

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You're listening to the Game Makers podcast, where we take you behind the scenes to listen to how Ubisoft games are made. I'm Charles-Adam Foster- Simard from Ubisoft.

We're continuing our series exploring the music of Assassin's Creed Valhalla with the game's three composers, discussing how they created music for the Viking era, melding traditional and modern instruments and techniques.

In this episode, I spoke to Sarah Schachner about her work on the song "The Sceptred Isle." Sarah is an American composer, producer, and multi-instrumentalist. She is not a newcomer to Assassin's Creed, having worked on the soundtracks for Assassin's Creed Black Flag, Unity, and Assassin's Creed Origins. But she says that she had dreamed of seeing the series go to the Viking era for a long time.

Since she's worked on the franchise for so long, I wanted to start by asking her about how important it was to bring new sounds and ideas to each game.

CHARLES:

How is it to do, like to follow a series like that through different games? And is it important for you I guess to bring like a totally different vibe each time? Or are you also aware that you wanna bring you know, a similar sensibility to it? Because I mean, you're you, and it's still the same series. Like, I'm just wondering how you generally kind of manage that aspect of it.

SARAH SCHACHNER:

I think, I mean, I always wanna put myself into what I'm doing. I can't imagine doing art and not having it be very personal. So, you know, there's gonna be common threads, which is my taste and how I interpret things. But the great thing about Assassin's Creed is that each game is a totally new slate. You get a whole new sound palette to pull from, a whole new collection of instruments to work with and harmonic language. You can of course do your own, or I do my own interpretation. I'm not as concerned with being 100% accurate. I, you know, it's a game, it's a fantasy game. It's supposed to be fun.

So it's not a history exam. We're not getting PhDs. So, I'm focusing a little more on the mood. I'm trying to convey the... tapping into the mental state of the player and in, you know, I definitely wanna respect the history and the influences and, but you know, I'm doing my interpretation of that. And I play, like with playing the instruments, I think most people know that I'm a string player and that I play a lot of this stuff myself on all my scores, but in particular, Assassin's Creed it's... that skill definitely comes in handy

with all of the old rustic string instruments. And I love that so much. I basically just use each game as an excuse to buy a bunch of new instruments. That's the best.

CHARLES:

It's a combination because you're also have that kind of really modern, like electronic aesthetic as well, right? Aand I think that that works so well for Assassin's Creed because there's the Animus and the framing device that's more sci-fi. So combining the like more traditional rustic elements with that more modern electronic stuff.

SARAH:

Yeah, combining the traditional, rustic folk instruments with modern production, modern accents, analogue accents and just thinking about it through a modern lens. That's something I like to do. Like even if I'm doing a game that has nothing to do with ancient history, I'll use these tagelharpas I bought on some other thing, you know. It's just kind of a part of my natural process. And get it in sound always easy to get these instruments and track them down 'cause I bought a bass tagelharpa that I found, it's always a risk 'cause I'm like buying some random instrument that's getting shipped from Russia. I have no idea if it's a legit or not. It took like over a month to get here. It finally got here and it was cool. And then I was like, OK, I got to get more tagelharpas. So then I got another one, like an alto, a higher-pitched one, that was luckily in California, but this was at the beginning of the pandemic. I was getting a second tagelharpa and the guy said it would take 15 days to make, he custom-makes them, he'd make it and ship it.

CHARLES:

Made to order?

SARAH:

Yeah, made to order. And the 15 days was turning into 30 days, and 30 days was turning, it was just going on and on. And he kept saying it was gonna be ready and it wasn't, I was getting so annoyed. And then he finally shipped it, and when it arrived, the lacquer on it was still wet. Like he must have, he must have shipped it as soon as he finished it, 'cause it was literally like, it had saran wrap texture on it, but it sounded awesome. So it was all good.

CHARLES:

And that made it into the soundtrack, you used that one for some of the tracks?

SARAH:

I use that at ton. 'Cause yeah, I mean, typically when you're working on something for a year, I'd say the first six months are a little more relaxed, a little more loose, kind of exploring sounds and figuring stuff out. And then once we hit the six-month mark, it's like, OK, we've got to buckle down and get a lot more music done. And so like a huge

amount of the music has done in the last couple months. It just it's like ramps up and gets crazy. So even getting instruments halfway through the process, hey still get used a lot.

(STRING EXCERPT PLAYS)

CHARLES:

So I talked to Simon and Aldo from the Ubisoft side, but what did they give you in terms of like a brief or in terms of material from the game, like your, to kind of know what you were composing to and what the vibe was?

