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From Sky to Depths: A musical analysis of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*

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Introduction

On 2 April 2026, the Philharmonie of Paris opened its very first exhibition dedicated to the history of video game music. Curated by Fanny Rebillard and Jean Zeid, it explores half a century of connections between music and video games, and how these two art forms have evolved together. This celebration of video game music in such a prestigious institution marks a significant shift in the recognition of this long-marginalised art form. This institutional recognition comes at a time when the video game industry now occupies a central place in the French cultural landscape: *« In 2025, 40 million French people, with an average age of 37, identified as video game players, of whom 49% were women and 51% were men. Video games are thus now the leading cultural industry in France, ahead of the film and music industries combined.*[1]*».*

Indeed, some video game franchises have stood the test of time and left a lasting mark on popular culture, just as much as some of the great film sagas. *Super Mario*, created in 1985, has been entertaining players for nearly forty years with a theme tune composed by Koji Kondo, which ranks among the most recognisable melodies in popular culture. Other titles, such as *Minecraft*, have established themselves as cultural phenomena in less than fifteen years, with C418's minimalist music also winning over the general public.

One franchise, however, stood out from the very beginning for the central role it gave to music, which quickly became one of the series' most iconic features: *The Legend of Zelda*.

Illustration 1 : Screen capture of The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker (2002) © Nintendo

Launched in 1986 by Nintendo, the series has made music much more than a simple accompaniment; it has become a *gameplay*[2] element in its own right. In the world of Zelda, music does more than simply underline the action: it is often the key to solving the puzzles that the hero, Link, must overcome. Throughout almost every instalment of the franchise, instruments become central tools of gameplay: the famous ocarina in *Ocarina of Time* allows the player to travel through time and control the weather, the conductor's baton in *The Wind Waker* controls the direction of the wind, and the whistling grasses in *Twilight Princess* are used

[1] Why is it a must-see to go and see 'Video Games & Music' at the Philharmonie de Paris? https://www.radiofrance.fr/francemusique/pourquoi-faut-il-absolument-aller-voir-video-games-music-a-la-philharmonie-de-paris-7744901

[2] Gameplay translates as « gaming experience ». It refers to all the mechanisms used to enhance the enjoyment and satisfaction of playing. https://www.esma-artistique.com/lexique/gameplay/

to summon animals to help Link on his quest, to name but a few examples. And when Link isn't playing an instrument himself, non-player characters take over: they help the hero by becoming singers, instrumentalists, or conveyors of melodies that carry narrative meaning. The sages of *Ocarina of Time* teach magical melodies; Sheik plays the lyre and teaches Link songs to teleport to the gates of the temples to be explored; Kass, the troubadour of *Breath of the Wild*, dispenses clues and legends through his ballads played on the accordion. In the world of Zelda, music is omnipresent; it is both an aesthetic and a narrative element.

The franchise's two most recent instalments, *Breath of the Wild* and its sequel *Tears of the Kingdom*, released in 2017 and 2023 on the Nintendo Switch, mark a significant shift in the way music is handled within the series. This time, Link no longer carries an instrument, and unlike previous instalments, the musical design adopts a radically new approach directly linked to a major change in the game's structure: the adoption of the *open world* format. The open world format allows the player to move freely within a defined space that is not divided into levels. This format grants the player considerable freedom. Although the central plot of the main story remains consistent across the various instalments – rescuing Princess Zelda from the clutches of evil – the worlds of *Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom* encourage exploration even further by offering the possibility to progress through the story in a non-linear manner, supported by gameplay mechanics that promote great freedom of action. An almost essential element to the success of a heroic fantasy open world such as *Zelda*, lies in the vastness of the world and the ability to explore its map. The kingdom of Hyrule, where Link adventures, spans a vast territory, and *Tears of the Kingdom* introduces a major structural innovation compared to its predecessor: a vertical stratification of the world into three interconnected layers.

The world of *Tears of the Kingdom* is indeed divided into three distinct layers: the Surface (Hyrule), where most of the adventure takes place; the Sky, dotted with Celestial Islands accessible by launching oneself into the air from Skyview Tower; and finally the Depths, an underground realm accessible by jumping into the Abysses that appeared after the Cataclysm. This new structure imposes compositional constraints that differ from those of previous Zelda games. Whereas the music in previous instalments was composed for areas that the player would typically traverse in under ten minutes, *Tears of the Kingdom* has no spatial limitations and boasts an average playtime of around a hundred hours. The introduction of the Sky and Depths biomes requires a musical composition capable of accompanying prolonged exploration without tiring the player, whilst clearly differentiating the sonic identity of each layer.

Since the first *Zelda* in 1986, the franchise's music teams have grown whilst maintaining a strong aesthetic continuity. The early instalments were composed by Koji Kondo, an iconic figure at Nintendo, whose memorable themes such as the *Main Theme*, *Zelda's Lullaby* and the *Overworld Theme*, have been arranged and reinterpreted throughout the various games in the series, creating a musical legacy recognisable across generations. For *Tears of the Kingdom*, the composition team comprises Manaka Kataoka, Maasa Miyoshi, Masato Ohashi and Tsukasa Usui. Their work follows in the footsteps of Koji Kondo whilst adapting the musical language to the demands of the new game. The scale of the soundtrack bears witness to this compositional challenge: it spans 9 CDs containing over 340 tracks, amounting to approximately 11 hours of

music. This vast body of work reflects the need to musically encompass a vast, open world, whilst maintaining narrative coherence and a high standard of listening quality across some 100 hours of gameplay.

Illustration 2 : Screen capture of The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom (2023) © Nintendo

In the context of a vertical open world, this freedom takes on an extra dimension. The player can decide at any moment what action to take, where to go and how to get there: diving from the Sky to the Surface, jumping from the Surface to the Depths, without any narrative constraints being imposed. This control over the experience reveals the unique potential of video game music compared to cinema. Whereas cinematic shots are fixed and predetermined by the director, video games (especially open world ones) offer total freedom: the player chooses the "shots" they want to see, the order in which they discover them, and the time they wish to spend on them. The music must therefore adapt to these unpredictable choices whilst maintaining narrative coherence. *"The music where you are the hero"*, subtitle of the *Video Games & Music* exhibition presented at the Philharmonie de Paris, perfectly illustrates what music means to the player in *Tears of the Kingdom*.

The music must therefore adapt to a major change in the game: the division of the map into three interconnected spaces, including the contrasting realms of the Sky and the Depths, each requiring its own distinct sonic identity. These worlds share one essential characteristic, however: devoid of habitations and familiar presences, they are either left to the mercy of nature or overrun by miasma, leaving the music to carry their narrative. As these areas are interconnected, the music must also accompany the player as they move from one world to another. It must therefore not only respond to unpredictable movements, but also give meaning to the transitions and ensure narrative coherence between environments with contrasting identities. This dual challenge: combining music specific to each of these new locations whilst accompanying the player's freedom of vertical movement, forms the core of our questioning:

How does the music of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* convey what is no longer visible: the remnants of a vanished civilisation in the Sky and the threat buried in the Depths? In what way does it create distinct sonic identities to symbolise and differentiate these two opposing worlds? How does it accompany the player on their vertical journeys between these opposing realms?

To attempt to answer this question, we will explore how the music of *Tears of the Kingdom* constructs distinct sonic identities for the two opposing realms of the world, whilst establishing narrative links between them. Our exploration will follow the game's vertical structure, divided into four chapters: the soundscape of the Sky, the music accompanying the hero's descent to Hyrule or the Depths, the musical atmosphere of the Depths, and finally the music of Hyrule Castle. We will examine both the ambient music and the interactive music that accompanies exploration and combat.

To begin with, we will examine two pieces of ambient music from the Sky in order to identify the compositional choices that give this place its sonic identity. By comparing these two pieces, we will explore how they musically depict a contemplative and poetic world through their choices of timbre, harmony, tempo and silence. Next, we will analyse a battle track and seek to identify the musical characteristics specific to the enemy and how they fit into the environment of the Sky.

In this second part, we will examine how the interactive music accompanies the player's vertical movements between the different layers of the world. We will analyse Link's fall from the Sky Islands to Hyrule, then his jump from Hyrule to the Depths. By comparing these two compositions, we will look for links between gameplay-related structures, and consider how they help to create a connection between transitions from one world to another.

In this third section, we will examine how the music of the Depths constructs a soundscape that is radically different from that of the Sky. By analysing a piece of background music, we will explore a different compositional approach, one that focuses on the sound phenomenon itself. We will then analyse a battle track featuring a creature from the Depths, where we will consider whether the music fits within the soundscape of the location or not.

Finally, we will conclude with an analysis of the music of Hyrule Castle, a place floating above the Surface, between the Heavens and the Depths, and we will explore the musical connections the piece has with these two opposing realms.

For the purposes of this thesis, it should first be noted that there are no official scores available for the works under consideration. The analysis will therefore be based on transcriptions taken from publicly available online sources, which may be adjusted, supplemented or annotated to serve the analytical purpose. Some musical excerpts will not require scores.

Furthermore, the music from *Tears of the Kingdom* is not freely available on mainstream streaming platforms or via direct internet access; this work therefore relies on an official soundtrack album containing all the tracks, whilst the excerpts mentioned will be accompanied by unofficial links hosted online.

Finally, the study also draws on gameplay clips, some recorded personally, which will last only thirty seconds due to the Switch's screen recording limit, and others sourced from online resources, in order to observe the music's actual context within the game.

I. The Sky

The Sky is one of the major new features in *Tears of the Kingdom*. This entirely new area allows players to venture across various archipelagos of Celestial Islands, suspended thousands of metres above Hyrule.

These floating islands – fragments of land torn from the soil of Hyrule – form a haven of peace guarded by ancient Golems, where nature and ancient ruins bear witness to a world abandoned by humans. The flora and fauna here are unique: certain fish and flowers are found nowhere else, helping to make this unspoilt place a contemplative, timeless space. These floating lands are reminiscent of the flying island of *Laputa* in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, reimagined by Hayao Miyazaki in the *Castle in the Sky*.

It is within this context that the music of the Celestial Islands must find its meaning: to convey this atmosphere of suspended serenity, peaceful solitude and a connection with the remnants of a vanished civilisation. The tracks we will analyse are *Field (High Sky)* and *Sky Island*, which together make up almost all of the background music the player hears whilst on the Celestial Islands. We will then examine a boss battle scenario on these same Islands, analysing *Flux Construct Battle*, in order to explore how an opponent's music fits into the sound identity of the location.

Illustration 3 : Link facing an archipelago of Celestial Islands, screenshot from Tears of the Kingdom © Nintendo

A. Field (High Sky)

Analysis of *Field (High Sky)* – music composed by Manaka Kataoka.

Music: https://youtu.be/4f_v0MxQ5sA

Gameplay: https://youtu.be/v0ub0qlpv8Q

Score: https://musescore.com/user/33605901/scores/11161447?share=copy_link (transcrite par XiaoMigros)

The track *Field (High Sky),* which plays when the player walks on the Celestial Islands, can be structurally analysed into two distinct parts: a gradual introduction and a contemplative main loop.

a) Gradual introduction

The music begins shortly after the player arrives on a Celestial Island and serves as the characteristic background music of the Celestial realm. It starts with two notes (E♭–F) played in unison on the saxophone, held quite softly before giving way to a long silence. Two new notes (E♭-A♭) are then played in the same manner, followed once again by a long silence. The intervals chosen (major second and perfect fourth) are not expressive but rather neutral, even slightly luminous thanks to the major second. They create a floating, ethereal atmosphere. The two long silences allow the music to gradually seep into the player's experience, without them immediately noticing, whilst leaving sonic space for the surrounding world.

b) Contemplative main section

The main section begins after about thirty seconds, when the full wind section enters. What we hear is not a melody in the strict sense, but rather a series of slow chord progressions in which the highest note traces an identifiable melodic line.

