

Roundtable with Arrangers and Performers of the Music of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997)

ABSTRACT In May 2022, the editors of this Special Issue convened a roundtable discussion with Alex Moukala, Smooth McGroove (Max Gleason), and PurpleSchala (Ruby Tuong): three well-known performers of videogame music, whose online recordings of music from *Final Fantasy VII* have garnered each of them a considerable following. The topics discussed included narrative, musical style and genre, practices of rearrangement, and the online presentation of musical arrangements. **KEYWORDS** covers, arrangements, style, YouTube, video, orchestration, classical music, adaptation, fandom

ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH *FINAL FANTASY VII*

RICHARD ANATONE: How would you describe your relationship with the game and music of *Final Fantasy VII* (hereafter *FF7*)? Could you maybe speak to your favorite music from the game or your favorite aspect of Uematsu's compositional process.

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): *FF7* changed my life, from the moment that I played it. I had it spoiled for me because my friend showed me *FF7* (and he showed me the final boss battle first) but luckily, I had no context! So, I just heard the wild music, [saw] the wild visuals, and then he lent me the disc to start.

I was born into a musical family, everyone in my family plays music, and so all the video games I ever played, the music was always coming through, and that was a big part of it. But *FF7* was my first time really delving into a game with such a deep world, and with music that enriched that world in a way that I didn't even cognize at the time. And, as the years went by, I was processing how that type of composition was painting those memories of that game and that story within me.

My brother and I were both musicians [...] we went to college and, you know, we had music scholarships and everything—but we always had this thing between us where we said, “But we know *the best* type of music,” and it was always video game music, *FF7* music, Koji Kondo, all these all these composers that we loved, and Nobuo was top tier for me, always. *FF7* had a special recipe for me. And it played no small part in the career that I developed, and [from] which I make a living doing now.

I actually was having a conversation with a friend last night about this. We were just mentioning random songs, and I had mentioned a project that I had started nine years ago: “Hurry,” from *FF7*, which is just a random track. It's not my favorite track from the game, but I brought that up, and my friend just *lit up* when I started singing the melody to him, because it brought back the memory of that part of that game and how powerful of a little composition that is!

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): I'm ashamed to admit [that] when I first played *FF7* (and I'd played every single *Final Fantasy* before that), I hated it. *Final Fantasy VI* was my favorite game, and I was like, "What is this? Everything's polygons and it's 3D!" I was like the old lady gamer! I was like, "Is this only three people in your party? What is this?!" I was really mad. But the cutscenes really blew me away. That's the first time we'd seen full-motion video: that was like, "Wow." I called people to my dorm room, "You guys got to see this—look! You know, I like it."

Final Fantasy is my favorite series. I grew up with it, it's the series that really got me into gaming, got me into making arrangements. I really despised [*FF7*] at first, but I've really grown to appreciate it now. It really deserves the accolades and the influence it had on gaming as a whole: it pushed RPGs into the mainstream. Back then it was just it was insane to see the commercials on TV, the magazine spreads. Gaming used to be just this fringe thing for nerds that people made fun of you for in school, and then it was suddenly it was everywhere, and people were talking about it! That was so wild!

FF7 as a whole, the soundtrack is Uematsu's greatest work. I love *Final Fantasy VI* and that's my favorite—but I think [*FF7*] as a whole: every single track is memorable. Like Max is saying, it's like he wrote everything just perfectly tuned to every single section in the game. And I think what really stood out to me was the "Main Theme." [It's] my favorite overworld theme ever, because it tells a story in itself [...] the fact that there's so much modal mixture in there, and then that wonderfully dark section near the end, it just reflects Cloud's shifting instability.¹ It starts out in this major lyrical theme, and then it shifts from dark to light with all these minor substitutions, and it lays the foundation for the whole vibe of everything that the game encapsulates (especially Cloud's personality). The overworld theme really gets me every time [...] when you first get out of Midgar and you see you're out in the world for the first time, like, oh my gosh. Like, that was an insane moment. It's like, "Oh, well, you know, the game's really starting," you know?

ALEX MOUKALA: I am known as a composer and musician now, that's what I do professionally [but] I don't really have the origin story that most people have, when they just played music when they were kids or stuff like that: I played PlayStation when I was a kid! I didn't really play music or an instrument, so I didn't really know anything about music until I was nineteen.

