

Houseki no Kuni - An Informal Musical Analysis of the Lunarians Theme

/u/Ekuru

In my opinion, the Lunarians theme is a great example of thoughtful ethnomusicological influence in anime music. A combination of Balinese gamelan music and Western music theory that creates a sense of suspense and mysticism - rather befitting for the Lunarians.

The main purpose of this analysis is to really dig deep into the compositional techniques and elements employed by the composer in this track, as I believe the intricacies within it is what truly makes it stand out from the rest of the Houseki no Kuni soundtrack. As such, parts of this analysis take a music theory approach to the track, but I'll try my best to write it in a way that anyone can understand what I'm getting at. This analysis will include listening examples and sheet music examples, but the sheet music examples are more so to provide some kind of visual supplement to the analysis and to show shapes and contours in the music. It's not absolutely necessary to understand exactly what the sheet music means, so as long as you can differentiate between a high note and a low note on the staff you're good to go. If you can read sheet music, then that's a bonus for you!

Also, I'm no ethnomusicologist but am familiar with Balinese music enough to make decent educated speculation with a bit of research.

Intro

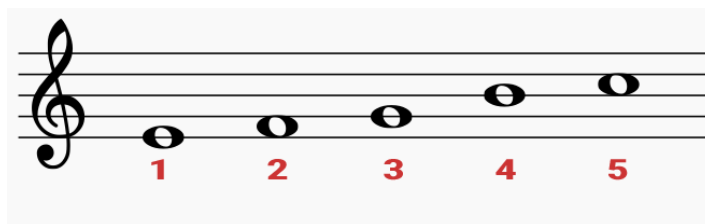
The track starts with a single gong acting as if it's a bell tolling to signal some kind of danger. Accompanied by a sustaining violin note, a low piano note following the violin, and dispersed wooden wind chimes, this sets the atmospheric and harmonic "bed" for the whole track. The soundscape is open and barren, giving an ominous air to the Lunarians' entrance. The atmospheric bed laid out in the beginning is then swept away briefly, followed by two shakes from a sleighbells-sounding instrument spaced out from each other. So much of the ambiance set up by the track's intro matches with what happens when Lunarians appear; a pitch black sunspot void of any light emerges from the sky, and as such a scarce instrumentation with very little musical activity accompanies that void.

Gamelan Motif (and unsurprisingly the bulk of my analysis)

Let's look at the main motif of this Lunarians theme - the main star of the track - played on what can be discerned as a gamelan. For those unfamiliar of gamelan, it is a Javanese or Balinese ensemble of tuned gongs and other metallic instruments. Give it a listen on youtube or something - [it's really neat!](#) They're typically performed on formal occasions, rituals, and ceremonies.

The musical scale that is used to create this motif is a Balinese/Javanese one known as a *pelog* - a word which is often said to be a variant on the Javanese word *pelag* to mean "fine" and

“beautiful” (take that as you will in comparing with Lunarians). *Pelog* are a collection of 7 notes, but more than often only a 5-note subset of it is used in most gamelan music. The subset used in the Lunarians theme that I was able to discern is a Balinese subset known as *pelog selisir* - the most commonly used of the Balinese *pelog*:



(figure 1.1 - [listening example here](#))

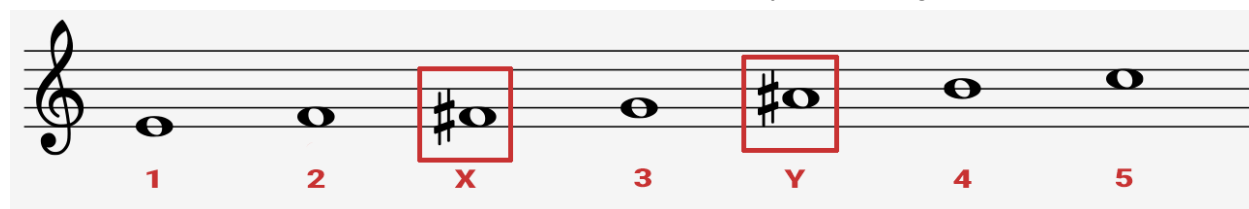
For the purpose of this analysis, I’ve numbered each of the notes in the scale for easy reference. Each individual note will be referred to as a “scalar note”, so the first note of the collection is the 1st scalar note, the second note is the 2nd scalar note, and so on with the rest.

