

NEOSonicFest: Contemporary Youth Orchestra plays music from video games at CSU (Mar. 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



Probably nothing divides human beings quite so neatly into two groups than whether or not they play video games. The members of the Contemporary Youth Orchestra obviously fall on the “I do” side of that divide. On Saturday evening, March 12 in Waetjen Auditorium at Cleveland State University, Liza Grossman led CYO in their annual “Music and Its Industry” concert, this year

featuring symphonic arrangements of video game music. Presented under the umbrella of NEOSonicFest, the evening was as fun as it was loud.

Dubbed “Power Up,” and presented in cooperation with Neoglyphic Entertainment, the evening included a survey of music from 14 video games accompanied by projections from the games themselves, two of which involved live play by Neoglyphic’s chief creative officer, Chris Chamberlain.

Rising to the spirit of the occasion, CYO musicians abandoned their usual themed t-shirts and dressed by section as characters in one of the games on the program. Conductor Liza Grossman got into the spirit herself, appearing onstage in a costume with red feathered wings which she then shrugged off, inspiring a disappointed “aww” from the audience.

As the orchestra ran the chronological gamut of games from *Tetris* to the recently developed *Sunborn Rising*, including *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Final*

Fantasy, Pokémon, Battlefield 3, and Halo 3 — all of those before intermission — we heard musical styles ranging from mariachi, Klezmer, Celtic, and what might be described as bargain-basement John Williams. When the CYO Chorus joined the orchestra, they sang the first of several segments of what sounded like Orc poetry set to parodies of *Carmina Burana*.

After intermission, games got more bizarre and violent with *World of Warcraft, Uncharted, Dragonborn, Journey*, and the post-nuclear *Fallout 4*. *Angry Birds* provided the antidote of some loony humor. One or two of the scores changed up relentless full orchestra textures in favor of lovely solo passages for cello and winds.

The program ended with a 25-minute suite composed by Sean Beeson for Neoglyphic's *Sunborn Rising*, a sequence of evocative cinematic music that draws on the Celtic tradition.

The CYO musicians had great fun with this program, which demanded concentration, stamina, and high energy for well over two hours. Doubtless also they learned a lot about how the video game industry operates not only from the concert itself but also from a studio video they recorded for Neoglyphic Entertainment.

On the purely musical side, it would have been refreshing to have heard CYO play with a bit more subtlety and stylistic variety. A lot of this program was heavily scored and played full-out, especially by the brass. When the over-amplified chorus joined the mix, the sound levels were ear-splitting and fatiguing.

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