The orchestration relies almost exclusively on wind instruments: saxophones and clarinets, although it is difficult to determine with certainty whether the harmonies include clarinets or whether they consist solely of different saxophones. This choice of instrumentation proves particularly apt: the timbre of the wind instruments perfectly captures the floating, ethereal quality of the Celestial Islands. It is also worth noting that the few animals Link encounters in the Skies are birds, which the wind instruments can evoke through their breath and lightness. Furthermore, this instrumental ensemble, heard exclusively on the floating archipelagos, allows for a clear distinction from what can be heard in Hyrule or the Depths. This choice represents a major aesthetic decision: by making the winds omnipresent in the world of the Sky Islands, the team of composers creates an immediately recognisable soundscape that the player associates with this ethereal world. The Sky Islands and the winds

become inseparable: the musical identity of the place is built above all through the timbre of its instruments.

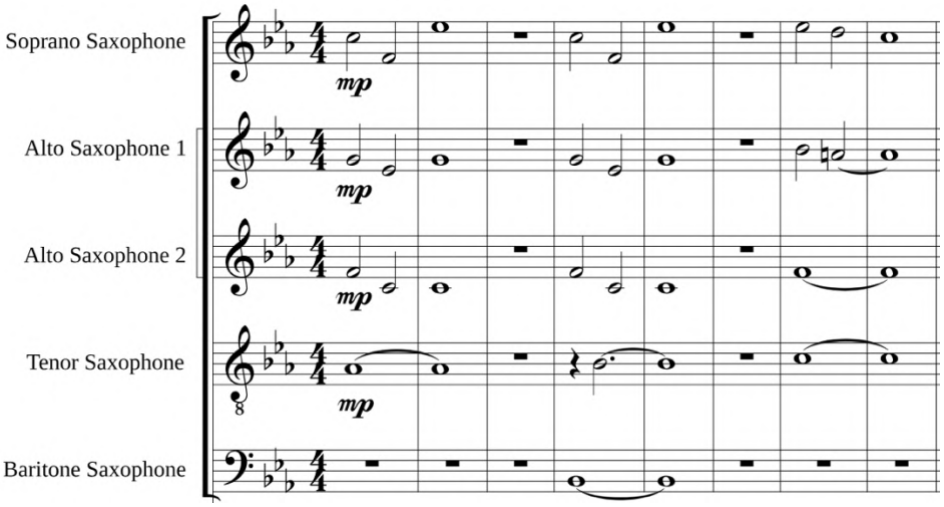

Illustration 4 : The first two motifs of Field (High Sky) © Manaka Kataoka (Xiao Migros)

The chords formed by the wind instruments are played in homorhythm at a very slow tempo, reminiscent of choral writing. This approach lends a certain solemnity to the ensemble, whilst maintaining a sense of lightness thanks to the predominant use of the middle-to-high register. We may also note that the considerable space between the notes played reinforces the floating sensation experienced by the player, as if the music were breathing in time with the clouds.

The main melodic motif consists of three notes (C–F–E♭), accompanied by three-note chords built on a A♭ root. The chord symbols reveal the following sequence: $F^{m(add9)}$, F^{m7}, $A^{♭m7}$, all on an A♭ root. The motif is then repeated after a bar of silence over the same harmony, this time based on B♭, with the addition of a baritone saxophone which enriches the sound texture.

We might hypothesise that we are in natural C minor or in the Aeolian mode, but this remains uncertain in the absence of the sixth degree. It is worth noting, however, that the transition from a minor fourth degree to a first degree forms a plagal cadence, a common sequence drawing on Gregorian chant, which reinforces the link between the abandoned ruins and the music.

The “response” to these three notes comes after another bar of silence, in the form of a second three-note motif (E♭–D–C). This new motif is more conclusive: the melody descends to C, the root note of the scale we are working in, whilst the harmony introduces a new note: A♮. This note, played simultaneously with the equally new D♮, triggers a change of scale and shifts us into the Dorian mode of C. This modal choice is not insignificant. The Dorian mode has strong connotations and is often used to evoke ancient times or a medieval atmosphere. One might think, for example, of the *Song of Storms* in *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, which perfectly

illustrates this evocative effect[3]. In this way, the use of modal modes and cadences allows the player to be musically situated in an ancient world, mirroring the ruins and human remains present in the Sky.

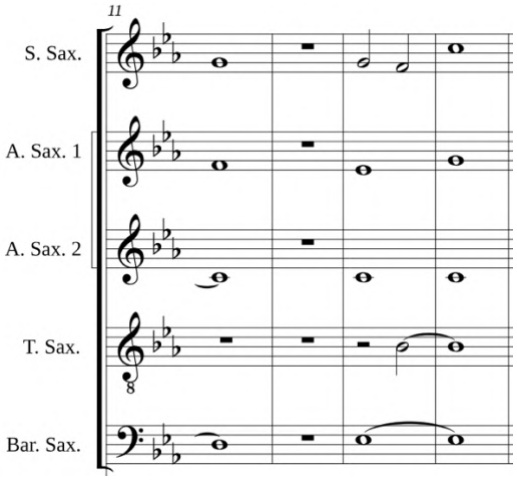

Illustration 5 : Other motif © Manaka Kataoka (Xiao Migros)

Several other motifs follow, constructed along the same lines: always three notes, repeating the same rhythmic and harmonic pattern as the previous example, thereby creating a sense of internal coherence within the piece.

We can also note that the “melody” is doubled by string harmonics. This subtle element adds an ethereal dimension to the sound. Similarly, the use of reverb helps to create a sense of space and depth, reinforcing the impression that the music itself is floating.

[3] Dozolme, M. (2025, 4 march). A timeless mode: from Debussy to Pink Floyd. France Musique. https://www.radiofrance.fr/francemusique/podcasts/maxxi-classique/un-mode-indemodable-le-dorien-de-debussy-a-pink-floyd-2253946 (around 2min18)

B. Sky Island

Analysis of *Sky Island* – music composed by Masato Ohashi.

Music: https://youtu.be/yqgXw-PerKo?si=8tyXvwWXSY9XHVB-

Gameplay: https://youtu.be/BKG7-V3YHNI

Score: https://musescore.com/user/29509274/scores/22333471?share=copy_link (transcribed by Frederik R.)

Whilst *Field (High Sky)* lays the foundations for a distinctive sonic identity for the Celestial Islands, based on choral composition, ethereal timbres and a stretched sense of time, it nevertheless constitutes only one facet of this musical universe. A second piece serves to nuance and enrich this representation of the Sky by offering a slightly different approach, whilst remaining within the stylistic continuity established by *Field (High Sky)*. This is the case with *Sky Island*, which, despite retaining certain characteristic features observed previously, distinguishes itself through a freer and more intimate aesthetic. Examining this second piece thus provides a better understanding of how the Sky Islands soundtrack is constructed as a series of variations centred around a single atmosphere.

Just like *Field (High Sky)*, the *Sky Island* music accompanies Link as he explores the world of the Sky. It can be heard on certain archipelagos, notably on the *Sky Island of the Prelude*, the largest floating island which serves as the hero's playground of discovery at the start of the game. Unlike the first piece, *Sky Island* has no clearly defined structure. Its short duration and rapid looping prevent traditional thematic development; no motif is reused or expanded upon. Nevertheless, the two compositions share deep connections and numerous common characteristics.

a) A common universe

To begin with, these two pieces serve the same function as ambient music. They do not interfere with the gameplay mechanics; their purpose is to create a dreamy, soothing atmosphere. Here, a solo wind instrument takes centre stage: the clarinet. This choice of instrument is apt for reinforcing the symbolic link between the winds and the heavens established in *Field (High Sky)*. The tempo remains slow, leaving ample room for silences, while the melodic motif consistently consists of around three notes. As in *Field (High Sky)*, we hear no developed melodies, but rather short, contemplative motifs. Beyond these structural and instrumental similarities, the two compositions share a common aim: to capture a poetic emotion unique to the Sky.

b) A more intimate approach

Unlike *Field (High Sky)*, *Sky Island* is based on a duet between clarinet and piano. The introduction of the piano marks a significant change, as it is the signature instrument of *Tears of the Kingdom* and *Breath of the Wild*. It can be heard regularly on the ground in Hyrule, and through its presence in the Sky, it establishes an initial link between the celestial world and the earthly world (we can also hear it in an alternative version of *Field (High Sky)*, when Link floats over some of the rare gravity-free islands). This change in instrumentation allows the two pieces of music heard on the Sky Islands to be contrasted, while creating a second, more intimate universe that feels "closer" to the listener. Alongside the main duo, we can occasionally hear saxophone passages or partial accompaniments that support the harmony.

Thus, the instrumental writing also changes, no longer being choral but based on the interplay between the two instruments, creating a dialogue rather than a collective harmonic progression. As mentioned earlier, the structure becomes difficult to identify, favouring a freer and more organic form, mirroring the setting in which the player finds themselves.

c) Between suspension and calm

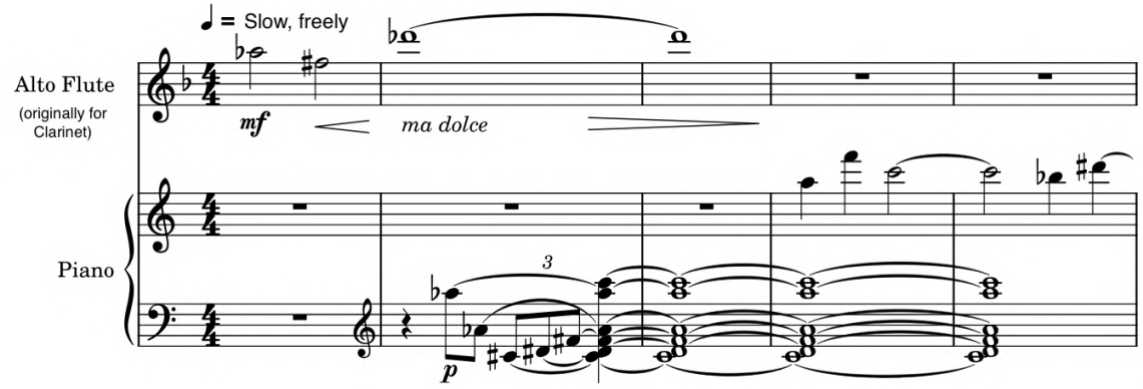

Illustration 6 : Entrance of the clarinet (written here for the alto flute) and response of piano © Masato Ohashi (Frederik R)

The clarinet's opening passage provides a gentle introduction to the piece. Its three-note motif forms an A♭^{sus4} chord (E♭–D♭–A♭), which immediately creates a floating, weightless feeling characteristic of suspended chords. The piano joins the clarinet's resonance on the same sustained note, playing freely in a faster tempo, using notes from the scale previously played by the clarinet, with the addition of G♭ and C, thus forming an A♭^{m7sus4} chord. Extended chords such as this evoke the unknown and provoke questioning, recalling the harmonic language and sonic imagery of certain impressionist composers, such as Debussy or Ravel. And just as impressionism seeks to capture nature, sensations, atmospheres, and sometimes bygone eras

(*La Cathédrale Engloutie* / *The Sunken Cathedral* – Debussy), *Sky Island* applies this approach and its harmonic language to try to capture the essence of the Celestial Islands.

