

Harmony and visual imagery in Nausicaä's soundtrack

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Abstract: This paper focuses on four selected cues from the animated feature Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind. Through close observation and study of their harmonic phenomena, the author examines how the music merges with the visuals from two perspectives: (1) the way tonal planning and chord progressions in the score drive the narrative and (2) their reflection of the film's imagery. The aim is to illuminate the composer's characteristic fusion of music and animation. All musical examples are drawn from Joe Hisaishi & Studio Ghibli Best Piano Collection.

Keywords: Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, animated film, soundtrack, harmony

1. Introduction

Animated film Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind is the first collaboration between anime master Hayao Miyazaki and composer Joe Hisaishi. Taking four cues from the soundtrack— “Road to the Valley,” “Distant Days,” “Bird-Man,” and “Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind”—this study examines their harmonic language and the way music and image interlock. Two questions guide the analysis: (1) how tonal planning propels the narrative, and (2) how chord progressions mirror the visual atmosphere.

2. Tonal design as narrative engine

2.1. Types of tonal relations

Hisaishi employs three shifting techniques—modulation, tonicization, and tonal juxtaposition—to align the score with changing imagery.

2.1.1. Modulation

Modulation is the primary agent of tonal motion. Parallel and relative major/minor alternations dominate.

Parallel major/minor alternation (same key signature, roots a minor third apart) underlies the cue “Bird-Man.” The excerpt below moves from C major to A natural minor. In m. 10 the C-major tonic chord becomes chord I of A minor; the ensuing iv–i cadence firmly establishes the new tonic. In the film this device accompanies moments of peaceful flight or hard-won victory: after the final battle with the Oh mu, Nausicaä glides down on her wind-rider. The luminous C-major theme evokes soaring hope; the shift to A minor colors her gentle descent, the tonal pivot as seamless as the landing itself.

Figure 1 Example 1: “Bird-Man,” mm. 5–14

Tonal Alternation Between Parallel Major and Minor. Throughout *Road to the Valley*, the music continually oscillates between the home key of C major and its tonic minor, C minor. This back-and-forth allows moods to shift without jarring sonorities; the ear slips almost imperceptibly from one mode to the other, the colour change felt as naturally as a change of light.

2.1.2. Temporary tonicization (*Brief Modulation*)

Hisaishi often uses secondary-dominant chords to create fleeting departures from the tonic. In the piano score of *Nausicaä*, m. 16 suddenly brightens: the raised sixth degree of C natural minor turns the harmony toward B major for a single bar before the music settles back into C minor. The momentary sidestep gives the visual scene a flash of fresh colour, then restores stability.

2.1.3. Tonal juxtaposition

Here the new key appears without the usual pivot-chord preparation. One section closes in the original tonic; the next begins immediately in the new key, a clean cinematic cut translated into harmony.

Figure 2 Example 2: “Distant Days,” mm. 13–15

In the excerpt above, the first phrase is stated in B harmonic minor; without warning, the next phrase drops into C harmonic minor—a distant tonal juxtaposition. The instant of that shift becomes the precise cut-point on screen: the relentless rotation of the windmill gives way to a sweeping vista of the Valley of the Wind. By means of this abrupt tonal contrast the soundtrack itself performs the edit, hurling the ear—and the eye—into a new image.

Figure 3 Example 3: “Bird-Man,” mm. 20–33

The passage employs transposed parallelism—a species of tonal juxtaposition in which the same thematic material is restated at a new pitch level without intermediary modulation. Measures 21–27 present the first phrase, oscillating between A natural minor and C major. The second phrase (mm. 28–33) immediately shifts the entire idea up a semitone, now alternating B \flat natural minor and D \flat major. The thematic fabric remains intact; only the tonal center is displaced. The leap from C major to D \flat major—a chromatic-step relationship—magnifies the harmonic color contrast. Hearing the same “winged” melody successively clothed in remote keys conveys the Bird-Man’s aerial view of a world in balanced coexistence: each rotation of the theme, now brighter, now dusker, mirrors the valley’s teeming yet harmonious life. The light, buoyant character of the tune, refracted through these shifting tonal prisms, underscores the rich variety of existence within the Valley of the Wind.

2.2. Tonal planning

In composition, the overall tonal plan is as critical as local chords. Analysis must therefore trace the functional succession of keys—how each tonic area prepares, prolongs, or dissolves into the next—across the entire musical arch.

