

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- **For Educational Use Only** -

Birth of the People
from
Actraiser

Composed by Yuzo Koshiro
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A ♩ = 90

Transverse Flute I

Transverse Flute II

Transverse Flute III

intentional par 5ths suggest pre-baroque style polyphony

D_m C F C B^b C D_m Same

D Minor: i ^bVII ^bVI ^bVII i Same

F Major: vi V I V

classical cadence

About the structure:

This track is through-composed and loops in its entirety. Therefore, I'll take the analysis section by section.

Overall observations:

For those who haven't played Actraiser, the premise of the game is simple but profound: you are - quite literally - God. You have been awakened from your slumber to - again, quite literally - free the world of Satan and his minions with your miracles and divine, sword-swinging action. This track has quite a special and integral function in the game, then, as it accompanies the game-play mode that the player will spend the most time in: the overworld simulation in which they guide their pious citizens to a happy and prosperous civilization free of nasty, family-snatching demons. As such, the track is meant to set the mood for the *world itself*.

So, what musical choices does Koshiro make?

- The art style of the game is distinctly High Renaissance (ala *The Last Judgement*), so Koshiro matches the music to that style, mixing in very on-the-nose elements of renaissance, baroque, and early classical music.
- The instrumentation is distinctly chosen to represent those eras as well: traverse flutes from renaissance music, a harpsichord from the baroque era, and a full string orchestra (a rare ensemble in early 16-bit SNES games due to the channel and sampler limitations) from the early classical period.
- Koshiro lays the common-practice devices on *thick*. Only in one specific instance (mm. 27) does the music veer from classical style.

The overall effect is that the player is transported into a psuedo-biblical (through a western, Christian lens) world of antiquity. Despite the bleeps and bloops of the early SNES sounds, the effect of the musical is palpable and evocative (and almost certainly turned many a gamer on to classical music in the process)

9 **Bridge** **B**

Trv. I

Hch.

Vlins. I

Vlins. II

Vlas.

Vcs.

pizz.

arco

pizz.

pizz.

1

2

Dm/A

A⁷

Dm

A⁷

i

V⁷

i

V⁷

Specific techniques:

1) A descending tonic chord (Dm) arpeggio is embellished with quick neighbor tones. These neighbor tones also happen to be leading tones, giving the impression of a continuous line of tonic resolutions. This figuration/technique is a common one found in a lot of early classical music.

2) This technique is called the "implied pedal point". In this case, it is a dominant pedal. The red notes hammer away at the dominant note (A) fast enough to give the impression that the note is being somewhat held down, like a true pedal tone. This is a very common technique used in baroque music of all kinds (i.e. Toccata and Fugue in D Minor).

15 C

The musical score consists of three staves: Trv. I (Treble clef), Hch. (Treble clef), and Vcs. (Bass clef). The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into measures 15 through 22. A box labeled 'C' is above measure 15. Below the staves, a sequence of chords is listed: Dm, Gm, C, F, Bb, C#o, A7, and Dm. Roman numerals are provided below each chord: i, iv, bVII, bIII, bVI, ii°, V7, and i. Four numbered circles (1, 2, 3, 4) are placed above the staves to indicate specific motifs or sequences. Motif 1 is a green eighth-note sequence in the Trv. I staff. Motif 2 is a blue sixteenth-note sequence in the Hch. staff. Motif 3 is a red sixteenth-note sequence in the Vcs. staff. Motif 4 is a purple ascending melodic minor scale in the Vcs. staff, starting on A and ending on D. The text 'ascending melodic minor' is written in purple above this motif.

Trv. I

Hch.

Vcs.

③ Dm Gm C F Bb C#° A7 Dm

i iv bVII bIII bVI ii° V7 i

① ② ④

ascending melodic minor

Specific techniques:

- 1) The motif in red repeats itself every other measure. Every repetition moves (sequences) the motif a diatonic step down. Similarly, the blue motif does the same, as does the green motif. This can be called "imitative melodic sequencing".
- 2) The red and blue motif trade off being sounded out between different voices as a call-and-response. This is known as "Antiphonal" writing.
- 3) A harmonic sequence is at play here as well: in this case, it's a diatonic progression by fifths. These aren't *dominant* resolutions, but the root movement is proceeding along the circle from D -> G -> C -> F -> Bb until it breaks the cycle to hit a ii-V7-i.
- 4) All the sequences are ordered in such a way that, in any given measure, there is not so much going on as to overwhelm the listener or distract from any one voice's independence. It's as if they all take turns sharing the spotlight. The rhythms, melodies, etc. *interlock* in a balanced way. For example, take a look at mm. 16: the traverse flute plays eighth notes, the harpsichord plays sixteenth notes, and the cellos play quarter notes. Then, in mm. 17, the rhythmic weight is re-distributed: the traverse flute holds a half note, the harpsichord takes eighths and quarter, and the cellos take a turn playing sixteenth notes. There's not so much a formal name for this technique (that I'm aware of), but this kind of "composite balancing" is a hallmark of good classical music (esp. baroque music).

23 **D**

Hch.

Vlns. I

Vlns. II

Vlas.

Vcs.

Cbs.

arco

leading tone of G

leading tone of F

D7

Gm

C7

F

I⁷

iv

♭VII⁷

♭III

The music picks up the pace and energy by launching into a full string orchestration that is lent a percussive bite from the doubled harpsichord. Many of the same techniques are re-used from the previous section, with the following changes:

- The same circle of fifths harmonic sequence is followed, but this time the extra voices create V7-I resolutions every two measures. This sounds *much* more in the style of classical symphonic music.
- The bass (now cello+doublebass) adopts the insistent drive of a basso continuo, a technique from the baroque era. Because of this, the harmonic resolutions are as much a *horizontal, melodic* phenomenon as they are a *vertical, chordal* one. This is achieved via the leading tones (in red).

27

Hch.

Vlins. I

Vlins. II

Vlas.

Vcs.

Cbs.

chordal 7th, strong beat

chordal 9th strong beat

4th degree of Bb lydian

ascending D melodic minor

Bb^{maj7}

E^{\emptyset}

A^7

D

bVI^7

ii^{\emptyset}

V^7

I

Here is the one exception to all the classicism: the Bb^{maj7} chord is an intentional dissonance as opposed to one that's formed incidentally through passing tones or suspensions. The reason for this is that the dissonance of the major 7th (A) is played on a strong beat *and* in the second highest register (which happens to be the most clearly heard in this mix as it is doubled by the top voice of the harpsichord). Furthermore, the scalar motion in the continuo is that of a *Lydian* scale (E natural instead of Eb) and contributes to the dramatic, modern-ish sound this chord creates.

And, in case Koshiro was worried that the listener might not get that the world he's attempting to musically paint is one of classical antiquity, he ends with a *picardy third*, in which the minor tonic is changed to a major one. The music then unceremoniously loops, whisking the listener back through this memorable romp through classicism once more.