The Influence of Music on Videogame Setting

A Case Study of *The Elder Scrolls*

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Abstract

Music significantly impacts the experience gamers have when playing videogames, as it does the experience of most audio-visual media. However, many aspects of videogame music are still under-represented in academic research. Analysing more concrete case studies in depth will create a strong basis for the academic field of videogame music to build on. The aim of this thesis is to help lay the foundations for future research by examining the importance of musical attributes on the experience of videogame settings, through the analysis of a well-known and influential videogame series. I compare three games from the *Elder Scrolls* series to establish the significance of musical details within an overarching style. To achieve this, I first explore the commonalities of the music throughout the game series to determine the central style, which is essential for understanding the effect of unique musical features. After this, I demonstrate how these musical features influence not only the conception of atmosphere, but also of temporal and spatial locales, by analysing the soundtracks from the games in depth. Finally, I relate the videogame scores to the visual settings and the plots, as these elements interweave into a cohesive experience when playing videogames. Hence, understanding each of these components and the relations between them is imperative. Music has a unique role in this system that is still lacking in literature on videogame music, which will get more attention in this thesis.

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Introduction

As I walk through the foggy forest just after dawn, the foliage still damp with morning dew, I notice the crepuscular rays shining through the trees. I feel the warmth from the sun shining on my face as I hear a captivating cello melody welcoming me into the comforting grasp of the thicket. An energetic violin reminds me of the fluttering birds cheerfully greeting the new day. But it suddenly grows colder, as I hear a choir mysteriously chanting in the distance. The dissonant flute draws my eye towards the birds again, which now seem to cower, although it is difficult to see through the murky fog.

This describes an experience I once had when playing a videogame, and demonstrates the impact music has on the experience of setting; the very same forest, visually unaltered, changed completely as a result of the alternation of musical tracks. As the immersive experience of setting is important for the credibility of the game world, and thus for the success of role-playing games (henceforth referred to as "RPGs"), it is appropriate to examine the part music plays in this. In this thesis, I argue that musical nuances in soundtracks from videogame series significantly influence the settings of the individual games.

The focus of this thesis lies on the genre of Western open world high fantasy action-adventure RPGs. I examine this by comparing exploration music from the third, fourth, and fifth instalments of the *Elder Scrolls* videogame series. The soundtracks from *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* have been composed by Jeremy Soule; a prominent figure who has written the scores for many fantasy RPGs. This particular game series is representative for the aforementioned genre, as it is a popular and critically acclaimed series which influenced many other fantasy RPGs. This is evident from the dozens of award nominations and wins the games and soundtracks from this series have received, and from the influential status popular videogame journalism ascribes to the series.[1]

As game music studies is a growing field, it is important to analyse representative case studies in depth. This creates a strong foundation for the field and is fundamental for the

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[1] Jessica Famularo, "'Skyrim' Is the Blueprint for Modern RPGs," Inverse, last modified October 8, 2016, https://www.inverse.com/article/22299-elder-scrolls-skyrim-influence-rpgs; Alex Seedhouse, "How *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* influenced *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*," Nintendo Insider, last modified January 8, 2018, https://www.nintendo-insider.com/how-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-influenced-the-legend-of-zelda-breath-of-the-wild/; Samuel Stewart, "*The Elder Scrolls* Game Order - The Chronological Game Timeline," GamingScan, last modified March 21, 2019, https://www.gamingscan.com/the-elder-scrolls-game-order/.

development of solid theoretical ideas. As various scholars have stressed, too few detailed analyses of music in games exist, as the majority of the available analyses are mostly limited to broader notions of genre, or are mainly theoretical.[2] The purpose of this thesis is to help fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the functions of musical details within a popular game genre. By doing this, I aim to illustrate the importance of details beyond generic characteristics as a world builder.

My approach for studying the effects of music on setting in the *Elder Scrolls* series is based on music theoretical analysis: I examine the musical attributes, such as orchestration, harmony, melody, and rhythm of representative tracks. When analysing instrumentation, my personal observations on this particular case study are based on Samuel Adler's insights into orchestration in general.[3] I complement musical analysis with world building, based on the ideas of Winifred Phillips and Tim Summers,[4] and the influence of film conventions, particularly from Hollywood, as described by Summers and Isabella van Elferen.[5] As the term "setting" is pivotal in this thesis, it requires clarification: I refer to setting as the combination of time and place where a game is set, including landscapes, ambience, moods, and cultural background. I adopt a comparative approach, as the chosen games facilitate this advantageous method due to the many shared aspects between them. By comparing exploration tracks from these specific games, it is possible to eliminate many variables, such as composer, genre, overarching style, and fictional universe. These similarities make the differences between the games all the more influential, and this approach helps to accentuate them, as Mark Sweeney has also demonstrated.[6]

I have opted to focus on exploration tracks, which are encountered in all *Elder Scrolls* games when the gamer is outdoors, outside city walls, and out of combat, for two important reasons. Firstly, compared to the other types of music, exploration tracks contain the most distinctive elements in each game. The alternative types, such as dungeon and combat music, are less suitable, because these adhere to common characteristics which transcend the unique

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[2] Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2008), 1-3; Kristine Jørgensen, "Emphatic and Ecological Sounds in Gameworld Interfaces," in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, ed. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (New York: Routledge, 2017), 72-3; Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4-6; Mark Sweeney, "The Aesthetics of Videogame Music" (doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2014), 1-2.
[3] Samuel Adler, *The Study of Orchestration* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002).
[4] Winifred Phillips, *A Composer's Guide to Game Music* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2014), 102-5; Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, 92-5.
[5] Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, 143-5, 150, 153; Isabella van Elferen, "Analysing Game Musical Immersion: The ALI Model," in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, ed. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2016), 36, 41.
[6] Sweeney, "The Aesthetics of Videogame Music," 193.

qualities of the individual games. Secondly, exploration music is used throughout the series, whereas town music and diegetic tavern music are not present in each game, making them inadequate for a comparative method.

