a repetition of one-measure segments, with a lower voice added to the melody of the A-major chorus (**Example 5**).

[16] The canon in “As Old as You’re Young” follows a round structure, with no transposed entries, and with interlocking repetitions. It is different from Jethro Tull’s “Round” and Caravan’s “Asforteri 25” primarily because of its integration into a larger song structure. This is true both locally (the canon appears within a texture of free writing in the instrumental parts, with motivic fragments of the canonic parts in the one-measure bass ostinato) and on a larger scale, since the canonic melody is the chorus melody, which was previously presented as a single lead part. The same melody appears in contrapuntal fragments in the modulation that follows the canonic section (see the last four measures of Example 4), enhancing the impression of canon as development.⁽¹³⁾ In “And You and I” this is not the case, since the canon is presented at the very first appearance of the melody in question and never returns again in the song.⁽¹⁴⁾

[17] In both the Yes and the Gentle Giant examples, either of the two parts could be removed and the other would be firmly harmonically rooted, which constitutes a sort of touchstone of deep canonic structure. Another way to understand a canonic section of a song as simultaneous or successive composition is via its relation to harmonic mobility and stasis. In Example 3, the first entry in the “And You and I” canon moves with the harmonic progressions in measures 1 and 4 of the example, and is static when the harmony is static. The second entry, albeit equally firmly integrated harmonically, moves when the harmony is static—in fact measure 2 seems interpolated mainly in order to accommodate melodic movement without

clashes. Furthermore, the time intervals between the entries are inconsistent, which signals that the surface design arises from the wish to have imitative entries here, and that the compositional process seems to have been successive.

[18] The emblematic level of imitation (with all the associations of a fugal exposition) in “And You and I” is showcased in the texture and style of delivery, while the canon as development in “As Old as You’re Young” is “hidden” in texture and instrumentation and thus not overtly emblematic. It is, however, far from always the case that the emblematic or associative use of canon and imitation appears as surface-level design, as in “And You and I.” A similar compositional procedure to that in “As Old as You’re Young” is also found in Gentle Giant’s “His Last Voyage” (see **Example 6**), but here the use is also emblematic, i.e., showcased and self-referential with one or more intended associations with learned counterpoint for the listener.

[19] Just as in “As Old as You’re Young,” in “His Last Voyage” the material treated canonically is first introduced as the main thematic material of the song, which means that the canon can be interpreted as a strategy of development. On account of this procedure, the canon is perceived as integrated into the song structure, or at least as a coherent continuation of what has been heard up to that point. It is not an agent of formal demarcation, and lacks the emblematic properties of a fugal or canonic exposition (characterized by one entry after another *ex nibilo* in a new section, often with a new tempo and instrumentation). Nevertheless it is showcased in a way similar to that in “And You and I,” and some intentional emblematic associations seem likely (e.g., it signals overtly that something complex is done with previously presented melodic material). “His Last Voyage” has a strict two-part canon (the top two staves in Example 6) and an added quasi-imitative part (the lowest staff). This added part (just like the second entry in the Yes song) is a key to our tentative distinction between emblematic and non-emblematic use, for why should one otherwise add a part that does not pull its structural weight, so to speak? One reason seems to be a desire for imitative textures; another could be that strict imitation is not possible.

[20] We have seen here, side by side with symbolic and emblematic use of imitation, a type of writing that uses canon and imitation as a developmental strategy. This is of course nothing unique to progressive rock, but a common practice in the contrapuntal tradition. But such a planned-out, development-oriented strategy is progressive in the literal sense of the word (also, one could argue, ideologically). The contrapuntal techniques exemplified in the two Gentle Giant songs (as well as other songs by a number of other bands) have, as far as I am aware, never been derided and criticized in a countercultural context, either from an aesthetic or ideological perspective.⁽¹⁵⁾ This suggests not only a successful appropriation of compositional techniques from the Western tradition, but also one that was widely acceptable to aesthetic paradigms within the counterculture movement. The same cannot be said of the examples of fugal writing to which we shall turn shortly. It could therefore be argued that this type of canonic integration in songs appears to have been uncontroversial in its cultural context as a compositional device, in spite of its complexity and apparent anomalousness in rock music.

Quodlibet and Combinatorial Sections

[21] One of the structural mainstays of early-70s progressive rock was the use of separate combinatorial sections, first presented individually, and then reworked in combinations, again giving the impression of development and musical intensification. The number of instances exemplifying this practice is much greater than those of canon, fugue, and imitation in this repertoire, and falls outside the topics covered in this study. Quodlibet technique has different historical roots from the compositional strategies analyzed in this study; it was not, as is the case with canon, fugue, and imitation (with a few mid-60s exceptions), new to commercial popular music by 1968, and therefore it needs to be examined in a different context of culture and reception history.⁽¹⁶⁾ Still, it requires compositional planning similar to that of canon and round, and therefore merits a brief discussion here. When it comes to small-scale instances of quodlibet (only one or a few measures long), there are some examples in which this is nearly indistinguishable from the compositional technique of the round (see e.g. Gentle Giant’s “Raconteur Troubadour” where the melodic material from two contrasting sections is combined). Quodlibet can, however, be utilized to allude to a learned contrapuntal style, as well as to provide a musical means of harmonic contrast, complementary figuration, and independently aligned phrasing. One such example is “L’orchestra dei fischetti” (1977) by the Milanese band Stormy Six (see **Example 7**). Different dense contrapuntal textures are derived throughout the song from a set of short diatonic melodies. This is a much more multifaceted and versatile use of the melodic material than in the Jethro Tull and Caravan examples, and very different from the way in which Gentle Giant downplayed the contrapuntal structure in relation to the rest of the songs. Here, the contrapuntal cleverness is at the forefront.

