**Distinction? The IRCAM, Progressive Rock, and Class at the End of Modernization**

*Jonathyne Briggs*

*Emory University*

The postwar economic miracle, famously termed "les trentes glorieuses" by Jean Fourastie, recreated French society through rapid modernization. For Henri Mendras, this transformation led to the "second French revolution," the disappearance of the social structures of class that had been embedded in France since the nineteenth century. Mendras argued that in the brief span of thirty years, class had been eclipsed by new social constellations of identity, including youth, gender, and ethnicity.¹ In his monumental work *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu countered that despite any leveling in economic capital during the postwar era, the dominant bourgeois class cultivated cultural capital to insure its position in society.² Class maintained a powerful charge in France due to the ability of social elites to dictate cultural norms, so that modernization only reinforced class divisions in the postwar era and any social changes were superficial.³ For Bourdieu, class differentiation continued

---

³ Kristen Ross makes a similar charge in her *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Remaking of French Society* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1995), although she factors in race as well.
to replicate itself as elites consolidated and reinforced their control of cultural codes necessary for legitimate culture to dictate the link between taste and class position. One important gauge in his survey was music, and while it helped Bourdieu position his subjects within his cultural graphs, the changes popular music underwent after 1968 call into question the durability of class distinctions.

The thrust of Bourdieu's work links educational background with cultural use and focuses on the meaning of cultural artifacts as objects of consumption and mediation. However, in the cultural production of the late 1960s and early 1970s, numerous musicians on either side of the so-called class divide ignored the distinction between high and low culture. In France and elsewhere during the postwar era, electronic composers and rock musicians borrowed ideas, aesthetics, and practices from one another to stretch the conventions of contemporary music. Although the engagement of the avant-garde and popular culture was by no means novel to this era, the cultural distance between the two was steadily decreasing and, as Bernard Gendron argues, popular culture – more specifically rock music – was developing its own cultural capital independent of legitimate culture. This high-low cultural exchange was amplified following the events of May 1968 as many soixante-huitards formed musical groups seeking to realize a social revolution through culture. These groups, influenced by the sophisticated rock music emanating from Britain in the late 1960s and by the free jazz movement in America, created a fusion between forms of legitimate and popular music called progressive rock. This musical hybrid celebrated rock music's artistic

---

pretensions through its attempt to unify popular and legitimate music. In France, progressive groups challenged the division between high and low culture in the hope of providing a soundtrack for the more inclusive, modernized society that they envisioned. But in Bourdieu's estimation, progressive rock, as an attempted mélange of high and low culture, was a transgression that only served to reinforce class distinction.

This conclusion ignores not only the open engagement of legitimate culture, represented in this case by electronic composers, with popular culture, but also the success of progressive rock in overcoming cultural barriers. Michel de Certeau, in his examination of the cultural habits of contemporary France, observed that people often ignored the legitimate uses of an object and instead appropriated it for their own ends, a strategy which he termed *perruque*. Although De Certeau developed this concept in context of the workplace, when applied in the sphere of production in progressive rock it illuminates the ability of these


6 Bourdieu, 326.

musicians to amalgamate popular and legitimate culture for an entirely new and self-serving purpose. Influenced by their interpretations of events of May 1968, progressive rockers wanted to break down the barriers they perceived between elite and popular classes. During the 1960s and 70s, both progressive rock musicians and contemporary composers sought to create futuristic music, a new musical vocabulary, and an inclusive culture that reached a broad public. By examining the rhetoric and music of two progressive groups, Gong and Magma, and that of contemporary composers Luciano Berio and Pierre Henry, I will show how cultural distinction was vaporizing in the era of modernization, so much so that cultural elites felt compelled to introduce a new institution, the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique, (IRCAM), to buttress legitimate culture by the late 1970s.