This thesis is structured in three chapters: similarities between the game soundtracks, in-depth analyses of the differences, and musical world building. The first chapter explains how music is integrated in the games, and offers a brief and descriptive analysis focussing on general musical similarities between the games. The second chapter consists of detailed musical analyses specific to each soundtrack, where I focus on unique features related to setting, which I supplement with uses of conventions where relevant. In the third chapter I combine my findings from the first two chapters with visual and story-related elements to further examine the effects music has on setting.

Chapter One – The Sound of *The Elder Scrolls*

In this chapter, I analyse how music functions across the *Elder Scrolls* series to reflect the similarities between the games. First, I briefly introduce what the series is about and how music is incorporated in the games. Then I analyse the shared musical features of the three games, particularly regarding instrumentation and harmonic material. This helps to understand the series' overarching musical style, important collective themes, and pinpoint where the unique features are situated.

The *Elder Scrolls* series is set on the continent of Tamriel, in a world called Nirn. This fictional universe with deep and exhaustive lore is shared by different fantasy races in addition to humans, such as elves, orcs, and humanoid beast races. The games are a blend based on pre-medieval, medieval, and oriental cultures, such as the Roman Empire, Vikings, and samurai. The games are typically focussed on open world exploration and epic quests, and are drenched in myth and magic.

The nondiegetic soundtracks are integrated in *Morrowind*, *Oblivion*, and *Skyrim* in a nonlinear and adaptive fashion. Nonlinearity means that the tracks are composed as pieces with their own internal structures, unhindered by narrative linearity. Adaptive indicates that they are played and switched dynamically, based on the status of the gamer and the game state.[7] For example, if the gamer is outdoors, exploration music plays, and when a fight commences, the exploration music quickly fades out as combat music starts. Tracks of the same type, such as exploration tracks, are alternated in random order based on the gamer's location and the game state, increasing the diversity of the score. However, as gamers typically spend hundreds of hours on these games, the same tracks will inevitably be heard quite often. Being aware of this, Soule has taken measures to counter listener fatigue, resulting in more ambient techniques used for scoring the three games.[8]

The joint musical style which is the basis for the soundtracks of *Morrowind*, *Oblivion*, and *Skyrim* is most directly noticeable in the use of instrumentation throughout the series. These soundtracks have all been written for symphonic orchestra with choirs, which is

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[7] Collins, *Game Sound*, 4, 126, 140, 142-7.
[8] Axel Berndt, Raimund Dachselt, and Rainer Groh, "A Survey of Variation Techniques for Repetitive Games Music," in *Proceedings of the 7th Audio Mostly Conference: A Conference on Interaction with Sound, Corfu, 2012* (New York: ACM, 2012), 61-5; Collins, *Game Sound*, 140-1; William Gibbons, "Music, Genre, and Nationality in the Postmillennial Fantasy Role-Playing Game," in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, ed. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (New York: Routledge, 2017), 420; Sweeney, "The Aesthetics of Videogame Music," 184.

conventional in the Western high fantasy genre.[9] Even though the exact uses of particular instrument groups differ somewhat between these *Elder Scrolls* games, certain patterns are clear. Strings and horns generally provide the main harmonic foundations for these soundtracks, playing most of the chords and ambient drones. The strings in *Morrowind*, *Oblivion*, and *Skyrim* predominantly make use of their stronger and energetic registers, meaning that the cellos exude warmth, whereas the violins are bright. Due to the dynamic range and registers in which Soule deploys horns, they have a soft quality, but are also heroic. Accents are usually of ethereal quality, as high-pitched suspensions or cluster chords are played by airy instruments reinforced with lots of reverb, such as woodwinds, female choirs, or extremely high violins. Another type of recurring ethereal accents consists of bright piano or harp notes, which are played sparsely and hang on high pitches for lengthy durations. These ethereal accents create a whimsical, magical nature for the *Elder Scrolls* games. The main themes and other melodies are stated with varying instruments, although strings, horns, flutes, or harps are most frequent. These melodies often resound with a great deal of reverb as well, which in combination with the timbres of these instruments causes the music to sound very resonant and spacious. In addition to being common in the genre, most of these instruments fit in the (pre-)medieval settings, as instruments similar to flutes, horns, and harps are present as diegetic objects in the games. They also relate to the featured nature and landscapes: recurring examples are flutes, which are employed to mimic birds, and harps, which often mirror leaves in forests, as I explain in more depth in chapter two. The common foundation for orchestration throughout the series is strong and varied, encompassing nearly all dominant instruments which Soule typically uses.

In addition to instrumentation, similarities between the three soundtracks can be found in the harmonic material. First of all, there is a hexatonic tendency in all scores: multiple tracks are written entirely in the minor hexatonic scale,[10] and even more tracks omit the sixth degree from the main melodies, although it is included in the bassline.[11] This abundant application of the minor hexatonic scale leaves the music floating between Dorian, a rather neutral mode, and Aeolian, a slightly darker mode. This makes the minor hexatonic scale quite neutral in quality, as well as a little mysterious due to the absence of the expressive sixth. The soundtracks have an overwhelming inclination towards the neutral and slightly darker keys. In addition to the minor hexatonic scale, Dorian, Aeolian, and minor are by far

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[9] Phillips, *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*, 88.

[10] Examples are: "Distant Horizons" and "Solitude." (Track titles are according to the official, original soundtrack releases.)

[11] Examples are: the openings of "Main Theme" and "Harvest Dawn," and "Far Horizons."

the most prominent. These modes and keys have a seriousness to them which suits the heroic nature of typical quests in *The Elder Scrolls*.

It is clear from the similarities in the music that each game focusses on exploring fantasy worlds and has strong themes of heroism, aspects of mystique and magic, and clear (pre-)medieval settings. However, these shared features cannot account for concrete and distinct locales, or for unique atmospheres.

Chapter Two – Distinctive Features in the Scores

The *Elder Scrolls* games each contain several unique types of exploration music which highlight specific characteristics related to atmosphere or location. These variations are to be expected due to the distinct countries where the games are set, causing variations in landscape, climate, and culture. In this chapter, I examine for each soundtrack how the unique orchestral, harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic attributes create settings. I illustrate these musical properties using several representative examples, for which annotated transcriptions of relevant sections can be found in the appendix for further clarification.

