

## No Exit presents Rob Kovacs in 88bit at Appletree Books (June 19)

by David Kulma



No Exit's summer offerings took a surprising, yet delightful turn on Friday, July 19 — to classic video game music. Rob Kovacs is from the generation of musicians who grew up playing video games on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the late 80s. Last year, he began an ambitious project dedicated to arranging this music for solo piano. 88bit, Kovacs's alter ego, now has about an hour's worth of music from eight games in his

memorized repertoire. He played with passion and panache on his electronic keyboard at the intermission-less concert in the cozy atmosphere of Appletree Books in Cleveland Heights.

Vintage game music presents some obvious difficulties for human performance. The composing possibilities of the 8-bit NES allowed composers to write three simultaneous musical lines at any given time. While they often feature the familiar texture of a melody and a bass line, the options regularly exceed easy distribution between two hands and go at speeds that make human musicians seem slothful. In addition, the length of time a game player would spend in a particular environment was unknowable, so the composers chose to create catchy loops that continued until the player moved to a new stage. Taking these loops and stringing them together without musical understanding could easily lead to endless vamping.

Kovacs easily surmounted these issues, creating cohesive wholes. He possesses bountiful virtuosity as well as a good compositional handle on how the disparate musics

of each game could flow into a standalone musical narrative. At times, Kovacs created veritable single-movement sonatas out of this spiraling, jumpy computer music. The best example was his take on Yoshio Hirai's music for *StarTropics*, an action/adventure game released in 1990. The various themes were given functional names ("Title Screen," "Danger," "Victory!") as well as poetic ones that fit the game's story ("The Test of Island Courage — Dungeon"). The music flowed so well in Kovacs' hands that when the "Boss Battle" theme came around, I was overtaken by the anxiety I remember as a kid playing similar games fighting evil overlords.



Like *StarTropics*, most of the concert was filled with music from games unfamiliar to me, but were enjoyable discoveries. *The Adventures of Lolo* resembled the Joplinesque main *Mario* theme — with a Latin feel — while *Marble Madness* was a fantastical set of etudes akin to Debussy had he been more ruthlessly minimalist. Kovacs' highly pianistic arranging choices used textures similar to Mendelssohn and Brahms where the middle voice is a hand-switching menagerie, and thickening octave doublings that made this deep-cut concert easily digestible for a classical aficionado.

The two lengthiest selections were from two well-known games, while avoiding the obvious choice of *Super Mario Bros*. Nobuo Uematsu's beautiful music for the original *Final Fantasy* (1987) is the most obviously pianistic of NES music with a famous

“Prelude” featuring atmospheric, spindly arpeggios, while Takashi Tateishi’s energetic music for *Mega Man 2* (1988) was full of rock bombast at high speeds.

Kovacs hopes to arrange all of the music ever released on the NES, and based on his obvious hard work and clear passion, his 88bit project is a worthwhile and impressive feat of musical skill and imagination.

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