

The Knells – Progressive and Beyond

What would progressive rock sound like if a “real composer” wrote it? That is to say, an artist with serious, legit, classical training in harmony, structure, counterpoint, thematic development, musical analysis, the history of music, and more – rather than an artistically ambitious but unschooled rock musician. For the last 40 years, I’ve asked myself that question, and up until this first album by The Knells, I hadn’t heard a conclusive answer. Music occasionally appeared that might impinge on some sort of answer, but upon examination, it really answered some other question. And the reason for that comes down to several quirks of history:

In the early Seventies, at the same time progressive rock evolved in popular music, the coming trend in the classical realm was Minimalism. As a result, most of the upcoming generation of classical composers contemporaneous with Yes, Crimson, Henry Cow *et al* fell into the Minimalist camp – Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Adams, Louis Andriessen, and others. Their pop music references, in turn, tended away from prog and toward minimal pop genres: modal jazz, funk & soul music, Afrobeat, Indian music, the Velvet Underground (who, through John Cale, actually had ties to the early Minimalists), disco, electronic dance music, punk/postpunk/indie rock, and the like.

Then in turn, almost contemporaneous with the Minimalists came the Postmodernists – Schnittke, Del Tredici, Ades, John Zorn, and others. And while they shared prog’s all-over-the-place aesthetic, for them pop music of any sort was just a few seconds’ pause on a spinning radio dial, somewhere in between straight-up serialism, electronic noise, imitation medieval plainchant, and a hundred other brief stylistic evocations. Not much room for prog in any of that. Progressive music, very much so, but nothing close to what we might recognize as any type of progressive rock.

Finally, the Great Prog Uncoolness of the late Seventies through the Nineties also played its part: Younger composers at the time would have tended to listen to the same pop tunes their friends did. So what progressive popular music they heard would have come from the *other* branch of art-rock – the non-prog, minimalist approach of Talking Heads, Wire, Pere Ubu, and their descendants. It would have included little or no prog, so little or none would have worked its way into their own output. In addition, those who depended on grant money for commissions had to keep an ear to the ground for what was “happening”. Specifically, for what the excruciatingly hip urban professionals who administer those grants might applaud as up-and-coming, or reject as intolerably *passe*. That difference could mean the difference between a full-on career as a composer and an Ivy League professorship – or teaching Music Theory 101 at the local community college. Between getting their music played, or having the scores gather dust in a drawer. Again, not too much room for anything to do with prog – the Nadir of Uncool – in there.

So, in fact, it wasn’t until the thaw of the last five or ten years that professional, academically trained classical composers seemed to start taking a second look at the prog legacy. To them, as to many in the younger generations, it was just another style out of the past. It was no hipper – or less hip – than the minimalist Eighties and Nineties art-

rock that had once consigned it to the scrapheap. Prog music and prog bands could be examined and appreciated or criticized on their own musical merits, without the emotional loading of terminal uncool they bore for some thirty years.

And thus, finally, after skipping a generation and a half, we're starting to hear a few answers to that initial question. This album is one of the first I've encountered. And since Andrew McKenna Lee, The Knells leader, composer, and lead guitarist, is about forty, he's just young enough for those past culture wars to mean little or nothing to him. The music here reflects that: You hear prog and half-a-dozen other rock sub-genres very precisely blended together with both modern and ancient classical music, presented in the context of a formally composed hour-long song cycle, and played by a grouping halfway between a rock band and a classical chamber ensemble.

Although there's also one point worth bringing up: While The Knells call their music "post-rock, neo-psychedelic chamber prog", and while it may even sound similar to prog rock at points, it is not at all the same thing. At least not in the usual sense. "Prog" as we know it is (very roughly) an attempt at a stylistic fusion of rock with classical composition, jazz, and a number of other musical genres. Almost all of it comes from musicians out of the rock world – most of whom are primarily self-taught, and who picked up what they know about writing classical music by ear, or from books, or from reverse-engineering the Bach, Chopin, and Bartok they learned when studying piano.

But Andrew McKenna Lee is the furthest thing from self-taught – he is a real-deal classical composer, whose training includes a PhD from Princeton. With a serious ongoing career as such, including orchestral commissions, he also has a couple of parallel careers as a respected classical guitarist and as a recording engineer, producer, and studio owner. And so, despite their rock-band-like instrumentation, name, and self-description, The Knells might really come closer to the Philip Glass Ensemble or to Steve Reich and Musicians – a specialized classical chamber ensemble organized by a composer, and dedicated to the performance of his own work – than to any usual kind of rock band.