Morrowind

In this section I analyse the score from *Morrowind* with the help of examples from three exploration tracks typical to the game: the gloomy "Peace at Last," the energetic "Main Theme," and the soothing "Love Lost."[12]

The harmonic material plays a central role in this soundtrack, as the majority of the exploration music is based around melancholic and ethereal harmonies. Most tracks are in minor keys and make abundant use of (sub)mediants, which are occasionally borrowed from parallel keys. The minor keys ascribe a gloom to the music, which is intensified by (sub)mediants, and enriched with a magical aura by chromatic mediants. This combination of minor keys and mediants creates a strong foundation for the mysterious and melancholic traits of the music, as is the case in bars 9-14 of "Peace at Last," for instance. Chords tend to be harmonically played triads in closed positions, which are generally complete and sometimes extended by sevenths, ninths, or even elevenths. These techniques enhance the richness and warmth of the chords. Evidently, the harmonic material is fundamental for establishing the main emotional qualities of *Morrowind*.

The orchestration further intensifies the mysteriousness and melancholy embedded in the harmonies, but also provides contrast. Strings frequently play lengthy and extremely high notes, creating an eerie character for the music. This is supplemented by ethereal chords, played by airy woodwinds and female choir, for which bars 13-16 from "Main Theme" are a good example. These eerie and ethereal accents make the music otherworldly and mystifying. Horns often provide the harmonic foundation in their deeper and darker registers, creating a glum mood. These magical and gloomy harmonies form the basis of *Morrowind*'s

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[12] Track titles are according to the official, original soundtrack releases.

exploration music, which is enriched by melancholic and warm melodic phrases. Violins and violas play melodic material in their lower registers and cellos in their lower middle range, causing them to sound sincere and somewhat grim, which is especially clear in bars 4-8 from "Love Lost." This is further reinforced by the woodwind section: flutes play luscious melodies, and oboes play reedy and plaintive phrases. Another recurring technique is strings playing pizzicato, contrasting the ethereal harmonies. This can either make up the main thematic material of a track, such as in "Ending Theme," or just a few accents. The result is that playfulness is added to the mystique and murkiness central to *Morrowind*. The game's central moods, as defined by the harmonic material, are further enriched and diversified by the instrumentation.

Morrowind's melodies and rhythms also affirm the differences between gloom and light-heartedness. To complement the prominence of ethereal harmonies in many of *Morrowind*'s exploration tracks, a large proportion of the melodic material is of static nature. Melodies are hardly discernible from harmonies in the beginning of "Love Lost," for example. The string section in bars 4-8 shape a slow and vague melody from the chords, and the choir forms a slow melody through the drone structures in bars 16-23. Due to the apparent melodic lethargy a stasis is created, causing temporal suspension. This allows for the gamers to primarily experience the timbres of the music. By deploying stasis to passages with resolute melancholic or ethereal timbres, the magnitudes of these qualities are elevated. However, some tracks or sections do feature clear-cut melodies. In these cases, the melodies are very dynamic, moving through several octaves and making numerous successive leaps. This is another aspect of the playful nature which is recurrent in *Morrowind*'s score. This division of either stasis or vigour is also distinct in the rhythm. Most tracks are moderately slow binary rhythms, such as "Peace at Last" and "Love Lost," whilst others are fast, energetic ternary rhythms, like "Main Theme." The melodies and rhythms facilitate the harmonies and instrumentation to express the game's dominant moods.

Soule centralises ethereal harmonies in *Morrowind*, and reinforces and contrasts them with airy as well as warm instrumentation, along with both stagnant and dynamic melodies and rhythms. Because of this, the soundtrack establishes melancholic, mysterious, and light-hearted moods, which combine to create a whimsical, magical, and otherworldly setting with the presence of wistfulness.

Oblivion

The two foremost styles in the exploration music from *Oblivion* are pastoral and forestlike tracks. I have chosen two examples for this analysis: "Harvest Dawn," because it contains the most important pastoral characteristics, and "King and Country," which covers the main forestlike qualities.

This score is largely based on lively solo and contrapuntal melodies. The motions of melodies are balanced (i.e. equal attention to upward and downward movements), and are reminiscent of nature sounds. A good example of a passage strongly evocative of bird song is the sweet sounding flutes from bars 9-24 in "King and Country," playing fluttering eighth notes in parallel fourths, followed by a solo flute melody in bars 25-32. Most of the melodies in *Oblivion* are lyrical, balance long and short notes, and regularly make leaps of perfect fourths and fifths. These intervals create a noble and heroic quality for *Oblivion*'s soundtrack, which are in line with conventions that developed directly from film scores.[13] The expressive melodies are central to bringing spirit into this score.

This nobility and heroism, as well as nature-related qualities, are also evident in the instrumentation. The solo melodies are mostly played in the warm middle range of the harp, the sweet middle register of the flute, the heroic middle-upper horn range, or on the warm cello D string. The double basses, sometimes in conjunction with the cellos, frequently provide noble and lively basslines. The result of this instrumentation is that *Oblivion* gains knightly qualities due to the noble and heroic aspects, and pastoral qualities owing to the warm, sweet, and gentle aspects. The music also contains various crisp and bright passages. This is most clearly notable in bars 33-56 from "King and Country," where first the piano and later the harp play bright, persisting arpeggios, complemented by crisp, tranquil piano and harp melodies, a luscious flute melody, an ethereal cluster chord sung by a female choir, and a mark tree (not notated) shimmering delicately. These accents create a mesmerising and slightly mysterious atmosphere. The gamer hears lots of short and subtle sounds, with consistent rhythmic and melodic patterns, giving an impression of being surrounded by many small things moving about. The inclusion of the flute melodies which mimic birds actualise this vague sense into more concrete images of forestlike environments, meaning that the aforementioned "small things" materialise into lush, rustling foliage. In short, the

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[13] Influential examples from heroic film themes starting with perfect fourths and fifths are the main title from *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), Luke Skywalker's theme from *Star Wars* (1977), and the Rohirrim theme from *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002); Summers argues that Hollywood conventions are an important influence for videogame music: Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, 143-5, 150, 153.

instrumentation plays a significant part in defining the atmosphere and actualising the gamer's direct surroundings.