Daevid Allen, the guitarist and de facto leader of Gong, arrived in England from Australia during the 1960s, studying at university and becoming involved with the art happenings at the UFO club in London, an important center of interaction between psychedelic musicians and avant-garde artists. He also spent time with Italian electronic composer Pamisiani, who introduced Allen to the techniques of musique concrète and influenced his glissando guitar technique. Eventually, Allen formed the influential progressive group Soft Machine, but he was forced to leave the United Kingdom after his visa expired. Relocating to Paris, Allen, along with vocalist Gilli Smyth, befriended members of the French underground just as the student movement erupted in May 1968, and he formed Gong later that year, with Didier Malherbe and a rotating

---

group of musicians. Despite the support of Jean-François Bizot's Actuel magazine and the pioneering French record label Byg, the group's mix of psychedelic guitars, jazz saxophones, and mystical imagery did not congeal until its third album, 1971's Camembert électrique. It was also on this album that the group introduced the story of Planet Gong and Radio Gnome Invisible, which would develop fully over the group's next three albums, Flying Teapot, Angel's Egg, and You.10

The narrative of the Radio Gnome Invisible trilogy begins with the transmissions of the Planet Gong via interstellar radio, which are received by the story's protagonist, Zero the Hero. Zero travels to Planet Gong via the Flying Teapot, where he meets the planet's inhabitants, the Pot Head Pixies.11 There, Zero learns about the reigning philosophy of the Pixies called Flying Anarchy, achieves enlightenment, and is returned to Earth to end the "world of illusion."12 Despite the humorous tone of the story, it is couched within complex musical forms that embraced experimental music. The arrival of Tim Blake on synthesizer in 1972 propelled this change. With the first album of the trilogy, Flying Teapot, Blake's synthesizers became a foundation of Gong's sound as the group increasingly used instrumental passages to develop the narrative, similar not only to the more traditional conception of nineteenth-century instrumental music but

---

10 Gong, "Invisible Gnome Radio" and liner notes, Camembert électrique, Byg 529335 (1971).
also to the electronic tone pieces of electronic composers Iannis Xenakis and Jean-Claude Risset.\textsuperscript{13} For example, in the title track, Blake's synthesizer creates a swirling mix of noise to evoke Zero's travel into outer space; the English group Pink Floyd often employed similar musical devices in their early work.\textsuperscript{14} Blake achieved his sound through the use of the most advanced synthesizers available commercially – the Minimoog, EMS Synthi, and Elka Strings – combined with his training as a classical trumpeter.\textsuperscript{15}

Gong's embrace of hippy philosophy made it popular among the underground set. Its vision of "flying anarchy" matched the spirit of left-wing rhetoric in the early 1970s and combined science fiction, Eastern philosophy, and humor.\textsuperscript{16} Much like its biggest supporter \textit{Actuel}, which


\textsuperscript{14} Gong, "Flying Teapot," \textit{Flying Teapot}.


\textsuperscript{16} Mixed with obvious humor and drug references, the Radio Gnome trilogy nevertheless champions one current of leftist activity during the early 1970s: communal living. Many disaffected radicals retreated from French (and British and American) society and attempted to construct a separate society to fulfill the hopes dashed in the "return to normalcy" at the end of May 1968. Much of the underground press was devoted to helping this movement, either through words of encouragement, as in the \textit{Actuel} editorials, or in how-to series on communal living, as in publications like \textit{Vroutsch} and \textit{L'anathème}. The group's living situation and its creative process were communal, as the studios in Herrouville and Middlefield Farm in Britain also served as the home of many of the
featured translations of the Freak Brothers comic, Moebius' science fiction comics, and leftist critiques of society in its pages, Gong's music manifested the eclectic currents informing the 1970s counterculture, engaging the high-brow culture of the electronic avant-garde in its whimsical utopianism. Through *perruque*, Gong appropriated elements of legitimate culture in order to create a new musical style that ignored the barriers of class culture. The group juxtaposed all levels of culture to promote its future vision of human society.

