

Noxia Somnia (Original Video Game Soundtrack): Program Notes

These tracks were written for the video game *Noxia Somnia* (Keenan Dignam, developer; Spandrel Interactive, publisher). For the men's choir—featured in “Pursuit of the Past”, “Nunc Morere”, and “A Nightmare Revealed”—I overdubbed my own vocals; I performed all the other parts using virtual instruments. Most of the tracks were originally written to loop indefinitely (as is common in game music): I've adapted them for this soundtrack so that each one has a discrete ending.

“Dreamer's Promenade” plays over the game's title screen, and at 0:14 introduces the game's most important musical theme: Tristan's Theme, named after the game's protagonist. The theme's main motif, or musical building block, consists of a root, fifth, fifth, and minor seventh: in the key of E minor, this corresponds to the notes E, B, B, & D. Tristan's Theme is unambiguously restated in several later tracks; but the theme's main motif, as well as its harmony, are also re-implemented in subtler ways. The mood of “Dreamer's Promenade” is deliberately ambiguous, but relatively untroubled (since the story's nightmares and horrors haven't yet been revealed...).

“Nascent Nightmares” accompanies an early monster encounter and chase in the game, and signals a clear shift to the hair-raising horror that characterizes much of the game's prologue and first act.

“The Sunless Heart” plays during encounters with a character who tries to discourage and defeat Tristan through words rather than violence: so this theme is meant to feel menacing but also beguiling.

“Wholly Weary” accompanies a quiet interlude in the game's prologue: in the absence of monsters or horrors, Tristan is gripped by isolation and weariness. The minimal piano melody is based on the Tristan's Theme motif, again rising from the notes E to B to D.

“Hallowed Sanctum” plays in the game's hub area, one of the few truly peaceful locations in the game. Its simple melody, warm harmonies, and instrumentation (including piano, harp, and women's choir) are meant to evoke a mystical, almost religious sense of tranquility and radiance.

“Fast Times at the Casino” was originally written for an action-heavy casino scene that ultimately ended up on the cutting room floor; but the track remains in the game—playing on the shopkeeper's radio. This is my take on 1960s pop jazz, but the main part of the track (starting at 0:13, then restated at 1:11) is actually another variant on Tristan's

Theme: the harmony follows the same outline, and the melody again follows the upward motion from the notes E to B to D. Tristan's Theme appears overtly in the baritone saxophone part at 1:11.

“The Ghastly Graduate” accompanies the boss fight that marks the end of the game's first act. The track is intense and grim, but also signals a positive shift in Tristan's mental state: his initial terror and self-doubt are slowly being supplanted by a sense of confidence and purpose.

“Dreamer's Idyll” is an overt restatement of Tristan's Theme, and appears early in the game's second act (in an enchanted forest clearing). The entire second act is fantasy-themed, and so the music shifts in its mood and genre—from horror to high fantasy.

“Fabled Quest” is the second act's exploration music. Its main theme, played by the French horn at 0:43, is wistful but heroic.

“Dragon's Dervish Inn”, which plays in a tavern in the second act, is a slightly campy (one might even say “Renaissance Fairesque”) track in shifting meter—alternating between 2, 3, and 4 time. Its theme is yet another variant on the Tristan's Theme motif.

“Pursuit of the Past” is the second act's main chase and boss fight track, scored for full orchestra and choir: the 7/8 meter, and the percussion-heavy scoring, lend it a particular urgency. The text is from Virgil (*Aeneid*, Book III), and roughly translates as: “On the entrails and dark blood of the wretched he feeds”. When recording my own vocals for these tracks, I generally opted to sing the Latin texts as if they were Ecclesiastical Latin rather than Classical Latin, regardless of their sources. But no serious attempt was made at correctness or consistency in the Latin diction or grammar.

