

# VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS

## - For Educational Use Only -

# Cosmo Canyon

## *from Final Fantasy VII*

Composed by Nobuo Uematsu  
Transcription/Analysis by Seventh Sam  
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1 **Intro** ♩ = 64 ①

2

Tambourine

Bass Drum 1

Bass Drum 2

(1) - The track begins with a straightforward, driving 4/4 bass drum rhythm (or - more than likely - what are meant to sound like o-daiko). With a few exceptions, the rhythm doesn't vary. This makes it easier to loop the track indefinitely as the rhythm can serve as a familiar bridge between sections (*see the last page of this analysis for elaboration*). Since this music is specifically meant to play during a "town" area, constructing the music with too much contrast and movement would suggest more drama than the setting asks for.

**NOTE:** This is an example of a *rhythmic leitmotif*. Often, leitmotifs are thought of as only melodic in nature, but there's no reason a particular rhythmic groove can't also serve the purpose of drawing attention/association to a character, place, idea, or situation.

(2) - You might be wondering why there are two bass drum staves when the rhythm could easily be attributed to one. In the original, the two drums are panned hard left and hard right. This isn't *exactly* double-tracking, but the effect is similar - to create a "wider-than-life" stereo image and spatial impression.

(*Technical note: to avoid phase cancellation, the hard-left and hard-right tracks use different bass drum samples/soundfonts. This is the case in both the original and in this transcription, and something to keep in mind if you are looking to do the same in your own music/mixes.*)

①

②

Bass

Tamb.

BD 1

BD 2

i iv i

(1) - The bass-line motif (in RED), the drum rhythm, and the Koto ostinato (coming up in the next section) are all direct quotations from a track heard earlier in the game: none other than Red XIII's Theme. Since this track plays during the player's visit to that character's hometown, it's fairly obvious why these leitmotifs appear in this track.

(2) - During the intro, the bass line mimics the I - IV - I sound of the first part of a traditional 12-bar blues progression. In Uematsu's work blues often equals "cool", and Red XIII is thus far a "cool" character.

### **OBSERVATIONS:**

When the player first meets Red XIII, the character is presented as strong, gruff, wise, and generally awesome. This is reflected in the "coolness" of the above leitmotifs; musically, they suggest nothing but an extremely capable, fire-tailed dog thing that says wise things and kicks lots of butt. Later on, throughout the player's visit to Cosmo Canyon (in which this track plays), they become aware of the more vulnerable, emotional side of Red XIII, a side they haven't been exposed to yet. This vulnerability is introduced, musically, in the B section with new melodic material and - later in the game - in "The Great Warrior", another track related to Red XIII and his backstory.

### **This is a wonderful example of both musical foreshadowing and storytelling in general:**

- Uematsu foreshadows the reveal of Red XIII's vulnerability by hinting at the thematic material associated with that aspect of his character during the player's visit to this town.
- Likewise, during this town theme he uses sound to help tell the story of a conflicted character. The theme of the gruff, "cool" exterior and the theme of the scared, vulnerable interior play side by side during this track, creating *musical* contrast that mirrors the *narrative* contrast.

8 **A1**  $E_m7$  ①

9  $G$

Tin W.

Ko.

Bass

Tamb.

BD 1

BD 2

BD 3

$i^7$   $\flat III$

(1) - Final Fantasy VII is - among other things - about the struggle to save the planet from environmental calamity, whether caused by human greed or inhuman madness. Thus far, the player has been treated to a soundtrack full of synth, rock, and grunge elements, symbolizing the pollution and "dirtiness" of human civilization. This track is one of the first times the player visits an area that is "at one" with the planet. Uematsu, then, employs several musical devices to create the appropriate mood:

- The melody is carried by what sounds like a Tin Whistle (*the soundfont is a Piccolo - best I could do with MuseScore's default capabilities, sorry...*). The timbre of the instrument itself is immediately evocative of Celtic folk music, which most listeners would associate more with nature than civilization. In a similar vein, a zither-type instrument (Koto, in this case) plays the ostinato as opposed to the more "formal, civilized" orchestral harp.
- Many grace notes and pitch bends adorn the melody. Grace notes like these are idiomatic of a lot of non-orchestral styles of flute playing, further distancing the music from formality and "civilization".
- During the A and A' sections, both the melody and harmony stick to the E minor *pentatonic* scale. As the "scale heard around the world", pentatonic minor is well associated with many pre and/or non-western musical traditions. It also is capable of evoking the peaceful, subdued sound that suits the area so well, as if we're all gathered around a bonfire under the twilight sky.