Cosmic imagery was an essential component of progressive rock, but not all groups used it to paint idyllic visions of future society. Counter to the promise and humanism of Planet Gong, Christian Vander's Magma built its recording catalog on the narrative of the planet Kobaïa. In this futuristic story, Earth has fallen into social and ecological chaos, forcing humans to seek answers through space travel. Upon encountering the distant planet Kobaïa, which is both philosophically and technologically more advanced, humans attempt to emulate many of the planet's ideas, which eventually leads to a destructive war on Earth.\(^{17}\) This story was spread across Magma's first three band members during recording sessions and collaborative writing efforts to insure democratic input in Gong's sound. Despite the silly tone of its lyrics, which itself was common in French progressive rock as evidenced in the work of Red Noise and Komintern, the Radio Gnome Invisible trilogy signaled Gong's affection for the political left, which was more clearly revealed in interviews in *Actuel* and *Extra*.\(^{17}\) See Peter Thelen, "The World of Magma," *Expose* 8 (Fall 1995), at http://www.furious.com/perfect/magma.html. Similar dystopian themes to the Kobaïan story recur in French progressive rock in the apocalyptic, anti-nuclear album *La fantastique épopée du Général Machin* by Ange and in French science fiction, such as the Cannes Grand Prix winner from 1973, René Laloux's animated film *La Planète sauvage*, all of which use futuristic visions as a warning of environmental and social disasters resulting from modernization.

---

*Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*
long-players – Magma, 1001 Degrees Centigrades, and Mekanik Destruktiw Kommandoh – released between 1970 and 1973, although fragments were scattered across the band's other records from the 1970s.

Progressive rock musicians also appropriated musical devices from legitimate culture for the express purpose of creating a "new classical music," to use Paul Stump's phrase.\(^{18}\) Vander developed his own language for his lyrics, Kobaïan, and his own fusion of free jazz, rock, choral music, and Stravinsky, which he called Zeuhl. Built upon repeating low register tones on pianos, multiple vocalists singing in different ranges, brass (rather than the woodwinds more common in progressive rock), and Vander's frantic drumming, Magma was a powerful voice in 1970s French popular music. Its fusion of styles and genres simply broke down the barriers between these different influences as Vander created a vision of what music would be like in the future, albeit a dark and sinister future. Critics then and now praised Magma's success in integrating different elements as evidence of the group's

---

Angé's 1970 song-cycle was written as a reaction to singer Christian Décamps' service in the French military and his encounters with Gaullist nationalism. In the three-hour piece, the story of Machin ends with nuclear annihilation, which of course illustrates another link between the politics of the left and progressive rock: the "no nukes" movement. See Herman Lebovics' recent Bringing the Empire Back Home (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) on the Laszac protests and anti-militarism on the left. Raloux's film chronicles the struggle between the Oms and the Traggs as the latter attempt to revolt against the paternalist control of the former, emphasizing the continued importance of class concepts in France. Furthermore, the film was set to Alain Goraguer's score, which combined progressive rock and electronic music.

\(^{18}\) Stump, 3.
musical sophistication and intelligence. According to pianist François Cahen, Magma pushed against the boundaries of conformism in popular music and society in general. Jean-Pierre Lentin, in the pages of Actuel, called Mekanik "a bloodied cantata, the sound of a symphony orchestra more than an electric group" and stressed the group's classical aspirations. Other music writers noted more specific influences apparent in Vander's compositions, such as Bartók, Stockhausen, and Carl Orff. Orff's integration of choral and percussive music in his work during the 1930s provided a classical schema for the complex vocals of Magma's recordings and performances, although Vander's embrace of free jazz and his role as both drummer and bandleader made his rhythms more in line with progressive rock's fascination with jazz meters. Musicologist Kevin Holm-Hudson also observes the similarities not only with Orff but also with Stravinsky's "Les Noces" in Magma's sound.

