

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD

You're listening to the Game Makers podcast, where we take you behind the scenes to find out how Ubisoft games are made. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard. In this set of episodes, we're talking to the three extraordinary composers and musicians who worked on the original soundtrack for Assassin's Creed Valhalla: Jesper Kyd, Sarah Schachner and Einar Selvik.

For this episode, composer Jesper Kyd tells us more about Ezio's Family - Ascending to Valhalla. The new Viking version of one of the most beloved pieces of music from the Assassin's Creed games, "Ezio's Family", which was first featured in Assassin's Creed 2, Jesper will tell us more about his process recreating this famous track, how he gave it a totally new sound while keeping the elements that made the original so powerful and memorable.

But first, let's go back to 2009 to listen to an excerpt of the original version of Ezio's Family.

(EZIO'S FAMILY PLAYS)

CHARLES:

So this is kind of the reprise of Ezio's Family, which I think it's fair to say has become the main theme for the Assassin's Creed franchise. I don't know at this point, if it's unofficial or official yet, but I think it's pretty clear. And I know talking to Aldo Sampaio, the audio director that it was very important for him to to reprise this track for, or this melody at least, in this game. Was it something from the get-go that you also wanted to do? Or can you say a little bit of how that came about?

JESPER KYD:

From the get-go, it was very clear that yes, Ubisoft was definitely looking for a new version of Ezio's Family for Assassin's Creed Valhalla. So, I didn't really think of it beyond that. I thought from the beginning, I knew we needed a new version. And I was thrilled when they asked me to write it.

CHARLES:

And how how did you go about doing that? So did you want to stay quite close to the original but just re-instrumentalize it? Or did you want to do something totally new with it. What was your process and your philosophy there?

JESPER:

Well, I would say both, the melody and Ezio's family is quite minimal. So if you if you go too far away from it, you're not going to catch people's ears, you are going to... So I needed to stay close to the theme for people to realise it is an Ezio's Family remix, if you want to call it that. But I wanted it to sound like it belonged in a Viking environment, which is very different from the last, and the original version that I wrote... last time I worked on this track was when I wrote the original foundation track like Ezio's family for Assassin's Creed 2. So that was obviously the Renaissance. So, I

mean, right off the bat, Renaissance versus Vikings, I mean, can you get any more different?

CHARLES:

It's not the same aesthetic.

JESPER: And then I also very much wanted to add something new to it.

(EXCERPT OF VIKING VERSION PLAYS)

CHARLES:

So what are some of the new elements that you added? Obviously, the melody of course is instantly recognizable, those eight notes, but what did you add?

JESPER:

Well, the second section actually comes in and then we go in a completely new direction. There is a feeling of transcendence, almost. I was working towards that kind of feel. And hence the title, ascending to Valhalla. That part very much feels like we are ascending or perhaps even weightless, but there's something like where we have this more driving, pulsating part with those notes repeating and then suddenly we are here and everything is like free and we're like floating and we're starting to ascend. So that was the idea there that you're off to Valhalla.

(EXCERPT PLAYS)

And then towards the third part of the track, I come back to Ezio's Family again, and start putting in new variations on that theme. And at that point, creating those variations wasn't such a concern to me because people have already heard, we are in Ezio's Family now, so I could create more and more variations without having to worry too much about sticking close to the theme.

CHARLES:

Because once you've established it more clearly at the beginning, then near the end, you can play around with it a bit more. Because then you're already like, people know we're in that universe.

JESPER:

Right. And even when I play around with it, I still feel it sounds very much like it came from the world of Ezio's Family. And Einar's vocals... He's playing, he's singing the violin part there from the original track. So it keeps the listener in that world for sure.

(EXCERPT WITH EINAR SINGING PLAYS)

CHARLES:

Can you talk a little bit about your collaboration with Einar for doing the vocals for the song?

JESPER:

Yeah, so that was a lot of fun working with him on this, I created a demo of the track and so there was vocal parts in there that I was looking for Einar to perform. And I had written some choir parts in there layered with his vocal so he could create those as well. And then I had a tagelharpa in there I had played not super awesome, because Einar is a great tagelharpa player. And so he played some tagelharpa, and then I doubled his harpa with my harpa so there's this thick sound now. Then, Clara Sorace is in there, towards the end, another singer I work with. And also Melissa [Kaplan] comes back in the second section when we are ascending, that is *her* performance, vocals there, ethereal, the kind of very mystical, we are now going to another dimension.

CHARLES:

That means you have three singers, right, three voices?

JESPER:

Right.

CHARLES:

And then and then you're doubling the tagelharpa. So, there's a lot of layering, I feel going on to the song, like a lot of sounds over each other.

JESPER:

Right. That's my music style, I mean, that's just, even... I mean I always do that, and even if music... if you hear some music I've done that perhaps you would say is much more minimal. It's still happening. I just that's just part of my DNA, it's part of my sound. I like mixing the acoustic world with the electronic world, and people not really being able to tell what's what. That's really fascinating to me. And I've always done this throughout my career from the very beginning. It's always been about mixing these two kinds of things together and mixing music styles together that often isn't mixed together to create new hybrid ideas. That's very much part of who I am and where I came from. And so perhaps another reason why I feel my music feels so natural to compose for a game like Assassin's Creed.

CHARLES:

There are some pretty funky instruments to me. Like there's these horn sounds that come in the song.

(HORN SOUNDS PLAY)

Can you talk a little bit about those wild horn sounds that we hear?

JESPER:

There's two horn sounds in there. There's a what's called a bronze lure, which is like a really typical Viking horn but it's a big horn, it's got these round shapes to it. And Einar performed on one of those horns for this track and the second horn that's in there, it's very much a more electronic processed approach. So I wanted an authentic horn in there. And then I wanted the more, animus simulated reminder that you were in the simulation type horn performance. So there's both of those in there.

(ELECTRONICALLY ALTERED HORNS PLAY)

CHARLES:

And were you trying to convey anything with these sounds?

JESPER:

I think outside of just embracing everything that's Viking, maybe I mean, you go towards the Viking instruments and for a Valhalla Ezio's family version, you definitely wanna go, all Viking with it.

CHARLES:

I was wondering, so because I mean, I think it was 10 years ago now that, or over 10 years ago that you were working on Assassin's Creed 2 and creating this song. Coming back to it after all that time, did you kind of discover or relearn something about the song that, that maybe hadn't struck you the first time or that you noticed?

JESPER:

I think so. I mean, I think it's quite apparent in the third section, after we come back from this whole ascension deal, that I'm starting to discover new ways to play this theme. And especially in the vocals, those are vocal parts I wrote and was very much looking for Einar to perform those as written there. You go exploring, and this is what I found. And I put it in the track. So I hadn't explored that track since I wrote it, maybe a little bit in Brotherhood, but not too much. So this felt quite new to me going back there after all these years.

CHARLES:

It feels very fresh. And there's something... maybe it's the way Einar is singing in the voices, but it sounds like there's a little bit of a rough edge to it, which is really interesting, I find, in this version.

JESPER:

Right, again: a band of Vikings. That's such an important aspect of the sound for me to have in there.

(EXCERPT OF SONG PLAYS)

CHARLES:

And are there any other sound effects or special bits of instrumentation that you added in the song? I mean, there's the water drop that I noticed that's kind of echoing in the background at one point.

JESPER:

Right. So I think you're referring to when the second section comes in there and we are starting to ascend. (SYNTH SOUNDS PLAY) That is a Yamaha CS-80 synthesizer, running through an analogue delay. And the idea there is to give a sense of weightlessness. And you call it waterdrop. That's really interesting to me, I didn't hear it like that, but I can totally hear it when you're saying it. And again, water dropping, there is a sense of, it's like the opposite of ascension, but there's still a movement going up or down. So that kind of like, thing where suddenly we're in another dimension, and we are whether we are ascending or falling, or we're floating, whatever it is, we're not... we're doing something different.

CHARLES:

You're in that liminal space, that in-between space, right.

JESPER:

So, you could argue, if up goes down, or anything like that the water drops could be dropping up. There's definitely some interesting thoughts there when you mentioned that that water drop sound, sounds cool.

(WHISPERING PLAYS)

CHARLES:

What was the idea behind that whispering sound that we hear in these very low kind of muttering voices?

JESPER:

So I had asked Einar to come up with some whispering parts for the track. And he found this poem, which I can talk a little bit more about. So the track starts out with some whispering as well, whispering Odin's name in old Norse, and towards the third part of the track after the ascending part. There's whispering in there from a poem by... it's called a Wisdom poem by Odin. It's called... Let me see about my Danish here, and Norwegian. It's a very long poem and this is the eighth verse, the verse talking about Valhalla. So I actually did translate it into English. Let's see if I can tell you what it talks about here.

CHARLES:

OK, go ahead.

JESPER:

So, it says and again, it's going through different sections. So this is the fifth section he's talking about: "where gold coins glimmer, Valhalla lies and illuminates, where weapon-killed men choose Odin every day." So it talks about being killed by a weapon in battle. And then after you're dead choosing Odin, and that means going to Valhalla. So it kind of glorifies Valhalla and what all that means. So that's what they're whispering in the background.

CHARLES:

It's interesting, because in the original game, I mean, Ezio's Family is this kind of tragedy, right? That happens to his family. And it's kind of a melancholy story. And here, it's used in a completely different way. Because I mean, there's still the theme of death I suppose, because Valhalla is this hall of the dead, glorious heroes, but it's used to talking about ascending and so if there's something kind of almost happy about it as well, because then you're spending time with Odin as a famed warrior.

JESPER:

I mean, again, I took a lot of inspiration from the spirituality and the afterlife, and that belief system of the Vikings, I think that's something that's so Viking, I mean, we have the name of all the gods in our week day names, right? I mean, it's just out in society, this whole belief system, and I very much wanted us to find ways to put that in the music. So when it does reach that section where it's ascending, I feel it's something that really fits well with Assassin's Creed Valhalla.

(FINAL SONG PLAYS)

CHARLES:

You can listen to "Ezio's Family - Ascending to Valhalla" on the Assassin's Creed Valhalla original game soundtrack, published by Ubisoft Music and Lakeshore Records. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. This episode of Game Makers was edited by Manu Bachet. Special thanks to our friends at Ubisoft music, Simon Landry and Anne Langourieux, 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.