

The Arts | Video Game Symphony invites players off the couch and into Benaroya Hall | Seattle Times Newspaper

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Conductor Andy Brick remembers leading the Czech National Symphony Orchestra in the very first video-game music concert in the Western world. That 2003 performance was at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, in Germany, and it was not a pretty picture — at least initially.

"There was a near-revolt among the musicians," Brick says. "They couldn't believe they were playing music written for video games. But by the end of the evening, they saw how thrilled the crowd was, and realized they had built a bridge to a new and different audience."

Then there was a more recent concert of video-game music played by the Eugene (Ore.) Symphony, again under Brick's baton.

"Someone started cheering from the audience while I was in the middle of talking," Brick said by phone from Amsterdam. "Suddenly a young guy in the viola section started screaming back. Then the entire audience and orchestra got into it. It was unbridled enthusiasm."

Emotions run high during performances of "PLAY! A Video Game Symphony," which Brick will bring to Benaroya Hall Tuesday and Wednesday. The program features the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, Seattle Choral Company and vocalist Aubrey Ashburn performing, among other things, all-new arrangements of music from hit games "Final Fantasy," "The Legend Of Zelda," "HALO: Reach" and "World of Warcraft."

Brick and the Seattle Symphony sold out two "PLAY!" concerts in 2008. He says the program continually evolves as the video-game music repertoire grows and older scores are reorchestrated for 80 or more musicians.

"We play some of the greatest symphonic game music out there," says Brick. "One of the standards people like to hear is 'Super Mario Bros.' We've redone it, so it's going to be a really nice surprise, a world premiere for us in Seattle. We're doing several pieces that are brand new. It's quite a new show."

Images from the various games will be shown overhead, but Brick says the program's overall experience is a musical one. Audience members who have never attended a symphony orchestra's performance are often moved hearing a beloved score's sonic expansion and added color.

Brick has written music for a number of blockbuster video games, including "Sim City: Rush Hour," "Sims 2," "Sonic the Hedgehog" and "Final Fantasy." He teaches music theory and composing at the Stevens Institute of Technology, in New Jersey, and is resident conductor of Prague's FILMharmonic Orchestra.

As those musicians in Leipzig discovered, part of the appeal of "PLAY!" is reaching out to an underdeveloped audience.

"Orchestras are finding there's a sincere demand for this music," Brick says, "and that the music's actually good and engaging, something which allows the audience to participate and be part of a concert. I don't know too many 14-year-olds who can sing Brahms or Mahler. But I know a lot who can sing something from 'Final Fantasy' or 'Halo.' A young ear needs to be trained into hearing serious music. A lot of game composers provide a gradual introduction."

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