Table 1 Tonal Layout of Selected Cues from the Animated Film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

Title of Work	Tonal Layout
Road to the Valley	C—c—C
Distant Days	B maj—D maj—B min—D min—D maj—C min—C maj—C min—C maj—D min — D maj
Bird-Man	F maj—C maj—A min—C maj—G min—C maj—C min—F min
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind	C min—C maj—C min—F min—F maj—F min—C min

In the table above: Road to the Valley revolves around a single tonal center, C. Throughout the cue Hisaishi juxtaposes C major and C minor, importing chords built on the parallel mode’s diatonic degrees without preparation. The resulting chromatic mixture intensifies the light-versus-shadow color contrast while keeping the tonic pitch fixed.

Distant Days alternates between several parallel pairs—B minor / D major, C minor / Eb major, and C major / A minor. By treating each pair as two facets of the same tonal area, Hisaishi lets the center of gravity drift; every shift refreshes the harmonic palette without rupturing the overall fabric.

Bird-Man offers the richest design. After an opening F-major “bright” panorama, the music moves to the dominant (C major), then makes a remote jump to D major and slips into G harmonic minor, finally closing on F minor. The large-scale arch is thus F major → ... → F minor, a tonic-minor ending that would normally darken the scene. Yet Hisaishi resolves the final phrase with an F-major triad, restoring luminosity and rounding the circle.

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind chiefly shuttles between the home key, C natural minor, and its subdominant minor, F natural minor. The brief flashes of B major and E major act as fleeting tonicizations—one-bar color spots that dissolve back to the tonic. The cue ends squarely on C minor, a conclusive perfect-authentic cadence.

Summary: By ceaselessly reshaping the tonal map—parallel alternation, distant transposition, last-moment Picardian third—Hisaishi aligns every change of key with a change of image or emotional focus. This chameleon-like tonal language is the hallmark of his animation scoring.

3. Chord ties to visual narrative in Nausicaä

In the animated score for "Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind," the harmonic progressions incorporate both traditional functional harmonic language and many coloristic harmonic expressions that break free from functional constraints to mirror the on-screen narrative. The harmonic movement plays a crucial role in the overall development of the work, making the study of chord connections and harmonic motion essential for a deeper understanding of the composer's harmonic techniques.

3.1. Harmonic connection vs. Melodic connection

Traditional four-part harmony includes both harmonic and melodic connections. In Joe Hisaishi's works, harmonic connection dominates. The theme of "Nausicaä" expresses the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, so the use of harmonic connection creates melodic stability in the horizontal dimension, perfectly complementing the peaceful and stable visual scenes.

For example, at the beginning of "Faraway Days," the harmonic progression I–V–I–V–I all employ harmonic connection. The theme melody is light and cheerful, expressing the protagonist's hopes for a better life, while the smooth harmonic connections reflect people's yearning for a stable and harmonious existence.

3.2. Parallel motion

In this score, this harmonic technique typically appears at both the beginning and the end of musical sections.



Fig. 4, Ex. 4: Distant Days, mm. 13–16

The passage closes with parallel chords that replace the traditional dominant-to-tonic cadence, foregrounding color over function. The four-bar phrase lingers in b harmonic minor for the first three bars, then slips into b natural minor for the final bar (tvi–DVII–t). A stepwise ascending melody floats above a ribbon-like lower strand in parallel thirds, casting a hazy, expectant glow that marks the episode's end. The

tune's immediate repetition betrays Minimalist DNA: a terse cell, looped, yet never dull once married to the image of Nausicaä gliding on her jet-powered Mehve—simple pitches and drifting parallels amplifying the exhilaration of flight.

3.3. Diverse uses of pedal points

Single sustained tones and arpeggiated figurations alike serve as pedals throughout the score.

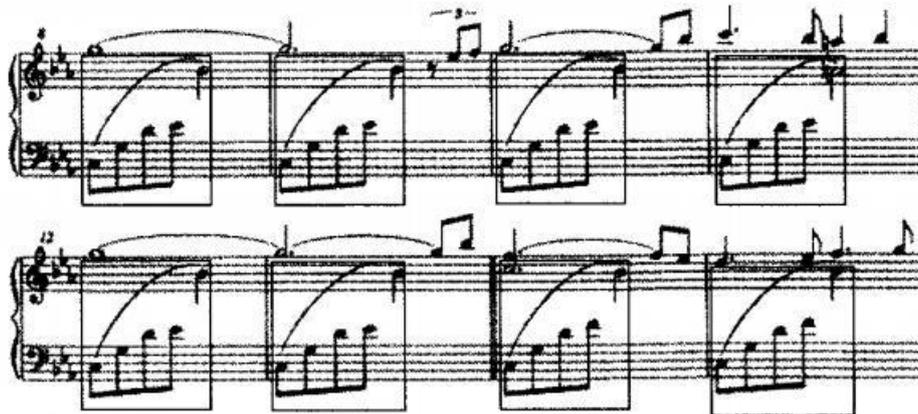


Figure 4. Musical Example 4: "Faraway Days," measures 13–16.

