

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS

- For Educational Use Only -

Vampire Killer

from Castlevania

Composed by Kinuyo Yamashita
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1 **A** Dm ③ 2 Bbmaj⁷ C 3 Dm i 4 Bbmaj⁷ C

Lead 1

Lead 2

Bass

Drumset

①

②

i bVI⁷ bVII bVI⁷ bVII

(1) - To overcome the 4-channel limits of the NES soundchip, Yamashita relies heavily on repeated staccato notes in the bass to give rhythmic drive and excitement to the track.

(2) - Another limitation of the NES sound-chip was a single noise channel for percussion. To maintain rhythmic clarity against the heavy use of syncopation in the melody, the snare stays firmly on the backbeat while the hi-hat (almost always) accentuates the downbeat. The bass/kick drum is not used because the soundfont would conflict/blend too much with the bass-line (no side-chaining for the NES, poor thing...)

(3) - Yamashita uses heavy syncopation in the melody to create as much interest in the music as possible, given the NES's limitations.

(4) - This iconic theme is shared between two lead voices.

-- The antecedent phrase, handled by the top voice, lands on B natural (in RED), briefly borrowing from the parallel Dorian mode. This brightens the tone up considerably, *almost* sounding like a major chord.

-- The consequent phrase, handled by the bottom voice, finishes the phrase out on C natural, the subtonic (natural minor's more mellow alternative to the leading tone).

-- The bass takes us back to the tonic mode (Aeolian) and reinforces a bVI - bVII - i cadence, an unmistakably adventurous sound.

2 All these musical choices add up to the music decisively telling the player that, despite featuring monsters and dungeons, this is *not* a horror game, but an action game. The music empowers and inspires action, not fear.

5 **B**

Ld 1.

Ld 2.

Bs.

D. Set

① ②

6 7 8

(1) - Highly chromatic parallel fifths/fourths that glide over the leading tone and #4 of the scale lend a "spooky" sound to the music. Notice the following:

- *mm. 5 & 7* - The voices play in unison, and in droning parallel fifths/fourths.
- *mm. 6 & 8* - The voices are contrapuntal, wildly dissonant with each other.

These choices aren't accidental. With such limited data available on the NES, Yamashita and other composers had to do everything they could to keep 16-bar looping tracks (like this one) from getting annoying/boring.

(2) - In *mm. 6* and *mm. 8*, chromatic counterpoint emphasizing the #4 (and thus tritone above the tonic) create irregular rhythms and jarring dissonances, a simple yet musically creative way to evoke the sounds of laughing, jeering monsters and other creepy dungeon dwellers chittering away in the dark, almost as if they are mocking the player.

Amazing what even the most limited tools can evoke...

9 **C** C#°7 ① Dm C#°7 Dm C#°7 Dm C#°7 Dm C#°7 A7

Ld 1.

Ld 2.

Bs.

D. Set

vii°7 i vii°7 i vii°7 i vii°7 V

(1) - The harmony vamps between the leading tone diminished 7th and the tonic chord.

Get it? Vamps...?...

I'll be here all night, folks!

(2) - The notes in RED are from the melodic minor scale, indicating a melodic resolution to the tonic.

13 14 15 16

Ld 1. **D** Dm Bb C Dm Bb Am^7 ②

Ld 2. ①

Bs.

D. Set

i bVI $bVII$ i bVI v^7

- (1) - The triumphant bVI - $bVII$ - i cadence from the A section returns, granting both resolution to the "spookier" tone of the previous two sections and paving the way for a smooth loop back to the beginning of the track.
- (2) - To further aid a smooth loop, the final chord is the minor seventh, not the dominant. This keeps the music from having a certain sense of finality, which in turn facilitates better looping/repetition.