

Song Exploder
Game of Thrones - Main Title Theme
Episode 40

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

(Game of Thrones audio clip: "Winter is coming. This one will be long and dark things will come with it")

Hrishikesh: That's a clip from *Game of Thrones*, the HBO series that premiered in April 2011, and became the most watched show in HBO's history. This is the main title theme.

("Game of Thrones" by RAMIN DJAWADI)

Hrishikesh: The theme was written by Emmy-nominated composer Ramin Djawadi. And, in this episode, he'll break down the different elements in this piece and how the themes within the show inspired his composition and his choice of instruments.

("Game of Thrones" by RAMIN DJAWADI)

(Music fades)

Ramin: Hi, my name is Ramin Djawadi, and I'm the composer of *Game of Thrones*. David Benioff and Dan Weiss are the creators of the show. They took the book and decided to turn this into a TV show. They sent me two episodes, the first two episodes of the first season before meeting with them so I watched them, and, of course, I was blown away. I thought it was absolutely amazing what I saw.

(Harp)

(Harp fades)

Ramin: I already had started on the episodes, and we were reviewing some music, and this, and that. And then, they said, "Oh, by the way, there's also a main title theme you have to do." And I thought, "Oh, OK [laughter]." And it's almost two minutes long. Nowadays, in TV, there's many times it's either no main title at all, or it's fifteen seconds, or seven seconds, you know, it's usually very short so I

thought it was rather unusual to have an opportunity to have, you know, a longer piece of music. They said, “You know, the visuals are not completely done, but we would love for you to just go see the visual effects guys, and meet with them, and check it out.” So I did. And it was these moving, the buildings coming out of the ground, you know, what it, what it is now, so that it was all there in an early stage, and it was absolutely inspiring for me.

(Harp)

(Harp fades)

Ramin: The one keyword that they said to me about writing the main title was that they wanted it to be a journey, because there's a lot of different locations, again, there's lots of different characters. There's just a lot of traveling in the show, and that's something that they wanted to convey with the music as well. And then, when I saw the visuals and saw the different locations, all that inspired me to write this piece.

(Harp)

(Harp fades)

Ramin: I wrote the riff of [sings the *Game of Thrones* theme melody]. I think that was the first thing that came to me. And I've built a whole piece around that, basically. The riff is played by the strings, the first two bars are in minor,

(Strings)

Ramin: and then, that switches to major,

(Strings)

Ramin: and then, it goes back.

(Strings)

(Strings fade)

Ramin: My intention was just because of what the nature of the show is, there is so much backstabbing and conspiracy, and anybody can turn on anybody at any

point. So I thought it would be cool to kind of do the same play with the music. So even though the majority of the piece is in minor, there's that little hint of major in there where it kind of switches, and then, it changes back again. So that's the opening. The melody first gets stated by the solo cello.

(Cello)

(Cello ends)

Ramin: The thing I liked about the cello was that it's, first of all, it's one of my favorite instruments, but what I love about the cello is that it's dark, which is perfect for the show, it has a huge range; it can play really low, it can play really high. And even if it plays higher, actually, it still has a darker sound and that's why I thought let's try to make that our main instrument for the show. And then, a solo violin joins an octave above.

(Violin with cello)

(Music fades)

Ramin: It's like two characters meeting or something like they know that there, what I think is so great about *Game of Thrones* is that there's so many different characters and you never know which path they might go on, and which characters might interact or meet. So I thought by starting with a single instrument with a single character, then having a second instrument join, it's the second character. And then, the melody repeats one more time with the full orchestra, so all the violins play it then as well.

(Orchestra)

(Orchestra fades)

Ramin: So it's every, everybody plays it, and it's just, gets nice and epic. And then, from there, it, then it changes, and we get to, I guess you can call it a B section. What I liked about this B section is that

(Orchestra)

Ramin: that gives a sense of adventure.

(Orchestra)

(Orchestra fades)

Ramin: The next repeat then, actually, we have choir come in. It's 20 women.

(Choir)

(Choir fades)

Ramin: This is all getting recorded in Prague. Everything gets recorded over the internet, basically. So I just, I don't travel to Prague, we just do it over the computer, and I just have a microphone set up in here, and just talk back and forth over microphone. And technology just makes it possible to have them hit the record button over there, and I hear it over here in great quality, and can give notes, and that's how we've been doing all of the recording sessions.

(Harp)

Ramin: And then, at the very end, I actually had fun with adding just a little bit of a, like a mysterious sound, which is a hybrid of like a dulcimer and like a contailer, which is actually, it's a Scandinavian instrument, it's like a small little harp. And I just thought the sound together gives it like this plucky, shimmery quality that I thought was nice.

(Harp)

Ramin: With that combination, I just thought that you can't really place it location-wise really by combining those two. And what I liked about it is after the piece gets so big, it leaves you hanging with the mystery and the question of, *what is this episode going to bring?*, because *Game of Thrones* is known for surprises. So I wanted to do the same with the main piece by just giving you this last little question at the end. When the first episode aired, the next day, David and Dan sent me, I think, I think it was a rock version that somebody had put up.

(Rock version)

Ramin: I thought, "Wow." And then,

(8-bit version)

Ramin: a couple hours later, they sent another version, and then, it sort of started

(Piano version)

Ramin: from there. It's like, I guess I just couldn't believe it. It's absolutely amazing. Now I have the Southpark version in my head where it says [sung] "Wiener, wiener, wiener [laughter]."

(Southpark version)

Hrishikesh: Have you heard the Peter Dinklage version?

(Peter Dinklage version)

Ramin: [laughter] Oh, this is great. I'm flattered that it's getting so many different versions out there. I think it's absolutely amazing. People have been super creative about it. And whenever you think, you know, *oh that this is it*, then all of a sudden there's like one new one that somebody came up with that you go, "Oh my God, this is great."

(Brass)

(Strings)

Ramin: I just wanted to try to capture an overall impression of the show. So if you turn on the TV and this theme plays, that you go, "Okay, here's *Game of Thrones*. This is my show." And you're just warming up to get ready for another great episode. I think what's so beautiful about the show is that there is magic, and there's dragons, and zombies. I just feel like creatively, there's no limits.

(Strings)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the main title theme to *Game of Thrones* by Ramin Djawadi, in its entirety.

("Game of Thrones" by RAMIN DJAWADI)

Hrishikesh: I put up the video of the full *Game of Thrones* opening title sequence on the Song Exploder website, songexploder.net. There are also links to the different cover versions that were in this episode.

("Anna" by WILL BUTLER)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Will Butler of Arcade Fire, breaks down the song "Anna," from his debut solo album.

You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. Find the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Anna" by WILL BUTLER)

(Music fades)