

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- For Educational Use Only -

The Dreadful Fight
(Battle with the Four Fiends)
from Final Fantasy IV

Composed by Nobuo Uematsu
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Intro

Am ♩ = 83

E7(b9)

Strings

Brass

Cymbal

Concert Bass Drum

Electric Bass

(1)

(2)

i

V^{7b9}

(1) - The four lead voices - high/low strings and brass - are playing in unison and doubled at the octave. Even though they are playing one melodic line over the tonic note in the bass, there is tonic-dominant tension throughout the line. I'll explain in detail (refer to the color-coded notes and slurs to see what I mean):

- The RED note groupings use the leading tone of G# and certain notes of the scale to tonicize/imply the A minor (tonic) chord.
- The BLUE note groupings use the secondary leading tone (D#) and the dominant note (E) to imply - roughly - the dominant chord.
- Thus, using the leading tone and certain emphasis/weight on parts of the scale, a single melodic line sounds like it has an incredible amount of harmonic motion.

Notice, too, how the groupings get smaller and "squeezed" towards the peak of the phrase. This rushed harmonic rhythm plunges the listener immediately into the jagged, threatening, and highly dramatic track that follows.

The musical score consists of five staves. The first staff, labeled 'Str.', has a treble clef and a 7/8 time signature. It begins with a boxed 'A' and a circled '(1)'. The second staff, labeled 'Brs.', also has a treble clef and a 7/8 time signature. The third staff, labeled 'Cym.', has a double bar line and a 7/8 time signature. The fourth staff, labeled 'BD', has a double bar line and a 7/8 time signature. The fifth staff, labeled 'El. B.', has a bass clef and a 7/8 time signature. The score is divided into two measures. The first measure is in 7/8 time and the second measure is in 4/4 time. The notation includes various rhythmic values, rests, and accidentals, with some notes marked with a '3' or '4' indicating triplets or quadruplets.

(1) - Technically, these are not diminished chords, but just bare tritones/augmented fourths. Hardly a comforting sound, these are clearly used to signal danger and fear to the listener. This fight will *not* be easy.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE STRUCTURE:

Unlike previous battle themes, Uematsu chooses an almost entirely through-composed structure for this track (the E section is the only one that repeats). Additionally, he varies the metric symmetry and phrasing heavily between sections; some are steady and easy to follow, while others contain contours and rhythms that jump all over the place. The cumulative effect is similar to that of a roller-coaster, full of jarring and exciting turns that keep the listener on their toes (and interested). The reason for these choices is clear: Uematsu wants this fight theme to stand out, to unequivocally signal *danger* and *hardship*.

Even with all this chaos, Uematsu wisely chooses to ground the music in a very static harmony, rarely deviating from the tonic A minor chord, the dominant E major chord, or the sub-mediant F major chord (and all the 7th/extended variations thereof). Occasional chromaticism is used for effect, but you'll notice that the harmony never travels too far in tone or structure from its, dare I say, *dreadful* sounding tonic.

Am7 F/A Am6 F/A Same

5 6 7 8

Str. (1)

Str. (2)

Brs.

Cym.

BD

El. B.

(1) - Taken together, each of these two measure phrases could be considered one measure of 13/8 (3+3+3+2+2 groupings). The groupings of 3 are punctuated by the cymbal crashes, with the timpani rolls lending an additional hand in accentuation. This asymmetrical rhythm has a disorienting effect, as if the music is being "pushy" and rushing the listener. However, I chose to write it out as a measure of 7/8 followed by 3/4 for formatting reasons...

(2) - The harmony is formed by contrary motion in the top strings (RED) and the top brass (BLUE) moving against bass pedal of A and the lower strings and brass reinforcing the other chord tones.

- The top strings move *up* chromatically from E to F# and back again.
- The top brass move *down* chromatically, from G to E and back again.

This overlapping motion subtly shifts the "fifth" of the chord up and down over an unchanging root and third, creating a smooth, subtly dissonant change of harmonic coloration over what *sounds* like the tonic chord. This is quite similar to harmonic techniques used in other soundtrack music, such as the James Bond theme.

9 **B** $E7(b9)$ 10 $Fmaj^9 (2)$

Str. (1)

Brs.

Cym.

Hat

BD

El. B. (3) V^{7b9} bVI^9

(1) - The rhythm and meter stabilize, giving the listener a *brief* reprieve from the chaos preceding.

(2) - Another reprieve comes from the harmony, a vamp between two chords that create a dramatic, desperate, *slightly* hopeful sound. This is because the harmony - while technically on the V and bVI of the tonic minor chord - is *also* on the I (major tonic) and bII chord of the dominant key (Could be thought of as the Phrygian Dominant, the fifth mode of harmonic minor).

(3) - Broken octaves in the bass line use one channel to create the impression of two voices an octave apart, making it seem like there is more low-end than there really is. This is a useful technique for composers with limited voices/resources at their disposal.

11

Str.

Brs.

Cym.

Hat

BD

El. B.

$E7(b9)$

$Fmaj9$

12

(2)

(1)

$V7b9$

$bVI9$

(1) - Rapid, agitated scalar motion is used throughout this track to keep the music frenetic and jumpy, to keep the listener's nerves on edge. These flourishes are not over-used, but appear at strategic times in the music to signal cadences, section changes, etc. Voicing them in thirds thickens the sound and creates the impression of a larger orchestra despite the sound fonts.

(2) - The choice of a thundering bass drum over the usual drum kit in this track is quite intentional. Uematsu wanted this track to stand out from the other battles as more threatening and dire (hence the title). The use of this war-like drum pulse keeps the music from sounding "safe" or "cool", something a drumset might do.

13 **C** G Dm7 E7 14 G Dm7 E7

Str. (1) (2)

Brs.

Cym.

BD

El. B.

bVII iv⁷ V⁷ bVII iv⁷ V⁷

(1) Variation of the Andalusian (bVII-bVI-V) cadence, with the Dm7 chord containing the notes F-A-C (the bVI chord)

(2) The "call and response" arrangement in this two measures is an effective way of generating intrigue and interest. Strategic use of silence and thinning out the voices shake up the loud *tutti* that's been heard up until now. It makes the listener wonder, "What's coming next? Is the fight going to get even *harder*?"

15 **D** ^{Am} **(1)** ^{E^ø/A} ^{Am} ^{Em/A} ^{Am} ^{E^ø/A} ^{Am} **(2)** ^{Am} ^{G[#]m} ^{A[#]m} ^{Am}

16 17 18

Str.

Brs.

Cym.

Hat

BD

El. B.

i ii^ø i V i ii^ø i

(1) The harmonic choices, oscillating over the pedal of A to a steady pulse, communicate one thing to the player: "Tremble and despair." If the previous measures posed a question: "Is this fight going to get worse?", the musical answer is "*Much* worse." The ii half-diminished chord and minor dominant chord create a very dark, unrelentingly *mean* sound.

(2) - Another effective use of sudden, rapid motion. The listener has been lulled into a despondent stupor by the previous measures, and is quickly slapped awake by a loud, chromatic passage that catapults into the ensuing section.

19 **E** *Am*

20 *B Am B*

Str.

Brs.

Hat

BD

El. B.

(1)

(2)

i II i II

- (1) - Another instance of implied harmonic motion in the bass line. The slurred notes (in RED) imply a dominant to tonic leap.
- (2) - The irregular phrasing in the brass section (which carries the melody) is particularly effective in creating a halting, rhythmically disorienting effect. The first measure of 4/4 builds up and gradually completes its motif (the first slur), then awkwardly repeats it on the first *upbeat* of a truncated 2/4 measure. This makes the music feel rushed, like it has to "catch its breath". The end result is that the music - as it has done so well before - keeps the player/listener on their toes the whole time.

Am B Am

21 22

Str.

Brs.

Hat

BD

El. B.

i II i

B B \flat A A \flat A \flat °7 G°7 G \flat °7 F°7 Am E Am

23 (1) 24

Str.

Brs.

(2)

Cym.

Hat

(3)

BD

El. B.

i V i

(1) - Descending chromatic chords give a dizzying sense of "falling apart", as if the player was hit so hard they started seeing stars.

(2) - Another skillful use of silence and thinned-out voicing to punctuate the music and retain interest.

(3) - The rhythmic groupings increase the sense of falling, as if the listener is reaching terminal velocity:

-- The first four groupings are in 3

-- As the measure comes to a close, they truncate down to four groups of 2

-- Then, in *mm.*24, the awkward, syncopated figures gradually die out. The music, like the exhausted but determined player, has a moment to catch its breath.

NOTE: The bass slides down in the original, but I couldn't replicate that accurately in MuseScore.

25 **E'** 26

Str.

Brs.

Hat

BD

El. B.

The section repeats exactly.

27 28

Str.

Brs.

Hat

BD

El. B.

This musical score segment covers measures 27 and 28. Measure 27 is in 4/4 time, and measure 28 is in 2/4 time, with a 5/4 time signature at the end of the measure. The score includes parts for Strings (Str.), Brass (Brs.), Hat, Bass Drum (BD), and Electric Bass (El. B.). The strings and brass play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The hat plays a consistent eighth-note pattern. The bass drum has a single hit in measure 27 and a pattern in measure 28. The electric bass line features a melodic sequence with various accidentals.

29 30

Str.

Brs.

Cym.

Hat

BD

El. B.

This musical score is for a percussion ensemble, spanning measures 29 and 30. The score is written for seven parts: Strings (Str.), Brass (Brs.), Cymbal (Cym.), Hat, Bongos (BD), and Electric Bass (El. B.). Measures 29 and 30 are in 5/4 time. At measure 30, the time signature changes to 4/4. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The strings and brass parts play a melodic line in measure 29, which continues into measure 30. The cymbal, hat, and bongo parts play a rhythmic pattern in measure 29, which continues into measure 30. The electric bass part plays a melodic line in measure 29, which continues into measure 30.

31 **F** *F* *Am7* **(3)** *F7* *Am7* *F* *E*

Str. **(2)**

Brs. **(1)**

Hat

El. B.

32

bVI *V*

(1) - The slurred melodic line in the brass (highlighted in RED) is a melodic inversion of rising chromatic string part from the beginning of the piece. (See *mm. 5-7*)

(2) - The voices in the strings double the brass line an octave below (highlighted in BLUE). The "echoing" of the descending figure in the lower strings sets up the next phrase (*mm. 33*) for the string rip effect to come.

(3) - The harmony in *mm. 31* - via the chromatically descending figure in the brass *over* a fixed bass-line tracing the chord of F major achieves the same "gliding of the fifth" device that was used in the beginning of the track (See *mm. 5-7*)

(4) - The voices unify into a half-cadence that then deceptively resolves to the *bVI*. This has the effect of prolonging the tension until the loop point two measures later.

33 F E Eb E 34 Dm G#^o7/D E7^b9 Am/^{maj}7 E7 (2)

Str.

Brs.

Cym.

Hat

BD

El. B.

iv vii^o7 V^b9 i⁷ V⁷

(1) - The strings descend the A Harmonic Minor scale in thirds, setting up the highly dissonant dominant (and secondary dominant) chords to follow.

(2) - Uematsu sets up a very decisive cadence here, but makes the very skillful choice of looping the track not to a tonic chord, but to the *common-tone diminished chord* (or, truthfully, a tritone of A-Eb). This means the music doesn't really "resolve" at all and slams the player/listener *right* back into the action. This is an extremely deft way to use the "problem" of needing the track to loop to the composer's advantage, because it plays right into mood of a exhausting, consequential, and nerve-wracking battle.