Vander recognized the transformative power of his cultural hybrid and of popular music in general: "The [counter-cultural] movement aroused by the appearance of pop music makes one believe that it can be a real threat to

---

19 See, for example, Magma's entry in Frédéric Delâge's Chroniques du rock progressif, 1967-1979 (Perigueux: Lauze, 2002), 106 and in Martin, Listening to the Future, 185-7.
23 See Antoine de Caunes, Magma (Paris: A. Michel, 1978) for a biographical account of John Coltrane's impact on Vander's drumming style as well as his assertion of his "classical" influences.
existing society with the volume and virulence it has.²⁵ Again, journalists equated the cultural possibilities of progressive rock with political change: "young people should understand it, love music as it loves life – this is a new, revolutionary attitude." Others noted that "being a musician and playing on the scene is already a form of political engagement."²⁶ Progressive rock has as one of its foundations "a subversive value" despite the banality of the French music industry.²⁷ Magma's *perruque* of a variety of cultural sources, though less utopian than Gong, illustrates progressive rock's subversive possibilities in undermining the notion of legitimate culture itself. By appropriating multiple and contradictory cultural schema, progressive musicians hoped to obscure the distinctions that elites asserted.

Both Gong and Magma showed that progressive rock was ultimately interested in building a new aesthetic upon cultural currents in the French left-wing underground, rock music, and elements of the electronic avant-garde. Their lyrical themes of progress and revolution found an audience in the Parisian clubs, the *Maisons de la jeunesse et de la

²⁵ Quoted in de Caunes, 108.
²⁷ "Méchanamment Rock," *Charlie-Hebdo* 22 (19 Apr. 1971): 14. The political valence of progressive rock was not always obvious, as the politics of Magma and Gong appear radically different. In fact, Vander's tendency to use Nazi iconography on stage as part of the Kobaïan story made many on the left uneasy. In a review of the self-titled album, *Charlie-Hebdo* remarked that the group's sound was "a para-military rigidity in the fantasies of Christian Vander" (19 July 1971). Later in a concert review, the editorial staff asserted that although Magma, in its stories of the horrors of mechanization, showed the "best sentiments of leftists in the world, when they take off their swastika and stop playing the SS blues, we all will be more relaxed" (18 Sept. 1972).
culture, and the summer festivals that became part of the French landscape of the 1970s, although not without opposition from French authorities. Their musical themes challenged the legitimate avant-garde by creating complex, intricate, and technologically sophisticated recordings that only hinted at the possibilities in popular music. But with progressive rock, it was not only the "dominated" class transgressing the cultural fault line, but also "dominating" composers recognizing and encouraging this fusion.

Italian electronic composer Luciano Berio in 1967 praised the eclectic nature of rock music, which for him was the culmination of trends within American popular music whose possibilities had been realized by the Beatles and psychedelic music in general with its integration of Eastern modes, its harmonic sophistication, its expansion of song conventions, and its willingness to manipulate sound as part of the recording process. More than just its musicological promise, rock music, according to Berio, could act as a liberating force: "each person (young or old, man, woman, child provided of course that he has been granted a voice) can use that voice in rock." His observations undoubtedly stemmed from his tenure during the 1960s as a professor of music at Mills College in the San Francisco Bay Area where the youth counterculture and rock music were beginning to merge at the corner of Haight-Ashbury. But Berio was not only a composer; he was also part of the new breed of electronic composers of the twentieth century: the music researcher.