SARAH:

We get a lot of rough gameplay videos, and then, I mean, they're pretty organized about what they want from us. So it's like the whole game is broken out into tons and tons of assets. So as much as I love to write very open-ended and freely, and then figure out where it works, with Assassin's Creed, it's a little more like I know what I have to write and what the cue has to do and how it needs to function. And so sometimes I will write more freely and then see where it's best fit. But I have a very clear idea of what they want, what they need. We brought back a lot of exploration music in this game. And so you're, when you get into kind of light skirmishes layers will come in on top of the track rather than a whole track starts, or it's a totally different track. So it was a very, for the combat and exploration, it was a layered approach.

CHARLES:

So you need to compose things that are layers that will sound good and make sense on their own, and then also sound good together as the layers get added in or removed, depending on what's happening.

SARAH:

That's exactly it. And it's kind of like twice as much work per piece of music when that's the case!

(LAUGHTER)

CHARLES:

And you were in charge, I believe you were more in charge of some of the places in England in the game.

SARAH:

I did do a lot of England stuff. I mean, as far as I know, yes, Jesper and I, everything was split very evenly. Like we each did kind of the same amount of combat, same amount of exploration, and everything. But I did seem to get a lot of the England regions. He did a lot of the Norse regions.

CHARLES:

'Cause obviously in the game, there's this progression, the player starts in Norway and then goes to England. And it's also about that blending of cultures in a way as they settle in England. So was it important for you and also to kind of blend the more Viking Norse cultures with the sounds that were a little bit more English in that way?

SARAH:

Exactly. Yeah, that was a big thing that I wanted to do. I mean, these cultures were really crashing together. And so for Viking, I was thinking more wild, raw, like the carnyx. Things that were just felt more raw and uncontained. And then for the Anglo-Saxon and English stuff, I was thinking more, you know, more like controlled harmony and a lot of plucked things and maybe religious influences as well.

(EXCERPT OF SONG PLAYS)

CHARLES:

So maybe we can dive into "The Sceptred Isle", which is a beautiful track. And I was just wondering what kind of vibe and what was the general idea that you wanted to convey or the emotions that you wanted to convey in that piece in particular?

SARAH :

So I was reading this book called the Viking Wars. You know, I felt like I needed to, as much as I loved Vikings as a kid, I wasn't really learning the actual history. So I wanted to brush up on the history and just kind of dive in further and spark any additional inspiration other than just what I'm seeing in the game. So I was reading a book and there was this one section that was talking about, you know how brutal the raids were of the churches and the monasteries. And then the fact that many of the Viking leaders later converted to Christianity.

So they ransacked these churches and just destroyed them. And then it's like funny, it's sad, but it's funny that they later ended up converting. So I just thought that was a really interesting thing. And I wanted to represent that in the music by kind of smashing together Scandinavian old Norse lyrics and more Western harmony that you would maybe hear in a church. And that's where the idea for the vocals came from.

CHARLES:

It sounds quite melancholy to me as a song. Like it's a little bit kind of sad and there is that kind of like liturgical church music vibe to it a little bit, the way you're describing it, I'm thinking like, it's almost like a converted Norseman, like thinking back on his young days, right? Like almost like sad of what he did now that he's converted.

SARAH:

Yeah. just kind of foreshadowing the heaviness of that history 'cause in the game, you

know, these, that track was originally just supposed to be like a 32 second enter region notify that you've discovered a new region and you know, maybe the player's walking over a hill and kind of overlooking the England area. And this was for England specifically. It was a bunch of churches or something. So I just wanted to give like more depth to it and have it kind of tap into a deeper history, another layer to the experience.

And actually, the lyrics... I was looking at these old rune stones, these Viking runestones that are planted all over and they have different inscriptions on them. And I came across this one, I think I'm not sure how to pronounce it, but the Karlevi, I'm not sure, runestone and it's from the tenth century, Scandinavian stone. And it's actually the oldest record of Skaldic verse on one of these stones. And it was kind of just honoring a chieftain or some Viking leader who had died in battle. So I took the lyrics from that stone and took pieces of them. And that's what's being sung, but it sounds like it would come out of an English church.

CHARLES:

Who's singing in this piece. Where did you get the voices from?

SARAH:

Well, this was again during the pandemic, so couldn't really do sessions. I'm singing and I forced my boyfriend begrudgingly, who's not a singer, to sing with me. A little auto-tune going on in there to help us out. But so yeah, we sang it together here at my house and made the best of it.