« The sound of the sea, the curve of a horizon, wind in leaves, the cry of a bird leaves a manifold impression in us. And suddenly, without our wishing it at all, one of these memories spills from us and finds expression in musical language. » – Extract from *Monsieur Croche* of Claude Debussy[4]

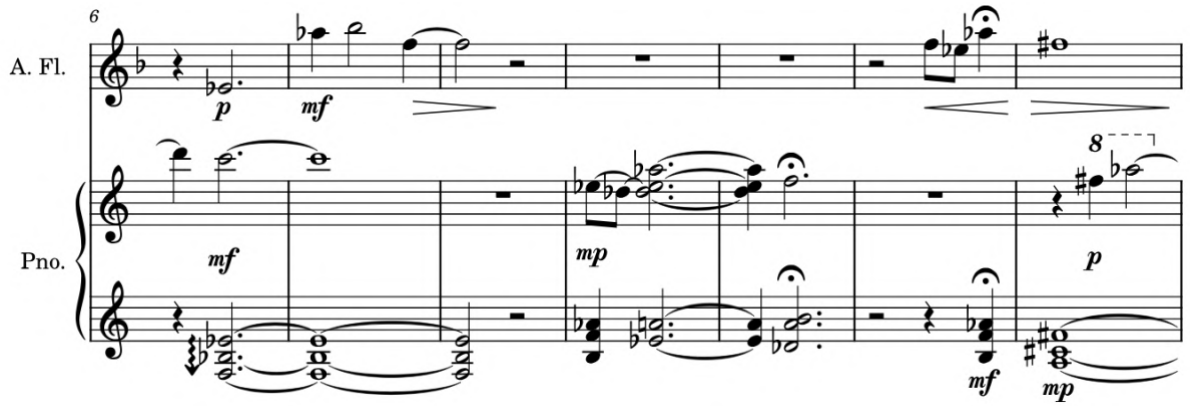

Illustration 7 : Dialogue between clarinette et piano © Masato Ohashi (Frederik R)

The recurring use of chords built on fourth intervals also helps to reinforce the composition's "timeless" quality. The A♭^{m7sus4} chord mentioned earlier is a prime example of this, as it results from the stacking of four fourths starting from E♭. This type of writing is part of the impressionist style and, more generally, of 20th century musical language, where fourth chords are frequently used. We find this technique employed by composers such as Igor Stravinsky in *The Firebird*. More recently, the composer Joe Hisaishi regularly employs this technique in his scores for Hayao Miyazaki's animated films. In *Spirited Away*, the musical introduction is played on the piano and develops into a sequence of fourth chords, which helps to create a mysterious and evocative atmosphere. This link between Joe Hisaishi's piano writing and that of the Sky in *Tears of the Kingdom* is not surprising, given that the composer also worked on Miyazaki's *Castle in the Sky*, whose Flying Castle likely inspired the Celestial Islands.

We can observe that the clarinet always comes in when the piano suspends its final chord, and that the piano plays during the clarinet's sustained notes or silences. This alternation creates a dialogue in which each instrument allows the other to breathe.

Thanks to the slow tempo of the piece, the space given to the silences, and the extended harmonies often built in fourths, the result is music that constantly oscillates between suspense and calm.

[4] « *Le bruit de la mer, la courbe d'un horizon, le vent dans les feuilles, le cri d'un oiseau déposent en nous de multiples impressions. Et, tout à coup, sans que l'on y consente le moins du monde, l'un de ces souvenirs se répand hors de nous et s'exprime en langage musical*. » Édition : L'imaginaire Gallimard (DV, 19/1/2020)

d) Minimalism in the service of exploration

The sparse instrumentation and the significant space given to silence result in an extremely minimalist score. This sonic restraint perfectly complements the game's open world structure: by leaving the player completely free, the music never interrupts them or distracts them from the discoveries they make. It simply envelops their exploration discreetly, creating an atmosphere conducive to contemplation without ever imposing itself. The soundscape thus becomes a discreet companion rather than a directive guide, allowing the player to construct their own experience of the Celestial Islands.

Illustration 8 : The Castle in the Sky, Hayao Miyazaki © Studio Ghibli

C. Flux Construct Battle

Analysis of *Flux Construct Battle* – music composed by Tsukasa Usui.

Music: https://youtu.be/dwX8haIIiA4?si=bxo_5uQxlxGn52o1[5]

Gameplay: https://youtu.be/Qtb3euf4C4k?si=WJoKbpuHrDAkUTON (screen recorded by play2free)

Visual cue: https://youtu.be/ne-eVIZxo9Q (screen recorded by Louis Delisle)

Although the Celestial Islands are a haven of peace reclaimed by nature and dotted with ruins, they are nonetheless home to a few adversaries. These enemies all share the distinctive feature of being made from the ancient technology of a long-lost civilization known as the Zonai, and are called Golems. Among them, some stand out for their power and their status as bosses, notably the Flux Construct. This formidable foe, composed of blocks linked together by Zonai technology, can be encountered both on the Celestial Islands and in the Depths, thus establishing a tangible link between these two opposing realms.

The difficulty of this duel calls for a musical score capable of conveying the specific tension associated with this enemy, whilst perfectly complementing the flow of the fight. To achieve this, the music is designed to be dynamic and evolving, structured around a precise framework.

Illustration 9 : Link fighting a Flux Construct, screenshot © Nintendo

[5] This is an arrangement of the battle sequence, which incorporates the “assault” phases in the second part, so as to mimic the sound of dynamic interaction with the gameplay that one might hear during a battle.

a) Structure of 3 main phases and 3 “assault” phases

The main theme begins as soon as Link enters the boss’s range and continues through three phases throughout the battle. However, these three phases may be interrupted by three separate “assault” phases. These transitions occur when the boss takes a critical hit, leaving it immobilised and vulnerable for around ten seconds. This moment of vulnerability requires the player to act quickly to inflict maximum damage, thereby triggering a specific musical variation that marks the intensity of the offensive. To help following this analysis, here is a link to the audio recording as well as the phase and metric tracking data: https://youtu.be/ne-eVIZxo9Q

b) Phase 1

The battle theme opens with a sixteenth-note ostinato played on a plucked-sound synthesiser. This motif, played in octaves, rises and falls in a rather unpredictable manner within a 5/4 time signature. The metrical instability created by the five beats per bar, combined with a fairly fast tempo of 97 beats per minute, aims to generate a sense of confusion and urgency in the player. We can also note that the synthesiser’s timbre is distinctive and recognisable, and that it functions as a sonic marker allowing for immediate identification as soon as combat begins.

In the third bar, a percussive element in the mid-to-high register enters, supported by a kick drum. The treatment of this percussive element’s timbre, particularly its characteristic delay, takes an almost sound-design approach and serves to musically embody the adversary. Furthermore, the rhythms played by the kick drum and percussion fall on the downbeats, but above all on the off beats, reinforcing the rhythmic ambiguity already established.

The seventh bar marks a break: the rhythmic ostinato is suspended for two bars, freeing up the sound space to initiate a crescendo in preparation for the second phase. A piano then emerges discreetly, playing sixteenth-note figures with delay, whilst layers of synthesizers gradually build up in an ascending glissando. Brass instruments enter on the off beat of the third beat of the eighth bar, preparing for the strings’ entry in the following bar, which present a rapid motif in the upper register. The metre then successively contracts from 5/4 to 2/4, then to 1/8: this metrical compression causes the first beat of Phase 2 to fall on an off beat relative to the reference frame of Phase 1, producing a surprise effect and prolonging the player’s musical disorientation.

c) Phase 2

This second musical section is distinguished by the introduction of a flute playing a recognisable melodic motif, characterised by a bouncy rhythm and a lack of emphasis on the downbeats. The motif revolves mainly around the notes F# and E#, with occasional appearances of G# and D#. In terms of timbre and dynamics, this presence can create a comical or burlesque impression. It helps to define a unique character for the enemy: although formidable in its

power, the Flux Construct does not take on the monstrous and oppressive appearance typical of creatures from the Depths, but rather that of a mechanical entity with a playful air.

As the flute phrase ends, the plucked synthesiser which had introduced the battle takes over, repeating the same melodic motif it played earlier, but this time transposed an octave higher, thereby creating thematic continuity whilst moving the register upwards towards the higher register

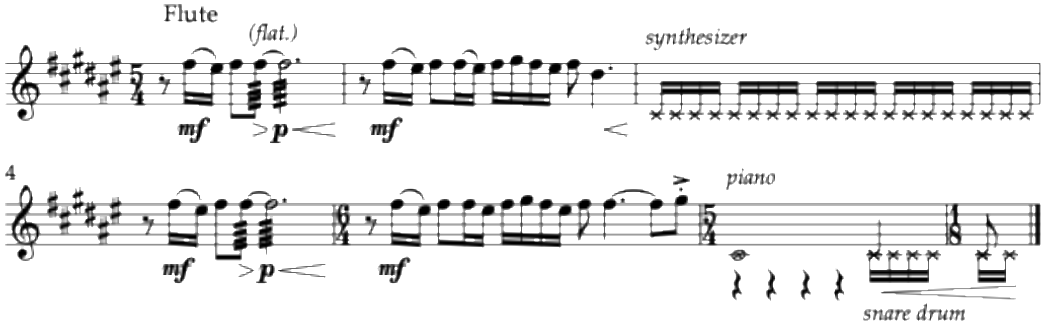

Illustration 10 : Motif de la flûte sur la Phase 2 © Tsukasa Usui (Louis Delisle)

In terms of percussion, the arrangement is enriched with new elements: a shaker marks the rhythm of the sixteenth notes, whilst drum rolls are accompanied by the sound of small bells. During the second repetition of the flute motif, the introduction of synthetic elements echoes the timbres of the synthesizers heard in the *Ancient Laboratory of Elimith*, a place dedicated to the creation and analysis of ancient technologies. This sonic choice reinforces the enemy's "zany" aspect whilst anchoring its identity within the technological universe, emphasising its nature as a machine rather than an organic creature. In the background, a keyboard-style synthesiser adds a textural layer by playing isolated notes over unpredictable rhythms, adding complexity to the soundscape.

Finally, the transition to Phase 3 replicates the shift mechanism observed previously: a bar of 1/8 note triplets precedes the first beat of the new section, reintroducing a rhythmic offset that maintains the tension and unpredictability of the battle.

d) Phase 3

Unlike the first part of Phase 2, which is predominantly in 5/4 time, this third section is characterised by a succession of bars in various time signatures: 6/4, 4/4, 6/4, 5/4, before returning to 5/4. This metrical instability serves a narrative purpose: occurring in the final phase of a confrontation, this rhythmic complexity reflects the escalating tension and urgency of the battle. The accumulation of rhythmic shifts and changes in time signature reinforces the sense of chaos and unpredictability characteristic of the climactic moment.

This intensity is sustained by the entry of a kick drum playing on every beat. This intervention provides a stable foundation and a pulse, giving the piece a dynamic energy and rhythmic drive that reinvigorates the end of the duel.

At the same time, the strings take centre stage, manifesting themselves through exchanges between groups of violins and cellos. Their contributions, characterised by a jerky

rhythm and marked brevity, introduce an organic timbre that stands in stark contrast to the purely electronic sounds of the synthesizers. This instrumental dichotomy enriches the sonic palette, creating a tension between technological rigidity and the liveliness of the string orchestra, thereby highlighting the hybrid nature of the enemy and the complexity of the confrontation.

e) The various “assault” phases

During combat, when the player lands a sufficient number of critical hits, the enemy shatters for around ten seconds and becomes vulnerable. The player then has a window of opportunity during which they hold the upper hand and must maximise damage before the opponent reforms. From a musical perspective, there are three such “assault” phases, which trigger in random order immediately upon the dispersal of the Flux and repeat in a loop for a brief duration until the enemy regenerates and the normal combat cycle resumes. The soundtrack supports this mechanic through several specific techniques designed to heighten the sense of urgency.