I was an Italian kid who didn't speak English, I learned English through *FF7* and that game inspired me like crazy. I remember at six years old and seven years old, downloading like the MIDI of the soundtrack on my PC, and listening to the boss theme and headbanging like crazy, because even though the samples were like, [basic] MIDI or whatever, it still felt like I was at a huge rock concert. Like I could feel that music to a level that I didn't feel other music back then, and still to this day. And so that really made me passionate about music as a whole. Obviously, I love the game because of the stories, the characters [...] but most especially the music, [that] really made the world real. And even when I was not playing, I would listen to the music

1. For more on the "Main Theme," see, in this issue, Richard Anatone's article, "Kishōtenketsu as Leitmotif: Storytelling and Musical Meaning in the Main Theme to *Final Fantasy VII*" and the "Roundtable with Wilbert Roget, M.J. Gallagher, and Pat Holleman."

and I would be transported to a world which was more interesting than reality. I like reality! But I like to fantasize also.

FF7 has a score that is very peculiar, because [*FF7* has] had many iterations, like *Crisis Core*, *Dirge of Cerberus* and *Remake*. With each one of these games that came at a different time in my life, I basically re-experienced the music of *FF7* at a different age. So, when I was a teenager, I remember *Crisis Core* came out, and the boss theme arrangement in *Crisis Core* is called “The Summoned.” It’s like this metal version with crazy guitars and synthesizers [. . .] Takeharu Ishimoto did an incredible job with that.

FF7 was the thing that made me passionate about music. I thought you only could make music if you were a famous person who was, like, insanely skilled, but I was just a nobody, right? *But*, one day I found on Google something called *Final Fantasy VII: Voices of the Lifestream*.² I thought it was another game, but actually was a compilation from something like forty or more music producers, singers, musicians from all kinds of places who came together to write arrangements of all the themes in the game in different styles: metal, EDM, hardcore, hardstyle, lyrical, every different . . . reggae! Every style was there.

It was so good. What made the difference for me in that moment was noticing that these arrangements were actually written by people who were *normal* people, not really famous or whatever: they just loved the game, and they developed the skills and became musicians because of the video game music. So, I was like, “Man, maybe I could do this too.” And so *FF7*, once again, inspired me to a whole other level, and then I started to make music because of the album.

[In a Zoom call a few months ago, Uematsu] told me that *FF7* came at a weird time because with *Final Fantasy VI*, it really felt like he’d mastered the art of writing a fantasy score, but *FF7* was this modern game, which was different from all the *Final Fantasys* that came before. “One-Winged Angel” itself for him was a bit of a fun experiment. But that was only possible because, with *FF7*, they really put him in the position where he had to reinvent himself a little bit. Every one of its releases, like *Crisis Core*, *Dirge of Cerberus* [. . .] made me rethink the way I think about music entirely. Square Enix employed so many composers in the *FF7* saga, and each of them added something that Uematsu by himself could not do, but he did lay the groundwork for everything.

I think people who like video game music tend to like music from cutscenes that are very iconic, or from bosses that are very iconic, but they tend to forget the smaller [pieces] that played in a small part. There’s a theme that plays in the place where you find Vincent, which is called “The Nightmare Begins.” That’s one of the most beautiful themes I heard in *Final Fantasy*, and I can’t wait to hear it in *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (hereafter *Remake*). In *Remake*, one of my favorite themes is called “The Solemn Sunset,” and it’s not Uematsu’s, it’s like Hamauzu, and it plays after the Midgar plate collapses and you’re climbing to the Shinra Headquarters [. . .] there’s this beautiful theme that plays with like strings and synthesizers and vocals, and the harmonies are just otherworldly and it’s just very good. So, there’s loads of small

2. Andrew Aversa (zircon), producer, *Final Fantasy VII: Voices of the Lifestream* (OverClocked ReMix, 2007), accessed September 15, 2023, <https://ff7.ocremix.org/>.

tracks like this in *FF7*, in the whole series, that are mind blowing, just as much as “One-Winged Angel,” and I can’t pinpoint just one of them.

ON NARRATIVE AND MUSICAL PRACTICES

RICHARD ANATONE: How does narrative inform or affect your arrangements?

ALEX MOUKALA: I guess it depends on the piece itself. I may arrange a track because I’m like, “Damn, it would be cool if [the] boss theme would be actually a quiet piano track,” for no reason.

