

The Fire Is Gone (for Piano, Saxophone and Trumpet)

This is an old song I wrote back in 2016 called "The Fire Is Gone, And I Remember It Best" but I chose to shorten it to just the first bit for this album. Originally it was just used for the intro, to play around with contrast and player expectations by having the game have a slow and delicate start before the chaos kicks off. You wouldn't expect a game called ULTRAKILL in all caps to have a start like that.

Back during the earlier demo versions, the main menu had no music and just had the continuous falling sound with an ominous drone. That ended up kind of being annoying if you stayed in the menu for too long, so I went digging around in my files for something that would work as a placeholder before writing a new thing, but this song ended up fitting so well that I decided to just keep it. I would like to reincorporate it into the game at a later point, so there was the risk of players getting sick of hearing it too often, but I'm glad I went with using it for the main menu since people seem to connect with it.

Into the Fire

Decided to include the tutorial ambiance and credits build-up on this track unlike the Prelude soundtrack version, since I feel the song lacks impact without the full preamble. That might mean some people may be a bit annoyed about not getting straight into the meat of the song, but I feel like most people who have played the game will understand why the lead-up is important.

The tutorial ambiance is called "Maw" and it's another old thing I made back in around 2016. It was for a dark ambient album that was loosely inspired by an indie horror game called "Anatomy" that I saw on the Best Friends Play channel. I never released the full album and now it doesn't really meet my standards anymore, though it has some very fun trippy parts in it so I might end up releasing at least some of it later on. Parts of Maw were also used in the intro of "Threnody for a Mockingbird" from my 2018 album Flowerworks. The title drop music stinger is a cut up part of the song that eventually became "Cerberus" so I'll leave talking about it until that track.

As for the main song itself, it's probably the song I'm the least satisfied with on this soundtrack, which makes sense considering how early into the game's development I made it. Mostly just riffs stacked back-to-back for a somewhat generic metal feel but with amen breaks (if you don't know what that is, look it up) to give it a bit of a personality. I've played around with using metal and amen breaks together on an earlier Heaven Pierce Her song called "The Light that Shines Above All" from the 2018 album Flowerworks. Pretty much everyone who listened to the album (all 15 people) agreed that that was by far the best track, so when it came time to decide how I wanted to do drums for ULTRAKILL's soundtrack, I decided to go with that. Amen breaks also have a distinct "rebellious" 2000's vibe to them that works with the DMC feel. The other option would've been for me to play and record them myself as I do on the other Heaven Pierce Her records, but I'm not very good at playing drums so the timing would've been off, which would've greatly reduced the flow and intensity of the music. Plus this way I don't have to spend a ton of time mixing and mastering drums and I've always been pretty poor at mixing and mastering in general, thanks to learning music-making through using MIDI instead of real instruments. Sometimes it's best to work with your weaknesses instead of trying to brute force them.

Compositionally there isn't much of interest here, it sets the mood nicely and has some Psycho Siren influence to it.

It also had by far the most outtakes and unused versions since I was still figuring out how dynamic I wanted the music to be, so there was a lot of little bits of variety to include here. The occasional parts with slower drums were intended to play when you get the shotgun to sort of match the slow-but-powerful shotgun, but I scrapped that idea because it really messed with the tempo and sucked out a lot of the intensity of the combat at a point where you were supposed to be on a power high. Goes to show how much music impacts gameplay.

There was also a version that used an 80's drum machine on top of the amen breaks that was supposed to play during the boss fights but it ended up making the normal combat version sound limp in comparison, so I decided against using it. I didn't include parts of it here for the same reason, but may release it at some point down the line as its own separate thing. Maybe an outtakes album? Who knows.

Unstoppable Force

This is a song I'm much more satisfied with than Into the Fire. It captures the same feel but with more impact and force (ha). Higher intensity, real fast and a bit shorter due to that, but I don't think anyone minds. The first 2 riffs are actually alternate versions of the first 2 riffs of Into the Fire, since the original plan was for each layer to have their own reincorporated sections that would keep popping up, but I decided against that fairly quickly since it would make the music a lot more repetitive and samey.

