What makes a good Touhou piano arrangement?

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For most of my childhood, including high school, I have played piano. As a young pianist, I was mainly taught how to read sheet music and play chords, with little emphasis on the wider theory around music itself. It's hard to say where the fault lies, but a part of it is my own greater interest in playing complex pieces from the game series Touhou Project. From the beginning of highschool, I was enamored with playing the hardest pieces with the fastest sixteenth-note runs. This was intertwined with my interest in Touhou music, which is known for its sixteenth-note runs. Although I was able to achieve my goals—and I am quite happy with what I can do—I would now like to make my own piano arrangements. While I have some understanding of the piano as an instrument, I hope to achieve a greater understanding of music theory and answer my research question "What makes a good Touhou piano arrangement?".

Before researching music theory, I would like to acknowledge the use music theory itself. Although music theory can be a functional tool in analyzing a song, Adam Neely (Adam Neely, 2020) points out how music theory can be restrictive to the "the harmonic style of 18th century musicians" and may not accurately describe musical practice in common styles of music in our modern world. Neely goes further and breaks down the idea that there is one correct way of playing music, comparing Western music theory to jazz and North Indian music theory to help support his claim. He highlights the white racial frame of music theory and how it can be used to downplay the views and ideas of nonwhite musicians, with reference to professor Ewell at Hunter College. The music culture of humanity is very rich; however, in order to limit the scope of this paper, I will be solely focusing on western music theory based on its twelve notes with concert A tuned to 440 hertz. To reconcile the above point, this paper will not prescribe any right or wrong to any characteristic of music. Instead, I will shift focus to the feel of the characteristic

and if I personally like it.

What is Touhou music, and why not write a piano arrangement on another game's music? Touhou music refers generally to the original and derivative soundtracks from the game series and album covers all labelled "Touhou Project", which encompasses seventeen mainline games and eleven spin-off games (*lux, n.d.) stemming from the first mainline game released in 1996. With at least fourteen original soundtracks in each of the seventeen mainline game, Touhou has, conservatively, 238 unique songs and up to 826 unique songs across all music Cds and extras according to the Touhou Patch Center (n.d.). Touhou Project itself is known for its lenient derivative works culture, allowing the free publication of non-commercial works and the sale of goods at conventions without notifying the sole author, Jun'ya Ōta, known as ZUN (Ōta, 2020). This has led to the creation of a rich community of artists over time, from visual works to even entire fan-made games. The music of Touhou is particularly notable because of circles established for the creation of these derivative works. The lenient copyright policy, the community, and breadth of songs in Touhou Project allow for and enable interesting arrangements that can connect more than one piece musically. I personally find that good arrangements take elements from at least two different songs.

How do we describe this music then? First, let's get an understanding of music itself. There are twelve notes in music and seven of those notes are grouped into a key, where relationships between notes are the same. Each note of every key is notated as the first through seventh note of the key in their respective major or minor key. These notes form chords. A basic type of the chord is the triad chord, where three notes, typically the third and fifth, are used. Besides the major and minor versions, this type of chord includes the diminished chord—minor third and diminished fifth—as well as the augmented chord, which has a major third and an augmented

fifth (Icon Collective, n.d.). In addition, chord extensions to the triad can be used, which can add the "seventh" or "ninth" note of the chord for more complex chords. Different orders, or inversions, of these chords can be made by shifting the bottommost note up an octave, with each successive inversion being named first inversion, second inversion, and so on (Icon Collective, n.d.). Of particular importance is roman numeral analysis for indicating chords in a progression. These indicate the root note of the chord progression by referencing the root note of the chord as well as what type of chord it is, with uppercase numerals representing major and lowercase numerals representing minor (Icon Collective, n.d.). Chords in a scale have three general functions called tonic, dominant, and predominant, and their functions and related chords are listed in the table below:

Table 1

Typical chords in a Touhou progression

Type of Chord	Chord Examples	Description
Tonic	*i*	Grounds the piece and
	III	provides resolution to a chord
	VI	progression
Dominant	*v*	Gives the piece tension and
	VII	typically resolves to the tonic
		chord
Predominant	ii°	Pulls away from the tonic and
	iv	gravitates towards the
		dominant

Note. This table has been created with info from Electroll (2020)

These chords are particularly important because they serve the role of tension builders

and resolvers that are at the heart of music itself. This paper will explore how these chords are used in Touhou music.

Now that we can describe music, what makes Touhou music special? While Touhou music can be defined by "fast-paced, driving drumbeats and quick flurries of arpeggios" (8-bit Music Theory, 2020, 0:45), it is best characterized by its major sixth, major seventh, and minor first chord progression (8-bit Music Theory, 2020, 4:10; Electroll, 2020, 1:40), which serves to create tension and resolution in a piece. Eletroll (2020) notes that this chord progression isn't absolute, but many variations of it can be found throughout Touhou music. As is evident, the chord progression mentioned by Electroll jumps from tonic to dominant and back to tonic for a resolution that is signature of Touhou music. To produce variety, a predominant chord can also be placed in between these three chords (Electroll, 2020). With just these tools, a majority of Touhou songs can be described (8-bit Music Theory, 2020; Electroll, 2020). Let's look at an example:

Figure 1

Written arrangement of the first four measures of "Suwa Foughten Field"

Note. The audio sample of "Suwa Foughten Field" that these four measures notate can be

accessed through this hyperlink:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NLhthTBhtuJP2V44bgqkZgdfUZ2LQh1B/view?usp=sharing

"Suwa Foughten Field" is a popular song from Touhou and is a great example of its music because it is the last stage's boss theme for a regular playthrough. Figure 1 represents the first four measures of the song with the chord progression on the left hand rearranged for better clarity. Although the chord progression analysis has already been done, the listed chords can be reconstructed in the key of D-flat minor. As can be seen in the last two measures, this Touhou song uses the major sixth, major seventh, and minor first chord progression as previously described to create tension and resolution at the end of the phrase. Chord progressions typically don't stand alone, and "Suwa Foughten Field" pairs this chord progression with a rising and falling melody that also creates tension, which likewise resolves to the minor first. Because Touhou music is so heavily ingrained with this type of chord progression, it is only natural that a good Touhou piano arrangement makes use of this, either in a part of the arrangement modelled after the original or in a solo.

Arranging a Touhou piece for piano can also have special implications for the instrument. Kendall R. Bean (n.d.) notes how the piano, is different from other instruments due to its amazing control over dynamics, or how loud a piece is. Indeed, each note can be any one value in a range of dynamics, with its selection chosen by how hard a note is played. In fact, this characteristic of the piano is widely used in piano arrangements of classical music (Bean, n.d.). Of course, the variability of dynamics can be tossed aside; however, a good Touhou piano arrangement ought to take advantage of this unique control and use different dynamics throughout the piece. Otherwise, why not just compose the piece in a different medium like a sax quartet?

In conclusion, a good Touhou piano arrangement should include elements from at least two different songs, should include the iconic major sixth, major seventh, and minor first chord progression, and should also take advantage of the unparalleled dynamic control of the piano. These elements take advantage of Touho's wide breadth of songs, the chord progression's ability to create and resolve tension, and the piano's unique construction respectively. As I've written it, much of this paper can seem abstract. It is especially limiting as this paper was only able to give one very short example out of the large pool of Touhou music. Thus, this justifies making a Touhou piano arrangement as a pair to this research project in order to better justify my claims.

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