

with Martin Leung

The StarPhoenix · 12 Jan 2011 · By Heather Persson Of The StarPhoenix hpersson@thestarphoenix.com

Pianist Martin Leung has taken an unusual path to fame for a classical musician, as a YouTube clip of him playing the theme from a video game as a teen created a huge buzz online.



But no matter how gimmicky some may consider the start of his career, it has led to him playing a demanding and well-loved concerto with a respected symphony.

Leung is leaving the warmth of his Orange County, California home to join the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra for Saturday's concert, titled Russian Romance. The 25-year-old will act as soloist for Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. Also in the lineup is another Tchaikovsky piece, Polonaise "Evgeny Onegin" and Nicolai RimskyKorsakov's Arabian-inspired Scheherazade.

Here, he talks to The StarPhoenix about gaming, Liszt and what makes a good date.

YouTube: When Leung was 17, he created a sensation when he posted a video of himself playing an arrangement of the Super Mario Brothers theme on the piano while blindfolded. It has received an estimated 40 million hits. "Things started from there," he says. "It was so unreal how many people saw it. It was all over the internet."

Game: Leung doesn't mind being known as The Video Game Pianist or The Blindfolded Pianist. In fact, it turned into a career-maker when he was asked to join Video Games Live — a world-wide concert tour devoted to the music of that industry. "It is just part of who I am and what I like to do for fun." He is currently playing a lot of Sonic Rush on Nintendo DS.

Serious stuff: It may be video games and the online world that made him famous, but Leung has a serious musical background that can get lost in the digital shuffle. At age 16 he made his debut at Carnegie Hall performing Mendelssohn's Concerto No. 1 — Presto. He also attended the Cleveland Institute of Music and The Yale School of Music.

Sawa a fan: Leung met SSO maestro Victor Sawa backstage after a Video Games Live concert in Saskatoon. "It is really great how I got to be invited (to play with the SSO). It is rare to meet a local conductor. He is warm, down-to-earth and approachable. It was really fun for

me to talk to him.”

Date night: Saturday’s concert filled with Russian, romantic works is being billed as a great date night. Leung says he keeps it pretty simple on dates — usually dinner and a movie. “ And the symphony — yes of course. But the symphony doesn’t play every night.”

On his Liszt: In March, Leung will play Liszt’s Concerto No. 1 with the Regina Symphony Orchestra — which Sawa also conducts. Leung and Liszt have some history. As a very young musician, Leung placed first on two occasions at the Los Angeles International Liszt Competition. It is also the 200th anniversary of Liszt’s birth in 2011. “ It’s another great opportunity,” he says of the upcoming concert.

The next level: Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 is a familiar work, but Leung says the more he looks at the piece, the more he loves it. “ I am always finding some new colours,” he says. Unlike video games, Leung says he will never be able to master the “ vast and huge” library of classical music that exists for piano. “ I will be working on it for the rest of my life.”