



A coming-out party for video game music

By Julie Cirelli-Heurich

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Composer Jack Wall will conduct the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra performing "Video Games Live" Saturday at NJPAC in Newark.

The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra is ringing in the new year the old-fashioned way, with four concerts of Viennese waltzes and polkas. But the ensemble ends the old year with a futuristic show featuring such soloists as Sonic the Hedgehog and Pac-Man.

"Video Games Live" brings the music found in PlayStations and Xboxes into the concert hall. Video game composer Jack Wall -- whose credits include "Myst III: Exile," "Myst IV: Revelation" and "Barbie: Secret Agent" -- conducts the orchestra underneath a huge screen. The video selections range from the Dark Ages of "Pong" to the newest installment of "Guitar Hero."

Wall's fellow composer and executive producer, Tommy Tallarico, insists "Video Games Live" isn't just for teens with twitchy fingers and time to kill.

"I wanted to prove to the world how sophisticated and artistically significant video games have become," Tallarico says. "We designed the show for the non-gamer."

"A lot of the people who come to the show are grandparents bringing their kids to the symphony for the first time."

And each night one child or adult gets to do more than listen. The "Video Games Live" experience includes costume contests and a pre-concert gaming arcade, as well as opportunities to meet game producers, designers and composers. The winner of a pre-show "Guitar Hero" competition is called up on stage to play

the game to the Aerosmith song "Sweet Emotion." (Tallarico is a cousin of Aerosmith singer Steven Tyler.)

Though a YouTube clip from a Dec. 18 show in Paris shows a contestant failing to complete the song, Tallarico says the winning record is pretty high: "Eighty percent of the time they really wipe the place clean, and the audience goes nuts when they do so."

Going nuts appears to be the standard response to the show, which has been touring for four years. The dates have increased from three performances in 2005 to 47 this year; 70 are scheduled for 2009.

And "Video Games Live" transcends national borders.

"When we go down to Brazil," Tallarico says, "they're standing and cheering and screaming the whole time. It's like a rave for them. In Taiwan, it was absolutely insane. People crying in the aisles."

But Tallarico -- who has written music for games ranging from "Tony Hawk's Pro Skater" to "The Incredibles" -- believes they're not just applauding the game clips and rock-concert lighting. It all comes back to the music, which can be as lush as any Hollywood score. Saturday's concerts may begin with the bloopers of "Pong," but they feature not just the NJSO but also Schola Cantorum on Hudson, a 45-member choir from Jersey City that has been praised as "clear and self-assured" by The Star-Ledger.

"All of us video game composers," Tallarico says, "we all draw inspiration from the masters. Beethoven, Mozart, Orff, Holst's 'Planets.' The music we've been making in the past 10 years, I will put up against any film score written in the last 10 years.

"In movies, what they write is background music. In video games, it's interactivity. It's music that drives the story a lot of the time."

He adds that film composers are making the leap to the video game industry, which has lured such heavy-hitters as Bill Conti (the "Rocky" franchise) and Howard Shore ("The Lord of the Rings" films).

"If Beethoven were alive today," Tallarico says, "he wouldn't want some director telling him what to do, and actors talking over his music. He'd be a video game guy."

Video Games Live. *Who: New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Schola Cantorum on Hudson, Jack Wall, conductor. Where: New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center St., Newark. When: Saturday, 2 and 8 p.m. How much: \$21-\$82. Call (888) 466-5722 or visit njpac.org.*

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