One time I wrote the arrangement of “Those Chosen by The Planet”—the Sephiroth theme—but I thought, “I would love to see a cutscene where [we witness] Sephiroth’s human side, and then we see his descent into madness, but first we see the pain he goes through.” In *Crisis Core*, they do a bit, but they didn’t play any Sephiroth themes there (they played a variation of the *Crisis Core* main theme, which is cool, it was one of my favorite variations, by the way). But I thought, “I wonder how that would sound like, if they actually did that with the Sephiroth theme.” So I tried that, and I went for a more calm vibe with like string ensembles only at the start, because I want to represent the fact that he’s still human [with] low strings that bring out the warmth that represents humanity; but as he gets more deranged, the track goes to higher and higher registers with violins [. . .] it reaches the highest notes when Sephiroth embraces Jenova, and in that moment, I do the “JENOVA” theme on the piano and strings. [There’s a] din of arpeggios, to say, “This is the moment where Sephiroth is like, ‘Mother, I’m coming to you.’” So, sometimes I write tracks that are imaginary like that. It’s nice sometimes to take a melody and subvert it, *invert* its meaning, by repurposing it in the opposite way. And sometimes, you must use melodies that recall certain emotions exactly as people remembered them, or even bigger than they remember them. You have to take into consideration what people globally remember about these melodies, so I try to do that myself, too.

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): My entire thing became focused on just doing vocal arrangements of my favorite tunes. And the way that [narrative] played into it for me was, again: memories. I would think about the songs that had the most powerful memories within the narratives of the games I was playing. The very first *Final Fantasy* song I did was for *Final Fantasy VIII* actually, it was “Balamb Garden.” Not long after that, I was like, “Well, if I can do this, then I’m going to jump into the “JENOVA” theme!” Because there’s so much feeling in that, it makes me feel so much just remembering that song and bringing me back to that place.

In the years after that, that’s just what I continued to do: I would pick songs that that made me feel things from the narrative. And a lot of times it was songs that people didn’t care about very much, you know, because they’re not the boss battle themes, they’re not the big, huge popular themes, and I’ve gotten some flack about that. For instance, when I replayed *FF7*, I was immediately inspired to do “Costa del Sol” theme. I love it! It just made me feel so good: you know that beach feel.

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): The bossa nova.

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): Yeah! Some people liked it, but some people [said], “Why did you do this song? You could have done “Birth of a God,” and I’m like,

“Everybody does that!” Narrative is always playing a part in like the way I feel about music from video games.

One thing I haven’t heard mentioned [yet] is *Advent Children* [which] rebirthed my passion for the *FF7* universe in a whole new way. I invited friends over to watch that with me. It brought me back to the whole narrative, of who Cloud was, and what he was going through and, how Aerith had died, but that was bringing her back, and who Sephiroth was, how he was split in that movie into three different parts, and you get to hear those themes. Listening to that soundtrack, driving around in my car, going to college, going to work, that was a huge [. . .] man, probably six months of my life, where that soundtrack never left my CD player. All of those arrangements! I put some friends together, and we covered some *FF7* music in a band. If [*Advent Children*] was fan service, it was the *best* fan service, because I got to have more of the narrative of the characters I loved, and the world that I love. I started learning those piano arrangements from *Advent Children*, like the Tifa arrangement.

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): “Those Who Fight”: every pianist was obsessed with that arrangement, myself included. [Shirō] Hamaguchi is just fantastic.

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): I’m still obsessed with it! In closing about narrative: that brought *Advent Children* to mind, and how that extends [the narrative], just like *Crisis Core*, and *Remake*. What I do, is literally just picking music based on the story and the narrative that I love. And, you know, again: changed my life! Put me on this path, so here I am.

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): It’s interesting to hear all these different takes on what we mean by narrative. I think just being a classically trained musician, narrative to me has a more narrow [meaning]. I take it to mean just the theme [as] it occurs in the context of the game and how the game’s narrative can inform the arrangement, and that’s kind of how I approached my arrangements. “OK, what was the context? When did this occur in the game and how can I translate that to music? How can I give people the experience of playing the game without playing the game, just listening to my arrangement or recalling what was happening in this particular scene?”

I arranged “Collapsed Expressway” from *Remake* [. . .] it was just me, “OK, I love this crazy, synth-driven, drums-driven thing: how can I make this work on piano? I need to own it.” [I] do a tangent on that [. . .] I just make a MIDI, a terrible MIDI condensed version, where it’s just piano, and I incorporate the drums, the instrumentals, the bass, and everything just in piano VST—just because out of the chaos, then you can hear certain things, and I try to tease out what can possibly be taken from that.

Usually what happens is some Latin jazz sort of stuff starts coming out [*laughs*], because it’s so syncopated. I’m all about that: I’m a huge fan of [Antônio Carlos] Jobim and [Stan] Getz and Astrud Gilberto. So that was, [asking myself] “How can I make this into a piano piece that is legit?” Usually, I write away from the piano, but then it’s also important for me to sit at the piano and vibe with the arrangement for hours, just to try to get it to a place where it sounds good, but also feels good to play as well, and is playable [*laughs*].

