

Vincent Diamante
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Tracker Music

The tracker changed the way I looked at and thought about music.

As a young music student in the early 90s, I had grown accustomed to music in the traditional sense comprised of notes and staves: one or many parallel horizontal lines of data to be interpreted by one or many performers. With the tracker, introduced to me just before I entered high school, I learned to see music from an entirely different perspective, visualizing them as vertical slices, arranged as grids, and controlled on the sample level.

Before the tracker, my music output was almost strictly in the classical interpretation world. I did no real composition; I improvised constantly, but little of that output is worth recalling. I also had no real understanding of the science of audio or audio engineering. This all changed when I was first exposed to Protracker, moving me from this:

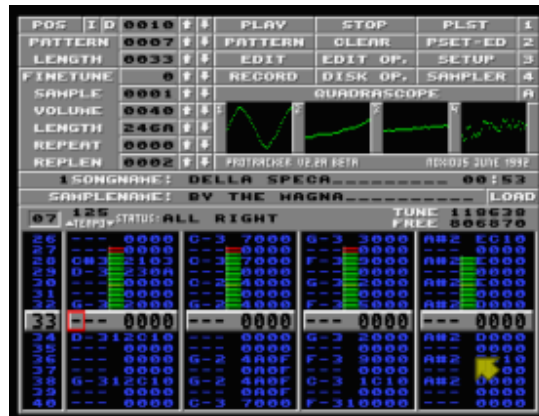
Adeste Fideles

Latin 18th Century

JOHN F. WADE

A musical score for 'Adeste Fideles' in G major and 4/4 time. The score consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: A - des - te, fi - del - es, Lac - ti trium - phan - tes, Ven - Can - tet nunc hym - nos Cho - rus ang - el - or - um; Can - Er - go qui na - tus di - e ho - di - er - na Ie -

to this:



At the time, there was no reason for me to have any sort of musical composition output. However, the program immediately grabbed me and forced me to learn its initially awkward yet powerful ways. It taught me that audio was formed of many, many small slices of pressure, positive and negative. It taught me that mixing many pieces of audio together was a simple thing that created sometimes unpredictable and amazing results. It taught me that the old way of music theory and note-level composition, while cool, just couldn't do certain things.

It also taught me that people, when given a tool that is obviously good at doing certain things, will tend to do limit themselves to those things. This presented itself as a challenge to me: making this tool with its grids and predictability sound like it was human. While many tracker musicians worked with 4-on-the-floor dance beats and rave idioms, I was part of a small but fervent constituency who wrote music that tried for a real, acoustic, swinging sound.

Tracking also introduced me to methods of tricking the listener's ear. With the limitations of polyphony in early hardware, musicians had to constantly engage in compromise throughout the composition, continuously assessing not only whether something was essential or not to the musical idea, but also whether the listener would be able to fill in the blanks if they were there to be filled.

My involvement with tracker music was also the jumpstart to my traditional composition career. Tracker idioms and techniques continue to inform my traditional composition, and I find I am a significantly different composer from others in concert art music or film scoring.

Tracker History

While I was a kindergartner playing around with my cousin's Commodore 64, a German computer programmer by the name of Karsten Obarski wrote the first music tracker program, Soundtracker for the Commodore Amiga. Making use of the 4 channel 8-bit PCM sample mixing that uniquely defined the Amiga's Paula sound system, Obarski used his creation and wrote the soundtrack for Amegas in 1987, a simple game written by a close friend.

The program wasn't meant to be a tool for anyone other than himself, but his employing company, EAS, decided that there was potential in marketing it as a commercial product. Place on retail shelves in mid-1987 as **Ultimate Soundtracker**, it fared poorly against other music creation programs, such as Electronic Arts' **Deluxe Music Construction Set**, largely due to Soundtracker's difficult, more programmer-focused user interface. According to e-mails from the Amiga Preservation Society, fewer than 1000 copies of the software were sold through. EAS later decided it wasn't a worthwhile venture and put the program in the public domain, where it was very quickly hacked and rebuilt into numerous shareware trackers from around the world. With the release of NoiseTracker in 1989, the MOD music format and the idioms for its creation spawned by Soundtracker were the standard among computer programmers throughout Scandinavia. A few years

later, MOD and MOD derivatives (such as PTMs and STMs that boasted increased features over MOD) could be found on BBSes and later, internet web sites, throughout Europe and America.

More Modern Times

As the Amiga side died down, the PC tracker scene took over with advanced formats like S3M, XM, and IT. These three formats comprised the bulk of MOD-type music in the mid to late 90s. The MOD format, with its efficient packaging of both sound sample data and sequencing information, saw a brief surge in popularity with game developers; among the games that used a MOD-type soundtrack format were the award-winning Unreal series of games and Deus Ex.

While MODs themselves have not received mainstream popularity, the demand for inexpensive or free software that allowed users to create music without specialized hardware on their personal computers has grown steadily throughout the internet generation. Where the NoiseTrackers and Screamtrackers, improved as they were over the original Soundtracker, were notorious for nonuse of the mouse and extensive use of function keys and combinations, today's BuzzTrackers and ModPlugTrackers are relatively simple affairs where nearly anyone can get sounds playing through their speakers with a drag-and-drop interface.

In a rare interview, Soundtracker author Obarski said of his creation that he was "a little bit sad, because until that, every computer musician were a very special person, because he also must have been a good programmer." I am eternally grateful for Soundtracker because of how it brought me, the traditional musician, into computer music and gave me insight into music far beyond what occurs in traditional concert art music education.

Music Files

All files can be found in <http://www.apocalypsewow.com/random/tracker/>

Dreamoff.mod and discrete.mod

Older pieces of music that conform to the original 4 channel 15 instrument specification of Soundtracker MODs. Representative of the style of traditional MODs.

Bass.mod

A more recent mod of the old 4 channel variety that stretches the sound possibilities of a limited polyphony format through more memory utilization.

Sk1-elys.s3m skl-iprv.s3m and skl-sati.it

Earlier pieces composed by me, attempting to not follow the traditional techno/rave/dance paradigm followed by most MOD composers. Note that these are not wholly unique, as other musicians such as Big Jim and basehead had been trying this exact same thing years before I started