Just like the melodies and instruments, the harmonies further establish the medieval setting and mimic physical landscapes. Following conventions in films set in medieval times, the harmonic material in *Oblivion* consists of mainly Dorian and Aeolian modes,[14] in which chords are often incomplete; thirds or fifths are recurrently missing. Because of these medieval modes and incomplete chords, such as in the first eight bars of "Harvest Dawn," the music not only evokes knightly themes, but is also emotionally neutral; befitting of nature. However, chords are repeatedly extended: the added sevenths and ninths, which are melodically and rhythmically accented, add warmth and comfort to the music. Chords and arpeggios are often reasonably densely positioned, but are spaciously separated from other chords, arpeggios, or harmonies. This is clear in bars 25-32 of "King and Country," where melodies are separated by more than an octave, and bars 33-40, where the piano arpeggios are narrow, but separated by roughly an octave and a half form the piano melody. This variation in wide and narrow spacing further reaffirms the images of dense forests and open pastures already created by the other musical features. *Oblivion*'s harmonic material thus establishes the game's more general moods, time and space.

Oblivion's rhythms also play a role in forming landscapes. The pictures of hiking through nature are supported by the exploration tracks' rhythms, as these are almost exclusively binary rhythms at walking pace, whether a slow stroll or a brisk stride. The more gentle pastoral tracks use the slower of these rhythms, whereas the busier, more energetic forestlike tracks use the faster ones. The composer makes clever use of pace to allocate temperament and space to the game's various landscapes.

To conclude, *Oblivion* can aptly be characterised by the featuring of lively and fluttering solo melodies, which are supported by modal harmonies and warm orchestration. The score closely mimics nature, and strongly features noble, medieval qualities. The result is that the soundtrack creates a detailed locale, consisting of lush forests, open fields and a pastoral atmosphere.

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[14] The conventional incorporation of modal music in medieval films is evident in the following high-ranking examples: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), *Braveheart* (1995), and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005).

Skyrim

Differences within *Skyrim*'s exploration music are not as clear-cut as in the previous two games. All tracks from the score emphasise coldness and vastness in various ways, however, "Distant Horizons," "Far Horizons," and "Solitude" together comprise the most important techniques.

The harmonic material is significant in the creation of stasis, a central technique in *Skyrim*. Even though most of *Skyrim*'s nondiegetic music is written in minor keys, sixth and seventh degrees are more often unaltered than raised, causing the music to lean strongly towards Aeolian. An apt example of this is bars 1-24 from "Far Horizons" (G minor), where the F-natural is used abundantly, also in dominant chords. Only in bar 16 is it raised to F-sharp for a strong cadence. The emphasis on Aeolian causes a rather neutral tone with a melancholic inclination. Many melodies and several entire pieces are in hexatonic minor, reinforcing this neutrality and adding a little mystery, as described in the first chapter. The neutrality of this key and its suspension between Dorian and Aeolian is a start towards constructing harmonic stasis. This stasis is further enhanced by the profusion of lengthy drones, with basslines and melodies moving separately from the drones' harmonies, such as in bars 1-8 from "Distant Horizons." These drones are either in very dense, closed positions, bordering on cluster chords, or are more sparsely distributed across octaves. Cluster chords and suspensions are common in *Skyrim*, and are usually sustained relatively long. Because of this, the gamer acclimatises to the dissonances and lack of resolution, causing harmonic and temporal stasis, which dislocates the music from temporal and spatial limitations, causing the gamers to experience boundlessness. This is enhanced by the resulting experience of ethereality, as has also been noted by Michiel Kamp and Mark Sweeney.[15] Apart from the cluster chords and narrow drones, most chords have wide spacing, often based on octaves and perfect fourths and fifths, which creates a sense of vastness and openness. It is noteworthy that, as opposed to the other *Elder Scrolls* games, chord extensions are a rarity in *Skyrim*, causing the game to lack warmth compared to *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*. Clusters are an exception to this, due to the different function of the additional dissonances. In short, by employing musical stasis and open chord spacing, the gamer experiences cold atmospheres and enormity.

Similar techniques are used in *Skyrim*'s melodies and rhythms. Leaps of perfect fourths and fifths are common, and melodies are often doubled in open octaves, especially by

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[15] Michiel Kamp and Mark Sweeney, "Musical Landscapes in *Skyrim*," in *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes & Harmonies*, ed. William Gibbons and Steven Reale (New York; London: Routledge, forthcoming).

cellos and violins. The emphasis on open intervals, especially the octaves, makes the music cold and spacious. Melodies also tend to be static regarding range; they meander within a limited range, often starting with an upward leap of a perfect interval followed by moving in a chiefly downward motion. An example is the main melodic material of "Solitude," as introduced by the strings in bars 1-8, which is restricted to the span of a perfect fourth. Melodies are frequently restated by different instruments, which are added and removed to reach different octaves, as is demonstrated by the flutes in bars 17-23 from "Far Horizons," which repeat the horn melody from the first eight bars in another octave. Stasis and immensity are also stressed by the rhythms in *Skyrim*, as they usually are slow, broad, stately, binary rhythms. Some of them hardly have any discernible pulse. However, some tracks focus more on the epic and heroic qualities of *Skyrim*, underpinning this with faster and nimbler ternary rhythms. Again, the emphasis is on the creation of coldness and openness with the help of musical stasis.

In addition to harmonic and melodic techniques, the instrumentation is also largely responsible for the same qualities in the soundtrack. Spaciousness is incorporated in many tracks through the stereotypical distant horn call with lots of reverb, resounding from mountains across valleys. Many tracks also contain epic choir passages, and some revolve around more delicate uses of mixed choirs, such as in "Solitude." These choirs are reverberant and ecclesiastical, reminding gamers of churches and their capaciousness. The employment of the enormous range of the string ensemble through doubling multiple octaves also underpins boundlessness and grandeur. The strings make use of their strong and energetic ranges, making the music sound bright and brilliant, accentuating the coldness of the open octaves that usually go with these instruments in *Skyrim*. The orchestration thus utilises instrumental associations as well as strong registers to further underline *Skyrim*'s principal features.