In terms of narrative, the track “Midnight Rendezvous” plays during a very short scene in *Remake* where Cloud and Aeris are walking to Wall Market. They look up

at the stars, and then Cloud has this flashback of Aeris dying, and a tear rolls down his cheek. In that moment, you get the full impact of the tragedy from the original game. And then there are these burgeoning romantic feelings. I love how they explore that in *Remake*.

I tried to make my own arrangement of “Midnight Rendezvous” recapture all those feelings of yearning, of this lack of resolution. “Midnight Rendezvous” starts with this ostinato, this arpeggiated ostinato figure that starts out really high in the treble, and then layers are added on—it’s a Mitsuto Suzuki piece, I thought it was Hamazu because they’re so alike, they work together a lot.

Then when [I’m] doing a solo piano arrangement, [I need to consider how to] recreate this effect of layers when you only have two hands. So, I started out sparse, and everything is inversions in the bass: it starts out in D-flat, and I never hit the root D-flat in the bass until about measure fifteen when the first statement starts, and then I still keep it within the mid-range. It isn’t until the second statement of this theme where I actually add the bass, when it goes lower in the bass. It’s a very, very simple pop progression: it’s like I–IV–V–I—and then the second half is another very simple pop progression—which is, I think, is one I–V–II–IV, before going back to I.

I’m really influenced by the so-called “indie classical school,” like Judd Greenstein and Missy Mazzoli, where they use pop sensibilities, but they mix it up with these complicated polyrhythms to give it some sort of interest and drive. I incorporated that into the ostinato figure, which was easy to do because that ostinato figure from “Midnight Rendezvous” was three bars, and it’s a four-four piece, so it has this feeling of imbalance, which kind of adds to the feeling of this lack of resolution: this kind of romantic turmoil in Cloud’s mind, where he just doesn’t know what to do with his feelings with Aeris.

Near the end, I wanted to create an actual ending—because you know how things just repeat in video game music [*laughs*]—I really wanted to give it a more poignant feeling, so I incorporate a lot of minor sevenths, which is what Mitsuda loves to do, but it works! Mitsuda’s pieces have this poignancy, and so I did a lot of minor sevenths near the end, like the IVmin7 to IImin7 to a Vmin7, back to a IVmin7, back to I, to give it a more sense of sadness, tenderness, yearning. That was how I tried to use the game’s narrative to inform my arrangement of “Midnight Rendezvous.”

ALEX MOUKALA: One thing to keep in mind about the answers we just gave you is that we are independent musicians, right? We are doing what we love. Sometimes we have to do something the community or the audience may like, but we have the freedom to not have someone supervise us and tell us, “Oh, this is not going to work for the project.” The same does not apply for the people working for Square Enix on *Remake*. I’m sure they would have given you completely different answers [regarding] the way they recontextualize melodies and themes.

Oftentimes it depends on many things, especially on the scene. In *Remake*, there are eight or nine leitmotifs that keep repeating over and over, and they keep getting repurposed in different ways. One of them is the Shinra theme: the Shinra theme has been made into a *few* battle themes—like, Rufus Shinra and the Turks, Reno and Rude—but also, there’s a battle theme called “Tightrope.” In “Tightrope,” there’s a certain bit that repurposes the Shinra melody, playing it in a way that is familiar,

but also adds a few notes, so it's not exact, but it's definitely the Shinra melody, and that gave them the freedom to create a whole new battle theme while also using part of the Shinra melody.

They do this a lot in *Remake* because they reuse all these melodies with modal modulations and change. [The “Main Theme”] gets repurposed so many times in that soundtrack and it changes so many times: you hear it major, you hear it minor, you hear it hopeful, you hear it sad and devastated. And all this repurposing of melodies might escape most people's ears, but when I was playing the game, I was literally taking notes, because I was like, “This is crazy; I need to make a video about you eventually.” Keiji Kawamori, who's worked closely with Nobuo Uematsu for several years, had a lot of say in this. So, from Square Enix's perspective, they are literally playing with people's emotions by repurposing the melodies that they've known all their lives, but they do it in a way that is so elegant that people may not even realize it.