Each distinct “assault” phase is heralded by an abrupt modulation to a distant harmonic mode, acting as an immediate attack signal and providing a clear auditory cue for the player. Three variants of this assault phase exist, serving to maintain an element of surprise and novelty with each occurrence. The system appears to randomly select one of these three versions, thereby preventing any musical anticipation on the part of the player and maintaining tension throughout each cycle. The first “assault” phase is based on G♯, the second on E, and the third on C. These modes, deliberately distant from one another, ensure that the transitions remain surprising and maintain tension in each cycle.

A steady, ascending string movement, beginning in anacrusis, marks the first beat and creates a countdown effect. Coupled with a cymbal roll in crescendo, this element urges the player to act quickly, musically embodying the passing of time.

The introduction of a plucked synthesiser with a mechanical timbre evokes both the robotic nature of the enemy and the urgency of this limited time window. Its clock-like timbre reinforces the “race against time” aspect of this phase of the game.

f) Final phase: the boss is defeated

Finally, as soon as the boss’s last health point is taken away, the entire orchestra immediately rises in pitch to mark the climax of the tension, while the blocks of the Flux Construct crumble to pieces. The strings then play a series of rapid, energetic sixteenth notes that come to an abrupt halt on the final note of the last group of four, creating a suspended moment of resonance and silence. This final moment allows the player to catch their breath and contemplate the motionless blocks, before the last one shatters into pieces. It is at this moment that the brass section plays a powerful chord in the lower register, before sliding downwards, visually and aurally accompanying the enemy’s final explosion.

D. Conclusion – Sky

The analysis of the compositional choices in *Field (High Sky)* and *Sky Island* reveals a perfect harmony between the music and the world of the Celestial Islands. Every musical decision seems to respond directly to the characteristics of this suspended, contemplative environment.

The extremely slow tempo and the long silences between musical phrases convey the stillness of these floating lands and their timeless atmosphere. The space left between each musical phrase reflects the airy void surrounding the islands, creating a sense of suspension and perpetual floating. The orchestration, consisting exclusively of wind instruments, echoes the very nature of this ethereal world. The saxophones and clarinet, through their breath, evoke both the wind sweeping across these heights and the birds that are their rare inhabitants. This unique instrumental palette allows the player to immediately identify the soundscape of the Sky and distinguish it from the other layers of the game. The choral writing in homorhythm, solemn yet light, conveys the presence of ancient ruins and a vanished civilisation. The use of the Dorian mode reinforces this connection with a distant past, lending the music a timeless quality that matches the impression of a preserved world, frozen in peaceful eternity. The duet arrangement offers a second perspective on the setting, giving it a more concrete dimension, introducing impressionistic harmonies and fourth chords to further illustrate nature. Finally, the gradual introduction of the music in both pieces, which gently seeps into the player's experience, respects the contemplative nature of these places. The music does not impose itself; it discreetly accompanies the exploration of a haven of peace where solitude is not oppressive but soothing.

An analysis of *Flux Construct Battle* reveals that the music does not merely accompany the combat, but acts as a genuine driving force, both perceptually and in terms of playfulness. The extreme rhythmic instability, alternating between 4/4, 5/4 and 6/4, punctuated by 1/8 bars serving as pivots, combined with a rapid sixteenth-note ostinato and percussive elements frequently playing off-beat, creates a profoundly unpredictable soundscape. Added to this are distant harmonic modulations, which serve to constantly disorient the player. All these techniques maintain a state of constant alertness, where anticipation becomes difficult and every moment is perceived as potentially threatening. Furthermore, the piece develops a strong and immediately recognisable sonic identity. The choice of specific synthetic timbres, mechanical-sounding percussion, and the almost burlesque flute motif all help to musically define Flux Construct as an entity that is at once technological, strange and surprising. This sonic identity is not merely aesthetic: it actively contributes to anchoring the enemy within the game's universe. Finally, the adaptive nature of the music reveals its deep integration into the *game design*[6]. The assault phases, triggered by the player's actions (particularly critical hits), illustrate a logic where the music no longer simply comments on the action, but participates directly in

[6] Le game design – en français la conception de jeux – est l'activité consistant à créer et à mettre au point les éléments constitutifs d'un jeu, notamment les règles. *Game design*. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_design

it. It becomes an indicator, a signal and a vector of intensity, structuring the rhythm of combat as much as the game mechanics themselves.

Thus, a joint study of *Field (High Sky)*, *Sky Island* and *Flux Construct Battle* highlights two complementary approaches to video game music. On the one hand, the pieces associated with the Celestial Islands illustrate an aesthetic of contemplation, where suspended time, the scarcity of sound interventions and timbral coherence construct a sensory space in perfect resonance with the visual and narrative environment. On the other, *Flux Construct Battle* adopts an opposite approach, based on instability, surprise and tension, where music becomes a central element of gameplay, directly influencing the player's perception and reactions. In both cases, the composition goes beyond the simple function of accompaniment to lie at the heart of the interactive experience: at times supporting a meditative immersion, at others actively structuring the action. This duality testifies to the richness of the compositional strategies at work in the game, and highlights the fundamental role of music as a vehicle for emotion.

Illustration 11 : Link on a Celestial Island, screenshot © Nintendo

II. From Sky to Hyrule & from Hyrule to the Depths

Tears of the Kingdom is unique in that it is a game built across three distinct layers. However, where the game truly sets itself apart from other open world titles, is in the freedom it affords the player to move between these spaces. Where one might expect loading screens or restrictive teleportation systems, the game prioritises a fluid and organic continuity: the player can let themselves fall from the Sky to the Surface, dive into an Abyss to reach the Depths, rise through material using the power of Infiltration, or even design flying machines to reach the Sky.

This freedom of vertical movement represents a major innovation in the design of open worlds. It takes the concept of free exploration to its extreme: the player is not only in control of their horizontal movements across a map, but also of their vertical trajectory through the layers of the world. At any moment, they can decide to leave the peaceful haven of the Skies to plunge down to the Surface, or to descend into the menacing darkness of the Depths. This verticality radically transforms the game's spatial experience and poses a unique compositional challenge: how to provide a musical accompaniment to these unpredictable transitions whilst maintaining narrative coherence between contrasting soundscapes?

The music in *Tears of the Kingdom* takes on this challenge during these transitional moments by being adaptive. When the player jumps from one level to a lower one, the music reacts instantly to their action: it does not simply switch from one theme to another, but creates a soundscape specific to the fall itself. Two musical pieces embody this approach: *Diving Through the Sky*, which accompanies the descent from the Celestial Islands to the Surface, and *Diving Through the Depths*, which follows the descent from Hyrule to the Depths.

In this section, we will analyse these two pieces of music side by side in order to understand how they handle the transition between contrasting sections.

Illustration 12 : Link and Zelda falling from the sky, screenshot © Nintendo

A. Diving Througt the Sky

Analysis of *Diving Througt the Sky* – music composed by Manaka Kataoka

Music: https://youtu.be/gpimcNnisjM?si=xqqBrIaB9KVkAY7v

Gameplay: https://youtu.be/N90rQZtZg5Y

Cue: https://musescore.com/user/32857867/scores/11397415 (transcribed by Lozberipie, annotated and edited by Louis Delisle)

The track *Diving Through the Sky* begins when Link plunges into the void (whether he is launched into the air or jumps from a Sky Island). The music unfolds and gradually transforms as he descends, in four distinct phases, each corresponding to a specific moment in the fall: the start of the descent, the middle of the fall, the approach to the ground, and finally the landing.

Illustration 13 : Link jumping into the void from the Celestial Islands, screenshot © Nintendo

a) Phase 1: the start of the fall

A few seconds after a leap into the void, the piano – the iconic instrument of *Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom* – establishes the central motif of this piece. Played in sixteenth notes in a six-beat binary metre, this motif creates a sense of anticipation thanks to the rests placed on beats three and six.

The composition is based on a pentatonic scale (E♭, F, G, B♭, C), which creates an atmosphere that is both moving and soothing. The motif descends gradually: first from the high register to the mid-range within a single bar (variation a.), then from one bar to the next (from

a. to b.), thus illustrating Link's continuous descent. In variation b., additional notes appear in a lower layer, remaining faithful to the pentatonic scale. This layering enriches the loop while maintaining the sense of constant descent. These two variations (a. and b.) repeat in a loop as long as the player hovers high in the sky without actually falling.

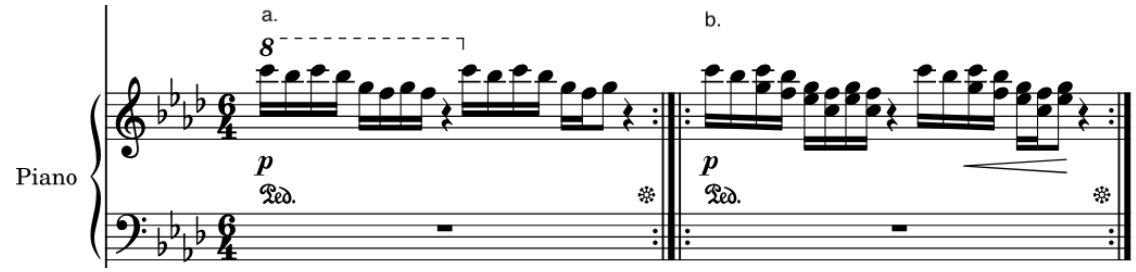

Illustration 14 : Piano motif from phase 1 © Manaka Kataoka (Lozberipie)

b) Phase 2 : the fall through the sky

As Link goes into freefall, the initial motif unfolds fully (variation c.) and serves as the foundation for the piece's development. The silences present in phases a. and b. are now filled by three sixteenth notes, and each sixteenth note is now played as two notes simultaneously. This new rhythmic and harmonic motif reinforces the sense of movement and acceleration, creating a genuine musical driving force that sustains the hero as he falls into the void.

One surprising element that stands out is the stereo spatialisation of the piano. Indeed, the sound moves from one ear to the other every three beats (from left to right), creating an effect of circular movement around the player. This technique, unusual for an acoustic instrument, enhances immersion by avoiding any focus on a fixed point, allowing the player to feel as though fragments of sound are enveloping them.

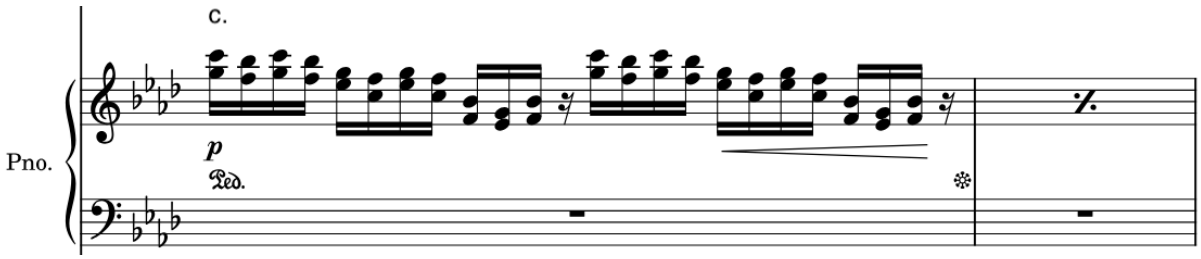

Illustration 15 : Piano accompaniment for phase 2 © Manaka Kataoka (Lozberipie)

Once this rhythmic foundation is established, other instruments make melodic appearances: the alto saxophone, the flute and the oboe. This choice is no coincidence: all three are wind instruments, which feature prominently in the music of the Celestial Islands. They thus create a sonic bridge between the celestial and earthly realms.