The gamelan motif consists of two moving lines - an upper and lower. Let’s take a look at the upper line of the gamelan motif first. If I were to write it using only the notes in the *pelog selisir* in figure 1.1 it would be this:



(figure 1.2 - [listening example here](#))

It has a rather “pure” sound to it and is not really unsettling. But this is not exactly what the composer has written. He modifies the *pelog selisir* used by bringing in two extra notes to the *pelog selisir* collection that do not belong to a *pelog*’s usual collection of notes. In this case a note is added between the 2nd and 3rd scalar notes, and another between the 3rd and 4th scalar notes (which we’ll call note X and note Y, respectively) - resulting in this 7-note collection:



(figure 1.3 - [listening example here](#))

Now let’s take a listen to what the composer has actually written for the upper line, using this modified *pelog selisir*.



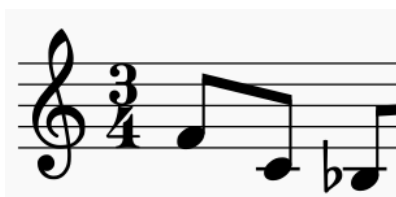
(figure 1.4 - [listening example here](#))

With only one note changed from the phrase, there is a rather subtle eeriness created. The top line makes use of note X, whereas the bottom line makes use of note Y - as seen here:



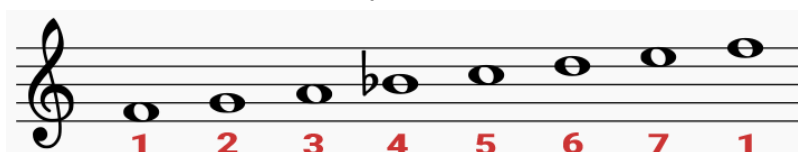
(figure 1.5 - [listening example here](#))

Though, the lower line has something interesting about it. Taking a listen to the lower line of the motif, note Y doesn't sound "wrong" in its context. In fact, the note coming after note Y is the one that sounds "wrong" - why is that when the added note in the upper line (figure 1.4) creates the unsettling sense? Well let's take a look at the first three notes of the lower line's phrase and do something called "enharmonic respelling". In short, there are several different ways that a single sounding note can be written on sheet music, so alternatively note Y can also be written like this:



(figure 1.6)

These three notes create a pretty strong aural foundation to imply a major or minor scale in F. To elaborate on this, let's take a look at an F major scale - much like in figure 1.1 with the *pelog selisir* I labeled each note in the scale for easy reference:

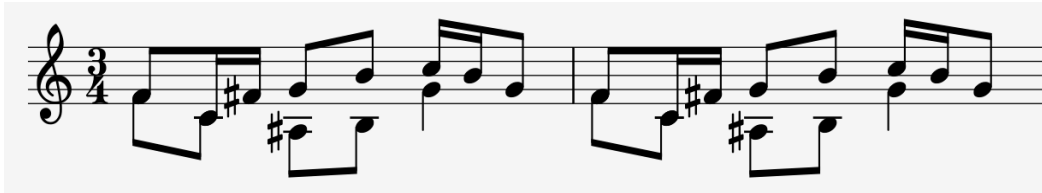


(figure 1.7 - [listening example here](#))

Looking back at figure 1.6, the first note of that figure would be the 1st scalar degree of an F major scale, the second would be the 5th scalar note, and the third would be the 4th scalar note. In much of Western music, the 1st, 4th, and 5th scalar notes of any key and scale are typically the main “anchor points”, or the more dominant notes. An example of why is the very commonly-used I-IV-V chord progression ([listening example here](#)). You’ve definitely heard this chord progression in many pop songs, and centuries of Western music conditioning made this the “most satisfying” of chord progressions with a very strong resolution to it.

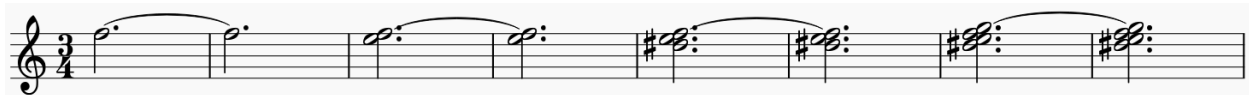
With this in mind, the first three notes of the gamelan motif’s bottom line cause the listener to expect something already familiar to their listening repertoire, something along the lines of the I-IV-V chord progression, and something in an F major or minor key. But then the phrase does something that breaks that expectation. The fourth note of the lower line’s phrase - that is a note that actually doesn’t belong to a major or minor scale in F. This would be known as a “non-scalar tone” in terms of the key of F. So think of this as an example of the music pulling the wool over our eyes (or ears) and going “HA fooled ya! Thought this was gonna be something else, huh?”. The break in expectations from this lower line phrase unsettles a little - just another thing to add to the gamelan motif’s eerie sound.