It's also so good how they re-modernize the tracks and they don't make them lose their identity; like the track that plays at the Honeybee Inn called “An Unforgettable Night” in *Remake*, it has one chip-tune sound from the original *FF7* Honeybee Inn track, and it starts with that sound. And then it crossfades to the modern sounds, and it becomes this sort of Broadway musical theme. So sometimes they reuse certain sounds, even if they're old and they just surround them with the modern. With the Jenova boss theme in *Remake*, “Quickening,” it starts with a certain *Dark Souls* vibe: this grandiose, dark, brooding, orchestral track. But people tended not to like it, because “JENOVA” is a theme that we all remember for the arpeggios, but most especially for the four-on-the-floor kick [drum]. In “JENOVA–Quickening,” in the first phase there's no kick, there's no electronic arpeggio. In the second phase, as soon as you hear the kick and the arpeggios, the memories start to float back like crazy. And that's where every streamer lost their mind, because of the kick and the arpeggios, so that's how powerful instruments can be, and they know it, and they use them specifically in key moments to create certain emotions. And in Jenova's theme itself, when the track loops, the strings play the “*Estuans interius*” rhythm from “One-Winged Angel” for a few measures. So, they did an even better job to portray the connection between the different characters.

ON VIDEO PRESENTATIONS OF ARRANGEMENTS

ANDREW S. POWELL: There are visual aspects to the presentation of your music via YouTube. Could you speak about the thoughts that go into the visual side of giving your music to the world?

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): I never planned to show my face. I never planned to show anything besides just random things, videos were an afterthought for me. [But] I started realizing that the visual element was cool and I do enjoy music videos—I watched MTV growing up. I thought, “Well, I could do that [and] if I'm going to be doing multi-track, then I can have the different frames [for different parts].” That evolved into my cat showing up and I realized that people enjoyed that. Then I realized that lighting was a thing, so if I was doing like a darker song like

“JENOVA,” with more serious undertones, I would record at night with just a floor lamp on. [For] “One-Winged Angel,” I utilized red lights and just a black background. And if I’m doing something more, you know, light and airy like “Costa del Sol,” you know, more and more lit up! And of course, the way that I would perform on screen would be a lot more smiles and happiness, rather than the serious eyebrows and having my hair in my face, you know, singing those Latin lyrics. The evolution [was] me realizing that having a middle screen with the with the video game footage playing, [showing] “This is what’s happening.” That was a complete accident, but it just happened naturally and was, I think, a big part of what made my channel end up being something that I was able to, well, quit teaching music and sing video game songs for a living.

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): I love how [in] your videos, you always look like you’re having fun, and you’re always super expressive, and how every single little video clip of yourself is like, you’ve got a different expression on your face, it’s so interesting to watch.

ALEX MOULAKA: I personally struggled with the idea of performance videos because I’m a composer first and foremost. People now know me for the most part for bass stuff, which is funny, because if I was a video game character, my bass class would be Level 10 or 15, and my composer class would be Level 80, because I’ve been composing for many years. But people know me from my bass, they don’t care about the composition that much.

I saw people like Smooth [Max] and other people like [FamilyJules] making covers on YouTube. And I thought, “Man, I like that. I love *FF* music. I want to make music [for *Final Fantasy*] one day, I better start making covers to understand this music a bit more.” I started making covers, and I would publish the screen captures of my computer playing the track in the DAW. I didn’t understand that, on YouTube, when people see a DAW screen, if they’re non-musicians, they’re like, “What is this? This is not music. I didn’t click for this,” even if it is playing music, so they might not be as engaged.

I thought, “OK, well, I’m going to just put the picture of the character, and maybe they’re going to be happy. Maybe I’m going to put a spectrogram under the picture, and that’s going to be it.” And that was better, but still didn’t have the same impact that I saw performance videos having. The problem was that people didn’t get to see the *passion* that we have for it. The hero quality, the hero music, they didn’t see the person making the music.

It’s very hard to portray my process of composing the music. I might be in the studio composing thinking, “Yes, this is awesome,” but I can’t show that, right? I thought, “I should try writing a commentary that goes along with the music, that says the things that I was thinking about when I was writing the song.” I did that, and that gave better results, because now the music had humanity to it. And then one day, I bought a bass, and I wrote a fifteen-second funky riff over “Giorno’s Theme” from *JoJo* (Part Five). It took me a few days to learn because I’m not good at bass, but I published a video of me playing it on Twitter for no reason, and then it blew up like nothing else in five years before. I realized, “Oh, people really like to see other people playing music.” So, I started to incorporate that as much as possible, [. . .] or, if it is

an orchestral composition I cannot play, I will make a video where I explain how I wrote it first, and then I will play it. The responses have been so different because people now see how passionate I am about the music I make and I take them through the journey of how the pieces were composed. Presenting your idea, and presenting your enthusiasm behind the idea is so fun. I've really enjoyed that, but it's been a long journey to get to this point.