“Nunc Morere” is the final boss fight track for Noxia Somnia's second act. It's my most self-conscious attempt at Epic Orchestral Fantasy Scoring (employing a large choir and an even larger orchestra). The text is a mishmash of Latin words and phrases: since my women's choir virtual instruments only had a few words of Ecclesiastical Latin to work with, I supplemented these with various confrontational and/or insulting Latin phrases in the men's choir (“Nunc morere” roughly translates as “Now die”; “Custos dominusque viperarum” is “Lord and master of the viper house”). At 1:28, there's a restatement of the “Dragon's Dervish Inn” theme—now in full heroic mode.

When the developer mentioned that the game would feature a character named Pierre who was a stereotypical French chef, I thought it would be fun to give the character his own theme: the result is “Chez Pierre”, my take on French café music.

“Mall of Shattered Dreams” is the exploration music for the game’s third act (and foreshadows, at the very end of the track, the third act’s boss music). As per the developer’s request, my reference here was horror movie scores from the late ’70s and early ’80s: so where the second act’s music mostly uses orchestral instruments, the third act’s music uses lots of synth. That said, I used virtual synths of various vintages—so the result is only a loose homage to synth scores of the ’70s and ’80s, and not an attempt to recreate that era’s music accurately.

“The Hammer Falls” is the third act’s boss music, once again channelling ’70s and ’80s horror—and particularly the work of John Carpenter, whose iconic film scores are referenced in the bass and piano parts.

“The Occulted Ones” is a recurring track used in the game’s secret boss fights (hence the title). Since I wanted it to fit comfortably in all of the game’s acts, I opted for a hybrid sound: a marriage of rock, synth, and orchestral instruments. For variety, I also decided to give most of this track’s lead lines to the woodwinds and strings, which I felt had largely been relegated to supporting roles in previous boss fight tracks.

“Dreamer’s Reckoning” is the game’s biggest, boldest, and most over-the-top statement of Tristan’s Theme (which appears at 0:36, after the intro). It features numerous electric guitars; heavy metal bass and drums; pipe organ; and choir (singing random syllables in Church Slavonic, for some reason). The second section (beginning at 1:45) is a restatement—much less wistful this time—of the main theme from “Fabled Quest”.

“Sorrowful Sanctum” is a mournful variation on “Hallowed Sanctum”, featuring strings, harp, timpani, and three women’s choirs.

“A Nightmare Revealed” is the game’s final boss fight track, and like “Nunc Morere” features a huge orchestra and choir. The text is another unholy Latin jumble: it includes an accusatory excerpt from Plautus’s *Mercator*; stanzas from the *Dies Irae*; and some miscellaneous Ecclesiastical Latin in the women’s choir. After the choral intro, the main melody (first heard in the low men’s voices, starting at 0:22) is a restatement of the piano theme from “Hallowed Sanctum” (which started at 0:24 in that track): the connection between the two tracks will become clear if you play the game. At 1:25, snippets of Tristan’s Theme are combined with the *Dies Irae* chant.

“Dreamer’s Limbo” is another interpretation of Tristan’s Theme, this time in the form of a grim lullaby: in the game, it’s heard over the Continue screen when the player dies.

“Forest of Dreams (Hallowed Sanctum Revisited)” is another variation on “Hallowed Sanctum”: in the game, it foreshadows (and later refers back to) the hub area’s music.

“Nunc Morere, Phase 2” is a faster and more intense rearrangement of “Nunc Morere”: it accompanies the second phase of the boss fight.

“The Heart’s Sunset” is a funereal reprise of “The Sunless Heart”, this time for solo organ.

“A Nightmare Revealed, Phase 2” plays in the second half of the final boss fight; as was the case with “Nunc Morere”, the Phase 2 version of “A Nightmare Revealed” has increased speed and intensity.

“Esoteric Alarm” is a particularly atonal and visceral track that employs lots of extended instrumental techniques (as well as some noises not made by musical instruments): it’s actually the game’s earliest boss music, and perhaps the most terror-inducing of all the game’s tracks.

Finally, “The Sword of Dreams” is a brief & cheeky homage to the 16-bit game scores that nurtured my early love of game music.

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