The melodic motif is introduced by the alto saxophone (variation a.): it begins with rapid rhythmic notes creating a bouncing effect, then gives way to longer notes, generating a sense

of breathing and space. This same motif is then repeated rhythmically in the same way by the flute, transposed in pitch, accompanied by the oboe playing a partial doubling a third below.

The rhythmic instability of this motif (whose accents never fall on the downbeats), combined with its orchestration entrusted exclusively to the winds, may evoke the song and flight of a bird, whilst creating a floating, light and whirling sensation. This evocation reinforces the idea of an aerial journey.

Illustration 16 : Piano motif from phase 1 © Manaka Kataoka (Lozberipie)

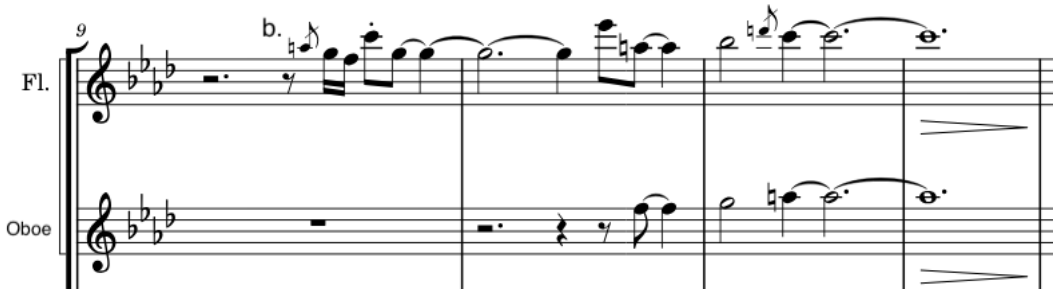

Illustration 17 : Melodic motif played by the flute and oboe © Manaka Kataoka (Lozberipie)

Towards the end of the cycle, harp harmonics and cello pizzicatos echo the melodies of the wind instruments. These string instruments restart the cycle and can be seen as a second group of birds – perhaps those of the earth responding to those of the sky? – establishing a dialogue between the two worlds.

c) Phase 3: approaching the ground

When Link enters the area near the ground, there is a sudden shift: a F played loudly by the brass section, accentuated by a bass drum and percussion, bursts forth. This striking element signals the imminent arrival in Hyrule and alerts the player that they must prepare to land. Following this interlude, the piano part drops an octave and continues on its own until the final phase.

d) Phase 4: the landing

The fourth and final phase begins when Link touches the ground. The piano, now alone, continues its motif until a final ascending arpeggio, leading to an arpeggiated chord in perfect fourths, just as he lands. The final chord, which can be notated as $D♭^{Majsus4(add6add9)}$, consists mainly of perfect fourths (F-B♭-E♭-A♭ in the right hand), evoking the suspended and mysterious atmosphere of Sky Island. This final chord also introduces a D♭ and an A♭, which are not part of the initial pentatonic scale. These notes create a gentle break that marks the conclusion of the descent, and this subtle change resolves the tension built up during the descent.

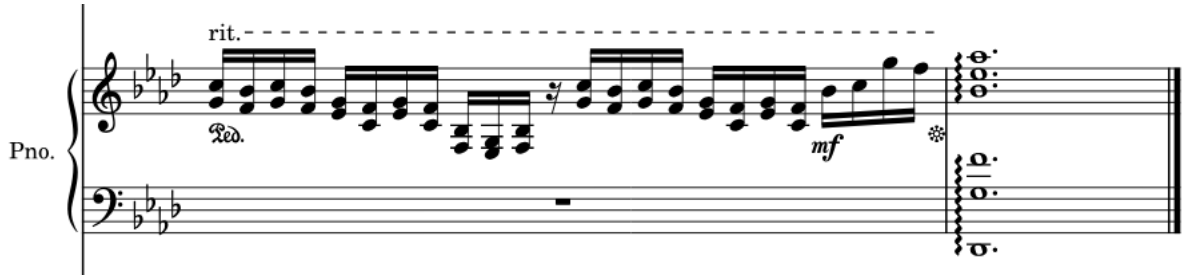

Illustration 18 : Descending final motif © Manaka Kataoka (Lozberipie)

We might wonder what happens if Link interrupts his fall, for example by landing on another Sky Island or by gliding for too long. In this case, the music fades out gradually without playing the final chord. This chord is thus reserved exclusively for the moment he lands on the ground in Hyrule.

e) Structural coherence and adaptability

We can see that the transitions between the different phases occur naturally, thanks to the piano's main rhythmic motif remaining within the same pentatonic scale from start to finish. This continuity allows the musical system to adapt to the player's descent speed: if the player falls very quickly, the music can move directly from phase 1 to phase 4, skipping the intermediate phases 2 and 3 if necessary.

B. Diving Through the Depths

Analysis of *Diving Through the Depths* – music composed by Maasa Miyoshi.

Music: https://youtu.be/fjGrLvVBzlY?si=3qOp_8Wo8RIyL1ei

Gameplay: https://youtu.be/kBdsQXk7UhY

Diving Through the Depths serves as the underground counterpart to *Diving Through the Sky*. This track plays when Link dives from the surface of Hyrule into the Depths, a hostile and dark world that stands in stark contrast to the brightness of the Sky Islands. While the gameplay mechanics remain the same, the musical atmosphere differs considerably.

In terms of musical composition, this piece draws numerous parallels with *Diving Through the Sky*, but systematically shifts its elements toward a darker, more unsettling aesthetic. The compositional approach seems to privilege a less structured style, potentially more improvised, and then assembled using a sequencer. The use of audio effects such as *delays*, *reverbs*, or moving spatializations helps create a dystopian and unsettling soundscape.

Like *Diving Through the Sky*, this composition can be analysed in terms of four distinct phases that mark Link's descent into the Depths.

Illustration 19 : Link standing before an abyss leading to the Depths, screenshot (Gamer Guides) © Nintendo

a) Phase 1: the beginning of the fall

The initial rhythmic and harmonic motif, which was played by the piano in *Diving Through the Sky*, is here transferred to a pitched percussion instrument whose timbre evokes a cimbalom or a plucked metal-stringed instrument. This change in instrumentation transforms the character of the motif: whereas the piano offered warmth and familiarity, this hard-to-identify instrument produces an unfamiliar and strange sound. As in the celestial piece, this motif forms the basis of the musical development, but its evolution is far more limited. It remains incomplete, with a pause each time on the third and sixth beats of the 6/4 measure, thus creating a sense of suspense. The application of a long *delay* to this instrument contributes to the composition's "unnatural" atmosphere, immediately establishing a sense of strangeness and surrealism. We find the same left-right stereo spatialization technique as in *Diving Through the Sky*, thus establishing a link between the two pieces while maintaining the effect of sound enveloping the listener.

Right from the opening, a *reverse*[7] sound design effect accompanies the listener, reinforcing the unsettling and unusual nature of this descent into a menacing underground world.

b) Phase 2: the fall into the Depths

Just as in *Diving Through the Sky*, a wind instrument enters to play a melodic motif. This time, however, it is not a saxophone but a flute, which takes up the opening of the motif heard during the celestial descent, but then freely deviates from it throughout the introduction. It employs an extended technique known as *flatterzunge*, which produces a rapid, unstable tremolo on sustained notes, creating both internal movement and a palpable tension that contrasts with the gentleness of the celestial winds.

Just as the flute and oboe took turns in the celestial version, the melodic motif is here entrusted to a violin, likely doubled by a viola a third below. This shift from the wind instruments to the string section contributes to the aesthetic transition from the ethereal to the earthly, from the light to the heavy. Instrumental effects punctuate this phase: string glissandos descending from high to low reinforce the idea of a fall while adding an anxiety-inducing dimension absent from the celestial version. These chromatic glides evoke a loss of control and a dangerous world.

The harp harmonics and cello pizzicatos that interacted with the winds in *Diving Through the Sky* are replaced by synthesizers. This choice maintains the same rhythm and intervals as in the celestial version, but substitutes acoustic warmth with electronic coldness, accentuating the hostile nature of the Depths.

[7] A *reverse* sound is a sound that has been flipped and played backward.

c) Phase 3: approaching the Depths

In the same way as in the celestial version, the descent toward the ground is marked by a massive brass section accompanied by percussion. However, this underground version significantly amplifies the impact of this musical event: the brass is doubled by a synthesizer to add sonic power, and the section lasts longer before ending with a descending glissando into the lower register. This glissando echoes the string glissandos heard earlier, creating internal coherence within the piece. The accent provided by the brass and percussion thus becomes far more impressive and frightening, reflecting the increased danger posed by the Depths compared to simply landing in Hyrule.

d) Phase 4: arrival at the bottom

Unlike the celestial descent, which ended with an ascending arpeggio leading into an arpeggiated chord, the arrival at the bottom of the Depths is far less elaborate. The rhythmic and harmonic drive continues on its own, as in the celestial version, until the moment Link touches the ground, when it is interrupted by a B♭ played by low-register brass (likely trombones). This intervention, loud but less intense than the warning signal in Phase 3, serves as a dramatic final conclusion. Its menacing nature reminds the player that they have now entered a hostile world, where nearly all living beings are enemies, creating a striking contrast with the sense of calm that concluded the celestial descent.

Illustration 20 : Link seen from behind, looking toward Hyrule; unknown source © Nintendo

C. Conclusion – Diving

The comparative analysis of *Diving Through the Sky* and *Diving Through the Depths* reveals a sophisticated compositional approach in which the musical structure remains constant, while the orchestration, timbre, and electronic production techniques radically transform the music's emotional impact. This musical duality reinforces the game's narrative:

Tears of the Kingdom presents a world organized into three horizontal layers, each with its own distinct soundscape. The freedom to move vertically between these layers gives the music a special role: to bridge these worlds and give meaning to the journey through them. In this way, the music complements a gameplay mechanic unique to *Tears of the Kingdom*, while shaping the player's emotional experience, transforming a simple fall into a sensory journey rich with meaning. A remarkable aspect of this composition is the aesthetic choice to present the fall into the void as a beautiful and soothing experience. It is the music that guides this perception: rather than tense music warning of danger, we have a piece that poetically evokes the celestial world throughout the descent. Admittedly, there is a musical accent and the intervention of brass instruments as the ground approaches, but this tension resolves immediately if the player lands safely. The fall is therefore not treated as a threat, but as a moment of grace, a moment suspended between two worlds. This musical vision transforms an action that could be anxiety-inducing into a contemplative experience, inviting the player to appreciate the beauty of the vertical journey and discovery, in keeping with the game's philosophy.

Diving Through the Depths functions as a dark mirror image of *Diving Through the Sky*. The two compositions share a common architectural framework – a four-phase structure, a basic rhythmic motif, stereophonic spatialization, progressive instrumental interventions, and a massive climax as the music approaches the ground – but each element is systematically reinterpreted to serve an opposite expressive intent. Where the celestial descent was soothing and contemplative, the subterranean descent proves unsettling and destabilizing. The transition from acoustic piano to a percussive instrument, from pure winds to anxiety-inducing *flatterzunge*, from acoustic instruments to cold synthesizers, musically conveys the contrast between two worlds: one luminous and reassuring, the other dark and threatening.

These two compositions demonstrate that video game music can act as an invisible narrator, guiding the player's interpretation even before the visuals reveal the nature of the destination world. The choice to maintain structural coherence while radically transforming the emotional impact illustrates the philosophy of interconnectedness unique to *Tears of the Kingdom*: these opposing worlds remain linked, reflecting their functional interdependence in the gameplay. The music therefore does not merely react to the player's actions; it anticipates and gives meaning to their vertical movements, inviting the player to feel the tension between wonder and unease at the very heart of exploration.