In the musical example, we can clearly see the continuous pattern in the bass voice. This pattern develops within the context of C harmonic minor and consists of arpeggiated I (tonic) ninth chords. This provides ornamental tonal coloring while maintaining a fundamentally stable modal foundation in the harmony, serving as a backdrop that supports the main melodic line. Harmonically, this evokes the imagery of a gentle breeze, with the protagonist riding her glider through the air.

Here, Hisaishi's minimalist approach becomes even more apparent. In the thirteenth measure, there is a subtle change in the chord tones. As the music progresses, the melody gradually transforms, creating variation within stability and novelty within simplicity. This chord change coincides with the visual of the glider changing direction, as if the harmonic shift itself controls the glider's path, making the fictional scene feel even more authentic.

3.4. Unexpected progressions

Unexpected progressions can be categorized into those occurring within a structural section and those appearing at cadences. The latter are what we typically refer to as deceptive cadences. In Hisaishi's works, he employs unexpected progressions to create distinctive harmonic vocabulary that leaves a profound impression on the listener.

3.4.1. Structural unexpected progressions

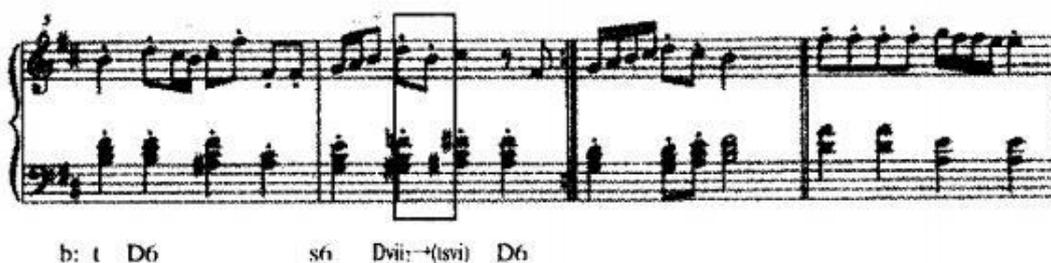


Figure 6. Musical Example 6: "Faraway Days," measures 5–8.

In the previous example, at measure 6 in B harmonic minor, the expected progression would be $s^6 \rightarrow Dvii^7 \rightarrow tsvi$. Instead, the composition deliberately moves to a dominant sixth chord (V^6). By employing this

harmonic technique, Hisaishi subverts the listener's expectations, creating an unexpected harmonic effect and forming a passing chord progression.

3.4.2. Unexpected progressions at cadences

Figure 7. Musical Example 7: "Faraway Days," measures 13–16.

In the transition from measure 15 to 16 in the previous example, a deceptive cadence (V–VI) appears at the end of the section. By employing this anti-functional harmonic progression at the conclusion of the phrase, the music gains momentum for further development, creating an emotional foundation for the introduction of new musical ideas.

These instances of unexpected progressions occur near the film's conclusion, during the final battle between the protagonist Nausicaä—the "angelic warrior"—and the Oh mu to protect the Valley. Everyone believes she sacrificed her life to calm the Oh mu's anger, but as the people grieve, the Oh mu use their tentacles to heal her. A miracle occurs, and she is reborn. It is at this moment that the melodic accompaniment employs unexpected harmonic connections, creating surprising harmonic colors that perfectly align with and enhance the visual narrative.

Summary: In the score for the animated film "Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind," the chord connections directly reflect the visual narrative. The harmonic techniques discussed above—including harmonic and melodic connections, parallel motion, varied uses of pedal points, and unexpected progressions—all serve the needs of the film's storyline, creating a perfect integration where music and visuals complement and enhance each other.

4. Conclusion

Through my study of the selected musical pieces from the animated film "Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind," I have focused on the central theme of how the composer's musical language integrates with the visual narrative.

From my analysis of four selected pieces, examining both the relationship between the diverse tonal changes and the animation, as well as how chord connections reflect the visuals, it is clear that the seamless integration of harmonic vocabulary with the animated images contributes significantly to advancing the storyline. This integration provides substantial space for character development, for accurately capturing personalities, and for depicting the narrative scenes.

The fusion of harmonic language with visuals becomes a highlight of the animated film's aesthetics and represents the core argument of this paper. The use of harmonic composition to enhance the cinematic narrative serves as a valuable entry point for studying how music combines with film. It is my hope that this analysis offers useful insights for future studies of Joe Hisaishi's animation scores as well as those by other composers.

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