

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- For Educational Use Only -

Let The Battles
Begin
from Final Fantasy VII

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A1 ♩ = 352

The musical score for Section A1 is written for a large ensemble. The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- Flute:** 16/8 time signature, with a rhythmic pattern of (3+3+3+3+2+2).
- Trumpets:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- French Horns:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Trombones:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. An annotation states: "The low brass riffs on the classic FF battle motif:".
- Tuba:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Timpani:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Snare:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Dynamics range from *mf* to *p*.
- Toms:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Tambourine:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Cymbal:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Hi Hat:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Metal:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Violins I:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. An annotation points to a note: "b2 scale degree from Phrygian mode".
- Violins II:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. An annotation points to a note: "blues note (b5)".
- Violas:** 16/8 time signature, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

SECTION A1:

4 measures serve as both intro and recurring section. It is "home base" for listener, and so the rhythm and harmony are most static. This familiarity also helps with the loop point - a final measure at the very "end" of the track overlaps into the second measure of this section, helping to achieve a seamless transition over and over again.

RHYTHM:

For the majority of the track, the pulse is in an odd meter (3+3+3+3+2+2). Why? Asymmetry creates tension - our brains want the rhythm to "resolve" to a steady pulse. Instead, the end of the measure "unsteadies" with shorter groupings, rushing the music forward to the next measure. This enhances the energy and drive of a battle theme.

HARMONY:

This section concerns itself more with tonal centering than chords per se. The first four beats of the measure dwell on the tonic of F minor, while the last two beats dwell on the b2 and b7 degrees (characteristic of Phrygian). Flourishes are thrown in for good measure, but the overall effect is that of a vamp between tonic and the Phrygian equivalent of leading tones that "crunch" back into the tonic.

3

The image shows a musical score for the track "HOT POTATO". The score is written for a full orchestra and includes the following instruments: Tpts. (Trumpets), F Hns. (Flute/Horn), Tbns. (Trombones), Tba. (Tuba), Timp. (Timpani), Snare, Toms, Tamb. (Tambourine), Cym. (Cymbal), HHat (Hi-Hat), Vlins. I (Violins I), and Vlins. II (Violins II). The score is in 3/4 time and features a complex, rhythmic melody that is passed between various instruments. The dynamics range from *mf* (mezzo-forte) to *p* (piano). The score is marked with a "3" at the top left, indicating a three-measure rest or a specific tempo marking.

HOT POTATO:

The majority of this track eschews a "single instrument takes the melody" approach for a more orchestrally-friendly one: passing the melody around between different instruments. In fact, the melody is not so much a singular contour, but a collection of figures and flourishes that zip from one to the other at a very fast pace. The overall effect is both explosive and kaleidoscopic; the listener is continually "knocked around" and "jostled", taken off guard and surprised by the music. Why take this "angular" approach? It keeps the listener *highly* engaged and excited, which is what one wants for this kind of battle theme (especially given that FF7's battles were somewhat slow paced, gameplay wise).

5 **B**

Fl.

Tpts.

F Hns.

Tbns.

Tba.

Timp.

Snare

Cym.

Metal

Vlns. I

Vlns. II

Fm Ebm Db Abmaj7/C Bbm7

SECTION B:

Three measures creates macro-rhythmic asymmetry, further keeping the listener on their toes. Without a predictable rhythmic framework, the music feels more through-composed and thus gives the music forward momentum.

Less like a dance, more like a story. Uematsu will continue to use this to his advantage throughout the track.

This section, unlike the A section, has a contour to it. The melody rises, and the harmony progresses to an inflection point.

- The melody is an ascending F minor scale (without the b6) sequenced atop various harmonizations that support the bass line moving in contrary motion. Why no b6? That scale degree almost always "darkens" the sound. This section is meant to be brighter, more hopeful - a brief surge of player victory before returning to the initial baseline of threat.