[22] The three vocal melodies and texts in “L’orchestra dei fischetti” are perceived as being introduced separately before being integrated in different combinations. But in fact these three melodies combined make up the guitar accompaniment for the first rhythmically regular section beginning at 2:04, after a free introduction. This is a relationship that few listeners would probably grasp upon first exposure to the song, hearing it instead as a straight rendition of the first melodic element with complex and irregular guitar arpeggiation. The last melodic element to enter sets the text “Niente resta uguale a se stesso, la contraddizione muove tutto” (Nothing remains equal to itself, the contradiction changes everything), which appears to be a direct lyrical reflection on the compositional technique—something not found in the other examples discussed so far. This is a “compact emblematicism,” I would argue, that also points to a link between social and aesthetic elements of contention, contest, or conflict.

[23] What is very intriguing about the apparent self-referential musical process (“Nothing is what it seems,” i.e. the truth

about the parts is not revealed vocally until the passage given in Example 7) is that it also appears to elaborate on a revolutionary social topic. The first melody, introduced on its own at 02:49–03:05, describes an awakening, “an orchestra of whistles” breaking through the fabric of perceived reality by their presence in the street, writing in red on the city walls. The revolutionary topic of this verse, nothing out of the ordinary in the international “Rock in Opposition” movement of which Stormy Six was part, would have been clear to most contemporaneous listeners. The second verse (04:23–04:45) presents the second quodlibet melody, sung in parallel thirds and sixths to a rhythmically complex version of what sounds like a pastiche of rural Italian mandolin accompaniment. Then the third melody presents the lyric that here is taken as an analytical key to the entire song: that nothing stays the same, that oppositions and contradictions change everything, as if out of a Hegelian-Marxist handbook. I would venture further that this melody, even before its combination with the other two, may present a musical reflection of the text, in its surprising modal turn to the lowered 7th scale degree in the context of a major key at the word “*contraddizione*.” When the three melodies are combined *a cappella*, the effect of the polyphonic texture and the simultaneous sets of lyrics create a carefully planned climax.

[24] In this reading, the Stormy Six example turns much historiographical and ideological analysis of progressive rock on its head, offering an interesting case where learned polyphonic writing in the Western tradition is appropriated for revolutionary and politically liberative purposes. This also says something about the “Rock in Opposition” movement in Italy at the time: in many countries, notably in Scandinavia but also in England by 1977, and most certainly according to rock critics all over Europe at that time, compositional endeavors such as this signaled too much pretension to offer contention. This is significant since Stormy Six shared concert bills (and thereby audiences) with the Swedish group Samla Mammas Manna, the French Etron Fou Leloublan and the Belgian Univers Zero in the late 70s.⁽¹⁷⁾ Among the songs by these artists, we find that one of the most openly Marxist-revolutionary texts of all gains its wider meaning through the emblematic use of the historically conditioned technique of quodlibet.

[25] This text and context challenge both the historiographical stances of pretension and contention discussed above. The Rock in Opposition movement of the late 70s may certainly be seen as a rather different context from the late-60s counterculture in Britain, from which progressive rock as a genre initially emerged. “L’orchestra dei fischetti” may with some justification be held to lack all three of the elements that Macan has outlined as a socio-musicological characterization of progressive rock: the Romantic notion of musician as (solitary) prophet, the idealization of rural pre-modern society, and a notion of spirituality and transcendence in music (1997, 68, 73–74; 2006, xxxix, 108). Stump, on the other hand, has pinpointed (without discussing this track or any other by Stormy Six) what seems to be at work here, when he ventured that in the youth culture of (predominantly northern) Italy “audiences of young radicals saw this style [of conservatoire and operatic traditions] not only as a well-spring of forbidden secular *jouissance* but also as a means of taunting their elders and betters by appropriating establishment forms and using them as distorting mirrors. Much Italian Progressive wears its classical ancestry unashamedly” (Stump 2010, 123). Stump goes on, however, to assert that Stormy Six is an exception from this tendency, a statement that is contradicted by my analysis of “L’orchestra dei fischetti.”

Fugato

[26] So far we have mainly surveyed types of contrapuntal writing that function in cyclical repetition. A different approach altogether is found in works that feature sectional polyphony, fugato, and fugue. A fugal exposition that has become iconic for many progressive rock fans is Gentle Giant’s “On Reflection,” both in the studio version from the album “Free Hand” in 1975 and in the re-worked live version recorded at the BBC “Sight and Sound” radio and TV sessions in 1978, but released only in 1994. It is an *a cappella* fugal exposition à 4, used as a building block in a sectional song, but not a complete fugue.

[27] Keith Emerson’s “High Level Fugue” from The Nice’s *Five Bridges Suite* is an example of stylistic crossover. The entire suite may be understood as an attempt to showcase as wide an array as possible of idioms and gambits from the Western musical tradition. The work was commissioned by the city council for the Newcastle Arts Festival of 1969, where it was also premiered. The album version was recorded in Croydon Hall with The Nice and the London Sinfonia. Emerson has credited Friedrich Gulda as the main source of inspiration of the fugue, and it indeed seems to draw on Gulda’s *Prelude and Fugue* in E-flat minor.⁽¹⁸⁾ “High Level Fugue” is not a complete fugue, but a single exposition lasting around one minute. By 1969, Keith Emerson was really on his own when it came to such experiments with art-music forms in rock music, and his attempts seem to have been widely embraced within the “free,” “freaked-out,” and experimental ideal described in Paul McCartney’s 1967 interview, despite his assessment of traditional compositional rules as no longer relevant. The Nice was in this respect already making the music that was later to become progressive rock, but it seems to have been understood rather differently at the time.⁽¹⁹⁾

[28] That Emerson did not mean “High Level Fugue” as an expression of Dionysian compositional freedom is clear in light of one of his later contrapuntal endeavors with the trio Emerson, Lake and Palmer. “Fugue,” the second movement of Emerson, Lake and Palmer’s “Endless Enigma” suite is again not a complete fugue but a fugato preceded by an introduction based on the same subject.

free introduction “false start,” section based on subject fugato

The contrapuntal section cannot be described as a fugue by any definition relating to the *fugue de l'école* from the so-called common-practice period, as taught at British public schools and conservatories using textbooks by, e.g., William Lovelock (1953) and Edmund Rubbra (1960). It is, however, a much more formally worked-out piece than the “High Level Fugue.” It is firmly tonally conceived, with a subject outlining C major, and with its main harmonic areas outlining sectional form in the same key. The episodes interposed between these sections are not sequential but rather full of harmonically unstable passagework.