People often point out the similarity of one of the riffs and E1M1 from Doom, but believe it or not this is purely coincidental. I didn't realize the similarity until it was pointed out to me. I kind of wish I had been smart enough to do something like that on purpose, but then again, skirting the line between homage and plagiarism would be a bad idea for a soundtrack, so probably not. This and Into the Fire are the only level bgm (background music) that are used for more than one full level.

The intro for this soundtrack version comes from the original recording of this song which was played at a much slower tempo. As soon as I put that version in the game I realized it was way too slow and didn't fit the high-impact gameplay at all, so I started over and redid it at a higher tempo the next day. That would've been as easy as changing a single value if I had been using my later workflow of writing in MIDI first before recording, so lessons learned. I tried including some more sections from that original version here and while it did have that cool "beat switch" effect that some modern hip-hop uses, it ended up being detrimental to the momentum of the song.

Cerberus

This is actually the first piece of music I made for the game. Originally it was just a tone setter to put in the background to get a feel for what the atmosphere of the game would be, but I ended up reusing it for Cerberus' battle music since it fit nicely with its menacing slow movements and because I love reincorporation. The sample here is from an ancient public domain recording of "Mars, the Bringer of War" from Gustav Holst's Planets. It's a very low-quality wax recording, but since it's hidden behind layers of guitars, the poor sound quality isn't really noticeable.

The idea was to channel the music of the first Drakengard game to give the gameplay an abrasive tension that would really keep players on edge the whole time, but the whole mood and tone of the game has greatly changed since then to a more fun version that fits the gameplay better. The guitar hits here are actually taken straight from "Threnody for a Mockingbird" since I was just making a quick mood piece and didn't want to do any separate recording for it. You can probably tell it's a bit lower fidelity when listening to this track in isolation, but you can't really tell in-game.

The intro for this soundtrack version is actually slightly faster and higher pitched than the one that plays during the platforming section in-game, but I chose to go with this faster version since it sounds better in isolation.

A Thousand Greetings

Again, an old piece from 2016. Titled "A Thousand Greetings #2", it was a follow-up to a previous piece of the same name, which has the same motif but with a different tempo and instruments. This version is probably one of my favorite tracks from around that time. It's one of those "accidentally good" works where things just really clicked together. I was mostly going for a Brian Eno "Music for Airports" kinda feel (minimalism combined with ambient music), but the looping, reversing and pitch shifting piano comes from a vaporwave inspiration. The game only uses one section of this song, but I decided to include the full thing since I like how it flows with the rest of the album. It gives a bit of breathing space between the prelude and the subsequent battle version.

The bird sounds you can hear here were recorded during a sleepless summer night when I went out for a walk at 6AM or so to freshen up. You can still hear my footsteps in there as well.

A Shattered Illusion

I wanted to play around a bit with different styles of composition to add some variety after the very single-minded Prelude, so I decided to go with a remix. I don't really listen to much electronic music and I certainly don't make much of it, but at least according to other people this song seemed to work pretty well. It has more focus on the drum patterns, heavy compression on the bass and a lot of cut up and manipulated sections of the aforementioned song. There's a part in here where I pitch shift the piano chords up by like half a note to add in some dissonance, which I'm still not 100% sure fits in, but people don't mind it so no harm done.

I'm overall very satisfied with this one, especially considering the radically different workflow I used to make it. It adds the variety I wanted, and while it's still not compositionally interesting, the sound and feel carry it. At least in my opinion.

A Complete and Utter Destruction of the Senses

The intro here is actually the second attempt at the dark ambiance that plays during the arrival of the Streetcleaners. The first was some low rumbling bass overlaid with a slowed down recording of kids at a playground. You can hear the original version in one of the devlog youtube videos, but it didn't really work all that well, mostly since the sounds of children were too distracting even when slowed down, so I remade it into this. The high frequencies are sinewaves that are slowly pitch-shifted to fall in and out of tune to create a nauseating and uncomfortable dissonance. I forget what the rest of the noise is and it's become too warped to recognize anymore, but it was most likely white noise or other Audacity-generated sounds.

The actual song itself was a bit of an afterthought. I made it after the level was already complete, because it felt really weird to have a big arena battle at the end while the same background ambiance is still playing. I quickly whipped this up in a couple hours or so by layering a ton of distortion effects onto a synth and some electronic drums to create a couple industrial noise loops. After I put them together, I copied the whole thing and layered it onto itself at half speed for extra bassy meatiness, which also helped slightly obscure how loop-heavy it is.