- All the counter-melodies differ in subtle ways from one another. This helps the section feel less copy-pasted and more organic.

- The melody is passed from horns to trumpets to flute+strings and thus ascends in octaves centered around C4, C5, and C6. Using timbral elements (orchestral instruments and ranges) to take the *same* melody, repeat it three times, and yet imbue it with escalating tension and excitement.

- The harmony follows the rhythmic pulse, descending (root-movement wise) from F to Bb in order to set up a iv - i cadence to return to the A section. The counter-melodic motion (which is in lockstep with the main melody's rhythm; an Uematsu favorite) is either doubled in thirds or closely follows the scale/mode implied by the bass movement. In the first measure, it's F minor. Second, Db Lydian (parallel Lydian). Third, Bb Dorian (parallel Dorian).

8 **A2**

Tpts.

F Hns.

Tbns.

Tba.

Timp.

Snare

Tamb.

Cym.

HHat

Vlns. I

Vlns. II

pp *f*

f

mf *p*

SECTION A2:

Rather than repeat the A section verbatim, Uematsu shortens it by two measures and adds new material in the trumpets, horns, and strings. This serves to keep the listener on their toes and help the music flow in a more unpredictable, organic way.

WHAT ON EARTH IS GOING ON IN THE BRASS:

Uematsu introduces some dissonances that don't quite fall into "common practice" territory:

- The horns and trumpets sound out two connected tritones (F-Cb-F). The Cb is key, here, as it sounds out the "blues" note against the F (tonic) in the bass and the otherwise "normal" melodic motion in the strings.
- On the last two beats, the trumpets sound out intervals that, when combined with what the low brass are playing, create a lightning fast impression of Cdim -> Cb major. Keyword "impression". What's *more* evident is the strings dwelling on the b2 degree. Being sustained and at the highest pitch, this is what we hear the most, and so we get the feeling of a b2 -> 1 motion. Underlying, we hear a quick bV - i progression, more a result of incidental dissonances (the b5 and b2) combining with previously established material rather than conscious choices of chords.
- All this messing about with dissonance creates an inflection point, reinforces the mood (via the tension notes and tonal center of F phrygian), and - above all else - sounds cool!

Fl.

Tpts.

F Hns.

Tbns.

Tba.

Timp.

Snare

Cym.

Metal

Vlms. I

Vlms. II

mf

pp

f

Same as before

13 **A3**

The musical score for Section A3, measures 13-16, is written for a full orchestra. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The score includes parts for Tpts., F Hns., Tbns., Tba., Timp., Snare, Tamb., Cym., HHat, Vlns. I, and Vlns. II. The score shows a variety of textures and dynamics, including a 'motif' in the Vlns. I part in measure 16.

SECTION A3:

This time, the section is four measures long, adding bits of new material here and there to keep things interesting. The last measure of this section breaks out of the static i-bII (or i-bvii) vamp in order to modulate - via plagal cadence - to the parallel Lydian mode (Db Lydian).

Why not modulate to Ab major instead? Uematsu seems to prefer parallel Lydian in most tracks of his I've studied, and it (the Lydian mode) does tend to lend itself to a more adventurous, fantasy sound than Ionian when utilized as Uematsu tends to utilize it.

motif
 leading tone reinforces
 F minor tonality

	Fm	E ^b 5	A ^b od ²
Key of Db:	iii	II	IV

17 **C**

Conjunct motion on top
Disjunct motion below

Db Lydian

#4 of Db Lydian

pp f

Db Cm

SECTION C:

A bridge section that serves to take the listener between the dark A section and the bright D section.

The bridge is smooth and musical, because:

- Harmonically, much brighter than before (contrast increases interest and staying power of the music), and with more chordal motion than the A section's vamp. The music goes on a little journey from point A to point D.
- Rhythmically, very similar to A. If the rhythm was fundamentally changed, we'd jump to soon into the effect the D section has - that of brand new musical territory.

So, one common thread, one new one, leading to entirely new threads.

