
Review of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*

A Game Music Companion by *Tim Summers* (Intellect, 2021, 314 pp, \$113.50)

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The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (1998; hereafter *OoT*) is a frequent source of examples for ludomusicological concepts, and for good reasons: in addition to using music in a variety of ways, it was and is an extremely popular video game. Tim Summers acknowledges the importance of both aspects in the introduction to his new monograph, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time: A Game Music Companion*. He also confronts the topic of canon formation at the outset, stating that he “is not interested in claiming that the game’s composer, Koji Kondo, is a ‘genius’, nor that *Ocarina of Time* has some quality of ‘greatness’. The study is instead motivated by *Ocarina of Time*’s popularity and the game’s novel use of music rather than belief in its quality in any universal sense” (2). Summers sets out to use *OoT* as a case study to “explore in depth the music of a single game, to illustrate the multi-faceted musicality of gaming and to explain the musical processes of a game which has great cultural reach and influence” (2). This is an enormous task, but Summers succeeds admirably. His monograph considers the entire body of sound within *OoT*, from memorable ocarina tunes to sound effects and interface cues, drawing connections with industry terminology, harmonic analysis, and music from around the world. Summers’s prose is snappy and concise as he unpacks Kondo’s simultaneous attention to ludic, narrative, and aesthetic effects as well as pragmatic concerns (player fatigue, aural interference, and console limitations).

Summers begins by situating *OoT* in context. Chapter 1 provides the background for *OoT*, laying out the musical expectations and conventions of *The Legend of Zelda* series, the capabilities and constraints of the Nintendo 64 console, and Kondo’s compositional priorities and strategies for the series. By clearly articulating these elements, Summers lowers informational barriers to entry for readers who may have little technical background with game consoles or minimal knowledge of the series. Here and throughout the book, Summers excels at providing information and analyses that enrich the reader’s understanding of *OoT*’s music while also highlighting how the music is specifically constructed to work without assuming the player has any additional musical information from outside of the game.

Chapters 2 through 6 address the music and sound of *OoT*, organized by function. In chapter 2, entitled “The Ocarina and Link’s Musical Performances,” Summers digs into some of the best-known compositions in *OoT*. After looking at the history of the instrument “in real life” and asking “Why an ocarina?” (22), Summers considers each of the tunes in turn and highlights the care with which Kondo composed each brief work. He also emphasizes the player’s role in performance and musical creation, which has ludic as well as recreational functions. Ultimately, he identifies four specific musical skillsets that *OoT* encourages players to develop via the ocarina: listening carefully, remembering, composing, and interpreting (69).

The third chapter focuses on music tied to location. Here, Summers breaks down the various musical cues that accompany most of the time spent playing the game. This large functional category is subdivided into the music of Hyrule Field, location cues that feature ocarina songs (building on chapter 2’s analyses), dungeon cues, towns, and other recurring types of location (e.g., houses and shops). Summers’s analysis of Hyrule Field’s cue illustrates a modular structure employed to avert listener fatigue as well as identifies gestural references to prior games in the series. The dungeons’ soundtracks function as ambient music, and Summers identifies their global references and inspirations.¹ This section includes some of the most surprising information, as Kondo’s dungeon cues are carefully built to minimize the player’s awareness of repetition and time spent solving puzzles and therefore prove difficult to call to mind. Summers’s analyses of Kondo’s “town” cues identify the ways timbre, orchestration, and generic markers communicate each location’s mood and general safety to the player, an analytical approach that continues in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 considers character themes and cutscenes. In some ways, this chapter feels less cohesive than the other chapters, a result of the way music is employed in *OoT*. Since character leitmotifs are heard primarily in brief cutscenes involving dialogue with that person, they functionally belong in the same chapter as the underscoring for unique cutscenes, but their musical logic is quite distinct. The choice to continue categorizing music on the basis of function is, however, a pragmatic one, as various motifs are reused throughout the game in different ways (in ocarina songs, in location cues, and in character leitmotifs). Summers subdivides the chapter to reflect these differences, first explaining how Kondo’s compositional efficiency is exemplified in the themes for characters, discussing each unique cutscene in turn, and concluding with a detailed analysis of the twelve-minute-long final cutscene sequence.

Chapter 5’s subject, ludic cues, may be the only musical material in *OoT* to compete with the ocarina tunes for memorability. Summers argues that the cues “aestheticiz[e] the ludic”: in *OoT*, “moments such as achieving an object, winning a battle or losing are

1. Probably the most recognized example of borrowed music occurred in the cue for the Fire Temple, which initially included a sample track of Islamic chant as part of its texture. However, it was subsequently removed, a choice commonly attributed to public criticism of the use of sacred text. Summers clarifies the situation and provides context to its use, finally providing a conclusive explanation of the issue—the sample was removed as soon as Nintendo developers learned of the religious nature of the music, before the game was released but after the earliest production runs were completed (121–25).

treated in terms of music. They are not just rule-based outcomes of the game mechanics; they become aestheticized into celebrations and commiserations” (246–47). Summers begins with the multiple battle cues, whose “family resemblance” and shared function link them together, but whose differences “musically represent a spectrum of ludic challenge and plot significance” (217). The second half of the chapter considers “cues for treasure and challenges” (227), explaining the musical logic that they use to teach the player the rules of the game or accompany games-within-a-game.

Chapter 6 continues the aestheticization of the ludic, as Summers considers the musicality of the briefest cues: earcons and sound effects. He argues that “many of the game’s sounds readily adopt pitches, timbres and gestures that invite interpretation as musical” (251). This chapter, despite its brief length, is the strongest proof of the deeply musical sensibility of *OoT*: musical sound is everywhere.

Finally, chapter 7 mirrors the first, identifying how *OoT* “changed the game.” Just as *OoT* was shaped by the earlier games in the franchise, its own tunes would resonate in the *Zelda* games that followed it. Summers also identifies some of the ways *OoT*’s music lives on outside of video games: in official recordings, in authorized covers, in published sheet music, and in fan compositions and performances uploaded to the internet. Summers argues that the latter are enabled by the inherently unfixed nature of video game music, which lends itself uniquely well to reinterpretation and reimagining.

The intended audience for this book seems to range from fans to scholars: the book includes call-out boxes for terms such as “leitmotif,” suggesting a consciously welcoming attitude toward nonspecialists, while the breadth and depth of Summers’s analyses offer much to scholars of game sound. Some knowledge of music, specifically the ability to read music notation, familiarity with common musical terms, and a basic knowledge of tonal harmony, are assumed. There is new information here for virtually all fans (myself included!), but familiarity with the game is not necessary. However, without prior experience with *OoT* in some form, readers may find the limitations of the book due to its medium more frustrating. For example, the screen captures included in grayscale are generally fine, but a few, such as Figures 3.25a and 3.25b (which depict Adult and Child Link at the Spirit Temple), are very difficult to parse, and readers will likely have to search out audio or video examples for cues on the internet. There may also be a few instances of cue title confusion for the reader: “Zelda theme” and “Zelda’s theme” are particularly easy to mix up. Even so, Summers does an excellent job of describing the soundscape of a video game within the confines of print, employing a variety of visual representations to support his prose arguments.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time: A Game Music Companion offers many things to many people: it is an in-depth analysis of a beloved game, a primer on ludomusicological terminology and concepts, a model analysis, a demonstration of the different things video game music can do, and an explication of how it does them. Summers’s attention to detail, wide-ranging knowledge, and affection and respect for the subject matter are evident throughout, resulting in a superb book.