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Rock minimalism: loop and motivic transformations in the music of King Crimson (1981-84)

ABSTRACT

Background

In 1981, the british prog rock band King Crimson, led by Robert Fripp, reappeared with a brand new album entitled "Discipline" after some years of silence. The new material was very much different from their previous compositions like "Red" or "Larks' Tongues in Aspic", in which the musical vocabulary was based upon symmetrical scales and pitch class collections, and motivic transpositions by a given interval cycle. Instead, the band chose to mix a wide range of influences from rock, minimalism, Gamelan and African drumming, which led to an intensive use of the loop within all musical parameters.

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper will investigate the compositional processes undertaken by King Crimson in the early eighties. This period (1981-1984) can be perceived as a radical transformation of their own musical language that reveals an incoming influence and a rethinking of rock musical aesthetics. The paper will unfold in two parts. First, we will study the period prior to the release of the album "Discipline", in which Robert Fripp was experimenting with ambient music with a device that was coined "Frippertronics". Those experimentations led to the development of a new vocabulary based upon the use of loops and motivic repetitions, in a way reminiscent of the American minimalism school. In a second part, we will take a close look at some seminal King Crimson's compositions such as "Frame by Frame", "Three of a Perfect Pair" and "Discipline", in which the band further developed the previous aforementioned experimentations of Robert Fripp.

Methods

Formal analysis is actually the best way to understand the interests and context of a band. It provides a good global view of the musical material used (scales, chords and progressions, pitch collections, rhythmic ideas, motives, instruments and effects), which is the best data to be used as a tool to explain aesthetic decisions: form and musical syntax, pre-compositional pitch structures, ways to represent lyrics, thematic or tonal integration, use of improvisation or strict planning, etc.

Implications

We aim to demonstrate how this innovative musical language uses various techniques and influences that include minimalism, motivic integration, motivic transformations, the use of various effects dramatically and texturally oriented, and the use of the loop in order to create an avant-garde aesthetic. This research, by adopting an analytical perspective, will help understanding the aforementioned style used by the band in order to renovate its own musical paradigms, as well as to redefine the multiplicity of aesthetics included in the heterogeneous scene known as Prog Rock.

Keywords

popular music, king crimson, prog rock, minimalism, motivic transformation

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