III. The Depths

The Depths are a hostile underground realm located beneath the Kingdom of Hyrule, shrouded almost entirely in darkness. They are inhabited by dangerous enemies and strange creatures, and can only be accessed through the Abysses, immense chasms surrounded by miasma. While the gameplay gradually allows the player to illuminate this darkness and explore its nooks and crannies, the threat and oppressive atmosphere remain integral to the identity of this place, standing in stark contrast to the light and harmony of the Sky.

However, this duality is not limited to a spatial or visual opposition. The Depths and the Sky, though radically distinct, are intrinsically linked by various elements that maintain a connection between the two: certain items for example, found in the Depths, such as Zonai mineral, allow Link to enhance his abilities in the Celestial Islands, while certain items from the Sky, such as celestial flowers, allow him to heal in the Depths. This geographical and functional duality naturally calls for a musical duality. It is within this tension between opposition and coherence that the analysis of the music in Depths takes place. Through the study of *Field (Depths)* and *Gloom's Spawn Battle*, we will seek to understand how the soundtrack constructs a hostile and anxiety-inducing soundscape.

Illustration 21 : Unknown location in the Depths, screenshot © Nintendo

A. Field (Depths)

Analysis of *Field (Depths)* – music composed by Maasa Miyoshi.

Music: https://youtu.be/x18TuzB6b6s?si=8gal45fds0LaTreE

Gameplay: https://youtu.be/gXOEP3rB8M4

When the hero enters the Depths, the soundtrack undergoes a radical transformation to accompany this exploration. Unlike the sonic freedom of the Sky, the music here is intrinsically linked to the environment and serves a specific narrative function: to establish a soundscape that is immediately recognizable and characteristic of this hostile place. The goal is twofold: to evoke the place's opacity and to create tension for the player. To achieve this, the composition draws on a palette of timbres distinct from those of the surface worlds.

a) A musical world centred on sound

The musical atmosphere of the Depths is characterized by the absence of structured melodies, defined harmonies, and evolving rhythms. The focus is primarily on the sound phenomenon itself: audio transformations, complex sound textures, electronic processing, and concrete sounds weave together a unique and unsettling soundscape. The use of a low-pitched synthesizer, heard from the moment the player first steps onto the ground, serves as an alarm signal to grab the player's attention and set the mood. Its timbre evokes the growl of a monster or an enemy, without the player being able to tell whether it is far away or close by. In this way, the synthesizer helps create a sense of unknown danger.

The use of the prepared piano, whose strings have been modified to produce muffled, percussive sounds, evokes the organic atmosphere of the world above, while heightening the sense of unease associated with entering the world below. The symbolism of the prepared piano is even more significant because this instrument, emblematic of both open worlds, is heard regularly in the kingdom of Hyrule and can evoke nature and purity. By "preparing" the piano, the strings are modified, objects are inserted between them to alter the vibration, transforming the instrument of purity into a source of organic dissonance. This technical alteration may illustrate the corruption that plagues Hyrule's underground, reminding the player that this place is an inverted and corrupted version of the surface. The prepared piano of *Field's (Depths)* is sometimes hard to distinguish amid the other electronic and ambient sounds, but it can be heard more clearly on *Depths Abandoned Mine*, which plays in the abandoned mines of the Depths.

Illustration 23 : John Cage preparing a piano (1947) © Irving Penn

Illustration 22 : Studio of the Groupe de Recherche Musical (1951) © GRM

A central element of this soundscape lies in the treatment of acoustic space. Nearly all musical elements are immersed in a *delay* effect, creating a sense of absolute uncertainty. In the game's total darkness, where visibility is limited, sounds seem to bounce endlessly, simulating a loss of spatial orientation and a sensation of vertigo. The player is thus placed in a situation where they lack visual and auditory cues, amplifying the tension inherent in exploring an unknown place. We can also note the use of certain sounds played in reverse when the player is in the Depths. These reversed sounds, used throughout the game, serve to symbolize corrupt evil (Ganondorf the Demon King, the miasma, etc.). The reversed sound thus serves as a *"timbral leitmotiv*[8]*"* to evoke the presence of evil, a stylistic feature that is also apparent in the game's various promotional trailers[9]. It is within this soundscape that these reversed textures reinforce the atmosphere of constant threat and underscore the perversion of the natural order.

Despite this stark contrast, the music of the Depths maintains a subtle connection with the Sky, reflecting the interdependence of the two worlds. The musical structure is built on regular percussive beats, played at precise intervals. These beats give way to a silence filled with the echo of *delay*, before the cycle begins anew. This slow tempo and this roughly one-minute loop create a hypnotic, highly refined rhythm. This simplicity leaves ample room for silence, a characteristic that links this soundtrack to those of the Sky (*Field (High Sky)* & *Sky Island*) and to the game's overall aesthetic, accompanying the player without overwhelming them with excessive auditory information.

[8] Motif ou thème assez caractéristique, destiné à rappeler, dans un ouvrage musical, une idée, un sentiment, un état ou un personnage. (Wagner en a systématisé l'emploi.) Dictionnaire de français Larousse. https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/leitmotiv/46622

[9] Sequel to The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild - First Look Trailer - Nintendo E3 2019 : https://youtu.be/3fr1Z07AV00?si=_ujZCOXgCa6fr3NI&t=12

B. Gloom Spawn Battle

Analysis of *Gloom Spawn Battle* – music composed by Maasa Miyoshi.

Music: https://youtu.be/-EO1BY-a6XM?si=Udjki_coj_fQcrDD

Gameplay: https://youtu.be/8VDuaDleNoM?si=wwAKNqYjtDMpSWKZ&t=10 (screen recorded by FierceDeityRick)

The Depths are teeming with a multitude of hostile enemies. In *Tears of the Kingdom*, these adversaries can be classified into several categories based on their level of danger. Each category features its own specific battle music, as well as variations that adapt to the location of the encounter or the presence of a boss within the group of enemies. Thus, certain battle tracks from the Surface are rearranged into underground versions. For example, *Battle: Field*, which accompanies battles against small groups of enemies on the surface, is orchestrated differently in the Depths: the arrangement incorporates more electronic sounds and audio effects characteristic of this environment. This musical adaptation reflects a gameplay reality: many enemies encountered in the Depths originally come from the Surface, but appear partially covered in miasma and significantly strengthened. The music thus conveys this transformation, signalling to the player the intensification of the danger.

However, some enemies truly belong to the Depths and may occasionally emerge to the surface of Hyrule. This is the case with Gloom Spawn, bosses that appear unexpectedly in various locations throughout the game. These monsters hold a special place in the hierarchy of adversaries because they establish a narrative and musical link between the Depths and the game's final boss: Ganon. Several elements link the Gloom Spawn to Ganon: they share a similar visual aesthetic tied to the miasma that completely covers them, and a battle against a Gloom Spawn leads directly into a battle against the Phantom of Ganondorf. Both monsters are powerful and terrifying, and although they can appear in both the Depths and on Hyrule, they fundamentally belong to the underworld.

Illustration 24 : Gloom Spawn, screenshot (Zelda Wiki) © Nintendo

Illustration 25 : Phantom Ganon, screenshot (Zelda Wiki) © Nintendo

The music starts playing automatically when Link enters the Gloom Spawn's detection range. In some cases, the creature may not be within the player's field of view; the music then becomes the first indication of its presence, alerting the player that they are under attack and creating an immediate sense of tension.

The composition can be analysed in four distinct phases that accompany the progression of the battle.

a) Phase 1: Introduction

This first phase aims to create an immediate sense of tension, foreshadowing the enemy's imminent arrival.

The music begins with a gentle fade-in, allowing for a more discreet entry. From the very start, we hear rapid double notes played on the piano in the lower-middle register, creating a frenetic and stressful atmosphere. These pianistic sixteenth notes foreshadow the rhythmic drive that will fully develop in the next phase, thus creating structural continuity between the introduction and the body of the battle.

The reversed voices, which we previously identified as a "timbral leitmotif" evoking the presence of evil, are no longer relegated to the background as before, but placed at the forefront of the soundscape. This choice underscores the direct link between the Gloom Spawn and Ganon, highlighting the connection between this monster and the Lord of Darkness. These reversed voices create a strange sensation, both fascinating and magical, reflecting the ambivalent nature of evil: magical and terrifying.

Plucked percussive sounds, likely from a prepared piano or a synthesizer, punctuate the crescendo with a few notes in the mid-range. These sounds are panned to the right in the stereo mix, echoed by a motif an octave lower, panned to the left. This left-right alternation creates a spatial dialogue effect that envelops the player and reinforces the sensation of an omnidirectional threat.

In the background, a sustained note centered around C can be heard, played by a blend of synthetic sounds whose pitch gradually glides toward the high register. This upward glide actively contributes to building tension, creating a sense of an inexorable escalation toward conflict.

All of these elements converge toward a general crescendo, both in terms of dynamics and orchestration, leading to the establishment of the rhythmic engine. This build-up is reinforced by the addition of *risers* (ascending sound effects found in electronic music) and by the increasing frequency of sixteenth-note runs on the piano, creating a sense of momentum toward the combat phase itself.

b) Phase 2: The Gloom Spawn

This second phase marks the beginning of the battle against the Gloom Spawn and is characterized by a densification of rhythm and instrumentation.

The piano establishes a steady rhythmic pulse in sixteenth notes, generating a rapid, uninterrupted flow. As in *Diving through the Sky*, the piano's sound moves in clusters of notes from right to left across the soundstage. However, this spatialization technique serves a radically opposite function here: whereas it created a soothing envelopment during the celestial fall, in this context it generates an omnidirectional sonic presence, with the rapid flow surging from all sides to destabilize and stress the player.

The entry of a low-pitched percussion instrument, likely a taiko drum, marks a turning point in this phase. The instrument initially beats out the downbeats for seven beats, temporarily establishing a stable rhythmic structure. Then, abruptly, it shifts to the offbeats for about four beats, creating a strong sense of rhythmic instability that mirrors the chaotic battle. This shift is accompanied by an additional dramatic effect: the piano's rhythm cuts out momentarily, accentuating the player's loss of bearings. We can also note that the beginning of each rhythmic pattern is punctuated by a tubular bell, whose resonance evokes the collective imagery associated with this instrument: that of ominous church bells.

Among the instruments with distinctive timbres that enrich this phase, the accordion plays a significant role. It complements the piano's stream of sixteenth notes, which are also spatialized across the stereo field. The use of this instrument in this context is no coincidence: its timbre resembles that of the organ, an iconic instrument in video games used to symbolize final bosses, and frequently employed in the *Zelda* franchise to represent Ganon. Through timbral association, the introduction of an accordion at this point in the battle is a crucial artistic choice: it foreshadows Ganon's imminent arrival and takeover of the fight, without directly resorting to the organ, which might be too obvious and "spoil" his appearance.

Strings constitute another instrumental group used in a characteristic manner. Their tremolos add a sense of frenzy and reinforce the piece's impression of speed. They intervene at the end of the rhythmic pattern to restart it, immediately followed by rapid reverse vocals that reiterate the "timbral leitmotif" of evil previously established.

Finally, several electronic sounds are incorporated into the background, evoking the characteristic soundscape of the Depths. In particular, a synthesizer glissando (for example at 1:45) can be heard that is identical to those heard while exploring the Depths. This integration creates a sonic continuity between the exploratory atmosphere of the underground realm and the confrontation with its most fearsome creatures, musically anchoring the Gloom Spawn in its native environment.

c) Phase 3: Phantom Ganon

This moment marks a dramatic turn of events: after finally defeating the Gloom Spawn, it transforms into the Phantom of Ganon, and the battle resumes with renewed intensity. This third phase begins around the 2:25. Contrary to expectations, this phase is musically less assertive than the previous one, despite the escalating danger. The soundscape is concentrated primarily in the low and mid-range frequencies, avoiding the high registers that might create a more pronounced sense of urgency. Certain instrumental techniques disappear without reappearing, notably the bowed strings, which were a major source of agitation in the previous phase. This restraint creates a paradoxical effect: rather than amplifying the threat through sonic escalation, the music becomes more insidious, perhaps suggesting the spectral and less tangible nature of this new adversary.

