

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- For Educational Use Only -

Death by Glamour
from Undertale

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A ♩ = 140

Piano 2

Drumset

CORE leitmotif

②

① Em¹³

LOL

Where do I even begin? Undertale is such an absolute masterpiece that it's taking every ounce of willpower not to write a gigantic essay on why it's one of the most creative, well-written, and thoughtful works of art in all of video game history. I will do my absolute best to try and stay focused on the track at hand :-)

CONTEXT: The player is in control of an (as of yet) unnamed human protagonist who finds themselves trapped in an underworld full of quirky monsters with a...*tense* relationship towards humankind. In a quest to return to the surface, the player encounters a robot - named Mettaton - that has been accidentally programmed to try and murder any human it encounters. After several close calls, the player is finally forced to confront Mettaton in a climactic battle that...turns into nothing less than a televised dance-off to the death as the robot transforms into an *absolutely fabulous* mixture of David Bowie, Prince, and...you get the idea. This track accompanies said battle/dance-off.

This is arguably one of the best tracks in the entire soundtrack. It sounds fantastic and is emblematic of Fox's unique and genuine musical voice, but it's also a treasure trove of thematic coherency. No less than *three* leitmotifs are woven into this track and - as a self-proclaimed leitmotif enthusiast - I couldn't be more thrilled! So, let's get into the nuts and bolts (robot puns, yay) of why and how this track works:

(1) - There's one "chord" for the entire section: Em¹³. Every note in the E Dorian scale is used in this section, and every note in the E Dorian scale belongs to the Em¹³ chord. Those just learning harmony might recall that the essential notes required to imply an extended chord are the root, third, seventh, and extended tone. And waddya know - in the motif, we get E (root), G (third), C# (13th), and D (7th) as our first four notes. A clever fox, that Toby...

(2) - This melody is one of three leitmotifs used to tie this battle to previously experienced situations. This particular theme is that of the dungeon (the CORE) that the player *just* traversed, the one that Mettaton is the "boss" of. Leading with this motif creates a great sense of continuity in gameplay as the player *just* heard this (albeit in a different key and context).

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Pno.2, Pno.3, and D. Set. The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Pno.2 starts with a measure rest of 5 measures. Pno.3 starts with a measure rest of 8 measures. D. Set starts with a measure rest of 2 measures. The score consists of four measures of music. Pno.2 and Pno.3 play a complex, layered melody, while D. Set plays a simple, rhythmic accompaniment.

The entire A section is composed using 2-4 measure loops that layer on top of each other, which is why you see two "piano" tracks. This is idiomatic of electronic dance music, which is appropriate as the battle is a dance-off.

9

Strs.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

D. Set

8

8

- (1) - This texture is very dense (and there are more layers on the way), so Fox ensures the rhythm stays intelligible by aligning the syncopation so avoid *too* complex of a composite rhythm (see the colored notes above)
- (2) - The strings are the first of many timbres that will introduce a very "disco" feel to the track. Not only is this just an immense amount of fun, but it fits the situation to a T.

13

Strs.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

Clap

D. Set

ties match up, keeping coherency

8

8

17

Trance

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

D. Set

8

8

21

Trance

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

Clap

D. Set

25

①

Rob. Nz

Trance

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

SFX

D. Set

It wouldn't be a love letter to retro games without the almighty orchestra hits!

(1) - I'm not entirely sure what sound Fox used for this lead, but the articulation of the phrase is meant to sound very robotic. Liberal use of staccatissimo, pitch bends, and other little intricacies make digital sound come alive.

(2) - I believe this sound effect is the "Mario Jumping" sound effect. Not entirely sure...

Rob. Nz

Trance

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

SFX

Clap

D. Set

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for page 29 and consists of nine staves. The top staff, 'Rob. Nz', is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. It features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including some triplets and rests. The second staff, 'Trance', is also in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, playing a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with slurs. The third staff, 'Strs.', is in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, featuring long, sustained notes with a tremolo effect. The fourth staff, 'Orch.', is in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing mostly rests with some short, sharp notes. The fifth staff, 'Pno.1', is in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, playing a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with slurs. The sixth staff, 'Pno.2', is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, playing a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with slurs. The seventh staff, 'Pno.3', is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, playing a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with slurs. The eighth staff, 'SFX', is in common time with a key signature of one sharp, featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The ninth staff, 'Clap', is in common time with a key signature of one sharp, featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The tenth staff, 'D. Set', is in common time with a key signature of one sharp, featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents and a final chord.

33

Rob. Nz

Trance

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

SFX

D. Set

This musical score page contains measures 33 through 36. The score is arranged in eight staves. The top staff, 'Rob. Nz', is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. It features a complex melodic line with many beamed notes and rests. The second staff, 'Trance', is also in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, mirroring the rhythmic patterns of the first staff. The third staff, 'Strs.', is in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing long horizontal lines indicating sustained chords. The fourth staff, 'Orch.', is in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, showing sparse notes and rests. The fifth staff, 'Pno.1', is in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, featuring a rhythmic accompaniment of chords. The sixth staff, 'Pno.2', is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, providing a bass line with eighth notes. The seventh staff, 'Pno.3', is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, also providing a bass line with eighth notes. The eighth staff, 'SFX', is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a series of eighth notes with a dashed line above it. The ninth staff, 'D. Set', is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, featuring a series of eighth notes with 'x' marks above them. The score concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 36.

Wah

Rob. Nz

Trance

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

SFX

Clap

D. Set

11

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, page 37, featuring a variety of instruments. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The instruments are arranged in a vertical stack from top to bottom: Wah (bass clef), Rob. Nz (treble clef), Trance (treble clef), Strs. (treble clef), Orch. (treble clef), Pno.1 (treble clef), Pno.2 (bass clef), Pno.3 (bass clef), SFX (percussion clef), Clap (percussion clef), and D. Set (percussion clef). The Wah part is mostly silent with some activity at the end. Rob. Nz and Trance play complex, rhythmic patterns with many beamed notes and slurs. Strs. has a long sustained note in the first measure followed by chords. Orch. plays chords. Pno.1, Pno.2, and Pno.3 play melodic lines with chords. SFX and Clap provide rhythmic accompaniment. D. Set plays a complex, rhythmic pattern with many beamed notes and slurs. The page number 11 is located at the bottom right corner.

41 **B** "Metal Crusher" B Theme

Wah

Trance

Orch.

D. Set

Synth.

Syncopated sub-bass creates a "rushing" rhythm that propels the music along.
Also creates rhythmic contrast with previous "four to the floor" section

C	B	A#maj7#5	B	Em	D	Em	D
<i>Key of E:</i> bVI	V	vii ^{7#5} /V	V	i	bVII	i	bVII

The B section switches to the parallel minor and the track takes a dark, intimidating turn; it's as if the music is reminding the player that - while this is fun and all - this David Bowie robot is still trying to murder you :-)

(1) - The second leitmotif emerges, this time the theme of Mettaton itself. This theme comprises the B section of "Metal Crusher", the battle theme that accompanies the various skirmishes with Mettaton that have preceded this climactic dance-off. Here the theme is largely intact (ensuring the player will recognize it), but it's subtly altered to fit this track's needs.

45

This melody deftly combines angular leaps with chromaticism to ensure memorability

Wah

Trance

Orch.

D. Set

Synth.

Little fill punctuates the end of the phrase group (known classically as a "period")

Same

Same

Wah

Trance

Orch.

D. Set

Synth.

This musical score consists of five staves. The top staff, labeled 'Wah', is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and contains a melodic line with various note values and accidentals. The second staff, 'Trance', is in treble clef with the same key signature and features a series of chords. The third staff, 'Orch.', is also in treble clef with the same key signature and contains a sparse melodic line. The fourth staff, 'D. Set', is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp and includes a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes and rests. The bottom staff, 'Synth.', is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp and contains a rhythmic line with eighth and sixteenth notes.

53

$D\#_{maj7\#5}$

$G\#$

Key of C#:

$V^{7\#5}/V$

V

(1) - A sudden, startling modulation comes out of nowhere, injecting levity and serious energy into the already frantic pace of the track. Despite the abrupt shift in register and tone, the progression is a logical secondary dominant cadence, utilizing a chromatically altered chord (the $maj7\#5$) to progress to the dominant of the target key of C# (a minor third away from our home key, E).

Why does that matter? Well, Fox wanted to create a sudden and exhilarating effect, and there's little better way to do that - harmonically speaking - than a fast modulation to a chromatic mediant!

57 **C** Chordal 11th **4**

A. Sax.

Trance **2**

Pno.1 Chordal 7th Chordal 7th

Perc.

D. Set

El. B.

1 C#m11 Bmaj7 B#°7

Key of C#: i¹¹ bVII⁷ vii[°]

(1) - Don't let the key signature fool you: we're in the Dorian mode again, characterized by the bVII and ii chords. Fox also utilizes 7ths and extended tones to drench this section in a modernity. The tonic 11th chord feels right at home with the retro, disco vibe.

(2) - The instrumentation of this section is:

a) A *great* contrast with the previous section, which is not only very fun (and funny) but *engaging*.

b) An over-the-top tip of the hat to the "disco" sound.

(3) - The piano stabs are entirely in Clave rhythm. It's a dance-off, so a dance rhythm seems appropriate!

(4) - Aaaand, lest we forget...the third and final leitmotif appears in this section, this time quoted from the track "It's Showtime!", itself a silly piece that plays when Mettaton broadcasts various reality-TV murder-plots starring the player (*hard to explain, I know...*). Point is: the silliness of the leitmotif is re-woven into an entirely different context. Why does this matter? It ***mirrors the evolution of Mettaton's character***. It's no longer a silly, comedic foil - it is now a full-on, bad-ass dancing machine of death ready to help you meet your maker in style, baby! (Still comedic, but bad-ass nonetheless...)

A. Sax.

Trance

Pno.1

D. Set

El. B.

C#m11

D#m7

G#m7

B7

i11

ii7

v7

bVII7

A. Sax.

Trance

Pno.1

Perc.

D. Set

El. B.

This musical score page contains six staves for measures 65 through 70. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 8/8. The A. Sax. part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Trance part consists of a few sustained notes. Pno.1 plays a complex chordal accompaniment with many beamed notes. Perc. has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with 'x' marks. D. Set has a steady bass line of quarter notes. El. B. provides a bass line with eighth notes.

A. Sax.

Trance

Pno.1

D. Set

El. B.

This musical score page contains five staves for measures 69 through 74. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 8/8. The A. Sax. staff features a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The Trance staff consists of a single bass line with a few notes. The Pno.1 staff has a complex texture with many beamed notes and rests. The D. Set staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with 'x' marks above them, indicating a specific sound effect. The El. B. staff provides a bass line with quarter and eighth notes.

Outro

73

Rob. Nz

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.3

D. Set

Synth.

E_m^{13}

And we're back in E Dorian. The A section's material is shuffled around to intensify the timbre and propel the listener towards the ecstatic finale. Other than pointing out the guitar-solo like "cadenza" in the lead voice, there's little left to be said about this track, theory-wise. However, there *is* something to be said about why this track *just works*:

Quite simply, it's music from Toby Fox's expansive and unfiltered imagination. No market testing, no trend-chasing, no playing it safe. Undertale - and its music - has a place in video game history not because it's a love letter to old, nostalgic games or because it has a particularly enthusiastic fanbase. No, it's because the game - and its music - is authentic, incredibly well conceived and written, and crafted with a level of depth, heart, and integrity that's quite lacking from 90-95% of AAA games.

Okay, I couldn't resist gushing a little about Undertale...c'est la vie!

77

Rob. Nz

I have no idea how to transcribe these two measures, sorry...

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.3

D. Set

Synth.

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score for measures 77-79. The score is arranged in a system with seven staves. The top staff is for the vocal line, Rob. Nz, in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). A red annotation, consisting of a curved line with two dots, is drawn over the vocal line in measures 77 and 78, indicating a specific musical element that the transcriber is unsure of. Below the vocal line, the other staves represent instrumental parts: Strs. (Strings), Orch. (Orchestra), Pno.1 (Piano 1), Pno.3 (Piano 3), D. Set (Drum Set), and Synth. (Synthesizer). The instrumental parts are written in various clefs and include notes, rests, and articulation marks. The drum set part uses 'x' marks to denote hits. The synthesizer part is in bass clef. The overall style is contemporary classical or film music.

Rob. Nz

81

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.3

8

8

D. Set

Synth.

This track actually *does* loop in the game after this point. Perhaps a point of criticism that the loop point could be better, but I honestly didn't notice it while playing...I was too busy having fun!