



## Video game virtuoso Cyber crowds love music institute's free-spirit pianist

Plain Dealer, The (Cleveland, OH) - Monday, March 13, 2006

*Author: Andrea Simakis, Plain Dealer Reporter*

If this were a teen flick, Martin Leung would be the bad boy who gets booted out of music school for playing the themes to "Super Mario" and "Halo" instead of Mozart and Haydn.

But this isn't a B- movie; it's Martin's life. And so far it's been sweet. His nonconformity has made him famous. A shy 19-year-old virtuoso with perfect pitch, Martin has emerged as a Web superstar and concert fave – all because of his flamboyant piano performances of the music video gamers have grown up with.

The sophomore at the Cleveland Institute of Music is an amalgam – Steinway mahogany fused with Gameboy plastic. Clad in a tuxedo, he gels his short hair into spikes and hammers out tunes from "Legend of Zelda" with the same passion he brings to Beethoven's "Sonata in F Major."

He calls himself the Video Game Pianist and has a Web site ([www.videogamepianist.com](http://www.videogamepianist.com)). He gets fan e-mail. His renditions of the theme from "Sonic the Hedgehog" and other video game classics win whoops and encores – 21 alone during a performance at the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema in Texas. At the Hollywood Bowl in 2005, the Orange County, Calif., native roared through a selection from "Final Fantasy" before a screaming crowd of 11,000 with nary a sweat stain on his thrift store tux.

His teachers at the institute don't mind his penchant for PlayStation tunes.

"That's only because when he brings me Beethoven sonatas, he does his best," says Paul Schenly, head of the institute's piano department and artistic director of the Cleveland International Piano Competition. Five hours of practice a day doesn't hurt.

Schenly helped Martin bone up for his show at the Hollywood Bowl – they spent an entire lesson dressing up the piece in tonal ruffles and ribbons – and last summer, the instructor saw the power of "Donkey Kong" and "Zelda" to move the toughest of crowds.

"We did an outreach program for disadvantaged kids, and I asked him to play a couple little selections from video games, and you should've seen how their eyes lit up, which, in a way, is what used to happen when Liszt was performing or Beethoven or Mozart," Schenly says. "They would take the most popular tunes from the opera and compose variations on those themes. Martin is just using what people relate to."

And everyone from grade-schoolers to retirees can relate to video games. The industry rakes in about \$10 billion a year, about as much as the movies.

As classical music CDs gather dust in half-price bins, and symphony patronage plummets, people in their 20s and 30s are downloading ring tones from "Madden NFL 2005" and "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas."

Video game music has moved from the bleeps and bloops of 1972's "Pong" to last year's "Advent Rising," whose operatic soundtrack is performed by a 72-piece orchestra and members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Americans spend 13 hours a week playing video games, more time than they while away in front of the TV. Up-and-coming bands would rather score a spot on the newest version of "Tony Hawk's Underground," where a song will be pounded into gamers' consciousness for weeks, than win 20 seconds of airplay on "The O.C."

A 'modern-day Chopin' who loves video games

Martin is the perfect icon for the maturing video game music scene – an appealing blend of the profound and the profane.

"To me he is the modern-day Chopin or Lizst – Bach, Beethoven. He's all of those guys wrapped up into one," says composer Tommy Tallarico, who wrote the "Advent Rising" score. "He just happens to love video games!"

Martin was first drawn to the keyboard at age 3. As a high school senior two years ago, he listened to the "Mario" theme ad nauseam, wrote out the notes and arranged them for piano.

A friend made a video recording of Martin performing the piece blindfolded, dressed like a rock star in a biceps-baring sleeveless T-shirt. The effect is electric and disturbing, evoking a prisoner about to be executed playing his beloved instrument as a final request, pounding out a children's calliope tune.

Since its debut on the humor site eBaum's World in 2004, Martin estimates that more than 40 million people have downloaded the clip. A follow-up home video featuring Martin standing with his back to the keys and plinking out John Lennon's "Imagine" caught the attention of the producers of "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," who have asked him to visit the studio and play the "Ellen" theme backward.

'Right now I'm just busy practicing'

Martin's virtuosity lured MTV cameras to Cleveland in October. Six hours of tape were edited down to a 2½-minute feature for "The G-Hole," the music channel's online show for gamers.

In the segment, "G-Hole" journalist Chi-Lan, a lingerie model of a correspondent with long black hair, scooches beside Martin on a piano bench after he has performed for a yowling crowd at Los Angeles' Electronic Entertainment Expo.

"You gotta girlfriend?" she asks.

"No, right now I'm just busy practicing," he says, as serious as when he played Mendelssohn at Carnegie Hall at 16. "Right now, I don't have time for that, but later on – sure!"

And he grins a kid's grin that breaks his face open like a pinata. Martin shares more with a happy, glowing anime character than a brooding prodigy partial to Mahler.

Chi-Lan grabs his slender shoulder and yanks him closer.

"All of that classical training has gone into video games!" she shouts. "That's what we like to hear!"

After seeing the blindfold video, Tallarico plucked Martin from the stuffy concert hall to play the Hollywood Bowl as part of Video Games Live, his North American concert tour featuring music from "Frogger" to "Medal of Honor." This year, the laser/live action spectacle will go global with stops in Australia, China, England and Italy, as well as the United States.

Equally at home

Martin will play at a handful of venues approved by his mother, Alice. School comes before standing O's for the chess player who was checkmating graduate students when he was in kindergarten.

Intellectual and artistic pursuits trumped TV night and visits to the multiplex in the Leung household, and it shows in Martin's general cluelessness about popular culture. MTV producers were so disturbed by the bare walls in his room at the institute that they sent him a slew of posters for films he had never seen.

"Sooner or later, I'll start watching movies," he says.

Despite his innocence, Martin has carved out a cyber audience that didn't exist 30 years ago, when kids in purple Toughskins first plugged in their Ataris.

He dreams of working as a soloist and playing with top orchestras in Cleveland, New York and Vienna. He also wouldn't mind jamming with Dr. Dre or being sampled by Eminem. Respected by the orchestra crowd, but also at home with "G-Hole" guests like mall punk rockers Good Charlotte, Martin is poised to become a crossover success story – the Glenn Gould for the gaming set.

"I think he could make a huge name for himself by playing pieces on the piano that are pop culturally significant, because all of us thirtysomethings grew up on this stuff," says Tallarico. "And as great as Beethoven and Mozart are, a lot of times we're more familiar with TV commercial jingles, movie soundtracks and the music from video games.

"More people know that 'Super Mario Brothers' song than any piece by Stravinsky."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: [asimakis@plaind.com](mailto:asimakis@plaind.com), 216-999-4565

**Caption:** THOMAS ONDREY THE PLAIN DEALER Previously known as the Blindfolded Pianist, Martin Leung changed his nom de plume to the Video Game Pianist last year, and it has been \$500-an-hour gigs and "Dude, you got some mad skillz" fan postings ever since. THOMAS ONDREY THE PLAIN DEALER Martin, in a practice room at the Cleveland Institute of Music, balances on one foot and pumps the pedal with the other to play tunes backward.

**Edition:** Final

**Section:** Arts & Life

**Page:** D1

**Record Number:** MERLIN\_4850508

Copyright, 2006, The Plain Dealer. All Rights Reserved. Used by NewsBank with Permission.