A new percussive instrument in the lower-midrange enriches the rhythmic texture, adding complexity while the other elements quiet down somewhat. A short, rapid three-note motif (D-D-E♭) appears somewhat randomly, played alternately by the piano and a solo cello. This obsessive melodic fragment, emerging unpredictably, brings a frenetic quality that reflects the instability of the battle.

Since the accordion foreshadowed this development in the previous phase, it is now the organ itself that makes its appearance, albeit discreetly, playing sustained notes in the background. This subtle introduction of the organ's timbre evokes Ganon's signature sound established in previous opus of the franchise, notably in *Inside Ganon's Castle*[10] from *Ocarina of Time*, which itself was first heard in *A Link to the Past*. This reference in the battle remains subtle and is not overly prominent. The balance is carefully calibrated, present enough to be recognized by players familiar with the series, yet restrained enough not to overwhelm the other musical elements.

Illustration 26 : Ganondorf playing the organ, screenshot from Zelda Ocarina of Time (1998) © Nintendo

[10] The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time Music - Inside Ganon's Castle : https://youtu.be/L4RnfipMibA?si=gDuj0MxtgJs17Zxd

The strings, which had previously been played with a bow, adopt new playing techniques: they produce percussive effects by playing *col legno* (striking the strings with the wooden part of the bow) and create unsettling soundscapes in the background using *sul ponticello* (playing close to the bridge, producing a metallic sound) and tremolo. These extended techniques contribute to the eerie sound of this section.

Compared to the previous section, we hear bursts of brass that energize the whole piece and add power, creating waves of intensity within an overall more restrained texture; however, these brass interludes are fairly rare. We can also note that many sounds are placed randomly in the sequencer, reinforcing the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the battle against the Phantom of Ganon. This paradoxically disorganized structure musically reflects the elusive and unsettling nature of this phantom adversary.

d) Phase 4: The defeated boss

If Link emerges victorious from the battle, a brief musical conclusion plays at the exact moment the boss is defeated. This final cadence lasts less than ten seconds and contrasts sharply with the orchestral intensity of the preceding sections.

All the instruments suddenly fade out, leaving the piano alone to perform a concluding cadence. This instrument, already central to the battle phases, regains its solo status here to mark the end of the confrontation. The cadence consists of a series of chords, progressing from high to low, accompanied by a melodic motif of descending eighth notes. This descent in register can be interpreted as the fall of the defeated boss or as a return to calm after the tension of the battle.

The piano's entrance is preceded by a cymbal roll that continues to resonate throughout the cadence, creating an enveloping sonic halo. This acoustic resonance is interwoven with sound design elements that blend with the piano's harmonies, blurring the line between instrumental sounds and electronic effects. This ambiguity in timbre maintains a sense of unease: victory has been secured, but the oppressive atmosphere of the Depths has not entirely vanished. The player remains in this hostile universe despite their temporary victory.

C. Conclusion – Depths

Thus, *Field (Depths)* marks a sharp aesthetic break from the music from the Sky, favoring an approach based on timbre, texture, and sound processing rather than melody or harmony. Through the use of electronic sounds, prepared piano, and spatial effects such as *delay* or reverse, the composition establishes an atmosphere of uncertainty and menace, reflecting the opacity and hostility of the Depths. However, behind this radical contrast, common elements remain (slowness, repetition, the importance of silence) that ensure continuity with the other layers of the game. The music thus plays a full part in constructing a world that is both distinct and interconnected, where sound becomes an essential vehicle for perceiving and understanding space.

The analysis of *Gloom Spawn Battle* extends this logic by demonstrating how these sonic elements are reappropriated and intensified within a combat context. The music adopts a multi-phase, evolving structure that precisely mirrors the dramatic arc of the confrontation. From the initial crescendo to the rhythmic densification, up to the transformation into Ganon's Phantom, each stage employs specific techniques (unstable spatialization, "timbral leitmotif", hybridization between acoustic and electronic instruments) to musically convey the escalating threat. Unlike Flux Construct, where the music actively participates in the gameplay by highlighting the player's windows of opportunity, this music acts more as a vehicle for anxiety and crescendo, conveying the unpredictable and deeply unsettling nature of the enemy. Whereas the battle against the enemy of the Sky relied on rhythmic instability and a rather playful composition, based on surprise and disorientation, the battle against the Gloom Spawn emphasizes a continuous build-up of tension. Here, the music takes on a primarily dramatic function: it heralds the growing threat, accompanying the enemy's transformation, while affirming the link between the Depths and Ganon.

Thus, the soundtrack for the Depths perfectly illustrates how *Tears of the Kingdom* uses music as a tool to create a sense of overall coherence between gameplay, storytelling, and the environment. It does more than simply guide the player; it shapes their perception of danger, space, and the narrative, underscoring the central role of sound in building the world of the Depths.

IV. Hyrule Castle

Visible from even the farthest reaches of the game, Hyrule Castle, located at the center of the map, was once the seat of the royal family and the heart of the kingdom. Now overrun by evil, ravaged by miasma, and abandoned by its inhabitants, it embodies the fall of power in the face of evil. Once a symbol of the kingdom, Hyrule Castle has partially risen into the air following Ganondorf's return. The portion that remains on the surface houses an Abyss providing access to the Depths, thus establishing a direct link between the world's three layers: Depths, Surface, and Skies. It is within this chasm that the Ghost of Ganondorf lurks, a direct manifestation of the evil buried beneath Hyrule.

Illustration 27 : Hyrule Castle seen from below, screenshot (TheGamer) © Nintendo

A. Hyrule Castle (Surface)

Analysis of *Hyrule Castle (Surface)* – music composed by Maasa Miyoshi.

Music: https://youtu.be/0F9Z0mXHDfM?si=RiEoEsWEfCqpI1a0 (called *Hyrule Castle Chasm*)

Gameplay: https://youtu.be/k3uXzbtnMBU

Cue: https://musescore.com/user/31048783/scores/11164771?share=copy_link (transcribed by Grilled Jello, annotated and edited by Louis Delisle)

The music starts playing when Link enters the Hyrule Castle area and serves as background music.

a) To evoke absence

The piece begins with a sustained female vocal note, likely created using a synthesizer, which is quickly interrupted by the piano's entrance. The use of this female voice is interesting because it subtly evokes the absence of Princess Zelda, who has disappeared and is search by the hero throughout the adventure, and who once lived there. Although the vocal interludes remain brief and fragmented, they are enough to subconsciously suggest the disappearance of the royal family and the desolation of the place.

The piano, the central instrument highlighted in this excerpt, enters freely on an arpeggiated $G^{m(Maj7)}$ chord in the upper register, immediately establishing the key of G minor. The friction between the major seventh (F♯) and the root note (G) creates a harmonic tension that envelops the listener in a mysterious and strange atmosphere, reflecting the deserted and enigmatic character of the castle. Once the chord is arpeggiated, the piano continues in a slightly more assertive manner by playing a G in the lower register, followed by a D whose resonance is left hanging. Simultaneously with this low G, a group of instruments appears discreetly in the background to provide harmony and reinforce the mysterious effect: this is a wind ensemble, identical to those heard in the Celestial Islands.

b) The timbre of the past

This wind section in the background punctuates each piano passage by providing a harmony or a cluster of notes. Their presence raises a question: why evoke the Celestial Islands in Hyrule Castle through their timbre, when this instrumental group is not heard anywhere else on the Surface? Several narrative interpretations can be proposed. On the one hand, this evocation could serve as a reminder that Ganondorf's threat once succeeded in defeating the people of the Sky, which is unlikely. On the other hand, and more likely, it echoes the fact that the first King of Hyrule was Rauru, a Zonai being from the Sky, who founded the kingdom and became its first ruler. Through the presence of the wind ensemble, the soundtrack evokes a

distant past when the first king lived xin the Castle, and thus acts as an invisible narrator: it allows the Zonai people to be depicted within the Castle grounds, like a faded memory.

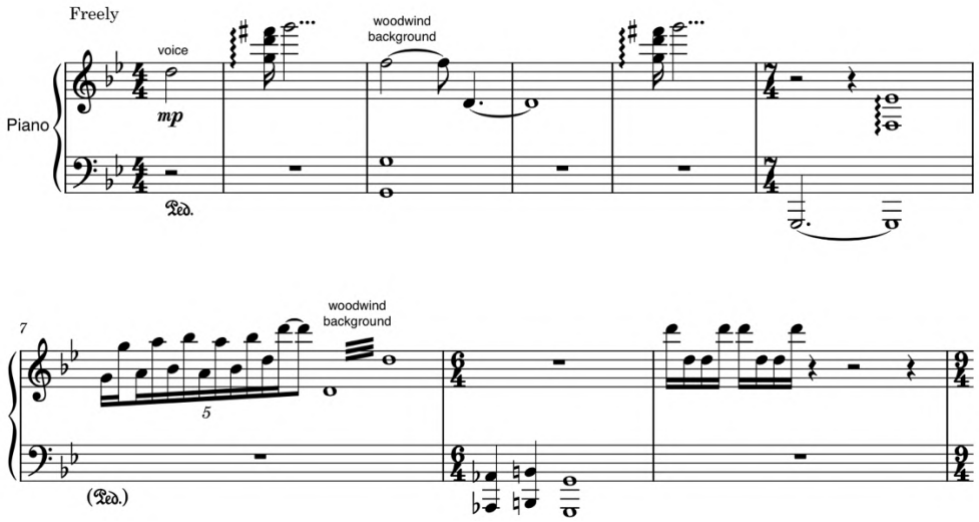

Illustration 28 : Entrance of music in Hyrule Castle © Maasa Miyoshi (Grilled Jello/Louis Delisle)

After the ensemble plays a G^{sus4} chord, the piano's first arpeggiated chord is repeated, thus calling into question the player's presence in this abandoned place. The piano plays a low G again, followed this time by the notes F and E♭, introducing a new harmonic color. This sequence is then interrupted by an ascending run of sixteenth notes, still on the piano, alternating with octave playing that creates a slight movement within the calm that has already been established.

While the wind section calmly holds a D pedal, the piano plays a recognizable motif in the lower register: A♭-B♮-G.

c) The enemy's motif

This motif, in which the B♮ acts as a foreign note within the harmonic context of G minor, creates an augmented second. This interval serves to make the music sound more menacing at this precise moment, while evoking an "Oriental" imagery for Western ears. This "orientalization" through the augmented second has been widely used in Western classical music to evoke, often in a reductive and fantasized way, "the Orient" as imagined by Europeans. We can think, for example, of the *Bacchanale* from Camille Saint-Saëns's opera *Samson and Delilah*, whose plot is set in Palestine, or more recently of Maurice Jarre's theme from *Lawrence of Arabia*, set during the Great Arab Revolt. It is true that the augmented second is present in certain Eastern modes, notably the *hijaz* mode, and its use in the context of Hyrule Castle is not insignificant: it evokes the Gerudo people, a tribe of female warriors living in the desert, and from whom Ganondorf hails. Through this short motif containing an augmented second, the music evokes the enemy threatening the castle by recalling the people from whom he was born.

d) The wait and the resolution

After this motif appears, the piano plays a foreshadowing of a second motif: eight sixteenth notes on D, with the 1st, 4th, 5th, and 8th notes played an octave higher. This foreshadowing gives way to a resonance before being repeated in the next measure.