Now I realize that there's a gray area between that sort of ensemble, and single-writer avant-prog bands like Thinking Plague or Present. But to me, there's a substantive difference in the music. On the one hand, you have people like (Univers Zero's) Daniel Denis, who figured out answers for himself entirely by ear; who may have developed a somewhat limited vocabulary but explores it quite deeply. On the other hand, you have someone like Lee, who learned the whole classical tradition systematically in school, and doesn't have to hazard a guess at working, flexible answers to any musical problem or settle for approximations. (Although knowing more also has a downside: If you don't immediately "hear" where a piece of music *must* go next, then you'll know full well exactly how intimidatingly numerous the possibilities are, you may have to try a lot more of those until you find the right one, and you'll know just how much you still don't know.) A different set of tools, leading to a different sound. Also, a different type of cliché – the stylistic quirks, personal solutions, and rules-of-thumb carried over from rock songwriting, versus the "correct" classical approach (which may amount to a bigger, fancier set of rules-of-thumb). And, at least to me, an audible contrast.

And what, exactly, is that contrast? What sets genuine classical music written for an ensemble similar to a rock band apart from progressive rock? It's hard to quantify. However, I'd say that part of it comes down to a matter of focus, in multiple areas:

- One consists of a textural transparency even when the music becomes quite dense – which quality comes from a trained composer's extensive education at writing true polyphony in multiple independent voices, as opposed to a rock musician's reliance upon homophonic chord progressions; The Knells' harmony appears as a seamless web of constantly morphing tonal color rather than a rock band's blocky *chunk...chunk...chunk* chord-changes.
- Coupled with that, you hear a precise harmonic and rhythmic mesh of parts in which nothing got left to chance, rather than the typical collaborative rock-band arrangements where the instruments occasionally work at cross-purposes.
- Another area involves a sort of aesthetic clarity, a sense that a "real composer" knows exactly what he is trying to accomplish, and handily accomplishes it, rather than going through a prog-rock musician's experimentation and struggle toward something not entirely known or understood.
- Still another comes down to someone with Lee's level of training not overdoing it or underdoing it, knowing exactly how far some musical idea can go and must go, and going no further – whereas rock musicians frequently go too far or not far enough.
- And lastly, structures in this music grow "organically" from the requirements of the thematic material – rather than betraying a self-taught rock musician's habit of falling into verse-chorus form or other set patterns because he never learned to "hear" musical construction in more complex, varied, and sophisticated ways.

Much of that focus comes from a relentless, mindful attention to detail. Which, in turn, comes from years of drill on proper compositional technique: *Gradus ad Parnassum* voice-leading, the use of *every* inversion to proper effect rather than just bashing bar chords up and down the neck, varied root movement, fully contrapuntal bass lines, rhythmic offsets between parts so each speaks clearly, a full range of dynamics, precise phrasing, exact notation, and more. Practices which get ingrained during the composer's schooling until they become an essential facet of how he "hears" his music, even his first inspirations for a piece. All of which differ greatly from the rough-hewn rock tradition of breaking half those rules and relying on performance practice to iron out the others. Or just letting everything fall where it may. Or – if absolutely necessary – tinkering until the music sort-of works. Again, the contrast is audible, though sometimes subtle.

So. Am I saying that this "post-rock, neo-psychedelic chamber prog", written by a formally trained composer, is better music than our old-fashioned progressive rock? Yes. And no. Lee shows a level of stylistic focus, artistic control, and mastery of his materials far beyond that of almost any prog band, a level of musicality most prog musicians can only dream of. His music is almost certainly better classical music. However, it may *not* necessarily be better progressive rock. Prog rock, after all, is a hybrid of art music and rock – which is, in turn, a sort of folk tradition. Like much folk music, it gets an essential

part of its vitality from precisely the sort of musical crudities that classical composers learn to avoid. As do many folk traditions. And try as it may to transcend them, progressive rock tends to share those crudities.

Which may not be a weakness. Are Irish, or gypsy, or country fiddling artistically inferior to the classical violin tradition? Not necessarily. They're just different.