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): It's such high quality, it feels like it sets a new standard for the rest of us! I hate video editing. It just takes so long! I can only imagine how long it takes you guys to edit your videos. [But] the visual aspect is a necessary evil, or else no one's going to listen your stuff. I started out in the VGM scene in 2005 and we were just all sharing MP3s on the GamingForce.com forums, and no one was seeing everyone, [...] and then YouTube became a new standard.

ALEX MOUKALA: And now there's TikTok.

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): Yeah, and then there's TikTok, which I'm just, "OK, I can't deal! I'm a little old lady for that!" [laughs]

[But] I didn't like how then people would make comments on my appearance, on the fact I was wearing shorts, I stopped wearing shorts because I was getting all these incels in the chat. You know, "Ah, it kind of sucks being a woman on the internet." And I'm not doing anything! I'm not even trying to get that kind of audience! It's just hot in Texas! Ninety-nine percent of the time, people have been lovely. They've been awesome. It's just a little upsetting, when I get that.

ON GAME MUSIC, STYLISTIC DIVERSITY, AND GENRE BLENDING

RICHARD ANATONE: There are so many different approaches to arrangement, across so many genres, including projects like *Final Symphony* that use classical genres. When I listen to Ruby, like the *Final Fantasy Tactics* cover that you just did the other day, "Character Making," it reminded me of a Rachmaninoff étude, "The March." You did "Apoplexy" and I thought, "This is a Prokofiev/Liszt/Rachmaninoff étude."

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): I'm so glad you mentioned Prokofiev, that was exactly what it was.

RICHARD ANATONE: Then you have Alex arranging the same theme in different genres, and Smooth McGroove's a cappella arrangements, both completely different approaches to arrangement.

ALEX MOUKALA: Music in games is so cool because it has less boundaries. There are so many genres in game music that get used. So many games that come out around the same time and their styles vary so wildly. In pop music, we tend to have waves, like, "OK, this is the year where we all try to do dubstep [for example]." But with games it's different. Do you remember *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, "Crazy Chocobo?" [A rap-rock version of the Chocobo theme.]

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): Yeah! I didn't know what I was listening to at first! Hamauzu just broke so many boundaries with the *XIII* soundtrack, even just like the genre, "Can't Catch a Break" [...] a battle theme that's straight up jazz!

ALEX MOUKALA: I'm just glad Square Enix is so forward-thinking with the composers that they have on their teams: not only the main composers, but also the arrangers, like Shotaro Shima, who did so many tracks in *Remake* and figured out how to blend the stylistic worlds of Hollywood and JRPGs, in a way that doesn't lose the Japanese identity, but also sounds like a fricking movie. And in the *Intergrade* DLC, "Episode Intermission," there's a whole section with big band jazz music, like *Cowboy Bebop*, and it's perfectly integrated into the game: the level design matches the music, so as it goes through the level, the music loops, including a drum solo.

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): The composer matters so much. There was a point in the '90s where these Japanese composers were utilizing jazz phrasing [...] that would normally happen in jazz, [but] not happening in jazz! You can compare it to the fusion of the '70s, these bands like Mahavishnu Orchestra. A track from *FF7* can have jazz chords, jazz harmonies, jazz phrasing, but it's absolutely not just jazz. And as the technology got better, they could actually make this *sound* like jazz or other genres. Why *is* the soundtrack to *Final Fantasy VI* or *VII* or *VIII* that good? It didn't *have* to be that good, and [I think it's because of the] advanced jazz harmonies in parts, but those are not jazz songs.

ALEX MOUKALA: Yes, when music is written by taking so many inspirations from so many different places, put together in a new mix, that's where it gets very interesting.

RICHARD ANATONE: Years ago, Uematsu lamented the fact that newer game technology was going to create orchestral soundtracks that sounded like film.³

ALEX MOUKALA: [Uematsu often] doesn't try to sound cinematic. The whole way through, he's like, "This is not even my final form," and then he does the orchestra, and you're like, "Oh, my God!"

Final Fantasy X came at the time when the PS2 just came out. The instruments used in that game were more realistic than the others, like the previous *Final Fantasy* games, but they were still a bit quirky in their own way. [For the remaster], they announced they were going to remaster the soundtrack with newer instruments, better quality [etc.]. It did sound "better quality," and more realistic, but it lost a lot. The music for *Final Fantasy X* was meant to sound like *Final Fantasy X*. When they wanted to make something potentially with the PS3, they did it, but it lost that identity, like the way certain melodies [were] written did not deliver anymore. The sound of the guitars did not deliver anymore. So, there is definitely value from choosing to stick to certain types of instruments, rather than going for the best orchestral VST.

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): Max, I really like what you said [earlier] about limitations that breed creativity. I also used to arrange for orchestra [...] then, when I started transitioning into just arranging for solo piano, [I had] to think outside the box so much [and ask], "What I'm trying to achieve right here, and how do I achieve that emotion by what is possible on a piano? I can't just replicate this."

3. Tim Edwards, "Has Videogame Music Become Unoriginal and Hollywood-Obsessed?" *Classic FM*, September 17, 2015, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/periods-genres/video-game/cliche-rut/>.

Sometimes you have to go with what's idiomatic on the piano, instead of just straight up replicating. On a high energy track like "Collapsed Expressway," with a whole rhythm section in the original, I was thinking, "how do I do this without drums?"

Drums are only one part of the rhythm section; the bass is the other. I can cover bass in the left hand, if I can write a super killer bass part, the power of the backbeat will provide enough rhythmic propulsion that you won't miss the drums. I mean you'll miss the drums! But you can get it by without it [*laughs*]*—*and it'll still create that sense of movement and danceability. [It's] hard to learn to play bass lines because there are a lot of octave skips, a lot of skips of tenths. On the bass you can do that so quickly, but on the piano, it's hard!

JAMES DENIS MC GLYNN: One of the most striking things I remember when I heard Ruby's "Collapsed Expressway" and "Midnight Rendezvous" arrangements was how they each drew so much attention to aspects of the tracks that I never really picked up on when I was hearing them in the context of the game. It was so interesting hearing about your process of picking apart the MIDI files and learning that this was exactly the type of thing that you were trying to achieve.

RUBY (PURPLESCHA): The thing with piano reductions is they always brings to the fore a lot of little hidden things. You're like, "Oh, that was in there?" and suddenly it's out [in front].

ON FAN COMMUNITIES, INCLUSIVITY, AND THE JOY OF GAME MUSIC

RICHARD ANATONE: What's evident in all of your performances is that the passion and fun is there. You can tell that you're enjoying what you're doing. When I saw *Distant Worlds*, and Uematsu came on stage to play synthesizer for "Dark World" from *Final Fantasy VI*, you could tell he was loving it, but you couldn't really tell with the rest of the orchestra. But with you three, the passion and fun is so clear.

ALEX MOUKALA: Thank you. I think it's very important. When I was growing up, I remember having an MP3 player without the screen, and there was no shuffle mode, so you only listened to music sequentially. I had the first half of the player full of popular music that was for "normal people," and then as you got to the end, suddenly the *Dr. Mario* theme would play, the *Tetris* theme, *Final Fantasy* music, and even just weird music like "Underneath the Rotting Pizza" [from *FF7*]. And I put it at the end, so when my friends were like, "Hey, can I check your MP3 player?" "Yeah. Just give me a second . . ." I would go all the way to the start of the MP3 player, so then I get forty tracks before they got to the weird part, which is what I really liked. And most people would never get [that far]. Back in the day, I really felt like I needed to hide that.

That was me listening to video game music when I was younger, and it was so weird in Italy. Why was I so concerned with fitting in? I've learned it's much better to be yourself and be proud about it. There're so many people in the world who are going through what I went through. The reason I do what I like with my videos is not only to make music, but I also like the idea of being a demonstration that, "Hey, you can just embrace your weird self, own it, and run with it."

People sometimes see my content and they say, “Wow it’s the first time I see a Black person who likes video game music. That’s so cool, and I’m Black, too! I mean, that’s so cool, I feel liberated.”

Sometimes people know me for my clothing style, and they say, “I bet you dress sharp because you’re from Milan, you know your fashion.” Yeah, I’m from Milan, but I don’t dress sharp because of that. My clothing style is very inspired by the Turks in *FF7*. For several years, I’ve been buying articles of clothing that were directly inspired by games and I didn’t realize it. One day I was playing *Yakuza*—and there’s [a character] with the shirt, with the chains, and I thought, “That looks like my shirt!” I bought the shirt that he has inadvertently! And then I figured out that literally half of my wardrobe was inspired by games. Then I went full-on, and I started buying more clothes inspired by games, to show gamers that actually video games are cool, and if you like them, it doesn’t mean that that’s awkward. That can be an awesome thing, actually.

When I’m dressing like a video game character, I know there’re some people out there are like, “Bruh, this guy is such a loser.” Maybe in your eyes, I am. But to me, I’m not. I know there’re so many video game lovers out there who maybe see that and think, “Wow, I can be like that, too?” Maybe that gives them [a] self-confidence boost. So, that’s also why I do this video game music content, because I want to reach the type of person that I was: I want to be there, and say, “That’s cool, bro.” That’s the reason.