---

Before his time in the United States, Berio operated the Studio di Fonologia Musicale in Milan in the 1950s, developing recording and broadcasting technology that would help electronic music develop further. He used his studio's connection with Radio Audizioni Italiani (RAI) to bring electronic music to a wider audience. However, counter to the other research laboratories established in Europe, the Groupes de Recherches Musicales (GRM) in Paris and WDR Studio in Cologne, his studio claimed no allegiance to a musical ideology, which helped Berio remain open to the aesthetics of popular music.30

Another composer went one step further than Berio; more than just praise, Pierre Henry attempted to create a musical fusion much like the progressive musicians, a paradoxical, inverse *perruque*. As a member of GRM, Henry worked closely with Pierre Schaffer on developing more sophisticated electronic recording instruments and synthesizers for *musique concrète* composition. The composer saw the lines dividing the different musical styles become permeable during the late 1960s, and in response Henry recorded *Mass for Today* (*Messe pour le temps present*) along with his musical meditation on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, *Le voyage*, in 1968.31 This album combined elements of *musique concrète* and rock music rhythms and harmonic structures with Henry performing on Robert Moog's synthesizer. In 1969, he worked with the British group Spooky Tooth on the album *Ceremony*, which was a fusion of the two genres along the lines of Pink Floyd's *Atom Heart Mother*. Although Henry's rock

31 The Tibetan Book of the Dead was an important cultural influence on youth counterculture in the late 1960s, most famously through the efforts of Timothy Leary.
career ended there, his association with GRM and *musique concrète* did not prevent him from making these cultural excursions. Neither the research careers of Henry or Berio nor their "classical" aesthetics prevented them from being open to ideas in rock culture as both sides of the divide challenged the distinctions between high and low culture.

In this atmosphere of cultural exchange across class boundaries, Pierre Boulez appeared in order to return contemporary compositional music to its elite status. Invited by then-President Georges Pompidou to head the musical division of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulez created the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM) to promote a renewal of electronic music. Much of the rhetoric of the IRCAM painted an egalitarian vision of the institute's purpose; director Gerald Bennett noted that "our era will be occupied, and those of generations to come, in constructing and structuring a new language that will be the vehicle of masterpieces to come."32 The 1978 published report on research at the institute stated, "Musical experimentation and scientific research undertaken at IRCAM should permit a new type of relationship between musicians and researchers, between creators, works, and public concerns, and contribute to the transformation of contemporary musical practices."33 In the hope that the public would relish the fruits of the researchers' labors, the IRCAM was addressing its role as the leading force of contemporary music in French society (as well as restoring an avant-garde

---

in Paris, but that is another story). But the Institute retreated from the commercialism of popular music and used its vast resources to prevent *perruque* by institutionalizing electronic musical aesthetics, thus maintaining cultural distinction.

One method to create cultural distance at the IRCAM was science. Because of the complexity of its synthesizer technology and its psycho-acoustic laboratory, it became a haven for academics and established electronic composers. The first machines it developed in the late 1970s, the 4C and 4X synthesizers, were crucial to the IRCAM's emergence as the global center for electronic music. Bennett noted the centrality of the synthesizer in three IRCAM compositions in 1977 – Michel Decoust's *Interphone*, Stanley Haynes's *Prism*, and Jean-Claude Risset's *Inharmonique* – as well as in Boulez's later composition, *Répons*. The synthesizer was an instrument shared between progressive rock and electronic composition, and many rock musicians quickly embraced its technological possibilities, for example in their use of the Mellotron and the Moog synthesizer. However, the technology at the IRCAM remained the province of electronic composers and only those who fit in with Boulez's conception of modern music. In this sense, technology fostered distinction between the rock musicians and composers despite the increasing points of shared aesthetics between them.

The response of the IRCAM illustrates the impact of *perruque* on the dissolution of the structures that Bourdieu surveyed. Arguably, one could see his conclusions on the role of distinctions in maintaining the existing class order as a historical moment of the late 1960s as these transgressions multiplied thereafter. The success of progressive rock musicians in adapting the conventions of
electronic music to serve their ends and the willingness of composers to employ elements of rock music meant that knowledge and cultural codes were not enough to create class distinction, leading elites to use other forms of cultural power, such as the IRCAM, to maintain the social order. Nevertheless, the forces of modernization and the efforts of progressive rock musicians to create a musical language to reflect this reality compressed the difference between high and low culture.