VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- For Educational Use Only -

Into the Darkness

from
Final Fantasy IV

Composed by Nobuo Uematsu
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(1) - The first two measures of this track are nearly identical to the last two measures of the track. By making the intro and "outro" so similar, the track disguises the repeat and keeps the music flowing despite the actual track's brevity. This is a very effective technique for creating looping VGM.

(2) - Harmonically, Uematsu is employing the so-called "Petrushka Chord", which is effectively two major triads the roots of which are a tritone apart. If played all at once, the chord would sound extremely dissonant. Instead, Uematsu alternates the strings between the two chords every sixteenth note, creating a textural "pillow" of ethereal, otherworldly harmony that doesn't so much dissonant as it does enchanting and intriguing.
Furthermore, he's setting up a cadence to the A section, since one of the chords in the "Petrushka" conglomeration is C major, which is the dominant of the target key of F. Additionally, the target *mode* is F Phrygian, which is characterized harmonically by the bII chord. And, wouldn't you know, the bII chord of F Phrygian is Gb Major, which is the second half of the Petrushka chord outlined above. In this way, Uematsu is setting up the ensuing tonality for the A section.

(3) - Uematsu's choice of 6/8 for a dungeon theme is unusual, but effective. The "swaying, lilting" feel this time signature imparts create much more mystery and a lot less danger.

This track is meant to accompany most of the dungeon areas in FFIV. Most of these dungeons are old, misty caverns and vast, ancient tombs full of mystery and wonder. How does Uematsu communicate this through the music?
- Aside from the electric bass, there is no ominous rumble, no scary croaks or groans of low ponticello strings. Instead, we have a flute, a glistening harp, and high strings. The composite timbre is one of wonder, not menace.
- The hat - while an unremarkable rhythmic accompaniment - sounds distinctly like a far-off echo, creating the impression of a wide-open space.
- The i-bII Phrygian vamp that forms the backbone of this section's accompaniment is dark, but not scary. Ominous, portentious, intriguing is more like it.

Chordal 7th

Fl.
Hrp.
Vlns. I
Vlns. II
Vlas.
Hat
El. B.

Fm

i

Ebm7

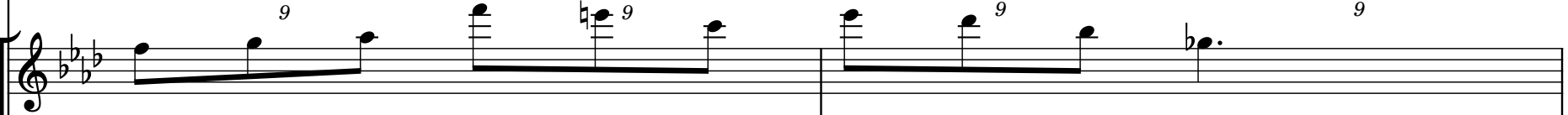| Key of F:	♭vii^7
Key of Ab:	v^7

With the Db sounding in the melody (colored above), Uematsu extends the Ebm to an Ebm7. Instead of serving a Phrygian subtonic function (bvii-i), the chord now serves as the minor dominant of the relative Mixolydian (Ab Mixolydian). The result is a mellow, almost relaxing shift to the contrasting B section.

This short motif...

Key of Ab: I   v⁷

The B section introduces a much brighter tonality (Ab Mixolydian) to the track, as evidenced by the I-v7 vamp.
Why does Uematsu introduce this kind of sound in a *dungeon* theme?
One could chalk it up to simple aesthetic taste, but there are two observations I take away from this choice:
- Contrast creates interest. This music is prevalent throughout the soundtrack and loops a lot, so making the music interesting is of prime importance.
- This dungeon theme isn't meant to sound menacing or overwhelmingly dark *because* it appears in so many locales. Using this brighter tonality helps the track be more generally applicable.

...is repeated here!

Ab
I

Key of B:
Bm
i

G
♭VI

Speaking of contrast:
Uematsu throws in a surprise abrupt modulation via chromatic mediant (Ab -> Bm). This has a jarring effect (but not unpleasantly so). It's as if the player has turned a corner and suddenly encountered something ominous, threatening, or unsettling. In this way, Uematsu is using the music to tell a mini-story which - of course - makes it infinitely more interesting than a simple drone or ambient pad.

Bm

i

C#m

v/v

Secondary minor dominant
(C#m -> F#m -> Bm)

F#m

v

High register chromatic bass
lick helps "glue" the phrases
together, avoiding too much
boring dead space.

This E7 chord does not serve a dominant function. Instead, it serves as another chromatic mediant progression. Why E7? Because it voice leads nicely to *both* C major and Gb major, which are the two superimposed triads that make up the Petrushka chord (the chord that makes up the intro/bridge sections.

Bridge

Notes of Gb Major

This is called the Tritone scale,
a synthetic scale made up of two major triads
whose roots are a tritone apart.

Notes of C Major

Tritone scale's notes line up with the implied harmony of the strings,
alternating the triads with each note. The result is an extremely dissonant
chord that doesn't sound that dissonant.

The last two measures are nearly identical to the first two measures, which makes this "outro" a de-facto "intro". This technique of preceding the loop point with material that is near identical to the intro is one of the most seamless ways a VGM track can loop without introducing awkward silence or abrupt transitions. It is highly likely that Uematsu composed the beginning and end of the track *first*, and *then* filled in the middle when he knew the loop would work.