It's certainly not something the grand majority of players would listen to on their free time, but I went ahead with it anyway since I remembered how beloved Silent Hill's soundtrack is despite the atonal abrasiveness. People tend to be a lot more open to music they would normally hate, as long as they're not focusing on it. Hopefully, this may open the gates of noise music to a couple new pairs of ears. This is easily the most abrasive song in the game so far and I was originally worried it might be *too* abrasive for most players, but only a few people have complained, so mission accomplished..? This quickly became one of my favorites on this soundtrack due to its intensity.

Sanctuary in the Garden of the Mind

Just a couple simple ambient drones made by layering a ton of different synths on top of each other. The drones are all from a 2016 song called "She Laid Her Head on a Bed of Flowers" that I made for the same album as A Thousand Greetings. The Witness doesn't actually include background music in it, but I figured people would be on edge if I didn't include something calming here, especially after O-S. Was somewhat iffy on whether or not to include it on this soundtrack release, but decided to do so to help create some breathing space between the previous track and the next, since Castle Vein (a fan favorite) would have its momentum deflated when directly following the harsh sensory overload of Utter Destruction.

Castle Vein

This was a turning point for ULTRAKILL's soundtrack. After trying out a couple styles I finally found the right voice for the game's music. This track in particular is basically a mish-mash homage to Castlevania music tropes (particularly Michiru Yamane's work) as a little tongue-in-cheek joke about how you're fighting inside a castle. Really went all-out with how gamey this song is and it really worked in its favor. This was around the time I found the original Rise of the Triad's soundtrack, so I started trying to go for the melodic thrust that it, Castlevania and the likes of Undertale thrive upon, and it worked out well, at least in my opinion. A lot catchier and more memorable than the prelude music, at least.

I was originally worried the repetitive drum pattern would wear out its welcome considering how long people may be stuck listening to this song, but it seems to be fine. This was also the first song to have been written in MIDI with the guitar and bass recorded on top, which became my workflow from now on. Luckily, it gives better results for melody-driven songwriting while also being much faster and easier. For this soundtrack version I added a trail-off to help it lead into Clair de Lune, which ended up working out much better than I had expected.

Debussy: Clair de Lune

A bit of a cliché choice, I know, but it fits too well to not use. This song is really what makes the exploration segment between the 2 bosses work, so it's a pivotal part of letting the player recuperate before the next boss fight. I originally also bounced around the idea of using Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, but that composition is so ever-present that I decided against it. You can still mute the music here and play the first movement of that when entering the mansion to see how the atmosphere would differ as a fun experiment. A lot heavier and a bit more ominous, I'd say.

Versus

Really went ham with this one, combining the riff-based metal of the Prelude with the melodic focus of Castle Vein to pretty successful results I feel. Had some trouble with the main melody here but I really like how it became a balance of epic and ambiguous. Fits the feeling of the fight and contrasts well with Clair de Lune's calm softness.

This song actually has 3 layers of drums: the original MIDI drums, the amen breaks on top and the electronic drums that were added to give more weight to the original drum patterns and to make it feel more dynamic compared to the flat intensity that just the amen breaks by themselves gave the previous tracks. The guitars were cut up and occasionally stutter to try to get across the mechanical aspect of the boss. Because of all the layers, the song ended up really heavily compressed, which probably makes audio engineers and musicians cry, but at least for the layman it doesn't seem to bother them.

Cold Winds

The intro here is a “paulstretched” (look it up, it’s cool) section of "Sourire d'Avril", which I added into the game because I wanted something in the background during the ascent, but didn’t want anything that would detract from the impact of the Lust reveal.

Most of the bgm thus far has been pretty high intensity so I wanted to add a song that's moodier and more atmospheric to balance things out a bit. Ended up coming up with this on accident when I found out one of the soundfonts I used for the MIDI versions had a really distorted and ominous choir sound, which became the backbone of this track. It really wouldn't work without that thick haze of sound bringing it all together and really breathing life into Lust. I was also going to record some clean guitar on top of the MIDI, but couldn't really get it to fit in, which started a long streak of "best not fuck with it if it works" in the music from here on out. Was kind of iffy on whether or not to keep the reversed amen breaks here since they might make the flow of the song too inconsistent and players might have trouble getting into the groove, but I think it works.

