

# Video Game Music

By ELIZABETH KELLEHER



Courtesy: www.videogameslive.com

## Orchestras Lure Young Audiences

*The Symphony Silicon Valley in San Jose, California, performs the Classic Arcade Medley segment. Frogger, the video game that inspired the concert, is playing on the screen.*

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ideo games are culturally significant.”

Try that statement, made by video game industry insider Tommy Tallarico, on a group of friends, and you are likely to unleash heated debate.

Tallarico co-produces a live concert with renowned symphony orchestras playing music from video games, and he says the show’s popularity among “gamers” and musicians alike underscores the growing cultural importance of video games.

*Video Games Live* ([www.videogameslive.com](http://www.videogameslive.com))—which features costumed characters, orchestras, choral groups and a light show that rivals any rock concert—started with three performances in 2005. It has progressed to a schedule of about 30 performances around the world in 2007, some of which have drawn thousands.

Music in video games is composed to be no more than background music but is as “emotional, powerful as any movie score out there,” says Tallarico.

Audiences tend to be rowdy, cheering or chanting frequently.

One oboe player said that, before he played *Video Games Live*, he never had someone cheer for him, despite having played in orchestras for 40 years. He liked it.

“It looks like these types of productions are catching on,” says Daniel Ozment, assistant conductor of the Master Chorale of Washington, a professional choir. “It’s a lot of fun to do.”

Concerts are not advertised in large-city newspapers but rather rely on “cell-phone movies” posted on YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)), buzz from social networking sites and flyers in video game stores. “It is a huge shift from what we traditionally do,” says Ozment.

As traditional, classical orchestras struggle as a result of dwindling audiences, they are trying more popular fare to attract younger people. In 2004, when the Los Angeles Philharmonic took what was then a bold step by playing music by Japanese composer Nobuo Uematsu from the video game *Final Fantasy*, the concert sold out in three days, according to a trade journal.

Craig Mulcahy, trombonist for the National Symphony Orchestra, says the *Video Games Live* concert his orchestra played at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. in June 2007 drew “the youngest crowd we have

*Synchronized lighting, live action and audience interactivity mark a performance of The Halo segment in San Francisco, California.*



had. There were lots of teens there, and both nights we did it were completely sold out. I imagine we'll do more in the future."

The National Symphony Orchestra's summer concert schedule also includes "Fantastic Planet"—music by Beethoven, Debussy, Vaughn Williams and Stravinsky played with outer-space film footage from NASA—and "Bugs on Broadway," symphonic accompaniment to cartoons.

"Operas were created to bring in people who might be attracted by the costumes or the stories," Tallarico says. He gets e-mails from audience members who never had been to the symphony before. "I tell them about Beethoven's Ninth, about Wagner," he says.

Ozment says his group, which sang some portions of the concert in a "made-up language," enjoyed rehearsals. "It's still classical music, in a way. The only difference is that some of our singers who performed in this concert were very excited about this music, because they grew up playing these [video] games."

Mulcahy, who at 33 is one of the younger members of the orchestra, says that he has played several of the games featured in *Video Games Live*. "Even when I was not playing [trombone], I was turning around, watching the screen and enjoying the music," he says.

The \$30 billion video game industry has changed significantly in the last 15 years, according to Joseph Olin, president of the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences. As computers store more digital information, the musicality of video games has improved dramatically.

In 1972, the first commercial game, Pong, went on the market. *Video Games Live* starts with an orchestral imitation of the game's bleeps and bloops. The music progresses to the complex score from Halo 3, a game that earned more than \$170 million in sales in the first 24 hours of its release in September 2007. It has since also set the record for the most money earned in a day by an entertainment product, topping figures set by the film *Spider-Man 3*.

Douglas A. Gentile, a psychology professor at Iowa State University and a critic of the violent content of many video games, says that as video games become more of an art form, they also could become more dangerous.

Gentile wrote a book about the violent effects of video games on children and adolescents. "Great art does have an effect on us," he says, noting that the American Academy of Pediatrics will release an update on media violence in the next year that will include more information about video games.

Gentile says violent games "increase aggressive thoughts, feelings and behaviors in the short-term and the long-term."

*Video Games Live* producers support the video game industry and do not see its products as a danger to young people. But they are also happy to think the show is turning some members of its audiences toward serious music.

"We do want to get in touch with that younger generation and find a way to make them aware of what we do and how cool this music is, even when it doesn't have a video on the screen," says Ozment, the chorale director.

"There are hundreds of thousands of pieces of music written in the last 200 years that have stories in them—you find the picture in your head."



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