In brief, *Skyrim*'s soundtrack focusses on distant horn calls, violin and cello melodies playing in open octaves, ecclesiastical choirs, and lengthy drones; almost every feature highlights coldness and open space, in which the creation of musical stasis plays an important role.

As this chapter demonstrates, various differences in musical details exist between the scores from *Morrowind*, *Oblivion*, and *Skyrim*. The soundtrack from *Morrowind* is unique in *The Elder Scrolls* in its focus on mystery and magic in an otherworldly country, which is largely achieved through the focus on ethereal harmonies. The score from *Oblivion* is exceptional in

its strive to mimic nature, imitating birds and plants, and pursuing balance in a great variety of musical aspects. *Skyrim*'s music is distinctive in its creation of ambient textures through musical stasis and temporal suspension, which help to convey immensity and coldness. Ultimately, the music actualises distinct sceneries and defines moods unique to each soundtrack.

Chapter Three – Musical World Building

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, both the shared and the unique musical details of the *Elder Scrolls* series influence the experience of setting. In this chapter I relate the musical findings from these chapters to the lore and visual landscapes of their respective games. With these insights, I consider the extent to which music affects setting, primarily by exploring how it functions as a world builder.

The World of *The Elder Scrolls*

The lore and visible settings in the *Elder Scrolls* games are closely related to the musical settings. In many instances they overlap, however, the lore, graphics, and the soundtracks do not simply reaffirm one another. Instead, they complement or adjust the meanings suggested in the other facets, as I briefly demonstrate here for each game.

Morrowind is set on Vvardenfell, an island located in the country called Morrowind. It is characterised by the massive volcano in its centre, arid wastelands, rocky highlands and coastlines, marshes, several green lowlands, and otherworldly flora and fauna. This compares well with the soundtrack, which stresses the magic and outlandishness of the whimsical and almost alien nature. Dark Elves are native to the country Morrowind, and are known for their aptitude for destruction magic. Their culture and architecture are largely based on oriental cultures. The score adds mystery to this culture, which is in line with Hollywood conventions for displaying oriental cultures "as the European creation of an imaginary 'other.'"[16] The music also creates a sense of anticipation for the coming of the champion played by the gamer. This is achieved by combining the gloom evident in both the lore and music with the heroism embedded in the quests and soundtracks of the *Elder Scrolls* series.

Figure 1: The arid landscape of Vvardenfell with giant mushrooms.[17]

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[16] John Haines, *Music in Films on the Middle Ages: Authenticity vs. Fantasy*, (New York; London: Routledge, 2014), 77.

[17] Screenshot from *Morrowind*, taken from "Media," *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, Bethesda, accessed June 8, 2019, https://elderscrolls.bethesda.net/en/morrowind.

As Paul Martin puts it, *Oblivion* is all about fighting the threat of an industrial demonic world in order to save the pastoral idyll of Cyrodiil,[18] the heart of Tamriel's Empire which comprises lush, green lands. These themes of good versus evil are also embedded in the soundtrack; especially the idyllic themes are abundant in the exploration tracks. This creates a stronger emotional foundation for the game's main themes. Mimicking nature is central to *Oblivion*'s exploration music, embodying this bucolic side, and the musical techniques used for this add comfort to and enliven the scenery. The valiance ascribed to the gamer's character in the main questline is underpinned by the noble music, which gains knightly traits due to the combination of the lore, visual setting, and medieval inspired music.

Figure 2: A knight overlooking the lush greenery of Cyrodiil.[19]

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[18] Paul Martin, "The Pastoral and the Sublime in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*," *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2011), http://www.gamestudies.org/1103/articles/martin.

[19] Screenshot from *Oblivion*, taken from "*The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* Game of the Year Edition," Steam, accessed June 8, 2019,
https://store.steampowered.com/app/22330/The_Elder_Scrolls_IV_Oblivion_Game_of_the_Year_Edition/.

Skyrim is set in the Scandinavian inspired country of the same name: Skyrim is a cold and unforgiving place with large, snow-covered mountain ranges and immense open spaces between them. The music from this game focusses on the same features, and is crucial for truly experiencing the boundlessness, as Kamp and Sweeney argue.[20] This is largely due to the way music is incorporated in *Skyrim* and to the orchestration, open intervals, and stasis as described in the second chapter. The culture in the game revolves around the fictitious Nords; a hardy people based on Vikings who make Skyrim their home. With this culture in mind, the cold, epic music brings the Nordic spirit and battle-oriented principles into the game.

Figure 3: A Nord preparing for battle with a dragon in the cold mountains of Skyrim.[21]

The importance of detail becomes clear from comparing the settings from the three games: different combinations of musical details, visual elements, and lore can alter the specifics of similar general themes. Heroism is a strong example for this, which varies between hopeful, knightly, and epic through the *Elder Scrolls* series, depending on the circumstances. Furthermore, comparing the soundtracks to lore and visual settings reveals that separating them would disrupt the overall experiences of the games' settings. The gamers' understandings would change radically, as lore, graphics, and music all influence and enhance the settings in unique ways, adding varying degrees of detail and depth.

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[20] Kamp and Sweeney, "Musical Landscapes in *Skyrim*."
[21] Screenshot from *Skyrim*, taken from "*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*," Steam, accessed June 8, 2019, https://store.steampowered.com/app/72850/The_Elder_Scrolls_V_Skyrim/.

The Importance of Music in Constructing Game Worlds

Because of how music functions, it is highly suitable for creating particular components of game worlds. As opposed to images, music is able to influence people on a deep emotional level without them realising: it subconsciously creates emotions and brings up memories and moods from previous musical experiences. By incorporating conventions established within game genres and those which developed from film, game composers can invoke collective associations and reasonably accurately guide interpretations of the games. How effective this is depends on the "musical literacy" of the gamers, although composers can generally depend on most gamers being familiar with generic and film conventions.[22] Skilful uses of orchestration and applications of harmony, melody, and rhythm are accompanied by these conventions to create an extra dimension to the visible locations: through the extensive use of open intervals in *Skyrim*, for example, the music makes up for the gamer's practical inability to physically feel the country's low temperatures, by introducing an audible experience of cold. The visible environments are enhanced with sensory and emotive experiences, which are achieved considerably more effectively through music than graphics ever could.