Anyway that’s enough theory talk, now let’s put these two lines together! (along with other textural stuff that is also present in the track):



(figure 1.8 - [listening example here](#))

There we go - now we got some menacing Lunarians! And if that wasn’t enough, the composer also adds high strings slowly building into a cluster of dissonance to add to the tension:

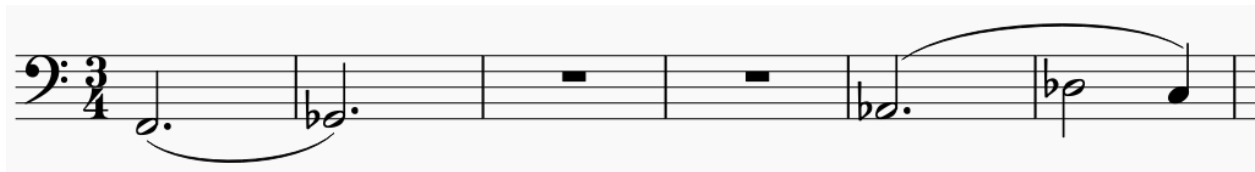


(figure 1.9 - [listening example here](#))

Whew! That was a lot to talk about. So what does this all mean in terms of the Lunarians? Is the Balinese influence to match the designs of the Lunarians? Is the fact that a gamelan is an ensemble of people performing as one connected to how Lunarians are always shown as a group attacking as one? All speculation, but I think it definitely says something about the Lunarians if their theme uses ceremonial instruments and a “fine”, “beautiful” musical structure in a way that sounds evil and threatening.

Strings Descending into Chaos

After the introduction of the gamelan motif, everything cuts off leaving a harrowing line played by the string basses and cellos with the intro section's gong making a re-entrance. Let's take a look at what the low strings are playing:



(figure 2.1 - [listening example here](#))

While this may seem like its own independent passage in terms of the context of the track, there definitely is a connection with the gamelan motif in this small passage. If all the notes used in this passage are rearranged into ascending order, it would be this:



(figure 2.2 - [listening example here](#))

Wait, that sounds like a *pelog selisir* (figure 1.1), except it's written a half-step higher than the *pelog selisir* played by the gamelan! But why use the *pelog selisir* a half-step higher? Well, taking a listen to the track as a whole, it has a tonal center on the note F (you know that "Do', a deer, a female deer" song and how "it all comes back to 'Do'"?) In that song, the note sung for 'Do' is the tonal center for the song. [Here's the song for reference](#)). Referencing the *pelog selisir* (figure 1.1) used for the gamelan motif, the F is the 2nd scalar note in that collection, while that collection's 1st scalar note is on the E - a half-step below F. Essentially by raising the *pelog selisir* by a half-step, we now have the 1st scalar degree on F. This way, there's a new musical context for the scale being used.

On the second iteration of the low string line (figure 2.1), the violas do something a little interesting. The iteration starts off sounding like the violas are going to play the same thing the low strings are playing, but instead they continue sustaining the first note after the low strings move on to their second note. From then on, the viola line moves in a motion contrary to the low strings' ascending line. Upon the fifth bar of the low strings line the same thing happens; the violas play the same note that the low strings enter with, only to continue sustaining it once the low strings move on to their next note. This is another good example of setting up expectations and breaking them. To make this point clearer, the listening example below isolates the low strings and violas, but the violas do not sustain their notes all the way through like in the original track:



(figure 2.3 - [listening example here](#))

Those sustaining notes continue to build and build, stacking onto each other and slowly adding more dissonance and tension to the track. But apparently it is not enough. Violins slowly come in from the background, playing unmetered and aleatoric glides spanning a wide range. Many of you probably recognize this compositional technique from many films or other media - you know, the creepy “oh crap, something’s about to go down” kind of moment.

Return of the Gamelan

This brings the track to its climax - the return of the Gamelan motif with bits and pieces from the other sections coming into play. At this point, battle has already been engaged between the gems and Lunarians. The gamelan remains the same - unwavered and strong, befitting to the Lunarians’ stoicness. Now the low strings act like the tolling bell in this section with two strong notes every phrase. The introduction of drums within the midground of the soundscape adds a more driving beat to the now-intensified gamelan. Most of this is now familiarity to the listener, and the gamelan is almost pushed to the side for another instrument to have the foreground - the high strings.



(figure 3.1 - [listening example here](#))

The high strings continue doing their sustained singular note motif throughout the section, adding a harmonizing lower line halfway through. In prior sections the high strings have only moved in a descending fashion, but this time they rise half-step by half-step, increasing the tension compositionally. I like to think of this as a programmatic narrative for the pending fate of the gem(s). Will they be swept up by the Lunarians this battle, or will they be victorious? Tune in next week to find out!

Outro

The track has now reached its end, and the outro fades with the gamelan motif playing on repeat. Every now and then, a gamelan instrument is omitted and the once bright and shimmering timbres fade into a rather dullened and spacious texture - similar to the empty

soundscape presented in the intro. The Lunarians have entered from the void, and now they have exited into the void.