Contemporary Music Research Project

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Abstract

Masashi Hamauzu is a Japanese composer mainly known by his work for Square Enix, a Japanese video game development company. As someone who became a composer from his interest in video game music, he has a different background than perhaps other more traditional composer origins. This paper seeks to analyze his initial start and interest in the genre, his works while under Square Enix, and his work specifically as head composer on Final Fantasy XIII. As well as his general life as a composer, this paper seeks to analyze some of his specific compositions and how those uniquely work and evoke emotion in videogames.

*Keywords:* Boss fights, RPGs, anime

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Massahi Hamauzu was born in Munich, Germany on September 20, 1971. Musical roots run deep in Hamauzu’s family with his father being a German opera singer and his mother a Japanese pianist. Even though his parents gave him little formal instruction, their attitude towards music pushed their son to pursue it later in life. Hamauzu’s interest in music was sparked much differently than other composers. Old-school RPGs (role playing games) and anime fueled his passion. He would not come to appreciate classical work and the music theory side of the art until much late in life (Greening, 2012).

**Composer Origins**

One particularly influential game for him was Dragon Quest. Dragon Quest, an ongoing RPG produced by Square Enix, is a widely acclaimed title in the genre (Jeriaska, 2011). Composed by the internationally acclaimed Koichi Sugiyama, it is unsurprising he would enjoy these works. They would have been the most popular Japanese titles of the time (SquareEnixMusic). While in college at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music, Hamauzu had the Dragon Quest music cassettes and vinyl’s in addition to the game cartridge (storage device that holds game), and he even learned the piano scores from sheet music. He loved the mood the music evoked and envisioned what he could do if he was the composer; the impressionistic aspect of music particularly struck him. Aside from Dragon Quest, he came to appreciate the depth Square Enix put into their game soundtracks and decided during his sophomore year that is where he would work. This inspired him to really pursue a career as a classical musician, despite initial doubts with the more formal side of music. He would then graduate with a degree in classical vocal music (Jeriaska, 2011).

**Square Enix**

Exactly as he set out to do, Hamauzu would go on to work at Square Enix immediately following his graduation in 1995. His work during his stay there would evolve drastically throughout his time (Greening, 2012).

**Trainee Work**

Hamauzu’s first position within the company was as a trainee. His very first task was to compose four compositions for Gun Hazard under the guidance of Nobuo Uematsu and Yasunori Mitsuda. Despite him wanting to produce music for an RPG, his first work was a side scrolling action title (Mario Bros style game). These works included “Naval Fortress,” “Trap,” “Approach to a Shrine,” and “Impatience” (Greening, 2012).

A commonality between all these works is the low, although iconic, sound quality giving all the pieces a very retro feel, as well as, the relatively short sequences before a loop of the music. “Naval Fortress” begins with a five-note trumpet introduction. It continues with an overarching trumpet melody with a drum rhythm underneath. This track has a very aggressive feel (Hamauzu, 1996, track 33).

“Trap” has a very industrial sound, likely simulating the military state that the world is set in. It is led by a rising violin like sound with high note piano keys interspersed. Trumpets then take over with a foreboding melody (Hamauzu, 1996, track 47).

“Approach to a Shrine” paints a very different picture with its sound. With the tribal-like percussion at the beginning into the monophonic chants and church bells, the music uses many different pieces together creating an amalgamation of sounds (Hamauzu, 1996, track 53).

The final work Hamauzu partook in was “Impatience”. Beginning with monophonic chants with violin in a very church-like arrangement, it breaks into a fast-paced synth beat with the keyboard keeping a melody above. The piece is then dominated by piano the rest of the way through keeping the beat extremely fast. It is also worth noting that “Impatience” is the final battle theme (music accompanying a given battle in game) of the game. This being the culmination of the entire title to this point, it’s interesting Hamauzu would be given the role of finalizing the score (Hamauzu, 1996, track 56).

**First Solo Compositions**

Hamauzu’s first work as lead composer was Chocobo’s Mysterious Dungeon, a spinoff game of the main Final Fantasy. The chocobo is the bird mascot of the Final Fantasy series, with an iconic theme that spans across gaming in general. Although this game is not exactly acclaimed in the modern day, Hamauzu was very excited to work on this title having loved the chocobo theme as a teenager. He would go on to make quite a variety of different variations of the theme in the game. One being track 6 on the game’s soundtrack, 幻のアイテムを求めて(Hamauzu, 1997, track 6). When compared to the original chocobo theme track from Final Fantasy II (Uematsu, 1988, track 10), it is easy to hear the underlying iconic theme underneath the woodwinds. Despite not being received well, the game was still noted for having an exceptional soundtrack (Greening, 2012).

Another title Hamauzu worked on was SaGA Frontier II. A large part of Hamauzu’s focus was bringing very original ideas and styles to his compositions; this is what made his work on SaGA initially disappointing. He sought so hard to emulate Kenji Ito’s style (the original soundtrack creator), he could not enjoy any of the work he created. He then decided very late into development that he needed to pursue his own creativity completely, and so he did. Working with Ryo Yamazaki, a synthesizer operator, he developed many new pieces and even went back to improve the originals. Some of his works on the title include “Feldschlacht I” and “Vorspiel” (Greening, 2012).

