

## Symposium on "Rand, Rush, and Rock"

Replies to Chris Matthew Sciabarra's Fall 2002 article

### Saying Yes to Rand and Rock

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Chris Matthew Sciabarra explicated three levels of human inquiry in *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*: the personal, the cultural, and the structural (Sciabarra 1995, 298–300). In reflecting on his exploration of Rand's place in the burgeoning scholarship on progressive rock music, I would like to focus my analysis on the personal level (Level 1 in Sciabarra's tri-level perspective). Doing justice to the personal level is especially important to me because I feel that existing analyses of Rand and rock have focused mainly on the structural (economic/political) and cultural (linguistic/ideological) levels of inquiry, especially in presenting the often-libertarian lyrics written by Neil Peart of the rock band Rush as a proxy for Rand in the world of progressive rock.

First allow me to provide some purely personal context. When I was thirteen years old, I discovered the excitement and personal significance of both the world of ideas (at that time almost exclusively through the novels and nonfiction writings of Ayn Rand) and the world of music (through beginning my study of guitar and bass, and through listening to a wide range of music, including centrally that of the progressive rock band Yes). Rand's vision of human potential exploded into my consciousness with all the propulsive force of Chris Squire's bass lines at the beginning of the Yes song "Heart of the Sunrise." I experienced these two worlds as distinctly different yet as springing somehow from a common source. At the same time, I felt a tension between them, and perceived them to be in competition. Indeed, later in my teenage years, I sold all my records and stopped performing music because I felt that such deep involvement in music was too Dionysian and therefore at odds with Rand's Apollonian

philosophy of reason! It was only after I let go of my Randian dogmatism in my early twenties that I again immersed myself in music, leading to a creative period in which I wrote over thirty songs as well as four extended works for classical guitar. Today, I continue to involve myself with music composition, recording, and performance; most recently, I have begun preparing a set of solo elaborations on bass lines by Chris Squire—a project suggested by Bill Martin in his book *Music of Yes* (Martin 1996, 115).

To me, the highest potential of progressive rock is to be found in the music of Yes. There is a nobility, grandeur, and spirituality in Yes music that I have seldom experienced elsewhere in music (“popular” or “classical”). Rock critics tend to scoff at the radically positive and progressive intentions of Yes music, dismissing it as blithely happy, pretentiously overblown, emotionally indulgent, and hopelessly utopian. Sadly, this bespeaks a painfully limited view of the potential of rock music, and reveals more about the psychology of the critics than it does about the meaning of progressive rock. Yes pushed the boundaries of rock with regard to instrumental virtuosity, structural complexity, lyrical vision, and the sheer scale of their works. The critics, more comfortable with the sophomoric prancing of a Mick Jagger, refused to do what Yes music would have forced them to do: think. They were not prepared to speak intelligently about complex, extended works like “Close to the Edge,” “The Gates of Delirium,” and “Awaken” (each over fifteen minutes long), not to mention the epic album *Tales from Topographic Oceans* (consisting of four connected pieces, each of which is about twenty minutes in length). So they abdicated their responsibilities and complained that Yes music was “pretentious,” “arty,” “not rock.” So much for the ability of rock critics to shed light on musical innovation.

The meaning of Yes music for me has always been “entirely personal, almost subjective” in the sense that Rand explicates in her essay “The Goal of My Writing” (Rand 1975, 171). The context of that discussion is the first scene in Part Four of *The Fountainhead* (Rand 1943, 527–30), in which a young college graduate bicycling through the hills of Pennsylvania happens on Howard Roark’s Monadnock Valley development and finds “the courage to face a

lifetime” (530). Why is the boy so inspired? Rand describes him as desperately wanting “to find joy and reason and meaning in life” (527), yet experiencing that exaltation only in the wilderness and in certain kinds of music (the author, in an autobiographical touch, mentions Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto and Rachmaninoff’s Second). “Men have not found the words for it nor the deed nor the thought, but they have found the music” (528). The boy wishes—almost prays—for “one single act of man on earth” that makes real “the promise of that music” (528). So when he witnesses Roark’s buildings, which grow organically out of the earth and seem “like the variations on a single theme, like a symphony played by an inexhaustible imagination,” he perceives “the promise of the music he had invoked, the sense of it made real” (529).

This scene could be dismissed in nearly the same terms that, we have seen, Yes music is often dismissed. Yet, I hold it is precisely the kind of “religion of man” that Rand expresses here and elsewhere that continues to attract readers to her novels, despite their often vitriolic rhetoric. Thus, I would maintain that Rand’s fundamental appeal occurs on Level 1 of Sciabarra’s tri-level analysis of human phenomena: it is deeply personal, capturing in seemingly overblown prose and utopian visions an inarticulate longing for “joy and reason and meaning” and a sense that life can be beautiful and inspiring.

I have always sensed the same kind of vision in much progressive rock, especially in the music of Yes. While that vision is partly lyrical and therefore in some sense linguistic or even ideological, at a deeper level it is specifically musical. Much as critics and philosophers seemingly prefer to focus on articulated ideas as represented by song lyrics (witness the almost exclusive focus on Neil Peart’s lyrics rather than Rush’s musical structures), the fundamental meaning of music is and must remain musical. And it is the groundbreaking musical innovations of bands like Yes that make them progressive. For instance, Yes music, far from having any one instrument as its foundation, has in reality no single foundation: it is much more thoroughly composed than nearly any other rock music, and the foundation or focal point of the music will shift throughout a piece from keyboards to guitar to bass to drums to some combination

thereof. Some would say that this shows Yes is pretentious; I would say it shows that Yes is musically ambitious.

One implication of this ambition is that Yes music is not easy to listen to. It has the kind of structural complexity that makes one's mind go to work, the kind of complexity one finds in a Beethoven symphony or a Bach fugue, albeit transferred to the realm of rock. Further, as Bill Martin argues throughout *Music of Yes* (Martin 1996), these progressive musical structures go hand-in-hand with an equally challenging cultural (or counter-cultural) vision.

Can we make the same kind of claims for Rand's novels? Can one find in them a seamless blend of structure and vision rather than "bad ideas, bad writing" (Martin 1998, 120)? Can one even go so far as to argue that Rand's novels are progressive? Bill Martin identifies the progressive with the possibility of a "radical transformative social revolution" that will "attempt once again to find and give meaning to human existence" (Martin 1996, 239). As we have seen, Rand certainly was concerned with issues of human meaning, and her novel *Atlas Shrugged* shows that she envisioned the possibility of a social revolution, albeit in a libertarian rather than traditionally progressive direction. In fact, Rand's works seem more obviously revolutionary than progressive rock, which is perhaps too personal and specifically musical to be easily connected with radical transformations at the more broadly ideological or structural levels of human experience. To counter this line of thinking, Martin maintains that "there is a dialectical relationship between the possibility of bringing a new society into being and creating a radical oppositional culture within the present society" (239). In this context, Martin sees progressive rock as creating just such an oppositional culture, and thus fulfilling more than one sense of the term progressive.

Interestingly, there was a time in the 1960s when it seemed that Rand's Objectivism might provide the seeds for an oppositional culture (some of that promise has been realized in the modern libertarian movement, which has influenced at least strands of both the science-fiction community and the progressive rock scene, not to mention political life). Yet, it remains far from clear that even those following in Rand's footsteps realize the truly radical and progressive

nature of her humanistic individualism, or how her ideas can be integrated with the kind of "green language" (56) of social harmony that one finds in the more communitarian strains of Romantic thought.

Following Price and Price (1998, 138), Sciabarra argues that Rush has sought to achieve just such a synthesis by doing justice to both Apollo and Dionysus and thus overcoming the false dichotomy between reason-based liberty and humanistic harmony. But many more achievements of such integration are necessary in order to make fully real the "promise of that music," and I hold that only a more concentrated cross-pollination between libertarian and progressive thinking (and action) will yield a truly radical and sustainable transformation of human relations at all levels. So let us continue to explore the common ground to be found here; for, as Yes sings in "Sound Chaser" (1974): "New encounters spark a true fruition."

## References

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