And while prog rock may often be awkward and not fully realized, at its best it has a sort of imperfect charm. Its peculiar strength can come from that very imperfection, that sense of trying for something and maybe not quite reaching it, but reaching something else in the process. Indeed, the entire rock aesthetic, one that prog shares, often involves overdoing things – too loud, raw over-emoting vocals, unbalanced extended solos, sloppy technique – but its artistic power results from that very messiness, those very lapses of taste. A prog band's arrangements, for example, may lack the precise focus found in classical music or mainstream pop, but they give a sense of everybody in the band, of a collective musical identity and a collective artistic voice – sometimes clamorous, sometimes melding into one. And that's the point.

In The Knells, though, you don't really get a strong sense of anybody as an artist or a musician except for Andrew McKenna Lee. Their ensemble sound rules. The second guitarist, the mallet percussionist, the bass and drums – all are excellent players, but highly understated, particularly the rhythm section. They play exactly the necessary notes, and no more. Possibly, instead of a band of strong musical voices, Lee simply assembled a set of extremely tasteful sidemen to form his group – although that in itself would amount to an artistic choice. However, I also wouldn't be entirely surprised if he had written out every note for the whole band, as well as the vocals and the parts for the string quartet, although the drumming *does* have the punch and drive of a real jazz or rock drummer, rather than a symphonic percussionist reading a composer's attempt at notating that sort of playing. Which, granted, is the standard practice in classical music.

However, a listener *does* get a strong sense of Lee's compositional voice and of his very individual approaches to vocal writing and to the guitar. Quite a strong sense.

Those vocals, now, are truly striking. They have a strange, unearthly beauty – elaborate harmonies or intricately hocketed Gentle Giant medieval counterpoint sung by three women in pure, angelic, vibrato-less sopranos, and perfectly exemplifying the grand classical tradition of gorgeous voices and almost completely unintelligible lyrics. At points, the singers sound a bit like the Northettes, at others, like the vocalists in Louis Andriessen's *De Stijl*. And sometimes, almost like the indie act Dirty Projectors – another band with an academically trained leader – but with far less interest in any sort of pop music. They deliver their lines rather dryly, though, without a great deal of individuality or expression – and while a deadpan delivery works for, say, Dylan, you can also understand every word out of his mouth. But here, all those elaborate vocal parts add up to a beautiful sound but don't really convey a whole lot of direct lyric meaning. In fact, they might as well be singing in Kobaian for all I can make out just by listening – and like the vocalists in Magma, I tend to hear them as instruments more than as singers.

As for Lee's guitar style, I can't come up with any close prog referents. Steve Howe's combination of C&W twang with a jazz-based harmonic palette might come nearest. Plus echoes of John Fahey's "New Acoustic Music" and, in the psych realm, Jorma Kaukonen. However, that still leaves out the effect of Lee's large borrowings from raw indie rock, his trebly, super-clean tone, and the almost constant ornamentation of his lines and chordal parts with trills, slides, bends, turns, grace-notes, and more. Once in a while, he uses the Fripp-like extreme sustain of an E-Bow, but most of the time it's that odd, bright, twanging, scrappy approach like a disorientingly virtuosic indie-rocker. Maybe a little like Nels Cline? But unlike most of Nels's work, it seems entirely composed.

When it comes to the album, and the specific songs on it, almost every one of them sounds quite similar, and pretty much as I've already described – elaborate interwoven vocal parts, Lee's idiosyncratic guitar style, medium tempos, through-composed or close to it, and understated accompaniment from a low-keyed rhythm section plus a second guitar, vibes, and string quartet to fill in the cracks and add color and warmth. You do hear the occasional exception: "Distance" has a set of elaborate string quartet passages in the middle; "Dying in Waves" is primarily a solo Lee guitar piece; "Seethe" is slower; "Spiral Knells" a bit faster. But generally, the whole album deals in one very specific sound, one set of timbres, one set of lyrical themes, one set of stylistic references, one harmonic idiom, and one relationship between the voices and between the instruments. And in that marked consistency it diverges from prog – which tends to go all over the map – and falls closer to indie rock or minimalist art-rock or hip NYC classical music.