Feldschlacht I opens very strong, giving a sense of urgency with the hard hitting drums and violin in the background; it then leads into a flowing woodwind. This is fitting as the music serves as a battle theme, and it does well to represent that initial build up to the first move and then the flow of combat to pursue. As with many of Hamauzu’s works, it repeats this theme twice and then leads into a variation on the main melody, this one having a greater sense of tension due to the shorter spurts of woodwind and drumbeats. (Hamauzu, 1999, track 8)

Vorspiel introduces itself with some stonng piano keys with violin int the background. I initially seems somewhat slow, until suddenly piano keys come in rapid succession and bring the music to a much faster pace. It then slows down again to a slower piano and violin as the music exits out. This serves well as a title screen. (Hamauzu, 1999, track 1)

**Mainstream Work**

Moving on into more mainline territory, Hamauzu also composed for Final Fanatasy X. Nobuo Uematsu being solely in charge of the score for previous works, this would be the first time Final Fantasy would receive the works of multiple people. When asked about constraints to creative freedom he noted, “We were given a great deal of freedom. I believe there was never a time where any particular melodies were specified. However, because Final Fantasy X is one single game, I feel that the music naturally had a minimum sense of unity”. Hamauzu would bring much to the table, making several series favorites such as “Besaid Island”, “Wandering Flame”, and Hamauzu’s personal favorite “Beyond the Darkness” (Glennon, 2019).

The extremely peaceful “Besaid Island” no doubt gives feelings of relaxation. The music begins this with the acoustic strums at the beginning, leading into the twinkling sound of some sort of chimes. This all continues while a low relaxing noise play under everything. A woodwind is then introduced while a monophonic female voice comes in to sing. A choir of female voices then join while church bells go off, with the chimes once again accompanying with the twinkling sound. Although some odd combinations exist of sounds, it all mends together to produce the idea of a relaxing, yet foreign and magic land no one has never seen which is exactly what this are seeks to be for the player. (Hamauzu, 2004, track 17)

While another peaceful track, “Wandering Flame” still elicits different feelings. One very important aspect is the opening violin, already giving the music a much more somber feel. It mainly keeps this melody going while other violins play a sharper rhythm coincided with it. Within the game, tragic loss without anyway to stop it is presented at the forefront. The player can’t do anything to save a dead city, or a dead friend, but still the world will move on. While Besaid Island feels comfort in peaceful Island vibes, this is acceptance of fate. (Hamauzu, 2004, track 76)

“Beyond the Darkness” opens with a piano solo, before fading into a rapid up down beat by violin. Another violin is overlaid playing very high, bringing the main melody of the theme. This beat constantly contrasts a somber tone, with a more upbeat tone. This could easily parallel the game as it both deals with heavy themes of loss not meaning to forget what has happened, but also the thought of it being a new day and needing to overcome that in some way. This also highlights the relationship between the two protagonists, both being close friends but ultimately being separated forever. (Hamauzu, 2004, track 81)

**Final Fantasy XII**

Following his work on other titles, he was moved to lead composer of Square Enix’s flagship series, Final Fantasy. Specifically, Final Fantasy XIII, Hamauzu’s work helped to bring each section of the game to life. Hamauza reminisced about this project saying, “I accepted this job without hesitation because it was my dream to make music for such a big RPG.” He noted how on other titles he never felt complete satisfaction, but being the lead composer on this title felt different. At least to some extent it showed, with many fans thinking the music is good enough to even be standalone (Borkowski, 2011).

**Saber’s Edge**

This piece often accompanied to boss fights (a large battle usually against a unique enemy being the boss, used to cap off a section of the game) sets up a dramatic tension for the fight. From the beginning somewhat dissonant piano over violin it makes the player feel a sense of urgency and general wariness about the situation, paralleling this being the first encounter with a particular boss. The music then transitions to rising trumpets over a piano playing in a high key, building the dread higher. It then moves into the iconic melody of the piece, a trumpet melody underlaid with violin. This music works well to evoke a sense of accomplishment, almost overcoming the trials set before the player. The music repeats the beginning dissonant keys over violin perhaps showing the battle continues. A short trumpet solo plays representing the player still ready to overcome the trials set before, but then fading as the piano comes in fast with violin in rapid short spurts. This clash of trumpet and piano continues, with the trumpet seemingly representing the hero and the piano representing the boss. Both are never really heard together without one overtaking the other. Several times throughout the piece the piano will “sneak” in, but the trumpet will quickly come back louder to silence it out. This “battle” between the trumpet and piano seems to be used to represent the power struggle faced in game. The piano’s dissonance being the evil creature, while the powerful trumpet represents the “good” knight. This is all held together by the consistent violin and drum. The music then loops, to allow that structure to go on for as long as a player may take to complete any given boss fight. All these aspects are picked up by the listener and players will even come to expect a boss fight when hearing this piece. (Hamauzu, 2010, track 5)

**March of the Dreadnoughts**

Despite what the name may make one think, this song is quite an upbeat and playful piece. Starting off with chimes accompanied by a low violin sustaining a rhythm, it is then joined by a noise reminiscent of shaking beads. This piece already sets a somewhat magical mood, and appropriately so since at this point the player is in a magical forest afterall. Continuing, a very quick piano plays along with a xylophone. Then comes a violin playing a very similar theme, the same theme present in Saber’s Edge, although perhaps less foreboding. Still the trumpet is once again present, with still the slight conflict of the piano. This was likely used to still present the theme of triumph and accomplishment as the player proceeds through the area, but perhaps not in the sense of defeating a large monster; It could be as simple as solving a puzzle or stumbling upon a beautiful viewpoint. The music then repeats this entire section, however, with his time the trumpet being much higher, and dominant compared to before. The music once again leads with the magical chimes; however, it goes into a much slower version of the main melody than before. It starts again with many piano notes thrown in, but then the low brass and trumpets overtake it once again bringing the player back to the overcoming stage. The music then loops as the player will be experiencing this sense of adventure and discovery constantly while in the given area. (Hamauzu, 2010, track 31)

Massashi Hamauzu’s work effectively demonstrates how one can use videogame music to produce a very specific feeling, while also accounting for the fact that it is much more freeform than other genres where music is employed. Although he no longer works in video game development, his work continues to evoke strong feelings.

Citations:

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