[29] The fugue subject is characterized by a tied note on scale degree $\hat{3}$, creating a slight syncopation and durational emphasis (see **Example 8**). The subject, consisting almost entirely of disjunct motion, is static in the tonic key. The prefiguring of the dominant key (by so-called over-preparation) is provided by a latched-on figure acting as countersubject. Similarly to “High Level Fugue,” the “Endless Enigma” fugue seems to be based on a compositional model, in this case not anything from the fugal repertoire, but rather the two-part keyboard inventions by J.S. Bach, widely used as didactic models of piano playing. Macan has stressed the importance of Bach’s music for Emerson’s piano playing and writing (2006, 3). In a general sense, Macan’s suggestion is relevant. Stylistically, one could consider BWV 722, the C-major invention, where not only the type of two-part exposition, voice allocation, and episode writing are remarkably similar to the Emerson, Lake and Palmer example, but also the subject itself is similar. (The tonality of Emerson’s subject, however, is ambiguous, and it features voice leading and skips that are not characteristic of Bach’s style.)

[30] Macan has suggested that the placement of Emerson’s fugue between Parts 1 and 2 of “Endless Enigma” carries some extramusical and metaphorical significance, in what he terms the “nineteenth-century tradition of fugue as metaphor for/agent of transformation/redemption” (2006, 209).⁽²⁰⁾ It may at first seem that this does not relate to what I have termed emblematic use of counterpoint, but a connection can be drawn, as I will show below. Macan claims that the extramusical (existential) aspects are rooted in compositional strategies of resolution by development. The interpretation of a transformation here hinges on whether or not one accepts **Example 9** from “Fugue,” from an episodic section following a brief pedal point, as an allusion to the melodic material in “Endless Enigma” Part 1 (see **Example 10**).

[31] Macan sees **Example 9** as a bona fide thematic statement of the passage given in **Example 10**, and interprets it in the following way: “Like Beethoven’s opus 110 fugue or Alkan’s ‘Quasi-Faust’ fugue, Emerson’s succeeds in exorcising the demons and answering the unanswered questions of the previous music” (2006, 210). According to such an interpretation, the quotation of the Enigma theme in the fugue accomplishes large-scale closure through the final statement of the same melody to the lyrics “Now that it’s done, I’ve begun to see the reason why I’m here” as a peroration. Macan’s analysis of “Fugue” resembles my analysis of “L’orchestra dei fischietti” above. Both interpret the climactic thematic statements as a peroration in the rhetorical structure: thematic entries that explain or reveal something of the piece as a whole by way of conclusion. But in “Endless Enigma” we lack a clear program for the song in which the fugue appears (in “L’orchestra dei fischietti” it is the very contrapuntal section that is the climax, music that resolves the tension among the three layers of lyrics). I agree with Macan’s interpretation of the thematic statement as an intentional allusion. I would even be willing to interpret the descending figure in measure 1 of **Example 7** as a motivic reference to the melodic line that precedes the lyric “your words waste and decay . . .,” but it is unclear whether Macan suggests this. The potential redeeming function of this allusion, however, is only one of several possible interpretations. Emerson often quotes himself and others in freer sections and solos, which normally do not give rise to meanings beyond that of a bit of clever wittiness.⁽²¹⁾ This caveat does not detract much from Macan’s analysis of the piece, but it has its place, since there are some elements of Emerson’s soloist-like playfulness in this otherwise through-composed piece.

[32] The Endless Enigma “Fugue” is highly eclectic in style, but it appears to be an honest attempt at tonal fugato rather than the high-modernist deliberately dissonant structures that are occasionally explored elsewhere in progressive rock. The latter aesthetic seems to have been behind the contrapuntal exposition in Van der Graaf Generator’s “Meurglys III (The Song-writer’s Guild)” from 1976 (see **Example 11**).

[33] Van der Graaf Generator have often been described, along with early-70s King Crimson, as expressing—in timbre, delivery, and composition as well as lyrics—a darker, more cynical, and pessimistic outlook and ideology than the escapist rural-historical utopia of Gryphon and Renaissance on the one hand, and the detached ironic playfulness of Gentle Giant, Jethro Tull, and Gabriel-era Genesis on the other.⁽²²⁾ What hints at futuristic and modernist aesthetics in the canonic exposition of “Meurglys III” is first of all the instrumentation and timbre. The entries are shared between organ (without any distortion or vibrato effects) and David Jackson’s saxophones, treated to effects that give them a timbre with fewer harmonic overtones than normal. The imitative writing is strictly *cantus prius factus*, all entries being identical at the unison or octave—yet it is not repeatable as an interlocking cycle, as in Gentle Giant’s “As Old as You’re Young” or Stormy Six’s “L’orchestra dei fischietti.” The rhythmic relationships as well as the pitch relationships are subject to development: from the third entry onwards, with the entry of the drums, the subject is recomposed in triplets.