Uematsu also revels in his newfound palette, taking advantage of his greater channel/voice count to keep the music driving via passing the "spotlight" from one instrument group to another. In these four measures, it could be heard as: Strings -> Horns -> Trumpets -> Strings -> Horns -> Flutes

This "spotlighting" keeps the texture thick and resonant, but avoids a cluttered, unintelligible mess.

19

Fl.

Tpts.

F Hns.

Tbns.

Tba.

Timp.

Snare

Cym.

Vlns. I

Vlns. II

mf

pp *f* *mf* *p*

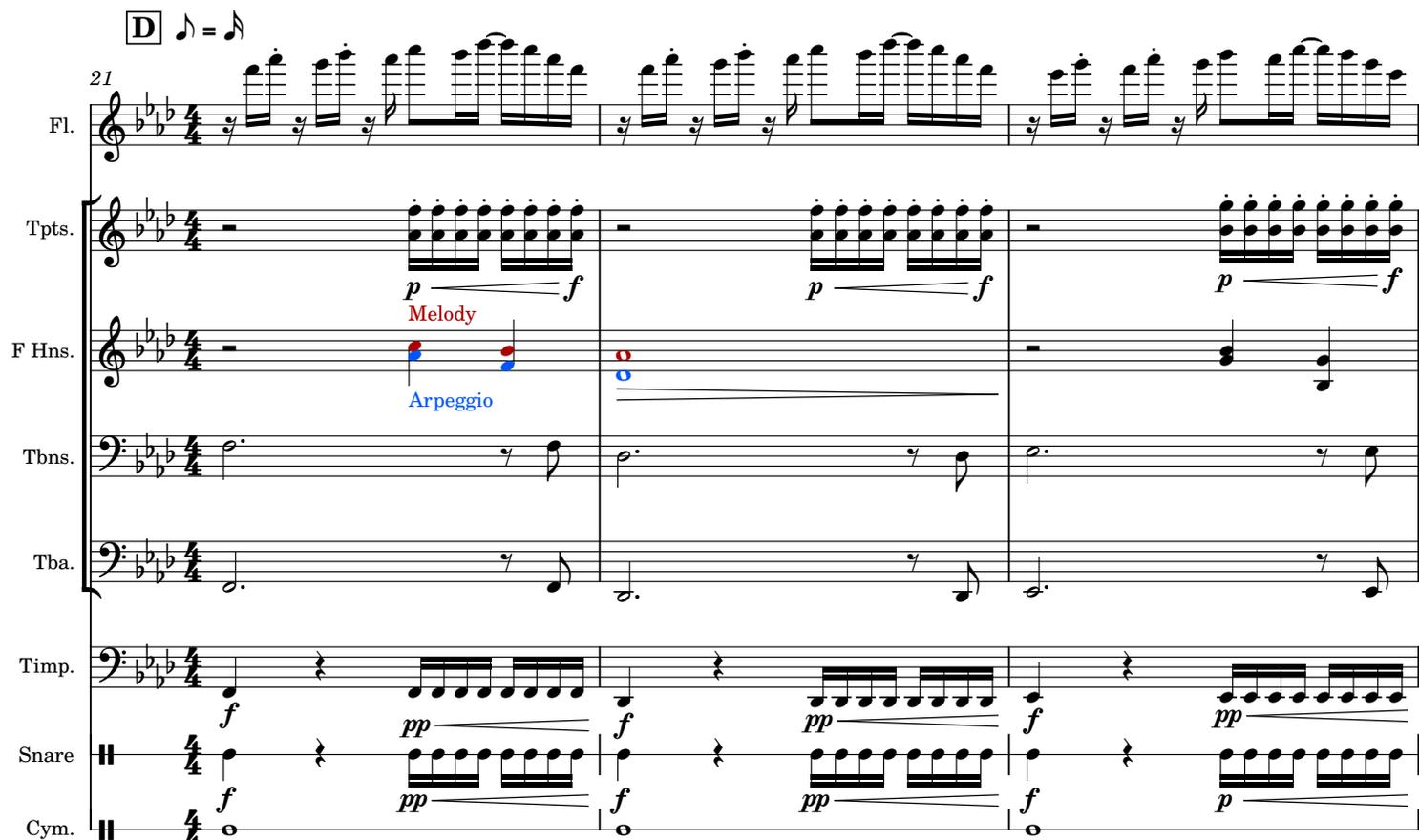
melodic method of working back to F minor scale, despite the chord being Bb minor.