This blend of various components of game design to create the game world is called "world building" and is crucial for the success of RPGs. World building encompasses all factors of setting, from time, to place, to culture, to atmosphere,[23] and by combining visual and auditory perception, the effectiveness of the conveyance of setting is increased significantly: scores make the settings of games more feasible and realistic. To continue the example of *Skyrim*'s wintery landscapes: if the gamer sees snow and feels the cold through the music, the environment becomes much more credible and convincing than without the soundtrack, even when the temperature in the gamer's room is relatively high. Successful world building further facilitates the gamers to easily immerse themselves in the games, because of the all-around more believable setting. Music is essential in achieving this level of immersion, which is desirable for game developers, as immersion is a necessity for the success of any RPG.[24] Important to stress once more is that immersion of this depth depends on musical details, which are able to specify aspects such as ethereal atmospheres, lush foliage, and cold within an overarching musical style.

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[22] Van Elferen, "Analysing Game Musical Immersion," 36-7.

[23] Phillips, *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*, 102-5; Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, 92-5.

[24] The importance of immersion in RPGs and the crucial role of music in this are widely acknowledged in game music studies, as illustrated by the following works: Collins, *Game Sound*, 132-3; Van Elferen, "Analysing Game Musical Immersion," 37; Rod Munday, "Music in Video Games," in *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, ed. Jamie Sexton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 58; Phillips, *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*, 35-6, 102-4.

As this chapter demonstrates, the exact impact of music is affected by the particular visible and story-related constituents of a game. Nonetheless, music has a significant and distinctive effect on the way settings are conveyed to and experienced by gamers. This effect not only works on the level of broad, genre-specific elements, but also on the level of unique details. Beyond simply reinforcing the settings already present in the visuals and lore, the music refines and sharpens environments, adds new emotional layers, and makes otherwise distant and unspecified moods and feelings palpable.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this thesis through a comparative case study of a prominent and influential videogame series, musical details well beyond generic techniques play a profound determining role in the creation of videogame settings: variations within an established musical coherence can manipulate the experience of time, place, scenery, ambience, and culture. This effect is achieved through careful application of musical qualities and well-known film and genre-specific videogame conventions. Due to the ability of music to subconsciously influence emotions and associations, music is able to pinpoint and actualise otherwise vague and disputable atmospheric implications. Consequently, music is crucial to achieving complete immersion and thus to the success of videogames, particularly RPGs. The comparative approach has been pivotal in understanding the extent of the influence of music, as it has shown how much variation can be applied to musical presentations of settings within an overarching style. This method has demonstrated that merely considering genre to determine setting is inadequate. Because of the diverse effects music has on perceiving setting, it is paramount to continue looking into how music builds game worlds on a detailed level in assorted game and music genres, which may use different musical techniques to portray the different settings. The fantasy games with orchestral scores from this case study likely use techniques highly divergent from a cyberpunk game, for example, which is probable to feature an electronic score. Beyond examining varying instances of musical world building, it is imperative to keep analysing all aspects of videogame music in depth.

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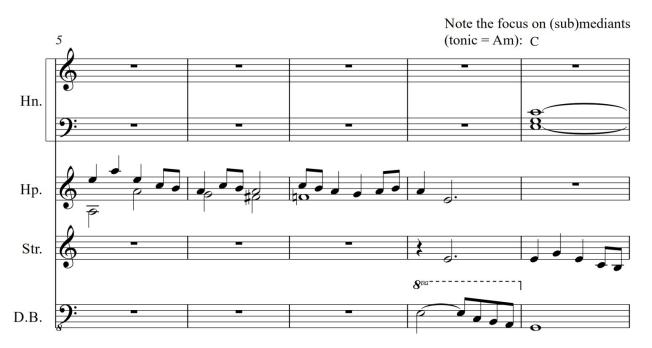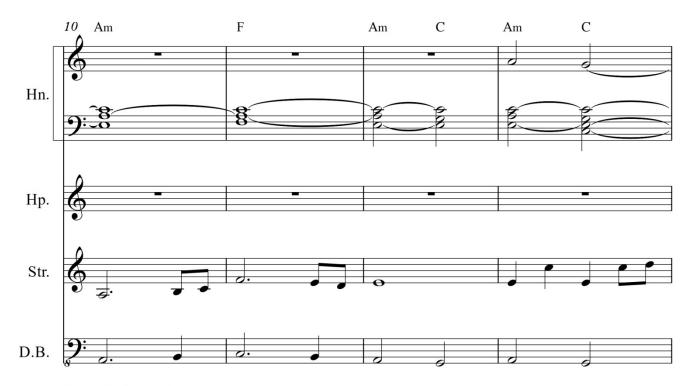
Appendix

This appendix contains selected transcriptions from the three *Elder Scrolls* games. The transcriptions are in the order as they appear on the official, original soundtrack releases. All transcriptions are made by me and are non-transposed.

Morrowind – "Peace at Last," A minor

Please note the dynamic harp melody,
which contains many skips and leaps:

Note the focus on (sub)mediants
(tonic = Am): C

Note the dense chord positions:

Leroy Roncken

Morrowind – "Main Theme," G Aeolian

The first twelve bars of this transcription are simplified: I have transcribed the main melody and main bassline, omitting embellishments and instrument specifications. I have done this as only the melody and bassline from this passage are relevant to my argument.