It also falls very much in line with critical views of the last thirty or forty years, which tend to posit just this kind of tight stylistic focus as the *essence* of artistic quality. And indeed, The Knells have the aesthetic seamlessness also found in mainstream critics' darlings like Van Morrison, and for a similar reason: Everything Lee does is securely within his artistic grasp; he has as thoroughgoing a mastery of his own musical materials as Van the Man or any of his peers do of theirs. The difference being that Lee's materials go considerably wider in scope and much further into complexity than the roots music informing Van M., or The Band, or John Fogarty, or Bruce, or David Byrne, or....

However I, for one, am not sure whether that kind of focus truly makes for richer, deeper, better art, or just more aesthetically fashionable and easier for a critic to write about. Make no mistake, I consider this highly worthwhile music – but I'm not convinced that those closely-defined stylistic boundaries specifically make it so. Or, that it would have suffered if Lee had cast a broader net for sounds and influences.

Speaking of influences, one that I do seem to hear, almost surprisingly, is that of Yes. Not just a very Yes-like guitar run in "Spiral Knells" (at about 7:04), but brief echoes of that band every few minutes, in chordal voicings, textures, melodies, harmonic relationships, and more. Usually, just for a few seconds. It's fairly subtle, not anything overt – unlike, say, Flower Kings or Glass Hammer or, particularly, Starcastle – and may just be something I'm imagining. It could also be the coincidence of Lee having put together a slightly similar-sounding band, with his Howe-like approach to the guitar and the three

womens' stratospheric voices. But, although I gather he's been a fan of Yes, I don't think it's the kind of inadvertent imitation that a hero-worshipping rock musician might fall into through having worn out several copies of *Tales from Topographic Oceans*. Lee seems far too aware of exactly what he's doing to stumble into something like that. If anything, I suspect it might come down to a combination of similar sounds, and of both bands using some of the same classical common-practice musical devices.

And lest some of my comments above be taken more harshly than I meant them, I think this is excellent music, something new and fresh and different. Although I can't quite figure out what to call it or where it might fit in relation to other music. It is definitely post-Seventies – there's no keyboards at all, and it has at least as much influence from minimalist art-rock as from old-school prog. But it doesn't really classify into any of the standard prog sub-genres. Post-modern Prog? It does combine genres and methodologies not usually heard together, but it's the furthest thing from the jump-cut-and-paste that term would seem to imply. Indie-prog? It's too minutely crafted. RIO? Not quite – the rhythmic and harmonic intricacies do indeed point toward current rehearsal-intensive avant-progressive, yet the near-medieval tone of the vocals looks to the past.

Post-progressive? Maybe that's it.

Because, unlike so much of the prog canon, this music goes quite a bit further than some rock band's home-made attempt at writing classical music – it is the genuine article, rigorously composed and informed by a deep level of musical knowledge. Yet also unlike many recent New Music works written for such avant-chamber ensembles as the Bang-on-a-Can All-Stars – ones who, like The Knells, have instrumentations similar to rock bands – this music *sounds* like rock, and *works* as rock, in a way theirs doesn't quite seem to. It really does pull popular music and serious art music together, meets right in the middle between them, and compromises neither.

Finally, it'll be interesting to see how this develops in the future. Does Lee intend anything for The Knells beyond just this one album of ten songs? The whole project seems so precisely defined, an exploration in depth of one sound, one consistent approach: medieval vocals, an indie-rock instrumental approach, and formal compositions. But this ensemble could go onward in a lot of directions they don't even touch on here. So the question is, does Lee want to stick with this group and maybe explore some of those directions, or move on to other projects?

- John Hagelbarger

The Knells:

Nina Berman ----- vocals
Amanda Gregory ----- vocals
Katya Powder ----- vocals
Andrew McKenna Lee ----- 1st electric guitar, percussion, compositions
Paul Orbell ----- 2nd electric guitar
Joseph Higgins ----- electric bass
Jude Traxler ----- vibes, percussion (live)
Michael McCurdy ----- drums

with the

Mivos String Quartet: Olivia DePrato – violin
Joshua Modney – violin
Victor Lowrie – viola
Mariel Roberts or Isabel Castellvi – cello

Album Tracks:

1. Airlift 6:17
2. Thread 3:21
3. Fray 4:56
4. Dying in Waves ... 4:20
5. Distance 7:13
6. Synchronesh 6:20
7. Seethe 6:51
8. Dissolve 6:20
9. Spiral Proem..... 3:06
10. Spiral Knells 10:01