



Four Shadows

Music for Trail of Cthulhu

By James A Semple

"There in the narrow hall, outside the bolted door with the covered keyhole, I often heard sounds which filled me with an indefinable dread-the dread of vague wonder and brooding mystery."

-HP Lovecraft, The Music of Erich Zann

These four tracks serve as an introduction to Trail of Cthulhu-themed music, and I hope that they support the genre to its fullest. For me, the game features elements of tension and horror but also thoughtful and considered investigation as well as dramatic moments of revelation. The music here is designed to play beneath those key moments to help enhance the all-important atmosphere of the game. In the case of the two themes, they are designed to open up a game session to help set the mood.

In creating these tracks I have drawn upon many influences from the worlds of classical orchestral music and film scores. The Golden Age scores of film composers such as Franz Waxman and Bernard Herrmann were particularly inspiring.

Trail of Cthulhu Theme (Pulp)

"I knew that the time for action had come, and forthwith drew the bolt of the northward connecting door, bracing myself for the task of battering it open."

-HP Lovecraft, The Shadow Over Innsmouth

As *Trail of Cthulhu* has two styles of play I felt it was fitting to create two separate themes. The Pulp theme emphasizes the action scenes of a typical game, depicting an encroaching terror and a desperate flight to safety. Many horror themes include elements of 'sound design' that are created artificially. For this piece I wished to include sound design ideas that could be created live with a real orchestra. This included string scraping, a wind machine and aleatoric playing on the woodwinds. The use of muted trumpets was a nod to the influence that jazz was having on the classical music of the time and I felt helped to emphasise the period sound.

Ruminations

"For in time, of course, my reading and research caught up with and passed the dreams in many phases, so that certain dream-fragments were explained in advance and formed verifications of what I had learned."

-HP Lovecraft, The Shadow Out of Time

Ruminations was written for a classic investigative scene. Many times I've found players puzzling over the clues they have for long periods. This music helps reflect the background tension and sense of lonely desperation so typical of the game. The music builds very slowly, shifting between nervous anticipation in the strings and lonely, melancholy statements in the woodwind. Finally the music shifts to 3/4 time and a last desperate motif commences in the woodwind across delicate harp lines. This final motif rises and develops until it reaches a powerful climactic statement in the brass before the dynamics diminish away into a whispering close.

Anagnorisis

"I think that both of us simultaneously cried out in mixed awe, wonder, terror, and disbelief in our own senses as we finally cleared the pass and saw what lay beyond."

-HP Lovecraft, At the Mountains of Madness

Anagnorisis is the moment where the protagonists suddenly grasp the reality of what is going on. Perhaps it is the unearthing of an ancient artifact or discovery of a long-lost tome of knowledge. Maybe it is the moment where the characters first walk in the ruins of an ancient city that should not exist. Most importantly it is the point where they finally understand and by that understanding they find themselves alone amongst humankind. The opening of this track is a whole minute of anticipation in sound design building into the orchestra and vocal chorus. I deliberately wanted a somewhat unearthly harmony defined by an opening tritone chord change. This harmonic progression remains constant throughout the piece as new motives arise and develop across it. Changes in orchestration and dynamics help to maintain a sense of freshness as the progression is repeated.

Trail of Cthulhu Theme (Purist)

"There was no bottom at all. Just ooze and bubbles and the feeling of something lurking under there."

- HP Lovecraft, The Colour Out of Space

To open a game played in the purist style, this theme conveys a sense of a mystery and a brooding threat just out of sight but constantly lurking and waiting. Elements hint at atmospheric touches (wind, a distant bell) but the music always manages to stay very intimate reflecting the internal, psychological nature of the purist game. For this piece I focused heavily on the piano. For the final sound I used two different pianos plus a harp all layered together. It adds a slightly unsettling sound which I particularly like.