[34] In light of these factors, the contrapuntal opening is best understood as emblematic, just as in Emerson's two fugato pieces: the canon starts *ab initio*, not hidden or embedded in deep textures, or with thematic material that was first presented with other functions. When we interpret this section in the context of the entire song, however, a self-referential function of the contrapuntal music becomes clear. The extensive song (over 20 minutes long) is about songwriting. The character Meurglys III is Peter Hammill's guitar, named after Ganelon's sword Murgleis in the twelfth-century *Le Chanson de Roland ou de Roncevaux*.⁽²³⁾ The guitar does not participate in the contrapuntal exposition; rather, it enters on a harmonically distant crash on the final downbeat of the section. It is similarly absent from the sections where Hammill sings about it (or to it). It seems reasonable to interpret the guitarless sections as the background to the song Hammill is trying to compose, a multi-layered theatrical approach that is commonplace in progressive rock.

(04:29–05:26)

“Meurglys III, he’s my friend,
the only one that I can trust
to let it be without pretense
—there’s no-one else.
It’s killing me, but in the end
there’s no-one else I know is true,
there’s none in all the masks of men,
there’s nothing else
but my guitar.
I suppose he’ll have to do.”

[35] The word “pretense” often recurs in Hammill’s lyrics; e.g., in “Still Life” 1976: “Arrival at immunity from all age, / all fear and all end. / Why do I pretend? / Our essence is distilled and all familiar taste is now drained / and though purity is maintained it leaves us sterile. . . .”. The term was by this time well-connected with the general trope of “pretension” and “pretentiousness” by which influential music critics had marked and condemned progressive rock (giving rise to the first of the two historiographical strands outlined above). By the mid 70s, the broader community of progressive rock showed several signs of self-awareness of this stigma. A few months after the release of “Meurglys III,” Gentle Giant labeled their compilation album “Pretentious—For the Sake of It” (1977). Philip Sutcliffe’s liner notes are illustrative of the apology for complexity and sincerity: “Gentle Giant, dedicated musicians that they are, have never taken themselves that seriously. They’ve always been one of the bands to cop flak from rock pundits who reckon Chuck Berry said it all, and so on an American tour they took the key put-down word of that school of criticism and spelt it out in huge neon letters above the stage while they played their set: ‘PRETENTIOUS’.”

[36] I suggest that, in light of melodic relationships between the exposition (Example 11) and other sections of the song, as well as the instrumentation and lyrical topic, the contrapuntal opening of Van der Graaf Generator’s “Meurglys III” should be understood along the lines of statements such as Sutcliffe’s, i.e., that it is self-consciously pretentious. The difference between Gentle Giant’s and Sutcliffe’s statements on the one hand, and Hammill’s lyrics in “Meurglys III” on the other, seems to be that the latter is not an attempt to wittily defend or deny pretension, but rather a sincere take on what may be termed the problem of pretentiousness in popular music. “Meurglys III” poses the idea of simple, personal, and passionate music with the guitar as one’s only companion against the contrapuntal structures that open the song, the melodic material of which returns intermittently. The opening relates to the melodic theme that appears to represent self-absorption, solipsism, and music that nobody wants to hear. The riff consists of the notes E–D–G joined to a row of eight rapid notes from the canonic exposition (see the last eight notes in the top part of Example 11). When the vocals enter, the E–D–G figure is exchanged for the descending tetrachord E–D–C–B, still with the latched-on eight notes from the canonic exposition.

(01:38–02:13)

“These days I mainly just talk to plants and dogs—
all human contact seems painful, risky, odd;
I stay acting god in my own universe
where I trade cigarettes in return for songs.
The deal’s made harder the longer I go on:
I find me gone from all but secret languages.”

[37] Later in the song, a simple guitar-driven section (based on a i–VII–VI–V⁷ pattern) deals with similar themes as “Still Life” (quoted above). Here the existential matters are applied directly to the task of songwriting. The descending tetrachord has been a traditional lament progression since at least the seventeenth century (see, for example, Monteverdi’s *Lamento della Ninfa*, SV 163). It is also melodically identical to the first part of the riff discussed above, but here augmented to constitute a bass line and harmonic foundation. The thematic material from the canonic exposition has now been eliminated, suggesting absence of the “secret languages” as a “pretentious” element.

[38] This section is followed by what seems to represent a conflict or battle between the i–VII–VI–V⁷ pattern (with guitar) against a complex motivic texture (with organ and winds), and quite possibly also between the vernacular and the “secret languages” of music referred to in the text (11:23–12:41). This type of conflict between sections and layers was not new to Van der Graaf Generator. A good example of similar competing layered sections within a song can be found in the 1971 track “Man-Erg,” where the two sections represent two sides of the narrator’s (Hammill’s, one presumes) personality. The struggle in “Meurglys III” is left unresolved both musically and lyrically, followed by the words:

“Though I know all this is just escape,
I run because I don’t know where the prison lies.
In songs like this I can bear the weight . . .
I’m running still,
I shall until,
one day, I hope that I’ll arrive.”

[39] The song closes with something exceedingly unexpected in a progressive rock idiom—in fact, as unexpected here as a fugal exposition would be in most other idioms of popular music: a reggae section (beginning at 13:19), initially based on the i–VII–VI–V⁷ lament progression! Over this pattern, the character of Meurglys III (the guitar) speaks, with a solo based on the thematic material from the opening fugato. Pretension is in conflict with what the band (in the sole instance of reggae style in their output) apparently saw as its opposition: music based on a standard harmonic progression, the descending tetrachord.