CHARLES:

Wow, that's so beautiful.

SARAH:

Thanks.

CHARLES :

I mean, it sounds professional. So, well done, maybe...

(LAUGHTER)

SARAH:

He was so annoyed at first having to sing, but then once he heard it after I edited it and like, you know, made it sound good, he was like, oh wow, that's actually pretty good. And then he, I got him to sing on another thing after that. So it's pretty cool. So I have Einar's voice and my boyfriend Kyle's voice kind of sprinkled in different spots throughout the score.

(VOICE EXCERPT PLAYS)

CHARLES:

And what about the other, the actual instruments that you're using in this song? Can you say a little bit more about your choice of instruments and how you're using them? So I think there's quite a lot of strings in this one.

SARAH:

Yeah, there's some of the rustic tagelharps and I think I used my regular violin as well. They're supporting the vocals. The vocals kind of, are like birthed out of the strings and the strings kind of have this foreboding, sombre tone, but also a sense of hope. So like, you know, you've discovered... you're looking out at this new region, but it's tapping into that deeper history, that's pretty dark.

CHARLES:

And now obviously, you're a wiz of the synth and electronic effects and everything. So although this one is quite "tame," maybe compared to other pieces, but what else in terms of the synth and the effects, did you apply to this song?

SARAH:

Yeah, actually I think this might... the song might not... or actually, no, it does have, it has like Voyager bass in it, but it doesn't have any overt accents. I would say in general, this score probably has less overt synths than I typically tend to do. You know, Ubisoft, the audio team, they were really pushing for very Norse and very Anglo-Saxon stuff. I mean, of course, there's still gonna be that crossover. And there are synths on other tracks and instruments used in ways that sound less traditional. But yeah, on this particular track, that wasn't the place for it.

CHARLES:

What about the feedback when you send... So let's say you send a first version of a track to the audio team. Do they get back to you with feedback usually or like, is there a little bit of back and forth?

SARAH:

Oh yeah, always. Every single track gets sent in, tested in context, and then they give feedback. So it's like hundreds of pieces of music, I mean, it's a very big, long process. I remember when we first started the game, we were asked – both Jesper and I – 'cause we were doing the exploration stuff and we had to do music for hostile environments and then music for after you've conquered and subdued a region. And I think both Jesper and I were sending stuff in for hostile that sounded very ominous and dark. And they were like, "This is way too ominous!" So it ended up being that the hostile regions were supposed to feel a little more neutral. So that was interesting, kind of adjusted a little bit. Yeah.

CHARLES :

And I love, what I love about this track. And Einar had a similar comment when I spoke to him, is how like it, so it was supposed to be a shorter thing, and then just because for some reason it like struck something in you, it became something bigger and a little bit maybe more produced or more intense than it was like meant to be at first.

SARAH :

Yeah, I struggle a lot with like very short little snippets of things. It's like, how can I, 30 seconds? You've just begun, you've just started! And like, you know, I like things to breathe and have space and develop. And so, yeah, I do have a hard time when they're asking for a lot of really short individual things. I would much rather write like a much longer, more meaningful suite and then kind of break it down.

But this track was cool 'cause like I was talking to the audio director when I sent it to him, I was saying how, 'cause the voices... we could have ended it right after the string thing, 'cause that's kind of how long the track was supposed to be anyway. And I went off a bit on a tangent 'cause I was excited by that book I was reading. So, you know, I sent this in, I had to give a disclaimer like kind of went off on a thing. And I was trying to merge these things and the lyrics on the stone. And I was saying how it would be cool if maybe the voices could be triggered somehow when you kind of are near a church. And Aldo, he was like, "Oh my God, I can put a trigger in. Like there's all these monasteries and monks coming out of churches." And he said he put a trigger in where, when you're near that some of the voices do play, but I love that type of collaboration with like implementation. And I don't get to do it a lot on AAA games. They kind of have it on lockdown a lot. But those moments where you do get to collaborate.

(TRACK PLAYS)

CHARLES :

You can find "The Sceptred Isle" by Sarah Schachner on the Assassin's Creed Valhalla original game soundtrack published by Ubisoft Music and Lakeshore Records. It's available now, wherever you get your music. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. This episode of Game Makers was edited by Manu Bachet. Special thanks to Simon Landry and Anne Langourieux from Ubisoft music and to Assassin's Creed Valhalla's Audio Director, Aldo Sampaio. Remember to subscribe to Game Makers and review us wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening.