



THE ORIGINAL LIGHT BEER



Eight-Bit Symphonies

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2006 AT 4 A.M.



Game faces: Phoenix's Minibosses lead the national craze for Nintendo rock.

Christian Johnson

Bach. Beethoven. Brahms. Mozart. Mario. The five pillars of classical music. And while those first four dudes had a good run, it's that last guy who enraptures us now: a Japanese-born yet ostensibly Italian plumber in a bright red jumpsuit who, in the mid-'80s, warp-zoned his way into 60 million homes worldwide, hipping the youth of America to the joys of stomping on Goombas, not to mention seeking magic mushrooms and other mystical flora and fauna that make you grow freakishly in size and/or shoot fireballs.

The theme song ("World 1-1," if we're getting technical) to *Super Mario Bros.*, the marquee title on 1985's Nintendo Entertainment System, was the most vital piece of music composed in the 20th century. The game's tinny, bleeping, eight-bit symphonies of endlessly looped, relentlessly catchy J-pop, ragtime, cartoonish jazz and surrealistic classical music reached roughly twice as many impressionable youngsters as did, say, *Thriller*. And as that generation grew up, took piano lessons and eventually heeded the siren song of nostalgia, the soundtracks to those Nintendo classics of yore -- *Super Mario*, *Castlevania*, *Duck Tales*, *Contra*, *Metroid* -- now soothe us with their familiarity and shock us with their excellence.

Cheesy mid-'80s video-game scores are the new classical music.

Consider 19-year-old Martin Leung, born in Hong Kong, raised in Orange County, and now a piano prodigy at the Cleveland Institute of Music. That's his day job. Here's his alter ego: VideoGamePianist.com. Leung achieved a staggering degree of Internet fame with a six-minute video of himself pounding out solo piano renditions of multiple tunes from *Super*

Mario Bros. and its myriad sequels. He starts off wearing a blindfold, actually, dramatically flinging it off and flipping on his glasses before stomping through the eerie, spacious crypto-jazz of Level 1-2 (you know, the dark blue subterranean one). Leung's site now includes a 10-minute version of the Mario Medley, climaxing when he mimics the series' penchant for jacking up the tempo as time runs out. It's a hilarious, jaw-dislocating virtuoso performance. It also represents Leung's artistic crusade.

For that, we turn to the Video Game Pianist's three-pronged Mission Statement, of which the third prong is a desire to "popularize classical music by performing video-game music," so as to "build a bridge that will link the pop music world with the classical music world."

Sweet.

"I think that as more and more people get exposed to video-game music, they'll realize that there's more music classical instruments can play other than video-game music," Leung explains. "And then they'll look at Bach, Beethoven and Mozart."

Like punk rock, mid-'80s Nintendo music started as a rogue, crude art form with strict sonic limitations and no respect from Real Musicians. Also like punk rock, it's now dead. The primary architect lives on, though: Japanese composer Koji Kondo, responsible for the bulk of the *Mario* empire, and the similarly beloved and ubiquitous *Zelda* series. The joy of his work lies in its forced simplicity -- the original Nintendo sounds, not surprising, like a computer mass-produced in 1985. Limp bass, cheesy keyboard melodies and a percussive tableau wherein the snare-hits sound like sneezes.

It's a unique and undeniably appealing style that, paradoxically, ultramodern technology can no longer replicate. "There's a definite classical influence, far beyond rock music and stuff, in terms of chord structures," explains Ben Milner, guitarist for The Advantage, Northern California/Nevada's preeminent all-video-game rock band. "It's pretty out-there. Kind of like a fusion between classical and '80s hair metal -- that was what was happening at the time."

Ah, yes, The Advantage. Leung is the gold standard in a shockingly large kingdom of Internet-only *Super Mario* tributes: There's an unbelievably rad-looking Asian teen rocking out on electric guitar (www.funnyjunk.com/movies/4/mario+guitar), or Novato, California's very own Jean Baudin (lurking over at www.jeanbaudin.com), who rips through a technically stunning rendition on an 11-string bass, an awe-inspiring black hole of gleeful geekdom. But weirder -- and louder -- still is the ongoing surge of full-blown guitar-slinging Nintendo rock bands. At the moment, it's a two-horse race between Phoenix's Minibosses (who do fine work with *Castlevania*) and The Advantage, a quartet featuring Spencer Seim from thrash deities Hella.

The Advantage released its second full-length, *Elf-Titled*, last month, flaunting fantastic renditions of the *Goonies 2* "Wiseman" stage, *Double Dragon III's* "Forest of Death" and, most notably, *Metroid's* epochal "Kraid's Lair." In the group's hands, these Nintendo ditties turn into snarling, technically demanding math-rock workouts, mosh-pit-worthy even as they recall childhood innocence. It's radical but not remotely ironic. Milner's fandom is sincere as he recalls his personal favorites, from *Super Mario 3* to the almighty *Mega Man II*, which might rival the original *Mario* in depth and vision. "It's pretty intense, just how good every song on there is," he declares. "There might be better individual songs, but if you made an album from a game, that would be the White Album of Nintendo."

But that, like the Beatles' heyday, is a bygone era -- nowadays, video games are scored like Hollywood blockbusters. Name-brand punk bands anoint Tony Hawk skateboarding games, and superstar DJ Amon Tobin scored a 2005 entry in Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell* military espionage series. But as hot new systems like the Xbox 360 take over, critics quietly consider "The Uncanny Valley," an odd but increasingly apparent principle that as video-game characters and situations get more realistic, at some point they get too realistic, to the point where it creeps you out and it no longer feels like a game. Video-game music follows a similar pattern. Modern tunes are all right, of course, but nowhere near as bizarre and distinctive and real as the Casiotone vistas Koji Kondo once whipped up, and guys like Leung and Baudin and The Advantage now rightfully deify and righteously reinterpret.

And it is invariably guys, by the way. This is a fascinating slice of humanity, but not a particularly sexy one. "It's funny, actually, 'cause one of the few things I've read about the Minibosses, one of their quotes was, 'Yeah, playing in a Nintendo cover band isn't a good way to meet girls,'" Milner recalls. "I would agree with that. We meet lots of rad people, but you don't really get so many screaming teenage girls. That wasn't exactly the goal." When it comes to *Mario's* classical music pedigree, girls might not know, but the perpetually adolescent boys sure understand.

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