

The National Symphony Orchestras Video-Game Summer: In defense of populist classical programming - Washington City Paper

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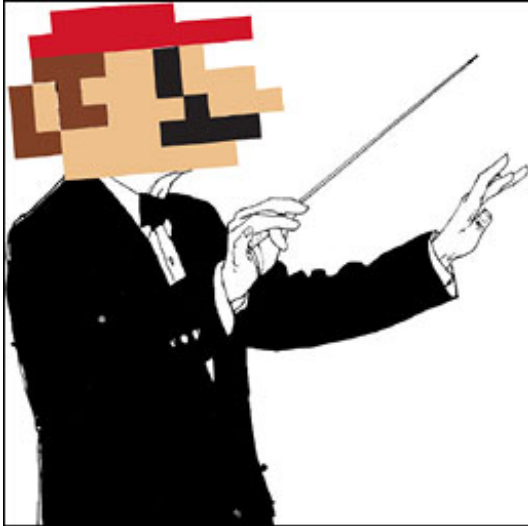


Illustration by Brooke Hatfield

Sure, the National Symphony Orchestra's summer season at Wolf Trap is usually a little entry-level: Broadway fare, Hollywood classics, video game music. Save for a few symphonic blockbusters, the Kennedy Center's orchestra sticks to lightweight stuff as it heads out to the bucolic venue each July and August. And, for the most part, few people ever fault the ensemble for it. Washington's arts critics politely ignore many of the populist concerts, treating the venerable NSO's warm-weather series as if it were a zany run of *Shear Madness*. Come fall, the orchestra will be back in Foggy Bottom, and highbrow listeners will take their seats as if summer never happened.

But maybe it's worth taking a minute to focus on this underappreciated season of silver-screen play-alongs and orchestral odes to video-game scores. Look beyond the fluffy material and you'll find a series of shows that test musical acumen, engage a devoted audience, and offer orchestra types a bit of fun. As one musician put it, it's like a "three-month barbecue," with crazy music, a short sleeve dress code—and sometimes, explosions.

For one thing, there's an ambiance you won't find in the refined concert halls of the Kennedy Center. "When you get in and get there, there's a sense of arrival, like a ball player getting to the stadium," says second section violinist Glenn Donnellan, who has been playing the Wolf Trap series since he joined the orchestra in 1997. And that's not just because the sweeping Filene Center looks vaguely like an elegant sports arena—it's the summer crowd, in their shorts and T-shirts and Texas, that complete the experience. Especially those he calls the "lawn people," the cooler-toting crowd that snatches up the cheap spots on the green.

According to Donnellan, Wolf Trap Festival Conductor Emil de Cou "loves to razz the lawn people." They're the semi-inebriated soul of the audience, and also the most prepared, Donnellan says. Pros, even. "When it starts to rain, all of a sudden you see these tarps and big sheets of plastic that come out of nowhere"—lawn people ducking and covering as if they were sitting in the front row at a Gallagher show. "It's a lot of fun!" he says. "It's just neat to be outdoors and playing...it just has a different feeling."

The violinist recalls a concert in August 2006 when the orchestra was just about to start a nine-minute performance of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." "By the time we got to the piece it was raining cats and dogs," he says. "On the very last chord... a lightning bolt hit a transformer. There was a huge boom somewhere off the property...and it knocked out all the lights in the entire place. It was really uncanny...and the cheer that erupted from the audience, it was almost as though it was scripted."

Things really crescendo when the orchestra takes on video game music. Never mind the purists: For musicians accustomed to playing underneath dripping chandeliers, these ever-popular programs are the closest thing they'll get to a fantasy metal concert. This summer's show, which first played at the park in 2006, is conductor Andy Brick's touring performance, "Play! A Video Game Symphony." On July 8, he'll lead the orchestra in scores from *Legend of Zelda*, *World of Warcraft*,

and *Halo*, among others. The 20-something dudes turn up in droves: Within the first couple notes, says assistant principal trombonist Barry Hearn, “you can hear the audience yelling out the video game names...it’s really like a modern version of *Name That Tune*.” Then, the screaming begins. It’s thrilling. “I personally hope we can do it every year,” he says.

And, as it happens, the musicians work pretty hard to earn the fanboys’ cheers. *World of Warcraft*, it seems, is no orchestral version of “Chopsticks.” “For me, as a brass player, oftentimes the Wolf Trap series provides some really unique demands that sometimes the subscription series doesn’t,” Hearn says. “A lot of the subscription series includes stuff from the baroque and early classical period, which is a fantastic generator of income for us,” he says, “but there isn’t a lot of opportunity for trombone players to play that stuff. With more popular music, they utilize the brass as a really dramatic component.” He calls the summer shows “very exciting and taxing.”

The movie score programs—such as this summer’s presentation of *Casablanca* on July 30—are also uniquely difficult. “The film ones are usually very tricky,” says Donnallen, “because they have a lot of runs and scales and they’re changing key all the time, and they’re written by freehand sometimes...they can be more of a pain to read.” Meanwhile, de Cou has to match the orchestra’s music to what’s happening on-screen, a task that standard concert-hall performances don’t require. “That is a tremendous challenge for our conductor,” says Hearn, and “a special skill set that I’m thankful I don’t have to work on.”

The series celebrates its 40th year this summer, and it continues to be immensely popular. Wolf Trap’s assistant director of public relations, Graham Binder, says the audience tends to change every year, with a couple exceptions. The video game symphonies have a built-in crowd (that probably only cares about the orchestra when they’re playing Nintendo themes), and the annual Fourth of July “1812 Overture” show attracts regulars whom Binder says “appreciate the familiarity of the program.” The big-name genre-crossing collaborations usually sell best. Binder projects that this summer’s shows with Arlo Guthrie and Time for Three (August 6), The 5 Browns (July 28), and Marvin Hamlisch and Brian Stokes Mitchell (July 29) will sell especially well. Alas, it’s a good bet those large crowds won’t include the usual retinue of music critics that review the symphony at the Kennedy Center every week.

That’s too bad. Among other things, they’ll be missing out on a good time. Lots of fans tend to mean a longer after-party—and, for musicians, a relished opportunity to kick back. After every performance, symphony players will “hang out afterward and kind of party and relax” while they wait for the traffic to clear the park, says Donnellan. “After the last concert, there’s always a big tailgate party,” he says. It’s probably about as rowdy as a party with a bunch of classical musicians could be: “There’s not a lot of heavy drinking or anything like that,” he says. But “people have their signature dishes that they bring.”