

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- For Educational Use Only -

Millenial Fair

from
Chrono Trigger

Composed by Yasunori Mitsuda
Transcription/Analysis by Seventh Sam
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Intro ♩. = 64 ①

Honky Tonk Piano

Upright Bass

Tambourine

Hand Clap

②

③

D C D C G^{odd4} A

I \flat VII I \flat VII IV V

D Mixolydian:

(1) - The key signature is D Major, but a good chunk of the melodic and harmonic material in this track is derived from the parallel Mixolydian mode. What Mixolydian is and how it works is a topic beyond the scope of this analysis, but suffice it to say that - when used as a diatonic, largely triadic tonal center - it gives the music an unmistakably cheerful, energetic, and down-to-earth sound. It's also very heavily associated with folk music (among other things) and invokes, in a non-derogatory way, a "commoner's" sound. Since this track is meant to score the scene of a crowded and happy festival, Mitsuda's choice to write the music largely in Mixolydian seems like a no-brainer.

(2) - The first example of mode mixture is here, in *mm.* 4. Mitsuda pulls from the parallel Ionian for the dominant chord (A Major) to allow for a strong, decisive resolution from the intro into the track proper.

(3) - The original plays a sample of a crowd shouting "Hah!" here, but since MuseScore doesn't have "Hah!" in its default soundfonts, I opted for the hand-clap as a replacement.

Honk.

Up. B.

Tamb.

Mrcs.

Con.

ONE and TWO and

ONE and uh TWO and uh ONE and uh TWO and uh etc.

D

I

The rhythm section is quite dense for an SNES track since only 8 channels were available at one time. Devoting so many to percussion is then a measured and deliberate choice on Mitsuda's part; he allocates nearly half the available musical resources to percussion to create the distinct impression of a large gathering of percussionists, as if the townsfolk had gathered into a drum circle to celebrate.

BREAKDOWN OF THE RHYTHM SECTION:

- The tambourine keeps the 6/8 pulse. (See the notes in RED and the "lyrics" as a visual aid)
- The piano assists the tambourine in keeping the pulse in the second beat of each measure (see the notes in RED)
- The bass introduces vaguely cross-rhythmic figure. What do I mean by "*vaguely cross-rhythmic*"? If you look at the notes I've highlighted in BLUE along with the tambourine, you'll see a consistent 2:3 poly-rhythm emerge in every beat. However, this effect is quickly subverted by the melodic structure of the bass: it plays its highest (and therefore most accentuated note) right on time with the *last* subdivision of each beat. This reinforces the standard 6/8 rhythm, so the cross-rhythm is subtle at best.
- The congas augment the bass line. Notice how the pattern in the second beat syncs up with the three 16ths from the bass line - the muted hit (the X note-head) falls right on time with the high D in the bass.
- The maracas add more syncopation to the rhythm, placed in order to "frame" the conga and bass line flourishes. Where there is space in its groove, the others ring out, and vice versa.

Mitsuda was certainly adept at creating tight, well-designed rhythm sections, and this track proves to be no exception to that.

9 **A** 10 11 12

Honk.

Acc.

Up. B.

Tamb.

Mrcs.

Con.

D C/Am⁷ D

I v⁷ I

(1) - One of the characteristic harmonic movements inherent to the Mixolydian mode is the *minor* dominant chord (v) to the *major* tonic chord (I). This has a mellow, smooth sound that makes the music want to keep going. Mitsuda gets very clever here, though, and takes it a step further by extending the chord to a 7th. He isn't just trying to add dissonance; he's also achieving two harmonic functions with one chord:

- First, while the entirety of the chord being heard is Am7, three of that chord's notes are C-E-G, which is C Major, the bVII of the Mixolydian mode. *Another* characteristic progression of Mixolydian is the subtonic (bVII) major triad to the tonic (I) triad. That's exactly what we hear in the piano, and we get a distinct and festive Mixolydian sound.
- However, the chord is Am7 since we have A in the bass. Mitsuda chose to place that note here for one very good reason: it resolves upwards via a perfect fourth to the tonic (D) from *mm. 11-12*, similar to a dominant-to-tonic cadence in the Major key.

The musical score is arranged in six staves, each representing a different instrument: Honk. (Honky-tonk), Acc. (Accordion), Up. B. (Upright Bass), Tamb. (Tambourine), Mrcs. (Maracas), and Con. (Congas). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score covers measures 13 through 16. Measure 13 starts with a D major chord (I). Measure 14 features an Am7 chord (v7). Measure 15 returns to a D major chord (I). Measure 16 contains a G major chord (IV) followed by a D major chord (I). The Honk. part is characterized by a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The Acc. part provides a melodic line. The Up. B. part has a steady eighth-note bass line. The Tamb., Mrcs., and Con. parts provide a complex, syncopated rhythmic accompaniment.

ABOUT THE INSTRUMENTATION:

While the original contains almost completely synthesized sounds, by the time of the SNES soundchip the technology had reached a point where the composers could do more than just saw and square waves. This meant instrumentation was a factor, and Mitsuda takes advantage of that in this track by assigning "folk" instruments to the various parts.

- It's not a piano, it's a rag-time-ish honky-tonker.
- The melody is carried by an accordian, an instrument that can't help but suggest a feeling of "being amongst the people".
- The percussion is made of various hand drums and shakers, not snare drums and timpanis.
- The only vaguely orchestral instrument we ever hear is something resembling a piccolo.

Ultimately, all of this adds up to a timbre - 16-bit as it may be - that is decidedly *not* classical or orchestral, but very "folk" instead.

17 **A'** 18 19 20

Honk.

Picc.

Up. B.

Tamb.

Mrcs.

Con.

D

I

Am⁷

v⁷

D

I

Repeat of A section, but the Piccolo takes the melody.

21 22 23 24

Honk.

Picc.

Up. B.

Tamb.

Mrcs.

Con.

Clp.

D I

Am⁷ v⁷

D I

G IV

D I

①

(1) - It's worth noting, at this point, that the melody has been starting and ending on the note A rather than the note D (the tonic). Why? In the section following this one, the tonal center shifts from D Mixolydian to A Mixolydian - a subtle modulation, but one that has the potential to be jarring (in a way that would detract from the music). By pre-emptively focusing the melody around the note of A (and thus somewhat tonicizing it), this transition is made smoother.

25 26 27 28

Honk.

Acc.

Up. B.

Clp.

①

②

G A G A G D A

A Mixolydian: \flat VII I \flat VII I \flat VII IV I

(1) - As mentioned on the previous page, the music switches to A Mixolydian (which matches the key signature). The harmony vamps between \flat VII and I before resolving with what is possibly the most widely heard Mixolydian cadence out there: \flat VII-IV-I. Who knew that AC/DC was playing at the millennial fair?

(2) - The dense, cross-rhythmic complexity calms down to a straightforward 6/8 groove with the hand claps keeping pulse on the backbeat(s):

- The hand claps are an interesting choice: it's as if the music is painting a sonic picture of the townsfolk gathering around to clap along to the music. One could go farther with this narrative interpretation, imagining the "players" of the piano and accordion jamming out together, encouraged by the happy crowd.
- A more sober, technical reason for the rhythmic thinning is that Mitsuda could not voice the harmonies in the accordion and piano without going over the 8 channel limit.

29 30 31

Honk.

Acc.

Up. B.

Clp.

G A G A G D

\flat VII I \flat VII I \flat VII IV

Repeat of first B section, but with asymmetrical phrasing that transitions into the C section.

Honk.

Acc.

Up. B.

Clp.

Cmaj⁹

A⁹

D Major: *bVII⁹*

V⁹

So far, the harmony is been almost entirely formed around simple, diatonic triads. So what's with these big old 9th chords all of a sudden?

Two answers:

- They sound nice
- They facilitate voice leading that suggests a IV - V - I resolution to the next section's key of D Major.

The specific voice-leading techniques Mitsuda is employing in these measures are much easier examined with a visual aid, so I've included an in-depth explanation at the end of this analysis. See the final measures (past the repeat) to read it!

C

Honk. 36 37 38 39

Picc.

D Major: D G E **①** A

I IV V/V V

Honk. 40 41 42 43

Picc.

The music takes 8 measures to serenade the player with a cherubic, purely polyphonic mixture of high register piccolo and piano. I've colored the 5 different melodic voices accordingly, as they can be hard to discern due to the similar timbre and register (not to mention the overlapping voices). *Note: while these eight measures are polyphonic in texture, that does not mean Mitsuda is attempting to follow Baroque counterpoint rules/theory or achieve its type of sound.*

(1) - The use of a secondary dominant (E major) in *mm.* 38 allows for chromatic voice leading in the inner voice (highlighted in dark blue)

Bridge

44 45 46 47

Honk.

Picc.

Acc.

Up. B.

Tamb.

Con.

D Mixolydian: D C D D C D

I \flat VII I I \flat VII I

One of the unique challenges of composing music for video games is that the time spent hearing the score is *indefinite*, meaning most - if not all - of the music will need to be able to loop endlessly. How, then, does a game composer create great, iconic music that doesn't **a)** have an awkward and un-musical transition at the loop point or **b)** sound like a boring copy-paste job?

This section is one of many fantastic examples of how to approach this potential problem with creativity and craft. Mitsuda could have simply looped back to the Intro section and called it a day - technically, it would work and sound *okay*. Instead, he spares some valuable SNES data to create an 8 measure bridge section that uses melodic material from the Intro, rhythmic material from the A section, and new material in the piccolo and accordion to punctuate the phrases and drive the music forward.

This all *feels* like a Recapitulation or Coda, which would normally *end* a piece of music. The listener gets the same "hit" from this - they feel a swell of excitement as the music prepares to come to a joyous close in *mm.* 50-51. We hit the dominant chord, hear the "Hah!" sound, and could very, *very* easily land on a final D major chord and end the piece. Instead, we loop right back to the second part of the Intro - as seamless and musically smooth as it gets in the 16-bit era.

In short, Mitsuda expertly handles the musical looping by creating a bridge section that *also* sounds like a coda.

48 49 50 51

Honk.

Picc.

Acc.

Up. B.

Tamb.

Con.

Clp.

D C D C G^{add4} A7

I $\flat VII$ IV V⁷

Detailed description: The image shows a musical score for measures 48 to 51. The score is written for seven instruments: Honk. (Horn), Picc. (Piccolo), Acc. (Accordion), Up. B. (Upright Bass), Tamb. (Tambourine), Con. (Conga), and Clp. (Clarinets). The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#). Measure 48 starts with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The Honk. part has a melodic line with a wavy line above it. The Picc. part has a rhythmic pattern. The Acc. part has a rhythmic pattern. The Up. B. part has a melodic line. The Tamb. part has a rhythmic pattern. The Con. part has a rhythmic pattern. The Clp. part has a rhythmic pattern. The chord symbols below the staff are D, C, D, C, G^{add4} , and A7. The Roman numerals below the staff are I, $\flat VII$, IV, and V⁷.

To further illustrate what I mean about Mitsuda creating an interchange-able Bridge/Coda, see the example given in the measures after the repeat.

(1) - In the last measure (*mm.* 51), the accordion plays a descending A Mixolydian scale. This implies an A7 chord, as the tonic seventh chord of the A Mixolydian scale is - you guessed it! - A7.

Honk.

Picc.

Acc.

Up. B.

Tamb.

Con.

Clp.

In the above example, I've taken the last four measures - almost unchanged, save for a few notes added at the end of the "final" measure - and created a brief ending.

Since Mitsuda crafted the bridge (and in this case, "coda") section so well, the music glides effortlessly into any kind of finale. Of course, the actual track *doesn't* do this, but the fact that it *could* makes the loop point so much more musically interesting than if he hadn't created a bridge section at all.

Pno.

The above is a simple reduction of the various voices and voice leading in *mm.* 32-35 of this score.

The above is a simple reduction of the various voices and voice leading in *mm.* 32-35 of this score.

- The entire chordal motion revolves around the note E as a "pivot" note (held by the accordion). This has been highlighted in green.
- In the bass (which is arpeggiated in the actual track), we hear the root, fifth, and ninth (as a passing tone) of the respective chords. It's worth noting the quintal spacing (spacing by fifths) of the bass line gives the harmony a lovely, "open" sound characteristic of more modern harmonic styles.
- The real magic of this particular voicing happens with the upper and inner voices, however. In the actual track, these are doubled an octave apart by the honky-tonk piano and the accordion. In this reduction, these voices are highlighted in red:

Notice that, in the Cmaj9 chord, they voice the notes G-B, which are the root and third of G Major. G Major is the IV of the key of D Major, which is what we are leading up to. Now, notice that these voices move from G-B to A-C#, which are the root and third of A Major, which is the V of the key of D Major.

So, you can see how Mitsuda is "hiding" (and/or "enhancing") a standard IV-V-I resolution with more robust, colorful extended chords.

Also, notice that these voices move *upwards*, allowing the leading tone resolution to be clearly heard (see above). In actuality, the resolution in the actual track isn't *chordal* (it leads into a contrapuntal section instead), but the tension and subsequent release is very clearly implied and felt by the listener.