10 *Asus<sup>4</sup>* ① 11 *Em<sup>7</sup>* 12

Tin W.

Ko.

Bass

Tamb.

BD 1

BD 2

BD 3

iv i<sup>7</sup>

(1) - This is an Asus4 chord in *name only*, as this chord doesn't resolve its suspension (D) in the usual fashion. Instead, Uematsu maintains the suspension right into the tonic Em7 chord. Why? Three reasons:

- To facilitate silky smooth voice leading in the Koto part. The notes highlighted in RED in *mm. 10* move "inwards" to the notes highlighted in BLUE in *mm. 11-12*. (See above for a visual illustration.) Meanwhile, the inner voices retain the subtonic (D) to tonic (E) oscillation characteristic of the minor modes.
- To keep the piece in E pentatonic minor, since the note C does not belong to that scale. Introducing it in this chord would change the feeling of this section of the track considerably (It would make it sound a lot more melancholy.)
- To emphasize the subtonic to tonic resolution in the bass line. Since D is both the suspended note in Asus4 *and* the subtonic degree of E minor, this chord fits the bill nicely. See the notes highlighted in PURPLE to see what I mean.

This non-traditional chord usage culminates in a lovely, serene alternative to the usual dominant -> tonic resolution and creates a harmonic coloration that is much more appropriate to the desired mood.

13 **A'**  $E_m7$   $G$  14

Tin W.

Ko.

Bass

Tamb.

BD 1

BD 2

BD 3

$i^7$   $\flat III$

The A section repeats almost exactly.

*Asus<sup>4</sup>*

*Em<sup>7</sup>*

15 16 17

Tin W.

Ko.

Bass

Tamb.

BD 1

BD 2

BD 3

*iv*

*i<sup>7</sup>*





Em

Am

C

22

23

24

Tin W.

Strs.

El. Guit.

Bass

Tamb.

BD 1

BD 3

i

iv

bVI

**(1)** - Tension leading to the dramatic climax of the track is built by the following elements:

**a)** T.W. and Strings doubling at the octave, supported by more strings a sixth below. These melodically sequence up in pitch (rising tension) against the top string voice holding the tonic note. Thickening and unifying the melodic voices "focuses" the music, drawing the listener's attention towards the crescendo.

**b)** For the first time, the bass (and electric guitar accompaniment) stop the 16th note motif and play steady half notes. This clear change in rhythmic (and harmonic) content *also* signals to the listener that a crescendo is happening.

*...continued next page...*

F#°      E<sub>m</sub>

25 26 27 28

Tin W.

Ko.

Strs.

El. Guit.

Bass

Tamb.

BD 1

BD 2

BD 3

ii°      i

...continued from last page:

- c) The drum rhythm picks up in pace along with the tambourine. The bass and guitar reinforce the downbeats.
- d) More and more held notes from more and more string voices chime in, rising in pitch. Rising pitch = rising tension.
- e) In *mm.* 26, the ii degree half-diminished seventh chord steps in to fill a dominant function, and we get a decisive yet *still* somewhat mellow resolution. Note the descending melodic motion characteristic of the minor modes (in RED) is doubled at the octave in order to emphasize this motion to the tonic.

29 30

Ko.

Bass

Tamb.

BD 1

BD 2

BD 3

And now the reason for the repetitive 4/4 rhythmic lietmotif becomes clear. As the crescendo becomes a diminuendo, we transition *seamlessly* back to the A section. The groove is already in the listener's head, the familiarity already established. In any other medium this would be overly repetitive, but in a non-linear, interactive narrative (such as a video game) the music is just one of many elements that help to tell the story.

Here, it serves its purpose well: the player is able to focus on other elements of the game *and* - at the very same time - reap all the storytelling benefits of the deft, nuanced, and concise manner in which Uematsu develops Red XIII's contrasting themes.

It's this attention to detail - the delicate balance between struck between broad ambience and specific drama - that make this music (and so much of Uematsu's output) not just good video game music, but *great* video game music.