B \flat m B \flat m G \emptyset E \flat 7

Key of F:

iv ii \circ \flat VII 7

Instead of using the V, Uematsu opts for the dominant chord built on the \flat VII. This cadence sounds much more Aeolian than "Minor", and lends itself to adventurous, hopeful moods. It supports a subtonic melodic resolution, and doesn't so much "resolve" as keep the music moving in a very modal way.

D 

21

Fl.

Tpts.

F Hns.

Tbns.

Tba.

Timp.

Snare

Cym.

p *f* *p* *f* *p* *f*

Melody

Arpeggio

f *pp* *f* *pp* *f* *pp* *f* *pp* *f* *pp*

*F*_m *D*^b *E*^b

i *♭VI* *♭VII*

Reverse Andalusian (♭VI-♭VII-i)
is a pure aeolian method of setting
a dramatic and adventurous mood.

SECTION D:

The "With our powers combined, we can defeat the enemy!" section. Contrasted with the previous sections, these six measures tell the climax of this battle theme's musical story. It lends gravitas to the normal battles of the game, making each encounter a mini-drama. Were the music to stay in Phrygian territory the whole time, it would cast 80% of the game's combat in a very different light.

The flute ostinato contrasts so sharply with the thundering brass. It's almost like a dove flying through a battlefield - wings of hope amidst the clashing of arms.

The metric modulation stabilizes the music - a steady 4/4 pleases the listener's brain and puts them at ease. Coupled with the harmony and unification of the rhythmic elements into exciting crescendos, this can't help but make the player swell up with determination and, perhaps, pride (or the tantalizing thought of victory).

24

Fl.

Tpts.

F Hns.

Tbns.

Tba.

Timp.

Snare

Cym.

Vlas.

p — *f*

f

p

p

this is just gorgeous:

16 8

F_m

D^bmaj⁷

E^b

i

^bV^I⁷

^bV^{II}

ASYMMETRY IN SYMMETRY:

The section is 6 measures long and achieve a symmetry between the first and last half via two methods:

- The flute ostinato remains the same, but doubles in sixths in the latter half, demarcating the two.
- The trombone+tuba continues the same bass line.
- The percussive elements intensify in the latter half, further demarcating.

However, the melodic elements *don't* follow a 3 vs. 3 framework.

In the first half (mm.21-23), the horns come in on the first and third measures.

In the second half (mm. 24-26), the horns come in on the *second* measure. The violas interrupt the steady macro rhythm the horns have created by coming in on the first measure of the second half, and then overlap with the final entry of the horns.

This creates, in a sense, a macro polyrhythm:

The rhythm/harmony/ostinato is 3 measures + 3 measures

The horn phrases are 2 + 2 + 2 measures.

The effect is that the music is less predictable, less "laid out neatly", and more flowing/organic. It's a nice touch that fits right in with the rest of the track and *really* helps the music stay fresh throughout the game's playtime.

♩ = 352

27

Fl.

F Hns.

Tbns.

Tba.

Timp.

Snare

Tamb.

Cym.

HHat

Vlns. I

Vlns. II

p

ppp

One effective way of looping:

Instead of zipping right back to measure one, certain elements from the D section fade out over the course of an identical version of measure 1. THEN, the music loops back to measure 2. This creates a natural overlap between the sections that helps the loop feel more seamless.