[40] The reader may find this interpretation far-fetched, but I will present additional arguments in its favor below. Significantly, by 1977, few progressive-rock bands were writing LP-side long tracks (“Meurglys III” clocks in at 20:55), and Van der Graaf Generator had not done so since “A Plague of Lighthouse Keepers” in 1971 (a very long period in the career of any band at the time).⁽²⁴⁾ This opens up a hermeneutic window for an interpretation of retrospectivity, which is also directly addressed in the lyrics. Furthermore, the song is about Hammill’s guitar. Hammill could by no means be seen as a guitarist on the same level as, for example, Steve Howe of Yes, Steve Hackett of Genesis, or Robert Fripp of King Crimson. In live sets he was primarily a singer, occasionally doubling on second keyboard. The band was in essence always a drums-organ-saxes-vocals outfit. Significantly, on the early Van der Graaf Generator tracks, Robert Fripp of King Crimson was called on to provide guitar parts. It was the lack of guitar and bass sonorities that provided the unique sound of early Van der Graaf Generator. Even when the two instruments are used, they are not played by specialized instrumentalists like the bass players and guitarists of most other British progressive acts. This fact is possibly significant in analyzing this song, since it purports to treat an instrument which was not central to the group’s writing in the early progressive period of the first years of the 70s.

[41] If the melodic theme treated contrapuntally in the opening represents “self-absorbed music” (self-indulgence was one of the other charges often made against progressive rock in the late 70s), does the contrapuntal exposition represent the pretense referred to in the section about “Meurglys”? Is it intended as the strange music (“secret languages”), as opposed to the vocal sections in “familiar style”? Considering the representational and symbolic density of Peter Hamill’s lyrics from the preceding albums (*Godbluff*, 1975 and *Still Life*, 1976) either of these interpretations seems a conceivable explanation for the sole use of strict contrapuntal writing in the entire output of Van der Graaf Generator. In the light of the factors elucidated above, one might even venture to suggest that “Meurglys III” could be heard and read as a comment on the death of progressive rock, or alternatively as a comment on its transition from a vital cultural idiom of some social significance to solipsism and introversion.

[42] The melodic material in the canonic exposition of “Meurglys III” is integrated thematically into the song as a whole, which is a completely different use of this compositional gambit from, for example, the fugato in “Endless Enigma.” Van der Graaf Generator’s case is interesting since organist Hugh Banton was, like Keith Emerson, predominantly a contrapuntal performer rather than a contrapuntal composer—having been trained at Wakefield Cathedral and at Silcoates School, he had a good mastery of polyphonic keyboard playing, but little formal training in composition. As in Emerson’s case, this lack of compositional training seems to result in contrapuntal exercises that are conceived at the keyboard, and that remain keyboard-centered even when parts are allocated to other instrumentalists. This is fundamentally different from the contrapuntal writing for ensemble forces by Kerry Minnear of Gentle Giant (a composition major from Royal Academy of Music) and also from that of the Royal College of Music alumni and Early Music instrumentalists Brian Gulland and Richard Harvey in Gryphon. The fugato writing in Gryphon’s “Opening Move” (03:53–04:29) from the 1974 album *Red Queen to Gryphon Tree* never amounts to fugue, but it is shaped formally by a similar balance of tonally separated entries, with the effect of having been written for an ensemble rather than having been conceived at the keyboard (see **Example 12**). The contrapuntal section is firmly rooted in the song as a whole: the fugato subject is derived from a short motive used for demarcation in the preceding section (03:39–03:52), spun out in an extended bassoon-led section (04:33–07:25), and then recurs as a demarcating motive (08:27–08:45). The large-scale sectional form and motivic cohesion resemble Gentle Giant’s use of canon in “As Old as You’re Young” and “His Last Voyage,” but “Opening Move” has stronger stylistic contrasts among its sections than do those songs. This is effected by way of instrumentation and timbre (the recorder, bassoon, acoustic guitar, and analogue synthesizer are

prominent in the mix, without reverberation), tempo (just as in Emerson's "Endless Enigma" fugue, the exposition picks up at a fast pace, independent from earlier tempi, immediately after a freer section—a possible reference to prelude or fantasia style), and by figuration with *Fortspinnung* and suspensions emblematic of the school fugue as taught in the above-mentioned fugue primers.

[43] A case similar to that of Gryphon's "Opening Move" is "Carnival Fugue" by the Dutch band Focus. Like "Fugue" from "Endless Enigma," the fugal writing is preceded by a semi-improvisational piano-led introduction consisting of four varied reiterations of a theme that does not recur in the contrapuntal section. The 2 + 2 repetitions in the introduction are interpolated with a cul-de-sac modulation leading to a tonal area that is immediately abandoned, and which when first heard seems to invoke both rhythmically and melodically the theme of the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony (and with the same sequential repetition), but which in fact is related to the fugal theme: it consists of the eight-note groups followed by a quarter note at the same sequential distance (see **Example 13**). The subject of "Carnival Fugue" seems to have been conceived with more planning in relation to possible contrapuntal treatment than the subjects in either exposition by Emerson, Lake and Palmer or Van der Graaf Generator. It is invertible at the minor third below or major sixth above, which facilitates entries at degrees other than those of the tonic and dominant, and it appears in stretto and quasi-stretto entries. The exposition is in C minor, but the highly chromatic subject does not clearly define a key. The second entry is in Ab minor, which illustrates the irregularity of the tonal plan of the piece. The subject appears in double counterpoint with several entries in A minor, and entries at the inversion with stretto. This type of compositional control sets "Carnival Fugue" apart from any other examples discussed above (even Gryphon's "Opening Move") and most likely testifies to Thijs van Leer's studies in composition at the Amsterdam conservatoire.⁽²⁵⁾

[44] Many of the works in the progressive-rock canon that either make reference to contrapuntal techniques, or have been interpreted by fans and critics as elaborate contrapuntal works, in fact only hint at the emblematic features of such writing: suspensions, clear registral and temporal separation of voices, varying texture, etc. "Fugue for the Sultan" in Renaissance's suite "Song for Scheherazade," for example, hardly features fugal writing at all. It showcases the surface features of the technique, with a lengthy, rhythmically and intervallically poignant subject that enters at different transposition levels in different instruments, but in a context of otherwise free material. The entries are too loosely connected to constitute an exposition proper, and the non-thematic parts lack independence and provide accompanimental figuration patterns.