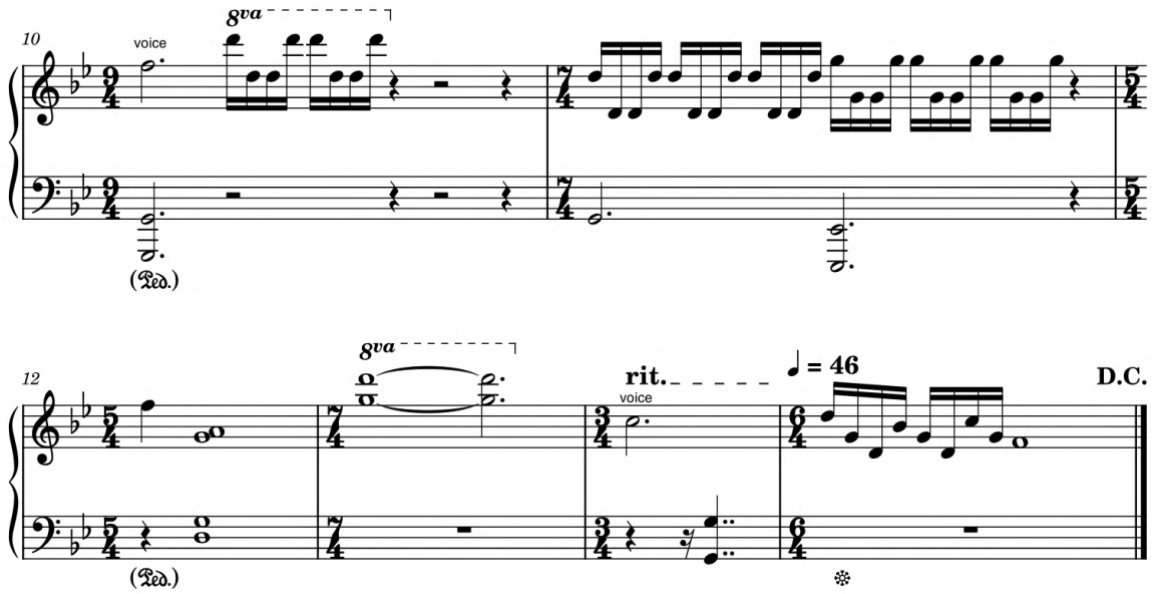

Illustration 29 : second part from the Hyrule Castle music © Maasa Miyoshi (Grilled Jello/Louis Delisle)

Starting in measure 11, the motif that was foreshadowed is played in its entirety on the same rhythm, following a sequence of the notes D-G-F. The entry of an E♭ bass note in octave on the G suggests an E♭ major harmony, identifiable as the sixth degree of the scale, lending breadth and significance to this moment in the piece. One might expect the onset of a crescendo, but this moment serves as a climax: the melody immediately descends to F, harmonized in the next beat by a D^{sus4}, concluding the phrase with a suspended half-cadence. This creation of a "false climax" evokes in the player a sense of incompleteness and anticipation, thus reflecting the fractured image of the castle and the kingdom.

The piece ends with a descending sequence of piano notes, moving from a G^{m} chord to a C^{sus4} chord, leaving the atmosphere hanging in suspense. One also notices the use of a long reverb in the background that octaves the notes in the manner of a *shimmer*[11] effect. This sound treatment creates a subtle additional connection to the Sky, adding an ethereal dimension to the castle's atmosphere and reinforcing the narrative link between the Zonai people and the kingdom of Hyrule.

[11] A type of reverb that combines reverb and pitch shifting

B. Conclusion – Hyrule Castle

The soundtrack primarily serves as ambient music perfectly suited to the setting of Hyrule Castle: it creates an atmosphere that is at once mysterious, suspended, and deeply unsettling, in keeping with a space stripped of life and filled with miasma. However, it goes further and provides a narrative subtext, making the absence audible. The use of a female voice suggests the disappearance of the royal family, and more specifically that of Princess Zelda, who was once connected to this place. The timbre of the wind instruments, meanwhile, evokes the memory of the Zonai people and the reign of Rauru, inscribing an ancient and almost forgotten past into the soundscape. Finally, the occasional appearance of the augmented second introduces a marked sonic otherness, referring to the Gerudo people and Ganondorf, whose threatening presence now permeates the area.

Therefore, Hyrule Castle serves as a focal point where music evokes temporalities drawn from different layers. It does not merely represent a place; it reveals its internal complexity. Within the same soundscape, a glorious past, a present marked by absence, and an imminent threat overlap, even though these dimensions are not visible on screen. The Castle thus becomes a perceptual crossroads where the Sky and the Depths converge, not physically, but through music, which acts as the only medium capable of making these invisible layers audible and unifying them into a coherent experience.

Illustration 30 : Link facing Ganon, screenshot from The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker (2002) © Nintendo

V. Conclusion

At the conclusion of this analytical journey through the three layers of *Tears of the Kingdom*, it becomes clear that the game's music far exceeds its intended function. Our initial question focused on music's ability to narrate what is no longer visible (the remnants of a vanished civilization in the Sky and the threat buried in the Depths), as well as how it musically symbolizes these opposing worlds while accompanying the player's vertical movements between them. Analysis of the eight pieces studied confirms that the music fully fulfils this dual narrative and adaptive function.

a) Giving the invisible a musical presence

In the Celestial Islands, *Field (High Sky)* and *Sky Island* do more than simply accompany the exploration of an aerial world; they give a sonic form to a vanished past. The orchestration, dominated by winds, the use of the Dorian mode, plagal cadences, and choral writing evoke the Zonai civilization, of which only architectural ruins and scattered Golems remain. The impressionistic universe and the fourths harmonies of *Sky Island*, seeking to "translate nature", transform the soundscape into a tangible trace of a vanished human presence. The music thus becomes the last witness to an ancient world, frozen in peaceful eternity.

In contrast, in the Depths, *Field (Depths)* constructs a universe based on the sound phenomenon itself, rather than on melodic or harmonic structures. The prepared piano symbolizes the perversion of the underground realm. The reversed sounds, identified as the "timbral leitmotif" of evil, give Ganondorf an audible presence even before the player encounters him. Where the Sky evoke what has vanished, the Depths reveal what is hidden: a threat lurking in the darkness, ready to strike.

Hyrule Castle, the central location of the game and the three layers, perfectly embodies music's ability to bring invisible temporalities into coexistence. The timbre of the celestial winds evokes the reign of Rauru, Hyrule's first Zonai king; the female voice suggests Zelda's absence; the augmented second recalls the Gerudo people, from whom Ganondorf hails. Within the same sonic space, a glorious past, a deserted present, and an imminent threat overlap, creating invisible connections that only music can reveal.

b) Support the player's vertical movement

A comparative analysis of *Diving Through the Sky* and *Diving Through the Depths* revealed a sophisticated compositional approach in which the structure remains constant while musical changes radically transform the emotional impact on the listener. These two pieces share a four-phase architecture, a basic rhythmic engine, stereophonic spatialization, and a massive emphasis on the approach to the ground. Yet each element is systematically reinterpreted: the acoustic piano becomes an indefinable percussive instrument, pure

woodwinds transform into anxiety-inducing *flatterzunge*, and harp harmonics give way to cold synthesizers. This musical duality does more than simply illustrate two opposing destinations: it sculpts the player's emotional experience in real time. Where *Diving Through the Sky* transforms a potentially anxiety-inducing fall into a moment of contemplative grace, inviting the player to appreciate the beauty of the vertical journey, *Diving Through the Depths* generates unease and destabilization, foreshadowing the hostility of the underground world. The music thus gives meaning to a gameplay mechanic (jumping into the void) that could be nothing more than a functional movement. It transforms the freedom of vertical movement, a major structural innovation in *Tears of the Kingdom*, into an emotionally charged narrative experience.

c) Music as perceptual and narrative driver

Beyond serving as background music, an analysis of the battles against the Flux Construct and the Gloom Spawn has shown that music also plays an active perceptual role in gameplay. *Flux Construct Battle* constantly unsettles the player through its metrical instability (alternating between 4/4, 5/4, and 6/4 time signatures), its distant harmonic modulations during assault phases, and its omnidirectional spatialization. The music does not merely comment on the battle: it becomes a vehicle for intensity, transforming the soundtrack into a dynamic tool in the service of the gaming experience. *Gloom's Spawn Battle* takes a different approach, prioritizing the build-up of narrative tension over playful disorientation. The accordion foreshadowing Ganon's organ, the reversed voices placed in the foreground, the gradual transformation of the Creature into Ganondorf's Phantom: here, the music acts as a vehicle for anxiety and narrative, musically establishing the link between the Depths and the final boss even before the player reaches the latter.

d) From illustration to narration

Our initial hypothesis has been confirmed: in *Tears of the Kingdom*, the music does more than simply illustrate what is happening on screen. It possesses an autonomous narrative dimension, capable of providing a counterpoint and subtext to the visuals that enriches the player's experience. By giving a sonic presence to what is absent – the vanished Zonai people, buried evil, invisible links between worlds – it truly attains the status of an "invisible narrator", a concept frequently used to describe the role of the soundtrack in cinema.

However, video game music goes further than its cinematic counterpart. Whereas film music accompanies fixed, predetermined shots, the music in *Tears of the Kingdom* adapts in real time to the unpredictable decisions of a player free to move vertically. It guides not only the emotions of a passive spectator, but those of an actor whose choices influence the unfolding of the experience. "*The music where you are the hero*", the subtitle of the Philharmonie de Paris's *Video Games & Music* exhibition, takes on its full meaning here.

Tears of the Kingdom thus demonstrates that video game music, for a long time considered a minor art form compared to other types of music, possesses a unique narrative and

emotional potential. By giving sound to the invisible and adapting to the player's freedom, it transforms a simple gameplay mechanic into a sensory journey rich with meaning. Music is no longer merely an accompaniment: it becomes the sonic extension of the very identity of the worlds traversed, revealing what images alone cannot convey.

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Table of illustrations

Research paper - Louis DELISLE

2nd cycle (Master), 2025-2026

InMICS – International Master in Composition for Screen

From Sky to Depths: A musical analysis of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*

Abstract

This thesis analyses the music of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* as an element that gives audible form to the invisible. Through the study of eight musical pieces spread across the Celestial Islands, the Depths, and their vertical transitions, we examine how the composition evokes a lost civilization and a threat buried beneath Hyrule. The analysis reveals that the music does not simply illustrate the action, but constructs distinct sonic identities for each world. By accompanying the player's unpredictable vertical movements within this layered open world, the music transforms gameplay mechanics into a narrative experience, demonstrating the unique potential of video game music.

Keywords: Video game music, Zelda Tears of the Kingdom, open world, adaptive music, Nintendo

Résumé

Ce mémoire analyse la musique de *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* comme élément donnant forme sonore à l'invisible. À travers l'étude de huit pièces musicales réparties entre les Îles Célestes, les Profondeurs et leurs transitions verticales, nous examinons comment la composition évoque une civilisation disparue et une menace enfouie sous Hyrule. L'analyse révèle que la musique ne se limite pas à illustrer l'action, mais construit des identités sonores distinctes par mondes. En accompagnant les déplacements verticaux imprévisibles du joueur dans cet open world stratifié, la musique transforme une mécanique ludique en expérience narrative, démontrant ainsi le potentiel unique de la musique vidéoludique.

Mots-clefs : Musique de jeu vidéo, Zelda Tears of the Kingdom, monde ouvert, musique adaptative, Nintendo