

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- For Educational Use Only -

Corridors of Time

from

Chrono Trigger (SNES)

Composed by Yasunori Mitsuda
Transcription/Analysis by Seventh Sam
www.seventhsam.com

Marimba

Intro ♩ = 112

The musical notation shows a marimba part in 4/4 time with a tempo of 112. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The melody consists of a repeating eighth-note pattern: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5. The notes are grouped into slurs that cross bar lines, with the first slur spanning the first two measures and subsequent slurs spanning the second and third measures of each measure pair. A circled number '1' is placed below the first measure.

(1) - The iconic marimba ostinato serves as the rhythmic and harmonic foundation of the track. Several observations:

- While the downbeats sound out a Bm(add4) chord, there's more to it than that. Notice that I haven't labeled the chord: this is because it's not really a *chord* in the functional sense, but a quartal/secundal backdrop that juxtaposes colorfully and evocatively with the rest of the track's melodic and harmonic elements. As is his style, Mitsuda uses simple triadic harmony, melodies, and progressions from a familiar mode (F#natural minor/Aeolian) and then extends the chords and accents the dissonance; this ostinato is the main way he achieves this effect in this track. To my ears, this is the key to how he created such a fantastical, enchanting soundscape that perfectly paints the picture of a magical kingdom floating in the sky.

- As the slurs above are meant to indicate, the implied groupings of the ostinato are arranged in such a way that they cross bar-lines (5+4+4+3 8ths over two measures of 4/4). This is completely intentional, as it lines the ostinato up with the upcoming bass and tabla grooves in such a way that the high notes of the ostinato are accentuated.

5

Vo.

Si.

Mar.

Tb.

Bass

①

highest pitches of the ostinato line up with rests in the drum groove

③

1 - and - uh 2 - and - uh 3 - and

② F#m E C#m

i bVII v

(1) - A sitar glissando, idiomatic of classical Indian music (albeit simplistically), takes the listener out of "orchestral western music" territory and into a different kind of world - perfect for an "otherworldly" location like Zeal. It also serves to root the track in F# minor.

(2) - As mentioned on the previous page, Mitsuda creates the game's signature harmonic style by taking simple triads, surrounding them with dissonances and extended tones in the outlying range of the track and emphasizing those dissonances. Here, he does so by emphasizing the extended tones in the bass (D in mm. 5, F# in mm.7-8). The triads in the vocal part are simple and have basic harmonic function, but when heard in conjunction with the bass and marimba, the listener hears a beautiful harmonic tapestry that perfectly exemplifies Mitsuda's attempts to create a unique kind of music that, in his own words: "wouldn't fit into any established genre...music of an imaginary world."

NOTE: For simplicity's sake, I will note the chords as dictated by the basic triads and their implied harmonic function. The actual chords heard are much more dense/extended, but since the "full chords" are largely (although not entirely) an incidental result of juxtaposition with the ostinato and mainly for coloration, I won't include those symbols.

(3) - The track is in 4/4, but just barely. The rhythmic underpinning is a Calypso Rhythm (3+3+2), which is actually a common rhythmic motif throughout the soundtrack. The groove here is finely crafted to be neither too complex nor too simple; this is important as the music is meant to loop *and* serve as a backdrop. Too much complexity draws attention, while too much simplicity gets boring too quickly. It's a delicate (and subjective) balance, but one I think Mitsuda does a good job striking here.

9 **A** **1**

Vo. 1 and uh 2 and uh 3 and 1 and uh 2 and uh 3 and

Si.

Mar. **2**

Tb.

Bass

F#m

i

E

bVII

borrowed from
parallel Dorian
mode

G#m

ii

C#m

v

(1) - Rounding out the catchy, solid groove are the staccato triads "ha"-ing (for lack of a better term) on the second downbeat of the first two eighth note groupings. The same technique (voicing basic triads in staccato offbeats) is utilized by Mitsuda in the main theme of the game. Perhaps the similarity is just due to Mitsuda preferring that technique, but I also think there is something to be said for it being a conscious artistic choice to tie the soundtrack together as a whole.

(2) - A rhythmically diminished version of the Calypso rhythm forms the foundational motif of the track's intoxicating melody. In fact, the Calypso rhythm forms the foundational motif for a large chunk of the music in the soundtrack; the 3+3+2 grouping can be found in track after track after track, including the Theme of Crono (the main theme of the game). Needless to say, leitmotifs don't have to be melodic - they can be rhythmic, harmonic, or even textural in nature. This is a case of a rhythmic leitmotif.

Vo.
 Si.
 Mar.
 Tb.
 Bass

F#m

C#m

A

C#m

A

i

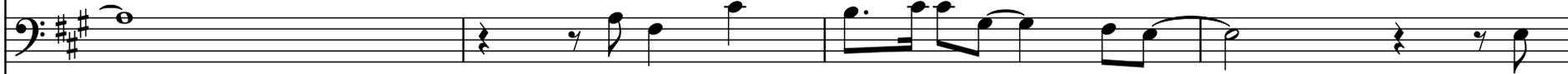
v

bIII

v

bIII

Vo. 

Si. 

Mar. 

Tb. 

Bass 

F#m

E

G#m

C#m

i

bVII

ii

v

21

Vo.

Si.

Mar.

Tb.

Bass

D E F#m

bVI bVII i

(1) - The A section closes with a bVI-bVII-i cadence - a "reverse Andalusian", if you will - that utilizes the distinct sound of the Aeolian mode's *subtonic-to-tonic* resolution (as opposed to common practice harmony's *leading tone-to-tonic* style of resolution). My ears inevitably associate this kind of harmony with fantasy and folk music. I'm guessing Mitsuda's ears might have thought the same: a floating island kingdom of enlightened sorcerors above the clouds is about as fantasy as it gets! These kinds of artistic choices matter a lot more when you take into account that Mitsuda was tasked with setting music to an entire timeline - from 60,000,000 B.C. to 2300 A.D. and everything in-between. Musical cues - such as modal, Aeolian harmony - help more clearly define the mood and nature of each time period, thus helping the game establish contrast and retain the player's interest.

30

Vo.

Mar.

Tamb.

Tb.

Bass

E A E F#m E F#m E F#m

\flat VII \flat III \flat VII i \flat VII i \flat VII i

(1) - Anyone familiar with the works of Debussy might be noticing a certain Impressionist technique being borrowed by Mitsuda in the B section. A fan of Debussy himself, Mitsuda utilizes *chordal planing* (in this track and others) to turn entire triads into a kind of "composite voice"; each note is not really heard as a distinct harmony, but more like a part of a "thickened melodic line". This is why - if you glance at the roman numeral analysis - the chords are diatonic but don't seem to follow any kind of functional progression.

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The lead up to the track's loop point is the only time the bass breaks from 3+3+2

BQ (B-F#-B-E) E F#m E A **①** Dmaj7 C#m7
 (...there's gotta be a better way to notate this...) \flat VII i \flat VII \flat III \flat VI⁷ v⁷

(1) - Here I'll notate the chord extensions (up to the 7th) being implied because these are not incidental coloring, but functional. How so? Pre-dominant to dominant to tonic, a cadence which brings the music to a "close" (which really means the loop point). Of note is that the dominant is a *minor seventh* dominant chord, so we still get that mellow subtonic-to-tonic resolution; this keeps the music from feeling too finished and helps it loop seamlessly.

Musical score for five instruments: Voice (Vo.), Maracas (Mar.), Tambourine (Tamb.), Trombone (Tb.), and Bass. The score is in the key of F#m (three sharps: F#, C#, G#) and consists of four measures. The Voice part features a long, sustained note with a fermata. The Maracas part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Tambourine part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The Trombone part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The Bass part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents.

F#m

i