Every time I think about how much certain video games mean to me, my brain is not big enough to comprehend it. It’s very rare for me to be overwhelmed to the point when I cry, *except* when I start playing *FF7* or *Final Fantasy VIII*, and the main theme kicks in with the initial cutscenes, I bawl like a baby. The memories: playing with my brothers, or with my friends, and the things I’ve learned, the afternoons I spent exploring those lands before the internet, getting to the freaking forest where Yuffie steals all my materia, and I get all the way to the end of the CD without all my summons. All these things, they mean so much to me, to a level that I can’t comprehend, even after all these years.

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): It’s such a vivid world, and you cannot explain it to someone unless they get it. There’s almost no way to explain it to someone. For my parents, I was trying to relate it to [the] vinyl albums that meant so much to them. And *that’s* when I started to get it across to my dad. Like my dad loading up the first Led Zeppelin album that his brother brought home, and they put it on the turntable, and the feeling that he gets when he hears that needle hit the record, the scratchiness, and the memories that he has. Or even when he was really young and he saw the Beatles play on Ed Sullivan for the first time. That was the only way that I could relate to my dad what it feels like for my brother and I that were playing these games.

ALEX MOUKALA: Very good comparison.

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): They’re transformative moments that create a world inside of you that’s a dynamic, chromatic memory. You just have to get it somehow, you have to you have to reflect in your own way on it, and video games do that to so many people.

ON UEMATSU'S STYLE

RICHARD ANATONE: There's a lot of discussion about Nobuo Uematsu's composition style and motivic connections. I'm curious: are you aware of these interesting connections between, for example, the Mako reactor and Sephiroth and Shinra Corporation with the main theme? Did he consciously add those?

RUBY (PURPLESCHALA): I wonder if it was the direction he was given, or whether the story informed how he decided to write. Going back to the main theme, you have the opening melody, followed by that foreboding: those minor chords. It's interesting how it starts in D major, then passes into a minor, and then suddenly we're in F minor, out of nowhere, and then suddenly the F minor does that same three-to-five motion again, and then suddenly we're in D minor. The "JENOVA" theme [also] passes through all these keys. It makes a lot of sense. It just shifts keys very suddenly. There aren't a whole array of pivot chords which slowly ease you into these modulations. It just happens. The shift happens very, very suddenly. It's almost like a reflection of how Cloud has these very sudden mysterious little flashbacks, or these breakdowns that happen out of nowhere.

Those sudden harmonic shifts reflect that. And then, when the main theme goes into F minor, to D minor, it's going down this rabbit hole, like when the plotline goes into this rabbit hole, like when Tifa and Cloud fall into the Lifestream after Mideel, that earthquake, and then all the revelations happen. His past gets blown wide open, and you just feel like, "Where's this going?" It's like that. I wonder if Uematsu was given those cues.

RICHARD ANATONE: I want to ask Uematsu like, "Are you conscious of this? How much was the developer? How much was the composer?" It's very difficult to ascertain.

MAX (SMOOTH MCGROOVE): Rick Rubin, the producer, has a quote that illustrates that mysticism behind music that I am attracted to—the depth of it. It's to do with his formative experiences with music, which was the Beatles.

It transcends everything. It's much bigger than four kids from Liverpool. For me the Beatles are proof of the existence of God. It's so good and so far beyond everyone else that it's not them.⁴

To him, the fact that those four guys came together in Liverpool and created that phenomenon—that music that still echoes today—was proof that the universe has some type of order, has some type of system that is, you know, to him, divinity. I feel the same way with *FF7*: with the music of it, and how it came together with the story. I take apart these tracks and I get to look at all of what Nobuo did, and I get to put them back together in my own way, which to me is a privilege: it's a tribute to that. But I step back, and I look at how these were composed and how they fit so well into that world, and I'm in Rick Rubin's shoes, where I almost just need to bow

4. Andrew Romano, "You Listen to This Man Every Day," *The Daily Beast*, June 26, 2013, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130627020553/http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2013/06/26/rick-rubin-on-crashing-kanye-s-album-in-15-days.html>.

down for a second and just appreciate that this is beyond: this is kind of like I'm touching that creativity that comes from the beyond to me, and I get to play with it.

ALEX MOUKALA: Uematsu wrote so many pieces of music [that make us] feel that way, because I definitely feel the same way when I listen to *Final Fantasy* music, it's overwhelming.

RUBY (PURPLESCHA): It's interesting how it's always art that evokes these emotions, because it lends credence to the argument that great art is transformative, and games are *are* art, [and have] become a higher form that transforms us. Whenever you receive great art, you will come away just different, transformed. ■

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