

## ALLAN F. MOORE

### *Gentle Giant's "Octopus"*

"Progressive rock" presents popular music scholars with one of their perennially intractable problems, namely that of definition. What is it? I first argued its multi-faceted nature more than a decade ago, now. (Moore, 1993) This meant that, contrary to many other critics, I declined to identify it as either a style or a genre. In this paper, I argue that, despite its many faces, it is possible to argue for a fundamental identifying feature, which I do by way of an investigation into some of the musical characteristics of the Gentle Giant album *Octopus*. I shall start, however, in a rather more unorthodox place, with a few remarks on the Jade Warrior album *Released*, of 1971. Who were Jade Warrior? The album's opening tracks evoke, in turn, glimpses of phase 1 King Crimson, of Jethro Tull, and of Caravan, with even a touch of Genesis, before turning into the sort of ambient haze which would subsequently become the key feature of Jade Warrior's idiolect. So, who were Jade Warrior? At this point, that of 1971, they are barely identifiable except as an amalgam of other idiolects. And that, for me, opens the key issue pertaining to progressive rock.

There has been a low-key buzz in the UK in the last few years about the possibility of a progressive revival. The High Street magazine *Mojo* carried a contextualising article in February 1997,<sup>1</sup> asking why this was the one mainstream genre which seemed unrevivable. March 2001 saw the broadcast of the Channel 5 documentary *Top Ten Prog Rock*, one of an occasional series. Steve Lamacq's Radio 1 show included a documentary on progressive rock in January 2004, while entire issues of *Classic Rock*, that of October 2004, and of *Q*, in July 2005, covered the movement. Now the Lamacq documentary really concerned not 1970s progressives, but contemporary bands who are not too put off by the label: Mars Volta, Tool, Oceansize, Amplifier, and of course Muse. Each of them was presented to Rick Wakeman, who was asked to comment on what he heard<sup>2</sup>. His general response, to each band, was that they certainly were "progressive", in that each of them was 'experimental'. This equation of 'progressive' with "stylistically experimental" (and thus, for some, negatively elitist) is pervasive<sup>3</sup>, but is only one that is often made. A perhaps more common move is to equate "progressive" with "classical referents", an equation which bestows less street-cultural credibility and is, therefore, often to be avoided. This latter equation is intrinsic to Edward Macan's study of progressive rock, trumpeted by its title *Rocking the Classics*, and is also upheld by many of the contributors to Kevin Holm-Hudson's collection, *Progressive Rock Re-considered*, despite frequent insistence within that collection that this presents too narrow a view. For all of these conceptions, "progressive rock" was a genre.

None of these positions – experimentalism, classicism, identification as a genre – seem to me to cover the totality of what 1970s listeners accepted as "progressive rock". Indeed, I would start by pointing to more general, social, and historically-specific characteristics:

1. the contradictory search for both legitimation in the presence of elite culture (and the resultant commercial funding) and wide market appeal (and the resultant commercial funding);
2. specifically English nationalist features, as Edward Macan notes;
3. the express avowal of countercultural values<sup>4</sup>, even if this avowal cannot be supported by the musicians' cultural practices<sup>5</sup> – another contradiction here;

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.norrow.demon.co.uk/turtle/links.html>

<sup>2</sup> I take Wakeman's comments at face value, despite his reputation as someone not entirely at ease with the bombast and pretention present in prog's more extreme examples, his own work included.

<sup>3</sup> Even if it makes more sense of Henry Cow, Gong and Soft Machine than it does of Genesis, Emerson Lake & Palmer and Jethro Tull.

<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, no general agreement on exactly what these values were: my own attempt at answering this point can be found in Moore, 2004: 75-89.

4. the visionary impulse, whether utopian<sup>6</sup> or dystopian<sup>7</sup>; and
5. the contradictory positioning of rank amateurishness and over-slick professionalism, as argued respectively by Paul Stump and Iain Chambers.

However, none of these factors directly addresses music, which is what I want to do here. So, in terms of musical detail, what was progressive rock? It seems to me that what defines the progressive “moment” musically is that it marks, chronologically, the moment within the history of modern Anglophone popular music which actualises the insubordination of idiolect to style (and which was continued in non-musical terms by subsequent “sub-cultures”). If you are a postmodernist, you should probably describe this as the “emancipation” of idiolect from style, but the subsequent history of popular song suggests to me that “a refusal to be suborned by” is a more accurate description<sup>8</sup>. I would like to clarify what I mean here, for a moment, before viewing Gentle Giant’s *Octopus* through this particular periscope.