Please note the fast and vibrant ternary rhythm:

Note the cheerful and playful rhythm of the main melody, and the abundance of leaps:

Note how the bassline creates a strong pulse, providing the passage with additional energy:

Note how the music steadily rises in this passage:
Also note how spacious the chord is positioned and
how the airy registers of these instruments are used:
Also note the lack of pulse:

Leroy Roncken

Morrowind – "Love Lost," E minor

Please note the dense chord positions,
and the extended chords:

Em   Am   Am⁷   F#°   Em

Larghetto

Flutes

Clarinets

Horns

Harp

Chorus Female

String Ensemble

arco

Double Basses

Note how ties subvert the pulse, creating rhythmic stasis:

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Note how pizzicato accents subvert the pulse, and how they add a playful touch:

Note how the music lingers on a chromatic mediant:
Also note the static nature of the following passage,
harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically:

Leroy Roncken

Oblivion – "Harvest Dawn," D Aeolian

Please note the sweet, gentle, meandering flute melody, and the balanced note values:

Note the wide spacing between voices:

Note how the rhythm of the bass provides contrast to the other instruments, adding variation by accenting the upbeat, further enlivening the music:

Note the denser spacing between voices:

Leroy Roncken

Oblivion – "King and Country," B Dorian

Please note the chord extensions:

Note how basses and cellos (F-clef of string
ensemble) combine to create a noble bassline
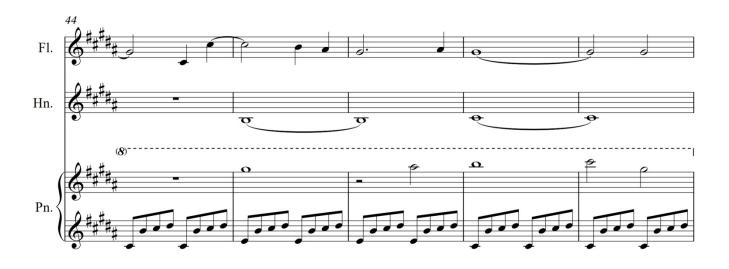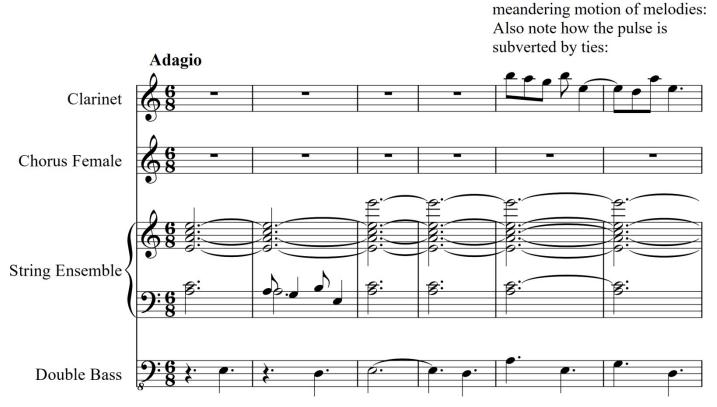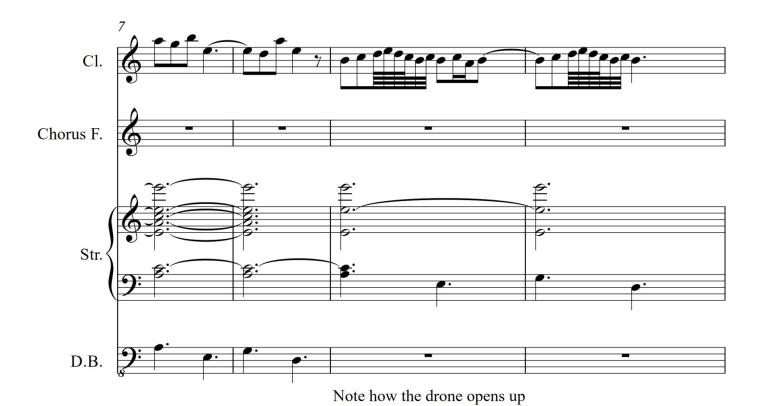through abundant use of rising fourths and fifths:

Leroy Roncken

Skyrim – "Distant Horizons," A hexatonic minor

This score is slightly simplified for the sake of readability. For every C written in the string drone in bars 1-8, a B directly below sounds at varying lengths, mostly on the first and fourth beats of every measure, either replacing or complementing the C. This B helps to create stasis by causing an unresolved tension. A short B_5 (scientific pitch notation) is alternated with the E_6 in bars 9-12 at a varying rhythm, obscuring the pulse.

Please note the static range and meandering motion of melodies: Also note how the pulse is subverted by ties:

Note the lengthy string drone, with harmonically independent bassline and clarinet melody:
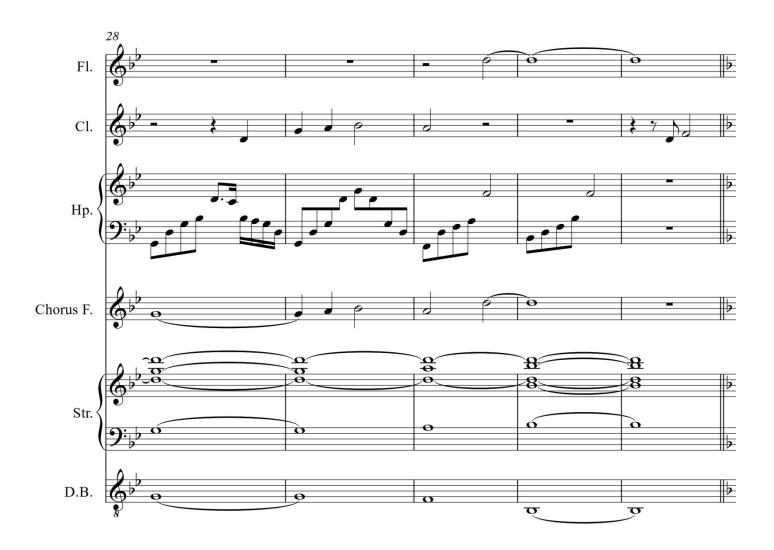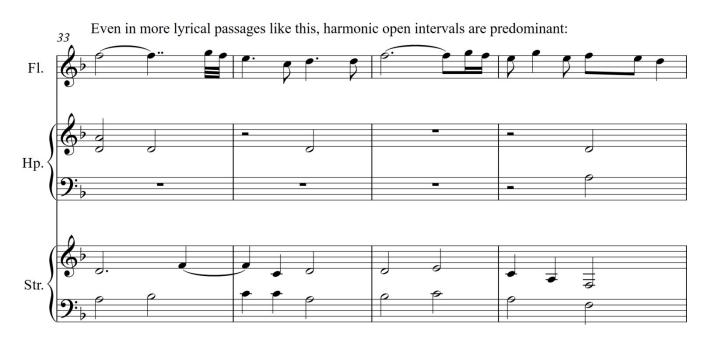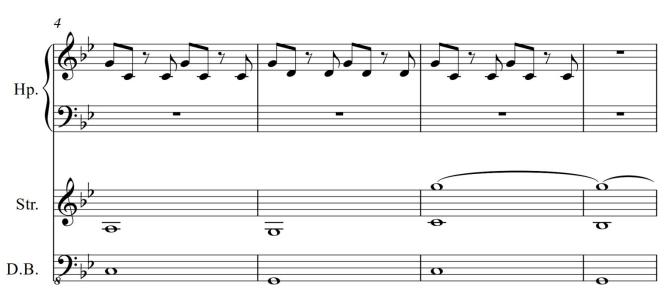Also note the density of the drone, with open upper voices:

Note how the drone opens up
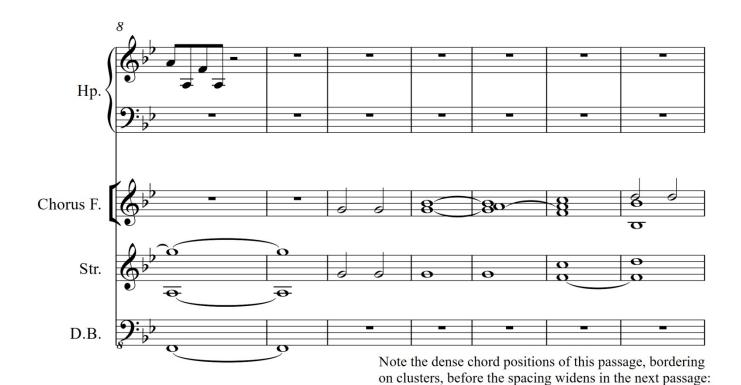and highlights open octaves:

Note how the string melodies
move in octaves:

Leroy Roncken

Skyrim – "Far Horizons," G minor

Please note the heroic and spacious sounding opening horn call, which is embellished with lots of reverb, and starts with an open fifth:

Leroy Roncken

Note the octave doublings of melodies:

Note the focus on open fourths and fifths in the upper string voices, and the extensive drone of the D in octaves:

Even in more lyrical passages like this, harmonic open intervals are predominant:

Leroy Roncken

Skyrim – "Solitude," G hexatonic minor

Note the dense chord positions of this passage, bordering on clusters, before the spacing widens in the next passage:
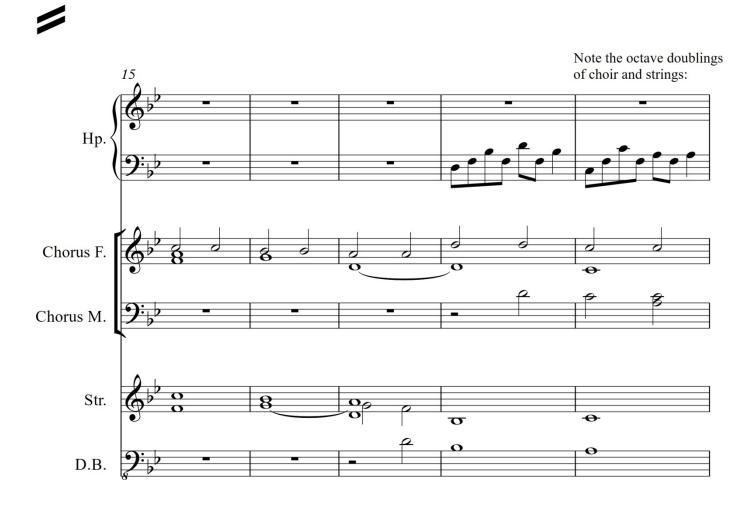
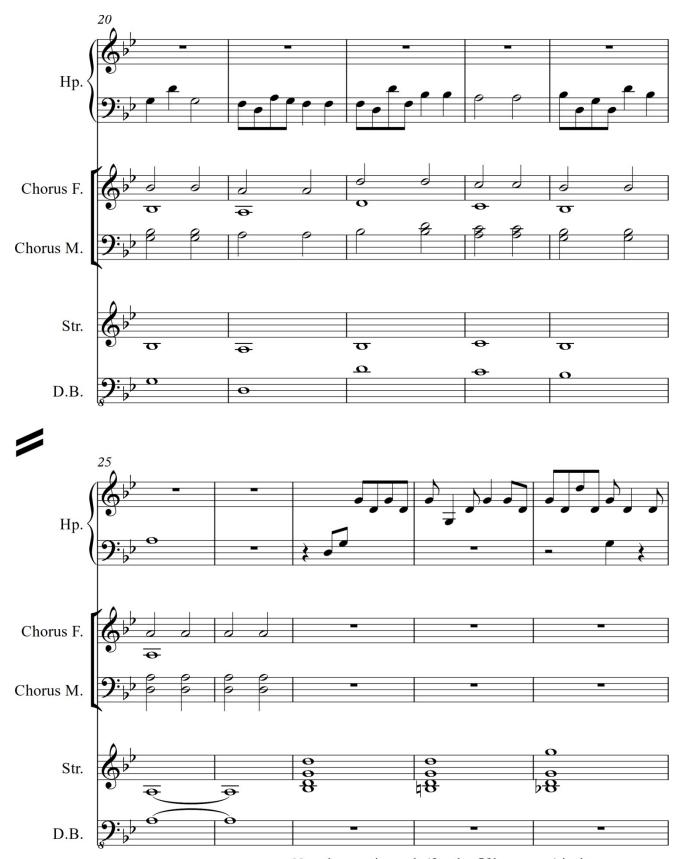Note the octave doublings of choir and strings:

Leroy Roncken

Note the open intervals (fourths, fifths, octaves) in the upper string voices in this harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically static passage: