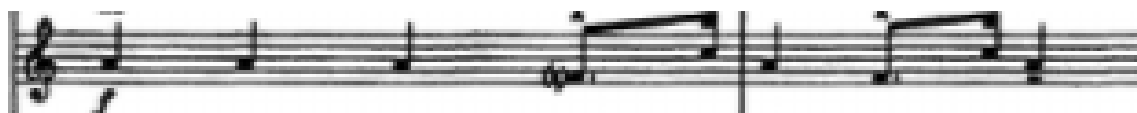


Leitmotifs of Hollownest

The world of Hollow Knight is immense, sprawling, and intricate, with its rich history told to us through many details in dialogue, visual world design, and much more. The music of Hollow Knight, composed by Christopher Larkin, plays an important part in creating its feel and building its atmosphere, however, it also contributes to some extent towards the lore, through its usage of leitmotifs to tell a story and imply tone. This doc will be attempting to list all the leitmotifs in the Hollow Knight soundtrack and will be exploring the possible connections they could be hinting at.

What is a Leitmotif?

A motif is a recurring theme or idea (in this case, musical) in an artistic work, used usually to represent something. Leitmotifs are musical patterns used throughout a soundtrack to highlight or represent something in the story or a certain emotion. For instance, the recognizable [Imperial March, from Star Wars](#), which gets repeated all throughout the Star Wars soundtrack:-



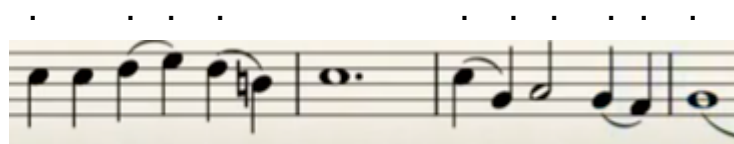
Hollow Knight/Vessel Leitmotif

One of, if not the most common repeating motif in the soundtrack of Hollow Knight is well, the Hollow Knight's theme. This is, in many ways, the main theme of the game, it appears in the [music for the title screen](#), and many other instances throughout the game.



Hollow Knight main theme at 0:00 (Note: pay attention to notes with dots above them)

This music represents the titular character of the game, The Hollow Knight. It also represents the Protagonist Knight (or Ghost, or Wielder), and all the vessels, children of the Pale King, killed at birth, hollowed out, then filled and animated by the Void in the Abyss in hopes to seal the Radiance away. A number of instances in which this motif plays backs up this claim. It plays when [the Abyss track is sped up](#) as the Abyss is the home of the vessels, it plays for the [Broken Vessel](#), which is another failed vessel like the ones in the Abyss, whose Shade has long left it and its shell is now animated by Lightseeds. And it plays in the [Hollow Knight/Pure Vessel](#), the “final” boss of the game, and the “successful” vessel chosen by the Pale King to seal the Radiance.



Hollow Knight main theme in Broken Vessel at 0:24



Hollow Knight main theme in Sealed Vessel at 0:59

Birthplace Cutscene

It also plays during the [Birthplace Cutscene, the second phase of the Hollow Knight fight, and the Path of Pain](#), which all use the same theme, with just slightly different instrumentation.



Hollow Knight main theme in Birthplace at 0:00

The Birthplace Cutscene is the single most important cutscene relating to the vessels, so it would make sense that it plays there. However, what I find interesting is its playing in the Path of Pain and the second phase of the Hollow Knight fight. Now of course all of these are related to the Hollow Knight and by extension the vessels, but they all use the same piece, with only difference being in instrumentation. This is just my perspective, but I think this serves to tie these moments together, and this playing in the second phase of the Hollow Knight, when they start stabbing themselves harkens back to the Path of Pain and the Birthplace cutscene, both of which share a common

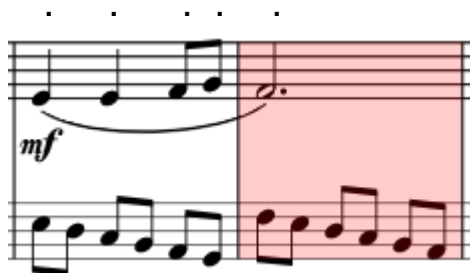
implication, a moment between the Pale King and the Hollow Knight, one of these being the first time they meet, and another supposedly being the moment of the so-called “idea instilled”, actually being instilled into the Hollow Knight, that being a bond with the Pale King that is said to have ruined its hollowness. With that in mind, this music can be led back to these moments and seen as the Hollow Knight remembering its bond with the Pale King, and trying desperately to one last time save Hallownest by helping the Protagonist Knight win by stabbing itself. (Note now that this needs to mean that the idea instilled has to exist, which is only implied, not confirmed, so this is just speculation, do not take this as truth. Also note that even if an idea instilled were to exist, it would not need to be the sole cause for the Hollow Knight’s failure as a vessel.) Regardless of whether you believe in this interpretation, this theme is still strongly tied to the Hollow Knight’s personality, justifying the place of the motif.

Others

There are a few more moments in the game where the Hollow Knight motif plays in reference to the Protagonist Knight, which are the [starting drop down cutscene](#), [the “Dream No More” ending cutscene](#) which calls directly back to the opening cutscene, the cutscenes for the [Hollow Knight](#) and the [Sealed Siblings](#) endings, and the music that plays when you sit on [the throne of the Pale King](#) in the White Palace.



Hollow Knight main theme in Opening Cutscene at 1:29



Hollow Knight main theme in the Hollow Knight and Sealed Siblings endings at 0:03 and 0:35 respectively



Hollow Knight main theme in Dream No More ending at 1:18 (same as the Opening Cutscene but with the full motif and the Pale King's theme along with it)

The Dream No More ending cutscene directly calls back to the Opening drop-down cutscene with its music, except with the Pale King motif doubling behind it, which harkens back to the Throne moment, which also has these two motifs doubling on top of each other, and the Sealed Siblings ending, which has the Pale King motif conclude the cutscene, representing Hornet, the Pale King's one alive daughter who up to this point was only represented by the Pale King's motif (this might be subject to change

upon Silksong's release) sealing herself as a Dreamer along with the Protagonist Knight.

[The Godmaster endings](#) use the Hollow Knight motif to signal its escape from the Black Egg in the final moments of the cutscene.

There are more obscure references to the vessel/Hollow Knight leitmotif all over the soundtrack. Usually these are just indicative of the Protagonist Knight since they are the character we play as. These will be listed below:-

[Greenpath](#)



Hollow Knight main theme in Greenpath at 1:16



Original for comparison

[Dirtmouth](#)



Hollow Knight main theme in Dirtmouth at 1:56

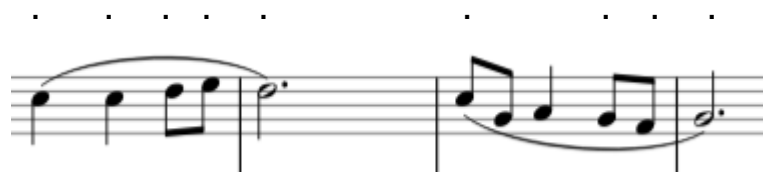


Original for comparison

Fungal Wastes



Hollow Knight main theme in Fungal Wastes at 0:13



Original for comparison

Decisive Battle



Hollow Knight main theme in Decisive Battle at 0:00



Original for comparison

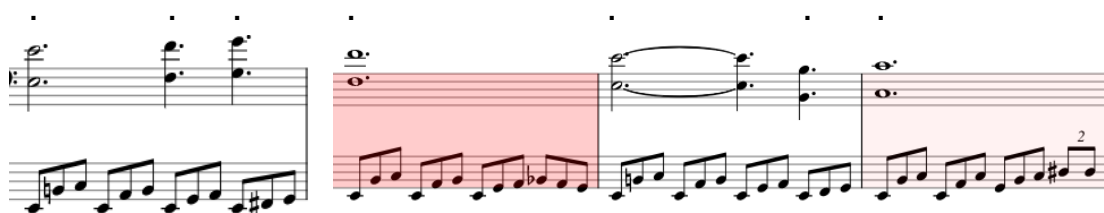
White Palace (Suggested by Rio Martin)



Possible Hollow Knight main theme in White Palace at 1:53 (in backing strings)

False Knight and Grey Prince Zote

And finally there are two instances of the Vessel leitmotif playing that are quite interesting, these being within the [False Knight theme](#), that also plays for the Watcher Knights, and the [Grey Prince Zote theme](#).



Hollow Knight main theme in False Knight at 0:13

There is a theory that the motif plays here due to these bosses being very similar to the vessels in nature, they are both shells being manned by an outside force, those being the Infected Maggot for the False Knight, and the Infected Lumaflyes for the Watcher Knights. This is very plausible, and backed up by the fact that the Broken Vessel is also less of a vessel when we fight them, and more so another example of a corpse shell being piloted by an outside Infected force, this time being the Lightseeds. However, it could also simply be that since the False Knight is the first major boss encounter in the game, Larkin decided to use the main theme of the game for him, and to represent the Protagonist Knight's first battle, and then because of the tonal similarity between the False Knight and the Watcher Knights, Larkin just decided to repurpose the False Knight theme for the Watcher Knights, and it just happens to have the vessel theme. Both of these scenarios are equally likely.

The other of the two interesting instances of the Vessel leitmotif is in the [Grey Prince Zote theme](#), which also plays during the Eternal Ordeal.





Hollow Knight main theme in Truth Beauty and Hatred (Grey Prince Zote's theme) at 0:03

Despite his visual and father-issue-similarities to a vessel, Zote is neither a vessel nor a child of the Pale King, there are many pieces of evidence disproving this. That being said, what could the piece being used here suggest? Here is a possible explanation. This theme plays for not the actual Zote the Mighty, but rather the Grey Prince Zote, who is a dream fantasy of Bretta where Zote is much stronger. Remember now that before meeting Zote and hearing of his false glory and “revealing the Protagonist Knight as a beast”, Bretta used to idolize the Protagonist Knight, thus at least suggesting that the Knight fit within Bretta’s definition of the ideal bug. Considering that now Bretta thinks of Zote also as an ideal and idolizes him, Zote also fits into the same idea of the ideal bug that Bretta had, which the Protagonist Knight fit into. Thus, the vessel motif playing here is not so much representing Zote or a vessel as much as it is representing Bretta’s idea of an ideal bug, something that resembles the Protagonist Knight, and thus the motif. While this is a possible explanation, it could also just be that since Zote is, to some extent, a parody of the Protagonist Knight, this over-the-top heroic version of the Vessel leitmotif playing, in complete contrast to the fumbling and tripping Zote, would just work as parody.

These are all the instances of the Vessel theme I could find in the Hollow Knight soundtrack, if there are more that I've missed, please feel free to DM me with suggestions and links.

Pale King/Hallownest Leitmotif

[The Pale King leitmotif](#) is the first motif you hear within the actual game, discounting the title screen, as you see the “Elegy for Hallownest”, which was written by Monomon the Teacher, one of the three Dreamers and a trusted archivist of the Pale King, and is, as the title suggests, an elegy for Hallownest, the kingdom created by the Pale King. The poem is addressed to the Pale King, and speaks about his great feats of expanding his previously savage subjects' minds, “taming their souls” and giving them a world they could never dream of.



Elegy for Hallownest/The Pale King's motif

This motif represents the Pale King, and also at times doubles as a leitmotif for Hallownest as a whole. This is also backed up, just like the previous motif, by the instances in which it plays, among which are in [the White Palace](#), the palace in which the Pale King resided, it plays when meeting [the White Lady](#), who was the previous wife

of the Pale King and ruled as the Queen of Hallownest alongside him and it also plays for [the White Defender](#), as he was one of the Five Great Knights of Hallownest, and their most loyal, given his charm description, so it represents his loyalty to Hallownest and his King.



Pale King's theme in White Palace at 0:44



Pale King's theme in White Lady at 0:00



Pale King's theme in White Defender at 1:32

Hornet and Resting Grounds

One of the more obscure instances of its playing, however, is in [Hornet's theme](#), however, this connection becomes more clear as the lore is unravelled. Hornet was the daughter of Herrah the Beast and the Pale King, and was his repayment to her for her becoming a Dreamer. Knowing this connection, it becomes clear as to why the Pale King motif plays for her. Moreover, she is also the last living protector of Hallownest who hasn't lost all her hope yet, and her Godhome battle theme is called the "Daughter of Hallownest", connecting her with not only the Pale King, but Hallownest as a whole.



Pale King's theme in Hornet at 0:16



Original for comparison

Another puzzling instance of the leitmotif playing is within the [Resting Grounds](#), probably the least related instance to the Pale King this motif plays in. But the Resting Grounds is the original home of the now extinct Moth Tribe, who if

you think about it mark the start and end of Hallownest's age, as they were its first members when they followed the Pale King's light and forsook the Radiance, and mark its end as if it weren't for the few Moths who remembered the Radiance, she wouldn't have been able to come back and infect Hallownest with her plague. The sad, almost mournful tone of the piece conveys the tone of the Resting Grounds as a burial spot, but it could perhaps also convey the regret of the Seer, the last alive moth, over her tribe's actions of following the Pale King, and thus the motif. Honestly, I don't know. But this does exist as a motif, and there can be a number of connections to make from it.



during the moment when you sit on the [throne of the Pale King](#) in the White Palace.



Pale King's theme in Sealed Siblings at 0:48



Pale King's theme in Dream No More at 1:18, playing along with the Hollow Knight theme

In the Sealed Siblings ending this motif represents Hornet, sealing herself as a Dreamer as a layer of protection over the Protagonist Knight. It plays to conclude the phrase started by the Hollow Knight/vessel motif, representing the layers of protection, which start with the vessel inside, in this case the Protagonist Knight, and Hornet finally outside as the Dreamer Seal on the Egg. In the Dream No More ending this doubles with the vessel leitmotif, possibly to represent the intertwined legacies of Hallownest's fate and the vessels and the connection between Hornet and the Protagonist Knight as she looks on at its corpse, almost

like these two motifs are dancing together . This moment is foreshadowed by the music that plays when you sit on the throne of the Pale King, which also has these two motifs doubling on top of each other.

This motif also plays in the track [“Pale Court”](#), which is a “remix” of the White Palace theme on the soundtrack for Hollow Knight that isn’t used in the game.

These are all the instances of the Pale King theme I could find in the Hollow Knight soundtrack, if there are more that I’ve missed, please feel free to DM me with suggestions and links.

Dream Realm Leitmotif

The Dream Realm Leitmotif is first heard in the track [“Dream”](#), when you first reach the Resting Grounds and are sealed into the Dream Realm by the three Dreamers, and then given the Dream Nail by the Seer in order to cut your way out of the Dream Expanse and back to the Waking World. This track also plays in the Shrine of Believers, and during the parkour course leading up to each of the Dream Bosses.



Dream Realm leitmotif in Dream at 0:09

This motif also plays when you kill each of the [Dreamers](#) to break the Seals holding the Black Egg, in an ethereal yet mournful manner, echoing their sacrifice, and the [Radiance fight](#), the secret final boss of the game.



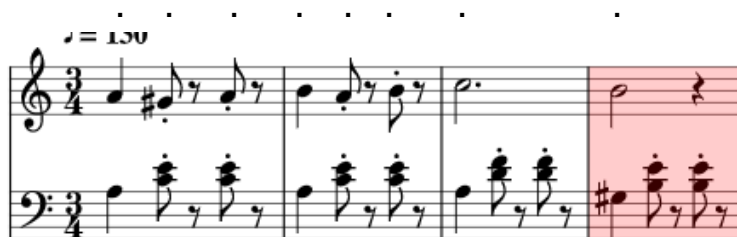
Dream Realm leitmotif in Dreamers at 0:00



These are all the instances of the Dream Realm theme I could find in the Hollow Knight soundtrack, if there are more that I've missed, please feel free to DM me with suggestions and links.

Grimm Troupe Leitmotif

The Grimm Troupe theme is not very present in the Hollow Knight soundtrack, and appears only in areas related to the Grimm Troupe. It is first heard when the Troupe is summoned by lighting the Red Flame in the Howling Cliffs, being played by an accordion. [This same melody](#) is later played by Brumm in Dirtmouth in the Troupe's tent.



Grimm Troupe leitmotif in Accordion Brumm at 0:00 (Fun fact: This motif rhythmically matches the poem of the Grimm Troupe)

[A more fast-paced version of this melody](#) plays when fighting each of the Grimmkin to collect the Nightmare Flames and feed the Grimmchild.

Then, the leitmotif plays during the [Troupe Master Grimm](#) fight, where it is fast-paced and does not adhere to the accordion palette set forth by the previous pieces, instead giving Grimm a more “Dracula” vibe.



Grimm Troupe leitmotif in Troupe Master Grimm at 0:16

Finally, the motif plays in the [Nightmare King Grimm](#) fight, which is the last instance it plays in.



Grimm Troupe leitmotif in Nightmare King Grimm at 0:36

These are all the instances of the Grimm Troupe theme I could find in the Hollow Knight soundtrack, if there are more that I've missed, please feel free to DM me with suggestions and links.

Godhome/Godseekers Leitmotif

The Godhome area is represented mainly by three musical qualities, its instrumental colour palette, its main leitmotif, and the tuning bell sound.

Instrumentation

The Godhome has a musical palette (choice of instruments) composed mainly of strings and a choir. There are other instruments that play in this area, but these are the most prominent. There are few other areas in Hollow Knight that establish their own musical palette. The Godhome has the string and choir take center stage in all its tracks [Godhome](#), [Gods & Glory](#), [Haunted Foes](#) and [Furious Gods](#). Even the boss remixes, namely [Daughter of Hallownest](#), and [Sisters of Battle](#) are consistent with this palette. Most of the times a choir is used in the soundtrack other than Godhome, it serves to create an ethereal, grand and glorious sort of feel, like with the Birthplace Cutscene and the Dreamers. Even with bosses, it adds to the dangerousness of the atmosphere, like with the Radiance fight, the Soul Master fight and the Troupe Master Grimm. Thus, the choir being used in Godhome signals the ethereal godliness and grandeur associated with the Gods and the Godhome, giving the place a heavenly atmosphere, and serves to stress the dangerousness of the task of ascending up Pantheons filled with deadly brutal Gods when it plays during battle.

Leitmotif

The Godhome is represented by a leitmotif that first appears in the track [Godhome](#). It is a short motif, comprising but two notes. Despite that, it is extremely noticeable.



Godhome leitmotif in Godhome at 0:00

The motif plays in all the other Godhome tracks (that aren't remixes), namely [Gods & Glory](#), [Furious Gods](#), and [Haunted Foes](#).



Godhome leitmotif in Gods & Glory at 0:00



Godhome leitmotif in Furious Gods at 0:22



Godhome leitmotif in Haunted Foes at 0:00

more grandiose version of the Hollow Knight theme, being played by the godly choir and backed by strings, representing the true glory of the chosen vessel and its power, as opposed to the tragedy and roughness of the Hollow Knight theme, just like the Pure Vessel is a more majestic version of the Hollow Knight. It is also composed adhering to the Godhome instrumental palette, being mainly played by strings and a choir. It also seems to have the [Godhome leitmotif](#) play at the last two notes of the track, and although this might be just a coincidence, it is a thing that should be worth pointing out.



Godhome leitmotif in Pure Vessel at 1:20



Original for comparison

These are all the instances of the Godhome theme I could find in the Hollow Knight soundtrack, if there are more that I've missed, please feel free to DM me with suggestions and links.

Smaller Melodies and Connections

City of Tears

The [City of Tears](#) has its own motif that is sung by Amelia Jones in the song. It also appears in the [Soul Sanctum](#), a subarea in the City of Tears, played in an organ and being backed by chords from the relative minor scale, so as to give off a darker vibe, and it also plays in the [Soul Master bossfight](#).



City of Tears theme in City of Tears at 0:08





Along with this, it also appears in the singing of [Songstress Marissa](#), who was an entertainer during Hallowfest's prime. She seems to be the in-game vocalist in the City of Tears track as well.

Dirtmouth/Greenpath Connection

There is also a motif shared by the area themes of [Dirtmouth](#) and [Greenpath](#).



Dirtmouth/Greenpath theme in Dirtmouth at 0:00



Dirtmouth/Greenpath theme in Greenpath at 0:27

This motif isn't really significant of lore, as there is no perceived lore connection between Dirtmouth and Greenpath. In my opinion, this motif more represents a feeling of hope and positivity. I believe this, because up until the point where you reach Greenpath, the game mostly has a feeling of desolate loneliness in the Forgotten Crossroads, and you fear that this melancholy will be the sole feeling throughout the game. Your only area of happiness and safety from that feeling is the area Dirtmouth, which has a friendly NPC, a bench and many friendly shops and even a Stag Station. But when you reach Greenpath, the desolateness of the Forgotten

Crossroads is immediately contrasted with this vivid happy musical palette and area, and calling back to the Dirtmouth theme serves to bring back the happy positivity of the fading town, further adding to the optimism of the area.

Shade Motif and Note about Diegesis

There is a [certain melody](#) that plays when you encounter your Shade to kill it to get your Geo back upon death. This same melody also plays in a [room in the White Palace](#), right outside the Throne Room. While the Shade theme is creepy and uncertain, here it is soothing and calming.



Shade theme in Shade at 0:00

I believe that this motif represents the two parts of a vessel. The shade, which is the inner Void (heart of Void) and the shell, which is the child of the Pale King and White Lady (soul of Wyrms, soul of Root). My evidence for this theory is that the theme plays for the Shade, which is the inner Void of the vessel, and it plays in a room in the White Palace which has something that looks an awful lot like a crib and a chair with the White Lady's silhouette on it. The "child" imagery of this room should suggest that this was a place, at least at some point built to nurture a child, or perhaps was even the place where the vessels' eggs were first laid before being put to the Abyss. Thus, since this is a child room in the White Palace, it is safe to say that this

could be an imagery for a child of the Pale King, the “shell” part of the vessel. The corrupted nature of its playing for the Shade and the soothing nature of its playing for the White Palace room could show how these two parts are constantly at odds, with the shell constraining the Shade and whatnot.

The music of Hollow Knight throughout the game remains mostly non-diegetic, as in it is not sourced from within the world and thus cannot be heard by the characters or be affected by canonicity. Thus, the fact that the Shade theme plays for the Shade only in an instance that is not canon is irrelevant, as the music is not affected by canonicity, only by intention. Even though it isn't canon, this is a moment accessible in the game Hollow Knight naturally, and without file editing or manipulation. Thus, it is evident that it was the intent of Team Cherry, canon or not, that this event be viewed by the player and the music heard. This cannot be applied to cut content as those are neither canon nor are they the intent of Team Cherry, since they are not perceptible in the game without manipulation. Music in Hollow Knight is an out-of-world source of information, a narrator, a commenter on the playthrough, rather than a part of it, like the words of Team Cherry on the game outside of the game itself, like confirming the relation of Pale Ore to Pale Beings, despite this relation never being mentioned in game. For the same reason as this, despite the event of meeting the Shade being non-canon, the music playing for the Shade in that instance as a motif should still be considered.

These are all the motifs and themes I could find throughout the Hollow Knight soundtrack. If you have found more, feel free to DM me with suggestions, links, or anything else you might want me to add.

Hollow Knight has a rich soundtrack that perfectly encapsulates the feeling of the game and even adds to the story, and this document has shown how it has used leitmotifs to aid the story and feeling of the game.

Sheet Music Sources

[Imperial March - Composed By John Williams](#)

[Hollow Knight - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged by Stoh](#)

[Broken Vessel - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By 5Gonza5](#)

[Sealed Vessel - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By Stoh](#)

[Greenpath - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By Stoh](#)

[Dirtmouth - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By Torby Brand](#)

[Fungal Wastes - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By Bluerunner12](#)

Decisive Battle - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Gonzalo Matus

White Palace - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged
By AM BT

False Knight - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged
By Kleopina

Grey Prince Zote - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Kleopina

White Palace - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged
By Stoh

White Lady - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged
By Stoh

White Defender - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Brohitbose

Hornet - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By
Stoh

Resting Grounds - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Stoh

Dreamer - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By
Nicobenner

Radiance - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By
Kleopina

[Accordion Brumm - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By SizeMcBilly](#)

[Troupe Master Grimm - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Kleopina](#)

[Nightmare King Grimm - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Shinkai Setsuna](#)

[Godhome - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged By
Brohitbose](#)

[Gods & Glory - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Brohitbose](#)

[Haunted Foes - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Brohitbose](#)

[Pure Vessel - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged
By TheElvenTimeLord](#)

[City Of Tears - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged
By Stoh](#)

[Soul Sanctum - Composed By Christopher Larkin,
Arranged By Relaxgineer](#)

[Soul Master - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged
By Koopamaker](#)

**Shade Song - Composed By Christopher Larkin, Arranged
By Neil R**

**All the sheet music that has not been credited is self-made.
Thank you for reading!**

Written and Edited by seedheart