According to Lucy Green, “Style is the medium by virtue of which we experience music, and without it we could have no music at all. No piece of music is ever stylistically autonomous. Whether particular individuals hear all music in terms of either pop or classical styles alone, or whether they make finer distinctions between late Haydn and early Beethoven, Tamla Motown and Disco, whether such activity is self-conscious or intuitive, it cannot be avoided ... *we must have some knowledge of the style of a piece of music in order to experience inherent meanings as distinct from non-musically meaningful sound, at all.* Such knowledge is by no means acquired only through study, but is learnt through repeated experience of music ... and is gained, to varying degrees, by every normal member of society [a process she conceptualises by way of Anthony Giddens]. If not, an individual could not tell a song from the sounds of a cat-fight, let alone distinguish pop from classical music.” (Green, 1988: 33-34) This everyday concept of musical *style* is perhaps a familiar one. In reasonably precise terminology, it “refers to the manner of articulation of musical gestures ... [and it] operates at various hierarchical levels, from the global to the most local.” (Moore, 2001: 441-442) In other words, it can refer to a decision a band may make to play a song in, for instance, a “rock” style rather than a “country” style. *Idiolect* as a concept is frequently conceived (Middleton, 1990: 174 – Meyer, 1989: 23-24)<sup>9</sup> to be subsidiary to *style*. Thus, Glenn Miller’s music is all couched within the style defined by the term “swing”. Indeed, the term *style* is often used to cover not only the deeper hierarchical level, but also the more local one of simply Glenn Miller’s music. I, however, prefer the term *idiolect* to refer to the more local level. Thus, the idiolects of both Fats Domino and Chuck Berry carve out spaces within the *style* known as rock’n’roll, the idiolects of both Glenn Miller and Artie Shaw carve out spaces within the style known as big band swing. They all carve out different spaces, of course - that is why we recognise their work as their work individually, and do not confuse Miller with Shaw, Domino with Berry - but to speak of the latter, both singers’ output is subsidiary to the style known as rock’n’roll<sup>10</sup>. But in our case, I believe, it is this insubordination, where idiolect steps out from under the shadow of style, so to speak, which defines the progressive moment as such, rather than just the allusions to classical music. It is also, if we insist, a specific form of experimentation, one not taken up by the current wave of bands. *Octopus* is thus the perfect title for an eight-track album which, while having a single identity, nonetheless has its tentacles in a number of different stylistic pies, if you’ll forgive the horrendous mixed metaphors.

*Octopus* flopped onto the sand in 1973, the fourth Gentle Giant album. It can be instructive to investigate deeply for the first time music we have been “close to” for years - I have certainly changed my mind about this album in the course of developing this paper. And, having spent thirty years with it, I find it difficult to realise what are its most immediately noticeable aspects, so for

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<sup>5</sup> Examples are legion, but Greg Lake’s insistence on his own carpet on stage, in the face of Carl Palmer’s battery and Keith Emerson’s bank of keyboards, is indicative of this position.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis’ ‘Supper’s Ready’, or Yes’ ‘Awaken’.

<sup>7</sup> King Crimson’s ‘Epitaph’ or the Strawbs’ ‘New world’. And these values are sometimes mixed, as in Van der Graaf’s ‘Childlike faith in childhood’s end’, far more equivocal than the Arthur C. Clarke tale from which it borrows its title.

<sup>8</sup> I say this because ‘style’ is a grand narrative. Most recent music demonstrates that its practitioners are locked within a parent style, as described for pre-progressive musicians, hence that the idiolect is normatively (but not intrinsically) subordinate to style.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer prefers the term ‘idiom’ to ‘idiolect’.

<sup>10</sup> This concept of *idiolect* is worked out in more detail in Moore-Ibrahim, 2005: 139-158.

these I've plundered various fan sites. The most common identifying features seem to be "medieval", "madrigal", "complex", "counterpoint" and "humble".<sup>11</sup> Granted that not everyone uses these terms precisely, they do capture perhaps three key features:

1. a general lack of pretension [humble];
2. commitment to sheer musicianship [complex; counterpoint]; and
3. evocations of the archaic, the insular, and perhaps the wonderful [medieval; madrigal].

I bear these in mind in what follows. One thing I do not do, is to discuss how this music was written. Not only do I not know, but I no longer have any trust in most of the mechanisms by which we presume to know<sup>12</sup>.

The album<sup>13</sup> consists of eight tracks, lasting about 34 minutes. By contemporary standards, this feels mean, although the album's busy and frequently changing textures make it an intense experience. The first point I want to make is just how careful we have to be with descriptors like "complex". The album uses three formal archetypes, which I may summarise as: ABA, ABAB, and ABABAB..., in other words ternary, binary and iterative, as summarised in table 1.

TERNARY	<i>The river</i>	extended intro - 3 verses - shortened intro - solos - shortened intro - 2 verses - intro to conclude
	<i>A dog's life</i>	intro - 3 verses - solo and new material - 2 verses - coda
	<i>Boys in the band</i>	a x 4 - b - a x 3 - c (& intercuts with b) - b - a x 6
BINARY	<i>Think of me with kindness</i>	2 verses + extension - refrain - 2 verses + greater extension - refrain & verses
	<i>Advent of Panurge</i>	aabab - solo & climax - break - climax - a b - solo - climax
	<i>Knots</i>	verse a - verse a - verse b - climax - solo a - a - b - climax
ITERATIVE	<i>Raconteur troubadour</i>	verse - devel. - verse - devel...nobilmente - verse
	<i>A cry for everyone</i>	2 verses - interlude - verse - break - 2 verses - climax

TABLE 1

Three tracks are broadly ternary. *A river* consists of an instrumental and verses, then various solos, returning to the instrumental and verses. *A dog's life* has verses surrounding an extended instrumental with new vocal material. The instrumental *Boys in the Band* has three distinct textures, which appear in near-palindromic fashion. Then, three tracks are broadly binary – one expanded, one compressed and one more straight-forward. *Think of me with kindness* has a verse-bridge-refrain pattern which is then repeated in extended form. The opening track *Advent of Panurge* has a bi-partite verse leading to a solo (incorporating climactic material), finishing with that climactic material. This whole is then re-played in compressed form. *Knots* has a two-part verse, the first part repeated, and a climax. This whole is then repeated, with the first part of the verse given over to soloing. The final two tracks are iterative, and essentially stanzaic. *Raconteur, troubadour* has a short development between the first two verses, and an extended development and two new ideas between the second and third verses. *A cry for everyone* has five verses, with extended developments between 2 and 3 and between 4 and 5, and a shorter one between 3 and

<sup>11</sup> Most taken from [http://www.progarchives.com/Progressive\\_rock\\_discography\\_CD.asp?cd\\_id=616](http://www.progarchives.com/Progressive_rock_discography_CD.asp?cd_id=616), accessed 30-06-2005.

<sup>12</sup> An early piano sketch for 'The Advent of Panurge' appears on the album *Under construction* (Alucard, alu-gg-01, 1997) but it does no more than present the skeleton of a couple of ideas for the track, prior to the band getting to work on it.

<sup>13</sup> Phonogram, 842 694-2, 1972.

4. This suggests to me that, compositionally, Kerry Minnear & the band are thinking in terms of limited spans, and then concatenating these in conventional ways to produce song structures.

So, formally, the simplest possible patterns are employed. All can be traced to earlier popular models: the ternary in the early rock jam (Cream's *Crossroads*, or King Crimson's *21<sup>st</sup>-century schizoid man*), the altered binary rare, but appearing in tracks like *A hard day's night*, and the Animals' *It's my life*, and the iterative-stanzaic in, say, the blues. Note, though, that in my descriptions I have had to refer to "broadly" or "essentially" this or that formal pattern. This is the key here, I think – regularity, of length and proportion of repeat, of metre, of texture, is avoided within the formal bounds identified. These are examples of sectional composition, no matter how complex the surface is made to sound, but the surface is of course what most listeners actually hear. Let me concentrate on that surface for a moment. *The Boys in the Band* opens with what is almost a progressive/jazz head tune, along the lines of Ian Carr's Nucleus, the Mahavishnu Orchestra or early King Crimson. A different complexity appears in the hocketed interweaving, and the pointillistic texture which completes the first part of the verse of *Knots*, where the prominent keyed percussion momentarily hints at the world of Pierre Boulez' uncontrolled hammering. Yet another complexity appears in the almost unmetred opening of *Advent of Panurge* where successive phrases have 14, 10 and 20 beats, before we do actually lose the will to count. Elsewhere we can find time-signatures of 5/4, added and lost half-beats and the like, but these are standard fare for progressive rock.

If we dive slightly below the surface, for a while, we can identify some common melodic strategies (see example 1). *The Advent of Panurge* is fundamentally scalic, with a pattern which changes its context: a line which falls from fifth, to first, and rises back to fifth degree climaxes, transposed, moving from tonic down to fourth and back. I'll call this a "trough" contour. Such a trough, fifth to first to fifth, organises *Raconteur, troubadour* too. *A dog's life* inverts this pattern, moving from lower fifth to upper fifth and back (a "peak" contour), disjunct upwards movement and conjunct down. *Think of me with kindness* has almost exactly the same contour. *A cry for everyone* relies on a single falling motion, from upper to lower tonic. *The Boys in the Band* makes use of a similar fall, but one with kinks in. *Knots* is very different, with a disjunct melody making great play with a sharpened fourth degree. Only *The River* has a markedly more complex line, although the subsequent melody twice rises from lower to upper tonic, in two different keys (f#-A). So, a limited palette of melodic shapes, although strongly disguised by texture and metre.

How are these melodic ideas developed, or at least continued? As example 2 shows, the "peak" contour of *A dog's life* develops its latter half, falling from upper seventh degree to lower seventh, then returning to the upper fifth degree to lower fifth motion, in effect "composing out" the falling tetrachord A-G-F#-E. The central idea retains the same shape as the initial idea, but with a mixture of conjunct and disjunct movement and with kinks in the outline. The "peak" contour in *Think of me with kindness* has an intermediate continuation which emphasises the first half, the upward leaps, while the refrain concentrates, at a slower pace, on negotiating its way back down. A central section then rises in fourths, as had that of *A dog's Life*. So, two different but related sets of continuations here, but each can be described as developing, in a nineteenth-century "classical" sense, the material initially presented.

*The Advent of Panurge* adopts yet another strategy, repeating the scalic movement but extending the range in both directions. There is a short central vocalise which has little to do with this straight-forward contour, but the remainder of the melody operates smoothly. *Raconteur troubadour*, whose contour is similarly shaped, develops in a quasi-motivic manner, as show in example 3. The opening melody reappears subsequently as a quasi-nobilmente theme (the second version of example 3), while the motif of a partly-filled sixth, either falling or rising, culminates in a trumpet phrase, the last "new" idea we hear, and which interlocks two such motifs (the third version). The opening tritonal motif of *Knots* is followed by its immediate infilling. The later cadential idea, again disjunct, is also immediately followed by its partial infilling. And, as in all good pop music, these memorable tunes are matched by equally resonant bass lines although, in the case of *Octopus*, they are mostly likely to function in a quasi-contrapuntal manner. On *A cry for everyone*, the bass has its own very strong sense of identity, as it moves into and out of syncopation, mostly in contrary motion with, but just occasionally doubling, the vocal line (see example 4). The occasional independence of the bass is perhaps most marked at the beginning of

*The River*, although note that it sinks into relative obscurity on the entrance of the voice. In these examples, perhaps, we can see devices which are familiar from European concert music, even if they are technical rather than stylistic features. So, below the surface, perhaps an equation of progressive with classical here makes some sense, although only on a note-to-note level. We can also observe a parade of compositional virtuosity, in that while there is a limited range of initial material chosen, the means of continuation are more varied, local to each song. One of the starkest examples of this occurs in the long instrumental section of *A cry for everyone*, where the process results from an exchange of material, what I have elsewhere termed “intercutting”, which is reminiscent of passages in Jethro Tull’s *A Passion Play*.

What might we say about harmonic language? This is hard to summarise, but we can say that the dorian mode dominates, while the two more contemplative tracks (*A dog’s life* and *Think of me with kindness*) pull strongly towards the mixolydian. Within this, the actual harmonic language is highly flexible. Thus *The Advent of Panurge* has an incessant harmonic motion from IV-I, as the emotional tone is forever pulled downwards, while *Raconteur, troubadour* pulls the dorian tonic towards III and IV before settling on *bV* for the instrumental, and finally cadencing in VI. Modes are not observed strictly – we are properly operating within a chromatic modal domain. There is little sense of large-scale harmonic design anywhere here, and perhaps this exemplifies well the technique of concatenating sections I have already talked about. Indeed, this seems to me a key feature of the Gentle Giant idiolect, as their live practice demonstrates. In live performance<sup>14</sup>, *Octopus* tended to reduce to a medley consisting of *Knots - The Boys in the band - The advent of Panurge*. The integrity of songs was, by and large, maintained, sometimes acquiring additional material developed after studio versions had been set down. For example, *Panurge* was usually interrupted by a recorder quartet (replete with quasi-medievalisms), and *Boys* was often played as an acoustic guitar duet, including an improvisatory section which often, virtuosically, touched on bluegrass and blues styles<sup>15</sup>. On *Artistically cryme*<sup>16</sup>, *Boys* precedes *Knots* and includes a blues interpolation. In live performance, *Knots* was usually shortened, and some of the vocal quartet material was played unaccompanied (necessarily, perhaps, if one bears in mind the song’s textural complexity). Often the move into *Panurge* was made via an organ solo reminiscent of Bachian toccata-like playing, but *Live Rome 1974* adopts a different route<sup>17</sup>. In live performance, then, we can see that the practice of concatenating sections to produce songs is extended to concatenating songs to produce larger wholes - using much the same strategy that so many progressive “concept” albums use<sup>18</sup>. What is remarkable is that such complex music still enables alternative subtleties of realisation.

So, how to summarise this view of *Octopus*? What remains its most interesting feature for me is the limited number of compositional strategies chosen, in different domains, but combined in such a way that each track retains its own individuality, an individuality which remains over and above the details of the actual material and its textural clothing from which each track is constructed. For example, *A Dog’s Life* and *Think of me with kindness* are melodically similar, but one is ternary, the other binary. The same goes for *Raconteur troubadour* and *The Advent of Panurge*, but one is iterative and the other binary. It is this sort of combination I find interesting. But, to return to my starting-point, can we perhaps label the style of which it forms a part? Terms like “symphonic progressive”, “medieval progressive” and even “folk progressive” are bandied about on fan pages, but none of these conclusively identifies the style. It is here I feel moved to call on adjectival phrases like “inky blackness” to cover my speedy retreat, for I don’t know what to do in the face of such a question as this. I can append no useful style label, but I hope I have successfully outlined some of the key stylistic features of the album. What then do I mean by “stylistic” features here? I mean some of the identifiably characteristic uses of particular musical domains. Strangely, for Gentle Giant, many of these uses show an awareness of the possibilities

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<sup>14</sup> For these comments I rely both on memory and on live recordings, some of which are identified below.

<sup>15</sup> As on the *Out of the woods* BBC sessions of 1973: Strange Fruit, SFRSCD023.

<sup>16</sup> One of a series of live recordings, with rather substandard audio quality, which has recently become available. This was from a show in Sweden in late 1976: Glasshouse, GLASS104CD, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Glasshouse: GLASS101CD, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> I have in mind here most particularly Jethro Tull’s *A passion play* and *Thick as a brick*.

of motivic thinking common to composers in the European tradition, although I would also maintain that the progressive rock movement as a whole is not marked by such awareness. Some of these uses transfer across to other Gentle Giant albums. *In a Glass House* is a good example here, although if I were to make comparisons with early Giant – the album *Gentle Giant*, say, or late material – *Civilian*, most notably – we will find many of these characteristics either inchoate or dissipated. This album, then forms part of a changing Gentle Giant idiolect, an idiolect which I suspect retains few constant features across its lifespan<sup>19</sup>. But this idiolect appears to me to be part of no style – even such undifferentiated blubber terms as “rock” or “fusion” do this music no justice. Perhaps this explains why, to return to Lucy Green’s definition with which I began, some of my most musically astute friends can barely distinguish this music from “non-musically meaningful sound”. What “musically-meaningful sound” might actually be will have to await another time.

To conclude, then, observation of the formal characteristics of *Octopus* reinforces my initial assumption that progressive rock is not a style, but is best understood stylistically as marked by the establishment of the independence of the idiolect. As a movement, it is individualistic and, in skill terms, elitist. But in its definitional emphasis on the importance of individual difference, within some loose stylistic bounds, it has had a profound effect on subsequent popular music, wherein a similarly-coded “difference” is the key discursive marker of aesthetic success, outweighing the indivisible communality promoted by the media surrounding its most prominent “other”, punk. Recall, if you will, Andy Gill’s, Mark E. Smith’s and John Lydon’s praise for King Crimson and Van der Graaf Generator, and our view of the historical importance of progressive rock begins to require redressing.

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, it would be possible to construct the idiolect with less reference to *style*, such that the constant reworking of material in live situations was defining of it, and this would change this point entirely.