

Orchestra Hero

By Michael Gordon

October 31, 2009

What is the hottest thing in music right now? A pair of video games — Guitar Hero and Rock Band. Anyone can play. The games allow you to become a member of the band. Each game offers a range of pop music hits on game controllers that look and feel like guitars and drums. What makes these video games so much more impressive than “air guitar” is that through the use of something called the instrument game controller the player actually experiences the visceral feeling of performing music. You can even improve if you practice.

So, why not Orchestra Hero? What if I could “play” the horn solo in “Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks” on a “controller horn” or the bassoon solo at the opening of “The Rite of Spring” on a “controller bassoon”? What if I could bang out the timpani part in the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony or the clarinet solo at the beginning of “Rhapsody in Blue”? What if I could stand in front of the entire orchestra and conduct Mahler’s Ninth Symphony, or sit in the brass section for a rendition of Janáček’s “Sinfonietta”? The possibilities are astounding.

And the good news is that Rock Band will soon be opening its format to classical music. (Please feel free to post a comment and add your favorite orchestral moments to this list. What would you most like to play or conduct?)

The period from the early 1700s through the mid 1930s boasted a rich palate for the Western orchestra. From the Baroque (think Bach’s Brandenburg concertos and Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons”) through to the transformative Beethoven symphonies and onward to the huge works of Mahler and Shostakovich, the orchestra evolved into a massive vehicle for musical expression. This is where big statements were made — statements that impacted the cultural and political dialogues of the West. Unfortunately this is a claim the orchestral world can no longer make. Competing now with movies, television, the Internet and popular music, the orchestra no longer has the platform for cultural dialogue that it once held. But, for me as a composer, the orchestra still holds an allure, a mystery and a sonic power that is hard to beat.

One simple reason is that the orchestra has all the best toys. Some of my favorites include the contra-bassoon, standing five feet tall and covered with knobs and gadgets. It howls deep and dark grumbly tones. (I use two of them in my work “Decasia.”) The French horn is a conch-like curl of silvery metal plumbing that blasts a clear pure tone – and can be like an angel singing above the choir. (The standard orchestra has four of these.) The glistening sleek trombones with their sliding tubes are the go-to power machines. When they get boisterous they can easily shake the audience to their core. (There are generally three of these in an orchestra.)

There are certainly great solo moments in orchestral works that feature these and other instruments — but for me the magic is in the synchronicity of the ensemble —

what makes it a whole. Anyone who saw the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics marveled, as I did, at the precision with which the cast of thousands performed. Years in the making and with months of long rehearsals, the Chinese performers put on a dazzling show. But the classical orchestra is even more dazzling, even more virtuosic, and so much more precise that it boggles the mind. A hundred instrumentalists can, with exact accuracy, divide a second into 16 micro-parts and play an off-beat note on any one of those 16th notes. In fact, they do this as a matter of course.

A string player can control the rapid movements of the bow. A wind player can control the speed at which the air vibrates. A brass player can not only reach extreme volume but can also produce warm and quiet tones. As a whole the instruments can play at mind-numbing speeds, produce an infinite array of sparkling colors, and thanks to the high octane boost of music notation, a huge work can be rehearsed and performed in a matter of hours.

Over the past 15 years I have written a lot of music for the orchestra. Some works acknowledge the past directly, like my string orchestra piece “Weather,” which is a handshake across the centuries to Vivaldi. In other works, like “Decasia,” I break with established traditions by having the orchestra re-tune — making it sound like a giant out-of-tune piano (the kind that might be found in someone’s basement after sitting there for 35 years).

Perhaps the most interesting interaction with classical music that I’ve had was a commission from the Beethoven Festival in Bonn, Germany, to write a new piece for orchestra that referenced Beethoven in some way. It was a challenging request and for a while I wasn’t sure how to proceed. In the end, I decided to take one theme from each movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony and work with them as if they were my own.

From the slow second movement of the Beethoven I took the exquisitely beautiful melody. Like Beethoven, I repeated the melody many times, but with a twist. In my version, each time the theme finishes it has spiraled harmonically so that it is one tone higher. With each repetition, I add other instruments playing the theme just slightly ahead or behind the one before. Eventually a gigantic canon builds up with more than 20 parts. (A canon is a fancy way of saying “round,” as in “Frère Jacques.”)

The audience at the premiere of my new work, **Rewriting Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony**, was one of the most musically conservative I’ve ever faced. I fully realized that what I set out to compose was going to be controversial, especially to Beethoven purists. When the music was over, the audience was decidedly mixed. In the lobby, the festival had set up computerized overhead projectors, where audience members took turns writing down their thoughts about what they had just heard. I got pans and raves. I was booed and I was called a prophet. I had tread on hallowed ground – no, I was leading the way into the future. Well, all in a days work.

One of the successes of **Rewriting Beethoven's Seventh Symphony** was that it engaged an audience that usually turns off when new music is presented. The piece built a bridge from the new to the old as it drew from a music that the audience revered. On the opposite end, perhaps Orchestra Hero could be a way in for those who are versed in video games but barely know that classical music exists. Controller bassoon, anyone?