

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- For Educational Use Only -

Dancing Mad

(3rd Phase)

from Final Fantasy VI

Composed by Nobuo Uematsu
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♩ = 82

Organ

The image shows a musical score for an organ. It consists of three staves. The top two staves are grouped by a brace on the left and labeled 'Organ'. The top staff is in treble clef, and the middle staff is in bass clef. Both are in 4/4 time and have a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The top staff contains a whole rest in the first measure and a whole note in the second measure. The middle staff contains a whole rest in the first measure and a whole note in the second measure. The bottom staff is in bass clef, also in 4/4 time with the same key signature. It features a long, sustained note that spans across both measures, indicated by a horizontal line above the note head. The note is a G-flat (two flats below the middle C).

Context (Spoiler Warning):

Final Fantasy VI is, fundamentally, a story about hope versus despair. The very end of the game sees the child-like psychopath Kefka (the game's antagonist) betray and murder his way to god-like power over the entire world. He's all but completely obliterated it, allowing a small group of survivors to live so that he can torment them like a bored cat toying with broken woodland prey. The player - in control of the heroes of the game - clings to life and hope regardless, rebuilding from tragedy and devastation to meet Kefka's nihilistic reign of terror head on and (hopefully) end it.

For such a monumental, climactic battle, Uematsu composed a four-part battle theme (a rarity on the SNES due to data limitations). Each part accompanies a phase of the battle: the first three score the battle against the subjugated, petrified corpses of the old gods upon which Kefka sits, having fashioned them into a twisted throne. The final phase is against Kefka himself.

This particular track is the third, and is particularly interesting in its use of particular musical style and devices (namely Baroque counterpoint) to invoke a specific mood. The first two phases of the battle are loud and pulse-quickenning, full of sinister harmonies and orchestral thunder. Here, however, he flips a switch and slows things down to a downright beatific organ solo. Given the narrative stakes outlined above, why on earth would Uematsu do this during a *battle*?

This is one of my favorite instances of subversive *genre dissonance* in any soundtrack I've heard. The majesty, religiosity, and grandeur of the organ and its association with imitative counterpoint *absolutely clash* with the vindictive, vulgar, and hateful character that is Kefka and the visuals of tormented, mangled god-creatures that the player is fighting. This unsettling juxtaposition *perfectly* captures - in musical form - Kefka's shameless mockery of all that is joyful and sacred.

3

Org.

"subject" (Db)

ascending motif

motif sequenced down a 3rd

descending motif (inverted)

①

②

"answer" (Ab)

rhythmically augmented motif

Db

Ab Db Eb7 Ab

③

Key of Db: I

Key of Ab: I IV V⁷ I

V⁷ Ab Eb7 Ab

V⁷ I V⁷ I

(1) - Uematsu deliberately alludes to not only counterpoint, but *imitative* counterpoint. We have here a pseudo-invention, complete with an answer at the dominant. This isn't an attempt at a specific baroque form, but rather a pastiche of stylistic devices that - to most listeners - will immediately evoke the intellectual gravitas that this style of counterpoint has come to represent in western musical culture. See the various highlighted portions above to see the specific imitations in action.

(2) - These short two measures are those in which Uematsu adheres to traditional counterpoint rules the most. As far as I can tell, no par. 5ths/8vs, improperly resolved suspensions, properly treated dim. 5th in mm. 6, etc. (This doesn't include the pedal voice in mm. 5, but it's possible I didn't transcribe/hear that correctly).

(3) - Uematsu implies (I say implies because counterpoint, being more *horizontal* than *vertical*, creates harmony incidentally as much as it does deliberately) I, IV, and V chords only. How much more "on the nose" can you get when trying to evoke the common practice musical tradition?

All of the above establish this as a very major-key, very baroque, very powdered-wig affair. All the more deliciously strange, then, that it accompanies such a *dissonant* situation.

7 implied pedal of Db

neighbor tone is also leading tone, reinforcing tonal center and key

Org. ①

Pedal tone on tonic, alluding to the baroque practice

Db Gb Ebm7 Db Db Gb Ebm7 Db

I IV ii⁷ I I IV ii⁷ I

(1) - A pedal tone, both implied and held (see colored marginalia). Additionally, a persistent neighbor tone acts as a persistent leading tone, which continually "resolves" to Db and reinforces both the tonal center and the mode (Ionian). While this isn't counterpoint, it's baroque, and still falls within the realm of what Uematsu is trying to evoke.

(2) - A pseudo choral (dare I say, *chorale*) interlude introduces such pomp and majesty that - given the circumstances of the track - one might almost think Kefka is putting on a little ceremony for himself, basking in his self-defined, narcissistic glory.

15

Org.

aug 2nd of harmonic minor

$D^{\flat}m$ $G^{\flat}m A^{\flat}7$ $D^{\flat}m$ C° $D^{\flat}m$ $A^{\flat}7$

i iv V^7 i vii $^{\circ}$ i V^7

But not even the most imperious of organs can keep a psychopath hidden for long. The theme switches abruptly to the parallel minor and deliberately avoids the melodic minor ascension to the tonic at the end of mm. 17, instead opting for the very sinister - and very un-baroque - sound of the augmented 2nd interval.

It's as if Kefka's horrid nature is beginning to corrupt the "good will" of the music, his fetid evil beginning to sonically leak into what we are hearing.

switch to C#m, enharmonic of Dbm
to better read/understand this modulation

19

Org.

leading tone to E

e melodic minor

a dorian (relative of e minor)

C#m D#° E/B F#m/A Em Am

Key of c#m: i ii° bIII Key of em: i iv

Key of E: vii° I ii

Harmonic plan breakdown:

Uematsu is aiming for the key of G minor over the course of the following modulatory passages.

mm. 19 - Switch from Db to C#m for enharmonic reasons. We go to the ii chord of C#m (which is diminished). This acts as the leading tone chord for E major and resolves to that key. From there, we go to the ii of E major, which acts as a modal pivot chord to the parallel minor (F#m is the ii chord - a dorian chord - of e minor).

mm. 20-21 - Now whisked into the key of E minor, these two measures follow a i - iv progression. The iv chord (A minor) serves a pivot chord, acting as the minor dominant to D major. Indeed, it resolves then to D major, which is the dominant of our target key - G minor - in *mm. 22* on the next page.

This whirlwind of temporary modulations and modal pivots is Uematsu's way of introducing a "thunder strike" into the harmonic rhythm of the track, keeping the listener on edge and engaged in the battle. The shift in tone suggests that the evil of Kefka is starting to come loose.

22

Org.

D C F B \flat E \flat

Key of Gm:

V

i

circle of fifths, etc. etc.

A prelude-like circle of fifths progression prolongs the modulation via one of the most common...well, common-practice period devices of all.

25

Org.

A	D	Gm	D7	Gm	G7	Cm	D7 ^{b9}	Gm	D7 ^{b9}	Gm
V/V	V	i	V ⁷	i	V/iv	iv	V ^{7b9}	i	V ^{7b9}	i

The following measures are much more *free* counterpoint than *imitative*.

Even so, there are hints of motivic reusal that I have indicated via marginalia above. I've highlighted some, but not all; there are certainly more to be found!

Notice, too, that the rules of counterpoint are less strictly observed in favor of more dissonant chaos, chromaticism, and "vertical" style arpeggiation. The two melodies are less evenly balanced, less contoured and legible. Was this a deliberate artistic choice, or simply Uematsu's relative lack of contrapuntal training?

Given the solid counterpoint towards the beginning of the piece, I would err on the side of "intentional". While there are parallels, etc. to be found in the above passage, the differences in rhythm and register maintain enough voice independence for my ear to register this as counterpoint. Furthermore - when factoring in the "arc" of the music - it's clear that this section is "corrupted": Kefka's evil has seeped out of the organ pipes and contorted the brief major-key respite into his own twisted, chaotic meandering as emphasized by the haphazard nature of the above passages.

The cumulative effect is that of a little music journey, an effective subversion of expectations that - within the confines of an unsettlingly juxtaposed gameplay situation - gives the player the distinct feeling that they are in the presence of a *mocking, sneering* villain with a twisted sense of humor.

What lovely moment of musical storytelling!

motif C (retrograde)

28

B \flat	Q	E \flat maj7	B $^{\circ}$	Cm	B \flat maj7/D	E \flat maj7	F ^{add4}	E \flat	D7	Gm
\flat III	?	\flat VI ⁷	vii $^{\circ}$ /iv	iv	\flat III ⁷	\flat VI ⁷	\flat VII	\flat VI	V ⁷	I

31

Org.

$D^{\circ 7}$
 $D^{\circ 7}$ $E^{\flat 7}$
 $E^{\flat 7}$ $G^{\circ 7}/D^{\flat}$
 $A^{\flat 9}_{sus^4}$ $A^{\flat 9}$

The track grinds to a near halt with toccata-like diminished arpeggiations, completely abandoning anything *but* the dire sound of tritones until it finally lands on very idiomatic treatment of a dominant 9th chord that whisks the player/listener back to the beatific beginning of this phase.