Requiem

Another fan favorite. Originally had a lot of trouble starting on this one. Couldn't really get anything that felt right, it all just ended up coming out flat and uninteresting. Decided to change my approach and challenge myself a bit by basing this song heavily on time signature changes. It mostly switches between 4/4 and 5/8 with some 7/8 and 6/8 flairs. Really helps add a feeling of motion and momentum to the song.

The otherwise inconsistent time signature also really helps make the climax hit, which I had a lot of trouble writing as well. I'm not too used to writing music based on chords, so there was a lot of trial and error here. The guitars were supposed to be recorded by me but, again, couldn't really get them to fit into the mix so I decided to just keep the MIDI guitars. Was also hoping to get a real violin for this track but that didn't end up working out either. Overall, it may have ended up sounding too climactic, but I’ve never heard anyone complain.

Funnily enough, this soundtrack’s transition from Cold Winds to Requiem ended up working bizarrely well despite me not writing the songs with that in mind.

Panic Betrayer

Continuing from the precedent that Requiem set, I decided to go even further with the time signature changes. A lot of classic video game songs use interesting time signatures to create tension and intensity, so I was hoping to channel that here. The synths were originally supposed to be more varied in terms of sound, but the simple square waves worked nicely, so I figured I might as well keep them. I was also supposed to record bass for this song, but the synths fill that role already so no need to. Probably my favorite song on the soundtrack in terms of composition and some parts like the first impact and the ending climax came out really well.

I needed something to add more intensity to the opening so players don't mistake an arena battle for having ended because the music calms down, but I also didn't want to lose the impact of those first guitar chords, so I added the really heavily modulated "The Mars Volta"-esque clean guitar to that and the climax. That guitar helps kick off the dissonant feeling of this track right at the start. The guitar in general may have been recorded out of tune, but honestly, I don't have a very good ear for pitch so I can't tell.

In the Presence of a King

The first half of this is actually an even more garbled and modulated version of the same paulstretched clip that the Lust layer (and Cold Winds on this soundtrack) opens with. I was playing around with trying to find a fitting mood and that ended up working really well, being somewhere halfway between calming and eerie. A nice break from the intensity of the previous 2 action-packed levels and their songs. The reverb in the in-game version was actually done in-engine, so the reverb in this soundtrack version is just an approximation.

The second half is a thick drone that I made using a bunch of previously recorded things like the Threnody of a Mockingbird guitar hit that I used in Cerberus and a bunch of other clips I forget. I just did it as an exercise to play around with Plunderphonics techniques since it had been a long time since I previously did that, and sometimes it's just fun to play around with sounds without having to worry about composition. At this point I had to start hurrying up to get Early Access ready for Realms Deep, so instead of writing a whole new song for the boss fight of this level, I decided to just use this exercise recording. I pitched it down in-engine by about 25% to make it a bit more ominous and tense, but kept it at its original pitch here. Happy with how well it fits the boss and its slow movement and thick atmosphere.

Guts & Glory

Decided to put both of these tracks under one category despite them being separated in the tracklist, because Guts is quite literally just Glory slowed down by 66,6%, so there wouldn't be much to say there. Originally, the start of this composition was one of the multiple failed attempts at the climax for Requiem. I ended up playing around with pitch shifting old songs to see if I could find a fitting mood for Gluttony and really liked how warped the orchestra sounds when slowed down so I decided to keep it. The level felt a bit repetitive and dull with just the dark ambiance, so I decided to have the level switch to the original pitch version halfway through. I extended the song a bit with some piano to give it that climactic feeling. I was still going to extend this song a

bit further with a couple extra sections, but I figured it works fine as is. I might still go back and add something to it at some point, who knows.

Bach: BWV 639 "I call to you, Lord Jesus Christ"

Obviously, the intro here isn't a part of the original composition, but the ULTRAKILL version doesn't really work without it so I included it in this soundtrack. The intro is simply enough just really low notes on a MIDI choir with a second layer added on top that I pitched up or down half a note to create dissonance between the layers.