[45] Similarly, some compositional and performance techniques that have often been interpreted as contrapuntal writing by music critics, fans, and music scholars are a matter of texture rather than an independence of melodic lines. Gentle Giant, for example, frequently utilizes hocket, where a monodic structure is fragmented and alternated between two or more parts with intermittent breaks and pauses within a single part (see, for example, "Knots" and the opening sections of "His Last Voyage"). Kerry Minnear's clavinet playing is distinguished by such rhythmic micro-syncopation and fragmentation, and the fact that in live performances he often transforms originally homophonic passages into hocket textures corroborates our definition of it as essentially a surface-level textural elaboration of monodic writing.⁽²⁶⁾

Fugue

[46] Among the songs listed at the beginning of this article, and as far as I am aware in the entire repertoire of European progressive rock, only one composition conforms to a strict definition of fugal form and process. It may thus justifiably be called a fugue, a title which we have seen inaptly used for a number of songs above. This is the six-part "Moog Fugue" by Kerry Minnear of Gentle Giant, which was originally sketched and composed in the early 1980s and later reworked with added instrumental tracks by a partly reunited line-up of Gentle Giant in the late 1990s.⁽²⁷⁾ The song thus never appeared on any of their albums within the time period covered by this article (1968–79), but deserves attention here precisely because it is indeed a complete fugue.⁽²⁸⁾ Here we have a proper exposition with subject and countersubject, followed by an episode, as well as incomplete and false entries and stylistic manifestations such as dominant pedals, fourth-species suspensions, and so on. **Example 14** outlines the form of the fugue.

[47] The instrumentation in "Moog Fugue" is significant, since it masks the equilibrium of parts and instruments without compromising the fugal structure. Its timbre and instrumentation give the impression of AB form, but thematically it is tripartite. The entire exposition is performed by keyboard instruments alone (John Weathers enters with drum kit at the fourth entry). The first five entries each use different Moog sounds, while the sixth introduces piano, the first acoustic instrument apart from the drums. It is only at the beginning of the episode that the entire band enters, but now Gary Green's guitar, overdubbed with several motivic replies and countermelodies in the lengthy modulation, asserts supremacy. The second exposition is, in contrast to the first, entirely combo-based, with acoustic piano and guitar sharing most entries (the Moog doubles some entries, but it is deep down in the mix). This succession of instrumentations pays lip service to conventions in rock and jazz that would have been germane to most listeners in the counterculture: a keyboard intro, followed by a guitar solo, rounded off by a section of the full band. This organization highlights the reconciliation of polyphonic processes with the expected large-scale sectional form, just as in other complex structures in Gentle Giant's music (see [Lundberg 2014](#)). Compared with the Stormy Six example, in which contrapuntal idioms seem to have been ideologically and aesthetically unproblematic (or even desirable), here we see the form of the fugue positively downplayed to notions of the "familiar style."

[48] Several of the more ambitious instances of fugal writing discussed here stand in some form of intertextual relationship to historical repertoire. These examples are not adaptations (“pretentious,” if you will) of works, such as Emerson, Lake and Palmer’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* or Rick Wakeman’s Brahms Scherzo in “Cans and Brahms” on Yes’s *Fragile*, cases where historical repertoire takes on emblematic value and associations. Rather, they seem to be related to the tradition of the *essai*, or *imitatio auctorum*, in which one practices a style by taking a pre-existent model as a point of departure. Robert Hatten’s (1985) distinction between competency of style (understanding, interpretation, and identification of organizational patterns) and competency of strategy (the ability to compose particular manifestations within a style) is relevant here. Minnear certainly knew very well how a fugue functions stylistically and how it ought to be constructed, but since it was not likely to have been one of his most natural idioms of composition, his competency of strategy may have left him with a subject somewhat resembling a that of a pre-existent work.

[49] “Moog Fugue” is a particularly clear example of imitation or parody technique, since it is hard to deny the possibility that Minnear borrowed his theme (consciously or subconsciously) from J.S. Bach’s “Little” G-minor fugue, BWV 578. **Examples 15 and 16** provide the beginning of the “Moog Fugue” and Bach’s fugue for comparison.

Thematically, “Moog Fugue” adheres closely to BWV 578, the two main differences being that its subject has a descending line in natural minor, $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$ with lowered seventh and sixth degrees, and a second half that modulates sequentially flatwards (Example 15). Bach’s subject, in contrast, uses the leading tone and has no modulatory section within itself. Passages of flatwards *Fortspinnung* do, however, occur in Bach’s model, as we can see in the last three measures of Example 16, which prepares for the second subject entry by moving back toward the tonic from the minor dominant of the answer. It is possible that Kerry Minnear derived the second part of his subject from such passages in Bach’s fugue. The fourth-species suspensions of falling fifths that provide Minnear’s countersubject recall the textbook fugue style that he would certainly have been taught at the Royal Academy of Music. Non-thematic passages are linked to the entries of the subject by way of motivic fragments, such as in the answer in measures 14–16 in Example 11 and in the bass part in the episode (see Example 14 above).

What About the Biggest Progressive Acts?

[50] A number of the chief exponents of the British progressive-rock movement, among them Genesis and King Crimson, do not seem to have used canon, fugue, or imitation in any form appropriated from the Western classical tradition.⁽²⁹⁾ Yes uses only three canonic devices, and all are mainly surface imitations, possibly for emblematic purposes, rather than structurally integrated into the song as a whole. King Crimson later (from 1981 onwards) explored techniques of phase music (Robert Fripp worked with this in his Guitar Craft networks throughout the late 80s), which is undoubtedly a type of polyphony, but one rather detached from the traditions of canon, imitation, and fugue, and chiefly related to Gamelan traditions and to the phase music of minimalist composers.

[51] The so-called Canterbury scene—progressive bands like Wilde Flowers, Soft Machine, and National Health, which were rather less illustrious than bands like King Crimson and Genesis and had a narrower audience—seem also to have shunned the use of counterpoint in their music (with the exception of the rudimentary “Asforteri 25” by Caravan, discussed above).⁽³⁰⁾ These bands focused on two other facets of “expanding the borders of rock” by appropriation, undoubtedly much more easily negotiable within the ethos of the counterculture (and thus less of an internal contention): free group improvisation and avant-garde sound experiments.

Summary and Conclusions

[52] It has been made clear here that contrapuntal writing in progressive rock is hardly ever to be understood as avant-garde in any conventional definition, such as Adorno’s metaphor “Flaschenpost” (1975, 126): messages in a bottle, not intended to be read or understood by any known person, but being unpacked individually by each listener. It lacks the alienating function of shock typical of the avant-garde. It also lacks, however, the potential aesthetic contention of shock by rhythmic intensity, dissonance, and strong dynamic contrast otherwise found in progressive rock. Furthermore, it lacks the flamboyant virtuosity and splendor in either harmonic relationships or timbre, which is at the heart of progressive-rock style, and which has often been read as pretension. Instead, contrapuntal writing may be seen as an academic approach, in the eyes of rock listeners and critics the most far-reaching detachment from “all that is gutter pure in rock,” as Lester Bangs wrote in 1974.⁽³¹⁾ The aforementioned hope within some countercultural circles—that Western art music and popular art music such as progressive rock would give rise to a new synthesis and thus to evaporate as separate entities—provides a contextual prism through which the contrapuntal experiments covered in this article can be understood. Indeed, this means also that all notions presupposing a polarity between contention and pretension (such as the Bangs-Christgau-Marsh school of music criticism) need to be fundamentally reconsidered, since the hidden premises of such interpretations seem to evaporate when examined lucidly and in detail.

[53] A principal distinction can be made between emblematic or associative uses of counterpoint and reticent, or sometimes even concealed, uses for purposes of development. Furthermore, the frequent borrowings or appropriations from extant works (from Gulda, Bach, and other composers) often seem to have risen from a necessity of or desire for model composition, a conclusion corroborated by the fact that the models are rarely pointed out explicitly (see Milano 1980, 23, and

Macan 1997, 169). The contrapuntal practices represented in the body of works examined here are manifold, but have previously not been analyzed in detail even by progressive-rock scholars.⁽³²⁾ While the present contribution is modest, and while others may disagree with my analyses of the songs, I hope to have shed some light on a truly historical anomaly in the history of popular music. I hope furthermore to have demonstrated that the phenomenon of contrapuntal writing in this repertoire cannot be understood solely and simply as cultural appropriation or pretension. Some of the musicians and composers involved seem in fact to have desired to “let it be,” as Hamill writes, “without pretense.”

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Footnotes

1. [Hatch and Millward 1987](#), 148: "There was also a chance that such creations would elevate the status of their composers and performers—and, by implication, pop music in general—to a level comparable with that of European classical music of the past, and thus lead to acceptance within the circles of the musical establishment." Stokes has argued that progressive-rock musicians were "consciously aiming at their 'betters,' the people in the suits and bowlers" (1986, 405) and DeRogatis that they aimed to make rock music "respectable enough to please Mum and Dad" (1996, 84). See also [Rockwell 1986](#) and [Tucker 1986](#). Wicke (1990, 97–98) and Gracyk (1993, 53) have furthermore pointed out that the British bands that had attended art schools in the mid 60s were characterized by a conscious cultural distance from their predominantly working-class listeners.

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2. The term "counterculture" was coined by Theodore Roszak (1969), and is thus coeval with the movement thus defined.

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3. Bill Martin has argued that the so-called "blues orthodoxy" critique against progressive rock is both essentialist and potentially racist in its suggestion that musical elements of the African-American tradition are not the results of a deliberate and creative process, not deriving from "hard work and hard thought" (1998, 140–41). Macan has stressed that it would indeed have been hypocritical of the British progressive rock bands of the early 70s to present a roots-based "oppositional"

music and that the only possible honest opposition would have to be voiced from within the demographic and cultural context with which the musicians were familiar (2006, 166). See also [Macan 2013](#).

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4. Citing the examples of Stockhausen, Bernstein, and others, Keister and Smith argue that many established artists, writers, and composers “went to great lengths to identify themselves with the hippies and gain legitimacy from the culture of rock” (2008, 447).

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5. There are, one could argue, exceptions. The Handelian choral fugue, well known to young educated musicians of the 60s and 70s, could possibly be seen as a flamboyant form of expression.

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6. The “school” of Lester Bangs (*Creem* and *Rolling Stone* magazines), Robert Christgau (*The Village Voice* magazine), et al., accusing the progressive rock bands of self-indulgence, has been taken to task by musicologists such as Macan (1997, 2006, and 2013) and today seems itself in need of scholarly defense in order to stand up to later musicological analyses. In non-academic discourses, however, this historiography appears to be perpetuated.

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7. That this view had not died out after the demise of progressive rock as a commercially successful genre is evident from Ernst 1977, 209. This is what Macan has called “the utopian synthesis view,” see e.g. 2006, xli–xlii.

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8. The interplay between social and aesthetic contention (from the concept of “Streit” in Kant’s “antinomy of Taste”) has been discussed by Manu Chander in relation to Romantic aesthetics. In the following I use the concept similarly to what Chander, in his reading of Bourdieu, terms “cultural contestation,” viz.: “where contestation suggests not only conflict and contention, but also contest, competition” (2008, 8).

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9. There are many songs from the period which have titles referring to contrapuntal idioms, but which have no musical relation to the idiom, e.g. Blues Image’s “Fugue U” (1970).

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10. The association of rounds more with folk-like idioms than with learned counterpoint is illustrated by a distinction made by an anonymous reviewer of Gentle Giant’s live album “Playing the Fool” in *Billboard* magazine in 1977: “The group is distinctive for a dry, almost Bach-like sound that has medieval reverberations but which substitutes a valid rock drum attack for congested counterpoint. Its vocals are straightforward, occasionally hinting at Old English Round singing” (February 12, 1977, 68).

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11. All musical examples have been transcribed by the author. Drums and percussion have been left out and textures have occasionally been reduced, while retaining all voice leading and melodic motion from the recordings.

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12. The way the two entries in “And You and I” are delivered, with identical phrasing but the second entry slightly deeper in the mix (i.e., at a lower volume level), gives the impression that it could be achieved by delay effects.

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13. As regards the poesis of Kerry Minnear’s and Gentle Giant’s songs, there is a chicken-and-egg conundrum to be dealt with. I have argued elsewhere (Lundberg 2014) that different but interconnected melodic concatenations in Gentle Giant’s songs seem to have been conceived from small motives, to the point where—as in this case—the canonic entries and the bass ostinato are equally deeply rooted in the structure.

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14. A studio demo version released as a bonus track to the 2003 remaster of “Close to the Edge” seems to confirm the assumption that the imitation was added later, since it is absent in the demo version.

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15. As regards reception in mainstream media, see note 9 above, where Bach-style counterpoint is described as “congested” but where it is claimed that Gentle Giant is doing something different, more natural and vital, in their polyphonical textures. Future, more specialized studies of the reception of contrapuntal devices in progressive rock may be able to distinguish between different types of accusations of pretension: Gentle Giant always had more of a cult following than more famous bands like Yes, Genesis and Emerson, Lake and Palmer. They were not associated with the grandiose stage shows and antics of some of these more famous acts, which they on the other hand generally surpassed in musical complexity.

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16. Paul McCartney notably experimented with such combinatorial sections in “Eleanor Rigby” (1966), “For No One” (1966), and “I’ve Got a Feeling” (1968). The superimposition of independent lines was also used by the Beach Boys (e.g., “Vega-tables,” 1967 and “Heroes and Villains,” 1967), but more to create a density of texture than unification between sections, as in the McCartney songs. Examples of the same technique in progressive rock include “Raconteur Troubadour” (1972) by Gentle Giant, “Close to the Edge” (1972, in the second half of the section titled “Total Mass Retain”) by Yes, and “To Be Over” (1974) by Yes.

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17. Macan has identified a shift in countercultural ideology in the United Kingdom from what he calls “utopian synthesis” (favoring “evolution” in art) before ca. 1972 to the rise of quasi-proletarian simplicity after that point (2006, xl–xli).

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18. Later on, Emerson went on to record a Prelude and Fugue by Gulda with Emerson Lake and Palmer, not released until 1993, on the 4-disc box set *Return of the Manticore*.

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19. Jimi Hendrix, who toured with The Nice in 1967, describes them as “original, free, more funky than West coast” (quoted in Macan 2006, 18).

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20. Macan compares this with the uses of fugue in the last movement of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in A-flat major (op. 110), Cesar Franck’s *Prélude, Choral et Fugue*, Valentin Alkan’s “Quasi-Faust” and Liszt’s Sonata in B minor.

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21. “Hoedown,” for example, an adaptation from Aaron Copland’s *Rodeo* of 1942 on the same album as “Endless Enigma,” quotes the folk tunes “Shortnin’ Bread” (02:17–02:23) and “Turkey in the Straw” (03:14–03:21).

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22. Macan asserts that the band “developed the dark undertones of [*In the Court of the*] *Crimson King*, framing vocalist Peter Hammill’s relentlessly bleak verse with ‘gothic’ organ backdrops, alternately angular and dulcet reeds, and virtuosic drumming” (1997, 24).

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23. In an article in the *Manchester Independent* in May 1968, the first Meurglys was described as a Vox guitar, but Meurglys III was a Guild guitar. Hammill has named and numbered several instruments in that manner (Hammill 2005, 82–84).

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24. An interesting analysis of the problems associated with large-scale form in 1970s rock is offered by Zak 2008.

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25. Van Leer first studied flute and composition at the Amsterdam Conservatoire, and graduated as a flautist at the Geneva Conservatoire. He also had good foundations in piano, organ, and orchestration. Stump (who is prone to value judgments) has called “Carnival Fugue” “a disciplined, economical fugal exercise, incorporated with uncanny expertise in a musical utterance of absolute coherence and logic, while surrendering not a whit of virtuosity, emotional literacy or tightness” (2010, 116).

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26. Macan has described this style of writing and playing as one “in which several short, repetitive melodic fragments are superimposed against each other to create intricately interlocking ostinato networks” (1997, 50).

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27. Personal communication (August 10, 2014) by Dan Bornemark, who was instrumental in drawing attention to the early audio sketches by Kerry Minnear, and for the newly recorded tracks by Gary Green and John Weathers at a later stage.

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28. It remained unreleased until the compilation of the CD box set “Scraping the Barrel” on the Alucard label in 2004.

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29. King Crimson’s use of layered repetition and phase music, as appropriated (one must assume) from minimalist composers does not fall into this category, and happened after 1978.

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30. Egg is sometimes mentioned in relation to the Canterbury scene due to the later flow of personnel to National Health, although the band lacked in the early 70s any connection to Canterbury.

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31. Bangs (1974, 44) considered Emerson, Lake and Palmer's music an "insidious befoulment" of those elusive qualities.

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32. Macan has labelled "High Level Fugue," "Fugue" in "Endless Enigma," "Meurglys III," and other works "fully fledged fugues" (1997, 50), which they may be said to be in the same sense as some twentieth-century modernist adaptations of the idiom, but not in relation to the *fugue de l'école* tradition.

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