The Bach composition I originally found through Andrei Tarkovsky's film "Solaris", where it was used extensively with excellent results. It's a very powerful piece, and though I didn't want to just use the same composition that Solaris had, I went through all related religious Bach organ pieces and none of them really hit the mark that this does. As with most religious music of the time, they're almost all very bright, cheery and celebratory (see: Hallelujah), but 639 has a dark mysterious edge to it that makes it really captivating, and I think that fits the imperfect angels of ULTRAKILL's universe. I would've liked for this to be recorded on an actual synth for the human touch and organic flow, but was short on time so at least for now I compromised with a MIDI organ. It does have a clear fakeness to it that fits, so maybe that was for the better?

Divine Intervention

This is another piece I had a lot of difficulty getting started on. Finding the right mood with a song as important as this is hard, but after a bunch of dead ends, I got the version that I'm satisfied with. As with Glory, this was supposed to be a longer composition, but I chose to cut it short and keep it to just the two sections it currently has. However, I definitely feel that's for the best with this one, because it has a great flow and momentum and adding anything extra would most likely just be detrimental to that. Sometimes, less is more, even with an over the top climactic piece like this. Despite its shortness, it doesn't really feel repetitive in-game at least, since it melts into the background while you focus on fighting the boss. I'm very happy with it, but may still come back to it to try to extend it further.

Disgrace. Humiliation.

This is one of the failed attempts of the previous song played at a slow tempo on a music box. Was going through old compositions to find ambient for the background of the intermission screen that wouldn't distract from reading, but this piece just clicked right into place perfectly and makes the whole sequence work so much better than I had even imagined it could've gone. It doesn't really fit into this soundtrack album structurally, but I decided to keep it in regardless since the structure towards the end gets shaky even without it, due to lots of short and wildly different pieces. I'd also probably never hear the end of it if I didn't include it.

Take Care

As the title implies, this was very much inspired by the music project The Caretaker, which is about taking old jazz recordings and manipulating them to create an eerie and distant atmosphere. Went searching online and found a fitting public domain old-timey jazz recording ("Were You Foolin'" by the Russ Morgan Orchestra), cut a couple clips out and made them loop smoothly. One is used for the shop and one for the Cyber Grind station and score screen. They fit together nicely so I decided to combine them into one track instead of having even more short tracks awkwardly stop-and-starting the last moments of this record.

The Cyber Grind

BigRock, one of ULTRAKILL's concept artists, is a fan of Meganeko's and noticed they were following the ULTRAKILL twitter account, so he sent them an email asking if they'd be interested in collaborating. I hadn't heard Meganeko's music beforehand so I'm really glad this coincidence happened, because he is a fantastic composer and producer. Originally, they were just making a mood piece to get a feel for what kind of song they might do for ULTRAKILL, but it ended up sounding so good we decided to just flesh that out into a full piece. I actually made the Cyber Grind mode because I felt Meganeko's song would be an excellent fit for a survival mode and the game didn't have one yet.

We went through a couple months of back and forth iteration before it became the completed piece it is now. It was interesting to witness the creative process of a much more meticulous artist, whereas I only really work on each ULTRAKILL song for an afternoon or a couple days at most. The results really show as it's by far the best song in the game and the production and mixing are immaculate. In fact, it's so good that I'm lucky to have already planned on putting it near the end of the album anyway, because otherwise it would've made all my songs sound weak and limp in comparison due to my amateur mixing and simplistic production. I had also asked Meganeko if I could include a previous version of the song in the game as an option, but they didn't want me using their unfinished work. Understandable, but another funny difference between us as artists. I'm really happy with the way it builds, starting off purely electronic and slowly building up, adding familiar elements like the electric guitar but not going full metal until the very end. A very varied, excellently paced and satisfying piece. So good that we used it for both ULTRAKILL trailers that were made after the song was completed. A part of me is slightly jealous, but I do absolutely think that I'm lucky to have gotten Meganeko on board, as this song really does encapsulate ULTRAKILL and any attempts I would've had at a survival mode soundtrack would've gotten repetitive and annoying on the 10th run.

The Fire Is Gone (for Music Box)

The bookend of the soundtrack album. As you might figure out from the title, this is the same song as the main menu song that started the album, but slower and on a music box. It's used for the Testaments in the secret missions. Not much to say here, so I'll stop and let you enjoy the music.